A handful of red earth: dreams of rulers in Tabari's history of prophets and kings

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Tabari’s Tārīkh: History, Chronology, or Catalogue?

Many modern readers have expressed their feeling that Tabari’s Tārīkh is ‘strange’, because it does not meet our expectations of what constitutes a story or a historiographical text. Reviewers of the English translation expressed this estrangement in no uncertain terms, admitting that they are ‘bewildered’, ‘exasperated’, even ‘infuriated’ by Tabari’s style. One speaks of the ‘sometimes rather bewildering approach of al-Tabari’s work—quite different not only from modern historiography but from the narrative manner of Herodotus and Thucydides that sets the style for historical writing in the West.’¹ M.G. Carter mentions Tabari’s ‘habit of meticulously, not to say obtrusively providing alternative versions of events at the apparent cost of destroying narrative clarity and undermining psychological plausibility’.²

A third reviewer develops on Tabari’s

...exasperating paratactical method. He strings together without comment or explanation anecdotal material ranging in quality from convincing comments about the socioeconomic considerations that went into selecting the site for Baghdad to ridiculous fables about the magic mirror that enabled al-Mansur to discern friend from foe. The reports are often so repetitive, so disjointed, so full of cryptic comments, so apparently pointless as to leave the most diligent reader utterly bewildered.’

The novelist and literary critic Robert Irwin, finally, counts himself among ‘those who have read al-Ṭabarî and have been infuriated by the man’s noncommittal presentation of variant accounts of past events’.4

Such an approach is largely negative, for it only defines what Tabari’s text is not: the Tārikh does not resemble modern historiography or the works of Herodotus and Thucydides; Tabari destroys narrative clarity, undermines psychological plausibility, his work is without comment or explanation, disjointed and pointless. Very few scholars have made the next step to a more positive approach: if the Tārikh does not resemble historiographical narrative as we know it, what does it resemble?

In this chapter, I will subject Tabari’s text to a thorough narratological analysis and argue that the Tārikh has the structure of a catalogue. Such a merely descriptive approach, however, is not enough. The third step is to provide a satisfactory answer to the question why Tabari chose to give his text such a format.

A number of scholars have tried to explain the Tārikh’s strange format by suggesting that Tabari was restricted by various conventions of his day.5 While knowledge of the conventions of his time makes Tabari’s behaviour seem slightly less strange, by itself this is still a negative approach. It assumes that Tabari was not able to give his text the form of a ‘fully developed’ historical narrative because he was too deeply imbued by the conservative taboos of his society and lacked the imaginative power and genius to break free from them.

For a long time the author of the Tārikh was seen as an unimaginative compiler of the works of others, who did not himself hold an opinion, or at least refrained from expressing it in ant for whatsoever. Since the bewilderment expressed by the reviewers in the 1990’s, most schol-

5 For example Shoshan, pp. 111-3.
ars have come to agree during the last decade that Tabari ‘in some indirect way’ does state his preference for one account of events over others and thereby indirectly offers his judgement on the characters and their actions.\(^6\) This view has also helped in rendering Tabari a little less strange in our eyes: It assumes that, after all, Tabari did set out to do what we expect him to do, and at least \emph{tried} to tell a story. This view fails, however, to fully explain Tabari’s method, for it does not explain why Tabari, if he did want to narrate, did not do so openly. Merely pointing here to the conventions of his time is again a negative approach, for it assumes that Tabari narrated indirectly because he did not dare completely to cast off the conventions that hampered him, that wanted to narrate, but did not dare to confront his public openly. In this context it is argued for example that Tabari hid his opinions out of fear he might get stoned by an angry mob of Ḥanbalites.\(^7\) Even El-Hibri, for whom \emph{indirect} narrative is such an essential feature of his reappraisal of accounts of Abbasid history found in the works of Tabari and others, fails to come up with a complete explanation why authors like Tabari did not chose to narrate openly.

In this chapter I will synthesize in a single overview the various literary and epistemological conventions of Tabari’s day, as suggested by a number of modern scholars, and add some suggestions of my own. More importantly, I will take a radical but ultimately obvious step, which is not even fully taken by Shoshan in his monograph on the poetics of the \emph{Tārīkh}. I will not approach Tabari as a passive victim to the conventions of his day, but argue that Tabari deliberately chose to adhere to these conventions for rhetorical effect. So not only will I analyse what the \emph{Tārīkh} resembles if it does not resemble a story, I will also analyse why Tabari chose to give it this form, and why he chose to narrate indirectly. I will argue that the format of the \emph{Tārīkh} is not an anomaly, but its strength.

In this chapter, I will make the following argument:

1. Tabari’s \emph{Tārīkh} has the outward appearance of a catalogue of \emph{akhbār};


\(^7\) Hodgson, \emph{Venture}, I, p. 352-3; Tayob, p. 205; but see Shoshan’s argument that Tabari’s conflict with the Ḥanbalites came too late to effect the formation of the \emph{Tārīkh}: Shoshan p. 112. On Tabari and the Ḥanbalites see also Rosenthal, \emph{General Introduction}, pp. 69-78.
2. Tabari has given his work the format of a catalogue to make it appear that he is not a storyteller but merely a reliable transmitter of reports;
3. These appearances, however, are deceptive. By way of strategies such as motif repetition, an implicit story is told;
4. Dreams are particularly well suited for such implicit storytelling.

THE MEANING OF THE TERM ‘ṬĀRĪKH’ IN THE TITLES OF TABARI’S TEXT

We will begin our structural analysis of Tabari’s text with an analysis of some of the titles that have been given to the work, its editions, and the English translation.

Tabari himself titled his work Mukhtaṣar ṭārīkh al-rusul wa-mulūk (Abridged ṭārīkh of prophets and kings) or Mukhtaṣar ṭārīkh al-rusul wa-mulūk wa-l-khulafa’ (Abridged ṭārīkh of prophets, kings and caliphs). He probably called his voluminous text ‘abridged’ to indicate that its subject matter, the men and women who ruled the world since Creation, ideally required an even longer treatment.⁸ To later generations, the book became simply known as ‘The Ṭārīkh’, probably for two reasons. It was seen to form a pair with another text that made Tabari famous, his exegesis of the Koran, which was simply known as ‘The Ṭafsīr’ (The Exegesis). Second and more important, his work on the past was called The Ṭārīkh because it was considered the text par excellence in its genre, that replaced all previous efforts in this field and set the standards for all later historians.⁹

The subject matter of the work is clear. As the last parts of Tabari’s titles indicate, it is about prophets, kings and caliphs, i.e. about the messengers sent by God to man, as well as about worldly rulers. The form of the text is less evident, for what ṭārīkh actually means in this context is unclear. Literally, the Arabic ṭārīkh means ‘time’ (compare to Greek khronos) or ‘dating; determination of the date’ (from the verb arrakha) and hence ‘chronology’. The term ṭārīkh, however, is also translated as ‘history’ in the sense of ‘story about events that took place in the past’, from the Greek verb hístoreo in its meaning ‘to tell a story’.¹⁰ It is this translation of ‘History’ which is commonly used to render the title of Tabari’s text. However, whether it is fitting to translate the word ṭārīkh

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⁹ Rosenthal, pp. 130-1.
in this title as ‘history’ remains to be seen. As we have stated in the introduction to this thesis, Tabari’s text raises a number of questions: does he tell a story about past events, using storytelling techniques to explain what caused them and how they influenced other events? Did he use storytelling techniques to captivate and move his readers by adorning his presentation of past events with suspense and tragedy? Or does he only provide a dry list of events or a dry catalogue of eyewitness reports without commentary?

