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# Arabic historical thought in the classical period

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intention appears to be to reformulate the Biblical scriptures through three major devices. The first is the very large number of *Hadith Qudsi*, the so-called divine speech, where God speaks directly or through revelations to prophets, most often to announce or prepare for the coming of Muhammad:

Then [the prophet al-Khidr] said, 'Lord, shall I fight him or shall I not?' God revealed to him: Do not fight him for I have not imposed the duty of fighting except on those who come after you and have not decreed this except for these. Among them is a prophet called Musa ibn 'Imran, the first that I send forth with the sword, then Yusha' ibn Nun, then Dawud and then Muhammad.<sup>100</sup>

A second device is to weave into the stories extensive passages of Qur'anic commentary relevant to each prophet. The intention here is to establish the correct Islamic version of the events by making them concordant with the Qur'anic account. A third device is Muhammadan *Hadith*. The tone and form of many tales of the prophets is set or introduced by *hadiths* from Muhammad which are designed to draw the moral of these tales:

They asked, 'Prophet of God, what are the character traits of prophets?' The Prophet replied 'Among them are honesty, loyalty, thanksgiving, praising God, patience, generosity, benevolence, piety and fear of God.' God had implanted all these traits in al-Khidr.<sup>101</sup>

Echoing the terminology of the Qur'an, a large number of Islamic words and phrases are deployed which have the effect of enveloping the tales in a purely Islamic garb: *dinar*, *kuttab*, *dawwain*, *qadi*, *hajib*, *sahib al-shura*, *sahib al-suy* and so forth. The speech of prophets is, as in the Qur'an, entirely Islamic in its formulation and one of them, Ilyas, is encountered by Muslims and asked about civil discord. Miracles are virtually confined to prophets while the freaks of creation are reduced to a minimum. But the prophets' tales are well suited to advance certain theological views, notably concerning the problem of *Qadar* or predestination.<sup>102</sup> Several prophets question God on this matter and are told by Him not to pry into this *sirr*, or mystery, since their intellects are too weak to comprehend it. On the other hand, prophecy is entirely consonant with reason:

For everything there is a limit, a fixed purpose and an end, but reason has no limit, fixed purpose or end. Men, however, differ in mind and the contrast between them is as far as what separates heaven from earth. Indeed, the Qur'an itself was revealed through reason, the prophets were sent with reason and they were made superior to the nations by virtue of their minds. Sa'id ibn Jubayr said, 'I was informed that reason was divided in a thousand parts and Muhammad was given nine hundred and ninety parts while his nation was given one part. The same holds

true for other prophets before him.' In fact, God chose the prophets for their reason and He did not endow them with knowledge and perspicacity nor were they able to live the ascetic life in this world with the struggle and patience that this involved except by virtue of their reason.<sup>103</sup>

In sum, the tales of the prophets were to acquire a permanent place in historical writing, especially such as was devoted to world history, where the creation of the world and the early history of prophecy formed the inevitable introduction. It was a particularly sensitive genre because it dealt with the scriptures of Jews and Christians but had to do so not on *their* terms but in conformity with the Qur'anic view and with the inescapable theological problems that this entailed.

### Tabari, the 'imam' of *Hadith* historiography

It is fitting that this chapter on History and *Hadith* should end with Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923). His *History of Prophets and Kings* and his Qur'anic *Commentary* were both massive works and brought him an equally massive reputation even in his own lifetime. As a scholar of the law and *Hadith*, he was propelled into public life and embroiled in controversy, probably against his own inclinations, inspiring a legal 'school' or *madhhab* which was named after him and which lasted for a brief while. His immense output spanned much of the thirteenth century and reflected a wide range of that century's scholarly concerns. In his *History of Prophets and Kings*, Tabari combined the history of creation and prophecy with the history of ancient nations, especially the Persians, adding to them a *Sira* of Muhammad, his *Maghazi*, the conquests, and a history of the community up to his own days. In his methodology, it is possible to find echoes of Ibn Ishaq's universalism, of Waqidi's conservatism and accuracy, of Baladhuri's crisp verdicts and of Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam's moral epic. And it was Tabari who composed what was by far the most explicit defence of the *Hadith* method in historical writing, while his annalistic arrangement enshrined a style that lasted until modern times.<sup>104</sup>

