

Introduction

The people who call themselves Arabs are speakers of Arabic, a Semitic language related to Akkadian, Aramaic, and Hebrew. In ancient times, the Arabs inhabited the Arabian Peninsula and the regions to the north and east of it, including parts of Syria and Mesopotamia. They lived in loosely organized tribal groups claiming descent from a common (and often legendary) ancestor. Some of these tribes grew powerful enough to meddle in the provincial politics of Assyria, Persia, and Rome. Famous Arabian communities of ancient times include the spectacular rock-walled city of Petra in present-day Jordan, built by the Nabateans, and Palmyra, on the Euphrates River, whose queen, Zenobia, ruled Syria, parts of Mesopotamia, and Egypt until she was captured by the Roman emperor Aurelian in the year 272.

It was not the city-dwellers but rather the pastoral nomads of the desert who produced the earliest surviving examples of Arabic literature. This literature consists of poetry and extended narratives supposedly preserved by oral transmission in a continuous tradition dating back to the sixth century. The authenticity of this material is practically impossible to determine. Despite the Arabs' familiarity with a variety of alphabets, they have left almost no early written records of their oral traditions. Scholarly knowledge of ancient Arabic folklore is therefore based on the collections of poetry and stories made in the seventh and eighth centuries. One of the first literary figures about whom anything is known is the poet-king Imru' al-Qays, who died well before the folk tradition was committed to writing.

Arabian folklore reflects the concerns of tribesmen dependent on each other, and on their herds, for survival in a harsh environment. When rainfall was scarce, the tribes raided their neighbors in the hope of capturing camels, goats, or sheep. A successful raid was conducted without bloodshed, but a raid in which a man was killed defending his herds could result in a protracted blood feud between tribes. The ideal tribesman was willing to die in defense of his kinsmen and his honor; and the ideal chief was one who shared his bounty with the poor, curbed the impetuosity of his subordinates, and mediated disputes between clans and tribes. It was the poet's task to proclaim the glories of

his lineage and exhort his comrades to display courage, forbearance, and generosity. It was equally his task to heap invective on rival tribes and clans and to mourn the dead.

The most elaborate poetic form was the *qasidah* (ode), a long poem of uniform meter and rhyme. As described by later critics such as Ibn Qutaybah, the *qasidah* began with a description of the poet's tearful visit to a campsite abandoned by his beloved. The poet would then describe his grueling journey on camelback across the forbidding desert and his arrival at the hearth of a generous chief. Although many ancient odes do not conform to this model, the themes of lost love, hard travel, and manly virtue are certainly recurrent, as are descriptions of landscape and wildlife, praises of conviviality and wine-drinking, and shrewd insights into human character and affairs. Any one of the themes of an ode might also serve as the basis of a *qit'ah* (short poem). Outside the realm of poetry proper was the *rajaz*, a chant consisting of short rhyming lines. It was commonly used for work songs, battle cries, and humorous doggerel. Finally, there was *saj'* (rhymed prose), which was used by soothsayers to convey their cryptic and ominous pronouncements. With the appearance of Islam in 610, such rhymed prose fell into disrepute, although it later resurfaced as a common device in literary epistles and popular stories.

Studies of modern Arabic-speaking communities have contributed much to the modern understanding of the function of poetry in traditional societies. Contemporary male poets use their verses to glorify themselves and their kin, to compete playfully with their peers, and to air their grievances. Men and women alike also use poetry in private settings to express feelings of love, loss, and despair. The extant sources suggest that ancient Arabic poetry served similar functions. Male poets used their verses to define themselves as tribesmen. Most, like the warrior-poet 'Antarah, did so in verses that stress the successful negotiation of the rite of passage from reckless youth to sober middle age. A few, notably the so-called bandit poets, used poetry to express their alienation from tribal society. Although the compositions of women are less well represented in the collections, the verses that survive include everything from mocking retorts directed at husbands to moving elegies pronounced in commemoration of fallen kin. The genre of elegy was the special province of women, and its foremost practitioner, al-Khansa', once called herself "the best of poets, male or otherwise."

