

Ancient imperial heritage and Islamic universal historiography: al-Dīnawarī's secular perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the historical work of the ninth-century Muslim scholar Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī. Adopting the format of universal history, al-Dīnawarī constructed a historical narrative beginning with the first human Adam, continuing through the rise of Islam and culminating in the Caliphate. This paper argues that al-Dīnawarī's work, appropriately entitled Longer narratives, represented an attempt to configure Islamic polity into world history through a reorientation of Sasanian imperial ideology and geographical consciousness in order to fit Islamic sensibilities. As an early example of belles-lettres (adab) oriented (belletrist, adabī) universal historiography, al-Dīnawarī's work comes across as a perceptive outlook on history, which proved relevant to dynasties of diverse origins struggling to carve a space for themselves in the Persianate political landscape of the late and post-'Abbāsīd world.

Introduction

From the middle of the ninth century, Muslim scholars of the 'Abbāsīd world narrated the history of the ancient world from a universal perspective, drawing on information from, *inter alia*, biblical stories, and the Sasanian and Hellenistic heritage. In a number of ways, this enterprise reveals the attempt of Muslim historians to construct Islamic religiosity and polity within an Abrahamic monotheistic historical framework, while at the same time making a case for Islam against its competitors as the rightful inheritor and representative of the ancient religio-political heritage. There is little reason to doubt that this consciousness of universal history was partly motivated by the Qur'ānic discourse on the creation, human destiny, and prophecy. However, the Qur'ān is not the sole source. On the one hand, from the eighth century, Muslims were growing increasingly diverse along multiple lines, occasioning a rethink of the experience of the community. On the other hand, Muslims came into closer contact with existing native cultures and were, therefore, compelled to think about their own identity vis-à-vis that of others.

Furthermore, the idea that humanity descended from a single family inspired historians to think about diverse regions and cultures as related entities in their remote origins. This political, as well as socio-cultural, challenge not only predicated the rise of universal history,

but also created a fault line in the reception and construction of ancient history in Muslim historiography, where alternative views on the socio-political direction of Muslim polities competed.

It is important to remember that the conquests of the Near East brought the thinly stretched Muslim ruling and intellectual elite face to face with the reality of late antique customs and laws existing in the region. This encounter reveals a deep and complex dynamic in early Islamic society, which involved the perception of, and the coexistence with, existing traditions and codes of law, many of them indebted to Hammurabi himself, which formed the bases of older views of kingship in the Near East. Although jurists promulgating the religious law (Sharia) certainly interacted with, and were impacted by, such laws and customs, their law codes eventually only minimally recognized such 'customary laws', whose status was left to the discretion of jurists or the governors. Despite the jurists' marginalization of these customs and laws, however, their persistence in social life, and more importantly in politics, during and after the 'Abbāsīd caliphate manifested itself in historiographical narratives.¹

A case in point is al-Dīnawarī (d. c. 895–96), a polymath with intimate knowledge of grammar, lexicography, historiography, astronomy, botany, mathematics, and even exegesis and jurisprudence.² In his work, *Al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl*,³ the *Longer narratives*, he attempts to define the Caliphate and Islamic faith within a world historical context by pursuing three major themes: kingship, monotheism, and the geo-political space of Iran. In his work, royal authority (*mulk*) represents one of the major institutions in human history closely related to but not subsumed under any particular religious tradition. Monotheism (*tawḥīd Allāh*) signifies a broad faith in the oneness of God whose association with the notions of fate (*qaḍā wa qadar, maqādīr*), divine favour (*khaṣṣa, afā'a, adbhara, and qallada Allāh*), and astrology (*'ilm al-nujūm*) recalls the popular religio-political ideologies of the ancient Near East. The pivotal importance of the Euphrates to Oxus region with its centre in Babylon, as the birthplace and sustainer of powerful kingdoms, calls to mind the Sasanian model of geographical consciousness. Al-Dīnawarī refers to Iran as the territories lying to the east of Tigris, and uses Irānshahr to mean the territories in between and around the Tigris and Euphrates as the central district of the larger Iranian/Sasanian hinterland.

1 I owe this to the editors of *JGH*. On the subject, see Wael Hallaq, ed., *The formation of Islamic law*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Variorum, 2004, esp. pp. xv–1, 29–77.

2 Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad b. Dāwūd b. Wanand was a native of Dīnawar. *Hadīth* is conspicuously absent from his specialities. For further information see the following partial list of references: Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litterature*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943, 1, p. 127, and Suppl. I, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937, p. 187, (henceforth *GAL*); B. Lewin, 'Dīnawarī', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958–2003, (electronic edition, henceforth *EI 2*); Fuad Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1967, 5, pp. 262–3, 6, pp. 158–9, 8, pp. 168–70 (henceforth *GAS*); Muhammad Hamidullah, 'Dīnawarī', *Diyanet İslam ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul: Türk Diyanet Vakfı, 1991, 9, p. 357, (henceforth *DIA*).

3 Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl*, 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Amir and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl, eds., Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1960, (henceforth *DA*). *Al-Akbbār* survives in four manuscripts. The earliest copy dates back to 1183, which is the basis for the 'Amir and al-Shayyāl edition. Guirgass and Kratchkovsky's edition is based on another copy dating to 1257. The latter seems to be the source of two later copies dating to 1591–92 and 1650. See Ignace Kratchkovsky, *Abū Ḥanīfa ad-Dīnawarī Kitāb al-akbbār al-ṭiwāl: préface, variantes et index*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1912, pp. 7–19. I use the 'Amir and al-Shayyāl edition.

However, his vision of kingship, although rooted in the territories of Irānshahr, aspired to be universal.⁴

This historical worldview sets al-Dīnawarī apart not only from the traditionist historians like al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) but also from al-Ya‘qūbī (d. c. 897 or soon afterwards), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) and al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 955),⁵ who otherwise pioneered belletrist historical writing. *Al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl* represents a nuanced version of universal history in the broad belletrist framework, which proved to be popular in the dynastic courts of the late and post-‘Abbāsīd world.

Belles-lettres, *adab*, with its distinct sympathy for Persian imperial heritage is therefore crucial in understanding this type of historiographical tendency. *Adab* was seen as a level of education and *etiquette* that was urbane and distinctly profane, as opposed to the religious learning that shaped the ideal man (*paideia*).⁶ It promoted mores cultivated from pre-Islamic Arabia, Hellenistic and Persian heritages, as well as Islamic life under the caliphate since late Umayyad times. In addition to the activities of state secretaries, the earliest examples of whom included ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 750) and Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. 757), *adab* was expounded by a group of literary scholars, such as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/69) and many others in diverse fields of knowledge. Included in this group were historians with a distinct taste for secular knowledge, poetry, linguistics, science, philosophy, administration, eloquence, and rhetoric. As such, *adab* played a large role in the construction of caliphal, and later sultanic, power, and the projection of its image at a popular level. The involvement with *adab* made clear that historical narrative acquired a worldly and practical dimension that concerned itself with secular knowledge, politics, manners, and entertainment within broader Islamic sensibilities.

When one inquires about the ideological and intellectual background of the belletrist trend in historiography and the historically oriented ‘mirror for princes’ genre of the tenth century onwards, al-Dīnawarī’s work emerges as a remarkable precursor. A later interest in ancient Iranian imperial heritage is exemplified in narratives mixing historiography with the ‘mirror for princes’ genre, as in the work of al-Tha‘libī (d. c. eleventh century?) on the history and biography of Persian kings, *Ghurar akhbār mulūk al-furs wa siyaruhum*, and al-Gardīzī (d. 1049 or later), *Zayn al-akhbār, Ornamentation of history*, both written at the Ghaznavid court. This type of literature aimed to inform and guide primarily not the community itself (hence its relative marginality in historiographical literature), but rulers, bureaucrats, and the broader ruling elite.

