

Near Eastern Studies Seminar

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"Forgetting al-Khwārizmī's History"

January 25, 4:00 to 6:00 pm in the West Seminar Room at IAS

Abstract:

Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Khwārizmī (d. after 232/847) is arguably one of the most famous scholars of the early 'Abbāsīd period. He was notoriously attached to al-Ma'mūn's *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, and enjoys an impressive scholarly fame and legacy, ranging from algebra and mathematics to astronomy, geography, or cartography. Yet, he has been almost totally forgotten as a historian, even if it is well established that he wrote a now lost *Kitāb al-ta'riḫ*. I have long been puzzled by this situation: why would he have vanished as a historian, while remaining a prominent authority in so many other fields? This is a truly vexing question if we bear in mind that al-Khwārizmī's *History* is more or less contemporary with that written by Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854), who composed what is usually considered to be one of the oldest complete Islamic chronographies that has come down to us. Any access to al-Khwārizmī's lost *Ta'riḫ* is thus critical to shed light on 'Abbāsīd historiography in the making. This paper will argue that such an access to al-Khwārizmī's *Ta'riḫ* is possible, with due methodological precautions, through the fragments preserved in later Muslim and non-Muslim sources alike, the latter perhaps best exemplified by the East-Syriac chronicler Elias of Nisibis (d. 438/1046). I will try to shed some light on the importance of this work, its content, genre, and originality. I will also attempt to trace the transmission of al-Khwārizmī's historical material to understand how he was forgotten as a historian. This will lead us to explore much-neglected historiographical genres, in particular astrological histories, to address the construction of historical knowledge in the early Abbasid period, and to re-evaluate the alleged "gap" of narrative sources that we are facing for early Islam.