Islamic Historiography

How did Muslims of the classical Islamic period understand their past? What value did they attach to history? How did they write history? How did historiography fare relative to other kinds of Arabic literature? These and other questions are answered in Chase F. Robinson's *Islamic Historiography*, an introduction to the principal genres, issues, and problems of Islamic historical writing in Arabic, and the first such study to stress the social and political functions of historical writing in the Islamic world. Beginning with the origins of the tradition in the eighth and ninth centuries and covering its development until the beginning of the sixteenth century, this is an authoritative and yet accessible guide through a complex and forbidding field, intended for readers with little or no background in Islamic history or Arabic.

Chase F. Robinson is University Lecturer in Islamic History at the University of Oxford. His publications include *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (2000).

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0 521 58214 8 hardback
0 521 58813 8 paperback

To Mayumi

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2003
Reprinted 2004

Printed in China by Everbest Printing Co.

Typeface Jaghbub 10/12 pt. *System* QuarkXPress [PC]

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

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data
Robinson, Chase F.
Islamic historiography.
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 62081 3.
ISBN 0 521 62936 5 (pbk.).
1. Civilization, Islamic – Historiography. 2. Islamic
Empire – Historiography. I. Title.
907.2053

ISBN 0 521 62081 3 hardback
ISBN 0 521 62936 5 paperback

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Acknowledgments

Although the idea of this book emerged from my reading and teaching only slowly (and sometimes very reluctantly), the nerve to carry it through was produced in the course of a brief conversation with a former teacher, Kevin Reinhart, who reminded me one afternoon in Harvard Square that Islamicists are responsible not only to fellow Islamicists, but to their colleagues and students. Needless to say, former teachers are entitled to take credit for their students' achievements, but should never be held accountable for their shortcomings. Much of the researching and writing took place during a fruitful year (1999–2000) spent at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, an opportunity for which I have the pleasure of thanking its staff in general and P. Crone in particular. That year of leave was supported by the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of Oxford University, to whom I am, as always, indebted. Much of the rest of the writing took place in Meredith, New Hampshire, which was only made possible by my parents' characteristic generosity of time and energy. I am also grateful to the British Academy for the award of a research grant that defrayed some costs.

Of those who helped in various ways (such as reading drafts, answering and raising questions and supplying material), I have the following to offer special thanks: H. Bone, P. Crone, F.M. Donner, R. Foote, G.J. van Gelder, J. Gelvin, M. Gordon, J. Howard-Johnston, H. Jamieson, N. Jamil, J. Johns, E. Landau-Tasseron, A. Marsham, J.S. Meisami, C. Melchert, D.S. Richards, J.S. Robinson, E. Rowson and C. Wakefield.

Abbreviations

AHR	*American Historical Review*
BEO	*Bulletin d'études orientales*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
DI	*Der Islam*
EI	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*
EI²	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition
GAL	C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*
GAS	F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 1.
IC	*Islamic Culture*
IQ	*Islamic Quarterly*
IS	*Islamic Studies*
IJMES	*International Journal of Middle East Studies*
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAL	*Journal of Arabic Literature*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
MW	*The Muslim World*
MSR	*Mamlūk Studies Review*
REI	*Revue des études islamiques*
SI	*Studia Islamica*
WI	*Die Welt des Islams*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

Glossary

akhbārī: one who writes, collects and/or transmits *akhbār*; historian; see *khabar*.
amīr: emir – commander or governor.
autograph: a manuscript copied out by its author, rather than by a copyist.
dhayl: lit. 'tail'; continuation (cf. *mudhayyal*) of an earlier work.
fiqh: religious understanding in general, and jurisprudence in particular.
fuqahāʾ (s. *faqīh*): people who possess *fiqh*; jurists.
futūḥ (s. *fatḥ*): conquests; usually said of the great Islamic conquests of the seventh and early eighth centuries.
ḥadīth: a report of the words or deeds of a religious authority, this almost invariably being the Prophet Muḥammad, which consists of a *matn* and an *isnād* (see below); it is usually adduced for the purposes of generating or understanding the law; cf. *khabar*.
Hijaz: the region of western Arabia where Mecca and Medina are located.
hijra (adj.: *hijrī*): Muḥammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622, which marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar.
Ibāḍīs: see Khārijism.
ikhtiṣār: lit. 'summarizing'; see *mukhtaṣar*.
ʿilm: knowledge, especially religious knowledge; cf. *ʿulamāʾ*.
isnād: the *ḥadīth*'s chain of transmitters that prefaces the *matn*.
Jāhiliyya: the name given by Muslims to describe the pre-Islamic period in the Hijaz.
khabar (pl. *akhbār*): an account of the past that has primarily historical, rather than legal, significance.
khalīfa (pl. *khulafāʾ*): caliph.
Khārijism: schismatic revolutionary movement of early Islam, of which only the quietist Ibāḍīs now survive.
mabʿath: lit. 'sending', but when used in connection with the Prophet, God's sending of Muḥammad.
madrasa: the institution of advanced learning that emerged during the tenth and eleventh centuries.
maghāzī: the Prophet's raids against Hijazi tribesmen and settlements; Prophetic biography; cf. *sīra*.

