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CHAPTER 1

The development of the genre

ANDREW: I want to return to this generation. I want to know about your life as a shaykh.
SHAYKH KHALAF: About me? About my life?
ANDREW: Yes.
SHAYKH KHALAF: Yes. At first there was [the tribe of] ʿAbbad. The shaykh of ʿAbbad back then was Kayid Ibn Khatlan. Shaykh of the shaykhs of ʿAbbad . . .

From Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*[1]

Akhbār, Ḥadīth, and Sīra

Until recently, modern scholarship (following Otto Loth) has tended to assume that classical Arabic biography arose in conjunction with the study of Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth-transmitters.[2] Muslim scholars, we are told, set out to collect information on the reliability of transmitters. Eventually they extended their inquiries "to other groups – legal scholars, doctors, Sufi masters, and so on," with the intention of showing "that the history of the Muslim community was essentially that of the unbroken transmission of truth and high Islamic culture."[3] This understanding of the genre is accurate in some respects: classical Arabic biography undoubtedly emphasizes the notion of transmission, and some of the earliest collections do list transmitters of Ḥadīth. Yet the genre itself did not originate among the Ḥadīth-scholars. Were this so, we would expect the earliest compilations to consist exclusively of entries about transmitters. But, as Willi Heffening was the first to note, biographical collections on poets, singers, Qurʾān-readers, and jurisprudents are at least as old as the ones on Ḥadīth-scholars.[4] Even older are the biographies

[1] Shryock, *Nationalism*, 12.
[2] Loth, "Ursprung." Here and throughout I use "Ḥadīth" and "Ḥadīth-scholars," not "tradition" and "traditionists," for the reasons cogently expounded in Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 63–66.
[3] Hourani, *History*, 165–66; see also Gibb, "Taʾrīkh"; Abbot, *Studies*, I:7. For a summary presentation of (to my mind) a more correct view, see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 204–05.
[4] Heffening, "Ṭabaqāt."

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(*maghāzī*, then *sīra*) of the Prophet, which had attained a substantial bulk even before the appearance of Ḥadīth-biography.

This precocious variety assumes greater plausibility if we acknowledge that biography originated among those narrators, transmitters, and redactors whom Ibn al-Nadīm (d. before 388/998) calls *al-akhbārīyūn wa 'l-nassābūn wa-aṣḥābu 'l-siyar wa 'l-aḥdāth*, "collectors of reports, genealogists, and authors of biographies and [accounts of] events."[5] These figures, most conveniently designated *akhbārī*s or "collectors of reports," first rose to prominence at the court of the Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya (r. 41–60/661–80).[6] They professed expertise in the pagan sciences of genealogy, poetry, and pre-Islamic tribal history. Some of them were also authorities on the life and times of the Prophet – that is, the corpus of reports from which both *sīra* and Ḥadīth proper were later to emerge. The *akhbārī*s' earliest works – when there were "works" at all[7] – exist only in later citations. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the ways in which they defined the directions early Arabic historiography, including biography, was to take.

Much of the information collected by the *akhbārī*s consisted of or included lists of names, often in the form of genealogies. Indeed, the citation of genealogies was almost impossible to avoid. This is because Arabic names typically contained a series of patronymics (expressions like "son of" and "daughter of") going back many generations. As a result, practically every name contained a family history that could serve as the nucleus of a collective biography. When they mention a person, the early *akhbārī*s frequently pause to comment on the ancestors mentioned in his genealogy. Alternatively, they start at the beginning of a family tree and tell a brief story about some or all of the figures in the list, as Shaykh Khalaf does in his interview with Shryock.[8] The utility of such performances, then as now, is to serve as an armature for narratives and poetry that support tribal claims to past glories and present rights. Unless the interlocutor is familiar with the reputation of one's ancestors, an unadorned list of names is not an effective genealogy. The minimal and possibly the earliest sort of Arabic biography thus appears to have consisted of a genealogy accompanied by a narrative. Werner Caskel, and before him Ignaz Goldziher, noted the close association of genealogy (*nasab*) and narration (*qaṣṣ*) in premodern Arabic literature.[9] More recently, Shryock has demonstrated the interdependence of the two forms in the oral histories of the Jordanian Bedouin.[10] Plausibly enough, bare lists do appear when the narra-

