

## Reviews of Books

*Literature and the Islamic Court: Cultural Life under al-Šāhib Ibn ‘Abbād*. By EREZ NAAMAN. Culture and Civilization in the Middle East, vol. 52. London: ROUTLEDGE, 2016. Pp. xv + 315. \$155, £115.

This book examines the life and work of the powerful Buyid minister al-Šāhib Ibn ‘Abbād through the topics of patronage, court colleagues, the literary aims (*aghrād*) used in cultural production by al-Šāhib and members of his court, and the literary taste that he represents, explaining in the process how and why the writer al-Tawhīdī did not agree with al-Šāhib about cultural production and court life. The book is part of a welcome effort to better understand this important part of Buyid culture, providing a complement to the recently published *Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of al-Tawhīdī and His Contemporaries* by Nuha A. Alshaar (Routledge, 2015) and *Licit Magic: The Life and Letters of al-Šāhib b. ‘Abbād (d. 385/995)* by Maurice Pomerantz (Brill, 2018). Naaman gives a critical and analytical perspective on a number of literary phenomena that help to define Arabic cultural production in this region at this time.

Central to al-Šāhib’s court and Naaman’s analysis of it is the fact that the main cultural activity revolved around language. As Naaman observes, the earlier concept of *nasab* (lineage) vs. *ḥasab* (deeds) had given way to *nasab* vs. *adab* (refined manners and literary culture). Naaman emphasizes the interactive aspect of cultural production and observes that genres (*aghrād* or aims might be more apt here) are an “interface between the composer and the audience” (p. 11).

Naaman takes the context of power relations into account but focuses on the literary qualities of cultural production in al-Šāhib’s court. He shares with other scholars the observation that the acquired relation of *nī‘ma* (benefit) in patronage could be more important than other types of relations and affiliations and that the benefit-based relation was terminable. Naaman’s investigation of patronage using a number of crucial Arabic terms as a guide is thorough and engaging. The discussions of how power relations were “dimmed” to allow creative interaction and of the qualitative nuances of “formal” and “informal” interaction are some of the most interesting aspects of the book. Naaman uses modern Western scholars and thinkers such as Richard Bauman and Erving Goffman as thinking tools, which may be of interest for some readers and especially readers from other fields, but the Arabic terms as a foundation for understanding interaction and cultural production at court serve as more useful concepts. The idea of organizing a project around a patron rather than certain poets is suitable for this topic.

Naaman systematically connects philosophy to practice in this court. He explains the contemporary thinking about this issue in the work of Miskawayh and Ibn ‘Adī in an accessible way that takes account of human development and power relations, and integrates these ideas into the literary practices of *ijāza* (challenge by a high-ranking person), *mu‘āraḍa* (imitation), *sariqa* (literary borrowing), and *ṭarab* (delight in a performance). Naaman later builds on this discussion of literary practice by addressing the contrasting functions of the *qiṭ‘a* (monothematic poem), used especially in informal gatherings, and the dedicated *qaṣīda* (polythematic poem), used especially on ceremonial occasions. His earlier investigation of the continuity and contrast between the “informal” and the “formal” leaves one to wonder what kind of variation may have occurred, especially if we recall that a *qaṣīda* might well have been composed for friends and a *qiṭ‘a* for superiors with the aim of panegyric, but in spite of this question for further research, this section is useful and more interesting than the analogous section on Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of a literary field, especially since Naaman notes that the competition was looser and less organized in the Buyid milieu than in Bourdieu’s context.

