

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: KONRAD HIRSCHLER, *THE WRITTEN WORD IN THE MEDIEVAL ARABIC LANDS: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF READING PRACTICES* (EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012): IV + 234 PP, 15 PLATES; ISBN: 978-0748642564; £95.

“A book”, said the illustrious 3rd AH/9th AD century Baghdadi man of letters ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāhiz (d. 255 AH/868-9 AD) “is the most wonderful companion and provision, the best amulet and entertainment, the best thing to keep oneself busy and occupied with, the most excellent friend in times of loneliness, the best source for knowledge in a foreign land, the best comrade and visitor and the best counselor and guest”¹. Al-Jāhiz’s words are significant: within literate societies in the Middle Ages Arabic culture was among the most influential and widespread. The cultural life of early Islamic times, up to the end of the 4th/10th century, has been widely researched. However, while the cultural and literary products of this early, often labeled ‘Classical’, period have elicited attention in modern research, the period from the 5th/10th century to the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 10th/16th century has been rather neglected due, perhaps, to the prevalent view that this was a time of cultural stagnation and decline. In recent decades this position has begun to shift, as more researchers have been working on different aspects of the ‘post-Classical’ cultural product². Konrad Hirschler’s well-documented, and nevertheless admirably concise, book is part of this growing trend. The study is dedicated to the cultural and social history of reading practices during the ‘Middle Period’ – a term Hirschler

¹ Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, ed. by ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo: 1965-1969, vol. 1, p. 38.

² Among them Hirschler’s first book, dedicated to questions of authorial agency in historiography at this period. See Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors*, Oxford: Routledge, 2006.

prefers over 'post-Classical' due to the latter's negative connotations. By reexamining the accepted paradigm, Hirschler shows that this was rather a time of immense cultural and sociological changes in reading and writing practices and, indeed, a period of bustling intellectual life.

Hirschler's main thesis is that the Middle Period gave rise to a general transformation in cultural practices, brought about by two interconnected processes: on the one hand a process of *textualization*, i.e. an increasing usage of the written word in various contexts that had been previously dominated almost solely by oral/aural practices; and on the other hand by a process of *popularization*, i.e. a transformation of the social contexts of reading practices, whereby growing numbers of new audiences from various sociological strata began to take part in the act of reading (and subsequently also of writing). Hirschler's concern "is thus to trace the effects that the spread of written texts in the Middle Period had on the social contexts and cultural practices of consuming and receiving the written word."³ Using a plethora of sources, the author examines various aspects of reading practices during the Middle Period, focusing mainly, due to the relative abundance of documentation, on the two most prominent cities of the time – Damascus and Cairo.

The first chapter examines the interrelationship between oral/aural practices and literacy in the general Islamic context. The shaping of Islamic literary culture is strongly linked to oral transmission practices, as oral modes of delivery were the authoritative vehicle for the transmission of *hadith* (prophetic traditions) during early Islamic times, even after these traditions had been written down and included in various treatises. A tendency towards the oral/aural method of transmission of authoritative texts continued well into the Middle Period, causing a constant interplay between the written and the oral/aural, as written texts were to be read aloud and consumed aurally. However, Hirschler stresses that "the Middle Period witnessed the spread of the written word to a degree that transformed cultural practices"⁴. He places the turning point in its status in the 5th/11th century, during which writing began to take its place as the authoritative vehicle for conveying and preserving knowledge.

The second chapter studies the rise of new *reading communities*. Hirschler's main concern here is with the heterogeneous audience that participated in public 'reading sessions' of various scholarly

³ Hirschler, *The Written Word* p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

works. One of the main sources for this study is the so-called *samāʿ* ('auditory') certificates, which were originally composed in order to give permission to scholarly auditors to transmit the contents of the work they had 'heard' (especially, but not exclusively, *hadīth* treatises), and subsequently documented also the non-scholarly participants in a given reading session. Taking as a case in point the reading sessions held in Damascus around the publication of Ibn 'Asākir's (d. 571/1175) voluminous *History of Damascus (Ta'rīkh Madīnat Dimashq)*, a biographical dictionary dedicated mostly to *hadīth* scholars, Hirschler is able to demonstrate the popularization of the written word during the Middle Period. Through the *samāʿ* certificates he traces the activity of twelve 'reading communities' during the second half of the 6th/12th century and the early 7th/13th century. These communities regularly held reading sessions of the work, guided by an authorized teacher (in certain cases – the author himself accompanied by reader who would read out an allotted portion of the text), over several years. While the *samāʿ* certificates make it clear that some of the communities were decisively scholarly in nature, others had an audience of mixed social background, including military men, merchants and craftsmen, women, children, 'dependents' (slaves and clients), and other non-scholarly participants. The different character of the scholarly vs. the 'popular' reading communities is furthermore attested by the different days of the week in which each community convened, by the venues of each group's sessions and by the seating arrangements (usually in a concentric semi-circle around the teacher and the reader, with the non-scholars occupying the back rows).

