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

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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 Eastern author in the Arabic tradition, and increasingly so with the translation of Arabic monographs by Aramco World or other such publishers. I think it is fair to say that the past two years have seen a surge in the availability of primary works through translation. I have noted this in our Research Review, but it has been a welcome trend and one that is continuing to grow. I write this column in the hopes that the following resources will help students and instructors alike as they seek to connect with Arabic authors from the past.

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: 978-1-61069-109-3, $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 entries 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 largely 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 resource 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: 978-1-61069-468-8, $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:

- European Union Encyclopedia and Directory 2015 (November 2014, ISBN: 978-1-85743-737-9, $1,015.) “provides in-depth information on all matters relating to the European Union (EU): the financial crisis affecting the eurozone is covered in depth, including details of recent developments: progress regarding the recent and future expansion of the Union is addressed; and the EU’s legal and social frameworks, the environment and external relations are discussed…”

And last but not least, Wiley-Blackwell is also planning a couple of new reference works:

- The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction, three volumes (March 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

From the Reference Desk
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Eastern primary source that is published, and as subject editor for Resources for College Libraries I will point to the RCL core collection because I know precisely how difficult it can be to find English-language primary resources for undergraduates.

Yet even in English translation, the terminology can be intimidating and unfamiliar to students unless they have prior knowledge of Middle Eastern 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 historian Maqrizi. 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 “McCreery.” I was referring to an Irish historian. Though we resolved the misunderstanding, 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 Historiography. 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 either 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 and published in English translation, is still considered the granddaddy 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 become standard texts for Middle East research almost as soon as they were published.

Before the ninth century, there are few historical 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-Rusulwa-al-Muluk [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 Dāwūd al-Bukhārī … and Abu Ǧarīr Muḥammad b. Ḥarīr al-Ṭabarī. …" Robinson refers to his work as "the crowning achievement" of the essential works in chronography, and Sauvaget considers it the most important source of classical history. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (838?-923), usually known simply as al-Ṭabarī, is one of the most revered classical historians, and his work has been referred to and various translators and editors. 39 vols. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1965-85. * (Selected volumes in RLC.)

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 19 cover the Umayyads; and volumes 27 through 33 describe the early ‘Abbāsīd 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 “akhtbar,” 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 that 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. Endnotes

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