maqtal: lit. 'murder' or 'killing', conventionally used as the first part of a book title, e.g. *Maqtal Ḥusayn*, *The Killing of Ḥusayn*.
matn: the text of a *ḥadīth* that follows the *isnād*.
muʾarrikh (pl. *muʾarrikhūn*): one who assigns dates, and so a chronographer; historian; see *taʾrīkh*.
mudhayyal: continuation; cf. *dhayl*.
muḥaddith (pl. *muḥaddithūn*): a transmitter of *ḥadīth*; traditionist.
mukhtaṣar: (usually) an abridged or epitomised version of another work.
sharḥ: commentary.
sharīᶜa: Islamic law as constituted by the Qurʾān and *sunna*.
ṣila: lit. 'connection'; usually a continuation of a book; cf. *dhayl*.
sīra (pl. *siyar*); paradigmatic behavior or conduct; biography.
sunna: the paradigmatic way of an authoritative figure, this usually being the Prophet Muḥammad.
ṭabaqa (pl. *ṭabaqāt*): a class, category or generation of men.
tarjama: a biographical entry in a prosopography.
taʾrīkh (or the variant *tārīkh*); date; dating; cf. *taʾrīkh ᶜalā al-sinīn*: 'history organized by annual entries' and *taʾrīkh ᶜalā al-khulafāʾ*: 'history organized by caliphal reigns'; chronography; history.
traditionalism: a conserving attitude towards the past (see chapter 5).
traditionism: the study of the traditions of the Prophet (see chapter 5).
ᶜulamāʾ (s. *ᶜālim*): Muslims who have acquired religious knowledge, especially of the law; the religious élite.

Chronology I: The historians of the formative period*

Caliphs	*Historians*
600	
'Four Rightly Guided Caliphs' (rg. 632–661)	
Abū Bakr (632–634)	
ʿUmar (634–644)	
ʿUthmān (644–656)	
650	
ʿAlī (656–661)	
The Umayyads (661–750)	
Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān (661–680)	
ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (685-705)	
700	
	ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (Medina; 712)
Hishām b. ʿAbd al-Malik (724–743)	al-Zuhrī (Medina; 742)
750	
The Abbasids (750–1258)	
al-Saffāḥ (749–754)	Ibn Isḥāq (Medina/Iraq; 761)
al-Manṣūr (754–775)	Abū Mikhnaf (Iraq; 774)
	Sayf b. ʿUmar (Iraq; 796)
Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809)	
800	
al-Maʾmūn (813–833)	al-Haytham b. ʿAdī (Iraq; 822)
	al-Wāqidī (Medina/Iraq; 823)
	al-Madāʾinī (Iraq; 830–850)
	Ibn Hishām (Iraq; 835)
	Ibn Saʿd (Iraq; 845)
	Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (Iraq; 854)
850	
al-Mutawakkil (847–861)	ʿUmar b. Shabba (Iraq; 878)
	al-Dīnawarī (Iraq; 891)
	al-Balādhurī (Iraq; 892)
900	
al-Muqtadir (908–932)	al-Yaʿqūbī (Iraq; *ca.* 900)
	al-Ṭabarī (Iraq; 923)

* The following includes only those historians who appear in the text most frequently. All the caliphs' dates are regnal, and the historians' are either approximate or conventional death dates.

Chronology II: The historians of the classical period

	Spain, N. Africa, Egypt, Syria	*Iraq, Iran, and the East*
950		al-Masʿūdī (955) Thābit b. Sinān al-Ṣābiʾ (976)
1000		
	al-Musabbiḥī (1030)	Ibn Miskawayh (1030) al-ʿUtbī (1036)
1050		Hilāl b. al-Muḥassin al-Ṣābiʾ (1055)
	Ibn Ḥazm (1063) Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (1071)	al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (1071) Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī (1083)
1100		
	al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (1149)	
1150	Ibn al-Qalānisī (1160) Ibn ʿAsākir (1176)	
		Ibn al-ʿImrānī (1184)
1200		Ibn al-Jawzī (1201)
	ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (1201) Ibn al-Athīr (1233) Bahāʾ al-Dīn b. Shaddād (1235) al-Kalāʿī (1237)	
1250		
	Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (1256) Ibn al-ʿAdīm (1262) Abū Shāma (1267) Ibn Khallikān (1282) Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir (1292)	Ibn al-Sāʿī (1276) Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (1323)
1300		
	Baybars al-Manṣūrī (1325) Abū al-Fidāʾ (1331) al-Nuwayrī (1332) al-Mizzī (1341) al-Dhahabī (1348)	
1350		
	Ibn al-Dawādārī (1335) al-Ṣafadī (1363) Ibn Kathīr (1373)	
1400		
	Ibn al-Furāt (1405) Ibn Khaldūn (1406) al-Maqrīzī (1442) Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (1449)	
1450		
	al-ʿAynī (1451) al-Sakhāwī (1497)	
1500		
	al-Suyūṭī (1505)	

