

Re-Remembering Muhammad

Oral Tradition and Collective Memory

In chapter 5, we identified a very high probability, approaching near certainty, that the teachings of Muhammad, beyond perhaps a few bits and pieces at most, would not have been written down in his lifetime. Such, at least, is indicated by the reigning consensus regarding the conditions of literacy in the time and place in which he lived. Instead, his teachings were only gradually collected as part of an ongoing process that led ultimately to the composition of the Qur'an, lasting for several decades after his death, seemingly until the end of the seventh century. This means that Muhammad's divine revelations must have been transmitted orally from memory without a written basis among the community of the Believers for an extended period of time, much as the teachings of Jesus likewise circulated orally among his followers for several decades. Therefore, we must approach the Qur'an as a text that was composed and recomposed in the process of its recollection and oral transmission amid the various other religious cultures of western Asia during the seventh century. Accordingly, it is essential to consider the effects that the process of oral transmission would have had on the community's memory of Muhammad's teachings as they were told and retold in the time between their initial delivery in Mecca and Yathrib (presumably) and their commitment to writing decades later in the various centers of the emerging Islamic empire. In doing so, we will draw on a range of scholarship from the past century that has studied the nature of oral cultures, their histories, their transmission of cultural memories, and the relation of these cultures to the written word.

Heightened attention to the role that orality played in the transmission and formation of the early Christian scriptures was one of the more important and productive developments in late twentieth-century biblical scholarship. Such considerations have been largely absent, however, from investigations of the Qur'an and its early history. Not surprisingly, however, perspectives gained from

the study of oral cultures have much to contribute to understanding the Qur'an's oral transmission and its eventual transition to writing, particularly given the profoundly oral nature of the Qur'an as a text in the Islamic tradition up until the present day. Oral transmission, as we will see, is characterized by a high level of omission and alteration, and, with only a matter of a few repetitions, a tradition will change significantly from the "original," even if in some instances something of the original gist is maintained. Therefore, we may not simply assume, once again, that what eventually came to be written down in the Qur'an is identical with what Muhammad taught, any more than we can assume that the canonical gospels preserve the words that Jesus taught his earliest followers.

At the outset, one must note the existence of a widespread belief, often embraced by scholars no less than the broader public, that people in oral cultures have developed remarkable capacities for accurate memory that we, the children of a written culture, can barely even comprehend. Since these cultures lacked writing as a means to accurately preserve the culture and history of their community, individuals must have worked especially hard, so it is assumed, to increase the faculties of their memory. Likewise, they must have taken intense care to remember with great precision what they had heard and to pass it along without change from one person to the next. Yet, despite these frequently presumed qualities of memory and transmission in oral cultures, decades of scientific study of oral cultures have now shown that such assumptions are not only unwarranted; they are demonstrably false.¹ It is true, of course, that literate cultures rely on memory differently from nonliterate ones, with the consequence that in literate cultures "our minds are freed to do much deeper and sophisticated work. Thus, it is no accident that advances in science, technology, engineering, and math have always happened in highly literate cultures."² But the lack of a literate culture simply does not make human memories more capacious or accurate in oral societies. In fact, scientific studies have shown the opposite to be true: that the acquisition of literacy significantly improves and strengthens verbal and visual memory, whereas the condition of illiteracy impairs these abilities.³ Accordingly, despite what is often assumed, it seems that people in literate cultures actually have better memories than those in nonliterate cultures.

As a direct consequence of the functions and limitations of the human memory, material that is transmitted orally, as we saw in the previous chapter, turns out to be highly subject to change, frequently involving significant alteration of the original tradition. Oral transmission, as specialists have demonstrated, is not the rote transmission of a literary artifact from the past but is instead a constant process of recomposition as the tradition is recreated anew in each instance of transmission. As we will see, this fundamental property of remembering is no less true in preliterate cultures than literate ones, and obviously this finding bears tremendous significance for how we understand the formation of the Qur'an out of an originally oral context. Like the human memory itself, as we also saw in the

previous chapter, oral cultures are often effective at preserving the bare bones “gist” of an event over time. Nevertheless, in the context of oral transmission, the skeleton of this gist is given new flesh each time, so that a tradition begins to be radically re-remembered from its very first repetition. And since we remember the past solely for the sake of understanding the present, as these memories are transmitted and the gaps are filled in, they are quickly reshaped according to the present concerns of those transmitting them.

The influence of the present as the context in which we inevitably produce all our memories brings us to the second topic of this chapter—that is, another kind of social memory known as “cultural memory,” or as I prefer to call it, “collective memory.” Memory is not something that belongs to individuals alone, but there is also a different sort of memory that is shared and shaped together by the members of a particular community or society. As Bart Ehrman writes of this phenomenon, “Society itself cannot function without a memory of the people and events that have bound and continue to bind it together. As a society we have to remember our origins, our history, our wars, our economic crises, our mistakes, and our successes. Without a recollection of our past we cannot live in the present or look forward to a future.”⁴ Such cultural or collective memories are therefore essential to defining and maintaining a social group’s identity and its cohesion. Collective memory generally will consist of a corpus of shared stories and symbols and interpretations of those stories and symbols that provide meaning and purpose for members of the community. The memory of a community’s foundation and formation are often essential components of its collective memory, as are the biographies of its founders and great leaders, as well as the stories of its most detested villains and enemies. Certain events, symbols, and figures may remain persistent in a group’s collective memory over long periods of time. Nevertheless, it is inherent to the nature of collective memory that the shared reminiscence and interpretation of the objects of collective memory will change across time and place—often very significantly.

The memories of Muhammad and the origins of Islam recorded in the early Sunni historical tradition are prime examples of such collective memories. As such, these sources remember their community’s founding prophet and the formation of their faith not with perfect fidelity to what actually happened in the early seventh century. By the time these accounts came to be written down, most of what happened and what was then said would have been forgotten, simply as a consequence of the frailty of human memory. But many things from this past were also “forgotten” because they were no longer relevant to the faith of Sunni Muslims in the Abbasid Empire of the later eighth century. The Muslims of this age remembered the origins of their community and the life and teachings of their prophet in a manner that was suited particularly to their contemporary circumstances, which were quite different from those of early seventh-century Mecca and Yathrib. Likewise, these collective memories of the period of origins have

been shaped so that they would exemplify and validate the religious beliefs and practice of eighth-century Islam, which seem to have been significantly different from those of Muhammad's earliest followers. Such transformations are typical of collective memory, and while it is widely acknowledged in scholarship that this type of communal memory has profoundly determined much of the early Islamic historical tradition, little consideration has been given to how collective memory must have also influenced the composition and canonization of the Qur'an.⁵ Considering the impact of collective memory on the fluid nature of the Qur'an during its oral transmission seems essential, since in an oral society like that of the early Believers, "changes in its cultural traditions are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant."⁶

The cultural and religious circumstances in which Muhammad's earliest followers found themselves were changing regularly and rapidly throughout the seventh century, and especially during the 630s and 640s. This religious movement that began in the nonliterate and isolated communities of the central Hijaz (assuming that is where the movement began) quickly found itself immersed within the highly literate, diverse, and developed cultures of late ancient Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Manicheanism, among other traditions. Indeed, despite their military dominance, one imagines that Muhammad's followers would have found themselves culturally overwhelmed in these new circumstances. According to our best estimate, the number of Muhammad's followers who initially entered western Iran and the Roman Near East in the mid-630s was somewhere between only thirty and fifty thousand men.⁷ Thanks to their amazing success in battle, within ten years Muhammad's followers were spread across the conquered territories of the former Sasanian Empire and much of the Roman Near East, including Syro-Palestine, Egypt, and much of North Africa and eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus: the occupied Byzantine territories alone amounted to around one million square kilometers.

Thus, within a decade Muhammad's followers found themselves a small minority of around forty thousand fighting men scattered over hundreds of thousands of square miles and living among a religiously diverse and culturally sophisticated population of around twenty million.⁸ As the Believers began to colonize these conquered regions, those in Iraq, as is well known, largely settled into separate garrison towns—notably, Kufa and Basra. Once some of the army's dependents began to settle in to these cities, we can estimate a population of around twenty thousand for Kufa, but only about one thousand for Basra at the start of 'Uthmān's reign.⁹ In the following decades, these settlements grew quickly to around 350,000 combined by 670, about one-third of which were soldiers with the rest being their dependents.¹⁰ Although the number of Muhammad's followers in the conquered lands had grown considerably by this point, they nevertheless remained

a vastly outnumbered minority community within the territories they ruled. The settlement of Syro-Palestine followed a different pattern, in that there Muhammad's followers preferred to take up residence in the already existing cities of this region. There they lived as a small minority alongside the many Jews and Christians of this region, interacting with them quite frequently, one imagines.¹¹

Undoubtedly, these new social and cultural conditions would have determined swift and substantial changes in how Muhammad's followers understood their faith and remembered the history of their community. One imagines that these early Believers were constantly bombarded by the Abrahamic traditions of the majority Jewish and Christian cultures, particular in Syro-Palestine, which by 661 had emerged as the political and cultural center of the Believers' new polity. Regular exchanges with these fellow worshippers of the God of Abraham cannot but have influenced the Believers' understanding of their own traditions, which no doubt were adjusted and amplified as a result of these encounters. The profound importance of Jerusalem and the Promised Land for Muhammad's earliest followers would have fueled great interest in the traditions of this region in particular, many of which were clearly adopted by the Islamic tradition, as can still be seen today.¹² Moreover, we should expect that during these early decades, many former Jews and Christians had joined Muhammad's new religious community, bringing with them the full panoply of their Abrahamic religious traditions. Undoubtedly, they shared these traditions with their new coreligionists, whose memories of Muhammad's teaching would have been shaped by these new ideas. Accordingly, there can be little question that Believers' faith and collective identity continued to develop during their intensive encounter with the full wealth of the Abrahamic tradition in the new context of that very tradition's most sacred lands, Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine. The historical study of religion (*Religionsgeschichte*) teaches us to expect nothing less during the formative period of a religious tradition. Therefore, we should also expect that the evolving nature of their religious faith and identity would inevitably have shaped how Muhammad's followers remembered the teachings of their prophet in these early decades, particularly while they were still circulating orally. And one should further note that at this point any knowledge they had of what Muhammad had taught ultimately depended entirely on the memories of no more than a few dozen illiterate villagers who followed him in Mecca and perhaps a few hundred in Medina. By the time these memories of Muhammad's revelations were recorded and formally canonized into a new sacred scripture, seemingly at the turn of the eighth century, there is every reason to suspect that their contents would have changed considerably from what Muhammad had originally taught. The context of their early transmission within the diverse "sectarian milieu" of the late ancient Near East is certain to have shaped how Muhammad's followers remembered his words.

