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PART I

Origins and categories

CHAPTER 1

Origins

In the 377th year after the Prophet Muḥammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina, a year which began on 2 May 987 and ended on 20 April 988, a Baghdadi book-lover named Ibn al-Nadīm was putting the finishing touches on a book of his own. We know this because he mentions the date in the preface to this book, and so do at least two indefatigable writers who were equally the product of classical Islamic bibliophilia, Yāqūt (d. 1229) and al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363). In fact, aside from the book itself, much of our knowledge of Ibn al-Nadīm comes from compilers such as Yāqūt and al-Ṣafadī, both non-Arab outsiders whose learning brought them celebrity in Islamic lands, and both, too, writers of massive books on learned men (and some women), often thousands of them. Yāqūt's work, which is concerned exclusively with men of learning, has recently been edited in seven thick volumes. Al-Ṣafadī's work tackles past celebrities more generally, which there means not only men of learning, but men of politics and culture, too; the editors began their work as long ago as 1931, and 71 years later the project, having exceeded 30 volumes, is only now coming to a close. In addition to this work, al-Ṣafadī wrote a single-volume biographical dictionary devoted entirely to blind scholars, a topic which will seem less strange once we understand the crucial role of audition – *hearing* books – in Islamic learning, and a three-volume work on the celebrities of his own day. This, he tells us in the introduction, begins in 'year 696 [1297], which is the year of my birth'. Other historians of this and later periods, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449), would begin their works in the same immodest fashion.¹

Ibn al-Nadīm, one learns in Yāqūt, al-Ṣafadī and elsewhere, was a Shīʿite Muslim who worked, as his father had, as a bookseller in Baghdad, then as now the first city of Iraq. He seems to have lived on the eastern side of the Tigris river, in a

¹ The most recent edition of Yāqūt's *Irshād al-arīb ilā maʿrifat al-adīb* is Beirut, 1993, but I shall cite the first (and less complete) edition of London and Leiden, 1907–1913; the editing of al-Ṣafadī's *al-Wāfi bi'l-wafayāt* began in Leipzig, 1931; for the birth date, see his *A'yān al-ʿaṣr wa-aʿwān al-naṣr* (Frankfurt, 1990), i, p. 3; on al-Ṣafadī in general, D.P. Little, 'Al-Ṣafadī as biographer of his contemporaries', in D.P. Little, ed., *Essays in Islamic Civilization Presented to Niyazi Berkes* (Leiden, 1976), pp. 190–210; his work on the blind is the *Nakī al-himyan fī nukat al-ʿumyān* (Cairo, 1911), on which F. Maltī-Douglas, 'Dreams, the blind, and the semiotics of the biographical notice', *SI* 51 (1980), pp. 137–162; Ibn Ḥajar's work is the *Inbāʾ al-ghumr bi-abnāʾ al-ʿumr* (Hyderabad, 1967–1976).

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predominantly Christian quarter of the city, and to have taken his sobriquet ('son of the boon-companion', *naḍīm*; he is also called 'al-Naḍīm' *tout court*) from his position as courtier to at least one patron, perhaps the Abbasid ruler, or perhaps a member of the Buyid family, an Iranian dynasty that had taken *de facto* control of the Abbasid caliphate in 945. Our author would have been around 20 or 25 at the time, still young enough to adapt to the political and cultural changes set into motion by the Buyid usurpation of Abbasid authority. As a book dealer, Ibn al-Naḍīm contributed to the flourishing trade of books in tenth-century Baghdad, still the capital of the caliphate as it had been since 762, and still, too, one of the world's greatest and most literate cities: the *sūq al-warrāqīn* (book dealers' market) lay in the eastern – and more prosperous – side of his city, and at one point it boasted something like 100 bookshops. It was there that books were bought, sold and traded, where commissions for new books were taken, and, some 900 years before the printing press became widespread, where books were painstakingly or carelessly copied out by scribes, both on order and on speculation. So Ibn al-Naḍīm knew the book market, and in his capacity as boon-companion – that is, adviser/raconteur/drinking mate to his wealthy patrons – he also had access to court culture and all that it favoured: magic, divination, alchemy, ribaldry, clowning around and buffoonery, alongside philosophy, music, mathematics and astronomy, all of which feature in his book. Again, the combination may seem strange to us, but it was a perfectly ordinary feature of courtly culture of the time, be it amongst Muslim or non-Muslim rulers.²

