

# Communities and Contexts: Concluding Thoughts on Medieval Biographical Collections

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This article reflects on the content of the previous chapters and offers concluding observations on medieval biographical collections from a transcultural comparative perspective. It looks at the fundamental desire to commemorate the illustrious dead that underpins such works, while also considering how compilers and authors moulded their collections to fit the particular circumstances of their time and place, and how the historical context could determine the aims and messages of individual compilations. The chapter highlights the relationship between biographical collections and processes of identity- and community-formation and concludes that across the medieval world such collections offer us a glimpse of compilers and communities in negotiation with their collective past, present and future.

*Keywords: transcultural comparison, remembrance, historical contexts, propaganda, community, identity*

The medieval biographical collections discussed in the preceding chapters were chosen on the basis of the individual contributors' familiarity with the sources and their expert knowledge of the historical context in which they were compiled. They are by no means intended to be representative of their respective genres or regions. A very broad definition of »biographical collection« applied and this was designed to ensure that only a low threshold needed to be crossed in order to engage in productive transcultural comparison and that potential problems posed by differences in genres between and within the medieval Buddhist, Christian and Islamic worlds could be circumvented.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the endeavour was to use deep analysis of the individual works to study the role that biographical collections could play in particular historical circumstances across different regions and religions in the medieval period. The transcultural comparative perspective of the volume thus has two main goals: firstly, the contributions seek to cast new light on the different strategies that individual compilers and authors across diverse medieval regions had at their disposal and implemented in producing biographical collections; secondly, the volume aims to reveal the historical processes that gave rise to the creation of such works and to elucidate the message or meaning they could convey. Rather than attempting to construct transhistorical models, this is an exercise in the »transcultural comparison of historical processes and phenomena«.<sup>2</sup>

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1 On the use of low-threshold vocabulary to aid comparative endeavours, see Lutter, *Comparative Approaches*; Kramer, *Introduction*, 280-283; Gingrich, *Medieval Eurasian Communities*, 474-475.

2 Pohl, *Introduction*, 3.

In particular, the question of the potential for the collections to be understood as expressions or visions of community was a central issue, the volume having been born out of the »Visions of Community« Special Research Programme (SFB) that ran in Vienna from 2011 to 2019. The following paragraphs discuss the fruits of the overall comparative exercise, the »pearl necklace« that is formed by linking together the insights gained from the individual studies, to borrow from the evocative title of the biographical collection discussed by Daniel Mahoney. They build on the introduction and three comparative chapters earlier in the volume, but the focus is now more on the »why?« than the »how?«, on the potential purposes, messages and effects of medieval biographical collections. As will be illustrated, no one single reason for writing or compiling should or can be ascribed to the works under consideration, as indeed is true of perhaps all narrative sources from the medieval period.

### *People Worth Remembering*

By its very essence, the act of writing or compiling multiple texts, passages or notes of a biographical character required that the author or compiler wished that the individuals in question be remembered, their deeds or aspects of their lives and character chronicled. In the prologue to his *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ*, al-Sharjī makes it clear that he wished to specifically remember the deeds of Sufi »friends of God« (*awliyā'*) from Yemen who had been omitted from previous biographical collections produced in the Islamic world. The desire to rescue the memory of holy individuals from oblivion is a common trope of Christian hagiography and is often cited as a *causa scribendi* in the prologue to saints' Lives. It is also writ large in the dedicatory letter to *De situ*, where the self-assured author furthermore argues pointedly that:

Admirable feats and deeds deserving the greatest of praise acquire further merit thanks to the ability with which they are narrated. If a dry source of words sets about to illustrate the deeds of the most excellent [men], their memory is either completely extinguished by the passing of time or is entrusted to posterity vitiated and deformed, beyond what is acceptable, by vile grammatical mistakes.<sup>3</sup>

The documentary function inherent to this act of remembrance can be primary, an author recording the deeds of the individual for the first time – though rarely without at least some sources to work from – or secondary, a compiler incorporating a pre-existing biography into a later collection. The archival aspect of memory-keeping comes to the fore in the latter activity, and indeed the preservation of biographical and other texts was so often secured by their inclusion in much later compilations in the medieval period, sometimes preserved only in single manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See the contribution of Vocino to this volume, p. 197.

4 The preservation of a large part of the corpus of Latin hagiography from Ireland thanks to the incorporation of earlier Lives into the late medieval »Dublin«, »Oxford« and »Salmanticensis« compilations is a case in point; Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*. On biographical collections as archives, see Hirschler, *Studying Mamluk Historiography*, 175-180.

