



MUSLIM CONTRIBUTION TO THE SCIENCE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

Science of historiography reflects the social, cultural and economic conditions of a society. Islam claims to work in the context of history. A remarkable testimony to the historical sense of the Muslims is their success in preserving the text of the Qur'an and *ahadith* of prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h). Islam is the only major religion of the history of mankind which was born and flourished under the light of history and Muslims are a people with a strong sense of history. Religion gave Muslims their historical sense. Hence historiography was to be approached with utmost sincerity. Muslim historiography informs us about our heritage, makes us conscious of links with the past, makes us aware of our origin, and provides us with a sense of direction for the future. Muslim period produced a galaxy of historians like al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari, al-Mas'udi, Ibn-al-Athir, Ya'qubi, Ibn Khallikan and Ibn Khaldun. The present paper will discuss the history consciousness among Muslims and their contributions in the field of historiography.

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INTRODUCTION

The word *Tarikh*, History, is derived from the root word 'arkh¹, which means fixing the period of an event². Classical Arabic historiographers define the term as knowledge pertaining to a country, customs and manners of a people, remains of the people of yore, as well as an account of the actions of those alive³. In the words of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, famous historian, history is "an art dealing with anecdotes according to the sequence of their chronology⁴". It acts as a discipline of knowledge "which informs us about our heritage; which makes us conscious of our links with past; which makes us aware of our origin; and which provides us with a sense of direction for the future⁵". The Arabs could have little conception of history before the advent of Islam. They even lacked a proper epic, and were people with no consciousness of history. It is, therefore, more likely that Muslims developed a sense of history from Prophet Muhammad's (p.b.u.h) mission and the holy Qur'an. The Qur'an brings to the light the account of nations; their misdeeds and their destruction as a result of their misdoings: See they not how many of those before them we did destroy? –

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Generations we had established on the earth, in strength such as We have not given to you – for whom We poured out rain from skies in abundance, And gave streams flowing beneath their (feet): Yet for their sins we destroy them, and raised in their wake⁶. There is, in their stories, instruction for men endowed with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it. – a detailed exposition of all things, and a guide and a mercy to any such as believe⁷. Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior to them in strength; they tilled the soil and populated it in greater numbers than these have done; there came to them their messengers with clear (signs), (which they rejected, to their own destruction): it was not Allah who wronged them but they wronged their own souls⁸. Do they do not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them, -- though they were superior to them in strength? Nor is Allah to be frustrated by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is All-knowing, All-powerful, if Allah were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the back of the (earth) a single living creature; but He gives them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily Allah has in His sight all His servants⁹. Thus Islam claims to work in the context of history. A remarkable testimony to the historical sense of the Muslims is their success in preserving the text of the Qur'an¹⁰.

Another aspect of history consciousness of the Muslims is their concern to preserve, in letter and spirit, the sayings of Prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h) and to create a vast literature to cover the day-to-day actions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). This speaks of the serious concern of the Muslims to have things recorded in the annals of history. The rise of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), his consolidation of the Arab ranks into a single nation and its subsequent impact on human civilization represents one of the greatest events in the history of the mankind in general and that of the Muslims in particular¹¹. So long as the immediate disciples of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) and companions were alive, this was a simple matter, but as time elapsed it was considered increasingly necessary to collect all information about him¹². Where the believers could not find clear guidance from the Qur'an or where there was dispute in the interpretation of its text, the best authority could be the Prophet's (p.b.u.h) actions and sayings (*Ahadith*)¹³. Thus there grew up the tradition of collecting the *Ahadith*. These writings comprised the first historic literature in Arabia¹⁴. The scholars put their best efforts to collect the *Ahadith* of Prophet (p.b.u.h) from the *Sahaba*, *Tabi'un* and successive generations. The traditionists (*Muhaddithun*) introduced an unparalleled technique, *Jarah Wa Ta'dil* (Science of declaring a *Hadith* valid or invalid) while compiling the *Ahadith*. We do not find any evidence of this method being employed in preserving the historical data either among the pagan Arabs or among the more civilized peoples of the neighboring countries¹⁵.