One imagines that Baghdad had other booksellers who doubled as courtiers, men who knew market forces and court tastes. What distinguishes Ibn al-Naḍīm from his contemporaries is that he recorded his vast knowledge in a book, leaving what would turn out to be our best source for Islamic learning in the early middle ages. The title of this book is *al-Fihrist*, which is usually translated as the 'Index' or 'Catalogue', and to paraphrase his very brief introduction, it offers nothing less than a comprehensive survey of Arabic books and learning, together with bi-bibliographic information about their authors. It is thus a book about books and the people who wrote them, at once the product of a hard-headed bookseller (he specifies the exact length of some books, since unscrupulous copyists occasionally sold incomplete volumes to unwary customers), and the educated man's guide to 'the attainment of success' (as an alternative title has it) that books were thought to provide.

² The standard edition of the work is now R. Tajaddud's *al-Fihrist* (Tehran, 1971), which has been reprinted (without proper credit to the editor) in Beirut; for a translation with a useful index, B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Naḍīm* (New York, 1970); on Ibn al-Naḍīm, the conference articles collected in *Ibn an-Naḍīm und die mittelalterliche arabische Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1996); on the institution of the *naḍīm*, A. Chejne, 'The boon-companion in early 'Abbāsīd times', *JAOS* 85 (1965), pp. 327–335; for a detailed description of Baghdad, J. Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Studies* (Detroit, 1970).

Ibn al-Nadīm divided his *Fihrist* into ten chapters, each divided into a number of sub-sections:

1. On the conventions of writing (e.g. scripts and penmanship), some non-Islamic scriptures, and the Qurʾān, including what Islamic learning calls ‘the Qurʾānic sciences’ (e.g., works on interpreting and reciting the text);
2. On grammarians of the Arabic language;
3. ‘Chapter 3 of *al-Fihrist*, which gives accounts of the *akhbārīs*, genealogists and those concerned with events’ (the meaning of *akhbārīs* is made clear below);
4. On poetry and poets of the pre-Islamic, Umayyad (661–750), and Abbasid period (750–);
5. On Muslim theologians, ascetics and mystics;
6. On jurists;
7. On philosophers (that is, those translating and working within traditions of classical antiquity), including mathematics, astronomy and medicine;
8. On entertainers of various sorts (such as storytellers, performers, magicians) and related *miscellanea*;
9. On non-Islamic sectarians and accounts concerning the Far East;
10. On alchemists.

There are at least two things that should be said about the contents of *al-Fihrist*. The first, which I shall discuss below, concerns the categories with which Ibn al-Nadīm has chosen to describe Baghdad’s written culture. Ibn al-Nadīm’s third chapter brings together authors of works of what we would conventionally call genealogy, hagiography (saints’ lives), legend, annalistic history, geography, prosopography, antiquarianism, natural history, administration, biography and a very great deal more besides. What does it mean that he puts them all together in a single chapter? Why does historiography, unlike law and philosophy, fail to secure a chapter of its own? Neither of these questions should be taken to suggest that all western critics agree on how to classify narrative and on what constitutes historiography, nor that Muslims of the medieval period went about it in a single or wrong way. Narrative, be it fact or fiction, poetry or prose, Arabic or English, is a continuum upon which we, as historians and critics, readers and writers, collectively create and impose our own categories. We need conventional categories to talk with each other about literature, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that these categories are intrinsic to it: the use of these categories is historically conditioned, and in some measure even political. This is as true of narrative that purports to describe the past (a work of history) as it is of narrative that conjures up a past (a novel).³

The common understanding of history today, as a variety of non-fiction that is distinguished from ‘literature’, even an autonomous branch of learning, is relatively

³ More will be said about literary categories below; for now see L. Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, 1987), esp. pp. 41f.

