

KONRAD HIRSCHLER:

The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands. A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices.

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In 2006 Konrad Hirschler published the remarkable study *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (London and New York: Routledge), in which he analysed the works of the medieval historians Abū Shāma (d. 1268) and Ibn Wāṣil (d. 1298), and showed that medieval Arabic authors were much more independent in their writings than was hitherto assumed.

With his new book, *The Written Word*, Hirschler switches his viewpoint from authors to their public. He shows how literacy increased considerably in the medieval period leading to a growing predominance of the written word compared to earlier oral practices. This rise of the written word was first established in the realms of the scholars but soon spread to other layers of society as well leading to a popularization of the written word. “The study’s central concern is thus to trace the effects that the spread of written texts in the Middle Period had on the social contexts and cultural practices of consuming and receiving the written word” (p. 5).

Hirschler draws from a great variety of contemporary Arab sources – histories, writer manuals or library catalogues – but he manages to bring evidence from the scattered sources into a convincing and consistent form, which guides the reader well through his main arguments.

The book is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the pre-modern history of reading in Arab societies. Hirschler explains that orality had for a long time been acknowledged as the main method of spreading the (Holy) word to its audience. However, early Islamic dominance of oral practices was to fade away slowly as time went on. This process happened partly through the wider availability of writing materials such as paper, and also because larger parts of the population were now able to read and write. Contrary to prevailing assumptions about literacy among the Arabs, Hirschler assumes that in great cities like Cairo or Damascus “those able to read simple texts was rather a two-digit than a one digit number” (p. 29). Hirschler compares the situation in Arab lands to the contemporary state of reading in Central Europe, where for example in German cities recent studies have shown a rise in literacy from 10 to 30 per cent of the population. The comparisons and analogies made throughout the book to similar developments in Latin Europe enrich the current study tremendously.

Chapter 2 looks at the social composition of audiences using reading certificates (*samāʿ*) which can be found in manuscripts. Hirschler uses onomastic analogies in order to classify social background, as the classic Arab name system provides clear hints about profession. He remarks that up to 80 per cent of the audience at reading sessions could be composed of non-scholars, i.e. traders, craftsmen, etc., depending on the location of the reading. In popular places like the Ummayyad mosque a crowd of 500 people gathered to hear what the reader recited. There were no women among the audience, however, although within the scholarly community women were present as hadith scholars and hadith transmitters, but it seems that they had to study individually at home as they took no part in public readings. For the men who took part, the social boundaries were expressed by the seating order around the reader, but one could move up by studying hard and increasing one’s knowledge.

Chapter 3 deepens this unusual but very promising look at society as a whole through an analysis of the written word as used by children in schools. Until now, early child education has hardly been mentioned in contemporary scholarship, yet schools were an integral part of urban life. The primary aim of these schools was memorizing the Quran. However, pupils also learnt to read and write in the schools and manuals explained how to teach these skills to children. Special children's curricula were developed. Schools for children were thus often found in religious endowments. The deeds of the endowments mentioned the enhancement of writing skills as one stipulation of the founder. With the increasing number of endowments, the number of schools increased in the twelfth century. This was possible also because teachers' salaries were now provided by the endowments and not from pupil contributions (p. 101).

Chapter 4 concentrates on libraries. Hirschler describes how the "ruler libraries", which dominated the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, disappeared at the expense of smaller endowment libraries. Moreover, he stresses that it is a misconception to say that the golden age of libraries ended with the destruction of large libraries in the Mongol and Crusader period. First, many of the manuscripts from the libraries which were assumed to have been destroyed reappeared in other libraries: the Mongols did indeed destroy many things but there are clear hints that libraries continued to function under their rule. Hirschler therefore argues that, in the medieval period, a new library culture with smaller but more accessible libraries emerged in the city centres. The increase in the number of libraries, which contained more and more popular volumes of folk tales alongside the religious literature, is in Hirschler's view closely connected (as in the case of children's schools) to new endowment practices.

Chapter 5 describes the rise of the popular epics like the *Sīrat 'Antar* or the *Sīrat Baybars* and how religious scholars reacted quite negatively to this development. They feared, rightly, that they would lose their monopoly on the written word and they objected on the non-religious nature of the genre.

Overall one has to acknowledge that *The Written Word* is very well written, straightforward to follow in spite of the large area it covers geographically and chronologically, and extremely well researched. If one has to find a lacuna it is that the economic perspective is not treated in depth. Was the popularization not also linked to the fact that writing materials became cheaper and new techniques were introduced? Another issue for further investigation would be to analyse why exactly endowments alloyed in such a symbiosis to the written word? The section on the reasons for the rise of endowments in the medieval Islamic world might have gone into more detail.

But this does not take away the innovative character of this excellent study. The award of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies book prize 2012 is truly deserved.

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