

TIME AND DEATH IN COMPILED *ADAB* “BIOGRAPHIES”

HILARY KILPATRICK

Lausanne

Introduction

It is not by chance that I have put inverted commas round “biography”, which here is a loose translation of the phrase “*akhbār fulān*”, “the reports about so-and-so”. The term “biography” implies the desire to trace the course of an individual’s life, something which necessarily has a beginning and an end and is thus inscribed in time, whereas this historiographical ambition is not expressed in “*akhbār fulān*”. Modern readers accustomed to biographies which trace an individual’s life from the cradle to the grave find their expectations disappointed if the “biographies” of mediaeval Arab poets or notables do not conform to the same pattern, and they are often at a loss to discern other meaningful ways of organising *akhbār*. Yet such ways exist, and they co-exist as possibilities along with chronological arrangement.

In this paper I will look at some *adab* compilations which contain sections focused on individuals’ lives, to discover where they resort to chronological presentation and where they avoid it, preferring some other angle from which to approach the individual’s portrayal. I believe that to appreciate *adab* “biographies” at their true value one must accept that a life can be considered as other than a chronological narrative. The essential question is not: why is the material not arranged according to a temporal progression? Rather, it is: how is the material organised and what effect is achieved by the organisation of the material in this particular way?

In the short space available I will not concern myself with biographical dictionaries, which tend to present their subjects according to a fixed scheme.¹ I have drawn my examples from a handful of

¹ At least one example of the bare bones of such a scheme can be found in an *adab* compilation. In *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih runs through twenty-three ‘Abbasid caliphs, from al-Saffāh to al-Muṭī’, mentioning their accession, when they died (or were

texts, al-Şūlī's *Akhbār Abī Tammām* and *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā' wa-akhbāruhum* and Abū l-Faraj al-Işbahānī's *Kitāb al-aghānī*.² These are books which, while containing extensive accounts of sometimes prominent personalities, stand outside the main tradition of historiography, with its marked sense of temporal progression,³ and they offer a variety of models of life writing.

In the first part of the paper I will show that chronological order is not absent in these compiled accounts of lives, even though it may only occupy a subordinate place alongside other ways of organising the *akhbār* in them. The second part of the paper will focus on where the subject's death occurs in the account and how it is introduced, and what this can tell us about the organisation of the accounts of lives on chronological or other lines. Why I choose death in particular I will explain later.

deposed), their appearance, the engraving on their seal, who their ministers and chamberlains were, and sometimes their wives and children (Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-'Uryān. Cairo: Dār al-fikr, n.d. V, 336-353).

One of the main types of biographical dictionary, the *Ṭabaqāt* works, has been studied by Ibrahim Hafsi ("Recherches sur le genre '*Ṭabaqāt*' dans la littérature arabe". *Arabica* 23 (1976), 227-265; 24 (1977), 1-41 and 150-186). A recent thesis has examined the organisation of the entries in some dictionaries more closely related to *belles lettres*, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-udabā'* and Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān*: Letizia Osti, *From Person to Persona: Portraits of Scholars in Medieval Arabic Biographical Dictionaries*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. St. Andrews 2001, 105-127.

² Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā al-Şūlī, *Akhbār Abī Tammām*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abduh 'Azzām, Khalīl Maḥmūd 'Asākir and Naẓīr al-Islām al-Hindī, 3rd ed. Beirut: Dār al-āfāq al-jadīda, 1400/1980. *Idem*, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā' wa-akhbāruhum*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne, 3rd ed. Beirut: Dār al-masīra, 1401/1982. Abū l-Faraj 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Işbahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*. 24 vols. Cairo: Dār al-kutub/al-hay'a al-mişriya al-'amma li-l-ta'lif wa-l-nashr, 1927-1974. This work will be referred to as *Aghānī*.

³ *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā' wa-akhbāruhum* forms part of al-Şūlī's *Kitāb al-awraq*, which in some sections, such as the *Akhbār al-Rāḍī wa-l-Muttaqī* (ed. J. Heyworth Dunne, 3rd ed. Beirut: Dar al-masīra, 1403/1983) and the fragment covering the reigns of the caliphs from al-Wāthiq to al-Muṭtaḍī (*Kitāb al-awraq*, ed. A. B. Khalidov, Saint Petersburg: Tsentr "Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie", 1998), combines the presentation of caliphs with the chronicle of their reigns year by year. But the annalistic element is absent from the accounts of caliphs's children and other non-rulers. And judging by the list of al-Şūlī's works in the *Fihrist* (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud, 3rd ed. Beirut: Dār al-masīra, 1988, 167-8) while historiography was an important concern of his, he was more interested in poetry, its authors and its evaluation, and more generally in court culture. Abū l-Faraj, whose surviving achievement as a historian is his *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, moved away from chronology when he chose memorable songs as the starting-point for the *Aghānī*.

Time in compiled accounts of lives

In the classical Arabic *adab* tradition, the raw material for accounts of personalities consists of reports of varying length and complexity, with or without quotations of poetry.⁴ A small minority of these reports are long continuous narratives,⁵ and thus as far as temporal organisation is concerned they come close to conventional modern ideas of life writing. Typically, they are accounts of incidents in the lives of pre-Islamic or early Islamic poets and personalities, such as Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm's revenge for his father's and grandfather's murders, the brigand poet 'Urwa ibn al-Ward's thefts of livestock, al-Ṭufayl al-Dawsī's meeting with the Prophet and conversion to Islam, or Dhū l-Iṣba' al-'Adwānī's discussion with his daughters about the relative merits of their husbands.⁶ Such accounts, however, belong to legends about the Arab tribal past (the *Ayyām al-'arab*), to the history of the beginnings of the Muslim community, or, in Dhū l-Iṣba''s case, where the discussion serves to explain a number of proverbial expressions, to the corpus of information about the Arabic language. They may function as entertainment; al-Manṣūr tells the stories about 'Urwa during an informal evening with his courtiers. The focus on events and at times on other non-biographical subjects; despite their length, the information they yield about their named heroes is extremely limited.

A rarer type of extensive narrative is to be found in entries about 'Abbasid personalities. It tends to recount the subject's education and the beginning of his or her career; it may well be couched in the first person. Thus, for instance, the singer 'Abdallāh ibn al-'Abbās al-Rabī'ī recalls the reason for his becoming a musician and starting to perform at court. He was in love with a singing-girl and needed an excuse to be with her; later, the news got out that he was an accomplished musician, and despite his grandfather's initial disapproval he performed before al-Rashīd and his successors.⁷ The focus in such

⁴ In the *Aghānī* songs form part of the material too. From the point of view of compilation, however, they may generally be assimilated to poems.

⁵ "Long" is understood in this context as extending over two or more pages.

⁶ *Aghānī* III, 3-6; III, 83-88; XIII, 218-20; III, 94-96. Al-Ṭufayl al-Dawsī is the father of the section's subject, the poet al-Ḥārith ibn al-Ṭufayl.

⁷ *Id.* XIX, 221-24. 'Abdallāh was the grandson of the vizier al-Faḍl ibn al-Rabī', who brought him up after his father's untimely death. The old man had evidently planned a more glorious future for his grandson than being a court musician.

accounts is on the subject's doings and inner life; they correspond to modern expectations concerning biographical or autobiographical material.