In a famous passage near the beginning of his history, Tabari sets forth what he takes to be the only means by which one can arrive at a knowledge of the past:

<sup>103</sup> Abu Rifa'a, *Bad'*, p. 128

<sup>104</sup> In classical Arabic literature, the two most important sources for Tabari's life and works are Baghdadi, *Tarikh*, 2:162-9 and Yaqut, *Ishad*, 18:40-94. In English, see E. L. Petersen, *Ali and Mu'awiya in Early Arabic Tradition* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964), pp. 149-59 and, especially, Franz Rosenthal, *The History of Tabari*, vol. 1, *General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 5-134.

<sup>100</sup> Abu Rifa'a, *Kitab Bad' al-Khalq*, p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> Abu Rifa'a, *Bad'*, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Abu Rifa'a, *Bad'*, p. 292 ff.

Let him who examines this book of mine know that I have relied, as regards everything I mention therein which I stipulate to be described by me, solely upon what has been transmitted to me by way of reports which I cite therein and traditions which I ascribe to their narrators, to the exclusion of what may be appended by rational argument or deduced by the human mind, except in very few cases. This is because knowledge of the reports of men of the past and of contemporary news of men of the present do not reach the one who has not witnessed them nor lived in their times except through the accounts of reporters and the transmission of transmitters, to the exclusion of rational deduction and mental inference. Hence, if I mention in this book a report about some men of the past which the reader or listener finds objectionable or worthy of censure because he can see no aspect of truth nor any factual substance therein, let him know that this is not to be attributed to us but to those who transmitted it to us and we have merely passed this on as it had been passed on to us.<sup>105</sup>

Knowledge of the past cannot be deduced or inferred; it can only be transmitted. Echoing terms that were becoming current in his days for the division of the sciences into *'aqliyya* (rational) and *naqliyya* (transmitted), Tabari sought to place history squarely in the second category, making it into a branch of *Hadith*.<sup>106</sup> But before we explore his *History*, an overall idea of the nature of the problems he faced and the range of his scholarship can best be obtained from his *Qur'anic Commentary*.

Tabari's *Commentary* is a massive work of erudition, displaying its author's mastery over a wide spectrum of subjects and argumentation. A fairly consistent plan is followed in the exegesis. To begin with, each verse is carefully paraphrased. Then follow *hadiths* from Muhammad or his Companions and the views of distinguished early scholars in support of the paraphrase and amplifying its historical and theological context. If these *hadiths* are in conflict, Tabari concludes with a summary of his own views. In a great many cases, the exegesis of a single verse can extend over several pages and it is here that Tabari is both erudite and polemical. If a grammatical problem is at issue, the views of both Kufan and Basran grammarians are quoted and assessed. Poetic examples are used profusely as illustration. If a historical event is in dispute, the *isnad* deemed most trustworthy is accepted. If a point of law is involved, *qiyas*, or reasoning by analogy, is deployed to settle the argument, the analogy resting upon other Qur'anic texts, Muhammadan *hadith* or the 'consensus of the exegetes' (*ijma' ah al-ta'wil*). In general, the levels of priority used to establish proof (*hujja; shahid*) of correct interpretation may be set out as follows:

- 1 Reports from God or His Prophet through abundant transmission.
- 2 Consensus of exegetes on points of law, history or doctrine.
- 3 Analogy, e.g. from accepted grammatical usage or poetry.