Preface

As it is currently used, the English word 'history', in this respect like the Arabic word *ta'rīkh*, has a two-fold meaning. It usually means the past, be it prehistoric, ancient, medieval, modern or even contemporary, such as is recorded in a diary. But 'history' can also describe our thinking, teaching and writing about the past – that is, a discipline or branch of learning – and it is in this sense that British university students read history and American students major in history. 'History' thus overlaps with 'historiography', an inelegant term that is extremely useful because it means only one thing: *writing about the past*. And since historiography means nothing more than writing about the past, the title of this book suggests that it is about how and why Muslims wrote history. This is true, but it is also imprecise, since I actually describe how Muslims wrote history in *Arabic* during the *formative and classical periods of Islam*. Why only Arabic, and why only the formative and classical periods – whatever that may mean? A few words of explanation are in order.

According to one recent estimate, there are well over one billion Muslims living today, the great majority in Asia and Africa, but over 32 million in Europe and five million in North America. They speak a variety of languages and belong to a variety of ethnic groups. Much of the growth of Islam is a relatively recent phenomenon, but throughout nearly all of Islamic history, Muslims have encouraged (and only very rarely compelled) conversion, and this by setting inspirational examples, offering fiscal or commercial incentives, building cities and otherwise transforming patterns of settlement and social life. The result is that for nearly all of Islamic history Arabs have been in the numerical minority. Now it is true that Islam was born amongst the Arabs of early seventh-century Arabia, that nearly all positions of authority in the early state (the caliphate) were monopolized by Arabs, and, according to nearly all who defined it, that the position of the caliph was to be held by a kinsman of Muḥammad himself, that is, a member of the Arab tribe of the Quraysh. But after about AD 900 Islamic history has relatively little to do with Arabs – indeed, even less to do with Arab tribes and kinship – and much more to do with Persians, Turks and many other non-Arab ethnic groups. Although Muḥammad's native town of Mecca would always remain at the centre of the ritual world, at least for those Muslims who regularly prayed towards it or made

the pilgrimage there, already by the end of the seventh century Muslims had abandoned it as the centre of their political world, which they made first in Syria and then in Iraq. The Near East has long held strategic significance for those engaged in East–West trade, but Arabia proper is now politically significant principally because of the chance discovery of oil.

If ethnic Arabs were edged off the centre stage of Islamic history at a relatively early date, their written language always retained its prestige amongst Muslims of nearly all stripes. Far more than Latin matters to Christians and even Hebrew to Jews, Arabic matters to Muslims: the responsibility to command some of the language, even if just a passing acquaintance with its alphabet or a few memorized lines of the Qurʾān, is commonly felt by non-Arab Muslims, wherever they may live. In part, this can be explained by attitudes towards scripture, or, more precisely, by attitudes concerning scripture and authority: whereas Christians of the Reformation made translating the Latin Bible into vernacular languages part of their programme of wresting authority away from an established clergy, the Arabic of the Qurʾān was generally held to be inviolate by all Muslims, reformist or otherwise. When Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130) preached a puritanical Islam amongst the Berbers of North Africa, he made a point of teaching them Arabic so that they could read the Qurʾān in God's own language. This said, attitudes towards scripture alone cannot explain the near monopoly enjoyed by Arabic on virtually all fields of higher learning in North Africa and the Middle East that took hold during the seventh and eighth centuries, and, in any case, attitudes towards scripture were influenced by broad trends.