Most of the reports making up accounts of personalities, however, are far shorter and generally fairly straightforward in form. The simplest type of *khbar* may be a bare statement of fact. For example: “‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan the secretary told me: ‘I saw Abū Tammām when I was a little boy. He was tall and brown-skinned’”.⁸ Somewhat more elaborate is the following report:

‘Awn ibn Muḥammad al-Kindī related to me: ‘I was with my father and uncle at the house of one of al-‘Abbās ibn Muḥammad’s descendants to condole with him about a relative of theirs who had died. Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī arrived and everyone looked at him and stood up for him – it was before the year 220. I had never seen him before, and my eyes lighted on a fat man with a swarthy complexion and thick lips, attractive eyes and a fine nose. When he spoke to condole with the family he expressed himself eloquently, and people remembered his words. I had not heard what he said when he arrived, but when he rose to go, he declared: “May God continue his favours to you, may he recompense you well for your loss and requite you. May God meet so-and-so [the deceased]; may He cause his achievement to grow, accepting his good deeds and forgiving his bad ones”.⁹

Both these reports sketch the appearance of their subjects, Abū Tammām and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī. The second also tells the reader something about Ibrāhīm’s standing in the ‘Abbasid family and illustrates one of his gifts, his eloquence, with a quotation. Neither of them, however, is concerned to date their information. In the case of ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan’s description a date is irrelevant; he is simply speaking of the adult Abū Tammām. ‘Awn ibn Muḥammad situates the condolence scene “before 220”, but the significance of this is obscure. It might indicate his recalling that the incident occurred before

⁸ Al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār Abī Tammām*, 259.

⁹ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash‘ār awlād al-khulafā’*, 46. Al-‘Abbās ibn Muḥammad (d. 186/802) was a brother of the first two ‘Abbasid caliphs, al-Saffāh and al-Manṣūr. Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (162/779-224/839), a brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd, was briefly counter-caliph before al-Ma’mūn arrived in Baghdad from Khurasan in 204/819. Al-Ma’mūn pardoned him in 210/825-6. (For further details see below.) Here and elsewhere I have not translated the *isnāds* except where they are relevant to the argument.

the deportation of the Zutt̄ to Baghdad on their way to Khāniqīn after their revolt had been put down, or before al-Mu'taṣim sent the Afshīn to combat Bābak, or before he left Baghdad for al-Qāṭūl to found another capital, or before al-Faḍl ibn Marwān was disgraced.¹⁰ But it might also be an aside suggested by a connection between the scene and some event in 'Awn's own life. A biographer concerned to narrow down the time when this event could have taken place would no doubt decide it occurred after al-Ma'mūn pardoned Ibrāhīm in 210. In fact, however, there is no point in trying to date it exactly, for the information it conveys does not belong in a chronological sequence. Apart from describing Ibrāhīm's appearance, it illustrates his eloquence and his standing among the 'Abbāsids. In addition it offers an example of a dignified and profound formula of condolence which a reader might find useful one day.

Working with material like this, compilers not surprisingly organised accounts of personalities on non-chronological lines. One method they adopted was to bring together all the reports on a given topic in a single section. The description of Abū Tammām quoted here is drawn from a section in his *Akhhbār* entitled *Ṣifat Abī Tammām wa-akhhbār ahlih* which includes three reports referring to his physical appearance, his slight stammer and his eloquence, followed by anecdotes involving his brother and his son.¹¹ In this book al-Ṣūlī organises his material according to topics. These are: the reasons why Abū Tammām was held in esteem; his contacts with a series of patrons and with a fellow-poet; what was faulted in his poetry; the passages of poetry and eloquence he transmitted; his appearance and family; a "varia" section of reports which could not be fitted in elsewhere; his death and the age he attained; the elegies composed on him. The main part of the *Akhhbār*, then, is taken up with the critical reception of the poetry and the context in which it was composed. Only at the end, with the poet's death and the poems mourning him, does chronological order makes its appearance – something which is possible because the reports are obviously situated at a given time. Here the order in the text mirrors the course of the subject's life. A second trace of chronological ordering can be observed in the section on Abū

¹⁰ For the events of 220, see Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et al. 15 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901, III, 1168-1186.

¹¹ Al-Ṣūlī, *Akhhbār Abī Tammām*, 259-62.

Tammām and his patrons. Although not all of them can be dated exactly,¹² there is evidently a progression from Aḥmad ibn Abū Du‘ād (c. 160/776-240/854), the first in the section, to ‘Abdallāh ibn Ṭāhir (182/798-230/844) midway through it, and then Aḥmad ibn al-Mu‘taṣim (born c. 200/815), who closes the series of patrons.¹³

Some *akhbār*, however, clearly refer to datable events. This is the case with several reports of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī’s relations with his nephew al-Ma’mūn, his junior by seven years, in al-Ṣūlī’s *Ash‘ār awlād al-khulafā’ wa-akhbāruhum*.¹⁴ After al-Amīn had been killed, al-Ma’mūn, while still in Merv, proclaimed ‘Alī al-Riḍā as his successor. This aroused the opposition of the ‘Abbasids in Baghdad, who proclaimed Ibrāhīm caliph in 201/817. Al-Ma’mūn thereupon decided to return to Baghdad, preceded by an army under al-Ḥasan ibn Sahl. Ibrāhīm, who had faced conspiracies and opposition within Iraq, withdrew from political life in 204/819 and went into hiding, shortly before al-Ma’mūn entered Baghdad. In 210/825-6 Ibrāhīm was discovered and imprisoned, but soon afterwards he was pardoned. He resumed his place as a prince of the ruling house and a notable contributor to court culture, devoting much energy to singing, composition and the training of musicians.¹⁵

Al-Ṣūlī evidently viewed this episode as one of the main focuses of interest in Ibrāhīm’s life.¹⁶ For it is the first subject he treats at length after naming Ibrāhīm’s mother and sketching a brief profile of the prince which mentions his standing as a poet and musician and his role

¹² A further problem is that often only the dates of death are known, which can make people of different generations appear to be contemporaries.

¹³ In al-Ṣūlī’s *Akhbār al-Buḥturī* (ed. Ṣāliḥ al-Ashtar. Damascus: Maṭbū‘āt al-Majma‘ al-‘ilmī al-‘arabī, 1378/1958), the material is also organised according to topics. It too contains sections on the poet’s contacts with patrons, but here chronological order is combined with arrangement on hierarchical lines. Al-Buḥturī’s relations with al-Mutawakkil and al-Faṭḥ ibn Khāqān are treated first, before the poet’s relations with subsequent caliphs, and then with viziers and secretaries.

¹⁴ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash‘ār awlād al-khulafā’*, 17-49.

¹⁵ For further details on this incident see *EP*, arts. “Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī” (D. Sourdel) and “al-Ma’mūn b. Hārūn al-Rashīd” (M. Rekaya), and the recent discussion in Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography. The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma’mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 31-2, 37.