The third chapter is dedicated to developments in education and schooling during the Middle Period, and focuses mainly on 7th/13th century Cairo. The sources for this study include manuals for market inspectors (who doubled as school inspectors), narrative texts, endowment deeds for schools and last but not least, 7th/13th-8th/14th century illustrations of two literary works (the *maqāmāt* of al-Harīrī and a Persian version of *Majnūn wa-Laylā*). By using these sources, Hirschler tracks the changing pedagogical attitudes of the Middle Period and the introduction of various new elements into school curricula and practices. While in earlier periods children's schools focused mainly on skills of Qur'ān recitation, during the Middle Period the stress shifted towards reading and writing skills, and new didactic texts were introduced alongside the Qur'ān. This process was followed by a significant increase in the number of schools for children in Cairo and elsewhere from the 7th/13th century on. These were established mainly through endowments by various individuals, including persons from the ruling elite, wealthy scholars, merchants, and others. These endowments were usually a part of larger complexes, such as mosques, *madrasas*,

communal fountains, etc., and were aimed at children from humbler backgrounds, including orphans and not at the sons of the elite, who usually enjoyed private education. As more children from lower social echelons attained reading and writing skills, the spread of these endowed schools became a significant factor in the popularization of the written word in the Middle Period.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to another endowed establishment that came into prominence during the Middle Period – the local library. Modern research has generally adopted the accepted narrative according to which the Middle Period saw a decline in the number of libraries due to various catastrophes. However, Hirschler shows that the period actually afforded a greater availability of the written word to larger audiences of readers through the expansion of local endowed libraries. These were established in increasing numbers from the 5th/11th century onward in various Arabic lands. As with the endowed schools, they were often part of larger complexes and served a far wider public of readers than privately owned libraries. Furthermore, an examination of the holding profile of these libraries, mainly through narrative sources, endowment deeds, and library inventories – most importantly, a unique inventory written during the 7th/13th century for the Ashrafiyya library in Damascus – enables Hirschler to show that the collections of these libraries, albeit poorer at times in number of volumes in comparison to private libraries owned by scholars, covered a wider array of topics and genres; while in privately owned libraries works of religious studies were predominant, in collections of these ‘public’ libraries a far greater presence of ‘belle-lettristic’ works, which were aimed, so it seems, at a larger, non-scholarly audience, can be witnessed.

The fifth chapter investigates the development of popular reading practices during the Middle Period. In this context, Hirschler examines the rise of the popular epic. Although works of this genre probably had their roots in oral practices, the earliest attestations to their existence in sources from the 6th/12th century onward refer to their written form. Although often treated as harmful by scholarly and religious authors, popular epics were apparently recited to mixed audiences in the public sphere. Hirschler suggests that the harsh scholarly attitude towards these works was not only due to the contexts in which they were read or to their vulgar style, but also because they dealt at times with historical topics that scholars saw as their exclusive domain, and thus were perceived as a threat to their authority of knowledge. In addition to the popular epic, the Middle Period saw the emergence of shadow plays, eclectic literary anthologies, popular

maqāmāt (rhymed narratives) and other ‘popular genres’, many of which were composed by non-scholarly authors.

In his concluding remarks Hirschler states that the double process of textualization and popularization demonstrated throughout the book “profoundly transformed cultural practices linked to the production, transmission and reception of texts in Egypt and Syria over the Middle Period”.⁵ Subsequently, already prior to the spread of printing to the Arabic world in the late 13th/19th century “dynamic manuscript cultures that successfully responded to the aspirations and changing cultural practices of wider sections of the population”⁶ had existed. While his work gives ample evidence for these claims Hirschler stresses that in order to present a fuller picture of the long-term development of reading and writing practices in the pre-modern era there is a need for further research on other geographical areas, other time periods and other forms of writing. This book, with its sound methodology and sophisticated use of various types of sources, seems to pave the way for all these and more.

In sum, Hirschler’s fascinating, well-argued and richly documented book draws a vivid picture of a transformative phase in Arabic cultural history, offering important glimpses into its various aspects. It is a highly valuable work for anyone interested in pre-modern Arabic literature in particular, and in the development of reading and writing practices in the Middle Ages in general.

⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁶ Ibid., 201.