

## Arabic Oration in Early Islam: Religion, Ritual, and Rhetoric

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Across the mosques, homes, battlefields, and open town spaces of the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries AD, religion, politics, and aesthetics coalesced in the richly artistic public performance of spontaneous Arabic oration (*khuṭba*). Exquisite in rhetorical craftsmanship, these interactive speeches and sermons by the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), Imam Ali (d. 661), and other political and military leaders were also the major vehicle of policymaking and persuasion, and the primary conduit for dissemination of ethical, religious, and legal teachings. The Friday sermon that is an intrinsic part of Muslim ritual across the globe in our present time has a long history rooted in the first Friday sermon delivered by Muhammad in Medina, and more broadly in these multifunctional orations of the early Islamic world. In this chapter, I consider Arabic-Islamic oration across different social domains in its foundational age and situate religious speech within them. Drawing on a decade of research for my book published in 2019, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*, I discuss the major features of classical Arabic oration, with a focus on religion, ritual, and the rhetoric of orality; further details for each of the points discussed below may be found in my book. I begin with a section on rhetoric, discussing the oral milieu of early Islamic oration and its aesthetic memory-based techniques. In a second section focusing on religion, I then discuss the pious themes of the early oration, and their diffusion across political and military speechmaking, which shows how boundaries between religion and other spheres of life were fluid in the early Islamic period. In the third section, on ritual, I say a few words about ceremonial aspects of the oration that served, among other things, as a mode of authority assertion. Altogether, I present the religious face of Arabic oration in early Islam, and some of its interconnections with art and society.

“Oration” is the English term I have used to translate the Arabic word *khutba*, which refers in the early period to speeches, sermons, and other forms of public address at a variety of religious, political, military, and other important functions, and which follows a standard structure and certain formal conventions. In modern times, *khutba* refers almost entirely to the Friday sermon, but that was not the case in its original iteration. At that time, the Friday sermon was just one of many types of oration declaimed across the Middle East. The first generations of Muslims and their forebears in the Arabian Peninsula lived in a largely oral realm, and they cultivated the art of the rhythmic spoken word. On the one hand, oration in this period was a fundamental art form. Rather than focusing on painting or sculpture or music, the early Arabians focused their aesthetic talents on eloquent verbal creations. Oratory, together with the Qur’an and poetry, was foundational in the earliest Arabic literary tradition and reigned supreme for more than a century as the preeminent genre of prose. Oration’s artistic formulation was also the loom on which the community’s movers and shakers wove their religious and political discourse. It was the chief form of public address, with central administrative, social, and devotional functions. It was the primary means of government, the major tool for negotiating authority, and the main vehicle for doctrinal instruction. It roused warriors to battle, codified legislation on civil and criminal matters, and raised awareness of the imminence of death and the importance of leading a virtuous life. It called listeners to the new religion and formed part of its ritual worship. In addition to being a vital piece of the Arabic literary landscape, it was an essential component of political, military, and spiritual leadership.

## Rhetoric

To persuade, to convince, to achieve its exhortative goals, oration needed to pack a powerful aesthetic punch, and oration texts found in the medieval sources include some of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of the Arabic literary canon. But wherein lay its beauty and power? Did orators randomly pick and choose aesthetic features, or were there characteristics that they privileged? More importantly, what drove their choices? I argue that the classical Arabic oration’s stylistic choices stem from its oral culture.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we access early Arabic oration through historical and literary sources, and from many genres of books from the medieval library. In other words, we engage with it as

written text. Because of this, and because of our experience with how our own modern-day speeches and sermons are produced, we fall into the trap of unconsciously assuming for early Arabic oration a similar mode of being. We look at it with the anachronistic eyes of people from a fully reading and writing society. For us, the presence of written texts all around is given fact. Even when we encounter orality today, it is a secondary orality that is dependent on writing and print. We measure orality against literacy, never on its own terms. But although early Arabic orations have come to us on paper, it is important to acknowledge that they were not created as written texts. When we read orations in the medieval sources, we are in fact reading texts that were produced, and initially transmitted, orally. We must keep in mind the oral milieu of Arabic oration. Unless we recognize its orality, we cannot fully appreciate its character.