¹⁶ This contrasts with Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s presentation of Ibrāhīm in the *Aghānī* (X, 69-70; 95-149), which emphasises Ibrāhīm’s role as a musician; the article starts and ends with lengthy treatments of his controversies with Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī on questions of musical theory and performance. His sally into politics and uncertain relationship with al-Ma’mūn are only broached midway through the article and occupy a modest place in it.

in politics. In the first report Ibrāhīm appears before al-Ma'mūn in chains. He admits his faults and appeals to the caliph's magnanimity, persuading him to let him go free. Quotations from two of his panegyrics on al-Ma'mūn follow. But just afterwards, Ibrāhīm appears in hiding; he falls for the dignified slave-girl who serves him and composes a poem to soften her heart. The next subject is the rehabilitated Ibrāhīm's state of mind; he was always anxious that al-Ma'mūn would regret his clemency, hence his dissolute life-style (a sign that he had abandoned politics), his singing, and his constantly eulogising the caliph. A letter of his to a musician expresses the same uncertainty about al-Ma'mūn's true attitude. There follow: a quotation from the first poem Ibrāhīm addressed to the caliph after he was captured; a couplet, evidently composed later, in which he reflects on his destiny; al-Ma'mūn's appreciation of one of his panegyrics; and a couplet on his suffering caused by an unnamed person – a beloved, or the caliph himself?¹⁷ Al-Ṣūlī returns to this relationship between uncle and nephew several pages later. Muḥammad ibn al-Zayyāt succeeds in getting back from Ibrāhīm money which his father had lent him during his brief caliphate by threatening to recite to al-Ma'mūn a long poem where he suggests that Ibrāhīm still has political ambitions and a following at court.¹⁸ A little later Ibrāhīm is portrayed lampooning al-Ma'mūn for his love of wine and singing girls, while innocent men are overwhelmed by injustice – and this despite his nephew's clemency. Soon after Ibrāhīm asks al-Ma'mūn to punish Di'bil for a satire composed on him, only to be consoled that the caliph has been the object of a worse attack which he has tolerated.¹⁹ In the relationship between them, al-Ma'mūn is given the last word when he judges that Ibrāhīm's own lampoons were surpassed by al-Jāhīz's laconic judgement on his powerlessness as caliph.²⁰

As this summary shows, al-Ṣūlī does not seek to present the chronological course of events: Ibrāhīm's brief counter-caliphate, his period in hiding, his capture and appearance before al-Ma'mūn, his pardon and subsequent engagement in music. Had the compiler done so, he

¹⁷ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā'*, 18-22.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 26-30. Ibrāhīm later gets his back on Muḥammad, lampooning him when al-Mu'tasim appoints him vizier (p. 30).

¹⁹ *Id.*, 32-33.

²⁰ *Id.*, 45.

would have placed the incident with the slave-girl earlier; it is possible that the complaint of suffering also belongs to Ibrāhīm's underground years. And the lampoon of al-Ma'mūn, which al-Ṣūlī's source implies belongs to Ibrāhīm's post-rehabilitation period, is situated more credibly by Ibn al-Jarrāḥ in his time in hiding.²¹ Further, the only information in the whole notice about Ibrāhīm's activities as caliph is provided in the introduction to the incident with Muḥammad ibn al-Zayyāt.

As they have been assembled, the themes which emerge from these reports and their accompanying poetry are the power of poetry and eloquent speech to influence events, the precariousness of the ex-caliph's position despite his nephew's clemency, and the ambiguity of Ibrāhīm's own attitude towards al-Ma'mūn. Apart from quotations elsewhere, examples of Ibrāhīm's eloquence in prose and poetry form the largest discrete section in the book;²² in the book's title, after all, the *ash'ār* come before the *akhbār*. Ibrāhīm's poems evidently played a part in bringing about al-Ma'mūn's pardon, though whether they swayed the caliph's mind or whether they simply provided him with an opportunity to do something he had already decided on is impossible to tell from al-Ṣūlī's account. As the incident with Muḥammad ibn al-Zayyāt illustrates, even if Ibrāhīm had been pardoned, he was still vulnerable, for his past could always be brought up against him, and a gifted poet could whip up the caliph's suspicions. Elsewhere it emerges that he was never quite sure what al-Ma'mūn's opinion of him was. Finally, Ibrāhīm's own attitude towards al-Ma'mūn hesitates between gratitude and admiration, recognition of his authority (he appeals to him to silence Di'bil), and resentment, expressed in his composing (or repeating) the lampoon of al-Ma'mūn between wine-jars and singing-girls.

Presenting these *akhbār* as far as possible in chronological order (first this happened, then that, and then the other) would have encouraged the reader to look for an evolution in the attitudes of the two protagonists and for links of cause and effect. Al-Ṣūlī's arrangement of them, by contrast, emphasises the elements of uncertainty and ambiguity and makes for a subtle and plausible psychological portrait.²³

²¹ Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd ibn al-Jarrāḥ, *al-Waraqā*, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām and 'Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj. Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1953, 19-20.

²² Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā*, 35-45.

²³ How far this corresponds to the historical Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī is impossible to say.

This is not to say that chronology is entirely absent from the notice on Ibrāhīm. It makes its appearance at the end, with the report of Ibrāhīm's last illness, his exclusion of the 'Alids from his will, his death and burial, and al-Mu'taṣim's inclusion of the 'Alids in the inheritance on the urging of his son, the later caliph al-Wāthiq.²⁴ In this case, as in *Akhhār Abī Tammām*, the account of the death rounds off the portrayal of the life even as death rounded off the subject's life itself. But, as often in such *adab* presentations, what prepares the reader for the subject's death is not the account of his aging and physical or mental deterioration but a change of tone. It begins with Ibrāhīm's moving elegy for his oldest son, Aḥmad, which closes the section of quotations from Ibrāhīm's prose and poetry. Almost immediately after, Ibrāhīm appears confirming his close friend Ja'far ibn Khālid al-Barmakī's fears that al-Rashīd has turned against him, and this is followed by the condolence scene translated above. Then just before Ibrāhīm's death, two scenes illustrate his relations with Abū l-'Atāhiya. In the first the two men are together in Mecca, and Abū l-'Atāhiya in a poem affirms the transitoriness of this world, the insignificance of possessions and at the same time his heirs' impatience to inherit from him. A passer-by says he would do better to recite from the Quran, whereupon Ibrāhīm remarks that such reflections are in the spirit of the Quran. In the second, Ibrāhīm sends a poem to Abū l-'Atāhiya, who has just taken to wearing woollen garments, rebuking him for making a show of asceticism while denying the Day of Judgment and life after death;²⁵ Ibrāhīm is here portrayed as a defender of Muslim orthodoxy.²⁶ These reports offers a transition from the worldliness of politics, court intrigues, poetry and singing to the solemnity of the prince's last days and his preparation for his approaching death.

²⁴ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā'*, 48-49.

²⁵ According to al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Ch. Pellat. 7 vols. Beirut: Manshūrāt al-jāmi'a al-lubnāniya, § 2537), Abū l-'Atāhiya took to wearing wool after his hopes of marrying 'Utba were finally disappointed. Ibrāhīm, however, here interprets it partly as exhibitionism and partly as a sign of a Manichean attitude to the created world.

²⁶ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā'*, 44-48. Abū l-'Atāhiya's poem is no. 377 in his published *Dīwān* (Shukrī Fayṣal (ed.), *Abū l-'Atāhiya. Ash'āruh wa-akhhāruh*. Damascus: Maṭba'at jāmi'at Dimashq, 1383/1965).

