

Reviews of Books

Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga. By ABŪ ZAYD AL-SĪRĀFĪ, edited and translated by TIM MACKINTOSH-SMITH; by IBN FADLĀN, edited and translated by JAMES E. MONTGOMERY. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. Pp. x + 312. \$40.

The Library of Arabic Literature (LAL) series of critical editions and side-by-side Arabic-English translations is one of the most exciting new developments in the fields of Arabic, Islamic, and Middle East studies to come onto the university press scene in many years. It offers an innovative model of publishing, design, and collaboration and is rapidly transforming the way scholars think about critical editions, the work of translation, and the corpus of texts that we use in our research and teaching. Among its first dozen instalments, *Two Arabic Travel Books* is emblematic of the spirit that animates the entire series—one of adventure, exchange, and generosity (for more on the series, see T. Zadeh, “Upon Reading the Library of Arabic Literature,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47 [2016]: 307–35).

The decision to join these two travelogues in a single volume is itself an example of the innovative approach of the series. Reading the two travelogues together—a reenactment of the experience of reading the parallel Arabic and English texts—makes a stronger impression than would either alone. The parallels and echoes between the two effectively evoke a vast but interconnected world that stimulated ambitions and appetites among Muslims of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. There are many indicators that long-distance travel was a way of life for the peoples under the loosening canopy of the Abbasid caliphate in this period. But to read *Accounts of China and India* and *Mission to the Volga* is to be convinced of this. Our interlocutors in these works, both named and unnamed, are most commonsensical about travel. They traveled to satisfy curiosity, to fulfill obligations, and, maybe, to get rich. They traveled with a set of cultural values that led them at times to judgment but more often to simple wonder at the array of humanity on God’s earth. They traveled to write about it, or to correct what others had written, and thus to authorize themselves in a context in which knowledge of the world was its own currency. What is unusual is not the fact that they traveled or the fact that they wrote about it, but the fact that their accounts have survived.

It is important to remember, though, that the realm to which the Abbasid caliph laid claim at the turn of the tenth century was itself vast and comprised great diversity. One did not need to travel far from the capital city of Baghdad to encounter different languages, novel customs, and unfamiliar landscapes. Indeed, the renowned jurist al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820) was reputed to have chided an associate who had never been to Baghdad with the words, “Then you have not seen the world” (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rikh Baghdād*, 14 vols. [Cairo, 1931], 1: 4, variants pp. 44–45). Moreover, one could travel great distances from Baghdad and still remain in lands ruled by Muslims. This is attested in work after work from this period. What sets the two texts under review apart is their emphasis on places or peoples that were even more far-flung, not (yet) ruled by Muslims, and/or considered unusually strange. They therefore constitute—especially when presented together as they are here—a particularly forceful rebuttal of assumptions that early Islamicate civilization was inward-looking or that cross-cultural economic and political connectivity is a modern phenomenon. As Tim Mackintosh-Smith puts it, this is a “picture of a world not unlike our own, a world on the road to globalization” (p. 4).

Accounts of China and India is a composite work consisting of two parts, the first without a named author and the second compiled by one Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, who frames his intervention as an expansion and verification of the first part. The two parts are made up of *akhbār*, or “reports,” an approach to prose writing that was very common across the fields of history, geography, and belles-lettres. Mackintosh-Smith describes the effect of this format as one of “immediacy” (p. 9); we hear in the text “the unedited voice of oral history” (p. 10). The voices in this work are those of merchants who plied the “maritime silk road” from the ports of Basra and Sīrāf on the Persian Gulf to the Chinese city of

Khānḫū, today's Guangzhou, as well as to so many places in between and beyond. As the title suggests, their reports are most detailed, however, on the subjects of India and China, which are presented as the civilizational heavyweights of Asia, along with, of course, the Abbasid caliphate, as well as its most lucrative trade partners. Indeed, Abū Zayd opens with the Huang Chao rebellion, which resulted in a massacre of foreign merchants in Khānḫū in 880, closing down trade with China for decades and causing "silk, in particular, to disappear from Arab lands" (p. 69). The interconnectedness of the Asian markets comes vividly across in this work, as does the great variety of languages, customs, and kings that our merchant-interlocutors negotiated as a matter of course. While many practices are described in a way that stresses their strangeness, rarely is disapproval explicit, and on the matter of kingship and governance in particular, the merchants find much to admire in foreign lands. In fact, the work reads at times like a "mirror for a prince," as many of the accounts stress the attributes of a just ruler. It is not surprising that those attributes usually included respecting merchants, adjudicating commercial disputes fairly, and generally establishing conditions that were conducive to trade.

Similarly, *Mission to the Volga* is concerned with travel, exchange, and good governance. Though it has a single author, it has the same feel of immediacy and reportage as *Accounts of China and India*. It differs, however, in several ways, but most significantly, to my mind, in that it describes the remote reaches of what might be termed "Islamdom" itself. It seems to evoke a frontier rather than a foreign country, and in so doing highlights the internal diversity of the realm in which the Abbasid caliph claimed direct or indirect authority. It also contrasts with *Accounts of China and India* in its focus on noncommercial forms of interaction and the rigors of overland, rather than maritime, travel. Ibn Faḍlān, the Baghdad-based author of the account, was among a group tasked in 921 with the delivery of letters, instructors, and funds to the king of the Bulghārs, a people on the upper Volga River, who had recently converted to Islam and appealed to the caliph for support. The journey was thus framed as an official "mission" or embassy. Nonetheless, Ibn Faḍlān found himself, like the merchants of Sirāf, frequently facing unforeseen circumstances and having to improvise on the spot. One of these moments was in Bukhara, before the mission had even ventured into unfamiliar territory, where they "discovered" that the Samanid dynast who ruled the region in the name of the caliph "was still a boy and did not even have a beard" (p. 193). He provided little support when the funds they were supposed to collect from the nearby estate of a deposed vizier were not forthcoming. The mission was forced to forge ahead without the money down the frozen Oxus River through snow and biting cold, only to encounter even harsher conditions as they followed the Volga further north. At the end of the journey, under the protection of the Bulghār king, Ibn Faḍlān witnessed many marvels, among them a party of "Rūs" traders, who have sometimes been identified as the Vikings; his description of them, including a particularly detailed account of their funerary rituals, inspired Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* (1976) and the movie adaptation *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999).