4 See *DA*, pp. 2, 36, 80. His definition matches that of his contemporary Ibn Khurdādhbih (d. c. 885 or 912) who mentions that Persian kings used to refer to lower Mesopotamia (al-Sawād, the Black Land) as the heart of Irānshahr (*dil-i Irānshahr*), meaning the heart of Iraq. Ibn Khurdādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik*, M. J. De Goeje, ed., *Bibliotheca geographorum Arabicorum*, Lugduni Batavorum: E. J. Brill, 1889, 6, p. 5.

5 ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī’s history, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawhar (The meadows of gold and mines of gems)* is a masterpiece of history of ancient and contemporary polities, their cultures and geography ending with the caliphate. See Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 131ff.

6 Following Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 83ff.

The emergence of Islamic universal history

Universal histories emerged in the second half of the ninth century, and spread in the tenth, when the caliphate appeared seriously undermined by proliferating dynasties on the peripheries and the central military elite in the capital.⁷ The historiographical response to this challenge coincided with a remarkable productivity in scholarship in other branches of knowledge, in which many of the universal historians were conversant, in many cases being even better informed in disciplines other than history. Muslim elites of diverse backgrounds and views, now acquainted with the intellectual aspects of existing secular and religious traditions of the known world, afforded historical writing the necessary ideological and intellectual depth to create a master historical narrative for the community and the caliphate to situate Islamic tradition in a wider religious and imperial context.

When Muslim historians began to think about objectivizing the community's identity, they placed it at the centre of historical progression as the culmination of religious and political history. This made the caliphate, and later the aspiring dynasties of Persian and Turkic origin, the representatives of both monotheism and imperial authority. That is why the narratives of universal histories culminate in the history of the caliphate, and after its demise, in a particular dynasty, usually the one providing patronage to the historian. Pioneer universal histories, penned by al-Ya'qūbī,⁸ al-Dīnawarī, and then a little later by al-Ṭabarī and al-Mas'ūdī, not only represent a new step in the flowering of Islamic historiography,⁹ but also demonstrate a major and multifaceted competition within this tradition.¹⁰

This undertaking required the modification of both the form and content of the historian's craft. In composing their narratives, universal historians expanded the range of their sources, widened the scope of their interests, and adjusted their prose. They surely relied on the biography of the prophet Muhammad (*sīra*), tribal accounts (*ayyām*), genealogies (*ansāb*), stories of biblical prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* and *isrā'īliyyāt*), translations from Persian political and cultural heritage, biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*), eye witnesses, Qur'ānic verses¹¹ and other available sources. They did so to mould what they gathered into an integrated narrative with a universal perspective. This was a *conscious* choice by a

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- 7 Wāḥb b. Munabbih (d. c. 728) and Ḥunayn b. Iṣḥāq (d. 873) might have written something similar to universal history. See Franz Rosenthal, *A history of Muslim historiography*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968, pp. 42, 80. Ibn Iṣḥāq's (d. 761) *Sirat Rasūl Allāh (Life of the Prophet)* can be considered a proto-universal history, though its main subject seems to be the history of prophets. See Hamilton A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the civilization of Islam*, Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk, eds., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 112; Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 35–6.
 - 8 Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī, *Tarikh al-Ya'qūbī*, M.Th. Houtsama, ed., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969.
 - 9 Al-Balādhurī's (d. 892) *Ansāb al-ashraf (Genealogies of the notables)*, which includes the biography of the prophet and extended biographies of the early Islamic nobility, represents a mature example of another ground-breaking style initiated by Ibn Sa'd (d. 845).
 - 10 For historical writing in early Islam, see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins: the beginning of Islamic historical writing*, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998; Khalidi, *Arabic*; Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. For medieval universal histories, see Bernd Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung im mittelalterlichen Islam*, Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1992, especially pp. 8–113 (content analysis), pp. 139–205 (evaluation).
 - 11 For a full index of references see Kratchkovsky, *Abū Ḥanīfa*, p. 93.

group of historians who were able to see the totality of Islamic experience in a wider historical context beyond sectarian divisions, helping the creation of a communal identity vis-à-vis other confessions.¹² As the rich and diverse corpus of universal history until the twentieth century shows, this was not a fleeting interest.

Both prophetic and communal legitimacy, and the Caliphate's universalist claims, assisted thought processes which led to universal history, but it was not a monolithic tradition. Even in formal structure, universal histories varied between those following annalistic style, and those preferring regnal and even dynastic chronology. Whereas traditionist historiography generally fell closer to the annalistic style, belletrist historiography, being more interested in culture and character, fared better using the regnal approach, eschewing precise chronology and year-by-year accounts of history. Although the annalistic style remained a major form in Muslim historiography in the following centuries, it never monopolized historical writing.¹³

In the ninth and tenth centuries, universal histories had to grapple with the rising popularity of attaching a chain of transmission (*isnād*) to prophetic and historical reports to verify their credibility. This was a prominent development, among both the transmitters of prophetic traditions and traditionist historians, as Khalidī points out. A mature example of this trend is certainly al-Ṭabarī. Many universal historians, however, either abandoned or at least minimized its use in their narratives for stylistic and literary, if not ideological, reasons, as the field of prophetic tradition and its methodologies appeared inadequate.¹⁴ Historians not only sought to impart information about the pre-Islamic and extra-Islamic past but also opted for a literary style that reflected the personal touch of the historian, emphasizing simplicity, clarity, and entertainment. This goal was more difficult to achieve when a long chain of transmission preceded each report.

Al-Ya'qūbī's *History*, al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*, and al-Dīnawarī's *al-Akhhbār* illustrate the neglect of the chain of transmission. All introduce their narratives with brief references to their sources and informants without citing the chain of transmission, intending perhaps to offer a narrative that stands out by its didactic message and literary appeal, as well as through the details of historical events. Recent scholarship suggests that this omission of the chain of authorities does not reflect laxity of style, as has been traditionally argued, but rather experimentation with writing history outside the parameters of prophetic traditions.¹⁵ Particularly in the late and post-'Abbāsīd milieu, dropping the chain of transmission became a common-sense approach among historians, because they could maintain the length of the chain only

12 Orientalist scholarship was for this very reason suspicious of universal historiography's 'Islamic' credentials. See Gibb, *Studies*, p. 118 ('intrusive elements').

13 See Robinson, *Islamic*, pp. 36–7, 41–2, 76; Julie Scott Meisami, *Persian historiography to the end of the twelfth century*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 14.

14 See Khalidī, *Arabic*, pp. 39ff., 99–100, 129.

15 Al-Dīnawarī's dramatic narrative seems to have overshadowed the detail of events, which prompted modern scholars to accuse al-Dīnawarī of laxity. For dismissive views of al-Dīnawarī, see Lewin, 'Dīnawarī'; also Carl Brockelmann, 'Dīnawarī', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4 vols. and Supplement, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913–1938, 2, p. 977; Kratchkovsky, *Abū Ḥanīfa*, p. 50; 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dūrī, *Baḥṭh fī nash'at 'ilm al-tārīkh 'inda al-'Arab*, Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1983, p. 55; Charles Pellat, 'Denawarī', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Ihsan Yarshater, ed., Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983—(online edition, henceforth *EI* r). For alternative, and more recent, views, see Khalidī, *Arabic*, pp. 39ff.; Elton Daniel, 'Historiography: early Islamic period', (*EI* r); Donner, *Narratives*, pp. 255ff.; Robinson, *Islamic*, pp. 83ff.

so far.¹⁶ This is the case, for instance, with the massive work of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233), who copies al-Ṭabarī generously for the early period, but leaves out the chain of transmission completely.