Levels 1 and 2 are dependent upon reports (*akbar*) and are therefore transmitted (*manqul*). Abundant (*musaffad*) transmission is never fully defined but appears to imply a quantitative and qualitative yardstick as in the following terse comment:

Of the two interpretations that of Hasan is closer to the literal meaning of Revelation . . . but the *akbar* regarding the second interpretation are greater in number and those who hold it are more knowledgeable in exegesis.<sup>107</sup>

Level 3 is called by Tabari analogy (*qiyas*), inference (*istidlal*) or scholarly judgement (*jihad*). He resorts to this when Levels 1 and 2 are lacking or in conflict. His formidable knowledge of grammar is applied in almost every verse he paraphrases in order to establish the correct reading and understanding of the text. This grammatical standpoint is linked to his view of the Qur'anic text as one where literal (*zahir*) interpretation, based upon common Arabic discourse, must be applied.<sup>108</sup> Analogies with other verses of the Qur'an or other *hadiths* from the Prophet are employed to infer meaning where meaning is ambiguous. Where legal issues are involved his view is that commandments must be regarded as applying in an absolute or general sense unless a specific application can be demonstrated.<sup>109</sup> Combining all three levels of proof, Tabari's theology is inimical to many powerful groups of his day such as the Qadariyya, the Jahmiyya, the Khawarij and some Sufis.<sup>110</sup>

The elaborate scheme of interpretation arrayed in the *Qur'anic Commentary* is fairly rigidly demarcated. The paraphrase, the grammatical gloss, the analogies, the *hadiths* quoted and the legal inferences drawn are all centred upon a text of manifest clarity. If one strategy of interpretation fails, another is brought into play but the revelation itself is ultimately accessible through literal interpretation and hence incapable of misrepresentation except by the perverse or stupid. Tabari is rarely in doubt as to his own views on what revelation means or implies.

But in his *History* the landscape is quite different. Here, there is no manifest clarity, no *bayan*, but only *akbar* which, stretching from the creation of the world to the Last Hour across a span of 14,000 years in Tabari's estimation, vary enormously in import and veracity.<sup>111</sup> Tabari was faced here with 1) a mass of pre-Islamic historical materials transmitted by such authorities as Ibn 'Abbas, Wahb and Ibn Ishaq, 2) a fairly well-

<sup>105</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:6-7. R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, p. 72, discusses this passage briefly, mistranslating it in several places. He ascribes Tabari's reluctance to speak in his own voice to the (otherwise undefined) 'concept of knowledge in early Islamic culture'.

<sup>106</sup> For the division of the sciences in this period, see, e.g., Farabi, *Usul al-'Ulum*.

<sup>107</sup> Tabari, *Tafsir*, 3:225.

<sup>108</sup> E.g., Tabari, *Tafsir*, 5:109.

<sup>109</sup> Tabari, *Tafsir*, 4:27, 136.

<sup>110</sup> Tabari, *Tafsir*, 3:111-12; 5:20; 7:109; 8:91.

<sup>111</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:55.

delineated *Sira* of the Prophet, thanks to the labours of scholars like Ibn Ishaq and Waqidi and 3) an enormous and expanding body of historical reports covering the conquests, the Umayyad and the early-Abbasid periods transmitted by scholars like 'Awana, Abu Mikhnaf, Sayf, the two Kalbis, Mada'ini, Waqidi and so forth.<sup>112</sup> Unlike the *Commentary*, where inference and deduction could be employed to wrest meaning out of a text whose ultimate clarity is, as it were, vouched for by the Almighty Himself, in the *History* Tabari is at the mercy of his transmitters. The historian's constricted role may be seen in the following hypothetical objection of one who legitimately uses Tabari's own reasoning against him:

If someone says, 'What is your proof that the six days in which God created His creation amounted each to one thousand years by earthly reckoning . . . since God Himself tells us in His book 'He Who created the Heavens and earth and what is between them in six days' . . . and you yourself claim that God's discourse to His creatures in His revelation is directed to the most obvious, literal and patent meaning whereas you now seem to interpret God's own words in His book about the creation of the world in six days in a manner which does not tally with the usual meaning of a day . . . for it is God's command, if He wills something, to say to it *Be!* and it is . . . We answer that we have already asserted in this work that we rely in most of what we describe in this book of ours on traditions and reports from our Prophet – upon whom blessings and peace – and from pious ancestors before us, to the exclusion of rational or mental deduction since most of it is an account of past events and present happenings, and these cannot be comprehended by rational inference and deduction.<sup>113</sup>

