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The excellence of historiography. An appreciation of the various approaches to history. A glimpse of the different kinds of errors to which historians are liable. Why these errors occur.

It should be known that history is a discipline that has a great number of approaches. Its useful aspects are very many. Its goal is distinguished.

History makes us acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their national character. It makes us acquainted with the biographies of the prophets and with the dynasties and policies of rulers. Whoever so desires may thus achieve the useful result of being able to imitate historical examples in religious and worldly matters.

The (writing of history) requires numerous sources and much varied knowledge. It also requires a good speculative mind and thoroughness, which lead the historian to the truth and keep him from slips and errors. If he trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if, furthermore, he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he often cannot avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the path of truth. Historians, Qur'ân commentators and leading transmitters have committed frequent errors in the stories and events they reported. They accepted them in the plain transmitted form, without regard for its value. They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material. Also, they did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight. Therefore, they strayed from the truth and found themselves lost in the desert of baseless assumptions and errors.

This is especially the case with figures, either of sums of money or of soldiers, whenever they occur in stories. They offer a good opportunity for false information and constitute a vehicle for nonsensical statements. They must be controlled and checked with the help of known fundamental facts.

For example, al-Mas'uḍī and many other historians report that Moses counted the army of the Israelites in the desert. He had all
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those able to carry arms, especially those twenty years and older, pass muster. There turned out to be 600,000 or more. In this connection, al-Masʿûdi forgets to take into consideration whether Egypt and Syria could possibly have held such a number of soldiers. Every realm may have as large a militia as it can hold and support, but no more. This fact is attested by well-known customs and familiar conditions. Moreover, an army of this size cannot march or fight as a unit. The whole available territory would be too small for it. If it were in battle formation, it would extend two, three, or more times beyond the field of vision. How, then, could two such parties fight with each other, or one battle formation gain the upper hand when one flank does not know what the other flank is doing? The situation at the present day testifies to the correctness of this statement. The past resembles the future more than one drop of water another.

Furthermore, the realm of the Persians was much greater than that of the Israelis. This fact is attested by Nebuchadnezzar’s victory over them. He swallowed up their country and gained complete control over it. He also destroyed Jerusalem, their religious and political capital. And he was merely one of the officials of the province of Fârs. It is said that he was the governor of the western border region. The Persian provinces of the two ‘Irâq, \(^1\) Khurâsân, Transoxania, and the region of Derbend on the Caspian Sea were much larger than the realm of the Israelis. Yet, the Persian army did not attain such a number or even approach it. The greatest concentration of Persian troops, at al-Qâdisiyah, amounted to 120,000 men, all of whom had their retainers. This is according to Sayf, who said that with their retainers they amounted to over 200,000 persons. According to ‘Ā’ishah and az-Zuhri, the troop concentration with which Rustum advanced against Sa’d at al-Qâdisiyah amounted to only 60,000 men, all of whom had their retainers.

Then, if the Israelis had really amounted to such a number, the extent of the area under their rule would have been larger, for the size of administrative units and provinces under a particular dynasty is in direct proportion to the size of its militia and the groups that support the dynasty. Now, it is well known that the territory of the Israelis did not comprise an area larger than the Jordan province and Palestine in Syria and the region of Medina and Khaybar in the Hijâz. Also, there were only three generations between Moses and Israel, according to the best-informed scholars. Moses was the son of Amram, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, the son of Jacob who is Israel-Allât. This is Moses’ genealogy in the Torah.\(^2\) The length of time between Israel and Moses was indicated by al-Masʿûdi when

\(^1\) That is, Mesopotamia and north-western Persia adjacent to it.
\(^2\) Exod. 6: 16 ff.
he said: ‘Israel entered Egypt with his children, the tribes, and their children, when they came to Joseph numbering seventy souls. The length of their stay in Egypt until they left with Moses for the desert was two hundred and twenty years. During those years, the kings of the Copts, the Pharaohs, passed them on (as their subjects) one to the other.’ It is improbable that the descendants of one man could branch out into such a number within four generations.

It has been assumed that this number of soldiers applied to the time of Solomon and his successors. Again, this is improbable. Between Solomon and Israel, there were only eleven generations, that is: Solomon, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob. The descendants of one man in eleven generations would not branch out into such a number, as has been assumed. They might, indeed, reach hundreds or thousands. This often happens. But an increase beyond that to higher figures is improbable. Comparison with observable present-day and well-known nearby facts proves the assumption and report to be untrue. According to the definite statement of the Israelite stories, Solomon’s army amounted to 12,000 men, and his horses numbered 1,400, which were stabled at his palace. This is the correct information. No attention should be paid to nonsensical statements by the common run of informants. In the days of Solomon, the Israelite state saw its greatest flourishing and their realm its widest extension.

Whenever contemporaries speak about the dynastic armies of their own or recent times, and whenever they engage in discussions about Muslim or Christian soldiers, or when they get to figuring the tax revenues and the money spent by the government, the outlays of extravagant spenders, and the goods that rich and prosperous men have in stock, they are quite generally found to exaggerate, to go beyond the bounds of the ordinary, and to succumb to the temptation of sensationalism. When the officials in charge are questioned about their armies, when the goods and assets of wealthy people are assessed, and when the outlays of extravagant spenders are looked at in ordinary light, the figures will be found to amount to a tenth of what those people have said. The reason is simple. It is the common desire for sensationalism, the ease with which one may just mention a higher figure, and the disregard of reviewers and critics. This leads to failure to exercise self-criticism about one’s errors and intentions, to demand from oneself moderation and fairness in reporting, to reapply oneself to study and research. Such historians let themselves

1 Cf. I Kings 10: 26. As a rule, Muslim scholars gave an unpleasant connotation to the term ‘Israelite stories’, as mere fiction presented as history.
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go and made a feast of untrue statements. 'They procure for themselves entertaining stories in order to lead others away from the path of God.'\(^1\) This is a bad enough business.

