

The tradition of Islamic historical writing emerged from the environment of jahili ('lawless' or 'savage') Arabia. This epithet was given to the pre-Islamic period by the Qur'an. It is in itself an important historical judgement on Arabia's past and will be considered in its proper place. However, some two to three centuries before the coming of Islam (c. third to sixth centuries AD) jahili Arabia had achieved linguistic unity, an impressive and lasting legacy. This unity coincided with the emergence, after centuries of southern domination, of the North as Arabia's centre of political, economic and religious gravity. The North was an arc of commercial and religious towns joining north-western to north-eastern Arabia and curving through southern Syria and southern Iraq. It was in this arc that the North Arabic script and dialect developed and then dominated the Peninsula. This was in effect a reformulation of a very ancient language with deep affinities to the languages of the ancient Near East.

The Dahr, endless, ever-changing Time, brings both good and bad fortune to men. It is an abstract, faceless power against which there is no appeal. To each man the Dahr allots a fate, but this fate remains forever obscure: I

One instrument of Dahr is the Manaya. Like the Moirai of ancient Greece, the Manaya are feminine plural, armed with arrows or ropes and lying in wait to trap or strike down the unwary. Railing against them is a legitimate, indeed laudable gesture of manliness but fruitless all the same.

Paraphrasing Aristotle, one might say that an Arabian without nasab was either above humanity or below it. Although the Qur'an and the preaching of Muhammad called for the strict equality of the believers and certain prophetic sayings restricting inquiry into genealogies gained wide currency, nasab was too deeply ingrained not only in a certain way of life but also in a certain delineation of reality. Abu Bakr, we are told, was the Prophet's genealogist, advising him on the structure of tribal alliances. We may infer that Abu Bakr was in this respect simply a representative of a long line of jahili genealogists who believed that their heroic traditions preserved the memory of real heroes and actual events.

In the Qur'an, there are numerous references to books, writing, tomes, writing tablets, records, codices and so forth, but the context suggests their association either with divine ordinances and revelations or with formal documents, and not with literature in the broad sense of the term. In what, then, is this prose supposed to have consisted?

The Arabian tribal lore, the so-called Battle-days of the Arabs {Ayyam al-'Arab} and the Biblical and Near-Eastern antiquities {Isra'iliyyat} are the two largest collections of prose narratives reputedly dating from pre-Islamic times. The Ayyam, as transmitted for example by Abu 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn

al-Muthanna (d. 209/824), bear clear signs of the editorial activity of their transmitter. A typical Battle-day begins with a raid by a single hero or a small band who carry away camels or horses. Rape is often committed and women frequently reveal the identity of the raiders. An angry confrontation follows which then leads to the battle itself. The confrontations often include proverbial sayings while the battles are preceded or followed by verses full of blood and threats and generally inferior in merit to the jahili odes. Neither date nor duration is ever specified.

The Isra'iliyyat and Yemeni antiquities are commonly associated with the name of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 114/732), a Yemenite of Persian descent and usually regarded as the most influential propagator of this material. Biblical, quasi-biblical and apocryphal tales together with Yemenite historical lore here also betray the art of their Islamic editor to the point where it is impossible to arrive at any meaningful judgement on the form or substance of pre-Islamic prose.¹¹

The inscrutable, impersonal Dahr of jahili Arabia is a mere delusion: They say: there is nothing but our earthly life. We die, we are born and only the Dahr destroys us. But they have no knowledge of this for they are only guessing . . . Say: It is God who gives you life, then makes you die, then restores you to life upon the Day of Resurrection, of which there is no doubt. But most of mankind is ignorant. (45:24-6)

Qur'anic man is forgetful, inconstant, impatient, fickle, frivolous: Those who believe and then disbelieve and then believe and then disbelieve and then increase in unbelief - God is not ready to forgive them nor to guide them to the true way (4:137) Man needs God not only for salvation but also for psychological harmony and social peace. Without belief, man is unstable, a prey to all the violence and barbarism of the Jahiliyya, which is as much a historical era as it is a warped state of mind, the 'original sin' of Qur'anic man.

rue, the early Meccan verses of the Qur'an are densely apocalyptic, but even these verses are less pronounced about what is to come soon and more like moral images of the end of the world. If history is the science of particulars, there are hardly any particulars in the Qur'an.

one might argue that Qur'anic history partakes of two elements. It is both orderly and accidental, rational and chaotic, wholly under the care of God but subject also to the blind violence of the human will. This view of history had a profound effect on the Islamic historical tradition. But, with the possible exception of the apocalyptic material, the Qur'an's impact on historiography was not immediately felt among the early historians, for it was only one among several other, more pressing stimuli to historical thought and writing. We have to wait until the third/ ninth century before we meet historians who grasp fully the historiographical challenge of the Qur'an. Meanwhile other factors, other circumstances were initially more decisive in the formation of this tradition.

Men of humble Arabian origins found themselves ruling the richest provinces of

Persia or Byzantium, rapidly becoming the successors of the great emperors of antiquity. The shadow of the Prophet fell across these events and proceeded to lengthen in the eyes of his followers. The earliest social hierarchy among Muslims began to emerge. It was based upon seniority in embracing Islam {sabiqa}, the determination of which was an open invitation to historical inquiry.

The painful birth of the early empire was the single most important motive for the emergence of Islamic historiography.

In Hijaz, the twin cities of Mecca and Medina were soon overtaken in importance by their northern sisters, Damascus, Kufa and Basra. After an initial and short period of prosperity, they tended to be watched carefully and perhaps kept deliberately underdeveloped.