Like the classical and folk poetry of many cultures, ancient Arabic poetry was oral-formulaic in composition. Having mastered a set of conventional expressions, poets learned how to combine them in new

ways and vary them in accordance with the requirements of meter and rhyme. Because they could easily replace any expression with another of similar meaning, poets did not have to memorize their compositions word for word. There was in effect no original text of a poem, and no two performances of it were exactly the same. When, centuries later, scholars attempted to record ancient Arabic poetry, they were forced to choose among the many variants preserved by the oral tradition. Moreover, they often had difficulty assigning a composition to a particular poet. While the diction of the various themes was distinct, the voices of different poets were not necessarily so. As a result, the attribution of particular line to a particular poet could well be arbitrary.

Despite these difficulties, the philologists of the eighth and ninth centuries managed to establish a canon of poems and a hierarchy of poets. They designated between seven and ten of the most famous pre-Islamic odes as the “precious,” the “gilded,” or the “suspended” ones—*al-Mu‘allaqat*—because they had allegedly been written in gold on sheets suspended inside the pagan shrine in Mecca. A similar arbitrariness is evident in the collection of later poetry as well. The philologist al-Asma‘i reports that he tried to collect the verses of Majnun, the demented lover-poet, only to be told by an Arabian tribesman that every tribe had its own Majnun. Yet the philologists continued to speak of only one such poet and constructed a unified biography for him out of bits and pieces of the oral tradition. In other cases as well, all poems of a certain type were assigned to a particularly well-remembered figure. For example, any jaunty love poem about an amorous lady would be attributed to ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi‘ah, and any particularly scurrilous bit of invective would be attributed to Jarir or al-Farazdaq. For these reasons, it is often possible to write a fairly detailed biography of a classical literary figure and to compile a list of his works; but it is hardly to be taken for granted that the biography and the works are genuinely his, much less that the works assigned to him were composed in the order his life-story would suggest.

The only substantial examples of prose traceable to ancient oral traditions are the *ayyam al-‘arab* (battle-days of the Arabs). The battle tales are collections of stories about the intrigues, raids, and wars that took place in the *al-jahiliyyah* (age of ignorance), that is, the time before Islam. To the extent that they often proceed genealogically, the stories amount to a sort of history, although the events they describe cannot be dated with any precision. Their emphasis is on the demonstration of verbal dexterity, and they abound in eloquent speeches and citations of verse. The narration is always external: readers are told what characters do

and say, but not what they are thinking. Events are usually reported by an (alleged) eyewitness, but there is almost no commentary on the action; the only authorial intervention consists in supplying whatever explanations are necessary to follow the story. Although Arabic historiography cannot be said to derive directly from these early battle tales, their narrative strategies would remain characteristic of prose writing until the modern period.

In many ways, the literature of pre-Islamic Arabia served as the basis for subsequent developments, especially in poetry. The same cannot be said of pre-Islamic religion. The ancient Arabs worshiped many deities, including a trinity composed of the goddesses al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and al-Manat. Later accounts state that the ancient Arabs worshiped idols, although there is little evidence for such a practice. There were many Jews and Christians in Arabia, although the prevalent faith in some parts of the peninsula appears to have involved the heretical practice of angel worship. In any event, the Muslim rejection (or reinterpretation) of many pre-Islamic traditions has resulted in the disappearance of much of the material needed to interpret ancient Arabic literature. For example, it is possible that ancient poetry served a liturgical function, but the literary tradition offers little evidence for or against such a claim. Similarly, the absence of written texts (other than rock inscriptions) does not necessarily mean that no such texts existed; it may be rather that the coming of Islam resulted in their destruction or neglect.

With the appearance of Islam, Arabic culture underwent a profound transformation, one marked by the appearance of the first book, the Qur'an. The Holy Qur'an is believed by Muslims to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, son of 'Abd Allah of the Quraysh tribe, through the archangel Gabriel. This revelation declares the absolute oneness of God and urges human beings to seek evidence of His power in nature and in the events of history. It retells the stories of previous prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus; and it warns of the impending Day of Judgment, when believers will enter the Garden and unbelievers fall into the fires of Hell. Finally, it imposes upon the believers (also called the Muslims, that is, "those who submit") the ritual obligations of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and charity.

