# The Abbasid "Golden Age":
# An Excavation[1]

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## Abstract

*The application of a Hegelian rise-and-fall narrative to the history of Arabic literature has been erroneously attributed to Ibn Khaldūn and his successors, though it can more probably be traced back to Hammer-Purgstall's* Literaturgeschichte der Araber *(1850). Although this paradigm has long been out of favor, its disappearance leaves us without a ready answer to the question of what (if anything) was distinctive about what is still sometimes called the early Abbasid golden age. The prominence of this era in later memory is here traced to the adoption of paper, which supported, on the one hand, the simplification and vulgarization of Arab language, lore, and religion; and on the other, the appearance of the first reliably contemporary eyewitness accounts in Arabic literature. These productions made the period the first Islamic space to be imaginable in almost granular detail, as well as the source of much of what we know about antecedent "Arab" and "Islamic" history. These features gave the period an outsized place even in the pre-modern Arabic tradition. They also made it available for popularization by Jurjī Zaydān, whose* Taʾrīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī *(1902-1906) proved formative of later attitudes in Arabic-language scholarship.*

I. In 1956, a well-attended conference on "classicism and cultural decline in Islamic history" could be held in Bordeaux in full confidence that those things existed.[2] But the

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1. I am grateful to Matthew Gordon for his kind invitation to submit this essay; to Antoine Borrut and the three anonymous reviewers for their many helpful suggestions; and to Ahmed El Shamsy and John Nawas for commenting on an early draft.

2. R. Brunschvig and G. E. von Grunebaum, eds., *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1957; repr. 1977). Among the many notable contributors were Regis Blachère, Claude Cahen, Francesco Gabrieli, Charles Pellat, and Joseph Schacht. Most seem to agree that "the Muslim peoples" had been in decline since the end of the Middle Ages (29). Pellat argues specifically that the decline of "Arab culture" was a multi-stage affair that began in the third Islamic (ninth Gregorian) century (81-91). Though in its own way perhaps equally essentialist, Henri Massé's discussion of whether Persian literature represents a "renewal" of Islamic culture (339-43) at least has the virtue of not conflating "Arab" and "Islamic." For an English-language example of this sort of inquiry see J. J. Saunders, "The Problem of Islamic Decadence," *Journal of World History*, 7 (1963): 701-20.

paradigm's days were numbered. As Albert Hourani pointed out, there was nothing innocent in the choice of "Islamic civilization"as the unit of analysis.[3] And as Roger Owen was quick to add, there was no good reason to assume that "Islamic civilization"—or even a better-defined entity like Ottoman society after 1600—was in decline, at least not until "decline" could be defined in terms not entirely dependent on comparisons with the West.[4] Today no serious historian speaks of "Islamic decadence" any more. But if one narrows the field a bit, the situation seems less clear-cut. In the study of Arabic literature, which will be my focus here, it was long considered axiomatic that the Mongol, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods constituted one long age of decline.[5] Today one finds vigorous arguments against this position,[6] but no generally accepted counter-narrative,[7] and some pushback from colleagues, who sense that some modern scholars, in their eagerness to disavow the old paradigm, "overcompensate by denying any reality" to nineteenth-century Arab accounts of the preceding two hundred years, "as a period of decline in Arabic letters and the institutions that sustained them."[8] There is also the awkward fact that the Orientalist paradigm, though the "Orientalists" themselves have largely abandoned it, remains the default position in Arabic-language literary histories and mass-culture references to the Arab and Islamic past, even if it has had, and continues to have, its critics.[9]

If we drop the notion of a "golden age," which entails dropping "decline" and "renaissance" too, what, if anything, remains distinctive about early Abbasid culture? To answer this

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3. Albert Hourani, "Islam and the Philosophers of History," *Middle Eastern Studies* 3:3 (1967): 206-68.

4. Roger Owen, "Studying Islamic History," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4:2 (1973) 287-98; idem., "The Middle East in the Eighteenth Century—An Islamic Society in Decline?" *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 3:2 (1976): 110-17.

5. See, e.g., Reynold Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (New York: Scribners, 1907), 442-43.

6. Thomas Bauer, "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature': A Review Article," *Mamluk Studies Review* 11:2 (2007): 137-67.

7. One ostensibly non-Whiggish approach is to use the terms Early, Middle, and Late Period, as Konrad Hirschler does in *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh UP, 2012). For new takes on periodization see Antoine Borrut, "Vanishing Syria: Periodization and Power in Early Islam," *Der Islam* 2014 91(1): 37-68 (in a special issue, edited by Hirschler and Sarah Bowen Savant, devoted to periodization), and Shahzad Bashir, "On Islamic time: Rethinking chronology in the historiography of Muslim societies," *History and Theory* 53 (December 2014): 519-544, both of which propose the adoption of multiple temporalities instead of a single timeline. In thinking about the periodization of literary history in particular, I am indebted to Panagiotis A. Agapitos, "Contesting Conceptual Boundaries: Byzantine Literature and its History," *Interfaces* 1 (2015): 62-91.

8. Ahmed El Shamsy, personal communication.

9. For early criticism of the paradigm as espoused by Jurjī Zaydān, see note 40 below. On later Arabic-language histories see Werner Ende, *Arabische Nation und islamische Geschichte* (Beirut: Steiner, 1977), who reads arguments for and against particular dynasties as extensions of Arab-nationalist, regional, and sectarian quarrels. Partiality to the Abbasids, for example, was often a concomitant of Iraqi Shiite identity (Ende, *Arabische Nation*, 233-60). For current Arabic-language criticism of the rise-and-fall model, see Ghāzī al-Tawbah, "Qirāʾah fī maqūlatay ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ' wa ʿaṣr al-nahḍah,'" *al-Jazīrah,* 24 December 2009; Aḥmad Kāmil Ghunaym, "Āliyyat taqsīm al-adab al-ʿarabī ilā ʿuṣūr adabiyyah," *Alūkah al-Thaqāfiyyah,* 3 March 2015 (I thank Mohamed Elsawy for this reference); Mūrīs Abū Nāḍir, "Mā jadwā iʿādat taʾrīkh al-adab al-ʿarabī bi-manhaj taqlīdī?," *al-Ḥayāt,* 21 August 2015.

question, it will be helpful to ask how the label "golden age" and its equivalents came to be applied to it in the first place.[10] Few readers will be surprised to learn that much of the work was carried out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But, as we will see, the early Abbasid period was *available* to be used for this purpose, though not—or not only—for the reasons usually adduced. In the end, I will propose an alternative explanation for the persistence of the early Abbasids in historical memory, one that takes into account its distinctive or formative characteristics while resisting the slide into "golden age" rhetoric.

