

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIVE

STRUCTURE AND/AS ARGUMENT IN THE SAQĪFA ACCOUNT

Les païens ne s'interrogent pas sur la conformité du récit à son objet, ils savent que les références sont organisées par les mots, et que les dieux n'en sont pas les garants, parce que leur parole n'est pas plus véridique que l'humaine. Rhétorique et chasse les affairant assez, on n'y a pas le dernier mot et il n'y a pas de coup de grâce.¹

When the Prophet died in Medina, appointing no one to succeed him, the young Islamic community was divided over the identity of his successor. While a small group assembled around 'Alī, Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, most of the Medina Muslims, known as Anṣār ("Helpers"), especially those belonging to the tribe of Khazraj, feared that the Muhājirūn ("Emigrants") would usurp the leadership. Therefore, they called for a meeting in the portico (*saqīfa*) of the Banū Sā'ida, one of their clans, in order to elect Sa'd b. 'Ubāda, their own member, as successor to the Prophet. Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's closest associate, was warned of this possibility and with 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrāḥ, two fellow leaders of the Emigrants, he hurried to the assembly. In the course of a stormy session, one of the Anṣār suggested that two successors, a Medinese and a Meccan, be elected. Abū Bakr objected and proposed either 'Umar or Abū 'Ubayda as the sole successor. Taking now a decisive move that broke the deadlock, 'Umar swore allegiance (*bay'a*) to Abū Bakr, and then all the Muslims followed suit.

Thus, receiving anything between a few lines and a number of pages, the so-called Saqīfa episode has variously been reconstructed.²

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris, 1977), 45.

² For brief, standard accounts, see e.g., Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London, 1964), 50–51; G. E. von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam* (Chicago, 1970), 50; Laura Veccia Vaglieri, "The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates," in P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 1A: *The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War* (Cambridge, 1970), 57; Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 291; Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), 82–3; Hugh Kennedy, *The*

To be sure, here we deal with a major event, for it is widely agreed that no issue has divided Muslims more profoundly and durably than the succession to Muḥammad.³ As for the scholarly view, two elements appear to be common to all writings on the subject. One is the implication that, by itself, the Saqīfa episode, aside from the Anṣār's abortive attempt at seizing the caliphate, was unproblematic. In other words, Abū Bakr was a "natural" choice and the well-known conflictual dimension of the succession issue is to be seen as a later development in the framework of the Sunna-Shī'a schism and as generated by Shī'ite fabrication.⁴ The second aspect has to do with the very reconstruction of the event. Here, a prevalent assumption, actually lacking any critical basis, is that a report preserved in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's well known biography of Muḥammad (*Ṣīrat Rasūl Allāh*), a report ascribed to 'Umar, the second caliph, produced late in his reign and transmitted by the reputed 'Abdallāh b. al-ʿAbbās is, unlike reports in other (later) sources, factual.⁵ Surely,

Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates (London, 1986), 51–2. Miklos Muranyi, "Ein neuer Bericht über die Wahl des ersten Kalifen Abū Bakr," *Arabica* 25 (1978): 233–60, is mainly concerned with a report identified as Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī's. Madelung, *Succession*, esp. 30–31, speculates about an array of issues and puzzles that arise, especially from reading Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Ṣīra*. Since I do not share Madelung's point of departure for establishing the "true" history in this case, his speculations are not my concern here. See most recently, Khalil 'Athamina, "The Pre-Islamic Roots of the Early Muslim Caliphate: The Emergence of Abū Bakr," *Islam* 76 (1999): 1–32.

³ Madelung, *Succession*, 1. The significance of the event as the first division in Islam has been noted already by Mas'ūdī, as cited in Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 105.

⁴ Madelung, *Succession*, 1–2. On pp. 3–18 he problematizes this assumption, the origins of which he attributes to Caetani, who, in turn, followed the Sunnī doctrine. Madelung goes on to speculate on some hypothetical scenario on which I do not see it necessary to comment. He fails to notice that such a problematization, albeit from a partisan (Shī'ite) point of view, yet based on similar arguments, is already to be found in Jafri, *Origins*, 13–57. Unsurprisingly, Jafri sees the Saqīfa event as the earliest manifestation of the Sunnī-Shī'ī schism (27), and in treating the episode groups the sources according to their supposed biases.