In his exploration of the poetic genres in al-Šāhib’s court, Naaman argues—using the contemporary writer and poet al-Tha‘ālibī, who is a significant source for this period—that the borders between the poetic genres of *mujān* (transgressive provocation) and *sukhf* (gross obscenity) were blurred. The translations of these terms represent the general qualities of these two categories based on very recent work by Zoltán Szombathy and Sinan Antoon respectively. Naaman updates our understanding of the

aims of *munākāt Banī Sāsān* (argot of Banū Sāsān) by using C. E. Bosworth's work and al-Tha'ālibī as a foundation and he describes *ikhwāniyyāt* (poems to friends) as poems that are monothematic, short, and exchanged by high officials writing to their peers or inferiors, concluding that hierarchy was an important aspect in them. The discussion of *shī'r kuttābī* (poetry by secretaries), which is based on research by Jamal Bencheikh, claims that this poetry was self-indulgent, banal, and characterized by affectation. (For both of the above genres, a broader examination of poems might well lead to different findings and conclusions.) In the case of panegyric, we tend to encounter earlier patrons not in a variety of roles but on a variety of occasions within the scope of their role. Naaman's explanation that panegyric was used to legitimate each of the dimensions of al-Ṣāhib's various roles in politics and culture is interesting and important.

Still based on the practices of al-Ṣāhib's court, Naaman also discusses types of prose writing that were valued for their artistic merit, including *ikhwāniyyāt*, *faṣl/fiqra* (a short passage), *tawqīf* (a political elite's response to a case that was presented in writing), and the intersecting categories of *mathal* (proverb) and *ḥikma* (aphorism). Naaman integrates the political and social dynamics of al-Ṣāhib's court with his observations about the kinds of artistic prose that were featured in cultural production.

Using the cultural production of al-Ṣāhib's court, Naaman explains ideas about imagery and "natural" and "artificial" style in primary sources on poetics and modern scholarship. He distinguishes between description in which imagery transfers the object of description to an abstract and figurative universe and description that is grounded in a specific object of description and specific people and functions connected to it. Future research may reveal how poets integrate these two categories. Naaman combines this discussion of poetics and poetic practice with al-Ṣāhib's own contribution to poetics and how it reveals the latter's ideas about poetry by al-Mutanabbī, al-Buḥturī, and Abū Tammām. He also observes that while al-Ṣāhib prefers a "natural" style that is accessible in spite of its use of *badīf* (rhetorical devices), his own poetry is not all in this style.

With regard to the above-mentioned interest in *mujūn* and especially *sukhf* in al-Ṣāhib's court, Naaman analyzes al-Ṣāhib's interactions with a member of his court, al-Aqta' al-Kūfī, whose background included beggars, gamblers, and related figures from city life. Al-Ṣāhib found him refined and eloquent. This perspective seems to echo the interest of early Abbasid philologists in interviews of Bedouin, except that in this case the eloquence from the margins or below is urban rather than rural. Al-Ṣāhib has al-Aqta' al-Kūfī memorize poems on the Prophet's family and recite them in a lamenting style, which reflects the importance of this type of poetry in his time, giving him a dirham per verse and beating him for mistakes. In one episode, al-Ṣāhib is delighted to watch al-Aqta' having sex with his wife, after which he rewards both of them as if in a more typical patronage relationship. It is not surprising that the most prominent Arabic poet of *sukhf*, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, was one of al-Ṣāhib's favorite poets. Naaman places his analysis of this relationship in the context of ideas in world culture about elites and their interest in culture that is defined as low or marginal, making the important observation that al-Ṣāhib asserts or re-asserts his authority—in ways that echo more conventional patronage—in the context of these interactions. Thus, they are inflected with a counterpoint between *jidd* (earnest) and *hazl* (playfulness), so it is not surprising to learn that al-Ṣāhib admired the writer al-Jāhīz who advocated for a balance of *jidd* and *hazl*.

Naaman looks at the tension between al-Ṣāhib and his contemporary al-Tawḥīdī by way of a counterpoint—that between al-Tawḥīdī, who had great difficulty fitting into court life in spite of his intellectual and literary expertise, and al-Ṣāhib, who was extremely successful in turning his intellectual and literary expertise into cultural capital and political power in the Buyid court. Naaman argues that because al-Tawḥīdī was unable to tolerate the fascination in transgression and *sukhf* on account of his commitments to Sufi and philosophical ideas, he did not fit in or want to fit in. Al-Tawḥīdī also disapproved of *sajf* in prose since he felt that it should be used in moderation, like salt in food. The contrast of al-Ṣāhib and al-Tawḥīdī offers insights into how court life, though important, was not the exclusive center of cultural life.

