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Collecting to the Core: Arabic Resources in Translation: The History of al-Tabart

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Collecting to the Core — Arabic Resources in Translation: The History of al-Tabari

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Column Editor’s Note: The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rclweb.net). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Over the years I have guided many undergraduate students to resources on the Middle East, as undergraduates are often lost when asked to find primary sources for research in Middle East history courses. Throughout my reference and instruction work I have learned that students’ need for primary sources is the most troublesome because undergraduates are almost always limited to materials in English, and these sources are rarely available. Despite the recent growth of Middle Eastern studies in the American academy (and the public’s attention), finding primary resources in translation from the modern Middle East remains problematic. More works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are being translated, often with an eye to popular works and trending topics, especially memoirs, autobiographies, and other monographs by prominent regional figures. Classical history, however, is another story. The problem is that while there are extant sources dating to earlier times, they are in Middle Eastern languages, most commonly Arabic. While a few translations have been available in the past, the number of translations into English was quite scarce. Fortunately, in the last few years the quantity of translations has been growing. Most are good and accurate, often with critical apparatus. In fact, as bibliographer at UC-Santa Barbara, I will acquire almost any translation of a Middle

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F. Robinson's "by classical and modern historians in the Middle
East, Ṭabarī was a typical scholar of his time; he wrote not only a massive chronography, but also one of the standard commentaries on the Qur'an. Ṭabarī lived in Baghdad during the time of the 'Abbasid Empire (750–1250 CE). He was a Sunni and wrote in Arabic although he was Persian, his name betraying his origins as one born on the shores of the Caspian Sea in Iran. His work is a "universal" history, which is also typical of the times in which the Tarikh was written; histories often began with the creation of the world, thus many volumes cover historic periods well before the advent of Islam and what followed. There are, of course, some problems with using this and other classical histories. As with all classical Islamic chronographers, "history begins with God's work of creation, and the underlying historical vision is both God-centered and teleological: history has a purpose...". Its purpose is to prepare for the advent of Islam and what followed. Robinson estimates that ten percent of this massive work concentrates on events from Ṭabarī's era, which Robinson attributes to a tendency for authors of this period to concentrate on foundational history and sacrifice their own generation's experience. This was a result of the "hijrah," the migration of the Prophet's followers from Mecca to Medina. During my student days there was only one very slim volume available in translation from the massive work of this important classical historian, The Reign of al-Mu'tasim (833–842), translated and annotated by Elma Marin. In 1988, John Alden Williams produced a two-volume translation of the Tarikh dealing solely with the early 'Abbasid Empire. Under the general editorship of the esteemed and unflagging Ehsan Yarshater (Professor Emeritus and Director of the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University), individual volumes of authors at the field of classical Middle East history for translation and commentary. Volumes 1–5 are still regarded as praiseworthy by many scholars, especially for those undergraduates seeking accessible primary sources.

In the History of al-Ṭabarī, for example, volume 1 covers the period "from the creation to the flood"; volumes 2 and 3 deal with Old Testament events and ancient kingdoms. Volume 5 covers the empires immediately preceding the rise of Islam. Volumes 6 through 9 address events during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime; volumes 10 through 15 cover the Umayyads; and volumes 27 through 33 the early 'Abbasid period. It is not until volume 34 that the reader encounters events from Ṭabarī's own time, and only the last five volumes deal with this period. Volume 39 covers all periods from the rise of Islam and is entitled Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and Their Successors. Certainly, the volumes covering periods immediately before Ṭabarī's time would still have tapped into living memory, but they are definitely not eye-witness accounts. That is not to say that earlier volumes do not have value as the received wisdom of the time; they are claimed and considered to have been based on reliable sources. The issue of those "reliable" sources (or "akhbar," i.e., reports) has been rather hotly debated for many decades in Middle Eastern historical discourse. It is sufficient to say that the English translation has resulted in The History of al-Ṭabarī has gone beyond being a welcome addition to the literature of classical Islamic history. It has been a monumental effort striving for and attaining the highest academic standards. It needs to be in every college library whose institution attempts courses in Middle Eastern history. It is a boon to scholars, students, and inquirers of all levels everywhere, especially for those undergraduates seeking accessible primary sources.

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**Endnotes**

5. Islamic Historiography, 74.
6. Introduction to the History of the Muslim East, 121.
7. Islamic Historiography, 137.
8. Ibid, 94.

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