Muhammad and the Empires of Faith

The Making of the Prophet of Islam

Sean William Anthony

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations *vii*
Acknowledgments *ix*
The Caliphs, 632–809 *xi*

Introduction: The Making of the Historical Muḥammad *1*

PART I. BEFORE THE *SĪRAH-MAGHĀZĪ* LITERATURE

1. The Earliest Evidence *25*
    - *Three Early Non-Muslim Testimonies to Muḥammad* *36*
    - *Revisiting the Doctrina Iacobi* *41*
    - *The "Keys to Paradise" in Late Antique Religious Discourse* *44*
    - *The "Keys to Paradise" in Early Islamic Preaching* *48*
    - *The Doctrina Iacobi and the Historical Muḥammad* *54*
2. Muḥammad the Merchant *59*
    - *The Earliest Depictions of Muḥammad as a Merchant* *60*
    - *Muḥammad's Occupation in the Ḥadīth and Sīrah-Maghāzī Literature* *64*
    - *Muḥammad as a Trader in Arabic Sources* *67*
    - *Muḥammad and the Monk* *73*
    - *The Merchants of Mecca* *78*

PART II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE *SĪRAH-MAGHĀZĪ* LITERATURE

3. The Beginnings of the Corpus *85*
    - *The Umayyads and the Beginnings of the Sīrah-Maghāzī Tradition* *86*
    - *ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān and ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr* *95*

4. The Letters of ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr 102
The Chains of Transmission for ʿUrwah's Letters 105
A Translation of the Letters Attributed to ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr 109
Letter 1. From the Persecutions in Mecca to the Hijrah to Yathrib 110
Letter 2. Khadījah's death and the Prophet's marriage to ʿĀʾishah 114
Letter 3. The Battle of Badr 116
Letter 4. On al-Ḥudaybiyah, a Gloss on Q. Mumtaḥinah 60:10–12 119
Letter 5. The Conquest of Mecca and al-Ṭāʾif 120
Letter 6. On the Ḥums 124
Letter 7. ʿĀʾishah's Accusers 125
Letter 8. On Khuwaylah, the wife of Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit, a Gloss on Q. Mujādalah 58:1–4 126
Letter 9. On the Prophet's Marriage to a Sister of al-Ashʿath ibn Qays 127

5. The Court Impulse 129
Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī and the Umayyads 132
The Corpus of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī 140
Ibn Isḥāq and the Abbasids 150
The Corpus of Ibn Isḥāq 158

PART III. LOCATING THE *SĪRAH-MAGHĀZĪ* LITERATURE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

6. Prophecy and Empires of Faith 175
Prophecy and the Rhetoric of Empire 176
The Vision of Heraclius 181
Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī's Christian Source 196
Translatio Imperii in the Early Sīrah-Maghāzī Literature 201

7. Muḥammad and Cædmon 204
Cædmon's Call and The Iqraʾ Narrative 207
From Muḥammad's Call to Cædmon's Call 213
Mechanisms of Narrative Influence 222
The Iqraʾ Narrative—Early, but not Historical 228
Excursus: Alternative Accounts of Muḥammad's First Revelation 230

Epilogue: The Future of the Historical Muḥammad 235

Bibliography 241
Index 277

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Genealogical table of the Quraysh and the early Caliphs *xiii*
2. Zubayrid silver drachm (ca. 686–87 C.E.) from Bīshāpūr (Iran) *31*
3. Umayyad gold solidus (ca. 691–92 C.E.), likely from Damascus *32*
4. Umayyad gold solidus of the “standing caliph” type (A.H. 75/694–95 C.E.), minted in Syria *32*
5. Samples of the diversity of “standing caliph” type of Umayyad coins *33*
6. Arabic inscription of al-Rayyān ibn ʿAbdallāh mentioning the construction of the Sacred Mosque (A.H. 78/697–98 C.E.), from Ḥimā al-Namūr near al-Ṭāʾif. *36*
7. Opening flysheet of BL Add. 14,461, a Syriac manuscript of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark bearing the earliest mention of Muḥammad by name *39*
8. Depiction of a man armed with a bow, sword, and whip leading a camel from a sixth-century C.E. mosaic in the Church of Kaianus in Ain Musa *64*
9. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago no. 17653, a late second/eighth-century Egyptian papyrus fragmen of a *Kitāb al-Maghāzī,* likely based on the *Maghāzī* of the Medinan scholar Mūsā ibn ʿUqbah (d. A.H. 141/ 758 C.E.) *100*
10. Chains of transmission for the letters attributed to the Medinan scholar ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr (d. ca. A.H. 93–94/ 711–13 C.E.). *104*
11. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago no. 17627, an early third/ninth-century Egyptian papyrus fragment containing traditions of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. A.H. 124/ 742 C.E.) as transmitted from ʿUqayl ibn Khālid to al-Layth ibn Saʿd. *145*

12. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicagono. 17636, a late second/ eighth-century Egyptian papyrus fragment from the *Kitāb al-Khulafāʾ* (*Book of the Caliphs*) of Ibn Isḥāq (d. A.H. 150/ 767 C.E.) *159*
13. Chains of transmission for the story of the vision of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius *182*
14. Gold imitation dinar of Offa, kingdom of Mercia, England, 773–96 C.E. *225*

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Many of the ideas underlying this book began to emerge early in 2012, when I first began translating one of our earliest surviving examples of a literary biography of the prophet Muḥammad: the eighth-century *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* of Maʿmar ibn Rāshid, subsequently published in New York University Press's Library of Arabic Literature series in 2015. Shortly after I finished the project, the editorial board of the Library of Arabic Literature (to my great surprise) took me under their wing and even invited me to join their ranks. Ever since, I have had countless discussions and exchanges with them about the ideas in this book, Arabic literature in general, and life writ large—so much so that it is impossible to keep track of the debt that this book owes them. All I know is that debt is large. So to Phil Kennedy, James Montgomery, Shawkat Toorawa, Julia Bray, Michael Cooperson, Joseph Lowry, Tahera Qutbuddin, Devin Stewart, and Maurice Pomerantz, I extend my deepest thanks for keeping the fire in my bones for Arabic and its literary heritage well kindled.

In Fall 2013, I arrived in Princeton with a Mellon fellowship at the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study. My intent was to work on my still unfinished book on early Shiʿite apocalypticism, but with my translation of Maʿmar's *Maghāzī* still fresh in my mind, I mostly ended up working on and researching topics and issues that appear in this book. My good friend Stephen Shoemaker shares part of the blame for this—we ended up with offices facing each across the hall that autumn, and we couldn't resist constantly debating the historical Muḥammad. We're still debating, and he's still teaching me a thing or two as well. The early stages of this book benefited immensely from the incredible resources of IAS and Princeton University, but even more from the faculty and fellows there. I must thank Hassan Ansari, Stefan Esdars, Sabine Schmidtke, Deborah Tor, and Jack Tannous (who's always got a great research lead for me to follow) for lending their help and erudition to the early stages of the project. Above all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Patricia Crone (requiescat in pace), whom we lost to cancer, and who is sorely missed. She was always a generous scholar. Even when I was an unknown and unproven PhD student at the University of Chicago, she generously shared her work and her insights with me, expecting nothing in return. Her encouraging comments on and helpful criticisms of the project at the earliest stage were immensely helpful. I only wish she had lived to see the final product.

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THE CALIPHS, 632–809

Caliphs marked with an asterisk (*) played a seminal role in the compilation and recording of the earliest traditions of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature. Years are C.E.

THE EARLY CALIPHATE 632–61 (MEDINA)

Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, 632–34
ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 634–44
ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, 644–56
In Kūfah:
ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 656–61

(First Civil War 656–61, begins with the assassination of ʿUthmān and ends with the assassination of ʿAlī and Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī's peace with Muʿāwiyah)

THE UMAYYAD DYNASTY 661–750 (SYRIA)

The Sufyānids
Mūʿawiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, 661–80
Yazīd I ibn Muʿāwiyah, 680–83

(Second Civil War 683–92, begins with the rebellion of ʿAbdallah ibn al-Zubayr and his establishment of a rival caliphate in Mecca and ends with his defeat and the bombardment of the Kaʿbah in Mecca by Umayyad forces in 692)

The Marwānids

Marwān I ibn al-Ḥakam, 684–85
*ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān, 685/692–705
*al-Walīd I ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, 705–15
*Sulayman ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, 715–17
*ʿUmar II ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, 717–20
Yazīd II ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, 720–24
*Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, 724–43
al-Walīd II ibn Yazīd, 743–44
(Third Civil War 744–50, Yazīd III assassinates al-Walīd II in a putsch, and in the East the Hāshimite movement in Khurāsān launches a call to install a descendant of the Prophet's clan, the Banū Hāshim, as caliph, eventually replacing the Umayyads with the Abbasids)
Yazīd III ibn al-Walīd, 744
Marwān II 'al-Ḥimār', 744–50

THE ABBASID DYNASTY (IRAQ)

Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Ṣaffāḥ, 750–54
*Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr, 754–75
(762, Baghdad founded as the new imperial capital)
*al-Mahdī, 775–85
al-Hādī, 785–86
Hārūn al-Rashīd, 786–809

KEY EARLY COMPILERS OF THE *SĪRAH-MAGHĀZĪ* LITERATURE

ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr (born ca. 643, Medina; died 713, Medina)
A prominent notable of Quraysh from the Asad clan, the son of the eminent Companions of the Prophet al-Zubayr ibn ʿAwwām and Asmāʾ Dhāt al-Niṭāqayn, the daughter of the caliph Abū Bakr. He was revered as one the seven learned men (*fuqahāʾ*) of Medina. His correspondence with the Umayyad caliphs ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Walīd I may be the earliest surviving biographical writings on the Prophet Muḥammad in Arabic.

Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (born ca. 670, Medina; died 742 at his estate in al-Adāmā in the Ḥijāz)

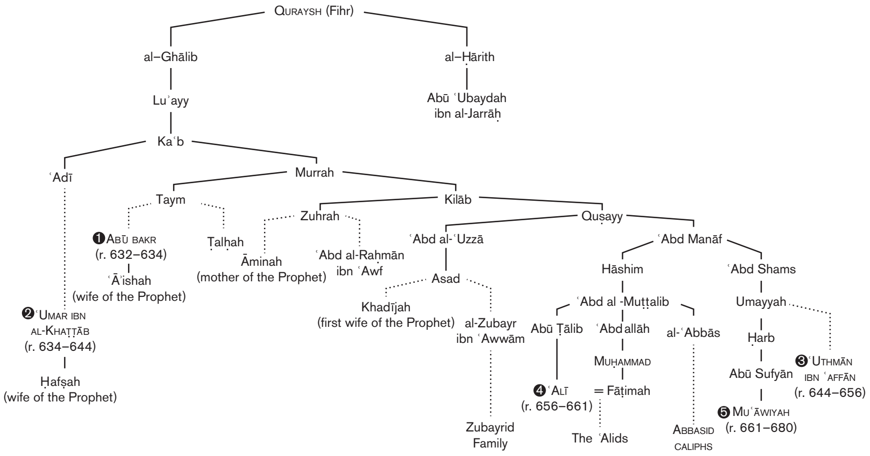
Quraysh (Fihr)
al-Ghālib
al-Ḥārith
Luʾayy
Abū ʿUbaydah ibn al-Jarrāḥ
Kaʿb
ʿAdī
Murrah
Taym
Kilāb
Zuhrah
Quṣayy
❶ Abū Bakr (r. 632–634)
Ṭalḥah
Āminah (mother of the Prophet)
ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf
ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā
ʿAbd Manāf
ʿĀʾishah (wife of the Prophet)
Asad
Hāshim
ʿAbd Shams
❷ ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–644)
Khadījah (first wife of the Prophet)
al-Zubayr ibn ʿAwwām
ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib
Umayyah
Abū Ṭālib
ʿAbd allāh
al-ʿAbbās
Ḥarb
Muḥammad
❸ ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (r. 644–656)
Ḥafṣah (wife of the Prophet)
❹ ʿAlī (r. 656–661)
= Fāṭimah
Abū Sufyān
❺ Muʿāwiyah (r. 661–680)
Zubayrid Family
The ʿAlids
Abbasid caliphs

FIGURE 1. Genealogical table of the Quraysh and the early Caliphs.