The idea that shaped the emergence of universal history, that the world is connected in a variety of ways historically and geographically, encouraged holistic prose. Many authors not only discounted the chain of transmission from their narratives, but also abandoned or modified the annalistic style.¹⁷ On a practical level, the pre-Islamic and extra-Islamic material with which Muslim scholars came into contact, bear the form of stories and legends about the biblical and Persian past, and this encouraged historical prose. Dropping the chain of transmission also helped historians sustain the coherence of their narratives, which is particularly evident in al-Dīnawarī's work. Reflecting the more profane attitude of belles-lettres, he moulds the material of his diverse sources into a dramatic narrative composed of wars, stories, and anecdotes mixed with wisdom, miracles, prophecies, speeches, dialogues, and arguments,¹⁸ eschewing chronology and dating.¹⁹

The divergence of historians precipitated competing historiographical epistemologies, one opting strictly for conformity to religious law and uniformity, the other seeking information in broad fields of knowledge for practical purposes, as well as for aesthetic pleasure. Historians closer to the jurists and traditionists (transmitters of *ḥadīth*), reaching their peak with al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), were putting forth a historical view which reflected compliance with the Sharia and the legacy of the 'pious ancestors' as constructed by the jurists themselves. At the same time, they attempted to position the caliphate on a trajectory less amenable to the intellectual legacy of Sasanian or Hellenistic political and cultural tradition. On the contrary, belletrist historians found no problem in dealing with the secular subjects of geography and astronomy, or in infusing the caliphate with the meaning and function of kingship on the model of the Near Eastern, and, more specifically, the Persian imperial tradition.²⁰

Works somewhere in between the two poles of traditionist and belletrist historiography also existed. An example of such a trend, which may also be seen as a hybrid between biography and universal history, is the *al-Ma'ārif* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889),²¹ a loosely historically oriented encyclopaedia (chronology is only broadly observed) surveying various practical subjects such as geography, biography, religious knowledge, sects, genealogy and the popular wisdom from the Islamic and pre-Islamic period. The compendium begins with the creation, briefly discusses the history of the prophets, and the genealogy of the Arab tribes culminating in Muhammad. It then offers an encyclopaedic survey of the events, culture and achievements of the Islamic community up to the reign of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu'taṣim (833–42), and concludes with the 'Book of Kings', which briefly discusses both the native and Ethiopian kings of Yemen, the kings of Ḥīra (south-central Iraq), and

16 Robinson, *Islamic*, p. 98.

17 Haytham b. 'Adiy (d. 821) also is mentioned as a pioneer. For further discussion, see Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 80; Robinson, *Islamic*, pp. 74ff. Meisami, *Persian*, p. 9.

18 Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 129.

19 For *isnād* see Donner, *Narratives*, pp. 255ff.

20 Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 86–7.

21 'Abdallāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, Tharwat 'Ukkāsha, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1981; G. Lacomte, 'Ibn Qutayba', *El* 2.

finally the Persian kings. It was apparently written for the benefit of secretaries and, one might venture to say, religious scholars, in the hope of equipping them with the general knowledge, which the author thought the 'Abbāsīd elite should have. As his general approach in other works suggests, Ibn Qutayba perhaps saw himself on a mission to rehabilitate *adab* into religious knowledge, while broadening religious scholars' scope of interests.²²

Universal history required, therefore, taking positions on many levels, and because of that it involved politics, whether particular historians received royal support or not. The majority of universal historians sympathized with the court, whose patronage they sought, and certainly envisioned a tradition for the community, the *umma*, stretching from Adam to Muhammad, and from Abū Bakr (r. 632–34), the first caliph, to their times. This does not mean, however, that historians unequivocally defended the actions of caliphs and rulers. On the contrary, their loyalty seems to have been to the caliphate (and later, sultanate) as an institution, rather than to individual caliphs or rulers.²³

Loyalty to the Muslim community in theoretical terms seems to have overshadowed the sectarian identity of universal historians, as is the case with al-Ya'qūbī who wrote a universal history in line with Sunnī-orthodoxy, although he was a Shī'ite. His work covers history from the creation until 872, in a versatile, comprehensive, and detailed narrative. The narrative is anchored in the history of the prophets but then expands to discuss the history of the world's polities, enumerating their achievements, culture, location, and their relation to the Muslim community. Al-Ya'qūbī's interest in geography, culture, prophetic history and astrological prognostication make this work a fascinating historical compendium which in many ways epitomizes the 'conceptual leap' toward universal historiography.²⁴

Although the received wisdom has tended to dismiss al-Dīnawarī's historiographical credibility as a mere *littérateur*, there is good reason to argue that his historical work was a late-ninth-century experiment with the universal, secular and generalist form of historiography, inspired by the Near Eastern socio-political heritage. The following pages highlight four aspects of al-Dīnawarī's meta-narrative that were responsible for the structure of his historical account, and show the historiographical and ideological linkages, as well as the tension, between al-Dīnawarī's work and that of other belletrist historians, as well as later dynastic universal historiography.

Kingship and the caliphate

Because the writing of history was hardly an idle endeavour, the narrative of al-Dīnawarī also reflected and was influenced by contemporary disputes and clashes within the Muslim community, including the debate over the legitimacy of the caliphate vis-à-vis domestic as well as confessional challengers. It was vital, therefore, that the political institution, be it the caliphate or later aspiring dynasties, occupied a central place in historical narratives. Al-Dīnawarī's narrative offers a model anchored in the historical contour of royal authority in Persia, although it also suggests that the Caliphate inherited the Byzantine political legacy.

22 Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 110–11.

23 For the critique of rulers see, Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the narrative of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 59ff., 95ff.

24 See Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 121.

In the narrative of ‘Abdallāh b. Šāmīt, the envoy of the caliph Abū Bakr (r. 632–34) to the Byzantine emperor (presumably Heraclius, r. 610–41), al-Dīnawarī points to the view that Islam and the prophecy of Muhammad symbolize the culmination of successive divine messages delivered by numerous prophets in the past, including those venerated by the Byzantines. The story of this encounter establishes the authority of Muhammad and the caliphate by the display of a range of relics housed in the Byzantine Emperor’s palace. These relics depict the most famous biblical prophets on pieces of cloth in painting.²⁵ The identity of the last of the prophets becomes known to the Emperor only after the Muslim envoys recognize it. It is the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. The moral lesson in this anecdote is that, since these relics were passed from Alexander to the Byzantine emperors, they must now be transferred to the caliph as Muhammad’s arrival concludes the custodianship of the Byzantine emperors.²⁶

Al-Dīnawarī’s version of the family genealogy of Adam illustrates the justification, birth, and evolution of Ur-kingship in human history, and brings to light the ambivalent dialectic between the secular and religious domains. In the course of his discussion of the descendants of Noah, he narrates that after Noah’s death, Shem took charge of his family and founded the kingship. After Shem, ‘Jam raised the torch of kingship [...] fixed the foundation of kingship, strengthened its pillars, built its emblems, and adopted the Nowrūz as a holiday.’²⁷

Crone has argued that there is a tendency in medieval Islamic political thought to see political authority as a given, religiously necessary and therefore even primordial,²⁸ but al-Dīnawarī’s discussion of the origins of kingship is anomalous. First, there seems to be no concept of the primordial kingdom of God, or of a religious imperative behind the institution of kingship in his account, although it is invented and headed by the pious and sanctioned by God. Secondly, kingship appears on the historical scene exactly when the human community grows large enough to require a political framework in order to function peacefully. Thirdly, it was not attached to a prophetic mission, although it was necessary that there should be cooperation between the two. Finally, his account of the emergence of kingship seems to place human history on a double-track of kingship and prophecy, unlike in the previous epoch, during which prophetic wisdom was the sole authority. From that point onward, the narrative rehabilitates royal authority to fit an Islamic worldview as a partner in the duality of rule and religion.

The long narrative devoted to Alexander the Great epitomizes the ideal kingship, the cooperation of monotheism and kingship, and the significance of the Persian geopolitics. In this delightful narrative, deriving from Persian sources, Alexander is actually an Achaemenid by birth, the mythical Dārā b. Bahman being his father, and the daughter of King Philip his mother.²⁹ His royal ancestry is complemented by a pleasant personal disposition and appropriate training, which enable him to be a legitimate contender for the

25 The knowledge of the *mandylion* legend is apparent here.

26 *DA*, pp. 18–19.