It is also important to keep in mind the limitations of this orality, because the pre-Islamic and early Islamic milieu was no stranger to writing. However, although Arabic oration lay between orality and writing, it was closer to the oral end of the spectrum. Let us imagine a sliding scale between pristine orality, in which there is absolutely no writing, and a fully literate society, in which writing is an integral part of the culture—for example, certain tribes living in isolation in the Congo and Amazon rainforests today versus the contemporary United States and Europe. Although writing was known in Middle Eastern lands in the period of our study, it was a skill limited to a tiny proportion of the populace. They laboriously employed crude instruments of writing such as rock, bone, and skin, and later, parchment and papyrus, and they reserved their writing for momentous occasions. Pre-Islamic and early Islamic society was predominantly oral.

A major aspect of the artistic verbal production of an oral milieu is mnemonic design, meaning that its aesthetic format helps the brain to remember it. In his pioneering study, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong (1982) demonstrated that artistic expression in an oral culture is essentially mnemonic. He explains these mnemonics thus (Ong 1982: 34–5):

In a primary oral culture, to solve the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready, oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, [and so on] ... Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems.

Ong goes on to say that an orality-rooted speaker will ground his ideas in the material world around him. He will represent his ideas graphically and visually, rather than in abstract forms. He will speak about a ball, for example, rather than a sphere, or about a plate, rather than a circle. He will repeat his core message, sometimes using the same language, sometimes using different words.

These ideas map on to early Arabic oration, in which two essential mnemonic features are vivid imagery and pulsating rhythm.

Here are some examples of imagery. Much of it relates to desert flora, fauna, and natural phenomena, and much of it is based on animals:

- Ali ibn Abi Talib was the cousin, ward, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's successor according to the Shia, and the fourth Rightly Guided caliph according to the Sunnis. He was a master orator renowned as the sage of Islam. In various sermons, he compared the world to "the sneeze or fart of a goat," to "a leaf being chomped in the mouth of a locust," and to the "bones of a pig in the hand of a leper" (Qutbuddin 2019: 122–3; Qutbuddin and Raḍī forthcoming: 1.3.4, 1.183.4, 3.221). Instead of stating that the world has little worth, Ali illustrated its low worth through graphic images that conveyed this abstract idea in concrete physical terms.
- Abu Sufyan (d. 653), in pre-Islamic times, compared two brothers from the Amir tribe, as being of equal stature: "You are like two knees of a fleshy camel" (Qutbuddin 2019: 121; Safwat 1933: 1:43).
- The Umayyad governor of Iraq, Hajjaj (d. 714), spoke of his subjects' rising stages of wickedness, saying: "Truly, Satan penetrated you, permeating flesh, blood, and nerves, ears and fingers, limbs and hearts. Then he rose into brain-marrow and inner ear. Then he climbed further and made a nest. Then he laid eggs and hatched chicks" (Qutbuddin 2019: 117; Safwat 1933: 2:293). Hajjaj's extended metaphor here may be described as a form of dramatization, as can the next example.
- The rationalist theologian Wasil ibn Ata (d. 748) began an *ubi sunt* sermon by asking, "Where are the kings who built Ctesiphon?" and answered, "Death grabbed them along with their howdahs, it crushed them with its breast, it chomped on them with its canines!" (Qutbuddin 2019: 112; Safwat 1933: 2:502).

These graphic images familiar to the audience helped the orator bring abstractions into the realm of the immediate audiovisual, and fix the texts in the audience's memory.

Another key feature of the oration's style was rhythm. Modern neuroscientists explain memory formation through the brain's propensity to organize information in patterns; they call the process neuronal entrainment. Children learn the ABC, for example, through a melody. Imagine how much more difficult it would be to memorize a random list of letters. Rhythm is present in many forms even in a society that communicates regularly through writing, but in the artistic expressions of an oral society, it is a primary characteristic. Among the features that create rhythm, classical Arabic oration is especially shaped by the consistent, almost relentless use of parallelism, where two sentences possess identical grammar; their structural units are "parallel" to each other, and thus rhythmic. Here is an example:

- The Umayyad governor Ziyad (d. 673) warned the rebellious people of Basra about severe punishments for criminal activity. He said: "Whoever drowns people, I shall drown him. Whoever burns people, I shall burn him. Whoever breaches a house, I shall breach his heart. Whoever digs up and robs a grave, I shall bury him in it alive" (Qutbuddin 2019: 347; Safwat 1933: 2:272–3).
- The pre-Islamic Christian bishop of Najran, Quss ibn Sa'ida (d. c. 600), is said to have orated from the back of his red camel at the Ukaz Market outside Mecca, "Whoever lives dies. Whoever dies is lost. Everything that could happen will happen" (Qutbuddin 2019: 238; Safwat 1933: 1:38).