In his presentation of lives in the *Kitāb al-aghānī*, Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī sometimes follows methods of arrangement similar to those al-Ṣūlī uses in *Akḥbār Abī Tammām*.²⁷ Different aspects of a poet's or composer's life and work may be covered in easily distinguishable sections. A simple example is offered by the article on the Umayyad poet Abū Ṣakhr al-Hudhalī. After his genealogy and a profile sketch, he is depicted appearing with his fellow-tribesmen to claim their stipends from Ibn al-Zubayr, who has set himself up as counter-caliph in the Hijaz. Ibn al-Zubayr refuses to give anything to Abū Ṣakhr, a known supporter of the Umayyads, and Abū Ṣakhr launches into an eloquent eulogy of them and biting attack on their opponent. In fury Ibn al-Zubayr has him imprisoned, but his tribe intercedes for him and he is released.²⁸ When 'Abd al-Malik comes to the Hijaz, the poet recites a panegyric of him and is compensated for all the money Ibn al-Zubayr withheld from him. After this dramatic episode comes a section of quotations from Abū Ṣakhr's poems in different genres, elegy, satire and 'Udhri *ghazal*. A long extract from the poem from which the lyrics of the song introducing Abū Ṣakhr's entry are taken is followed by a report about the song's performance before al-Hādī; a second poem of his which was set to music is then quoted, and three anecdotes connected with the poem's quotation and the song's performance round off the article.²⁹ The material is organised in three thematic sections: the poet's involvement in politics as a courageous and eloquent supporter of the Umayyads; a selection from his admired poems in different genres; the reception of his poems, in particular by musicians and music-lovers. Given the paucity of information about the poet's life, there would seem to be little scope for chronological organisation, but it is not entirely absent. The long narrative about Abū Ṣakhr's political sympathies can be dated to the period 65/685-72/692, while the first of the two elegies quoted was

²⁷ In his earlier, historico-religious work, the *Maqātil al-Ṭālibīyīn*, the presentations follow a standard format, with the events leading up to the character's death, the death itself and sometimes elegies concluding each entry. For the organisation of material on personalities in the *Aghānī*, see my *Making the Great Book of Songs. Compilation and the author's craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's Kitāb al-aghānī*. London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003, 181-238.

²⁸ The initial profile sketch, however, states that he died in Ibn al-Zubayr's prison.

²⁹ *Aghānī* XXIV, 108-124: "Akḥbār Abī Ṣakhr al-Hudhalī wa-nasabuh". Here and elsewhere I count the introductory song as part of the article.

composed by Abū Ṣakhr at the request of his patron 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abdallāh ibn Khālid ibn Asīd, who was governor of Mecca for several years from 96/714-15;³⁰ here a temporal progression provides a link between two distinct thematic sections. The reception of the poetry and its being set to music also presuppose the passing of time; the performance of the introductory song before al-Hādī and that of the second song by an unprepossessing but gifted woman singer who was later bought by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dākhil in Spain prove that fifty or more years after his death Abū Ṣakhr's poetry was still being performed and appreciated. As this example shows, chronological progression may be observed both within sections and between sections.³¹

One aspect of a life where Abū l-Faraj (or his sources), like al-Ṣūlī, may arrange material chronologically is the subject's connections with patrons; the patron's name in the reports treating this topic can often serve as a chronological marker. In the centre of the article on Abū Ḥashīsha, Abū l-Faraj incorporates a passage from the musician's own memoirs in which he recalls the songs from his repertoire which the caliphs from al-Ma'mūn to al-Mu'tamid liked to hear. This passage is preceded and followed by *akhbār* depicting Abū Ḥashīsha performing before fellow musicians or powerful people and winning their approval, with quotations of the songs in each case; the number of songs justify the article being considered as focussed essentially on the composer's œuvre,³² but the central section introduces a note of temporal progression as far as the poet's career is concerned – and perhaps, if the settings could be heard, an indication of his development as a composer.

The poet's relations with his patrons do not form a section in the article on the Umayyad poet al-Ṭirimmāḥ; the *akhbār* on the subject are interspersed with other topics in the article. But they occur in chronological order, first the meeting with Makhlad ibn Yazīd al-Muhallabī, then the ones with Khālid ibn Yazīd al-Qasrī. The movement of time in this article is emphasised by the fact that the

³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, II, 1305, 1314, 1335, 1346, 1394, 1436, 1439.

³¹ For further discussion of the organisation of material in sections in the *Aghānī*, see *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 204-208.

³² *Aghānī* XXIII, 45, 75-83; the connections with caliphs are given 78-80. The issue of focuses of articles is discussed in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 176-80, 183-5.

first report in it sketches the young poet's arrival in Kufa from his native Syria and the last describes his death. And the temporal progression from Makhḷad to Khālid is accompanied by an evolution in al-Ṭirimmāḥ's attitude to his patrons, from the arrogant self-assurance of his youth to a willingness in later life to admit his economic dependence on the *mamdūh*.³³

In the article on the early 'Abbasid poet Manṣūr al-Namarī a sense of chronological progression is established in the detailed profile where Abū l-Faraj sets out the subject's career. He learns his craft from Kulthūm al-'Attābī, who introduces him to the Barmakids; they present him to al-Rashīd, his principal patron; later he falls out with his teacher; he achieves success with poems echoing and affirming al-Rashīd's anti-'Alid stance, along the lines of those of his older contemporary Marwān ibn Abī Ḥafṣa. The subsequent *akhbār* elaborate on the account of patronage in this framework, treating Manṣūr's relation with his patron al-Rashīd and often involving his rival Marwān. They then introduce an incident ignored by the profile, Manṣūr's fall from favour when his sympathies for the 'Alids become known; three versions are given of this incident. These accounts, taken together, narrate the course of Manṣūr's career at court, his departure in disgrace and his natural death, which intervened before the caliph's messengers came to execute him. They are followed by *akhbār* illustrating aspects of the poet's character, his contact with his colleagues and his role in ending the government's campaign against the tribes of Rabī'a; the last incident portrays the poet successfully improvising before al-Rashīd and receiving a reward.³⁴ A chronological framework thus underlies the earlier part of this article, but the later part demonstrates that Manṣūr deserves to be remembered as more than an initially successful court poet who narrowly escaped execution. In particular the final anecdote reaffirms his gifts as a poet, recognised by the caliph in an informal, non-political context.

The combination of a profile which indicates in some detail the subject's background and training in his or her art with reports about early patrons is to be found in several articles on musicians. Here,

³³ *Id.*, XII, 34-45; a summary of the article is to be found in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 211.

³⁴ *Id.*, XIII, 140-41 (profile); 141-150 (relations with al-Rashīd); 150-157 (other reports).

however, there is sometimes a modification, generally where women are concerned; the patrons are replaced by owners. Shāriya, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's favourite singing-girl, is introduced by a profile indicating her (uncertain) origin and her being bought and trained by Ibrāhīm. There follow accounts of Ibrāhīm's purchasing and training her after Ishāq al-Mawṣilī had turned her down as too expensive, and his engaging in an elaborate legal fraud to protect himself against Shāriya's mother's intrigues, which could have led to al-Mu'taṣim claiming the girl.³⁵ In the subsequent pages anecdotes portraying Shāriya with Ibrāhīm are interspersed with others documenting her contacts with later 'Abbasids, al-Wāthiq, al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'tamid. The final anecdote portrays her singing before the caliph al-Mu'tamid. The nature of her relation with these dignitaries alters over time; whereas Ibrāhīm calls her "My daughter", towards al-Mu'tamid, who trusts her, she behaves like a mother, cooking for him every day when he is still a prince.

A unique example of relations between people providing a chronological framework is found in the article on 'Ā'isha bint Ṭalḥa, where 'Ā'isha's three marriages, to 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Abī Bakr, Muṣ'ab ibn al-Zubayr and 'Umar ibn 'Ubaydallāh ibn Ma'mar al-Taymī are treated successively. As with several of the other examples presented here, the passage of time mirrors a change in the quality of the relationships. While the beautiful 'Ā'isha always remains headstrong and capricious, her manner of relating to her husbands evolves somewhat. In her first marriage she leaves home and spends four months with her aunt 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr before agreeing to a reconciliation arranged by others; at 'Abdallāh's death she does not mourn him. She quarrels with Muṣ'ab too and keeps him at a distance for a time, but she seizes a chance to make it up with him. During her third marriage she angers 'Umar by recalling Muṣ'ab's attractive qualities in his presence, but no long-lasting clashes are recorded. She also appears sharing a joke with him about his other wife's ugliness, and at his death she makes it known that she does not want to remarry.³⁶

³⁵ *Id.*, XV, 379; XVI, 3-15 (3-8: profile, acquisition by Ibrāhīm and training; 12-15: anecdotes with later caliphs).