27 *DA*, pp. 1–2.

28 See Patricia Crone, *God’s rule: government and Islam*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 5–6.

29 Al-Dīnawarī was aware of Greek sources. *DA*, pp. 29–30.

Achaemenid throne. Alexander grows up to succeed his father, having one goal in mind: to capture the Achaemenid empire, his father's throne. However, before that, Alexander undergoes spiritual purification, which brings direction and meaning to his rule and refines his raw physical strength and political prowess. Influenced by Aristotle, the sage of the legend, Alexander embraces monotheism, *tawḥīd Allāh*, no longer being merely a king, but a king with the right belief and mission. Having acknowledged monotheism, Alexander reorganizes his realm accordingly and, after receiving the support of his subjects, announces to the kings of the earth his mission of propagating monotheism, by force if necessary.

After legitimately gaining the Persian throne (both by the will of God, as a victor in war, and by Darius III's acknowledgement) Alexander continues his quest to conquer the world. He marches to India, to the land of the Blacks, and to the Arabian Peninsula via Yemen. While in Yemen he makes his way to Mecca on pilgrimage and continues from there to North Africa and then from there to the Dark Lands in the North, 'as far as God willed'. Despite his advisers' caution, Alexander marches to the Far East, crossing the Green Sea (whose rotten water prohibits sailing), to where the Sun rises. He passes through the Northern lands arriving finally at the borders of China, whose king readily submits to Alexander. Here, al-Dīnawarī clearly identifies Alexander with the Qur'anic Dhū al-Qarnayn, The Two Horned One. Before returning to Babylon, Alexander builds a wall around Gog and Magog to seal them off. He finally returns to Babylon after crossing Central Asia, Bactria, and Khurasān. When he arrives at Ctesiphon, he resides there for a short while and leaves for Syria, where he meets his end. His demise could not be more fittingly constructed: Alexander dies in Jerusalem.³⁰

Al-Dīnawarī's sympathetic narrative, with Alexander as both Persian by lineage and monotheistic in religion, anticipated a widespread Alexandrian legend in the following centuries. Apart from treatises devoted to the exploits of Alexander, general books of history, including universal histories and historically oriented 'mirror for princes', devoted pages to Alexander because the authors, who were in many instances court officials, deemed this indispensable for rulers. The fact that Muslim exegetes sanctioned Alexander as Dhū al-Qarnayn could only help the spread of his fame in later centuries.³¹ No wonder therefore that the romance found its way into multiple languages and geographical regions. A description of Alexander, closely resembling al-Dīnawarī's account, shows up in al-Firdawsī's (d. c. 1020) celebrated *Book of kings*, in Niẓāmī's (d. 1209) *Iskandar-nāma* and al-Ṭarsūṣī's (thirteenth-century) *Darab-nāma*.³² In Turkish, Ahmedī's (d. 1414) Alexander romance dates to the end of the fourteenth century. In India, there are at least two significant versions: *Qiṣṣa-i Sikandar* and *Karnāma-i Sikandarī*. The Mongolian version dates back

30 DA, pp. 29–39.

31 For the overlap of Dhū al-Qarnayn with Alexander and Khidr legends, see I. Friedlaender, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman*, Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von B. G. Teubner, 1913.

32 For Dhū al-Qarnayn see Brannon M. Wheeler, 'Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic exegesis of Qur'an 18: 60–65', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 57, 1998, pp. 191–215. For its spread in Central and East Asia, see Andrew Runni Anderson, 'Alexander's Horns', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 58, 1927, pp. 100–22; Mino S. Southgate, 'Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-romances of the Islamic era', *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 97, 1977, pp. 278–84. See also Meisami, *Persian*, p. 39; Richard Stoneman, 'Alexander the Great in the Arabic tradition', in Stelios Panayotakis et al., *The Ancient novel and beyond*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003, pp. 4–22.

as early as the fourteenth century. There are multiple versions of the romance in Malay and Thai as well.³³

The knowledge of the legend itself among Muslims is clearly earlier than al-Dīnawarī's time, but al-Dīnawarī's account, based on Persian sources not antagonistic to Alexander,³⁴ is one of the earliest written Islamic versions of the legend. Al-Ya'qūbī's account is very brief, dealing mostly with his death and the eulogy at his funeral. Al-Ya'qūbī also identifies him with the title Dhū al-Qarnayn, but has no discussion of Alexander being a monotheist.³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī's longer account, which offers multiple versions concerning Alexander, including one similar to that of al-Dīnawarī,³⁶ fails to convey a coherent story.

Al-Dīnawarī's narrative of Alexander is emblematic of his vision of imperial history on a number of levels: Alexander was a world conqueror, the champion of monotheism, and, finally, a rightful heir, both by birth and deeds, to the Persian throne.³⁷ In the Persianate milieu of the post-'Abbāsīd world, when Persian language, literature, and culture flourished in dynastic courts in the east and west, from Southeast Asia to Anatolia, Alexander became a model for medieval Muslim rulers. Alexander emerged as a world conqueror, a monotheist, a patron of science and wisdom, and the ultimate symbol of individual triumph.³⁸

As in the case of Alexander, and other Persian rulers, the narratives of exemplary behaviour or virtuous conduct, and above all the wisdom of royal justice, set a model and criterion to compare the ideal with the actual, and are intended to be sources of moral lessons.³⁹ By focusing on the king and his court, al-Dīnawarī advocates a political culture at the centre of which rests the king, whose legitimacy is derived from his dynastic right, from divine favour, and from his personal virtues and prerogatives as the executor of justice.⁴⁰ In this close proximity between moralizing stance and narrative, we notice the junction between the genre of 'mirror for princes' and historiography, which drew upon both the recent and remote Iranian and Islamic past to provide models for statecraft and administrative practice. An eleventh-century representative of this perspective is the Seljukid vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092), whose *Siyar al-mulūk*, while not strictly historiographical, demonstrates

33 The Alexander romance hails ultimately from a Greek source known as the Pseudo-Callisthenes. Andrew Runni Anderson, 'The Arabic history of Dulcarnain and the Ethiopian history of Alexander', *Speculum*, 6, 1931, pp. 434–45. See also *EI* 1 'Iskandar'.

34 The destruction of the Achaemenid empire by Alexander motivated a plethora of legends demonizing Alexander down to the Sasanian times. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic culture*, New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 36–40.

35 Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1, pp. 142–5.

36 Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1968, 1, pp. 336–40.

37 *DA*, p. 30.

38 See E. A. Budge, *The life and exploits of Alexander the Great*, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968, 1, pp. xix–xxv; Francis Woodman Cleaves, 'An Early Mongolian version of the Alexander romance', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Society*, 22, 1959, pp. 1–99. John Andrew Boyle, 'The Alexander legend in Central Asia', *Folklore*, 85, 1974, pp. 221–8.

39 See his discussion of Kaykāvūs and Kaykhusro, pp. 13–14, and even of the Queen of Sheba, Solomon, and others pp. 19–20, 23, 72, 74, 77, 78, 80, 108, 394–5, 396, 389.

