Al-Ṭabarî's Place within the Islamic Historiographical Tradition

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The field of Islamic historiography is challenging. At a first glance, the various accounts of history-writing seem to be straight forward and simple both in meaning and language. However, when one starts to examine the function and contribution of the sources within the historical framework of a particular period several difficulties arise. It is then that Islamic historical accounts become problematic.

The issue of the degree of interrelation[1] between the oral and written tradition in the sources is complicated yet further by issues of authenticity.[2] Moreover, the question of the date[3] when serious historical writing emerged, is still a matter of debate. In addition, considerations such as on the interpretative development of ancient historical tradition in terms of how far it was altered as regards language, structure and conceptual framework between the time they were formulated and the moment when they took their definite form obscure attempts to reach a clear understanding of the nature of the sources. Moreover, problems concerning the distinction between factors,[4] which

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[1] This reflects different historical methods and ideas expressed by various writers.

[2] The fact that the great majority of the early accounts tend to be literary compilations which took their form one or two centuries later than the events they describe raises questions, such as how much material in the extant sources is "older" and what attitudes it reflects and how and whether scholars can distinguish between "authentic" older material and recent accounts; see S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, 1991), 69 – 103.

[3] There are related questions as to the real existence of proper historical composition by the eighth century and whether these accounts ascribed by our texts are fictitious or genuine. This debate is also linked to the critique of *isnâds*. Whether *isnâds* represent genuine lines of transmission or forgeries intended to legitimize state policies of later periods, see Humphreys, *Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry*, 73; see also T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), 39.

[4] Problems of transmission and contradiction in the early sources are compounded with issues of deliberate bias and distortion; also the use of different methodologies by historians has led to various interpretations of history-wriiting. For a discussion, see Humphreys, Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry, 82-3; A. Noth and L. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition. A Source Critical Study*, tr. M. Bonner (Princeton, 1994); F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins. The beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton, 1998); on the function of isnâd

led to the fabrication and confusion of history-writing and the effects of social and political currents should always be taken into consideration. Also, the existence of *topoi* in sources especially where there is no corroborative tradition obscures the historian's attempts to validate the information. Consequently, the reader should hesitate to place faith in reputed historians without an examination of their given accounts. These points should be borne in mind throughout the general development of history-writing in the early period.

As Dûrî argues, "it is only through the understanding of the reasons for the evolution of the history-writing among the Arabs to perceive the factors which motivated it, as well as the perspectives of those who wrote it, their historical ideas, their method of examining various accounts, their view of the importance of history and its role in cultural activity and in public life" [5].

The two technical terms by which the idea of history is denoted in Arabic are *akhbâr*[6] and *ta'rîkh*[7]. The former means "information about remarkable events" and refers to history in the sense of a story whereas the latter means "date" and "era". From the ninth century it is considered to be the specific technical term for history designating works which contained dates.

Despite the fact that history-writing was developed in the Islamic period, there are elements of cultural continuity which can be traced back to the period of *Jahiliyya*[8] It is commonly held that no written literature has survived from that period. It is mostly through inscriptions that an interest in noteworthy events can be attested. For example, in South Arabia[9] inscriptions dated from 8 B.C. to 7 A.D. display evidence of a

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and akhbâr and their use in history-writing, see A. Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, ed. And trans. L.I. Conrad (Princeton, 1983), 28 – 60.

[5] Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 6.

[6] On the term, see F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 1968), 11.

[7] On the term, see *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. H.A.R. Gibb-J. H. Kramers (Leiden, 1953), 578-9; Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 11-7; see also the discussion of these terms in M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography. The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma'mûn* (Cambridge, 2000), 19 – 23.

[8] The period of ignorance coming before the Islam; see I. Goldziher, "What is meant by al-Jahiliyya", *MSI* (1967), 201 – 8.