[5] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 131–67.
[6] Abbot, *Studies*, I: 14–31; and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 43ff.; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 46–48.
[7] See, e.g., Leder's reservations on the "books" attributed to al-Haytham (*Korpus*, 8ff.).
[8] See, e.g., Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, *passim*, e.g., 117; for contemporary parallels, see Shryock, *Nationalism*, e.g., 51–52.
[9] Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 168, 170; Caskel, *Ǧamhara*, I: 35.
[10] Shryock, *Nationalism*, 65, 145, 319ff. On the relation between *ansāb* and early historiography see further Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 81–82, 98–99, 115; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 49–54.

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tor does not wish to pronounce in favor of one or another tribe. In Jordan, Shryock found that tribal histories (that is, performances of *nasab* and *qaṣṣ*) inevitably challenge the claims made by neighboring clans and tribes. The tribal *ʿulamāʾ* (as his informants are called) were reluctant to relate their histories for fear of provoking a hostile reaction from neighboring rivals. After one eight-hour session with a tribal *ʿālim*, Shryock reports that he succeeded in recording only a bare genealogy: the narrative component had "collapsed under the weight" of participants' efforts to "negotiate an acceptable version."[11] In many cases, the bare lists we find in early Arabic sources may have been compiled by *akhbārī*s working long after particular disputes had been settled or forgotten. In other cases, they may be artifacts of a written history that strove to maintain neutrality.

Besides genealogies, the early sources contain lists (*tasmiya*) of persons credited with particular occupations or unusual feats or attributes. Some of these lists appear to date back to pre-Islamic times: they name tribal celebrities such as arbiters, trackers, and even "men whose big toes dragged on the ground when they rode."[12] As Stefan Leder has noted, such lists, like genealogies, "give expression to the perception of closed and independently acting social units."[13] In the Islamic period, the *akhbārī*s applied a similar principle of classification to a wider range of persons. These persons included prophets, Companions, caliphs, Successors, jurisprudents, Ḥadīth-scholars, Qurʾān-readers, transmitters of poetry and rare expressions, schoolteachers, participants in feuds, people who were the first to do a certain thing, and people afflicted with leprosy, lameness, and other maladies.[14] Because the placeholders in incidental lists were not necessarily related in any other way, compilers frequently added identifying remarks (*akhbār*) like those appended to genealogies.[15] Again, the bare listing of names is a theoretical possibility, occasionally realized. More commonly, however, we find narration, or at least description, appended to some or all of the items in the list.

As the genealogies and *tasmiyāt* indicate, the first Arabic biographers (i.e., the *akhbārī*s) did not confine themselves to collecting information about Ḥadīth-scholars. Heffening's discovery of early works on poets, singers, and the like confirms this view. Still, the oldest extant collection, the *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, does appear to be a catalogue of Ḥadīth-transmitters. Compiled by al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) and Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), the *Ṭabaqāt* contains entries of widely varying length on Muslims of the first six generations. In many cases, it offers assessments of its subjects' reliability as transmitters. However, it also contains many reports that have little bearing on reliability, as well as a substantial biography of the Prophet. This genre, certainly, is older than Ḥadīth-biography: a substantial *maghāzī* is attributed to Ibn Isḥāq, who died in 150/767. At first glance, then, it appears that the compilers of the *Ṭabaqāt*

[11] Shryock, *Nationalism*, chs. 4 and 5; citations on p. 108.
[12] Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar*, 132, 189, 233.
[13] Leder, *Korpus*, 199.
[14] Ibn Qutayba, *Maʿārif*, *passim*.
[15] E.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, III: 87.

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adopted the *sīra* as well as the list-form from the *akhbārī*s. Upon closer examination, however, it seems more accurate to suggest that al-Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd were *akhbārī*s, and that Ḥadīth-biography proper, while doubtless influenced by the example of the *Ṭabaqāt*, appeared later and under different circumstances.

