

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jonathan Bloom, Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*. Second edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. 269 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-09422-0.

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Bloom and Blair wrote this book to complement a television documentary that aired in May 2001. It presents the history of the Islamic world from the advent of the Prophet to the 1600s—somewhat over a thousand years. Section 1 treats “Muhammad and the Origins of Islam, 600-750”, section 2 “The Golden Age, 750-1250”, and section 3 “The Age of Empires, 1250-1700”.

The two principal themes seem to be historical change and cultural achievement. Historical change is suggested first by the chronological arrangement of information and the rise and fall of one state after another. Unsurprisingly in a book by two art historians, art and architecture get special emphasis as examples of cultural achievement, but literature and natural science also get their due.

The natural audience for the book comprises the sort who watch television documentaries on Islamic history. It presents a series of wholesomely entertaining spectacles, such as descriptions of monuments and lists of luxury imports. It is relentlessly upbeat, so that, for example, the Mongol destruction of Baghdad is immediately qualified by the allegation that the Arab authors who describe it for us must have exaggerated, since Baghdad remained a cultural center (p. 162). A few pages later, Baghdad is conceded to have received “a final blow” from Timur (p. 167), but the main stress is on the magnificence of Samarqand.

The sort who turn up for introductory World History classes are not too far from this television audience, and a series of books like *Islam* would probably satisfy many of them. Mistakes are fairly few for so wide-ranging a survey (there seem to have been Christians at

Yathrib/Medina, and *fiqh* seems to be a branch of *kalam*).

Still, I do not think I would assign it to a class, myself. First, there is not nearly enough here for my taste by way of why things went one way and not another. Explanation is not completely overlooked. For example, the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty is related to Syrian economic decline (brought on by the reduction of trade with the Byzantine empire to the north) in contrast to Iraqi and Iranian prosperity (from trade with Central Asia, India, and China, complemented by irrigated agriculture [p. 73]). But it is something Bloom and Blair usually consider dispensable. For example, I see no explanation of why, if long-distance trade was such a regular support of Islamic prosperity, it was long-distance traders from Europe who came to sap Islamic states (p. 237), not Muslim traders sapping European states.

Second, there is little consideration here of class stratification or patterns of surplus extraction. For example, there is no consideration of how very few persons actually touched luxury imports. Finally, I see little sense of what was Islamic about Islamic civilization. Marshall Hodgson identifies its salient historical features as Islamic law, Sufism, and militarization. Bloom and Blair never notice militarization directly—it would sound too negative. Islamic law gets two pages near the beginning, Sufism six, but they had important articulations with rule by warlords later on: with the ruin of great landholders, Muslim jurists become practically the only identifiable civilian notables. In sum, it is a book for the antiquarian more than the historian.

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