Over the twenty-three years of his prophecy (610–632), Muhammad recited verses from the Qur'an to his followers. The so-called Meccan period (610–622) is characterized by divine exhortations, many of which resemble the words of the soothsayers of pagan Arabia, a resemblance that leads the Qur'an to distance itself from that world and worldview. In the so-called Medinan period (622–632), after Muhammad and his

followers fled to Medina from Meccan persecution in a famous journey called the *hijrah*, the Qur'anic text becomes more legalistic, as it helps to guide the nascent *ummah* (community), and more narrative, as it attempts better to situate the Muslims in a context of Semitic monotheism. The Qur'an is normative in questions of grammar; is understood to be literal not allegorical; is regarded as inimitable; and its teachings, injunctions and prohibitions are held by most Muslims to be binding.

The Qur'an had been memorized by believers during the Prophet's lifetime. As Muhammad received revelation, he recited it to his followers, who then committed each passage to memory. In the mid seventh century, two decades after the Prophet's death, these scattered passages were collected. Muhammad's immediate successors are all credited with wanting to establish a definitive written version of the Qur'an. Muhammad's adopted son Zayd directed the actual process of collection, calling upon all those who had committed any part of the Qur'an to memory to assist him in the enterprise. The collators also had recourse to fragments of leather and bone on which some Qur'anic verses had been recorded. Decisions were made regarding variant *qira'at* (readings), and consensus was reached about what properly formed part of the text. The Qur'an's 114 chapters came to be organized according to length, not chronology, roughly from longest to shortest *surah* (chapter), consisting of a little more than 6,200 *ayah* (verses) in all.

Thus did the first Arabic book come into being. Committing the Qur'an to writing was particularly important as memorizers passed away and as Islam spread to lands where memorizers were few and where Arabic was not the native language. Yet, everywhere the Qur'an went, it was committed to memory—for liturgical purposes, such as recitation in ritual prayer, but also for the beauty this Arabic text was said to exhibit. It was, after all, the word of God, inimitable by mortals and timeless in its application.

The importance of the Qur'an and the fascination with it has not diminished. It remains of paramount importance—all of the billion or so of the world's Muslims use the Qur'an in Arabic; and it is the world's most memorized text. All over the Muslim world, children and adults, men and women, learn part or all of it by heart. This memorization is done with a teacher, and not from the written text, underscoring its importance as an oral and aural document. Indeed, in its written form, it is not called *Qur'an* (literally, "recitation"), but rather *mushaf* (collation). Arabic writers throughout the centuries have mined the Qur'an extensively, despite the view of many conservative theologians that by virtue of being divine, the Qur'an cannot therefore be "lit-

erary.” One can find Qur’anic passages and motifs in al-Tahir Wattar’s twentieth-century novel *al-Zilzal* (1974; translated as *The Earthquake*, 2000), [Q: **Confirm changes here?**] just as one can find literary borrowings from the Qur’an in the verses of the eighth-century poet Abu Nuwas.

With the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the revelation of Islam was complete, and those who had embraced his message set out to proclaim it to the world. By 732 the Arab Muslims had conquered Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, reaching the westernmost limits of their expansion in southern France. Along the Mediterranean, they had driven the Byzantines out of Palestine and Syria and twice laid siege to Constantinople. In the east, they had overthrown the Persian Sassanian Empire and established themselves in Central Asia. In many places, the Muslim Arab presence was at first negligible: the conquered peoples continued to practice their ancestral religions and speak their ancestral languages. Many Arabs, among them the renowned poet al-Akhtal, remained Christian. Yet Islam soon spread among the conquered peoples, and with it the language of God’s revelation to Muhammad. Native speakers of Berber, Coptic, Syriac, and Persian accepted Islam and learned Arabic, the liturgical language of the new faith and the administrative language of the new empire. Within a single generation, many non-Arabs (and some non-Muslims) had acquired a proficiency in the language equal to that of the Arabs themselves and made formative contributions to the spiritual, intellectual, and literary life of the community. For this reason, modern scholars speak of “Arabic writers,” that is, writers who used the language, rather than “Arab writers,” that is, writers of Arab ethnicity, who during the classical period of Arabic literature were probably in the minority.