To justify this assessment, we must look more closely at the circumstances under which Ḥadīth-studies emerged as a discipline distinct from the collection of *akhbār*. In the Umayyad period, "Ḥadīth" – that is, *akhbār* about the Prophet – had yet to attain the status of a distinct body of texts. Of the *akhbārī*s active in Medina and Damascus in the early third/ninth century, we find several who claimed expertise in subjects that included, without special distinction, the corpus later codified as Ḥadīth. For example, the Damascene *akhbārī* Muḥammad b. Muslim al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741) is credited with knowledge of the Prophet's campaigns (*maghāzī*), post-prophetic history, and "Ḥadīth."[16] The sweeping nature of this declaration suggests that his contemporaries had yet to enforce any strict classification of *sīra*-related topics.[17] Al-Zuhrī himself was reportedly the first to use *isnād*s (lists of transmitters) to check the genuineness of Ḥadīth. G. H. A. Juynboll agrees that the systematic examination of authorities began at that time (*c*. 130/747, with Shuʿba b. al-Ḥajjāj). However, he places the "structured collection" of Ḥadīth rather later: the two earliest compilers of *musnad*s (books of Ḥadīth arranged by transmitter) both died in 228/847.[18] The tardy but seemingly abrupt appearance of Ḥadīth proper has been corroborated by Joseph Schacht, who notes that the Iraqi jurist Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) commonly cited historical reports of juridical import without *isnād*s, while his younger contemporary al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) differentiated between Prophetic biography and "legal traditions" (i.e., Ḥadīth) because only the latter had good *isnād*s.[19] The implication is that the strict division between Ḥadīth and other kinds of history, that is, *sīra*, *maghāzī*, and *akhbār*, came late but took hold, in this case at least, within a single generation.

The new insistence on Ḥadīth as a distinct category, and on the *isnād* as a necessary concomitant of historical narration, evidently caught the *akhbārī*s off guard. One of them, ʿAwāna b. al-Ḥakam (d. 147/764–65 or 158/774–75) is reported to have said: "I gave up Ḥadīth because I couldn't stand the *isnād*."[20] Even in the middle of the third/ninth century, by which time the *akhbārī*s had given up Ḥadīth, the scholars insisted on denouncing them. Al-Bukhārī and Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn, for example, called Ibn al-Haytham a liar, and al-Dāraquṭnī labeled Ibn al-Kalbī *matrūk* "abandoned" as a transmitter.[21] In some cases, the critics appear to be condemning the *akhbārī*s' ignorance of Ḥadīth proper, and in other cases deploring their failure to apply Ḥadīth-standards to the

[16] Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 157–58; cf. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 146–159.
[17] Hinds, "*Maghāzī* and *Sīra*," 189–92.
[18] Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition,* 9–23.
[19] Schacht, *Origins*, 75 and 139.
[20] *MU*, IV: 513; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 134.
[21] *MU*, V: 606; 5: 595.

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Prophet's biography and other historical narratives. Either way, it is clear that the Ḥadīth-scholars were the newcomers, and that their professional self-definition required condemnation of the older *akhbārī* tradition.[22]

Most misleadingly for us, the Ḥadīth-men also retrojected their criticism upon *akhbārī*s of previous generations. Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767), for example, was regarded as an authority by his contemporary al-Zuhrī. A century later, however, he was censured by Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) for "leaving things out and changing them" in his recitation of the Prophet's campaigns.[23] Similarly, the so-called "Ḥadīth" of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774) was declared "worthless" by Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/847).[24] This pattern of retrospective condemnation has created the false impression that the early *akhbārī*s were sloppy Ḥadīth-scholars, and indeed that such a thing as "Ḥadīth" existed as a disciplined canon in the early period at all.