II. Pre-modern Arabic scholarship had much to say about why polities decline. It is important to consider at least one strand of this thought, not only as a corrective to the assumption that notions of decline were entirely a European imposition, but also because the Euro-Arab nineteenth century[11] conflated this particular strand with the rather different early-modern European idea of *civilizational* decline, creating a particularly powerful and long-lived narrative of Oriental decadence. The easiest way to show this is by looking at the reception of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).[12]

Ibn Khaldūn's famous "theory of civilization" deals with human communities at several orders of magnitude. The largest order is that of *ʿimrān*, "organized habitation" or "human aggregation" (as Aziz Al-Azmeh translates it[13]), of which one manifestation is *ḥaḍārah,* "the culture centered around life in cities" (as Muhsin Mahdi renders it[14]). These entities are subject to change of various kinds. But the entity that can most easily be seen moving in real time, so to speak, is the *dawlah* or polity. Regardless of the religion or ethnicity of the people involved, polities (*duwal*) rise and fall for the same reasons, even if certain adventitious

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10. In its original, ancient Greek use, the Golden Age was a paradise on earth, like Schlaraffenland or the Land of Cockaigne. Aware of this meaning, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn speaks dismissively of purported *ʿuṣūr dhahabiyyah* in both and Greek and Arabic literary history: see *Fī al-adab al-jāhilī*, 15th edition (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 178. Like Marwa El-Shakry, "Between Enlightenment and Evolution: Arabic and the Arab Golden Ages of Jurji Zaydan," *Jurji Zaydan: Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature*, ed. George C. Zaidan and Thomas Philipp (Washington, DC: Zaidan Foundation, 2013), 123-44, which studies Zaydān's argument that there were several Arab golden ages, my concern here is with the idealization of a particular period and not with the term as such. Here I address only the purported Abbasid golden age. Another major contender for the title, namely "Muslim Spain," presents a strikingly different case. One important difference is that the idealization of al-Andalus has been grounded, from the beginning and recurrently, in visits by Arab men of letters to the monuments in Cordoba, Granada, and Seville. See Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2017), 48-79.

11. By this I mean the community of Orientalists (for lack of a better term) working in Europe and the Levant from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Although the differences between, say, Alfred von Kremer and Jurjī Zaydān are many and significant, there are also good reasons to read them together, at least for the purposes of this study.

12. My comments here are necessarily very selective. For broader treatments see Gabriel Martinez-Gros, *Ibn Khaldûn et les sept vies de l'Islam* (Arles: Sindbad, 2006); Allen James Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun: Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 2010); Mohammad Salama, *Islam, Orientalism, and Intellectual History* (New York: Tauris, 2011), esp. Chs 2 and 3; and Nabil Matar, "Confronting Decline in Early Modern Arabic Thought," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 9:1-2 (2005): 51-78, at 56-59 (I thank John Nawas for this reference).

13. See his *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), 48 and 62.

14. See his *Ibn Khaldûn's Philosophy of History* (London: Unwin and Allen, 1957), 201.

circumstances may accelerate or retard the process of change.[15] Already, then, it is clear that *ʿimrān, ḥaḍārah*, and *dawlah* are each quite distinct from what G. W. F. Hegel (d. 1831) was to call a civilization, that is, the life and spirit of a particular people as manifested in history.[16] Ibn Khaldūn *does* know a concept roughly comparable to "a (single) civilization," namely *ummah*, that is, the global and transhistorical community of Muslims.[17] By his time, though, that *ummah* had long since ceased to exist as a unit. Rather, it was divided into multiple polities, each of which behaved like any other *dawlah*. And it was the *dawlah*, not the *ummah*, whose behavior Ibn Khaldūn was trying to explain.

When dynastic cyclism was taken up by Ottoman theorists of decline, they retained the *dawlah* as the unit of analysis.[18] Since my concern here is with literary history, I will take an illustration from the short history of Islamic scholarship prefixed to Ḥajjī Khalīfah's (d. 1657) bibliographic encyclopedia *Kashf al-ẓunūn*. The great nations (*umam*), he says, all practiced *ʿilm*, the search for knowledge. The Arabs had knowledge revealed to them by the Qurʾān, which, being a scripture for all peoples, provided a basis for an Islamic community (*millat al-islām*). The reduction of this knowledge to writing was an achievement of the Umayyad period. Then, under the early Abbasid caliphs, foreign sciences such as philosophy were adopted and adapted. But as the Abbasid polity unraveled, learning suffered.[19] What happened next is not entirely clear, but there is no doubt that Muslims eventually went back to seeking knowledge and writing books, including the many Persian and Ottoman books that the *Kashf* describes.

Even from this cursory survey it is evident that Ḥājjī Khalīfah was familiar with the idea of national or racial communities—that is, with something roughly comparable to Hegel's

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15. In his study of the *ʿIbar* (the history to which the *Muqaddimah* is a preface), Martinez-Gros notes that Ibn Khaldūn treats each of the ancient peoples (e.g., the Hebrews, the Persians, the Greeks) with due regard for its particular circumstances. Even so the individual case studies amount to a "double application des regles déjà posées: les peuples épuisent leur souveraineté et leur existence de branche (*jîl*) en branche; et la conquète reprend souvent le flambeau tombé des mains de son conquérant" (Martinez-Gros, *Ibn Khaldûn*, 132-33).

16. For Hegel's original formulations see *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts,* in *Werke*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Nicolai, 1821; reprinted Frankfurt a. M. 1979, online here); and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* tr. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), paragraphs 341-60 (in both German and English).

17. This is also Ibn Khaldūn's term for what we might call ethnic groups, such as the Hebrews, Greeks, Persians, and so on, and as such a source of possible confusion. I would argue that the Muslim *ummah*, being a faith community, is conceptually distinct from the others, but that his broad use of the term is justified in that all *umam*, however constituted and defined, are subject to the same historical processes.

18. How much of the theory came directly from Ibn Khaldūn has been taken up, with largely negative conclusions, by Cornell Fleischer, "Royal Authority, Dynastic Cyclism, and 'Ibn Khaldūnism' in Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Letters," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* XVIII 3-4 (1983), 198-220 (I thank Mohammad Salama for this reference). For a recent and more Ibn-Khaldūn-friendly survey of the question see Nurullah Ardıç, "Genealogy or *Asabiyya*? Ibn Khaldun between Arab Nationalism and the Ottoman Caliphate," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 71:2 (October 2012), 315-24, at 317-18.

19. Ḥājjī Khalīfah, *Kasf al-ẓunūn ʿan asāmī al-kutub wa l-funūn,* ed. Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn Yaltqāyā (Istanbul, 1941; reprinted Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 1:26-35 (these numerals refer to the numbered columns, of which there are two per page).

"civilization." The Muslim community was one such community, even if it was defined by religion, not ethnicity. Again, though, this *ummah* or *millah* does not rise, flourish, and collapse as a whole. Rather, only particular polities within it—the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and so on—follow the Ibn-Khaldūnian trajectory. From another source (a fiscal report he was commissioned to write) we happen to know that Ḥājjī Khalīfah believed that he himself was living through an age of crisis—in this case, a crisis of his own *dawlah*, the Ottoman state.[20] But if this was a decline, it was a decline with respect to the reign of Sultan Suleiman (r. 1520-66), *not* the fall of Baghdad.[21] Evidently, then, Ḥājjī Khalīfah believed that cultural production does not thrive once and then collapse forever, in a *longue-durée* arc. Rather, it rises and falls in dynastic epicycles.

Remarkably, this focus on the *dawlah* persisted even when Ḥājjī Khalīfah's work was taken up (or perhaps more accurately, plagiarized) by Barthelmy d'Herbelot (d. 1695), who used it as the basis of his *Bibliothèque orientale*, the first European encyclopedia of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature.[22] As Nicholas Dew has shown, the *Bibliothèque* does not lend itself to a teleological vision of its subject, for the simple reason that the entries appear in alphabetical rather than chronological order.[23] At one place, admittedly, d'Herbelot refers to the Abbasids as "[la] race la plus féconde en grands Personnages de toutes celles qui ont regné parmi les Musulmans."[24] But he is quoting the Persian historian Khwānd Mīr (d. 1535?),[25] and in any case the reader will not encounter this claim unless he or she happens to consult the entry on the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn. Where we do find some broader historical claims is in Antoine Galland's introduction to the work. The Umayyads, says Galland, never declined:[26] they were simply overthrown. The Abbasids, on the other hand, *did* decline, but they were succeeded

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20. Bernard Lewis, "Ottoman observers of Ottoman decline," in *Islamic Studies* 1:1 (1962), 71-87, at 79-81; cf. Douglas A. Howard, "Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of 'Decline' of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of Asian History* 22:1 (1988): 52-77.

