

Book Review

Jean Aubin, *Études sur l'Iran médiéval: Géographie historique et société*. Edited by Denise Aigle. Les Cahiers de Studia Iranica 60 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2018), 371 pp., index, maps. ISBN 978-2-91064-046-0. Price: €60 (paper).

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Twenty-two years after his death, the visionary work of Jean Aubin is an enduring source of inspiration for scholars working on medieval Iran. For this reason alone, the publication of this volume is to be welcomed. Prepared by his student Denise Aigle, it contains seventeen of Aubin's articles on the subject, published between 1959 and 1991.

Who was Jean Aubin? In the article on Ḥasan Jūrī, the improbable leader of the Sarbedar movement in fourteenth-century Khurasan, Aubin notes that "he did not like to parade himself in front of the public. He conducted his preaching in secret" (p. 308). No doubt Aubin felt an affinity with his subject. He discouraged the preparation of any *Festschrift* to honor his work, going

so far as to prohibit his colleagues from writing his obituary after his death.¹

Born to a family of printers in rural France, with no particular predisposition to dedicate a large part of his life to Iran, Aubin was twenty-two years old when he left for Tehran immediately after graduating from the École des langues orientales in Paris with a degree in Persian. Over a period of roughly six years (1949–55), he was in contact with luminaries such as Saïd Nafisi and M.T. Danishpazhuh, traveled extensively inside the country, and worked directly with unexploited manuscripts. It was during this stint in Iran that he prepared his editions of important sources for Timurid history, which at the time was something of a poor relation in the field of medieval Iranian studies.²

1. See Jean Calmard and Jacqueline Calmard, "Jean Aubin 1927–1998," *Studia Iranica* 27 (1998): 9–14, at 9. It seems that no one has dared to violate the prohibition in or outside of France.

2. Aubin's source editions include biographies (in 1954: sayyids of fifteenth-century Bam; in 1956: Shāh Ni'amat Allāh Walī) as well as chronicles (in 1957: the Timurid chronicle *Muntakhab al-tawārikh-i Mu'ini*).

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His first publication, the 1953 “Les princes d’Ormuz du XIII^e au XV^e siècle,” carried within it the seeds of his future research: the Turko-Mongol period, local frameworks of study, and Portugal. Indeed, Aubin dedicated most of his attention to the four centuries from the Mongol invasion in the early thirteenth century to the transformation of the Safavid state in the late sixteenth, and its key issue: the acculturation process induced by the rule of Turko-Mongol nomads over a country, or rather, a world (“le monde iranien”), with a different social fabric. For Aubin, the historical analysis could be done only at the local level, through the analysis of interpersonal relations.³ In 1953, this local framework was a small island in the Persian Gulf. Later he would choose a city (Bam, Shiraz, Yazd), a rural area (eastern Azarbayjan and northern Gilan), or even a road network (in Khurasan, or by the Persian Gulf). Conversely, Aubin always remained defiant of preconceived theories and even more so of dogmatism. For example, he was able to show that the various *ideas* put forward to explain the rise of the Sarbedar state in fourteenth-century Khurasan (a Shi‘i movement for some, the result of class struggle for others) did not hold up when the evidence

was subjected to scrutiny (articles 16 and 17 in the reviewed volume).

Finally, there is Hormuz, which was a Portuguese base from 1507 to 1622 and the European gateway to Persia. Aubin, ever alert for new sources, was quick to grasp the potential of the Portuguese archives to complement the Persian sources on the Safavid period. This interest led him to become a major scholar of the history of the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Iranians, Indians, and Europeans took part in the shaping of a new world. That a believer in local approaches to history became a pioneer of “global history” is an apparent paradox on which to meditate.

The present volume contains most of Aubin’s articles on the pre-Safavid period, with the exception of the source editions.⁴ They are organized in four sections: (1) cities and roads, (2) religious and cultural elites, (3) Mongol Azarbayjan, and (4) acculturation and social issues. It goes without saying that these categories are not hermetic; they are mere tools that serve to highlight Aubin’s various areas of interest. The articles have been not simply reprinted but entirely retyped (even the maps have been redrawn) and printed in a uniform, well-spaced, and highly readable layout.⁵ Thus this volume looks more

The complete references can be found in the bibliography of Aubin’s works at pp. 367–71 in the reviewed volume.

