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Introduction: The Ties that Bound the Societies of the Islamic Empire

EDMUND HAYES AND PETRA M. SIJPESTEIJN

This volume aims to mark a shift in the way we study the history of the early Islamic empire and its regional successors in the Umayyad and Abbasid period (with one paper introducing a broader chronology by focusing on the thirteenth century). The central thesis of this volume is that the early Islamic empire was tied together by networks of social dependency that can be tracked through the linguistic and material traces of interconnectivity in our sources – the traces of the 'ties that bind' society.[1] These relations between individuals and groups are an important part of what made the early Islamic empire and held it together. The publication emerges from several years of conversations about how to formulate a holistic approach to the early Islamic empire in the framework of the research project Embedding conquest: naturalising Muslim rule in the early Islamic empire (600–1000) funded by the European Research Council.[2] While there have been various small-scale case studies on social relationships in early Islam, especially in relation to philanthropy and care of the poor,[3] patronage of scholars and the arts,[4] religious

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1 While 'dependency' is often used with a negative connotation, here we do not assume it to be intrinsically oppressive, though in some cases dependency relationships may be so. See Keir Martin, 'Dependence', *Cambridge encyclopedia of anthropology*, http://doi.org/10.29164/21-dependence, accessed 1.11.2022. See the section, 'The Ties that Bind', below.

2 For a full description of the project, see https://emco.hcommons.org/. This work was supported by the European Research Council under Grant number 683194. We would like to thank the EmCo team, Alon Dar, Reza Huseini, Birte Kristiansen, Cecilia Palombo, and Eline Scheerlinck for their comments on earlier drafts. Any remaining mistakes remain, of course, our own.

3 See e.g. Zachary Chitwood and Esther Möller (eds.), *Foundations and the power of giving. Christian, Jewish and Muslim perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Adam Sabra, *Poverty and charity in medieval Islam. Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517 (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4 E.g. Sonja Brentjes, *Teaching and learning the sciences in Islamicate societies (700–1800)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018); Judith Pfeiffer, *Politics, patronage and the transmission of knowledge in 13th–15th-century Tabriz* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Jocelyn Sharlet, *Patronage and poetry in the Islamic world. Social mobility and status in the medieval Middle East and Central Asia (*London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Ana Akasoy, *Philosophie und Mystik in der späten Almohadenzeit. Die Sizilianischen Fragen des Ibn Sabʿīn* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

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interaction and conversion,[5] client–patron relations,[6] and, in the political realm, on ruler–subject relations,[7] rarely do these studies set their frame of reference at the level of the empire itself.[8] In this volume we aim to demonstrate how the very particular relationships that emerge from focused case studies can and should be understood as constituent parts of the early Islamic empire as a whole. Indeed, it is precisely through the granular particularity of individual cases that we can see the practice of empire.[9] Focusing on the language used by our sources to describe relations and interactions (see also

[5] E.g. Mohamed Meouak (ed.), *Biografías magrebíes. Identidades y grupos religiosos, sociales y políticos en el Magreb medieval (*Madrid: CSIC, 2013); Ragnhild Johnsrud Zorgati, *Pluralism in the Middle Ages. Hybrid identities, conversion and mixed marriages in medieval Iberia* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Uri Simonsohn, *A common justice. The legal allegiances of Christians and Jews under early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Dominique Valérian (ed.), *Islamisation et arabisation de l'occident musulman médiéval (VIIe–XIIe siècle)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011); Dorothea Weltecke, *Minderheiten und Mehrheiten. Erkundungen religiösen Komplexität im mittelalterichen Afro-Asien* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

[6] E.g. Monique Bernards and John Nawas (eds.), *Patronate and patronage in early and classical Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership in an early Islamic society* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

[7] Alain George and Andrew Marsham (eds.), *Power, patronage and memory in early Islam: Perspectives on Umayyad elites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jürgen Paul, *Herrscher, Gemeinwesen, Vermittler. Ostiran und Transoxanien in vormongolischer Zeit* (Beirut & Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1996); Jürgen Paul, *Lokale und imperiale Herrschaft im Iran des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2016); Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks XIIIe–XVIe siècle. Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam médiéval* (Paris: Seuil, 2014); Andrew Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic monarchy: Accession and succession in the first Muslim empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

