1 *Modeling Islamic Historical Writing*

To what extent do contemporary approaches to the study of Islamic historiography reflect the presuppositions that informed the writing of early Muslim historians? A proper answer to this question requires a consideration of the classical and late antique periods. Numerous studies over the last fifty years have shown that Muslim political, social, and intellectual structures appropriated (and further elaborated) preexisting models.[1] This claim is not universally applicable, but it seems to hold in areas ranging from coinage and court culture to legal codes and literature.[2] A similar dynamic likely governed the relationship between late antique and early Muslim historical writing. At the very least, an approach that highlights such continuity promises a better understanding of the source material than does the current propensity to utilize categories drawn from a modern European context.[3]

In order to properly understand early Muslim historical works, it is useful to first examine the contours of historical writing in late antiquity. Contemporary scholars document the prevalence of two types of historiography in this period.[4] The first valued dry readings of the past that minimized personal commentary and were informed by "research."[5] Historians of this variety, such as Thucydides (d. 395

[1] For a good overview of this topic, see *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, parts 1 and 4. For some representative examples, see Brown, *Late Antiquity*, and Crone, *Roman, Provincial, and Islamic Law*.

[2] To be clear, this argument is not predicated on Arabs and/or Muslims borrowing foreign concepts. It also rejects the nativist position that Arabs developed their own historical categories internally and in isolation. The reality likely lies between these extremes. This book emphasizes cultural connection rather than arguments predicated on derivativeness.

[3] Meisami argues this point in "Mas'ūdī," esp. 152.

[4] There is a large corpus of scholarship that focuses on the development of classical and late antique historiography. See, for example, Fornara, *The Nature of History* and Croke, "Historiography."

[5] Fornara, *The Nature of History*, 134–5.

BCE), sought verifiable information through eyewitness accounts and drew on documentary evidence such as letters or official decrees. The second (and dominant) form of late antique historiography relied on highly stylized elements and often included wondrous and fantastical details.[6] This type of material is often referred to as "rhetorical historiography" because it developed under the influence of the classical schools of rhetoric.[7] Historical works of this type placed primacy on narrative logic, credibility devices, and emotive persuasion.[8]

It was this second category of historical writing that may have exerted a particular influence on early Muslim historical writing. Before turning to the historiographical tradition, however, the narrative materials preserved in the Qur'ān merit some discussion. Bear in mind that the Qur'ān, despite its status as one of the few extant sources on early Islam datable to the seventh century CE, is not a book of history. Its relationship to and influence on historical writing lies outside the scope of the present study.[9] Even so, it is worth noting that the Qur'ān's engagement with biblical stories (e.g. Abraham's interactions with God prior to the destruction of

[6] For the prevalence of these typologies of historical writing in the classical and late antique world, see Gabba, "True History," 338–44.

[7] The term "rhetorical historiography" is not without controversy. The most widespread criticism asserts the rhetorical nature of all writing, historical or otherwise. This truism misreads the technical sense of the term "rhetoric" as explained by Cicero (who was himself drawing on Aristotle). For a discussion of rhetoric and medieval historiography, see Partner, "The New Cornificius." For a critique of a different nature, see Brunt, "Cicero and Historiography," who argues that the blurring of rhetoric and historiography stems from a partial misreading of Cicero. For rhetoric in late antique historical writing, see Van Nuffelen, *Orosius*. Other scholars whose work on rhetoric and historical narrative inform the discussion that follows include M. J. Wheeldon ("True Stories") and Patricia Cox (*Biography*). For a similar approach in Judaic studies, see Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*.

[8] This characterization draws on Cicero's use of the Aristotelian terms *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. For the connection between rhetorical historiography and Cicero, see T. P. Wiseman, "Lying Historians." For the influence of Aristotle and Cicero on historical writing, see Fornara, *The Nature of History*, 135–41. For the application of a "rhetorical" model in the Muslim sources, see Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 287–92.

[9] For the connection between the Qur'ān and historical writing, see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 1–16. The seminal study of the Qur'ān in its historical context is Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies*, which generated considerable (and justified) criticism, but still provides much of the conceptual framework for contemporary scholars. There is voluminous scholarship on the larger topic of the origins of the Qur'ān. See, for example, Neuwirth, *Scripture*.