Perhaps the most seminal figure in the history of the Islamic tradition writ large, al-Zuhrī was an eminent member of the Zuhrah clan of Quraysh and a prominent member of the Umayyad court from the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik until the end of his life. During the caliphate of Hishām, the court sponsored a massive effort to record the traditions of al-Zuhrī, effecting a sea change in early attitudes to the codification and distribution of the oral tradition.

Maʿmar ibn Rāshid al-Azdī (born ca. 687, Baṣrah (Basra, Iraq); died 770, Ṣanʿāʾ)

A Persian cloth-merchant and a non-Arab client (*mawlā*) of Azd clan of Baṣrah who traveled widely from southern Iraq to Syria (where he studied under al-Zuhrī), the Ḥijāz, and eventually Yemen, where he settled. In Yemen, he transmitted one of the earliest surviving accounts of the Prophet Muḥammad's life, *The Expeditions* (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*), to his prominent student ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī.

Mūsā ibn ʿUqbah (born after 675, Medina; died 758, Medina)

A non-Arab client of the Zubayrid family who wrote one of the earliest accounts of the Prophet's life entitled *The Book of Expeditions* (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*), reputedly quite short, which only survives in later quotations. A teacher with his own study circle in the Prophet's mosque in Medina, he maintained a strong reputation among the scholars of Medina and their school, especially their doyen, Mālik ibn Anas.

Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (born 704, Medina; died 767, Baghdad)

The greatest architect of the *sīrah-maghāzī* genre and its most influential author, Ibn Isḥāq was a non-Arab client of the household of the Qurashī Qays ibn Makhramah and lived a tumultuous early life in Medina, although he earned the admiration and praise of eminent teachers such as al-Zuhrī. He found fame after he abandoned Medina and went to the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr, under whose patronage he and his work flourished until the end of his days.

Introduction

The Making of the Historical Muḥammad

This is a book about the formation and beginnings of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, an early genre of Arabic writing about the life of Muḥammad, the prophet and founder of Islam. It is also about how to situate this genre historically in the thought world of Late Antiquity (approximately 250–750 C.E.), a period that witnessed the ascendance of today's major monotheistic faiths (Christianity, rabbinic Judaism, and Islam), as well as others that are no longer so prominent (such as Manicheanism, Zoroastrianism, and other Iranian religions). In addition to the burgeoning of these faiths, Late Antiquity also saw the rise of their political fortunes, often by means of imperial expansion, and the articulation of their intellectual, literary, and legal traditions, which led to the transformation of a broad array of civic ideas, such as empire, law, and political community.

Employing the reading strategies of historical and comparative philology, this study explores what sort of insights situating the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature in a late antique context might provide. Hence, the work has been written with two primary goals in mind: firstly, to explore how historical and comparative readings of the earliest Arabic sources on the biography of Muḥammad in tandem with the non-Muslim sources of the sixth to eighth centuries C.E. might revitalize historical research into the life and times of Muḥammad; and, secondly, to shed new light on the historical circumstances and the intellectual currents that gave rise to the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition as a discrete genre of Arabic letters from the last decade of the seventh century C.E. up until the end of the eighth. In a nutshell, this is a book about what can currently be accomplished by researchers dedicated to investigating the historical Muḥammad using modern historical methods and close readings of our earliest source-texts. It is not a comprehensive biography of Muḥammad but rather an attempt to open new paths of research in the near term and to lay the methodological groundwork for future comprehensive accounts of him as a historical figure.

Although the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature remains an indispensable source for studying the historical Muḥammad, it must be emphasized that the corpus of traditions that this literature preserves is by no means our only source of data about his life. Much of this study is concerned, therefore, not just with understanding the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, but also with how this corpus relates to these other sources. There are four cardinal sources upon which all research into the historical Muḥammad hinges: (1) the Qurʾan; (2) epigraphic, documentary, and archaeological evidence; (3) contemporary and near-contemporary non-Muslim accounts, written primarily in Armenian, Greek, and Syriac;[1] and (4) Arabic literary sources that are mostly, but not exclusively, preserved in the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature and the *ḥadīth* compilations.[2]

Ideally, these cardinal sources must be viewed as complementary, rather than mutually antagonistic, layers of historical evidence.[3] In practice, however, this ideal proves difficult to achieve. Of these four cardinal sources, the first three are for the most part quite early, inasmuch as they were written, composed, or (in some cases) disposed of within the first hundred years following Muḥammad's death in 632 C.E. The last of these sources—comprising the Arabic literary sources in general and the *sīrah-maghāzī* traditions in particular—is often seen as the most formidable and daunting. Although all historical sources pose challenges of interpretation for historians, the challenges of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition are particularly acute. This bromide may be a common refrain among historians of the early Islamic period; however, the challenges of relying on the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature are salient and still worth articulating.

For one thing, the *sīrah-maghāzī* corpus is the latest of the four cardinal sources. No extant books that preserve the *sīrah-maghāzī* traditions date from before the period stretching from the late eighth century C.E. to the early ninth—approximately 150 to 250 years after Muḥammad's death—and the works that do survive are filled, to varying degrees, with theologically tendentious and even outright legendary materials. For this reason, a great number of modern historians have come to hold that the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature tells us far more about the formation of the early cultural memory of Muḥammad than it does about the so-called historical Muḥammad. Expressed another way, the *sīrah-maghāzī* corpus is a primary source less about the historical figure of Muḥammad than for understanding how early Muslims understood Muḥammad and his message, as well as how they chose to depict God's disclosure of His providential plan for human salvation through both. From the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, we learn mostly about how Muslims of the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. wished Muḥammad to be known and how they used their constructed images of him to forge their own confessional and sectarian identities, but perhaps not much else.

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[1] I refer here only to sources written prior the close of the seventh century C.E. The most important of these to mention Muḥammad are discussed in chapter 2 below. My rationale for excluding the other, later sources is relatively simple: by the 700s, a strict division between Muslim and non-Muslim sources becomes a false one, inasmuch as the authors of this era, regardless of confessional identity, begin to read one another's writings and respond to their respective, competing visions of the past with increasing regularity (see Hoyland 2011, 26ff.; id., 2017, 114–15).

[2] Brockopp 2017, 11ff., offers a similar breakdown of the sources.

[3] See the astute comments of Salaymeh 2016, 25–28.

Secondly, the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition is problematic because it is such a noisy source—its version of history tends to drown out the other sources or else demand that they be read within the framework it provides. This applies especially to how one reads the Qurʾan, itself a source relatively devoid of historical narrative (which is not to say that it is uninterested in history, or that it lacks its own historical vision).[4] For over a century, modern scholarship has seen early Muslim efforts to interpret and historicize the Qurʾan as the very fount of the *sīrah-maghāzī* traditions. In other words, although the traditions may appear to be historical narrative, this current in modern scholarship holds that such traditions are, in fact, fundamentally exegetical rather than historical in character.[5] Whatever the drawbacks of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, the versions of history that its representative books offer is a rather cogent one and a useful heuristic, so its narratives and frameworks are inevitably the first narratives that one learns as a neophyte. Hence, the arc of this tradition's narrative is often difficult (and, for some, impossible) to unlearn. Even today, modern scholars have scarcely begun to imagine what it would be like to read the Qurʾan without the aid of the exegetical and chronological framework of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition.

The late Patricia Crone, our field's most articulate skeptic, once expressed just how acute the problem is for modern historians when she characterized the most important representative of the early *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (*Book of Expeditions*) of Ibn Isḥāq (d. A.H. 150/767 C.E.), as follows:

> The work is late: written not by a grandchild, but by a great-grandchild of the Prophet's generation, it gives us the view for which classical Islam had settled. And written by a member of the *ʿulamāʾ*, the scholars who had by then emerged as the classical bearers of the Islamic tradition, the picture which it offers is also one-sided: how the

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[4] Paret 1961; Neuwirth 2010, 223–34.

[5] Becker 1913 and Blachère 1952, 10–11. Cf. the countervailing view articulated by Rubin 2003a, who offers an important riposte to the monomania that clings blindly to the premise that all the traditions of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature are exegetical in origin; he demonstrates compellingly that many traditions were, rather, "quranicized" at a secondary stage of their development rather than invented for exegetical ends.

> Umayyad caliphs [as opposed to the scholar's Abbasid patrons] remembered the Prophet we shall never know. That it is unhistorical is only what one would expect, but it has an extraordinary capacity to resist internal criticism . . . one can take the picture presented or one can leave it, but one cannot *work* with it.[6]

Crone calls Ibn Isḥāq practically our only source, which is likely to strike specialists nowadays as rather outdated.[7] Ibn Isḥāq's corpus can no longer be regarded as the historiographical bottleneck it once was. I myself have published a new Arabic edition and English translation of the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* by his younger contemporary Maʿmar ibn Rāshid (d. A.H. 153/770 C.E.), which not only provides an important additional source but also helps reconstruct the traditions of a key Medinan teacher of both Ibn Isḥāq and Maʿmar: Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. A.H. 124/744 C.E.). However, the pall that such dreary prognoses cast over the prospect of successful research into the historical Muḥammad persists. At the time she published these words in 1980, Crone's intervention was indispensable for the field, a much-needed revolt against a stubbornly dominant strain of Orientalist positivism that took these texts as simple records of historical fact—and, indeed, the iconoclastic spirit of her intervention remains vital to moving the field forward.[8] But is the problem truly as intractable as Crone characterized it four decades ago? Can a historian really not *work* with the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature? This monograph has in large part been written to counter this pessimism and demonstrate that, yes, one indeed *can* work with this corpus. But the question of *how* remains.

The distinctive élan of Crone's writing often obscures the fact that her pessimistic attitude to the *sīrah-maghāzī* material was not isolated, or even especially new. Three decades earlier, the German Orientalist Rudi Paret characterized the period preceding the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate in 750 C.E. as a historiographical "blank slate."[9] This is not because nothing had been written about it—quite the contrary, the sheer volume of sources discussing this period is in fact daunting, and its events and crises serve as the *locus classicus* for the sectarian and theological debates over early Muslim history. Rather, Paret was pointing to a gaping chasm between the earliest sources of the Arabo-Islamic tradition written in the late eighth and ninth centuries and early Islamic history of the early seventh century. No matter how many late sources we have, their sheer number does not mitigate the fact that they are late. This chronological source gap, not to mention the ideological tendentiousness of the later sources that do survive, has been characterized by some modern scholars as so dire as to render a historical approach to Muḥammad impossible[10]—a nihilistic abnegation of the importance of historical inquiry if there ever was one. After all, conclusions about what may or may not be knowable about the past itself arises from historical inquiry, not despite it. If this is where the pursuit of the historical Muḥammad takes us—that he is as historically as unknowable as, say, the King Arthur of the Arthurian legends or the patriarch Abraham of biblical lore—then so be it. That too, however, would constitute a sort of progress.

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[6] Crone 1980, 4.

[7] That Ibn Isḥāq was not the only game in town was noted early on by M. Cook 1983, 62, 91.

[8] Robinson 2015a, 606.

[9] Paret 1954, 149–50, "Die Zeit, die dem Ende der Omayyadenherrschaft vorausgeht, ist . . . ein unbeschreibenes Blatt. . . . Am Anfang der Überlieferung über den Urislam klafft eine Lücke"; cited in Schöller 1998, 53n14.

Recent research has mitigated at least one key aspect of our knowledge of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition and its utility as a source base. One of the reasons that our sources are so voluminous is because they compile, redact, and preserve *earlier* sources. Like the biblical critic who compares synoptic Gospel accounts to uncover the underlying source(s) behind them, modern scholars of the Arabic literary tradition have leveraged to their advantage this tradition's own "synoptic problem"—namely, the problem of relying upon a voluminous corpus of divergent accounts that relate the same historical event in slightly different ways—to discover whether or not older sources lie underneath these accounts and are embedded in the later texts. How far back one can go remains controversial, but the current consensus holds that, at the very least, we have a robust sense of what one of Ibn Isḥāq's teachers, the scholar Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. A.H. 124/742 C.E.), transmitted about Muḥammad. As discussed in chapter 5 below, we even know what one of al-Zuhrī's teachers, ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr, likely said as well.[11] This insight takes us well into the cultural and intellectual milieu of the late Umayyad period, which ended in 750 C.E. It turns out after all that we have a rather good sense of how the late Umayyads (not to mention a good number of their contemporaries) viewed Muḥammad.