It may be said that the increase of descendants to such a number would be prevented under ordinary conditions which, however, do not apply to the Israelites. The increase in their case would be a miracle in accordance with the tradition which said that one of the things revealed to their forefathers, the prophets Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was that God would cause their descendants to increase until they were more numerous than the stars of heaven and the pebbles of the earth. God fulfilled this promise to them as an act of divine grace bestowed upon them and as an extraordinary miracle in their favour. Thus, ordinary conditions could not hinder it and nobody should speak against it.

Someone might come out against this tradition with the argument that it occurs only in the Torah which, as is well known, was altered by the Jews. The reply to this argument would be that the statement concerning the alteration of the Torah by the Jews is unacceptable to thorough scholars and cannot be understood in its plain meaning, since custom prevents people who have a revealed religion from dealing with their divine scriptures in such a manner. Thus, the great increase in numbers in the case of the Israelites would be an extraordinary miracle. Custom, in the proper meaning of the word, would prevent anything of the sort from happening to other peoples.

It is true that a movement of (such a large group) would hardly be possible, but none took place, and there was no need for one. It is also true that each realm has only its particular number of militia. But the Israelites at first were no militiamen and had no dynasty. Their numbers increased that much, so that they could gain power over the land of Canaan which God had promised them and the territory of which He had purified for them. All these things are miracles. God guides to the truth.

The history of the Tubba's, the kings of the Yemen and of the Arabian Peninsula, as it is generally transmitted, is another example of silly statements by historians. It is said that from their home in the Yemen, the Tubba's used to raid Ifriqiya and the Berbers of the Maghrib. Afrîqus b. Qays b. Şayfî, one of their great early kings who lived in the time of Moses or somewhat earlier, is said to have raided Ifriqiya. He caused a great slaughter among the Berbers. He gave them the name of Berbers when he heard their jargon and asked what that barbarah was. This gave them the name which has remained with them since that time. When he left the Maghrib, he is said to have concentrated some Ḥimyar tribes there. They remained

\(^1\) Qur'an 31. 6 (5).

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dere and mixed with the native population. Their descendants are the Ṣinhâjah and the Kutâmah. This led at-Ṭabarî, al-Mas'ûdî, and others to make the statement that the Ṣinhâjah and the Kutâmah belong to the Ḥimyar. The Berber genealogists do not admit this, and they are right. Al-Mas'ûdî also mentioned that one of the Ḥimyar kings after Afriquṣ, Dhû l-Adh‘âr, who lived in the time of Solomon, raided the Maghrib and forced it into submission. Something similar is mentioned by al-Mas'ûdî concerning his son and successor, Yâsîr. He is said to have reached the Sand River in the Maghrib and to have been unable to find passage through it because of the great mass of sand. Therefore, he returned.

Likewise, it is said that the last Tubba‘, As‘ad Abû Karîb, who lived in the time of the Persian Kayyânid king Yastâsb, ruled over Mosul and Azerbaijan. He is said to have met and routed the Turks and to have caused a great slaughter among them. Then he raided them again a second and a third time. After that, he is said to have sent three of his sons on raids, (one) against the country of Fârs, one against the country of the Soghdians, one of the Turkish nations of Transoxania, and one against the country of the Rûm (Byzantines). The first brother took possession of the country up to Samarkand and crossed the desert into China. There, he found his second brother who had raided the Soghdians and had arrived in China before him. The two together caused a great slaughter in China and returned together with their booty. They left some Ḥimyar tribes in Tibet. They have been there down to this time. The third brother is said to have reached Constantinople. He laid siege to it and forced the country of the Rûm into submission. Then, he returned.

All this information is remote from the truth. It is rooted in baseless and erroneous assumptions. It is more like the fiction of storytellers. The realm of the Tubba’s was restricted to the Arabian Peninsula. Their home and seat was Ṣan‘â‘ in the Yemen. The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by the ocean on three sides: the Indian Ocean on the south, the Persian Gulf jutting out of the Indian Ocean to Baṣrah on the east, and the Red Sea jutting out of the Indian Ocean to Suez in Egypt on the west. This can be seen on the map. There is no way from the Yemen to the Maghrib except via Suez. The distance between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean is two days’ journey or less. It is unlikely that the distance could be traversed by a great ruler with a large army unless he controlled that region. This, as a rule, is impossible. In that region there were the Amalekites and Canaan in Syria, and, in Egypt, the Copts. Later on, the Amalekites took possession of Egypt, and the Israelites of Syria. There is, however, no report that the Tubba’s ever fought against one of these nations or that they had possession of any part
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of this region. Furthermore, the distance from the Yemen to the Maghrib is great, and an army requires much food and fodder. Soldiers travelling in regions other than their own have to requisition grain and livestock and to plunder the countries they pass through. As a rule, such a procedure does not yield enough food and fodder. On the other hand, if they attempted to take along enough provisions from their own region, they would not have enough animals for transportation. So, their whole line of march necessarily takes them through regions they must take possession of and force into submission in order to obtain provisions from them. Again, it would be a most unlikely and impossible assumption that such an army could pass through all those nations without disturbing them, obtaining its provisions by peaceful negotiation. This shows that all such information is silly or fictitious.

Mention of the allegedly impassable Sand River has never been heard in the Maghrib, although the Maghrib has often been crossed and its roads have been explored by travellers and raiders at all times and in every direction. Because of the unusual character of the story, there is much eagerness to pass it on.

