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Introduction

On the authority of Rā'iṭa, one of Muḥammad's Companions:

> I said to 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd [her husband], "you and your children have kept me so busy that I can't give charity (*ṣadaqa*). I am unable to give anything as *ṣadaqa* because of [what I spend on] you." Ibn Mas'ūd said to her, "By God, I don't want you to do this if you don't get a reward for it." So she went to the Prophet and said, "O Messenger of God, I am a woman who is skilled in the work of my hands and [I] sell what I make. My children, my husband, and I have no income other than that. And they've kept me so busy that I can't give *ṣadaqa*. . . . Do I get a reward for what I spend?" [T]he Prophet of God said to her, "Spend on them and you will be compensated accordingly."
>
> Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855)[1]

> Zaynab bint al-Kamāl was born in 646 [AH]. In [6]48, she was brought to Ḥabība bint Abī 'Umar. She heard [*ḥadīth*] from Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Hādī, Ibrāhīm b. Khalīl, and Khaṭīb Marda. . . . Al-Dhahabī said, "[S]he transmitted a great deal [of religious knowledge]. Students would crowd around her and read lengthy books to her. She was kind in her manners, generous in her spirit; it may well be that they had her listen to their readings for most of the day. . . She was afflicted with opthalmia in her youth and never married. She died on 19th Jumādā al-Ūlā in the year 740, having passed 90 years of age. Great numbers of people turned out for her funeral. She had a camel-load of *ḥadīth* [compilations]. She was the last in the world to transmit from Sibṭ al-Silafī and other scholars by virtue of her *ijāza*s [i.e., certificates] from them.
>
> Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449)[2]

[1] Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1993), 3:660–61.

[2] Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-Kāmina fī A'yān al-Mi'a al-Thāmina* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1966), 2:209–10. Her full name is given at the beginning of this entry as Zaynab bint Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Aḥmad al-Maqdisiyya. I have shortened Ibn

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These two accounts bookend several centuries of the history of Muslim women as transmitters of religious knowledge. Even stripped of context, they evoke women's spiritual aspirations and authority in disparate settings. Rā'iṭa, the speaker in first report, is the sole earner of her household. Worried that her expenditures on her family prevent her from gaining the heavenly rewards for charitable spending, she takes her concern directly to Muḥammad. His reassurance and her transmission of it are preserved in Muslim tradition not merely as a historical artifact. Rather, her narration conveys an authoritative legal precedent to all Muslims about charity. The second account encapsulates Zaynab bint al-Kamāl's educational career, which spanned nine decades. She was taken in her infancy to acquire certification for religious texts that she taught later in her life, apparently undeterred by her opthalmia, an eye disease. In her seniority, she attracted large numbers of male and female students eager to partake of her knowledge.

These intriguing descriptions whet our curiosity about Muslim women's religious learning. What else did Rā'iṭa transmit? Where does she stand with respect to other Companions who also narrated reports? Did Muslims contest her authority, or Zaynab's? What does it mean for a two-year-old girl to be brought to teachers, and how does she then go on to transmit that knowledge as a ninety-year-old woman? How did women's religious learning change during the centuries separating Rā'iṭa and Zaynab and thereafter? And what do women's intellectual endeavors tell us about their times?

This book, inspired by such questions, uncovers a surprising history, and in the process unsettles two well-known and opposing narratives about Muslim women's religious education. One view, projecting backward from contemporary news reports about the repression of Muslim women by extremists, reads similar oppression into most of Muslim history. The second, extrapolating from the impressive achievements of well-known early women such as Prophet Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678), promotes an unfailingly positive account of educational access and opportunities for Muslim women throughout history.

My analysis highlights the fluctuating fortunes of Sunnī female religious scholars across nearly ten centuries (seventh–sixteenth centuries) and nuances monochromatic views about their education. These shifting, uneven patterns of women's transmission of religious knowledge (specifically *ḥadīth*) structure the narrative of this book. My central thesis is that

Ḥajar's biography of Zaynab in this excerpt to emphasize a few salient characteristics of women's *ḥadīth* transmission in her time.