**al-Tārīkh = The Chronology**

As will be argued below, Tabari’s *Tārīkh* has the outward appearance of a list of events, which are presented in a rigid chronological order. In this sense, *al-Tārīkh* can be translated as ‘The Chronology’, meaning a chronological list of rulers and of the events that took place during their reign. Such a translation is supported by a passage in the beginning of Tabari’s work, where his primary narrator announces that he will mention rulers ‘in conjunction with their time’ and state the length of their lives and the time of their deaths:

> In this book of mine, I shall mention whatever information (khābr) has reached us about kings throughout the ages...There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or caliphs established in the caliphal succession...Every one of them whom I shall mention in this book of mine will be mentioned in conjunction with his time but (only) summaries of the events of his day and age will be added...This will be combined with references to the length of their natural life and the time of their death.\(^{11}\)

In other passages, the term *tārīkh* is used as a synonym of *azmān*, ‘times’ and *ayyām*, ‘days’, which implies that we should render *tārīkh* as ‘dates’, ‘chronology’.

> *naqṣūdū bi-kitābinā hādhā...mā dhakarnā min taʿrīkh al-mulūk al-māṣīn wa-jumal min akhbārihim wa-azmān al-rusul wa-l-ʿanbiyāʾ wa-maʿqūdīr aʿmarīhim wa-ayyām al-khulūfī al-sāliḥīn wa-baʿd siyarīhim*

In this book of ours we...intend to present the *taʿrīkh* of past kings and summaries of the reports about them; the *times* of the messengers and prophets and the spans of their lives; as well as the *days* of the early caliphs and some of their biographies.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\) Tab. 1, 5.

\(^{12}\) Tab. 1, 6, my translation.
Wa-kāna al-qaradā fi kitābīnā hādhā dhikr mā qad bayyānā annānā dhākirīhā min ta’rīkh al-mulūk...wa-azmān al-rasul wa-l-anbiyā’

The stated purpose of this book of ours is to mention the ta’rīkh of kings...as well as the times of the prophets and the messengers.\(^\text{11}\)

In this sense of tā’rīkh as ‘chronology’, the only objective of Tabari’s work was to establish in what order events succeeded each other and, for the part dealing with events since the hijra, to establish in exactly what year they took place. In such a chronological list, there is no place for commentary or authorial interpretation of these events.

al-Tārīkh = The (Chronologically Arranged) Catalogue

Another way to look at Tabari’s Tārīkh is to see it as compendium of quotations from the works of earlier authors. In this sense, the objective of Tabari was to provide an anthology that was both comprehensive and searchable: to collect all known reliable akhbār into one text and to make this huge collection searchable by way of a rigid system of classification. Such a catalogue would be used in the same way that we use a phone book: it was not to be read from cover to cover but each time to be consulted to easily locate the correct reading of a single item in the collection.

In this sense, we can translate al-Tārīkh as ‘The (chronologically arranged) Catalogue’, as the word catalogue carries the meanings of comprehensiveness and searchability, and at the same time implies absence of interpretation or mutual comparison of the elements. To approach Tabari’s work as a catalogue is a novel reading that has not yet been proposed elsewhere in the scholarly literature.\(^\text{14}\) However, the reading of Tabari’s title as a ‘chronologically arranged catalogue of akhbār’ is supported by descriptions of Tabari’s work by pre-modern Arabic readers. The title of a 16th-century copy of Tabari’s work stresses that fact that this book deals not only with kings and prophets but also with the akhbār about them:

\[\text{Tārīkh al-mulūk wa-akhbārhum wa-mawālid al-rasul wa-anbā’hum}\]

Tārīkh of kings and reports about them and birthdates of prophets and accounts about them\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{11}\) Tab. I, 78.

\(^{14}\) But see Keegan, p. 15 & p. 19.

\(^{15}\) Tabari, al-juz’ al-thānî min Tārīkh al-mulūk wa-akhbārīhim wa-mawālid al-rasul wa-anbā’ihim, National Library of the Czech Republic, XVIII G 29, 1592 AD/1001 AH, fols. 261r.
Here, anbā’uhum, ‘accounts about them’, is used as a parallel or synonym to akhbārūhum, ‘reports about them.’ Likewise, tārikh is used as a synonym to mawālid, ‘birthdates’, and should therefore not be translated as ‘history; but rather as ‘dates, chronology’. One of Tabari’s students also stresses the fact that his master’s work deals with akhbār and calls the text:

Tārikh al-rusul wa-l-mulāk wa-akhbārūhum wa-man kāna fī zaman kull wāḥid minhum
Tārikh of prophets and kings and reports about them and those who lived in the time of each one of them.

In this case, we could even vocalize tārikhu l-rusuli wa-l-mulākī wa-akhbārīhim and conclude that tārikhu forms a genitive construction not only with al-rusuli and al-mulākī but also with akhbārīhim. Tārikhu...akhbārīhim can not mean ‘a history...of reports about them’, for a ‘history of reports’ doesn’t make sense. Tārikhu...akhbārīhim could, however, mean: ‘a chronology...of reports about them’, i.e. ‘a catalogue of akhbār arranged in chronological order’.

As we shall see below, the ambiguity of the term Tārikh (History, Chronology, or Catalogue) is indicative of the many layers of Tabari’s text: this work has the form of a chronological list of rulers, of a dry list of events without commentary, as well as that of a catalogue of quotations, and on top of that it also contains elements of a story.

De Goeje’s Leiden Edition

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Tabari’s Tārikh was edited in Leiden by an international team of scholars, headed by the Dutch Orientalist Michiel Jan de Goeje. These editors established their final text on the basis of a large number of manuscripts from different countries, none of which carried the complete text of Tabari’s work. As the Arabic title for their edition they chose Tārikh al-rusul wa-l-mulāk, and as Latin title Annales quos scriptis Abu Djafar Mohammed Ibn Djarir At-Tabari.17


16 Rosenthal, General Introduction, p. 131. Rosenthal translates the title as ‘History of the messengers and kings and their historical record and all those who lived in the time of each one of them.’

(‘Annals’ suggest the equivalent of a diary in which events are recorded shortly after they have taken place, in this case not every day but every year. Although Tabari might have wanted to raise such a suggestion of reliable year-to-year reportage among his readers, he did not, in fact, record events shortly after they took place; instead, he collected reports about events from several centuries ago.)

The Leiden team chose to edit the Annales in three parts or ‘series’. The first series ends with the death of the last Râshidûn caliph in the year 40 H. The second series treats the period of Umayyad rule, until the end of the year 130, when the Umayyad forces were beaten by the Abbasid rebels in Khurasan, two years before the first Abbasid became caliph in 132 H. The third series treats the Abbasid period up to 302 H., eight years before Tabari’s death in 310 H. Included at the end of this third series is a list of biographies of the Prophet’s Companions and Successors and transmitters of hadith, which Tabari wrote as a supplement to his Târikh.

