

# Chapter 4

## The sources

How do we know what we know about Islamic history? In theory, as ‘Islamic’ history is a branch of history more generally, the methods and tools used by historians of other societies are also available – to a greater or lesser extent – to historians of Islam. Naturally, the sources for each branch of history are particular to it, and our sources for some periods and regions are better than those for others: in some cases, we possess a small number of sources that tell us a lot; in other cases, an extraordinary glut of sources proves to punch well below its weight.

In 1977 and 1978, four books were published in which historians of Islam were told that they were doing their job poorly. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* chastised Islamicists for – amongst other things – creating a field of study that is condescending towards and critical of the Muslim societies that they study. John Wansborough’s *Quranic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu*, along with Patricia Crone’s and Michael Cook’s *Hagarism*, told Islamicists that they are not being critical enough (in the scholarly rather than judgemental sense of the word). Over the past three decades, scholars have been forced to engage with the ideas presented in these books, even if only to refute them. Broadly speaking, historians work with two types of written materials: primary sources (written by the people *under* History’s microscope) and secondary sources (written by the people looking

*through* the microscope). Said's work concerns secondary sources and will be discussed in the following chapter; Wansborough's and Crone/Cook's work concerns primary sources and will be discussed here.

Our sources for Islamic history after 1100 (following the chronology adopted in Chapter 1) are, for the most part, of the sort that will be familiar to historians of other societies. People in these centuries wrote many books about many topics and – once we read them – we can attempt to reconstruct and analyse the world they describe. Obviously, the careful historian will be on guard for misleading or biased accounts (or for what some might consider to be the inevitable biases that each author brings to his/her writing), but otherwise the study of Islamic history will be broadly comparable to the study of European history, for instance. In fact, by this period, due to events described in Chapter 1, some of our sources for Muslim societies *are* European documents and accounts. Jean Chardin (d. 1713), for instance, left us the record of his travels from France to the Near East and Iran, a record that fills ten volumes. Similarly, Ottoman–European relations are known to us from European accounts as well as Ottoman ones. The same can be said for the Mediterranean societies of the immediately preceding periods, when Christians from southern Europe and Muslims from North Africa and the Near East interacted regularly, leaving plenty of literary and documentary traces of this interaction from which historians can now benefit. From this context comes one of our most important resources for Islamic history, the Cairo Geniza. This source, the nature and contents of which have no parallels in European societies, is worth highlighting here.

The sources

The Cairo Geniza comprises some 250,000 fragments discovered in an Egyptian synagogue at the end of the 19th century. Jews (as well as Muslims) are reluctant to dispose of documents that contain references to God's name. For this reason, religious documents that are no longer considered useful (because they

are torn or otherwise irrelevant) are deposited in a safe location. Jews in Fatimid Cairo appear to have extended these rules to documents that merely concern God or religious issues more generally, and even to documents composed in Hebrew (to them, Divine) characters. As the Jews of Muslim lands usually wrote in local languages (e.g. Arabic, Persian) using Hebrew characters, the Cairo Geniza came to comprise an exceptionally varied selection of documents pertaining to all aspects of life under Islam, in Fatimid Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, as well as in southern Europe, North Africa, Yemen, and other lands with which this Jewish community had contact. Whereas most sources from Muslim lands were written by the literate elite, Geniza sources are largely the record of daily life amongst ordinary people, and provide us with a richly detailed snapshot of Islamic history in the 11th to 13th centuries. Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* is a historical novel based on these documents; Shlomo Goitein's five-volume *A Mediterranean Society* is a masterly reconstruction and analysis of the world of those who contributed to the Geniza. The Geniza is thus our most important source for a bottom-up view of Islamic history.

The 800–1100 period from which many of the Geniza documents date is also when the top-down view is reflected in an enormous range of literary works, almost all of which are in Arabic (the occasional exceptions being Persian works from the east). Due in part to the paper revolution described in Chapter 1, and in part to the necessarily protracted course over which such complex and sophisticated traditions develop, practically every work of fundamental importance to classical Islamic law, theology, Quranic and *hadith* studies, and – crucially for us – historiography dates from this period; before then, only administrative documents were regularly written down. Significantly, even those works attributed to earlier authors were first committed to writing in this period. Muslims almost certainly *did* write things in the 600–800 period: parts of the Quran itself and some early Islamic poetry, for instance, can be dated on the basis of internal evidence (predominantly linguistic archaisms) to no later than the

