

# *Narrative Traditions and the Signification of Historical Events*

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**B**raudel's *La Méditerranée* was ground-breaking in its ability to illustrate what a history can look like when it has broken away from the story of political events. It explores the interface between geographical setting and human events, breaking this down even further into the “hinges” between long duration human practice (predicated on the relationship with these geographic spaces) and the more recognizable narrative of human history.

As part of a longer project on the reception of Andalusí communities displaced to the Maghrib, I am developing a theoretical framework which argues that the medieval Mediterranean witnessed the genesis of a new political culture when the space was overwritten by a set of narrative traditions that in turn allowed for the description and identification of political relationships and movements. For this project, which I conceive of as a kind of conceptual essay on the medieval and early modern refugee, I am interested in exploring a similar hinge between long-duration culture and event and the means by which the event takes on meaning against the backdrop of regular life patterns. Perhaps “disruption and continuity” can be thought of as the sort of digital binary of such an identification: The event was a disruption. The event produced a disruption. The event is part of a longer pattern and is thus a form of continuity, etc.

But I am coming at this thought from a different angle, not so much from the historical question of causes and effects of change, but rather from the cultural historian's question of how change, events, and social movements are given meaning and signified in their time and context.

Perhaps the most apt analogy I can think of is popular music. I don't mean necessarily “pop” over hip-hop or new wave or even Cumbia. I mean any genre of popular music and the means by which a new song produces the recognition of meaning within this tradition. And, as we may intuit, mostly it does so by being exactly the same as the ones that came before—so much so that only the initiated can tell the difference between one song and another. Meanwhile we, the initiated in a particular tradition, spend all our time trying to account for why a particular instance is meaningful and brilliant (a departure), often entirely forgetting that, in fact, much

of the instance's brilliance lies in the fact that it sounds just like the rest, that we recognize and love it for that reason, and, perhaps most importantly, that enormous effort and cultural work are being done in transmitting the tradition as a whole, in sharing the repertoire to enough people so they can distinguish the instance in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

I find the analogy useful, because a similar dynamic prevails over narrative. But we are less inclined to recognize the power and the centrality of the narrative tradition, likely because it is a prime means by which we make sense of our personal experiences and the personal experience of the world. Still, you probably do not need too much convincing if I state that our narrative forms and genres are also highly repetitive, and that our enjoyment and engagement with them as stories depend on their predictability and conformity to a repertoire with which we are familiar. You may think that I want to talk about literature, but I don't—at least not primarily. I want to talk about the hinges by which we make meaning of smaller and larger instances within longer duration patterns of community behavior.

Ancient and medieval legal and literary traditions have at their hearts narrative complexes from which they generate meaning (including juristic meaning), interpretive stances, and, of course, further stories.<sup>2</sup> The narrative complex at the heart of Islamic law is the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (the *sira*), which is, in turn, imbricated with a series of other narrative traditions through the Qur'an and through the lives and actions of his companions and successors.<sup>3</sup> But let's stay centered on the figure of the Prophet. I'll mention two of an almost infinite number of examples of how the Prophet's life is used as a touchstone to make sense of events. The first is an action in the genesis-narrative of the Almoravids (a dynasty I work on) when a certain Yahyā b. Ibrāhīm, a Guddala chief from the western Sahara, travels east and returns looking for someone to teach Islam to his people. (He would return to his Saharan village with 'Abd Allāh b. Yāsīn, spiritual founder of the Almoravids.) Yahyā's trip eastward is identified as a *hajj*, which, of course, is the pilgrimage to Mecca, but, more specifically, it is the pilgrimage to Mecca as performed by Muḥammad in his life time (which co-opted and overwrote the pre-Islamic tradition). Yahyā's displacement and return, his trip, is given meaning through an analogy that rests on the Prophet's example.