Ibrâhîm’s Cairo Edition

In the years 1960-69 the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Abû al-Faḍl Ibrâhîm published a new edition of Tabari’s Târikh, based on a comparison between De Goeje’s Annales and additional manuscripts from Istanbul that had not been available to the Leiden Orientalists. Ibrâhîm titled his edition Târikh al-Ṭabarî: Târikh al-rusul wa-l-mulûk.18 Ibrâhîm’s new edition didn’t differ much from De Goeje’s text, with one important exception: the Egyptian editor changed the lay-out of the Leiden edition by turning some phrases of running text into extra headings, and adding headings of his own invention which he put between square brackets. This allows the modern reader easier reference, but also breaks up the structure of the entries as they are found in the Leiden edition (more on these entries below).

The English Translation

Between 1985 and 1999, the *Tārīkh* was translated into English as *The History of al-Ṭabarî: An Annotated Translation*.\(^{19}\) The 39 volumes were translated by different scholars, who based their work on a combined reading of the Cairo and the Leiden editions. The translators reproduced all the headings from the Cairo edition, but omitted Ibrāhīm’s square brackets, and added headings of their own.\(^{20}\) All these headings were included in the tables of contents which are found at the beginning of each volume of the translation. This translation, while being an invaluable research tool, has two drawbacks. A single text has been chopped up into 39 individual books, and the headings that were added distort our view of the structure of the Arabic original. One of the reviewers comments:

The process of the translation has completely restructured the narrative internally by subjecting it to Western sentence and paragraph conventions which on many occasions do not seem to this reviewer to reflect the only possible cohesion between the ideas in the text.\(^{21}\)

Both Ibrāhīm and the English translators have added the original pagination of De Goeje’s edition in the margin of their works. When I refer to a passage from Tabari’s *Tārīkh*, I only give the series and page numbers of the Leiden edition, even if I quote from the translation. To easily locate the correct volume of the translation in which these quotes can be found, Table 1 has been devised, which shows the correspondence between the three series of the Leiden edition and the 39 volumes of the English translation.

**The Structure of the Tārīkh: A Narratological Analysis**

The *Tārīkh* can be divided into two parts that have a narratologically different structure. The first part deals with the prophets that preceded Muhammad, as well as the kings that ruled the world to just before the *hijra*, when Muhammad migrated to Medina and became the first Islamic ruler. This part occupies one sixth of the total text.\(^{22}\) The second

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\(^{20}\) See for example Tab. III, 734.

\(^{21}\) Carter, p. 138.

\(^{22}\) 1256 out of a total of 7787 pages of De Goeje’s edition—if we do not count the biographical supplement—corresponding to volumes i-VI of the translation.
part, that starts with the beginning of the hijra calendar, deals with the Islamic rulers and the events that took place during their reigns: Muhammad’s time as head of the umma and the reigns of his successors the caliphs: the Râshidîn, the Umayyads and the Abbasids. Whereas the first part about the pre-Islamic rulers consists of more or less continuous narrative, the second, Islamic part deals with events according to a rigid year-by-year treatment. It is this part which can be said to have the form of a catalogue, and it is this part which we will now subject to a structural analysis.

*The Author and His Narrators*

In the introduction to his *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, that set out to ‘deconstruct’ Tabari’s Târikh, Boaz Shoshan gives a very short analysis of the structure of Tabari’s work. He discerns three types of text in the Islamic section: ‘short reports no longer than a few lines, called khabar in Arabic; medium-sized reports of a few dozen lines; and longer reports that sometimes transcend the boundaries of a particular year, and which could be called “chapters”.*

As Shoshan’s threepartite division is wildly incorrect and as the English translation has distorted our view of the original layout of Tabari’s text, we will here provide a more detailed analysis of its structure. Such an analysis will enable us to progress beyond the statement that the Târikh does not look like the historiography we are used to, and help us to formulate what it does look like.

As this will be a narratological analysis, my primary interest is in the narrators of the different types of text. If one looks at the narrators figuring in the Islamic part, one sees that the text can be divided into two types: words uttered by the primary narrator of the Târikh; and words spoken by other narrators who are quoted by this primary narrator (secondary narrators).

As was explained in chapter one, readers should not forget that all narrators in a text, both primary and secondary, are voices orchestrated by the author, puppets that obey to his strings, mouthpieces that he can use to his liking. The primary narrator is not automatically identical with the author, but one of his creations, that might voice the author’s opinions but doesn’t necessarily have to. The secondary narrators can also be considered as the author’s creations: they might voice the opinions of other writers, but they might just as well be used by the author

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23 Shoshan, pp. xxix-xxx.
as a way to voice his own opinions indirectly. Words voiced by secondary narrators might in fact have been invented by the author, while words voiced by the primary narrator might in fact have been copied from the works of earlier authors.

As Tabari’s oral informants are long dead and as the great majority of his written sources have not been preserved, we will never be able to know for sure whether the words put in the mouth of the Tārīkh’s primary narrator are actually Tabari’s own words. Maybe some of the words of the primary narrator were slavishly copied from earlier chronicles. Likewise, we do not know whether Tabari, when citing secondary narrators, quoted his sources verbatim, or whether, and to what extent, Tabari rewrote the material he claims to transmit from earlier authorities. We are not even sure whether Tabari did not invent completely new material, which he might have put in the mouth of secondary narrators to express his opinion indirectly.

The words spoken by the secondary narrators make up short narratives, spanning a couple of lines up to a maximum of around three pages. Whatever their length, the term khabar (pl. akhbār) should refer to these narratives put in the mouth of secondary narrators. These akhbār often have the form of eyewitness accounts; their narrators were witnesses to the events they speak about, sometimes even characters who caused or underwent these events. In their reports, these narrators often quote characters using direct speech, something which is never done by the primary narrator. ‘It is one of the conventions of khabar narrative that the reportage of direct speech requires a witness present at the scene to hear it.’

A khabar consists of an isnād (a chain of transmitters) followed by a matn (the narrative text uttered by the last person in the chain). In narratological terms, when presenting a khabar, the primary narrator quotes a secondary narrator (the first person in the isnād), who in turn quotes a tertiary narrator etc., until the last link in the isnād is reached, who is often an eyewitness or participant of the events dealt with in the matn. Although the last person in the isnād might officially be a narrator of much higher levels, I will, for clarity’s sake, refer to all these transmitters in the isnād as secondary narrators, to distinguish them from the Tārīkh’s primary narrator.

What follows below in smaller font is a detailed, technical analysis of the structure of one ‘year chapter’ from the Tārīkh’s annalistic, Islamic section, based on the example of the year 193 H.

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Year Chapters and Their Entries

The Islamic part of the Tārīkh is made up of ‘year chapters’, that list a number of events which took place during a particular year. In Table II we see an example of such a chapter, dealing with the year 193 H. Among the events that took place during this year was the death of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, an event which will be dealt with in more detail in chapter five of this thesis.25

Every year chapter starts with an introductory formula: ‘Then the year x began’, followed by a heading: ‘Mentioning of (the reportage on) the events that took place during it’ Dhikr (al-khabr ‘an) mā kāna fīhā min al-ahdāth. Under this heading, Tabari’s primary narrator presents a list of events that happened during that particular year, which we shall call the ‘key events.’ To each key event an entry has been devoted. In Table II, I have given each entry a code. 193.7, for example, refers to the seventh entry of year chapter 193. The year 193 contains twelve of such entries. Each entry begins with the words ‘In this year... (wa-fī hādīhi al-sana...). In De Goeje’s edition a line is drawn above this introductory formula to make it stand out from the rest of the text and enable readers to quickly locate the beginning of a new entry. Key events can be very simple, and merely state: ‘In this year, so-and-so died/rebelled/was appointed’ (entries 1, 2, 5 and 10).