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women's initial participation – a largely ad hoc, unregulated enterprise – was sharply curtailed by the professionalization of this field in the early second/eighth century, only to be resuscitated in the mid-fourth/tenth century as "traditionism" and "traditionalism" became prevalent expressions of Sunnī Islam.[3]

Ḥadīth transmission emerged early on as the principal arena for Muslim women's religious education. Conveying Muḥammad's words, decisions, and actions on innumerable matters, *ḥadīth* constitute the bulk of normative religious knowledge transmitted from the earliest decades of Islam. They are vital as sources of law, second only to the Qur'ān, and as records of the early Islamic past. After the death of Muḥammad, his Companions (those Muslims who had actually met him) became valued sources about the practice of the new faith. Men and women participated in a free, unregulated exchange of information. This matrix produced the tradition of the female *ḥadīth* transmitter and provided a template that would be revisited and refashioned to accommodate the needs and visions of subsequent generations of Muslims.

Over the course of ten centuries, women's participation in *ḥadīth* transmission rose and abated in four distinct phases. In Chapter 1, I treat the earliest decades of Islamic history, when many female Companions shared their firsthand knowledge of the Prophet. The communal memory of Muslims preserves not just numerous sayings from 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, but also the few words of more obscure women such as al-Jahdama, known to us only because she reported seeing Muḥammad with *henna* in his hair. Further, some women of this first generation are portrayed as interpreting the legal significance of reports with a view to guiding and shaping Muslim practice. As may be expected, several of the Prophet's wives are prominent transmitters during this period.

This early acceptance of women as authoritative sources for information about Muḥammad quickly faded – a development that I analyze in Chapter 2. By the end of the first century, these sayings were increasingly deployed to serve political, legal, sectarian, and theological agendas. Forgery became rampant, prompting widespread calls for professionalization and more stringent criteria for determining valid transmission. Legal

[3] I use traditionism to refer to the view that upheld the importance of *ḥadīth* reports in deriving Islamic law and that promoted this view through accurate transmission of them. Traditionalism, on the other hand, references a broader outlook and implicates not just the derivation of Islamic law but also approaches to understanding Muslim history and to mitigating inter-*madhhab* division among Sunnīs. I discuss my usage of this term later in this introduction and provide a more detailed analysis of its historical dimensions in Chapter 4.

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acumen, linguistic training, direct (face-to-face) contact with teachers, and an ability to undertake long, arduous, solitary journeys in order to acquire even a single report became a sine qua non for accomplished transmitters. Most women could not compete in this environment, and their participation dropped precipitously, remaining negligible for the next two and a half centuries.

Remarkably, in the mid-fourth century of Islamic history, women re-emerged as trustworthy *shaykha*s coveted for their religious learning and revered for their piety. In Chapter 3, I assess how new developments, among them the canonization of *ḥadīth* collections, the growing acceptance of written (as opposed to oral) transmission, and the increased incidence of kinship-based groupings within the scholarly class (*ʿulamāʾ*), created favorable conditions for this trend. The revival drew strength from precedents of the female Companions whose contributions as transmitters of reports were recalled in modeling feminine piety and religious learning. Chapter 4 explores how the ascendancy of Sunnī traditionalism as an orthodoxy provided the final impetus for a full-scale mobilization of women in this arena from the sixth/twelfth to the ninth/fifteenth century. My narrative ends with another sharp contraction in female participation in *ḥadīth* transmission in the late Mamlūk and early Ottoman period (tenth/sixteenth century). Here, the trajectory of women's religious education takes a different turn as attested by scattered references in the contemporary literature to their legal training and increasing involvement with organized Ṣūfism. This latter period of decline is therefore substantively different from the one that occurred during the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries.

To make sense of how trends in women's education are intertwined with a host of social, intellectual, and political factors, I draw on interdisciplinary theoretical insights. Studies on the sociology of education, for example, have highlighted the multiple social uses of knowledge.[4] In this vein, the history of women as *ḥadīth* transmitters affirms that evolving social uses of religious knowledge (specifically *ḥadīth*) shaped women's educational access and participation. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the different forms of capital is helpful in understanding the trend in the classical

[4] For an introduction to this field (in contexts other than the Islamic one studied here), see Alan R. Sadovnik (ed.), *Sociology of Education* (New York: Routledge, 2007). See also Volker Meja and Nico Stehr (eds.), *The Sociology of Knowledge*, 2 vols. (Northampton: Edward Elgar, 1999), for seminal articles in the field and an overview of its development.