8th century; but not much else. Ibn Ishaq (d. 767) transmitted to his students a biography (*sira*) of Muhammad, for instance, and people read it (in notebook form), talked about it, and reworked it. We know this not because Ibn Ishaq's *sira* survives but because one of these later re-workings of it – by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) – does. Even the pre-Islamic Arabian poetry that is known to us is pre-Islamic poetry *as remembered by 9th-century authors*. The literary sources from the 800–1100 period are thus of great significance to us for their recollection of things that happened in the preceding one. This raises all sorts of questions (occasioning, in turn, all sorts of answers) of immense significance for the study of Islamic history, as we will now see.

## The sources for 600–800 (and their limitations)

In 1972, a Muslim 'Geniza' was discovered in Yemen, containing tens of thousands of Quranic fragments, some of which date to the late 7th and early 8th century. Until then, our earliest attestation of Quranic verses came from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (c. 692), and early Islamic 'language' and culture more generally are known to us from thousands of extant documents (mostly papyri from Egypt) and coins from the 7th and 8th centuries. The papyri tell us something about the administration of Egypt from the first century of Muslim rule, indicating how the rise of Islam there did or did not change realities on the ground. Coins from all over the caliphate exist in substantial numbers, and tell us something about caliphs, governors, and minor rebels in distant provinces. The dates of a ruler's tenure, the titles he chose for himself, and the inscriptions he had imprinted on his coins all provide us with details relating to the political scene in a given time and place.

Even cumulatively, however, these sources cannot provide us with a continuous, detailed account of the first century or so of Islamic history. For this we must rely on the voluminous and consequently very detailed literary accounts of this period, written (at least



**13. Gold 'tanka' of the Delhi Sultan Qutb al-Din Mubarak Shah I (r. 1317–21). Both the 'tanka' denomination of the coin and its square shape reflect pre-Islamic Indian influence. The Arabic inscription on the coin, in which the Sultan is described as 'the commander of the faithful' and 'the caliph', is unmistakably Islamic**

in their present form) in the 800–1100 period. The Quran tells us surprisingly little about Muhammad and the rise of Islam; traditions about Muhammad and his Companions (known as *hadiths*) and biographies of Muhammad (*sira*) and accounts of the early Islamic conquests (*maghazi*) fill the gaps. Arabic chronicles are very detailed and contextualize the information of these other sources within their greater historical framework, often starting with the creation of the world and continuing into the 9th and 10th centuries. In terms of quantity, we are better served by sources that describe this period than are historians of Western Europe, Byzantium, India, or China, in the same period. That is the good news. The less-good news is that these sources are beset by historiographical issues, as identified (mostly but not exclusively) by modern scholars.

Even when Abbasid-era authors describe the first half of the 8th century (of which they may have had first-hand experience), their accounts must be filtered for anti-Umayyad propaganda. These sources are not only consciously pro-Abbasid but also (less consciously) pro-Eastern, that is to say they focus on Iran/

Iraq far more than they do on Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Iberia (though these individual regions produced much smaller and less influential works of their own). Such biases are more or less understandable – why would Abbasid, Iraq-based historians of Persian descent (which, on the whole, is who they were) do otherwise? After all, everyone knows that history is written by the victors, and these victors were unencumbered by notions of political correctness. But Abbasid sources for early Islam are also problematic for less obvious reasons.

Imagine finding our Martian guest on your doorstep. The initial hurdle in trying to understand who he is, where he is from, and why he is there, is a linguistic one. Once we learn his language, we can then ask him all about himself. But what are we to make of his answers? Are we to assume that the standards of accuracy that we apply in the modern West are shared by Martians? Even if we decide that he is aware of our standards and sincere in his attempts to satisfy them, are we to expect him to remember anything about his birth and infancy or to have an unbiased (or otherwise untainted) opinion of his parents, family, and friends? And what are we to make of the numerous contradictions we may find in his testimony?

In some ways, dealing with the literary sources for the early history of world religions is even more difficult than dealing with the testimony of Martians. Our understanding of early Judaism and early Christianity (to take two examples) is compromised by deficiencies that obscure our picture of what happened in the formative period of these religions, chief amongst which are the fact that virtually no verifiably contemporary sources exist, and that these are histories whose theological, spiritual, and political stakes are exceedingly high (leading us to be sceptical about versions of events that might benefit those who recount them).