3. In the foreword to the first issue of *Le monde iranien et l’Islam*, a journal he founded in 1971, Aubin writes that “local history is the natural framework of analytical research. Only the analysis at the level of the cells of the Iranian body, that is the counties and the cities, will allow us to realize . . . the remarkable permanence of Iranian-ness [thanks] to the cohesion and the social forces at play” (quoted in the reviewed volume at p. 12, my translation).

4. The absence of the aforementioned 1953 article on Hormuz and the famous 1963 article on Tamerlane’s warfare tactics is regrettable. The articles on the Safavid period will be included in another volume.

5. These editorial choices have caused some misprints (e.g., p. 180, n. 36: “distriblition” for distribution; p. 159, n. 15: “india” for indica) and formatting issues (e.g., p. 201: the subtitle “II. Les cadis Kakuli” should have

like Claude Cahen's famous collection of articles, *Les peuples musulmans dans l'histoire médiévale* (Damascus: IFEAD, 1977), than like the typical Variorum reprints. The index is thirty-five pages long. The insertion, between brackets or in the margins, of the original pagination of the articles would, however, have been helpful. In addition, the new layout would have been an opportunity to update the text, at least as far as source editions are concerned. Although Aubin's analysis stands the test of time remarkably well, many critical editions have since been published (for example: Bayhaqī in article 7; Shabānkāraʿī in article 9; Ibn Bazzāz in articles 11–13; Faryūmadī in article 17).⁶ But these omissions do not detract from the fact that this is a fine book that will be of benefit to every specialist in medieval Iran.

Why spend so much effort on the publication of relatively old articles

(and, incidentally, why review the result in such length in a journal that aims to be at the cutting edge of scholarship)? Of course, anyone studying medieval Iran and the Mongols knows Aubin's name. He is all over the bibliographies of volume 3 of *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, which treats the eastern Islamic world between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries.⁷ But for a number of reasons, his work has not been as widely read as it should have been. Several factors are to blame for this. For one thing, it did not help that many of the key texts were published in two journals that did not survive Aubin and that never made it to the digital world.⁸

The main problem, however, lies elsewhere. Very demanding of himself, Aubin was also demanding of his students and readers. His meticulousness resulted in immense notes, in which he displayed an

come with the table on p. 218, not in the text) that even a painstaking proofreading process could not avoid. On a more critical note, the choice to standardize all the transliterations in the reference system (to follow the later system propounded by Aubin in *Studia Iranica* and *Le monde iranien et l'Islam*) has led to multiple mistakes (e.g., p. 159, n. 11: "tārīḥ" instead of *tārīḥ*; nn. 16 and 18: "tavārīḥ" instead of *tavārīḥ*; n. 19: "mirāḡ" instead of *mī'rāḡ*). Also, the map in the 1959 article on Siraf has been left out. The reader can refer to the relevant map in the article on Shilau (= Siraf) on p. 89, but this fact could have been mentioned.

6. Abū l-Faḍl Bayhaqī, *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar Fayyāḍ, 2nd ed. (Mashhad: Dānīshgāh-i Mashhad, 2536 *shamsī shāhānshāhī*/1977); Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Shabānkāraʿī, *Majmaʿ al-ansāb*, ed. Mīr Hāshim Muḥaddīth (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1363sh./1984); Ibn Bazzāz, Tawakkul b. Ismāʿīl al-Ardabīlī, *Ṣafwat al-ṣafā*, ed. Ghulām Riḍā Ṭabāṭabāʿī Majd (Tehran: Intīshārāt-i Zaryāb, 1373sh./1994); Ibn Yamīn Faryūmadī, *Dīwān*, ed. Ḥusayn-ʿAlī Bāstānī-Rād (Tehran: Kitābkhāna-yi Sanāʿī, 1363sh./1984).

