



Review: [untitled]

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several of his successors (whose rule amounted to a dictatorship) but to insure by their presence the very survival of the Fatimid dynasty in the face of a Saljuk onslaught. The extent of this influx was considerable; sources suggest that well over thirty thousand Armenians took up residence in Egypt and, because many of them remained Christian, they constituted a recognizable threat to the Muslim domination of the country. Among the seven (or possibly more) Armenians who were to hold the wazirate in the century from Badr until Ruzzik b. Ṭalāʿī, one was the Christian Bahram, who never converted, even though as wazir he was granted the title “Sword of Islam” (*sayf al-Islām*). These Armenians thus form a distinct chapter in Fatimid history and the phenomenon of their participation *en masse* in its final phase deserves considerable scholarly attention and study.

Therefore, given the inherent interest of the subject that is implied in Professor Dadoyan’s title, students of Fatimid history should be drawn to her book. What they will find in it, however, may prove disappointing and more than a little difficult to fathom. The author is not a specialist on the Fatimids nor on the Egypt of this period. Instead she wants to use the Fatimid Armenians as a major case to illustrate how heterodox and sectarian Armenians interacted with sectarian Muslims. She sees this situation as the “. . . last large scale phase in the perpetual alliance between the Armenian sectarians and the Muslims” (p. 1). Apparently, therefore, she understands the extensive Armenian role in Fatimid Egypt as the outcome of a natural affinity between the Ismaʿili Shiʿites and various renegade and heterodox Armenian groupings—both at odds with the orthodoxy of their respective religious establishments.

To make that argument, she devotes substantial space to the history of pre-Fatimid Armenian heresies, going back several centuries and earlier. Fully a third of the book treats this background, without more than a vague hint as to why or what importance it has for its later subject. Finally, when she does come to the Armenian establishment in Fatimid Egypt, the connection to this latter subject exists by faint implications—a relationship that is not likely to be at all clear to most readers. A sentence such as the following comment about the “spiritual zeal” of the Jamālīs (Badr and al-Afḍal) seems to provide a bridge.

It seems that the cultural syncretism which gave rise to sectarian, revolutionary and apocalyptic movements (like Ismāʿilism itself) underlay the intimacy the sectarians had with Islam at the same time maintaining their adherence to their Armenian identity. (p. 124)

In reviewing the specific careers of various key individuals in the Fatimid state, Dadoyan also tends to see an Armenian presence in all situations where she can deduce even the slightest possibility of it. As one example, because many Armenians had once been relocated to Sicily in an era long before the

Fatimid period, any Sicilian could thus have been Armenian. Jawhar, the Sicilian, the famous general who conquered Egypt for the Fatimids, according to this reasoning, is “. . . thought to have been of Armenian descent” (pp. 83–84). The caliph al-Mustaʿlī was Armenian by virtue of the fact that he was Badr al-Jamālī’s grandson (pp. 13, 106, 128–30). Where this information came from is unclear; al-Mustaʿlī was actually Badr’s son-in-law (and thus al-Afḍal’s brother-in-law), but hardly an Armenian. These two examples must suffice but there are more in the book.

In general the writing is careless throughout and often confused and confusing; and the facts put in evidence, even when accurate, are frequently forced to mean something quite unlikely. Still, it is useful to be reminded of the depth of Armenian involvement in Fatimid Egypt. Some issues discussed by Dadoyan—though not necessarily resolved by her—are highly significant. For example: the precise religious attitudes and proclivities of Badr and al-Afḍal remain a mystery; Bahram’s connection to an international Armenian ecclesiastical elite through the Catholicos Grigor Martyrophil and his nephew (also named Grigor), who may have been Bahram’s own brother, raises again the question of Bahram’s possible princely status prior to his entry in Egypt and his purpose in coming there; and the Banū Ruzzik’s purported attachment to a Nuṣayrī-Imāmī version of Shiʿism, at least in the case of al-Mālik al-Šālīḥ Ṭalāʿī b. Ruzzik, and their Armenian backgrounds, also requires investigation. But specialists on the Fatimids should take up these issues with due caution and certainly consult the sources in addition to the material in this book. Unfortunately, the non-specialist, even while gleaning from it valuable information about the Armenians, in the absence of a way to judge what is accurate and what is speculative (or even incorrect), may be all too frequently led astray by its author’s less obvious agendas.

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Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text. By IRENE A. BIERMAN. Berkeley: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1998. Pp. xvi + 124, illustrations and maps. \$50 (cloth); \$20 (paper).

Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museums. By ANNA CONTADINI. London: V & A PUBLICATIONS, 1998. Pp. 138, color plates and illustrations. £60, \$99 [U.S. distribution: Antique Collectors’ Club Ltd., Wappingers Falls, N.Y.]