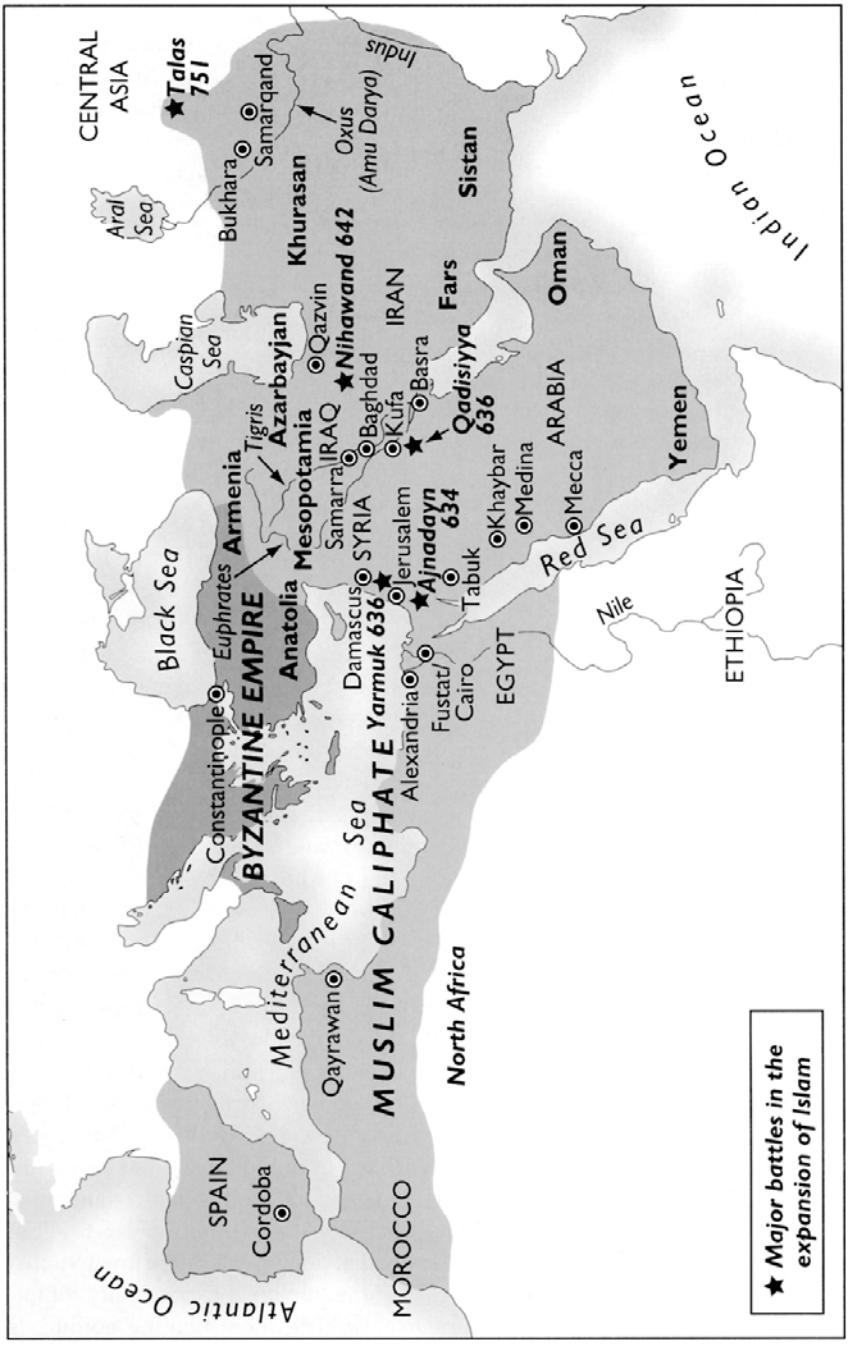
The conquests of the mid-seventh century, when Muslim armies pushed the Byzantines out of North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and put an end to the 400-year-old rule of the Sasanians in Iraq and Iran, resulted in an Islamic state that was ruled, at least initially, by and for Arab Muslims, some of whom had been townsmen, but many of whom saw themselves as pastoralists. Still, as one Chinese aphorism has it, 'it is possible to create an empire on horseback, but it is impossible to rule from that position'. Muslims, too, understood that empire building meant settling, building cities, putting in place an administration and bureaucracy, and generating a cultural matrix in which Arabs and non-Arabs alike could participate. During the first centuries of Islamic rule, Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim – indeed, virtually anyone with any intellectual ambitions to speak of – accordingly adopted Arabic as the language of high culture. This process of Arabicization, which should be distinguished from that of Islamicization (that is, conversion to Islam), took some time, and its course naturally varied from region to region; but in one form or another, it was nearly irresistible. Arabic almost entirely replaced Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the Fertile Crescent, while in Iran, and in other regions where early Islamic administration was thinner and local culture more robust, its impact was still strong: Persian would survive, but only in Arabic dress, written in an Arabic alphabet and teeming with Arabic loan words. So even though the political unity of the Middle East that resulted from the great Islamic conquests of the mid-seventh century was relatively short lived (about 200

years), the cultural and intellectual patterns that Arab-Muslim imperialists had created by settling and patronising learned culture in Arabic would endure. Even today, Arabic survives outside the Arab Middle East as a written language of theological and legal expression, much like Latin in some Catholic institutions of learning. History has probably not seen a more successful instance of linguistic imperialism than the spread of Arabic, propelled as it was by the expansion of the Islamic state.[1]

The emergence and spread of Arabic in the Middle East count not merely as one of the signal achievements of early Islamic rule, but as an exceptionally creative moment in human history, one which would produce a volume and variety of literature that rival any other linguistic tradition. Early Islamic scholarship was initially concentrated in centres of post-conquest Arab settlement and administration, particularly the Iraqi cities of Basra, Kufa and, somewhat later, Baghdad itself, which was founded soon after the Abbasid branch of the Quraysh overthrew the Umayyad branch in 750 (the 'Abbasid Revolution'). It was in cities such as these that Arabic was transformed from a largely oral medium into a language and literature of great possibilities: grammar was worked out, thereby making Arabic literary culture universally accessible, and disciplines of learning and genres of literature emerged, particularly under the patronage of eighth- and ninth-century caliphs. That the metropolitan centre of the empire was to generate so much learning is natural enough: it was where patrons and resources were concentrated, attracting in equal measure the ambitious and talented from Iraq and beyond. But it is also natural that the provinces should eventually produce some learning too, and this they did, particularly during the ninth and tenth centuries, when Iraq fell into political and economic decline. By this time, the *formative period* of Islam had come to an end. Arab settlement in many of these regions had originally been relatively thin: in numbers, Arab settlers in the far Islamic west (present-day Spain) and east (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan) were always dwarfed by non-Arab indigenous populations, but after years of assimilation and cultural transformation, provincial cities now began to produce scholars in large numbers, particularly under the patronage of newly independent dynasties.