Sodom)[10] presupposes an audience's knowledge of the larger narrative and utilizes subtle changes to make theological points (e.g. a different conception of God). In other words, the Qur'ān engages biblical narratives in a manner reminiscent of the rhetorical historiography of late antiquity.

The example of the Qur'ān, though not decisive, is suggestive of the larger thesis of this book: namely, that authors of the early Muslim world held presuppositions about historical writing that resembled those of late antiquity. The identification of these presuppositions, which are never explicitly mentioned, requires a close examination of the source material. This is, in fact, the only means for reconstructing the parameters that governed the scholarly output of early Muslim historians. It is noteworthy, then, that these historians employed literary devices and stylistic elaborations that both made a story more edifying and conveyed some type of moral lesson.[11] At the same time, they wove stories into interpretive frameworks that inscribed meaning onto an event or biography. This suggests that the literary characteristics of the material – often the sole focus of modern historical studies – were only one component of a larger historical project mainly centered on interpretation.[12]

[10] Compare, for example, Q11:69–83 with Genesis 18. In Genesis 18, divine messengers visit Abraham, who offers them food (bread, curds, milk, and meat), which they consume in his presence. Abraham later negotiates for the lives of the people of Sodom, securing God's agreement to spare them if the city is home to even ten innocent people. In the Qur'ān, by contrast, the messengers decline the offered food (variation 1), and God later reprimands Abraham for even contemplating intercession on behalf of the city's population (variation 2). The first variation clearly highlights the divide between the divine and the human through the messengers' refusal to consume earthly food. This is especially striking given the biblical story's emphasis on Abraham's hospitality as exemplified by his elaborate preparation of food. The second variation reiterates one of the overarching themes in Qur'ānic renderings of biblical stories, namely, humanity's unconditional submission to God. There is no space for negotiation in this relationship, even for a figure as revered as Abraham.

[11] These literary devices are discussed by many contemporary scholars (e.g. Albrecht Noth, Stefan Leder), who characterize Muslim historiography as "fictional." In their view, Muslim historians were fiction writers only loosely constrained by fact and prone to filling informational lacunae with stock literary devices. This idea is further developed in the sections pertaining to rhetorical approaches and terminology. See Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition* and Leder, "Conventions."

[12] The lack of attention devoted to the larger historical frame has contributed to the mischaracterization of some early historical works and the marginalization of others. I return to this point in the conclusion.

Early Muslim historians were influenced by classical and late antique "rhetoricized"[13] historiography in a number of ways.[14] First, they composed narratives with the assumption that audiences[15] knew the broad contours of a given event or episode. This mirrors the approach of many late antique historians, who, for example, assumed their audience's familiarity (in broad strokes) with certain historical narratives, such as the biography of Julius Caesar or the outline of the Punic Wars. This familiarity then allowed them to construct accounts with subtle differences that the audience could discern without difficulty. Second, historians felt *authorized* to endow narratives with significance and present them in an edifying form. In other words, they produced not merely dry timelines but embellished accounts that highlighted the importance of an event through the use of literary devices such as anecdotes, poetry, letters, or speeches. The result was a meaningful rendering of the past that was deemed more truthful than a documentary recitation of figures or events.[16]

The key dynamic here centers on the relationship between the author's text and the audience's expectations. This, of course, first requires us to identify the audience for a particular text. There is scant material available on this topic for the early period but, at the very least, it is reasonable to assume an elite, educated audience from a privileged socioeconomic background potentially familiar with a shared set of source materials. Building on this assumption, Michael Cooperson argues that audiences (presumably of biographical material in the early period) authorized the embellishment of historical narratives as long as this process (i) did not disguise the narrative as a Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) and (ii) remained within the bounds of

[13] I prefer to speak of "rhetoricized" rather than "rhetorical" historiography for two reasons. First, the former descriptor better reflects the idea of historical writing composed under the influence of the classical rhetorical tradition. Second, it addresses criticism rooted in the claim that all writing is rhetorical which misinterprets an argument about the presuppositions of historical writing as one concerned with literary composition.

