SSA Book and Article Prizes 2013

The Prize Committee of the Syrian Studies Association is pleased to announce the prizes for the most outstanding book and article published between January 1, 2011 (for books)/September 1, 2011 (for articles), and July 1, 2013.

The committee was made up of Thomas Pierret (chair), Sophia Hoffmann, Melanie Tanielian, Heghnar Watenpaugh, and Benjamin White.

We had four books and six articles to evaluate. The subjects covered included the Umayyad period, the development of Damascus’ Old city throughout the ages, legal opinions and practices in the Ottoman era, colonial violence under the French occupation, the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, intellectuals and the Asad regime, Palestinians of Syria and the 2011 uprising, and the Shiite holy place of Sayyida Zaynab. Half of the contributions were devoted to pre-modern and early modern history, whereas the other half addressed recent political developments.

The committee congratulates the winners, and thanks all the participants for contributing to this closely fought competition.

Book prize:


This is the first time since 2001 that an SSA prize is awarded to a study of a pre-Ottoman issue, and as far as we know, the first time ever it is awarded to a piece of research on the Umayyad Empire.

In this very rich book, Antoine Borrut proposes an original and sophisticated attempt at finding a middle ground between uncritical and radical skeptical approaches to extant sources on early Islamic, and in particular Umayyad, history. Borrut offers much more than the widely accepted assumption that early (that is, Abbasid) historiography on the Umayyad period was shaped by the incumbent dynasty’s political agenda. First, he masterfully unpacks the idea of “political agenda” by showing that there were in fact several phases/layers of historical writing, each of which was characterized by specific, evolving political concerns. Second, the author goes beyond a strictly skeptical reading of Abbasid historiography by demonstrating that the latter was constrained by existing historical accounts inherited from the Umayyad period.

Abbasids historians were of course filtering and twisting these accounts, but for reasons Borrut skillfully explains, they could not simply ignore them and write a purely invented history of the Umayyad period. In order to retrieve the traces of this now disappeared Umayyad historiography, Borrut compares Abbasid historiography with earlier non-Muslim sources on the Umayyads, and find convergences that could not be explained if Abbasid historiography was a mere invention of the past. This use of non-Muslim sources is certainly the most innovative aspect of this book. The sophistication and originality of Borrut’s approach to source analysis makes his book an important contribution not only to our knowledge of Umayyad history, but also to the reflection on late Antique/early medieval historiography in general.

Article prize:

This article is an excellent exemplar of the tradition of Syrian-ottoman social-juridical history. It is generally acknowledged that a reading of the “imperial periphery” as negotiating partner and agents of change in the policies of the Ottoman state has to consider both central and local archives. Seldom do we see this carried out so successfully as here. Taylor’s use of sources is superb as it shows her abilities to move from local court records to Kanunname. The argument about how the differences between Sultanic law and its implementation in the provinces expresses certain power relations, differences in technological and knowledge change is well made and convincing. The article also provides vivid insights into how legal scholars grappled with the contradictions between law and “everyday life”. Moreover, Taylor includes an interesting gender dimension in her analysis by highlighting a differentiation between how men and women farmers dealt with usufruct inheritance.