Thus Muslims brought the highest standards of objectivity into their writings and showed great enthusiasm for the discovery of true facts. Though the debt that history owes to the efforts of Muslim writers is generally recognized by Orientalists¹⁶, yet the consciousness of the value and significance of Muslim contribution is rare among Western historians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that historiography is a Muslim science. F. Rosenthal comments on Muslim historiography as:

The development of modern historical writings seems to have gained considerably in speed and substances through the utilization of Muslim literature which enabled the Western historians from the seventeenth century on to see a large section of the world through foreign eyes. The Muslim historiography helped indirectly to shape the present day historical thinking¹⁷.

Muslim Contribution to the Historiography

As mentioned before, religion gave Muslims their historical sense. Hence historiography was to be approached with utmost sincerity. Muslims considered themselves to be the custodians and transmitters of facts that could not be altered. They produced a vast literature of considerable merit at a time when even among the civilized peoples there was not much flair for historiography¹⁸. Thus it were Muslims who gave new orientation to historical thinking and writing with a greater depth and dimensions. The histories written by Muslim authors were characterized by accuracy, scientific assembling of facts, and their objective approach¹⁹. Muslim period produced a galaxy of historians. We shall, however, try to discuss some of the prominent historians as al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari, al-Mas'udi, Ibn-al-Athir, Ya'qubi, Ibn Khallikan and Ibn Khaldun. They all have an everlasting contribution to the development of Muslim historiography.

Abu Ja'far Ahmad bin Yahya bin Jabir al-Baladhuri (d.279/829)

He wrote a continuous history, woven around the Arab aristocracy, thus indicating where the emphasis lay, and giving full emphasis to an Arab social idea²⁰. His renowned work *Futuh al-Buldan* is a record of the Islamic conquests²¹. It expresses a central mission of Islam and meets a juristic and administrative need²². In this work each section usually gives some details about the subsequent history of the country. The details have been gathered from the local authorities. Besides obtaining this local information, which was no doubt trustworthy to a great extent, he also made use of the works of earlier researchers, such as Waqidi, through Muhammad bin S'ad his secretary and the author of the *Tabaqat*²³. After Arabia the description of Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, certain Mediterranean Islands, Nuba, Iraq, Persia and India is found in the work²⁴. Another work of al-Baladhuri originally in forty volumes is his *Ansab al-Ashraf* (Book of the Lineages of Nobles) which is not a continuous history but a collection of narratives dealing with particular events²⁵. He enriched the Muslim historiography with the bulk of historical literature found in '*Ansab al-Ashraf*²⁶.' He was one of the first to integrate the many stories of the conquest of various cities and lands into one comprehensive whole, thus ending the era in which the monograph was the typical form of historical composition²⁷.

Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 A.D)

His fame rests on his remarkably elaborate and accurate history *Tarik al-Rasul We al - Muluk* (The History of the Prophets and the Kings), as well as on his commentary on the Qur'an. He is celebrated and renowned Muslim historian. His vast historical repository has remained to us as an immortal monument of his extensive scientific activity which has been written in the early fourth (tenth) century and is the first work in the annalistic form written by a Muslim that has come down to us. al-Tabari's greatness, as a matter of fact, is recognized in all quarters because of his accuracy and great diligence in collecting data and giving them the form of authentic history²⁸. While commenting on his *Tarikh* al-Mas'udi says, "It excels all other works in brilliance and substance as it includes all different kinds of historical information, comprises a great variety of memorable data and contains all sorts of knowledge. It is an extremely useful work²⁹." al-Tabari's work is constructed in an entirely different principle.

His work shows a definite departure from the ancient form, although in details of style ancient influences are still alive, especially in those parts of the work which deal with pre-Islamic history and the beginning of Islam. What makes his work especially valuable for the purpose of scientific research is the manner in which he imparts the events recorded. Probably, we are to regard Tabari as performing for history a task similar to what Bukhari and Muslim did for traditions³⁰. al-Tabari's work not only contains a mere historical narrative but also imparts the documents authenticating the events³¹. This is the real merit and value of his great historical work for science³². For this reason al-Tabari has been justly called "The father of Arab history³³". al-Tabari was a true and real historian as he wrote history without any motives and did not try to shape it according to particular interests and objects³⁴.

Abu al-Hassan al-Mas'udi (896-957A.D)

al-Mas'udi's renowned work is his *Muruj al-Dhahab Wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar*, (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) in which the story of the creation of the world is followed by a physical description of the Earth³⁵. In this encyclopaedic historico- geographical work the author, with catholicity and scientific curiosity, carried his researches beyond the typically Moslem subjects into Indo-Persian, Roman and Jewish history³⁶. Briefly speaking, the *Kitab Muruj al-Dhahab* abbreviated al-Masudi's major work³⁷. While the *Kitab al-Tanbih wa al-Ashraf* contains al-Masudi's whole historical series on a much scale³⁸.

