

which historians of later epochs rely. Professor Pryor is to be congratulated on organizing what was evidently a most stimulating meeting and producing a volume of essays that will come to be seen as marking a significant advance in our understanding of medieval warfare.

Peter Edbury

WILLIAM GERVASE CLARENCE-SMITH:

Islam and the Abolition of Slavery.

xxvi, 293 pp. London: Hurst and Company, 2006. £40.

ISBN 1 85065 708 4.

This book is an ambitious attempt to consider Muslim attitudes towards slavery from the rise of Islam until the present day, and take a revisionist look at the status of the institution in Muslim societies. Despite the prominence of “abolition” in the title, the book actually reviews attitudes both for and against slavery thus presenting a thorough and penetrating survey of Islamic slavery. After a general introduction to slavery and abolition in Islam, from the conceptual and factual viewpoints, the book moves on to explore the contradictions of slavery in the classical Islamic era from a variety of perspectives in Part I, and then the routes some Muslims took towards its abolition in Part II. One of the main objectives of Part I is to present the diversity of Muslim positions by looking at the majority Sunni position, followed by a brief examination of the attitudes of adherents to “dissenting traditions”, that is Sufis, various Shii and other sects, and slaves themselves. It lays bare the reservations towards slavery felt by early Muslims and the subsequent construction of an edifice supporting the institution, and its rapid expansion with the introduction of extensive military, agricultural, domestic and sexual slavery. However, it also highlights the voices against slavery which arose in unexpected quarters, for example the Druze rejection of slavery in the twelfth century.

Part II turns more directly to the issue of abolition and enters into a dialectic with the common Orientalist assumption, mentioned in the introduction, that abolition was imposed upon Muslims by Europeans during the colonial era. Clarence-Smith shows that right from the outset, Islam could harbour abolitionist tendencies and that one can see hints of opposition to slavery in many different quarters: among reformist scholars, Sufis and modernizing rulers. Despite this very laudable attempt to present a more nuanced picture of Muslim attitudes on the issue, the arguments for slavery do seem to triumph in many of the places and historical situations reviewed. A constant problem is the recurrent argument that the quranic injunction to free slaves actually makes it necessary for the institution to exist. With respect to the period from the nineteenth century onwards, Clarence-Smith also makes the important point that anti-colonial reformers could oppose abolition on the grounds of authenticity and resistance to the West’s imposition of its value system on others.

The book concludes with a summation in which the author himself recognizes that the volume is a starting point for the further exploration of slavery and abolition in Islamic societies. It then gives a useful overview of the attitudes of other major religious groupings towards slavery which highlights the similarities between them, as well as the differences. The book’s encyclopaedic coverage of the issue of slavery is both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, it is refreshing and illuminating to find examples from

North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia alongside each other, and to get a sense of the immensity of the Islamic ecumene and the diversity within it. It is also sobering to consider the pervasiveness of slavery within Muslim societies. There is a tendency among scholars of the Islamic world to fall into the trap of perceiving Islamic slavery as of less significance, and more benign, than other forms of slavery – Trans-Atlantic slavery for instance. The array of evidence here, however, explodes the myth that slavery in Muslim societies was predominantly elite slavery, or a form of domestic slavery in which slaves were treated as family members, and shows that it could be as brutal as any other form of slavery and was extremely widespread.

On the other hand, the vast array of evidence cited by the author leaves little space for a fuller analysis of the situation, or for the drawing of conclusions. On occasion the level of detail and rapid shift from location to location leave the reader bewildered. This is perhaps inevitable, and Clarence-Smith notes the areas where research needs to be done and suggests several useful questions that should be investigated. The focus on slavery may also, in some cases, decontextualize the stances of particular actors. One example of this is the opposition of the scholar Ibn Jasus to the sultan Mawlay Isma'il's enslavement of blacks in Morocco: although his actions can be read as opposition to slavery, they also reflected scholarly opposition to the monarch's pretensions.

That said, this book is a major contribution to our understanding of slavery in Muslim societies: it synthesizes the work done by myriad scholars on many different epochs and regions of the Islamic world. While the early Islamic attitude towards slavery is fairly well known, it is extremely useful to be able to compare the variant readings of quranic injunctions, the input of different sects, and the divergent views of rulers and scholars. One of the most striking, and indeed controversial, aspects of the book is its exploration of contemporary debates on slavery in Muslim circles and indeed the perpetuation of slavery in many Muslim societies, to some extent supported by literalist interpretations. This sheds new light on characters like Sayyid Qutb and al-Mawdudi, and provides an important additional dimension to our understanding of the potential impact of such interpretations of Islam in contemporary society. It is a stimulating and thought-provoking addition to Islamic studies in general.

Amira K. Bennison

COLETTE SIRAT:

Writing as Handwork: A History of Handwriting in Mediterranean and Western Culture.

(Bibliologia – BIB 24.) 575 pp. Turnhout: Brepols, 2006. €75.
ISBN 2 503 52116 9.

Writing, from billboards to the Internet, engulfs our lives today. As Colette Sirat's fascinating study shows, this has been the case in the Western world for five millennia. The magnitude of the numbers she amasses is startling: an estimated six million inscriptions from the Roman world, and that a conservative estimate; two hundred thousand fragments of Greek papyri collected from only some forty Greco-Roman sites in Egypt; 1,450 tombstones inscribed in Hebrew re-used to build a house in Würzburg after the expulsion of the Jews in the fourteenth century; a million documents dating from the