⁵ For Jafri's traditional and utterly uncritical argument for his choice of 'Umar's version as a so-called master version, see *Origins*, esp. 28–32. For example, the argument that 'Umar's account was widely circulated and was later unanimously transmitted, hence stood no chance of fabrication, takes it for granted that the attribution to 'Umar is authentic. Also Madelung, *Succession*, 18–27, insists on the authenticity of Ibn al-ʿAbbās' report, yet rightly stresses that authenticity is no guarantee for reliability. He "resolves" the problem by suggesting that, for the historian, the source's point of view and bias is as interesting as the facts themselves (22–3). However, Madelung's treatment of the report by Ibn al-ʿAbbās (28–31) is uninformed by this qualification and, in the end, sets out to tell the "real" story instead.

there are scholars who point out the difficulties involved in establishing precise facts from reports that, in their earliest rendition, are at least one hundred years later than the alleged occurrence itself. Also, suspicion has been raised as to the interests and biases that informed these reports.⁶ These serious reservations notwithstanding, there is a clear desire to resolve the problems involved. Isolating differences of information and disregarding them as simply manifesting partisanship, scholars have preferred to stress rather the similarities between the various Saqīfa accounts in order to pursue, after all, a reconstruction of the event.⁷

That not all the differences that emerge in the reports about the Saqīfa can be satisfactorily resolved becomes clear upon a cursory reading of the available material. To illustrate the point: there are in the *History* alone (that is, apart from other historical works) two different versions of the reaction of Sa'd b. 'Ubāda, the leading Anṣārī contender to the *khilāfa*, to Abū Bakr's nomination. In the first, Sa'd remains firm in his opposition, vows under no circumstances to render an oath of allegiance, and to fight the winning party "until I am brought forth before my God and know what my reckoning is." Thereafter, a leading man of Medina advises against 'Umar's suggestion to pester Sa'd in order to force him to change his mind, since—he argues—nothing would be effective in this case. However, in a second version we are told that, as a result of physical pressure exerted on him, Sa'd joined the Community in rendering the oath, albeit in "an action taken without consideration, like those of the *jāhiliyyah*." In a complementary version we find that Sa'd is totally isolated in his opposition to Abū Bakr and he himself expresses disappointment in his own tribe for not supporting him on this matter. Thus, in contrast to the first version, where Sa'd remains a bastion of opposition, in the second he is reduced to a state of misery. The Emigrants leave him with little room for escape: "If you withdraw a hand from obedience, or divide the union, we will strike off your head."⁸ Reading the two versions, a question thus remains: Did Sa'd swear allegiance to Abū Bakr? Did he not?

⁶ Jafri, *Origins*, 28.

⁷ Ibid. For his unconvincing reconciliation of variances, see pp. 44–5. Muranyi, "Bericht," 254, who points out an array of differences, mildly concludes that the material belongs to "Nacherzählung." Also Madelung, *Succession*, 28, speaks of "slightly variant versions."

⁸ *History*, vol. X, 9–11 [I, 1844–5].

Take as another example Abū Bakr's coronation speech, so to speak. In the account preserved in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, it is quite relevant to the occasion, its thrust being the relationship between the Caliph and the Community (*umma*). Abū Bakr expresses the desire to be corrected when in the wrong and promises to absolve the Believers from obedience if he himself defies God. He takes upon himself to defend the weak, and warns the Muslims that straying unto a wicked course would soon bring calamity upon them.⁹ When we turn to Ṭabarī's account, although it echoes the former in its first passage, and on occasion re-formulates what the *Sīra* had already said (e.g., "I have a Satan who takes possession of me," instead of the more prosaic phrasing of the possibility of the caliph committing error), it then takes an entirely different direction. In this version, Abū Bakr chooses to briefly relate Muḥammad's mission "as an Apostle to His creatures and as a witness to his community." The caliph further mentions Meccan opposition to the prophetic message, the suffering by the Muhājirūn from hatred, and their ability to prevail. The speech moves on to emphasize three theological issues that bear questionable relevance to the occasion. One is the tension between human brevity of existence and one's obligations in this world. The second theme is the fate of past generations and the lesson to be learned from it. That is, the Community is to take warning from those tyrants, renowned for their victories, from the kings who had cultivated the earth and fortified cities—all of them now perished and their bodies turned into dust. The third theological theme deals with the deception involved in the conventional categorization of good and evil, one that may lead to an erroneous association of "good" with Hell and "evil" with Paradise.¹⁰ Once again, the two versions in the *Sīra* and the *History* respectively leave the quest for Abū Bakr's "real" speech unanswered: Does the first account provide a truncated speech? Does the *History*'s version supply a mostly fabricated speech? Surely, the two versions are hard to reconcile.

