

Heather Keaney,

Medieval Islamic Historiography: Remembering Rebellion,

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Heather Keaney's *Medieval Islamic Historiography: Remembering Rebellion* seeks to analyze the development of Islamic historiography from the 9th century to the 14th century by means of a close case study on histories of 'Uthmān b. 'Affān's caliphate. She argues that the memory of his caliphate and life-story act as a kind of microcosm in which the most critical tensions of Islamic historiography and Islamic intellectual history are brought to the fore. These tensions center around four dichotomies: historiography vs. hagiography, Sunni vs. Shi'i theology, religious vs. political authority, and the pursuit of justice vs. the preservation of unity. She hopes that a detailed study of portrayals of 'Uthmān's caliphate in 9th-14th century historiographic texts will provide fresh insight into these tensions.

She details her methodology in the first chapter, where she presents her work as a close case-study of a single, historiographically momentous event (the caliphate of 'Uthmān b. 'Affān) that seeks to shed light not on the event itself but on the underlying shifts in medieval historiography that are highlighted by its changing portrayals within that historiographic literature. To detect these underlying changes, she closely inspects historians' *strategies of compilation* – what reports historians chose to include, which ones they chose to repeat or emphasize, and how they arranged different reports together in order to bolster their own positions on the story. This idea of strategies of compilation is relatively new; up to the 2000s most Western scholarship had seen the medieval Islamic historian as a mere compiler of reports or paraphraser of earlier works, possessing no authorial intent himself. Such a view prevented scholars of Islamic historiography from understanding the very real potential for the medieval compiler to arrange the compiled reports in a way which complements best his own interpretation of the past and his own positions within contemporary debates. It is precisely this potential that Keaney focuses on and through analyzing the strategies of compilation of various medieval historians on this one event, she attempts to trace the development of four lasting debates within Islamic historiography.

These four debates, introduced earlier, are summarized as follows: first, history vs. hagiography, by which Keaney is referring to, respectively, texts which

are historical – i.e. concerned with chronology, causation and context – and texts which are ahistorical. Examples of the historical are chronicles and histories, and examples of the ahistorical are texts of the *fadā'il* or *manāqib* genre, describing the merits of Companions as reported from the Prophet. The second tension fits nicely with this historiography/hagiography split; it is about the conflict between Sunni and Shi'ī theology and epistemology. Keaney's general argument is that Sunni-Shi'ī conflict played an important role in directing the growth of the two historiographic genres mentioned above. While on the one hand, hagiography was developed as a means for Sunni historians to defend the memory of all Companions, on the other, political histories were used by Shi'ī scholars to censure the policies of 'Uthmān and the Umayyads.

Third is the tension between religious and political authority. This also overlays the Sunni vs. Shi'ī tension, since Shi'ī thought saw religious and political authority as rightfully united in the Imam whereas Sunni scholars came to accept the *de facto* separation between religious and political authority in the post-Rightly-Guided Caliphs era. Questions concerning what justifies a ruler's legitimacy and to what domains his rule extends are addressed within the discourse of this dynamic. Claims to legitimacy are also a central issue in the fourth tension: preserving unity vs. pursuing justice. Both with their fair share of justifications and evidences from the core Islamic legal sources, these two competing goals play a critical role in shaping interpretations of 'Uthmān's behavior towards the rebels; according to Keaney, we can generalize and say that 'Uthmān's detractors sought what they believed to be justice while 'Uthmān and his supporters prioritized the unity of the Muslim community.

Keaney's key assumption is that she will be able to detect the individual historian's positions in all of these debates by closely analyzing how he portrayed 'Uthmān's caliphate. Having thus introduced in Chapter One the lens through which she studies these texts and the thematic debates she is focusing on, Keaney begins in Chapter Two to systematically analyze a number of historians from each century between the 9th and the 14th. The remainder of the book continues chronologically and for each period she selects a number of what she deems representative historiographic and hagiographic texts as sources.

Chapter Two focuses on 9th-century sources, which represent the earliest extant historiographic texts on the events studied. Among these one finds many of the "giant" texts of Islamic historiography: those of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Sa'd, Aḥmad b.

