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

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From the Reference Desk

K. Wayne, with advising editor Lois Banner, examines the issues, people, and events of women's activism, from the early period of American history to the present time. This comprehensive reference not only traces the historical evolution of the movement, but also covers current issues affecting women, such as reproductive freedom, political participation, pay equity, violence against women, and gay civil rights.

- Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression, Second Edition (December 2014, ISBN: 978-1-61069-108-3, $399; eBook, eISBN: 978-1-61069-110-9, call for pricing). “This revised and expanded edition… presents more than 140 essays that address contemporary spiritual practice and culture with a historical perspective. The essays cover virtually every religion in modern-day America as well as the role of religion in various aspects of U.S. culture. Readers will discover that Americans aren’t merely Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish anymore, and that the number of popular religious identities is far greater than many would imagine…”

Oxford University Press has released two new works in their Oxford Encyclopedias of the Bible series:
- The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Law (January 2015, ISBN: 9780199843305, $395) offers “130 A-Z entries, written by more than 100 international authors, making this the authoritative reference on the subject…”
- The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology (March 2015, ISBN: 9780199858699, $395) consists of “nearly 170 signed A-Z entries, by more than 150 international scholars… extensive overviews of key topics, including information on both the trajectory and reception history of theological issues,” and “thorough coverage of traditional theological perspectives, such as Forgiveness and Grace, and modern concerns, such as Wealth and Poverty…”

In addition, Oxford University Press recently announced the launch of Oxford Historical Treaties (OHT) on the Oxford Public International Law platform. “Oxford Historical Treaties” is a comprehensive online resource of nearly 16,000 global treaties concluded between 1648 and 1919 — between the Peace of Westphalia and the establishment of the League of Nations.

("The source for these treaties is The Consolidated Treaty Series, compiled by the late distinguished scholar Clive Parry of Downing College, Cambridge University, and published by OUP in 231 print volumes…")

H.W. Wilson is publishing a new edition of a classic:
- Famous First Facts, 7th Edition (December 2014, ISBN: 978-1-61925-468-8, $195). This edition “is updated and expanded with new entries reflecting the latest developments and discoveries, and newly organized for easier access to information. The seventh edition includes more than 8,000 firsts, over 1,000 new to this edition. Fields updated include science and technology, military history, and politics, describing events that have occurred since the 2006 edition…”

Routledge has also released a new edition of a standard reference:
- The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction, three volumes (March 2015, ISBN: 978-1-118-61110-4, $495) is a “reference work with contributions from leading global scholars, available both online and as a three-volume print set. It successfully brings into a single source explication of all relevant work that is developing internationally.”

- The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society, 3 volumes (February 2015, ISBN: 978-1-118-29074-3, $495) “offers critical assessments of theoretical and applied research on digitally-mediated communication, a central area of study in the 21st century… with the aim of bringing together international and interdisciplinary perspectives.”

Both of these titles are published with a regularly updated online edition. For further information see http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com

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

by Meryle Gaston (Librarian for Middle Eastern Studies, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara; Middle Eastern History, Languages, and Literatures Editor, Resources for College Libraries) <gaston@library.ucsb.edu>

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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 historical 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
Eastern primary source that is published, and as subject editor for Resources for College Libraries I will do so to the RCL core accep-
tion because I know precisely how difficult it can be to find English-language primary resources for undergraduates.

Yet even in English translation, the termin-
ology can be intimidating and unfamiliar to students unless they have prior knowledge of Middle East history or languages. Once I was helping a student find resources for a paper on Egypt and recommended that she look at works by the fourteenth-fifteenth century Egyptian his-
torian Muqārizī. Despite my urging, she seemed reluctant to follow up on my suggestion and said, “Why would I want to use his work?” My response was that he actually lived at the time about which she was writing. She still seemed reluctant. Finally, it became clear to me that we were communicating on two different levels. I was casually tossing the author’s name around as specialists do; meanwhile, her ears heard “Mc-
Cread” which I was recommending her to look at. She is an Irish historian. Though we resolved the mis-
understanding, I use this anecdote to highlight the often considerable gap between what a subject specialist may know about resources, regions, and renowned authors and what may be accessible and approachable for student users.

The best guides on Islamic historiography and, therefore, discovery tools to the extant historical literature are R. Stephen Humphreys’ Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry and Chase F. Robinson’s Islamic Historiographies. These scholarly works are extremely thorough and always cite translations; in fact, I cannot point to a single translated work that has been missed in ei-
ther volume. Although the resources they include are still more than valid, neither of these works has been revised in recent years; consequently, recent translations have become available that students may miss. Jean Sauvaget’s Introduction to the History of the Muslim East, edited by Claude Cahen, is a good translation, is still considered the grandaddy of all guides to classical Middle Eastern historical literature, but at fifty years old it is now an extremely dated resource. Despite their age, these three works are still widely considered the best go-to resources available and became standard texts for Middle East research almost as soon as they were published.

Before the ninth century, there are few histor-
ical works of record. During the ninth century, a body of history writing, mostly chronographies, developed and a canon of sorts emerged. There is little argument that the most important of all these histories is Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’s Tarikh al-Rusūluwa-al-Maluk [History of Prophets and Kings]. In fact, R. Stephen Humphreys has said, “Without question … the crucial historical works for the late 9th and early 10th centuries are the massive compilations of two scholars: Abū ʿAbd Allāh Yaḥya b. Baladhūrī … and Abu Ja’far Muḥammad b. Ḥarīr [al-Ṭabarī].” Robinson refers to his work the most revered and referenced by classical and modern historians in the Middle East, as well as by modern scholars of 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 ‘Abbāsīd Empire (750–1250 CE). He was a Sunni and wrote in Arabic although he was Persian, his name betraying his origins as one born near the Persian Gulf and the southern 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 lifetime of the author. 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 trend was defeated, he believed, by his work. 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 trend was defeated, he believed, by his work. 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 trend was defeated, he believed, by his work.

In 1979 there was great excitement in the academic community when a project was un-
dertaken to translate Ṭabarī’s massive Tarikh al-Rusūluwa-al-Maluk. At the risk of dating my-
self, 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 trans-
lation of the Tarikh dealing solely with the early ‘Abbāsīd Empire. Under the general editorship of the esteemed and unflagging Ehsan Yarshater (Professor Emeritus and Director of the Center for Irania Studies at Columbia University), individual top scholars in the field of classical Middle East history for translation and commentary. Volumes 1 and 2, edited by Robin-son, contain the earliest volumes and are still widely considered the best go-to resources, and remain the only volumes that have been widely available in translation. The index is 674 pages and quite

Endnotes
1. Humphreys, R. Stephen. Islamic His-
2. Robinson, Chase F. Islamic Histori-
3. Sauvaget, Jean. Introduction to the His-
tory of the Muslim East: A Bibliographical Guide. Based on the 2nd edition as reac-
4. Islamic History: A Framework for In-
quiry, 72.
5. Islamic Historiography, 74.
6. Introduction to the History of the Muslim East, 121.
7. Islamic Historiography, 137.
8. Ibid, 94.
10. al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn-Jarīr. The Early ‘Abbāsīd Empire. Translated and edited by John Alden Williams. 2 vols. Cam-
13. Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.