Without direct access to *History*, having no Archimedean point from which to decide what are the facts, we are, like Lyotard's pagans, forced to satisfy ourselves with different *historiographical* accounts,

⁹ Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā' (Cairo, 1936), vol. IV, 306–10, English trans. Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad* (London, 1955).

¹⁰ *History*, vol. IX, 11–13 [I, 1845–7].

none of which has an edge that would entitle it to be called "History." The crucial question to me, therefore, is not what *really* happened in the Saqīfa; the sad yet unavoidable answer is that we simply do not know. À la Magritte and his "This is not a pipe," and Michel Foucault's elaboration thereof,¹¹ shifting our emphasis from an elusive object to its *representation*, we may ask: What sort of representation of an alleged historical event do we have in the *History*? That is to say, what are the main features of the historical reports about the Saqīfa event and what is the meaning they have for us as modern/postmodern readers?

In light of my approach as already clarified, which is opposed to a comprehensive comparison between the existing versions of the episode in question, and even more so to an attempt to "reconstruct" a composite story,¹² I intend to concentrate on the account I consider most significant, the one preserved in the *History*.¹³ Still, it is essential to my treatment of this account to note (as has already been mentioned) that it is in no small detail different from that contained in Ibn Ishāq's "Biography of Muḥammad,"¹⁴ as well as other early sources.¹⁵ Compared with Ṭabarī's, Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's "Saqīfa" is clearly a minimal narrative. It is ascribed, as noted above, to none other than 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who was allegedly required to relate his version of the event a few years *post factum*, when oppositional elements in the Community were still questioning the legitimacy of Abū Bakr's election, by now a *fait accompli*. 'Umar's version is clearly meant to dispel the doubts and can be considered an

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley, 1983).

¹² This is done in Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 121–5.

¹³ To be precise, there is besides the account that is here in focus, another that is placed earlier in the *History*, vol. IX, 192–4 [I, 1822–3], and is similar to the one in the *Sira*.

¹⁴ Jafri, *Origins*, 40, is clearly erroneous on this. He most likely considered the shorter version in the *History* (see note 13 above). Similarly, Madelung's insistence that there are merely slight differences between the versions (see n. 7 above) should be contested.

¹⁵ Ibn Ishāq himself has another version that was transmitted by Zubayr b. al-Bakkār, as pointed out by Muranyi, "Bericht," 251–2, 258. Balādhurī, Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Abī Shayba, and Bukhārī in his Commentary ("kitāb al-muḥāribīn," in the section *Bāb rajm al-hablā min al-zinā'*; I owe this reference to the late Norman Calder), all resemble Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām. The latter is reproduced in later sources such as Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya* (Beirut, 1966), vol. V, 245–7; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī'l-ta'rikh* (Beirut, 1965), vol. II, 326–8. For further treatment of sources, see Muranyi, "Bericht."

exercise in historicized ideology or, else, ideological history. Implied in it is a *post factum* justification of Abū Bakr's appointment.

There are three major speakers in 'Umar's story as it unfolds in the *Sīra*: an anonymous speaker for the Anṣār, who briefly states his party's rights; Abū Bakr, who, in response, takes a conciliatory tone, but at the same time insists on Qurashī superiority ("the best of the Arabs in blood and country") and suggests either 'Umar or Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrāḥ as caliph; a second Anṣārī, also anonymous, who proposes a compromise in the form of dividing the caliphate between the Anṣār and the Muhājirūn. The conclusion is somewhat unexpected and quite dramatic: as "voices were raised" and a "complete breach was to be feared," 'Umar performed the *bay'a*, everybody then followed suit, and thus Abū Bakr was elected.

Ṭabarī's account, we are informed, originated in one 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī 'Amra al-Anṣārī, of the Khazraj tribe,¹⁶ no trivial ascription, since it would be expected that, like 'Umar's version that gives voice to the party of the Muhājirūn, al-Anṣārī's would identify itself with the Anṣārī position. That things are in fact different, or at least, so they are told to have been, will soon become clear. In any case, this account in the *History* is considerably more complex than Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's. Of the five (as opposed to three in Ibn Ishāq) major speakers in the session, three represent different positions with regard to the Anṣār's political aspirations. Their identity, the order of their appearance, and the content of their addresses are significant elements, creating the basic thread of the narrative, which is the demonstrably gradual decline in support for the Anṣār's cause and the shift to the side of the Muhājirūn as the only party worthy of the caliphate. To put it the other way around, implied in the sequence is Quraysh's claim to the *khilāfa*; the propagation of the Emigrant's right to the caliphate is embedded in the very development of the plot. Let us examine this sequence in some detail.

