

Writing Strategies

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For biographical collections to form a coherent whole, literary choices had to be made and writing strategies applied to the individual segments (lives) of what was conceived as an overarching narrative or a textual ensemble. In this chapter we analyse the genres, models and traditions upon which authors, compilers and editors relied to assert the authority of the text and create a product meeting the expectations, tastes and textual practices of the community within which and for whom the biographical collection was written. We furthermore explore authoriality to establish the ways in which an author's opinions, social entanglement and participation in scholarly networks contributed to shaping not only the content but also the style of his or her work. The comparative analysis of the written texts studied in this volume shows that authors also made consistent use of strategies of persuasion. These constituted powerful tools to build and convey a sense of trustworthiness encompassing both texts and authors: modesty (*topos humilitatis*) and self-confidence were, for example, put on show to strengthen the authority of a text, while prophecy provided a means to boost the legitimacy of the institution, the dynasty or the community celebrated by the biographical collection. Tropes and rhetorical devices can be identified in texts written in distant cultural regions – from Carolingian Brittany to the 14th-century Tibetan Plateau – as they allowed authors and compilers to showcase their learning and make sure to arouse and keep their audience's attention. Focusing on writing strategies thus, surprisingly, reveals an unexpected degree of literary proximity between texts composed across Medieval Eurasia.

Keywords: genres; literary traditions; authoriality; style; strategies of persuasion; tropes.

Writing history through the lives of exceptional individuals is one of the most ancient cross-cultural narrative strategies and one that enjoys never-ending popularity, as modern-day best-selling novels and films show.¹ If retelling the story of a single person already offers the opportunity to provide a much larger representation of the world in which that individual was born, lived and died, the extraordinary potential of gathering more than one biography is self-evident.² The analysis of such works across Buddhist, Christian and Islamic cultures reveals that it is not only the choice of the narrative mode that ties biographical collections

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This article is part of *Medieval Worlds* 15, special issue, *Medieval Biographical Collections: Perspectives from Buddhist, Christian and Islamic Worlds*, guest editors: Daniel Mahoney, Diarmuid Ó Riain and Giorgia Vocino. To read all related articles, please access: dx.doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no15si_2022.

1 Cf. for instance Custen, *Bio/pics*.

2 See Howes, *Collective Lives*.

together but also the literary strategies employed by their authors and compilers to ensure their compositions form a coherent whole, that is, something more, and something else, than a mere juxtaposition of lives. The threads that keep together biographical collections are woven into and through their individual biographies, and to recognise such threads sheds light on the authors' and compilers' agenda as well as on the patterns in which earlier material was received and transmitted.

Moreover, literary choices were a powerful means to bolster the prestige of texts and collections, as these could be designed, either explicitly or implicitly, after authoritative models and traditions. The authority of texts could also be enhanced by their authors' personal reliability and prestige, and the ways in which they were written into biographical collections reveal unexpected parallels between chronologically and spatially distant cultures. Finally, literary tropes and rhetorical devices need to be considered as well. These not only contributed to the cohesiveness of biographical collections but were also applied to ensure the aesthetic quality and apparent trustworthiness of the written text, in the process increasing its chances of being passed on to the next generation. Exploring writing strategies thus proves to be a pertinent hermeneutic approach for comparative research on communities which, despite their obvious historical differences, ultimately shared an essential and constituent element of their structure, namely the textual quality of their cultures.

Genres, Models and Traditions

The biographical collections studied in this volume are all heirs to pre-existing literary traditions. Jerome of Stridon (d. 420), for instance, the late antique theologian who can be considered the initiator of the Christian tradition of biographical collections with his influential *De viris illustribus* (*De viris*), did not invent a new genre but knowingly reused and adapted the model of Suetonius' popular biographical collection of Greek and Roman authors.³ With his literary endeavours, Jerome can be banded together with a wider group of late Roman Christian theologians and historians who started to experiment with various genres, ranging from universal and ecclesiastical histories to chronicles, exegesis and hagiography. Their aim was to develop a Christian vision of history and to appropriate the past of the Roman Empire.⁴ Jerome's catalogue of prominent Christian authors and their works thus had an important impact on the thriving and diverse fields of ›Christian literature‹.⁵ With his biographical collection, he efficaciously responded to the needs of an increasingly Christian-dominated society, in which a new canon of authoritative authors and texts was progressively being established. In a retailored Christian dress, the ancient model of biographical collections (Plutarch, Suetonius) enjoyed lasting success across the Middle Ages, with Latin continuations being written in the 5th (Gennadius of Marseilles), 7th (Isidore of Seville and Ildefonsus of Toledo), 11th (Sigebert of Gembloux), 12th (Honorius of Autun) and 13th centuries (Ps.-Henry of Ghent).⁶

