

Reviews of Books

An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities. Edited and translated by YOSSEF RAPOPORT and EMILIE SAVAGE-SMITH. Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science, vol. 87. Leiden: BRILL, 2014. Pp. xii + 698, illus. \$289, €223.

In 2002 the Bodleian Library, Oxford, acquired a new Arabic manuscript of quite unusual importance, a major find well worth its substantially high price of £400,000. This relatively short work consists of only forty-eight folios, some of which, however, contain unique maps and illustrations from a fairly early period. The treatise itself, which does not mention an author and is therefore so far anonymous, carries the title *Kitāb Gharāʾib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-ʿuyūn*, which the editors translate as “The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes.” Subsequent study of this text went on to establish and then confirm over and over again how significant it was for, first of all, the history of cartography, with its detailed maps such as the one of the Mediterranean, but others as well, all but otherwise unknown. As an example in the genre of books of geography and of curiosities, it also stands out with its own special significance. Finally, it can claim a remarkable place among the historical remnants of the Fatimids and their empire as somehow a product of the rich intellectual tradition they created in Egypt at the time of its composition.

The treatise contains two parts (sing. *maqāl*). The first, comprising ten chapters (*fuṣūl*), deals with the heavens; the second treats the earth in twenty-five chapters. There is a tremendous quantity of information packed into the few pages devoted to each chapter, often as notations on a chart or a map, but also in sections of exposition associated with a given item. Exactly what is covered, however, is itself here and there a curiosity. The first section includes material about the form of the universe, zodiacal constellations, stars, and occult influences, comets, obscure stars, planets (including their association with ominous and propitious events), and the blowing of winds. The second section covers such matters as the form of the earth, its size, and inhabited and uninhabited areas. Here we find several of the most interesting maps, including one of the whole earth, and lists and discussions of such topics as cities of the remote regions (chapter five); various seas, cities, and fortresses around the shores of the Indian Ocean (chapter seven); the Syrian sea and its harbors, islands, and anchorages (chapter ten); the Caspian Sea, the large islands of the seas (among them Sicily, which is depicted in detail with a full map), the peninsula of al-Mahdiyya (in North Africa), Tinnīs (in the Egyptian delta), islands controlled by the infidels, such as Cyprus, Crete, Rhodes, Sardinia, Sri Lanka, Socotra, the Maldives, and Sumatra, and the bays of Byzantium (chapter sixteen); the lakes (marshes) that are the source of the Nile, maps of the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Indus, and the Oxus, aquatic creatures, deformed humans, wondrous waters, strange plants, wild animals, and, finally, birds.

The inclusions in this list seem mostly unremarkable given that this is a book of curiosities, but a few stand out, particularly the chapters on al-Mahdiyya and Tinnīs. Why them and not, for example, other cities or ports? Alexandria hardly merits a comment, let alone a map, yet al-Mahdiyya and Tinnīs receive careful treatment and a map, both of high quality. The one of al-Mahdiyya shows the palaces of the Ismaili Fatimid imams in stunningly vibrant colors and fine detail. Here, accordingly, it is essential to ask about date and place. Although we do not know, as yet, who wrote it, could these be viable clues in the text that indicate, or at least suggest, where and when it was written?

Once it was available in the Bodleian, scholars begin to work on these and other related questions about the manuscript. The ensuing process of inquiry has occupied the substantial attentions of many, most especially the two editor-translators, Emily Savage-Smith and Yossef Rapoport. Already by 2007 the Library had posted on its website a high-quality reproduction along with Arabic transcription and English translation. By then much had been discovered and disclosed about the work, including the existence of additional copies from later periods, although all of distinctly poorer quality and less complete, lacking in most cases the illustrations, maps, and other items, except as, in a few cases, crude

drawings. But, with another reading of the work, variants could be used to amend the Arabic text. (One of these additional copies served as the source on which al-Mahdi Eid al-Rawadih based an edition, which he published in 2011 in Beirut.) Nevertheless, none of this scholarship provided a clear answer about an author.

The search for possible evidence internal to the work to determine time and place turned up several issues immediately. One is the inclusion of an Idrīsī-style world map (*Tabula Rogeriana*, 1154 C.E.) that indicates a rather late date, well beyond the context of most of the material in the work. Rapoport and Savage-Smith are fairly certain that this map was inserted long after either the composition of the rest or its redaction in the present form. A second problem is the citation of Ibn Bassām's descriptive treatise on Tinnīs, which by itself surely stems from the early eleventh century since it mentions nothing concerning this city from a later period. But Ibn Bassām is supposedly the author also of a work on *hisba* that has been thought to date from much later. The editors, however, suggest that, if both works are by the same author—they have the same or quite similar names—it is not likely that the *hisba* treatise is in fact later. They therefore now date it to the eleventh century as well.

With those two issues resolved, the key evidence comes down to (1) the latest dates mentioned and (2) events that might have been cited but are not. The latter concerns the eviction by the Fatimids from Egypt of the Banū Qurra about 1050. The text regards them as still present in the Delta and thus it must be from an earlier period. Three events from the reign of the caliph al-Ḥākim are mentioned, all three precisely dated. In the chapter on Tinnīs we find a comment that this city once contained seventy-two churches until this caliph ordered their destruction in 403 (1012/13) and another about the building of *funduqs* and markets there in 405 (1014/15). Yet one more interesting detail occurs in the long list of stars, among which is one specifically connected to the revolt against the Fatimids of the Andalusian adventurer Abū Rakwa, which was so serious it nearly brought about their collapse over the course of the summer of 396 (1006). Incidentally, this particular star, which, in the popular mind of the time, was associated closely with the rise and fall of Abū Rakwa, was in fact a supernova, the brightest ever recorded, and it is well known as SN1006, a fact apparently unknown to the editors.