The study of early Islam is no different. Even if we assume that our later sources have transmitted their accounts accurately (an

assumption to which we will return, with a magnifying glass, below), they still present us with two, related problems. First, they can be contradictory, in some cases offering us a dozen or so conflicting versions of a single event. Second, they usually relate to politically and religiously loaded issues, such as the right of a certain group to stipends from the state (precedence in converting to Islam, or involvement in the early conquests had direct financial ramifications for many Muslims), or the correct practice of Muslim rituals (if an historical account shows Muhammad or his Companions to have done things in a certain way, then those practices can serve as legally binding precedents). Thus, what might appear to us as ‘secular’ history is in fact largely shaped by religio-legal concerns. For this reason a great historian such as al-Tabari (whom we will encounter below) provided *several* versions of the same event, usually without expressing his own opinion on them: to be useful and impartial as an historian, he had to limit his task to the presentation of the existing options to his readers, who could marshal one of the versions in support of their point of view. Modern scholars have demonstrated that many of the conflicting *hadiths* or historical reports (*akhbar*) were created as part of a legal debate between local schools and their members, which would explain why al-Tabari had so many versions of events to record in his massive work.

Furthermore, we should not take it for granted that once language barriers are surmounted a text’s meaning will be unambiguous to us. Ninth-century Arabic may be far more similar to 19th-century Arabic than modern English is to Old English, but literal understanding of an account’s language does not guarantee an understanding of historical facts. Scholars have shown that Arabic accounts of this period (Muhammad’s life and the early conquests in particular) are replete with *topoi* (sing. *topos*). A *topos* is a literary convention or device that is meant to make a point without being taken literally. For example, when a child boasts that her daddy is ‘ten times stronger than Penelope’s daddy’, we know that in 99% of cases (itself a *topos*)

the child did not measure the relative strength of hers and Penelope's fathers and reach a 10:1 ratio. 'Ten times stronger' is simply another way of saying 'a lot'. An example from early Islamic sources is the assertion that Muhammad received his first revelations at the age of 40. All but the most hypothetical of revisionists would agree that Muhammad lived past the age of 40, so he must have done *some* things in that year. To that extent, there is little reason to doubt this detail in the *Sira*. However, scholars familiar with Near Eastern cultures and languages from the centuries preceding and following the rise of Islam recognize that the age of '40' is a *topos* for 'spiritual maturity'. Saying that Muhammad began to receive revelations at this age is saying that he was spiritually mature, not that he was literally 40 years old. Accepting that '40' is a *topos* is innocuous as it has no bearing on Islamic beliefs and rituals. Modern scholars have identified dozens of such *topoi* in accounts of Muhammad's life and, especially, the early Conquests, and even if these too are hardly destructive to our understanding of Islamic history itself, they chip away at our confidence in the utility of these sources. In other words, what these sources are *saying* and what they are *telling us* is not always the same thing, and to understand them fully, we must study our sources within the context of Near Eastern languages and literatures from late antiquity, a process that is still in its infancy.

It has also been shown that early Arabic sources on the first century of Islamic history must be understood within the broader context of their genre. To assess the value of a particular account or work, it pays to be aware of earlier and later accounts of the same topic. Research along these lines has shown that early Arabic sources that are based on orally transmitted narratives dealing with the rise of Islam *increase* in volume and detail rather than *decrease* with time (contrary to what we might have expected, human memories and Chinese-whispers being what they are). This applies to details about Muhammad's life in both the *Sira*



and in the *hadith* literature. Thus, Ibn ‘Abbas is said in a late 8th-century work to have transmitted no more than ten *hadiths*; by the 9th century, he is said to have transmitted 1,710. Some of these may be the early handful of *hadiths* that he is thought to have transmitted, but which ones?