With regard to the supposed raid of the Tubba’s against the countries of the East and the land of the Turks, it must be admitted that the line of march in this case is wider than the (narrow) passage at Suez. The distance, however, is greater, and the Persian and Byzantine nations are interposed on the way to the Turks. There is no report that the Tubba’s ever took possession of the countries of the Persians and Byzantines. They merely fought the Persians on the borders of the ‘Irāq and of the Arab countries between al-Bahrāyn and al-Hīrah, which were border regions common to both nations. It would, however, ordinarily have been impossible for the Tubba’s to traverse the land of the Persians on their way to raid the countries of the Turks and Tibet, because of the nations that are interposed on the way to the Turks, because of the need for food and fodder, as well as the great distance, mentioned before. All information to this effect is silly and fictitious. Even if the way this information is transmitted were sound, the points mentioned would cast suspicion upon it. All the more then must the information be suspect since the manner in which it has been transmitted is not sound. In connection with Yathrib (Medina) and the Aws and Khazraj, Ibn Ishâq says that the last Tubba’ traveller eastward to the ‘Irāq and Persia, but a raid by the Tubba’s against the countries of the Turks and Tibet is in no way confirmed by the established facts. Assertions to this

1 Al-Hīrah on the Euphrates was the capital of the Lakhmid buffer state under Persian control. Al-Bahrāyn (Bahrain) included the country on the north-western shore of the Persian Gulf, and not only the islands today known under that name.
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effect should not be trusted; all such information should be investi-
gated and checked with sound norms. The result will be that it will
most beautifully be demolished.

Even more unlikely and more deeply rooted in baseless assump-
tions is the common interpretation of the following verse of the
Sūrat al-Fajr: ‘Did you not see what your Lord did with ‘Ād—Iram,
that of the pillars?’ 1

The commentators consider the word Iram the name of a city
which is described as having pillars, that is, columns. They report
that ‘Ād b. ‘Ūs b. Iram had two sons, Shadîd and Shaddâd, who
ruled after him. Shadîd perished. Shaddâd became the sole ruler of
the realm, and the kings there submitted to his authority. When
Shaddâd heard a description of Paradise, he said: ‘I shall build
something like it.’ And he built the city of Iram in the desert of
Aden over a period of three hundred years. He himself lived nine
hundred years. Iram is said to have been a large city, with castles of
gold and silver and columns of emerald and hyacinth, containing all
kinds of trees and freely-flowing rivers. When the construction of the
city was completed, Shaddâd went there with the people of his realm.
But when he was the distance of only one day and night away from
it, God sent a clamour from heaven, and all of them perished. This
is reported by aţ-Ţabarî, ath-Tha‘âlibî, az-Zamakhshari, and other
Qur’ān commentators. They transmit the following story on the
authority of one of the men around Muĥammad, ‘Abdallâh b.
Qilâbah. When he went out in search of some of his camels, he came
upon the city and took away from it as much as he could carry. His
story reached Mu‘âwiyyah, who had him brought to him, and he told
the story. Mu‘âwiyyah sent for Ka‘b al-aţhâbâr and asked him about it.
Ka‘b said, ‘It is Iram, that of the pillars. Iram will be entered in
your time by a Muslim who is of a reddish, ruddy colour, and short,
with a mole at his eyebrow and one on his neck, who goes out in
search of some of his camels.’ He then turned around and, seeing
Ibn Qilâbah, he said: ‘Indeed, he is that man.’

No information about this city has since become available any-
where on earth. The desert of Aden where the city is supposed to
have been built lies in the middle of the Yemen. It has been in-
habited continuously, and travellers and guides have explored its
roads in every direction. Yet, no information about the city has been
reported. No antiquarian, no nation has mentioned it. If (the Qur’ān
commentators) said that it had disappeared like other antiquities,
the story would be more likely, but they expressly say that it still
exists. Some identify it with Damascus, because Damascus was in the

1 Qur’ān 89. 6–7 (5–6).

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possession of the people of ‘Âd. Others go so far in their crazy talk as to maintain that the city lies hidden from sensual perception and can be discovered only by trained magicians and sorcerers. All these are assumptions that would better be termed nonsense.

All these suggestions proffered by Qur’ân commentators were the result of grammatical considerations, for Arabic grammar requires the expression, ‘that of the pillars’, to be an attribute of Iram. The word ‘pillars’ was understood to mean columns. Thus, Iram was narrowed down in its meaning to some sort of building. (The commentators) were influenced in their interpretation by the reading of Ibn az-Zubayr who read a genitive construction: ‘Âd of Iram. They then adopted these stories, which are better called fictitious fables.

In fact, however, the ‘pillars’ are tent poles. If ‘columns’ were intended by the word, it would not be far-fetched, as the power of (the people of ‘Âd) was well known, and they could be described as people with buildings and columns in the general way. But it would be far-fetched to say that a special building in one or another specific city (was intended). If it is a genitive construction, as would be the case according to the reading of Ibn az-Zubayr, it would be a genitive construction used to express tribal relationships, such as, for instance, the Quraysh of Kinânah, or the Ilyâs of Mu’dar, or the Rabî‘ah of Nizâr. There is no need for such an implausible interpretation which uses for its starting point silly stories of the sort mentioned, which cannot be imputed to the Qur’ân because they are so implausible.

Another fictitious story of the historians, which they all report, concerns the reason for ar-Rashîd’s destruction of the Barmecides. It is the story of al-‘Abbâsah, ar-Rashîd’s sister, and Ja‘far b. Yahyâ b. Khâlid, his minister. Ar-Rashîd is said to have worried about where to place them when he was drinking wine with them. He wanted to receive them together in his company. Therefore, he permitted them to conclude a marriage that was not consummated. Al-‘Abbâsah then tricked Ja‘far in her desire to be alone with him, for she had fallen in love with him. Ja‘far finally had intercourse with her—it is assumed, when he was drunk—and she became pregnant. The story was reported to ar-Rashîd who flew into a rage.