THE QUR'AN'S ORAL CONTEXT: THE STUDY OF ORAL CULTURES AND ORAL TRANSMISSION

Much like the science of human memory, the study of oral cultures and oral transmission witnessed significant advances over the course of the last century. For obvious reasons, the results of these investigations afford invaluable, if generally ignored, perspectives for understanding how the contents of the Qur'an developed during its initial oral transmission within an effectively nonliterate society. The bulk of this research on orality was conducted, not surprisingly, by anthropologists, who traveled the globe in search of various oral civilizations, from which they could learn how such cultures function differently from literate societies and how the process of oral transmission works. Nevertheless, some of the first and most significant work on this topic was done by scholars of ancient Greek literature, who sought in the study of contemporary oral cultures models and perspectives that could illuminate the oral culture of ancient Greek poetry, including the Homeric epics in particular. Thus, our approach in the first part of this chapter, using data from the study of contemporary oral cultures to understand an ancient one, has a long and distinguished pedigree. And since the faculties of the human memory appear to be consistent across time and space, the use of such evidence, obtained from a modern context, to illuminate the workings of an ancient oral culture, is fully warranted.¹³

There is strong consensus among scholars who have studied oral cultures that people living in them do not in fact have better memories than those of us in written cultures, and that people who live in oral cultures "generally forget about as much as other people."¹⁴ A key difference between written and oral cultures, however, is that when something is forgotten in an oral culture, it is obviously gone for good. For those of us in written cultures, we can always go back to a written text and look up what we have forgotten. Likewise, when a tradition changes in an oral culture, the original version vanishes, so that "Oral tradition destroys at least parts of earlier versions as it replaces them."¹⁵ In a written culture, we can look back at past versions, at least if they were committed to writing. We can also check the accuracy of a memory of a text or a tradition by going to the written authority. In such a way, only in a written culture, ironically, can texts be truly memorized: repeated comparison with the written exemplar allows for regular correction and eventual mastery of the text in a way that simply is not possible in an oral culture. Jack Goody, one of the most preeminent experts on oral tradition and cultures, describes the relation between writing and memorization as follows:

It is rather in literate societies that verbatim memory flourishes. Partly because the existence of a fixed original makes it much easier; partly because of the elaboration of spatially oriented memory techniques; partly because of the school situation which has to encourage "decontextualized" memory tasks since it has removed learning from doing and has redefined the corpus of knowledge. Verbatim memorizing is the

equivalent of exact copying, which is intrinsic to the transmission of scribal culture, indeed manuscript cultures generally.¹⁶

Oral traditions, by comparison, have been shown to change quickly, often, and substantially over the course of their transmission. It is a medium that, despite what many people may believe in ignorance of the scholarship on this topic, is inherently unstable and highly productive of alterations, omissions, and additions. Dependence on memory in oral cultures simply does not provide members of these societies with a preternatural ability to remember that is absent in written cultures. Quite to the contrary, “the human accomplishment of lengthy verbatim recall”—that is, the verbatim recall of a sequence of fifty or more words—occurs only when there is already “a written text and does not arise in cultural settings where text is unknown. The assumption that nonliterate cultures encourage lengthy verbatim recall is the mistaken projection by literates of text-dependent frames of reference.”¹⁷ Oral cultures also lack mnemotechnical devices of the sort studied by Frances Yates in her famous book *The Art of Memory*. Such memory techniques, frequently used by the Greeks and Romans and in the Middle Ages, as well as by modern “memory champions,” were invented by and belong to literate societies and are unknown in oral cultures.¹⁸ If anything, then, it seems that memories are more capable in written cultures than they are in oral settings, as studies of nonliterate societies have repeatedly confirmed.

In a very real sense, the dynamics of oral transmission in nonliterate societies mirror precisely the operations and limitations of human memory. Such correspondence is hardly surprising, however, since the capacities of the human memory form the basis for what can be transmitted in an oral culture and likewise delimit the scope and function of oral tradition. It turns out that just as our memories are at their best when recalling the gist of an experience, so oral tradition also excels at transmitting the gist of a story or a poem. The actual content and details of the text change—significantly and often immensely—with every recitation and transmission, but the basic structure of the tale remains stable and is pretty much the same each time. Like our memories, oral cultures have adapted to embrace a significant amount of useful forgetting, since in most instances “the product of exact recall may be less useful, less valuable than the product of inexact remembering.”¹⁹ Each time a tradition is passed along in an oral culture, it is recomposed anew in the same way that our memories create a reminiscence from mere disconnected fragments of an experience, piecing them together by filling in large gaps with information drawn from general knowledge or an accumulation of other similar experiences. In each instance, the raconteur has ready a bare outline of the tradition, including certain key figures, events, tropes, and so on that must be included for the story to be the same. But in telling the tale or recalling a proverb or a proclamation, the narrator exercises a great deal of creativity and liberty in fashioning the story into a new form, suited to the immediate circumstances

and audience—just like our memories adapt in the same ways in response to the specific conditions of the moment in which we remember.

Early Study of Oral Tradition: Homer, Parry, and Lord

The study of oral cultures began, so it would seem, with the work of Milman Parry, a classicist at Harvard University. Parry was an expert on the Homeric corpus, and although he died at the very young age of thirty-three, his work revolutionized the study of both Homer and oral tradition. Parry was interested in understanding how the ancient poetry ascribed to Homer was initially compiled and transmitted in a nonliterate context. More fundamentally, he wondered how and even if such a large amount of poetry could possibly be memorized and transmitted accurately without writing. Parry decided to address these questions by studying the performance and transmission of lengthy epics in a contemporary oral culture. He would then use his findings from this living lab to better comprehend the nature of the Homeric writings, their production, and their transmission. To this end, Parry traveled in 1933 with his assistant Albert Lord to Yugoslavia, where there was a hoary tradition of singers who recited—from memory—extensive epic poems equivalent in length to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In studying their techniques for remembering and reproducing these epics, Parry discovered that the singers of Yugoslavia relied on certain methods and practices that also appeared to be in evidence in the written texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Parry made only two trips to Yugoslavia before he accidentally shot himself while packing a firearm and died, late in 1935. Nevertheless, his assistant Lord continued his work and would also follow him onto the Harvard faculty. The main fruit of their collective labors was Lord's field-defining study of epic poetry and oral tradition, *The Singer of Tales*.²⁰

One of the main conclusions to emerge from Parry and Lord's fieldwork is that oral and written cultures have radically different ideas of what it means for an iteration of a text or tradition to be the same or accurate in relation to previous versions of the same cultural material. For most of us, in written cultures, an accurate transmission of a text or tradition is one in which there is no variation from its earlier exemplars. This simply is not so, Lord and Parry discovered, in oral cultures. The reason for this difference seems to be that in literate cultures one can check the written exemplars for variations in their oral recollections, an option not available in an oral context. Given the significant limitations inherent in the nature of the human memory, as seen in the previous chapter, in a nonliterate culture, no one would have the mnemonic ability to even detect such differences with any accuracy, let alone correct them. As Goody observes, "A detailed comparison of successive verbal inputs of this length and rapidity is quite beyond the capability of the long-term memory of individuals in oral societies."²¹ Therefore, while we might demand verbatim reproduction of a text in order to consider it accurate and the same as its preceding exemplars, oral cultures do not and simply cannot have a similar standard. Indeed, such verbatim repetition is not only impossible;

it is not even the ideal in oral cultures. In these societies, a new version of a poem will be considered identical with its predecessors, even if significant changes are introduced in the performance.