Thus, it makes good sense to date our text between about 1020 and 1050. As for place, the rather obvious preponderance of Egypt, including words in Coptic, coupled with a clear indication that the author was a subject of the Fatimids, suggests Egypt. The opening lines of the work call upon God to bless the Prophet Muḥammad “and those of his leaders in his community who have descended from him, the virtuous chosen, the most excellent caliphs.” This is a formula often used by those loyal to the Fatimids, even among the Sunnis, such as in works, to give two examples, of the famous Qāḍī al-Quḍāʿī and the amir al-Musabbiḥī, both Sunni but nevertheless adherents of this dynasty. And both prominent at the time indicated. Thus, the author need not on this evidence have been Ismaili. The chapter on al-Mahdiyya may say more, however. The small legend on its map above the palaces says “the palaces of the imams, on whom be peace” (*quṣūr al-aʿimma ʿalayhim al-salām*). The use of the word “imam” (plus the pious benediction) instead of “caliph” would appear to indicate religious as opposed to political loyalty.

Preparing a text as complicated as this one, with its wide range of data covering many subjects, often presented as legends or lists in charts and maps, frequently replete with unknowns and obscurities, was obviously a daunting task. We are fortunate therefore to have this result. Clearly the Bodleian and the editors deserve special thanks and our gratitude. And for those of us who still prefer a hard copy, a book to hold in the hand and peruse without a machine involved, it is especially nice that Brill provides a bound printed version.

This volume thus contains a careful learned introduction, a full facsimile copy on glossy paper, a transcription of the Arabic with notations of variants in other manuscripts, corrections and emendations, and coded number references from the maps to the transcription (pp. 38–320). The two parts, which accord with the right-to-left orientation of Arabic, are followed by the extensively annotated translation (pp. 325–527) in the other direction (left-to-right). Then, there is a long glossary of star names (pp. 529–662) arranged apparently according to some form of alphabetical order based on transliterations, although exactly what is not everywhere clear. Lastly, following the bibliography, there are indexes (of land animals, marine animals, insects, birds, plants, astrological terms, people, and places).

Whoever prepared the indexes, however, cannot have known much about the subject. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is listed (p. 693) as an Umayyad caliph (quite possibly for the first and only time in Islamic history). On p. 698 ‘Ubayd Allāh is a “Fatimid Imam, fl. 304–9/916–21” whereas two pages earlier he is somewhat more correctly said to be “al-Mahdī bi-Allāh, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad,” the first Fatimid caliph, with correct dates of his rule. This is the name the text gives him, although it should have been Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh. How this error occurred is unknown, but the author of this text should have known better, most particularly if he was an Ismaili.

Of course, indexes are often an afterthought or not the work of the main editor, author, or translators. However, there are some signs that work on the edition and especially the translation was not always done in its various stages by a single hand or checked carefully for conformity. The Arabic *maṣallā* (in its dual form) appears twice in reference to a suburb of Tinnīs, once translated as “two prayer places” (p. 471) and the other as “two prayer houses” (p. 475). The latter cannot be correct and is misleading; the festival prayer grounds normally have no built structure (except perhaps a *minbar*). In the chapter where al-Mahdī is mentioned a sentence begins: “The Mahdī may the peace of God be upon him, passed away. . . .” This Fatimid caliph had the title al-Mahdī but he was not the Mahdī.

Nevertheless, despite a few things to quibble about, the whole volume represents an impressive achievement, both as the study of a single Arabic manuscript in all its fascinating detail, and in the assembling of the learning needed to begin to explain what it is and how important.

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Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays. Edited by PETER ADAMSON. Cambridge: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. Pp. xi + 300. \$99, £55.

There is little doubt that one of the real success stories of recent times in Islamic Studies has been the flourishing of intellectual history, especially with respect to the study of philosophy. We have a much better understanding of the course of rationalities (and perhaps even a-rationalities) in the world of Islam than ever before, from the rise in the focus on the “post-classical” period, which stretches from the systematic popularization of philosophy in a range of intellectual and seminary disciplines, to the initial encounter with colonial modernity during the eighteenth century and beyond, all the way to a deeper understanding of the “Avicennan” turn in *kalām*. The turn toward more serious philosophical reflection on the work of Avicenna himself has been part of this process and in many ways this book under review is the critical and essential guide to the state of Avicennan studies today. This is an opportune moment for such a work to be available, as new critical editions of texts along with highly useful translations of his works and editions of those he influenced, whether in the Latin West or the Islamic East, have appeared. Highlights include Mujtabā Zārī’s 2004 edition of *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* and Ḥusayn Mūsavīyān’s edition of the different recensions of *al-Ta’līqāt* (which help us understand the reception of these recensions, especially in the Safavid period), alongside editions (Sā’atichān and Nūrānī, among others) of the works of the philosophers of Shiraz in the Timurid and early Safavid periods that debunk to a large extent the notion of Iran being dominated by Illuminationist thought and demonstrate the vitality of Avicennism. Meryem Sebtī and Daniel De Smet’s ongoing editions and translations of the mainly non-extant *al-Inṣāf* corpus, which included Avicenna’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics Lambda*, his glosses on the *Theologia Aristotelis*, and his corpus of exegesis, will also be a major contribution, as will Amos Bertolacci’s ERC-funded project on *al-Shifā’*. All in all, these works allow our study of Avicenna to move away from generalizations divorced from textual evidence and ideological polemics about the “real” Avicenna, the very meaning of what we consider to be philosophy in Avicenna between the focus on “mysticism” and an *askesis* of life and a more hard-headed empirico-rationalism. Each of these ideological postures suffers from what contextualists would consider to be “prolepsis” and an insufficient regard for linguistic and intellectual possibilities of their