Ḥanbal and others. They served as the foundations for the dichotomic sub-genres of Islamic historiography. Ibn Ḥanbal's text, for instance, set the standard for future *manāqib* literature on 'Uthmān by focusing not on his actions during the caliphate, but rather his virtues as attested to during the lifetime of the Prophet. Moreover, al-Ṭabarī's history as well as al-Baladhūrī's and Ibn Sa'd's biographical dictionaries paved the road for future political and military chronicles and portray 'Uthmān in a still positive, yet more problematized and more politicized light.

Chapter Three builds on this dichotomy, demonstrating how in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, political chronicles expanded to include pre-Islamic Persian values of leadership and took on a distinctly Shi'i bent. Simultaneously, sacred hagiography became more entrenched in its goal of portraying the Companions as ideal, timeless, and pure figures, leaving out the political and historical realities of the early caliphates. This hagiography also came to represent Sunni theology in its staunch defense of all Companions. Thus, one of the above debates — Sunni vs. Shi'i — was now laid parallel to a second debate — historiography vs. hagiography. This division between the two types of scholarship resulted in “two competing images of 'Uthman the Companion and 'Uthman the caliph” (74).

Chapter Four discusses how these two separate strands of scholarship had been growing farther apart until the end of the 12th century. However, early in the 13th century, as part of a temporary lean towards reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'i scholarship and reflecting the political pragmatism of the time, a number of Sunni historians took up the issue of 'Uthmān's caliphate with an approach more critical than their immediate scholarly predecessors. Among these were Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī and Ibn al-Athīr. This resurgence of Sunni historiographic interest in a more critical, al-Ṭabarī-esque history of the events of 'Uthmān's caliphate led Sunni hagiographers to feel obligated to respond and reassert the unambiguous innocence of 'Uthmān. Yet they could not do so by simply ignoring his caliphate and treating him only as a Companion, as hagiographers in the preceding three centuries had done. Rather, the nature of the contemporary debate forced them to engage in the issues of 'Uthmān's caliphate. Their response was that 'Uthmān dealt as best he could with such issues. This was new territory for hagiography, and represented a kind of convergence between historiography and hagiography even though the two were approaching the same topics for very different reasons.

Chapter Five deals with the tumultuous 14th century, when debates on religious and political authority were granted new importance with the Mongol

conquest of Baghdad and the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate. There was a “growing desire to re-evaluate early sources and place events within their proper historical perspective,” a desire whose peak was represented by the work of Ibn Khaldūn, who sought “to understand, rather than defend or condemn” (132). Yet while works of historiography and hagiography continued to differ in their portrayal of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate, there seemed to be a universal consensus which was formed as a result of the crises of the preceding decades: that the caliphate as an institution must not be undermined. Even those historians who criticize ‘Uthmān’s choices as a caliph reject any form of military rebellion against the caliph. The scholars specifically studied in this chapter are al-Nuwayrī, Ibn al-Dawādārī, al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Khaldūn. Having reached the end of the 14th century, she ends her work highlighting the need for a revised understanding of the early years of Islam and of their portrayal in Islamic historiography.

Her intended audience is probably intermediate or advanced students of Islamic historiography. Keaney does not provide a general history of the events of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate or of the preceding caliphates but rather assumes that the reader has a general understanding of the political context of these early events. However, for later centuries, in particular the 13th and 14th, she does provide more political and military context.

In any case, more than lack of contextualization, her work suffers from an overreliance on strategies of compilation. While acknowledging the role of strategies of compilation within Islamic historiography is a welcome development which moves the field beyond the “mere paraphraser” paradigm of medieval historiography, I think that the author takes the methodology to its extremes and overcompensates for its earlier lack by putting too much stock in its effectiveness. Specifically, she disregards the constricting nature of genre convention over individual historians and their choices of compilation. For example, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s inclusion of reports focusing on ‘Uthmān’s life as a Companion, not a caliph, is seen in Keaney’s approach as intentional whitewashing. However, whatever intention Ibn Ḥanbal himself might have, the genre he worked in was that of the *hadith* and by the conventions of this genre, he was directed to primarily report the sayings of the Prophet, which by their very nature tend to focus on ‘Uthmān’s life as a Companion, not a caliph. Thus what Keaney interprets as whitewashing can perhaps be better explained by focusing on the conventions of the genre within which Ibn Ḥanbal was studying.

