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0521661994 - Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn

Michael Cooperson

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Classical Arabic Biography

The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn

Pre-modern Arabic biography has served as a major source for the history of Islamic civilization. In the first book-length study in English to explore the origins and development of classical Arabic biography, Michael Cooperson demonstrates how Muslim scholars used the notions of heirship and transmission to document the activities of political, scholarly, and religious communities. The author also explains how medieval Arab writers used biography to tell the life-stories of important historical figures by examining the careers of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, the Shiite Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, the Sunni scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfi. Each of these figures represented a tradition of political and spiritual heirship to the Prophet Muḥammad and each, moreover, knew at least one of the others, regarding him as a rival or an ally. The study reconstructs the career of each figure from his own biographies, as well as from the biographies of the others. Drawing on anthropology and comparative religion, as well as history and literary criticism, the book offers an account of how each figure responded to the presence of the others and how these responses were preserved or rewritten by posterity.

MICHAEL COOPERSON is Assistant Professor of Arabic in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma'mūn

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University of California, Los Angeles



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Dedicated to my parents,
and to the memory of my grandparents

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The reader familiar with tales of people now dead, with the feats of those plunged into the cavern of extinction never to emerge, with the lore of those who scaled the heights of power, and with the virtues of those whom Providence delivered from the stranglehold of adversity, feels that he has known such men in their own time. He seems to join them on their pillowed thrones and lean companionably with them on their cushioned couches. He gazes at their faces – some framed in hoods, others lambent under helmets – seeing in the evil ones the demonic spark, and in the good ones that virtue which places them in the company of angels. He seems to share with them the best pressings of aged wine in an age where time no longer presses, and to behold them as in their battles they breathe the sweet scent of swordplay in the shadows of tall and blood-stained lances. It is as if all that company were of his own age and time; as if those who grieve him were his enemies, and those who give him pleasure, his friends. But they have ridden in the vanguard long before him, while he walks in the rear-guard far behind.

al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, I: 4

Men by mere principles of nature are capable of being affected with things that have a special relation to religion as well as other things. A person by mere nature, for instance, may be liable to be affected with the story of Jesus Christ, and the sufferings he underwent, as well as by any other tragical story: he may be the more affected with it from the interest he conceives mankind to have in it; yea, he may be affected with it without believing in it; as well as a man may be affected with what he reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage play. He may be affected with a lively and eloquent description of many pleasant things that attend the state of the blessed in heaven, as well as his imagination be entertained by a romantic description of the pleasantness of fairy land, or the like . . . A person therefore may have affecting views of the things of religion, and yet be very destitute of spiritual light. Flesh and blood may be the author of this: one man may give another an affecting view of divine things with but common assistance: but God alone can give a spiritual discovery of them.

Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," *Selected Writings* (1734), 71

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Preface

If poetry is the “archive of the Arabs,” biography is the archive of the Muslims. Premodern Arabic literature contains biographies of hundreds of thousands of Muslims (and occasionally non-Muslims) from soldiers and scholars to lovers and lunatics. With this diversity of subjects comes a variety of forms, ranging from simple lists of names to elaborately detailed narratives. In a few cases, above all that of the Prophet Muḥammad, biographers strove for exhaustive coverage of a subject’s life from birth to death. More commonly, they collected the names of all the notable men, and sometimes the notable women, who had lived in a certain town, practiced a single profession, or died in a particular century.¹ The entries in such collections are often very short. However, the collections themselves are so large that historians have been able to mine them for information about kinship, marriage, political alliances, labor, social status, and the transmission of knowledge in premodern Muslim communities.² Scholars of Arabic literature, for their part, have preferred to deal with single entries that contain descriptions, anecdotes, and lines of poetry. They have analyzed compilers’ use of sources, traced changes in the representation of a single subject over time, and brought to light biographers’ notions of plotting, characterization, and moral thematics.³

Given the genre’s diversity of form, one may wonder whether the term biography properly applies to it at all. Admittedly, it is awkward to refer to a list of names as a work of biography. Yet it is equally awkward to impose a firm distinction between the bare list and an annotated one, or between the annotated list and one where the notes have grown into anecdotes. Moreover, the tradition itself regarded all such works as related. In their discussions of

¹ Surveys of the genre include Hafsi, “Recherches” (cf. Robinson, “Al-Muʿāfā”); Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”; von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, 276–81; Khalidi, “Islamic Biographical Dictionaries”; Auchterlonie, *Arabic Biographical Dictionaries*; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 184, 204–10; Al-Qāḍī, “Biographical Dictionaries”; Roded, *Women*.