[8] E.g., a standard, overview work (the *New Cambridge History of Islam.* Volume 1, *The formation of the Islamic world, sixth to eleventh centuries*, edited by Chase Robinson. Volume 2, *The western Islamic world, eleventh to eighteenth centuries*, edited by Maribel Fierro. Volume 3, *The eastern Islamic world, eleventh to eighteenth centuries*, edited by David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid, all published in 2010) does not include a chapter on social relations, nor does that form a prominent part of the discussion throughout the volumes. This is in contrast to work on the late Roman empire, European medieval world and medieval China. See e.g. Arnaldo Marcone, 'Late Roman social relations', in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (eds.), *The Cambridge ancient history,* Volume 13, *The later Roman empire, AD 337–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 338–370; Peter Heather, 'State, lordship and community in the West (c. AD 400–600)', in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge ancient history,* Volume 14, *Late antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 437–468; Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel (eds.), *The dynamics of ancient empires: State power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and the classic Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman social relations, 50 BC to AD 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[9] *Doing* empire, as Tom Tölle calls it. 'Early modern empires: an introduction to the recent literature', in *H-Soz-Kult, Kommunikation und Fachinformation für die Geschichtswissenschaften*, www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-2021, accessed 15/4/2021. Tölle reiterates the call for focus on practising imperial agents rather than their self-proclaimed goals as formulated by Anne Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue in the introduction to their edited volume *Imperial formations* (Santa Fe: University of Santa Fe Press, 2007).

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Language and Rhetoric below), and what they show of the modes, expressions, and conditions that governed communication and interaction, we aim to understand the driving forces behind the early Islamic empire as extending beyond motives of economy and conquest.[10]

Before we proceed, then, it is appropriate to define both how we understand the early Islamic empire, and what kinds of approaches are taken here to study it. In this introduction, we lay out, through a series of sub-headings, some key approaches and themes that structure this volume. The final three of these sub-headings, 'Communities', 'Institutions', and 'Interpersonal Ties', also serve to divide the chapters of this book into broad thematic sections. It must be understood, however, that regardless of this division, all chapters deal with multiple modes of connecting and communicating in the early Islamic empire and its successors. Thus, most of the chapters in this book speak to types of connection beyond the broad section in which they have been placed.

Understanding the Empire: Late Antiquity and Empire Studies

The plurality of its inhabitants' ethnic, religious, and regional identities is generally considered to be the constitutive characteristic of any empire. And understanding how an empire managed its diverse populations is key to understanding its characteristic features. The Islamic empire was no exception, reaching from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of China, albeit not all under the direct political control of the caliph during the period under study. The linguistically, religiously, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous population may have been headed by Arabic-speaking political, legal, religious, and military elites, but it was ruled by a diverse administrative

[10] See Peter Webb's criticism of Robert Hoyland's materialist view on the Arab conquests focusing mainly, in his eyes, on economic factors (Peter Webb, 'March of Islam' *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March, 2015, review of Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's path: The Arab conquests and the creation of an Islamic empire (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)). Traditional historical overviews mostly present the conquests as a series of political events. Cf. Hugh Kennedy, *The great Arab conquests: How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007); Fred Donner, *The early Islamic conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Michael Mann's classical study on legitimacy (*The sources of social power*, volumes 1–4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986–2013)) identifies four sources of social power: ideology, economy, military and politics. Mann's model has been criticised for ignoring a politics of identity, including inherited identities such as kinship, but also imagined and created identities, as a source of legitimacy and the presence of power networks in society. Cf. Anatol Lieven's review of *The sources of social power,* volume 4 in *International journal of politics, culture and society* 29 (2016): 209–214; John A. Hall and Ralph Schroeder, *An anatomy of power: The social theory of Michael Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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and governmental class of secretaries, scribes, and tax-collectors, both as a residue from the empires that preceded it and because diversity fitted Islamic imperial policy.[11] Especially Persian but also other local languages, literatures, and aesthetic expressions soon played at least as important a role as Arabic in cultural and literary production. The majority of the population throughout this period was not Muslim but Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and to a smaller extent Hindu, Buddhist, and other.