The Baghdad-centred caliphate of the earliest Abbasids was to some degree unifocal, but already in the days of Hārūn al-Rashīd (rg. 786–809) the seeds for these provincial dynasties were being sown. The result was a polyfocal Islamic world, in which dynasties, great and small, long and short-lived, Turkish, Kurdish, Persian or otherwise, would take root in areas stretching from the western Mediterranean to central Asia. With the notable exceptions of the Umayyads of Spain, independent since the Abbasid Revolution in 750, and the Fatimids, a Shīᶜite dynasty that would rule Egypt from 969 to 1171, virtually all of these dynasties owed their legitimacy either to the now-enfeebled Abbasid caliph himself, or to the law (the *sharīᶜa*) that he had come to symbolize. In either case, these dynasties had

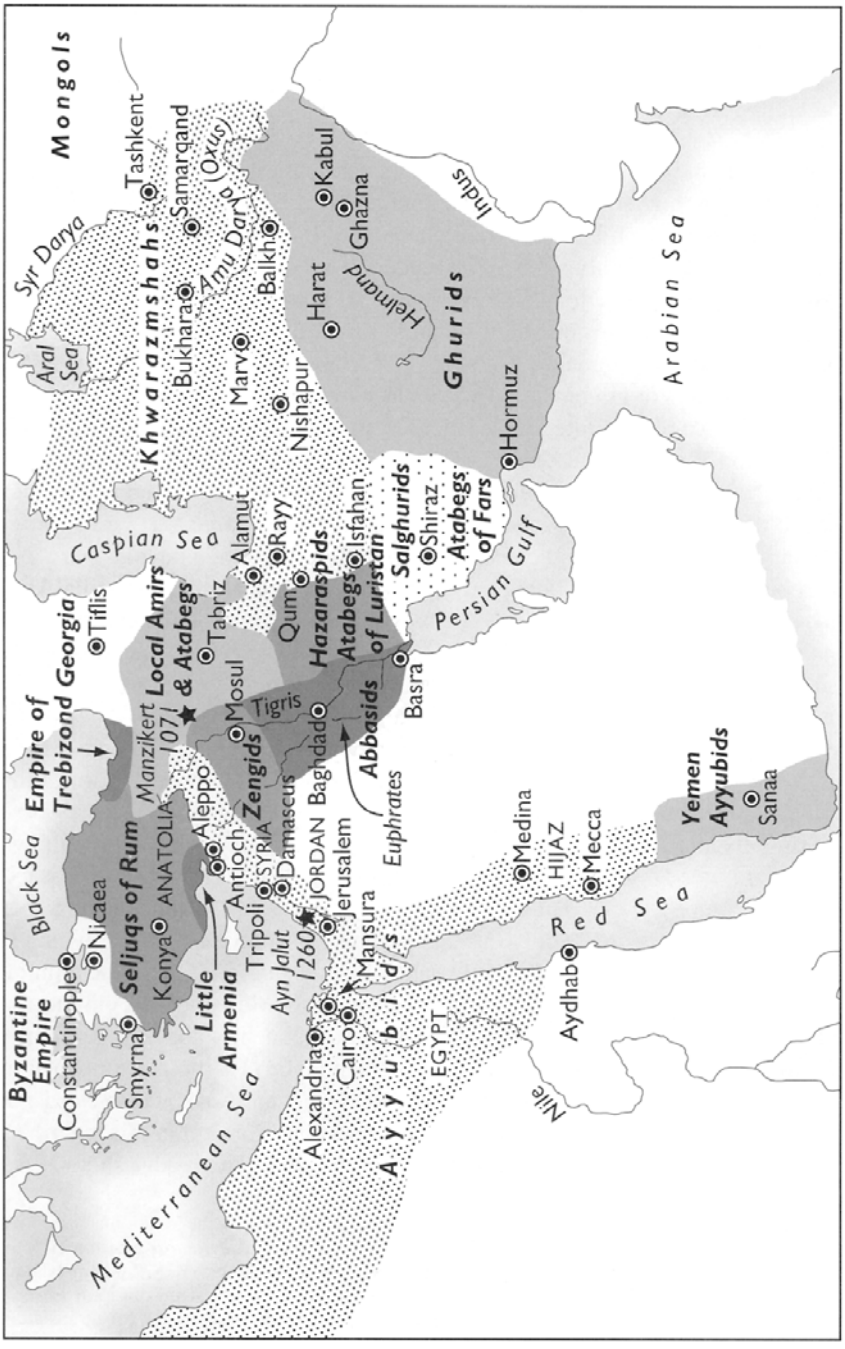
[1] For the aphorism, I draw upon A. Khazanov, 'Muhammad and Jenghiz Khan compared: the religious factor in world empire building', *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 35 (1993), p. 469.