In some cases, the key event of an entry is actually made up of a short series of related events, caused or undergone by the same actors, in fact constituting a small story (entries 4, 7, 8 and 9). For simplicity’s sake, both a single event and a short series of events presented by the primary narrator are referred to as the key event of an entry.

Some entries contain akhbār. In this case the primary narrator quotes a secondary narrator who tells a story that touches in some way upon the entry’s key event. Some of these secondary narrators are mentioned by name, others remain anonymous, when it is simply stated: ‘It has been mentioned that...’. In Table II, these akhbār have also been given a code. 193.5.2, for example, refers to the second khabar of the fifth entry of year chapter 193. As we can see, the number of such reports contained in a single entry varies greatly, from not a single khabar to more than thirty, such as in entry 193.5 on the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd.

If we only list the words spoken by the primary narrator as is done in Table II, the fifty-nine pages that are occupied by year chapter 193 in the English translation easily fit on just two pages. In other words, the akhbār occupy much more space than the key events. Therefore, the large majority of Tabari’s Tārīkh consists not of primary narrator speech, but of words put in the mouth of others. This is what gives rise to the impression ‘that Arabic historical writing

25 193 H. corresponds to October 25, 808–October 14, 809 AD.
contains more direct speech than is found in the literature of any other civilization.\(^{26}\)

In some entries with a large number of akhbār, such as 193.5 and 193.7, headings are used to divide these akhbār among subsections that share a sub-topic. These are called here ‘internal entry headings’ and mostly begin with the words ‘Mentioning of the reportage on...’ (Dhikr al-khabr ‘an...). In contrast to the headings added by Ibrāhīm and by the English translators, the headings in De Goeje’s edition are only found within an entry. In other words, in the Leiden text headings are used to highlight the internal structure of a single entry, that is, to title or subdivide the akhbār section of that entry. Headings are not used to name an entire entry or to combine different entries under one thematic heading, with the exception of the headings that introduce a new year or the reign of a new caliph (on the latter see below).

**Obituary Entries and Regnal Chapters**

The particular entry that deals with the death of a caliph not only lists akhbār which deal with the specific event of the death itself, but is also used to classify material which could not be put in other entries, such as general statistics regarding the caliph’s reign, and akhbār about general aspects of the caliph’s behaviour during his life. These entries could be called ‘obituary entries’. For example, the entry on the death of caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (193.5) has the following structure. After Harun’s death has been dealt with in nine akhbār, the entry changes its character. Firstly, under the heading Dhikr wilāt al-ansār fī ayyām Hārūn al-Rashīd, the primary narrator presents a list of the governors over the provincial capitals during Hārūn’s reign. Then, under the heading ‘Mentioning of some biographical akhbār about al-Rashīd’ (Dhikr ba’d siyar al-Rashīd), he quotes sixteen akhbār that do not deal with Hārūn’s death but with various aspects of his behaviour during his life. Then the primary narrator presents a list of Hārūn’s wives, sons and daughters, which is followed by seven other akhbār concerning the caliph’s general behaviour. One could say that, after those akhbār are listed which deal with the specific event of the death itself, the entry changes from an annalistic entry into an entry from a biographical dictionary. In these works, each entry deals with the life of an individual, as opposed to annals where each entry deals with a single event.\(^{27}\)

After each obituary entry, De Goeje’s text starts with a new heading which has the form Khilāfat...’The Caliphate of...’ In other words, after the last entry of the life of the previous caliph, a new reign begins. This division of Tabari’s Tārīkh into subsequent caliphal reigns can be described as a secondary structuring principle which coexists with the division according to years.\(^{28}\)

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26 Carter, p. 140.


28 On ‘regnal chapters’ see also Robinson, Islamic Historiography, p. 75.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>entry code</th>
<th>words uttered by the primary narrator</th>
<th>page</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>193</td>
<td>Then the year 193 began.</td>
<td>733</td>
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<tr>
<td>193.1</td>
<td>Mentioning of the reportage on the events that took place during it</td>
<td>733</td>
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<td>Among these events was the death of al- Faḍl b. Yahyā b. Khālid al-Barmak</td>
<td>733</td>
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<td>in prison at al-Raqqa in the month of Muḥarram.</td>
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<td>193.1.1 According to what has been mentioned (...) he had previously been</td>
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<td></td>
<td>wont to say, “I don’t want al-Rashīd to die (before me),” and people</td>
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<td>used to say to him in reply, “Don’t you want God to grant you</td>
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<td>deliverance (i.e. release from existence in prison)?” But he would answer,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My fate is linked with his fate.” (…) He died (…) five</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>months before al-Rashīd’s own death (…)</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.2</td>
<td>In this year, Sa’īd al- Ṭabarī, known as al-Jawharī, died.</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.3</td>
<td>In this year, Hārūn reached Jurfān in the month of Ṣafar, and there met</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>him in Jurfān the treasures of ʿAlī b. Ṣūsā, conveyed on the backs of</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fifteen hundred camels.</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.4</td>
<td>In this year, there took place a battle campaign between Harthama and</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rāfī’s partisans, in the course of which Harthama conquered Bukhārā and</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>took prisoner Rāfī’s brother Bashīr b. al-Layth. He then sent the latter to</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>al-Rashīd at Tūs.</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.4.1 It has been mentioned from Ibn Jāmī’ al-Marwazi, from his father,</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that he said, “I was one of those who brought Rāfī’s brother to al-Rashīd.”</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Bashīr went into al-Rashīd’s presence, when the caliph was lying on a bed,</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm (…)</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5</td>
<td>In this year, Hārūn al-Rashīd died.</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he died</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.1 It has been mentioned from Jibril b. Bukhtishū that he said: “I was</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with al-Rashīd in al-Raqqa, and I used to be the first to come in to him</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>each morning, so that I might learn how he had passed the night (…)</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.2 It has been mentioned by a certain authority that Jibril b. Bukhtishū</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>had made a mistake regarding al-Rashīd’s illness in some treatment he</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prescribed for him which was, in fact, the cause of his death. Al-Rashīd</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>had therefore decided, the night in which he died, to put Jibril to death</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and have his limbs dismembered just as he had Rāfī’s brother dismembered (…)</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.3</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>… [..]</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.9</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of the governorship over the provincial capitals during the</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>days of Hārūn al-Rashīd</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[a list of governors over major cities]</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.10</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.26</td>
<td>756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of the free wives of al-Rashīd that were endowed with</td>
<td>756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>substantial dowries</td>
<td>756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[a list of wives, followed by a list of children]</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>… [..]</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.5.33</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The caliphate of al-Amīn</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>193.6 In this year, allegiance was sworn to Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Hārūn as</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>caliph at the camp of al-Rashīd. ’Abdallāh b. Hārūn (al-Ma’mūn) was in</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marw at the time.</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.6.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table II (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>entry code</th>
<th>words uttered by the primary narrator (in a smaller font: akhbār put in the mouth of secondary narrators)</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>193.7</td>
<td>In this year, the discord between al-Amīn Muḥammad and his brother al- Ma‘mūn began. Each of them determined to oppose the other in what their father, Hārūn, had enjoined them to carry out in the document that we have mentioned that he drew up as an obligation for them and between them. Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of the discord between them 193.7.1 According to Abū Ja‘fār (...) [...] 193.7.6</td>
<td>765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.8</td>
<td>In this year, Umm Ja‘far left al-Raqqa in the month of Sha‘bān, taking all the treasures and other things she had there. Her son, Muḥammad al-Amīn, met her at al-Anbār with all the dignitaries who had been in Baghdad. Al-Ma‘mūn established himself in charge of that to which he had been appointed—that is, the governorship of Khurāsān and its districts as far as al-Rayy. He wrote to al-Amīn and sent him many gifts. Al-Ma‘mūn’s letters to Muhammad arrived one after the other, extolling the latter’s greatness, and accompanied by gifts of Khurāsānian rarities—furniture, vessels, musk, beasts, and weapons.</td>
<td>774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.9</td>
<td>In this year, Harthama entered the wall of Samarqand. Rāfī took refuge in the inner city and sent a message to the Turks, who came to him. Harthama was caught between Rāfī and the Turks, but the Turks withdrew, and Rāfī grew weaker.</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.10</td>
<td>In this year, Nicephorus, king of the Byzantines, died fighting the Bulgars.</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.11</td>
<td>The pilgrimage was led this year by Dāwūd b. Ḥisā b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, the governor of Mecca.</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.12</td>
<td>In this year, Muḥammad b. Hārūn (al-Amīn) confirmed his brother al-Qāṣim b. Hārūn in the governorship of al-Jazīra to which his father had appointed him. He appointed Khuzayma b. Khāzim to be al-Qāṣim’s agent for al-Jazīra, and he also confirmed al-Qāsim over Qinnasrīn and the frontier strongholds.</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legenda**