The second example is this gem from Alfonso X's *Historia de Espanna*, in which a section is dedicated to the life of Muḥammad:

*Despues desto paso el a Espanna et fuesse por Cordova, et predigo y aquella su mala secta; e dizie les en su predicacion que Nuestro Sennor Ihesu Cristo que nasciera de uirgen por obra dell Spiritu Sancto, mas non que fuesse Dios. Quando esto sopo el buen padre sant Esidro, que llegara entonces de la corte de Roma, enuio luego sus omnes a Cordoua quel prisiessen et ge le leuassen; mas el diablo apparecio a Mahomat et dixol que se partiesse daquel logar; ell entonces saliosse de*

<sup>1</sup> I am citing an episode of the podcast *All Songs Considered* in which the host, Bob Boilen, reports on a talk he listened to. I cannot remember the episode, which was several years back. The broader concept echoes powerfully with T. S. Eliot's famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," although here we are de-emphasizing the individual talent. I make a similar point when teaching translation theory, a subject in which the work of reproducing the tradition comes to the fore.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term: Nomos and Narrative," *The Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 1 (1983): 4–70.

<sup>3</sup> I wrote about this very recently in a post for the Harvard Program in Islamic Law; Camilo Gómez-Rivas, "Why I Love Teaching Islamic Law and Literature," *Islamic Law Blog*, November 26, 2024, <https://islamiclaw.blog/2024/11/26/why-i-love-teaching-islamic-law-and-literature/>.

*Cordoua et fuxo et passo allend mar, et predigo en Arauia et en Affrica, et enganno y et coffondio muchos pueblos ademas assi como oy en dia ueedes, et tornolos a su creencia por que les prouaua el les afirmaua aquello que les dizie por la ley de los judios et de los cristianos...*<sup>4</sup>

(After this he travelled to Spain and to Córdoba, where he preached his evil sect. He taught them in his preaching that our Lord Jesus Christ was born to a virgin by the grace of the Holy Spirit, but not that he was God. When the good holy father Isidore, who was arriving then from the court in Rome, learned of this, he sent his men to Córdoba, to apprehend and deliver him. But the devil appeared to Muhammad and told him to leave that place. He then left Córdoba and traveled across the sea and preached in Arabia and in Africa, where he misled and sowed confusion among many other peoples, as you can witness today, turning them to his belief, demonstrating and asserting what he taught about the laws of Jews and Christians...)

Here, the history of Córdoba and Spain are narrated, even if polemically, by reference to a different, even unrecognizable, life of the Prophet, but nonetheless present, seen from the outside.

The narrative matter of the life of the Prophet forms much of the core of the narrative tradition of Islamic law and ritual. It exists in parallel versions: one legal, one narrative—devotional, so that the dry proof prose of the *ḥadīth* is backed up by one of Islam's most affectively powerful narrative traditions (the *sīra* and its devotional offshoots). The life of the Prophet forms the core corpus of higher education in Arabic, so that its substance and rhetorical forms are shared across the literate elite and spill into other fictive and non-fictive genres, religious and secular, including popular prose, poetry, philosophy, polemical literature, and, naturally, historiography, which is on some level why movement such as Yāḥyā's is identified as a *ḥajj* and the movement of displaced Andalusīs as *hijra*. The identification is at once legal and historiographical.

The hinges I want to talk about (as I pursue this project further) are at least two. One makes sense of individual experience and local community by reference, example, or relation to the Prophet and his community. I'm thinking of this as the "biographical hinge."<sup>5</sup> The other, and often entirely related, is calendrical: how commemorative performance rehearses the narrative relation of locale within the broader Mediterranean space. The classical form of this (sticking to our focus) is the *Mawlid al-Nabawiyy* (The Prophet's birthday) in turn connected through story and spiritual and family genealogy to myriad *mawlid*s (the feast of notable historical individuals, "saints," tied to villages, towns, and neighborhoods) across the Muslim Mediterranean, connecting the local with the wider Ummah (and readable to Jews, Christians, and others).

An event, a movement of refuge or displacement or of long-distance commerce, can be traced against this spatial and calendrical backdrop, which this Life and its many related stories have overwritten. A

<sup>4</sup> Alfonso X el Sabio, *Prosa Histórica*, ed. Benito Brancaforte (Editorial Catedra, 1999), 88.

<sup>5</sup> Can be termed mythical or hagiographical, but I am interested in the simple reference to a life story.