³⁶ *Id.*, XI, 180-87; these *akhbār* are in the centre of the article on 'Ā'isha, XI, 175-192.

These examples show that in a presentation of a personality compiled from different accounts it is possible to convey temporal progression. Such progression may be visible when the individual takes part in a succession of datable events, as in Abū Ṣakhr's case, or transfers from one patron to another, like Abū Ḥashīsha.³⁷ When names of the same category of persons, such as patrons or owners, provide the chronological markers in *akhbār*, temporal progression may be accompanied by an evolution in the personality's character, illustrated in his or her changing relationship with different members of this category, as can be seen in the articles on al-Ṭirimmāḥ, Shāriya and 'Ā'isha bint Ṭalḥa.

Temporal progression is also implicit when the reception of a poet's or musician's oeuvre is documented, as in the article on Abū Ṣakhr mentioned above. Another example is provided by the article on the singer Sallāmat al-Qass, who was bought by Yazīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik. The *akhbār* of the article on her move gradually both in time and in place from Medina, where she grew up, established her reputation and earned her nickname because of the ascetic 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī 'Ammār's passion for her, to the caliph's residence in Damascus. At the end of the article Yazīd dies and Sallāma mourns him. One of her laments for him, the lyrics of which are also ascribed to the poet al-Aḥwaṣ, is later recycled by Ishāq al-Mawṣilī, when Umm Ja'far commissions a lament from him for Hārūn al-Rashīd and he is unable to compose anything on the spot.³⁸ The article on Sallāma thus extends beyond her master's lifetime and her own by nearly a century. Another example of accounts of reception of a poet's work adding a dimension of time can be seen in a group of *akhbār* in the article on the poet al-Shammākh, a contemporary of the Prophet. They recount how a particularly successful line in one of his panegyrics is admired by Ibn Da'b, an early 'Abbasid scholar, and Abū Nuwās, faulted by 'Abd al-Malik, and used as an inspiration by petitioners in both the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid periods.³⁹

³⁷ A striking example of a chronological outline of a life is to be found in Abū l-Faraj's profile of al-Mughīra ibn Shu'ba, Companion of the Prophet, warrior, general, ambassador and governor of Kufa and Basra (*Aghānī* XVI, 79-80, translated in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 75-76).

³⁸ *Aghānī* VIII, 332-349; the section on Yazīd's death and Sallāma's laments is 346-49. The recycled lament is also the song introducing the article.

³⁹ *Id.*, IX, 167-70.

A case study: death

Having identified some common forms of chronological organisation in "biographies" compiled from *akhbār*, I will carry out a small case study on where the subject's death is placed. Deaths have several merits in a study about time and biography.⁴⁰ They are a topic about which information is very often available. They may be expected to come at the end of the presentation of lives, mirroring the place of death in reality,⁴¹ and their chronological relation to the rest of the information about the subject's life is easy to establish.⁴² The place where they occur in the text and the events which lead up to them cast light on the importance of chronological organisation relative to other ways of arranging material, as has been shown in Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's case, where the death is not introduced, as might be expected, by the subject's aging or another immediate cause.

The article on the early 'Abbasid poet Bashshār ibn Burd is one of the longest in the *Aghānī*.⁴³ By and large, Abū l-Faraj adopts a "pointillist" approach to portraying the brilliant, quarrelsome and controversial blind poet, as he does with other poets and musicians of the 'Abbasid period for which he had much information to hand.⁴⁴ But groups of *akhbār* on a single subject are also found in the article, such as those on critical opinions about the quality of Bashshār's poetry or on his irreverent and witty retorts.⁴⁵ And the end of it includes six reports about Bashshār's dramatic execution; as is well-known, he was beaten to death on al-Mahdī's orders.

⁴⁰ In several respects they resemble education and artistic training, also frequent topics in life writing.

⁴¹ They may, however, be followed by a short summary of the person's achievements or general evaluation of him concluding the "biography".

⁴² Theoretically births display the same advantages in a study of time and biography, but in practice there is less information about how the lives of people who become prominent begin than about how they end.

⁴³ *Aghānī* III, 134-250.

⁴⁴ I have proposed the term "pointillist" for those articles which appear to be aimed chiefly at an all-round presentation of their subjects, each anecdote or quotation of poetry serving as a brush-stroke in the portrait. The compiler, by moving from place to place on the canvas, prevents the reader from fixing his attention exclusively on a single facet of the subject and losing sight of the whole picture (*Making the Great Book of Songs*, 226-28).

⁴⁵ *Aghānī* III, 141-59; 159-64.

The reports of Bashshar's tragic end do not, however, simply represent another section, but are the last in a series of anecdotes scattered through the article which portray the contacts between the caliph and the poet. They start with a neutral account of al-Mahdī asking Bashshār about his origins and the poet giving him the information, after he has exchanged insults with Abū Dulāma, who is present. In the next anecdote featuring al-Mahdī, the caliph is amused by Bashshār's frivolous interpretation of two Quran verses and his mocking answer when one of al-Mahdī's *mawālī* asks him a stupid question. Further on the reason for al-Mahdī's forbidding Bashshār to compose love poetry or mention women's names in his verses is set out for the first time; the caliph, who was naturally jealous, considered that Bashshār's poems, treating the theme of seduction with simple diction and naturalistic dialogues, had a pernicious effect on morals, especially those of women and young people. But shortly after al-Mahdī appears inviting Bashshār to describe in poetry a singing-girl who is exhibiting her musical skills⁴⁶. These *akhbār* reflect the two facets of al-Mahdī's attitude to Bashshār which reappear several times in the article: appreciation of his wit and poetic art, and fear of his verses' subversive effect on morals⁴⁷. Bashshār himself does not take the censorship of his poetry lying down; true to form, he responds provocatively, composing short pieces on the veto and referring to it in *qaṣīdas* at the point where description of a love affair would normally occur. And when the caliph fails to reward him for his panegyrics, he philosophically observes that both parties, poet and patron, have behaved dishonestly, he in serving al-Mahdī lying words, and al-Mahdī in giving his hopes the lie⁴⁸.

Somewhat more than halfway through the article Abū l-Faraj relates a more elaborate incident involving Bashshār, Rawḥ ibn Ḥātim⁴⁹ and al-Mahdī. Bashshār lampoons Rawḥ, Rawḥ responds with threats, Bashshār mocks Rawḥ again, and Rawḥ swear to strike

⁴⁶ *Id.*, III, 137-8; 158-9; 182-4; 188-9.

⁴⁷ *Id.*, III, 192-3, 213, 222, 230-1 (appreciation, often combined with a reward); 221 (al-Mahdī's veto of Bashshār's love poetry); 219-20 (Bashshār complies with al-Mahdī's veto, but al-Mahdī gives him the same reward two years running); 215-6, 239-40 (al-Mahdī does not reward Bashshār for his panegyrics).

⁴⁸ *Id.*, III, 211-2, 219-20, 221, 234-6 (references to the veto); 215-6, 239-40 (comment that both poet and patron are liars).