Yet despite being considered always the same, the variations among a poem's many recitations are in fact quite considerable, at least from the perspective of a literate culture. In their research among the rhapsodes of Yugoslavia, Parry and Lord discovered that

in a very real sense every performance is a separate song; for every performance is unique, and every performance bears the signature of its poet singer. He may have learned his song and the technique of its construction from others, but good or bad, the song produced in performance is his own. The audience knows it as his because he is before them. . . . His art consists not so much in learning through repetition the time worn formulas as in the ability to compose and recompose the phrases for the idea of the moment on the pattern established by the basic formulas. He is not a conscious iconoclast, but a traditional creative artist. His traditional style also has individuality, and it is possible to distinguish the songs of one singer from those of another, even when we have only the bare text without music and vocal nuance.²²

Parry and Lord also discovered that the very same poet will regularly tell the same story in radically different fashion on different occasions, even as the performer will himself insist that in each case the tales were exactly the same. For instance, when Lord went back to Yugoslavia to follow up on his teacher's work, he returned to one of Parry's subjects several years later and had him repeat the same text that he had performed for Parry. The two versions were surprisingly different: the telling recorded by Lord amounted to 12,323 lines, while the same singer told the same story to Parry in a mere 8,488 lines. In another example, Parry once had two different bards recite the same tale. One version was nearly three times as long as the other, and yet, according to both narrators, their accounts were identical.²³ For the singer, then, what makes a particular tradition the same "does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story. He builds his performance, or song in our sense, on the stable skeleton of narrative."²⁴

The very idea of a verbatim reiteration is foreign to this context; the oral poet stands removed "from any understanding of verbal accuracy in our sense" and "is psychologically incapable of grasping the abstract concept."²⁵ For the bard, such rote repetition is not even an ideal to be sought after. Rather, the goal is, on the contrary, to adapt the text to meet the present context and audience, so that, as Goody notes, "oral singers are often pushed toward variation, by their own ingenuity, by their particular audiences, or by the wider social situation." Creativity and adaptation are prized qualities in a performance, so that the reciter is as much a composer as a transmitter of poem. Poets are therefore encouraged to elaborate on the text in their recitations, and this "elaboration inevitably involves some contraction unless the recitation is to proliferate continuously. The result is continual

change,” so that “the whole concept of an original is out of place.”²⁶ Even very short poems, such as ballads, which can be effectively memorized and passed along in relatively stable form, are subject to significant change during oral transmission. Comparison of the transmission of English and Scottish ballads to North America and Australia, for instance, demonstrates just how dramatically even these short poems will change, even as they retain their basic structure, over a relatively short period of time.²⁷ The constant repetition of such ballads, as Goody notes, “gives rise to a great number, indeed, an infinite number of variants.”²⁸

One should note that Andrew Bannister recently published a monograph advocating the wholesale application of Parry and Lord’s paradigm of oral-formulaic analysis to the Qur’an.²⁹ The results are intriguing and demonstrate the potential promise of this method for studying at least some parts of the Qur’an, although I am not convinced that oral-formulaic analysis is equally useful for understanding the Qur’an in all its elements. Bannister offers only a limited and rather formal application of Parry and Lord’s model, without broader consideration of other studies of oral cultures, whose perspectives seem essential for understanding the impact of oral transmission on the Qur’an. Bannister’s analysis also focuses tightly on understanding the oral formation of the Qur’anic traditions during Muhammad’s lifetime in the Hijaz, with little scope beyond these traditionally received circumstances of the Qur’an’s origins. There is no effort to consider how orality may have impacted the traditions of the Qur’an during oral transmission after Muhammad’s death, which is unfortunate. Nevertheless, Bannister’s study helpfully identifies certain features of the Qur’an indicating that the text we have today is product of oral transmission that was committed to writing only after an extended period of oral existence.

Anthropological Studies of Oral Cultures and Oral Transmission

The range of ethnographic data that has been accumulated over the last century regarding the nature of oral tradition and oral cultures affords an invaluable supplement to the early work of Parry and Lord. These anthropological perspectives on orality provide an alternative framework for thinking about the Qur’an’s oral transmission that not only is less rigid in its application than oral-formulaic analysis but also was developed on the basis of a broader range of cultural traditions, beyond the recitation of long epic poems. In each instance, however, as the study of oral cultures has progressed to encompass a range of different societies from around the globe, the basic conclusions of Parry and Lord regarding the instabilities of oral tradition and its transmission have been repeatedly confirmed. With each reiteration, oral traditions will immediately and inevitably change, often substantially; and while the gist of the original tradition will sometimes survive a series of retellings, not infrequently, it turns out, even this gist will quickly be lost.

More than any other figure from the later twentieth century, Jack Goody led the vanguard in the study of oral cultures, and his prolific publications on this

topic have largely defined the field. As noted above, Goody observed that in the absence of a written text or a recording, it is not possible either to judge if two versions of an oral tradition are identical or to memorize a text verbatim. Without such a fixed, material standard, it is simply impossible to maintain textual stability; only recourse to such documentation can correct any errors or changes introduced through the process of oral replication. We are quite fortunate in our case that Goody had occasion to consider the significance of these findings particularly as they relate to the Qur'anic text. "Indeed in oral cultures," he remarks, "it would be virtually impossible to remember a long work like the Qur'an." Only with the introduction of writing "as a tool to develop oral memory" is there any "possibility of a canonized text that has consistency over time and place," since "with a written text you could look back at it again and again and get it absolutely right."³⁰ Given the circumstances of a predominately nonliterate culture at the beginnings of Islam, then, we must assume that major changes were introduced to the traditions taught by Muhammad as they were remembered in the decades after his death, if not even already during his lifetime. Only the establishment of an authoritative and invariable written version could bring such constant change to an end.

Goody's primary fieldwork among the LoDagaa people in northern Ghana documented the constant fluidity of oral tradition with striking clarity, offering an extremely useful perspective for considering how oral transmission must have similarly affected the text of the Qur'an. Goody focused his analysis particularly on the transmission of a lengthy sacred text that circulated orally among the LoDagaa, known as the Bagre. The Bagre is an extended religious poem that is recited in rhythmic speech primarily in a liturgical context and the contents of which provide the basic structure for the LoDagaa's social and ritual practices. It is not a bad match, in effect, for the Qur'an, inasmuch as Neuwirth and many other scholars following her lead would describe the Qur'an in very similar fashion. When Goody began his studies of the Bagre, he assumed—naively, as he tells us—that "all the recitations [of the Bagre] were 'one,' the same (*boyen*)," in large part because the LoDagaa, like the bards of Yugoslavia, insisted that they were.³¹ Goody knew that there would be differences in the wording, to be sure, but he assumed that at the very least he would find a "common frame" that characterized all the recitations, despite the myriad of variants in each narration. Yet he discovered that preservation of even a common framework stands beyond the limits of oral culture, and such basic consistency exceed its capabilities and those of its members. Instead, Goody found that "changes in a recitation can be very radical, in a generative way, leading to something 'other.' . . . The last version is always the starting point. To see this process as nothing more than transformations within a frame seems to me to underestimate their extent."³² And herein, according to Goody, lies the primary significance of his findings "for social science and for the humanities generally": his studies of the Bagre "show how great a measure of

variation can exist in the performances of oral cultures; not in all their facets but in the case of long recitations I would be prepared to say ‘has to exist.’”³³

Goody documented the highly productive and transformative nature of oral transmission in nonliterate culture during two separate trips to northern Ghana, about two decades apart from one another. During his initial visit, in 1949 or 1950, Goody transcribed a version of the Bagre by dictation from a single source, which of necessity was done outside the Bagre’s usual liturgical setting, since it took ten days for him to write it all down.³⁴ At the time he was convinced, under the influence of Claude Levi-Strauss and Bronislaw Malinowski, that what he had documented on this first trip was in fact “a fixed recitation that people knew by heart and that was handed down in more or less exact form.” In hindsight, he remarks, he “should have known better,” noting elsewhere that he should have taken more seriously from the start Bartlett’s experiments on “serial reproduction,” which we discussed in the previous chapter.³⁵

Then, in 1970, Goody returned to northern Ghana, this time equipped with a portable tape recorder, which made collecting data much easier and also allowed for recordings to be made of actual performances of the Bagre in its ritual context. Now, armed with a recorder, the anthropologist could easily collect multiple iterations of the same cultural text with ease, and over the course of the next several years, Goody and his associates made recordings of fifteen versions of one part of the Bagre, the “White Bagre,” and nine recordings of a different part known as the “Black Bagre.” What Goody discovered was astonishing and served to affirm and augment the earlier findings of Parry and Lord, demonstrating that the variations introduced during the process of oral transmission were generally even more frequent and significant than their pioneering fieldwork would suggest.³⁶ The differences in the various performances of the Bagre were great. “They were significant even when the same man recited on different occasions and greater still when different men recited on the same occasion (for the myth had to be recited three times at each ceremony). Between nearby settlements, only 16 kilometres apart, they are enormous. These differences have to do not only with length, i.e. whether some incidents have been included or excluded. The differences are of a transformative, generative kind.”³⁷ Goody also found that some of the elements that he initially considered most essential to the narrative were simply dropped from other versions.

Even the most formulaic and frequently repeated parts of the text were subject to extraordinary variability. For instance, the Bagre has a sort of short introductory prayer that Goody identifies as being more or less equivalent to the Lord’s Prayer in Christian culture. This brief litany of roughly ten lines and no more than a few dozen words, which he calls “the Invocation,” is known to everyone in the culture and repeated often on multiple occasions. Goody relates that

Even when I had given up the idea that the Bagre was fixed, I still believed the Invocation to be rigid, because people would confidently begin to speak these lines, like

reciting the Lord's Prayer. An elder would correct a younger man's version, and say, "no not 'hallowed be *your* name' but 'hallowed by *thy* name.'" However I have now recorded some dozen versions of these lines and none of them are precisely, word for word, the same as any other. If an elder corrects my recital, it is from his own memorized version, his personalized model, which differs slightly from that of others. Since there is no fixed text to correct from, variation is constantly creeping in, partly due to forgetting, partly due to perhaps unconscious attempts at improvement, at adjustment, at creation.³⁸

The difference in stability between this invocation, which turns out to have "almost as many variants as speakers," and the Lord's Prayer is of course, as Goody elsewhere notes, determined by the fact that the latter is a written text, which allows it to be faithfully memorized.³⁹ Accordingly, we must assume that even the shortest of Qur'anic texts, such as the last thirty or so suras for instance, would likewise have been highly unstable and subject to alteration during the process of their oral transmission.