A key contention of this volume is that the coherence and longevity of the Islamic empire is to be explained by the way in which it was successfully embedded within the social networks of the societies it brought together. That is, an enduring and geographically far-flung political unity encompassing a very diverse population was achieved by integrating numerous networks of interpersonal relations both in formal and informal institutions.[12] This new insight is built on two scholarly developments.

The first scholarly development we draw upon is the insight of empire studies that empires are not ruled by top–down force alone, but that legitimacy and stability are created in various ways, both top–down and bottom–up.[13] It has become clear that while institutions such as the caliphate, law, the military, religious leadership, and their various infrastructures are crucial elements of government, understanding the functioning of the early Islamic empire takes us far beyond the courts, academies, monasteries, and

[11] Petra M. Sijpesteijn, 'A multilingual policy. The early Islamic empire and its many languages of governance', in Antoine Borrut, Manuela Ceballos, and Alison M. Vacca (eds.), *Navigating language in the early Islamic world: Multilingualism and language change in the first centuries of Islam*, 43–88 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024).

[12] For formal structure, see e.g. the *walā'* system integrating clients, converts, and freedmen into a fictional tribal system (Patricia Crone, *Slaves on horses. The evolution of the Islamic polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)). For the porous tribal structure incorporating many more than those connected through bloodlines, see also **Leube**'s contribution to this volume. Ties of kinship in the early caliphate are examined in another publication of the project: Birte Kristiansen and Cecilia Palombo (eds.), 'Ties of kinship', special issue of *Medieval encounters. Ties of kingship and Islamicate societies,* special issue of *Medieval Encounters* 29 (2023). For informal structures, see e.g. the role that local elites played as power and cultural brokers in the early Islamic empire (Uriel Simonsohn and Luke Yarbrough, https://iias.huji.ac.il/cultural-brokerage-pre-modern-islam, accessed 1/3/2021). See also Cecilia Palombo's dissertation showing Christian religious leaders playing instrumental roles in the Muslim administration of Egypt centuries after the establishment of Muslim rule in the province, 'The Christian clergy's Islamic local government in late Marwanid and Abbasid Egypt', unpublished PhD dissertation (Princeton University, 2020).

[13] Krishan Kumar, *Empires. A historical and political sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Gregory E. Areshian (ed.), *Empires and diversity: On the crossroads of archaeology, anthropology, and history* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2013); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in world history: Power and the politics of difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Karen Barkey, *Empire of difference. The Ottomans in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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palaces to an arena in which all inhabitants of the empire participated in shaping it.[14] The practices of empire that we aim to access through our case studies include not only the actions and expressions of imperial agents, the secretaries, tax-collectors, agents of law and order, and the body of governing personnel, but extend into the fabric of society. Several of the papers in this volume deal with connections at the lowest, visible, social layers, showing, however (because actors from higher levels of society were involved or because interactions mirror those at different hierarchical strata), that these are not isolated phenomena but form a continuum with similar interactions throughout society. The individuals who figure in the credit-related documents studied by **Palombo** and **Hoyland**, for example, are largely unknown, but they belonged to elites as well as lower social layers, involving legal and economic institutions and private persons. The legal transactions they are involved in, moreover, intersect with the legal debates conducted by jurists at urban courts and academies.[15] The letters and petitions that **Sijpesteijn** and **Zinger** present were exchanged between 'middle- and lower-class' individuals otherwise not known from the historical record, but these texts show striking similarities with the correspondence of political rulers and their agents. **Bauer** and **Hayes** discuss the (emotional) content of administrative decrees, but private letters exchanged between anonymous individuals lower down the social hierarchy also show that rhetorical devices between sectors of society clearly overlapped.