The main methodology that has been used in recent decades to achieve this narrowing of the source gap is called, somewhat esoterically, *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis.[12] The methodology that these works pioneered exploits a feature of the *ḥadīth* and *sīrah-maghāzī* literary corpus that makes it ideally suited for source-critical analysis. This corpus is for the most part made up of small, discrete accounts, stories, anecdotes, and utterances that constitute easily identifiable textual units. This applies especially to the *ḥadīth* literature, which unlike the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, usually excludes "extraneous" catalogues and compositions such as lists of battle participants, tribal genealogies, and poetry.[13] Each of these textual units, called a *matn,* varies in size. They can thus be merely a sentence long or even stretch for a few pages. Each *matn* is also accompanied by a chain of authorities, called an *isnād,* that recounts who transmitted the account from whom, from teacher to pupil, and so on across generations. The best *isnād*s list a series of pupil-teacher relationships that stretch back from author/compiler either to Muḥammad himself or to someone who knew him or witnessed the events being recounted. *Isnād*s, of course, could be forged and indeed quite often were forged and improved upon as the ages passed—something long recognized by Muslim and Western philology alike, albeit while addressing the problem with different approaches and assumptions.[14] But as a source-critical method, what *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis does is test *isnād*s by comparing the *matn*s to which they are attached. Scholars who practice this method pair together *matn*s concerned with the same topic and/or event and then analyze their accompanying *isnād*s in order to track the evolution of a *matn* over time and determine the authenticity of the transmission represented in the *isnād*s. Some traditions are revealed to be spurious and forgeries, whereas others have been revealed to have been faithfully transmitted and recorded by later redactors, who, in most cases, did so without attempting to harmonize the disparate accounts.

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[10] Chabbi 1996.

[11] Görke and Schoeler 2008.

[12] Schoeler 1996 and Motzki 1996 gave the term "*isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis" wide currency. Although the studies of Schoeler and Motzki laid the groundwork for the methodology, previous scholars had employed similar methods; see Pavlovitch 2016, 24, and Zaman 1991, with which Pavlovitch and Powers 2015 engages fruitfully. For helpful reviews of other methods, see Motzki 2005, Sadeghi 2008, and Haider 2013.

Earlier scholars' pessimism nonetheless remains with us despite these recent achievements in the source-critical analysis of the Arabic literary sources. Some scholars still dismiss the vaunted insights of the method, even if they rarely offer a better interpretation of the evidence.[15] That said, the method is not a panacea despite its insights, a fact readily recognized by even its most ardent and experienced practitioners. Besides being exceedingly arduous and time-consuming, it has very real limitations. Here are some of the most important of these,[16] worth keeping in mind:

1. With regard to episodes from the life of Muḥammad, *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis produces the most reliable results when the number of different traditions on a given episode is high and when they are transmitted by numerous authorities. Many, if not most, of the events recounted in the

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[13] Of course, within the *sīrah-maghāzī* compositions themselves, these literary companions of the "raw" *ḥadīth* material are anything but "extraneous"; they are, rather, integral to an expansive project to encompass all of human time within the prophetic frame of early Islamic kerygma.

[14] Brown 2009 offers what is by far the best comparative account of Muslim and Western approaches to the problem of the falsification of *ḥadīth.*

[15] Tilman Nagel 2013, 568, for example, has likened the practitioners of *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis to treasure-hunters who, having set out to discover gold, rejoice even when they only turn up worms. Nagel's characterization grossly misrepresents the methods and results of *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis; see the riposte of Görke and Motzki 2014.

[16] I rely here on Görke 2011b, 143

sīrah-maghāzī tradition are not attested widely enough and in a sufficient number of variants to yield significant results.

2. Individual traditions vary widely in terms of wording, often due to the process of transmission and reception. Such variants resulted, not only from the vagaries of oral transmission, but also from those of textual transmission in manuscripts. Even if the existence of an early source text or template can be proven with a reasonable degree of certainty, some of the "original" wording of many accounts as transmitted from teacher to pupil has often been lost.
3. The earliest *hadith* and *sīrah-maghāzī* accounts that can be reconstructed generally date from no earlier than sixty years after the death of Muḥammad, and, with very few exceptions, they are not eyewitness reports. Hence, the chasm between source and event is never really eliminated; it is only narrowed.
4. Although analysis can verify the authenticity of transmission (i.e., that teacher *x* transmitted tradition *n* to pupil *y*), it cannot verify the historicity of a given tradition being transmitted. We merely get a sense of its beginnings. Moreover, the epistemological problems of all historical projects are never entirely resolved just because the beginnings of a tradition can be placed at an early date. An early tradition is neither necessarily a historically accurate tradition nor even a historical one.[17]

Overall, the *isnad*-cum-*matn* method has given modern scholars a better understanding of how our earliest sources came to be, and reliable methods for dating the traditions that fill these sources. However, these new insights have merely reconfigured the terms of the debate rather than settling the oldest questions. Chase Robinson (2015b) delineates what he sees as the recent emergence of two camps of historians of early Islam, and his observations equally apply to the historical investigations into the biography of Muḥammad. The first camp is populated by those historians who are determined to ascertain the general outlines of events that constituted Muḥammad's life and who are confident they can do so successfully, perhaps even to peel back the layers of pious legend to arrive at a bedrock of raw historical fact.[18] And in the second camp are those historians who are content to document how the cultural memory of early Muslim communities coalesced and the formation of the literary forms that preserved this cultural memory.[19] Robinson expresses his sanguinity about the second project, but of the two camps, the second bears the more pessimistic message in my reckoning. Its message seems to be that modern historians can sort and sift through the memories of the past—or, more accurately, the literary representations of the past that élites used to construct the cultural memory of their societies and, thus, sustain and shape the identities of subsequent Muslim communities—but they cannot look beyond them.

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[17] Görke and Motzki 2014, 499ff., and Pavlovitch 2016, 22–49.

[18] The hard-won *Grundschicht* (base layer) of Sellheim 1965–66, 73ff. Although dismissed as historically naïve by Hoyland 2007, 5, this sort of textual stratigraphy has been invoked as foundational as recently as Lassner 2000, 45ff., and Azmeh 2014b, 83ff. Hoyland likely echoes the verdict of Crone 1980, 14, "Sellheim published his stratigraphy of the *Sīra,* a work notable . . . for its definition of a *Grundschicht* so broad that the basic problems of the formation of the Prophet's biography were evaded." Sellheim later singled out the erudite tradition sorting of M. J. Kister as offering the key to approach early Islamic history; see Sellheim 2005.

Robinson's attitude is understandable and justified in numerous respects—just because he is pessimistic does not mean that he is wrong. The habits cultivated by historians create an aversion to naïve and credulous approaches to sources, and a healthy skepticism is a staunch and indispensable inoculation against such naïveté.[20] But even skepticism has its limits.[21] More important, Robinson's observations help us to focus on the salient point: the gap between the events of early Islamic history and the sources that narrate them cannot be entirely bridged by modern methods. We must still grapple with the process of how early Arabo-Islamic historiography in general and the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition in particular used literary narratives to forge competing communal memories of the past. Even if historians happily undertake this Sisyphean task, however, is the process of how early Muslim élites constructed this cultural memory really all there is for them to ponder?[22] Certainly not.

As Alan Megill has noted, "far from being a continuation of memory, true history stands almost in opposition to memory."[23] Memory ought not to be confused with the craft of history. Yet what is really meant by "memory" in such parlance? As used by contemporary historians, it has become an increasingly slippery term, and in the eyes of some perhaps even at risk of losing analytical value altogether,[24] but in the context of the discourse pervading modern historical scholarship, "memory" must certainly mean the sense-making stories that convey meaning(s) about the past for societal groups. Such sense-making stories simultaneously play a role in the constitution of an individual's selfhood and a group's collective identity and perform that function independently of any academic discipline or professionalized craft called "history."[25] Certainly, this social function of cultural and historical memory merits the careful attention of historians; but it is not theirs to wield. As a "basic anthropological feature" of human communities, Jan Assmann notes, cultural memory must not be confounded with the task of the historian and its evidentiary demands. "One must simply bear in mind," he warns, "that memory has nothing to do with the study of history." Assmann does not mean that professional historians ought not to be concerned with the process of how cultural memory is formed—to the contrary, the process is of utmost concern to historians (and, in particular, to Assman's own work). The distinction is simply this: the human and societal drive to construct a cultural memory of the past must not be confused with the actual craft of historical scholarship.[26]

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[19] Robinson 2015b, 122.

[20] Cf. the comments of Aziz al-Azmeh : "the terms of the debate seem to be starkly simple, counterposing confidence in Arabic sources, critical or uncritical, to the use of hyper-criticism as an elixir against credulity" (Azmeh 2014b, 3).

[21] Robinson 2015b, 122, "No historian familiar with the relevant evidence doubts that in the early seventh century many Arabs acknowledged a man named Muḥammad as a law-giving prophet in a line of monotheistic prophets, that he formed and led a community of some kind in Arabia, and, finally, that this community-building functioned . . . to trigger conquests that established Islamic rule across much of the Mediterranean and Middle East in the middle third of the seventh century."

[22] Azmeh 2014b, 6, "some scholarship which despairs of historical reconstructing later literary representations of the Paleo-Muslim period, as a contribution to what might be termed a history of mentalities." On the relation of the proliferation of memory to a loss of confidence in history, see Dirlik 2002, 83–84.

[23] Megill 2007, 18.

[24] Algazi 2014.

This is, of course, simply a word of caution and not intended to cast aspersions on historians of cultural memory or memory studies more broadly—their contributions to our understanding of the construction of the past and the contingency of our knowledge thereof has been invaluable. Our widespread fondness for using "memory" as a catch-all analytical category risks leading us astray. By terming such traditions about the past simply as "memories," one risks leaving the impression that these traditions are in fact literal, cognitive memories passed on by people who experienced the events in question. More often than not, these accounts merely don the guise of eyewitness reports rather than actually preserving them. Even when, in rare instances, historians unearth records of actual memories of the literal, vernacular sort, one cannot necessarily use them as shelter from historical scrutiny. "The frailty of human memory should distress all of who quest for the so-called historical Jesus," Dale Allison writes,[27]— and we who study the so-called historical Muḥammad would also do well to keep in mind the deficits of memory.[28] Though history *needs* memory, memory *needs* history too. Given the importance of cultural memory to all historical projects, I doubt that historians will quit overusing "memory" as a term of art any time soon.[29] The salient point is that history as a craft and discipline is not merely about cataloging these sense-making stories told about the past. History uses memory and its reconstructions of the past as a source, even an extraordinarily important source, but still just one source to be read and utilized in light of many others.[30] Rather than merely cataloging memories, the historical craft corrects memory, supplements it, subverts it, and demonstrates it to be contingent and contested. Focusing too much on memory poses a certain risk for modern historians of early Islam, who risk confining themselves to a mere "affirmative historiography" that values memories for their own sake and elevates memory and tradition to the most authentic view of the past. This is, in fact, to evade history.

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[25] "History turns into myth as soon as it is remembered, narrated, and used, that is, woven into the fabric of the present" (Assmann 1997, 14).

[26] Assmann 2011, 60.

[27] Allison 2010, 1; see Ehrman 2016 for the most devastating case.

[28] Cf. Schoeler 2011, 113, "even in the case of authentic traditions, we should not expect to have objective reports on actual events. What we have are 'memories' at best, if not actually 'memories of memories.'"

[29] On the staying power of memory studies, see Rosenfeld 2009.