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¹⁶ For biographical references, see Muranyi, "Bericht," 234 n. 2. The account reached Ṭabarī by way of the Kūfan writer Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. 157/745), to whom a *Kitāb al-ṣaḡīfa* is attributed. See Ursula Sezgin, *Abū Mikhnaḥ* (Leiden, 1971), 111 n. 33. Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) was also allegedly involved in the transmission of the account.

The opening speech in the hastily convened assembly, a speech most eloquently representing the Anṣār's claim of the right to rule the Community, is delivered on behalf of Sa'd b. 'Ubāda (Sa'd himself being ill), the chieftain of the Khazraj tribe and one of the Prophet's "apostles (*nuḡabā*)."¹⁷ Sa'd is the man whom most of the Anṣār are planning to choose as Muḥammad's successor. He is of the opinion that his party's exclusive claim to "precedence in religion and merit in Islam," their determination to counter the Messenger's enemies, and their taking up the sword to abase the Arabs, are now, in the wake of Muḥammad's death, all expected to pay dividends. Sa'd's concluding sentence leaves no room for doubt: "[K]eep [control of] this matter [the caliphate] to yourselves, to the exclusion of others, for it is yours and yours alone." That is to say, the sole leader of the *umma* should come from among the Anṣār. Unsurprisingly, Sa'd's audience agrees: "We will not diverge from your opinion, and we shall put you in charge of this business."¹⁷

Contrary to this vote of confidence, however, some of the Anṣār, anticipating Qurashī opposition, express their anxiety at quite an early stage. In the course of the debate now evolving, they raise the idea of dividing the leadership between the two parties, the Helpers and the Emigrants. As it turns out, the unexpected arrival of the triumvirate of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and Abū 'Ubayda indeed justifies the Anṣārī anxiety. For, Abū Bakr, albeit in a conciliatory speech, stresses before the assembly the priority of the Muhājirūn. According to his description, they were singled out by God to affirm the truth and were the first to worship Him and believe in Him and His messenger. They were ready to endure patiently harsh insults from their kin. "We are the leaders, and you are the helpers," Abū Bakr flatly states the only hierarchy possible in his opinion; the Anṣār *must* occupy a secondary status to that of the Muhājirūn.¹⁸ For him, the option of dividing the rule over the Community is nonexistent.

Next, at a considerably lower point on the scale of Anṣārī demand of government, we find Ḥubāb b. al-Mundhir's speech. A Khazrajī leader as well, and a warrior in the Prophet's army, Ḥubāb, unlike Sa'd, does not explicate the grounds for the Anṣār's claim to succession. He certainly retreats from the statement by his Anṣārī predecessor

¹⁷ *History*, vol. X, 1–3 [I, 1838].

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5 [I, 1840–44].

on the exclusive right of his party. The Helpers, according to Ḥubāb, have no claim to run the affairs of the entire Community on their own; their rights should be limited to self-government only. Surely, he depicts the Anṣār as “people of power and wealth, numerous and strong in resistance,” but he does so not in order to stake a claim for an exclusive privilege, as Sa‘d had done, but rather to prescribe a self-imposed obligation, since the people “look only to what you do.” In order to live up to the expectations, it is necessary to demonstrate unity, not to be trapped in a maze of inner dissention. As it turns out, in his call for unity (“[D]o not differ among yourselves, lest your judgment [*ray*] be spoiled and your cause [*amr*] collapse”), Ḥubāb anticipates a situation of fissure within the Anṣārī camp. It should be noted, however, that having decided on a two leaders solution, Ḥubāb is unwilling to retract. Against ‘Umar’s objection that two successors cannot come to an agreement, as well as other arguments against the suggested compromise, Ḥubāb retains his firm opinion: “If they [the Muhājirūn] refuse to give you what you ask for, then drive them out of this country, and seize control of these matters despite them.”¹⁹

With Bashīr b. Sa‘d’s (no immediate relation to Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda) address, the third in number for the Anṣār, which follows an exchange of insults between ‘Umar and Ḥubāb, as well as a brief intervention by Abū ‘Ubayda on behalf of the Muhājirūn, we reach a total relinquishing of any pretensions to government on the part of the Anṣār. Here are Bashīr’s crucial words:

If indeed by God we were the first in merit in battling the polytheists and in precedence in this religion, we would want by [these deeds] only [to gain] our Lord’s pleasure . . . it is not appropriate for us to exalt ourselves over [other] people.²⁰

In a clear antithesis to Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda, Bashīr states that the Anṣār’s privileges should not be “cashed” in the form of political gains. In his opinion, his party should relinquish their claim to the caliphate. Bashīr’s view is theologically grounded: the caliphate is one of the worldly “transitory things” and, therefore, should not be craved. The speaker then goes on to argue that, since Muḥammad was of

¹⁹ Ibid., 5–6 [I, 1840–41].