During this period of rapid expansion, Muslims clung to their memories of the Prophet and the early community. They also became acquainted with the traditions of the conquered peoples and strove to reconcile them with the historical vision of Islam. These concerns gave rise to a vast body of legends, anecdotes, and historical reports, including tales of the Jewish and Christian prophets, accounts of the life of Muhammad and his companions, and descriptions of the Islamic conquests. Like old Arabian folklore, this information was transmitted by word of mouth and was subject to expansion, elaboration, and embellishment. Many believers found this state of affairs intolerable: given the mass of conflicting and sometimes fanciful reports, how was one to know what the practice of the early Muslims had really been like? In many cases, the need to know was pressing. As Muslims sought to apply the Qur’anic vision to such practical matters as the administration of

justice, they turned increasingly to the Prophet's example as a source of guidance, only to find that accounts of his *sunnah* (precedent) were divergent and sometimes contradictory.

In the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, a literary division of labor was established. Reports about the practice of the early community were separated out and subjected to rigorous tests of authenticity. Scholars such as al-Bukhari traveled far and wide to collect reports about the Prophet, commit them to writing, and investigate the trustworthiness of the men and women who had transmitted them. Those reports whose transmission could be verified came to be known as *hadith* (literally, "speech"). As the authenticated record of what the Prophet had said, done, or condoned, the Hadith came to serve, along with the Qur'an, as a basis for decisions about law and ritual. It also provided a ready supply of aphorisms for all occasions. Rare indeed is the classical Arabic book that does not cite a Hadith, or many, in its introduction, no matter what the subject.

Oral traditions that had no bearing on legal matters fell into a second category, that of *akhbar* (literally, "accounts"). Some scholars, notably Ibn Sa'd, drew on such accounts to construct biographies of the Prophet and his companions. Ibn Sa'd's successors went on to write the life stories of other classes of people, such as Qur'an readers, *hadith* collectors, and poets. Other scholars used accounts to compile histories. Some of these histories were modest accounts of the author's hometown, while others were sweeping chronicles covering the history of the world from its beginning down to the author's time. The crowning achievement of early historiography is al-Tabari's monumental *History of the Prophets and Kings*, [Q: Date? Title in Arabic?] which begins with God's creation of the world and ends with the political upheavals of the Muslim community in the early tenth century.

At the bottom of the literary hierarchy came the reports that no self-respecting Hadith scholar, historian, or biographer could accept as true, as well as unverifiable reports transmitted or fabricated for instruction or amusement. This category, called "tales," "night-stories," or "legends," included everything from adventure stories to dirty jokes. Purveyors of such tales tended to regard the Hadith scholars as stuffy and literal-minded, while the Hadith scholars and historians responded by denouncing the storytellers as shameless fabricators. The world-famous *Alf laylah wa laylah* (Thousand and One Nights), for example, were never accepted as serious literature by classical scholars; the canonical character of Shahrazad's night-stories is a purely modern (and originally European) phenomenon. Even so, the three categories of narrative material were not absolute, and

many transmitters, such as al-Haytham ibn 'Adi, cultivated the art of blurring the boundaries. For this reason, it is necessary to include practitioners in all three categories in any history of Arabic literature.

As approaches to the tradition began to crystallize along specialist lines, new branches of scholarship arose that set the stage for important literary developments. The two most significant branches were grammar and lexicography. Grammar was concerned with describing, classifying, and analyzing the forms of speech. Some scholars collected examples and used them to derive the underlying rules of language, while others began with premises borrowed from Greek grammar and tried to square them with actual usage. In both cases, the two principal sources of what came to be regarded as *fusha* (the most eloquent Arabic) were the Qur'an and the Bedouin poetry of ancient Arabia. The seminal work on grammar is, interestingly, by an eighth-century Persian scholar, Sibawayhi; its status is so high that it is known simply as *al-Kitab* (The Book). [Q: Name in Arabic?] In it, Sibawayhi systematically explains all of Arabic grammar, relying in part on the legal training he is said to have received before setting his sights on language. Sibawayhi's *Book* and the grammatical tradition that developed from it are credited with anticipating many of the findings of modern linguistics.