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new and altogether narrower than the traditions from which it emerged. It would have confused most pre-modern writers, be they Muslim or non-Muslim. (The English word *history* comes via Latin from the Greek *historia*, and generally meant ‘inquiry’; it earlier described a variety of genres, including geography, folklore and ethnography, in addition to what we would commonly understand to be history.) Because we regard history as a useful and important thing, in some measure because we have rooted our national identities in it, we give it a variety of institutional forms, such as museums, local historical societies, dedicated sections in bookshops and libraries, and university departments. We also privilege some forms of history over others, again for cultural and political reasons. Now history was certainly important to Muslims of the classical period, and it hardly needs pointing out that this book of history is only worth writing because pre-modern Muslims wrote so many books of history, filling their libraries with volume after volume. But most learned Muslims of that period accorded the historian far less authority than we do, and envisioned his activity not so much as a discipline independent from other disciplines, but as a kind of narrative practice. Medieval Muslim historians, unlike modern western ones, only rarely insisted that they were doing something special. What distinguished a Muslim historian, who was usually called an *akhbārī* (‘one concerned with [past] events’; ‘historian’) or *mu’arrikh* (‘chronologer’; ‘historian’) was not that he belonged to a history department, paid dues to some analogue of the American Historical Association, nor even that he saw himself primarily as an *akhbārī* or *mu’arrikh*. Almost to a man, Muslim historians made their living doing something other than history, especially tutoring, teaching (particularly the law, and, starting in the middle of our period, in institutions of learning), and writing – everything from copying out books to drafting letters for a patron. In fact, we shall see that for much of the classical period Muslim historians kept their heads low, choosing to follow the cultural and academic patterns set by those who *did* enjoy enormous social authority – the jurists – out of whose ranks they frequently came, especially during the ninth and tenth centuries. What made an author a historian was that he chose to arrange accounts of events past (*akhbār*) in one or more distinctive ways that, unlike those of other purveyors of written narrative, were explicitly or implicitly chronological. A great French Arabist once asked if al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956), author of a hugely ambitious cultural history of the world, was a historian or a littérateur. The answer is that he was both.⁴

This brings us to the second thing that should be said about the contents of Ibn al-Nadīm’s book, which is in no way incompatible with the first: they reflect tenth-century Baghdad’s voracious appetite for knowledge, including the historical narrative that figures so prominently in his third chapter. Historiography did not

⁴ On the etymology of *ta’rīkh*, see F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 2nd rev. ed., 1968), pp. 11ff.; very infrequently one finds *khbarī* instead of *akhbārī*, such as in Ibn ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥimyārī, *al-Rawḍ al-mi‘ār fī khabar al-aqtār* (Beirut, 1975), p. 133; the French historian is C. Pellat, ‘Was al-Mas‘ūdī an historian or an *adīb*?’ *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 9 (1961), pp. 231–234.

secure so prestigious a place in the medieval world of Islamic learning as other branches of learning, especially the law, but it was still produced in great quantity. Of the *Fihrist's* ten chapters, the third occupies nearly 20 per cent of the book as a whole, and lists nearly 100 authors, many prolific by the standards of this or any other time, and over 1000 titles (we shall see that these 'titles' are actually something of a problem). All this added up, and it had been adding up for more than 200 years. At his death, the historian al-Wāqidī (d. 823) is said to have left behind no fewer than 600 trunks of books, each to be hoisted by a pair of men (he had employed two scribes to copy books for him, both working, we are told, day and night); we can only imagine how many of these were works of history. The great essayist al-Jāhiz (d. 868), paralytic in his old age, was famously crushed to death by his books; the story is probably concocted, but it remains telling. One tenth-century courtier declined a post on account of the difficulty of moving his library, which is said to have included 400 camel loads of books – and these were just the theology titles. One of the manuscripts of the history written by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) calls the work an 'abridgment' (*mukhtaṣar*), and according to some reports, the fuller version was ten times the length of the extant work – a hypothetical 77,870 pages in length! This number stretches credulity, for sure, but there can be no doubt that by this time very lengthy books were commonplace. Indeed, the market for books and learning was as insatiable as it was sophisticated: one late tenth-century library in Cairo seems to have housed hundreds of thousands of books, including multiple copies of what had by then become standard histories. Nothing in the contemporaneous Christian world, East or West, compared with this bibliomania, nor had Greece or Rome produced anything on its scale. Perhaps outside of China, one must wait for the printing press to find a comparable phenomenon.⁵