40 Divine favour is indicated in a rich range of adjectives and phrases throughout the work. See pp. 12, 28, 34, 43, 75, 77, 118, 134.

the uses of history as well as the close connection between historical, political and ethical thought.⁴¹

Where al-Dīnawarī and the belletrists differ from traditionist historians, is in the vision of rule and law which underlies their counsel. Unlike the caliphate, which is based on supra-territorial religious law, Sharia, kingship rests on divine favour, customary laws of justice and political virtue supported by right belief. Kingship is not subordinate to, or the product of, jurisprudential reasoning within religious law, but rather the very foundation of public order. Whereas the legalist vision embodied a political ideology that highlighted the infallibility of the Muslim community, the *umma*, as the source of legitimacy, the vision of kingship favoured a hierarchical social order, which culminated in kings as its guarantors.⁴²

Legal scholars and traditionists often used the concept of kingship as a way to distinguish the historical caliphate of the Umayyads and the ‘Abbāsids from that of the ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs’ and from their ideals, and to express their opposition to certain policies. They emphasized the distinction between rightful caliphate and kingship since kingship was, for them, almost an antithesis of the caliphate.⁴³ When it was necessary to draw a line between their ideals and the realities of the caliphate, religious scholars therefore fell back on the distinction they drew between kingship and rightful caliphate. This was a compromise offering, on the one hand, an outlet for religious scholars to continue to defend the legitimacy of the historical caliphate as an institution, in its capacity as a commendable social utility in maintaining order and keeping the house of Islam safe from outside and inside threats. On the other hand, this was a position keeping them safely distanced from the caliphate. This opposition to kingship prompted legal scholars and traditionists to emphasize the elective nature of the office of the caliphate, even when the practice of succession was not remotely related to any type of election.

The prime representative of traditionist ambivalence is al-Ṭabarī, who titled his work *The history of messengers and kings*. He perceives a chasm between kingship and prophecy, and refrains from referring to caliphs as kings.⁴⁴ In the introduction to his masterpiece, he carefully separates kings from prophets and caliphs and clarifies that he will mention ‘the dates of past kings mentioned by us and summaries of their history, the times of the messengers and prophets and how long they lived, the days of the early caliphs and some of their biographical data’. Al-Ṭabarī chooses his vocabulary to emphasize a qualitative difference between kings and caliphs in terms of succession to rule and style of ruling. He notes that he will narrate ‘whatever information has reached us about kings throughout the ages from when our Lord began the creation of His creation to its annihilation. There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or Caliphs established in the caliphal

41 Meisami, *Persian*, pp. 145 and 162.

42 For *siyāsa*, see Patricia Crone, *God's rule*, pp. 145ff.; Ann K. S. Lambton, *Theory and practice in medieval Persian government*, Burlington VT: Ashgate, 1980; Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1997. From a historiographical perspective, Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 83ff.

43 The overall stance of the Qurʾān concerning kingship is neutrality. Although some verses accuse kings of oppression (e.g. Qurʾān 27: 34), in general the Qurʾānic discourse recognizes kingship as a legitimate political organization. See for instance Qurʾān 2: 246–8, 251, 258; 3: 26; 4: 54; 5: 20; 12: 76, 101; 38: 35.

44 Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 79.

succession.⁴⁵ At the centre of debate therefore lies the question of how to reconstruct the shorter (Islamic) and longer (prophetic-ancient dynastic) history.

The contrast offered by al-Dīnawarī is best illustrated by the treatment of the theme of prophecy in his work. Traditionist and other universal historians devote a substantial portion of their narratives to the history of prophecy and prophets. Al-Dīnawarī opts for the opposite approach: he does not concern himself with the lives of prophets, not even Jesus and Muhammad.⁴⁶ He discusses prophets only when they are related to the mainly political subjects he wishes to explore. When they are irrelevant to the subject, he leaves them aside. When he does show some interest in the history of prophets, such as in the affairs of Moses, David and, particularly, of Solomon, he focuses his attention not on their role as prophets, but on their kingship and their activities as rulers. One is justified in arguing therefore that the minor place of Muhammad and other prophets in the narrative vis-à-vis Solomon is due to al-Dīnawarī's main concern in the book, namely kingship and secular politics. It is important to remember that the number of pages allocated to David and Solomon almost matches those devoted to Alexander, and they deal, like Alexander's narrative, with Solomon's secular-political activities, his conquests and rule.⁴⁷

There is another dimension to this attitude. What his narrative accomplishes by the marginalization of Muhammad's role in political history is the emphasis that Muhammad was not a ruler, but rather a prophet, whose duty was to deliver God's message to his community, on the model of previous sages and prophets. He was thus detached from the empire-building efforts of the caliphs. In contrast to what Solomon, Zoroaster, and Aristotle achieved, Muhammad, like Jesus, convinced no king to whom he delivered his message. I would like to argue that it is exactly this gap that al-Dīnawarī intends to fill by endowing the caliphate with the emblems of kingship, making the experience of Muhammad match that of Zoroaster and Aristotle.⁴⁸ One should also add that such a perspective tallies well with the historically oriented 'mirror for princes', which depict prophets and religious sages as guides and symbols of political legitimacy but not as centres around which polity is constructed.

What al-Dīnawarī attempted to do in practice was to separate the history of prophecy from secular history, assigning prophets the responsibility for propagating God's revelations to rulers and people. This view seems unusual, but it is certainly not unique. A similar approach was later further elaborated by one of the most accomplished historians in the Islamic tradition, al-Miskawayh (d. 1030), who considered prophecy outside the domain of historical study, because miracles have no benefit for human conduct as they cannot be

45 Al-Ṭabarī, *The history of al-Ṭabarī*, Franz Rosenthal, tr., Ihsan Yarshater, gen. ed., 38 vols., Albany: SUNY Press, 1985–99, 1, pp. 168–9.

46 *DA*, pp. 11, 12, 40, 74, 107, 110. Modern historians have been curious about his only paragraph-long reference to Muhammad. See Kratchkovsky, *Abū Ḥanīfa*, p. 53; al-Dūrī, *Baḥth*, p. 55; Donner, *Narratives*, pp. 134–5; Lewin, 'Dīnawarī'.

47 *DA*, pp. 17–23.

48 *DA*, pp. 25, 29, 30. Al-Tha'libī's description of Adam, Joseph, David, Solomon, Alexander and Muhammad as prophets who combined kingship with prophecy echoes al-Dīnawarī's outlook. See Crone, *God's rule*, p. 11.

imitated and repeated. Information on prophets' secular affairs however is not excluded, precisely because one can learn and draw lessons from them.⁴⁹

Kingship and monotheism

It is exactly in this role of guiding and advising rulers and people, that religious sages and prophets appear or take their place in al-Dīnawarī's narrative. Monotheism appears, similar to universal histories in general, a foundation upon which righteous and successful rule is built. Monotheism occupies a higher moral ground than other faiths, and certainly fittingly complements successful rulers. As in the discussion of Zoroaster and the Persian king Vishtaspa, where al-Dīnawarī points out how Zoroaster claimed that he was a messenger of God, who had been commissioned to bring God's scripture to the king (a scripture which the king eventually embraced), the narrative depicts the religious message as complementing kingship, and strengthening its legitimacy.⁵⁰

As far as any shift toward monotheism represents in essence a move toward justice, which assures the continuation of divine favour, al-Dīnawarī expresses the general sentiment of universal histories. Thus, al-Dīnawarī narrates that Kaykāvūs b. Kayqubādīh 'was harsh on the powerful, merciful to the weak. He was victorious and praiseworthy until he committed a blasphemous act by wanting to ascend to the heavens [...] so that the people of Persia hated Kaykāvūs [...] and conspired to overthrow him.'⁵¹ It was because of the violation of justice and of religious sincerity that divine favour and popular support turned against Kaykāvūs and brought about his demise.

Al-Dīnawarī's narrative reconstructs the role of monotheism not on the model of the traditionist historians but rather on the model of Near Eastern political wisdom, which sees kingship and religion as twins. First, the institution of kingship came as a result of the growth of human population, through the descendants of Adam, without any explicit religious imperative. Secondly, prophetic succession and prophecy are separated from royal authority, and the legitimacy of the latter is closely tied to divine favour and the guidance of religious sages.⁵² When for instance al-Dīnawarī narrates the deeds of Hormazd b. Khusro (579–90) he underlines exactly this point. Hormazd b. Khusro emphasizes that kingship was a privilege from God to him and his family.⁵³ Finally, divine favour is associated with fate (*qaḍā wa qadar, maqādir*) whose arbitrary nature has little correspondence with institutional religiosity.⁵⁴

49 See Khalidi, *Arabic*, pp. 173–4; Franz Rosenthal, 'The influence of the biblical tradition on Muslim historiography', in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East*, London: University of Oxford Press, 1962, p. 40. Rosenthal, *A history*, p. 141.