Map 1 The early Islamic Middle East

a stake in patronizing the cultural patterns first mooted in Iraq, which, as far as learning was concerned, meant patronizing Arabic, Arabic letters or an Arabicized language (such as New Persian). Even those exceptional dynasties (including, but not limited to the Fatimids) that had Shīᶜite sympathies would follow suit. Such historical affinity as exists between Shiᶜism and Iran only dates from shortly after the discovery of the New World, which is recent history in Near Eastern terms. At this point, we have entered the early sixteenth century, which produced not only the first dynasty to make Shiᶜism the faith of an Iranian state (the Safavids), but also the Ottoman conquest of Cairo, which put an end to the long-lived Mamluk dynasty of Egypt (rg. 1250–1517). Arabic learning would survive both the Safavids and the Ottomans, and in some respects it would even flourish. But for the purposes of this book, these events mark the end of what I have called the *classical period*, and only exceptionally shall I have anything to say about the tradition after 1500.

Being the prestige language of scholarship, Arabic was the language of historiography, exclusively so for early Muslims, and increasingly so even for Christians living under Islamic rule. This pattern holds until the late tenth and eleventh centuries, when dynasts in the eastern Islamic world began to reinvigorate Persian as a written language, first its poetry and then its prose; Persian-speaking historians such as Ibn Funduq al-Bayhaqī were writing in Arabic as late as the middle of the twelfth century, but the fashion was now changing, and the East would eventually produce a vibrant tradition of Persian historiography. Much later, the Ottoman Turks would also patronise Turkish historiography, and other Islamic languages would produce traditions of their own. No doubt some of my critics will fasten onto this point, insisting that this book should have been entitled something like *Islamic Historiography in Arabic* (the preceding paragraphs should make it clear why *Arabic Historiography* is out of the running). But *Islamic Historiography in Arabic* is both indecorous and pleonastic. Like it or not, the fact is that much of what was written in Arabic in this period was written by non-Arabs (perhaps the greatest of all historians of the first three centuries, Abū Jaᶜfar al-Ṭabarī, was Persian) who, as learned Muslims, expressed themselves according to the linguistic norms of the day. This meant writing in Arabic. Islamic historiography would become polyglot, but it had always been a collective endeavour. And by the time that Muslims began to write their history in Persian or Turkish, the tradition had begun to follow a number of discernible patterns, some of which were set already by the middle of the ninth century, others emerging in the twelfth and thirteenth. To understand Persian historiography one needs not only Persian, but also some grounding in the Arabic tradition from which it emerged; and an understanding of Persian historiography only complements what the Arabic tradition can teach us about Islamic historiography. The same survey that demonstrates the great vitality of local history writing in Persian also speaks of the 'remarkable continuity' of that tradition from Arabic into Persian. Similarly Turkish: there may be nothing in Arabic that can match Babur's glorious autobiography in Chagatai Turkish, but by this time (the early sixteenth century), earlier objections to autobiographical writing



Map 2 The Islamic commonwealth of states in the middle of the thirteenth century

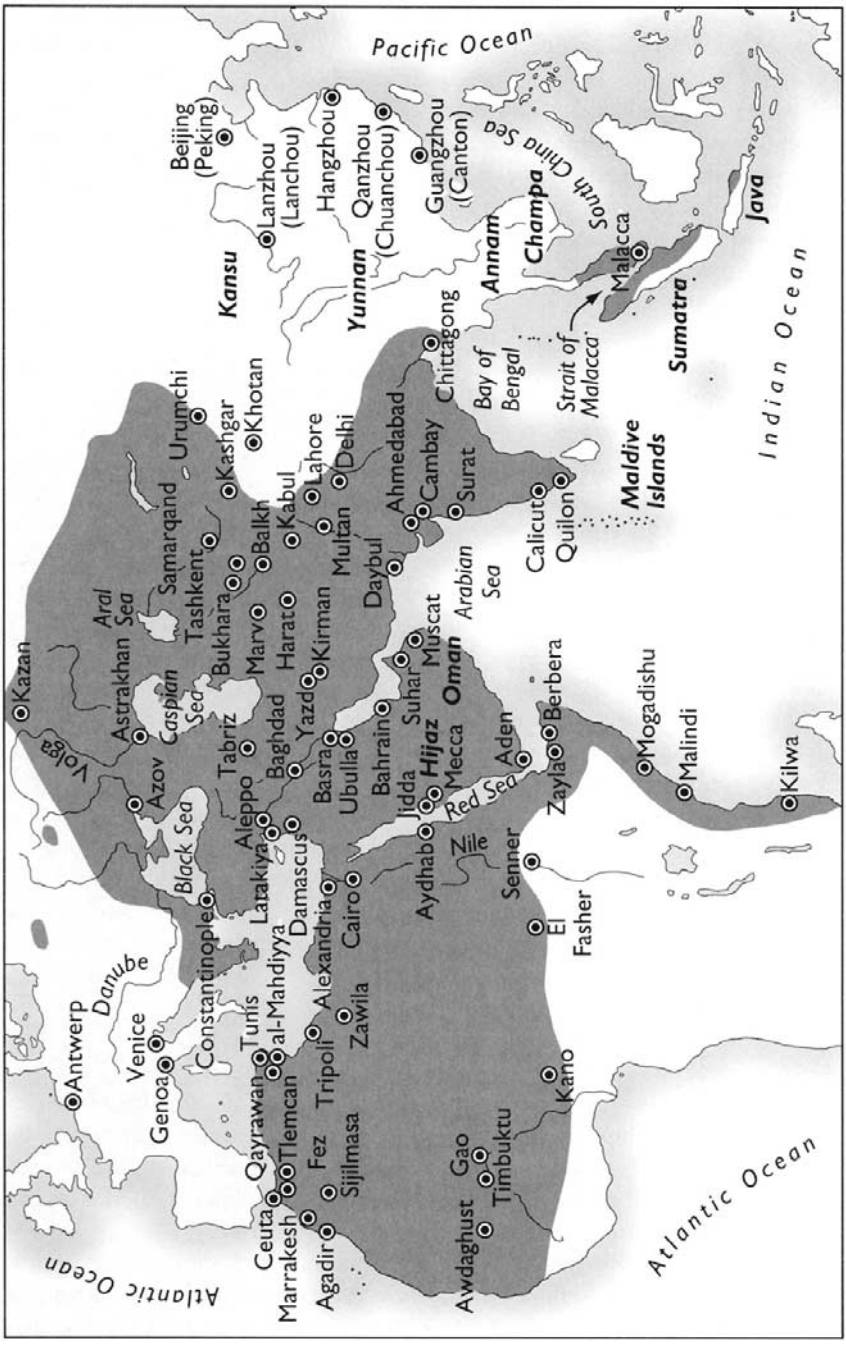
had been overcome in Arabic. Like the Persian historiographic tradition, the Turkish is rooted in the Arabo-Islamic tradition.[2]

