

*L'Europe et les géographes arabes du Moyen Âge (IXe–XVe siècle): “La grande terre” et ses peuples. Conceptualisation d'un espace ethnique et politique.* By JEAN-CHARLES DUCÈNE. Paris: CNRS ÉDITIONS, 2018. Pp. 502. €27.

In *L'Europe et les géographes arabes*, Jean-Charles Ducène has produced a definitive study of the information and ideas about Europe amassed in Arabic geographical literature over eight centuries. Ducène casts a wide net for “littérature à contenu géographique” (p. 11) and constructs a diachronic survey of over fifty Arabic works dating from the eighth to the fifteenth century, with forays into the post-1500 period as well as Persian sources from Ilkhanid Iran. This consummately erudite, empirically rich monograph is an emphatic corrective to portrayals of medieval Arabo-Islamic culture as marked by ignorance of Europe.

Divided into ten chapters plus an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue, *L'Europe et les géographes arabes* moves systematically along a chronological arc that begins with the eighth to the eleventh century, reaches a pivotal moment in the twelfth century, and concludes with new developments in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. It provides geographical coverage of Eastern and Central Europe, Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and the cities of Rome and Constantinople in each period. Broadly speaking, Ducène's argument is that between the eighth and tenth centuries Europe was conceived as “la grande terre” (*al-arḍ al-kabīra*), depicted cartographically as an island cut off from the rest of the Afro-Asian oecumene by an imagined waterway stretching from the Dardanelles-Bosphorus north to the “Encircling Ocean” (*al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*), and described in terms of the different ethnic groups that inhabited it. The most visible peoples in this period were the Byzantines (*rūm*), the Franks (*faranj*), and the Slavs (*ṣaḡāliba*), though more detailed ethnographic information emerged from tenth-century accounts of commercial and diplomatic exchange further to the east and north along the Volga River. A shift began around the turn of the eleventh century when geographers and travelers from the Islamic West—al-Andalus, the islands of the Mediterranean, and North Africa—started to write about their northern neighbors in accounts that lent them further specificity, defined the area more consistently in terms of Christianity, and emphasized urbanization. Under the cartographic gaze of al-Idrīsī in twelfth-century Sicily, this city-centric vision reached an apogee, accompanied by an emerging interest in the political formations that bound cities together. This interest became the *raison d'être* for the less geographically expansive but unprecedentedly politically nuanced descriptions of the states ringing the Mediterranean and Black Sea composed by chancellery officials of the Cairo-based Mamluk empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For Ducène, what characterizes this entire body of Arabic literature—and gave rise to this centuries-long intellectual tradition in the first place—was an ongoing and palpable awareness of Europe's proximity: “ce regard géographique arabe a été constamment porté sur ‘l'Europe’ avec une acuité et une pertinence changeantes selon les catégorisations des observateurs, et cela parce que l'Europe leur était voisine” (p. 26). This is the chief reason why Persian works only appear at the end in a short section on the Ilkhanid period and why the fifteenth century marks the end of the book, with later geographical literature on Europe appearing in the language of its new neighbor: the Ottoman empire.

Ducène's chapters are empirically oriented. He moves from work to work, providing long quotes from his sources in French translation, sometimes stretching over multiple pages, and then clarifying details, toponyms, and other references to the historical and cultural contexts. Where possible he provides corroborating evidence from contemporary European sources and numismatic and archaeological analysis. This signals Ducène's concern with not only what the Arabic geographical tradition reveals about changing ideas of Europe, but also what it can contribute to the study of European social, economic, and political realities. For example, one chapter is devoted to a reconstruction of a lost text composed by Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb, a Jewish traveler from Umayyad al-Andalus, describing his peregrinations throughout Europe circa 960 to 965 CE. Excerpts from this remarkable travelogue have been preserved in a number of later works, allowing Ducène to assess the possible routes taken and to highlight the new information provided about the ethnic groups, cities, rulers, and customs encountered along the way. Similarly, Ducène works from his own previously published reconstruction and translation of a travelogue by the twelfth-century Abū Ḥamīd al-Gharnāfī, originally from Granada,

who recounted nearly three decades among the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe after settling down in Baghdad in 1160 CE. Where Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb is credited with the first Arabic account of whale hunting off the coast of Ireland (p. 173), Abū Ḥamīd bequeathed the earliest description of a ski, sketched with particular charm in the margin of the Madrid manuscript (p. 232, illus. no. 11). These texts, like so many others considered in the book, yield rich ethnographic, political, and geographical data that Ducène evaluates methodically.