50 *DA*, pp. 25, 29–30ff.; and pp. 49–50.

51 *DA*, pp. 13, 74, 75, 83.

52 For divine favour see E. B. Inlow, 'The divine right of Persian kings', *Journal of Indian History*, 45, 1967, pp. 39ff.; R. N. Frye, 'The charisma of kingship in ancient Iran', *Iranica Antiqua*, 4, 1964, pp. 36ff.

53 *DA*, pp. 75, 77, 86.

54 The problem of predestination or fate is one of the most significant theological debates in medieval Islam, which we cannot address in this article. As a starting point see *EI* 2, 'Qadar'.

It is true that divine favour is often linked to justice and virtuous conduct, the presence or absence of which may be revealed through human agency or portents. For instance, the transfer of the Iranian territories from the Sasanians to the Caliphate, as well as Alexander's conquests of Iranian lands, appear as divinely ordained. In both cases, the imperial throne is depicted as occupied by rulers who have lost their divine support because they either committed religious transgressions or failed to uphold justice.⁵⁵ Conversely, the conquerors, both the caliphs and Alexander, were worthy of victory because they had the moral capacity to fulfill the demands of the renewed monotheistic message. While Alexander undergoes a spiritual purification initiated by Aristotle, the caliphs Abū Bakr and 'Umar are inspired by the monotheistic summons of God.

However, recalling the widely circulating stories about the raising of an ordinary individual to be king, or about the tragic fall of mighty dynasties due to the arbitrary and whimsical nature of fate, the transition of authority from the Sasanians to Muslims hinges upon the shifting winds of divine favour. In the narrative, to resist the calamities of this changing fortune, Rustam asserts his family's providential dignity. However, in the conversation between the Sasanian commander Rustam and the caliph 'Umar's (r. 634–44) envoy Mughīra b. Shu'ba, the latter remarks that God entrusted Muslims with both a religious and political mission to subdue their rivals. Like any other individual, Rustam has no control over the wind of divine favour.⁵⁶

Similarly, justice, responding to God's call, and upholding virtuous conduct and piety may further the continuation of divine favour, but they do not guarantee it. Fate's mysterious and arbitrary shift determines the succession of kingship and the ultimate success or failure of a ruler. The account of the death of Darius III (r. 380–30 BCE) illustrates well how al-Dīnawarī allows fate to control human destiny. On his deathbed, Darius III, in his confession to Alexander, resigns himself to his fate by recognizing the dramatic power of shifting fortune. He was a king just yesterday but he is dying and alone today. In the response of Alexander and the final remark of Darius, the reader is assured that power and wealth do not protect one from the wrath of fate, nor do weakness and poverty bring greater ill fate to their sufferers. Fate appears as arbitrary as the wind, and human life and its pleasures are as fleeting as a shadow.⁵⁷ In Islamic history, al-Dīnawarī takes liberty in using the civil wars to highlight how fate works in political life. The first civil war (656–61) was, thus, a preordained destiny that could not be altered, despite the players' awareness of that destiny.⁵⁸

Although fate seems generally associated with hardship and calamity, it may also bring happy prospects, as al-Dīnawarī points out in his biography of Ardashir b. Papak, who had no son to succeed him until fate led him to discover that indeed he did have a son, of whose existence he had previously been unaware, a son who eventually was to succeed him.⁵⁹

55 DA, pp. 30–2, 111–12, 119. For justice, see F. Rosenthal, 'Political justice and the just ruler', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 10, 1980, pp. 92ff.; Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic conception of justice*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

56 DA, pp. 120–1, 134, 140.

57 DA, pp. 32, 120–1.

58 DA, pp. 145, 147, 174, 252–3, 389.

59 DA, pp. 32, 43–4, 100.

Moreover, human beings are not completely helpless against or unaware of the hand of fate. If fate determines outcome and is related to astral causes indicated in the position of stars, astrology and prophecies provide, if not protection, warning against it. While prophets one after another renew divine messages to initiate shifts in human history, prophecies and astrological prognostications guide rulers through the intricacies of fate. Al-Dīnawarī offers vivid examples of this position, which epitomizes the dialectic of fate, prophecies, and astrology. On one occasion al-Dīnawarī relates that astrologers warned Shimir b. Ifrīqīs, a Yemeni king, that he would die between two iron mountains and that indeed he died of thirst between the two sides of his armour. In a discussion on Anushirvān (r. 531–79), we learn that ancient prophecies predicted correctly his fortune by interpreting portents.⁶⁰

Astrological prognostication and deciphering prophecies appropriately can thus offer assistance to align one's conduct with fate, in order to cultivate a positive outcome. It is significant that the narratives of fate mix strongly with prognostication, prophecies, and predictions, suggesting a link between ancient wisdom and human destiny. In the narrative of the civil war between al-Amīn (r. 809–13) and al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–32) astrological prognostication thus plays a crucial role. After looking at the stars all through the night, al-Faḍl b. Sahl, adviser to Al-Ma'mūn, calculates that his master will defeat al-Amīn (his master's brother) and win the seat of the caliphate.⁶¹

What is striking in these narratives is that the function of fate differs neither in content nor in form between pre-Islamic and Islamic history. The nature of fate is not linked to divine intervention directly and has a worldly aspect, since it is clearly mentioned in the company of astrology, and astrology does not fit comfortably with the theological discourse on predestination. To the extent that fate represents an extra-juristic dynamic in royal authority and is not governed by any particular religious law, astrological prognostications and prophecies offer extra-religious means to deal with its effects.

The geographical pivot of history⁶²

The geographical coverage of the *al-Akhhār al-tiwāl* is not universal in the contemporary sense as it deals with lands outside 'the center of the world' only briefly. East Asia, India and sub-Saharan Africa appear in the narrative but only briefly and as lands of wonders and precious commodities, not as seats of power. China emerges as a significant polity, though it seems too far away to be taken seriously as an imperial competitor.⁶³

Numerous other universal histories too cover non-Islamic cultures and pre-Islamic history only very selectively, often sketchily. Even when they spare many pages for the subject, their content appears, as in al-Ya'qūbī, limited to cultural matters and avoiding political

60 DA, pp. 4–8, 17–8, 24, 40–41, 74, 108–10.

61 DA, pp. 332, 380, 395.

62 The reference is to Sir Halford John Mackinder's article, 'The geographical pivot of history', *Geographical Journal*, 23, 1904.

63 Africa is a vast, isolated land. DA, p. 366. Also, pp. 20, 24, 28, 33, 35–7, 321. The neglect holds true also for the Syrian region, which is only cursorily treated. DA, p. 160.

history. An analogous limitation is also seen in Byzantine historiography where the chronicle of George Synkellos appears much narrower in scope when compared to that of Eusebius.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, al-Dīnawarī's choice seems deliberate. Al-Dīnawarī's emphasis on the ancient Iranian core imperial area shows his appreciation of the relationship between kingship and geography and of the strategic importance of the Fertile Crescent's eastern territories for viable imperial ambitions.⁶⁵ This correlation between worldwide royal authority and geography is depicted in the biographies of numerous Iranian kings, including Alexander, and the recurring attempts at reconstruction after the fragmentation of his empire. Kayqubādī's royal influence for instance was such that 'all of the kings on earth were subject to Kayqubādī and protected themselves by paying tribute' to him.⁶⁶

There is a remarkable parallelism in the narrative of al-Dīnawarī between the dispersal of the sons of Noah and the geopolitics of the world. In general, Islamic universal histories see human communities as ultimately related to each other somewhere along the human genealogical tree going back to Noah, and to the first human, Adam. They like to envision the Muslim community as a distillation of previous faithful communities, as they see Muhammad as the final prophet in a long chain of prophecy beginning with Adam, and passing through Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. However, this chain can be central (al-Ya'qūbī, al-Ṭabarī), or marginal (al-Dīnawarī), to the narrative. This linear vision of history culminates in the Muslim community, which marks the final stage before the resurrection. At that point, universal history focuses on Muslim history and the regions and polities with which Muslims came into contact. One may, therefore, see the accounts given by al-Dīnawarī and his colleagues in the ninth century, concerning the biblical prophets, as a means of emphasizing the legitimacy and mission of Islam and the finality of the prophecy of Muhammad vis-à-vis other religious traditions.