What this discussion is meant to highlight is that the constructions of the past purveyed in the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition ought not to be seen simply as "history" writing; rather, these works rely on historical discourse in order to construct a sophisticated theological narrative about the past.[31] Much of what is conventionally termed "historical memory" is in fact such "narrativized theology," and a failure to recognize it as such leads to gross historical errors. That is, to view memory-cum-tradition as our main and most important source of history is to recapitulate and enracinate the theological and political projects of the past in the present. But then history ceases to be history. It collapses into tradition, aimed at carrying forward past traditions into the future tradition of specific groups (confessional, sectarian, tribal, nationalist, or otherwise), or else it collapses into memory, used to promote the vaunted and valorized memories of parochial groups.[32] A habit of speaking of Muslim scholars of the Abbasid period as curating and passing on early communal memory has occluded an important reality: this "memory" was no unbroken chain mooring them to an authentic past; rather, it was an imagined story, not just about the recent Islamic past, but about the deep human past and the ordering and guidance of creation and historical time by divine providence. It was, briefly stated, a theological construct that served theological aims. If we historians confine our task merely to cataloguing such "memory," we risk sublimating some of the most problematic aspects of the past and the craft of historical writing: how to avoid historical error, how to refine (or challenge) authoritative accounts of the past, and how to perceive the contingency of the evidence that survives about the past and thus measure our knowledge thereof. As Megill notes, "If the historian enters into the service of memory, the consciously or unconsciously selfinterested and self-serving memories of individuals and groups become the final arbiter of historical knowledge."[33]

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[30] "Memory is the raw material of history . . . the living source from which historians draw," Jacques Le Goff writes (1992, xi). However, the raw materials of history necessarily include not just memory but also remnants of the pasts, whether remembered or forgotten (see Megill 2007, 25–26). Indeed, even Le Goff warns: "To privilege memory excessively is to sink into the unconquerable flow of time" (1992, xii; cf. Ricoeur 2004, 385–86).

[31] Robinson 2015b, 129.

[32] Megill 2007, 33.

How, then, can historians escape the cognitive loop of memory's horizon? The answer is surprisingly prosaic: broaden the source base and enlarge the archive. However, the implementation of the solution is also fraught: the boundaries between history and memory are often elusive, and history can never fully vanquish memory or its own pluralities (i.e., the perennial existence of "histories" rather than an all-encompassing, grand narrative of History).[34] One sees this in the first such strategy to be adopted in modern times—namely, setting aside the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition for the historical Muḥammad and turning to the other cardinal sources, especially the Qurʾan and early non-Muslim accounts. Since much of *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith* in fact argues for the importance of integrating non-Muslim source material, I shall here briefly single out the challenges the Qurʾan poses vis-à-vis the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature.

The Qurʾan is the earliest and most important artifact of the life of Muḥammad and, therefore, the best witness to the religiosity and sociocultural milieu of his earliest followers. Moreover, the Qurʾan's documentation and the material evidence for its redaction and transmission are peerless in the Arabic literary corpus. This assertion reflects, not the naïve sentiments of believers or pietistic scripturalists, but rather an emerging consensus based on over a century and a half of Western scholarship and debate, inaugurated by the publication of the first edition of Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorâns* in 1860. That the text of the Qurʾan had been established as a written document mere decades after Muḥammad's death was first demonstrated on the basis of the intrinsic qualities of the Qurʾan itself.[35] However, the arguments for the Qurʾan's antiquity have in recent decades been considerably strengthened by breakthroughs in the paleographical analysis of the early Arabic script and codicological and radiocarbon analysis of the earliest surviving fragments of the Qurʾan on parchment and papyrus.[36] All of this leads modern historians to an encouraging conclusion: the theological narrative that renders the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature such a problematic historical source has not touched the Qurʾan, the primeval document of Islamic religiosity.

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[33] Megill 2007, 37. This phenomenon can be seen in recent popularizing works such as Tariq Ramadan's *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (2007), Asma Afsarrudin's *The First Muslims* (2008), and Omid Safi's *Memories of Muhammad* (2009). That "memory" serves gate-keeping purposes can be readily discerned in how rarely, if ever, non-Muslim sources are said to reflect the historical memory of Muḥammad or the early Islamic conquests.

[34] Megill 2007, 58–59.

[35] First by Donner 1998, 35–63, and then Neuwirth 2010, 235–75 and Sinai 2017b, 40–77.

[36] George 2010; Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012; Déroche 2013; Youssef-Grob 2019; Marx and Jocham 2019.

This is not to say that all the historical problems surrounding the Qurʾan have been resolved—they have not, not by a long shot. The earliest manuscripts of the Qurʾan are copied in a "defective" Arabic devoid of vowel markings and often lacking signs to disambiguate similarly written consonants. As result, how the highly stylized, oral recitations (*qirāʾāt*) of Qurʾan relate to the archaic text of the earliest manuscripts has yet to be fully determined.[37] Codicology has simultaneously established the early date of the Qurʾan and called into question the circumstances and motivations behind its compilation as recounted in historical accounts of its codification dating from the second/eighth century.[38] Deeply intertwined with the question of the Qurʾan as well is the very history of the Arabic language. Thanks to new discoveries in epigraphy and historical linguistics, that history is on the brink of being rewritten, upending old certainties.[39] The list goes on, but that just means there is still plenty of work for scholars to do.

So why not just jettison the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition and rely solely on the Qurʾan as our main source about the historical Muḥammad? Although historians can, and indeed *must,* rely on the Qurʾan when writing on the historical Muḥammad, it is "an unusual historical source."[40] Embedded in the Qurʾan is a great deal of information about the worldview and religiosity of its Messenger, his community, and even their opponents, but the text contains few details about Muḥammad that one could easily organize into a historical narrative. The Qurʾan relates no stories of Muḥammad's life, offers no narratives of his Companions or his enemies, and in general takes little interest in directly providing the immediate historical context for its own message. While the Qurʾan was divided into chapters called *sūrah*s at its earliest stage (e.g., see Q. Nūḥ 24:1), in its current form it does not present these *sūrah*s to us in chronological order but, rather, roughly in order of the *sūrah*s' size, with the longest *sūrah*s placed closer to the beginning and the shortest towards the end. The Qurʾan, not surprisingly, has been preserved with the needs and concerns of the faithful in mind, not historians.

At first sight, then, the Qurʾan contains few concrete historical data despite its substantial length.[41] It mentions only six historical personages by name, of whom only two are Muḥammad's contemporaries;[42] fourteen geographical place-names and monuments;[43] eight tribes and peoples, many of whom are from the distant historical past;[44] and only explicitly refers to five historical events, only three of which were contemporary.[45] This amounts to a mere thirty-three data points with which to situate the Qurʾan within a historical context. All of this is *not* to say that the Qurʾan does not propound its own view of the human past—indeed, it conveys a cosmic vision not merely of the primeval and the human past but also of the eschatological future as illuminated by divine providence and prophetic revelation.[46] What I do mean to say is that, even when it addresses "historical" material, the Qurʾan does not so much aim to convey, to clarify, or to record historical facts as to edify and to exhort—it is emphatically an oratorical and liturgical text, not a historical one.[47]

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[37] For important steps forward, see Nasser 2012; Dutton 2012; Kaplony 2018, 342–43.

[38] Anthony and Bronson 2016; Anthony 2019b.

[39] E.g., see Al-Jallad 2017a; van Putten and Stokes 2018; van Putten 2017a, 2017b, and 2019.

[40] Welch 1983, 15.

[41] I have adapted the following list from Robin 2015, 27–28—who himself relies on Paret 1961, Horovitz 1925, and Horovitz 1926. My tally also differs slightly from Robin's; even straightforward lists will reflect idiosyncratic decisions by the compiler. For instance, should "Badr" be counted as an event, a place, or both?

[42] These named persons are Abū Lahab (Q. Masad 111:1), Aḥmad (Q. Ṣaff 61:6), Muḥammad (Q. Āl ʿImrān 3:144; Muḥammad 47:2), and Zayd (Q. Aḥzāb 33:37). Even this list could be shorter. "Aḥmad,"

To illustrate this problem and its practical effects for historians, consider a famous example cited by the late Andrew Rippin, a short, early Meccan *sūrah,* Q. Ḍuḥā 93:

> By the white forenoon
> and the brooding light!
> Thy Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee
> and the Last shall be better for thee than the First.

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usually interpreted as the name of the prophet Muḥammad as announced by Jesus, may not be a proper name at all, as I have argued in Anthony 2016b. In addition to these four figures, the Qurʾan mentions by name two quasi-historical figures, Dhū l-Qarnayn and Tubbaʿ, five "Arabian" prophets (Hūd, Idrīs, Luqmān, Ṣāliḥ, and Shuʿayb), and twenty-four biblical figures.

[43] The places and monuments are: al-Aḥqāf (Q. Aḥqāf 46:21); al-ʿArim (Q. Sabaʾ 34:16); al-Arḍ al-Muqaddasah/the Holy Land (Q. Māʾidah 5:21); Bābil/Babylon (Q. Baqarah 2:102); Bakkah (Q. Āl ʿImrān 3:96); Egypt/Miṣr (Q. Yūnus 10:87); al-Ḥijr (Q. Ḥijr 15:80); Iram dhāt al-ʿImād (Q. Fajr 89:7); al-Kaʿbah (Q. Māʾidah 5:95, 97); al-Madīnah (Q. Tawbah 9:101, 120; Aḥzāb 33:60; Munāfiqūn 63:8); Makkah/Mecca (Q. Fatḥ 48:24); Mt. Sinai (as *Ṭūr Sināʾ* in Q. Muʾminūn 23:20; as *Ṭūr Sīnīn* in Tīn 95:2; and as *al-Ṭūr* in Baqarah 2:63, 93; Nisāʾ 4:154; and Ṭāhā 20:80); the sacred valley of Ṭūwā (Q. Ṭāhā 20:12, Nāziʿāt 79:16); and Yathrib (Q. Aḥzāb 33:13).

[44] ʿĀd (twenty mentions; Q. Aʿrāf 7:65, etc.); Bedouin nomads/Aʿrāb (ten mentions; Q. 9 Tawbah 9:90, 97–99, 101, 120, etc.); the Children of Israel/Banū Isrāʾīl (forty-three mentions; Q. Baqarah 2:40, etc.); Midian/Madyan (ten mentions; Q. 7:85, etc.); Quraysh (Q. Quraysh 106:1); Romans/al-Rūm (Q. Rūm 30: 2); Sheba/Sabaʾ (Q. Naml 27:22; Sabaʾ 34:15); and Thamūd (twenty-six mentions; Q. 7:73, etc.). This tally excludes qurʾanic terms that identify specific religious groups such as believers (*muʾminūn*), Muslims (*muslimūn*), Jews (*yahūd*), Christians (*naṣārā*), Magians (*majūs*), Sabeans (*ṣābiʾūn*), unbelievers (*kuffār, kāfirūn*), pagans (*mushrikūn*), apostles (*ḥawāriyyūn*), emigrants (*muhājirūn*), and helpers (*anṣār*).

[45] These events are the battle of Badr (Q. Āl ʿImrān 3:123); the battle of Ḥunayn (Q. Tawbah 9:25); the Byzantine-Sasanid War (Q. Rūm 30:2–3); the massacre of the Christians at Najrān (Q. Burūj 85:4–8); and the defeat of Abrahah's elephant troop (*aṣḥāb al-fīl;* Q. Fīl 105). As noted by Robin (2014, 27n4), one could also cite further events merely alluded to in the Qurʾan, e.g. the battle of the Trench (Q. Aḥzāb 33:7–27), the expulsion of the Banū Naḍīr (Q. Ḥashr 59:1–8), the massacre of the Banū Qurayẓah (Q. 33:26–27), and the treaty of Ḥudaybiyah (Q. Fatḥ 48:1–10). However, to affirm that these passages in fact allude to the events in question, one must assent to the exegesis of the later tradition.

[46] Cf. Paret 1951 and Cheddadi 2004, 101ff.

[47] Robin 2015, 31.

> Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shall be satisfied.
> Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee?
> Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee?
> Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?
> As for the orphan, do not oppress him,
> and as for the beggar, scold him not;
> and as for the Lord's blessing, declare it.[48]

How should the historian read this text as a *historical* text? The voice of this *sūrah* throughout addresses a singular "thee" (-*ka*) rather than a plural "you" (-*kum*). So is it addressing the individual to whom the *sūrah* is revealed or any believer who individually hears the message? The *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition used this *sūrah* to anchor its narratives of the Prophet's early life in the qurʾanic text, and some modern historicizing readings of the *sūrah* have adopted this strategy too, thus claiming to find direct references to factual data about Muḥammad's early life in its verses. For example, the sixth verse queries its addressee, "Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee [*a-lam yajidka yatīman fa-āwā*]." The *sīrah-maghāzī* literature, the modern argument goes, holds that Muḥammad had been orphaned at an early age by the deaths of his father and mother, and this *sūrah* confirms it: Muḥammad was an orphan.[49] That's simple enough. However, if one continues with this line of reasoning, the seventh verse is more problematic. "Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee [*wa-wajadaka ḍāllan fa-hadā*]," it asks. But could God have allowed His Prophet to have gone astray or been in error? Now, merely two steps into the analysis, the historian has unwittingly entered the arena of theological debate. Muslim theology of nearly all sectarian stripes came to hold that Muḥammad was granted divine protection from sin (*ʿiṣmah*) and could thus never have gone astray or been in error (*ḍāll*), a term used to describe infidels, so how could God have found His prophet astray or in error (*ḍāll*)? A theologically motivated reading might posit that the verse must be read contrary to the prima facie meaning of *ḍāll* (contending, for example, that Muḥammad was "guided" away from his "erring" assumption that he was an ordinary person to the realization of his prophethood).[50] The historian might respond that these later theological concerns are irrelevant and that many early traditions do indeed hold that Muḥammad went from a period of "error" (*ḍalāla*) to "guidance" (*hudā*),"[51] but this observation by our hypothetical historian is really beside the point. By assuming that Muḥammad is the "orphan" in this *sūrah*, the historian has *already* imbibed a theological proposition from the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition and entered the fray of its theological debates; the assumption does not rest on the purely forensic basis that one might otherwise assume.

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[48] A. J. Arberry's translation.

[49] Paret 1983, 194; W. M. Watt 1988, 48–49.

[50] E.g., see al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh*, 150–51; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ʿIṣmah*, 137; Ṣābūnī, *Muntaqā*, 216.

[51] E.g., see Kister 1970; Rubin 1995, 76ff.; and Ḍirār, *Taḥrīsh*, 118–20.

Rippin's example is intended to demonstrate just how fraught the prospect of historicizing the Qurʾan can be. He himself seems to have regarded the project as impossible, since even outwardly banal facts derive their perceived facticity from one unconsciously imbibed theological supposition or another. These passages from Q. Duḥā 93, according to Rippin, "need not be taken to reflect historical 'reality' as such, but, rather, could well be understood as the foundational material of monotheistic religious preaching."[52] Rippin's ultimate verdict thus seems to have been against historical readings of the Qurʾan altogether. "In no sense can the Qurʾān be assumed to be a primary document in constructing the life of Muḥammad," he wrote, "The text is far too opaque when it comes to history; its shifting referents leave the text a historical muddle for historical purposes."[53] Rippin's argument owes a profound a debt to John Wansbrough's contention that the very premise "that a chronology of the revelation is possible" internalizes the dubious axioms of the theological projects undertaken by Muslim exegetes of the second/eighth century.[54] Rippin is correct in saying that this qurʾanic verse and other passages like it do not inherently demand to be read in a manner that distills historical data about Muḥammad. But is he right to assert that any such reading that does so is necessarily contingent on or, at worst, wholly tendentious in its reliance on the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition as providing a lens through which the Qurʾan ought to be read?

I contend that the utility and richness of the Qurʾan as a historical source has been undersold.[55] For one thing, the Qurʾan can be read *historically* even if one rejects the proposition that it may be mined for prooftexts to confirm the historicity of this or that narrative of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition. Increasingly, reading the Qurʾan historically has come to mean enriching our understanding of its historical context. As our understanding of late antique Arabia has radically changed in recent years due to new findings in archaeology and epigraphy, so has our understanding of the Qurʾan. No longer can the Qurʾan, its Arabian context, and thus Muḥammad himself, be seen as aloof from the political stakes and imperial machinations in the region of the Eastern Roman Empire and Sasanid Persia.[56] Likewise, comparing qurʾanic laws to the contemporary legal cultures of Late Antiquity has cast considerable light on why the Qurʾan's interest in divine law assumed the shape it did.[57] Understanding the history of the Qurʾan and the historical and cultural context from which it emerged will inevitably enrich and redound to our understanding of Muḥammad.

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[52] Rippin 2000, 299–300.

[53] Ibid., 307.

[54] Wansbrough 1977, 38; cf. Pavlovitch 2017, 68.

[55] A point also made by Azmeh 2014b, 113ff.

[56] Robin 2015 contains three examples. For a good overview of these recent discoveries in English, see Robin 2012a.

Much has been said of the recent "literary turn" in Qurʾanic Studies,[58], which has also produced considerable *historical* insight. Literary analysis of the Qurʾan has reminded historians of its textual heterogeneity, and the consequences thereof for how we read the text as a product of late antique Arabia. Although short on history, the Qurʾan contains a staggering array of textual themes and types, such as eschatological warnings, descriptions of nature and the cosmos, moral exhortations, narratives of prophetic legends, creation myths, parables, hymns, creeds, prayers, and even laws. This heterogeneity is framed by *sūrah*s, coherent textual units whose literary features can be individually analyzed and placed in dialogue with their broader historical context and the religious currents of Late Antiquity. In the main, modern scholars of the Qurʾan currently hold that from this heterogeneity of materials one can also provide the basis for the reconstruction of the chronology of the Qurʾan's composition based solely on internal textual criteria.[59] The lack of *external* chronological order in the post-redaction Qurʾan does not necessarily imply the absence of an *internal* order:[60] the convergence of internal features within *sūrah*s—including style (such as verse length and end-rhyme), literary structure, terminology, and content—and the Qurʾan's own self-referentiality reveal four distinct classes of *sūrah*s (viz., early Meccan, Middle Meccan, late Meccan, and Medinan), which can be arranged diachronically and, therefore, interpreted *historically.*[61]

Although the diachronic approach to the Qurʾan is still very much in the making, recent findings are very promising. Patricia Crone's work on the pagans (*mushrikūn*) of the Qurʾan, the last project she completed before her death, has revealed extraordinary information, not just about their beliefs and cultural world, but also about their livelihood.[62] Fred Donner has quite convincingly demonstrated that the defining characteristics of the early community of believers (*muʾminūn*) can be extensively reconstructed on the basis of the Qurʾan alone in terms of their basic beliefs, piety, and rituals, the status of Muḥammad among them, their militancy, and (albeit far more controversially on this final point) their early openness to Jews and Christians joining their community's movement.[63] Hence, it should not deter us that early attempts to construct Muḥammad's biography using only qurʾanic data more or less failed to gain traction. These first studies were mostly prosaic and not at all comparative, and worst of all treated the Qurʾan forensically as an ad hoc apparatus for confirming the broad outlines of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition.[64]

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[57] Zellentin 2013.

[58] Zadeh 2015.

[59] *Pace* Reynolds 2011. The contention that the most recent chronological reconstructions rely on and/or reproduce the chronology of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature is a common canard of its detractors—a criticism that might be leveled against early pioneers of the method, such as Gustav Weil and Theodor Nöldeke, but certainly not the more updated approach of, for example, Nicolai Sinai. See esp. Stefanidis 2008. As Neuwirth notes, the Qurʾan's self-referentiality, not the *sīrah-maghāzī* corpus, is the key, "Once we concede this self-referentiality, we must also concede a historical development: only a text that grows around a nucleus is able to comment on itself" (Neuwirth 2014, 281).

[60] Neuwirth 2014, 280–81.

[61] Sinai 2010, 410ff. Cf. Sinai 2009; Schmid 2010; Sadeghi 2011. As Neuwirth argues, this entails moving beyond examining the Qurʾān *only* "in its post-redaction form, as a unified document made up of pieces of evidence of equal chronological and hierarchical value, and regardless of the process of change reflected within the Qurʾan's language, style, and self-referentiality" (Neuwirth 2014, 279).

[62] Crone 2016.

The Qurʾan's lack of interest in narrating contemporary events in any but the most allusive fashion, and, consequentially, the difficulty of reading it as a historical text, should not deter modern historians from pursuing the considerable insights it does contain. Fundamentally, this entails embracing a diachronic approach to reading the Qurʾan, while simultaneously rejecting attempts to treat it as a prooftext for verifying the historicity of the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition, which not only constitutes an entirely different genre of Arabic literary expression but also came into being via a fundamentally different historical process. The *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition and the Qurʾan are not two panels in a diptych. The *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition is a second-order source to be read in light of the Qurʾan; it ought not to provide a framework for reading the Qurʾan, because, unlike the Qurʾan, it is not an artifact of the earliest phase of Islamic religiosity but rather a corpus that attests to the centuries-long formation of Muslim identities and ideologies. A famous (and somewhat notorious) legal maxim attributed to the Syrian scholar al-Awzāʿī (d. 157/773) boldly declares, "the tradition determines the meaning of scripture; scripture does not determine the meaning of the tradition."[65] As a historian, what I advocate is essentially the inversion of Awzāʿī's principle—to take the historical and philological insights gained from reading the Qurʾan to reinterpret the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature.[66]

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[63] Donner 2010a, 56–89. For a critique of Donner's "ecumenical" hypothesis, see Sinai 2015–16, 76–80.

[64] E.g., as did Régis Blachère's *Le problème de Mahomet* (1952) and W. Montgomery Watt's *Muḥammad's Mecca: History in the Qurʾān* (1988). Nagel 2014 likewise has stated that the Qurʾan is the only reliable source of Muḥammad, but his 1,000-page tome *Muḥammad: Leben und Legende* (2008) makes liberal use of al-Wāqidī (d. 207/823) upon whom he lavishes extraordinary praise as a historical source. See Nagel 2008, 902ff. However, al-Wāqidī in particular has been demonstrated time and again to be a comparatively late and tendentious source. E.g., see Hagen 2009, 104–5; Motzki, Boekhoff-van der Voort, and Anthony 2010, 458ff., 464–65; Lecker 2015b; Motzki 2017, 12–14.

[65] My loose translation of *al-sunnatu qāḍiyatun ʿalā kitab Allāh wa-laysa l-kitābu bi-qāḍin ʿalā l-sunnah* (Dārimī, *Sunan*, ed. Dārānī, 1: 473–75).

[66] See Dayeh 2010 and Saleh 2016 for two studies that achieve this. Put another way, it may be hoped that future historical biographies of Muḥammad will bear far more resemblance to Rudi Paret's *Mohammed und der Koran* (1957) and Michael Cook's *Muḥammad* (1983) than they will to the works of W. Montgomery Watt.

Both the Qurʾan and the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition must be read historically and philologically. This process entails subjecting these two sources to the traditional realms of philological research, such as the comparative study of texts and their genres and the historical evolution of languages and language families as they evolve and interact with each other over time. But doing so relies on a conceptually pluralistic methodology that draws upon methods that are text-critical, codicological, rhetorical, historical, and so on.[67] Lastly, this type of philological reading requires self-reflection on the part of the philologist-cum-historian. No philological reading is absolute and immutable. Each reading is contingent, rather, on the philologist's access to the particular constellation of source material available to her as well as her embeddedness in her own time, place, and cultural context—it is not the product of "a view from nowhere." The scholar and her project are just as historically bound and contingent as her sources.[68] Each scholar must contend with "the vast domain of historical unknowability."[69]

Sheldon Pollock terms such an approach "philology in three dimensions," a scholarly practice that takes seriously "its factitiousness and historicity as a knowledge form." As conceived by Pollock, three-dimensional philology plots the practice of reading texts philologically across three planes that presume the intersecting dimensions of time and space through which every reader encounters texts: "1) the text's genesis; 2) its earlier readers; and 3) me reading here and now."[70] Modern scholarship of the Arabo-Islamic tradition already boasts skilled practitioners who engage with this second dimension of philological scholarship. Modern research into the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition that analyzes *isnād*s, compiles and compares all the accounts of a given event, and establishes criteria for distinguishing reliable sources from unreliable ones is deeply embedded in (and frankly unthinkable without) the tools and methods inherited from the monumental philological undertakings of the Muslim communities of scholarship, whether of the past or the present.[71] Indeed, recognizing this redounds to the methodological and conceptual pluralism of modern philological practice at its best. Philological practice, as Pollock has noted, is a knowledge form that appears wherever texts and the problem of their interpretation appear; it cannot be owned by or exist as the self-contained scholastic enterprise of a single discursive community. Hence, making sense of texts inevitably entails learning how others have done so, and often done so very differently.[72]

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[67] Turner 2014, x; Pollock 2016, 14–15.

[68] Particularly vivid explorations of these theme can be found in Ali 2014.

[69] Megill 2007, 58.

[70] Pollock 2014 and 2016, 20.

[71] Hoyland 2008, 6–10, has rightly seen this aspect of modern scholarship as a good thing, albeit not acknowledged frequently enough..

