

BOOK REVIEW

Hassanein, Hamada & Jens Scheiner (2020). *The Early Muslim Conquest of Syria: An English Translation of al-Azdī's Futūḥ al-Shām*. [Culture and Civilization in the Middle East] London and New York: Routledge, x[xiv] + 309 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-23025-8.

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The book under review is the very first translation of al-Azdī's *Futūḥ al-Shām*, one of the early extant examples, if not the earliest one, of Arabic historical works. As the Arabic title suggests, al-Azdī's writing belongs to the so-called *futūḥ* ('conquest') literature, and its main focus is on the conquests of Greater Syria in the early seventh century.

Translations of the most widely known Muslim histories were already available by the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century when, for example, selections from al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) chronicle (Nöldeke 1879) and the translation of al-Balādhurī's (d. ca. 279/892) entire *futūḥ* work (Hitti 1916, Murgotten 1924) were published. During the second half of the twentieth century, continuous scholarly interest in early Muslim history in general, and in the conquest period in particular, gave rise to the birth of numerous monographs on early and classical Arabic history writing. Yet, besides the monumental translation of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, published in forty volumes in the 1980s and the 1990s, this growing interest had not stimulated a rise in published translations of early works of Muslim historiography. Accordingly, even some quite early texts of fundamental importance continued to remain inaccessible to a broader audience unable to read the original Arabic version. However, this regrettable tendency has changed since, and the production of translations appears to have gained a new impetus. During the past few years, translations of various early and classical Arabic histories have been published, including Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī's (fl. late third/ninth century) *Ta'rikh* (Gordon, Robinson, Rowson and Fishbein 2018), Ma'mar ibn Rāshid's (d. 153/770) biography of Muḥammad (Anthony 2015), and a partial translation of Khalifa ibn Khayyāṭ's (d. 240/854) *Ta'rikh* has also appeared (Wurtzel and Hoyland 2015). The present publication of al-Azdī's work fits neatly into this welcome tendency and is its most recent example.

Not independently of its very early date, numerous studies have addressed the many issues surrounding al-Azdī's work since William Nassau Lees's *editio princeps*, published in the mid-nineteenth century. Even though some doubts had been previously cast on the credibility of the *Futūḥ*

al-Shām as a reliable source for reconstructing historical events owing to its incompleteness compared to other early historical writings such as al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* and al-Balādhurī's *Futūḥ*, today few if any would share these reservations. Consequently, al-Azdī's text is by now seen as an indispensable source for understanding the historiography of Muslim expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, this hardly means that no disputed points and unanswered questions have remained after more than a century of research. Both the author's person and his work lack a comprehensive scholarly treatment, and previously no translation into a modern Western language was made. As the present translation seeks to remedy both, it will undoubtedly receive particular attention both from scholars and interested readers.

The book starts with a table of contents which, following the Arabic original, meticulously lists every chapter heading of the Arabic text (taking up more than three pages). After the acknowledgements, the translators briefly describe the structure of the work, which is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 (pp. 2–5) is a helpful summary of the main events narrated in the *Futūḥ al-Shām*. In phrasing their summary, the translators highlight that they made 'use of the vocabulary and the concepts of the text, deliberately adopting al-Azdī's perspective'. The result of this most welcome approach is a brief and precise synthesis, which assists the reader in following and understanding the text much more easily than if they had to rely solely on the table of contents. Although this approach will be familiar to readers interested in other fields of Arabic studies, it is sadly all too rare in books on Muslim historiography.