The second development that has influenced our approach is the increasingly nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of the larger world of which the Islamic empire was a part. This interconnectedness is both synchronous and diachronic. Recent decades have seen a salutary shift towards seeing the early Islamic Middle East not as a fundamentally new framework but as the heir and continuation of the late antique world in which it was embedded.[16] This development has a number of important consequences that should be highlighted. First, the legacy of the eastern Roman

[14] Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin, 'A stakeholder empire: The political economy of Spanish imperial rule in America', *Economic history review* 65 (2012): 609–651; Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler, *Cosmopolitanism and empire: Universal rulers, local elites, and cultural integration in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[15] See e.g. Petra Sijpesteijn, 'Good governance in theory and practice. Comparing Abū Yūsuf's *Kitāb al-Kharāj* with papyri', in *The historian of Islam at work. Essays in honor of Hugh N. Kennedy*. Maaike van Berkel and Letitia Osti (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 183–200.

[16] See e.g. the works published as part of the series 'Studies in late antiquity and early Islam' (SLAEI), formerly published by Darwin Press, Princeton, and recently recontinued by Gerlach Press. See also the ERC-funded consolidator grant (Grant agreement ID 8666043) 'The Qur'an as a source for late antiquity' with PI Holger M. Zellentin (Tübingen University) running from 2020 to 2025.

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and Sasanian empires that predated the rise of Islam long continued to be important. This legacy is evident throughout the volume. Many contributions to this volume indicate that it is not desirable to ask black and white questions such as 'Is x institution derived from Arabia or from pre-Islamic late antiquity?' for the pre-Islamic Arabian forms and institutions spread by the empire were themselves already formed in communication with the broader world of late antiquity. Thus, **Hoyland**'s contribution suggests that debt slavery was a product of a late antique Mediterranean world of which (Islamic) Arabia was a part; caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 717–720) and Muslim jurists developed ideas about debt slavery in accordance with the legal thinking of the time. This is not just the influence of the past, however, for the attitudes of Muslim jurists towards (temporary) debt slavery were influenced by evolving late antique Byzantine and Zoroastrian ideas as well as Arabian ones. Our sources show how Muslim ideas continued to develop, increasingly expressing disapproval of debt slavery, which is why ʿUmar's ideas, frozen in time in the letter studied by **Hoyland**, were 'forgotten' by later sources because they were outdated, reflecting an earlier, more pragmatic attitude towards temporary debt slavery. Meanwhile, **Berkes**' Arabic letter formulae that appear in Greek decrees show how Arab governors and their Greek-writing secretaries on the one hand continued older Greek chancery styles, while on the other hand they integrated innovative elements to signal the establishment of Arab rule. The subsequent appearance of these Arabic formulae in Coptic private correspondence indicates that this was not only a top–down process, but that Greek and Coptic letter-writers aimed also to signal close relations with the new rulers through epistolary formulae. **Schmidt**'s messengers in Islamic Egypt operated in languages and according to practices and routes inherited from the Byzantine empire, but new elements were introduced as well by the Arabs in need of controlling a diverse population with tools and institutions they inherited. **Vroom** observes that material culture in Sicily reflects political rule, with Byzantine amphorae slowly being replaced by Islamic ones as Islamic rule spread over the island. Local production and imported wares start to reflect Islamic models as economic zones follow military-political competition. **Sijpesteijn**'s and **Zinger**'s studies of the rhetoric of letters (Arabic ones from the 8th–9th centuries and Judaeo-Arabic ones from the 13th century respectively) show biblical and (ancient) Near Eastern themes interacting with specific medieval Egyptian historical and social contexts. **Huseini** shows how certain inhabitants of the Rob region of early Islamic Bactria turned to a neighbouring non-Muslim Turkic king to stop the disintegration of the household structures under the influence of Islam. When

