

Two Arabic Travel Books: Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi *Accounts of China and India* • Edited and translated by Tim Mackintosh-Smith and Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*. Edited and translated by James E. Montgomery • London • New York: New York University Press, 2014; pp. 320 • ISBN: 978-1-4798-0350-7 (cl) • 978-1-4798-0028-5 (e-book)

This latest book in the New York University Press' Library of Arabic Literature Series brings together two of the oldest surviving travel books in Arabic. Both books are published with Arabic text on facing pages, which is an admirable feature of the Series. In his "Forward", Tim Mackintosh-Smith, the editor-translator of the first book—Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi's *akhbār al-ṣīn wal-hind* (*Accounts of China and India*)—sets the scene for both books, which came into existence in "an extraordinarily mobile world in which a tailor from Baghdad can end up as the Bulghār king's couturier, a wanderer from present-day Pakistan can end up hanging from a tree in a northern forest, and a refugee from Basra can drop in, apparently on a whim, on the Tang emperor of China." (p. ix-x)

Fabulous and rich in anecdotes, yet not unreal tales spun by sailors or imaginative leaps like those of Sindbad (which would appear later in Arabic literature), these two travel accounts are rich in ethnographic details. They also provide first-hand accounts of life at the two interwoven levels of narrative, the first dealing with real human beings in small settings, the second providing a panoramic view of the emerging international trade between the Muslim empire and its neighbors to the east.

Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi, the author of the first of the two books (*Accounts of China and India*) wrote about "the Sea of India and China, in whose depths are pearls and ambergris, in whose rocky isles are gems and mines of gold, in the mouth of whose beasts is ivory, in whose forest grow ebony, sapan wood, rattans, and trees that bear aloe-wood, camphor, nutmeg, cloves, sandalwood, and all manner of fragrant and aromatic spices, whose birds are parrots and peacocks, and the creeping things of whose earth are civet cats and musk gazelles, and all the rest that no one could enumerate, so many are its blessings." (p. 4).

This quote from the book has been matched by the editor/translator of

Accounts of China and India who describes the book as: “It is a short book, but it has a sweeping perspective, from the Swahili coast to a rather mistily glimpsed Korea. It is therefore one of those books that seems bigger than it is. And, like the ports of that immense Afro-Asiatic littoral, its pages are busy with people and piled with goods, not just with the luxuries listed above but also with a priceless cargo of information, especially on China. Here are the first foreign descriptions of tea and porcelain, and a whole panorama of Chinese society, from the Son of Heaven and Confucian ethics down to toilet paper and bamboo urinals.” (p. 5).

As if to make this volume of two books more interesting, the first book (*Accounts of China and India*) is, in fact, two books, probably written by two different authors. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, the confirmed author of the second book, says that the first book was given to him “to look carefully through it, and to verify the information I find in it”. He does not tell us who gave him the book and asked him to verify its content. But it was in the course of looking into the marvelous account of the first book, that he wrote the second book. The first book, written in 237/851-52, is thus, without a real author, although both books contain accounts of travels handed down to their authors by informants who were the eyewitnesses of what they relate—a fact indicated by the word *akhbār* in the title.

While the *Accounts of China and India* presents to general readers a marvelous book of travels, it simultaneously brings to the connoisseurs of Arabic literature and historians an edition of a critical work which opens new vistas to understand the world of the Abbasids, whose second caliph, al-Manṣūr, had famously proclaimed “while standing on the bank of the river of the recently founded imperial city and watching the silks and porcelain unloading, “Here is the Tigris, and nothing bars the way between it and China”. (p. 7)

The translation is fluid. Notes, glossary, and bibliography add to the understanding of the context, weights and measures, unfamiliar things and places and historical personage mentioned in the work.

The second book of the volume, Ibn Faḍlān’s *Kitāb Aḥmad b. Fuḍlān* (*Book of Aḥmad b. Fuḍlān*, renamed *Mission to the Volga* by the translator), written during a particularly unstable period of turmoil, is, in some ways, far less interesting than the accounts of travelers put together by Abū Zayd, but nevertheless it provides numerous insights into the relationship between the decaying Abbasid empire and regions on its borders. The translation, introduction, as well as annotations and notes have a different flavor than the first book. The first is the work of a serious scholar tied to his desk, demonstrating focused attention, bringing insights from long years of study, while most of the work on *Mission to the Volga* “has been done on flights between London and Abu Dhabi or New York, in the InterContinental Hotel Abu Dhabi, and in various restaurants, hotels, and bars in Greenwich Village and SoHo.” (p. 166). The

difference is obvious in the translated text, although *Mission to the Volga* reads well in translation, it lacks the polished and chiseled narrative force of *Accounts of China and India*. The editor-translator makes sweeping, commonplace statements in the Introduction without substantiating them with scholarly references (for instance, the remarks about the execution of al-Hallaj, which could have benefited from the Massignon's magisterial four-volume work); it raises seriously scholarly concerns about the *raison d'être* of the work, but fails to provide a fully articulated and historically grounded answer. Perhaps such scholarly discussions are not needed in a work that has been presented as a travel account rather than a historical document; yet the series in which the volume has been published claims scholarly attention. The translation reads well in general, but at places it does not correspond to what is being said in the original text, or the manner in which certain phrases have been translated does not convey the intent of the original (e.g., "they had built a wooden masjid to pray in" for *wa qad banū lahum masjidan min khushab*, which may be better translated as "they had built a masjid with wood" (p. 233); on the same page, we have "did not know how to read the Qur'an", whereas the intent of the original is to indicate that they did not know the correct recitation during obligatory prayer, *al-qirā'at*, p. 233). At other places unintelligible words appear (e.g., W*r' on p. 237). Notwithstanding these reservations, *Mission to the Volga* does have its merits and reading it in translation, with parallel Arabic, allows one to enter into that enchanted world of discoveries and descriptions of strange people and things.

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S. R. Burge, *Angels in Islam: Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's al-Ḥabā'ik fī akhbār al-malā'ik* • Routledge • London and New York • 2012; pp. 338 • ISBN: 978-0-415-67292-4 (hbk) • 978-0-203-14497-8 (ebk)

This monograph focuses on "angels in Hadith literature" through the lens of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's *al-Ḥabā'ik fī akhbār al-malā'ik*, which—the author erroneously claims—consists of approximately 750 Hadith related to angels (p. 21; see below for more on this) and a substantial postscript, *khātima*, on theological issues related to angels. Al-Suyūṭī actually has 810 narrations, not all of which are Hadith, and these narrations are of all categories of authenticity, including *marfū'*, *mawqūf*, *maqtū'*. Thus, it is not correct to say that this monograph deals with angels in Hadith literature.