In the middle column of this table, we find all the words uttered by the primary narrator in year chapter 193, a year that contains twelve entries. In the left-hand column, I have given each entry a code. Some entries contain akhbār, put in the mouth of secondary narrators. These are only indicated here by a code in a smaller font. Of some akhbār, however, I have quoted part of their content, as these reports will be treated in chapter five of this thesis. Long lists of akhbār have been compressed using the symbol ‘[...]’. By far the longest entry in this year chapter is the obituary entry devoted to the death of the caliph. After this obituary entry, a new regnal chapter begins, ‘The caliphate of al-Amīn’.
The Relation between Key Events and Akhbār

The previous analysis can be summarized as follows. The Islamic section of the Tārikh is made up of entries that consist of two types of material: 1) a key event presented by the primary narrator and 2) akhbār put in the mouth of secondary narrators.

What is the relation between the key event and the akhbār that have been included in the same entry? What is the function of these key events, and what is the function of the akhbār? In other words, is Tabari primarily interested in (knowledge of) the key events, or in (knowledge of) the akhbār?

1. akhbār state the cause of the key event

From internal headings that read ' Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of... ' (Dhikr al-khabr an sabab...) one could infer that the function of akhbār is to provide a causal explanation of the key event under which they are listed. However, in the case of entry 193.7, which has as its key event the eruption of discord between Rashīd’s two sons, of the six akhbār included under the heading ' Reportage on the cause of the discord between them ', at least three (2, 4 and 6) do not actually deal with the causes of the discord.

2. akhbār support the veracity of the key event

If akhbār do not deal with the causes of the key events, than we might suggest that they have been included to support the claim to veracity of the key events, as reports by eyewitnesses that actually were there when the key event took place. However, in order to buttress this truth claim, the akhbār themselves would have to appear very reliable. Yet in many instances such a khabar is juxtaposed with a report of the same event by another eyewitness that flatly contradicts the former. Now if anything sows doubt about the reliability of eyewitnesses it is the existence of mutually conflicting reports. Tabari’s primary narrator in no way helps his readers. He never voices a possible preference of one account over another and never pronounces an opinion on the relative reliability of accounts or reporters.

3. akhbār provide anecdotal illustrations of the key event

The problem of the inclusion of mutually conflicting akhbār would be solved if we do not see them as proof of historical exactness but rather
as ‘entertaining illustrations’. A mere list of key events would appear objective and scientific, but also provide a fairly dry read. By including akhbār, the seriousness of the key events is relieved with light and lively stories. These anecdotes have a higher aesthetic and entertaining value, but do not claim to be as true as the key events.

4. the key event is merely a heading under which to classify the akhbār

Perhaps we should not see the akhbār as subservient to the key event, but consider the key event as subservient to the akhbār. Maybe it is not the key events but the akhbār that constitute the main focus of the text. Perhaps Tabari was not primarily interested in reconstructing what actually happened, i.e. in the events themselves, but rather in the stories that were told about these events. Such an attitude would be another explanation of the inclusion of mutually conflicting akhbār. An event can only have happened in one possible way, but eyewitnesses can produce many different accounts of that event. If not the event itself, but these accounts are the main focus of interest, it pays off to include different versions.

This way we can approach the Tārikh as a huge database of akhbār. Such a view is shared by Matthew L. Keegan, who recently stated that Tabari’s ‘History is a collection of khabar literature placed in a chronological framework.’\(^\text{29}\) In order to make his Tārikh, Tabari has collected all sound akhbār that deal with a broadly defined topic: past events of political and religious importance, with a particular focus on politically and religiously important characters: kings, prophets, and caliphs. To make this collection searchable, Tabari adopted a rigid system of classification. He chose to classify these akhbār not according to author, but according to subject matter. This way, akhbār dealing with the same event were grouped together into a single entry. Next, all entries dealing with events that took place in the same year were grouped into a single chapter. These year chapters were eventually arranged in chronological order.

Such catalogues or compendia are a widespread phenomenon of classical Arabic literature. All types of akhbār were collected and classified according to a variety of systems. Akhbār on dreams were gathered in dreambooks, sorted according to dream image and then arranged following a cosmological hierarchy.\(^\text{30}\) Akhbār on animals were collected

\(^{29}\) Keegan, p. 15 & p. 19.

by al-Ḍamīrī in his Ḥayāt al-hayawān al-kubrā, sorted according to animal and then arranged in alphabetical sequence. Authors of ṭabaqāt works, or biographical dictionaries, collected akhbār on the members of certain professions, sorted them by main character and then classified these characters according to generation. Balādhurī, in his Ansāb al-ashrāf, collected akhbār on past events that he sorted by topic (key event) and then arranged following a system based on tribal genealogy. Tabari also sorted akhbār by key event, but arranged them chronologically.

If we consider the Tārikh as a catalogue of akhbār, then the key events are nothing more than labels, search terms or key words that define the topic of an entry. At the same time, we can see in Table II on year chapter 193 that not all key events are followed by reports: some entries do not contain akhbār. However, the structure of a catalogue allows to add akhbār dealing with these key events in a later stage, without disrupting a larger narrative. In the words of Robinson: “The annalistic scheme can accommodate, accordion-like, as little or much material as the historian wishes to include.”

The Reticent Style of Tabari’s Primary Narrator

In conclusion, we can say that the primary narrator says very little. He restricts himself to voicing the introductory formula of each year chapter: (“Then the year x began”) and the following heading; the key events of the entries, and the headings inside the entries. The bulk of the Tārikh, the akhbār that make up the rest of the text, is put in the mouths of others.