This story is irreconcilable with al-‘Abbâsah’s position, her religiousness, her parentage, and her exalted rank. She was a descendant of ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs and separated from him by only four generations, and they were the most distinguished and greatest men in Islam after him. Al-‘Abbâsah was the daughter of Muhammad al-Mahdî, the son of Abû Ja‘far ‘Abdallâh al-Manṣûr, the son of Muḥammad as-Sajjâd, the son of the Father of the Caliphs ‘Alî.
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‘Ali was the son of ‘Abdallâh, the Interpreter of the Qur’ân, the son of the Prophet’s uncle, al-‘Abbâs. Al-‘Abbâsah was the daughter of a caliph and the sister of a caliph. She was born to royal power, into the prophetical succession (the caliphate), and was descended from the men around Muḥammad and his uncles. She was connected by birth with the leadership of Islam, the light of the revelation, and the place where the angels descended to bring the revelation. She was close in time to the desert attitude of true Arabism, to that simple state of Islam still far from the habits of luxury and lush pastures of sin. Where should one look for chastity and modesty, if she did not possess them? Where could cleanliness and purity be found, if they no longer existed in her house? How could she link her pedigree with that of Ja’far b. Yahyâ and stain her Arab nobility with a Persian client? His Persian ancestor had been acquired as a slave, or taken as a client, by one of her ancestors, an uncle of the Prophet and noble Qurashite, and all Ja’far did was that he together with his father was drawn along (by the growing fame of) the ‘Abbâsid dynasty and thus prepared for and elevated to a position of nobility. And how could it be that ar-Rashîd, with his high-mindedness and great pride, would permit himself to become related by marriage to Persian clients! If a critical person looks at this story in all fairness and compares al-‘Abbâsah with the daughter of a great ruler of his own time, he must find it disgusting and unbelievable that she could have done such a thing with one of the clients of her dynasty and while her family was in power. He would insist that the story be considered untrue. And who could compare with al-‘Abbâsah and ar-Rashîd in dignity!

The reason for the destruction of the Barmecides was their attempt to gain control over the dynasty and their retention of the tax revenues. This went so far that when ar-Rashîd wanted even a little money, he could not get it. They took his affairs out of his hands and shared with him in his authority. He had no say with them in the affairs of his realm. Their influence grew, and their fame spread. They filled the positions and ranks of the government with their own children and creatures who became high officials, and thus barred all others from the positions of wazir, secretary, army commander, doorkeeper, and from the military and civilian administration. It is said that in the palace of ar-Rashîd, there were twenty-five high officials, both military and civilian, all children of Yahyâ b. Khâlid. There, they crowded the people of the dynasty and pushed them out by force. They could do that because of the position of their father, Yahyâ, mentor to Hârûn both as crown prince and as caliph. Hârûn practically grew up in his lap and got all his education from him. Hârûn let him handle his affairs and used to call him ‘father’. As a result, the Barmecides, and not the government, wielded all the
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influence. Their presumption grew. Their position became more and more influential. They became the centre of attention. All obeyed them. All hopes were addressed to them. From the farthest borders, presents and gifts of rulers and amirs were sent to them. The tax money found its way into their treasury, to serve as an introduction to them and to procure their favour. They gave gifts to and bestowed favours upon the men of the Shi‘ah and upon important relatives of the Prophet. They gave the poor from the noble families related to the Prophet something to earn. They freed the captives. Thus, they were given praise as was not given to their caliph. They showered privileges and gifts upon those who came to ask favours from them. They gained control over villages and estates in the open country and near the main cities in every province.

Eventually, the Barmecides irritated the inner circle. They caused resentment among the elite and aroused the displeasure of high officials. Jealousy and envy of all sorts began to show themselves, and the scorpions of intrigue crept into their soft beds in the government. The Qaḥṭabah family, Ja‘far’s maternal uncles, led the intrigues against them. Feelings for blood ties and relationship could not move or sway the Qaḥṭabahs from the envy which was so heavy on their hearts. This joined with their master’s incipient jealousy, with his dislike of restrictions and high-handedness, and with his latent resentment aroused by small acts of presumptuousness on the part of the Barmecides. When they continued to flourish, as they did, they were led to gross insubordination.

Ja‘far himself paved the way for his own and his family’s undoing, which ended with the collapse of their exalted position, with the heavens falling in upon them and the earth’s sinking with them and their house. Their days of glory became a thing of the past, an example to later generations.

Close examination of their story, scrutinizing the ways of government and their own conduct, discloses that all this was natural and is easily explained. One understands that it was only jealousy and struggle for control on the part of the caliph and his subordinates that killed them. Another factor was the verses that enemies of the Barmecides among the inner circle surreptitiously gave the singers to recite, with the intention that the caliph should hear them and his stored-up animosity against them be aroused. These are the verses:

Would that Hind could fulfil her promise to us
And deliver us from our predicament,
And for once act on her own.
The impotent person is he who never acts on his own.1

1 The verses are by ‘Umar b. Abī Rabi‘ah who lived ca. A.D. 700.

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When ar-Rashîd heard these verses, he exclaimed: 'Indeed, I am just such an impotent person.' By this and similar methods, the enemies of the Barmecides eventually succeeded in arousing ar-Rashîd's latent jealousy and in bringing his terrible vengeance upon them. God is our refuge from men's desire for power and from misfortune.

The stupid story of ar-Rashîd's winebibbing and his getting drunk in the company of boon companions is really abominable. It does not in the least agree with ar-Rashîd's attitude toward the fulfilment of the requirements of religion and justice incumbent upon caliphs. He consorted with religious scholars and saints. He wept when he heard their sermons. Then, there is his prayer in Mecca when he circumambulated the Ka'bah. He was pious, observed the times of prayer, and attended the morning prayer at its earliest hour. He used to go on raids (against unbelievers) one year and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca the next. He once rebuked his jester, Ibn Abî Maryam, who made an unseemly remark to him during prayer. When Ibn Abî Maryam heard ar-Rashîd recite: 'How is it that I should not worship Him who created me?' he said: 'Indeed, I do not know why.' 'Jokes even at prayer?' he said. 'Beware, beware of the Qur'ân and Islam. Apart from that, you may do whatever you wish.'

