

Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors

Konrad Hirschler

London, Routledge, 2006, SOAS/Routledge Studies on the Middle East, No. 5x + 182 pp., 2 figures, 4 tables

This is a short but well-researched book, published as part of the series SOAS/Routledge Studies on the Middle East. It is based on Konrad Hirschler's PhD dissertation submitted at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). Rather than historiography in general, the book is concerned with historical writing in Syria at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century. The aim of the book is to analyse the component of agency (understood as defined by Emirbayer/Goodwin, 1994¹) among two historians of the period who composed historical chronicles.

The two authors chosen are Abu Shama (d.1268) and Ibn Wasil (d.1298). Owing to their handling of similar sources and events but their different social contexts, Hirschler is able to draw a comparison between the respective ways in which both historians interpreted their past. The comparison is justified by the fact that both of the authors lived in the same region (Syria) and were contemporaries to one another, but the way in which both constructed their narratives was marked by the different social networks they constructed. In order to prove this point, in Chapter Three Hirschler reconstructs some of the personal links established by these two authors, showing how while Ibn Wasil was attached to officials, commanders and amirs in the Ayyubid court, Abu Shama was closer to religious scholars. This social networking is therefore considered a key element that influenced the authors when writing their political history of Syria.

The Islamic categorization of science as belonging either to the religious sphere or to the rational domain of ancient philosophy is the main division between the authors analysed by Hirschler. The life of these authors is analysed in the fourth chapter, which underlines the different intellectual background and scholarly interest of Abu Shama and Ibn Wasil. While the former produced an autobiography, enabling a more extensive outline of his intellectual life, the latter was mainly concerned with rational science, which was not always included in biographical dictionaries. In this chapter, through comparing the different disciplines in which each of the authors was versed, Hirschler establishes a clear distinction between their respective intellectual backgrounds. Abu Shama is shown through his work on Qur'anic reading, Hadiths, commentaries on poetry dedicated to the prophet Muhammad, theoretical jurisprudence and *Kalam*. On the other hand, Ibn Wasil was mostly remembered by later Islamic scholars for his works on logic and poetry and, to a lesser degree, for his commentaries on medicine and astronomy. Therefore, despite some shared intellectual interest in *Kalam*, although differing in approach, both authors inhabited very different scholarly environments.

Chapters Five and Six are dedicated to the analysis of Abu Shama and Ibn Wasil's chronicles from a comparative perspective. The first of these chapters is devoted to defining the 'mode of emplotment' used by each author in constructing their narratives. Hirschler identifies the mode he calls *Process* in Ibn Wasil and *Stasis* in Abu Shama's historical works. This categorization is done by an analysis

¹ See M. Emirbayer and J. Goodwin, 'Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency', *American Journal of Sociology*, 99(11) (1994), pp. 1411–1454.

of different elements present in both chronicles. The choice of titles, final sections and historicization of each author allows Hirschler to establish these categories where *Process* presents a lineal and continuous historical process in which righteous governance existed in the past (e.g. in the Golden Caliphate), are present in the author's time (personified in the reigns of Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din) and will continue in the future. On the contrary, the *Stasis* used by Abu Shana operates as a cyclical idea of rule, in which periods good governance (Golden Caliphate and the reign of Salah al-Din) are preceded and followed by periods of ignorance and darkness (*Jahiliya*).

In Chapter Six, Hirschler narrows down his argument about how the modes of emplotment act as factors for agency by analysing particular events narrated in the texts. Once again, he shows how the information is organized differently by Ibn Wasil and Abu Shana when dealing, for example, with the advance on Mosul by Salah al-Din in 578/1182. While the former followed a clear chronological development of the military campaign, Abu Shana repeatedly 'returned to previously described stages in the course of the text' (p. 88). This approach serves to reinforce the author's argument about the space of manoeuvre afforded by Islamic medieval historians. Firstly, according to this study, the historical narratives were determined by the social and intellectual background of each author (explored in Chapters Three and Four). Secondly, these chronicles also reflect different modes of emplotment in the structure of the texts themselves (see Chapter Five); and, finally, this particular emplotment is crucial in determining the way in which the historical events are narrated (see Chapter Six).

As Hirschler himself states, more research is needed in order to corroborate or refute his categorisation of modes of emplotment in Arabic historical narratives. However, the author succeeds in showing that agency played a role among the authors of these chronicles and that it can be analysed through the framework he proposes. This framework can be very useful not only for historians, who must manage biases in the sources all the time, but Hirschler's thesis is also appealing on account of its use of a literary analysis approach to sources that have remained generally within the sphere of the historical discipline. This approach might not sound original for those studying European history, but within Middle Eastern Studies this is a refreshing and stimulating proposal.

Bruno De Nicola © 2010
University of Cambridge

1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War

Benny Morris

London, Yale University Press, 2008, xiv + 524 pp., 30 maps, 32 photographs

This is an important and well-researched book. Benny Morris is known to readers of the literature on the Arab–Israeli conflict and has written on the subject more than any other author. His first and most well-known book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*, published in 1989, is still considered to be a classic on the subject. It was re-edited in 2004 as *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. He is also a leading figure among Israel's 'New Historians'; a group of university professors and researchers who try to present a more 'balanced' rather than a 'biased' Zionist view of the Arab–Israeli