## Religion

All types of orations in our period, including battle and political speeches, contain religious themes. Among the various types, the three that are most focused on religious speech are the Friday sermon, the similar Eid sermon, and the ad hoc sermon of pious counsel. Additionally, the marriage oration, the legislative oration, the theologically oriented oration, and the oration that supplicated for rain, also have well-defined religious functions.

### Pious Themes

The sermon of pious counsel contains three core themes. The first is piety, more specifically, consciousness of God, and obedience to him; the second is the imminence of death; and the third is a comparison of this world and the

hereafter. A handful of pieces are attributed to the pre-Islamic period, while hundreds are recorded for the first two centuries of Islam.

Pre-Islamic pieces focus on the transience of human life. We have seen an example in my presentation of rhythm earlier, namely the sermon by the Christian Bishop Quss, which warns of the imminent end of life. Here is the full sermon (Qutbuddin 2019: 238–9; Safwat 1933: 1:38–9):

People! Gather around, listen and retain!

Whoever lives dies. Whoever dies is lost. Everything that could happen will happen.

Truly, there are messages in the earth. There are lessons in the sky. Firm signs. Rain and plants. Fathers and mothers. One who goes and one who comes. Light and darkness. Piety and sin. A garment and a mount. Food and drink. Stars that rise and set. Seas that do not dry out. A firmament elevated. An earth laid out. A dark night. A sky with zodiacal signs.

Where do people go, and why do they never return? Have they been given satisfaction and chosen to reside? Or have they been confined and compelled to sleep?

The opening rhythmic lines after the address drive home the inevitability of death. “Whoever lives dies.” The body paragraph directs the audience to observe the natural world and take lessons from it. “Truly, there are messages in the earth. There are lessons in the sky.” And so on. The final lines pose rhetorical questions that leave the audience to ponder for themselves: “Where do people go, and why do they never return?”

The Islamic sermons of pious counsel, while continuing the theme of mortality, build on it to exhort the audience to perform good deeds and prepare for the eternal life to come. An example is a sermon by Imam Ali in which he urges preparation for the hereafter, translated rather literally here to highlight its parallel structure (Qutbuddin 2019: 153; 2023: 1.28):

Truly! The world has indeed turned back and proclaimed its departure.

And truly! The hereafter has come forward and announced its arrival.

Hark, truly! Today is the day of training, and tomorrow is the race:

The goal is paradise, and the end is hellfire!

Is there no one who would repent from his sin before his death?

Is there no one who would perform good deeds for his soul before his day of hardship?

Hark! These are your days of hope, right behind them is death.

Whoever performs deeds during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deeds will benefit him, and his death will not harm him.

Whoever falls short during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deeds he will lose, and his death will harm him.

Hark! Perform good deeds from fondness as you perform them from fear.

Hark, truly! I have not seen the like of paradise, one who desires it sleeping, nor the like of hellfire, one who flees it sleeping.

Hark, truly! Whomsoever right does not benefit, wrong will harm.

Whoever guidance does not put on the straight [path], error will drag to destruction.

Hark! You are commanded to depart and directed toward provisions.

And truly! The most fearful thing I fear for you is following of desires and length of yearning.

Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow.