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period when women reemerged as celebrated teachers of *ḥadīth*.[5] Bourdieu has prompted us to think of capital not just as accumulated material resources, but also as assets that can accrue in the form of social dispositions and cultural goods, which in turn confer coveted status and upward social mobility. Women's accumulation of *ḥadīth* learning during the classical period translated well into cultural capital and lent status to the scholarly families who supported their endeavors.[6]

Women's resounding successes from the fourth/tenth to the ninth/fifteenth century were built on two foundations. First, their participation was seen as a continuation of established tradition, based on the precedent of the prominent female transmitters of the Companion generation. However, notwithstanding the appearance of and claims to continuity, the roles of female Companions were distinct from those of women of the classical era. The former, as witnesses to Muḥammad's life, were authors of the accounts they narrated. Some of them were also sought out for their opinions on legal, ritual, and credal matters. In their time, the reports lacked the formal structure of *ḥadīth*, namely an *isnād* (chain of transmission) appended to a distinct *matn* (text). The formulaic accounts preserved in the collections of *ḥadīth* should not mask that their contribution lay in the very origination of these reports. By contrast, women of the classical period were honored primarily as faithful reproducers of *ḥadīth* proper, which by their time had been sifted and arranged and had generated extensive commentary. Additionally, women of the later eras are praised in the historical literature for embodying feminine piety by espousing asceticism and engaging with *ḥadīth* transmission from the cradle to the grave. Talal Asad has distilled the theoretical underpinning of such reworking of past models in his outline of an Islamic discursive tradition, thereby providing a framework for analyzing evolutions in the forms and contents of women's *ḥadīth* transmission. Asad states:

> A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to *a past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper

[5] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," trans. Richard Nice, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, 241–58 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[6] Michael Chamberlain has also applied Bourdieu's ideas to his analysis of practices associated with religious learning in classical Muslim societies. See his *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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performance has been transmitted) and *a future* (how the point of the practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through *a present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions).[7]

Tradition and its maintenance are valuable not because "traditional practices" are blind imitations of past practices. Rather, discursive traditions enable stable evolution by orienting practices to the past while allowing for modification of original models. Asad conceives broadly of an "Islamic discursive tradition" to address shortcomings in previous anthropological approaches to Islam. Qasim Zaman, in his study of contemporary South Asian *'ulamā'*, draws out the utility of applying Asad's model to multiple discourses *within* Islam: the *Sharī'a*, classical Islamic historiography, and Ṣūfism are other such examples that Zaman notes.[8] I extend Asad's model to understand evolutions in the arena of *ḥadīth* transmission. In Chapters 3 and 4, I cast the revival of female *ḥadīth* transmission as exemplifying a discursive tradition in which the *'ulamā'* as a social class responded to profound changes in the field of *ḥadīth* studies (such as the canonization of *ḥadīth* literature and the acceptance of written transmission) and reintegrated women into this arena of Islamic learning. This reintegration, in turn, facilitated adaptation by the *'ulamā'* to changing political and social orders that accompanied the dissolution of central 'Abbāsid power and the rise of autonomous dynasties.

A second and related foundation for women's success was that the collective gatekeepers of tradition embraced and sanctioned their accomplishments. Here too Talal Asad's theoretical insights and conceptual model of "orthodoxy" are instructive. Critiquing the prevalent definition of Muslim orthodoxy as "a specific set of doctrines at the heart of Islam," Asad defines orthodoxy not as "a mere body of opinion, but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power." He continues: "[W]herever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones,

7 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers Series*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University (1986), 14–15. In developing his outline of tradition, Asad credits the influential works of Alasdair MacIntyre, in particular his *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See also MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) for further development of his ideas on tradition.
8 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *'Ulamā' in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4–7.

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there is the domain of orthodoxy."[9] Asad's assertion that orthodoxy exists *wherever* Muslims exercise such power is balanced by his emphasis that the Islamic discursive tradition maintains the centrality of foundational texts (the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*). By retaining the referents of foundational texts while accounting for localized interpretations of doctrine and practices, Asad advocates a view that acknowledges the existence of multiple orthodoxies synchronically and diachronically.