* * *

This book assumes that the reader is curious enough about Islamic history and historiography to bother reading about it, but that he or she possesses no training in Islamic history, much less the Arabic language. In fact, I would regard it as a ringing success even if only a few of its readers were inspired to take up either of the two, and it is in part for those who wish to learn more that I bother with transliterating Arabic terms into their standard forms. Those who learn Arabic will come to know how to pronounce ẓ, ṭ, ṣ, etc. For Arabophile and Arabophobe alike, a few simple points of grammar and vocabulary must be made at the outset, however. First, the Arabic definite article (there is no indefinite article) is *al*, which is prefixed upon the qualified noun: so *kitāb* (a book) and *al-kitāb* (the book). Second, when feminine nouns are put in the construct state, their *a* ending becomes *at*: so the *sīra* (biography) of Muḥammad and the *sīrat Muḥammad* ('the *sīra* [life] of Muḥammad') refer to the same work. Third, 'Ibn' (or 'ibn') means 'son', and will frequently appear in abbreviated form ('b.') in genealogies, as will 'Abū' (father; in the genitive, 'Abī'): so '^{c}Alī b. Abī Ṭālib', which is the full name of Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law ^{c}Alī, literally means '^{c}Alī, the son of the father of Ṭālib' (bt. abbreviates bint, 'daughter'). Fourth, the adjective ending 'ī' (fem. 'iyya') denotes a relationship of one kind or another, e.g. 'al-Ṭabarī' (geographic, 'the person from Ṭabaristān'), 'Ḥanbalī' (academic, 'the person who follows the legal thinking of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal'), and 'al-Qurashī' (tribal, 'the person from the tribe of the Quraysh').

To simplify and clarify things for non-Arabists and non-Islamicists, I have drawn some illustrations from pre-existing translations, and included a brief glossary, maps, a chronology, death dates, and some suggestions for further reading. For similar reasons, I have made only infrequent mention of Islamic dating, which is based on a lunar rather than solar cycle, and which began in 622 of the Common Era (C.E.). This *hijrī* dating, which takes its name from Muḥammad's emigration (the Hijra or Hegira) from Mecca to Medina, more frequently appears here in the publication details of Arabic texts, where it is marked by 'H' (books published in Iran are generally dated according to a modified *hijrī* calendar, which need not concern us). On occasion I cite more than one Arabic edition, but in this regard, as in many others, I make no attempt to be comprehensive. The reader should also

[2] For the Persian local tradition, see A.K.S. Lambton, 'Persian local histories: the tradition behind them and the assumptions of their authors', in *Yād-Nāma in memoria di Alessandro Bausani* (Rome, 1991), i, pp. 227–238; for the Persian rhetorical tradition's debts to Arabic, K.A. Luther, 'Islamic rhetoric and the Persian historians, 1100–1300 A.D.', in J.A. Bellamy, ed., *Studies in Near Eastern Culture and History in Memory of Ernest T. Abdel-Massih* (Ann Arbor, 1990), p. 93; for a translation of Babur's autobiography, his *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. W.M. Thackston (Washington, D.C., 1996); for a study, S. Dale, 'Steppe humanism: the autobiographical writings of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, 1483–1530', *IJMES* 22 (1990), pp. 37–58.