The first two pairs of parallel lines compare this world with the hereafter. The parallelism persists through the sermon, all but the final line being parallel in structure. I have analyzed the rhetorical features of this sermon in some detail in an article titled “A Sermon on Piety by Imam Ali: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded” (2018a), using Richard Lanham’s (1983) term, “tacit persuasion.” There, I argued that the oration’s artistry played a vital role in achieving the orator’s goal of persuasion, and that together with rational argumentation, the orator achieved much of his stirring of hearts and prodding of minds through literary techniques. The parallelism underscores the stark dichotomy between two opposing entities. It sets up this world against the hereafter, and it highlights the choice of good versus evil, hope versus fear, and paradise versus hellfire. In the final line, the sermon breaks from the parallelism and crescendos in a longer, non-parallel finale, encapsulating the gist of the sermon’s overall message, “Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow.”

Connected with reminders of death and the imminence of the hereafter, the most important theme, an umbrella theme in Islamic sermons of pious counsel, is consciousness of God. The Arabic word is *taqwā*. Expressing a fundamental concept in Islam, *taqwā* is among the most frequent lexemes in the Qur’an and in Muhammad’s traditions. The term is ubiquitous in Muslim sermons, whose lines are permeated by the formula “I counsel you to piety” and which frequently quote the Qur’anic verse 2:197 “Gather your provisions! The best of provisions is piety.” *Taqwā* is often translated imprecisely as “fear of God.”

Muslims understand it to mean something more than simple fear. As with many signifiers that are culture-specific, no English word or phrase exactly conveys its full range of implications, but its scope comes close to the English (Christian) usage of “godfearing,” or the Biblical Mosaic command in Lev. 19:2 to “be holy” (Hebrew: *kedoshim*), “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” In Islam, *taqwā* means to desist from evil deeds, to fear God’s retribution for any wrongs you may do, to be aware that God sees and knows everything, and indeed, most importantly and paradoxically, to be in awe of him while always taking comfort from his presence. This attitude entails believing in God, being ever conscious of him, and thus always thinking and acting righteously.

Among leaders in early Islam, some are singled out as prolific and effective orators of pious counsel. Muhammad is for Muslims the foremost guide, and, in addition to the Qur’an, which he is believed to have brought from God, his own words—called “hadith”—are revered as the product of divine inspiration. All his sermons are framed by the injunction to *taqwā*, and one of his Friday sermons will be presented shortly.

In addition to Muhammad’s sermons, the sermons of Ali are held up as the gold standard for brilliant eloquence and sage advice. We have seen one already. Here is another famous sermon by Ali on piety (Qutbuddin and Raḍī forthcoming: 1.191):

The pious in this world are people of virtue. Their speech is rational, their garments simple, and their walk the embodiment of humility. They lower their eyes avoiding things God has forbidden them to see, and dedicate their ears to hearing words of wisdom that bring them benefit. Their hearts are at peace in times of tribulation and in times of prosperity. If not for the lifespans decreed for them by God, their souls would not tarry in their bodies the blink of an eye, but would instantly depart, yearning for God’s reward and fearing his punishment. The creator’s majesty in their hearts makes all else small in their eyes. Paradise is before their eyes—they see it as clearly as though they themselves were enjoying its blessings. Hellfire too is before their gaze—they see it as clearly as though they themselves were being tortured in it. Their hearts are sorrowful, their malice never feared, their bodies emaciated, their needs few, and their persons chaste. They patiently endure these few days here, awaiting the long comfort of the hereafter. Theirs is a profitable trade bestowed in ease and security by their lord. The world approached them but they turned away. It shackled them but they ransomed their souls and set them free.

In the night they stand in worship reciting sections of the Qur’an, chanting it in sweet melody, moving their own hearts to tears and finding in it the cure for their illness. If they come across a verse that rouses yearning, they latch on



to it hungrily and their hearts stretch out toward it in longing. They see—its promised blessings are visible right in front of their eyes. If they come across a verse that stokes fear, they incline their hearts toward its warning—the hiss and crackle of the inferno fills the innermost recesses of their ears. They bow their backs, laying their forehead, palms, knees, and toes on the earth, beseeching God to free their necks from the fire.

In the day they are kind, wise, good, and pious. Fear has emaciated them like arrow shafts. The observer thinks them ailing, but they are not ill. He says, “They are crazy!” but they are crazed only by something immensely grave. They are not satisfied with a few good deeds, and they do not think their numerous endeavors too many. They constantly chide themselves and fear the consequence of their actions. If one of them is praised he is apprehensive, and replies: I know myself better than you know me, and my lord knows me even better. Lord, do not hold me to what they say about me, make me more virtuous than they think I am, and forgive those of my actions they do not know.