²⁰ Ibid., 7–8 [I, 1842].

the Quraysh, “his people are more entitled to [hold] authority and more suitable.” He is utterly “persuaded” by the Muhājirūn’s point of view. Not only that, and unlike what we read in the *Šīra*, he even precedes ‘Umar and Abū ‘Ubayda in swearing allegiance to Abū Bakr. To Ḥubāb’s admonition that, in so doing, Bashīr puts himself in opposition to his own kinsmen, and that his act possibly derives from envy of his “cousin” (i.e., Sa’d b. ‘Ubāda), Bashīr replies that he “abhorred contending with a group [Muhājirūn] for *a right that God had given them*.”²¹

Now, it is important to stress that Bashīr’s position is not presented in the narrative as an outcome of any special circumstances. Neither are there decisive arguments that Bashīr is forced to confront and that might divert his view in the unexpected direction that he has taken. In short, there are no obvious reasons in Ṭabarī’s version to explain this Anṣārī’s peculiar position. Bashīr’s conclusion in favor of the Muhājirūn employs the familiar topos of using the opponent’s testimony against his own interest as a means of clinching an argument in favor of the winning party. There is certainly no better way to legitimize a claim than the support it receives from the opposition.²²

After Bashīr’s speech, further arguments by Qurashīs themselves to promote their cause are unnecessary. Bashīr has done the job for them. Furthermore, with Bashīr’s homage to Abū Bakr, the flimsy unity of the Anṣār, a body composed of—as tradition has it—the originally rivals Aws and Khazraj, is supposedly exposed. The Aws express suspicion that all the Khazraj desire is to monopolize power.²³ Precisely at this point, a manifestly pro-Qurashī argument, dressed in the garb of a conventional literary formula, is introduced to tell

²¹ Ibid., 8 [I, 1843], italics added.

²² Notable examples of this topos can be found in alleged Jewish and Christian predictions of the rise of the future Prophet. See, for example, the story of Baḥīrā’s prediction of the future emergence of the Prophet in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s *Šīra*. Early popular material of this kind is briefly discussed in my *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 30, 31.

²³ For this as evidence of the inner division within the body of the Anṣār, which, as the sources tell us, goes back to pre-Islamic times, see Murānī, “Bericht,” 234, 235; Isaac Hasson, “Contributions à l’étude des Aws et des Ḥazraǧ,” *Arabica* 36 (1989): 1–35, esp. 30–31 (I owe this reference to E. Landau-Tasseron). For a problematizing of this “fact” see below.

the reader what he already comprehends: "Thus that which Sa'd b. 'Ubādah and the Khazraj had agreed to do was defeated."²⁴

This somewhat inexplicable sequence, whatever the puzzles it leaves in the reader's mind, is the crucial axis in Ṭabarī's Saqīfa account, while the precise content of the arguments in favor of either of the two parties, the Anṣār or the Muhājirūn, is rendered marginal. No side is made to produce a decisive argument.²⁵ Such an argument is unnecessary to bring the plot to its desired conclusion, which appears pre-determined. Thus, when Sa'd's claim about the Anṣār's "precedence in religion and merit in Islam" is, surprisingly, confirmed almost word for word by no other than Abū Bakr, it has no effect on what follows and leads to no tangible gain for the Medinan Muslims. And when Abū Bakr, in turn, maintains that the Muhājirūn "were the first who worshipped God on earth," he almost repeats Sa'd's words, only this time applying them to the Meccan party. Similarly, when Abū Bakr represents the Emigrants as the Prophet's "friends and kinsmen," he is made to describe his own party in terms not dissimilar to that of Sa'd, who depicts the Anṣār as a squadron in the service of Muḥammad during his life and his favorites up to the moment of his death. In short, Abū Bakr's ascription to the Muhājirūn of the title of "leaders," relegating the Anṣār to the status of "helpers," is not an outcome of an intellectual showdown but takes the form of an arbitrary pronouncement. There is no winner in this ideological debate.