'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir (1160-1234A.D)

His universal history *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (The Perfect Work on History) in twelve volumes is one of the great productions of Arabic historiography and was known to the West before that of al-Tabari. The First volume of Ibn al-Athir's *al-Kamil* is mostly concerned with the beginning of historical works in Islam and with creation of the universe. Ibn Athir also compiled a book on the lives of seven thousand five hundred companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) entitled *Usud al-Ghabah* (The Lions of the Forest).

Ahmad bin 'Ali b. Ya'qub b Ja'far b. Wahn b. Wadih al-Ya'qubi (d. 897 AD)

He is commonly known as al-Ya'qubi. He collected material for his historical works through the extensive travels³⁹. His outstanding work *Kitab al-Buldan* (The Book of Countries) was written in 891 A.D. It struck a new note in emphasizing topographical and economical detail⁴⁰. This famous work was an outstanding contribution to several aspects of geography including regional description, physical geography and environmental factors⁴¹.

Shams al-Din Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khallikan (1211-1282 A.D)

Among the numerous compositions of biography and history we can have no hesitation in awarding the place of honour to *Wafayat al-A'yan* or 'Obituaries of Eminent Men' by Shamas al-din Ibn Khallikan. It is a comprehensive selection of eminent figures in all fields of activity in all parts of the Islamic world. The author took pains to establish the correct spelling of names, fix dates, trace genealogies, verify facts, indicate the main personal traits, sketch the significant events and illustrate by the use of poems and anecdotes⁴². The merits of the book have fully recognized by the author's countrymen as well as by European scholars. Nicholson while commenting on the book says:

It is composed in simple and elegant language, it is extremely accurate, and it contains an astonishing quantity of miscellaneous historical and literary information, not directly catalogued but conveyed in the most pleasing fashion by anecdotes and excerpts which illustrate every department of Muslim life⁴³.

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 AD)

Wali al-din 'Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abi Bakr Muhammad bin al-Hassan, commonly known as

Ibn Khaldun, a prominent Muslim historian, sociologist and philosopher of fourteenth century. He is primarily known for his *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena) and his *Kitab al-Ibr* (Book of Instructive Examples). He considered history a science worthy of study. He wrote history in the light of a new method of explanation and reasoning. He opens his *Prolegomena* inquiring into the value of history and its kinds, and the errors into which the historians fall in recording annals and events, whether dictated by purpose and partiality or inadvertently and from ignorance of the laws of sociology, want of precision and investigation in estimating the possible and impossible⁴⁴. Ibn Khaldun has a special style of exposition and expression. His *Prolegomena* is distinguished for the brilliance of its literary style which is at the same time characterized by simplicity and harmony⁴⁵. With reference to his *Muqaddimah*, P.K. Hitti, comments as:

In it he presented for the first time a theory of historical development which takes due cognizance of the physical facts of climate and geography as well as the moral and spiritual forces at work. As one who endeavored to formulate laws of national progress and decay Ibn Khaldun may be considered the discoverer as he himself claimed – of the true scope and nature of history or at least the real founder of the science of sociology. No Arab writer, indeed no European, had ever taken a view of history at once so comprehensive and philosophic. By the consensus of critical opinion Ibn Khaldun was the greatest historical philosopher Islam produced and one of the greatest of all time⁴⁶.

Conclusion

It would be seen from the present discussion that historiography in the Muslim world had religious beginnings. It was religion that gave the Muslims their historical sense, and the requirements of developing a theology made it imperative for the Muslim theologians to undertake historical research and to lay down canons of evaluating historical data for eliminating doubt and error so far as it was humanly possible. It led them to explore the traditions of religions allied to their own which had preceded the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) in point of time. of the methodology of historians in developing history as an academic discipline using particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches. One may say that history has been a favorite discipline with the Muslims. They brought the highest standards of objectivity into their writings; they showed great enthusiasm for the discovery of true facts; they produced a vast literature of considerable merit at a time when even among the civilized peoples there was not much flair for historiography; indeed, there were cultures of a highly developed nature that had no place. The Muslims were able to expand the scope of history from mere recording of facts into a repository of political, administrative, and cultural experiences and made fruitful essays into the analytical field as well.

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