² E.g. Cohen, “Economic Background”; Bulliet, *Patricians*; Crone, *Slaves*; Shatzmiller, *Labour*; Melchert, *Formation*; and further Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 187–92.

³ E.g., the work of Fāhndrich and Leder; also Malti-Douglas, “Controversy”; Rāḡib, “Al-Sayyida Nafisa”; van Ess, “Ibn al-Rēwandī”; Eisener, *Faktum und Fiktion*; Homerin, *Arab Poet*; Spellberg, *Politics*.

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history and historiography, late-classical scholars described biography as a genre whose minimal topical and structural element is the individual human subject.⁴ In practice, the genre was indeed distinct from annalistic history and performed specific duties with respect to it. On this point the biographers are less forthcoming, but a close study of their works reveals a distinctive approach to the problem of historical inquiry.

As is evident from the popularity of works devoted to groups of people, Arabic biographers did not see their task as consisting primarily in the commemoration of individual lives. Rather, they used life-stories to document and perpetuate traditions of authority based on knowledge borne and transmitted, or merely claimed, by groups (*tawā'if*, sing. *ṭā'ifa*) of specialized practitioners. By recording the activities of single members, biographers sought to demonstrate the legitimacy of the group's chosen enterprise as well as the place of individual subjects within the tradition. In seeking to account for both the documentary and belletristic aspects of the genre, this book hopes to show (among other things) that its "literary effects" arose in response to the need to negotiate crises in the history of the groups whose collective life the biographers had undertaken to record.

Of all the traditions of knowledge contested by the *ṭā'ifas*, none was more hotly disputed than the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad reportedly said: "The bearers of knowledge are the heirs of the prophets."⁵ The political and religious history of premodern Muslim societies was often envisioned by participants and observers as a struggle among claimants to this legacy of knowledge, and much scholarly attention was devoted to sorting out the claims. To illustrate how biographers applied this schematic notion of social order to the rough-and-tumble negotiation of that order in history, I have chosen four figures of the third/ninth century and surveyed the textual record of their lives. Each of these figures – the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, the Shiite Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, the Sunni scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfī – claimed heirship to Muḥammad, or was declared to have done so by his biographers. Moreover, their respective claims ranged from the complementary to the flatly contradictory. Most helpfully for our purposes, each of the four also had significant contact with at least one of the others. As a result, their respective biographers had to address the claims made by representatives of rival *ṭā'ifas*. The collective textual afterlife of these four men thus permits a contrastive examination of the ways in which their biographers dealt with competing claims to authority.

The period during which our four subjects flourished, the first half of the third/ninth century, is fraught with dramatic events. These include the struggle between al-Ma'mūn and his relatives for control of the caliphate, the designation of 'Alī al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Abbasid Inquisition. These events, whose spectacular character made them prominent episodes in the

⁴ Šafadī, *Wāfi*, I: 42; Suyūfī, *Ta'rikh al-khulafā'*, 4; Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 56.

⁵ *Inna 'l-ulamā'a warathatu 'l-anbiyā'*. Wensinck, *Concordance*, IV: 321.

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biographies of those involved, are also symptomatic of broader trends. Al-Ma'mun appears to have been testing ambitious notions of caliphal authority. The failure of both his major initiatives – the designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Inquisition – set the stage for the eventual compromise with Sunnism. Sunnism itself first takes on a distinct political and doctrinal identity during this period. It appears first as a set of practices and opinions attributed to pietists like Ibn Ḥanbal, and emerges as the officially sanctioned ideology of the Abbasid caliphate. Shiism, too, was still in its formative period: though its major doctrines had already crystallized, its subsequent understanding of the Imam's role in history drew upon the experiences of the third-century Imams, including al-Riḍā'. Meanwhile, asceticism, at first often congruent (in Baghdad, at any rate) with proto-Sunnism, emerges as a distinct style of piety, laying the groundwork for the appearance of a new mystical tradition, Sufism. A study of the representatives of four leading traditions of heirship to the Prophet permits a synoptic vision of the conflicts and compromises that shaped later belief and practice. It also brings into relief the work of biographers, whose accounts of their respective heroes contain the bulk of the information we are ever likely to obtain about this formative period of Islamic civilization.