⁴⁹ A member of the prominent Muhallabī family, Rawḥ ibn Ḥātim supported the 'Abbasids against the Umayyads; he was governor of Basra in 166/782.

the poet with his sword when he next catches sight of him, even if it is in the caliph's presence. Bashshār goes to court and appeals to al-Mahdī, who immediately summons Rawḥ. With the help of legal experts a way out is found; Rawḥ strikes Bashshār with the flat of his sword, at which Bashshār wails with pain and exclaims: "*Bismillāh*". Laughing, al-Mahdī comments: "This is when he struck you with the flat. How would you have felt if he had struck with the cutting edge?"⁵⁰

This anecdote portrays al-Mahdī as still well-disposed towards Bashshār, indeed saving his life. It forms an ironic contrast to those at the end of the article where the caliph himself orders the poet's death. Readers are encouraged to notice the contrast not only because Bashshār's death is involved in both cases, once potentially and once in fact, but also because of the expression *Bismillāh*. In the first and longest account of Bashshār's death, his executioners reproach him for not saying either "*Bismillāh*" or "*Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*" when he receives the blows, whereupon he answers that they are neither food to pronounce a blessing over nor a favour to thank God for. In two of the subsequent accounts one or other of the phrases is mentioned, with Bashshār giving the same answer. The poet reacts in a conventional fashion so long as the situation is not threatening, but when his life is truly in danger he behaves with courage and independence.⁵¹

The difference in the outcomes of the incident with Rawḥ and the final anecdotes where al-Mahdī decides to have Bashshār killed illustrate dramatically the evolution in the relation between caliph and poet.⁵² And the sense of an evolution is strengthened when it is realised that the placing of the other anecdotes on the subject suggests a gradual shift in al-Mahdī's attitude from positive to negative. The veto on love poetry does not appear immediately; it follows scenes first where al-Mahdī shows his appreciation and then where he does

⁵⁰ *Aghānī* III, 216-7.

⁵¹ *Id.*, III, 240-44 (*Bismillāh*, *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*); 245-7 (*Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*). Here Bashshār is reported as pronouncing the phrase "*Innā li-llāhi wa-innā ilayhi rāji'un*", traditionally used when a death is announced); 250 (*Bismillāh*).

⁵² The immediate reason the *Aghānī* gives for Bashshār's execution is that he was suspected of heretical views (*zandaqa*), and influential people who had been the butt of his satires accused him of this to al-Mahdī. But had the caliph still been well-disposed to the poet, he would not have had him executed without any investigation of the claim; indeed, Bashshār's accusers might have hesitated to bring it in the first place.

not reward the poet. The death in Bashshār's article is well prepared for, appearing as a logical outcome of the tense relationship between poet and ruler; its treatment conforms closely to the expectations of modern readers of biographies.⁵³

Whereas most deaths, if they are mentioned, come at least some way into articles, very occasionally they are found at the beginning. One example is that of the article on the Umayyad poet Abū Jilda al-Yashkurī. After his genealogy the profile sketch runs: "a poet... of the Umayyad period, an inhabitant of Kufa. He was one of those who rebelled with Ibn al-Ash'ath, and so al-Ḥajjāj killed him." This last piece of information is immediately picked up in a report of Abū Jilda's relations with al-Ḥajjāj. From being the governor's close associate and confidant, Abū Jilda turns against him, joins 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn al-Ash'ath in his revolt, and violently attacks his former friend. After 'Abd al-Rahmān's defeat at al-Zāwiya, Abū Jilda's head is brought to al-Ḥajjāj, and gazing at it he recalls how often he confided secrets to his friend – and his confidence was never betrayed. Two subsequent tableaux show Abū Jilda whipping up Ibn al-Ash'ath's followers at al-Zāwiya with his poetry, though in the end they are defeated and decimated, and al-Ḥajjāj recalling the poet's effectively shaming his fellow-combatants into fighting by defecating before their eyes and commenting that he is only doing in public what they are doing secretly out of cowardice.⁵⁴

This is all the reader learns of Abū Jilda's death. What turned him against al-Ḥajjāj is left in the dark, and the details of how he died are not given either, though one may assume he fell in the general slaughter at the end of the battle. Al-Ḥajjāj does not reappear, and the subsequent *akhbār* do not mention any contacts between Abū Jilda and Ibn al-Ash'ath. They are little more than frames for poetry in different genres: panegyric, satire, self-praise, elegy, reproach, wine-songs, love poems. They show the poet in contact with influential leaders, though none so prominent as al-Ḥajjāj, and being rewarded at times, disappointed at others. Some of them are set in Sistan, to where Abū Jilda presumably accompanied Ibn al-Ash'ath, but they lack chrono-

⁵³ For mediaeval readers the shift from frivolity to seriousness will have represented an interesting departure from the usual movement in the opposite direction, that is, from *jidd* to *hazl*.

⁵⁴ *Aghānī* XI, 310-13.

logical markers.⁵⁵ Thus it appears that the reports round this poet's death serve less to narrate the end of his life than to offer a dramatic illustration of his salient characteristics: his poetry's capacity to move its hearers, his courage, his resort to crude arguments, his constancy. Life-writing and temporal progression have parted company here.

Another instance where a poet's death is mentioned at the very beginning of the article is in the treatment of the Umayyad brigand, Mālik ibn al-Rayb. Mālik, unusually, composed an elegy on himself when he felt death approaching, and the song introducing the article is taken from this poem. But the account of this robber poet's death closes the article; references to his death thus form a frame round his life.⁵⁶

The subject's death can also be narrated in the middle of the "biography". Here two different cases may be distinguished. In the first, the death comes at the end of a section on the poet's life, and subsequent sections treat other themes. This is true of the article on the pre-Islamic poet 'Adī ibn Zayd, for instance, where a number of thematic sections are clearly distinguished: the history of 'Adī's forebears; his own life, violent death, and revenge for it; his marriage to Hind bint al-Nu'mān and her fate; the reception of his ascetic poetry by contemporaries and later on; explanations of allusions in the poetry; its use by musicians.⁵⁷ In this case the death rounds off the chronological presentation of 'Adī's life (and that of his forebears); it occupies the expected place in a biographical account. What follows are developments round material mentioned in the biographical narrative.

The 'Abbasid poet Abū l-Hindī's death also occurs in the centre of his short article, but this is an article compiled as a series of frames one within the other round a central event. Whereas references to Mālik ibn al-Rayb's death form a single frame round an article on his life, Abū l-Hindī's life frames his death. The outermost frame affirms his eloquence in poetry and prose; partly superimposed on this is a frame of reports about stealing, where the poet is first victim and later perpetrator. The inmost frame contrasts Abū l-Hindī's indulgence in wine with his abandonment of it during the Pilgrimage. At the centre

⁵⁵ *Id.*, XI, 313-332.

⁵⁶ *Id.*, XXII, 285-301.

⁵⁷ *Id.*, II, 95-154. This article is discussed at greater length in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 205-207.

are two versions of the poet's death, which was brought on by his excessive drinking. The grotesque summer version portrays Abū l-Hindī after a drinking-bout in Merv getting up in the night to relieve himself and falling off the roof where he had been sleeping. Since he was a restless sleeper, his friends had tied a rope round his ankle to prevent him having just such an accident, and so he was suspended in mid-air. He choked on the wine he had imbibed and died; his grave became a meeting point for young men to drink. The less ignominious winter version has him being caught in a snow-storm as he makes his way home, well lit-up, from a tavern and freezing to death.⁵⁸

This arrangement of the reports about Abū l-Hindī does not pretend to be chronological. What it brings out, apart from the poet's remarkable literary gifts, are the ambivalences in his biography, mirrored in the summer-winter dichotomy in the death accounts. Thus on the one hand he is a heavy drinker and frequents prostitutes, on the other he performs the religious duties of the *ṣalāt* and the Pilgrimage. He is criticised by both a political authority, Naṣr ibn Sayyār, and an ascetic, but he silences them when he points to their own failings; by implication no-one is free from criticism. It is quite fitting that a poet such as Abū l-Hindī should end his life suspended between heaven and earth - or Heaven and Hell. And because the death is placed at the centre of the article rather than closing it, its significance is symbolic rather than historical.