This passage is a convenient point at which to observe the contrast between Tabari's *Commentary* and his *History*. For whereas a fairly wide range of interpretative resources are available to elucidate revelation, history is made up of *akhbar* which cannot be inferred or deduced but can only be transmitted. Moreover, if the 'Be! and it is' of the divine command governs creation, there is no obvious procedure by which one can separate the true from the false in history since the command must always be admissible. For Tabari, the category of *ja'iz* (possible; admissible) was always operative where no divine revelation or prophetic *hadith* declares the contrary. For instance, in discussing the original site of the Ka'ba, Tabari sets forth the alternatives:

It is possible (*ja'iz*) that it was a ruby or a pearl made to descend from heaven. It is also possible that Adam had built it and that it fell into ruin until its foundations were raised by Abraham and Ishmael. We have no knowledge as to which of these

two alternatives it was. For the reality of this can only be arrived at by a report from God or from His prophet by abundant transmission (*naql mustafid*). In this instance there exists no report establishing proof and necessitating acceptance. Nor is this a case which, in the absence of a report such as we described above, can be proven by inference or by analogy as compared with other cases, nor can it be deduced by individual reason.<sup>114</sup>

Given the derivative nature of historical reports, can there be no room at all for internal criticism, even if only the curt verdicts of a Waqidi or a Baladhuri? The surface of Tabari's text, aside from the passages cited above, contains very few comments on method or even on the truth or falsity of the *akhbar* he transmits. But in examining these comments, one or two broad principles of selection may be noted.

The first principle is the one already familiar from the *Commentary* and, earlier on, from Waqidi, namely the appeal to the majority view of early scholars:

The first report is of better derivation (*asahu makhaqian*) and with greater claim to truth because it is what most predecessors affirm.<sup>115</sup>

A 'better derivation' is of course a better *isnad* while the majority view is supplemented by what Tabari considers to be reports too well known to be in dispute:

The people of the Torah claim that there is no mention of 'Ad, Thamud, Hud or Sath in the Torah. But they are as well known among the Arabs of both the *Jahiliyya* and Islam as Abraham and his people. Had I not been loath to prolong this work . . . I would have quoted verses about 'Ad and Thamud by *jahili* poets . . . enough to convince any who dispute their fame among the Arabs.<sup>116</sup>

Well-known verse becomes an additional channel of verification, as it had been for earlier historians.

The second principle of selection is what may be called the appeal to experts. At their head stands Muhammad, 'most knowledgeable of God's creatures in what has happened in the past and what is yet to happen'.<sup>117</sup> More broadly, the principle is phrased as follows, in the course of a critique of Hisham al-Kalbi:

What Hisham says here with regard to king Hushang is baseless since this king is better known to experts on Persian genealogy than al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf is to Muslim genealogists. Every people is better acquainted with their own ancestry, genealogy

<sup>112</sup> The most exhaustive treatment of Tabari's sources is in Jawad 'Ali, 'Mawarid Ta'rikh al-Tabari, *Majalla al-Majma' al-'Ilmi al-'Iraqi*, 1 (1950), 143–231; 2 (1951), 135–90; 3 (1954), 16–58; 8 (1961), 425–36. See also Claude Gillot, 'La formation intellectuelle de Tabari (224/5–310/839–923)', *Journal Asiatique*, 276 (1988), 203–44, who follows Tabari's life from place to place and lists his masters in each.

<sup>113</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:55–6.

<sup>114</sup> Tabari, *Tafsir*, 1:410; cf. *Tarikh*, 1:85.

<sup>115</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:52; cf. 1:252–3.

<sup>116</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:252–3. Why did Tabari not consult the Bible directly? Other contemporary historians, e.g. Ya'qubi, had clearly done so. Perhaps, and in line with his view about consulting the experts of each nation regarding their own history (see footnote 118, below), he felt that the Arabs alone could settle the problem of the Arabian prophets.