Ironically, however, it was precisely the formalization of Ḥadīth-criteria that left the Prophet's *sīra* and the allied biographical and historical genres in the hands of the *akhbārī*s. By the early third/ninth century, the Ḥadīth-scholars had committed their texts to compilations arranged by transmitter or by theme.[25] In either format, the Ḥadīth was now severed from the sequential narrative of the Prophet's biography. Admittedly, a given Ḥadīth remained formally identical to a report in the *sīra*: both consisted of a listing of transmitters culminating in a first-person eyewitness account, often in multiple versions. Yet the Ḥadīth-reports were now arranged by transmitter or by subject (e.g., prayer, inheritance, contracts, etc.), while the reports in the *sīra* remained a sequential set of narratives.[26] With these boundaries in place, the *akhbārī*s could produce Prophetic biographies without falling afoul of the Ḥadith-scholars.[27] Thus al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) was called "an authority on the Prophet's biography (*al-maghāzī wa 'l-siyār*), the conquests, and disputed matters of Ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and *akhbār.*" Not surprisingly, "a number of Ḥadīth-scholars considered him weak," a typical reaction – as we have seen – to such broad expertise. Yet even those who questioned his knowledge of Ḥadīth were willing to concede his authority in other fields. "As far as biography (*akhbār al-nās wa 'l-siyar*), jurisprudence, and the other sciences are

[22] See also Robinson, "Study," esp. 206.

[23] Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, I:17 and I: 22; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136; *MU*, V: 220; Abbot, *Studies*, I: 87–91. Ibn Isḥāq was condemned in his own time, but not for his *isnād*s: his major contemporary critic, Mālik b. Anas, did not always use them himself (Robson, "Ḥadīth"). Although some later authorities spoke approvingly of Ibn Isḥāq (Guillaume, *Life*, xxxv–xxxvi), such assessments were often arbitrary (Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 163–90), reinforcing the sense that we are dealing with collective self-assertion through *akhbārī*-bashing rather than strictly individual assessments of transmitters.

[24] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136–37; *MU*, V: 29.

[25] The first *musnad*s are credited to Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, Musaddad b. Musardad (both d. 228/847) and Nuʿaym b. Ḥammad b. Muʿāwiya (d. 229/848). Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 22 (on Musaddad see also Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 139, note 3).

[26] See further Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 77ff.

[27] On the mutual respect eventually established on the basis of this division of labor, see Schacht, *Origins*, 139, and note 6.

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concerned, he is a reliable authority by consensus."[28] Similarly, his scribe and successor Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) was called "an expert in the *akhbār* of the Companions and Successors," not a Ḥadīth-scholar.[29] Admittedly, the *Ṭabaqāt* the two men produced is well supplied with *isnād*s, indicating that Ibn Saʿd, at least, had mastered the evidentiary protocol of the Ḥadīth-scholars. However, as Juynboll has pointed out, the book contains "hardly any" material that falls into the category of Ḥadīth, not even in the biographies of Companions in whose entries one would expect to find it.[30] The contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* thus illustrate the extent to which the earliest biographies, even of the Prophet, were the work of *akhbārī*s, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper.

As the contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* indicate, the *akhbārī*s had assumed authority over the biography of the Prophet as well as the lives of the Companions and Successors. It is clear why: in the beginning at least, the compilation of a Prophetic biography required expertise in pre-Islamic genealogy and history, fields that had long been the acknowledged province of the *akhbārī*s. In later periods, the closest parallel to the contents of the *sīra* does not appear in the writings of the Ḥadīth-scholars, but rather in the works of *akhbārī*s, particularly al-Madā'inī (d. 225/839–40). Al-Madā'inī is clearly an *akhbārī*: his works deal with the history of Quraysh, the conquests, caliphs, poets, and such odd subjects as wedding parties, coinage, and persons famous for their propensity to flatulence.[31] To him are also attributed twenty-seven works on the Prophet, covering his physical appearance, his sermons and letters, his enemies and detractors, his military campaigns, the delegations he sent to the tribes, etc. The subject matter of the latter works thus corresponds to the contents of the earliest known recensions of the Prophet's biography (those by Ibn Isḥāq and Ibn Saʿd). These topics include pre-Islamic Arabian history, the Prophet's mission, the resistance to Islam, the emigration to Medina, and Muḥammad's negotiations and military campaigns.