The other major branch of literary scholarship, lexicography, was concerned with defining in precise terms the vocabulary of Arabic. Not only were the Qur'an and the poetry of Arabia the sources for a normative grammar and lexicon, but they were also objects of study in themselves. The first known dictionary was compiled in the eighth century by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, in an alphabetical order based on the points of articulation of the Arabic letters. From this beginning, the lexicographical tradition expanded to produce not only enormous dictionaries that purported to cover the entire language, complete with examples from the Qur'an, Hadith, and poetry, but also smaller collections of specialized vocabulary, thesauruses, and even glossaries of Persian and Turkish. In size and thoroughness, the largest Arabic lexicons rival such modern efforts as the *Oxford English Dictionary*: an astonishing achievement in a culture where all books had to be laboriously copied by hand.

Besides their intrinsic interest, grammar and lexicography also had a role to play in the expansion of the religious sciences. Language scholars wanted to achieve a precise knowledge of Arabic, but so too did scholars of religion. One could not follow the Qur'an's injunctions and prohibitions if one did not understand precisely what God was saying. So, although the Qur'an and the poetry of Arabia were avowedly different, one

the word of God, the other the words of pagan tribes-people, each helped explain the other. Philologists wrote books defining unfamiliar or difficult words in the Qur'an. They were succeeded by scholars who attempted to explain the meanings of entire passages. The efforts of these early commentators were the precursors of Qur'an *tafsir* (exegesis), a genre that burgeoned in later centuries. The tenth-century *al-Tafsir*, or *Commentary*, of al-Tabari, which offers extended explanations of every verse in the Qur'an, is regarded as one of the most remarkable examples of exegetical scholarship in any language.

Commentary on the Qur'an created as many questions as it answered. How were Muslims to put into practice the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Qur'an and of the Prophet Muhammad? The task of interpreting the legal content of the Qur'an and Hadith fell to a class of scholars called *fuqaha'* (sing. *faqih*), or jurists. Figures such as the ninth-century al-Shafi'i set about to elaborate a methodology and legal hermeneutics for interpreting and reconciling this material. In his *Epistle*, al-Shafi'i devises principles of Islamic jurisprudence that served as the basis for much subsequent legal theory. Other scholars developed a theology of *kalam* (disputation), which sought to answer the philosophical questions posed by the revelation, such as the apparent contradiction between human free will and divine predestination.

Meanwhile, the study of poetry, which could be justified, albeit tenuously, on the basis of its contribution to linguistics, continued unabated. Two important early anthologies of early Arabic poetry are those of al-Mufaddal al-Dabbi and al-Asma'i. [Q: Give titles?] The former was made at the request of the mid-eighth-century caliph al-Mansur, who wanted an anthology of lesser-known poets to be made lest their poetry be lost. The latter work was reportedly compiled later that century at the request of caliph Harun al-Rashid, who wished his sons to know the literary tradition of tribal Arabia. These anecdotes are important for two reasons. First, they underscore the importance of patronage by influential figures in the recording and canonization of the literary corpus; and second, they demonstrate a keen awareness of a tradition to be transmitted and preserved. The scholarly attention given to the poetic tradition is evident also in the work of the grammarian and lexicographer al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, a phonetician and prosodist who discovered that the poetry of early Arabia had fifteen distinct meters (a sixteenth was later added), a system that he was the first to describe and characterize. A particular favorite of the philologists was the seventh- and eighth-century poet Dhu al-Rumma: even the relatively late thirteenth-century dictio-

nary, *The Language of the Arabs*. [Q: Arab title?] quotes his poetry almost a thousand times as proof texts.

The anthologists were frequently grammarians and transmitters of poetry and historical reports. With the rise of writerly culture in the ninth century, book-sellers and chancery secretaries also participated in the canonization of the literary culture, expanding the corpus to include contemporaries such as Abu Tammam, whose poetry is characterized by new, “modern” literary devices and themes; to include neoclassical poets such as al-Buhturi, whose poetry is modeled closely on the poetry of early Arabia; and to include prose writers such as the secretaries ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Katib and Ibn al-Muqaffa’. Some preeminent poets were also anthologists. For example, Abu Tammam, while he was snow-bound in the town of Hamadhan, composed the *Registry of Zeal*. [Q: Is this *Kitab al-Hamasah*? Title translated as “Book of Fieriness” in the Abu Tammam article.] a memorable anthology of ancient verses arranged by theme. Inevitably, too, scholars began to compare: The poetry of the moderns was measured on the one hand against that of the ancients, and on the other against that of the neo-classicists; single lines or motifs in a poem were compared to others in the same poem or by the same poet; poetry was compared to prose. In this way, Arabic literary criticism was further developed. Those who compared lines or motifs in one poet to lines or motifs in another created an important subgenre of literary critical writing, namely works on literary theft and plagiarism.

