

Teaching Note

Why Do We Need a New Textbook?

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Back in early 2007, when I started teaching an undergraduate survey course on Islamic history, I was frustrated in my search for teaching materials that would align with how I had come to appreciate that history. There definitely were great history textbooks out there (Hodgson, Lapidus, Hourani, Endress & Hillenbrand, Egger, Choueiri, Noth & Paul, Haarmann, Garcin, et al.). Islamic history research had, however, been expanding rapidly, and its diversifying fields of specialization continued to generate exciting new insights and interpretations, which even the more recent of these textbooks had not yet managed to fully acknowledge. I therefore became one of the many colleagues who take it upon themselves to integrate this ongoing research into their lectures and generate

their own comprehensive overviews. This gargantuan task first took shape in the default format of annually updated and upgraded personal lecture notes, but it soon transformed into a textbook publication project that took the challenge to keep our teaching materials up to date more seriously. Now, more than a decade later, this project has finally borne the desired fruit.¹

A History of the Islamic World, 600–1800 presents one of the ways in which today a history of the Islamic world can be written and taught. This involved making several key decisions. The temporal and geographical parameters that define and connect the chapters of this textbook emphasize the intense Asian connectedness of the landscapes ranging from the Nile in the southwest

1. Jo Van Steenbergem, *A History of the Islamic World, 600–1800. Empire, Dynastic Formations, and Heterogeneities in Pre-Modern Islamic West-Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

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and the Bosphorus in the northwest to the Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) in the northeast and the Indus in the southeast between the seventh and eighteenth centuries CE. This means that I made the choice to tell only the story of what Marshall Hodgson called the pre-Technical and Theocratic age, defined here as the late antique and ‘medieval’-early modern periods, in Islamic West Asia’s history. Central to the framework of historical interpretation that I use to tell this story is the argument of the mutually constitutive interaction between dynastic reconfigurations and cultural efflorescence and, in particular, between practices of power and discourses of belonging in the making and remaking of premodern Islamic West Asia’s diverse social and cultural landscapes. This connected social and cultural history approach enables the reconstruction of a particular, but also meaningful, framework narrative about different waves in premodern Islamic history’s ocean of events, people, and stories. Not only did each of these waves carry diverse but related sets of leadership groups; they also continued to do so defined by multifarious but equally related sets of practices and discourses. The analytical grid—insufficiently specified in many textbooks—used to reconstruct the narrative of these leaderships, practices, and discourses combines a Khaldunian reading of the historical interaction between nomads and urban dwellers with a Weberian conceptual framework of different types of legitimate authority.

A History of the Islamic World, 600–1800 explains how two major historical waves in the Khaldunian movement of nomadic-urban interaction can be usefully identified as coherent time-space units of social

and cultural history. A first, late antique imperial wave started swelling during the Arabian expansion from the early seventh century and lost momentum in the course of the complete disintegration of the Abbasid imperial formation in the tenth century. A second, ‘medieval’-early modern dynastic wave then took over in the polycentric form of a long series of invasions by Inner Asian Turkic- and Mongolian-speaking leaderships from the early eleventh century onward, and the social and cultural effects of their conquest practices and (post-)nomadic stabilizations appeared to peter out only with the radical transformations of the region’s early modern dynastic formations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first wave is traditionally, and rightly, deemed of enormous importance and relevance. The second wave, however, is often considered to represent only a ‘postclassical’ shadow of the first. One of the contentions of this textbook is that this stereotype does not hold true and, therefore, this second period of dynastic polycentrism, creative heterogeneity, and being Islamic also deserves full attention and appreciation in its own right. Only when one understands the intensity, innovativeness, and decisive impact of leadership configurations, social and cultural practices, and discourses of belonging in both periods can one fully estimate the further, modern trajectories of these regions’ social and cultural histories. The two chronological parts and fourteen illustrated chapters of *A History of the Islamic World, 600–1800* therefore invite students and teachers as well as general readers and specialists to be acquainted with, and reflect on, such new understandings of Islamic history.