<sup>117</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:416–17.

and achievements than others. In all matters of doubt, recourse must be had to the experts (*ula ahlihi*).<sup>118</sup>

The little that Tabari has to say on the epistemic status and the evaluation of historical reports is to be found in the pre-Islamic portion of his *History*. The reason is largely because it was in that era that Tabari felt most urgently the need to *reshape* history in order to conform with both the form and the substance of the Qur'anic view. He was thus, as we shall see below, one of the earliest of Islam's historians to project a vision of history inspired by the regular rhythms of Qur'anic narrative. For the history of the pre-Islamic era, two great historiographical traditions were recognized by Tabari as authoritative and of particular relevance to Islam: the Biblical and the Persian. The Biblical tradition had of course been incorporated already into Islamic historiography by earlier scholars, notably Ibn Ishaq. But the Persian tradition was one which Tabari was to defend explicitly, preferring it above all others, e.g. the Yeménite, as in the following passage:

Writing the history of the world in times past in accordance with the reigns of their kings is easier to expound and more illuminating than it is with the reigns of kings of other nations. For no nation among those that claim descent from Adam is known to have had a lasting kingdom, a continuous kingship, kings to unite them and chiefs to defend them against enemies . . . in an uninterrupted, constant and regular manner, where the last takes over from the first . . . except them . . . hence, the history written in accordance with the reigns of their kings is the best documented and the clearest.<sup>119</sup>

Later, he adds a further clarification:

As for nations other than the Persian, it is impossible to arrive at a knowledge of their history since they did not have uninterrupted kingship, either in ancient or in modern times, except such as cannot form the subject of a continuous history . . . In the Yemen, there were kings ruling kingdoms but kingship was interrupted. One king would follow another but there were long gaps in between which scholars cannot estimate because little care was taken in this regard or in recording the age of each and of the following king, for there was no continuous succession.<sup>120</sup>

These long historical traditions had the added advantage for Tabari of overlapping and then merging into one another so that the Biblical line of the Israelites was ended by the Persian and the Persian was ended by the *umma* of Muhammad.<sup>121</sup> Tabari therefore set himself the task of bringing these histories into harmony by synchronization of chronologies. This meant that the Biblical line of descent from Adam and his progeny was

to be reconciled to the line from Kayumarth, the Persian Adam, and his royal successors. Thus, the stories of such figures as Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses were taken from the Islamic historical tradition, amended if necessary by reference to the Qur'an and *Hadith*, and then interwoven with their contemporaneous Persian kings.<sup>122</sup> One, continuous and comparative history of the pre-Islamic world was now created. The *umma* was thus shown to be the prophetic heir of Biblical tradition and the temporal heir of Persian dominion.<sup>123</sup>

Accordingly, a fabric had been built by which the Muslim community could situate itself with respect to the past. One might argue that Tabari's intention was to historicize the Qur'an, to transform its timeless, one-dimensional allegories into historical narrative that reflected the scholarly interests and attachment to 'pious ancestors' current among the *Hadith* group to which he belonged. But his *History* also had a more explicit intention:

Our intention in this work is to record what we have indicated to be its content, that is, the history of mighty kings, both those who disobeyed and those who obeyed God, and the times of messengers and prophets . . . Let us now turn to the mention of the first to be given dominion and blessings by God who then showed ingratitude, denied and rebelled against God and waxed proud. God then withdrew His blessings, shamed him and brought him low. We shall follow this with a mention of those who followed in his path . . . and earned God's wrath . . . as well as contemporaneous or later praiseworthy kings who obeyed God.<sup>124</sup>

In this as in another passage on the same theme,<sup>125</sup> Tabari seeks to illustrate what he takes to be the origin, structure and ultimate destiny of world history, as symbolized by the struggle of prophets and kings. It was a vision inspired by the Qur'anic conflict between prophets and 'pharaohs', a parallel history first set in motion by Adam and Satan and their respective 'party' (*fariq*)<sup>126</sup> and thereafter traceable in the histories of 'every despotic king and every appointed caliph'.<sup>127</sup> The Adamic fate is one of sin, repentance and ultimate reconciliation with God. The Satanic is of unpentant disobedience. It is a history of moral 'types', and one which might be expected to set the stage for what is to come in the Islamic portion of the work.

But the Islamic portion is far different. It is made up of a *Sira* built mainly from the materials of Ibn Ishaq and Waqidi, a section on the conquests and an annalistic history of the leading figures of the community until the year 302/915. The annals are introduced with the beginning of

<sup>118</sup> E.g., Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:506.