What gives Ṭabarī's account about the Saqīfa affair its dramatic flavor,²⁶ when compared with other accounts of the same event, is the quite enigmatic turn-about from an initial position to its antithesis on the part of the Anṣārī speakers. The claim to an exclusive right of succession is followed by a compromise proposal, only to

²⁴ *History*, vol. X, 8 [I, 1843].

²⁵ This is overlooked by Tayob, "Islamic historiography," 150–51, who sees in Abū Bakr's speech evidence for Ṭabarī's own approval of his election. Tayob fails to note that Ṭabarī's text reproduces Sa'd's parallel claims for the Anṣār.

²⁶ In *E.I.*², s.v. "Saḳīfa," Gerard Lecomte refers to the Saqīfa event as "worthy of the ancient theatre," and analyzes the account in the psd. Ibn Qutayba, *Kūṭab al-imāma wa'l-siyāsa*, which is believed to have originated in the ninth or tenth century A.D. See further idem, "Sur une relation." Lecomte fails to notice that most of this account is also found in the *History*. The latter part of the psd. Ibn Qutayba, pertaining to 'Alī's claim, echoes the text in Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī, as I point out at the end of this chapter.

lead to the total waiving of pretensions. While in Ibn Hishām's account the drama lies in the unexpected end, when 'Umar imposes Abū Bakr's rule upon the Anṣār against their plan to divide the office, the drama in the *History* is located elsewhere, that is, in the debate itself and the change in position. In the end, the allegiance to Abū Bakr, which is the climatic moment in Ibn Hishām's version, is in Ṭabarī's account a sort of anticlimax, an almost natural outcome of the Anṣār's final position. Persuasion, rather than coercion, is the name of the game.

To conclude up to this point, the two accounts, one in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, the other in Ṭabarī's *History*, are about the same event, they share some details, and yet they differ significantly in both particulars and form. I would say that, in the end, they tell us quite different stories. Which, if any, is of historical veracity? Unlike scholars who lean on the "evidence" of reliable authorities (*isnād*), or something else,²⁷ I have no way to answer. I wish, therefore, to choose a different track and consider the Saqīfa episode as not only a factual account but also as a form of an argument. That is to say, what allegedly happened in the Saqīfa is a "proof" in what could be contextualized as a specific and rather important dispute that took place among the early Muslims concerning the right of succession.²⁸

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Focusing on contextualization, it is perhaps a truism, yet an important one, that a text is shaped by a host of unstated desires, beliefs, interests, etc., which arise from pressures that are social (in the broadest sense of the term), namely, *contextual*, and that impress themselves upon the text.²⁹ We need to complement textual analysis, even in its deconstructionist form, by conceptualizing text production as an action in a social world, undertaken by socially (which certainly subsumes politically, etc.) situated authors, and linked to extra-textual

²⁷ Jafri, *Origins*, 30–32.

²⁸ *E.I.*², s.v. "Saqīfa;" Lecomte, "Sur une relation," 175, 180, argues that the Saqīfa event has become an article of faith in Sunnī Islam.

²⁹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 84. On pp. 78–83 Spiegel discusses two cases of the text-context relationship, which are expanded in her *Romancing the Past: Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1993).

realities, with the intention of influencing the thoughts and behavior of other persons. This is why, as William Sewell argues, “even a study focused resolutely—indeed, almost obsessively—on puzzles of textual interpretation cannot avoid, or can only avoid with peril, articulations between texts and the social world.”³⁰

How to define the social world of a given text? For, as LaCapra tells us, “one never has—at least in the case of complex texts—the context.”³¹ A major result of what has been termed the “linguistic turn” in the human sciences has been to collapse text and context “as equally part of one broad vein of discursive production characteristic of a given epoch.”³² Reality is implicated in textual processes, the “real world” is textualized in a variety of ways,³³ thus one must guard off falling into the trap that posits the context as something ontologically different from the text.³⁴

Still, nothing can stop the effort of tracing “the ways in which the historical world is internalized in the text,”³⁵ the “social logic of the text,” as Gabrielle Spiegel has coined it.³⁶ Like Sewell pushing the reading of the Abbé Sieyès’s *What is the Third Estate?* to its limits, in order to demonstrate the unavoidable presence of the social in the text, I propose to look for the context not just in texts but *in the very text it produced*. To follow Spiegel, only by attending to overt and suppressed meanings, of implied and articulated purposes, together with the variety of literary and discursive modes in which they are given

³⁰ William H. Sewell, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and “What Is the Third Estate?”* (Durham, 1994), 36–7, 38.