[9] See Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 13. On the evidence of Yemenite accounts which were based on the glorification of Yemenite Arabs in

variety of human actions using a confusing method of dating. They do not refer any specific historical event but they do bear witness to a sense of historical thinking. The same consideration applies to the Arabs of the north. There existed oral accounts of stories about their gods, social affairs, raiding expeditions and battles[10] and genealogies. This collection of reports based on organization, customs of society and Bedouin virtues, had a moral aim: to teach the individual about his ancestors. It may be true that the recording of these events contained historical elements. What they lacked however, was a sense of continuity. They tended not to be organized according to a historical sequence. However, genealogy[11] is indicative of the existence of a historical sense. To sum up, it can be argued that even in pre-Islamic Arabia there existed a certain degree of historical consciousness as is attested both in the sourthern inscriptions and the north central Arabian battle day narratives and genealogical lore.

Another element which played an important role in the later development of historiography is the Judaeo-Christian tradition.[12] It is generally accepted that the biblical tradition influenced the Prophet's idea of history as seen in the Qur'ân. Issues of the biblical[13] influences according to its Jewish and Christian components are complicated and obscure.

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contrast to the Arabs of the north, see Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 16.

[10] On the battle-day tradition (*ayyâm*) as a Semitic form, see Rosenthal, A History of Muslim Historiography, 19; The *ayyâm* stories were originated in tribal gatherings (*majalis*) and were until the eighth century an orally transmitted body of collective tribal accounts; see Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 16-20; on the use of poetry in the ayyâm, see Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 19.

[11] On the practical interest in genealogical traditions, which developed into an interest in the past and strengthened the historical consciousness, see Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 23; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 49.

[12] See F. Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim historiography" in Lewis-Holt eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 35 – 45.

[13] Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition" argues that the difference between the biblical view and that of the prophet's lies in the fact that whereas the Judaeo-Christian outlook was pessimistic, the Prophet was more confident in the cause of Islam, which is validated by the later political success of Islam.

However, history in the Qur'ân was perceived as universal and predestined. It was seen as a succession of prophetic missions,[14] which had a definite beginning. Its future was determined by the end of the world. The Day of Judgement or Great Day remained a fixed event in the history of the future. This notion of predestination gave an impetus to interest in the present and awareness of the past. The actions of the present merited attention and value which was accompanied by an appreciation of the worth of the events of the past. Moreover, Muḥammad's divine words and exemplary life proved to be a historical watershed. History was divided into two periods, that which preceded Muḥammad and that which came after. The recording of events[15] after his coming fulfilled the principal duty of history-writing which was to illustrate the truth of Islam. On the other hand, the preceding history and the history of non Muslims was considered as a story full of errors [16] which could only instruct in its negative aspect.

The inheritance of the message of Muḥammad coupled with the important political[17] developments, which led to the establishment of

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[14] Muslims are considered to be the successors of previous nations among whom past prophets had carried out their missions. The Prophet Muḥammad was linked with the succession of prophets in the sense that it was the defeats and triumphs of the history of the past which made him what he was; see Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition", 39; see W. A. Bijlefeld, "A Prophet and more than a prophet?: Some observations on the Qur'ânic use of the terms "prophet" and "apostle", in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. A. Rippin (Aldershot, 2001), 131-58.

[15] Muḥammad's knowledge of historical facts was limited as is seen in the use of many false data, and so it was the existence of events in a form of allusions which gradually acquired a historical significance; see Rosenthal, A History of Muslim Historiography, 29; contemporary world history enters the Qur'ân when a prediction is made, for example about the outcome of the struggle between the Byzantines and the Persians. Due to the interpretation of history in terms of the divine will of God, the deeds and events of the past acquired a religious importance. Even historical reflections are connected with biblical figures and events, which form part of the Prophet's message. As Rosenthal argues, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition", 37 "this material constituted the nucleaus of the earliest Muslim historical writing".

[16] This is one of the main reasons why the information on pre-Islamic and non-Muslim history remained obscure.