In fact, the rise of historical writing in Islam corresponds almost exactly to the period of the T'ang dynasty (618–907) in China, but there is at least one crucial difference between Chinese and Islamic literary culture. T'ang bibliomania was the product of centuries of momentum and growth: historiography may be said to have started already with Confucius (d. 479 B.C.) and paper had been available for some 500 years. Its Abbasid analogue exploded in the space of four or five generations. The Prophet Muḥammad died in 632, an enormously charismatic, shrewd and gifted man – and one who is also said to have been illiterate. It seems that literacy amongst the Muslim élite began to catch on with the generation of his grandson, and then it very quickly accelerated: the standard reference work (controversially) credits a great-grandson (ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, d. 715) with seven titles, and ʿAlī's grandson, the deeply learned Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (d. 765), with 32. This

⁵ For al-Wāqidī, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 111 (Dodge, *Fihrist*, p. 214); the tenth-century courtier is al-Šāhib b. ʿAbbād, for which see A. Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*, trans. S.K. Bakhsh and D.S. Margoliouth (Patna, 1937), p. 174; on al-Ṭabarī, F. Rosenthal, *General Introduction, and From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany, 1989; al-Ṭabarī translation, vol. i); for libraries and the proliferation of books in general, J. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, trans. G. French (Princeton, 1984), especially chapter 9, and below.

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chapter tries to shed some light on how historiography figures in the explosive growth of written culture, which was triggered by the rise of Islam.⁶

Orality, tradition and history

Jaʿfar al-Šādiq reflected the cultural ideals of early Abbasid Kufa, the prosperous southern Iraqi city in which he lived and taught. So too did Muḥammad, who was born in the Arabian town of Mecca in about 570, and to whom God had sent serial revelations that were collected after his death to form the Qurʾān. Unlike late eighth-century Kufa, in Muḥammad’s world little room was made for writing, at least beyond the occasional contract or treaty. Even less was made for books. This was because its social organisation – families, clans, tribes and confederations of tribes, all held together by kinship, whether real or fictitious – did not require it, while its low level of economic development, which was determined by thin populations of herders and settled folk in small and scattered oasis towns, did not encourage it. In its very lean culture of writing, the town of Mecca contrasted sharply not only with Abbasid Kufa of Jaʿfar’s time, but with that of the contemporaneous settled south, where written culture (including written dating systems) was relatively sophisticated. The modest level of literacy in the Hijaz is reflected in the technology of writing itself. As experienced by Muḥammad, the Qurʾān was a series of communications orally transmitted by God through the angel Gabriel, and when first written out, it was inscribed on pieces of leather and animal bones. The Qurʾān itself makes some mention of books and other writing media, but these are generally associated with monotheism – the revolutionary idea that Muḥammad fought so hard to spread – rather than paganism, which was the prestige form of religiosity.⁷

There is nothing exceptional about the very modest level of Arabian literacy and literature in the seventh century. Arab and non-Arab pastoralists and semi-pastoralists of earlier and subsequent periods have generally produced little writing, relying instead on the more pliant medium of orality. Amongst pre-Islamic Arabs, orality’s highest register was apparently occupied by poetry, particularly the ode. As one early tenth-century historian (al-Yaʿqūbī) put it, pre-Islamic Arabs ‘had

⁶ The standard reference work is Sezgin’s *GAS*, pp. 526ff.; on contemporaneous Chinese historiography, D. Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T’ang* (Cambridge, 1992), and, for older essays that remain useful, E.G. Pulleyblank and W.G. Beasley, eds., *Historians of China and Japan* (Oxford, 1961), and E.G. Pulleyblank, ‘The historiographical tradition’, in R. Dawson, ed., *The Legacy of China* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 143ff.

⁷ On the Hijaz and Arabian pastoralism in general, see F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 11ff.; on South Arabia, A.F.L. Beeston, *Epigraphic South Arabian Calendars and Dating* (London, 1956); on the modest use of written documents, G. Schoeler, ‘Schreiben und Veröffentlichen: Zu Verwendung und Funktion der Schrift in den ersten islamischen Jahrhunderten’, *DI* 69 (1992), pp. 2ff., which is partially translated as ‘Writing and publishing: on the use and function of writing in the first centuries of Islam’, *Arabica* 44 (1997), pp. 423–435; and M. Maraqtan, ‘Writing materials in pre-Islamic Arabia’, *JSS* 43 (1998), pp. 287–310 (skins, plants and trees, cloth, metal, bones, potsherds, stones).

nothing to refer to for their decisions and actions except poetry; in it they quarrelled, from it they drew their lessons, through it they vied in virtue, swore oaths with each other, fought each other and offered praise and blame'. Poetry offered a currency in which a wide variety of cultural transactions could be made, and it is in poetry that we can also recover some sense of the pre-Islamic Arabs' conceptions of time and fate. The following lines are credited to ʿAbīd b. al-Abraṣ, who seems to have belonged to the first half of the sixth century; they are exemplary in both form and content.