21. See Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali* (Princeton 1986): 243-45, 257-68 (I thank Dana Sajdi for this reference). Even so, Suleiman's reign was not immune to criticism: see Cemal Kafadar, "The Myth of the Golden Age: Ottoman Historical Consciousness in the post Süleymânic Era," in *Süleymân the Second and his Time*, ed. Halil İnalcık and Cemal Kafadar (Istanbul: Isis, 1993), 37-48.

22. D'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque orientale, ou Dictionnaire universel contenant generalement tout ce qui fait connoître les peuples de l'Orient* (Paris: Compaignie des Libraires, 1697); on its sources see Henry Laurens, *La* Bibliothèque orientale *de Barthélemi d'Herbelot : aux sources de l'orientalisme* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1978).

23. Nicholas Dew, "The Order of Oriental Knowledge: The Making of D'Herbelot's Bibliothèque Orientale," in *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 233-252, at 248-9 and 250-52.

24. In the entry on al-Maʾmūn: d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque*, 546.

25. D'Herbelot is citing the *Khulāṣat al-akhbār*, which remains unedited and unpublished. I have not found the claim in Khwānd Mīr's *Ḥabīb al-Siyar*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Humāʾī (Tehran: Khayyām, 1954). I thank Theodore S. Beers for sharing with the editors his information on Khwānd Mīr.

26. "...ne recevra point d'atteinte, & ne tombera pas en décadence": Antoine Galland, "Discours pour servir de préface," in d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque*, sixth page (the preface is unpaginated in the first edition).

by new dynasties, some of them quite powerful. Strikingly, this process was still churning along, even if

> … all these great dynasties, and others less powerful…are reduced, in our time, to the Emperors of India, or the Great Mongol; the Uzbeks, masters of Turkestan, Transoxania, and Khurasan; the Sufis [Safavids] of Persia; the Ottoman emperors of Constantinople; and the kings of Fez and Morocco [= Marrakesh]".[27]

This is still the world of Ibn Khaldūn: what rises and falls are dynasties, not something called "Islamic civilization."

It is with the next major European history of Arabic literature[28] that the Hegelian rise-and-fall becomes the framing device. The work in question is Alfred von Hammer-Purgstall's enormous *Literaturgeschichte der Araber*.[29] In his preface, a fascinating document that deserves more attention than I can give it here, von Hammer-Purgstall (d. 1856) explains that what determines a period of literary history is the interaction of the literary and the political—an interaction that is visible only in retrospect. Although literary production does not always require centralized political authority in order to flourish, it is nevertheless the rise and fall of dynasties (he says) that mark off the great periods of Arabic literature.[30] On this basis, he divides the literary history of the Arabs in half: one great period from Muhammad to the fall of Baghdad, and another from Baghdad to Napoleon. He adds that each half can itself be halved, giving four periods as follows: the rise, from Muhammad to about 925; the flowering, from 925 to 1258; the fall-off, from 1258 to 1517; and the decadence, from 1517 to 1789.[31] The work itself is organized according to this plan, which makes it, as far as I know, the first chronological history of Arabic literature. In any case, what matters for us is that the *Literaturgeschichte* replaces the little cycles of Ibn Khaldūn's *duwal* with one great rise and one great fall.[32]

With schemes like this in place, it became possible for subsequent writers to isolate and explore the golden age as a topic in itself. A notable example of this approach is

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27. Ibid., seventh page.

28. All the works discussed so far included Persian and Turkish; von Hammer-Purgstall's *Literaturgeschichte* surveys Arabic only.

29. Hammer-Purgstall, *Literaturgeschichte der Araber von ihrem Beginne bis zu Ende des zwölften Jahrhunderts der Hidschret* (Vienna: K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1850).

30. Von Hammer-Purgstall, *Literaturgeschichte*, 1: xxvi and lvi.

31. "Jeder der zwei grossen Zeiträume, in welche der Sturz der Chalifats die arabische Geschichte zerschneidet, zerfällt wieder in zwei fast gleiche Hälften, und also nach dem Jahrhunderte des Beginns vor Mohammed die ganze Geschichte arabischer Literatur in vier grosse Perioden, jede von beiläufig dreihundert Jahren, wovon die zwei ersten die der Aufnahme und den höchsten Flores, die zwei letzten die der Abnahme und des Verfalls" (von Hammer-Purgstall, *Literaturgeschichte*, 1: xxvii).

32. Von Hammer-Purgstall was of course not the first to claim that "Islamic civilization," or the Orient, or the Semites, had declined. Ernest Renan, for example, had made the claim in no uncertain terms only a few years earlier: see, for example, his 1859 study of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, in *Essais de morale et de critique* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1859), 287-382. I thank Maurice Pomeranz for this reference. My point here is that with von Hammer-Purgstall, the rise-and-fall scheme becomes the basis for writing histories of Arabic literature.

*Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen* (1875-77), by the Austrian diplomat and scholar Alfred von Kremer (d. 1889). In his preface, von Kremer tells the reader not to be misled by the sad spectacle of the present-day Orient. Islam, he says, was once a great civilization, distinguished by "a surprisingly humane spirit" (*ein überraschend humaner Geist*). The scholars of Baghdad, receptive as they were to the ancient Greek heritage, led the world in the exact sciences. In philosophy, law, and political theory, medieval Islam outstripped Europe. The jurists of Baghdad espoused many humanistic principles, arguing, for example, that the life of a non-Muslim or a slave was equal to that of a Muslim. The institutions of the early caliphal period, including the tax system, the courier routes, and the provisions for public welfare, attest (he says) to a high level of culture. Later, however, these institutions were exploited by despotic rulers, and collapsed.[33]

One of the notable things about von Kremer's approach is its determination to look at everything—law, literature, and so forth—as manifestations of the particular spirit of the civilization being studied. This is the approach called *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history), and we find it practiced in other European treatments of the "golden age," including Adam Mez's *Renaissance of Islam* and Gustav von Gruenbaum's *Medieval Islam*.[34] It also served as the structuring principle of major works in Arabic, including Jurjī Zaydān's *Tārīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī*, Aḥmad Amīn's *Fajr*, *Ḍuḥā*, and *ʿAṣr al-Islām*, and Shawqī Ḍayf's *Tārīkh al-adab al-ʿarabī*. In a moment we will have occasion to look more closely at Zaydān in particular. First, though, I want to close this section with a glance backward at Ibn Khaldūn.

