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## The Preservation of Muḥammad's Letters

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### People, Tribes and Society in Arabia Around the Time of Muḥammad

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The letters written by the Prophet Muḥammad to Arabian individuals and tribal groups, together with those written to rulers outside Arabia, form a sizable corpus of source material in early Islamic historiography. Many people, both prominent and unknown, contributed to the preservation and transmission of the collection. This article is concerned almost exclusively with the preservation of the Prophet's tribal letters.

Our most important source for the letters is the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd (d. in Baghdad, 230/845). The two sections of the *Ṭabaqāt* relevant for us here deal respectively with the tribal letters of the Prophet and with the tribal delegations which came to visit him. Our main concern is the identity of those who took part in the preservation and transmission of the letters before they reached Ibn Sa'd. In 1889 Julius Wellhausen published an edition and translation of the sections in his *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, IV. This article is intended as a follow-up to his pioneering work. Wellhausen (88) deals briefly and authoritatively with Ibn Sa'd's sources, but the rich material which we now possess justifies a new discussion of this matter. The historiographical aspects involved, above all the letters' genuineness, will not be discussed here. However, in my opinion a significant segment of the letters ascribed to the Prophet which were written to individuals and tribal groups is genuine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wellhausen, 90, remarks: "Im allgemeinen ... hat man keinen Grund an der Echtheit der Schreiben zu zweifeln". He adduces convincing arguments to reinforce his position. Concerning Muḥammad's flexibility as it is reflected in the letters, Wellhausen, 91, says that they show him "nicht als rigorosen Propheten, sondern als opportunistischen Politiker"; cf. Kister, "Some reports concerning al-Ṭā'if". The apologetics surrounding 'Umar's re-allocation of the land given by the Prophet to Bilāl ibn al-Ḥārith al-Muzanī (see below, 10) strike me as clear evidence that the Prophet's grant to Bilāl, and the letter which accompanied it, are historical; cf. Lecker, *The Banū Sulaym*, 237. There was often a practical reason for preserving a letter of the Prophet. A letter given to a clan of the Sulaym confirmed their right to a certain watering place which was also claimed by another tribe. "Whenever we applied to the *qāḍī* of Medina regarding it", one of the Sulamīs said, "he acknowledged our right to it"; Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr*, V, 75-76, s.v. Razīn ibn Anas al-Sulamī (*fa-mā qāḍaynā fihī ilā ahad min quḍātī l-Madīna illā qaḍaw [sic] lanā bihī*); Lecker, *ibid.*, 174, n. 77. In any case, the letters include valuable information about the tribes involved; cf. Lecker, *ibid.*, Chapter VIII.