3 Withing, *Jerome's De viris illustribus*.

4 Vessey, *Reinventing History*.

5 Cameron, *Christianity, 141-143*.

6 Baus, *From the Apostolic Community*, 20.

A similar pattern can be observed in the South Arabian tradition of the *ṭabaqāt* in respect of Ibn Samura's seminal book on Yemeni learned men. His collection reused well-established models and itself became a base for later authors to consult and use as a source of information and material to be inserted into larger biographical collections, such as those of al-Janādī studied by Heiss.⁷ Striking for its idiosyncratic features, the *Singular Volume of the Rlangs* (*Singular Volume*) adopts and adapts different literary traditions, combining the Tibetan ›treasure-text‹ genre, genealogy and biography as well as snippets of archaic literature and perhaps even epic traditions. This peculiar work does not accord to any single literary model, although the fabled 11th- or 12th-century treasure text *bKa'-chems-ka-khol-ma* attributed to Srong-btsan-sgam-po may be its closest antecedent. This latter work, in parallel to late Roman Christian historiographies, put forward a vision of history that was moulded by religious concerns, casting the Tibetan past as one pervaded by Buddhist actors and motives.

The medieval biographical collections presented in this volume thus tend to combine a variety of literary genres to help artfully construct the »memorableness of history«, as Aleida Assmann labelled it.⁸ These include hagiography and wisdom literature as well as anecdotes, miracle stories, prophecies and quotations from sacred scriptures, which are abundant in the examined works. They not only enabled emphasis on the individual remarkability of each life but also created repetitive threads that contributed to a collection's cohesiveness. Easily dismissed for their fictional nature, these narrative and literary devices fulfilled important functions that are largely shared by the analysed texts. The use of the Bible and the abundance of miracle stories in the *Gesta sanctorum Rotonensium* (*GSR*) for one, not only turned many lives into one story but also offered efficacious didactic tools. For face-to-face communities, scenic stories provided examples of correct behaviour and confirmed the validity of societal norms.⁹ They also helped shape the symbolic capital of the individuals celebrated in the biographies, to whom the present community was directly connected. The monastic community of Redon could thus see itself reflected in the biographical vignettes of the first generation of monks and find in them a source of inspiration, moral edification and a model of order.

Moreover, quotations from the Qur'ān, the Bible and even from popular poetry were effective mnemonic devices in communities in which the written and oral dimensions of literacy were largely intertwined. The identity of these social groups, which Brian Stock would call »textual communities«, was cemented by a shared understanding of authoritative texts and access to these was often mediated by orality.¹⁰ The integration of Qur'ānic verses and references to the life of the Prophet Muhammad in the South Arabian biographies may thus be compared to the use of the Psalms in saints' Lives: because they were recognisable to a wide audience, they tapped into a broader shared cultural memory.¹¹

7 On the genre of the *ṭabaqāt*, see Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*.

8 Although created in relation to Shakespeare's plays, the concept can also be fruitfully applied to medieval history-writing; see Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 70.

9 See Isaïa, *L'hagiographie*, 17-42. On Tibetan Buddhist literature, see Roesler, *Operas*, 113-139. On wisdom literature (*ḥikma*) in Arabic, see Gutas, *Wisdom Literature*, 49-86. On Islamic hagiography, see Renard, *Friends of God*.

10 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*; *idem*, *Listening for the Text*.

11 The work of the influential 10th-century historian al-Ṭabarī is a good illustration of the ways in which Qur'ānic material could be woven into historiographical literature; see Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, esp. chap. 3, 85-107.