Goody's findings concerning the volatility and persistent transformation of texts in an oral culture have since been verified in any number of anthropological studies. At the same time, no study of either memory or an oral culture has emerged that would challenge these findings. There is simply no evidence that oral transmission, in the absence of a written document, can relay cultural material with any degree of accuracy beyond the most basic gist level of information. We find as much to be confirmed by another leading scholar of orality and oral cultures, Jan Vansina, whose work was contemporary with Goody's. Vansina's fieldwork also took place among oral cultures in Africa, in his case primarily in Rwanda and Burundi. Yet unlike Goody, who studied the liturgical recitation of lengthy, unwritten religious texts from memory, Vansina instead chose to investigate the oral transmission of historical events from the recent past within these nonliterate communities.

In effect, Vansina's studies take the approach of Bartlett's earlier experiments with serial memory out of the lab and into the real world, where he observes the operation of memory in successive oral transmissions of a living cultural tradition, within an actual nonliterate community. Vansina's summary of his findings, based on many years of studying oral tradition in the field as well as numerous other published studies of oral cultures, is worth quoting at some length.

A testimony [a report about the past] is no more than a mirage of the reality it describes. The initial informant in an oral tradition gives, either consciously or unconsciously, a distorted account of what has really happened because he sees only some aspects of it and places his own interpretation on what he has seen. His testimony is stamped by his personality, colored by his private interests, and set within the framework of reference provided by the cultural values of the society he belongs to. This initial testimony then undergoes alterations and distortions at the hands of

all the other informants in the chain of transmission, down to and including the very last one, all of them being influenced by the same factors as the first.⁴⁰

Indeed, the more times a tradition has been repeated and transmitted, the more often it will change in significant ways with each reiteration, so that “every time a tradition is recited the testimony may be a variant.”⁴¹

Nevertheless, as Vansina also notes, the alteration of a tradition during the process of its oral transmission is not only a consequence of our rather limited abilities to remember things from the past with much accuracy. To be sure, the weaknesses of our memories play a decisive role in introducing significant modifications to the testimonies we are able to give of past events. Yet this corrupting factor is compounded by the fact that when individuals pass along a memory to others, their accounts are always determined by the circumstances in which they relate them. Such circumstances include, most notably, their reasons for wanting to pass the information along, the particular person(s) to whom they are telling their story, and the conditions in which they have chosen or been asked to provide a testimony. For these reasons, Vansina observes that, depending on the circumstances and audience, “the same persons with regard to the same series of events will tell two different, even contradictory stories.”⁴² Consider the following example, suggested by Susan Engel, which helpfully highlights some of the ways that our recollection will shape a memory differently to meet specific conditions.

Think back to some charged event in your own life. Perhaps the first fight you had with your spouse. Now imagine telling that story to your mate, many years later at the celebration of your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, telling it to the divorce lawyer, telling it to your children now that they are grown up, writing it in a humorous memoir of your now famous life, or telling it to your therapist. In each case the person you are telling it to, and the reasons you are telling it, will have a formative effect on the memory itself.⁴³

These sorts of influences, and not only the lapses of an individual memory, effect the transformation and distortion of a particular tradition each time that it is transmitted. Yet each individual or audience will have knowledge only of the particular version that they hear. Moreover, on many occasions an explanation or interpretation of the testimony may be offered, and then, on subsequent tellings, this element will become a part of the testimony itself.⁴⁴ The result is that with every iteration of the tradition, “each informant who forms a link in the chain of transmission creates new variants, and changes are made every time the tale is told. It is therefore not surprising to find that very often the original testimony has disappeared altogether.”⁴⁵ This means that, in oral transmission, not even the gist of a memory always survives. Nevertheless, the context in which an informant relates a tradition seems to have even more control over its content than even Vansina recognizes: indeed, the listeners may have more influence in shaping the tradition than the actual speaker. As Elizabeth Tonkin notes, in an effort to further

refine Vansina's model, the concerns of individuals in the audience or the specific moment will greatly shape how the tradition is received, while the indeterminacy of textual meaning also accelerates the process of change. Tonkin thus presents us with a model of oral transmission that is even more unstable than Vansina's observations would suggest. Even the term oral "tradition," she maintains, implies too much stability and seems to smuggle ideas of print culture into our conceptualization of oral cultures.⁴⁶

There is, of course, one must note, the oft-repeated claim that the Indian Vedic traditions were transmitted orally and without any written exemplars for centuries with verbatim accuracy. Somehow, we are expected to believe, the Vedic tradition poses a singular exception to the limitations of oral tradition and human memory as repeatedly verified by both memory science and anthropological study. In the main it is scholars of ancient South Asian languages who have advanced this position, no doubt because they wish to date the text of the Vedas as it has come down to us as early as possible.⁴⁷ In this way, they can imagine that its contents directly reveal the religious culture of the Indian subcontinent over two thousand years ago. One should note that not even all Indologists are convinced that this could be possible, and some—Louis Renou, for instance—have instead recognized that "the organisation of the Vedic canon is hardly conceivable without the help of writing," and furthermore that most likely from early on "the recitation of religious texts was accompanied by the use of manuscripts as an accessory."⁴⁸ One should also perhaps note that specialists on the closely related Avestan corpus of the Zoroastrian tradition, which also long circulated in oral transmission, are in general highly skeptical—as they should be—that such transmission could faithfully preserve a text without significant change over generations.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the opinion that the Vedas were transmitted verbatim in the absence of any written version remains strongly held in some sectors of South Asian studies, even as it flies in the face of all evidence otherwise indicating its impossibility.⁵⁰

Indeed, one of the most influential scholars of early India, Frits Staal, defended the Vedas' verbatim oral transmission by arguing—astonishingly—that we simply must set aside our cultural "prejudice that writing is more reliable and therefore better than memory."⁵¹ Nevertheless, as we have seen, this is no mere cultural prejudice of the West; one thinks, for instance, of the Chinese proverb, "The faintest ink is better than the best memory." But more to the point, this fact has been repeatedly demonstrated by both memory science and anthropology, whose findings Staal seems to ignore completely. To the contrary, scholars with actual expertise in studying human memory, oral cultures, and oral transmission have regularly expressed thoroughgoing skepticism regarding this claim on behalf of the Brahmins, and rightly so, it would seem. Belief in the verbatim transmission of the Vedas over dozens of centuries with no written exemplars is simply an Indian cultural myth that certain scholars have chosen to believe without any sufficient evidence because it serves their research interests. Scholarly assent to this

cultural tradition is the real cultural prejudice in play in these debates, and it regularly defies and ignores compelling evidence to the contrary from other disciplines. Indeed, as Goody remarks, our prejudices in this matter seem to run in a direction counter to the one that Staal imagines: "As members of a written culture we tend to read back our own memory procedures onto oral cultures. We look at oral cultures through literate eyes, whereas we need to look at orality from within."⁵²

Goody has most directly and definitively addressed the effective impossibility of verbatim oral transmission of the Vedas in the absence of a written version, although many other experts on oral cultures appear to have unanimously reached the same judgment. Goody catalogs a number of features inherent to the Vedas that are generally hallmarks of production within a written culture. Likewise, as noted above, he identifies the kind of specific memory techniques that the Brahmins today use to memorize their texts as belonging to literate, rather than nonliterate cultures, as is also the impulse to commit texts to verbatim memory itself, which seems to arise only with literacy. For these reasons and others as well, it is all but certain that the ancient Vedas were in fact "a written tradition being passed on largely by oral means."⁵³ Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Goody observes that prior to the existence of a written version of the Vedas, there is simply no way at all to verify the claim of exact oral transmission: "the proposition itself seems incapable of proof, or even support, before the advent of writing itself. Only then can we tell if we have a similar or identical work being transmitted over time."⁵⁴ Otherwise, like the bards of Yugoslavia and the LoDagaa, they would simply insist that every version was exactly the same, even when they were not. Ruth Finnegan, another leading scholar on oral tradition, underscores this same problem—that prior to the existence of written exemplars, we simply have no idea at all what the state of the Vedic texts was. Finnegan also emphasizes that the archaic style in which the Vedas are written affords no guarantee that they have been transmitted orally without alteration from great antiquity. Rather, it is quite common for poetry and sacred texts to be expressed using an antiquated parlance that is culturally expected for these genres.⁵⁵

Walter Ong, perhaps the most influential modern theorist of orality and literacy, also notes the fundamental improbability of these assertions that the Vedas were transmitted orally verbatim for centuries in the absence of writing. In particular, Ong notes the complete failure of those making such claims to engage at all with the findings of Parry and Lord in regard to oral "memorizations."⁵⁶ To this we should also add the decisive ethnographic evidence compiled by Goody, Vansina, Finnegan, and others. Ong helpfully summarizes the issues involved as follows:

In the wake of the recent studies of oral memory, however, questions arise as to the ways in which memory of the Vedas actually worked in a purely oral setting—if there ever was such a setting for the Vedas totally independent of texts. Without a text, how could a given hymn—not to mention the totality of hymns in the collections—be

stabilized word for word, and that over many generations? . . . Mere assertions, frequently made by literates, that such lengthy texts were retained verbatim over generations in a totally oral society can no longer be taken at face value without verification. . . . In point of fact, the Vedic texts—on which we base knowledge of the Vedas today—have a complex history and many variants, facts which seem to suggest that they hardly originated from an absolutely verbatim oral tradition.⁵⁷