Chapter 2 (pp. 6–24) focuses on the author-compiler and his work. In general, modern translations understandably aim to reach the broadest possible readership. In order to achieve this, extensive introductory chapters seeking to summarize the available information on the author and his work and to contextualize the text itself provide the most useful tools. These studies are especially valuable in the case of such a problematic representative of early Muslim historiography as al-Azdī. Readers will be delighted to find that the book under review goes even further, offering a concise synopsis of research history organised around seven subchapters on the compiler-author (pp. 6–8), the title (p. 9), the audience (p. 10), the manuscripts (pp. 10–13), the chains of transmission (*riwāya*) (pp. 13–20), the editions (pp. 20–21), and the modern scholarly studies on al-Azdī's *Futūḥ al-Shām* (pp. 21–24). As the very first note to this chapter (p. 1, n. 1.) indicates, this part of the book is based on and summarizes the main conclusions of a forthcoming monograph authored by Jens Scheiner, *Al-Azdī's Futūḥ al-Shām in Past and Present*. Although for some reason the translators did not indicate their respective authorship either in the table of contents, or at the onset or end of the individual chapters, Chapter 2 was in all likelihood written by Scheiner (cf. n. 22, where the author of the text refers to himself as 'I'), who shall therefore be referred to as 'the author' in the following discussion. In several instances, the footnotes also cite his monograph, which, being still an unpublished work at the time of this review's writing, I was unable to consult.

The forthcoming status of this detailed study is one of the main reasons that the introduction accompanying the present translation confines itself to the most essential pieces of information as regards the *Futūḥ al-Shām* and its author. First, his name, *floruit*, time of death, and geographic origins are covered. Given the lack of biographical entries, the author's full name is solely known from the manuscripts of the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, where it is specified as Abū Ismā'il Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallāh al-Azdī al-Baṣrī, shortly al-Azdī (p. 6). According to a 'fairly widespread consensus among scholars', he 'died within a period of approximately forty years, i.e. between ca. 170–210/786–825' (p. 8). As for al-Azdī's geographic background, Scheiner finds neither the arguments for a Syrian nor those for an Iraqi origin wholly convincing, and suggests that this question be



left open until new evidence comes to light. As for the title of al-Azdī's work, Scheiner concludes that either *Kitāb futūḥ al-Shām* or its abbreviated form, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, should be used, while two other versions, which also gained currency in the secondary literature, namely *Mukhtaṣar futūḥ al-Shām* and *Ta'rikh futūḥ al-Shām*, should be regarded as inappropriate (p. 9).

Concerning the problematic issue of the work's audience, which has not been addressed in previous studies, the reader has to be content with hypotheses in the lack of any direct references in the text. Since the *Futūḥ al-Shām* narrates a Muslim success story phrased with a rich array of 'religious, and in particular Qur'anic, terms and concepts', it is reasonable to assume that it was intended for a Muslim audience (p. 10).

The *Futūḥ al-Shām* has at least (cf. p. 10, n. 22.) three extant manuscripts (Paris MS 1664, 'Kāle-Sprenger-manuscript'/Berlin MS 9767, and Paris MS 1665), dated within a period of ca. 150 years in the seventh–eighth/thirteenth–fourteenth centuries. All codices were purchased either in Cairo or in Delhi and 'are said to have been transmitted in Syria (Jerusalem) and Egypt (Alexandria and Cairo)', by the disciples of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (d. 576/1180).

The meticulous analysis of the chains of transmission highlights several important points. It reveals, for example, how al-Azdī can be regarded as the compiler-author of the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, even though no attestation can be found about this 'author–text relationship' before Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī (d. 575/1179) and Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (p. 13, p. 17). Based on the *riwāyas*, Scheiner further details the crucial role played by Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī in the transmission of the work, who transmitted the text even within his family (p. 20). He also accentuates the role of another eleventh-century scholar, Abū Ishāq al-Ḥabbāl (d. 482/1089), who, as Scheiner argues, seems to have had 'a fixed text of the *Futūḥ al-Shām* at hand' a century before al-Silafī (pp. 14–17).