Biography, then, originated among *akhbārī*s, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper, who in the early third/ninth century had barely come into existence as writers of books. By the third/ninth century if not earlier, scholars exclusively interested in Ḥadīth had begun to condemn the *akhbārī*s, including those of older generations, for failing to uphold the newly emerged rules for Ḥadīth-transmission. At the same time, they conceded to their *akhbārī* contemporaries the right to compose biographies, including those of the Prophet. This entente appears to have succeeded in part because many *akhbārī*s had acquired competence in the evidentiary protocol of Ḥadīth.

Professional specialization and collective biography

The history of *akhbār* after *c.* 200/800 becomes the history of the diffuse fields of specialization that emerged from it. These include not only Ḥadīth but also

[28] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 144; *MU*, V: 392–93. Note that *fiqh* in this period did not necessarily entail knowledge of Ḥadīth.
[29] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 145.
[30] Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 24–27.
[31] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 149–52.

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the various branches of *adab* (the literary and linguistic sciences) and of *taʾrīkh* (history). Many of these branches developed their own biographical traditions. Common to all the traditions was the notion of descent, now understood as a metaphorical rather than a literal genealogy. An examination of early biographical writing, whether by *akhbārī*s or Ḥadīth-scholars, bears out one element of Hourani's contention that biographers intended to establish "unbroken transmission." However, this transmission did not always have to do with "truth," as Hourani proposes. More exactly, it had to do with knowledge, an attribute of poets and singers as well as of Ḥadīth-transmitters. As we have seen, the Ḥadīth-men insisted on evaluating transmitters as well as (or instead of) the reports they transmitted. Similarly, biographers of musicians, poets, and grammarians felt the need to compile a catalogue of experts in their respective disciplines. In the apologetic prefaces they attached to their works, the *adab*-biographers made explicit what was implicit in Ḥadīth-biography, namely, the notion that professional legitimacy derived from the documented transmission of knowledge.

Rijāl-works and Ḥadīth-biography

The earliest biographical tradition particular to Ḥadīth-studies is the *rijāl*-collection, which consists of a list of persons named as authorities in the transmission of reports.[32] One of the oldest extant examples confirms Heffening's suggestion that the genre represents a "special application" of techniques of composition already in use among *akhbārī*s. This is the *Ṭabaqāt* of Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (d. 240/854–55), which groups transmitters by generation, tribe, and place of residence. Khalīfa also compiled a chronological history, and may therefore be considered an *akhbārī* of sorts. However, neither his history nor his *Ṭabaqāt* contains much *akhbār*. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, the information most important for Ḥadīth-purposes – namely, where and when the transmitter was active – must be inferred from the placement of that transmitter's name in the generational, tribal, and regional classes.

Much more detailed is the *ʿIlal wa-maʿrifat al-rijāl* ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). However, its compilers evince little awareness of the organizational techniques in use among *akhbārī*s: the imam's comments on transmitters and texts are placed in whatever order they happened to be spoken during Ḥadīth-sessions. A roughly contemporary work, the *Taʾrīkh* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) takes the transmitters' names as the unit of organization and lists them alphabetically for easy reference. Al-Bukhārī's entries are invariably brief, mentioning only the subject's teachers and students, e.g.: "Ismāʿīl b. Saʿīd b. Rummāna al-Yamānī; he heard Ibn ʿUmar; Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad related on his authority."[33] The fragments of *rijāl*-criticism ascribed to al-ʿIjlī (d. 261/875) are only slightly more forthcoming: one transmitter, he says, was "a harsh and ill-natured man, but he knew the *sunna*."[34] As these examples

[32] For a list of *rijāl*-works see Juynboll, "Rijāl."
[33] Bukhārī, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 1: 356; no. 1126.
[34] Cited in Muryani, "Entwicklung," 61.