According to von Kremer, it was Ibn Khaldūn who first conceived of *Kulturgeschichte*. In an essay published in 1879, the Austrian declared that his North African predecessor was the first to regard history, "not as a description of events or of the succession of dynasties but rather of the intellectual and material development of peoples."[35] In effect, von Kremer is crediting an Arab Muslim theorist with inventing the method by which the decline of his civilization might be diagnosed. But von Kremer is committing a category mistake: that of replacing Ibn Khaldūn's *dawlah* with "Islamic" or "Oriental" or "Arab" civilization. According to classical Orientalism and some strains of modern Arab thought, "Arab-Islamic civilization," rather than some particular *dawlah*, is the thing that is supposed to have risen, fallen, and risen again. Ibn Khaldūn, as I read him, offers no basis for thinking so.

III. In this section I want to take a closer look at Arabic-language *Kulturgeschichte* in order to explain why the early Abbasid period came to serve as the golden age of nationalist historiography. A key moment, I believe, is the publication of Jurjī Zaydān's *Taʾrīkh*

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33. Alfred von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1875), 1: iv-x.

34. For general background see Josef van Ess, "From Wellhausen to Becker: The Emergence of *Kulturgeschichte* in Islamic Studies," in Malcolm H. Kerr, ed., *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems* (Malibu: Undena, 1979), 27-51.

35. Von Kremer, "Ibn Chaldun und seine Culturgeschichte der Islamischen Reiche," *Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Classe*, 93: 581-640, at 584-85. Von Kremer finds it remarkable that such an original thinker should have come along at a time when the decline of "the Arab people" had already begun (581).

*al-tamaddun al-islāmī.* When Zaydān (d. 1914) set out to write a history of Islamic civilization, he justified the endeavor by arguing that previous histories written in Arabic had dwelt on the wrong topics. "The true history of a nation (*ummah*) is the history of its civilization (*tamaddun*) and its settled life (*ḥaḍārah*), not the history of its battles and conquests."[36] But how was one to write this new kind of history? One did so by providing a lively account of social life and material culture. In his preface to the final volume of his history, Zaydan explains that his aim has been to write so vividly that whatever he is talking about "appears to the reader as if it were physically there before him."[37]

Even for modern historians, cultural history is hard to write because—among other things—there is no conventional way to impose order on one's material. Zaydān's *History* is not well organized, by any standard. But it does have a method. As a novelist, Zaydān knew that the only way to conjure the past into seemingly physical existence was to choose a *particular* past and fill it out with as much local color as he could find. In Volume 1, he explains which past he chose to focus on and why. After zipping through the political history of the Umayyads, Abbasids, Spanish Umayyads, and Fatimids, Zaydan declares that it would take too long to go through all the other Islamic dynasties that have existed in the world. So he lists them in tabular form, giving their capitals, how many kings each had, the year each was founded, and the year each came to an end. The table takes up four pages. He then continues:

> To sum up, from the earliest days of Islam until now, over a hundred Islamic dynasties have come into existence, with some 1200 leaders, among them caliphs, sultans, kings, emirs, atabegs, ikhshīds, khedives, sherifs, beys, deys, and more; by origin Arabs, Persians, Turks, Circassians, Kurds, Indians, Tatars, Mongols, Afghans, and others; and ruled from Medina, Kufa, Damascus, Baghdad, Egypt, Cairawan, Cordova, Istanbul, Sanaa, Oman, Delhi, and elsewhere… But inasmuch as the Abbasid dynasty is the most famous of them all, and the first to attain civilization (*tamaddun*), we shall base our description of *tamaddun* for the most part on the Abbasids.[38]

Here Zaydān does not quite say that the early Abbasid period was the golden age. But his decision to use it as the exemplar of Arab-Islamic civilization certainly implies a certain

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36. Jurjī Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī*, 4th ed (Cairo: al-Hilāl, 1935; originally published 1902-06), 1:3. Cf. von Hammer-Purgstall: "Erst im verflossenen Jahrhunderte haben europäische Geschichtschreiber einzushehen begonnen, das die Geschichte eines Volkes nicht nur seine Thaten im Kriege, sondern auch in die im Frieden, die seiner Künste und Wissenschaften, seiner geistigen und sittlichen Bildung umfassen müsse…" (*Literaturgeschichte*, 1: xv). Zaydān goes on to argue that histories written in Western languages are inadequate for different reasons.

37. *Li-anna wijhatanā al-ūlā fī kitābatinā innamā hiya basṭu al-ʿibārati wa-īḍāḥu al-mawḍūʿ ḥattā yanjalī lil-qāriʾi kaʾannahu mujassam*: Zaydan, *Tamaddun*, 5:3. A worthy successor of Zaydān in this regard is Guy Le Strange's *Baghdad During the Abbasid Caliphate* (Oxford, 1900), which, despite the tenuousness of its reconstructions, delivers a powerful reality effect, describing, as it does, some parts of Baghdad almost street by street.

38. Zaydān, *Tamaddun*, 1:81-86.

privilege over the many other times and places he might have written about.[39] This approach, and the decline-and-fall paradigm it implied, was criticized even by some of Zaydān's contemporaries, who reproached him for adopting an Orientalist model.[40] Yet it has served as the basis for the literary histories found in schoolbooks and dictionaries even today.[41] For example, the literary-history chart in the *Munjid* encyclopedic dictionary, a standard reference work, until recently labeled the entire period from 750 to 1258 "the Abbasid age," and the period from 1258 to 1789 "the age of decline."[42] Admittedly, this arrangement has its advantages: the alternative would have been to create a new section for each of Zaydān's hundred-odd dynasties, or to come up with some new principle of classification. In the end the *Munjid* editors took the easy way out: following Zaydān, they declare the Abbasids to have been the most important Islamic dynasty, and then herd every writer between 750 and 1258 into the Abbasid tent.

This way of looking at literary history may seem natural to many Arabic speakers today, but it hardly follows in any obvious way from historical reality—not even the reality known to Zaydān. Rather, the construction of an Abbasid golden age follows in part from the choices Zaydān made in order to write a specifically cultural history. Most fatefully, he decided to focus on the Abbasids because the sources on them would give him more of what he thought of as the raw material of *Kulturgeschichte*—social life, material culture, and so on. For that purpose, his choice made sense. But, as he himself was aware, there were plenty of other dynasties out there: in fact, he lists them in his chart. Their subsequent disappearance is doubtless the result of a streamlining intended to produce a curriculum for a secular Arab-nationalist history. Fortunately, the many criticisms of this scheme finally appear to have had an effect: the most recent edition of the *Munjid* has a new chart. In this one, the unfortunate "Abbasid" label for 750-1258 is retained, but the period from 1258 to 1798 is called the Mamluk and Ottoman period, not the age of decline.

39. For another early example see Ḥasan Tawfīq al-ʿAdl, *Tārīkh ādāb al-lughah al-ʿarabiyyah* (Cairo: al-Funūn, 1906), which divides the field into "pre-Islamic, Umayyad, Abbasid, Andalusian, and after." He appears to have derived this scheme from Carl Brockelmann, making it a descendant of Hammer-Purgstall's. See Konrad Hirschler and Sarah Bowen Savant, "Introduction: What is A Period?" *Der Islam* 91:1 (2014): 6-19, at 14, citing Jan Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 327-30. Note that although al-ʿAdl's work precedes Zaydan's *Tārīkh ādāb al-lughah al-ʿarabiyyah* (Cairo: al-Hilāl, 1911-13) it postdates the *Tamaddun* (1902-1906).