Furthermore, ar-Rashîd possessed a good deal of learning and simplicity, because his epoch was close to that of his forebears who had those qualities. The time between him and his grandfather, al-Manṣûr, was not a long one. He was a young lad when al-Manṣûr died. Al-Manṣûr possessed a good deal of learning and religion.

His son, al-Mahdi, ar-Rashîd's father, experienced the austerity of al-Manṣûr, who would not use public funds to provide new clothes for his family. One day, al-Mahdi came to him when he was at his office discussing with the tailors the patching of his family's worn garments. Al-Mahdi did not relish that and said: 'O Commander of the Faithful, this year I shall pay for the family's clothes from my own income.' Al-Manṣûr's reply was: 'Do that.' He did not prevent him from paying himself but would not permit any public Muslim money to be spent for that purpose.

Ar-Rashîd was very close in time to that caliph and to his forebears. He was reared under the influence of such and similar conduct in his own family, so that it became his own nature. How could such a man have been a winebibber and have drunk wine openly? It is well known that noble pre-Islamic Arabs avoided wine. The vine was not one of the plants cultivated by them. Most of them considered it reprehensible to drink wine. Ar-Rashîd and his forebears

1 Qur'ân 36. 22 (21).
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were very successful in avoiding anything reprehensible in their
religious or worldly affairs and in making all praiseworthy actions
and qualities of perfection, as well as the aspirations of the Arabs,
their own nature. . . .

It is a well-established fact that ar-Rashîd had consented to keep
Abû Nuwâs\footnote{Poet (d. A.D. 810).} imprisoned until he repented and gave up his ways,
because he had heard of the latter’s excessive winebibbing. Ar-
Rashîd used to drink a date liquor, according to the ‘Irâqî legal
school whose responsa (concerning the permissibility of that drink)
are well known. But he cannot be suspected of having drunk pure
wine. Silly reports to this effect cannot be credited. He was not the
man to do something that is forbidden and considered by Muslims
as one of the greatest of capital sins. Not one of (the early ‘Abbâsids)
had anything to do with effeminate prodigality or luxury in matters
of clothing, jewellery, or the kind of food they took. They still retained
the tough desert attitude and the simple state of Islam. Could it be
assumed they would do something that would lead from the lawful
to the unlawful and from the licit to the illicit? Historians such as
a-Tabarî, al-Mas‘ûdî, and others are agreed that all the early
Umayyad and ‘Abbâsid caliphs used to ride out with only light
silver ornamentation on their belts, swords, bridles, and saddles, and
that the first caliph to originate riding out in golden apparel was
al-Mu‘tazz b. al-Mutawakkil, the eighth caliph after ar-Rashîd. The
same applied to their clothing. Could one, then, assume any differen-
tly with regard to what they drank? This will become still clearer
when the nature of dynastic beginnings in desert life and modest
circumstances is understood. . . .

A current story explains how al-Ma‘mûn came to be al-Ḥasan b.
Sahl’s son-in-law by marrying his daughter Bûrân. One night, on his
rambles through the streets of Baghdad, al-Ma‘mûn is said to have
come upon a basket that was being let down from one of the roofs by
means of pulleys and twisted cords of silk thread. He seated himself
in the basket and grabbed the pulley, which started moving. He was
taken up into a chamber of extraordinary magnificence. Then, a
woman of uncommonly seductive beauty is said to have come out
from behind curtains. She greeted al-Ma‘mûn and invited him to
keep her company. He drank wine with her the whole night long. In
the morning he returned to his companions at the place where they
had been awaiting him. He had fallen so much in love with the
woman that he asked her father for her hand. How does all this agree
with al-Ma‘mûn’s well-known religiosity and learning, his
emulation of the way of life of his forefathers, the right-guided
(‘Abbâsid) caliphs, his adoption of the way of life of those pillars of
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Islam, the first four caliphs, his respect for religious scholars, or his observance in his prayers and legal practice of the norms established by God! How could it be correct that he would act like one of those wicked scoundrels who amuse themselves by rambling about at night, entering strange houses in the dark, and engaging in nocturnal trysts in the manner of Bedouin lovers! And how does that story fit with the position and noble character of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl’s daughter, and with the firm morality and chastity that reigned in her father’s house!

There are many such stories. They are always cropping up in the works of the historians. The incentive for inventing and reporting them shows a tendency to forbidden pleasures and for smearing the reputation of others. People justify their own subservience to pleasure by citing the supposed doings of men and women of the past. Therefore, they often appear very eager for such information and are alert to find it when they go through the pages of published works.

I once criticized a royal prince for being so eager to learn to sing and play the strings. I told him it was not a matter that should concern him and that it did not befit his position. He referred me to Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdî¹ who was the leading musician and best singer of his time. I replied: ‘For heaven’s sake, why do you not rather follow the example of his father or his brother? Do you not see how that pursuit prevented Ibrâhîm from attaining their position?’ The prince, however, was deaf to my criticism and turned away.

Further silly information is accepted by many historians. They do not care to consider the factual proofs and circumstantial evidence that require us to recognize that the contrary is true. . . .