Traditionalism was one of several Muslim orthodoxies that existed between the early Islamic centuries and the late classical period. The term "traditionalism," one of academic coinage, is contested and its connotations vary depending on historical context.[10] I have incorporated it here to evoke a particular set of characteristics that are important for understanding the history of women's religious education. My own usage is broad and references a worldview inspired by the following beliefs: that *ḥadīth* reports are of primary importance in interpreting the Qur'ān and in deriving Islamic law; that consensus (*ijmāʿ*) is an important guarantor of the righteousness of the Muslim community; and that the pious early ancestors (*salaf*), irrespective of their political affiliations and other differences, are exemplary for all future generations. Traditionalists also tend to either avoid speculative theology altogether or strive to mitigate its influence in their religious discourse.[11] This is the worldview that Marshall Hodgson has famously called Jamāʿī Sunnism. For him, the defining characteristics include a collective interest in minimizing division among

[9] Asad, "Anthropology of Islam," 15. By comparison, the prevailing definition of orthodoxy is "correct or sound belief according to an authoritative norm"; see *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, s.v. "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy." Asad's conceptualization is more complete because it integrates the ideas of correct doctrine and correct practice while evoking the contestations that occur to establish and maintain orthodoxy.

[10] For discussions about the use of the word "traditionalism," see Benyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), especially Introduction and chapter 1; William Graham, "Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 495–522; George Makdisi, "Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic Religious History II," *Studia Islamica* 18 (1963): 48–52; Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1: 64–66, for an analysis of the problems associated with the use of "tradition" and "traditionalism"; and Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16–29, for a keen critique of shortcomings in the usage of the terms "traditionalism" and "rationalism."

[11] In contrast to my own broad usage, some scholars use the term to signify only Ḥanbalī theologians and their followers during the classical period. See, for example, Richard Martin and Mark Woodward, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 10–15.

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the four major Sunnī schools of law and an understanding that theological reasoning within acceptable boundaries was permissible.[12]

As an orthodoxy, traditionalism enjoyed tremendous success and exercised pervasive influence in the central Islamic lands from approximately the sixth/twelfth to the tenth/sixteenth century. Women were able to promote this orthodoxy because those who articulated its social vision *upheld* the tradition of female transmission of religious knowledge, as originally instituted by the Companion generation, and *adjusted* the practice in accordance with their needs in the classical era. The accomplishment of traditionalism in including women comes into sharper focus in comparison with Muʿtazilism, a rationalist orthodoxy that enjoyed success primarily among the ruling and intellectual elites in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. Unlike traditionalists, Muʿtazilīs appear to have eschewed women's active participation in the promulgation of their ideology, and we find few records of accomplished female Muʿtazilī theologians in the annals of Islamic history. This pattern will appear counterintuitive from our modernist perspective, which conditions us to think of rationalist ideologies as more amenable to women's empowerment and participation and traditionalist ones as being inimical to their interests. Asad's theoretical contribution sensitizes us to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that underpin different orthodoxies, which in turn profoundly impact women's involvement.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Given the centrality of *ḥadīth* to Muslim life, the traditions and their transmitters were subject to scholarly scrutiny. While women's lives are largely overlooked in the male-authored annals of Islamic history, their participation in the field of *ḥadīth* was more diligently documented. As a result, this is one of the few areas of premodern Muslim women's history for which we have considerable source material. Arabic biographical dictionaries and chronicles are among the most important sources for reconstructing women's *ḥadīth* participation. These include compilations arranged according to generations of scholars and noteworthy persons, such as the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) and the *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ* of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), as well as centenary dictionaries, such as *al-Durar al-Kāmina fī*

[12] Marshall Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:276–79 for an introduction to his use of the term Jamāʿī Sunnism. See also *Venture of Islam*, vol. 2 (passim), where he describes the spread of this understanding of Sunnism across the Muslim world during the classical eras.

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A'yān al-Mi'a al-Thāmina of Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) and *al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi' fī A'yān al-Qarn al-Tāsi'* of al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497). Such works amply attest women's activities and the widespread acceptance of their participation in religious education.