A second issue with Keaney's usage of the *strategies of compilation* tool is that she reduces all author intentionality down to the four tensions introduced earlier. So, taking Ibn Ḥanbal again as an example, according to Keaney's approach if he repeats or omits certain *hadith*, it is because he wants to bolster his position in terms of Sunni-Shi'i debate or of the conflict between religious and political authority or in some other combination of those four debates. She overlooks all the other reasons that might have influenced the historian's choices of compilation. She thus ignores Ibn Ḥanbal's unique project of gathering and systematically arranging *hadith* collections as well as al-Bukhārī's and Muslim's project of compiling only the most sound *hadith*. That these scholars might have had intellectual goals beyond arguing about the four tensions she has listed is largely ignored.

These examples highlight one of the key flaws of this approach: it attempts to understand the intentions of an author by studying a) the author's text and b) the author's political, social and intellectual context. However, such a goal is unattainable and attempting to guess an author's motivations and intentions leaves much room for the observer to insert his own biases and assumptions into the portrayal of the original author's intentions. In Keaney's case, this means that the vast majority of the intentions guiding these medieval historians is political. For her, if a scholar portrays 'Uthmān positively, it is probably because his political patron would benefit from such a portrayal and if he offers a negative portrayal, it is again for the same reason. She has thus made room to recognize author intentionality, but only when that intentionality corresponds to her conceptions of why a reasonable person would make certain choices. For instance, Ibn al-Jawzī "supported the *fadā'il* image of the Companions up to a point, but did not idealize 'Uthman in a way that would highlight the shortcomings of his own less-than-perfect patron" (60). That Ibn al-Jawzī's intentions are politically oriented is accepted *a priori*.

To be fair, this understanding of intentionality does change somewhat in later sections of the work where she suggests that a number of 14th century scholars may have been more concerned with accurately narrating history than with bolstering their own positions. However, taken as a whole, such a concession comes too little, too late.

In addition to these theoretical and methodological issues, the work also suffers from a truncated bibliography. As Antoine Borrut mentions in his own review of the same title, the work's robust selection of Arabic primary sources is

in stark contrast to the lack of any Persio-Islamic histories. Similarly, while she makes use of a respectable number of English secondary sources, she references no non-English works, even though there is a large corpus relevant to her topic. If I may add one more source to Borrut's list of suggested additions, I would mention Ulrika Mårtensson's "Discourse and Historical Analysis: The Case of al-Ṭabarī's History of the Messengers and the Kings." Through a close study of the economic and political context of the 9th Abbasid court, Mårtensson argues for a causal link between the context within which al-Ṭabarī wrote and his choices in portraying certain pre-Islamic events (Persian tax-farming practice, for instance). Although the piece has many of the same assumptions that I find problematic in this book, it gives a good idea of what a more limited (in scope) but also more nuanced version of Keaney's project might look like.

Finally, the work also suffers from a number of smaller issues. Her sources consist of a good number of classical Arabic texts; nevertheless, certain mistakes in translation and transliteration raise doubts, albeit small, about the accuracy of her reading of the primary source material. Mistakes in recording the titles of texts (e.g. she writes *Kitab al-ansab al-ashraf* rather than *Kitab ansab al-ashraf*) and inconsistencies in her methodology of transliteration (e.g. she will demarcate the long vowel "ā" in *fadā'il* but not in *al-ansab*) bode ill for the exactitude of her reading methods. She makes a handful of other mistakes that do not have a direct bearing on the subject of her work but nonetheless suggest a weaker understanding of general Islamic history and civilization. To mention only some of these mistakes: she makes the rather egregious error of switching Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān when she says some reports emphasize how the former came to Islam through the later and she employs the term *khawārij* anachronistically.

By themselves such mistakes would be tolerable, but taken together they give the impression of a work whose potential is undercut by its inaccuracy. Yet the underlying idea – that one can understand the development of medieval historiography by studying various portrayals of this one critical set of events – is clear and ambitious. Although there may be flaws in some of her core assumptions, we nonetheless have much to gain from the great breadth and vision of her case study of medieval texts within their contexts.

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