Pre-existing verses were also included in the *Singular Volume*, parts of which seem to have been learned by heart by its readers and would likely have been recited on fitting occasions. Borrowings from verse literature reveal the extent to which the examined texts were produced within and for communities in which poetry also played an important didactic role.¹²

The prevalence of hagiographic and exemplary elements differs from one medieval biographical collection to the next. The *Libellus de situ civitatis Mediolani* (*De situ*) and *De episcopis Salisburgensibus* (*De episcopis*) are clearly built on and around saints' Lives and therefore naturally accommodate hagiographic features, namely miracle stories and the information necessary for liturgical commemoration. Islamic *ṭabaqāt* associated with Sufi communities also make space for miracles showing God operating through his friends (*awliyā'*), including at their burial places, in ways that can be compared to the Christian understanding of saints, and through their bodies, as vessels for the manifestation of the divine. The *Singular Volume* combines the lives of saintly figures, who engage in miraculous events and are sometimes explicitly identified as Buddhist emanations, with violent martial episodes from the lives of mighty warriors.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Jerome's bio-bibliographies and many of the obituaries included in al-Khazraji's collection rely on a more standardised, apparently more neutral and factual, format, and are thus almost entirely devoid of hagiographic features. Instead, the latter illustrated the exemplarity and reputation of the individuals associated with the Rasūlid dynasty through, for example, their moral qualities and their intellectual stature, as shown through direct testimony, anecdotes, positions acquired and the literary or architectural products they created and sponsored. The Christian authors collected in Jerome's *De viris* were reputable scholars and, with few exceptions, champions of orthodoxy; at the same time, many of them were already venerated as saints and doctors of the Church, and references to their hagiographic legends are often included.

The varying length and narrative complexity of each biography does not obliterate another essential feature of biographical collections: their formulaic nature. In most cases, the absence or overabundance of detailed information and the distance in time between the author and the individual whose life is narrated often resulted in the redaction of stereotypical portraits, which resemble a catalogue entry more than they do a biographical account. One exception in this volume is provided by the shorter biographies in al-Khazraji's collection that appear to have been personally composed by him. These stand in contrast to the earlier biographies in his work, whose more fully fleshed-out content was extracted from previous collections. And yet, the narrative strategies adopted reveal the extent to which biographical collections were conceived of as a whole and not as a mere hodgepodge of unconnected Lives. Narrative organisation along the lines of, say, a lineage, as has been noted in the context of Tibetan Buddhist biographical collections, serves to locate »the place of the individual within the pattern of the tradition and is meant to represent the identity of the school as a coherent whole«. ¹³ Indeed, in a bid to paint a compelling picture, the author(s) or compiler(s) of the *Singular Volume* added many figures apparently unknown from other literary sources to the smaller mix of Rlangs

12 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 66.

13 Roesler, *Operas*, 393.

characters well-attested in Tibetan historiography. Although most of these life stories are brief, their insistent reiteration of the individuals' affiliation to the Rlangs clan of old clearly serves to build up the descent group as a whole. Jerome, for his part, could not avoid mentioning authors that were largely unknown to him, and authors of *Gesta episcoporum* could not simply omit those early bishops about whom little more than their names was known.

As a matter of fact, references to origins play a central role in these texts, regardless of whether the authors refer to a more distant past, such as primeval and legendary times, or a more recent one, such as the first generation of monks at a recently founded monastery. The Prophet, ecclesiastical and dynastic founders, and the revered Buddhist missionary Padmasambhava represent undisputed sources of correct doctrine, norms, order and moral values on which the identity and the social cohesion of the present community relied. Through them, authors and compilers were confronted with the evanescent time of origins, an age of men and women whose contours often dissolved into legend.¹⁴ Biographical collections focusing on long-lived religious or political communities naturally privileged a diachronic approach. Through the creation of a chronological line, separate individuals were placed in a clear historical continuum relevant to readers living in the present. The Milanese *De situ* reused the prestigious model of the Roman *Liber Pontificalis* (Book of Pontiffs), in which the history of the papacy from the time of its first bishop, St Peter, unfolded. Jerome was able to demonstrate the learnedness and accomplishments of Christian writers – among whom he placed himself – while at the same time creating an idealised image of the past, the origins of which likewise went back to apostolic times. Similarly, the edited compilation of historiographic texts and biographies in *De episcopis* created a sense of historical continuity connecting the present to highly significant and politically charged moments in the history of the archiepiscopal see of Salzburg. A glorious past is also evoked by al-Khazraji in his compilation of obituaries found in a chronographical work describing the emergence and evolution of the Rasūlid sultanate. Building on an already existing tradition, it provided an ideological framework to legitimise Rasūlid rule in South Arabia by tracing the rulers' genealogical origins back to ancient Yemen, even though the dynasty actually possessed Turkman roots. Although it does not privilege a strict diachronic perspective, even the chain of biographical vignettes in the *Singular Volume* anchors the history of a ruling dynasty to an authoritative past.