Their hallmark is strength in faith, resolve with gentleness, belief with conviction, voracity for knowledge, knowledge with maturity, temperance in affluence, humility in worship, forbearance in indignity, patience in hardship, seeking the licit, enthusiasm in following guidance, and aversion to greed. They perform good deeds while always being on guard. They spend the night thanking God and the morning praising him. They sleep vigilant and awake in joy, vigilant because they have been warned against neglect and joyful because they have gained blessings and mercy. If their ego bucks against doing something it dislikes, they do not allow it full rein in letting it do what it desires. Their joy is centered on things which bring lasting reward, while they care little for commodities which will not remain. They combine maturity with learning and words with action.

You will see this—their needs are few, their slips are rare, their hearts are humble, their souls are content, their fare is meager, their manner is easygoing, their faith is protected, their appetite is dead, and their rage is held in check. Their goodness is always anticipated, and their evil never dreaded. If they sit with the heedless they are still numbered among the heedful, and if they sit with the heedful they are not numbered among the heedless. They forgive those who oppress them, give to those who refuse them, and foster those who cut them off. Lewdness is far removed from them, gentleness imbues their words, and wrongdoing is absent from their actions. Their decency is ever present, their goodness always forthcoming, and their evil always distant and removed.

In calamities they remain calm and dignified, in catastrophes they remain patient, and in happy times they remain thankful. They never wrong an enemy or transgress to help loved ones. They acknowledge the dues they owe to another

before testimony is given against them. They never squander something they have been given in trust. They never forget a thing of which they have been reminded. They never call others vile names. They never harm a neighbor. They never gloat at another's misfortune. They never enter into wrongdoing and never leave the truth.

If they are silent their silence is not burdensome. If they laugh they are not raucous. If attacked in treachery they are patient—God himself avenges them. They weary themselves by constant chiding while never causing others unease. They push themselves to prepare for the hereafter and never cause others harm. Chaste and upright, they stay away from those who distance themselves. Kind and merciful, they draw near to those who seek to come close. Their detachment is not from arrogance or grandiosity, and their drawing near is not from cunning or trickery.

In this long sermon, Ali describes the pious, the people of *taqwā*, and lays out in minute detail the virtuous characteristics, the hereafter-focused aspirations, and the entirely godly way of life of those who truly deserve the epithet. He presents virtue and piety as two indivisible sides of the same coin. Just as virtue is incomplete without piety, piety is incomplete without virtue. The sermon begins with a general statement: “The pious in this world are people of virtue.” It goes on to give a list of ethical and religious traits: They “speak sensibly,” “dress simply,” and “walk humbly.” They are “deeply conscious of God’s greatness and bounties,” and “do not care for the world.” It is as though they “see paradise and hell in front of their eyes.” Their “bodies are emaciated, their needs few, their souls chaste.” They pray all night, standing before God, and reciting the Qur’an. They possess amazing virtues, including “strength in religion, maturity with gentleness, belief with conviction, passion for knowledge, and moderation in wealth.” They are kind to their fellow humans, for they “forgive those who oppress them, give to those who refuse them, and show compassion to those who shun them.” They are “dignified in times of calamity, patient in times of misfortune, and grateful to God in times of ease.” In sum, according to Ali, *taqwā* governs the totality of a believer’s life, grounding her relationship with God, and encompassing her relationship with all of God’s creation.

In an earlier article, “Piety and Virtue in Early Islam: Two Sermons by Imam Ali” (2018b), I cataloged a hundred virtues of the pious noted in this sermon. In it, I separated them into the two categories of religious and humanitarian virtues, to highlight the strong presence of both in Ali’s description of piety. Indeed, for Ali, they are all religious and they are all humanitarian. There is no substantive difference between the two. Virtues in Ali’s sermon that we now

deem religious speak of God, of spiritual practices, and the hereafter, twenty-three in all. Virtues in Ali's sermon that are now usually deemed humanitarian relate particularly to humans' behavior toward each other, fifty-seven in all. Taking the middle ground between secular humanism and insular faith, Ali propagates a holistic model, combining individual devotion with dynamic social engagement. All this comes together in the notion of *taqwā*.