Despite the popularity of the more exotic elements of Ibn Faḍlān's account, however, James Montgomery's translation, especially when read alongside *Accounts of China and India*, is particularly effective in evoking a broader context for the mission, one in which the peoples of Eurasia jostled up against each other, had regular interactions, and formed alliances out of both expediency and conviction. The matter-of-fact tone in which Montgomery renders Ibn Faḍlān's observations makes the cultural variations he encountered at the fringes of the caliphate seem like an accepted phenomenon, something that any curious and cultivated traveler should note, but not an existential threat or insult to orthodoxy. In fact, when Ibn Faḍlān attempts to teach the Bulghār king about proper ritual practice, he ends up bested in debate: "He had dumbfounded us—we had no answer" (p. 223). Like many of the merchants in *Accounts of China and India*, Ibn Faḍlān appreciated a savvy and discerning ruler regardless of his cultural background or religious beliefs.

At a technical level, both editions and translations offer scholars something new. *Accounts of China and India* is the first complete English translation of the work to come directly from the only surviving Arabic manuscript, which can be dated to the late twelfth century. *Mission to the Volga* has received more attention, but Montgomery is the first to privilege the "Mashhad manuscript"—a manuscript compilation that comprises Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue plus three other geographical works donated to a Mashhad library in the mid-seventeenth century—over the version preserved in long quotations in

Muʿjam al-buldān by the thirteenth-century scholar Yāqūt. In his introduction, Montgomery argues persuasively that the “rough and ready” prose of the Mashhad manuscript—an informal style akin to the “Middle Arabic” associated with later periods—is closer to the original than are Yāqūt’s “formal and chaste” quotes (p. 183). He also suggests that it is representative of “a type of unpolished and private-life writing” that may characterize more sources from this period than has previously been thought (p. 183). Montgomery has been a leader in calling attention to the tendency to produce published editions of early Arabic works that conform more to modern expectations of style, genre, and the fixed and formal object we call a “book” than to the sometimes messy and often nonlinear archival record (see, e.g., his “Serendipity, Resistance, and Multivalency: Ibn Khurrādādhbih and his *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*,” in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. P. Kennedy [Wiesbaden, 2005], 177–232). His edition and translation of *Mission to the Volga* can be seen, therefore, as part of a broader project—consonant with that of the Library of Arabic Literature as a whole—to change the way scholars approach the manuscript heritage of the early and medieval Islamic world. Key to this more specialized intervention are the supplementary materials available on the LAL website, including an extremely useful “Alternate Web Edition” that catalogues the elements of “Middle Arabic” that Montgomery has identified in the Mashhad manuscript and provides a typographical transcription that can be compared to the critical edition. This, along with the highly imaginative “Logbook,” in which Montgomery recreates a diary-like first draft that Ibn Faḍlān might have penned en route, represents a major contribution to the field.

My only quibbles are with Montgomery’s historical introduction, which is pitched a bit high for nonspecialists but lacks the annotation that would appeal to specialists, and with two minor elements of his translation that stuck out to me as someone particularly interested in gender and sexuality. First, the translation of *mahr* as “dowry” is inaccurate and potentially misleading (pp. 194–95, ¶7; pp. 202–3, ¶21). In making this choice Montgomery is not alone among translators of medieval Arabic literature, and I have witnessed firsthand the confusion it causes in the classroom. *Mahr* indicates a flow of assets from the groom or groom’s family to the bride or bride’s family (see K. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* [Cambridge, MA, 2010], 49–62). The connotation of dowry is just the opposite. While marriage practices varied considerably among the peoples described in works like these under review here, unless there is explicit evidence that the flow of assets was different from what an Arabic-speaking audience would understand from the word *mahr*, it should not be translated as dowry. “Dower” is a more accurate, if less familiar, choice, and marriage- or bride-price could be alternatives in certain contexts. Also, I noticed an inconsistency between the Arabic and English translation (pp. 206–7, end of ¶24). While the Arabic of the “Alternate Web Edition” matches the English translation supplied in the book, I think the Arabic of the critical edition, which suggests it was the Khwārazmī rather than the Turk paying compensation for the seduction of the Turk’s son, makes more sense in the context.

We have been given a precious gift in *Two Arabic Travel Books*. Mackintosh-Smith and Montgomery bring their years of experience in the field, their towering erudition, and, most importantly, their love of the texts themselves—and of travel—to a wide audience that is most in need of a fresh look at the world shared by the peoples of Eurasia a millennium ago.

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The Medieval Islamic Hospital: Medicine, Religion, and Charity. By AHMED RAGAB. New York: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. Pp. xviii + 263. \$99.99, £64.99 (cloth), \$80 (ebook).

The appearance of Ahmed Ragab’s *The Medieval Islamic Hospital* sparked historical, historiographical, and methodological debates. The title of the book suggests a broad scope: the history of an important institution, namely, the hospital (*bīmāristān*), during the medieval period (no exact definition provided) throughout the Islamic world (no exact definition here either), from three different