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Thinking and writing about the past has always been of critical importance to the way that any culture or civilization views itself and its role in the world. In a work which surveys an entire tradition of historical thought and writing across a span of eight hundred years, Tarif Khalidi examines how Arabic-Islamic culture of the pre-modern period viewed the past, how it recorded it, and how it sought to answer the many complex questions associated with the discipline of history. Arguing that this tradition underwent the successive influence of four epistemic 'domes' – *hadith*, *adab*, *hikma*, and *siyasa* – the author combines a topical with a chronological method, thus placing the tradition within its broader intellectual context and socio-political environment. In a selection of quotations from historians and scholars, the reader is introduced to some of the principal intellectual texts of Arabic-Islamic culture.

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Arabic historical thought in the classical period

TARIF KHALIDI

American University of Beirut



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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1994

First published 1994
Reprinted 1995, 1996

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Khalidi, Tarif, 1938–
Arabic historical thought in the classical period / Tarif Khalidi.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 46554 0

1. Islamic Empire – Historiography. 2. Historiography – Islamic
Empire. I. Title. II. Series.

DS38.16.K445 1994

909'.097671'0072–dc20 93-51021 CIP

ISBN 0 521 46554 0 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

0521465540 - Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period - Tarif Khalidi

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For Hani and Raja

Cambridge University Press

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But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

Contents

Preface	<i>Page xi</i>
1 The birth of a tradition	1
2 History and <i>Hadith</i>	17
From <i>Hadith</i> to history	28
Sacred history	30
Muhammad ibn Ishaq	34
The <i>isnad</i> debate of the 3rd/9th century	39
Sacred history continued: the scholarly consensus of Waqidi and Ibn Sa'd	44
Tribal history: genealogy	49
Tribal history continued: genealogy reformulated	54
The genealogies of al-Baladhuri	58
Tribal history continued: the conquests	62
The conquests: three representative histories	65
The histories of prophets	68
Tabari, the 'imam' of <i>Hadith</i> historiography	73
Concluding observations	81
3 History and <i>Adab</i>	83
The rise of <i>Adab</i>	83
The Umayyad state secretaries	89
From <i>Adab</i> to History: 2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries	96
<i>Adab</i> , <i>Hikma</i> and history: Jahiz	104
<i>Adab</i> , <i>Hadith</i> and history: Ibn Qutayba	108
Intention, space, time and number	111
Intention	113
Space	115
Time	118
Number	122
Three aspects of historical thought: pattern, argument and style	124

x	Contents	
4	History and <i>Hikma</i>	131
	Mas'udi: <i>Adab, Hikma</i> , history	131
	The <i>khavar</i> : jurists and theologians	137
	The <i>khavar</i> : four formulations of the 5th/11th century	142
	'Abd al-Jabbar	143
	Baghdadi	146
	Basri	148
	Ibn Hazm	149
	The four formulations examined	150
	Miracle and custom	151
	Time and the philosophers	158
	History and the philosophers	162
	History as administrative experience: Miskawayhi	170
	History and natural science: Biruni	176
5	History and <i>Siyasa</i>	182
	The background	182
	Images of a new age	184
	Images of a new society	188
	The institution of rank	189
	Sultans and ' <i>ulama</i> '	191
	<i>Siyasa</i> and <i>shari'a</i>	193
	History and self-Consciousness	200
	Biographical dictionaries	204
	Bezels of wisdom, glimpses of the Unseen	210
	Patterns of change	215
	The sense of place	219
	Ibn Khaldun	222
	Conclusion	232
	<i>Bibliography</i>	235
	<i>Index</i>	243

Preface

Historians may be informative in either of two very different ways: for what they may or may not tell us about the past or for what they tell us about *thinking* about the past. My own interests have for some years now been centred on this latter aspect of historiography – one which, where Arabic-Islamic culture is concerned, has clearly not received the attention it merits. It also seemed to me, when I began to investigate the historiographic corpus, that historians in general do not concern themselves too much with the theoretical dimensions of their work and that the epistemic canopy under which a historian normally shelters is furnished, generally speaking, by the neighbouring social sciences. The ‘data’ or ‘events’ or ‘archive’ which historians for the most part examine come to them already refracted, most often by other historians. That process of refraction dooms most historical writing to be second-hand but is also of course compounded by the fact that historians are themselves conditioned in their manner of receiving, filtering or transmitting the past.