In line with Ali's advocacy of balance in all things, here is another dimension of his philosophy of *taqwā*, that of living with joy in this world, yet preparing all the while for the hereafter. He says (Qutbuddin and Raḍī forthcoming: 2.27.2):

The pious (the people of *taqwā*) partake of the joys of this world and those of the next. They share the world with the worldly, but the worldly do not share the hereafter with them. In this world, they reside in the most splendid of residences and consume the finest of delicacies. They possess the sumptuous comforts of the wealthy and partake of the lavish luxuries of the mighty. Yet, when they depart, they leave with full provisions and a large profit.

I have analyzed both these last sermons in some detail in various articles (2016, 2018b). Here, I cite them to show the broad scope of *taqwā*.

The theme of *taqwā*, as you would expect, is an essential component of the Muslim Friday sermon, the weekly communal prayer service of Islam. The following is said to be the Prophet Muhammad's first Friday sermon, delivered in a hamlet on the outskirts of Medina, when he emigrated there from Mecca (Qutbuddin 2019: 287–9; Safwat 1933: 1:148–9):

[A] God be praised! I praise him, and beseech his aid, forgiveness, and guidance. I believe in him, I do not disbelieve in him, and I abhor those who disbelieve in him. I bear witness that there is no god but God, one without peer; and that Muhammad is his servant and messenger, whom he sent with guidance, radiance, and counsel, after a period had gone by without messengers, when knowledge had become scarce and people had gone astray, when the age had neared its conclusion, the hour had drawn close, and the end had approached. Whoever obeys God and his messenger has been guided. Whoever disobeys them has sinned and gone far astray.

[B] I counsel you to be conscious of God—that is the best counsel a Muslim can give a Muslim: urging him to seek the hereafter and commanding him to be conscious of God. Beware God's retribution, of which God himself has warned you. There is no better advice, nor better recommendation. Consciousness of God—if you act upon it, heeding and fearing your lord—is the best aid for obtaining what you desire of the hereafter.

[C] If someone is righteous in doing the things God has commanded him to do, the things that are between himself and God, in public and in private, intending by them only God's pleasure—they will become a memorial for him in this world, and a treasure for him after death, at the time when a man is truly in need of the deeds he has set by. As for the things which he has done otherwise, he will wish that a great distance divided him from them. God warns you of himself, yet he is kind to his servants. I swear by the one who speaks truth and fulfills his pledge, that there is no dispute in this—he, the high and mighty, has said: "My word never changes, and I never oppress my servants."

[D] Remain conscious of God, now and later, in private and in public. If someone is conscious of God, God erases his bad deeds and magnifies his reward. If someone is conscious of God, he has attained a great victory. Consciousness of God protects you from his aversion. It protects you from his punishment. It protects you from his wrath. Consciousness of God makes faces gleam, pleases the lord, and raises rank.

[E] Seize your share, but do not be remiss in tendering God's due. He has taught you his book and laid out for you his path, in order to differentiate between those who speak truth and those who are liars. Do good, for God has been good to you. Bear enmity to his enemies and strive truly for him. He has singled you out and named you Muslims. "Anyone who perishes does so having seen clear proof, and anyone who lives does so having seen clear proof."

[F] There is no power save God's. Always remember God and act for what will come after today. Indeed, if someone is righteous in doing the things that are between himself and God, God suffices him the things that are between him and others. This is so because God ordains things for people, they do not ordain things for him. He rules over them, they do not rule over him. God is greatest. There is no power save God's.

Notice that immediately after the opening benediction, in the section marked [B], Muhammad says, "I counsel you to be conscious of God—that is the best counsel a Muslim can give a Muslim: urging him to seek the hereafter, and commanding him to be conscious of God." Seen in this sermon and elsewhere, the invitation to piety, *taqwā*, frames the entire oration. Muhammad's first Friday sermon is a blueprint for the main doctrines of Islam, and it also forms the exemplar for one of the Muslim community's defining rites of worship. It sets the standard for the ritual Friday sermon of Islam in terms of its exhortative tone, its standard structure, and its pious content and religiopolitical themes. In all these areas, perhaps most significantly in its pious themes—including directions to be conscious of God and remember him, to obey God and his Prophet, to perform

good deeds and prepare for the hereafter—we see echoes in the vast majority of Friday sermons to come.