Up till now I have discussed presentations where the subject only dies once, that is, even if alternative reports are given of the death, they are presented consecutively, as in Abū l-Hindī's article. But a few poets' deaths are reported at intervals through their articles; one may speak here of a character suffering multiple deaths. One victim of multiple deaths is the 'Udhri poet 'Urwa ibn Hizām. The story is as follows: 'Urwa falls in love with his cousin 'Afrā', her parents (especially her mother) object to him as a son-in-law because he is poor, he goes off to acquire some wealth, and in the meantime a rich man turns up and 'Afrā' is married off to him. When 'Urwa returns, the family tries to make him believe that 'Afrā' is dead, but the truth comes out. He meets 'Afrā' and her husband, who even offers to divorce her so

⁵⁸ *Aghānī* XX, 328-334; the accounts of the death are on p. 332. See *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 203-204, for a more extensive summary and discussion.

that they can marry, but 'Urwa refuses. He sets off back to his tribe but dies on the way.

A variant has 'Urwa learn of 'Afrā's marriage when he meets her while she is on her way to her new home in Syria. Shattered, he returns home and goes into a decline. On a trip into the desert Ibn Abī 'Atīq encounters him with his mother, just before he breathes his last. This version is followed immediately by an account where the witness to 'Urwa's last moments is al-Nu'mān ibn Bashīr, and then by two slight variants on that account. 'Urwa's last death occurs in a different story, where he first rejects his uncle's offer to marry him to 'Afrā', but later falls in love with her. His uncle then refuses his proposal and marries her off to someone in Syria, but 'Urwa continues to love her till he dies, with one report situating his death at 'Arafāt.⁵⁹

One can distinguish here three main versions of the death, each one coming at the end of an account of the love story, as chronology dictates. Each account situates the death in a different geographical location. First, 'Urwa dies while on his way back to his tribe after seeing 'Afrā'; second, he dies in Banī 'Udhra territory among his family after seeing 'Afrā' on her way to her husband; and third, after missing the chance to marry her he dies at Mecca. Minor variants of these versions concern, for instance, the name of the witness to 'Urwa's death. Leaving aside the issue of the meaning of these different versions, the point here is that 'Urwa's multiple deaths are a product of the way in which stories of the 'Udhri poets developed, becoming more elaborate and acquiring different significations in the course of time. They also reflect Abū l-Faraj's desire to document this process of elaboration, of which he was well aware, and which can be observed in the *Aghānī* articles on other 'Udhri poets too.⁶⁰ Nothing obliged him to give these three versions with their variants; 'Urwa's poetry did not attract composers, and the lyrics of only one song are quoted in the article. It would have sufficed to mention the version containing those verses. But Abū l-Faraj is concerned to illustrate the literary develop-

⁵⁹ *Aghānī* XXIV, 143-66; the deaths occur on pp. 158, 162 (with variants 163 and 164) and 165 (variant 166).

⁶⁰ For instance Majnūn (*id.*, I, 417; II, 1-95, which contains three versions of the poet's legend, although the death is only related once at the very end of the article) and al-Šimma al-Qushayrī (*id.*, V, 435; VI, 1-8, which has two versions of al-Šimma's death). The latter article and the literary elaboration of which it is evidence are discussed further in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 223-6.

ment of the material, and to portray ‘Urwa dying just once would not have made that point.

Over against the victims of multiple deaths can be set the poets who do not die even once. The simple reason for this – and very often the correct one – is that no reports about their deaths were available. But occasionally the explanation is more complicated; the compiler declined to use information he is known to have had. For instance, Abū l-Faraj is greatly indebted to al-Ṣūlī in his treatment of Abū Tammām, but whereas the older writer rounds off his account of the poet with his death and the elegies dedicated to him, Abū l-Faraj does not speak of them. The only mention of Abū Tammām’s death comes in passing; when he is no longer alive his great rival Di‘bil expresses a positive opinion of his poetry. The reference to death at the end of the article, by contrast, is connected with an elegy Abū Tammām himself composed on one of his patron’s sons. In the *Aghānī* it is Abū Tammām’s poetry and its critical reception which are the chief subjects of interest, and while standard biographical information could not be completely ignored (after all, Abū l-Faraj always keeps in mind what his readers expect him to include in his book)⁶¹, it is reduced to a minimum.

Another reason for not including mentions of deaths emerges in the *Aghānī* in connection with members of the ‘Abbasid house. In the titles of the articles on two composing caliphs, Abū l-Faraj announces that he will include only information about their musical activities.⁶² He does not explain this decision, but it accords with his concern not to make the book too unwieldy;⁶³ the quantity of *akhbār* available

⁶¹ For Abū l-Faraj’s explanations of why he included or omitted material, see *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 104-106. The article on Abū Tammām is analysed on pp. 196-8.

⁶² *Aghānī* IX, 318 (about al-Mu‘tazz) and X, 41 (about al-Mu‘taḍid). It may be doubted that Abū l-Faraj completed his treatment of these caliphs. Apart from his detailed appreciation of al-Mu‘taḍid’s musical gifts he includes only three *akhbār* about him (pp. 41, 67-8); there must surely have been more to say about a composer as eminent as he regarded al-Mu‘taḍid to be. Other sides of al-Mu‘taḍid’s character are discussed in Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Texts and tortures: the reign of al-Mu‘taḍid and the construction of historical meaning”, *Arabica* XLVI (1999), 313-36. For al-Mu‘tazz, one of Abū l-Faraj’s sources, al-Ṣūlī’s *Kitāb al-awrāq*, is extant and has been published; it contains three more *akhbār* about him and musicians, one of them quoting a song al-Mu‘tazz composed (al-Ṣūlī, *Kitāb al-awrāq*, §§ 362, 366, 380).

⁶³ See above, note 61.

about 'Abbasid caliphs obliged him to make a severe selection.⁶⁴ It also serves to mark the *Aghānī* off from other biographical texts.

One may however wonder whether other considerations also played a part.⁶⁵ The question is particularly relevant to the portrayal of Ibn al-Mu'tazz. Both al-Ṣūlī and Abū l-Faraj devote considerable space to this artistic and brilliant prince. Al-Ṣūlī, although he was a friend and admirer of Ibn al-Mu'tazz, says nothing about his death;⁶⁶ he defends him from the accusation of hostility to the 'Alids, quotes a few anecdotes about his relations with poets and men of letters and then concentrates on his poetry. The section on Ibn al-Mu'tazz ends with a selection from his prose pieces, the last of which run:

The world humiliates those it has honoured, and the earth consumes those it has nourished.

He who is at your disposal has more control over you than you do over yourself. (...)

The man who anticipates fate can avert it at times. Every elevation is perilous, yet caution may lead to perdition.⁶⁷

It is hard not to read these maxims as a disguised epitaph.

Abū l-Faraj starts his article with a long defence of Ibn al-Mu'tazz's poetry, refuting those who objected to his abandoning the canons of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*.