The Fatimids (r. 909–1171), Ismaʿili Shiʿites who claimed descent from the Prophet’s daughter Fatima and his son-in-law ʿAlī b. Abu Talib, rose to power in tenth-century Ifriqiya (now

Tunisia) and soon fought with the Umayyads of Spain for control of much of northwest Africa. In 969 the Fatimid general Jawhar turned in the other direction and conquered Egypt, ostensibly the first stage in the Fatimids' conquest of the entire Muslim world and their recognition as its rightful rulers. Inspired by Jawhar's successes, the Fatimids abandoned north Africa and moved eastwards, establishing their capital at Cairo, on the banks of the Nile. Although they came to control parts of Syria and the Hijaz and even were briefly recognized in Baghdad itself, things didn't work out the way they had planned, and for most of the next two centuries Fatimid power was largely confined to Egypt. There they transformed Fustat, a somewhat sleepy regional capital, into Cairo, the bustling metropolis of the Mediterranean, and presided over a mixed and prosperous population of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Arabs, Berbers, Blacks, Turks, etc. Despite famines, political and religious crises, and the onslaught of the Crusaders, the Fatimids held on by the skin of their teeth for two centuries until Saladin restored Sunni rule to Egypt.

The Fatimids have exerted a powerful attraction on later generations of historians, perhaps because of the shivers they arouse as the only Shi'ite dynasty to have ruled Egypt, which was normally a bastion of Shafi'i Sunnism, or else because of the unparalleled splendor of their art and court. The great Mamluk historian al-Maqrizi chronicled the history of the dynasty and its fabulous monuments and treasures, basing his accounts on mostly now-lost chronicles written in the Fatimid and post-Fatimid eras. These tantalizing reports are complemented by a score of buildings, largely mosques and tombs, surviving in Cairo and a seductive assortment of artworks—including lustered ceramics, exquisite rock crystals and diaphanous linens interwoven with gold, mostly preserved in European church treasuries and museums.

Apart from the 1969 millenary celebration of the founding of Cairo, which provoked an exhibition and a symposium, there has not been an exhibition or book devoted to Fatimid art until recently, but a spate of publications shows that the Fatimids have finally gotten their chance. The two books under review are complemented by recent and important publications about Isma'ili—particularly Fatimid—history and thought by such eminent scholars as Farhad Daftary, Heinz Halm, and Paul Walker. In 1998 the Institut du monde arabe held the first international exhibition on Fatimid art in Paris, which was commemorated in an important catalogue (*Trésors fatimides du Caire*, 1998). The proceedings of the accompanying symposium at the Sorbonne, edited by Marianne Barrucand, are in press.

The two books under review present very different approaches to the visual world of the Fatimids. Anna Contadini's *Fatimid Art* is by far the better book and would be a useful and important addition to any library dealing with Islamic art. It presents the collection of artworks from the Fatimid period in London's Victoria and Albert Museum and includes such varied media

as carved rock crystal, woven textiles, ceramics, glass, carved ivory and wood, and metalwork. The first chapter is a solid introduction to Fatimid history and architecture. It is followed by chapters on the individual media, including discussion of their history and technique. The discussion of rock crystal is particularly interesting. To each chapter Contadini appends a catalogue of many, but not necessarily all, of the examples from the V&A collection attributed to the Fatimid period. This selection indicates at once the book's strength and its weakness, for the author is unsure whether her book is about Fatimid art—hence she discusses works outside the V&A collection—or about the V&A collection—hence she discusses works in the collection that have nothing to do with the Fatimids, such as the Marwanid *tiraz* and a Yemeni *iqat*, both illustrated in color. Overall, this is a fair, useful, and reliable book.

Irene Bierman's book is quite different. It is at once more ambitious but ultimately less successful. Her thesis is that the Fatimid rulers of Egypt were the first to use writing on buildings and textiles ("the public text") to present their own distinct ideology to the diverse members of Cairene society. Fatimid doctrines, she argues, were presented in a distinct "Fatimid" form of Kufic script embellished with tendrils, leaves, and flowers. The book's blurb suggests that it will provide new insights into a complex period of Muslim history, as well as provide a pioneering model for studying public writing in other societies. This is hardly likely.

The author appears to have decided on a theory about public writing and adduced only the evidence needed to support it, while ignoring any conflicting evidence or information that might have led her to modify her extreme positions. For example, floriated Kufic was established in Egypt before the arrival of the Fatimids. It was not developed to make an ideological statement but was an aesthetic response to peculiarities of the Arabic script. There can be no question that the Fatimids used public texts to make public statements, but by limiting her scope to Egypt, Bierman is conveniently able to ignore the long tradition of public writing in the Muslim world before the Fatimids and in other regions, from Central Asia to Spain, let alone in the pre-Islamic Roman world. Although her reading on subjects ranging from contemporary signage to contextual literacy is omnivorous, and she thereby expands the horizons of dull scholarship, she oddly ignores the substantial literature on such crucial subjects as the contemporary—and perhaps related—revival of public writing in medieval Italy (Petrucci 1993) or larger questions of Islamic epigraphy (Blair 1992). Bierman is to be commended for writing a book with an idea; unfortunately, the idea is—in my opinion—quite wrong.