[14] For a treatment of Muslim historical writing that covers authorial intent, epistemology, and audience expectations, see Waldman, *Historical Narrative*, 3–25.

[15] Few sources address audience in the early period. See Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 105–14.

[16] Although one could argue that the term "documentary" in this context is synonymous with "truthful." See Van Nuffelen, *Orosius*, 113, and Meisami, "Mas'ūdī," esp. 152.

plausibility.[17] The historian remained faithfully within the epistemological borders of the discipline when he altered details, elaborated speeches, and related encounters that *could have* occurred in order to make a larger point. This was an integral and accepted component in the vocation of historical writing.

The description of rhetoricized historical writing presented here is not a revelation to scholars of other periods and regions. A number of studies have documented, for example, the prevalence of rhetorical elements and moralizing in premodern European historical writing.[18] The most interesting parallel, however, is found in South Asian historiography, where Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam have proposed an analytic model that highlights a reader's ability to sense the "texture" of a source and thereby differentiate factual elements from interpretive embellishment based on internal markers.[19] Such embellishment does not constitute an attempt at willful distortion, as the audience is perfectly capable of decoding the author's intentions. In other words, the audience recognizes the text not as an exact reproduction of the past, but rather as a historical narrative that plays with time, form, and content in a readily decipherable manner. Rao and his collaborators note that such historical texts are best referred to as myths "in the sense of being more deeply saturated with meaningfulness and also more creative of the reality that they purpose to describe than are other expressive modes."[20] In their discussion of the early eighteenth-century conflict between Desingu Raja and the Nawab of Arcot, for example, they note the fluidity of a historical narrative that "may realign itself with a template of patterned mythic recurrence" which requires a "creative movement within the awareness of the observer."[21] The account retains a strong notion of "fact," which is central to the endeavor, while remaining open to transformation.[22]

[17] See Cooperson, "Probability." There is, of course, an inherent ambiguity in the concept of "plausibility," which is relative to time and place. To offer one example, reports of conversations with animals may seem "plausible" in some historical and geographical settings but would be dismissed as "implausible" in many modern American contexts.

[18] See, for example, the essays compiled in Breisach (ed.), *Classical Rhetoric*, particularly Partner's "The New Cornificius" (5–59) and Wilcox's "Sense of Time." For a discussion of issues of historicity from an anthropological perspective, see Sahlins's *Islands*.

[19] Rao, Schulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, 5–18.

[20] Ibid., 15 and 225. [21] Ibid., 17–18. [22] Ibid., 17.

Many contemporary scholars of early Islam, by contrast, continue to employ literary approaches that, while revealing important structural insights, largely ignore governing presuppositions (see section II on rhetorical approaches to historical writing).[23]

I Method

This book illuminates the value and potential benefits of applying a rhetoricized framework to early Muslim historical writing. It does so by proposing an analytic model consisting of three steps, which are outlined in Figure 1.1 and described further in this section. These steps do not, in and of themselves, constitute a radical departure from previous studies of early Muslim historiography (see sections II and III). A number of past scholars have discussed narrative emplotment, literary embellishment, and frameworks of meaning. The difference here lies in the integration of these elements into a single approach that is applicable to the early Muslim historical tradition as a whole. Put differently, this book attempts to detect the outline of large-scale structures that unite these historical sources.

The first step involves the identification of a *core structure* that is presumed to be known to the audience. This is done through the comparison of multiple sources (across genre, period, and communal affiliation[24])

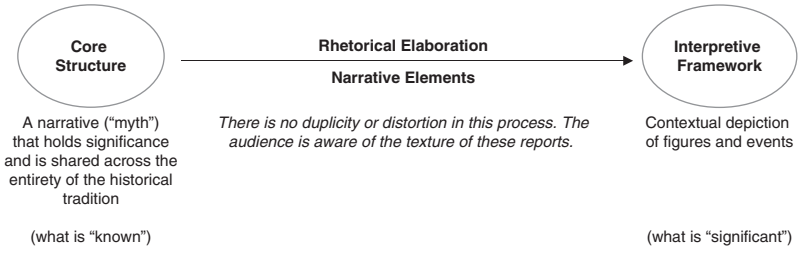

Figure 1.1 The Model

[23] Meisami expresses some frustration on this point, which contributes to her harsh (perhaps overly harsh) assessment of the field. She writes, "[the] concept of 'ethical-rhetorical' historiography, which is widely accepted in Western scholarship, has not yet penetrated our field, and I seem to be the only person to have made use of it." See Meisami, "History as Literature," 19.