³¹ Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 57.

³² Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 50.

³³ Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 50. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 76 n. 57, dissociates herself from this conclusion.

³⁴ For some thoughtful remarks on this issue, see Andrew Galloway, “Narratology and the Pursuit of Context: Three Recent Studies of Medieval Narrative,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 21 (1994): 111–26, esp. 117–21, where the author criticizes Spiegel’s contextual assumptions in her otherwise innovative *Romancing the Past: Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1993).

³⁵ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 84.

³⁶ Idem, *Past as Text*, 53.

voice, can we achieve “a genuinely historical understanding of textual production.”³⁷ Attempting to define the context of Ṭabarī’s Saqīfa episode, my focus is on the ideological debate I detect resonating in the text.

Now, this debate has been mainly seen as taking place on the Sunna-Shīʿa axis. Already by the second half of the ninth century A.D., Yaʿqūbī (d. 824/897), a historian with attested Shīʿite inclination, appropriately attributed his Saqīfa account to the *imām* Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. That account is certainly a counterpart to the reports detailed above. On the one hand, it suppresses Qurashī claims to leadership and pursues strictly Hāshimite, though not strictly ʿAlid, precedence. On the other hand, the Anṣār’s claim is rendered marginal.³⁸ For Yaʿqūbī, the Muhājirūn-Anṣār dispute is not a real issue.

Yet, it will not be superfluous to note in this regard that, as we have briefly seen above, such a dispute between the Emigrants and the Helpers is indeed the backdrop to Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s version. Accordingly, ʿUmar describes his recollection of “what really happened” in the assembly, in order to justify Abū Bakr’s election against an opposition that still exists a dozen years after the event had already been concluded. Whatever the specific details of the context in which accounts of the Saqīfa were produced, there is a general sense of a milieu in which Abū Bakr’s nomination is yet debated, not in the way we are acquainted with as coming from the camp of the Shīʿa, but rather the one supporting an Anṣārī claim.

If, then, our emphasis shifts from the question of “truth” (or, “what are the facts?”) to that of an ideological intent of the Saqīfa report, there can be no doubt that, in terms of defending Abū Bakr’s right to the caliphate, Ṭabarī’s account performs the job more effectively than Ibn Hishām’s. The latter is inferior in terms of reproducing (or, is it rather producing?) the debate between the contending parties. No less important, the need of the *Sīra* to conclude the story with an act of violence, by which Abū Bakr was elevated to office, can be seen as both an outcome and a symptom of the ideological aspect (actually, ideological weakness) of the contention: the deadlock requires some form of a showdown, force will have the last say.

³⁷ Ibidem, 54–5. For Sieys see n. 30 above.

³⁸ Tayob, “Islamic Historiography,” 133–5, 151–2. The suggestion to see also in Masʿūdī’s report some ʿAlid leanings (136–7) seems less persuasive.

In Contradistinction, Ṭabarī's account, not without its touch of the aesthetics of storytelling, unfolds a more complex plot that leads to a "natural" solution and thus the *bayʿa* can forego violent means. It is rationality that, supposedly, prevails.

Interestingly enough, once the dispute is over, Ṭabarī's Saqīfa may convey the image that things were not actually so grave. In fact, in a recent study, Tayob points out one possible tactic at play, which is to show the dispute as no more than a result of Saʿd b. ʿUbāda's personal ambition, with no genuine support on the part of the Anṣār as a whole. The projected amicable relationship between the two parties, the Emigrants and the Helpers, appears to propagate the general Sunnī view that all the parties involved lived up to the moral and ethical demands of their faith. Whether this was Ṭabarī's intention—there seems ample room for debate—at least he was able to persuade one modern reader (Tayob, that is) that this was the case.³⁹ And a late chronicler like Ibn Kathīr, possibly trying to benefit from frail human memory, strove to put on a poker face and declare that no tension or conflict arose after the death of the Prophet.⁴⁰

Ideology *cum* history being the interpretation here suggested, authorial production or narrator's intention, rather than the real facts, become the main focus for consideration; narrator's intention as Sternberg has it, not in the antiquated sense of a psychological state of mind that is consciously (or unconsciously) rendered in words. As Sternberg defines it, intention in this case is "a shorthand for the structure of meaning and effect supported by the conventions that the text appeals to or devises: for the sense that the language makes in terms of the communicative context as a whole."⁴¹ Or, as LaCapra puts it, "an intention is a kind of proleptic reading or interpretation of a text . . . for it is rarely a transcription of what the author meant to say at the 'original' time of writing."⁴²

Ṭabarī's account, in the structure it develops, exemplifies—what Sternberg has argued of biblical narrative in general—the "transformation of ideological discourse into art of the highest order, with-

³⁹ Ibid., 161, 162, 166.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁴¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 9.