The interpretive highlights of the book are Ducène's treatment of al-Idrīsī and the geographer-administrators of the Mamluk chancellery. Al-Idrīsī acts as the fulcrum of Ducène's study; his two major works, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq* and *Uns al-muhāj*, represent the culmination of earlier approaches to describing European territory that stressed cities and ethnic groups, inflected by a new geopolitical awareness that would be developed further in later periods. Ducène argues that al-Idrīsī's cartographic imperative determined his approach: "al-Idrīsī dans son texte suit une carte qui a demandé à ne pas être vide" (p. 352). Consequently, his geography was ekphrastic in a more determined, systematic way than anything that had come before. This cartographic imperative also had the effect of amplifying al-Idrīsī's emphases. Where he mentions 350 cities in the written commentaries on the sectional maps for Europe in *Nuzhat al-mushtāq*, the maps themselves depict toponyms for more than 835! However, while the maps do recognize another level of toponym—the unbounded geographical region—it is only in the written commentaries that al-Idrīsī's attention to state formation prefigures the geopolitical turn of the next two centuries.

As he turns to this period, Ducène argues that, paradoxically, at a moment when European and Muslim polities had never been in closer contact, the Arabic geographical vision seemed to contract. On the one hand, it became more specialized, with different genres producing or reproducing different kinds of knowledge about Europe. On the other, in one of those genres—administrative literature emanating from the Mamluk chancellery—it became unprecedentedly detailed and nuanced. The exemplar of this shift was Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī, whose long career in the Mamluk bureaucracy of the early fourteenth century provided the material with which he composed an encyclopedic work, *Masālik al-abṣār*. As Ducène puts it: "En effet, al-ʿUmarī est le premier auteur à développer une géographie politique des États en rapport avec le Caire" (p. 311). In the spirit of the chancellery, al-ʿUmarī defines his terms in the introduction to the work, emphasizing the importance of the category of "state" (*mamlaka*), which indicates that his geographic vision is above all political rather than ethnographic. Ducène quotes directly from al-ʿUmarī for almost ten pages to illustrate the rich data he recorded about thirteen "Christian states," most of them in southern Europe or the Mediterranean, organized hierarchically in terms of their political and military strength (pp. 312–20). One of Ducène's overarching arguments in the book is that the association between Europe and Christianity appears relatively late in the Arabic geographical tradition, but by al-ʿUmarī's time it had clearly crystallized. With this increasing attention to Christianity and politics came an increasing awareness of the importance of Rome. Nevertheless, another paradox that Ducène reveals across the arc of the geographical tradition is a persistent vagueness in descriptions of Rome, especially in comparison with Constantinople, which was consistently evoked in the most concrete terms possible.

Ducène's conclusion is deceptively simple: geographers writing in Arabic from the eighth to the fifteenth century were *interested* in Europe. This does not go without saying, given the history of the study of Arabic and Islam in the West, and it is a major contribution to have produced a meticulously researched and exhaustive work that proves this important point. After reading *L'Europe et les géographes arabes du Moyen Âge*, moreover, it is impossible to claim that Europe received static or formulaic treatment in Arabic geographical literature. Ducène presents a dynamic intellectual tradition, encompassing a multiplicity of methods and orientations, that represented this "grande terre" in increasingly nuanced ways. Indeed, according to Ducène, the Arabic geographical literature that he examines reflected ethnic, religious, and political realities as much as the dispositions and agendas of its authors. In short, Ducène establishes how much there is to learn from Arabic geography about Europe itself.