However, prophetic history reveals an understanding of the human race and society as well. Similar to other universal historians, al-Dīnawarī traces back the dispersal of the human race out of Mecca to the grandchild of Adam, Mahalaleel b. Cainan, who after his relatives disagreed about which portion of the land they would reside in, partitioned their dwelling places in the direction of the 'four winds' until they inhabited the four corners of the Earth, allocating 'the best of lands', Iraq, to the sons of Seth. God sent Enoch and after him Noah, who lived through the Flood and dwelled in Iraq, in order for their generations to deliver His message. Noah was succeeded by Shem, who invented kingship, and after him by Salah. When Salah was on his deathbed, he entrusted the leadership of this extended family to his paternal cousin Jam, the grandson of Arphaxad. This small community of ancestors once spoke one language, Syriac, and lived together in an exalted location, Babylon. It was from Babylon during the time of Jam that they spread to the four corners of the globe after their languages had diverged and they were no longer able to communicate in the same language.

64 William Adler and Paul Tuffin, *The chronography of George Synkellos: a Byzantine chronicle of universal history from the creation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. xxxii–iii.

65 See Garth Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth: consequences of monotheism in late antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 12ff.

66 DA, pp. 11, 29–30, 38, 42.

Diverse human groups derive therefore from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The sons of Japheth (seven: Turk, Khazar, Şaqlāb, Tārīs, Mansak, Kamārā, al-Şīn) were given the region between the ‘East and the North’. The sons of Ham, who were also seven (al-Sind, al-Hind, al-Zanj, Qibt, Ḥabash, Nūba, Kanān) were given the regions of ‘the South and the West’. The descendants of Shem remained in the region of Babylon despite the divergence of their languages. Shem had five sons: Iram (who was the eldest and spoke Arabic), Arfakhshadh, ‘Ālam, Alyafar, and al-Aswar. The Semites eventually spread in the territories from eastern Anatolia to the Oxus River and the lands between them, while the sons of Arphaxad b. Shem and King Jam remained in Babylon.⁶⁷

Following Braude’s insightful evaluation of the biblical genesis story and its medieval evolution,⁶⁸ one should note that, like the biblical genesis tradition, of which Islamic genesis literature is a part, Islamic versions likewise fluctuate in the reconstruction of the origins of diverse human groups. According to al-Dīnawārī, human communities grew apart because of their differing tongues and subjection to separate kings. With the eventual emergence of distinct peoples in diverse regions from an original band of brothers and cousins, history becomes a platform of competition and interaction among various communities (*firqa*).⁶⁹ This perspective sets al-Dīnawārī apart from some of the major universal histories. Al-Ya’qūbī offers the details of the Abel and Cain controversy⁷⁰ and al-Ṭabarī allocates extensive pages, filled with reports and opinions denigrating Canaan, to the episode of Noah’s nakedness.⁷¹ However, al-Dīnawārī does not even mention the Abel–Cain dispute, thus eliminating the need to discuss later how the Canaanites joined the Cainites to form an anti-society. With this, he avoids the whole notion of the subjugation and damnation of certain human groups and races.

On Ham, al-Dīnawārī is silent concerning the whole issue of Noah’s nakedness and Ham’s behaviour, as well as Noah’s cursing of the Canaanites. By dropping this myth, he eschews at once the moral stigma associated with the Canaanites, while al-Ya’qūbī’s narrative accuses the Canaanites of laxity in morals and misbehaviour. Even though al-Dīnawārī anchors the genesis of human race in a prophetic line and grants a central role to the descendants of Shem, he nevertheless pictures the evolution of the linguistic, regional and political diversification of the human race as prompted not by an existential or ontological meta-cause, damnation, but rather strictly by historical causes that have to do with language and kingly politics.

As Shem and the Semites are the central line of the family of Noah, the region of Euphrates to Oxus, the land watered by the five rivers – Euphrates and Tigris, Seyhan and Ceyhan in the west and the Oxus River in the east – is ‘the center of the world’ and the

67 DA, pp. 1–3.

68 Benjamin Braude, ‘The Sons of Noah and the construction of ethnic and geographical identities in the medieval and early modern periods’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54, 1997, pp. 103–42. Edith R. Sanders, ‘The Hamitic hypothesis; its origin and functions in time perspective’, *Journal of African History*, 10, 1969, pp. 521–32. (I owe these references to the editors of the *JGH*.)

69 DA, pp. 1, 4, 6–7.

70 Al-Ya’qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1, pp. 15, 20.

71 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1, p. 125. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ma’ārif* p. 25: mentions the curse of Ham (‘Accursed is the father of Canaan’).

hearth of kingship.⁷² Compared to the Ptolemaic notion, which divides the habitable world into horizontal climes, al-Dīnawarī's geographical imagination, based on the Sasanid seven climes (*aqālīm*), which highlights Iraq as the centre and best of all, fits squarely with the theory of the *Kishvar*, which organizes the world around existing major kingdoms. Thus, the geographer al-Istakhri divides the world into four major polities in six climes: the Persian in the centre, surrounded by the Roman, Chinese, and Indian polities.⁷³

Al-Dīnawarī's perspective on the political significance of the Persian territories proved popular among the dynastic historians of the post-ʿAbbāsīd world, as Persian territories became the centre of attention of numerous conquerors throughout the medieval centuries. One such general history is the *Mujmal al-tawārīkh wa al-qīṣaṣ*, compiled around 1126, by an anonymous author, and which is about the history of the ancient Persian kings concluding with the Seljuks and the prophetic history culminating with Muḥammad. Beyond his emphasis on the conquests of Persian territories by Muslims, similar to al-Dīnawarī's coverage, his history centred on the history of Persia, more particularly on Iraq, perhaps to provide a geographical legitimacy to his patrons.⁷⁴

Al-Dīnawarī and Islamic historiography

Al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl is a work whose chief theme is to show the place of the Euphrates to Oxus region in universal history and, as scholars have already noted, the inter-connectedness of Islamic and Persian history.⁷⁵ Given the relatively small number of direct references to *al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl* in later sources, it seems that it never became a very popular source. However, *al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl* was not forgotten. It is only right to note the high regard adduced to al-Dīnawarī by al-Masʿūdī, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995) and Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023), which certainly points to his fame as a scholar of the highest calibre.⁷⁶ Four complete copies of the manuscript from the eleventh to the seventeenth century and occasional references to it on specific points show its availability among the learned: Al-ʿAynī, *ʿUmdat al-qārī* (on the number of Ham's sons), ʿUmar b. Aḥmad b. Jarāda, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tāriḫ Ḥalab* (on al-Muʿtaṣim and al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī), al-Qazwīnī, *al-Tadwīn fī akbbār Qazwīn* (on Bahrām), and Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, *Tārīkh al-Fāriqī*, cite al-Dīnawarī on a

72 DA, pp. 1, 34.

73 Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Fārisī al-Istakhri, *Masālik al-mamālik*, M. J. De Goeje, ed., *Biblioteca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Lugduni Batavorum: E. J. Brill, 1927, 1, pp. 3–4; Caroline Janssen, *Babil, the city of witchcraft and wine: the name and fame of Babylon in medieval Arabic geographical texts*, Ghent: University of Ghent, 1995, pp. 114–15.