As this brief comparative overview illustrates, the authors, compilers and editors of the biographical collections examined in this volume skilfully exploited the features of the literary genre(s), models and traditions available to them; these allowed them to assert the authority of the text, to make sure it responded to the cultural (and often political) expectations and tastes of the audience and, last but not least, helped create a fitting product for the textual practices of the community.

14 See Schneidmüller, *Constructing the Past*, and for a larger comparative approach the articles gathered in Lincoln, *Discourse*.

Authors and Authoriality

When authors, compilers or editors of a biographical collection started to engage with their texts, they not only intended to recount the outstanding deeds of holy men and women or the virtues and vices of rulers but also to use these narratives to present a particular version of history.¹⁵ In their works, the authors and compilers enter into negotiations with their past as well as with the present community they were living in and writing for. Unfortunately, not all authors allow us to gain as much insight about themselves, their education and background as for instance Jerome did, when he ended his collection on a lengthy auto-biographical note, carefully selecting the information he wanted his audience to remember.¹⁶ The author of the Milanese *De situ*, for example, deliberately chose to stay anonymous in order to let the story he was telling take centre stage. He was hardly unknown to the earliest readers of *De situ*, who most likely were fellow clerics at Milan cathedral, and yet in the prologue he provided only enough personal yet rhetorically formulaic information to indicate his affiliation to the cathedral clergy and prove his competence and learnedness. Even less information may be provided in respect of collections written in a monastic context. The author of the *GSR* reveals no more about himself than that he belonged to the monastery of Redon, while it is only through study of the content and manuscript transmission of *De episcopis* that we can locate its compiler(s) to the monastery of Admont. Nevertheless, the authors or compilers are continuously present in their works as witnesses to the events they describe or as learned readers of the books they commented on.

Furthermore, authorial information given by the author himself does not always prove to be helpful or informative. Gennadius' auto-biographical entry, for instance, has to be read critically because it cannot be verified by other sources. Indeed, anonymity could help to support a particular author's standing. The person writing or compiling the *Singular Volume* seeks to disappear behind the words of more reliable people of the past, to whom the work is attributed and who should guarantee its authority. Though refusing to reveal his name, the anonymous writer of *De situ* is a recurrent voice in the text as he comments on the events described, connects the past episodes to the present and sews the individual parts into the overarching narrative. By effacing his personal historical identity and by recalling the episcopal command at the work's inception, the author actually enhances the authority of his text as he creates an official history of the Church and the city of Milan that was bound to transcend the specific moment in space and time in which it was written.

While the examined authors and compilers made different authorial choices, and addressed and emphasised distinct political, religious or intellectual issues, many of them reflected on their own position and integrated themselves into the communities they were depicting and shaping in their texts. Jerome, who was an outstanding intellectual, started to write his catalogue because it was his personal goal to prove the worthiness of renowned Christian authors, among whom he counted himself. The historian al-Khazrajī, who was working with the Rasūlid court, mentions a few times his presence at various types of events in conjunction with it, such as the lavish ceremony surrounding the circumcision of the sultan's sons, as well as recalling being hired by the sultan to teach recitation of the Qu'rān at a local mosque. Sometimes, indeed, authors and compilers divulge information about

15 Vessey, *Reinventing History*; Clark, *Rewriting*, 61-68.

16 Vessey, *Reinventing History*.

themselves unknowingly. Despite his attempts to remain ›unseen‹ in the *Singular Volume*, the author's use of particular toponyms and certain cultural and linguistic particularities of the text suggest he was associated with a specific region in the east from which the dynasty's forebears originally hailed. At Redon, the stories about the first monks shaped the past of the author's own community and the region he came from. By elaborating on the saintly deeds of the community's founding fathers, the author tried to safeguard the monastery's interests and its future.

