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Ebu Eyyub el-Ensari

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DREAMS OF HAGIA SOPHIA: THE MUSLIM SIEGE OF
CONSTANTINOPLE IN 674 CE, ABU AYYÜB AL-ANŞARİ,
AND THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC IMAGINATION

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Nancy Khalek

Historical writing in the formative period of Islam, from the first to the third centuries, is not easily divisible into distinct genres. Collections of akhbār ranged in subject from battle days to local events, from birth- and death-dates to biographical sketches and genealogical lists. Regional schools of early historical writing are notoriously difficult to discern, let alone to reconstruct.¹ This is not to say that there were no loose categories of writing which bore their own hallmarks, had their own foci, or charted similar trajectories. Some of these categories were interrelated, or interwoven, as in the case of biography with genealogy. One thing that is certain, however, is that *sira* was an essential component of early Islamic historiography.

Biographical information is available both in works of which it is the specific focus, such as *ṭabaqāt* and *siyar*, and in other more “clinical” sources, such as *tasmiya* texts or genealogical works. By the middle of the third century AH, *‘ilm al-rijāl* and the insistence upon chains of transmission for the classification of *ḥadīth* material narrowed scholars’ appreciation of the potential of biographical material.² By *‘ilm al-rijāl* I mean to indicate works which aimed to comment

¹ Elad, “The Beginnings of Historical Writing by the Arabs: The Earliest Syrian Writers on the Conquests.”

² An excellent study of the development of the biographical genre in Arabic literature is Michael Cooperson’s *Classical Arabic Biography*. Cooperson notes that *‘ilm al-rijāl* was in fact the first subset of biography that was particular to *ḥadīth*. Previously, biography had been the purview of *akhbārīs*, whose work came before the application of the *isnād* as a necessary component of *ḥadīth*. The *Sira* of the Prophet and his Companions remained under the control of *akhbārīs*, as they had been before the advent of *‘ilm al-rijāl*. For an especially interesting discussion of the relationship between history and biography, see especially p. 20ff. The contrast between annalistic records of a totality of events and narrative writing focused on a particular person highlights the conceptual boundaries Arabic authors conceived of when differentiating one category of writing from another.

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