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their converted elder brother refused to continue the Bactrian tradition of polyandrous cohabitation and joint ownership of the household's properties that legally bound them and instead approached the Muslim authorities, another brother tried to secure his socio-economic basis by appealing to non-Muslim authorities. Such examples show us that change or resistance to change is not always produced by ideological principles, and that the desire to hold on to existing structures can also be motivated by socio-economic concerns. Some social forms gave way to the pressure of new exigencies, while other late antique, pre-Islamic forms lived on as part of Islam or the broader imperial society. Meanwhile, **Palombo**'s approach is to examine the papyri from Islamic Egypt as a group on its own not in relation to what came before and after. In so doing, she aims to counter scholarship that has artificially separated linguistic traditions in early Islamic Egypt, studying them in the framework of the empires where these languages prevailed rather than in the context in which they occurred. **Palombo** does not deny a persistence of existing practices but purposely cuts with the Roman past, warning against 'overextending the gradual formation of Islam out of late antiquity'. There is no single story of the imposition of Arab or Muslim institutions, then, but a constant evolution of forms from various sources within an interconnected empire.

Multiple Approaches and Sources of History Writing

It has long been recognised that literary sources cannot be read as providing a transparent window onto the events of early Islam, or indeed events in general.[17] As a response, we have seen the rise in the importance of three broad kinds of studies. First, there has been an increased focus on documentary sources,[18] material culture, and archaeology, though scholars are moving beyond naive attempts to use such sources to merely disprove or verify elements mentioned in the literary sources. Second, scholars have turned to literary traditions that are considered to be at least partially independent, if not isolated, from Islamic historiography, including Greek, Coptic, Syriac, and Pahlavi, to mention just a few, acknowledging that

[17] Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998); Stephen Humphries, *Islamic history. A framework for enquiry. Revised edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[18] Here we make a contrast between 'documentary' sources, recovered through archaeology, and 'literary' sources, by which we refer to any written text that has been transmitted and copied in manuscripts and printed editions, without any aesthetic judgement implied by using this term.

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'Islamic' history cannot be written with recourse only to Arabic sources. Third, we have seen a proliferation of studies that argue for reading historical narratives not to reconstruct past events but to understand the meanings for their audiences and the intentions of their authors.

Each of these interpretive frameworks is present in our volume. At the heart of our research lies the conscious combination and comparison of documentary, material, and literary sources to write history. Very often, specialists of documents or material culture and specialists of literary texts circulate, publish, and think in different domains. This is slowly changing, but still there is insufficient dialogue between specialists of historiography and intellectual history, and specialists of material culture. This volume seeks to promote and intensify the dialogue between these fields. This is not always easy. Courtly culture and belles-lettres often seem a world away from the down-to-earth documents dug up from the trash heaps of the Fayyum or Bactria. There is, moreover, still a strong tendency amongst document specialists to consider material evidence as unmediated, direct, and therefore neutral and objective. Archaeology, material culture, and documents have, however, their own complex sets of interpretive challenges – not least because their explanation relies heavily on, again, historical sources and the researcher's subjective view.[19] But it is precisely such a breadth of perspective that a holistic vision of the early Islamic empire requires. Moreover, the literary and documentary evidence portray different but interconnected worlds, with individuals regularly travelling between them. This means that we must continue to build an effective set of methodologies both for working on literary and material sources and also for combining their insights. In this volume, **Leube** incorporates archaeological information about early Islamic cities in his understanding of historical accounts about Kufa to understand the spatial dynamic of tribal politics. **Vroom** uses archaeological, in particular ceramic, finds to contribute to the historiography of the Islamic conquest of Sicily. **Hoyland**, **Palombo,** and **Bauer** combine legal

[19] Methodological discussions of the potential and limits of material sources for the study of Islamic history are limited. In their introduction to *The Oxford handbook of Islamic archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), the editors Bethany J. Walker, Timothy Insoll, and Corisande Fenwick 'problematize the relation between Islamic archaeology and history'. Insights from ancient history are useful. For the misguided view that papyri offer an unmediated perspective on history, see Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading papyri, writing ancient history. Second edition* (London: Routledge, 2019). Petra Sijpesteijn discusses similar issues in her chapter on Arabic papyri in Roger S. Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of papyrology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 452–472. Similarly, Christopher Howgego shows how coins can be used responsibly as a source for history writing in *Ancient history from coins* (London: Routledge, 1995).