Where are the abodes on the gravelly tract of Rawḥān? Their traces have almost vanished –
 changed by the passing of time.
 I stopped my camel there so that I might question them. Then I turned [the beast] away,
 and tears flowed from my eyes,
 Pouring as if my eyes had surprised me with their tears [like copious rain from] a wintry shower.
 [I remember] the time [lit. 'days'] when my people were the best of ordinary folk to those suffering
 from famine or hardship or imprisonment.
 How excellent were those who played *maysir* [a game of chance] over the slaughtered camel,
 when the wind of winter blew hard and neighbours gathered together;
 When it came to spear-thrusting, they used to dye the points of their spears [with blood];
 And when it came to the clash of swords, they were lions, protective of their cubs;
 And when the shout went up 'dismount', they would rush headlong [to battle on foot] in short
 coats of mail.
 I have remained after they have gone, though I shall not remain forever – for Fortune (*al-dahr*)
 is full of changes and multifarious hues.
 God knows what I do not know about their fate. My memories are of what has gone from me
 at whatever time [it went].

Some doubt attaches to the beginning of the last line, 'God knows'; it may be an interpolation made by a Muslim transmitter of the text. None attaches to the preceding line, where 'Fortune' neatly expresses the fatalism that permeates much pre-Islamic poetry, against which Muḥammad's Qur'ānic morality was directed.⁸

In an age before books, magazines, radio, television and computers, the task of circulating news, predicting the future, passing on wisdom and practical advice, representing one group's opinion before another, providing entertainment – all of these were discharged by talkers: storytellers, diviners, soothsayers, and tribal spokesmen (the categories overlapped). Orality, put very crudely, *suit*ed the pre-Islamic Arabs of the Hijaz. Stored in one's head and delivered in the form of

⁸ For the tenth-century historian on poetry, see al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden, 1883) i, p. 304 (noted already in T. Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* [Cambridge, 1994], p. 2, where the translation somewhat differs); cf. Ibn Rashīq as translated in S.P. Stetkevych, 'The ʿAbbasid poet interprets history: three qaṣīdahs by Abū Tammām', *JAL* 10 (1979), p. 49; I draw the translation of ʿAbīd's poem from A. Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry, Volume I: Marāthī and Ṣuʿlūk Poems* (Reading, 1992), pp. 58ff.; for fatalism, W. Caskel, *Das Schicksal in der altarabischen Poesie: Beiträge zur arabischen Literatur und zur allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1926).

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sound, poetry and other forms of oral communication are effortless to transport and relatively inexpensive to acquire: a story might cost a meal. Just as important, their content can be adapted to the changing requirements of tribal societies, where one's identity is determined principally by perceived bonds of kinship. In very schematic terms, a tribesman rationalises his social and economic ties to contemporaries by creating or severing ties between supposed forefathers. Those favoured (allies in war; herders who share pasture or water rights) are integrated into a shared past ('we migrated together', 'we fought together', 'we descend from the same man'). Those out of favour are given no or little part in this shared past. And because a tribe's allies naturally change over time, so too do its genealogy and past. More than stubborn written history, oral history suits the pastoral tribesman's way of constructing identity and community. Unlike history books that have to be banned, destroyed or otherwise suppressed, oral history is as dynamic as a society wants it to be.