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indicate, the *rijāl*-critics had little interest in *akhbār* as such. Their comments are ascriptive rather than narrative, and almost always bear on the subject's reliability as a transmitter. This does not mean that the tradition could not grow: on the contrary, the contentious nature of Ḥadīth-criticism produced a farrago of judgements, pro and con, that had to be appended to the entries on individual transmitters. This process eventually culminated in the massive compilations of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449). However, it did not result in anecdotal biography of the sort found in Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt*. Even the long entries in late *rijāl*-books favor laconic assessments (albeit a great many of them) over extended narratives.

With the appearance of distinct schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*) came dictionaries devoted to their affiliates, who were often transmitters as well as jurists.[35] Such compilations, unlike the *rijāl*-books, are not concerned with weeding out unreliable transmitters. Rather, the compilers were intent on demonstrating the distinctive attainments of their school. To the extent that such a project necessitated praising affiliates and criticizing rivals, some biographers collected anecdotes with as much enthusiasm as any *akhbārī* (for the Ḥanbalī tradition, see chapter 4). Others, however, were still interested only in the transmission of Ḥadīth – not Ḥadīth in general, but the sequence of teachers of which they formed a part. As a result, their works consist of name-lists supplemented with such minimal facts as death-dates, teachers, and students.

In a study of one such collection, Rudolf Sellheim suggests (following Ibrāhīm Madkūr) that the brevity of the entries is due to the "abashedness and humility" of the compilers.[36] But this remark strictly speaking applies only to autobiography (and as it happens, is not true there either).[37] I would argue rather that long entries on Ḥadīth-scholars are only needed when membership in the group is being contested: that is, in *rijāl*-books. Lists of one's own teachers, on the other hand, document a figurative genealogy back to the Prophet. Instead of parentage, the relevant relationship is the equally successive one of hearing and transmission. The implied narrative of succession to the Prophet, not the idiosyncrasies of any of the men named in the list, makes the best argument for one's own authority to transmit Ḥadīth. An endless series of nearly indistinguishable entries does not therefore fail to take account of individuality. Rather, it succeeds in excluding it.

Musicians

A more explicit example of collective self-assertion comes from al-Jāḥiẓ' (d. 776/868) compilation on musicians.[38] The ancient philosophers, al-Jāḥiẓ states, divided knowledge (*ʿilm*) into four arts (*ādāb*). Of the four, Muslim scholars

35 On the early history of *madhhab*-biography, see Melchert, *Formation*, esp. 145–46.
36 Sellheim, "ʿIzzaddīn."
37 See *Edebiyat* VII: 2 (1997; special issue on Arabic autobiography).
38 Jāḥiẓ, "Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn"; cf. Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 140 and I: 176.

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quickly attained a precise knowledge of three: astronomy, geometry, and chemistry. Yet the fourth art, music (*luḥūn*, *ghināʾ*), suffered from neglect. People grasped its principles only by intuition, or by hearing of Persian and Indian ideas on the subject. Then al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad derived a metrical system for poetry and music. His system came to the attention of Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, who, with his greater experience as a performer and auditor, perfected it and made it into a science. Since then, every age has had its generation of musicians who learn from those before them, and who along with their musical skill cultivate various refinements of character. Unfortunately, biographers have not yet written about the celebrated musicians of al-Jāḥiẓ' day. To give his contemporaries their due, he has composed an account of "their characteristics, their instruments, and the styles they attribute to themselves and pass on to others," and arranged his account by *ṭabaqāt*, here meaning "categories of comparable excellence."[39] The biographies themselves have not survived, so the second part of al-Jāḥiẓ' project – the narration of individual lives within a master-narrative for the musician class – cannot be studied. Nevertheless, his introduction provides a relatively early and complete instance of the etiological narrative, that is, the story a biographer tells to legitimize his category of subjects and lay the groundwork for his exposition of the virtues of individual exemplars within the category.

