

## Communication and Contention: The Role of Literacy in Conflicts with ‘Abbāsīd Officials

### Peer Review

Upon reviewing the article submitted, “Communication and Contention: The Role of Literacy in Conflicts with ‘Abbāsīd Officials,” I would recommend acceptance after a few minor revisions—copy-editing based and content-based—are made. For the review, I will first address the content-based suggested revisions. As the focus of *History Compass* articles is to provide as accessible an overview of a particular area of study as possible, this article goes a long way in addressing the literature on two very broad topics. The difficulty inherent in this particular article, however, is that the two topics covered, “discussions of the consequences of the introduction and dissemination of the written word,” and “the various ways of analyzing conflicts and their settlements in (medieval) studies,” may, at times, lead a scholar down two often-divergent paths. The author should be commended for addressing both and bringing in some of the key works from a variety of fields and disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

That being said, I do believe that there are a few instances in which the author could add other works and expand upon the discussion a bit more so that the reader may better ascertain both the complexity and importance of the topics covered. As to the first topic addressed—dealing with “the introduction and dissemination of the written word”—I suggest the author incorporate the work of Chase Robinson’s *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) into the overview of medieval Islam. In his introduction (“Origins”) and throughout the section on “Contexts,” Robinson discusses the effects of an oral society on its “historiography” (or lack thereof). What is more, Robinson’s coverage of the challenges and ramifications of moving from an oral to a lettered society—a society in which “history” goes from being plastic and malleable as it is passed from one person and/or one generation to the next to a society in which “history” is presumably static/fixed although hotly contested—is quite helpful. In addition, Robinson, much like the author of the article under review, has done the requisite legwork, and a perusal of his bibliography and footnotes would not be amiss.

Another author, whose coverage of “Islamic History” as a field has become *de rigueur*, is R. Stephen Humphreys and his *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, revised edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). Humphreys provides an effective and accessible introduction to Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> As a scholar of medieval Islamic history, I can speak to the author’s coverage of that field; in my own readings on oral and lettered societies beyond medieval Islamic society, the author appears to have covered the requisite ground.

Historiography from a technical standpoint as opposed to Robinson's and the author's conceptual standpoint. Nonetheless, his addressing of such issues as narrative and propaganda, fiscal administration, and the like as "case studies" in the work make it a worthwhile addition to the coverage already provided. Although there have been no further published revisions since 1991, in relation to many of the works covered in the article, it is comparatively current, and extremely useful.

Whereas I did not find the latter two works discussed or in the bibliography, Chamberlain's excellent survey of thirteenth-century Damascene society was mentioned, albeit in a footnote.<sup>2</sup> The author is *Michael* Chamberlain, not Richard. What is more, Chamberlain's focus on Damascene *fitnas* during the thirteenth-century among the *ʿayān* (notable) families centers on the issue of education and literacy. This appears to be an area of importance to the topics of literacy and conflict and I would have thought that more on Chamberlain's efforts would have been offered. On a similar note, Roy Mottahedeh's *Loyalty and Leadership in and Early Islamic Society*, Revised Edition, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), and its privileging of the language of conflict, inclusion and exclusion, might add to the overall coverage of the second topic under discussion in the article.

As to the copy-editing revisions, there is not much I can offer specifically in this format. The flow of the article is relatively smooth and the ideas conveyed or done so in a clear and concise manner. There are some stylistically awkward points when discussing time-frames within the article ("present Egypt," discussion of the decades when certain works were written) that may be clarified and/or changed. I will leave that to the editors and author.

I believe that is a decent article that fulfills its stated goals. With the addition of a few more works and the expansion of the discussion on one in particular (Chamberlain), I believe that the readers of said article will walk away with a newfound respect for both the complexity of medieval Islamic society's lettered tradition as well as a fascination with the myriad ways in which administrative officials conducted their professional *and* personal business.

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote 37, p. 20.