In respect of the individuals recalled in the collections studied in this volume, it is striking that almost all are men, a picture that reflects but at the same time very much exaggerates the actual bias towards men as the subjects of medieval biographies. Only in the case of *al-Uqūd* can the treatment of female and male subjects by a compiler be juxtaposed. The fact that the women deemed worthy of being remembered were generally close relations of the ruling sultans and that the content of their obituaries focuses primarily on their acts of patronage reminds us that most of the biographical subjects we encounter here and elsewhere belong very much to an elite. Indeed, while a format involving multiple biographies can create the impression of a communal past, it is one that is largely populated and imagined by elites, whether secular, ecclesiastical, spiritual or intellectual. Indeed, as our examples show, the collections were also written by and largely for members of the (literate) elite, and though the potential of oral transmission to reach a wider audience cannot be ignored, the ›trickle-down effect‹ would have had its limits.

Single biographical works are often expressly ascribed exemplary functions by their authors or compilers, and there can be little doubt as to their potential in this regard. This effect is multiplied in biographical collections, which provide a range of model lives, albeit often schematic in their conception. This didactic quality is made very explicit, for example, in the prologue to Al-Janādī's *al-Sulūk*:

... when someone later on takes an interest in the report of the distinguished men before him or hears how they got ready and approached this interest in knowledge and the quest for it, his soul will yearn to imitate them and he will take their way and will realise their high esteem and adornment.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the characteristics of a mirror of princes or bishops could be ascribed to the *al-Uqūd*, *De episcopis*, *De situ* and the *Singular Volume*, the biographies of the exalted predecessors providing a template for their contemporary successors. While an exemplary function can be assumed, the exceptional qualities and feats attributed to the dynasts and bishops, whether martial or miraculous, suggest that the expectation of *imitatio* should not be exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> Even in the case of the *GSR*, the stories of the first generation of monks at Redon present a difficult template for later generations to follow due to their often miraculous nature.

### *The Greater Scheme*

The biographical tracts written or chosen for inclusion in the collections are not textual elements floating independently of each other but rather part of a historiographical scheme that seeks to present a particular vision of the past and to shape collective memory. In selecting who and what should be remembered – and, of course, who and what should, or simply could, be omitted or forgotten – the authors or compilers were shaping a specific image of earlier times and necessarily mediating between the past and the present. The past offered medieval authors and compilers a means by which to interpret, orientate and frame their

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5 See the contribution of Heiss to this volume, p. 129.

6 For a sceptical view on the exemplary function of hagiography, see Geary, *Saints*, 22.

present.<sup>7</sup> As the individual chapters have shown, medieval biographical collections were often propagandistic in character, intended to promote and legitimate a particular order. The chapters of Langelaar and Mahoney demonstrate how collections of biographical accounts of dynastic predecessors embedded within a wider historiographical framework could be designed to support the current hegemony of the relevant dynasties. Similarly, the collections of biographies of Milanese and Salzburg archbishops promoted the past, present and future greatness of the respective sees. The propagandistic quality of Jerome's *De viris*, on the other hand, had universal application, being expressly intended to exalt the distinguished writers of the Christian Church as a whole. The selection of biographical subjects for al-Sharjī's *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ* had an expressly patriotic motivation, the author wishing, as mentioned above, to remedy the hitherto neglect of the Yemeni *awliyā'*. The author of the *GSR* wished to establish Redon as a holy place through his recounting of the deeds of the model first generation of monks at the monastery. The multiplier effect inherent to biographical collections made it an ideal means of emphasising the sanctity of a particular place by highlighting its association with several holy individuals and their miraculous feats. The collections studied in this volume certainly do nothing to disprove Patrick Geary's assertion that »the study of historical memory is a study of propaganda, of the decisions about what should be remembered and how it should be remembered«.<sup>8</sup>

To a greater or lesser extent, therefore, medieval biographical collections could allow an idealised past to be drawn upon to provide succour and authority for the *status quo*, the current order. Indeed, it can be said with regard to almost all the collections that the compilers saw their presents as part of a continuum encompassing the glorious past depicted. In keeping with Carolingian ideology, only in the case of Frechulf's use of *De viris* can a compiler be said to see a historical distance or »gap« between his own time and the era of the individuals depicted.<sup>9</sup> Behind the sense of continuity promoted by the other collections lies the fact that the compilers can be said to be very much insiders and therefore beneficiaries of the current order. That said, the example of the special relationship between Admont monastery and the Salzburg see that appears to have predicated the compilation of *De episcopis* shows that the boundary between inside and outside is often so fluid as to defy demarcation. The *Singular Volume*, also, reveals the different possible shades of »inside«, with the textual evidence pointing to the compiler(s) occupying the periphery rather than the core of Rlangs dynastic circles.