The ways in which authors selected, organised and presented the content of the lives they chose to retell also differ from text to text. Characteristic of some of the examined collections are short biographical entries providing pre-selected information, which is sometimes fragmented and lacking in depth and completeness. In some of Gennadius' biographies, for instance, it can even be difficult to discern the person about whom the author was writing, thus making the collection's contents harder to interpret. The *Singular Volume* is also characterised by its telegraphic style, including both grammatically dense sentences as well as cultural references whose proper understanding requires acquaintance with a cultural context largely absent from the text itself. However, in longer entries it is easier to trace the author's sources, the information available to him, and to analyse his authorial choices and methodology. The lengthiest biographical entry in the *Singular Volume*, for instance, offers many clues about the text's composition as it includes numerous toponyms as well as culturally and politically specific content that is absent from the work's briefer entries.

Besides the information the author gives or withholds in a collection's prologue about the motives and goals of composition, he often emerges in the text as commentator, eyewitness or interlocutor, revealing particular interests or reflecting on specific problems. The monks at the monastery of Admont, for instance, paid great attention to chronological accuracy in *De episcopis*, and it seems no coincidence that a new set of annals and a world chronicle were produced at the Styrian monastery in the same period of the 12th century. Specific interests and agendas also come to the fore in Al-Sharji's and Gennadius' works: on the one hand, Al-Sharji's states that his work emerged from the need to promote in the Islamic biographical tradition the existence and actions of Sufis in Yemen, who had been neglected in previous collections; on the other hand, Gennadius' interest in heresiological treatises and his tendency to mainly add authors to his compilation who shared and supported his own orthodox views can be understood as a reaction to the diverse and controversial religious landscape of late antiquity. Indeed, both he and Jerome used the collection to deprecate theologians and scholars they did not approve of. A similar permeability of biographical collections to contemporary doctrinal disputes has also been observed in South Arabia, and particularly in respect of the popular religious movement of the Muṭarrifiyya that spread in Yemen from around 1000 to the early 13th century.¹⁷

It was not only the author's opinions, assignment or awareness of traditions that shaped the content and rhetoric of a collection; his social entanglement, his participation in elite scholarly networks and access to a well-stocked library played crucial roles as well. Having a copy of Jerome's *De viris* to hand informed the content of Frechulf's history of the Church, albeit he weaved his source into a new narrative, in what was itself a prestigious scholarly

17 Heiss and Hovden, *Competing Visions*.

exercise. The compiler of the Milanese *De situ* indulged in the use of figures of speech appealing to the tastes of his learned audience, and he chose as a literary model a late antique author (Ennodius of Pavia) whose work was locally available but did not circulate widely outside Milan and northern Italy. In contrast, the *Singular Volume* has particular foci and pieces of information that seem to have enjoyed limited to no currency in the circles of the ruling house that the work buttressed, hinting at a degree of separation between the author (or his sources) and the championed community.

Strategies of Persuasion and Tropes

A variety of tactics were employed by authors and compilers to boost the credibility of their literary productions. At heart, most of these revolve around one and the same concern, namely to convincingly establish some sort of proximity, and thereby congruence, between the author and the described events. Naturally, such attempts to limit any perceptible rift between the narrative and the narrator would, if successful, bolster the work's reliability and thus enhance the degree to which the work could serve its social agenda. This rather uniform underlying strategy may, however, manifest itself in quite different literary forms and narrative choices.