When the primary narrator speaks at all, he does so in a dry, frugal style. He does not use comparison or metaphor, and he does not describe the appearance of characters, objects or scenery. He presents events apparently as plainly as possible:

- The primary narrator does not deviate from the strict chronological sequence of key events (to produce prolepses and analepses for example);
- Except for the chronological link that is provided by this strict chronological sequence, the primary narrator does not draw links between events or akhbār from different entries;

31 Ch. Pellat, ‘Mawsū’a’, EP.
32 Robinson, p. 78.
- The primary narrator does not draw links between akhbar found within the same entry, except for the topical link provided by the key event of that entry (or the internal entry heading). Only the key event or the internal entry headings tell us explicitly that the akhbar of this entry or this section share a topical link;
- The primary narrator does not express commentary, judgment or interpretation on events: neither on the key events nor on the additional events presented in the akhbar.
- He does not comment upon or interpret the akhbar he quotes; he does not (or only very rarely) pronounce judgment on their veracity, or on the reliability of their transmitters. When akhbar flatly contradict each other, the primary narrator does not state which khabar he deems the more reliable.
- In short, the primary narrator does not tell stories, except when he presents the short series of events that make up a larger key event.

A modern audience expects that an historian explains the relationships between events, that he interprets why they happened, and that he passes judgement on the reliability of his sources. Therefore, this absence of any direct, explicit judgment or interpretation by the primary narrator, and the inclusion of variant accounts of the same event has puzzled and one could say almost exasperated Tabari’s modern readers, as we have also seen in chapter one. Tarif Khalidi, in his Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period (1994), commenting on the annalistic part of the Tarih that we analyzed here:

There is no trace in this whole portion of the History of any explicit judgement on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events...The annalistic scheme was perhaps a natural one to select for the Hijri era and the scheme itself had already been adopted by the historians of the third/ninth century...More difficult to explain, however, is the almost total absence of any comments on the veracity of reports or any moral verdict on events of momentous consequence for the Muslim community.35

CONVENTIONS OF RETICENCE

Why is the primary narrator of Tabari’s Tarih so reticent? Why does he speak so little in his own words, and why does he refrain from explicitly judging events and characters? Some scholars have suggested that Tabari styled his Tarih after the format of hadith collections, because he wanted to raise historiography to the level of the respected science of

35 Khalidi, Arabic Historical Thought, p. 80.
Prophetic tradition. While it is true that the Tārīkh shares structural qualities with a hadith collection, this explanation is not satisfactory. Firstly, the formal elements that the Tārīkh shares with a compendium of hadith (a reticent primary narrator, the use of isnād, and the inclusion of contradictory accounts of the same event) can be found in most official genres of classical Arabic prose, even when we admit that Tabari was somewhat more thorough in mentioning isnads than other authors. Secondly, pointing to a resemblance between the Tārīkh and hadith collections only postpones the problem, for it does not answer the question why hadith collections were given such a format in the first place. More positive approaches are the following:

1. disdain for fiction

By letting his primary narrator say so little, by not providing links between events and by putting most of the words in the mouth of others, Tabari appears as someone who himself does not tell a story. He had to create this impression because telling a story about events one did not personally witness was seen to lead inexorably towards invention or fiction. Now the use of fiction, in any prose genre, was frowned upon by the critics of official literary production, as it was associated with lying and deceit.

The disdain of boldly imaginative narration, the general demand for truthfulness even for stories which serve the purpose of amusement, as well as the distrust against the literary tradition of marvellous tales evince the endeavour to banish the imaginary from the literature which serves education and mediates knowledge.

54 Khalidi, p. 74; Carter, p. 140, but see the critique against this view in Keegan, pp. 5, 10, 19, 21.
55 Beaumont, p. 29.
For someone whose main task was to convey reliable information about the past, storytelling, with its associations of fiction and hence lies, was completely out of bounds.

2. scientific objectivity

In the second place, the dry, detached style of the primary narrator makes him appear scientifically objective. He appears as someone who relies on evidence, such as eyewitness accounts and documents, instead of someone who is under the influence of personal preconceptions and ideologies, or who gets carried away by literary embellishment and a flowery style. The primary narrator is a scientist, not a _raconteur_. The catalogue format of the _Tārikh_, with its associations of rigid classification, comprehensiveness and exactitude, adds to this scientific appearance.

3. political neutrality

Thirdly, the fact that the primary narrator abstains from explicitly judging historical characters and their actions, makes him appear politically neutral. Many of the events of Islamic history, especially those of the Rāshidūn era, were controversial and had divided Muslims up to the point of schism and civil war. According to Stephen Humphreys:

> If a would-be historian spoke about these matters in his own words, he would inevitably be regarded as no serious scholar but as a mere propagandist for one or another faction. For an historian to be accepted as an objective transmitter of reliable facts about these religiously sensitive events, he had to disclaim personal responsibility for the statements in his works. \(^{38}\) ...Scholarly authority required a talent for self-effacement. \(^{39}\)

In the case of Abbasid caliphs, under whose reign Tabari composed his _Tārikh_, direct criticism of one of these rulers could be read as an attack on the legitimacy of the dynasty as a whole, and understood by some readers as a provocative call for armed revolt.

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\(^{38}\) Humphreys, _Islamic History_, p. 74.

\(^{39}\) Humphreys, 'Ta’īrīkh', _EP_.

4. piety

In the fourth place, refraining from explicitly judging characters and from proposing possible causes of events also made the primary narrator appear pious. Only God knows the causes of events, and only God can offer final judgment on the actions of his worshippers. Human beings, with their imperfect knowledge, should not have the arrogance to perform God’s task.

In general, the norms of a Muslim historian’s audience seem to have been opposed to the obvious use of human reason to explain what could and should only be explained according to divine will. Many writers shared these norms and felt guilty about seeming to transgress them; other writers reject the audience’s norms on this and other matters but felt compelled to pay lip service to them. For all these reasons Muslim histories on the surface often have an air of objectivity and equanimity that has misled many modern critics.40

5. respect of tradition

In the fifth place, the fact that the primary narrator is so modest with his own words and so generously hands the floor to the earlier narrators and transmitters of akhbār, makes him appear respectful of tradition. Later generations were not supposed to base their knowledge of the past on the active use of their own reason, but merely on the contemplation of the words of eyewitnesses to these earlier events, as they had been handed down by tradition. Humphreys comments on the style of the later compilers such as Tabari:

I would prefer to connect their apparent diffidence not to pious modesty or arid objectivity, but rather to the concept of knowledge in early Islamic culture. In this milieu, the historian’s proper task was to convey objective knowledge of those past events which were generally believed to possess legal, political, or religious significance. Such knowledge (ilm) consisted of accounts of these events which could be traced back to reliable authorities—in the ideal case, eyewitnesses of known veracity, but in any case reputable early scholars who had obtained their information from such persons. The historian’s task was decisively not to interpret or to evaluate the past as such; rather, he was simply to determine which reports about it (akhbār) were acceptable and to compile these reports in a convenient order.41

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41 Humphreys, Islamic History, p. 74, my italics; see also Khalidi, p. 25; Robinson, p. 85; p. 89.
Such a case for the preference of tradition over reason is made in the text of the Ṭārikh itself. In an oft-quoted passage from the introduction to the work, the primary narrator states as his main objective: ‘ilm bi-mā kāna min akhbār al-mādīn. Tabari’s primary narrator claims here to be interested not in knowledge of ‘the past as such’ (Humphreys), i.e. the events of the past, but knowledge of reports, told by the people who witnessed these events. This claim is another argument for the thesis that Tabari wanted to give his Ṭārikh the appearance of a catalogue of akhbār. The primary narrator goes on to explain that knowledge of such reports cannot be obtained by the use of reason. Rational deduction alone cannot reconstruct what people we never met could possibly have said, let alone judge the truthfulness of their words. There are only two ways by which someone can know exactly what other people have said and at the same time judge their reliability as informants:

1. When he has known them personally and has talked with them face-to-face, for which his lifetime has to have overlapped with theirs;
2. When he obtains a verbatim quotation of what they have said which has been handed down by a process of oral, hadith-style transmission by professional transmitters, a process that is supposed to guarantee the truthfulness of the original eyewitness, the transmitters in the chain, and the transmitted statement.