Dynasty and government serve as the world’s market-place, attracting to it the products of scholarship and craftsmanship alike. Wayward wisdom and forgotten lore turn up there. In this market stories are told and items of historical information are delivered. Whatever is in demand on this market is in general demand everywhere. Now, whenever the established dynasty avoids injustice, prejudice, weakness, and double-dealing, with determination keeping to the right path and never swerving from it, the wares on its market are as pure silver and fine gold. However, when it is influenced by selfish interests and rivalries, or swayed by vendors of tyranny and dishonesty, the wares of its market-place become as dross and debased metals. The intelligent critic must judge for

¹ The son of the caliph al-Mahdî, who was for a short time considered by some groups as caliph. 162–224 (779–839).
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himself as he looks around, examining this, admiring that, and choosing the other....

Lengthy discussion of these mistakes has taken us rather far from the purpose of this work. However, many competent persons and expert historians slipped in connection with such stories and assertions, and they stuck in their minds. Many weak-minded and uncritical men learned these things from them, and even (competent historians) accepted them without critical investigation, and thus (strange stories) crept into their material. In consequence, historiography became nonsensical and confused, and its students fumbled around. Historiography came to be considered a domain of the common people. Therefore, today, the scholar in this field needs to know the principles of politics, the nature of things, and the differences among nations, places, and periods with regard to ways of life, character qualities, customs, sects, schools, and everything else. He further needs a comprehensive knowledge of present conditions in all these respects. He must compare similarities or differences between present and past conditions. He must know the causes of the similarities in certain cases and of the differences in others. He must be aware of the differing origins and beginnings of dynasties and religious groups, as well as of the reasons and incentives that brought them into being and the circumstances and history of the persons who supported them. His goal must be to have complete knowledge of the reasons for every happening, and to be acquainted with the origin of every event. Then, he must check transmitted information with the basic principles he knows. If it fulfils their requirements, it is sound. Otherwise, the historian must consider it as spurious and dispense with it. It was for this reason alone that historiography was highly esteemed by the ancients, so much so that at-Tabari, al-Bukhari, and, before them, Ibn Ishâq and other Muslim religious scholars, chose to occupy themselves with it. Most scholars, however, forgot this, the secret of historiography, with the result that it became a stupid occupation. Ordinary people as well as scholars who had no firm foundation of knowledge, considered it a simple matter to study and know history, to delve into it and sponge on it. Strays got into the flock, bits of shell were mixed with the nut, truth was adulterated with lies.

'The final outcome of things is up to God.'

A hidden pitfall in historiography is disregard for the fact that conditions within nations and races change with the change of periods and the passage of time. This is a sore affliction and is deeply hidden, becoming noticeable only after a long time, so that rarely do more than a few individuals become aware of it.

1 Qur'an 31. 22 (21).
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This is as follows. The condition of the world and of nations, their customs and sects, does not persist in the same form or in a constant manner. There are differences according to days and periods, and changes from one condition to another. Such is the case with individuals, times, and cities, and it likewise happens in connection with regions and districts, periods and dynasties.

The old Persian nations, the Syrians, the Nabataeans, the Tubba’s, the Israelites, and the Copts, all once existed. They all had their own particular institutions in respect of dynastic and territorial arrangements, their own politics, crafts, languages, technical terminologies, as well as their own ways of dealing with their fellow men and handling their cultural institutions. Their historical relics testify to that. They were succeeded by the later Persians, the Byzantines, and the Arabs. The old institutions changed and former customs were transformed, either into something very similar, or into something distinct and altogether different. Then, there came Islam. Again, all institutions underwent another change, and for the most part assumed the forms that are still familiar at the present time as the result of their transmission from one generation to the next.

Then, the days of Arab rule were over. The early generations who had cemented Arab might and founded the realm of the Arabs were gone. Power was seized by others, by non-Arabs like the Turks in the east, the Berbers in the west, and the European Christians in the north. With their passing, entire nations ceased to exist, and institutions and customs changed. Their glory was forgotten, and their power no longer heeded.

The widely accepted reason for changes in institutions and customs is the fact that the customs of each race depend on the customs of its ruler. As the proverb says: ‘The common people follow the religion of the ruler.’

When politically ambitious men overcome the ruling dynasty and seize power, they inevitably have recourse to the customs of their predecessors and adopt most of them. At the same time, they do not neglect the customs of their own race. This leads to some discrepancies between the customs of the new ruling dynasty and the customs of the old race.

The new power, in turn, is taken over by another dynasty, and customs are further mixed with those of the new dynasty. More discrepancies come in, so that the contrast between the new dynasty and the first one is much greater than that between the second and the first one. Gradual increase in the degree of discrepancy continues. The eventual result is an altogether distinct (set of customs and

1 _Dkh ‘religion’ is here used in the more general sense of ‘way of doing things’._

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Institutions). As long as there is this continued succession of different races to royal authority and government, changes in customs and institutions will not cease to occur.

Analogical reasoning and comparison are well known to human nature. They are not safe from error. Together with forgetfulness and negligence, they sway man from his purpose and divert him from his goal. Often, someone who has learned a good deal of past history remains unaware of the changes that conditions have undergone. Without a moment's hesitation, he applies his knowledge (of the present) to historical information, and measures such information by the things he has observed with his own eyes, although the difference between the two is great. Consequently, he falls into an abyss of error.

This may be illustrated by what the historians report concerning al-Ḥajjāj.¹ They state that his father was a schoolteacher. At the present time, teaching is a craft and serves to make a living. It is a far cry from the pride of group feeling. Teachers are weak, indigent, and rootless. Many weak professional men and artisans who work for a living aspire to positions for which they are not fit but which they believe to be within their reach. They are misled by their desires, a rope which often slips from their hands and precipitates them into the abyss of ruinous perdition. They do not realize that what they desire is impossible for men like them to attain. They do not realize that they are professional men and artisans who work for a living. And they do not know that at the beginning of Islam and under the (ʿUmayyad and ʿAbbāsid) dynasties, teaching was something different. Scholarship, in general, was not a craft in that period. Scholarship consisted of transmitting statements that people had heard the Lawgiver (Muḥammad) make. It was the teaching of religious matters that were not known, by way of oral transmission. Persons of noble descent and people who shared in the group feeling and directed the affairs of Islam were the ones who taught the Book of God and the Law of the Prophet, (and they did so) as one transmits traditions, not as one gives professional instruction. The Qurʾān was their Scripture, revealed to the Prophet in their midst. It constituted their guidance, and Islam was their religion, and for it they fought and died. It distinguished them from the other nations and ennobled them. They wished to teach it and make it understandable to the Muslims. They were not deterred by censure coming from pride, nor were they restrained by criticism coming from arrogance. This is attested by the fact that the Prophet sent the most important of the men around him with his embassies to the Arabs, in order to teach them the norms of Islam and the religious laws he brought.

