If one had to rely upon a single word to sum up the historiography of the Mediterranean post-the Islamic conquests, it would have to be "contentious." Henri Pirenne set the tone of the debate with the assertion that: "Henceforth two different and hostile civilizations existed on the shores of Mare Nostrum..." Conversely, Fernand Braudel argued that "The Mediterranean (and the accompanying Greater Mediterranean) is as man has made it. The wheel of human fortune has determined the destiny of the sea, expanding or contracting its area."

Scholarship from the Islamic perspective has also been divided. There is the view that parallels the Pirennian one, namely that the Mediterranean was the last buttress between the Muslims and the Dar al-Harb (Abode of War). In contrast there is also the view that the Muslims did not really care much about Europe; or that, if they did care, it was only from the point of view of trade.

The Muslim geographers also paint a conflicted picture—one that vacillates between the sensational and banal. Tales of the wrath of God abound. The geographers write of a rough, out-of-control sea that takes pleasure in drowning Muslim sailors and makes a loud roar at night, particularly Thursday nights, i.e. on the eve of the Muslim day of prayer. They describe in great detail the terrible creatures that torment the sea, such as the monster "Tinnin" whose tail rises in the Black Sea and head in the Atlantic, near the mouth of the Mediterranean. The geographer al-Muqaddasi (ca. d. late tenth century C. E.) suggests that the Mediterranean was anything but a "Muslim lake."

Mostly the geographers portray a banal, dispassionate view: That of a traveler going from one end of the Mediterranean to the other; passing in itinerant fashion one place after another around the littoral of the sea. This view is often coupled with technical details debating the length and width of the sea; its tides; where it narrows and where it spreads out, etc.

But what about the view through maps? Specifically medieval Islamic ones? This is the question that I propose to address from the point of view of a large corpus of maps that accompany, in atlas-like fashion, a specific series of geographical texts that are generally known by the universal title of their most prolific copy: The Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms). These illustrated map manuscripts first make their appearance sometime in the mid-10th century and spawn a popular copying tradition that begins in the Abbasid heartlands of Iraq and continues through the 16th century in the Ottoman empire and the 19th century in Mughal India and Qajar Iran.
There is a particular iconic form that dominates every image. I focus upon aspects of these forms and their subtle variations. In particular I address the depiction of the Mediterranean in the "full" or "regional" view as well as maps of the world and the Maghrib.