Zimo on Picard, 'Sea of the Caliphs: The Mediterranean in the Medieval Islamic World'

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Christophe Picard's new book, Sea of the Caliphs, is the translation of his La mer des califes: Une histoire de la Méditerranée musulmane, VIIe—XIIe siècle (2015). In it, he argues that the importance of the Mediterranean to early Islam has been misunderstood and sets out to demonstrate just how fundamental it was to the thinking of early men of letters as well as to the caliphs who conquered and ruled the vast territory spanning from Central Asia to the Atlantic. Although the Mediterranean did come to be dominated by Latins by the thirteenth century, he pushes back against the perception, created in part by the nature of the sources, that during the first centuries of Islam, the sea was nothing more than a venue for sporadic piracy. Instead he shows how it featured in the shifting ideas of jihad propounded by the Umayyad, Abbasids, Fatimid, and Andalusi caliphates. The book has lofty and important goals but unfortunately falls short of providing a well-organized argument to achieve them.

Picard, a professor of history at the University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, is a prominent scholar of the medieval Mediterranean and has published widely on the societies living along the sea, with a particular focus on the Islamic world. As such, he is well suited to take aim at what has been a historiographic truism—that, with one or two exceptions, seafaring was never particularly important to Islamic powers. Following a short introduction, the book is divided into two large sections, titled “The Arab Mediterranean between Representation and Appropriation” and “Mediterranean Strategies of the Caliphs.” In the introduction, Picard discusses the narratives of the Mediterranean as established by such figures as Henri Pirenne and Ferdinand Braudel and revised more recently by archaeologists to include not just Latin, but Greek and Arabic voices as well. He offers a critique of Horden and Purcell, whose Corrupting Sea (2000) is a magnum opus of Mediterranean studies, for ignoring the Arabic voices: “Before we ask Horden and Purcell’s question, ‘What is the Mediterranean?’ we should perhaps first ask ourselves which Mediterranean and what history of the Mediterranean writers and geographers of the time wanted to leave to posterity, as well as for whom their descriptions of the territories of Islam were intended” (p. 7).

This questioning of the intent of sources is exactly what Picard traces in part 1. Dividing this section into seven distinct chapters, he reviews the Arabic textual sources, both in terms of their content regarding the sea and seafaring as well as their author’s intentions. The first chapter offers a preview to what Picard discusses throughout the book, arguing that prior to the tenth century, Arab writers...
largely ignored the Mediterranean in favor of the Indian Ocean. The texts that did mention the Mediterranean were constrained to do so in the context of warfare, as the caliphs whom the authors were supposed to be propagandizing had to be seen as emulating the Companions to the Prophet Muhammad. The rest of the chapter provides an interesting comparison of three different geographers, al-Masudi, al-Idrisi, and Ibn Khaldun, to trace the evolution in attitude and portrayals of the Mediterranean in geographic texts. The remainder of part 1 covers the general development of how men of letters deployed the Mediterranean in their texts, focusing at times on particular genres like geography (chapter 4, “The Geographer’s Mediterranean”) and texts produced in the western Mediterranean (chapters 5-7). He argues that for all of the authors, the importance of the Mediterranean was tied to efforts to legitimize their caliph, which in turn hinged on conceptions of jihad. Abbasid chroniclers framed the caliphs as ruling in the model of the Companions, and thus focused on frontier areas as areas of jihad modeled on the initial conquests. In a time when large-scale conquest was no longer tenable, Picard argues that authors of Abbasid chronicles recorded events only with an eye toward legitimization, and so would not record events or naval encounters that did not further their project and would mold events to advance the image of the caliph as a ghazi (a warrior involved in ongoing raids against non-Muslims along the frontier). He argues that over time, the Mediterranean became encompassed in the idea of jihad, especially as the institution of ribat (places along the frontier where volunteers could protect the land of Islam while dedicating themselves to prayer and asceticism) developed. He notes that many of the ribats were built along the sea, suggesting that the Mediterranean itself was seen as a frontier zone. Although used in different ways across the Mediterranean and over time, the sea was indeed an important component in ideas of caliphal legitimacy.

In the second part of the book, Picard treads much of the same ground as the first, except with an emphasis on what happened historically. Drawing from many of the same sources discussed in part 1, he moves in five chapters from the seventh century to the thirteenth, when Latins came to dominate the Mediterranean, and presents a historical narrative for the political and economic developments of the Islamic caliphates as related to maritime activities. The points he makes largely echo those of the previous part, in that he notes all of the activities the caliphates (Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Andalusian Umayyad, and Almohad) engaged in that demonstrate an ongoing interest in the sea. He also is careful to note that even as the sea was frequently a site of military encounter, it was also seen as a place of economic development and opportunity. Warfare and commerce were not mutually exclusive to the caliphs.

The ideas contained in this book are vitally important. Picard has taken aim at assumptions and uses of Arabic sources to reveal that the truism of caliphal indifference to the Mediterranean is incorrect. Unfortunately, it seems this book, or perhaps the original French version, was published prematurely. It has many problems, including a lack of clear argumentation, needless redundancy, and inaccurate maps. The book requires signposting and reorganization. The book’s purpose and argument, although articulated on the dustjacket, is not stated anywhere in the introduction, leaving the reader to fend for herself to determine the connections the author wants to make. The book would have benefited from a clear statement about the organizing principle of the book—that the first section is dedicated to textual discourse and the second to a political and economic survey of the same chronological period covered in the first.

Likewise, the relationship between the two sections is also not clearly articulated. There appears to
have been little effort to ensure that the contents of each part are truly distinct. Moreover, each chapter tends to suffer from oversegmentation without obvious signaling for how each relates to each, all while failing to articulate a thesis. Sometimes the subheading does not clearly relate to the contents of its section (e.g., pp. 40-46). In terms of mechanics, especially in part 1, the translator seems to have translated the French original literally, which leaves many paragraph-long sentences, as well as sentences with word and clause order that does not work well in English. There are also inconsistencies in the spelling of words, for example Koran/Quran (pp. 37 and 90). There are many maps, but their utility is undermined by inaccuracy or a failure to display cities recently discussed in the text. For example, there is a map that shows England and all of Ireland as belonging to the “Kingdom of the Franks” from 622-751 (pp. 44-45).

Some of the above criticisms might be explained by the intended audience, but it is not clear whom the book is intended for. The numerous maps, the in-text definition of Arabic terms (ulema is defined twice, on pp. 39 and 53, but is not in the glossary) and glossary, as well as the very minimalist end notes suggest a popular or non-academic audience. However, the absence of any dynasty charts and the frequent invocation of the names of caliphs without explanation for who they were, where they lived, or what dynasty they belonged to, suggest that Picard had an expert audience in mind. It would be very hard for someone not already versed in the history of the medieval Islamic Mediterranean world to follow Picard’s narrative. Picard should be commended for challenging conventional wisdom that does indeed need to be challenged. Many of his points show the weakness of the current state of the question. It is unlikely, however, that he will persuade many who are not already in his camp, not least because of the unorganized and repetitive nature of the writing, as well as some infelicitous translation issues.


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