¹ Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, the great governor of ʿIrāq (ca. 660–714).
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He sent his ten Companions\(^1\) and others after them on this mission.

Then, Islam became firmly established and securely rooted. Far-off nations accepted Islam at the hands of the Muslims. With the passing of time, the situation of Islam changed. Many new laws were evolved from the (basic) texts as the result of numerous and unending developments. A fixed norm was required to keep (the process) free from error. Scholarship came to be a habit. For its acquisition, study was required. Thus, scholarship developed into a craft and profession.

The men who controlled the group feeling now occupied themselves with directing the affairs of royal and governmental authority. The cultivation of scholarship was entrusted to others. Thus, scholarship became a profession that served to make a living. Men who lived in luxury and were in control of the government were too proud to do any teaching. Teaching came to be an occupation restricted to weak individuals. As a result, its practitioners came to be despised by the men who controlled the group feeling and the government.

Now, Yūsuf, the father of al-Ḥajjāj, was one of the lords and nobles of the Thaqīf, well known for their share in the Arab group feeling and for their rivalry with the nobility of the Quraysh. Al-Ḥajjāj’s teaching of the Qur’ān was not the same as the teaching of the Qur’ān is at this time, namely, a profession that serves to make a living. His teaching was the kind practised at the beginning of Islam, and as we have just described.

Another illustration of the same (kind of error) is the baseless conclusion critical readers of historical works draw when they hear about the position of judges, leadership in war, and the command of armies that judges exercised. Their misguided thinking leads them to aspire to similar positions. They think that the office of judge at the present time is as important as it was formerly. When they hear that the father of Ibn Abi ʿĀmir, who had complete control over Hishām, and that the father of Ibn ʿAbbād, one of the rulers of Sevilla, were judges, they assume that they were like present-day judges. They are not aware of the change in customs that has affected the office of judge. Ibn Abi ʿĀmir and Ibn ʿAbbād belonged to Arab tribes that supported the Umayyad dynasty in Spain and represented the group feeling of the Umayyads, and it is known how important their positions were. The leadership and royal authority they attained did not derive from the rank of the judgeship as such. In the ancient administrative organization, the office of judge was given by the dynasty and

\(^1\) The 'asharah al-mubashsharah, the ten early Muslims to whom Paradise was guaranteed.
its clients to men who shared in the group feeling (of the dynasty), as is done in our age with the wazirate in the Maghrib. One has only to consider the fact that (in those days judges) accompanied the army on its summer campaigns and were entrusted with the most important affairs, such as are entrusted only to men who can command the group feeling needed for their execution.

Hearing such things, some people are misled and get the wrong idea about conditions. At the present time, weak-minded Spaniards are especially given to errors in this respect. The group feeling has been lost in their country for many years, as the result of the annihilation of the Arab dynasty in Spain and the emancipation of the Spaniards from the control of Berber group feeling. The Arab descent has been remembered, but the ability to gain power through group feeling and mutual co-operation has been lost. In fact, the (Spaniards) came to be like (passive) subjects, without any feeling for the obligation of mutual support. They were enslaved by tyranny and had become fond of humiliation, thinking that their descent, together with their share in the ruling dynasty, was the source of power and authority. Therefore, among them, professional men and artisans are to be found pursuing power and authority and eager to obtain them. On the other hand, those who have experience with tribal conditions, group feeling, and dynasties along the western shore, and who know how superiority is achieved among nations and tribal groups, will rarely make mistakes or give erroneous interpretations in this respect.

Another illustration of the same kind of error is the procedure historians follow when they mention the various dynasties and enumerate the rulers belonging to them. They mention the name of each ruler, his ancestors, his mother and father, his wives, his surname, his seal ring, his judge, doorkeeper, and wazir. In this respect, they blindly follow the tradition of the historians of the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsid dynasties, without being aware of the purpose of those historians. Their predecessors wrote their histories for members of the ruling dynasty, whose children wanted to learn about the lives and circumstances of their ancestors, so that they might be able to follow in their steps and to do what they did, even down to such details as obtaining servants from among those who were left over from the previous dynasty and giving ranks and positions to the descendants of its servants and retainers. Judges, too, shared in the group feeling of the dynasty and enjoyed the same importance as wazirs, as we have just mentioned. Therefore, the historians of that time had to mention all these details.

Later on, however, various distinct dynasties made their appearance. The time intervals became longer and longer. Historical
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interest now was concentrated on the rulers themselves and on the mutual relationships of the various dynasties in respect to power and predominance. (The problem now was) which nations could stand up (to the ruling dynasty) and which were too weak to do so. Therefore, it is pointless for an author of the present time to mention the sons and wives, the engraving on the seal ring, the surname, judge, wazir, and doorkeeper of an ancient dynasty, when he does not know the origin, descent, or circumstances of its members. Present-day authors mention all these things in mere blind imitation of former authors. They disregard the intentions of the former authors and forget to pay attention to historiography’s purpose.