[72] Pollock 2016, 15.

The field has excelled in analyzing these early texts in their vertical dimension—the manner in which subsequent generations of Muslims glossed, commented upon, critiqued, and debated these texts over centuries—but it has not yet sufficiently read these texts in the lateral dimensions: in their original historical context and comparatively across cognate literary traditions. Philologically informed and historical readings need both a holistic reconstruction of a text's reception *and* a reconstruction of its original context—one reconstruction cannot be realized without the other. Although there has long been a widespread consensus on the indispensability of close readings of the Qurʾan and the *sīrah-maghāzī* tradition in Arabic that draw on the full insights of the philological apparatus of the Muslim tradition, the emerging consensus that one must *also* know and comparatively engage with the languages and literary traditions of Late Antiquity and modern scholarship thereon, not as a mere desideratum for the field but as a prerequisite for scholarly analysis, is less well established. In an important article, Angelika Neuwirth eloquently described the shortcomings our field's insularity as a failure to situate the Qurʾan in the "thought world" and "epistemic space" of Late Antiquity—a failure she diagnoses as rooted in a subconscious, but nonetheless persistent, tendency of modern scholarship to reproduce the premodern view of early Islamic history as momentous yet "foreign" and somehow outside and beyond the forces exerted by Late Antiquity on Western and European history.[73] As Garth Fowden has recently noted, the great pioneer of the *sīrah-maghāzī* genre, Ibn Isḥāq, placed Muḥammad not in a parochial Arabia but rather in a capacious world of "generous historical contextualization." The world of the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature is not just one of Arabian tribal pagans and their idolatrous soothsayers; its scope reaches into the cosmic and primordial past of Genesis, of the Israelites and their patriarchs and matriarchs, and its narratives include characters who abide in and travel in Egypt, Axum, Syria, and Iran, and who set foot in monasteries, synagogues, Mazdean temples, and even the courts of Roman and Sasanian rulers. The *sīrah-maghāzī* literature is just as much interested in rabbis and monks and how their exegetical cultures reimagined the cosmos and humanity's place therein as it is in the world of Arabian barbarism (Ar. *al-jāhiliyyah*) into which Muḥammad was purportedly born.[74] To embed the *sīrah-maghāzī* within the societal, literary, and cultural contexts of Late Antiquity is not only to correct methodological dereliction; it is also to shed light on the fundamental human process at work in these early Islamic texts—namely, the manner in which interconnected human communities interpret their historical experiences and imbue them with meaning.[75]

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[73] Neuwirth 2017, 167; cf. Hoyland 2012.

[74] Fowden 2014, 76–77.

[75] Neuwirth 2017, 169.

The solution, therefore, cannot be to return what Joseph Schacht termed "the gratuitous assumptions" of earlier generations of scholars[76]—namely, that there exists a pure, original, or authentic core of material, the proverbial "historical kernel" of the life and times of Muḥammad. Such a view is not only historiographically naïve, it is epistemologically unsound and a betrayal of the philological method. There seems to be a persistent misconception that all hopes of future insights rely on our field's ability to purloin the methods and tools of biblical studies. Not so—truth be told, current scholarship shows an unwelcome emergent trend of neglecting the centuries-long philological tradition of Muslim scholarship or else traducing what this tradition actually contains. The field will have to develop its own tools, better suited to the corpora with which we work.

Nor is the solution to resign ourselves to the role of curators and catalogers of historical memory. Historical research into the founding personalities of religions (Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muḥammad, or whoever) has often been misconstrued as a project aimed only at undermining the truths of scripture and demolishing the claims of a religious tradition once vaunted as self-evident. However, the aims of such historical research into the founders of religions are far more banal: to derive new knowledge from ancient sources using the tools and methodologies of historical inquiry. That such historical inquiry poses no challenges for contemporaries, whether persons of faith or not, is also a common canard. New knowledge always entails a new way of looking at the world and at humanity itself. Early modern humanistic research into the historical Muḥammad dismantled hoary European views of him as a demoniac possessed of the malevolent spirits of the age (such as heresy and pseudo-prophetic imposture) and rendered untenable the view of him as the archenemy of Christendom. So too contemporary research into the historical figure of Muḥammad might dismantle the paranoiac fear-mongering discourses that cast Muḥammad, and by extension Muslims, as possessed by demons that torment our own time, such as terrorism and religious fanaticism. This is not a call for the politicization of scholarship on early Islam, but merely to recognize that not only the findings of historical research but also its very undertaking have ramifications for our time.[77] In the cosmopolitan pursuit of an understanding of Muḥammad's life as a historical figure, the formation of his image among early Muslims, and the history-bound contingency of our knowledge about him and the stories of his life, we find a common humanity. As Guy Stroumsa has persuasively argued, when Enlightenment thinkers naturalized Muḥammad as a mere man rather than a demonic false prophet, they forged a humanistic intellectual environment that inexorably led to the naturalization of Moses and Jesus as men of history and of their times as well. Hence, the three founders of Judaism, Christianity, and

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[76] Schacht 1949, 146.

[77] Cf. the instructive comments in Robinson 2009.

Islam suddenly came to stand on par with one another in the humanists' imaginary, a parity and equilibrium that established the foundations of the very enterprise of the comparative study of religions.[78]

The process that Stroumsa describes, albeit considerably transformed by successive generations of scholars, still endures. There is no reason to work in the cloud of pessimism once expressed by Maxime Rodinson, who, now decades ago, began his book on the historical Muḥammad with this concise *apologia,* "My book does not propose to bring out new facts about the subject. None have been discovered for a long time, and it is unlikely that any will be."[79] The somnambulatory era of Rodinson and his ilk has ended and hopefully will remain far behind us into the foreseeable future. Studying the founder of any ancient religious tradition poses formidable challenges, but for all the difficulties posed by our sources, modern researchers have plenty of justification to be optimistic about what can be achieved in the field and the importance of that work. "We probably know more about Mohammed than we do about Jesus (let alone Moses or the Buddha), and *we certainly have the potential to know a great deal more,*" the late Patricia Crone observed.[80] If this monograph succeeds only convincing its readers that this optimism about the field's future is indeed justified, I will be quite satisfied with the fruits of my labor.

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[78] Stroumsa 2010, 137.

[79] Rodinson 1971, ix; cited in Lecker 1995a, x, who rightly quips, "Rodinson's pessimism is totally unwarranted."

[80] Crone 2008a, para. 2 (emphasis added).

PART I

Before the *Sīrah-Maghāzī* Literature

1

The Earliest Evidence

Despite the limitations of the Qurʾan for reconstructing the events of Muḥammad's life, it remains our best and earliest witness to the historical existence of a man named Muḥammad who was revered by a faith community of Arabic-speakers as God's messenger and prophet, not to mention the message that he preached and the religiosity that he espoused. Yet do the limitations of the Qurʾan as a historical source per se demand that we inevitably fall back on the *ḥadīth* corpus and the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature as our *only* other option for knowledge about the historical Muḥammad? Apart from the Qurʾan, is there any knowledge to be gained at all about the historical figure of Muḥammad from sources that predate either the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature or the *ḥadīth* corpus? One can pose the question in even simpler terms: apart from the Qurʾan, what are the earliest references to Muḥammad as a historical figure, and where are they found? More important, what do these earliest testimonies say about him, and how do these sorts of testimonies differ, if at all, from the depictions of Muḥammad in either the early *sīrah-maghāzī* literature or the *ḥadīth* corpus? Chapters 1 and 2 offer some answers to these formidable questions. This chapter in particular aims to demonstrate what historians can learn by examining the earliest documentary testimonies to Muḥammad as a historical person, as well as what can be gleaned from the three of the earliest non-Muslim sources to mention Muḥammad and his activities.

The corpus of material evidence for the historical existence of Muḥammad that survives in the form of artifacts from the seventh century C.E.—be they Arabo-Islamic papyri, graffiti, or official inscriptions—is surprisingly rich, especially considering the amount of survey work and documentation that still remains to be done by archaeologists, papyrologists, epigraphers, and historians. As ongoing surveys and expeditions continue to discover new finds, particularly in the field of Arabian epigraphy of late, it is prudent to begin by highlighting this material, as it provides compelling evidence not only for the existence of Muḥammad as a historical figure but also for the salience of his message and persona among Arabic-speakers in the first century after his death.

Arabo-Islamic documents and inscriptions—that is, material evidence bearing words that are either written in Arabic, that bear the names of Muslims and/or their rulers, or that contain touchstone features of Islamic religiosity such as pious invocations and prayers composed in the religious idiom of the Qurʾan—appear on the historical record within mere decades after Muḥammad's death in C.E. 632.[1] The earliest dated documents and inscriptions of this sort hitherto discovered are recognized as such by modern historians because they either explicitly refer to contemporary, datable events and/or because they use the newly minted *hijrī* calendar, or *anno hegirae* (represented in modern Western scholarship by acronym A.H.). The significance of the *hijrī* calendar, one of the earliest, most visible markers of Muslim identity, is considerable. As a distinctive means of timekeeping, reckoning years according to a cycle of lunar months, it regulates Islamic ritual and its observance, and the early Islamic polity also eventually used it for broader administrative and societal purposes as well.[2] It is important to point out that, on the one hand, the use of this calendar, as well as the names of the months it employs, are unattested in any Arabic or Arabian inscriptions that predate Islamic conquests,[3] and, on the other hand, that the calendar putatively begins counting the passing of years with the year A.H. 1 (622–23 C.E.), the year in which Muḥammad purportedly fled persecution in his native city of Mecca and undertook the Hijrah, or Emigration, to the city of Yathrib (subsequently renamed Medina), where he would become ruler and inaugurate the Muslim community, or *ummah*. The ideological importance of the calendar is, therefore, immense—it represents no less than a reorientation of human time-keeping around an event deemed so significant that it was placed at the axis of a community's historical consciousness.

Though adopted at an early date, the counting of years beginning with Muḥammad's *hijrah* to Yathrib was not an innovation of Muḥammad himself. If our earliest sources are to be trusted, the second caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–44) instituted its use sometime between A.H. 16/638 C.E. and A.H. 18/639 C.E.[4]

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[1] The surveys of Hoyland 2016, Imbert 2011, 2013, and Lindstedt forthcoming *a* and *b* are especially useful. Imbert 2013's catalogue of the citations of the Qurʾan contained in Arabic inscriptions from the first two centuries of Islam demonstrates just how swiftly the Qurʾan was disseminated and how indispensable the epigraphic record is to its textual history.

[2] Hoyland 2006, 396; see now the overview in Shaddel 2018.

[3] Robin 2016.

[4] Prémare 2002, 272, cited in Imbert 2011, 6. Key features of the calendar, however, date to and/or precede the lifetime of Muḥammad and are partially attested in the Qurʾan, such as its cycle of sacred months and the qurʾanic prohibition of intercalation.

The earliest documents bearing a *hijrī* date—two papyri known as P.Berol 15002 and PERF 558, first published by the Austrian scholar Adolf Grohmann in 1932— seem to confirm this, because they date from the final years of ʿUmar's rule. The first papyrus, a fragmentary tax receipt, is written solely in Arabic, and merely mentions "[the] year twenty-two."[5] The second papyrus, however, is better preserved and bilingual as well, being written in both Greek and Arabic. It is a receipt for the delivery of sixty-five sheep by two *pagarchs* of Herakleopolis to an Arab commander (*amīr*) in Egypt named ʿAbdallāh ibn Jābir. The Arabic portion of the text provides us with details such as the name of the Arabic-speaking scribe (one Ibn Ḥadīd) and the date of the transaction: Jumādā I A.H. 22/March–April 643 C.E. Significantly, the verso side of the document also calls the early conquerors to whom the sheep are delivered by an important name: it refers to them as in Greek as *magarítais,* a neologism that originated as a calque of the Arabic *muhājirūn,* meaning "emigrants," or "those who have undertaken a *hijrah* [to join the community and/or conquests]."[6] Despite their importance, both documents leave one question unanswered: twenty-two years into which epoch exactly? The most compelling answer to this question remains, "twenty years after the *hijrah* of Muḥammad," a *hijrah* that becomes the archetype for the subsequent *hijrah*s of the Arabian tribesmen to the conquered territories.[7] Indeed, at this juncture this answer remains the only feasible one—particularly when read in light of the pivotal, conceptual role of *hijrah* in the qurʾanic corpus, which renders this inference virtually irrefutable.[8]

The earliest, known Arabo-Islamic inscriptions to utilize the calendar follow quickly on the heels of the papyri: they are two early inscriptions dated to A.H. 23 (643–44 C.E.) and A.H. 24 (644–45 C.E.), respectively.[9] The first, and earliest, is a laconic graffito discovered west of Medina near Yanbuʿ that simply reads, "Salamah wrote [this] in the year three and twenty."[10] The second inscription, first discovered by Ali Ghabban, is particularly famous. Written by a certain Zuhayr, it mentions not merely the *hijrī* date but also the death of the caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, "In the name of God. I, Zuhayr, wrote (this) at the time ʿUmar died, the year four and twenty."[11] These early graffiti attest to the use of *hijrī* era, not just in an official, administrative capacity (as attested in the papyri), but also in nonofficial capacities as well.

