Islamic Historiography

Chase F. Robinson
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 264 pages.

In this introduction to the large, unwieldy, and complex topic of Islamic historiography, the author has limited himself to historical works written in Arabic, primarily in the central Islamic lands, before 1500. This choice can be justified in that the field's formative works written early on in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Syria and all in Arabic, served as models for historians writing later on in peripheral regions and in other languages. Nevertheless, it is a bow to convenience and necessity, given the vast amount of material involved. As a result, the Arabic historiography of North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other peripheral regions are largely ignored, as are the Turkish histories of the Ottoman Empire and the Persian histories of Iran, Central Asia, and India. Within these admitted and understandable limitations, the book provides an excellent thematic overview, while, at the same time, introducing the reader to some of the Islamic world's most fascinating histories and historians.

This book is divided into three parts, including ten chapters and a conclusion. A glossary, five plates of manuscript folios, three maps, two chronologies of prominent historians, and suggestions for further reading contribute to making this a useful and accessible text.

In part 1, chapters 1-4, Robinson presents a tripartite typology of historical works: chronography, biography, and prosopography. These are ideal types, which serve as broad categories within which to classify a huge body of texts. Chronography refers to annals, works organized into year-by-year sections; biography refers to texts that treat the lives of famous or exemplary individuals; and prosopography refers primarily to biographical dictionaries, works in which biographical notices are devoted to large numbers of individuals who all belonged to a particular scholarly or professional group. All of these types of historical works, Robinson writes, had emerged by the ninth century and were consolidated by the early tenth century. The end of this formative period was characterized by large synthetic works, such as Abu Ja`far al-Tabari's *History of Messengers and Kings.* In part because of such works, many earlier historical monographs, including the works of such historians as Abu Mikhnaf and al-Mada'ini, were abandoned by the tradition as unnecessary.

Part 2, chapters 5-8, describes the major affiliations and concepts that shaped Islamic historiography. According to Robinson, historiography

was closely related to the science of hadith, and the methods of the traditionists (experts in Prophetic hadith) were in large part adopted by historians as well. History was thus one of the Islamic sciences, and its methods were part of the Islamic world's international culture. History was a serious undertaking with religious overtones, presented in a sparse, straightforward style, with little attention paid to contemporary history, as opposed to the sacred past. The paired *isnad* and *khabar* (chain of authorities and report) characteristic of *ahadith* formed the fundamental unit of historical narration. Al-Tabari's famous *History of Messengers and Kings*, for example, consists entirely of these units. Later authors would break away from this model by eliminating the *asanid*, adding rhetorical flourishes and dialogues in vernacular Arabic, and addressing contemporary history. However, the connection with the traditionists' methods never gave way completely.

Islamic historians wrote within a theocentric ideological framework. Islamic history was part of a universal history, beginning with creation and including Biblical history in a single line. Society and government were organized hierarchically under God's aegis, and societal hierarchies and traditional roles were clear and ordained. Within this framework, the historian's goal was not primarily to explain exactly why certain events had occurred, but rather to expound on known truths and teach lessons by describing exemplary events. A theocentric view, however, did not make for uncritical historians. Most wrote in a rational spirit, weighing the value of evidence, reconciling contradictions, judging verisimilitude, and consulting original documents (e.g., treaties, correspondence, diplomas of investiture, contracts, deeds, and petitions), which they often cited verbatim in their works. In their critical appraisal of such sources, the best medieval historians were equal to any modern practitioners. However, we find certain elements in their accounts that modern historians would eschew, such as patterning after literary models and reports of miracles, dreams, and other forms of divine intervention.

In part 3, Robinson discusses the historians' socioeconomic status and writing methods. In the early Islamic centuries, historians belonged primarily to traditionist circles, which were outside courts and steady patronage. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, most historians worked for the state judiciary, chancery, or other departments or were supported by salaried posts in institutions endowed primarily by the ruling elite, such as *madrasah*s and *khaniqah*s. Court patronage produced a large body of historical works outside the traditionists' circles, including royal biographies, dynastic histo-

ries, universal histories, and biographies of the Prophet. Historians most often belonged to wealthy, conservative scholarly families and usually wrote their histories on the side, while being paid to do something else. Their approach was also conservative, although not without innovation. Many histories were based on earlier works, including epitome (*ikhtisar, mukhtasar*), continuation (*dhayl, silah*), and recasting (*tahdhib*).

The medieval Muslim historians' methods are in some ways familiar even in the present day (or were until the advent of computers). They worked from notebooks, slips or cards, and in some cases diaries, and completed rough drafts that then would be polished into a fair copy. They used sigla and abbreviations in citing sources. The accuracy and regularity of source citation varied. Some historians copied freely from earlier works without acknowledging their sources, others cited early works through unacknowledged intermediary sources, others cited works more carefully, and a number of authors (e.g., al-Ya`qubi and Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani) provided relatively complete bibliographies at the beginning of their works. Some medieval works even sported the equivalent of the modern jacket-blurb, a laudatory appraisal (*taqriz*) requested from a well-disposed colleague and written on the work's cover or opening pages.

At once an entertaining introduction, a handy reference, and a thoughtful essay, *Islamic Historiography* is well worth acquiring.

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