74 Meisami, *Persian*, pp. 188–209. Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī (d. 1077), *Mujalladāt*, on the other hand shows indifference, if not disdain, for Persian history. See Meisami, *Persian*, pp. 107–8.

75 Daniel, *Historiography*; A. A. Duri, 'The Iraq school of history to the ninth century – a sketch', in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East*, p. 53.

76 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 172; ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿUmar al-Baghdādī, *Khizānat al-adab wa lub lubāb liṣān al-ʿArab*, ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī lī al-Kitāba wa al-Nashr, 1967, 1, p. 54; ʿAlī b. Al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawhar*, Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, ed. Reviewed and corrected by Charles Pellat, Beirut: Lebanese University, 1973, vol 3, p. 442; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, *sl.*, 1, p. 124; Sezgin, *GAS*, 4, p. 338.

number of occasions. One possible explanation of this discrepancy is the fact that medieval Muslim historians were not always meticulous in acknowledging their sources. Katib Çelebi makes a tantalizing claim of plagiarism that al-Mas'ūdī used to say concerning *al-Akhhbār al-tiwāl* that 'this book was large. Ibn Qutayba took what he [al-Dīnawarī] mentioned and attributed it to himself.'⁷⁷ It would otherwise seem odd that, while his perspective seems to have gained more popularity, his name grew fainter.

The early universal belletrist histories in general continued to be written in the broader approach initiated by al-Dīnawarī and al-Ya'qūbī and proliferated especially in the courts of numerous post-'Abbāsīd dynasties,⁷⁸ but they did not enjoy great popularity in subsequent centuries compared to al-Ṭabarī's work.⁷⁹ With the Samānids, the pre-Islamic Sasanian historical tradition received renewed attention. Under the Ghaznavids, Persian history continued to be a popular field of interest in courtly circles. Maḥmūd of Ghazna's brother, the Sipahsālār of Khurasān, commissioned al-Tha'ālibī to write his *Ghurur*, which included a lengthy account of the Persian kings. Al-Gardīzī, probably a minor official at Maḥmūd's court, likewise shows an interest in material belonging to other cultures, but his work remains anchored in Persian history.⁸⁰ His general history, *Zayn al-akhhbār*, treats the succession of the Persian kings and dynasties up to the Ghaznavids, who were depicted as the culmination of the succession of fortune. With its dramatic immediacy, eye for prophecies, attention to heresy and heretics, heroes, change of dynasties, and royal justice Al-Gardīzī's history reminds us of *al-Akhhbār al-tiwāl*.

The interaction between *ḥadīth* and belles-lettres and social change in general prompted a hybrid historiographical style, such as al-Miskawayh's work, *Experiences of the nations*, which harmonizes *ḥadīth* and *adab*. Although it follows the annalistic style of al-Ṭabarī up until 979–80, it differs greatly in its treatment of its subject in the years 907–80 in both style and substance. Compared to al-Ṭabarī, religious matters occupy no place in the work, not even the stories of the prophets and antediluvian history, while the reasons behind the cycle of dynasties and the methods of government are readily visible, perhaps because unlike some of his earlier belletrist colleagues he was actually involved in the world of politics and administration about which he was writing.⁸¹ His history owed little to the traditionalism of al-Ṭabarī, but much to the rationalism of al-Ya'qūbī and al-Dīnawarī.⁸²

Belletrist historians were able to inspire histories combining the princely advice genre and encyclopaedic compilations intended for the ruling elite in the post-'Abbāsīd dynastic milieu, as history was increasingly written for rulers, secretaries and bureaucrats, and

77 Katib Çelebi, Mustafa b. 'Abdullah Ḥajjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmī al-kutub wa al-funūn*, Şerefeddin Yalrkaya and Rifat Bilge, eds., Istanbul: Maarif Matbaası, 1941–43 (repr. Istanbul: Milli Eğitim, 1971), 1, p. 280. Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 1038) describes his work, *Laṭā'if al-ma'ārif (Curious and entertaining information)* as derived from history books 'in accordance with long days'. Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 129.

78 Daniel, 'Historiography'.

79 See Robinson, *Islamic*, p. 75.

80 Meisami, *Persian*, pp. 10, 51, 68–79.

81 Daniel, 'Historiography'.

82 Robinson, *Islamic*, p. 100.

patronized by them. The social dimension of this change had to do with the historians themselves. After the tenth century, many of them were employed as secretaries and bureaucrats. With their role as bureaucrats, they brought their linguistic training, the practice of government and the patronage of the rulers to historical prose,⁸³ making history a mine of lessons, advice, and a guide for the ruling elite in how to administer and rule more effectively. The history of Ibn al-Azraq (d. after 1181), who cites al-Dīnawarī on multiple occasions, is such a work. Although the work is a local history (Mayyāfāriqīn) with much attention given to the Marwānids and the Artūqids, its interests are certainly much broader, resembling a collection bringing together material from the past and present for the purposes of practical politics, wisdom, lessons, and entertainment.⁸⁴

Although many historians wrote in Arabic, Persian was certainly a competing language in the post-'Abbāsīd world, indeed increasing in prominence. In general, the Persianate historiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries shows less insistence on an exact chronological order and classification by years, and a marked preference for continuous narrative, a predilection for edifying anecdotes, and for depicting the history of Islam as a series of dynasties. A case in point is al-Ṭabarī's Persian translation, commissioned by the Samānīd ruler Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ in 963 CE, and done by Bal'amī (d. 974). The 'translation' is actually a radical reworking of al-Ṭabarī in order to fit the belletrist historiographical taste in vogue in the courts of Persian and Turkic rulers. First, Bal'amī's is an abridgement. There is no chain of transmission, and not even an annalistic narrative. Secondly, the prose is modified to match belletrist writing, with dramas, plots and added material.⁸⁵ Conceptually, as Meisami points out, Persian history is central to Bal'amī, and Islamic history is presented from a Persian, largely Khurasānian, perspective.⁸⁶ No wonder that it subsequently became very popular in the Persian-speaking world that inspired additional translations from Arabic to Persian following the same style.

The aspirations of historians projected, in this new socio-political reality, the ambitions not of the caliphate, but of dynasties of Persian, Turkic, and Mongol origins, weaving together histories which culminated in their respective domains of kingly authority. In that sense, the inspiration of al-Dīnawarī, and his belletrist colleagues, or the socio-political atmosphere they anticipated or perceived, made possible works explicitly focusing on universal history and Persian imperial heritage, even when the dynasties for which the histories were written were not Persian. Rashīd ad-Dīn Fadhlullāh al-Hamadānī (d. 1318) wrote in Persian his *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh* (*Compendium of histories*) under the patronage the Ilkhānīd ruler Ghazān Khān. The work was conceived as a world history with information on Chinese, Indian, Western European and Jewish history.⁸⁷ This approach made sense in such courts because what it suggested about religion and imperial heritage fitted the aspirations of rulers who had either just recently converted to Islam, or sought universal authority,

83 Robinson, *Islamic*, pp. 100–01.

84 See 'Awaḍ's introduction to Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, *Tārīkh al-Fāriqī*, B. A. L. 'Awaḍ, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1974, pp. 21ff.

85 Daniel, 'Historiography'; Meisami, *Persian*, p. 27.

86 Meisami, *Persian*, p. 29.

87 See, Rosenthal, *A history*, pp. 147–8.

even though in practice many failed to achieve it.⁸⁸ It is important to reconsider what al-Dīnawarī was attempting to do precisely because the marginality of his outlook in the ninth and early tenth centuries was due to the overshadowing image of the caliphate constructed by the traditionists. Once that shadow waned, the outlook he presented began to make more sense to belletrist historians. It is likewise from this vantage point that we better understand not only al-Dīnawarī's work but also the ideological and political tension in medieval Islamic historiography.

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88 Khalidi, *Arabic*, p. 129; Daniel, 'Historiography'.