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documents, recording forced labour or debt slavery and marriage, respectively, with legal and theological writings to understand how legal prescriptions and descriptions, and socio-economic considerations, intertwine. **Zinger** integrates moral arguments presented in private letters with ethical debates in other sources. **Vanthieghem** and **Hayes** study both decrees preserved on papyrus and such documents cited in chronicles and Hadith works to understand how their typologies follow each other.

The shift towards the narratological analysis of the meanings of historical stories has its own challenges and limitations. Narratological approaches have been salutary in encouraging a more holistic view of the function and nature of our literary sources and what they were trying to achieve. However, the idea that historical narratives are, at heart, about meaning-creation not fact-recording does not really give us a way out of the methodological conundrum. To comprehend the meaning of narratives, we must understand the societies in which such narratives circulated and the technologies and media through which they were transmitted. Attempting to understand societies where these narratives were produced and circulated leads to the same historiographical dilemmas because we will have to use the same historical sources in order to do so. What is the way out of this vicious circle? Historical inquiry is ultimately provisional and requires a process of modelling rather than settling upon definitive conclusions. To the extent that historians of the early Islamic empire now acknowledge this, we can say that we have moved beyond revisionism to a productive synthesis of different approaches towards the complex societies under the microscope, in which the narratological and historiographical analyses are aware of the material and documentary, and vice versa.

Language and Rhetoric

The analysis of rhetorical devices is a prominent element of many studies in this volume, allowing us to see how the ethical-political programmes of actors in the early Islamic empire were expressed both in documents and literary texts. The analysis of both the meaning and the social function of language is a key method for applying the acknowledgement that both facts and meanings can be studied in an integrated fashion. Thus, **Gordon** analyses the narratives describing the pledge of allegiance made to the son of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn (r. 868–884) as an example of literary meaning-making aimed at proposing certain ethical truths that the audience of these texts was to draw from history; but also as a reservoir of information about how the Ṭūlūnid political

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project was presented to contemporaries. In **Gordon**'s view, historical narratives operate like mirrors-for-princes with an ethical-normative dimension. While they narrate the creation and maintenance of ties at historical moments, they also reinterpret and reproduce how these ties are to be understood as they are received by future generations. **Lucas** looks at the complex history of a state letter that caliph Hishām (r. 724–743) is purported to have sent to his disobedient governor of Iraq, Khālid ibn al-Qaṣrī (in office 724–738), studying the role this letter played in narratives of the dismissal of this governor. She links her historiographical investigation with the way in which such letters embodied the ties that linked a caliph to his governor, arguing that the preservation and literary elaboration of such letters derives from their meaning as exemplary political gestures.

In **Hoyland**'s discussion of documentary evidence and literary sources, the temporary enslavement of free people for debt, which had initially been considered as a practical solution, was met with mounting disapproval that influenced later jurists' writings. Such literary discourses are resources for the conceptualisation and performance of social ties in a literary context, informing the ethics of behaviour in society. Understanding their literary nature does not render such texts useless as sources for the study of how these relations operated in society but rather allows us to study them as reflections on social processes.

Several of the studies in this volume focus on language as constitutive of and performative of social relations.[20] Language plays a key role in creating relations of social dependency. Thus, the language in documents not only describes relationships but can also be actively performative of social relations, creating and reinforcing ties by appealing to certain principles. Through a focus on language and the rhetoric of dependency, we can talk about meanings and we can model social structures; and, more importantly, we can talk about how these aspects were intertwined. Language is socially embedded: both documents and literary texts had an audience and a function which, when analysed, can tell us much about both producer and recipient.

The multiplicity of languages that appears in the contributions reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the populations participating in the Islamic empire. Rhetorical methods were shared across linguistic

[20] This is a continuation of both the profound consequences of the linguistic turn for the humanities and of a much older tradition: the philological humanistic tradition. Cf. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (eds.), *World Philology* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2015).

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