I rely only on what has been transmitted to me: the akhbār that I have included in [this book] and the traditions that I have ascribed by name to their transmitters. I do not rely on what is learned through rational arguments or deduced by the human mind, save to a very limited degree. For knowledge of [the content and reliability of] the akhbār that were told by eyewitnesses in the past—and the same goes for reports that are told by current eyewitnesses today—cannot be obtained by someone who did not live in the same time as these witnesses and met them face-to-face, except through one channel: oral transmission by professional traditionists. Knowledge of [the content and reliability of] such eyewitness reports cannot be brought out by reason or produced by mental deduction.\(^2\)

\(^2\) Tab. 1, 6-7. My translation, see also Rosenthal, General Introduction, pp. 170-1; Humphreys, Islamic History, pp. 73-4; Khalidi, p. 74; Mārtensson, pp. 291-2; and Keegan pp. 20-2. For a similar passage see Tab. 1, 56; Khalidi, p. 76.
There is an additional reason behind this reverence for the sayings of ancestors, besides the assumption that they had witnessed past events with their own eyes. The older generations, that were closer in time to Muhammad, were deemed to be fundamentally wiser and of sounder judgement than the younger generations. It would have been hubristic for a later historian to try to improve on the rendering of events by these revered authorities. In the words of Tarif Khalidi, traditionalist historians were:

...animated by an essentially conservative spirit which tended to view the past as a process of steady decline and their own days as inferior in morality and knowledge to the days of Muhammad and of his four ‘rightly guided’ successors....In passing on the wisdom of ancestors these scholars believed that they were transmitters rather than creators.\(^43\)

Compilers such as Tabari had to preserve the words of these ancestors intact, as the last relics of a golden past. ‘Every opinion, every voice which could be added to his collection reinforced the community of believers by the weight of authority as a witness of the Islamic past and a part of it.’\(^44\)

6. feigned orality

In the sixth place, the paucity of comments by the primary narrator himself, and his emphasis on direct discourse and on detailed chains of transmitters, could also be due to an apparent respect for orality. More important than the writing of a book by a single author was the continuous process of oral transmission by a community of transmitters. By publishing his Tārikh, Tabari did nothing more than provide a snapshot of this process, a reference tool that allowed its participants or observers to keep track of it, and gave them an overview of the state of affairs of oral transmission in their own time. Just as a photographer captures one moment of a continuous and three-dimensional process in a flat image, Tabari freezes one moment of a continuous process of face-to-face communication between large numbers of transmitters in a single written text.

According to this view, the scarce words uttered by the primary narrator are nothing but the framework for an orderly classification of

\(^{43}\) Khalidi, p. 25, my italics.

the units of this process of oral transmission, the *akhbār*. Robinson speaks in this context of the 'tension between an ever-expanding corpus of *akhbār* material' and 'narrative frameworks engineered to contain and order it'.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, simply listing the conventions of Tabari’s time that called for reticence on the part of the historian is unsatisfactory, for it presents Tabari as the passive victim to these conventions and does not explain why he chose to adhere to them. Here, therefore, a new element will be added to the discussion by arguing that Tabari chose to comply with these restrictions for rhetorical effect, that is to enhance the convincing power of his text.

Tabari knows that readers will be inclined to identify him with his primary narrator. Style and structure of the Tārīkh make its primary narrator (and hence Tabari) appear not only as truthful, scientifically objective and politically neutral, but also as modest, pious, and respectful of tradition and orality. Style and structure are chosen to make the author appear more authoritative as a purveyor of reliable information about the past, and hence more convincing in the instances that he does pass judgment.

*What Constitutes a Story?*

The fact that the primary narrator abstains from drawing explicit connections between the events of different entries raises the question whether he tells a story that supersedes the structure of a single entry. Does he only catalogue, or does the sequence of (some of) these entries taken together form a story? According to the definition given by the narratologist Mieke Bal, a story is a series of chronologically and logically related events which is presented in a certain manner. This definition implies that the presentation of a series of events which are only chronologically—but not logically—related, is not actually a story, or is, at least, an incomplete story. In other words, as long as the events are only chronologically related, their presentation cannot form a story.

However, as is noted by Bal’s colleague Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, many readers are easily tempted to supplement the missing logical link themselves, thereby turning the presentation of a number of subse-

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45 Robinson, p. 24; see also pp. 171-7.
quent events into a story. ‘Stories may be based on an implicit application of the logical error post hoc, ergo propter hoc.’

Let us stick for the moment to Bal’s definition and say that a list of events without explicit causal relationships between them is not a complete story, but an implicit one: it is up to the reader to turn it into a complete story by suggesting a causal link. In the case of the Tārikh, however, it is sometimes hard to suggest a logical relation between two subsequent entries, as they might concern completely different characters—some of which are mentioned only once in the entire Tārikh—and take place at different places. Take for example, two subsequent entries from the year 192:

In this year, the judge Ali al-Zabyan died at Qasr al-Lusus.
In this year, Yahya b. Mu‘adh brought (the Syrian rebel) Abu al-Nida to al-Rashid whilst the latter was at al-Raqqa, and al-Rashid had him killed.

Although the second entry consists of two related events which make up a small story of its own, the two entries taken together do not form a story; the narrator does not establish a logical relation between them, and the reader has no clue to supplement a logical relation himself. Even if subsequent entries concern the same character, they are not always easily interpreted as forming a story, as in the sequence: In this year, al-Rashid killed X; In this year, al-Rashid raided Byzantine territory; In this year, al-Rashid appointed Y.

Strictly speaking, therefore, the primary narrator does not narrate: he sums up events without establishing a logical relation between them, and he cites secondary narrators.

DREAMS AND IMPLICIT STORYTELLING

We started this chapter with the question how to translate the term tārikh in the title of Tabari’s work. Is it a full history, a mere list of events, or a catalogue? After a closer look at the narrative structure of this text, it appears to have aspects of all these options.

48 Tab. III, 732.
Tabari’s Tārīkh = Chronological list of past events

Because the key events of the Tārīkh are presented in such a rigid chronological order and are nowhere accompanied by explicit commentary, judgement or interpretation, one could say that this text is nothing more than a chronological list of events. According to this reading, Tabari’s sole objective was to provide his readers answers to questions of relative and exact chronology: In what sequence did events take place? In what year took a given event place? What events took place during a given year? According to this reading, the term tārīkh can simply be translated as ‘chronology’.