An exception are the wazirs who were very influential and whose historical importance overshadowed that of the rulers. Such wazirs as, for instance, al-Ḥajjāj, the Banū Muhallab, the Barmecides, the Banū Sahl b. Nawbakht, Kâfûr al-Ikhsâdi, Ibn Abī ‘Āmir, and others should be mentioned. There is no objection to dealing with their lives or referring to their conditions for in importance they rank with the rulers.

An additional note to end this discussion may find its place here.

History refers to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race. Discussion of the general conditions of regions, races, and periods constitutes the historian’s foundation. Most of his problems rest upon that foundation, and his historical information derives clarity from it. It forms the topic of special works, such as the Murūj adh-dhahab of al-Mas‘ūdi. In this work, al-Mas‘ūdi commented upon the conditions of nations and regions in the West and in the East during his period, the three hundred and thirties [the nine hundred and forties]. He mentioned their sects and customs. He described the various countries, mountains, oceans, provinces, and dynasties. He distinguished between Arab and non-Arab groups. His book, thus, became the basic reference work for historians, their principal source for verifying historical information.

Al-Mas‘ūdi was succeeded by al-Bakrī,¹ who did something similar for routes and provinces, to the exclusion of everything else, because, in his time, not many transformations or great changes had occurred among the nations and races. However, at the present time—that is, at the end of the eighth [fourteenth] century—the situation in the Maghrib, as we can observe, has taken a turn and changed entirely. The Berbers, the original population of the Maghrib, have been

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replaced by an influx of Arabs (that began in) the fifth [eleventh] century. The Arabs outnumbered and overpowered the Berbers, stripped them of most of their lands, and also obtained a share of those that remained in their possession. This was the situation until, in the middle of the eighth [fourteenth] century, civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to (its more affluent) civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call. God inherits the earth and all who dwell upon it.

When there is a general change of conditions, it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew. Therefore, there is need at this time that someone should systematically set down the situation of the world among all regions and races, as well as the customs and sectarian beliefs that have changed for their adherents, doing for this age what al-Mas‘ūdī did for his. This should be a model for future historians to follow. In this book of mine, I shall discuss as much of that as will be possible for me here in the Maghrib. I shall do so either explicitly or implicitly in connection with the history of the Maghrib, in conformity with my intention to restrict myself in this work to the Maghrib, the circumstances of its races and nations, and its subjects and dynasties, to the exclusion of any other region.1 (This restriction is necessitated) by my lack of knowledge of conditions in the East and among its nations, and by the fact that secondhand information would not give the essential facts I am after. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s extensive travels in various countries enabled him to give a complete picture, as he mentioned in his work. Nevertheless, his discussion of conditions in the Maghrib is incomplete. God is the ultimate repository of all knowledge. Man is weak and deficient. Admission (of one’s ignorance) is a specific (religious) duty. He whom God helps finds his way made easy and his

1 Ibn Khaldûn soon changed his mind and added the history of the East to his work at a very early stage in its preparation.
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efforts and quests successful. We seek God’s help for the goal to which we aspire in this work. God gives guidance and help. He may be trusted.

It remains for us to explain the method of transcribing non-Arabic sounds whenever they occur in this book of ours:

It should be known that the letters (sounds)\(^1\) of speech are modifications of sounds that come from the larynx. These modifications result from the fact that the sounds are broken up in contact with the uvula and the sides of the tongue in the throat, against the palate or the teeth, and also through contact with the lips. The sound is modified by the different ways in which such contact takes place. As a result, the sounds become distinct. Their combination constitutes the word that expresses what is in the mind.

Not all nations have the same sounds in their speech. One nation has sounds different from those of another. The sounds of the Arabic alphabet are twenty-eight, as is known. The Hebrews have sounds that are not to be found in our language. In our language, in turn, there are (sounds) that are not in theirs. The same applies to the European Christians, the Turks, the Berbers, and other non-Arabs.

In order to express their audible sounds, literate Arabs chose to use conventional letters written individually separate, such as \(\), \(b\), \(j\), \(r\), \(h\), and so forth through all the twenty-eight letters. When they come upon a letter for which there is no phonetic equivalent in their language, it is not indicated in writing and not clearly expressed. Scribes sometimes express it by means of the letter which is closest to it in our language, the one either preceding or following it. This is not a satisfactory way of indicating a sound but a complete replacement of it.

Our book contains the history of the Berbers and other non-Arabs. In their names and in some of their words, we came across (sounds) that have no equivalents in our written language and conventional orthography. Therefore, we were forced to indicate such sounds (by special signs). As we said, we did not find it satisfactory to use the letters closest to them, because in our opinion this is not a satisfactory indication. In my book, therefore, I have chosen to represent such non-Arabic (sounds) in such a way as to indicate the two (sounds) closest to it, so that the reader may be able to pronounce it somewhere in the middle between the sounds represented by the two letters and thus reproduce it correctly.

I derived this idea from the way the Qur‘ān scholars write sounds that are not sharply defined, such as occur, for instance, in \(\text{as-fird}[\) according to Khalaf’s reading. The \(\varsigma\) is to be pronounced somehow

\(^1\) The written symbol is considered to be identical with the sound indicated by it.
between ẓ and ẓ. In this case, they spell the word with ẓ and write a ẓ into it. They thus indicate a pronunciation somewhere in the middle between the two sounds.

In the same way, I have indicated every letter that is to be pronounced somehow in the middle between two of our letters. The Berber k, for instance, which is pronounced midway between our clear k and g or q, as, for instance, in the name Buluggīn, is spelled by me with a k with the addition of one dot—from the g—from below, or one dot or two—from the q on top of it. This indicates that the sound is to be pronounced midway between k and g or q. This sound occurs most frequently in the Berber language. In the other cases, I have spelled each sound that is to be pronounced midway between two sounds of our language, with a similar combination of two letters. The reader will thus know that it is an intermediate sound and pronounce it accordingly. In this way, we have indicated it satisfactorily.

God gives success.