[24] I use the terms "communal affiliation" and "communal group" in the place of "sectarian" or "sect." The latter are imprecise categories with a Christian genealogy that do not map well onto the early Muslim context.

that discuss the event/subject in question. The shared components in these sources represent the core structure and provide the backbone for the larger historical account. Historians populate this structure with rhetorical elaborations (step 2) to produce a cohesive text that addresses contemporaneous circumstances in a manner that is both persuasive and edifying (step 3). The core structure also represents the so-called factual element in historical writing. In some cases it is strikingly bare, whereas in others it includes considerable detail.

The identification of the core structure is made difficult by the absence of information pertaining to audience. It is always a tenuous endeavor to make assumptions about audience or scholars in the distant past. That being said, relatively similar core structures are often found across a wide range of sources. While it is untenable to argue that the simple presence of a story in myriad sources establishes its historicity, the presence of that story (in varied forms) across the historical tradition suggests, even if it does not prove, its ubiquity among the educated elite. Although the term "core structure" is unwieldy and difficult to use, it has a number of advantages over possible alternatives, including, most prominently, "myth." These terms are discussed in greater detail in section III on terminology.

The second step of the model involves categorizing and comparing *narrative elements*, smaller units of text that populate the core structure. These are crafted by historians in a process of rhetorical elaboration and embellishment. They are the individual stories or vignettes that, taken together, constitute the flesh of a historical work. Historians might forward narratives that differ from previous versions in minor but significant ways or present variants with radical changes in context and content involving, for example, the expansion of a speech or the insertion of dialogue. They might even create (or "discover") episodes designed to inscribe new meanings onto an established core structure.[25] In many cases, the elaborations of one writer will contradict those of another. The audience, however, is able to navigate such contradictions through its ability to recognize the texture of the source material and thereby separate the historical from the polemical/rhetorical.[26]

[25] Boaz Shoshan's work (*Poetics of Islamic Historiography*) operates at this level, as he analyzes the rhetorical methods that al-Ṭabarī used to develop multiple registers of meaning. This point is further elaborated in section III on terminology.

[26] Rao, Schulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, 5–18.

Overall, this step is concerned with the identification of rhetorical embellishments.

The broader purpose or intent of a historical text is the subject of the third step, which attempts to ascertain the *interpretive frameworks* that inform an author's description of an event or person. These frameworks provide the superstructure for the stitching together of the narrative elements. There is still room for rhetorical elaboration at this point. An author might alter an account in subtle or substantial ways to fit a larger purpose. It is at this level of organization that the audience grasps the full intent of an author's composition. By way of example, a historian writing an imperial history may shape individual accounts around an interpretive framework of 'Abbāsid decline. A historian composing a genealogical work may offer similar accounts but craft them in a manner that highlights the rise or fall of tribalism. It is worth mentioning that this step conveys a truism in historical studies, namely, that a given text reflects the sociopolitical circumstances surrounding its composition. A number of contemporary scholars have addressed this topic in isolated historical case studies.[27] This book, by contrast, incorporates interpretive frameworks into a broader model that also includes historical context (step 1) and composition (step 2).

A detailed example may help to communicate the idea behind the proposed model and decipher its terminology. Take the following three narrative reports:

1. A dog ventured into the woods and, passing a stream, came across a squirrel, which it killed. The town then passed a leash ordinance to protect wildlife.
2. A pitbull bit his owner's hand and was expelled from the house. It ran into the woods, where it saw a squirrel with a bushy tail drinking from a spring. The pitbull leaped at the squirrel and chased it for hours. The terrified squirrel hid behind a tree. Eventually, the pitbull came upon the squirrel from behind and killed it. It left the poor squirrel's body next to the stream.
3. A poodle was mistakenly locked out of the house and drifted into the woods, looking for water. It found a stream and paused to take

[27] For representative examples of this type of scholarship, see Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* and Pierce, *Twelve Infallible Men*. See also Haider, "Contested Life," "Community Divided," and "Lunatics and Loving Sons."