Tabari’s Tārīkh = Chronological list of the reigns of rulers

Because various titles given to Tabari’s work speak of rusul ‘prophets’, mulūk ‘rulers, kings’ and khulafā‘caliphs’, rulers and their reigns appear to constitute the main focus of Tabari’s interest. His main objective is to provide his readers with the dates on which rulers came to power and on which they were succeeded by other rulers. It is true that he mentions some of the events that took place during their reigns, but he says that these can only be summarized. As noted above, when speaking of the rulers that form the subject of his wok, Tabari’s primary narrators states in his introduction:

Every one of them whom I shall mention in this book of mine will be mentioned in conjunction with his time but (only) summaries of the events of his day and age will be added...This will be combined with references to the length of their natural life and the time of their death.

There are also structural arguments to consider the reigns of rulers and their chronological sequence as the main focus of Tabari’s work: the ‘regnal chapters’ found in the Islamic part, as well as the extensive obituary entries devoted to each ruler that conclude these regnal chapters.

This way, the Tārīkh would have been created to answer questions such as: From what year to what year reigned this or that ruler? In what sequence did they rule? What are the events that happened to take place during their reigns? According to this reading, tārīkh is a synonym to mawālid and simply means ‘dates’.
Tabari’s Tārīkh = Catalogue of akhbār on past events

Other elements of the text foreground the catalogue aspect of Tabari’s work: the Tārīkh as a database of akhbār, where eyewitness reports are the main focus, not the events behind them. In the first place, akhbār make up the bulk of the text. Secondly, most headings contain the word khabr, ‘report’ or ‘reportage’, such as Dhikr al-khabr ‘an mā kāna fihā min al-ahdāth or Dhikr al-khabr ‘an sabab..., implying that the reportage is at least as important as the events. The juxtaposition of akhbār that tell conflicting stories of the same event is also more logical when the akhbār, not the events are main focus. Moreover, some of the titles given to the work specifically mention that it is about akhbār and anbā’. Tabari’s primary narrator states in his introduction that his main objective is ‘ilm bi-mā kāna min akhbār al-māḍīn, ‘knowledge of the akhbār that were told by eyewitnesses in the past.’

This way, Tabari’s goal was to provide his readers a complete overview of all circulating akhbār that dealt with the broad topic of past political and religious events. Readers could use his database as a reference tool to obtain answers to questions as: What is the exact wording of a particular khabar? What sound akhbār on a specific event are in circulation? According to this reading, the word tārīkh in the title refers to the fact that Tabari chose to order his akhbār following a chronologically classification. We could see the work as a Tārīkh al-akhbārī, ‘a chronology of akhbār’, i.e. a catalogue of chronologically arranged reports.

Tabari’s Tārīkh = Story about past events

Can such a list of events, or such a database of the works of others, also tell a story of its own? Marylin Waldman, a narratologist who studied classical Islamic historiography agrees that annalist works such as Tabari’s do not constitute a complete story. ‘Full narrativity’ involves, among other things, ‘explicit comments on the connections between events.’ She states, however, that ‘we cannot assume that a text like this one tells no story because it does not make its story fully explicit, formally organized and finished.’ Elements of the listing strategy such as ordering, juxtaposition, selection, association, and omission, are used to tell ‘implicit stories’.

50 Waldman, p. 786.
The rest of this thesis will be devoted to arguing that Tabari tells such implicit stories. In the following chapters I will focus on one of these ways to implicitly connect events: association, in this case association by way of recurrent narrative motifs. In chapter three, I will analyse how motifs derived from the Bible recur throughout the pre-Islamic part of the Tārīkh. Focussing on motifs related to a particular type of dream that involves the confrontation between a pagan tyrant and an Abrahamic oneiromantic, I will show how motif repetition is used to draw implicit comparisons between episodes that are hundreds of pages apart. Chapters four to six focus on the early Abbasid caliphs. In chapters four and five I will analyse how the same biblical motifs discussed in chapter three are also used in the Islamic section of the Tārīkh, to implicitly judge caliphs and their actions. Here not only association, but also juxtaposition will be discussed as one of the ways to tell an ‘implicit story’. In the sixth chapter I will show how predictive dreams add suspense and tragedy to the apparently dry presentation of events. Our final conclusion will be that in the case of Tabari’s text, we can indeed translate the term tārīkh as ‘story about past events’, i.e. as ‘history’ in the full sense of the word.

THE LIST AND CATALOGUE FORMATS AS RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

All the aspects of the Tārīkh that at first view puzzle and irritate the modern reader, such as the dry summary of events, the absence of full narrativity, the reticent style of the primary narrator, the inclusion of contradictory akhbār, and the absence of explicit connections between events, do not spring from the fact that Tabari was unimaginative, afraid of the Ḥanbalites, or was severely handicapped by the conventions of his time. Tabari chose to give his Tārīkh the format of a catalogue as a rhetorical strategy.

To appear more authoritative in the eyes of his contemporaries, he pretended not to draw comparisons between events, not to explain their causes, not to have added embellishments such as metaphor, suspense, tragedy or irony. He went out his way not to appear as a storyteller. To achieve this, he not only hides behind his narrators but also behind the catalogue format of his collection. However, as the ambiguity of the term tārīkh indicates, Tabari can have it both ways. Tabari’s Tārīkh is not either a list or a catalogue or a story; it is all of these at the same time. Hiding behind the catalogue structure Tabari can pose as a

51 Heyland, p. 22.
modest, objective and neutral collector, and at the same time tell a captivating story, that highlights seminal events, chooses sides and offers scathing judgements on the legitimacy of rulers.

_Dreams as an ideal tool for implicit storytelling_

In the remaining part of this thesis I will argue that for Tabari’s purpose, i.e. remaining within the conventions of classical Arabic historiography while at the same time telling a story, an ideal tool is provided by dreams. In other words, dreams are perfectly suited for *implicit* storytelling.

As I will argue in chapter four, dreams provide a perfect instrument by which the author can offer his opinion or cast judgment _indirectly_. In the case that dreams occur in the _Tārīkh_, the primary narrator quotes an eyewitness who in turn quotes a character who reports an event he witnessed: the dreamer recounts a dream he saw. In case the dream is explained, the eyewitness quotes an additional character (the dream interpreter) who translates the dream’s message. No one here states an opinion: not the primary narrator, not the eyewitness, not the characters. The dreamer reports an event he witnessed in his sleep, the interpreter simply translates what others saw; he hides behind the dreamer. This way, the author himself can hide behind at least five figureheads: his primary narrator, the _khabar_ transmitters, the eyewitness, the interpreter, and the dreamer.

However, at the same time that this indirect judgment is hidden under so many layers, it is also _heavily foregrounded_. Dreams cry out to be noted and interpreted by the reader. When the contents of a dream are recounted, the reader knows that these contents constitute a message, a message that needs to be interpreted, and an important one at that, as dreams come from the supernatural realm.

In addition, the judgment offered by dreams is also _highly authoritative_. An account of a dream or its deciphering by a professional interpreter was not seen as the expression of a subjective, human opinion, but as an objective account of an event that actually took place. Not a single classical Arabic author ever expressed doubt on the existence of truthful dreams. The immense literature on dreams, from philosophical treatises to works of oneirocriticism, provided their interpretation with an aura of scientific objectivity. Dreams were related to prophecy; they were messages send by God himself, and therefore expressions of His infallible judgment.
Finally, dreams, as a type of prediction, are eminently suited, not only to indirectly highlight events but also, as prolepsis, to provide connections between different events.