

Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam

Sebastian Günther, ed.

Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005. 468 pages.

This ambitious collection of sixteen essays (plus an introduction by the editor) ranges widely across Islamic history and scholarly disciplines. The unifying theme is reflected in the title: Muslim texts are examined for their conceptual frameworks as conveyers of a cultural ethos. While some essays are more successful than others in enunciating this theme's more theoretical aspects, the range of topics covered means that most readers will find something of interest and relevance and will likely be stimulated to apply the methods of analysis to their own area of study.

Sebastian Günther's introduction does an admirable job of highlighting each essay's contribution to creating an overall picture of Muslim intellectual history and the "cultural specificity of Islam that facilitated the advancement of intellectual life and the formation of 'modern' societies" (p. xiv) by paying attention to the ideas, forms, content, and impact of textual artefacts from the eighth through the fourteenth centuries.

Stephan Dähne begins the volume by focusing on the Qur'an and its use in political speeches attributed to Abu Hamza al-Shari (d. 747), Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692), Uthman ibn Hayyan al-Murri (d. after 713), and Abdallah ibn Tahir (d. 844). Ute Pietruschka then deals with the Christian community's literary activity under the Umayyads as it developed in Syriac (and emerged in Arabic), maintained the Byzantine tradition, and was impacted by Islam. Keeping with the Christian theme, Sandra Toenies Keating discusses the work of the Christian apologist Abu Ra'ita (d. ca 835) and his attempt to defend Biblical scripture from the Muslim charge of falsification (*tahrif*).

Next, Beatrice Gruendler treats the "modern" (*mudath*) poetry of the early Abbasid period and draws attention to how, in the stories of these poets' lives (especially as reported in the works of Ibn al-Mu'tazz [d. 908] and al-Suli [d. 946]), we witness medieval attitudes toward intellectual

authority in society being actively altered. Sebastian Günther examines al-Jahiz (d. 869) and Ibn Sahnun (d. 870), as well as their views on pedagogy, in a chapter that includes the Arabic text plus a translation of the advice that both writers gave to teachers, paying attention to the ethical and philosophical perspective on teaching.

Monika Bernards subjects the much debated Basra/Kufa dichotomy among Arabic grammarians to a statistical analysis of social networks to see if the division has any geographical reality. The results show an intermingling of the supposed groups. John Nawas' essay focuses on non-Arab converts (*mawali*) and their contribution to hadith transmission via a statistical analysis. Both Bernards and Nawas are engaged in the "Ulama Project," a database of material culled from ninety biographical dictionaries classified in up to one hundred categories relating to the life and career of individual scholars from the first four Islamic centuries.

Aisha Geissinger's provocative analysis of al-Bukhari's hadith collection focuses on gender and its role in the intellectual image of medieval Islamic scholars. She analyzes female authority in exegesis as well as the limits on women's role in establishing the *sunnah* in matters of ritual and, eventually, their complete autonomy in aspects of religion, especially the hajj. Verena Klemm pursues similar interests in her essay on Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and the creation of her image as a hagiographical subject especially in Shi'i texts.

Stephen C. Judd concentrates on the narrative treatment of late Umayyad history by al-Tabari (d. 923) and al-Baladhuri (d. ca 892). The historians' view of why the Umayyads fell is disclosed by the way in which the narratives are constructed on the basis of earlier sources, as is seen by examining the two chroniclers' parallel accounts. Alexei A. Khismatulin looks at al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) and his Persian work *The Alchemy of Happiness*. He argues that this book is not an abridgement of the author's more famous *Revivification of the Islamic Sciences*, but an independent book that both reflects and developed Iranian mystical ideas of the time. Frank Griffel examines al-Ghazzali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, specifically paying attention to its introductory chapters, in which al-Ghazzali presents his overall argument for the philosophers' epistemological failings. Biographical dictionaries reappear in Camilla Adang's essay on the spread of Zahirism in Islamic Spain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. She documents, through extensive data on sixteen scholars, that although small, the Zahiri school was perceived as an intellectual threat and its members were well connected socially.

Andrew J. Lane assesses al-Zamakhshari's (d. 1144) *tafsir* and shows that, in form and method, there is nothing distinctively Mu'tazilite about the work, despite what has often been suggested. He has elaborated upon this point in his *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'an Commentary: The Kashshaf of Jar Allah al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006). Heather Keaney examines the 250-page biography of Caliph Uthman written by Ibn Bakr (d. 1340), a Mamluk-era historian. She points out that later writers did not usually undertake the type of analysis used by earlier historians (e.g., Judd's essay in this volume). Here, she compares Ibn Bakr's work to the treatment of Uthman in al-Dhahabi (d. 1348) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). Mamluk writers clearly found the period of Uthman ideal for conveying their own contemporary ideas about leadership and obedience.

The volume concludes with Adrian Gully's discussion of the image of the "sword and the pen" in three fourteenth-century texts. Gully argues that the texts reflect more of their contemporary setting than was previously suggested, and that they are vehicles for displaying the author's skills.

All of these stimulating contributions are complemented by very complete indexes of proper names, geographical names and toponyms, titles of books, Qur'anic references, and topics and keywords that serve to enhance the value of the work significantly.

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