<sup>119</sup> The Persian influence will be discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>120</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:78.

<sup>121</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:4-5.

<sup>122</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:164.

<sup>123</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:5.

<sup>118</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:155; see also 1:847.

<sup>119</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:148.

<sup>120</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:353.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

the Hijri calendar, approximately half way through the prophetic mission, and strictly adhered to until the end. There is no trace in this whole portion of the *History* of any explicit judgement on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events. Within each year one or more major event is usually introduced as a 'headline' and subsequently its causes, development and outcome are presented by tying together the accounts of several informants, or by keeping these accounts separate, resulting in much repetition and what are often minor variations in detail.

There is much that needs to be explained in this abrupt change of structure and mood. The annalistic scheme was perhaps a natural one to select for the *Hijri* era and the scheme itself had already been adopted by the historians of the third/ninth century.<sup>128</sup> Its year-by-year tempo parallels the verse-by-verse analysis of the *Commentary*. More difficult to explain, however, is the almost total absence of any comments on the veracity of reports or any moral verdict on events of momentous consequences to the Muslim community. It may of course be said that Tabari had already asserted that a historian was only a transmitter, and yet a pattern of conflict was seen to obtain in the pre-Islamic period which was nowhere spelled out in the Islamic. The 'Adams' and the 'Satan's' of Islamic history are left largely to the judgement of the reader.

The three centuries or so of Islamic history that Tabari records were dotted with events that had grievous political and theological consequences. Many of the issues engendered were still very hot in Tabari's own days. Several strands of historical writing had arisen which show bald or subtle bias in favour of one party or another. As we saw above, Tabari in his *Commentary* had expressed views inimical to the Qur'anic interpretations of some of these politico-religious groups like the Qadariyya, Jahmiyya, Khawarij and Sufis. But historical reports could not be similarly attacked or dismissed. One must therefore presume that Tabari exercised great care in selecting reports which he held to have been most trustworthy, in line with his avowed reliance on the experts in each field. And yet, the first *Fitna* or civil war in Islamic history, which pitted the third caliph 'Uthman against his enemies, was one event whose disastrous repercussions could still be deeply divisive. Few if any of the Prophet's Companions could be said to have come out of that ordeal unblemished in character or behaviour. In reconstructing that civil war, Tabari relied heavily on Ibn Ishaq, Sayf and Waqidī, all of whom, upon very close examination,

reveal some degree of bias in favour of one group or another. How did Tabari handle these terrible events?<sup>129</sup>

In transmitting the materials of his three distinguished predecessors, Tabari was bound to transmit also three divergent and divisive versions of the *Fitna*. There was no way in which he could create, as he tried to do in his *Commentary*, a single or unified interpretation which would exclude 'heresy'. And to identify the 'Adams' and 'Satan's' of that particular episode in history would almost certainly have meant the adoption of an extreme sectarian position, a highly unlikely position for him to adopt given his general anti-sectarianism. What he really thought of these events and especially of their implications regarding the moral behaviour of Muhammad's Companions will probably never be known. But there are a few hints as to his process of selection:

As for Waqidī, he records many incidents in connection with the reasons which made the Egyptians march out against 'Uthman and their camping at Dha Khushub. I have related some of them above and refrained from mentioning others owing to my abhorrence at mentioning them due to their repugnant nature (*basha'atih*).<sup>130</sup>

Later, he adds,

We have mentioned already many of the reasons which those who killed him [sc. 'Uthman] cited as a pretext for killing him but have refrained from mentioning many more for reasons which call for such refraining. We turn now to how he was killed and how this began.<sup>131</sup>

It is fairly clear from these two short passages that while Tabari could not, in conformity with his definition of a historian, edit, rationalize or argue away the trauma of that war, he did attempt to minimize the damage by avoiding any reference to reports he considered 'morally repugnant'. If it was too late to rescue Islamic history from partisanship, it could at least be pruned of its more offensive episodes.