> a drink when a malevolent squirrel began throwing acorns at it from a nearby tree. The poodle moved to a different part of the stream, but the barrage continued. The poodle ran away, but two hours later it came upon the same squirrel, laughing about the incident with his bushy-tailed friends. The poodle attacked and, after a prolonged struggle, killed the squirrel.

The core structure (step 1) of these reports is quite straightforward: A dog went into the woods and killed a squirrel near a stream. This skeletal series of events conveys the information that the audience expects from each report. The narrative elements (step 2) are quite numerous and include the breed of the dog (unspecified; pitbull; poodle), the reasons for his entry into the woods (unspecified; expulsion after misbehavior; mistaken exile), the description of the squirrel (unspecified; bushy-tailed and thirsty; malicious), the nature of the encounter (random; dog aggression; squirrel aggression), the timing of the fight (immediate; hours later; two hours later), and the particulars of the fatal encounter (unstated; surprise attack; prolonged struggle). In examples taken from early Muslim historical writing, each of these details would entail vignettes or longer anecdotes with considerable rhetorical elaboration. Turning to the final, third step, the three reports are embedded in larger interpretive frameworks. The first example places the incident in the context of town politics and policy. The second example emphasizes the mercurial nature and destructive behavior of dogs. The possibility of a cat-loving author cannot be ruled out (with apologies to Abū Hurayra). The third example highlights the aggression and danger of squirrels who victimize other animals out of sheer maliciousness. The dog's killing of the squirrel here constitutes a general good. Overall, then, authors work off a known template to produce variant reports that convey competing meanings. This is a process that is both familiar to and authorized by the audience.[28]

[28] It is worth repeating that the model central to this study is indebted to scholarship on late antique historiography. This influence is apparent in three areas. First, it shapes the priorities of each chapter, as an author's production of meaning is given primacy over his preservation of information. Second, it underlies differences between narrative elements that result from rhetorical tinkering (step 2). And finally, it informs the discussion of the interpretive frameworks through which authors endow larger narratives with significance (step 3).

II Rhetorical Approaches to Islamic Historiography

Before proceeding further, it is helpful, and perhaps necessary, to place the proposed model within the context of contemporary scholarship in early Islamic historiography. The primary debate in this field over the last half-century has concerned the nature of the source material.[29] In recent years, scholars have increasingly favored literary approaches in their analyses of this material. Stefan Leder has gone furthest in this regard, characterizing early Islamic history as largely fictitious and describing extended historical accounts as novels.[30] Tayeb El-Hibri has also embraced this approach, discovering a complicated set of biblical allusions and symbolic references in early Muslim historical works.[31] Such studies offer intriguing conclusions, but they assume that the proper standard for the evaluation of historical materials posits truth against fiction/distortion.

This book proposes an analytic reorientation that pivots away from debates over veracity and toward a new understanding of early Muslim historical writing. In so doing, it builds on developments in the field over the last two decades. Previous scholars have considered emplotment and thematic approaches to early source material. They have offered close literary readings of particular historical accounts. They have even extrapolated interpretive frameworks informed by the sociopolitical context of a given author or by the constraints of a genre. The model presented in this chapter draws on all of these approaches while also accounting for factors such as the internal structure of a text or the communal identities of authors. In the process, it engages the question of what it meant to write history during the early Islamic period.

In his seminal study of Muslim historiography, Chase Robinson describes early Muslim historians as "creating as much as preserving" the past.[32] He notes that "imposing narrative form upon disparate

[29] There is extensive literature on this controversy. For a good summary of the debates, see Donner, "Modern Approaches," and *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 1–31.

[30] See Leder, "Features of the Novel." In a later article ("Conventions"), Leder expresses some discomfort at the use of the term "fiction." See also Noth's useful discussion of the role of fiction in historical writing in "Fiktion."

[31] See El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics*.

[32] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 154–5. I am deeply indebted to Robinson's book, particularly his consideration of audience (105–14) and of the context of early Muslim historical writing (143–55).