[17] See Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 20-1 who argues that the cultural and political developments, such as the introduction of the *dîwân* system, the settlement of the tribes in garrison towns, the view of the Arab towards the *mawâlî* (Arabic speaking Iraqis), the attitudes of the Iraqis as opposed to the Umayyads, the impact of the concept of *umma* in historical thinking, and the Hijra

the Arab Empire, enhanced Arab status and pride. History-writing at this time appears to have been associated with two cultural centers[18] which reflected different perspectives. The first was the Islamic perspective, which thrived in Medina and was initiated by the scholars of *ḥadith*[19] The second was the perspective of the tribes or *ayyâm* centred in the garrison town in Kufa and Basra and was in a sense the continuation of earlier tribal activity.

The school of Medina[20] was based on the study of *ḥadîth* of the Prophet and *sunna* and the care for the historiographical narration was viewed within Islamic tradition. Parallel to the attention to the words and deeds of the Prophet as a source of spiritual guidance, the study of military expeditions (*maghâzi*)[21] of the Prophet began to gain prominence. Both of these accounts were based on a chain of authorities[22] (*isnâd*) who transmitted them. Their value was endorsed in their reputation. History-writing was mainly the study of scholars of *ḥadîth* It involved a search for collection of accounts and *ḥadîth* in general circulation, it was related to the *isnâd* and gave a special emphasis to dating system. To sum up, in the school of Medina history-writing was influenced by the Qur'ânic interpretation of history as expressed in the divine revelation of the Prophet. The interest in gaining religious knowledge expanded to include activities of the Prophet's

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dating system which became a vital element in historical thought, gave a new importance to the study of history-writing.

[18] See Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 21, on Humphreys's criticism of Dûrî's thesis, see Humphreys, *Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry*, 77.

[19] The Prophet's Qur'ânic message provided the motive for the study of his deeds and words; on the ḥadîth studies which was a discipline distinct from the collection of *akhbâr*, see Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 4.

[20] On the exponents of the school and their methods, see Dûrî, The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs, 76 – 121.

[21] The *ḥadîth* and *maghâzî* were intertwined since *hadîth* provided the material in the *maghâzî* studies; see Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 25; see also M. Hinds, "Maghâzî and Sîra in Early Islamic Scholarship", *La vie du prophète Mahomet*, Colloque de Strasbourg, 23 – 24 October 1980 (Paris, 1983).

[22] The *isnâd* introduced each section of the narrative and consisted of the name of the narrator from whom the author had taken it. It was followed by those from whom he had taken it and went back to the original eye-witness in the form "I was told by x who was told by y who was told by z that he heard the Prophet saying"; see H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the age of the Caliphates* (London, N.Y., 1986), 352 – 63; see also Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 28.

companions and descendants and operated within the framework of the Islamic community, the *umma*.

In contrast, the Iraqi[23] school of Kufa and Basra was born out of an interest in the exploits and genealogies of the Arab tribes which rose to prominence after the conquests attached new achievements to tribal topics. The most important development connected to this school of writing is the appearance of the *akhbâr*[24] tradition related to the first historians or "collectors of reports" designated *akhbâriyûn* or *akhbârîs* which reached a professional standard in the second half of the eight century.[25] The *akhbârîyûn* collected narratives (*khabar*) which were consisted of compilations whose aim was to depict an incident or a limited sequence of events.[26] Since the accounts were influenced by local traditions and tribal interests, the formation of common themes[27] and motifs are predominant in many accounts. It is also evident that the element of exaggeration in depicting events reflects the approach of the pre-Islamic *ayyâm* tales.[28] The use of *akhbâr* in historical writing

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[23] See A. A. Dûrî, "The Iraqi school of history to the ninth century: A sketch", in Lewis-Holt eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 45 – 53.

[24] See C.S. Leder, "The Literary use of the Khabar: the basic form of historical writing", in A. Cameron-L. Conrad eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992), 277 – 315.