Yet, as important as the results of anthropological studies of contemporary oral cultures are, the decisive factor in this case comes from the scientific study of human memory. As noted above, memory science has demonstrated that lengthy verbatim recall of a text of fifty or more words in the absence of writing is effectively impossible and has never once been documented. Ever. Rather, such verbatim memorization “arises as an adaptation to written text and does not arise in cultural settings where text is unknown.”⁵⁸ In the current state of our scientific knowledge, then, what many Indologists have maintained about the verbatim oral transmission of Vedas without a written text is simply not possible given the limitations of the human memory. Since, as Vansina notes, “so far there exists no proof that there is any inborn difference in the cerebral faculties between the various races of man,” we must dismiss out of hand any claims that the Vedas were transmitted verbatim orally in the absence of a written tradition.⁵⁹ Evidence from both anthropology and memory science plainly rebuts these claims, while the matter of the Vedas’ exact transmission can only be assessed once we have written versions to compare with oral recitations. Thus, it would seem that, despite the wishful thinking of many South Asianists, this matter is effectively settled. Verbatim recall of a text of more than fifty words is beyond the capacity of the human memory, absent a written text. The burden of proof now falls on any Indologists who would persist in this claim about the Vedas to demonstrate that it is in fact possible. The same conclusion applies no less to any suggestion that the Qur’an could have been orally transmitted verbatim prior to the establishment of its canonical, written form: this hypothesis is simply an impossibility.⁶⁰

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND EARLIEST ISLAM

We have already drawn attention to the considerable influence that the immediate context and audience will exercise on an individual’s recollection of a tradition in an oral setting. As we begin to move further in this direction, away from the functions and limitations of individual memory and toward the influence of the community on memory, we quickly begin to approach the very closely related phenomenon of cultural, social, or collective memory. Cultural memory consists of the memories shared by members of a group about their collective history: it is, as Jan Assmann succinctly defines it, “the handing down of meaning.”⁶¹ For the most part, these memories were not experienced directly by individual

members of the group themselves, but instead they are remembered by the community and imparted to its members. These collective memories give a group—a family, a tribe, a nation, an empire—cohesion, demarcating and reinforcing its self-identity, core beliefs, and values.⁶² Collective memories are thus communally shaped memories of the past whose function is primarily to present an account of history that serves the social and cultural needs of a group in the present. Not surprisingly, religious beliefs in particular—a community's religious history and sacred memory—are regularly a vital part of a group's cultural memory. As a group progresses through time, its collective memory determines what is remembered, how it is remembered, and how memories of the past will change over time—often significantly. It is yet another aspect of memory that limits our direct knowledge of past events, even if at the same time it opens up extraordinary new perspectives for thinking about how we study and remember the past, only a few of which we will be able to consider presently.

The single most important figure in the study of collective memory is the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whom we have already had occasion to meet in chapter 2. It is striking just how much Halbwachs's understanding of how our memories work parallels Bartlett's contemporary findings regarding the reconstructive nature of memory, even as the latter was still in the process of making this discovery through his experiments. Like Bartlett, Halbwachs determined that "a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered."⁶³ Halbwachs first published these views in his 1925 study *On Collective Memory*,⁶⁴ in time for them to be embraced wholeheartedly by Bartlett when he published *Remembering* seven years later in 1932.⁶⁵ Moreover, according to Halbwachs, it is largely thanks to our collective memories that we as individuals are able to produce memories. "There are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be preserved only within individual memory."⁶⁶ Rather, prior to and undergirding our individual memories, "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection."⁶⁷ Collective memory provides the structure that enables us to coherently recall events from the past; and therefore the past, even as we remember it individually, is a social construction.⁶⁸

What individuals remember, then, is highly determined in advance by the collective memories that they have acquired from the various groups to which they belong. Yet a group's collective memory is largely, although not entirely, governed by the community's concerns and self-understanding in the present. Of course, one must acknowledge that much of a community's cultural memory has been determined by things that actually did happen in the past: it is not entirely a collective mythology grounded purely in the present. Nevertheless, despite this

concession, the influence of present concerns looms exceedingly large in both collective and individual memories. As Halbwachs explains, "If, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then knowledge of the original circumstances must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer in the past."⁶⁹ What is considered memorable in the present, and thus what is remembered, is not determined by what actually happened, but instead predominantly according to how the group has come to understand and represent itself: "In other words, historical events are worth remembering only when the contemporary society is motivated to define them as such."⁷⁰ And as Halbwachs highlights here, a group's religious convictions at any given moment will play a particularly active role in shaping its collective memory, so that as beliefs may change, memories of the past will readily change to meet them.

Collective memory is no less a feature of literate cultures than it is of nonliterate ones, and the powerful control that present concerns and conditions exert on the dynamics of a group's cultural memory is not hindered by the presence of the written word. Indeed, even with widespread literacy and easy access to the written word dramatic changes in collective memories of the past can take place. Perhaps one of the most famous examples concerns the memory of President Abraham Lincoln in the United States. Today Lincoln is remembered as the greatest of American presidents, by a wide margin. Yet Lincoln's contemporaries hardly considered him great in any way. As Barry Schwartz observes in his landmark study, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Identity*, "When Abraham Lincoln awoke on the last day of his life, almost everyone could find something about him to dislike."⁷¹ Moreover, despite his opposition to slavery, Lincoln was in his day well-known as a white supremacist, and yet in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, he came to be remembered instead as a great champion of racial equality.⁷² Christopher Columbus is another figure whose reputation has shifted decidedly in the opposite direction in the American collective memory. In the middle of the twentieth century, Columbus was still revered, as he long had been, for being a great explorer who "discovered" America and ultimately gave rise to the United States, serving also as an icon for the Italian American community. Now Columbus has become an intensely controversial figure, who is reviled in many quarters for introducing, through his "discovery," the widespread subjugation and genocide of Native American peoples. Even as I write these words, statues of Columbus are being torn down by protesters across America, something unthinkable only fifty years ago.

One can cite examples from other cultures as well, one of the most famous being the changing status of Masada in the Israeli and Jewish collective memories. At Masada, a small force of Jews liberated this remote outpost from its Roman garrison during the First Jewish-Roman War and made a heroic last stand there against the Romans (in 73 or 74 CE): they ultimately committed collective suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. Until the rise of Zionism and

the birth of the state of Israel, the events of Masada were of little significance in the Jewish collective memory. Zionism, however, imbued the memory of this event with profound new significance, and for the past century, Masada has served as a principal site in Israeli collective memory. It serves as a symbol of “military valor and national commitment,” in a nation where, “like the besieged and outnumbered defenders of Masada, contemporary Israelis find themselves surrounded by hostile and numerically superior forces.”⁷³ Nevertheless, the myth of Masada in Israeli collective memory has been fashioned from a “highly selective representation of Josephus’s historical record” that “reshaped the story and transformed its meaning” to better suit the circumstances of contemporary Israeli society and culture.⁷⁴ This is what collective memory does. It adapts reminiscence of the past so that it will comport with present experience.

Perhaps my favorite example comes from nineteenth-century England, in the Luddite movement. Between 1811 and 1817 there were a number of uprisings across England, occasioned by the introduction of new weaving technology that would make many jobs redundant. Although these insurrections were only loosely connected in their organization, they were united in protesting in the name of a certain “Ned Ludd,” whence they drew their name. As the movement grew, Ludd became increasingly central to its identity, and the protesters drew inspiration from his actions and his angry letters expressing outrage at the workers’ exploitation. Songs and poems were written about him, valorizing him as an army captain who became a general and was eventually proclaimed king; he even had a heroic son who fought in the United States during the War of 1812. All of this, and yet there is no record of any Ned (or Edward) Ludd ever existing at this time!⁷⁵ The collective memory completely imagined him, his life, and even his writings into existence in order to give meaning and coherence to their rebellion. This all happened, one should note, in a society with widespread printing and literacy levels approaching 50 percent.⁷⁶

There is an important lesson here for scholars of early Islam who would insist that the only alternative to accepting the accuracy of the early Islamic historical tradition at more or less face value is to posit a massive, coordinated conspiracy to distort and disguise the actual facts of Islamic origins. Such arguments stand in total ignorance of how collective memory works. The examples above, and particularly the case of Ned Ludd, alert us to the creative and shifting nature of collective memories, even to the extent of inventing a person who never existed at all and composing writings in his name. There is simply no reason whatsoever to assume that the memories of Muhammad’s earliest followers would have operated any differently. Although I have no doubts that Muhammad, unlike Ned Ludd, actually existed, we must recognize that his followers also would have rather “naturally” adjusted their memories of him and the foundation of their community, often quite radically, in order to meet new, changing circumstances. Just as other communities across the globe and the ages have adjusted the memories of

their founders over time, Muhammad's followers surely ascribed to him deeds and words that he never said or did as their collective memory developed. No conspiracy required, only entirely ordinary and expected development in the group's collective memory.

Such changes are all the more to be expected given the nonliterate culture of Muhammad's earliest followers. In contrast to Lincoln, for instance, there is no written archive to search for evidence of how Muhammad was actually remembered during his lifetime. We have instead only the highly malleable collective memories formed by his earliest followers and passed down among them for decades in oral transmission. In oral cultures, collective memory is especially active in shaping and controlling what will be remembered.⁷⁷ Beginning even with the very first transmission, as we already noted, an informant will attempt to tailor his telling of a tradition to suit his audience, so that "some subjects will be glossed over, and mention will only be made of things which would have the approval of everyone present."⁷⁸ If some event or detail does not connect with the values or collective memory of the group, it either will not be remembered or will be spontaneously transformed into something more relevant for the group. The group will remember what it needs to remember in the way that it needs to be remembered, and with no written records, once a memory has been changed in its retelling, in an oral culture, all earlier versions vanish into oblivion.