Frequently, the literary critics were themselves poets (for example, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz), anthologists (for example, Ibn Abi Tahir), or writers of prose (for example, al-Jahiz); sometimes they were also scholars of religion or exegetes (for example, Ibn Qutaybah). In any event, they often combined several distinct talents. This multifaceted scholarship was the hallmark of the *adib*, the practitioner of *adab*, a term that has been translated as *belles lettres* and is the modern Arabic word for “literature.” Because the true *adib* was something of a “renaissance man,” works needed to be written to furnish him with the apposite historical, linguistic, and literary information he would need to sparkle in polite society. On the philological side, this purpose was filled by the likes of al-Mubarrad’s *Compendium*. [Q: No work by that title in the al-Mubarrad article. Which of his works are we referring to?] The chancery secretaries were especially well served by the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and Ibn Qutaybah.

Although the poets of the eighth century had by and large conformed to classical models, many important poets patronized by the caliphal court began to explore new themes and new modes of expression. The originator of this new style, *badi’*—to which Ibn al-

Mu'tazz, a prince, poet and literary critic, was more than a century later to devote a whole treatise—was the eighth-century poet Bashshar. This colorful figure did not deviate totally from classical models but did consciously attempt to appeal to new urban sensibilities. One of his early successors, Abu Nuwas, excelled in the traditional genres but ridiculed the traditional motifs of Bedouin poetry, preferring to sing the praises of wine and comely youths. Modernist poetry culminated in Abu Tammam, whose panegyrics have been described as crucial in the formation of a dynastic poetics. His rival was his own student, the great neoclassical poet al-Buhturi.

In spite of differences, in style, in temperament, and in choice of poetry or prose, one factor that tied early Arabic litterateurs together was patronage. Poets declaimed poems in exchange for purses of gold from the caliph, and secretaries and other prose writers dedicated multivolume works to be assured of their retainer. Though the caliph, the political and symbolic leader of the Muslim community, was the most important and certainly the most prestigious patron, patronage was also available from ministers, other members of the caliph's entourage, and wealthy notables. Occasionally patronage took other forms: the caliph's boon companion 'Ali ibn Yahya al-Munajjim, for example, used to provide free room, board, and supplies to writers in his "Library of Wisdom."

The poet al-Buhturi is said to have amassed a fortune through the generosity of patrons, and the prose stylist al-Jahiz made more from one dedicated work than many other writers made in a lifetime. Such patronage, however, could be fickle, as in the case of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, who would reward idiosyncratically; or unstable, as in the case of ministers and courtiers who were dismissed or who fell out of favor. Musicians and singing girls were also often at the mercy of the caliph. A musician and singer of prodigious talent, such as Ibrahim al-Mawsili, and a performer with a splendid voice and of unparalleled beauty, such as 'Arib, were assured of patronage, but a wrong word could be one's undoing, as the authors of *adab* works never tired of pointing out.

Along with the so-called Arab sciences of grammar, lexicography, and poetics, scholars had also begun to explore the traditions of non-Arab civilizations. In Iran, the language and literature of the fallen Sassanian Empire had survived the conquest, and many Persians continued to pride themselves on what they considered to be the superior attainments of their ancestors in the arts of civilization. One of these proud Persians, the bilingual secretary Ibn al-Muqaffa', devoted himself to translating Sassanian history and wisdom literature into Arabic, and in so doing created an entirely new style of

literary prose. His translations and original works on kingship, statecraft, and self-cultivation were instrumental in forming the new cultural ideal of *adab*. One of his translations from Persian, a collection of Indian animal fables titled *Kalilah and Dimnah*, went on to become a classic of world literature.