[25] The akhbariyûn consulted families, tribal accounts, other accounts in the garrison towns, and were supplemented with accounts from Medina and government registers. The fact that they used *isnâd* indicates the continuity of influence of the Islamic perspective on history-writing; on the relation between *isnâd*and *akhbâr*, see Leder, "The Literary use of the *Khabar*: the basic form of historical writing", 285, 314; on other genres of literature at this period, such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and the *futûh*□ (conquests), see C. Cahen, "History and historians", Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period (Cambridge, 1990), 188-233, at 193; Khalidi, Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period, 65.

[26] On the function of the *akhbârîyûn*, see Leder, "The Literary use of the *Khabar*: the basic form of historical writing", 314. He argues that the reconstitution of the works of the *akhbârîyûn*is difficult because they have been absorbed into larger and better works which have been recopied.

[27] The fact that the tribes were in close proximity to one another and sometimes mingled could lead the narrators to combine versions of other groups with a version of their own group; see Cahen, "History and historians", 195; Leder, "The Literary use of the Khabar: the basic form of historical writing", 283.

[28] On Abû Mikhnaf (d. 157/774) an authority in the field of history, who was not held in high esteem as *umḥaddithûn*, see Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical* Writing among the Arabs, 45.

became widely used by historians in later periods and was subject to various methods and approaches.[29]

The bulk of our historical texts on early Islam however, are found in a body of compilations composed between 850-90 A.D. These compilations are further supplemented by universal chronicles,[30] biographical[31] dictionaries written in later centuries.

Dûrî argues that by the second half of the ninth century historians were no longer representatives of schools. He relates this to the cultural development,[32] which was initiated by *ḥadîth* scholars who aimed at a critical approach of the materials of their works. It is in this context of intellectual activity, that the new turn to the "universal history" whose main exponent is al-Ṭabarî lies in the fact that he preserved the broadest account of early history-writing which represents the ancient historical tradition.[33] His History covers the history of the creation and prophecy, the history of ancient nations such as the Persians, the *Sîra* of the

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[29] On akhbâr's relation to genealogy (*nasab*), poetry, *qiṣṣaṣ* see Leder, "The Literary use of the Khabar: the basic form of historical writing", 310-2; Cooperson argues that it was the formalisation of the standards of *ḥadîth* such as the use of *isnâd*, that left historical gtenres to the *akhbâris*; on the relation of *akhbâr* to *ḥadîth*, that is *akhbâr* about the Prophet, *adab* and *Sîra*, see Cooperson, Classical Arabic Biography, 1-9; on the development of the early Arabic historical tradition, see also T. el-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography. Hârûn al-Rashîd and the Narrative of the Abbâsid Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1999), 219.

[30] Chronicles whether universal or dynastic were written around the activities of caliphs, focussed on their political affairs, and their function was official for they pressented matters which interested official circles; see B. Radtke, "Towards a typology of "Abbâsid universal chronicles", *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbâsid Studies* 3(1990), 1-18; on al-Yaʿqûbî's (897) Ta'rikh, and al-Masʿûdî's (956) Murûj al-dhahab, see Humphreys, Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry, 72; Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 149.

[31] On the genre of *ṭabaqât*, see Cahen, "History and historians", 195; Humphreys, *Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry*, 71.

[32] Dûrî, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 62 identifies this cultural development with the period for travels for knowledge in the mid ninth-century characterised by increased communication and a wide exchange of ideas and influences which led to the circulation and adoption of different methods and historical ideas.

[33] On the importance of his accounts for the Byzantine-"Abbasid diplomatic relations, which lies in the fact that he deals systematically with Byzantine – "Abbasid diplomatic activity until the year 915 shedding light on procedures, personalities involved and the character of negotiations, see M. Vaiou, *Diplomatic Relations between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire: methods and procedures*, forthcoming.