Indeed, "collective forgetting" is no less an essential part of any group's collective memory than remembering. In some cases, such collective forgetting can take the form of a "repressive erasure," in which the state takes action to ensure that something is forgotten.⁷⁹ In the case of early Islam, the deliberate destruction of the different early versions of the Qur'an constitutes a perfect example of this sort of forgetting. Likewise, there is a sort of collective forgetting that involves the repression and eventual elimination of memories of a community's past that are too embarrassing or shameful to remember.⁸⁰ Again, in the case of early Islam, one may consider the degree to which liberal Muslims, especially in the contemporary West, are determined to forget the enormous violence and the aggressive colonialism that was an integral part of the foundation of Islam. Yet for our purposes, the most relevant form of collective forgetting is what Paul Connerton names "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity."⁸¹ We witness this sort of forgetting frequently in the later Islamic tradition's memory of its origins: for instance, in regard to the troubling diversity of the early Qur'anic text in the community, the initial inclusion of Jews as Jews by the Constitution of Medina, the likely inclusion of some Christians as Christians within the community of the Believers, and the centrality of Jerusalem and its Temple for the early tradition. All these were aspects of Muhammad's new religious movement that his later followers have sought to forget—in these particular cases with less success than in many others, presumably. Their elimination was essential in the formation of a new Islamic sectarian identity separate from Judaism and Christianity, focused

on an Arab identity, the Arabic language, an Arabic scripture, and an Arabian sacred geography.

These transformations in group memory can take place both deliberately and in real time. For instance, Maurice Bloch relates an episode from his fieldwork among the Zafimaniry people of Madagascar that illustrates perfectly the transformative role of collective memory and forgetting, on an oral tradition, even in a tradition's earliest recollection. Bloch tells the story of his return visit to a family living in a remote village, where he had been conducting fieldwork periodically for twenty years. Since he had stayed with this particular family in the past, they welcomed him enthusiastically when he arrived and brought him inside. Immediately, they asked him for the details of his trip, the last bit of which had been difficult, and what he had been doing since he was last in their village. Once the family had interviewed him to their satisfaction, they invited the other villagers to come in and talk to their guest. The others also asked about the journey and his recent activities, which Bloch repeatedly described for the curious villagers. Yet each time he told the story, he was repeatedly interrupted by a senior member of his host family. He describes the situation as follows:

What was very obvious to me as a participant was how the endless repetition of the interchange involved the building up of a received narrative account of my absence and return. . . . At every repetition what I could say and could not say became clearer and clearer, when I could answer or when I had to leave other senior members of the household answer for me became fixed. Rapidly we became experts at this performance and everything went extremely smoothly.⁸²

In the course of its very first retellings, the narrative of Bloch's travels was reshaped to accommodate what was for the group

an apparently inevitable and morally appropriate sequence. I could not come sooner because the university had been saving up money in order to be able to afford the fare; the year before, when I had intended to come, my parents had asked me not to come because they knew that there had been riots in the capital of Madagascar and because they had felt ill, . . . and so on.

As he continues to explain what happened, "the construction of the narrative abolished the specificity of time by reordering and making the past follow a predefined pattern, that, it did this by dissolving the specificity of events into a prototypical present."⁸³ Thus, Bloch's account of his journey and the period of his absence were very quickly accommodated to conform to patterns that served the collective memory and values of his host community. The version received by the community was ultimately poor in detail, but rich in moral value for the community, so that "*their* memory of his arrival had been manipulated to accord with local expectations of what made an appropriate story."⁸⁴ There is again no reason to assume that Muhammad's earliest followers would have been immune to this same tendency. Without question, their memories of Muhammad and his teachings

would have been quickly adapted to conform to their cultural expectations and collective memory.

Nevertheless, during the period in question, the middle of the seventh century, “Islamic” collective identity was still very much in the process of formation and constant reformation as the nature of the community and the circumstances that it inhabited were themselves rapidly changing. The main repositories of existing Abrahamic cultural memory available to members of the early community of the Believers would have come primarily from contemporary Judaism and Christianity. Perhaps there were also collective memories, among the earliest followers at least, that had formed in the Hijaz on the basis of local cultural traditions before the expansion of the movement to encompass the Roman and Sasanian Near East. Yet the main collective memories that would have been active in shaping their new form of Abrahamic monotheism and its content would have come from these religious ancestors: there is no clear evidence of a generic, non-Jewish or Christian Abrahamic monotheism that was present in the seventh-century Hijaz that could have filled this role instead. Accordingly, we must recognize that the religious collective memory of the community of the Believers during much of its first century would have been profoundly determined by the traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

Moreover, during this period Muhammad’s followers were at a cultural stage where the living memory of the community and its collective memory were not yet entirely differentiated, which would only make the latter even more volatile than it is in other more established communities. As both Halbwachs and Assmann note, a community’s living memory, which Assmann terms its “communicative memory” (following Vansina), is very short lived and subject to rapid changes.⁸⁵ And as Vansina demonstrated, a group’s communicative or living memory can at best recall about eighty years into the past, growing weaker the further back one goes from the present moment. Beyond this point, even the “gist” of what happened has become lost and extremely little at all can be recalled. In a well-established community then, the group’s memory of events that took place over a century effectively evaporates. This memory loss is not a matter of accuracy or alteration; rather, the group has simply forgotten what happened that long ago, and, after eighty years, “one finds either a hiatus or just one or a few names, given with some hesitation.”⁸⁶ Nevertheless, when it comes to remembering the period of its origins, the community’s memory, its collective memory in this case, becomes remarkably clear and detailed—not that it is accurate, but that it preserves a remarkably clear and detailed version of the memory of these events as they formed at a certain later point in time. Thus, as Vansina concludes, “Historical consciousness works on only two registers: time of origin [i.e., collective memory] and recent times [communicative memory],” with “recent times” including no more than the past eighty years.⁸⁷

In the seventh century, Muhammad’s followers had not been around long enough for a sharp differentiation to emerge between their living memory and

the collective memory, so that the latter could have attained a degree of relative stability. Instead, as the Believers' living memory was constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances from moment to moment and place to place, their collective memory would also have been rapidly shifting and evolving. Here once again, comparison with similar studies of the early Christian tradition can help us to understand the dynamics of formative Islam. Halbwachs considered precisely this issue, the relation between living memory and collective memory, as it would have impacted formative Christianity during the first decades of its history. As he observes, at this time "Christianity was in effect still very close to its origins; it wasn't easy to distinguish what was remembrance from what was consciousness of the present. Past and present were confused because the evangelical drama did not yet seem to be at its end. The last act was still awaited."⁸⁸ The same could (and should) be said of Islam during its formative period. Until the turn of the eighth century, there would have been very little gap between the community's living memory and its collective memory, with the exception, of course, of those aspects of Jewish and Christian collective memory that Muhammad and his followers had appropriated. At this stage, the community of the Believers, like the nascent Christians before it, "did not yet oppose its message to contemporary collective thought as a relation of a past to a present that was not linked to it."⁸⁹ Instead, the Believers' faith "was immersed in the present and was in part conflated with the thought and spontaneous life of contemporary groups."⁹⁰ For this reason, Halbwachs further suggests that "in certain respects a Catholic living ten or fifteen centuries later will understand the Gospels less well than a pagan, a Jew, an Oriental, or a Roman of the first two centuries."⁹¹ One suspects that this is equally true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Qur'an.

For most of the seventh century, then, Muhammad's followers had a memory that was still immersed in the social and cultural milieux of the late ancient Near East, from which they had yet to clearly differentiate themselves.⁹² They eventually would do this in large part by developing a distinctive collective memory for their group, different from those inherited from Judaism and Christianity, a process that was no doubt delayed by their fervent belief that the world would soon come to an end, making such an endeavor rather pointless for a time. Only as the end continued to remain in abeyance, and the community's living memory grew ever distant from the time of origins did they develop a collective memory of their own. Yet, as Islamic collective memory began to evolve, one imagines that it initially took different shapes within the various pockets of Believers that were scattered across their empire. The basic elements of this nascent collective memory were, as Halbwachs says of the early Christians, "still dispersed among a multitude of spatially separated small communities. These communities were neither astonished, anxious, nor scandalized that the beliefs of one community differed from those of another and that the community of today was not exactly the same as that of yesterday."⁹³ Thus, we should expect to find a significant degree of diversity

in religious faith and memory among the different early communities of the Believers, scattered and outnumbered as they were among the Jews and Christians of their burgeoning empire. Only with 'Abd al-Malik's program of Arabization and Islamicization was a new, distinctively Islamic collective memory and identity concretized and established for this new religious community. It was a collective identity that was formed from the top down and imposed, at the expense of any other alternative collective memories, with the full power and backing of the imperial state.

