

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 Qur'an; (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

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.

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.

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 Qur'an, 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Ishāq (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 'ulamā', 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

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, "quranized" 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 Ishāq practically our only source, which is likely to strike specialists nowadays as rather outdated.⁷ Ibn Ishāq'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 Ma' mar 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 Ishāq and Ma' mar: 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 charac-

6. Crone 1980, 4.

7. That Ibn Ishāq 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 Schölller 1998, 53n14.

terized by some modern scholars as so dire as to render a historical approach to Muḥammad impossible¹⁰—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.

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 Iṣḥāq'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, 'Urwah 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

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.

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 *isnāds* 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. *Isnāds*, 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 *isnāds* by comparing the *matns* to which they are attached. Scholars who practice this method pair together *matns* concerned with the same topic and/or event and then analyze their accompanying *isnāds* in order to track the evolution of a *matn* over time and determine the authenticity of the transmission represented in the *isnāds*. 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.

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

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

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

18. The hard-won *Grundschrift* (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 *Grundschrift* 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.

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.

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”

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.

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 Assmann'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

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

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.

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.

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 self-

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.

interested and self-serving memories of individuals and groups become the final arbiter of historical knowledge.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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an poses vis-à-vis the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature.

The Qur'an 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 Qur'an'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 Qurāns* in 1860. That the text of the Qur'an 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 Qur'an itself.³⁵ However, the arguments for the Qur'an'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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an, the primeval document of Islamic religiosity.

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 *Memoirs 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 Jochem 2019.

This is not to say that all the historical problems surrounding the Qur'an have been resolved—they have not, not by a long shot. The earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an 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 (*qirā'āt*) of Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an as our main source about the historical Muḥammad? Although historians can, and indeed *must*, rely on the Qur'an when writing on the historical Muḥammad, it is “an unusual historical source.”⁴⁰ Embedded in the Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an, not surprisingly, has been preserved with the needs and concerns of the faithful in mind, not historians.

At first sight, then, the Qur'an 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

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 'Imrān 3:144; Muḥammad 47:2), and Zayd (Q. Aḥzāb 33:37). Even this list could be shorter. “Aḥmad,”

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 Qur'an within a historical context. All of this is *not* to say that the Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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

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. ʔuḥā 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.

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 Qur'an mentions by name two quasi-historical figures, Dhū l-Qarnayn and Tubba', five “Arabian” prophets (Hūd, Idrīs, Luqḡmān, Šālīḡ, and Shu'ayb), and twenty-four biblical figures.

43. The places and monuments are: al-Aḡqāf (Q. Aḡqāf 46:21); al-'Arim (Q. Saba' 34:16); al-Ard al-Muqaddasah/the Holy Land (Q. Mā'idah 5:21); Bābil/Babylon (Q. Baqarah 2:102); Bakkah (Q. Āl 'Imrān 3:96); Egypt/Miṣr (Q. Yūnus 10:87); al-Ḥijr (Q. Ḥijr 15:80); Iram dhāt al-'Imād (Q. Fajr 89:7); al-Ka'bah (Q. Mā'idah 5:95, 97); al-Madinah (Q. Tawbah 9:101, 120; Aḡzāb 33:60; Munāfiqūn 63:8); Makkah/Mecca (Q. Faṡḡ 48:24); Mt. Sinai (as *Ṭūr Sinā'* in Q. Mu'minūn 23:20; as *Ṭūr Sīnīn* in Tīn 95:2; and as *al-Ṭūr* in Baqarah 2:63, 93; Nisā' 4:154; and Ṭāḡhā 20:80); the sacred valley of Tūwā (Q. Ṭāḡhā 20:12, Nāzi'āt 79:16); and Yathrib (Q. Aḡzāb 33:13).

44. 'Ād (twenty mentions; Q. A'rāf 7:65, etc.); Bedouin nomads/A'rāb (ten mentions; Q. 9 Tawbah 9:90, 97–99, 101, 120, etc.); the Children of Israel/Banū Isrā'il (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/Saba' (Q. Naml 27:22; Saba' 34:15); and Thamūd (twenty-six mentions; Q. 7:73, etc.). This tally excludes Qur'anic terms that identify specific religious groups such as believers (*mu'minūn*), Muslims (*muslimūn*), Jews (*yahūd*), Christians (*naṣārā*), Magians (*majūs*), Sabeans (*ṣābi'ūn*), unbelievers (*kuffār*, *kāfirūn*), pagans (*mushrikūn*), apostles (*ḡawāriyyūn*), emigrants (*muhājirūn*), and helpers (*anṣār*).

45. These events are the battle of Badr (Q. Āl 'Imrān 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 Abraham's elephant troop (*aṣḡāb al-fil*; Q. Fil 105). As noted by Robin (2014, 27n4), one could also cite further events merely alluded to in the Qur'an, e.g. the battle of the Trench (Q. Aḡzāb 33:7–27), the expulsion of the Banū Naḡdir (Q. Ḥaṣhr 59:1–8), the massacre of the Banū Qurayṡah (Q. 33:26–27), and the treaty of Ḥudaybiyah (Q. Faṡḡ 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 qur'anic 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 ḡāllan 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 (*'iṣmah*) and could thus never have gone astray or been in error (*ḡāll*), a term used to describe infidels, so how could God have found His prophet astray or in error (*ḡāll*)? A theologically motivated reading might posit that the verse must be read contrary to the *prima facie* meaning of *ḡāll* (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” (*ḡalāla*) 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*

48. A. J. Arberry's translation.

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

50. E.g., see al-Sharīf al-Murtaḡā, *Tanzīh*, 150–51; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *'iṣmah*, 137; Ṣābūnī, *Muntaḡā*, 216.

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

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.

Rippin's example is intended to demonstrate just how fraught the prospect of historicizing the Qur'an 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 Qur'an altogether. "In no sense can the Qur'ān 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 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 qur'anic 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 Qur'an ought to be read?

I contend that the utility and richness of the Qur'an as a historical source has been undersold.⁵⁵ For one thing, the Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an. No longer can the Qur'an, 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 qur'anic laws to the contemporary legal cultures of Late Antiquity has cast considerable light on why the Qur'an's interest in divine law assumed

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.