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Abbreviations

<i>EI1</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 4 vols. and supplement. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913–38
<i>EI2</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . <i>New edition</i> . Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958–in progress
<i>EIr</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i> . Ed. Ehsan Yarshater. London and Boston: Routledge, 1982–in progress
<i>HA</i>	Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, <i>Hilyat al-awliyā’</i>
<i>KB</i>	Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, <i>Kitāb Baghdād</i>
<i>ManIH</i>	Ibn al-Jawzī, <i>Manāqib al-imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal</i>
<i>MDh</i>	al-Mas‘ūdī, <i>Murūj al-dhahab</i>
<i>MU</i>	Yāqūt, <i>Muṣjam al-udabā’</i>
<i>SAN</i>	al-Dhahabī, <i>Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’</i>
<i>TB</i>	al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, <i>Ta’rīkh Baghdād</i>
<i>ṬH</i>	Ibn Abī Ya‘lā al-Farrā’, <i>Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila</i>
<i>ThG</i>	Josef van Ess, <i>Theologie und Gesellschaft</i>
<i>TMD</i>	Ibn ‘Asākir, <i>Tarīkh maḍīnat Dimashq</i>
<i>TRM</i>	al-Ṭabarī, <i>Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa ‘l-mulūk</i>
<i>UAR</i>	Ibn Bābawayh, <i>‘Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā</i>

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Note on transliteration

This book follows the Library of Congress transliteration system for Arabic, but without indicating final *tā' marbūṭa* or distinguishing between *alif mamdūda* and *alif maqṣūra*. In connected discourse, the *hamzat al-waṣl* is indicated by an apostrophe. Technical terms and place names used in English appear without transliteration (e.g., Shiite, Baghdad), as do Anglicized derivatives of Arabic words (e.g., Alid).

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Note on dating systems

Dates are given according to the Hijrī calendar and then according to the Gregorian (e.g., 230/845). When only the Hijrī dating is certain, the corresponding range of *anno domini* years is indicated (e.g., 230/845–46).

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Glossary

This list covers terms used without explanation after their first appearance. Arabic expressions not included in the glossary are glossed in the text.

abdāl: see *badal*.

abnā' (sing. *banawī*); also *abnā' al-dawla* and *abnā' al-da'wa*: originally, the Khurasani supporters of the Abbasid revolution; later, their descendants resident in Baghdad, whether soldiers or civilians.

adab (pl. *ādāb*): the cultivation of the literary and linguistic sciences.

ahl al-ḥadīth: students and teachers of Ḥadīth (q.v.), often synonymous with *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.).

ahl al-sunna (*wa 'l-jamā'a*): in the third/ninth century, a sect that stressed the importance of the *sunna* (q.v.), cultivated the Ḥadīth (q.v.), and rejected Imami Shiism and the *khalq al-Qur'ān* (qq.v.).

akhbār (sing. *khbar*): historical information, often conveyed in a narrative.

akhbārī: a collector of *akhbār* (q.v.).

ālim: see *'ulamā'*.

al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf wa 'l-nahy 'an al-munkar: “enjoining good and forbidding evil” (Qur'ān 3: 104, etc.); an ideal of conduct invoked by the *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.).

āmma: the common people; among Shiites, a non-Shiite.

awliyā': see *walī*.

'ayyār (pl. *'ayyārūn*): a hooligan or gangster; an irregular mercenary.

badal (pl. *abdāl* or *budalā'*): one of a limited number of holy men gifted with special powers of intercession.

baraka: the power to confer blessing.

budalā': see *badal*.

da'wa: a call to allegiance, specifically (1) the summoning of support for the so-called Abbasid revolution of 132/749; and (2) the summoning of support for al-Ma'mūn's rebellion against al-Amīn.