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- Petrucchi, A. 1993. *Public Lettering: Script, Power, and Culture*. Tr. L. Lappin. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Trésors fatimides du Caire*. 1998. Exhibition catalogue, 28 April–30 August 1998. Paris: Institut du monde arabe.

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Hadji Bektach, un mythe et ses avatars: Genèse et évolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie. By IRÈNE MÉLIKOFF. Leiden: E. J. BRILL, 1998. Pp. xxvi + 317.

Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East: Collected Papers of the International Symposium "Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East in the Past and Present," Berlin, 14–17 April 1995. Edited by KRISZTINA KEHL-BODROGI, BARBARA KELLNER-HEINKELE, and ANKE OTTER-BEAUJEAN. Leiden: E. J. BRILL, 1997. Pp. xvii + 255.

Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives: Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, November 25–27, 1996. Edited by TORD OLSSON, ELISABETH ÖZDALGA, and CATHARINA RAUDVERE. Istanbul: SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL, 1998. Pp. 210.

Irène Mélikoff's attempt at synthesis, and the two conference volumes, follow on the heels of three collections of papers published by Éditions Isis in Istanbul, two consisting of Mélikoff's own scattered articles: *Sur les traces du soufisme turc: Recherches sur l'Islam populaire en Anatolie* (1992); *De l'épopée au mythe: Itinéraire turcologique* (1995), and one consisting of papers presented at a conference on the Bektashis held at Strasbourg on 29 June–2 July 1986: *Bektachiyya: Études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, ed. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (1995).

In a revealing "Avant-propos" to one of the collections of her articles (*Le soufisme turc*, p. 3) Mélikoff recounts her astonishment one day in 1969 when she heard someone singing a *nefes* containing the words: *Men Ali'den gayri Tanrı bilmezem* ("I know no other God than Ali"). She had been visiting Turkey regularly for twenty-five years and had never imagined the possibility of such an assertion. "Je croyais tout connaître de ce pays et voilà que je découvrais une Turquie inconnue, insoupçonnée, qui vivait en marge de l'autre, la Turquie officielle!" And so she spent the next twenty-five years investigating this hidden and intriguing side of Turkish culture. Her remarkable career as the doyenne of Bektashi/Alevi studies, to which the

Strasbourg conference paid homage, has culminated in the book under review. *Hadji Bektach* is useful in providing an overview of her own researches, extending, as she puts it, "over a quarter of a century" (p. xiii). But there is little in it that is not found in her earlier articles, to which she frequently refers. And it is disappointing in other respects.

In revealing the "myth" of Haji Bektash and trying to separate out the strands of history and legend, Mélikoff perpetuates one or two myths herself. Chapter one of her book is entitled "Le chamanisme islamisé." Shamanism is understood as the original religion of the Turks of Central Asia, which in Anatolia became funneled into the heterodox sects that developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and eventually settled around the figure of Haji Bektash, an otherwise obscure dervish who had some connection with the Babai revolt in 1240 and settled near the present-day town of Hacibektaş. It was Fuad Köprülü who first put forward the notion of an islamized shamanism or shamanized Islam, but the evidence for it is tenuous in the extreme. A recent article by Reuven Amitai-Preiss has, I hope, given it the coup-de-grace ("Sufis and Shamans: Some Remarks on the Islamization of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42.1 [1999]: 27–46).

A major obstacle to the advancement of Bektashi/Alevi studies is that our chief source for the legend of Haji Bektash, the hagiographical *Vilayetname*, which dates to the fifteenth century, has not been edited. Mélikoff acknowledges the deficiency (p. 59: "L'édition d'Abdulgâki Gölpinarlı étant assez libre, une nouvelle édition serait bienvenue"), but then goes on to cite Gölpinarlı's 1958 publication, which is actually a translation into modern Turkish and not an edition. It is true that Gölpinarlı included a facsimile of the Ankara manuscript, but unfortunately this is largely illegible. A small example of the danger of relying on this publication is found on p. 62 of Mélikoff's book, where she cites the following legend: Haji Bektash demonstrates the "cooking" or maturation process required of the dervish by having one of his disciples, a certain Molla Sadeddin, cooked over the fire in a closed vessel. After forty days he removes the cover and Sadeddin has disappeared; after another forty days he again removes the cover and Sadeddin has turned into a baby; finally after another forty days he again removes the cover and Sadeddin has reverted to his original form. In Mélikoff's recounting, the vessel in question is a cauldron (*kazan*). This depends, although unacknowledged, on Gölpinarlı's publication, p. 62. But this passage happens to be legible, with the aid of a magnifying-glass, in the facsimile (fol. 139a), where it turns out that the vessel is a wash-bowl (*legençe*). The reading is confirmed in a versification (ca. 1500) of the *Vilayetname* by Firdevsi-i Rumi (*Manzûm Hacı Bektâş Veli Vilâyetnâmesi*, ed. Bedri Noyan [Aydın, 1986], 313). Apparently Gölpinarlı changed the wash-bowl into a cauldron to make the story more realistic! The recent, uncritical, French