Brief but informative comments are provided on the existing printed editions of the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. It is emphasised that Lees's edition (1854), although conscientiously edited and annotated, was based on a single manuscript. Readers are warned that 'Āmir's edition (1970) should no longer be used, mainly due to the unavailability of the single manuscript on which it is allegedly based. Thus, in sum, the last and most recent edition, published by 'Uqla and Banī Yāsīn in Irbid (Jordan) in 2004, is the most reliable of all extant printed versions, and readers are strongly advised to use that edition, on which the translation was also based.

Yet, in all fairness, mention should be made of the circumstance, also duly stressed in the introduction, that in this reviewer's experience, the availability of the Irbid edition is very limited, at least in the libraries across Europe. Thus, one is inclined to speculate whether the re-publication of the Arabic text or of an improved version based on the cross-checking of 'Uqla/Banī Yāsīn's edition with the readings of all extant manuscripts, alongside the English translation would not have significantly contributed to the accessibility of al-Azdī's work for specialists. To be sure, similar bilingual editions have rarely been published until now, not least because such volumes would serve the needs of no more than a handful of scholars, but would significantly increase both the production costs and the sale price of a book, and are therefore supported only in exceptional cases by profit-oriented publishing houses.

Finally, various studies on al-Azdī from the past 150 years are surveyed and divided into two main groups according to their main concerns: *riwāyas* and *isnāds* on the one hand, and content on the other. Scheiner concludes with L. I. Conrad's words: 'al-Azdi remains an outthor [sic] known to us only through the book that survives under his name.' He also points out that despite the enormous efforts made to study the work, what is known about the author remains very limited (pp. 23–24).



Chapter 3 presents the principles of translation. Following Marshall Hodgson's (1974: 68) terminology, the translators opted for a 'precise study translation', meaning that 'although the translation is free of the syntax of the original language, yet the most natural retranslation of it into the original language will give back the original form, without precisions and omissions.' Following Hodgson's definition, such a text 'attempts to provide an equivalent communication of the original which readers can then interpret for themselves' (p. 25). However, before leaving us in the company of the text, Hassanein and Scheiner cover every aspect of the method they chose for their translation. An emphasis is placed on how religious terminology and repetitive synonyms were used, and they include a four-page long list of technical terms and eulogies. Similarly, a detailed enumeration in twelve points explains various stylistic issues, including the use of groups' names, personal names, chapter divisions, paragraphs, pagination, typesetting, translating *isnāds*, dates, transliteration, the translation of the Qur'ān, and typography. Finally, notes have also been made on the method of providing annotations.

As Hodgson (1974: 68) himself put it, the chosen method of translation calls for great precision and 'complete control of what is routine grammatical pattern'. The outcome of the enterprise undertaken by the translators is, in general, convincing and, as was the intention of Hassanein and Scheiner, the translated text clearly gives back the formulaic character of the Arabic.

A final note on the physical appearance of the volume seems in order. The book has a nice feel to it. The single aspect possibly marring the readers' enjoyment is the slightly too cramped layout, which renders the translation, densely packed with additional information set into brackets, a laborious task to read. Obviously, this is mostly a consequence of the nature of the Arabic text itself, which could not have been entirely overcome by any means. A layout chosen with less focus on saving space, and thereby some expenses, might have been more expedient.

In sum, we should once again emphasise the careful work and the exceptionally high quality of scholarship that went into the production of the volume under review. It is a most welcome addition to the existing corpus of modern translations of medieval Arabic historiography, for which both the translators undertaking the time-consuming work of preparing a precise study translation of an Arabic historical text and the publisher are to be duly thanked and commended. That said, it is also to be remarked that the present translation will reach its full impact with the publication of Scheiner's forthcoming monograph, not least because there is hardly any other early or classical Arabic historiographer whose writing was chosen for a full translation and comprehensive study in its entirety by one and the same leading scholar in the field. With both volumes in hand, al-Azdi's doubtless very significant oeuvre will not merely attain its proper place in the canon of early Muslim historiography, but will instantly become one of its best-studied representatives too.



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