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[5] Grohmann 1932, 44; cf. Diem 1984, 272–73; Rāġib 2009; Rāġib 2013, 702ff.

[6] Grohmann 1932, 40–43; cf. Lindstedt 2015.

[7] Crone 1994.

[8] Sinai 2015–16, 54–55; cf. Hoyland, 2006, 396, and Saleh 2006, 270. Other epochs do seem to be attested in the documentary record of this era, such as the enigmatic *qaḍāʾ al-muʾminīn.* However, what sort of era the phrase *qaḍāʾ al-muʾminīn* refers to, and even whether or not it refers to an era at all, still remains unclear. See Shaddel 2018.

[9] Imbert 2011, 6–7. Still enigmatic is a claim made by an early-thirteenth-century scholar named Abū Bakr al-Harawī to have found an epitaph dated to A.H. 29 on the tombstone of a certain ʿUrwah ibn Thābit on the wall of a church in Cyprus, which was subsequently made into a shrine dedicated to the early female martyr Umm Ḥarām. His testimony has not been authenticated by modern observers; however, if authentic, the inscription is not merely extraordinarily early: it is also bears the earliest written attestation to the 112th sūrah of the Qurʾan. Cf. Elad 2002, 284–87; Ghabban and Hoyland 2008, 215 n15. Recent surveys in the area have not turned up any trace of the inscription; see Akçam and Akçam 2017.

[10] Kawatoko 2005, 51.

This material evidence for early Islamic religiosity is extraordinarily early. In fact, it is so early that it even predates the traditional date assigned to the systematic compilation of the Qurʾan under the third caliph, ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (r. 23–35/644–56).[12] Such attestations to early Muslim religiosity may not mention Muḥammad directly, but one can reasonably argue that his importance in them is nonetheless implicit and can reasonably be inferred: an inscription that makes no mention of Muḥammad yet records a date employing the *hijrī* calendar likely presupposed both the historicity of his emigration from Mecca to Yathrib in 622 C.E. and the monumental significance of that event to the formation of his community. However, insofar as this line of argumentation relies on inference rather than on direct evidence, it is not completely watertight. Although evidence for the *hijrī* calendar in the seventh century C.E. is both early and abundant,[13] the earliest inscriptions and documents in fact merely read "in the year *x*" and make no explicit mention either of Muḥammad's *hijrah* or of Muḥammad himself, either by name or by title as a messenger (*rasūl*) or as a prophet (*nabī*). In fact, mentions of Muḥammad are entirely absent in the earliest chronological stratum of Arabo-Islamic epigraphy and papyri. In the earliest stratum of the epigraphic and papyrological record Muḥammad's existence thus remains implicit: the numeracy displayed in these early inscriptions and papyri prove the existence of a new calendar to mark a new epoch, but they offer no explicit rationale for its use. The rest must be inferred from evidence external to the papyri and inscriptions themselves.[14]

Explicit mentions of Muḥammad's name or qurʾanic epithets (e.g., *nabī/rasūl Allāh*) are much harder to find in the earliest strata of the material evidence. Indeed, Muḥammad, whether by name or honorific, does not begin to reliably appear in the epigraphic record until the A.H. 70s/690s C.E. and, even then, only begins to appear in abundance by the second century A.H.[15] Yet even though the earliest Arabo-Islamic graffiti and papyri do not mention Muḥammad's name or invoke his common epithets, they still mobilize the idioms and touchstones of qurʾanic piety. They are replete with confessions of faith in God alone, prayers for divine blessing, petitions for the forgiveness of sins, and petitions to be admitted into Paradise (*al-jannah*) and to be spared the Inferno (*al-nār*).[16]

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[11] Ghabban and Hoyland 2008, 211.

[12] On the historicity of this compilation, see Motzki 2001; M. Cook 2004; Anthony and Bronson 2016. The precise year of ʿUthmān's compilation is difficult to determine; see *GdQ*, 2: 49.

[13] At the last count made by K. M. Younes and J. Bruning, there are ninety-four papyri dating from the first-century *hijrī*. Adding undated papyri which bear the paleographic features of first-century documents to this tally more than triples this number. See www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/geesteswetenschappen/onderzoeksprojecten/foi-arab.-docs..pdf (accessed September 12, 2019).

[14] The fact remains, however, that alternative explanations for the existence of the *hijrī* calendar have fallen flat. See in particularly the case laid out by Shaddel 2018, 301ff.

The above statements are accurate as of the time of writing, but my strong intuition is that the accuracy of some of these statements may soon be overturned by future discoveries. More recently, a couple of near misses have turned up in epigraphic surveys. A simple example can serve to illustrate this.[17] Among the earliest, undated inscriptions to mention Muḥammad are a series of inscriptions that Maysāʾ al-Ghābbān discovered during an epigraphic survey in the Ḥismā region near Tabūk.[18] Two of these inscriptions bear the name Yazīd ibn ʿUmayr al-Anṣārī al-Khaṭmī. From his epithet 'al-Anṣārī', one may surmise that he was a descendant of one of the two tribes of Yathrib who originally welcomed Muḥammad and his early Meccan followers to their city in 622 C.E.; and from the epithet 'al-Khaṭmī', one can discern that he descended from a clan of the Aws tribe of the Anṣār, as opposed to the Khazraj tribe. Although an obscure figure, it appears that he can nonetheless reasonably be identified in the Arabic literary sources: Yazīd ibn ʿUmayr's father was regarded as a contemporary of the Prophet, and Yazīd's son was, moreover, known as a reliable transmitter of prophetic traditions in the second century A.H.[19] Of the two inscriptions of Yazīd to mention Muḥammad's name, one of Yazīd's inscription contains the double testimony of faith (*al-shahādatān*),[20] and the other contains a version of the formulaic invocations of blessings upon Muḥammad called the *taṣliyyah,* which derives from qurʾanic piety (cf. Q. Aḥzāb 33:56).[21] Maysāʾ al-Ghabbān cautiously dates both of Yazīd's inscriptions to the end of the first century A.H.[22] As comprehensive epigraphic surveys of many regions of the Ḥijāz still remain to be done, one may reasonably anticipate that future finds like these will provide even earlier attestations.

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[15] One of the most helpful surveys in the regard is the recent publication of Prof. Mohammed Al-Thenyian at the Department of Archaeology of King Saud University. Al-Thenyian's extensive survey of dated graffiti from the first *hijrī* century reveal a bevy of materials that attest to early Islamic religiosity and even the text of the Qurʾan, yet none of the inscriptions of this period (unlike those of the following century) mention Muḥammad either by name or title. See Thenyian 2015, 145–49.

[16] Imbert 2013.

[17] For a discussion of the challenges to dating these inscriptions, see Anthony 2018.

[18] Ghabbān 2016–17, 103–4, 386ff.

[19] Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ,* 3 (2): 379; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb,* ed. Maʿrūf, 22: 391–93

[20] Ghabbān 2016–17, 212–13, no. 147, testifying "that there is no god but God alone without partners and that Muḥammad is the servant of God and His messenger [*annahu lā ilāha illā ‘llāh waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu wa-anna muḥammadan ʿabdu ‘llāhi wa-rasūluh*]."

[21] Ibid., 230–31, no. 170, "May God bless Muḥammad the Messenger of God [*ṣallā ‘llāhu ʿalā muḥammadin rasūli ‘llāh*]."

[22] Ibid., 323–24.

Yet such epigraphic attestations to Muḥammad are not the earliest Muslim documentary texts to mention his name—and certainly not the earliest that can be dated with precision. The earliest datable attestations hitherto discovered come from numismatic rather than epigraphic evidence. Hence, Muḥammad's name and epithet "the Messenger of God" (Ar. *rasūl allāh*) are first attested on silver coins minted in Bīshāpūr in the Fārs province of southern Iran. The coins were struck early in the Second Civil War between the Umayyads and the Zubayrids, which pitted two families of Quraysh against each other in a political contest for the leadership of the early Islamic polity. Between 66/685 and 69/688–89, these coins were put into circulation as a new issue minted on behalf of the would-be caliph and the leader of the Zubayrid faction, ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr, by his brother-in-law and governor of the east, ʿAbd al-Malik ibn ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿĀmir. The margins of these coins bear the simple confession, "In the name of God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God" (see fig. 2). Although these Zubayrid coins also offer the earliest-known attestation to the Muslim confession of faith (*al-shahādah*), they only feature an affirmation of Muḥammad's prophethood and curiously lack the otherwise ubiquitous companion phrase "'There is no god but God [*lā ilāha illā Allāh*]," which subsequently achieved prominence in the documentary record after 70s/690s.[23] The confession of Muḥammad's messengership conveyed on these early coins seems to have played an integral role in the Zubayrids' attempts to bolster the legitimacy of Ibn al-Zubayr and his claim to the title "Commander of the Faithful [*amīr al-muʾminīn*]," and thus to the Zubayrids' efforts to articulate a counter-discourse against their rivals, the Umayyads, whom they sought to displace.[24] We will encounter the Zubayrids repeatedly in the course of this monograph, but for now it suffices to note the following. While the Zubayrids mounted a formidable military and ideological challenge to the Umayyads' leadership over the early Islamic polity, they ultimately failed to vanquish the Umayyads or to permanently dislodge them from the caliphate. Yet, however brief the Zubayrid intermezzo, the influence of their ideological and numismatic innovations left an indelible imprint on how political legitimacy would be articulated by the early Islamic polity's elites ever thereafter.

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[23] Hoyland 2017, 122.

[24] Heidemann 2011, 167. An outlier to this chronology might be a series of undated, "standing caliph"' type coppers that seem to bear the names of local governors and commanders, such as *Saʿīd* and *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.* One of these bears the name *Muḥammad* but lacks honorifics alongside the name, suggesting rather that the coin refers to a local of governor rather than the Prophet. See Goodwin 2010 and Goodwin 2012, 95–96. Cf. Theniyian 2015, 81, for an inscription dated to A.H. 83 bears the name "Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm."

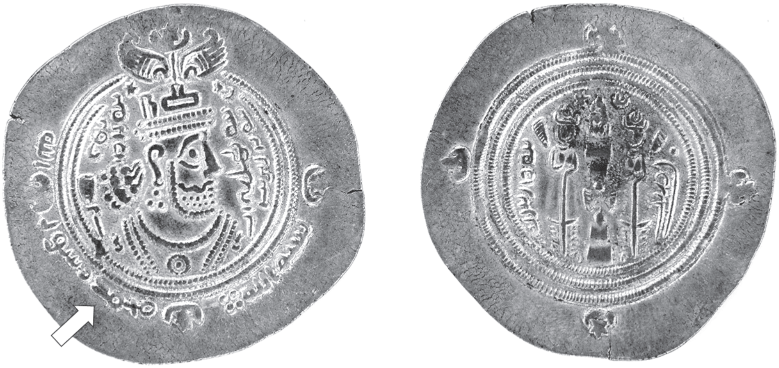

FIGURE 2. Zubayrid silver drachm struck ca. 686–87 C.E. in Bīshāpūr (Iran) by ʿAbd al-Malik ibn ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿĀmir, bearing the legend in the margins of the obverse side: *In the name of God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.* The arrow points to the place where the name "Muḥammad" appears. This specimen is a "Sasanian style" example of pre-reform coinage: the crowned figure on the obverse represents the Persian shah Khusro and the two figures on the reverse represent Zoroastrian priests flanking a fire altar. http://numismatics.org/collection/1975.238.12 (public domain). Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

Under the leadership of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705), the Marwanid branch of the Umayyads spearheaded the efforts to eliminate the Zubayrid threat to their dominance over the Islamic polity, and by A.H.73/692 C.E., ʿAbd al-Malik had eliminated the Zubayrids' political threat and had become the sole ruler of the early Islamic polity. Throughout the 70s/690s—during his contest with the Zubayrids and well after—ʿAbd al-Malik undertook a series of reforms of the administrative apparatus of the early Islamic empire. Famous among these measures is his reform of the coinage, adapting and expanding upon the Zubayrid tactic of featuring Muḥammad's name and the confession of faith in official inscriptions (see fig. 3). ʿAbd al-Malik's coinage reforms were, however, far more radical than those of the Zubayrids. Although the Umayyads eventually adopted an aniconic, creedal aesthetic for their coinage, the earliest coins of the experimental phases depict representations of the caliph standing in Arabian dress with a sword in its sheath and a scourge hanging from his right shoulder (see fig. 4).[25] The "standing caliph" coinage appears in diverse issues; it was struck not just in gold but also in silver and (most abundantly) in copper at as many as nineteen separate mints (see fig. 5).[26] The striking iconography of the "standing caliph" coins and the prominence of the declarations of Muḥammad's messengership thereon have even inspired some

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[25] Treadwell 2009; Heidemann 2011, 170ff.