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faqīh (pl. *fuqahā'*): one capable of *fiqh* (q.v.).*fatā* (pl. *fityān*): a young man possessing authority based on physical strength or endurance; a member of a criminal fraternity (often synonymous with *'ayyār* [q.v.]).*fiqh*: interpretive skill; the ability to discern the right course of action in ritual and legal matters; formal text-based jurisprudence.*ghayba*: speaking ill of a fellow Muslim; backbiting, slander.*ghulāh*: among Shiites, a derogatory term for those who ascribed supernatural powers, notably immortality, to the Imam (q.v.).*ghuluww*: the doctrine of the *ghulāh* (q.v.).Ḥadīth: an authenticated report of the Prophet's words or actions; the corpus of such reports (cf. *sunna*).*'ilm*: knowledge, often knowledge of Ḥadīth (q.v.) specifically.imam, Imam, *imām al-hudā*: one who in his capacity as a Muslim leads other Muslims, whether in group prayer or as a head of state. Among Sunnis, it is used as a title for exemplary scholars (e.g., Ibn Ḥanbal); this meaning is rendered here as "imam." Among Twelver Shiites, it refers to one of twelve destined leaders of the Muslim community; this meaning is rendered here with capitalization ("Imam"). The caliph al-Ma'mūn (among others) referred to himself as *imām al-hudā* or "rightly guided and rightly guiding leader"; this title will be given in transliteration.*imāmat al-hudā*: the office of the *imām al-hudā* (q.v.).

Imamism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) from which Twelver Shiism (q.v.) emerged.

isnād: a list of the persons who have transmitted a report from one generation to the next.*kalām*: a discourse on religion that employs syllogistic reasoning; theology; dogmatic speculation.*khalq al-Qur'ān*: the belief that the Qur'ān was created by God, as opposed to being co-eternal with Him.*madhhab* (pl. *madhāhib*): a school of *fiqh* (q.v.); a community of affiliated scholars.*maghāzī*: the military campaigns undertaken during the Prophet's lifetime; a work describing these campaigns; a common designation for early biographies of the Prophet.*ma'rifa*: mystical knowledge, as opposed to *'ilm* (q.v.).*mihna*: a "trial" or "test"; specifically, the Inquisition put into effect by the caliph al-Ma'mūn.

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mushabbiha: “anthropomorphists” (cf. *tashbīh*); a derogatory term for literalist Ḥadīth-scholars.

ra'y: “judgement” or “opinion”; a type of *fiqh* (q.v.) that could take place without reference to Ḥadīth (q.v.).

ri'āsa: the office or attribute of leadership; the attainment of a popular following.

riḍā, al-: an acceptable leader of the community; the title of the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shiites (and thus capitalized: “al-Riḍā”).

rijāl: literally “men”; the term for a sub-genre of biography that examines the reliability of transmitters of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

Shiism: the belief that the office of Imam (q.v.) may be held only by a descendant of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

sīra: literally “conduct”; a common title of biographical works, especially those dealing with the Prophet.

sunna: the exemplary practice of the early Muslim community; (pl. *sunan*) a report of this practice. Unlike a Ḥadīth (q.v.), a *sunna* in the latter sense can report the practice of any exemplary early Muslim.

Sunni, proto-Sunni: associated with the *ahl al-sunna wa 'l-jamā'a* (q.v.), either in its formative period (“proto-Sunni”) or in its later manifestations (“Sunni”; cf. Sunnism).

Sunnism: the mature articulation of the creed of the *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.), characterized by solidarity with the historical caliphate and communal organization by *madhāhib* (see *madhhab*).

ṭabaqa (pl. *ṭabaqāt*): A generation; a group of persons comparable in some way. Commonly used as a title of biographical works.

ṭā'ifa: a group of persons possessing the same expertise, holding the same office, or otherwise engaged in a common and characteristic activity.

ta'rīkh: a biographical work that provides the death-dates of its subjects; a historical work organized by year; history as a field of inquiry.

tashbīh: the assertion of a similarity between God and created things; anthropomorphism.

Twelver Shiism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) that holds that the succession of Imams ended with the twelfth.

'*ulamā'* (sg. *ʿālim*): literally “those who know”; a common term for scholars, especially scholars of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

walī (pl. *awliyā'*): literally, a friend or affiliate of God; a person credited with extraordinary piety and spiritual power.

waqf: among Imami Shiites, the belief that a particular Imam is the last of the line.

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xxii Glossary

wāqifa: a group of Shiites professing *waqf* (q.v.).

wara': scrupulosity; the strict avoidance of the forbidden and the suspect, as gauged by the *sunna* (q.v.).

zāhid: a renunciant; an ascetic.

zuhd: renunciation of the world; self-denial; asceticism.