7. *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3, *The Eastern Islamic world, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Aubin has the most cited titles (after Thomas Allsen) in Beatrice Forbes Manz's chapter on the Mongols as well as in Sholeh Quinn's on the Safavids. See also A. C. S. Peacock's synthesis, *The Great Seljuk Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Specialists of medieval Iran, such as Jürgen Paul in Germany (on Sufi orders, local rule, and Mongol domination) and Kazuo Morimoto in Japan (on sayyids), are among those who have also made the most of Aubin's publications. In Iran, Aubin (Ūbin) is known mostly through translations of articles quoting him, starting with Denise Aigle's collection of articles (*The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History* [Leiden: Brill, 2015]). An exception who has made more use of Aubin's work is M. B. Wuthūqī, a native of Lār, which happens to be a region in southern Iran that Aubin knew very well.

8. These are *Le monde iranien et l'Islam* (four issues published from 1971 to 1977) and *Moyen-Orient & Océan indien* (seven issues published from 1984 to 1990).

amazing command of the sources and the scholarship in all European languages, beginning with Russian, a key language for the Mongol period. Aubin never taught undergraduates and never felt the need to reach a wider public, as Cahen (to take another example from France) did with his excellent book *L'Islam des origines au début de l'empire ottoman* (Paris: Bordas, 1970).⁹ Or rather, he felt that as far as medieval Iran was concerned, the time was not yet ripe for synthesis, and he remained unconvinced by the synthetic attempts made by A. K. S. Lambton in English and I. P. Petrushevsky in Russian.¹⁰ It was only when he realized that he was ill that he finally agreed to write a very short book (ninety-six pages) on Ilkhanid Iran. The resulting volume—*Émirs mongols et vizirs persans dans les remous de l'acculturation* (1995)—develops some of the broader conclusions that he reached after four decades in the sources, namely that, for the elite, acculturation between Mongols and Iranians worked in both directions and personal interest trumped racial/national antagonism.

Aubin also suffered from the decline of French, along with several other European

languages, in the field of Iranian studies. The effects of this decline were aggravated by Aubin's complex prose, which demands a very good command of the language. Like that of Fritz Meier in German, Aubin's historical analysis was neglected as the values of European orientalism faded and as English monolingualism grew rampant.

Even in France, Aubin's work left little trace, but for different reasons: the students he trained were too few, and his field was not able to compete with the hegemony of the Arabists on the one hand and that of the students of Henry Corbin on the other.¹¹

A few reading suggestions may perhaps help the neophyte use this volume. The first step should be Aigle's very useful introduction, entitled "L'œuvre de Jean Aubin (1927–1998) et l'histoire globale" (pp. 11–24), followed by Aubin's own "Elements of the Study of Urban Agglomerations in Medieval Iran" (article 1). In it, he provides guidelines "to move from the descriptive inventory [of events and spaces] to a dynamic approach and the formulation of complex problems" (p. 31). This article is very synthetic, very clear, and truly thought-provoking, and it

9. A shorter German version appeared as *Islam: 1. Vom Ursprung bis zu den Anfängen des Osmanenreiches* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1968).

10. A. K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); I. P. Pertruševskij, *Zemledelie i agrarnye otnošenija v Irane XIII–XIV vekov* (Moscow: Akademija nauk SSSR, 1960). Similarly, Aubin thought that John Masson Smith Jr.'s pioneering history of the Sarbedar was useful for its numismatic analysis but still premature given the "lack of familiarity [of the author] with fourteenth century Iran" (Smith, *The History of the Sarbadār Dynasty, 1336–1381 A.D., and Its Sources* [The Hague: Mouton, 1970], reviewed in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 14, no. 3 (1971): 332–33).