To answer this question, scholars have devised methods for sifting what they deem to be authentic historical reports and *hadiths* from fabricated ones. Before getting to these, it should be stressed that the debate about the authenticity of our sources for early Islamic history is often misrepresented as being between believers who trust the sources and unbelievers who do not. This is wrong for all sorts of reasons: we will see here and in the following chapter that there are and have been non-Muslims who take the early sources at face value, just as there are Muslims who apply the methods of critical scholarship to these sources. In fact, the ‘critical’ approach to the sources was pioneered by Muslims in the 9th century. The identification of foreign words in the Quran, a pursuit rejected by modern Muslims as a hostile ‘Orientalist’ enterprise, was first undertaken by Muslim lexicographers in the Abbasid period. More crucially, the process of identifying the small number of authentic *hadiths* from the huge mass of fabricated ones was pioneered and developed by Muslims. Thus, al-Bukhari (d. 870), the compiler of one of the six authoritative (to Sunnis) collections of *hadiths*, is said to have chosen his c. 7,400 ‘sound’ *hadiths* from an original corpus of 600,000. About two-thirds of these 7,400 are repetitious, so the actual number of acts and statements attributed to Muhammad is considerably fewer than 3,000. Modern, sceptical scholars make much of the statistics here. Although these scholars overlook the fact that ‘600,000’ is actually a Near Eastern *topos* for ‘an enormous group in its entirety’ (cf. *Exodus* 12: 37), the 7,400 *hadiths* must be still a mere fraction of the original corpus. How did al-Bukhari (and his colleagues) accomplish this?

## *Isnads* – the traditional solution

To sift authentic accounts from spurious ones, Muslims in the 8th and 9th centuries developed and applied a science of *isnad*-analysis. Every *hadith* (and this applies to early historical sources too) contains two parts: a *matn*, which is a statement about something Muhammad or another early authority said or did; and an *isnad* or ‘chain of authorities’ that serves as a sort of Near Eastern footnote, telling us how each report has reached us (e.g.: al-Tabari heard it from ‘x’, who heard it from ‘y’, who heard it from ‘z’, who was an eyewitness to the event). *Isnad*-analysis was taken so seriously that an entire auxiliary genre of biographical literature was produced to determine whether the various links in an *isnad* are reliable and likely to have transmitted from and to other links in the chain. These biographical dictionaries can be enormous and the genre is virtually unparalleled in other historiographical traditions. Thus, for most Muslims the problems concerning the sources for early Islam are basically solved in the following way: a method (*isnad*-analysis) was devised; tools (biographical dictionaries) were developed to enable scholars to apply the method; reliable scholars (led by al-Bukhari and five others in the case of *hadiths*, and al-Tabari and others in the case of historical chronicles) did all the sifting work; and now we know exactly what Muhammad did and said, and how the rest of early Islamic history unfolded.

The sources

Much of this activity is owed, at least indirectly, to a scholar by the name of al-Shafi‘i (d. 820). Before him, Islamic law was locally based, with each region having its own traditions and authoritative jurists. The earliest *hadiths* were thus traced to the leading lawyers of each regional tradition. Al-Shafi‘i realized that this variety was dangerous to the *umma*’s cohesion and introduced two rules that were generally accepted by all schools of thought: only *hadiths* traced back to Muhammad himself are to be followed (thereby overriding idiosyncratic, local rulings); and such *hadiths* *must* be followed (even, interestingly, when they contradict the

Quran, as Muhammad's sayings are taken to be divinely inspired 'living commentary' on the Quran itself). Following al-Shafi'i, various local schools started assembling *hadiths* with sound *isnads*, resulting eventually in the six collections taken by Sunnis to be authoritative. (The relationship between Shiite *hadiths* and Shiite law is much simpler, as *hadiths* attributed to the imams were transmitted from the very start, with relatively little regional variety.)

Modern scholars have identified problems with this process and its results and look to the *matn* of a *hadith* (as well as to the *isnad*) for evidence for or against a report's authenticity. Already in the late 19th century, Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) argued that *hadiths* tell us more about 8th- and early 9th-century legal debates than they do about Muhammad's life. His ideas were pursued by Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), who made two major points of his own. First, by examining a wide selection of early *hadiths*, he determined that only in the mid-8th century were *isnads* going back to Muhammad widely circulated. Second, he reasoned that the better an *isnad* conforms to al-Shafi'i's rules, the more likely it is to post-date those rules. Thus, not only do *isnads* traced back to Muhammad not prove a *hadith*'s authenticity, they almost certainly prove the opposite (at least regarding the *isnad* itself; it in turn may have been attached to a genuine statement).