The multiplication of laudatory biographies of secular or ecclesiastical figures associated with a particular institution ensured the image of a past peopled by exceptional people could be created. Compilers could use the juxtaposition of biographies to create the impression of a golden age or generation, but even more important, and perhaps the central argument of most of the collections studied, was that an unbroken continuity could be shown to exist between this exalted past and the compiler's present: that the current incumbents within an institution were the rightful successors of these glorious predecessors and drew their authority from them. The portrayal of all Milanese archbishops from the legendary origins of

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7 Cf. Thier, *Aus Altem ein Neues*, 250, where the author discusses history as a »zentrales Medium der Orientierung« when it comes to text and identity in the medieval period.

8 Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, 9.

9 On such »gaps« between past and present in the minds of medieval scholars, see Diesenberger, Introduction, 4.

the see up to the present intended by the author of *De situ* is a salient example of such an institutional *Eigengeschichte*, while the inclusion of a complete bishops' list with the Salzburg *De episcopis* nicely illustrates the theme of continuity.<sup>10</sup> Using the past to frame the present in this way encouraged the belief that the current order was the natural one and had always been in place: things had always been this way, the idea of »immer-so-gewesen sein«.<sup>11</sup>

The correlation drawn between continuity and legitimacy necessarily means that the length of time over which the order can be claimed to have prevailed is of crucial importance. At the end of final text in *De episcopis*, the exact number of years between the death of St Rupert – the founding father of the episcopal see – and the time of writing, 563 years, is stated. In *De situ* the origins of the Milanese Church are traced back even further, to the Apostle Barnabas, thus creating a direct connection to the beginning of Christianity and to Christ himself and enhancing Milan's claims to primacy within the Italian kingdom. When it comes to legitimacy in the medieval period, origins are important, and the *al-'Uqūd*, for example, makes sure to give the Rasūlid dynasty a spurious South Arabian genealogy to enhance their claims to be the natural hegemony of the region.

### *Contexts and Communities*

In many instances it was times of uncertainty or decline, if not crisis, that seem to have prompted the »backward look«.<sup>12</sup> The waning fortunes of the Rasūlids in South Arabia, interdiocesan competition in Milan and political transformation in Gaul provide the backdrop for the *al-'Uqūd*, *De situ* and *De viris*, respectively. In the cases of *De episcopis* and the *GSR*, the reimagining of the past followed times of considerable upheaval, and the collections can be viewed as part of the process of consolidation. Depending on the circumstances, the compilers of these collections can be seen to be operating anywhere between boldly offering a glorious past as a template for future prosperity and being forlornly *à la recherche du temps perdu*. In either case, the collections generally present an old rather than a »new reality«<sup>13</sup>, defending rather than challenging the consensus and *status quo*. This, of course, ties in with the general position of the authors and compilers as insiders, as beneficiaries of the current order.

However stable or instable the times actually were, it is clear that structured biographical collections of the type studied in this volume had the potential to promote social cohesion by providing narratives that groups could identify with, »shared beliefs about the past«<sup>14</sup> that strengthened their connection to an institution and to each other. These works can build the sense of belonging of a group, the *Wir-Gefühl* that binds it together and helps constitute a community. Communities are here understood very broadly as groups »sharing some practical, emotional or ideological affinity with each other to varying degrees«.<sup>15</sup> Because this volume is a child of the »Visions of Community« Special Research Programme, questions regarding the relationship between text and community loomed large in the interpretative framework within which the individual authors operated, and diverse manifestations of the link between medieval biographical collections and community have been highlighted in the different chapters.

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10 On institutional *Eigengeschichten*, see Rehberg, Die stabilisierende »Fiktionalität«, 401–402.