CONCLUSIONS

By all indications, as we have seen, the Qur'an came into existence in a culture that was fundamentally nonliterate. For the first several decades of its history, its traditions circulated orally within the community, in the absence of any definitive written version. Admittedly, it is certainly possible, if perhaps even likely, that some individuals had begun making limited notes and textual aids prior to its formal canonization. Yet the production of such rudimentary written materials does not mark a change from what was still a fundamentally oral culture in which the traditions of the Qur'an were transmitted orally.⁹⁴ Even as more substantial written collections began to be made in the main centers of the early Islamic empire, the absence of a single canonized version, authorized by central authorities and recognized by the community, meant that these collections would have remained relatively open to changes coming particularly from the Qur'an's oral usage and transmission. We will examine this topic further in the following chapter, as we consider the transition of the Qur'anic traditions from oral transmission to written versions. The Qur'an that we have is therefore not to be simplistically identified with what Muhammad taught his followers in Mecca and Medina, as so many modern scholars have been wont to assert. Given the conditions in which memories of his teachings circulated among his followers for decades, it is not possible that his exact words have been preserved.

In light of what we have seen in this chapter, we must assume that as Muhammad's followers were remembering and transmitting what he had taught them, these traditions would have been subject to alteration on a massive scale. They would have been recalled each time only as fragments of what had been heard in the previous instance, and the gaps in these fragments would need to be filled in with information drawn from general knowledge or an accumulation of other similar experiences. In each iteration, the transmitter must complete these lacunae in the memory according to his or her own predispositions and prejudices as well as the expectations of the audience. The concerns of the present circumstance, of both the speaker and the audience, would determine how certain details are recalled—if they are at all. As Werner Kelber nicely sums it up, "What is transmitted orally, therefore, is never all of the information available, but only the kind of

data that are orally pliable and retrievable. What lives on in memory, moreover, is what is necessary for present life. Neither oral composition nor oral transmission can ever escape the influence of audience and social circumstances."⁹⁵

Given the dynamics of oral tradition, as well as its limitations and regular distortions, searching for the original words of Muhammad is clearly a fool's errand. It is utterly implausible, not to say impossible, that we have them. Again, unless his teachings were taken down under his supervision while he was alive, which is not in evidence, to imagine that we today have the words of Muhammad in the Qur'an is either an act of religious faith, in the case of the devout Muslim, or a delusion, in the case of the modern historian. At best we can expect to find in the Qur'an some of the basic gist of what Muhammad taught his followers, as these teachings were remembered and retold again and again by his followers within the sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East. This gist would include, presumably, monotheism, eschatological fervor, divine revelation through prophecy, piety before God, personal morality within the community of the Believers, concern to prepare for the final judgment, expansion of the community through conquest, Abrahamic identity, and embrace of the collective memory of the Abrahamic traditions (at least in parts). Muhammad's initial followers likely received this general religious framework from his teaching and were able to preserve an emphasis on these broad points, even as Muhammad's words and deeds became ever more faint, forgotten, and reimagined. The bearers of these oral traditions would have exercised immense freedom and creativity in their reproduction, giving little heed to the exact words or much at all beyond the basic outline of the gist and perhaps certain tropes and formulas, filling in huge gaps each time along the way. In very many instances, even the gist of what Muhammad had taught would quickly dissolve, falling victim to the fallibility of the human memory and the edits of oral tradition.

The realities of the human memory and its limitations, on the one hand, and of oral transmission in all its variation and adaptation on the other, can only lead us to the following conclusion about the text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, as we have it, was simply not composed by Muhammad in Mecca and Medina. Rather, his early followers composed it while living in the newly occupied territories. In reality, the text of the Qur'an was continually recomposed, again and again, many times and in multiple circumstances by multiple individuals for multiple audiences as it was transmitted orally in the early decades of the Believers' movement. In each instance, the tradition being relayed would change to meet the moment, after having been already reshaped by the workings of the transmitter's memory and those coming before him or her. Then the memories of those who heard the tradition would reshuffle the tradition, and when each of them retold it to another audience, there would be still more alteration.

After a few such transmissions, we would be lucky if even the bare gist were retained. Bartlett's scientific studies of serial reproduction indicate that we should

be extremely skeptical that much of the original tradition would remain intact in such circumstances. Anthropological studies have confirmed that the patterns and limitations identified by memory science directly impact the oral transmission of culture in exactly the expected ways. Oral transmission is indeed extremely unstable in the absence of writing and remains so even with the introduction of limited efforts to take notes or record traditions in writing. So long as the primary medium of transmission remains oral, change will remain constant and considerable. Therefore, Muhammad's words would have been quickly lost, and even the general content of his teaching would have been substantially altered by his followers—in most cases without *any* intent or even awareness on their part—after just a few reminiscences and transmissions. What we have in the Qur'anic text today must be recognized, to borrow the words of Alan Kirk, “as *the artifact of memory*, the artifact of the continual negotiation and semantic engagement between a community's present realities and its memorialized past, with neither factor swallowed up by or made epiphenomenal of the other.”⁹⁶

Since we have observed that audience and context play a determinative role in the alteration of orally transmitted traditions, we must consider the particular circumstances within which Muhammad's early followers were seeking to remember and transmit what he had taught them. Within only a few years of his death, according to the traditional chronology at least, Muhammad's followers entered the religiously charged landscapes of Mesopotamia, Syria, and, especially, Palestine.⁹⁷ The Believers quickly took possession of Jerusalem and the Abrahamic Holy Land, which stood squarely at the center of their sacred geography during these early years, holding far greater significance, it would seem, than the Hijaz, Mecca, and Yathrib. For the Believers, seizing control of these lands, the Promised Land of their Abrahamic inheritance, was directly linked to their fervent eschatological expectations, and, in line with these beliefs, they restored worship to the site of the Jewish Temple almost immediately. Jerusalem held enormous religious significance for Muhammad's earliest followers, to an extent that the later tradition is not always comfortable with remembering. Indeed, one can clearly see that steps were later taken in the collective memory to diminish Jerusalem's sacred preeminence and to transfer its sanctity instead to the Hijaz.⁹⁸ But since Jerusalem was such an important religious, cultural, and political center in the early Believers' movement, undoubtedly its ancient and illustrious religious traditions would have been irresistible to their religious imagination. We must consider, then, how this particular context would have influenced their repeated reminiscence and retelling of the things that Muhammad had taught them.

These were the places in which the Believers were initially remembering Muhammad's revelations, as they were living amid and engaging with the much larger Christian and Jewish communities around them. Given the operations and limitations of both memory and oral tradition, it would be completely naïve to imagine that the memories of Muhammad's teachings, which were grounded in

Abrahamic tradition and identity, would remain sequestered and unaffected by the encounter with these older, larger, and more theologically developed Abrahamic communities. As Muhammad's followers learned the religious traditions of their Jewish and Christian neighbors, these would inescapably have colored their own memories and retellings of Muhammad's revelations. Even without individual awareness, the sacred traditions of the Believers would have adapted to encompass these new elements. Moreover, new traditions that the Believers learned from Jews and Christians about their Abrahamic heritage and faith would surely have been adopted in order to fill in gaps in their sacred tradition. Indeed, there must have been many such lacunae, since, at least according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad's new religious community initially formed in relative isolation from the main centers of Abrahamic culture and tradition.

Numerous historical and archaeological studies of Syro-Palestine during the decades following the invasion and colonization of the region by Muhammad's followers reveal a consistent pattern suggesting that they would have readily adopted religious traditions from their new subjects. These studies have demonstrated a remarkable degree of economic and cultural continuity across the transition from Christian Roman rule to the new polity of the Believers, including, as we have seen, the Believers' employment of the same local elites in their government that previously had served the Romans.⁹⁹ One should note that these cultural, economic, and political continuities were obviously a result of Muhammad's followers assimilating to and adopting the patterns of the peoples whose lands they had come to occupy. One would only expect that this broader pattern of assimilative continuity would have applied just as equally to religious culture as to the many other elements of late ancient culture and society that they adopted once they had achieved dominion over the former Roman Near East.

Accordingly, we must recognize the very high probability that some significant parts of the Qur'an are likely not rooted directly in the revelations that Muhammad shared with his followers; instead, they were added only after coming into contact with the traditions of the Jews and Christians in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean. For instance, such would seem to be the case particularly with the Qur'anic traditions of Jesus's Nativity and of Alexander the Great, among others. It seems highly improbable that the herdsmen of Mecca would have been familiar with the particular sources of these traditions, inasmuch as they did not circulate widely even among the Christians of the late ancient Near East.¹⁰⁰ Thus, it would appear that in the end John Wansbrough was basically correct in his hypothesis that the traditions of the Qur'an were formed largely in the "sectarian milieu" of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Even if we must set aside his impossibly late date for the Qur'an's final composition, once we reframe things a little, he seems to have been largely right about the context of the Qur'an's genesis. This would also mean, as Wansbrough additionally suggested, that the origins of Islam as the distinctive new form of Abrahamic monotheism that has come down to us today are similarly

the result of religious developments that took place among Muhammad's early followers within this Near Eastern milieu, rather than in the relative isolation of the Hijaz. It was also in this context that the earliest collective memory of their community's history formed, their "salvation history," as Wansbrough calls it, a term for religious collective memory that he borrows from biblical studies. Although Wansbrough's execution of his hypothesis may have been lacking in many respects, in part owing to the limited data available to him at the time, many of his instincts about the beginnings of Islam nevertheless appear to retain their merit, at least if we take seriously the linguistic and cultural setting in which the Qur'an first took shape. While I would by no means embrace all the positions that Wansbrough advanced, in this regard, and in an unexpected way, he seems to have been largely correct. Indeed, as Gerald Hawting rightly observes, "the important work on early qur'ānic manuscripts since Wansbrough wrote may shorten the time span that he envisaged for this process, but does not invalidate his approach."¹⁰¹