Two further objections to the science of *isnad*-analysis have been raised: first, an *isnad* authenticated by traditional means can be cut-and-pasted onto any *hadith* or historical report for which one seeks a formal seal of approval. Second, the fact that some 'sound' *hadiths* were not adduced in 8th- and 9th-century debates to which they would have provided a definitive solution suggests that these *hadiths* simply did not yet exist. By contrast, modern scholars grant that a *hadith* concerning an issue that was obsolete by the late 8th century or one that goes against what became acceptable practice by all Muslims is likely to be genuinely ancient – even if these *hadiths* have deficient *isnads* (hence,

in such cases modern scholars are *more* accepting of a report's authenticity than traditional Muslim scholars are).

What these scholars have in common with traditional Muslims is the conviction that *hadiths* and early accounts of the rise of Islam *do* contain useful data on the basis of which Islamic history can be reconstructed. Where they differ is in their means for identifying authentic reports. And, not having religious or theological concerns riding on the issue of authenticity (regardless of any cultural or political biases they may hold), modern scholars can allow themselves to presume *hadiths* to be inauthentic unless proven otherwise, whereas traditional scholars presume the opposite. Still, proponents of both approaches agree that *hadiths* and early historical reports *can* be proven to be 'innocent' and of use to historians.

Much of the above concerns the utility (or futility) of *isnad*-analysis. Since *isnads* were used by both *hadith*-collectors and most early historians, in theory the issues are of relevance to all written accounts of the first two centuries of Islamic history. In practice, however, most modern scholarship on these matters has dealt specifically with *hadiths*, while being altogether more accepting of 'historical' accounts (i.e., those preserved in chronicles). It was only a matter of time before scholars would attempt to apply the same standards of scepticism to historical accounts as were applied to *hadiths*, which brings us to Wansborough's books and Crone/Cook's *Hagarism*. The basic idea of these studies is that although *Sira* accounts and chronicles of early Islamic centuries take a form that resembles 'real' historical sources – by following chronological sequences, being more or less internally consistent, and being full of names, dates, places, and verisimilar events (accounts of Muhammad's life are much freer of ostensibly fictitious elements than we might have expected) – they are open to the same objections raised against *hadiths*, and are too closely bound up in questions directly relating to Muslim beliefs and practices to be deemed as anything other

than religious literature. Early Islamic history is thus not to be reconstructed on the basis of such sources.

Where Wansborough and *Hagarism*'s authors differ is in their responses to this problem. Wansborough argued that we simply cannot know how Islam arose and developed in the 7th and 8th centuries. Each of his works makes this point by focusing on a different set of sources: *Quranic Studies* deals with the Quran and early exegetical works, and *The Sectarian Milieu* is concerned with the early Islamic historical tradition. The latter identifies numerous *topoi* in Prophetic biographies, as discussed above, and argues that Islam emerged when the conquering Arabs sought to distinguish themselves from the Christians and Jews of the conquered populations. The former work asks a number of questions about the Quran itself: why does it contain contradictory verses and parallel passages? Why, following earlier arguments about *hadiths*, are Quranic verses not adduced as evidence in early legal debates to which they are clearly relevant? And why did exegesis of the Quran emerge only a century or so after the Quran is supposed to have been assembled into its classical form? (Most modern scholars reject the attribution to early 8th-century Muslims of exegetical works bearing their names.) To these and other questions Wansborough saw only one convincing answer: a definitive codex of the Quran does not predate the turn of the 9th century. More generally, he argued that just as Islamic literary culture, administration, and art emerged gradually, over centuries of contact between the Arab conquerors and the conquered populations of the Near East, Islam as a religion must also have developed gradually.

The authors of *Hagarism* also concluded that Islam and the Quran as we know them are not as 7th- and 8th-century Muslims knew them. They postulated, on the basis of non-Muslim sources from the period, that Mecca was not the original sanctuary of Islam; that the early conquests took place before Islam had emerged as a religion distinct from a form of Judaism; and that,

accordingly, 'Islam' and 'Muslims' were not the original labels of the religion and its followers. Rather, Muslims were known by a word derived from the Semitic root *h.g.r.* (or *h.j.r.*), which referred both to the *HiJRa*, which was an Exodus from Arabia to the Holy Land (rather than a flight from Mecca to Medina), and to the Arabs' descent from Hagar, Ishmael's mother. Neither Wansborough's works nor *Hagarism* has met with widespread acceptance, both because their arguments are contentious (and, in light of recent evidence such as the Yemeni Qurans, on some points summarily refutable), and because modern approaches to Islamic history have been shaped by a fairly unique set of concerns and considerations that might discourage the pursuit of certain arguments about early Islamic history, as we will now see.