Prophet, his *maghâzî*, and conquests and ends up with a history of the *umma* up to his own days.[34] In his introduction to the History of the Prophets and Kings he refers to the method he followed in his compilation "I rely on what I transmit from explicitly identified reports (*akhbâr*) and from accounts which I ascribe by name to the transmitters".[35] In other words, his purpose in constructing his compilations was to bring together all the reliable and well attested accounts related to each event and person. Al-Ṭabarî belonged to the group of *muhaddithûn* traditionists. He follows *isnâd* but adopts a more critical stance. For each event he presents *akhbâr* introduced by an appropriate isnâd.[36] Frequently he juxtaposes several reports of the particular event in the interest of objectivity and thoroughness. For the 'Abbasid period he abandons the used of different *akhbâr* for each event which he replaces with a linear narrative. He abandons the *isnâd* and used terms such as "It was said" or "I was told" or "It reached me" or no introduction at all. Further, he introduces the annalistic[37] form of historiography. He uses biographical[38] details in order to separate the ruling succession from one another and highlight moral and ethical qualities.

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[34] Al-Ṭabarî, *Ta'rîkh al-rusul wa-l-mulûk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols (Leiden, 1879-1901); English trans. *The History of al-Ṭabarî (Ta'rîkh al-rusul wa-l-mulûk)*, ed I. Abbâs, C.E. Bosworth et al., 39 vols (New York, 1985); On the History of the Prophets and Kings, see Dûrî, The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs, 71; see F. Rosenthal, "General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood" in E. Yarshater ed., *The History of al-Ṭabarî*, vol. 1, (Albany, 1989), 5-134. on the Judaeo-Christian influences on his work, see Rosenthal, "General Introduction", 38; for older editions and translations, see A. A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes, i. La dynastie d'Amorium (820-867)*, French ed. H. Grégoire, M. Canard (Brussels, 1935), 278-86.

[35] See al-Ṭabarî, *Ta'rîkh*, I, 6-7.

[36] See al-Ṭabarî, *Ta'rîkh*, II, 1606, III 50, 65, 1539; see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 73-81.

[37] Muslim annalistic historiography in its beginnings was indebted to Greek and Syriac models. The influence may be attributed to the contact with learned Christians or Christian converts to Islam; see Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 71-86.

[38] On biography, which achieved a dominant position in historiography as rulers and caliphs found the best models of ethical behaviour in the lives of the men of the past, see Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 100-6; see also Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 18-23 who explores the relationship between history and biography (*sîra, ṭabaqât, tajârim*) or biographical anecdotes (*akhbât*) drawing on a number of sources, such as al-Ṭabarî's, Ta'rîkh, al-Mas'udi's Murûj al-dhahab and Ibn Abî Ṭâhir Ṭayfûr's *Kitâb Baghdâd*.

Al-Ṭabarî's accounts are not accompanied by subjective evaluation. His reluctance to express value judgements and to comment on the sense and significance of the materials he was using has led scholars to believe that his task was mainly compilation without the involvement of any thinking. At this point Humphreys argues[39] that al-Ṭabarî shares the same concept of knowledge as was embodied in early Islamic culture rather than a "pious modest". The task of historians during that time was to preserve objective knowledge of important past events. Objectivity was associated with the transmittance of authorities, which could not be questioned. Therefor, the historian's task was not to interpret the past but to "determine which reports about it were acceptable and to compile these reports in a convenient order".[40]

However, the issue of the reliability of al-Ṭabarî's quotations is debatable.[41] Sometimes there is no indication for the provenance of his sources using for example the formula was *fîha* (in this year), *dhukira* (it is mentioned), *qila* (it is said), *qâla* (he said) or *fî hadhihi al-sana* (in this year).[42] Other times he gives contradictory accounts of an event, for example he relates the event of the relocation of markets from the city of Baghdad to a suburb called *al-Karkh* in the year 773-4 to the caliph al-Manṣûr's response to the advice of a Byzantine envoy. Elsewhere he attributes other reasons than that of the Byzantine envoy's advice to the transfer of markets to *al-Karkh*, which contradict the date and obscure the historicity of the embassy.[43]

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[39] Humphreys, Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry, 73.