The conditions and limitations of oral transmission should also oblige scholars of early Islam to turn away from the heavily philological models that have long reigned in the study of the Qur'an.¹⁰² Although philology will obviously remain of some considerable importance in Qur'anic studies, it must be supplanted with new alternative approaches grounded in the oral context within which the Qur'an first circulated and developed. Perspectives from anthropological studies of oral cultures are certainly to be welcomed, but we also have at the ready a powerful tool kit for this endeavor. The various methods developed over the past century for studying the biblical traditions have been designed with full consideration of their originally oral transmission. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the period of oral tradition was of course both very long and ancient, and likewise the text itself was gathered together over an extended period of time. Such circumstances are admittedly rather different from those of the Qur'an, and so it is quite unfortunate that when scholars have ventured to consider the Qur'an in light of biblical studies, they tend to compare the Qur'an with the Hebrew Bible and its investigation. Since these two corpora are indeed so different, there has been an ill-informed tendency to dismiss the methods and approaches of biblical studies out of hand as not applicable to the Qur'an.¹⁰³ Yet Qur'anic scholars have regrettably overlooked the remarkable similarity in the circumstances that produced both the New Testament gospels and the Qur'an. The time frame, the eschatological conditions, the nonliterate context, the delay in writing things down—these are all nicely paralleled. For this reason, we should turn especially to New Testament form criticism for perspective, particularly since this method was designed specifically for studying the traditions of the gospels during the process of their oral transmission. The basic approach of this method holds enormous promise for studying the formation of the Qur'an, even if Qur'anic specialists may ultimately find it helpful to make certain adjustments in the approach that are more suited to the Qur'anic material and the milieux in which it was circulating.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, given the vagaries of oral tradition, not to mention the limits of human memory, one must note that there is very little basis for placing much stock at all in the traditional Islamic accounts of the Qur'an's composition, contradictory and confused as they are. As we saw already in the first chapter, the tradition of 'Uthmān's collection of the Qur'an appears to have entered into circulation with al-Zuhri, whose students were perhaps the first to write this tradition down. Al-Zuhri was active around 730 CE, and his students made their collections a little later, seemingly in the middle of the eighth century.¹⁰⁵ This means that the tradition entered into circulation around eighty years after the events that it purports to describe and was committed to writing approximately one hundred years after the alleged events. Accordingly, even if there were actually some sort of a memory regarding 'Uthmān's actions in collecting a version of the Qur'an that originated during the time of his reign, it would have circulated orally for at least eighty years before reaching the form in which we have received it. Studies of both human memory and oral transmission have determined that even the gist of any actual memory would very likely have been long gone by this point. Likewise, the nascent Islamic collective memory will have been highly active in shaping all the various traditions about the collection of the Qur'an to fit its newly expected contours, so as to have the right people accomplish this in the right way at the right time. Indeed, it is entirely possible that in the formation of this collective memory during the eighth and ninth centuries, many, if not most, of the traditions about the Qur'an's origins were "invented"—unintentionally and even unconsciously—so that they would comport with the community's emerging self-identity and the memory of its collective past.

Certainly, in such circumstances, it would be a grave mistake to accept as historically factual the report of 'Uthmān's collection of the Qur'an in the absence of anything else that could confirm even its most basic elements. Yet not only is such corroboration lacking, but this account is contradicted by the many other traditions of the Qur'an's origins in the early Islamic tradition itself, most of which also will have been significantly altered, or invented, during decades of oral transmission. As we already noted, the Qur'an is notoriously absent from early Islamic culture and also from any of the reports about Muhammad's followers and their religious faith in the contemporary sources. The tradition of 'Uthmān's collection of the Qur'an is therefore not only weak; given the unreliability of oral transmission, as well as the historical improbability in general that 'Uthmān could have accomplished what is attributed to him, it is highly suspect. The same is not true, however, of the tradition that 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj supervised the composition of the Qur'an into its canonical form around the turn of the eighth century. Not only were the historical circumstances highly favorable for 'Abd al-Malik to accomplish the publication of a canonical version of the Qur'an, but we find external confirmation of this tradition in multiple sources close to the events in question. These qualities, in stark contrast to the 'Uthmānic tradition, make for a

historically credible report that can be relied on as transmitting information with a high degree of historical probability.

Before moving to the next chapter, however, it is also worth emphasizing that the limitations of oral transmission apply even more so to the extra-Qur'anic teachings of Muhammad, the hadith, as well as to his early biographies. The traditions in these collections circulated orally from memory for at least a century before they finally began to be written down sometime around the middle of the eighth century.¹⁰⁶ By this time, these memories would have departed profoundly from the original events and experiences that inspired them, regularly introducing substantial changes to earlier accounts as they were transmitted and also adding new information to the accumulated tradition along the way. In her *Slaves on Horses*, Patricia Crone draws our attention to an exceptional instance in which we are able to compare written and oral transmission of the same tradition side by side. The Constitution of Medina, as we mentioned in chapter 5, is regarded by wide consensus as an agreement between Muhammad and the tribes of Medina, including especially the Jewish tribes, that was almost certainly written down at the time. This written version survives through its transmission in Ibn Ishāq's early biography of Muhammad, from the middle of the eighth century, and also in the ninth-century *Kitāb al-amwāl*, the *Book of Revenue*, by Abū 'Ubayd.¹⁰⁷ Yet there are also any number of hadith that describe the Constitution of Medina in accounts written down much later by the early collectors of hadith after more than a century of oral transmission. As Crone compares the two, she observes that

Whereas written transmission exposed the document to a certain amount of weathering which it withstood extremely well, oral transmission resulted in the disintegration of the text, the loss of the context and a shift of the general meaning: the document which marked the foundation of the Prophet's polity has been reduced to a point about the special knowledge of the Prophet's cousin.¹⁰⁸

A problematic tradition from the early community regarding the inclusion of Jews was thus effectively erased in the process of oral transmission and re-remembered according to the patterns of collective memory.

The lesson could not be clearer, confirming in effect everything that we have seen in this chapter: oral transmission from memory quickly distorts and changes the content of traditions, omitting and adding material in the process to conform with collective memory, with the result that, after a number of years, the original tradition has been so altered that it is often unrecognizable. Were this not so, then we would expect that these transmissions of the Constitution of Medina orally as hadith would be almost identical to the written versions by the time they themselves came to be written down. Thus, we are left with considerable and necessary doubts about the reliability of the early Islamic memories about the Muhammad and the period of origins, and the historical study of formative Islam must proceed accordingly, with great skepticism toward these traditional accounts.

Moreover, these same limitations of oral transmission apply no less to the tradition of so-called “pre-Islamic” poetry than they do to the Qur’an or the Vedas. The Vedas in fact raise an important point of comparison in this regard, since, as we noted above, many scholars have argued that these texts must transmit verbatim very ancient compositions, since the language in which they survive is antiquated. So, scholars of early Islam often have cited the linguistic archaisms of these early Arabic poems as proof that they must indeed preserve authentic and accurate exemplars of pre-Islamic Arabic literature and language. Yet such a conclusion on this basis alone is unwarranted, since, again as noted above, anthropological study has demonstrated that recourse to a special, archaic-sounding form of language is a regular quality of oral poetry across a wide range of cultures.¹⁰⁹ One may assume, therefore, that the same phenomenon is responsible for the archaisms of “pre-Islamic” poetry. The linguistic style of these poems is not a sign of their actual antiquity but is rather a particular register of language that is expected for the expression of poetry. There is, therefore, every reason to assume that the corpus of so-called pre-Islamic poetry does not in fact preserve actual poems verbatim from the pre-Islamic period. The limitations of human memory and oral transmission militate against this supposition. There may well have been a tradition of poetry in the pre-Islamic Hijaz, and these poems were perhaps transmitted orally for centuries and possibly underlie the poems that were gathered into the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry much later on, in the eighth and ninth centuries and afterward. Yet no one should mistake the much later poems written into collections of poetry during the Abbasid Empire with actual words from Arabian desert poets in the sixth and earlier centuries.¹¹⁰ To suppose accurate oral transmission of the words of these poets with any sort of fidelity is simply preposterous and is in no way validated by any supposedly “archaic” forms of language.

Whatever the context of their initial composition may have been, there is virtually no chance that these poems, as they have come to us in written form, preserve the words of actual pre-Islamic poetry, even if they may partly reflect—with profound and transformative changes—faint traces of earlier traditions. The human memory and oral tradition are simply not capable of this level of verbatim repetition. And once again, it is not a matter of a widespread, coordinated conspiracy to commit a massive forgery. Rather, these poems, like the Qur’an and other teachings of Muhammad, may have been inspired by earlier compositions from poets of the sixth and earlier centuries, and in the process of their oral transmission perhaps something of their original gist or a few strange words survived—or perhaps, just as likely, not. Similarly, it is not at all out of the question that they preserve memories of proper names, perhaps the names of some ancient poets themselves, or place names, or even gist memories of major events or disasters. Perhaps certain shorter poems reflect some of the greater stability that one finds in ballads, but even in this case there is considerable variation among different versions, and we cannot simply look to this corpus of poetry as if it preserved the

words of pre-Islamic Arab poets.¹¹¹ Yet, as we have just seen, according to Vansina, Assmann, and others, even gist memory rarely survives more than eighty years in an oral context. Accordingly, if we are interested in discerning the collective memory of Abbasid-era Muslims regarding pre-Islamic Arabia, then this corpus of poetry affords an invaluable resource. But if we seek texts from sixth-century Arabia or earlier still, memory science and the study of oral transmission teach us that searching through these poems for such material is, again, clearly a fool's errand. To maintain otherwise, would amount to nothing more than unwarranted special pleading.