In the *GSR*, for instance, the author seeks to gain the trust of his readership by plainly noting his own presence during recorded episodes or his acquaintance with key players in those events. Al-Khazrajī, as stated above, also references his own witnessing of events, including the completion of the recitation of al-Bukharī's Ṣaḥīḥ and the unusual rocking of a recently installed woman's gravemarker that attracted attention from many at the time. Additionally, he occasionally notes other eyewitnesses to different events, in whose reporting he claims to have great confidence. In the same vein, both Jerome and Gennadius marked themselves out as in the know by mentioning that they were personally acquainted with some of the contemporary authors they described or that they had read their works. These relatively minor notes establish a compelling ambience of first-hand testimony, which for the readers comes as close to direct knowledge as they may ever expect to enjoy. Interestingly, the same objective of establishing a tangible link between the author and the episodes related by him gave rise to a strikingly different solution in the case of the *Singular Volume*. By the time of composition (or compilation) in the late 14th or early 15th century, the author or compiler was far removed from the archaic ancestral events he (or they) described. Accordingly, it was out of the question to write himself into the narrative as an eyewitness. For this reason, it was the text itself that was presented as an allegedly archaic »treasure« text (*gter-ma*) composed by some of the very illustrious forebears it depicts. Despite the use of a radically different strategy – namely to remove, rather than to insert, the author – the underlying goal is very much the same: to directly tie historical events to their written narration.

Moreover, we also find analogous contrasts in the demeanour with which texts present themselves. Whereas the author of *De situ* plays himself down as somebody who produces »poor writing« and thus employs the traditional *topos humilitatis* to inspire an air of integrity and truthfulness, the *Singular Volume* simply boasts itself to high status. The latter work's repeated grandiose self-references and claims of ritual efficacy hammer home the fact that this document transmits grand powers of times gone by – a characteristic that can only be associated with a trustworthy account.

Both textual modesty and textual self-confidence seek to establish authority: in the first case, this was done by suggesting that the material perfectly and without distortion reflected existing sources of tradition, whereas, in the second, the text builds up its own clout by presenting itself as the words of a commanding cultural figure. In the first category we may include works such as the South Arabian biographical collections or the 15th-century Tibetan *Religious History of lHo-rong*,¹⁸ which sometimes cite the exact sources they rely upon. Gennadius, too, repeatedly commented on how he had obtained information, whether orally or in written form.¹⁹ Such intertextual references served to display the bridges that linked the depicted past to the author's present. The second category, in turn, might be exemplified by the most influential Christian biographical collection, the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*, whose compilation was traditionally considered to have been initiated by Pope Damasus (d. 384) at the prompting of Jerome of Stridon.²⁰ This strategy of persuasion can also be observed for famous Tibetan treasure texts such as the perhaps 12th-century *bKa'-chems-ka-khol-ma*, which reports on the lives of some key figures of the Tibetan empire (7th-9th c.) and notably claims to have been composed by an emperor himself. Whereas the first set of works may push their self-effacing modesty quite far, the latter aim to establish authority by claiming proximity or even identity with the persons and events celebrated in the narrative.²¹ Although doing so in drastically different ways, both strategies – self-effacement and self-absorption – strive towards the same goal, namely intimate association with the sources of tradition.

Perhaps the *topos humilitatis* is, on an abstract level, pushed furthest in straightforward compilations such as the Salzburg *De episcopis*, where older texts are simply collected and placed side-by-side rather than being incorporated into a new narrative. In doing so, the eternal risk of corruption that is inherent in rephrasing and repackaging materials is largely undercut by foregoing any semblance of authorship altogether. This approach breathes life into a trope regularly encountered in Buddhist literature, where authors note, with obligatory modesty, that they lack any literary skill and did not compose anything new or innovative. That is to say, they claimed to be mere copyists, passing on authoritative words without taking the risk of tarnishing them.

Another powerful strategy of persuasion was provided by prophecy. Al-Khazrajī's prologue, for one, starts out with a pre-Islamic prophecy on rulership in South Arabia, a position of authority eventually taken over by the Rasūlid rulers, thus presenting them as the (partial) fulfilment of this prediction. In the Milanese *De situ*, prophecies connecting past and present contribute to explain local happenings and place them within a divinely ordered and sanctioned wider history. Prophecy also takes on a dominant role in the Tibetan work, in which ancestral gods, Padmasambhava and an important ancestor all provide future visions that carve out a teleological niche into which the dynasty's rulers neatly fitted.

18 rTa-tshag-Tshe-dbang-rgyal, *lHo-rong-chos-byung*.

