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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
from page 51

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: 978-1-61925-468-8, \$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..."

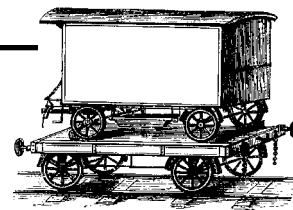
Routledge has also released a new edition of a standard reference:

- *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: 978-1-118-61110-4, \$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>

Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

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 decades 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

continued on page 53

Eastern primary source that is published, and as subject editor for *Resources for College Libraries* I will add many of these 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 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 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 "McCreasy" and wondered why I was recommending 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***.¹⁻² 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** in its 1965 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.³ 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 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 **Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari'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: **Ahmad b. Yahya al-Baladhuri** . . . and **Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari** . . ." **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.⁵⁻⁶ **Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari** (838?–923), usually known simply as **al-Tabari**, is one of the most revered classical historians, if not the most revered and referenced by classical and modern historians in the Middle East, as well as by modern scholars of the Middle

East. **Tabari** 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. **Tabari** lived in Baghdad during the time of the 'Abbāsid Empire (750–1250 CE). He was a Sunni and wrote in Arabic although he was Persian, his name betraying his origins as one born in the Tabaristan region on 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.⁷ **Robinson** estimates that ten percent of this massive work concentrates on events from **Tabari'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.⁸ This explains why not all volumes are true primary sources. In addition, one should not be surprised that **Tabari** is circumspect regarding some of the less favorable actions taken by the 'Abbāsid rulers under whom he worked (i.e., he does not mention some events at all).

In 1979 there was great excitement in the academic community when a project was undertaken to translate **Tabari's** massive *Tarikh al-Rusulwa-al-Muluk*. At the risk of dating myself, 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**.⁹ In 1988, **John Alden Williams** produced a two-volume translation of the *Tarikh* dealing solely with the early 'Abbāsid Empire.¹⁰ 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 sections were given to top scholars in the field of classical Middle East history for translation and commentary. Venerated and well-established scholars such as **Franz Rosenthal**, **Gautier H.A. Juynboll**, **William M. Brinner**, **John Alden Williams**, **Moshe Perlman**, and **Clifford Edmund Bosworth** shared these duties with a number of emerging scholars, many of whom are now well established in the field: **Fred M. Donner**, **Yohanan Friedmann**, **G. Rex Smith**, **R. Stephen Humphreys**, **Michael G. Morony**, **Everett K. Rowson**, **Carole Hillenbrand**, **Jane Dammen McAuliffe**, and **Hugh Kennedy**, to name a few. The translation was published in its entirety in thirty-nine volumes between 1985 and 1999 by the **State University of New York Press** under the title *The History of al-Tabari*.¹¹ A final fortieth volume serving as index to the work was published by **SUNY Press** in 2007 and was prepared by **Alex V. Popovkin** and **Everett K. Rowson**.¹² The index is 674 pages and quite exhaustive. Each volume of *The History* includes not only an excellent translation but copious critical notes, excellent bibliographies, and thorough indexes. Although each volume is substantive, the material translated still represents a selection of **Tabari's** original work.

As mentioned above, one problem with using this and other classical histories is that they cover historic periods well before the author's existence.

In *The History of al-Tabari*, 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 to 26 cover the period of conquest and the early 'Umayyads; and volumes 27 through 33 the early 'Abbāsid period. It is not until volume 34 that the reader encounters events from **Tabari'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 **Tabari'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 that has resulted in *The History of al-Tabari* 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

1. **Humphreys, R. Stephen.** *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.*
2. **Robinson, Chase F.** *Islamic Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.*
3. **Sauvaget, Jean.** *Introduction to the History of the Muslim East: A Bibliographical Guide*. Based on the 2nd edition as recast by **Claude Cahen**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965.*
4. *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, 72.
5. *Islamic Historiography*, 74.
6. *Introduction to the History of the Muslim East*, 121.
7. *Islamic Historiography*, 137.
8. *Ibid*, 94.
9. **al-Tabari, Muhammad Ibn-Jarir.** *The Reign of al-Mu'tasim (833–842)*. Translated and annotated by **Elma Marin**. New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1951.
10. **al-Tabari, Muhammad Ibn-Jarir.** *The Early 'Abbāsi Empire*. Translated and edited by **John Alden Williams**. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
11. **al-Tabari, Muhammad Ibn-Jarir.** *The History of al-Tabari*. Various translators and editors. 39 vols. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985-1999.* (Selected volumes in RCL.)
12. **Popovkin, Alex V., ed.** *The History of al-Tabari. Volume XL Index*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.