Map 3 The Islamic world in 1500

know that most of the authors and books mentioned here can be tracked down in the new edition of the *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1954–), which has now reached the letter Y, and in J.S. Meisami and P. Starkey, eds., *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York, 1998), which is complete; both provide even more bibliography. For those equipped with greater ambition and rudimentary German, the standard reference works are C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Weimar, Leipzig and Leiden, 1898–1949) and F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1967); the former covers all the ground covered here, the latter, the first four centuries of Islam. Those with Arabic will almost certainly also know of ʿU. Kaḥḥāla, *Muʿjam al-muʾallifīn* (Damascus, 1957–1961, with multiple Beirut reprints).

As an introduction to what obstinately remains a forbidding field, this book is intended to complement some pre-existing literature, particularly F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, second ed. (Leiden, 1968), T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), and J.S. Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999), all of which must be read by anyone whose interest in the topic has survived the present book. From these it differs in what it asks of the reader, and, even more important, in approach. As a social historian who works primarily (but not exclusively) on the basis of texts, I have put what some may feel is undue emphasis on the social function and production of the historiographic tradition. In other words, I have said nearly as much about how and why Muslim historians wrote as I have said about what they wrote. I leave it to the reader to determine if this emphasis is undue, or, as I believe, overdue. Suffice it to say here, my intention has not so much been to survey (as does Rosenthal) or interpret (as does Khalidi) the classical tradition, as much as to make it comprehensible. I set about doing this in two ways. First, I have tried to describe the production of historiography within the sociology of learning broadly conceived, which means touching on everything from the historians' conceptual debts to Islamic law to how they earned their living and organised their notes. Second, I have proposed a three-part typology of historiography – chronography, biography and prosopography – that is intended to impose some order on a huge and unruly body of books.

What do these terms mean?

1. By *chronography*, I mean those genres that describe events as they occur in time, organizing them according to annual entries (in which case it is annalistic) or caliphal reigns. Universal histories, which begin with Creation, and cover the non-Islamic world generally insofar as it relates to Islamic history, are conventionally chronographic, local history less frequently so, since it often takes one prosopographical form or another.
2. The Islamic tradition produced biographical narrative of various sorts, but by *biography* I mean only single-subject works that relate the life of a person, the coverage usually being representative rather than comprehensive. As we shall see, in Arabic it is conventionally called *sīra* ('way of acting'), which clearly expresses the paradigmatic force of biographical writing. If the prestige form

of chronography was universal history, the prestige subject of biography was Prophetic biography, but there were others, even in the earliest period.

3. By *prosopography*, I mean writing about social groups, rather than the collective study of social groups, as the term is commonly understood by modern historians (the Greek *prosōpon* means 'face' or 'person'). Whereas biography is about exemplary or otherwise distinctive individuals whose lives – however exceptional or heroic – take meaning from their times, prosopography compiles and organises those items of biographical data that *mark an individual's belonging to a group*, the individual entry generally being called a *tarjama*. (We shall see that the growth of the *tarjama* would blur the distinction between prosopography and biography.) Many of these works, which have parallels in western and non-western traditions (e.g., the Chinese), are conventionally called 'biographical dictionaries'.[3]

Much more about these definitions will be said in chapter 4. Here it is enough to note that the categories are meant primarily to be heuristic, rather than pragmatic: this is not a *Handbuch* intended for practitioners, and I limit myself to some general comments about the utility of the sources for writing Islamic history. For excellent discussions along those lines, the reader might consult C. Cahen, *Introduction à l'histoire du monde musulman médiéval: VIIe–XVe siècle (méthodologie et éléments de bibliographie)* (Paris, 1983) (a revision of J. Sauvaget and C. Cahen, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'Orient musulman* [Paris, 1961], which has been translated into English as *Introduction to the History of the Muslim East: A Bibliographical Guide* [Berkeley, 1965]), R.S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (rev. ed., Princeton, 1991), and T. Nagel, *Die islamische Welt bis 1500* (Munich, 1998). All three are exemplary in several ways.

It is a historiographic truism that the survival of historical sources is a matter of history itself, and the same thing can be said of the ideas and categories that historians invent to make some sense of their sources. The historical context of this book and series is the growth of the academic study of Islam and Islamic history, their intention being to open a door into Islamic studies for the uninitiated and, it is my own special hope, to ventilate some of its mustier corners as well. To serve a broad audience – students, scholars, and the odd Islamicist, too – I have tried to strike a balance between simplifying, generalizing and comparing on the one hand, and exemplifying on the other; the syntax of this sentence is deliberately unbalanced. Here and throughout I take consolation in an aphorism credited to H.H. Munro: 'A little inaccuracy sometimes saves tons of explanation'.

[3] I am not the first to use the term 'prosopography' in this sense; see M.J.L. Young, 'Arabic biographical writing' in M.J.L. Young et al., eds., *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period* (Cambridge History of Arabic Literature; Cambridge, 1990), p. 170.