19 Gennadius, *De viris illustribus*, 81, 89, 91, ed. Richardson, 89; 92; 93.

20 On the writing of this influential text, see now McKitterick, *Rome*, esp. chapter 1.

21 For more general information on literary strategies and hagiography, see Talbot, *Hagiography*.

In a nutshell, all these strategies seek to establish close affiliation between the contemporary text, its associated community (or communities) and the events set out in the narrative. No matter how this is done – by situating the author within the described events, by attributing authorship to somebody who was present, by recording scholarly links through citations, by including the text's transmission history or by posing a teleological channel of prophetic ordainment – it invariably involves an attempt to solidify ties with the past. As such, they all share a distinct genealogical agenda that seeks to establish epistemological kinship between the work, its associated community and whatever past it looks back to.

Tropes could be used in a somewhat similar fashion, as they could create a familiar atmosphere and thus signal affiliation with established traditions and sources. Depending on the socio-religious context in which a work was composed, different themes could be appropriate. Ancestors in the *Singular Volume*, for instance, are repeatedly credited with feats familiar from the life stories of tantric Buddhist masters, such as hanging one's robes from a sunbeam or stopping the passage of the sun to stretch the day's duration. These feats, then, are at once extraordinary *and* comfortably familiar, allowing the work's impressive claims to piggy-back on the standing of firmly established religious conceptions.

Stylistic techniques of persuasion, such as the rhetorical flourishes highlighted by Vocino, can be distinguished from the different strategies described above. The *De situ* uses both ornamented and elaborate phrasing, which was not only pleasing to the reader or listener's trained ear, but also encouraged trust by signalling the author's membership of one of the text's intended audiences, a community of highly educated men trained in the local cathedral school, that is, one of the most reputable educational institutions in medieval Europe. Rhetorical devices are also put to use by both the South Arabian biographical collections and the *Singular Volume*, which contain similarly structured entries in which repetition provides both emphasis as well as narrative orientation to varying effect. The author of the *De situ*, moreover, brings up, again and again, the evocative metaphor of the sea journey to describe the act of writing not only for its obvious aesthetic quality but also to accompany the reader and help him through the transitions from one Life to the next or from a digression back to the main narrative thread. Besides displaying an author's literary skills, such stylistic guidance thus also helps keep the audience's attention.

When focusing on the writing strategies employed by the authors and compilers of the works examined in this volume, historical, religious and political contexts seem to move into the background, as the texts unveil a surprising degree of literary proximity. Biographical collections obviously do not belong to a particular culture or civilisation: if the Gospels and the Lives of Suetonius and Plutarch are considered to be the quintessential models that influenced the development of the genre in Western culture, we should not forget that biographical collections of equal, if not greater, antiquity and lasting popularity existed outside the world shaped by Judeo-Christian thought and Graeco-Roman culture.²² Given the shared space of intellectual production across Eurasia during the late antique and early medieval period, it is not entirely surprising to observe a certain degree of familiarity and influence between Christian and Islamic medieval biographical collections. Yet history-writing in Tibet after the so-called ›later spread‹ of Buddhism (from the

22 In Ancient China, for instance, Sima Qian compiled a monumental gallery of biographies between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. His *Shiji* would greatly influence subsequent Chinese historiography.

late 10th through 12th century) responded to the political, religious, cultural and social frameworks of a rather different religious world, which did not experience substantial influence from contemporary Christian and Islamic societies. Regardless, the examination of the *Singular Volume* unveils the use of literary and narrative devices that are similar to the ones observed in works produced in Europe and South Arabia. These similarities cannot be explained by reference to a shared influential »Ur«-model or tradition, which is probably why a comparative approach to biographical collections compiled in different cultural and literary traditions has not been pursued by philologists and specialists of literary theory.²³

The obstacles to such comparative research are both obvious and sizeable, and they include the need to overcome a variety of language barriers, to understand different historical and cultural contexts and to develop an acquaintance with the vocabularies of distinct academic traditions. However, a focus on the strategies of writing, combined with a historical and socio-anthropological approach to the contexts of textual production, reveals that the redaction of biographical collections not only often responded to similar needs and goals but also triggered the use of comparable literary strategies and rhetorical devices.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): Project F42-G18 Visions of Community (VISCUM).

23 For a comparative study of hagiographies (life writings) from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, see Conermann and Rheingans, *Narrative Pattern*.

References

Abbreviations

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)

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