40. On Luwīs Shaykhū's criticism of Zaydān's dependence on Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, see Anne-Laure Dupont, "How Should the History of the Arabs be Written? The Impact of European Orientalism on Jurjī Zaydān's Work," in Zaidan and Philipp, eds., *Jurji Zaidan*, 85-121, at 104-7. Another early critique is that of Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī (d. 1937), *Taʾrīkh ādāb al-ʿarab,* originally published 1911, reissued and edited by ʿAbd Allāh al-Minshāwī and Mahdī al-Baḥqīrī (Cairo: al-Īmān, undated reprint of 1911 edition), 1:13-19. The gist of his objection is that literary history is neither progressive nor cumulative; indeed, its finest hour came near the beginning, with the revelation of the Qurʾan. Moreover, it is independent from events in other spheres, including religion, politics, and science. I thank Ahmed El Shamsy for this reference.

41. A prominent example in the schoolbook category is [Shaykhū, Luwīs,] *al-Majānī al-ḥadīthah ʿan majānī al-Ab Shaykhū*, edited by Fuʾād Afrām al-Bustānī et al (Beirut: al-Kāthulīkiyyah, 1960-61). I thank John Nawas for drawing this example to my attention.

42. "Tārīkh al-ādāb wa l-ʿulūm al-ʿarabiyyah," in *al-Munjid fī l-lughah wa l-aʿlām*, 27th ed. (Beirut: Dar el-Mashreq, 1984), pp. 462-69. I thank Bilal Orfali and John Nawas for sending me photos of these pages.

IV. On the basis of the preceding survey one might be tempted to conclude that the elevation of the early Abbasid period is entirely the result of back-projection. But there is plenty of evidence that Abbasid glory was a topos in Arabic literature *even before* the modern process of mythification got started. Having now excavated and put aside the modern rise-and-fall paradigm that *requires* a golden age, we can proceed to examine the pre-modern topos in more detail.

In what now seems an amateurish essay published two decades ago, I offered a selective history of the trope of Baghdad as a city of vanished glory.[43] Century after century, one finds the claim that the city had only recently stopped being a glorious center of political power, prosperity, scholarship, and so on. Whatever the weaknesses of my essay, it still seems true that the trope was persistent and ubiquitous, and that its persistence and ubiquity make it impossible to treat the glorification of the early Abbasid period (for which Baghdad is the most convenient synecdoche) as a purely modern phenomenon.[44]

A recent essay by Suzanne Stetkevych seems to address the problem with its argument that the golden age is the creation of Abbasid court poets.[45] But Stetkevych takes it as axiomatic that Abū Tammām (d. 845 or 846), al-Buḥturī (d. 897), and the rest had something to celebrate, namely, "the astounding and unprecedented might and dominion of the rulers of the Arab-Islamic state" and "the moral, military, scientific, and cultural achievements of Abbasid rule" (3). Or at least, she takes it as axiomatic until she doesn't: a few pages later she says that "the Abbasid Golden age was a literary construct, not a historical reality," adding that it is "an image created and promulgated by the court panegyrists and not an objective historical assessment of the period" (7). Apart from the circularity of the argument, I am not convinced by the poems she analyzes that the panegyrists believed that theirs was a golden age, or, if they did, that this belief would have mattered very much. The problem is one of genre: *madīḥ*, by definition, insists that *tout va pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes*. Since this is what praise-poets always say, no matter where or when they live, their having said it during the early Abbasid period would seem to lack probative value. On the other hand, Stetkevych's further argument that nineteenth- and twentieth-century neo-classical poets invoked Abū Tammām, al-Buḥturī, et al., to construct the image of a lost Arab-Islamic utopia is fully convincing.[46] What remains to be determined why the poets of *this* particular period should have been chosen to play this role.

A convenient way to re-open the problem is to ask what different users of the trope thought the early Abbasid period was like. In the *Thousand and One Nights*, the stories that feature al-Rashīd, Zubaydah, al-Amīn, Jaʿfar al-Barmakī, Abū Nuwās, Masrūr, and Isḥāq

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43. Michael Cooperson, "Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative," *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 99-113.

44. For a more recent study of this trope, see Zayde Antrim, "Connectivity and creativity: representations of Baghdad's centrality, 5th-11th centuries," in *İslam Medeniyetinde Bağdat (Medînetü's-Selam) Uluslararsı Sempozyum*, ed. Ismail Saa Üstün (Istanbul: Marmara University, 2011), 55-74.

45. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Abbasid Panegyric: Badīʿ Poetry and the Invention of the Arab Golden Age," in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, published online 04 May 2016.

46. On the notion of "Arab-Muslim utopia" see Wien, *Arab Nationalism*, 48-79.

al-Mawṣilī draw on associations with vast wealth and spectacular self-indulgence.[47] In the French travelogue of Rifāʿah Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī, on the other hand, the early Abbasid period is notable not for its prosperity and glamor but for its promotion of culture and learning.[48] These two attributes—wealth and learning—have become so naturalized as attributes of the early Abbasids that it becomes tempting to argue that the golden-age trope came about because the caliphs were, as a matter of historical fact, wealthier or more supportive of science than other pre-modern Muslim rulers. But that claim is hard to prove. Baghdad may have been a very wealthy town, but how much wealthier can it have been than (for example) Umayyad Damascus or Fatimid Cairo? More importantly, how would any pre-modern observer really know? What needs to be explained—in a study of cultural history, anyway—is the *reputation* for wealth, or more broadly, why Abbasid materiality should have left such a vivid afterglow in cultural memory.

The matter of scientific learning is also less straightforward than it may appear. At some point in history, instrumental rationality became thinkable, and was felt to be a good thing. Historians who found something analogous to it in past societies declared those societies prescient or precocious, especially when their discoveries and inventions—algebra, say, or movable type—anticipated their counterparts in Western Europe or, better yet, led to them. As a premise for historical study, the problem with this idea is that it leads modern observers to assume that people like al-Khwārizmī (who systematized algebra) shared our modern ideas about the nature and purpose of scientific inquiry. This assumption, in turn, forecloses questions about why someone in ninth-century Baghdad would trouble to systematize algebra or why someone else would pay him to do it. Especially in the case of Islamic societies, the march-of-progress trope also tends to support the claim that science was a marginal endeavor that flourished in a few obscure corners before being snuffed out by the dark forces of orthodoxy.[49]

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47. It would be tedious to list every reference to these figures in the *Nights*. The best-known example is the appearance of al-Rashīd and Jaʿfar in the middle of the story of the porter and the three ladies of Baghdad: see [Shahrzād,] *Kitāb alf laylah wa-laylah min uṣūlihi al-ʿarabiyyah al-ūlā*, ed. Muḥsin Mahdī (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 138 = L32). Jean-Claude Garcin has identified distinct stages in the representation of these figures: see his *Pour une lecture historique des Mille et Une Nuits* (Arles: Sindbad, 2013), 62-77. As Garcin notes, antecedents for these characters may be found in the literature generated more proximately by the early Abbasid period itself. For our purposes, however, the question is why these particular figures came to assume such a prominent place in popular memory.

48. Rifāʿah Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī, *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīs* (Cairo: Kalimāt, 2011), 17, 25, 309. This trope has been tirelessly repeated since al-Ṭahṭāwī, and still appears regularly when Arabic media has reason to refer to the Abbasids. See, e.g., Muḥammad Majdī, "Baghdād madīnat al-thaqāfah al-ʿarabiyyah bayna izdihār al-māḍī wa-ʿālam al-wāqiʿ" (*Veto*, March 4, 2016).