There is, then, every reason to think that history mattered a great deal to the tribesmen of the Hijaz, and the Qur'ān itself testifies to that: 'Narrate to them the history [or story], so that they reflect' (Q 7:176); 'Has not the history [or story] of those before you reached you, of the people of Noah, and 'Ād and Thamūd and those after them?' (Q 14:9). But in shape and significance, history for pre-Islamic Arabs differed markedly from history as understood by the annalist or chronographer working within a written medium, not to mention a modern, professional historian. The annalist is produced by a culture that values record keeping and institutionalizes this value in libraries and archives. He may be biased or even disingenuous, but he still shares his culture's view that the past is past and subject to record. If he is a monotheist, he also holds that the world had a beginning in time (Creation) and would have an End. The storyteller in a non-literate and non-monotheist context generally holds an altogether more continuous view of time, and his project is not so much one of recording or transmitting as it is re-inventing. In fact, in the absence of written narrative, established techniques of memorization or professional 'remembrancers' (all of which were apparently lacking in the pre-Islamic Hijaz), the past, by its very definition, is plastic. Whereas written history *can* be made to conform closely to the imperative of the present, oral history *always* conforms to it. Tradition transmitted orally tends in particular towards an hourglass shape, with 'memories' clustering around formative (and frequently legendary) origins and more recent generations (usually fathers and grandfathers). It is true that oral history can extend back three or four generations with some accuracy, but this seems to be the exception rather than the rule, and even in those exceptional cases, what is remembered is generally what is socially significant. What is more, a relatively accurate oral history is predicated on a more or less stable social system, one that holds to old truths and conventions; in societies undergoing rapid social and political change (such as early Islam), oral history tends to be much less accurate. The material may be authentic, at least in that it represents a genuine attempt to make sense of the world, and as such it may interest anthropologists or anthropologically inclined historians. But in this sense it is

much more useful as a barometer of social change – especially how people come to terms with the present by reconceptualizing the past – than as a record of what had actually happened.⁹

We shall see that some large part of understanding early Islamic historiography is coming to grips with how, as a bureaucratic empire emerged, oral traditions were complemented and, to some extent, replaced by written history. The transformation of story to history is conditioned not only by bureaucratic habits of record keeping, however. Religious attitudes play a role as well. We can see this most clearly if we briefly compare early Christianity with earliest Islam. The first Christians seem to have been principally interested in Christ's resurrection and its meaning for them, the defining moment in his life being his death. Their belief in his resurrection, rather than their knowledge of his birth or miracles, was what most clearly distinguished Christians from their contemporaries. For their part, it seems that earliest Muslims were principally interested in Muḥammad's charismatic career as God's prophet, the defining moment in his life being his call to prophethood, which is usually said to have occurred when he was 40 years of age. Belief in Muḥammad's prophecy, rather than knowledge of his childhood or career as a merchant, was what distinguished Muslims from other monotheists. And since these were the issues that defined them, they were what earliest Christians and Muslims talked about and passed on. Being central to their identity as Christians and Muslims, they were what they chose to remember.

In both cases, however, believers came up against doubters and sceptics who challenged their views, who demanded to know more about Jesus or Muḥammad: What were their credentials? How do we know that theirs was God's work? Believers also squabbled amongst themselves and challenged each other with all manner of questions. The questions had to be answered, and so they were. Drawing away from a past they actually remembered (the passing of time gave them more freedom to recreate one), and having entered a market of competing ideas and polemics, early Christians and early Muslims eventually came to tell the *whole* story. What they could not remember they duly provided in the form of legends, myths, conjectures and reasonable guesses, all about things that they had had no real memory of, since they had not really mattered before. This explains why Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, which were first set down in writing about two generations after his death, are so much less reliable as history than accounts of his Passion; while Mark and Acts reflect earlier views and say nothing of Jesus' birth,

⁹ Although a great deal has been written about orality, the dearth of contemporaneous evidence makes it hard to know where Hijazi orality stands vis-à-vis other traditions; for a very useful discussion of the African evidence, J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past: Three Essays* (Princeton, 1981), p. 120 (the Bobangi of Zaire may be the closest parallel); for an argument for an exceptionally long-lived tradition, J. Fadiman, *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya* (Berkeley, 1993) (from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth); cf. J.K. Davies, 'The reliability of the oral tradition', in L. Foxhall and J.K. Davies, eds., *The Trojan War: Its Historicity and Context* (Bristol, 1984), pp. 87–110; and O. Murray, 'Herodotus and oral history' in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Achaemenid History II: The Greek Sources* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 93–115; T. Spear, 'Oral traditions: whose history?', *History in Africa* 8 (1981), pp. 165–181.