[40] Humphreys, Islamic History: a Framework for Inquiry, 73; on the sources he used, see Kennedy, The Prophet and the age of the Caliphates, 356-7.

[41] The question of whether he selected the *akhbâr* in order to develop major themes about the history of the Islamic state or whether the inclusion simply reflects the weight of the sources at his disposal is questionable; on the historians' reliance on *ḥadith* which renders the historical value of works dubious, see J. Koren & Y.D. Nevo, "Methodological approaches to Islamic studies", *Der Islam* 68 (1991), 89-104; see also A. Noth – L. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition, tr. M. Bonner* (Princeton 1994), 173-218.

[42] For examples, see al-Ṭabarî, *Ta'rikh*, III, 1109, 503, 695, 1104, 1254, 1236

[43] On the commercial suburb of al-Karkh, see *El*, 2 1, 896; see al-Ṭabarî, II, 324; al-Ya'qûbî, *Kitâb al-Buldân*, ed. J. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1892), 241, 245-6; G. Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate* (Oxford, 1900), 64ff.; J. Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit, 1970), 169-177; see also Yâqût, *Mu'jam al-buldân*, IV, (Leipzig, 1869) 255 indicates that the caliph transferred the merchants to Karkh because the smoke from their shops blackened the city walls.

Other times whereas most of his quotations seem to be accurate by comparison with original or other sources, there are still obscure points such as the omission of passages, which could perhaps be ascribed to his different political affiliation or their repetitive nature or the lack of available sources.[44] The picture is further complicated by the fact that we cannot be sure of the relationship between the edited text and the author's original. "There is no complete surviving manuscript of the Ta'rîkh and the text has been reconstructed from a number of partial manuscripts by the editors". All these make it difficult to determine the extend to which the text has been altered by copyists and decide whether omissions or errors are the result of transmission or due to the author's choice.[45]

To sum up, despite the great bulk of misunderstanding and confusion in the sources, one cannot fail to notice that early Islamic historical writing was part of a cultural development which had its roots in pre-Islamic times. To what extend the development of Islamic and tribal perspectives in historiography was the outcome of the religio-political currents is difficult to establish. What is important however is that these two parallel lines of thinking were intertwined and interrelated. It was not until the second half of the ninth century that any distinction between them completely disappeared.

Al-Ṭabarî represents the new style of approaching history writing. Although he is a traditionalist, for whom history was the expression of divine will, he adopts a critical approach to *isnâd* Following early historical methods he combined a great amount of literary-geographical and historical material to provide a coherent account of the Islamic history up to his day. He preserved archaic texts which otherwise would have been lost. Despite the problems one encounters in connection with his work, the History of the Prophets and Kings remains a "monumental corpus of everything which could be known in the eighth Century Empire". It was a labor, which relieved his successors of making a

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[44] See for example the accounts of Byzantine-"Abbasid exchanges of prisoners such as in 908; al-Ṭabarî, III, 2280; see also al-Mas'udi's, *Kitâb al-Tanbîh wa'l-Ishrâf*, ed. M. de Goeje, *BGA* VIII (1893-4), 192-3 more detailed accounts.

[45] Kennedy, *The Prophet and the age of the Caliphates*, 362-5. On a literary critical approach to reading the sources on the Abbasids based on the assumption that the function of the narrative is to provide commentary on a certain issue of a historical event rather than to tell facts, see el-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography. Hârûn al-Rashîd and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate*, 13ff.

similar attempt, a fact that may explain the gradual disappearance of works of early history. Is only however, if one turns to a broader context of history-writing of the period that it would be possible to evaluate and understand al-Ṭabarî's immense contribution to the field.