49. This is the assumption behind Richard Dawkins's notorious tweet: "All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge. They did great things in the Middle Ages, though" (Richard Dawkins, August 8, 2013). For studies that complicate this bit of received wisdom, see George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Boston: MIT, 2007); Ahmad Dallal, *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History* (Yale, 2010); Justin Stearns, "Writing the History of the Natural Sciences in the Pre-Modern Muslim World: Historiography, Religion, and the Importance of the Pre-Modern Period," *History Compass* 9/12 (2011): 923-51.

The reality, as it turns out, is more complex. Some early Muslim scientists did believe that the study of nature was progressive and cumulative. But their actual investigations often had more in common with neo-Platonic magical thinking than with anything we might recognize as science. Similarly, their patrons were motivated by desires that may seem odd to us: using translation to establish a philosophical pedigree that bypassed the Byzantine empire,[50] for example, or constructing an epistemology that could serve as an alternative to Imami Shiism on the one hand and scriptural nominalism on the other.[51] Understandably, opponents of these endeavors took a dim view of Abbasid science: Arabic historians' references to al-Maʾmūn's scholarly interests, for example, are often derogatory.[52] Moreover, scientific activity, however defined, continued long after the end of the so-called golden age, and in many places all over the world defined by Islam. For all these reasons, saying that the Abbasid-period scholars were good scientists, and were acknowledged and appreciated as such, cannot serve as a complete explanation for all the love that al-Ṭahṭāwī and his successors have thrown at them.

V. So why an Abbasid golden age? Let's begin with a contingency: the appearance of paper. Paper came to the attention of Muslims in the eighth century.[53] Compared to parchment and papyrus, it was simple to produce, cheap, and easy to work with. Thanks to paper, the west Asians of the early Abbasid era were able to produce a good deal more writing than their predecessors. The result has been described as "an efflorescence of books and written culture incomparably more brilliant than was known anywhere in Europe until the invention of printing with movable type in the fifteenth century."[54] For our purposes, the point is that only after 750 was it possible for Muslims and their west Asian neighbors to record their thoughts and share them with others so efficiently. It doesn't matter whether those thoughts were brilliant or not: whatever they were, they were saved—or at least, more of them were saved than had ever been possible before.

Thanks to paper, then, Abbasid writing was plentiful and easy to reproduce. But there's more to it than that. As several modern studies have argued, Abbasid-era compilers did not simply record the tradition: they *constructed* it, in accordance with their own preoccupations and concerns.[55] In that sense, our image of pre- and early Islam is the Abbasid image of pre-

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50. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ʿAbbasid Society (2nd-4th/5th-10th c.)* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

51. Michael Cooperson, *Al Maʾmun* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

52. Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* (Cambridge, 2000), 65-66.

53. This was probably not—as tradition has it—because Muslims captured Chinese papermakers at the battle of Talas in 751, but through contact with Central Asian craftsmen. See Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper Before Print* (Yale, 2001), 42-45 (citations at 44-45).

54. Bloom, *Paper*, 91.

55. See Rina Drory, "The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making," *Studia Islamica* 1996/1 (February): 38-49, which argues that early Abbasid *mawālī* "constructed Arab identity" by "collecting and organizing knowledge belonging to 'the Arab (and Islamic) sciences'" (42); Borrut, "Vanishing Syria," which shows that our periodization of early Islam is an Abbasid-era creation; and Peter Webb, *Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh 2016), esp. 255-69, which makes a similar argument about Arab identity—not merely its content, *à la* Drory, but its very existence.

and early Islam, and seeing through it or around it requires an enormous amount of effort. To this insight I would add that when Abbasid-period compliers set about their work, they were doing something else that had not been done before: they were setting out to make Arab lore and Islamic tradition *readable* to people raised in other traditions, as well as to the people who had came to think of themselves as Arabs. When a *rāwī* performed a pre-Islamic ode at the Umayyad court of Damascus, or when Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, and al-Akhṭal took turns savaging each other at the great poetry slam that was Basra, no one bothered to ask whether Greek captives or Persian converts could understand what was being said or why they should care. Under unusual circumstances, some freedmen and converts did acquire a native or near-native command of Arabic, but those fortunate few seem to have been content to make a fortune and then pull the ladder up behind them.[56] Only in the early Abbasid period do we find authors intent on making Arab lore and Islamic tradition accessible to outsiders.[57] This was not done kindly: it often involved name-calling, mockery, and threats, along with complaints about how culture was going to the dogs.[58] But the result was fortunate: a dumbing-down of everything that had been thought and said in Arabic up to that point.[59] This dumbing-down made the tradition accessible not only to the *mawālī* but also to Arabs who had lost touch with their roots[60] (or, perhaps more exactly, were now being told for the

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56. Michael Cooperson, "'Arabs' and 'Iranians': The Uses of Ethnicity in the Early Abbasid Period," *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts. Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 364-387.

57. The intention may have been, as Gérard Lecomte says of Ibn Qutaybah, to create "un système intellectuel et moral composite, mais homogène, qui deviendra le dénominateur commun de la Communauté." *Ibn Qutayba (m. 276/889): L'homme, son oeuvre, ses idées* (Damascus: Ifpo, 1965), 421. Yet the presentation of this system by Ibn Qutaybah at least comes off as snarky rather than high-minded. In any event, I agree entirely with Lecomte that Ibn Qutaybah's notion of *adab* was neither secular (as religion is unmistakably a part of it) nor humanist (because the term is simply anachronistic; Lecomte, *Ibn Qutayba*, 424ff.) On this last point see Alexander Key, "The Applicability of the Term 'Humanism' to Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī," *Studia Islamica* 100/101 (2005): 71-112.

58. See. e.g., Ibn Qutaybah, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, undated reprint of 1925 edition), where incompetence is everywhere (*shumūl al-naqṣ*) and learning extinct (*durūs al-ʿilm;* 1: *ṭāʾ*), and where the author has made his work as complete as possible because the reader, if left to his own devices, is too lazy to seek learning on his own (1: *yāʾ*). See also, by the same author, *Adab al-kātib*, ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Dār al-Saʿādah, 1963), where scribes who scorn the Arab and Islamic sciences are likened to beasts (6) and the reader is given several examples of bureaucrats who embarrassed themselves by their ignorance of Arabic expressions and lack of general knowledge (7-8).

59. In offering his readers a "menu" of possibly useful information to choose from, Ibn Qutaybah, whom I take as a representative example of the vulgarizer, "is apparently bowing to values of the semi or self-educated, and by designing a manual of short cuts for them, freeing them from the need to acquire real intellectual discipline." Julia Bray, "Lists and Memory: Ibn Qutayba and Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb," in *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 210-31, at 221.

60. Among his prospective readers Ibn Qutaybah lists not only "sons of Persian kings who know nothing of their father and his times" but also "tribespeople of Quraysh who cannot explain their relationship to the Prophet and his companions." Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. Tharwat ʿUkkāshah, 4th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1981), 2.

first time that they had specifically Arab roots to be proud of). In the long run, it also made the tradition accessible to later generations of readers, including us.

Let me flesh out this claim with some examples. Today it is entirely commonplace to hear Muslims say that a believer should know Arabic. As it turns out, though, someone actually had to argue this position. The first such someone I know of is the famous jurist al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820). In his foundational treatise on law, he declares that believers are required to understand what the Qurʾān says. Since the Book is entirely in Arabic, it is "incumbent on every Muslim to learn as much of the Arabs' language as his efforts allow."[61] Moreover, anyone who acquires Arabic from Arabs "becomes one of the speakers of their language." Al-Shāfiʿī concedes that the learner's language will be imperfect, but he insists that this is no excuse for not trying: native speakers don't know Arabic perfectly either (¶54-57).