⁴² Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 58.

out compromising either but enriching both.”⁴³ At play is the shaping of history by its meeting with ideology and aesthetics, all three joining to generate a strategy of telling that casts reading as a drama. They merge into a single poetics, their interests and formations so coalescing that they can hardly be told apart in the finished product.

How the two accounts, in the *Sīra* and the *History*, respectively, stand diachronically to one another is a moot point. One possibility is that Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s, the relatively simpler of the two, is also the earlier one.⁴⁴ In the light of such hypothetical chronology, this account could have been deemed at some point insufficient to convey the rights of the Qurashī claim. A clearer (*historicized*) argument, hence a more complex plot, were required to buttress it. And these were indeed achieved in the *History*.

The shift to authorial intention is, perhaps, also a way out of the aforementioned contradictions that transpire between significant elements in the different versions. In the light of what has been argued above, it is possible to approach the variations in detail in a way different from a straightforward factual concern that, to reach a solution, is bound either to gloss over differences, or make preferences on the basis of guesswork or sheer idiosyncrasy. When the emphasis shifts to the argumentative aspect, to possible authorial intent, contradictions of facts—if, indeed, facts they are—do not oblige one to decide which are the true ones when he is unable to do so. Rather, a specific element in one plot may be judged according to the function it serves. And thus, Sa’d b. ‘Ubadā’s oath of allegiance to Abū Bakr, featuring in one version, may be seen as the narrator’s need to emphasize Sa’d’s surrender in order to provide a conclusive end to the episode. In contradistinction, the lack of Sa’d’s compromise in another version can be seen as serving the purpose of preserving tension; or, to put it differently, the author there possibly deemed it unnecessary to introduce Sa’d’s humiliation in order for the account to achieve its purpose. Similarly, the narrator of Ṭabarī’s Saqīfa version considered it appropriate to provide an elaborate text of Abū Bakr’s coronation speech, which is a concise version of the “official” story of the founding of the Community, in

⁴³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 98.

⁴⁴ Madelung, *Succession*, 28, asserts that this is indeed the case. He is even able to tell that Ṭabarī’s account was composed in the late Umayyad age.

other words: Islamic salvation history in a nutshell.⁴⁵ To approach contradictions this way may also save us from what could be an almost automatic fall into a propagandistic trap set by Muslim orthodoxy. Thus, instead of looking at the inner division within the Anṣār on the issue of the succession, along Aws-Khazraj lines, as perpetuating their inner division in pre-Islamic time,⁴⁶ the detail of the division may be seen to function as an additional argument against the Anṣār, hence, an ideological element.

One final note on the foregoing analysis may be in order. A comparison of Ṭabarī's version with the (later?)⁴⁷ version reproduced by Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī (d. ca. 314/926?) reveals that in the *History* we do not necessarily reach the final elaboration on the Saqīfa report. Although not essentially different, Ibn A'tham's version provides additional, on occasion indeed trivial, details that add to its sense of "authenticity" and persuasiveness. To give one example, Bashīr b. Sa'd, the third Anṣārī speaker, who, it should be remembered, tips the balance in favor of Abū Bakr's appointment, is not only, as in Ṭabarī, the first one to confer the *bay'a* on the elected caliph. He also makes a declaration about his intent.⁴⁸ It is also noteworthy that Ibn A'tham concludes with a unique treatment of 'Alī's merits as a candidate to the caliphate, a treatment that, obviously, contradicts the gist of most of the report: that Abū Bakr is the right successor. It is likely that such a Shī'ite point of view⁴⁹ is to be explained by Ibn A'tham's reliance in his report on the Shī'ite author Minqarī, and thus resulting in inner contradiction.⁵⁰ However, the issue need not concern us here.

⁴⁵ For Wansbrough's discussion of this concept, see *Sectarian Milieu*, 147–9.

⁴⁶ See above and note 23.

⁴⁷ Madelung, *Succession*, 28, n. 1.

⁴⁸ Muranyi, "Bericht," 244.

⁴⁹ See also *ibid.*, 257.

⁵⁰ For this reliance see *ibid.*, 237.