Under the 'Abbasid dynasty, which came to power in 750, attention turned to the legacy of ancient Greece. The 'Abbasid caliphs encouraged a group of Nestorian Christians, notably the supremely gifted Hunayn ibn Ishaq, to translate into Arabic the entirety of Greek literature then available in Baghdad. Arabic readers suddenly had access to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and Ptolemy, and the results were far-reaching and profound. Theologians seized on Aristotelian logic, as often as not deploying it against such Aristotelian doctrines as the eternity of the world; and philosophers strove to reconcile Plato's vision of the ideal society with the teachings of Islam. Under the early ninth-century caliph al-Ma'mun, scientists measured the circumference of the earth, and al-Khwarizmi produced the foundational treatise on algebra. The most controversial of the early philosopher-scientists was the skeptic al-Razi, who diagnosed smallpox, expressed doubts about prophecy, and wrote an autobiography in which he compares himself to Socrates.

If there is one figure who can be said to represent the confluence of all these currents of thought and activity, it is the prose stylist al-Jahiz, one of the most interesting, eclectic, and influential literary figures in all of Arabic literature. His writings, everything from a multivolume work *Kitab al-Hayawan* (The Treatise on Living Creatures), [Q: Title translated thus in al-Jahiz article. Confirm?] to a treatise *Risalah fi fasl ma bayna al-'adawah wa al-hasad* (On the Difference between Enmity and Envy), [Q: Called "An Epistle on Distinguishing the Difference between Enmity and Enviousness" in the al-Jahiz article.] to the disjointed but brilliant *Risalah fi al-balaghah wa al-ijaz* (Book of Eloquence and Exposition), [Q: Right text here? Called the "Epistle on Eloquence and Concision" in the al-Jahiz article.] were widely circulated, read, and debated. Al-Jahiz has something to say for and against practically everyone, from translators and philosophers to misers and bureaucrats. Constantly shifting his perspective, he offers pro and con on every subject of contemporary interest, including the state of the caliph's army, the theological status of the Qur'an, and the wiles of female singers.

The one worldview al-Jahiz seems consistently to deplore is that of the self-declared "people of tradition and community," that is, the Sunnis. In his day, many Sunnis were popular teachers of Hadith who condemned what they perceived as deviation by the com-

munity from the example of the early Muslims. They rejected the speculations of the philosophers and theologians and exhorted their followers to adhere to the letter of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Alarmed by their popular following, the caliph al-Ma'mun attempted to crush the Sunni leaders by subjecting them to an inquisition, but the persecution of the Sunni leaders only increased their popularity, and al-Ma'mun's successors eventually adopted Sunnism as the official dogma of the state. Philosophers and freethinkers could no longer count on 'Abbasid patronage, and many had to pursue their activities in one of the provincial centers that had sprung up in conjunction with the collapse of central authority in Baghdad.

The triumph of Sunnism was by no means complete, however. The community remained divided between Sunnism and Shiism, a division that harked back to the earliest period of Islamic history. When Muhammad died in 632, it was unclear who was to succeed him as the head of the Muslim community. He had, according to the Sunni tradition, intentionally refrained from naming anyone as his successor. According to the Shiite tradition, he had clearly indicated to a large group of Muslims a few months before he died that his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, **[Q: Name given thus in the entry on him. Confirm?]** was his rightful successor. Indeed, 'Ali asked that he be recognized as such. When another man, Muhammad's confidant and father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was elected successor by acclamation, 'Ali refused to pledge allegiance to him. Although he did so six months later, a group of Muslims held steadfastly to the view that 'Ali was the rightful successor. Even after 'Ali was killed in 661 by a disgruntled partisan, some Muslims held the view that the succession had passed to his children and their descendants: these heirs came to be known as Imams. A larger number of Muslims opposed this view, arguing that succession devolved to the most qualified, pious, and righteous member of the community. The difference of opinion is particularly important in that each group developed independent theologies and juridical practices. Consequently, there are differences between Sunni and Shiite law books, and between Sunni and Shiite Qur'an commentaries.