Given the state of the relationship between Arabs and *mawālī* at the time, al-Shāfiʿī's position was anything but obvious, as is evident, too, from the careful way he lays it out. Yet, despite flying in the face of many commonplace assumptions about language, ethnicity, and the hierarchy of peoples, his argument won the day. For modern Muslims who care about such matters, it now seems beyond dispute that Arabic can and should be acquired. It also seems obvious that native proficiency in a language offers no free ride when it comes to content: that is, being a native speaker does not guarantee *fiqh* (understanding). For our purposes, the important point is that these positions were articulated in the early Abbasid period, not at any other time, as part of what I am calling the great dumbing-down of Arab lore and Islamic learning: that is, the process by which the language and culture of the Arabs, like their religion, were simplified for consumption by non-natives as well as "Arabs."[62]

To show what the dumbing-down looked like in practice, there is no better example than Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889). Most of his books amount to lists of "things you need to know" about Arabs: their food, drinks, games, poems, stories, and so on, with his books on Qurʾān and Hadith arguably being extensions of the same impulse. In the *Faḍl al-ʿarab wa t-tanbīh ilā ʿulūmihā*, for example, he begins by admonishing the presumptuous non-Arab reader that he has no basis to feel superior to Arabs.[63] Then he lists the kinds of lore (*ʿilm*) that the Arabs were experts in, including astronomy, divination, and horsemanship, clinching his case by citing poems that would be incomprehensible to any but an expert in those fields. In one passage, for example, he quotes the following verses about a horse:

> ... a smooth-cheeked,
> Broad-breasted, full-chested steed,
> With imposing "five longs," compact "four shorts,"

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61. Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, *The Epistle on Legal Theory*, ed. and trans. Joseph E. Lowry (New York University, 2013), ¶65. (I cite this and other Library of Arabic Literature volumes by paragraph numbers, which are the same across the Arabic and English pages.)

62. For practical purposes, this "simplification for consumption" is probably indistinguishable (from our perspective, anyway) from constructing the relevant notions of language, culture, and religion. See Drory, "Abbasid Construction," 44; Bray, "Lists and Memory," at 225; and more generally Webb, *Arab Identity*.

63. Ibn Qutaybah, *The Excellence of the Arabs*, ed. James E. Mongomery and Peter Webb, tr. Sarah Bowen Savant and Peter Webb (New York: New York University, 2017), 1.1.1ff.

And ample "six-broads": towering legs, solid and firm.
Its "sevens" chiselled and "nines" stripped...[64]

Having made his point—that "Arab lore" can easily stump a layman—Ibn Qutaybah does not even explain the jargon words. Rather, he advises the reader to look them up in his book on horses. Peter Webb, the translator of these verses, has done so, and explains the terms as follows:

> The "five longs" refers to... the neck, the ears, the forelegs, the haunches, and forelock; "four shorts" refers to the pastern, the dock, the back and the flanks... The "six broads", the forehead, chest, the haunches, the thighs, the cannons of the hind legs, and the place between the ear-roots; the "sevens" are the ears, eyes, the shoulder, the barrel, the hamstrings of the hind legs, the bones meeting the fetlock, and the bones meeting the shoulder; and the "nines" are the bones under the eyes, the bones under the tear-ducts, the cheeks, the forehead, the place between the ear-roots, the fetlocks, the veins in its forelegs and the hind legs...[65]

This may not look like a dumbed-down version to us, but it is easier to understand than the poem, and would doubtless have been straightforward enough to an audience at home with horses. A near equivalent in our own world might be something like this, from a BBC site that attempts to explain American football to audiences more familiar with British games:

**Touchdown (six points)**
A touchdown is scored when a team crosses the opposition's goal line with the ball, or catches or collects the ball in the end zone.

**Field goal (three points)**
These are usually attempted on fourth down if the kicker is close enough to the end zone to kick the ball through the posts, or **uprights**.

**Extra point (one or two points)**
A point is earned by kicking the ball through the uprights after a touchdown (similar to a rugby conversion). Two points are earned by taking the ball into the end zone again...[66]

It is with the early Abbasids, then, that everything before them becomes *readable* for the first time. This does not mean that Abbasid-period glosses and commentaries on, say, the Qurʾān or the *muʿallaqāt* were necessarily the ones used in later periods.[67] But the format and

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64. Ibn Qutaybah, *Excellence of the Arabs*, 2.2.10.

65. Ibn Qutaybah, *Excellence*, notes 172 and 173.

66. BBC Sport, American Football, "NFL in a nutshell," http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/other_sports/american_football/3192002.stm.

67. In fact they usually weren't: Ahmed El Shamsy, "Islamic Book Culture through the Lens of Two Private Libraries, 1850-1940," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 4 (2016): 61-81, shows that "the late manuscript

substance of many later commentaries—and more importantly the idea that one should need a commentary in the first place—go back to the early Abbasid period.[68] As a result, the names of late-eighth- to mid-tenth-century authorities were baked into the exegetical tradition at its source, and have echoed down the centuries long after most of their works ceased to be consulted and were eventually lost. At some point, citing an Abbasid-period source became a trope even in popular literature, where, for example, we find the massive, sprawling, wildly unhistorical *Epic of Antar* attributed to al-Aṣmaʿī.

This growing backwards of *isnād*s (to borrow a term from Islamic legal history) does not mean that sources cited informally or for effect were always from the early Abbasid period itself. But when other sources are cited, they consist of figures canonized by the early Abbasid *tadwīn*, as Ḥājjī Khalīfah calls it (1:33). For example, in al-Ḥarīrī's fortieth *maqāmah* (usually called 'of Tabrīz'), Abū Zayd and his wife have a slanging match in which they refer to two dozen figures from pre- and early Islamic history, of whom the latest is al-Aṣmaʿī (there called Ibn Qurayb, d. 828).[69] Al-Ḥarīrī died in 1122, meaning that there was *three centuries' worth* of poets, scholars, and other luminaries he might have cited in this episode. Instead, though, he limits himself to figures of the early Abbasid period and before.

The last point to be made about the explosion of writing in the eighth and ninth centuries is that it made the Abbasids themselves more readable as well. Though much of what they wrote was about the past, they wrote about themselves too, and enough of this has survived—though again not always in its original form—to convey the sense of a dense, layered world. To exemplify, Ibn al-Jawzī's life of Ibn Ḥanbal provides a rich store of detail on how life was lived in the poor-to-middling neighborhoods of ninth-century Baghdad. From it we learn, for example, that a month's rent might be three dirhams (¶42.1) while live chickens, cuppings, and circumcisions cost one dirham (¶49.18, 63.4, 38.9); that landlords kept registers of tenants and how much rent they owed (¶42.1); that roofs had drainpipes that might empty into the street (¶49.28); that rooms were heated using clay pans full of embers (¶45.10) and might be closed off by curtains instead of doors (¶45.7-8); that grocers sold thorns for kindling (¶47.1, 52.3) and wrapped their butter in leaves of chard (¶49.24); that the penniless might pawn items like sandals and pails in exchange for food (¶41.3, 49.7); and that children were given almonds, sugar, and raisins as treats (¶38.11, 44.10).[70]

Strikingly, Ibn al-Jawzī died in 597/1201, that is, three and a half centuries after the death of his subject (241/855). Yet enough had already been written about Ibn Ḥanbal to provide his biographer with enough material to fill some 230 folios of manuscript. Because the realia (unlike, say, the creeds ascribed to the imam) are there by accident, they seem believable;

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tradition was overwhelmingly focused on a small number of curriculum texts and extensive commentaries on them, while ignoring most of the works that we today consider the classics of those fields" (61).

