

Book Review

Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire. The Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017), viii+337 pp. ISBN 978-07-48-64076-8. Price: £20.99.

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Those of us intimately involved in the study of Fatimid history, as well as others who teach areas of Islamic history in which this dynasty played a significant role, have long lamented the lack of a good, substantial one-volume account of that era suitable for use in classroom instruction and also generally available and accessible for anyone interested in the period. Among those who have such an interest is, of course, a large world-wide population of Ismaili Muslims who continue to regard the Fatimid caliphs as the divinely chosen imams of their religious tradition. I am quite pleased to announce that finally we have just such a work.

For the many times I have offered a course specifically devoted to the Fatimids, it has been a challenge to cobble together an adequate set of reading materials,

most especially if the only language the students could use was English. Heinz Halm's truly monumental three-volume history¹ is in itself excellent but only one volume has appeared in English thus far. Without German the rest remains, sadly, inaccessible. There exist fine works in French, notably some by Th. Bianquis, and Arabic is reasonably well served, most recently by A. F. Sayyid.

Even in English the situation is not hopeless but until now it has required gathering together many separate items: a few book length works, articles on various topics, Genizah studies, and the increasing and quite valuable publications of the Ismaili Institute in London which has added, over the years, immeasurably to our store of Fatimid era Ismaili texts in translation. Yet others have become available due to the efforts of several

1. Heinz Halm, *Das Reich des Mahdis: Der Aufstieg der Fatimiden (875-973)* (München: C.H. Beck, 1991); *Die Kalifen von Kairo: Die Fatimiden in Ägypten, 973-1074* (München: C.H. Beck, 2003); *Kalifen und Assassinen: Ägypten und der Vordere Orient zur Zeit der ersten Kreuzzüge, 1074-1171* (München: C.H. Beck, 2014).



scholars (including Tahera Qutbuddin, Devin Stewart, most especially Ismail Poonawala). *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entries are often useful and now updated with the latest in the *EI3*.

SOAS's Michael Brett has all along been a major contributor to Fatimid studies with an important book on the rise of the dynasty and its early tenth century phase,² plus a long stream of articles on various aspects and periods of its existence. Until this book appeared I had thought I was keeping up with his many publications. However, I now see from its bibliography how many I had missed. One of the lesser but still important benefits it offers is a list of them.

There are several areas where Brett's previous work is essential, among them the role of the Berbers and the importance of trans-Saharan trade, along with the wider problem of tribal versus urban economies and social organizations. His attempts to explain major economic factors, as in the land granting *iqṭā'* system, with its various medieval recalibrations, is also noteworthy, but these are only those that come immediately to mind. After reading this new book, it would seem that he not only well understands a wide range of issues, problems and puzzles peculiar to the Fatimid case, but can often explain them as clearly as anyone might be expected to do and with the highest standards of scholarly investigation.

The Ismaili dimension of this empire and the concomitant role its *da'wa* played, both inside and outside of the domain of its direct rule can, as in many past efforts, prove how difficult it is to adequately

integrate religion in an ordinary historical account of its political affairs. Al-Maqrīzī's key *Itti'āz al-ḥunafā'*, the sole medieval attempt to cover the whole period (both the North African and Egyptian phase together) in one work, indicates that he wanted to know much more than he did but that he lacked access to most of Ismaili materials that we now have. Happily Brett appears at home with much, if not most, of the recently uncovered works of the *da'wa*. It is true that we owe to Farhad Daftary and his *The Ismā'īlīs*, substantial credit for the basic, full account that serves this purpose quite well. But, as his work mainly concerns religious history, putting together both religion and state was often not adequately done. And the Ismaili *da'wa*, its sectarian appeal and membership, was far wider than the political empire, encompassing as it did nearly the whole of the Islamic world, East, West, North and South, with pockets of adherences spread to places far from the North African or Egyptian home of the imam-caliph. Brett devotes considerable space in this book to the far-flung *da'wa*, in some cases exceeding what I would have expected at best, for example with the Nizār-Musta'li split and the subsequent history of the independent polity founded by Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ and centered on Alamut.

For a work that needs to cover well over two and a half centuries and territories as diverse and far apart as the furthest Maghrib in the West and central Asian Khurasan in the East, from northern Iran to the Yemen and on to India, there are bound to arise more than a few bits and pieces that one could quibble with.

2. Michael Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Fourth Century CE*, *The Medieval Mediterranean* 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

Brett's insistence that al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's *Da'ā'im al-Islām* had no successor (p. 66, 68) ignores Ibn Killis's later work³ of at least the same size and kind wherein he collected the pronouncements of the Fatimid imams of his own time. At one later point the government actually ordered legal authorities to memorize and refer to it along with the *Da'ā'im*. Al-Maqrīzī, centuries later still, possessed a copy. In another example Brett would have al-Ḥākim's mother be a Melkite Christian and implies that her brothers became Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Alexandria, missing entirely, it seems, the fact that this Melkite family belonged to the caliph's half-sister's mother. These Patriarchs were Sitt al-Mulk's maternal uncles, not al-Ḥākim's; he was not related to them by blood in any way. But here I must quickly add that my few quibbles

pale by comparison to the many items of information I picked up from this book, interpretations of issues I am now forced to rethink and look at in a new light, terms such as "seveners" I previously thought misleading and obsolete but may have been convinced otherwise, along with many works in the bibliography that ought to be read or reread. Throughout, the level of detail is impressive for a volume designed as one of a series on various Islamic empires. A great deal of material has been skillfully reduced to a single narrative that seldom leaves anything out. For the expert this book will certainly reward; for the novice it is a trustworthy introduction and more. Hopefully it will serve to attract more attention to the Fatimids in the wider scholarship on the classical Islamic period. There is still much left to investigate.

3. Paul E. Walker, "Ibn Killis," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas, E. Rowson. Online at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30871