

Book Review

Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry (*Studies in Middle Eastern History, No. 9*)

by R. Stephen Humphreys; Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988, 375 pp.

Stephen Humphreys' *Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry* represents a new approach to the old problem of the historian and his sources. Following the current trend among Western scholars of Islam and of history in general, Humphreys lays much more emphasis on the methodology of dealing with pre-modern historical sources than on establishing the "facts" to get at the "truth." This is because of Humphreys' belief, widely shared by historians today, that before we can learn any facts, we must understand our sources, their uses and their inadequacies, and that before we can understand the sources, we must arrive at a methodology that is universally acceptable, at least in its broad outline. With reference to medieval Islamic history, these needs are all the more acute, because there has been little systematic thought given to methodology, except in a few introductory pages in the work of certain scholars, and because the sources themselves present so many problems.

Owing to these considerations, Humphreys' book focuses on methodology, contains no narrative history and is intended for the student of history or one of its allied fields rather than the layman. The book covers the period of medieval Islamic history, which is defined as 600-1600 CE. The reason for continuing to use this conventional and widely-accepted division is that the source material fundamentally changes in quality for the period after 1500 because of the survival of Ottoman archival material subsequent to that date (p. 9). This seems reasonable, for the lack of contemporary documents for the medieval Islamic period imposes a greater reliance on non-literary epigraphic and archaeological evidence, as well as traditional literary sources which are usually not contemporary with the events described, leading in turn to a different methodology than that of modern social science. On the other hand, one must remember that the study of history should not mold itself simply according to the dictates of what is and is not available in the sources, for that could exaggerate the distortions to which our information is already subject. Also, we should not forget that artificial periodizations may obscure the real continuity of the flow of history and impair our ability to see its unifying features. Nevertheless, the atomization of history did not begin with Humphreys, whose methodology rather tends to unify Islamic

history by seeing similar patterns in and drawing comparisons between widely divergent times and places.

To demonstrate his methodology, Humphreys divides his work into two parts. The first part consists of two chapters covering modern reference works and the medieval sources of evidence generally, while the second part contains ten chapters, each dealing with a broad problem of Islamic history and detailing the sources relevant to that problem. Humphreys' strong bibliographical emphasis makes his work most closely resemble Jean Sauvaget's *Introduction to the History of the Muslim East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), as revised by Claude Cahen, a work which Humphreys himself refers to as "the best overview we have of Islamic historical studies" (p. 20). Sauvaget, however, was selective, whereas Humphreys aims to be comprehensive, and to a large extent succeeds. Because it is both broader and more recent, Humphreys' work supersedes the earlier book. As a general annotated bibliography, Humphreys' work is certainly a useful resource for students of Islamic history.

There are, however, some minor errors and gaps in his bibliographies, such as Humphreys' dated assertion that "only three volumes have ever materialized" of the complete edition of Ibn 'Asākir's *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq al-kabī* planned by the Arabic Language Academy of Damascus (p. 221). Actually, by 1986, nine volumes had already appeared and more have come forth since. Humphreys also did not note that Ibn Manzūr's medieval abridgement of Ibn 'Asākir has also come out in a scholarly edition. But, considering how difficult it is to keep up with the publications even in one's narrow field of interest, the author can be forgiven a few slips. His bibliographical information, on the whole, is up-to-date and fairly comprehensive for the Eastern Mediterranean core areas of the Islamic world, though he skimps on North Africa and other peripheral regions.

But Humphreys' work goes beyond the level of a mere annotated bibliography; rather, he integrates the bibliography with analysis in his book's second part, and this is perhaps his most important contribution. Here, in each chapter, he presents a historical problem. The ten problems he deals with are: the value of the early Islamic historical tradition, the 'Abbāsīd revolution, royal autocracy, ideology and propaganda, fiscal administration, status of the *ulamā* as an elite, Islamic law in society, urban topography and social history, non-Muslim minorities, and rural inhabitants. In each case, the sources are described, including whatever modern commentary there may be. The breadth of the problems all together enables the author to cover Islamic historical studies fairly completely. Then specific cases taken from Islamic history are discussed and analyzed. Each of these analyses constitutes a small research paper in its own right and is meant as a model of what is to be done, thus bringing the reader back to Humphreys' emphasis on methodology.

The use of particular cases of each problem as examples keeps up the reader's interest and also unites methodological theory with historical practice.

There are only a couple of reservations one might have about Humphreys' work, aside from those already mentioned. First, while he tries to be objective, detached, and non-committal, and thus sometimes appears to hedge his statements too much, he nowhere discusses the question of Western bias in discussing Islamic history. Rather, he appears to show a tendency in favor of a certain trend of thinking. Thus, in the chapter on early Islamic historical tradition, he criticizes A. A. Duri, F. Sezgin, N. Abbott, and N. A. Faruqi, while praising, or at least not attacking, Goldziher, Wellhausen, Schacht, Crone and Cook at much greater length. Despite the mild language of his criticism, his attitude is particularly revealed by his characterization of G. H. A. Juynboll's discussion of Ibn Hajar's *Tahdhiib* as "sympathetic." Anyone who has read Juynboll cannot doubt the hostile and deliberately anti-Islamic polemical character of his work, not only in his treatment of Ibn Hajar, but also in his conclusion calling openly on present-day Muslims to abandon the *hadith*. On the other hand, Humphreys can be partly excused on the plea that here his bibliography only reflects what has been produced by scholars and is thus presently available.

The other reservation concerns the underlying materialistic assumptions that have affected Humphreys' choice of subject matter. As a result of such assumptions, discussion of religion as such has generally been skimmed. Despite reference to it in terms of propaganda, ideology, and the 'ulamā as a social class, Humphreys' work contains no chapter basing itself on religious developments in Islam. Thus, discussion of Shūism, Khārijism, and the sources about them is confined to the margin of the chapter on the 'Abbāsīd revolution, while the chapter on Islamic law concerns only what the law can inform us about social history. Historians have long since gotten past the notion that history is merely a litany of kings and battles, so that social history has begun to be cultivated, as is so admirably shown by Humphreys' book. Perhaps it is now time to begin to consider all human fields of endeavor as part of history, including religion and its ideas viewed in broad perspective.

Despite these reservations, Humphreys' work should prove most useful to students and scholars of Islamic history. It should be noted that it contains no overt bias against Islam and that it does mention the works of modern as well as medieval Muslim writers, a feature that has often been absent from the bibliographies of other Western Orientalists.

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