The dispute between the Shiism and Sunnism was never resolved and often led to bitter hostility. This hostility is not absent from the literary material. If one were partial to the Shiite position, one might, for instance, praise the Prophet's descendants and lambast or simply ignore his political successors. The poet Ibn al-Rumi, for example, is said to have been denied courtly patronage for his virulently pro-Shiite beliefs and to have been executed for them. Also, because of the importance of the lineage through 'Ali, the words of

his descendants were recorded, commented upon, and granted the status of doctrine: Ja'far al-Sadiq is, for example, credited with an important book of prayers and aphorisms, and 'Ali himself is credited with a collection of speeches, *Nahj al-balaghah* (The Path of Eloquence). **[Q: Title from 'Ali article. Confirm?]**

Issues of succession were doctrinally irrelevant for some Muslims, especially those for whom religious devotion, in particular aspiring to proximity to God, was a private activity. The group that best represents this aspiration came to be known as Sufis, literally those "who wear a woollen cloak" (as a sign of renunciation and asceticism). A Sufi is a Muslim mystic, someone who seeks communion with God through metaphysical and esoteric practices, such as ritual utterance of the attributes of God. Sufis also attached themselves as disciples to a teacher or master, whose authority and knowledge derived in an unbroken succession from Muhammad, typically through 'Ali. In later times, this attachment was formalized through the creation of orders, each with their own hierarchy and rules, and housed in buildings that came to be variously known as *khanqahs* or *ribats*: the latter gives its name to the present-day capital of Morocco. Many Sufis wrote esoterica, treatises on Sufism, poetry, guides to spiritual progress, and biographies of their teachers and predecessors. Significant in this regard is al-Hallaj, whose literary output is overshadowed by his pronouncement that he was the Truth, that is God, for which he was crucified and executed. Indeed, statements such as al-Hallaj's have continued to cause religious scholars to look at Sufism askance, in spite of the continued prevalence of mysticism in the Arabophone (and Islamic) world.

*

Summarizing four centuries of one of the world's richest literary cultures in an "Introduction" such as this is a difficult task, one rivaled by the need to have a small number of individuals represent that culture and its literature. Indeed, when we were asked to produce this, the first of four volumes devoted to Arabic literature, we had to make difficult decisions, ones that editors of the remaining three volumes will inherit. We were aided in this task by the Dictionary of Literary Biography guidelines, which call for thirty-five to forty individuals per published volume. We opted not to have volumes organized according to genre, deciding rather to divide the period from the beginnings of Arabic literary culture up to today, roughly the years 500 to 2000, into four segments of approximately forty individuals.

The year 500, with which this volume begins, is significant inasmuch as it represents the "beginnings" of Arabic literature, but the year 925 has no literary signif-

icance. Our use of a purely accidental date is deliberate. It has allowed us to depart from the arbitrary dynastic periodization that has tended to characterize the study of Arabic literary culture and to adopt instead a purely chronological presentation that we hope will clarify the relation of our authors to each other.

Note on transliteration and the use of dates.

We have opted to render Arabic names, words, and titles in a way that will be user-friendly for readers unfamiliar with Arabic and yet recognizable to specialists. We have therefore dispensed with all diacritical marks, keeping only a single opening quotation mark (‘) for the letter *‘ayn* and a single closing quotation mark (’) for the letter *hamzah* (except in the initial position). We render the feminine marker *h*, but *t* in construct, and we do not assimilate the Arabic definite article.

Throughout this volume, we use Common Era dates. Dates from the Islamic calendar (Hijri) are occasionally provided, where appropriate, and are followed by the letter *H*.

DLB practice is parenthetically to indicate the date of publication of any work mentioned in the body of an entry. In this volume we indicate instead the date of death of the author of a given work.

Note on front rubrics

DLB practice is to list at the very least Works, First editions, and all known manuscripts. Doing this for classical Arabic materials presents difficulties. We are grateful, therefore, to the DLB for agreeing to relax its requirements and allow us to use the following guidelines:

Bibliographical reference indicating location of manuscripts

[MAJOR] [EXTANT] WORK[S]

[Editio princeps][**Q: Dr. Bruccoli asks you to define your term here.**]

[Standard] [Critical] Editions [with commentary]

Translations into English

—*Michael Cooperson and Shawkat M. Toorawa*

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