He then affirms the prince's general excellence and his growing reputation, despite the fact that he died a horrible death and left no descendants to defend his name.⁶⁸ The rest of the article is devoted to Ibn al-Mu'tazz's songs, anecdotes about his relations with singers and poets, occasions when he composed poetry, and his exchanges with other notables. Further from the events than al-Ṣūlī, Abū l-Faraj openly, if concisely, expresses his verdict about Ibn al-Mu'tazz's

⁶⁴ Al-Mu'tazz's caliphate covers 40 pages in al-Ṣūlī's *Kitāb al-awrāq* (§§ 348-406). Al-Ṭabarī has an extensive section on al-Mu'taḍid's caliphate (*Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* III, 2133-2207), as does al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūj al-dhahab*, §§ 2341-3356).

⁶⁵ More extensive treatment of al-Mu'taḍid as a musician, for instance, would have entailed referring to his teacher and later companion, Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī, a writer on musical theory, who fell from grace and was executed in 285/899.

⁶⁶ After al-Muktafi's death in 295/908, the 13-year-old al-Muqtadir was proclaimed caliph. The attempt to replace him with Ibn al-Mu'tazz failed, and Ibn al-Mu'tazz was captured and killed. *EI²* s.v. (B. Lewin).

⁶⁷ Al-Ṣūlī, *Ash'ār awlād al-khulafā'*, 107-296. The maxims are on p. 296.

⁶⁸ *Aghānī* X, 274-7, partially translated in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 83-85.

death. But he gives no information about it and, true to his intention in this part of the book, confines himself to *akhbār* about the prince as poet and musician, as he has done, for instance, in Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's article.⁶⁹

The self-censorship which al-Ṣūlī seems to have exercised when writing about Ibn al-Mu'tazz (whereas he is quite informative about, for instance, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's death) seems to be at work in the *Aghānī* in the article on al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī. In his *Maqātil al-Ṭālibīyīn*, Abū l-Faraj devotes an extensive section to al-Ḥusayn and the events surrounding his death; since deaths are the rationale for the whole book, this is normal. The *Aghānī* treatment of him, by contrast, only mentions his death indirectly, by quoting part of an elegy his wife al-Rabāb composed about him. The anecdotes about al-Ḥusayn and his immediate family take up a quarter of the article, the rest of which focuses on his daughter Sukayna.⁷⁰ There are scattered allusions to al-Ḥusayn's death elsewhere in the *Aghānī*, but nowhere is there an exposition of this, one of the central events in Islamic history. The *Aghānī* does not avoid presenting more recent violent events, such as the massacre of the Umayyads after the 'Abbasid revolution, and the conclusion must be that since Sunni-Shī'ī hostility was still a reality in his own time, Abū l-Faraj preferred to avoid an explicit mention of the controversial events of Karbala in a book intended for a wide audience of music-lovers.⁷¹

As these examples show, the decision not to treat a person's death even though information about it is known to have been available may have various motives. Where the subject's oeuvre is controversial, as is true of Abū Tammām's poetry and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's compositions, the presentation may focus on that and avoid according much attention to the man behind the artist.⁷² Where there is a pleth-

⁶⁹ A century later al-Khafīb al-Baghdādī devotes half of his entry on Ibn al-Mu'tazz in *Ta'rīkh Baghdad* (Cairo 1349/1931, X, 95-101) to the circumstances surrounding the prince's death.

⁷⁰ The treatment of al-Ḥusayn in the two books is examined in greater detail in Hilary Kilpatrick, "Songs or sticky ends: alternative approaches to biography in the works of Abū l-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī". *Actas del XII Congreso de la UEAI (Málaga, 1984)*, Madrid 1986, 403-421.

⁷¹ The *Aghānī* allusions to al-Ḥusayn's death are discussed in *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 146-47.

⁷² This explains why Abū l-Faraj, in contrast to al-Ṣūlī, says nothing about Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's death.

ora of information about the subject, his life and death, but it is not relevant to the compiler's main purpose, it is ignored in order to limit the book's size. Where the death itself is controversial, it may be passed over in silence to avoid giving the book a partisan tone and perhaps putting its compiler in danger. And perhaps, where al-Şūlī's silence about Ibn al-Mu'tazz is concerned, the events were simply still too painful for him to talk about them.

Conclusion

This examination of presentations of poets, musicians and other personalities of pre-Islamic and early Islamic history has brought out the great variety in approaches to life writing developed in the mediaeval Arabic *adab* tradition. Chronological narration of the life was only one of many possibilities open to the compiler, and it was not always a viable solution, given the nature of the available material. Where it was employed, it was often combined with other approaches, such as thematic treatment, framing devices, or the shifting of focus to the individual's *œuvre* and its reception, this last offering another possibility of chronological presentation.

I have used only a very small sample for texts for this investigation. Other studies of biographical presentations in mediaeval Arabic literature, however, also conclude that chronological presentation was only one of the methods employed in life writing⁷³. Rather than wondering why mediaeval Arabic *adab* compilations so often dispensed with temporal progression in presenting lives, one might ask: why did chronological structure come to dominate in European life-writing, to the exclusion of other ways of presenting lives?⁷⁴

⁷³ Writing of al-Mu'taḍid's life as presented by al-Safadī, Malti-Douglas observes: "[H]is life is examined from several angles, and from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives" (Malti-Douglas, "Texts and tortures", 324). Osti's presentation and analysis of Yāqūt's notices about Tha'lab and Ibn Bassām stresses their complexity; she also suggests that some of the anecdotes serve the same purpose that photographs do today, "portraying the biographee in several postures and together with different people" (Osti, *From Person to Persona*, 227-30 and 272-79. The quotation is on p. 273).

⁷⁴ Cf. Dwight F. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Tradition*. Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 2001, 246. The authors make this point and remark: "There is nothing inherently natural about linear chronologism: human memory is not linear and indeed is far more susceptible to associative linkages."

ABSTRACT

In mediaeval Arabic *belles-lettres* (*adab*), accounts of lives are usually made up of quite short reports *akhbār*. These *akhbār* are arranged in different ways, one of which is chronological order, but the compilers of such accounts apparently accord relative insignificance to chronological order.

This paper examines some “biographies” compiled by al-Ṣūlī and Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, showing that temporal progression can exist in a “biographical” presentation, either alone or more often combined with other ways of organising the material. It then focuses on the placing of subjects’ deaths in life accounts and on how they are integrated with the rest of the material. In conclusion, I suggest that when temporal progression is absent in “biographical” presentations, this should be seen as reflecting a mediaeval Arabic approach to life writing which differs from modern expectations but has its own rationale.

RESUMEN

En el género árabe medieval del *adab* (bellas letras), los relatos de vidas están normalmente compuestos a base de pequeñas noticias (*ajbār*). Estos *ajbār* están organizados de distintas maneras, una de las cuales es el orden cronológico, aunque los compiladores de tales noticias dan aparentemente poca importancia a tal orden.

Este artículo estudia algunas «biografías» recogidas por al-Ṣūlī y Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, y muestra que la progresión temporal puede existir en las presentaciones «biográficas», sola o junto con otras formas de organizar el material. En él se analiza también el lugar que las muertes de los personajes ocupan en el relato de sus vidas, y cómo se integran en el resto del material. En conclusión, propongo que si la progresión temporal está ausente en las presentaciones «biográficas», ello se debe a la manera característica que la literatura árabe medieval tiene de enfocar los relatos de vida, que posee su propia lógica, aunque difiera de las concepciones contemporáneas.