68. In the field of *tafsīr*, for example, the works Andrew Rippin classes as "formative" include those ascribed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Sanʿānī (d. 211/827), and al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830), with the caveat that attributions are made to earlier figures, and the dating of all these works remains uncertain (Rippin, "Tafsīr," in *EI²*).

69. *Les séances de Hariri*, ed. Silvestre de Sacy (Paris, Imprimerie Royale, 1822), I:443-58, at 453.

70. Ibn al-Jawzī, *The Virtues of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. and trans. by Michael Cooperson (New York University, 2013 and 2015). Chapters 1-50 are in vol. 1 and Chapters 51-100 are in vol. 2.

and the overall effect is so dense that the few obvious fabrications (for example, the story where Ibn Hanbal is shipwrecked on a desert island, ¶4.22) stand out like a sore thumb.[71] To fully appreciate the reality effect (as Roland Barthes would call it) of this material, we might compare it to what is known about an earlier celebrity, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728). Although he is often cited as an authority in piety and theology, his life story is much thinner than Ibn Ḥanbal's, and many of the statements and actions attributed to him appear to be spurious.[72] In this respect, the main difference between him and Ibn Ḥanbal is that the latter lived in the full light of history—that is, at the beginning of the period when, as the sharp-eyed Mamluk-era biographer al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) put it, Muslims began making an effort to keep track of biographical information.[73] With writing itself made easier, Ibn Ḥanbal's family, friends, and colleagues could record their memories of him, or have them written down. This kind of record-keeping was evidently a novelty to him, and he did not like it (see Chapter 29).

To this argument one might object that later periods have their vivid personalities and densely layered stories too. Indeed they do. But my argument here is merely that there was plentiful Abbasid (and pseudo-Abbasid) material standing ready to be activated once the initial choice had been made to declare the mid-eighth to mid-tenth centuries the golden age. Had the choice fallen upon, say, the late Mamluk period, the rich material characteristic of that era would no doubt have been pressed into service in the same way. Conversely, had the early Abbasids been chosen on purely formal grounds, as almost seems to be the case in von Hammer-Purgstall's four-part schema, but then failed to supply the raw material for a *Kulturgeschichte*, it seems unlikely that their elevation would have succeeded as well as it has. This is what Zaydān means when he says that the history of *tamaddun* and *ḥaḍārah* can best be told when the sources are sufficiently dense to let the physical reality of a past society "appear to the reader as if it were physically there before him."

VI. At a recent conference in Doha, Qatar, I heard a speaker at a panel on the history of translation speak at length on the Abbasid *bayt al-ḥikmah*, describing it as an unprecedented, large-scale initiative to translate the literatures of the world into Arabic. During the question

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71. This is a significant difference, I think, between the biography of Ibn Ḥanbal and that of earlier celebrities such as (for example) the first caliphs. Any given *khabar* about, say, ʿUmar, might be (a) entirely made up but (b) indistinguishable from an authentic one, simply because so many different kinds of things are said about ʿUmar that there is no obviously authentic core to compare it to. Reports about Ibn Ḥanbal, on the other hand, almost all seem to be about the same person. This is doubtless because most of them go back to a relatively limited number of eyewitnesses, most of whom, furthermore, were committed to, and trained in, the practice of exact transmission. Of course, anyone interested in glorifying a particular era might draw on dubious reports as well as more reliable ones. But an account based on reliable reports would, it seems to me, be more persuasive, precisely because of its reality effect.

72. Suleiman Ali Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

73. "The ancients did not record death dates as they should have, relying instead on their memories. As a result, the death dates of many Companions and Successors nearly down to the time of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shāfiʿī [d. 204/820], were lost... Then latter-day [authorities] began to make careful note of when learned persons and so forth died." Al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh al-Islām*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1990), 1:26.

period, a member of the audience (and a Moroccan, like the speaker) correctly pointed out that recent research has called into question the size, importance, and even the function of the *bayt al-ḥikmah*. The speaker dismissively replied that matters were as he had described them, adding that anyone who doubted his account probably had "ideological motives" for doing so.

This incident serves as a reminder that any questioning of the traditional golden-age story may be perceived as an attack on an already embattled culture. But getting past inherited notions of "decadence" and "decline" means putting aside equally facile notions of "golden ages" and "renaissances." In excavating the myth of the early Abbasid golden age, my purpose here has not been to write off what one colleague calls "the 'fact' of an enormously creative period."[74] Rather, I have tried to see what happens if we approach it without neo-Hegelian baggage. What happens, in my view, is that we can tell a story not about a golden age but about a convergence of contingencies. After the mid-eighth century, paper made it possible to create an archive. Because it came into being at the time it did, that archive preserves the first systematic efforts to make the language, lore, and religion of the Arabs readable to outsiders—or more likely, to help bring those things into being, at least in the form we know them today. Paper also made it possible to preserve memories almost immediately. Accordingly, the Abbasid archive contains what are almost the first fully reliable accounts of contemporary experience in Arabic. As a result of these developments, the early Abbasid period became, simultaneously, the first Islamic space to be imaginable in almost granular detail, *and* the source of much of what we know about everything that had gone before.

Describing the period this way is not to deny or belittle its achievements, however one chooses to define them. The point, rather, is to clear a space for studying them as the products of contingency rather than as points placed along a trajectory of glory and decline. The work of ninth- or tenth-century writers, for example, need not represent the pinnacle of literary achievement in Arabic. Instead, it can be understood as the distinctive product of a particular conjuncture. As such, we may as well admit, it is often not so much glorious as maddeningly local and opaque—a fact that should remind us how much we owe to the vulgarizers. In different ways, previous scholarship has circled around this idea of a dumbing-down: we have, for example, Gregor Schoeler's eighth- and ninth-century "*taṣnif* movement",[75] Shawkat M. Toorawa's ninth-century "readerly culture,"[76] and Garth Fowden's ninth- to tenth-century Baghdadi "exegetical culture."[77] Where my approach differs is in its insistence that our own present position as readers give these postulated "movements" and "cultures" some of the transparency and coherence they seem to possess. The idea of a golden age, or indeed of any age at all, results from the encounter between the archive and our expectations. It has been my argument throughout that the early Abbasid period produced an archive some parts of

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74. Matthew Gordon, personal communication.

75. Gregor Schoeler, *The genesis of literature in Islam: From the aural to the read*. Revised edition, in collaboration with and translated by Shawkat M. Toorawa (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), esp. ch. 5.

76. Shawkat M. Toorawa, *Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

77. Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muḥammad: The First Millenium Refocused* (Princeton, 2014).

which happen to be easily readable to us. This readability, finally, is doubtless one reason for the fascination that the period exerts. I would call this fascination an affect, in the sense of a feeling that can be studied historically. Von Kremer, Zaydān, and others among our *mashāyikh* felt it, and passed it on to others, who in due course passed it down to us. I am not sure I want to give it up, but I hope now to have understood it better, at least.

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