### Concluding observations

*Hadith* had served history well. It had inspired its earliest form and methods. It had provided it with its chief vehicle for the establishment of veracity, the *isnad*. It had instilled into it something of its own dry factuality and attention to detail. By preserving divergent accounts of events, the

<sup>128</sup> No fully satisfactory explanation has yet been given of the origins of annalistic historiography in the Arabic tradition. R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 106, says that the *Tarikh* of Khalifa ibn Khayyat (d. 241/855) 'seems in fact to have been the first general annalistic work to be composed in Arabic'. A more likely candidate for this honour is al-Haytham ibn 'Adī (d. 206/821): see Duri, *Rise*, pp. 53-4, and Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, p. 42. It is not impossible that both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi used an annalistic format in some of their works: see, e.g. Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:2479-80 and 2516.

<sup>129</sup> The late Marshall Hodgson attempted a brilliant analysis of Tabari's handling of the murder of 'Uthman in his 'Two Pre-modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting them to Moderns', in John U. Nef, ed., *Towards World Community* (The Hague: W. Junk, 1968). But perhaps too much is read into Tabari's account as regards his ultimate political and moral position.

<sup>130</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:2965.

<sup>131</sup> Tabari, *Tarikh*, 1:2980.

history written under the epistemic umbrella of *Hadith* enables the modern historian to assess the different historiographical traditions and to reconstruct the emergent views of various politico-religious parties and movements.

Nevertheless, a parting of the ways was bound to occur as the territory and interests of each discipline were more rigidly defined. As *Hadith* became more circumscribed by succeeding generations of scholars intent upon greater control and testability of the material, encouraged in this endeavour by governments pursuing greater uniformity of judicial and administrative practice, history was expanding beyond the bounds of such control. Even Tabari, when he approaches his own days, is found to abandon the *isnad* and to resort increasingly to such terms as 'I was told', 'It reached me' or simply, 'It was said'. As the history of the *umma* filled out to catch the winds, it was regarded with ever-increasing fascination by both the ruling elites and the literati as an imperial history on a par with the history of other great nations. It was natural that parallels would be detected, that hopes and fears would be raised.

In order to see history in this broader, more universal perspective, *Hadith* was obviously ill equipped. The *isnad* was largely unobtainable or irrelevant where foreign nations were concerned. But more importantly, the *isnad* was designed not for the expression of personal opinion but for accuracy of transmission. If history was to yield its lessons, the historian would have to sever the 'chain' of *isnad* and draw out the full implications of the narrative by revealing his own intentions and strategy. Other criteria would have to be applied to both the selection of reports as well as their assessment. Other styles would need to be employed to express the new mood. History began to be affected by *Adab*.

### CHAPTER 3

## History and *Adab*

In the course of the third/ninth century, historical writing began to respond to the increasing influence of *Adab* and, in doing so, to modify its content, form and perspective. A gradual shift in mood carried history into a new and more 'secular' environment. In this environment, the style and horizons of *Hadith* were no longer seen to be adequate carriers of a history now required to be more pragmatic and more sensitive to the challenge of foreign cultures. *Adab* was the chief instrument of this transformation.

In many European histories of Arabic literature the word *Adab* is translated as 'Belles-Lettres'. One could argue that the classical Greek 'Paideia' is a more accurate rendering of the term since *Adab*, like Paideia, refers to a process of moral and intellectual education designed to produce an *adib*, a gentleman-scholar, and is thus intimately connected with the formation of both intellect and character. In its earliest days *Adab* meant education. With time it came to mean a *special* kind of education, a moral and intellectual curriculum aimed at a particular urban class and reflecting the needs and aspirations of that class. To understand its influence on historical writing, one must first explore the environment in which *Adab* grew and attempt to show how and why it came to exercise that influence.

### The rise of *Adab*

We saw above how early *Hadith*, by casting its net wide over the lore of the community, pulled in a mixed bag of 'traditions', an undifferentiated mass of reports differing greatly in nature and religious importance. By slow degrees, and largely under state or factional guidance, groups of specialized scholars began to give this mass a more manageable structure so that this structure could function as legal precedent and historical image to a society more intent on separating itself from its environment, more determined to delineate its religious contours. With specialization came rigour and with rigour a 'science' with its distinct principles and method. It was under this 'Science of *Hadith*' that historical writing first found shelter.