The integration of poetics, philosophy, politics, and cultural production in al-Ṣāhib's court, the analysis of the relationships that al-Ṣāhib had with al-Aqta' al-Kūfī and with al-Tawḥīdī, and the author's

examination of a range of poetic aims and types of fine prose writing make this book an insightful and engaging contribution to research on Buyid court life.

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*Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*. Edited by CAROL BAKHOS and MICHAEL COOK. Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions. Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. Pp. ix + 267. \$85, £65.

The idea for *Islam and Its Past* was formed at the conference of the same name held at UCLA's G. E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies in 2013. All eight chapters "are concerned directly or indirectly with the Islamic revelation, and for the most part this means the Qur'an" (p. 1).

Chapter one by Devin Stewart provides a brief survey of previous research in Quranic studies, starting from the translation of the Quran into Latin by Robert of Ketton. Stewart divides the history of Western Quranic studies into five periods: the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the nineteenth century to the Second World War, mid-twentieth century, and the late twentieth century to the present. He furthermore divides the field into three primary fields of inquiry: "investigation of the text," "history of its revelation," and "history of its recording."

Stewart begins by examining the approach of the "old Biblicists," the first Western scholars interested in the Quran. These scholars aimed to evaluate the development of early Islam through a comparative analysis of the Bible and the Quran, which offered the first deep analysis of hadith and exegetical literatures. Over the last three decades, the debate has often still focused on whether the Quran should be seen as entirely dependent on the Judeo-Christian scriptures or as an original and autochthonous product of Arabia. Those more inclined to the latter viewpoint often compare the Quran with material from the Christian tradition written in Syriac. Stewart labels this camp "New Biblicists." He further traces eight "influential trends" in current Quranic scholarship. Among these are "the extra-peninsularists or allohistorians," who prefer using "outside sources" to write the history of early Islam, and "the late antiquarians," who explore the rise of Islam within the broader framework of late antiquity by integrating it into the philosophical, artistic, and legislative framework of the period. Stewart also mentions "the sheepskinners, or the new textualists," who study the history of the Quran through an analysis of its sources, linguistic features, and the structure of the suras, and "feminist critics," who approach the reading of the Quran from a gender studies perspective.

In his final pages, Stewart encourages further attempts to translate both the Quran and nineteenth-century scholarship written in German, and expresses a desire for ideological openmindedness, better knowledge of the Arabic language in the West, and a greater awareness of medieval Islamic scholarship. He moreover exhorts his academic audience to engage in more multilateral discussion, particularly given that the field is rapidly expanding and more scholars are now approaching the Quran from a wide range of disciplines. Ultimately, despite the evident limits of putting different approaches into separate boxes, Stewart's chapter serves as a stimulating introduction to the work as a whole.

Chapter two, by Nicolai Sinai, deals with the editorial expansion of two suras traditionally dated before the *hijra*. He begins with some general considerations in determining whether a passage was secondarily incorporated into a sura, such as stylistic and lexical peculiarities and structural intrusiveness. He then briefly considers Q 74:31, before examining the tension between certain statements appearing in the opening verses of Q 5 and 9. Sinai deals with the position of verses in Q 5 that mention food taboos, ritual rules, and the relation between Muḥammad's followers and the People of the Book, and concludes that parts of verses 3, 4, and 5 were inserted at a secondary stage in order to abrogate previous prohibitions and clarify existing passages.

Sinai also claims that Q 9 polemicizes with "external opponents"—scriptural communities and associators (*mushrikūn*)—and with an internal group of "hypocrites" (*munāfiqūn*). He demonstrates