11 Rehberg, Die stabilisierende »Fiktionalität«, 401.

12 Boyle and Hayden, Introduction, xlii; cf. O'Connor, *The backward look*.

13 Diesenberger, Introduction, 12.

14 Innes, *Using the Past*, 1.

15 Gingrich and Lutter, *Visions of Community*, 2

Perhaps the most significant variable when it comes to the relationship between the collections under consideration and community is scale. In most cases the works can be shown to have been written for a particular community by a member of that same community. These communities, however, range in size from the monastic brethren of Redon to the entire Christian community, or at least its literate members, targeted by Jerome and his continuators. The spread thus extends from small, ›face-to-face‹ groups right through to communities of universal scale.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, the strength of the identity- and community-building messages transmitted by the collections stand in direct correlation to the scale of the group addressed. In respect of both its exemplary function and its favourable portrayal of the first generation of monks at Redon, for example, the potential of the *GSR* to shape the identity of and encourage cohesion among contemporary and future monks reading or listening to the narrative certainly seems more immediate than that of a work with a much wider reach and larger target audience.

The inclusion of multiple biographies within a collection creates a vision of the past populated by the individuals in question, a sort of community within the text. Although these individuals will often belong to elite groupings and be credited with feats beyond the ordinary person, the effect on the community outside the text may increase when there is a visible community with which to identify within. In the context of a collection, the exemplary function of medieval biographical texts can expand to encompass a model community. Despite or perhaps because the community presented is an idealised or imagined one full of individuals behaving in an exemplary way, the vision transmitted can help to set the norms of behaviour for the community outside the text. *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ* offers a good example of the potential educative and exhortative quality of biographical collections, and such a ›vision of community‹ can also help set the boundaries of the external community through the inclusion and exclusion of individuals or groups. Through his choice of subjects for the obituaries he includes in *al-Uqūd*, al-Khazraji was creating a vision of the political community of the Rasūlid sultanate and thereby giving the community outside the text an indication as to who did or did not belong. Through the manner in which they treated the divergent views of Christian authors in their versions of *De viris*, Jerome and Gennadius were also sending a signal to readers regarding orthodoxy and the true boundaries of the Christian community.

The relationship between biographical collections and communities can also be interpreted with the aid of the concepts of ›communities of learning‹ and ›textual communities‹, as discussed by Kramer/Ward and Vocino. The reading of these collections can play a constitutive role in community formation, bringing ›insiders‹ with a particular understanding of the text together or binding through the exchange of ideas. Indeed, the conception of a ›community of learning‹ can also be extended beyond the initial period of reception. In common with all medieval texts, the manuscript transmission of the collections did not occur in a vacuum but rather was situated within and constitutive of networks of exchange that were essential for the circulation of ideas that is a hallmark of ›communities of learning‹.<sup>17</sup> Manuscript tradition and reception are relevant to the notion of community in another respect also.

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16 On different levels of community, see for example Kramer, Introduction, 277-283.

17 Cf. Ó Riain, *Neue Erkenntnisse*, 1-2.



Manuscript transmission can add chronological depth to processes of identity and community formation, and alterations made to texts as they circulated can signal changes in the norms and orthodoxies of communities over time. Because they contain multiple stories, biographical collections were seen as ripe to shorten, extend or amend over time, as best illustrated by the Ward/Wieser study of the reception of *De viris*. The common central message of continuity could also encourage later scholars to bring the work up to date and thereby revise the ›vision of community‹ presented by the work to suit a contemporary audience.

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that detailed studies of individual biographical collections, though from diverse regions and heterogenous in scale, date and genre, can provide plenty of food for comparative thought. Using very wide definitions of the terms ›biographical‹ and ›collection‹ and approaching the different works with a broad range of questions, it was possible to engage in productive comparison and in the process open new avenues for the study of medieval biographical collections. The chapters have illustrated how compilers and authors could and did mould their collections to fit their particular circumstances, how these works were received by contemporary and later audiences, and how biographical collections were capable of transmitting a range of messages and having a role in processes of identity- and community-building. Regardless of the region and time in which they were created, the biographical collections offer us a glimpse of medieval compilers and communities in negotiation with their collective past, present and future.

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## References

### Abbreviations

*al-Sulūk*: *al-Sulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-mulūk*

*al-‘Uqūd*: *al-‘Uqūd al-lu’lu’iyya fī ta’rīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*

*De episcopis*: *De episcopis Salisburgensibus*

*De situ*: *Libellus de situ civitatis Mediolani*

*De viris*: *De viris illustribus*

*GSR*: *Gesta sanctorum Rotonensium*

*Singular Volume*: *Singular Volume of the Rlangs (Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru)*

*Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ*: *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ ahl al-ṣidq wa-l-ikhlāṣ*

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