Friday sermons most often had a political and military side to them. In the texts from our period, we see religious advice assimilating with the evolving political aims of the nascent Islamic state. Political themes of the Friday sermon include administrative and fiscal policies and their justifications, executive commands, statements asserting the legitimacy of various power groups, and instructions to the subject populace, primarily regarding obedience to the leadership. In a classic combination of administrative and spiritual themes, the second Sunni caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644) said in a Friday sermon, “By God, I do not send governors to flay your skin or to seize your wealth. I send them to you so they may teach you your religion” (Qutbuddin 2019: 282–3; Safwat 1933: 1:219). Note also the political implications in the Prophet’s Friday sermon, at the end of section [A], for example, which enjoins obedience to God and His Messenger.

Military themes are also observable in Friday and Eid sermons, in the form of exhortations to fight in the path of God and to defend the community. A famous oration full of military themes that Ali delivered when his enemies raided a town in Iraq is flagged by one source as a Friday sermon (Qutbuddin and Raḍī forthcoming: 1.29). Note also the military implications of the Prophet’s Friday sermon in the middle of section [E], where Muslims are directed to take God’s and Muhammad’s enemies as their own enemies.

### **Diffusion of Religious Themes across Oratation Types**

As we have seen, Friday sermons combine pious themes with secular themes. Conversely, as I mentioned earlier, a religious component can be observed in all major types of oration in early Islam, including the battle oration and the political speech. Friday sermons are an obvious repository of devotional material, but battle speeches and political orations are also frequently framed in terms of piety. Injunctions to piety, invocation of prayers, and testamentary Qur’an citations shored up the orator’s authority (Qutbuddin 2017), and they helped him persuade the audience to accept and deploy his policies. A preponderance of leaders, including the Prophet, caliphs, governors, and commanders, delivered orations in various political, military, and liturgical contexts, and these real-world contexts coexisted and intermingled. Ali is said to have seldom ascended the pulpit, for any purpose, without saying at the beginning of his oration these words of counsel, “People, always remain conscious of God. Humans are not created in vain—do not waste your lives in frolic” (Qutbuddin and Raḍī

forthcoming: 3.351). Further examples include the first Sunni caliph Abu Bakr's (d. 634) speeches in Medina early in his caliphate, which disparaged material wealth and pomp (Safwat 1933: 1:173–5). His successor Umar intoned in one of his first caliphal speeches a series of prayers for himself to be a good caliph and a good Muslim (Safwat 1933: 1:213–4). The accession speech of Umar's successor Uthman included censure of the world, along with a large number of Qur'an quotations (Qutbuddin 2019: 339; Safwat 1933: 1:271).

Qur'an citation was an important mode of pious counsel in political speech. It provided religious sanction to political claim and secured public support. In *The Use of the Qur'an in Political Argument* (1988), Ibrahim Jomaih writes that Muslims used Qur'anic allusion to imply comparisons between themselves and their opponents.

Quran citation was also frequent in the Battle Oration, where orators used verses from the Holy Book to endorse their point of view. Two Qur'anic verses that were commonly cited in military contexts advocate endurance:

- “God is with those who endure” (Qur'an 2:153).
- “With God's permission, many a small contingent may overpower a larger one; God is with those who endure” (Qur'an 2:249). This verse adds the element of hope in the face of challenging odds.

Two other verses that were also cited in battle orations often refer to the inevitability of death, and the ultimate victory of the pious:

- “We belong to God, and to him we shall return” (Qur'an 2:156).
- “The earth belongs to God. He bequeaths it to whomsoever he chooses among his servants. The good outcome is reserved for the pious” (Qur'an 7:128).