Accordingly, in attempting to trace the development of historical thought in the Arabic-Islamic tradition, it quickly became apparent that the net must be cast wide, to include not only the historians themselves but the various conceptual frameworks within which they operated. Once these epistemic canopies were determined, it was also important to show how these were, in turn, implanted in social and political developments. But even when all these problems became less obscure, there still remained the daunting obstacle of the size of the historiographic corpus. When the full range of historical writing in classical Arabic-Islamic culture, that is to say from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries – the approximate temporal boundaries of this work – is spread before us, one is confronted with a body of writings in the order of several hundred thousand volumes. Inevitably, one has to select and to hope that such selection will be a ‘fair’ sample of both the majority of bread-and-butter historians who did not systematically reflect upon the epistemic implications of their work as well as the small minority of historians who did.

Books, once begun, often take on a life of their own, as many novelists

xii Preface

at least would confirm. This work, too, tended as it progressed to organize itself a little too neatly for my liking. It is therefore necessary to point out that this division into four dominant epistemic canopies or modes should be qualified in four important respects. In the first place, the succession of these canopies broadly reflects the order of their appearance in time. Thus, *Hadith* cast its shadow over historical writing approximately from the 1st–4th/7th–10th centuries, *Adab* from the 3rd–5th/9th–11th centuries, *Hikma* during the 4th–5th/10th–11th centuries and *Siyasa* from the 6th–9th/12th–15th centuries. But this division does not mean that these canopies were entirely separate from one another. In point of fact, they overlap but with some difference in time of first appearance. Still less can one classify historians rigidly in accordance with this division for it is clear that many historians shelter under more than one canopy. I do not seek to impose such a division artificially upon all historians. Rather, I attempt to determine the epistemic framework within which they operated in order to understand the full range of their diverse historical styles and methods.

In the second place, the dates suggested for the ends of each of these epistemic divisors do not of course mean that the influence of this or that canopy ended in this or that century. They are meant only to delimit the period during which such influence reached its furthest theoretical extent. My ultimate purpose is to show how historical writing evolved in step with the expanding horizons of Arabic-Islamic culture through the attempt to understand the nature and causes of the evolutionary process itself.

In the third place, the historiography of any culture or age is subject not only to dominant currents of thought and belief but also to the dictates of political life in the widest sense of the term. In choosing purely epistemic divisors, it was not at all my intention to ignore or downplay the manner in which the configuration of political structures and events affects the nature and purpose of historical writing. I have therefore attempted throughout this study to show how the sphere of politics helped to shape the historical outlook, the last chapter being the most explicit attempt in this direction. I have also attempted to understand the social background of the historians examined and the development of history as a craft practised by succeeding generations. It was Ibn Khaldun who first recognized that the arts and sciences were not abstract entities but crafts produced by diverse periods of an ever-developing human culture (*'umran*). This connection between the arts and sciences on the one hand and the marketplace on the other is an insight which intellectual history can ignore only at its peril.

In the fourth place, it seemed to me that one important way in which a particular historian or group of historians could be distinguished from another lay in the manner in which their 'inherited background' determined their attitude to truth and falsehood. In suggesting a scheme of four major epistemic canopies or divisors, I hoped to clarify the nature of that

background and hence to exemplify the theoretical range of speculation on the meaning and method of history. I have little doubt that other, equally suitable, canopies might be proffered, and do not claim for mine any methodological finality. If mine have any merit, it lies in whatever capacity they may possess to provoke further inquiry into the history of Arabic historical thought.

Accordingly, this study is constructed in two tiers: in each chapter I first examine the epistemic canopy and then turn to the historians who may be said to represent its most obvious indwellers. In my choice of figures to represent both tiers of the analysis, I was guided by no particular principle of selection other than my own estimate of their influence or typicality. However, I was determined to include more quotations from the sources than is perhaps the norm in such studies, partly because I wanted to lend the work an anthological semblance but also because the works of Arabic historians are still very largely inaccessible to non-Arabists.

This work was begun in Oxford and finished in Cambridge. As a Senior Research Associate at St Antony's and with a very generous grant from the Muhammad Salam Educational Fund, I spent an initial year of reading and planning. In Cambridge, I was elected to an Overseas Visiting Scholarship at St John's, which made it possible for me to finish the bulk of the writing. To all these institutions my gratitude is profound. Three people in particular read portions of this work or discussed its basic assumptions: Muhammad Ali Khalidi, Tamima Beyhum Daou and Basim Musallam. The first read chapter 4 and suggested basic changes in structure and argument. The second read chapter 2 and helped to clarify many of its obscurities. The friendship of the third was constantly abused to test out pet arguments or theories. No author could wish for more perspicacious critics. To all three my debt is enormous and my thanks are whole-hearted.