
Reviewed by Malissa Taylor

Following a trend set in the field of early modern European history, historians of the early modern Middle East have recently shown a greater interest in the history of books, readers and writers. While this new interest in books and the culture of literacy has led to fresh and productive inquiries, scholars of the Middle East have rarely broached the subject of popular literature and the circumstances of non-elite readers and writers that have received so much attention in early modern Europe. There are of course notable exceptions to this generalization, such as Nelly Hanna’s *In Praise of Books*.

Dana Sajdi’s *The Barber of Damascus Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* sets out to remedy this lacuna. As a work, it is similar to its early modern European counterparts in that it aims to explore the changing world of non-elite subjects, in this case the world of non-elite authors. Sajdi observes that the eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion in the number of historical chronicles authored by tradesmen, soldiers, farmers and a number of others who were not scholars. Sajdi claims that this appropriation of the chronicle by men who were not ‘ulama’ constituted a phenomenon related to the increased social mobility and social displacement that broadly characterized the eighteenth century. Sajdi points to the scholarly consensus that the malikane and other developments in this century led to the rise of new elites in the Ottoman provinces known as ‘ayan: local strongmen who were able to establish themselves in positions of wealth and political power hitherto unattainable. Likewise, she maintains, classes of men who had never previously obtained the cultural capital to produce books were able to do so during this new period of opportunity, and to break the monopoly of the ‘ulama’ on cultural production. Sajdi uses the term “nouveau literacy” to refer to this entry of literate artisans and commoners into the formerly rarified domain of chronicle writers. She characterizes nouveau literacy as a break with the preceding literary order corresponding to the simultaneous break up of the older political, economic and social order of the Ottoman provinces.

Sajdi’s evidence does not come exclusively from eighteenth-century chronicles, but these are understandably at the heart of the study. In particular, she draws on the text produced by the eponymous barber of Damascus, Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Budayr (fl. 1762). This chronicle was long known to the scholarly community only through the version bowdlerized by the nineteenth-century ‘alim Muhammad Said al-Qasimi. Sajdi’s discovery of the original manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library and her 2003 article calling attention to its recovery caused a stir in the small community of Ottoman Syria historians. Ibn Budayr sits squarely at the center of the book, as Sajdi uses his life experience and the events described in his chronicle to illustrate how the nouveau literates acquired the cultural capital to establish themselves as writers and changed the formal characteristics of chronicles.

Earlier chapters chart how tradesmen, farmers and religious minorities were able to claim an intellectual space as authors of history. One chapter immerses the reader in the social world of Ibn Budayr, arguing that his newly acquired profession as a barber in an auspicious location gave him access to centers of learning and associations with learned men, both ‘ulama’ and Sufis. Ibn Budayr’s chronicle would draw frequent attention to his participation in this learned milieu, a strategy that provided an arriviste like himself with some measure of authority. Later chapters explore the way that these nontraditional authors appropriated the genre of the chronicle and
reconfigured it to reflect their own concerns. While older chronicles written by ‘ulama’ had focused on the deeds of sultans, high officials and other ‘great men’, the chronicles of Ibn Budayr and his fellow nouveau literates showed a new interest in mundane events and the lives and tribulations of small folk. The formal features of non-elite chronicles also differ from those written by ‘ulama’, and bear the imprint of the oral performances of the Damascene coffee house. There, adventure tales were read aloud in the colloquial idiom of the city and set in rhyming prose, both of which are conspicuous features in Ibn Budayr’s chronicle. In these ways and others, Sajdi establishes how Ibn Budayr and others like him found a literary foothold in the genre of the chronicle, and rendered it a new genre in both content and style.

If there is a chief foible of the book, it is a tendency to overstate the case in ways that are—in this reviewer’s opinion—unnecessary. To point to one example, why state so categorically and so repeatedly that Ibn Kannan was the last ’alim not only in Damascus but in the entire Levant to author a chronicle? Such a statement means either that Muhammad Said Ustuwani’s Mashahid wa Ahdath Dimashqiyyah fi muntasif al-garn al-tasi’ ‘ashar and Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi’s Ta’tir al-Masham fi mathir Dimashq al-Sham are not chronicles, or that the respective authors are not ‘ulama’. Are such claims really necessary to sustain Sajdi’s argument? It seems to me that Sajdi’s point that the Levantine chronicle was increasingly coopted and adapted by non-‘ulama’ is impregnably sound. She need not claim that the ‘ulama’ completely abandoned the writing of chronicles to further substantiate it. As foibles go, however, this is a minor one.

In terms of revising prevailing trends in historiography, Sajdi is making two important contributions. First, she is directly challenging the notion that the ‘ulama’ were the exclusive producers of Arab learned culture. Contradicting depictions of Arab intellectual pursuits as hidebound, she asserts a changing intellectual climate with new and socially more diverse participants. Secondly, she is corroborating and further elaborating the contention that the eighteenth century was an age of profound change for the Middle East, creating foundations for the developments of the nineteenth century. She makes this claim explicitly in the book’s conclusion by linking the emergence of the nouveau literate to what she deems his successor, the journalist/public intellectual of the Nahda. Sajdi’s work is a fine one, unusual and commendable in its blending of social and intellectual topics. Scholars of Ottoman Syria will find it a must read.

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