[26] Goodwin 2018.

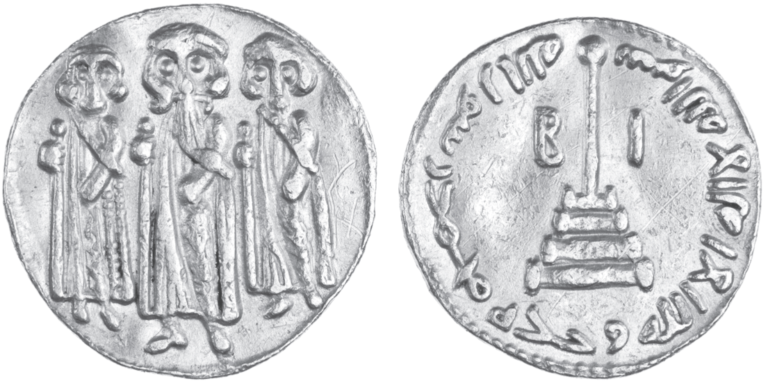

FIGURE 3. Umayyad gold solidus struck ca. 691–92 C.E., likely in Damascus. The reverse side (right) reads along the margins: *In the name of God. There is no god but God alone. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.* http://numismatics.org/collection/1968.225.1 (public domain). Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

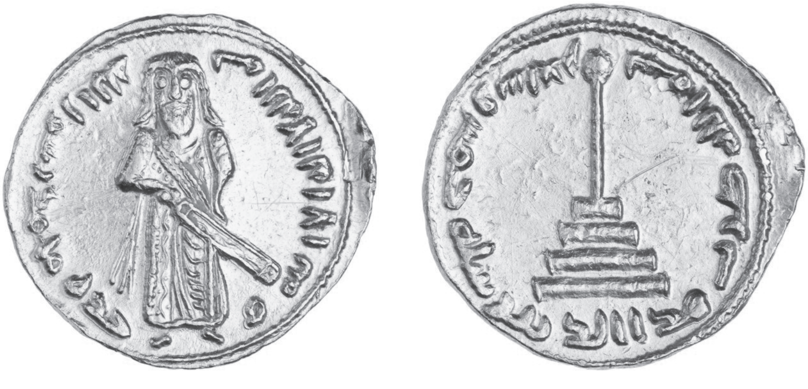

FIGURE 4. Umayyad gold solidus of the “standing caliph” type struck in A.H. 75/694–95 C.E., likely in Syria. The legend surrounding the “standing caliph” figure on the obverse (left) reads: *In the name of God. There is no god but God alone. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.* The legend surrounding the pole on steps on the reverse (right) reads: *In the name of God. This dinar was struck in the year five and seventy.* http://numismatics.org/collection/1970.63.1 (public domain). Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

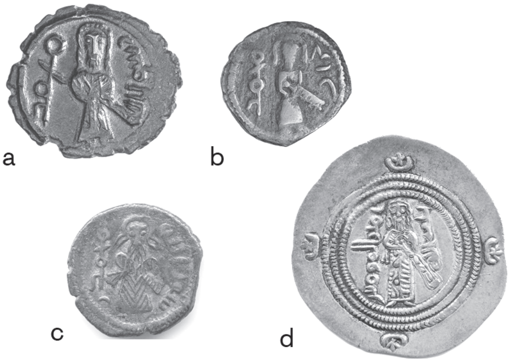

FIGURE 5. Samples of the diversity of the "standing caliph" type of Umayyad coins: (a) obverse of a copper alloy fals from Edessa (ca. 694–97 C.E.) whose legend reads "Muḥammad" (left) and "Messenger of God" (right); (b) obverse of copper alloy fals from Harran (ca. 694–97 C.E.), whose legend reads "Muḥammad" (left) and "Ḥarrān" (right); (c) obverse of a copper alloy fals from Jerusalem (ca. 694–97 C.E.), whose legend reads "Muḥammad Mes-" (right) and "-senger of God" (left); (d) reverse of a silver drachm minted in A.H. 75/ 694–95 C.E., whose legend reads "Commander of the Faithful" (left) and "Caliph of God" (right). Image (a) from http://numismatics.org/collection/1998.25.77; image (b) from http://numismatics.org/collection/1917.215.3376; image (c) from http://numismatics.org/collection/1971.316.288; image (d) from http://numismatics.org/collection/1966.151.1 (all in the public domain). Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

scholars, such as Clive Foss and Robert Hoyland, to speculate that at least some of the coins bearing the so-called standing caliph figures depict, rather, a "standing prophet"—in other words, that these coins portray the Prophet Muḥammad and not ʿAbd al-Malik. Numismatists, however, have generally rejected this interpretation.[27] Indeed, the coins' iconography seems caliphal rather than prophetic. The standing figure depicted on the coins often carries both a whip and a sword, corresponding well to the image in Arabic literary sources of Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik.[28]

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[27] I. Schulze and W. Schulze 2010, 342ff.; Treadwell 2015; Goodwin 2018, 29–30.

[28] Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh,* ed. de Goeje, 1: 858, "ʿAbd al-Malik the commander of the Faithful . . . his scourge falls upon any who disobey, his sword upon any who defy him [*sawṭuhu ʿalā man ʿaṣā wa-ʿalā man khālafa sayfuh*]"; noted also in Goodwin 2018, 27. ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib is also described with similar imagery by Ibn Sabaʾ in Saʿd al-Qummī, *Maqālāt,* 21; see Anthony 2012a, 155.

As Chase Robinson has observed, “the Marwanids seem to have learned a Zubayrid lesson—that . . . principal articles of belief should be proclaimed and disseminated publicly.”[29] Muḥammad’s name and title suddenly became ubiquitous in official inscriptions—a touchstone of Umayyad coinage and their monuments and a major milestone in their effort to unify the Islamic polity theologically and politically around the figure of Muḥammad as a prophet. The most prominent, famous example is the epoch-making Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, ʿAbd al-Malik’s monument to the supremacy the Muslim faith and the Islamic polity over its monotheistic forebears.[30] The Dome of the Rock’s inner mosaics, which bear the longest extant official inscriptions of the first century A.H., date from 72/692 and bespeak a new Islamic orthodoxy rather than political concerns.[31] The phrase “Muḥammad the Messenger of God” appears six times in the mosaic inscriptions of the inner and outer octagonal arcades of the Dome of the Rock. Among the most striking examples is the inscription on the northeast section of the outer octagonal arcade:

> In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God alone. He has no associate. To Him belongs dominion, and to Him belongs praise. He gives life, He causes death, and He has power over all things. Muḥammad is the messenger of God, may God bless him and accept his intercession on the Day of the Resurrection on behalf of his community.[32]

Here, one sees not merely a declaration of belief in the unity of God and the messengership of Muḥammad as the final, supreme prophet of monotheistic faith but also a full-fledged eschatology that adds a new belief unattested in the prophetology of the Qurʾan. In this newly espoused orthodoxy, Muḥammad is not merely God’s lawgiver and the messenger of God’s final revelation to humankind; he is the intercessor on behalf of his community and the focus of all their hopes for salvation on the Day of Judgment.[33]

The invocation Muḥammad’s name and epithets is not the most striking fact here—a papyrus from Nessana in southern Palestine dating to the late 680s C.E. that bears the phrase “the pact of God and the pact of His Messenger” (*dhimmat Allāh* [*wa-dhimmat ras*]*ūlih*) suggests that such invocations by officialdom may have not been entirely unprecedented in Syria[34]—rather, it is how truly widespread and quotidian such proclamations had become in the documentary record as markers of political and religious supremacy, communal belonging, and even personal hope. The Umayyads permanently inscribed public proclamations of Muḥammad's messengership and prophethood into the triumphalist imperial ideology of the early Islamic polity and made the theological axioms undergirding such proclamations among its hallmarks. Thereafter, Muḥammad and his prophethood remained an integral facet of the ideological discourses of Umayyad legitimism and a bedrock of their hegemonic claims as rulers over the Islamic polity and the territories that fell beneath its shadow.

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[29] Robinson 2005, 39.

[30] Grabar 2006, 118–19.

[31] Donner 2010, 205ff., 233ff.

[32] Kessler 1970, 9; Milwright 2016, 67–75.

[33] Tillier 2018, 7–9. By the middle of the eighth century, the theme of Muḥammad’s intercession is already fully developed in the *ḥadīth* literature; see *EI*², art, “Shafāʿa” (A. J. Wensinck [D. Gimaret]).

[34] Hoyland 2015b. See Sharon 2018 for the phrase “the protection of God and the guarantee of His messenger [*dhimmat Allāh wa-ḍamān rasūlih*]” in an inscription on a limestone slab discovered during excavations at the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount in 1968. Sharon dates the

The increased importance of public declarations of Muḥammad's messengership and his prophethood was, moreover, not merely a phenomenon restricted to officialdom—at least not for long. It was also simultaneously mirrored in other parts of the Arabic epigraphic record not directly connected to officialdom, such as in epitaphs and graffiti left behind by early Muslims who lived farther away from the centers of imperial power and who did not necessarily participate in its maintenance and expansion. Muḥammad's name first appears in a non-official inscription on an epitaph written for a tombstone found in Aswān, Egypt, which belonged to a woman named ʿAbbāsah bint Jurayj. The inscription on the tombstone states that ʿAbbāsah died on 14 Dhū l-Qaʿdah 71/21 April 691 and begins, "the greatest loss to afflict the people of Islam [*ahl al-islām*] was their loss of the Prophet Muḥammad, God's blessing and peace be upon him." The inscription goes on to provide us with one of our earliest attestations to the Muslim confession of faith: "She bears witness that there is no god but God alone, that He has no partner, and that Muḥammad is His servant and His messenger, God's blessing and peace be upon him."[35] Also from this period, we have an inscription with a dual confession of faith similar in wording discovered in the Ḥijāz near al-Ṭāʾif, around seventy-five miles southeast of Mecca (fig. 6). The author of this was one al-Rayyān ibn ʿAbdallāh, who dates it A.H. 78 (697–98 C.E.), which he specifies was the year of the "[re]construction of the Sacred Mosque [*al-masjid al-ḥarām*]"—presumably by the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik after the siege of Mecca and the defeat

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inscription to A.H. 32/ 652 C.E.; however, most of the text on the limestone is illegible, particularly the date of the inscription in the final line, and Sharon's proposed reading of "the year thirty-two" is, in my view, paleographically indefensible. As Sharon himself notes (ibid., 100), the stratigraphy of the excavated mosque where the limestone slab was first found by Benjamin Mazar seems to date to the eighth-ninth centuries C.E. I see no justification for Sharon's contention that "the inscription, dated more than a hundred years earlier, had no connection to it" (ibid.).

[35] Bacharach and Anwar 2012; cf. Halevi 2004, 125ff., and Brockopp 2017, 65–67. See also Hoyland 1997b, 87n65, where he suggests that the epitaph, based on its content and wording, may in fact date to A.H. 171 rather than A.H. 71. Brockopp 2015, 137–38, regards Hoyland's doubts as ideological rather than evidentiary.