The abundance of data, however, should not blind us to its inherent limitations. First, these sources were composed by men, and we have few self-narratives of women's experiences in this arena. Second, most entries on women in biographical compendia are formulaic and frugal, hindering our ability to compose a nuanced history. Lineages, death dates, teacher-student networks, and remarks on the moral character and personal piety of various women comprise the bulk of what early and classical biographers preserved for posterity. Such information goes only so far in our attempts at historical reconstruction. Needless to say, classical Muslim biographers were not interested in issues of women's empowerment or the role of gender in determining women's educational access. Questions about women's concerns, their daily lives, and their routines can only be answered inferentially, sometimes by reading into the silences of our sources.

Two other sources of more limited utility that contain scattered references to women's narration of reports are legal compendia and manuals on the sciences of *ḥadīth* transmission. The prescriptive nature of both genres dictates a different methodological approach. For example, *al-Kifāya fī 'Ilm al-Riwāya*, the *ḥadīth* manual of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), prescribes a curriculum for study and the appropriate etiquette for teachers and students. We cannot, of course, assume that students maintained these standards. In fact, the presumption is often that if authorities repeatedly insist on a protocol, it is because that protocol is being violated. In general, the extent to which individual men and women adhered to the standards enunciated by leading scholars must be gleaned from other sources related directly to the individual in question. Similarly, legal manuals present historical evidence only to the extent necessary to substantiate or undermine the claims of jurists. On the topic of women's access to public space such as mosques (popular sites for religious instruction), *ḥadīth* reports are presented selectively to support a juristic prescription. Nevertheless, judicious use of these sources can help us recreate some of the historical circumstances affecting women's participation in the transmission of religious knowledge.

For the earliest decades of Islamic history, we can look to the individual *ḥadīth* credited to female narrators. The chains of transmission (*isnād*s) appended to these reports can augment our knowledge of the teacher-student networks of the women who appear in them. An analysis of the

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ḥadīth texts (*matn*) themselves reveals the subjects about which women imparted knowledge. Finally, because the Companions are portrayed as the first authors of the texts they convey, various narrative elements can at times be used to reconstruct the circumstances of women's participation and their own perceptions of their roles.

Use of *ḥadīth* and historical reports from the earliest decades of Islam, however, requires grappling with debates about the authenticity of this material. The most comprehensive early collections of *ḥadīth* from which it is possible to draw data for this study date to the latter part of the second/eighth century.[13] The first extensive biographical work, the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd, dates to the beginning of the third/ninth century. We are therefore confronted with one of the enduring debates of early Islamic historiography: the use of *ḥadīth* as primary sources, especially for the first decades of Islam. The literature on this issue is extensive. Here I present only the contours of the debate and the position I take in this study.

It is a cornerstone of faith for many Muslims that authenticated *ḥadīth* convey the sayings and actions of Muḥammad as reported by his Companions.[14] Some modern scholars of Islamic history also maintain that these traditions form a relatively accurate record of the rise of Islam and the formation of the first Muslim polity, as well as Muḥammad's ritualistic practices and injunctions.[15] At the opposite end of the spectrum, other scholars hold that the *ḥadīth* are primarily fabrications and cannot

[13] While there are earlier collections, comprised of notes (*ṣuḥuf*) compiled by second-century authors, the *Muwaṭṭa'* of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/796) is one of the earliest surviving substantial collections containing traditions attributed to female Companions.

[14] It is important to point out here that in the derivation of law, Muslims themselves aspire not to absolute certainty about the authenticity of a *ḥadīth* but rather to a high degree of probability that a particular report accurately conveys Muḥammad's views. For an exposition of this view, see Wael Hallaq, "Authenticity of Prophetic *Ḥadīth*: A Pseudo-Problem," *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 75–90.

[15] See, for example, Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri,* vol. 1, *Historical Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957–72), and Fuat Sezgin, *Ta'rīkh al-Turāth al-'Arabī*, vol. 1, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān wa'l-Ḥadīth* (Riyad: Wizārat al-Ta'līm al-'Ālī, 1991). See also Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). In the introduction to this work, Donner provides a more detailed presentation of the debate than I have given here. It is also worth noting that the use of *ḥadīth* in Muslim historical writing is secondary to the use of *akhbār* (historical reports other than those ascribed to Muḥammad). The latter form an important basis for works on Muḥammad's life (*sīra*) and the military conquests of the early community (*maghāzī*). See the works of Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) for their analyses of developments in historical writing in early and classical Islam.

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