The theme of death's imminence is especially suited to warfare, and as we might expect, it is often connected with martyrdom. The Umayyad commander Attab ibn Warqa' (d. 696) is reported to have urged his army to be conscious of God and patiently endure, and then to have spoken of the rewards enjoyed by martyrs, in the following battlefield homily (Qutbuddin 2019: 321; Safwat 1933: 2:464):

Martyrs have the fullest share of paradise. God is pleased to reward none other in the manner in which he is pleased to reward those who endure. Do you not see that he says “Endure, for God is with those who endure” (Qur'an 8:46)? If God is pleased with your action, what a high station you will have! God hates

no one as much as he hates the treacherous. Do you not see that your enemy is putting Muslims to the sword, believing all the while that it will garner them closeness to God? They are the most evil of all the people of the earth.

## Ritual and Authority

Early Arabic oration was delivered from a position of power. Its practitioners were leaders—caliphs, commanders, governors, or people with religious weight. Through speeches and sermons, these leaders articulated policy, solicited support for military and religiopolitical initiatives, and recruited people to a particular set of ethics and values. Hannah Arendt (1968) has argued for the importance of language as an integral medium in constructing political identity, and this was certainly true for the orator-leaders of the early Islamic world, where language, and particularly the language of oratory, was vital in the construction of religiopolitical identity. In addition to a Muslim leader's other qualifications, such as nobility of lineage, wisdom, courage, early conversion to Islam, and service in its cause, effective leadership entailed nuanced interpersonal communication; the communal aspect of high-level power brokerage was enacted largely through public oration. Orations were the vehicle of state policy and religious legislation, for important decisions were conveyed to the public almost solely through this medium. They were also the platform of religiopolitical decision-making, for policy was communally negotiated through them. In many ways, Arabic oration shaped the religious and political landscape of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period, and was a prime locus of authority.

So, what were the ways in which the ritual of the oration reinforced the authority of the orator? The preaching of the Friday sermon was itself a symbol of authority, and attending it was tantamount to accepting that authority. In an exception that demonstrates the rule, the people of Iraq wrote to the Prophet's grandson Husayn (d. 680) in Medina and urged him to take up arms against the Umayyads, and the way these people indicated their disavowal of Umayyad authority was by saying to Husayn, "We have dedicated ourselves to you, and we do not attend the Friday service anymore with the Umayyad governor" (Qutbuddin 2019: 285; Safwat 1933: 2:35). Moreover, the Friday sermon, and many kinds of religiopolitical orations, were delivered from a pulpit. The battle orator often spoke from the back of a horse. The orator's higher positioning, in addition to its practical benefits of enabling better seeing and hearing, was also emblematic of his authority over the audience. Additionally, the preacher carried

a ceremonial staff, or sword, or bow in his right hand as an emblem of authority. This was rooted in pre-Islamic practice, and for Muslims it connects also with the staff wielded by the Prophet Moses to perform miracles (Qur'an 7:107); Muhammad perpetuated this practice, and it became part of his exemplary *Sunnah*. Yet further, the language register of the early oration was usually classical Arabic, which conveyed an official and authoritative ambiance. Also, the use of religious formulae to open and end lent the oration an air of holiness. Since early times, many preachers opened with a verbatim recitation of the Prophet Muhammad's standard praise invocation. Furthermore, citation of Qur'an verses infused the oration with the grace and authority of God's revelation. And finally, the standard structure of the oration—blessings, the phrase “now to the point” (*ammā ba'd*), the vocative address (e.g., “O Muslims”), main body, and ending formulae of prayer—also gave the oration an air of sacred convention.

These physical accoutrements and ritual practices in early Muslim oration all exuded formality and authority. Going forward, the Friday sermon's physical context symbolically invoked the authority of the Prophet's mantle and the divine word. The present volume contains Abdulkader Tayob's chapter (Ch. 3) on performance aspects of present-day Friday sermons in Cape Town, Linda Jones's chapter (Ch. 9) on ritual dimensions of rain-supplication orations in tenth-century Cordoba, and Julian Millie's chapter (Ch. 6) on embodied ritual in today's Islamic preaching. These rituals, and the rituals of all Muslim sermons across the ages, are rooted in the Arabic oration of early Islam. As we have seen, the interaction between religious and secular spheres of oration shows that boundaries between religion and other spheres of life were fluid in the early period of Islam. Early Arabic oration was located at a rich nexus of religion, ritual, and rhetoric.

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