11. Among Aubin's few students, we should mention, in addition to the editor of the volume under review, the late Chahyar Adle in Paris (who developed primary interests in art history and archaeology) and Masashi Haneda in Tokyo (who emulated his teacher by combining research on medieval Iran and the first phase of globalization).

should form part of any curriculum on the history of Iran.¹² The same is true for his aforementioned short book, *Émirs mongols et vizirs persans*.¹³

After completing these relatively approachable pieces, the non-expert reader is advised to proceed to the article on Shaykh Zāhid (no. 13). This is an extremely readable biography of a Sufi master in thirteenth-century Azarbayjan in which Aubin shows a real talent for integrating extracts from a source into his own prose. The student will then be ready to tackle Aubin's most emblematic writings. The slope in these articles is steep, but if the reader makes it to the summit, he will be able to see a great deal farther. Three articles, in particular, should be mentioned. "Réseau pastoral et réseau caravanier: Les grand'routes du Khorassan à l'époque mongole" (article 16) shows that the Mongol period saw the creation of a dual network of roads: those for caravans (in the plains) and pastoral ones (at higher altitudes). Aubin describes them through a broad sociohistorical analysis that involves the initiatives of local dynasties (e.g., the Juwaynīs in Bayhaq) and the transformation in the economy and the

structure of power during the Turko-Mongol period. In "La propriété foncière en Azerbaïdjan sous les Mongols" (article 11), Aubin uses the unique documentation linked to the Safavid order to show that, contrary to preconceived ideas, the peasantry was able to resist; Iranian landowners did not hesitate to call on the Mongols when needed; and, above all, for new religious elites such as the early Safavid masters, spiritual authority and good land management went hand in hand. In "L'ethnogenèse des Qaraunas," (article 14) he solves an issue concerning which the contradictions within the sources (the most famous being Marco Polo) had puzzled everyone from Yule to Pelliot.

In 1997, Aigle oversaw the publication of the proceedings of an important conference convened under Aubin's aegis.¹⁴ It is to be hoped that this latest tribute will draw still more attention to a truly pioneering historian whose work remains useful and reliable. Sources he was the first to use in manuscript are now on every scholar's desk, and many of his findings have been confirmed by later research (although the terminology may have changed).¹⁵ Like Minorsky's, Aubin's

12. I give the title of this article in English, as it is translated in David Durand-Guédy, Roy P. Mottahedeh, and Jürgen Paul, eds., "Cities of Medieval Iran," special issue, *Eurasian Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2018): 21–38 (repr. Leiden: Brill, 2020), with an introduction by Jürgen Paul.

13. The text is devoid of footnotes. Aubin assumed that specialists would be familiar enough with the sources to fill in the gaps and that nonspecialists would benefit from a fluid and compact narrative. This methodological choice had been "harshly criticized," as Philippe Gignoux recalls in the foreword (without naming it, Gignoux is referring to Monika Gronke's review in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 3 [1997]: 310–12).

14. Denise Aigle, ed., *L'Iran face à la domination mongole* (Tehran: Institut français de recherche en Iran, 1997).

15. In the second preface of her book on Timurid Iran, Beatrice Manz mentions Aubin as someone whose work was foundational to her. At some point in the analysis, she argues against Aubin's interpretation of the events of 850/1446 in Isfahan as a "Shi'ite uprising" (Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 256). Indeed, Aubin had spoken of "the aristocratic attempt

methodological approach, his lack of regard for theoretical frameworks, and his refusal to follow *l'air du temps* gave

his articles a high resistance to aging.¹⁶ His path is not an easy one to follow, but is there another one?

of the Shii notables of Isfahan under the ‘honorific patronage’ of Sulṭān Muḥammad-i Baysonḡor,” but he was also the first to note, on the same page, that “the demarcation between Sunnism and Shiism is made of nuances, and as long as these are not clarified by a specific research, we will not know exactly what does the label ‘Shi’i’ cover in the fifteenth century” (Aubin, *Deux sayyids de Bam au XV^e siècle* [Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1954], 484).

16. Although Aubin was loath to write obituaries, he made a telling exception for Minorsky, whose erudition and method he regarded as a model to emulate. The obituary appeared in *Studia Iranica* 5 (1976): 131–33.