Poets

Early *akhbārī*s took a particular interest in poetry, which like music soon found its apologists.[40] The early Islamic view of poets and poetry was preponderantly hostile. Although poetry survived the advent of Islam, it perforce renounced its claim to supernatural inspiration.[41] Not surprisingly, the earliest biographers of poets do not adduce an etiology for their subjects. Instead, they argue for the importance of being able to identify good poetry, something mere amateurs cannot hope to do. In the earliest extant biographical work on poets, Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī (d. 232/846) begins with a complaint about declining standards. "Much of the poetry one hears is contrived and fabricated," he says, "no good at all, and no proof-text for correct Arabic." This is because "people have passed it from book to book without taking it from the Bedouin and without submitting it to the judgement of scholars."[42] In response to a man who declares that he could appreciate a poem perfectly well without asking an expert, al-Jumaḥī replies: "If you like a coin but the money-changer tells you it's false, what good does your appreciation do you then?"[43] His attitude parallels (but does not necessarily derive from) that of

39 Jāḥiẓ,"Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn," III: 133; cf. Hafsi, "Recherches," 107–8.
40 On poetic biographies, see Tarabulusi, *Critique;* Sezgin, *Geschichte*, II: 92–97.
41 See Qur'ān 26: 225–8, and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 40–97, esp. 56; Kister, "Sīrah"; Amidu, "Poets"; and Heinrichs, "Meaning," 121.
42 Jumaḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5–6.
43 Ibid., 8.

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the Ḥadīth-scholars: antiquity and authenticity confer authority upon a text, the content of which cannot stand on its own merits without the imprimatur of the experts.

As in Ḥadīth-studies, too, the requirement of authenticity requires a foray into biography in order to establish the names and works of the most reliable authorities. Al-Jumaḥī explains that he has "classified the poets of the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and transitional periods, and ranked them."[44] The result is "ten classes of four poets of equal skill."[45] Unlike Ibn Saʿd and Khalīfa, al-Jumaḥī constructs his *ṭabaqāt* on the basis of excellence, not geography or age. Excellence, in turn, depends on the twin criteria of authenticity and quality. Some poems and poets are more authentic than others: ancients more than moderns, and desert-dwellers more than urbanites. Within each category, moreover, some poets are better than others, and here explicitly aesthetic considerations play a role. Imruʾ al-Qays, for example, is superior to other equally authentic (i.e., old) poets because "he invented things that no one had said before, things that the Arabs considered beautiful."[46] Any biographical elaboration beyond these minimal facts is not necessary for a critical discussion of the verses. Most of the entries, accordingly, contain citations of poems rather than anecdotes.

A biographer of the next generation, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), offers a more explicit justification for his work. Cultivated people, he says, refer to poetry when discussing "usage, grammar, the Qurʾān, and the Ḥadīth." Like al-Jumaḥī, Ibn Qutayba conflates this philological standard with a literary one, for which he regards the ancients as the highest model. Provided they respect convention, however, some modern poets may attain parity with the ancients:

> I do not consider the ancient poets any more favorably because they are old, nor do I think any less of recent poets because they are new. Rather, I consider both groups without bias, and give each its due. I have seen scholars who approve of, and anthologize, poor poetry just because the person who composed it lived a long time ago. I have also seen them denigrate solid poetry only because it was composed in their own time, or by someone they have actually seen. But God has not restricted knowledge, poetic talent, and eloquence to one age as opposed to another, nor has He made it the special property of one people while denying it to another. Rather, He has divided it and made it the common property of all His creatures in all ages, and made everything ancient modern in its time, just as every noble line has a humble origin. After all, Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, al-Akhṭal, and others like them were once considered modern.[47]

This bold statement has the effect of extending the biographer's field down to his own time and then leaving it open for his successors. Indeed, Ibn Qutayba's chronological arrangement permits future compilers to append biographies

[44] On "ranking" see Khalidi, "Biographical Dictionaries," 57.
[45] Jumaḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 21–22. The actual arrangement is somewhat different, due perhaps to later interpolations (see Shākir's introduction, 20–21).
[46] Ibid., p. 47.
[47] Ibn Qutayba, *Shiʿr*, I: 76, I: 62–63.

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