

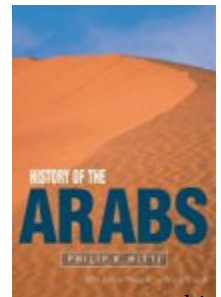
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Philip K. Hitti. *History of the Arabs*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiv + 822 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-63142-3.

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This is the revised tenth edition of a work which is almost too well-known to be described. It has long been a standard textbook for Arabic and Islamic studies and its author, Philip Hitti (1886-1978), is a name known to all Arabists as one of the most important scholars of the past century, whose work has been universally appreciated and translated into several languages.

The book reviewed here is a general history of the Arabian Peninsula at first, and then of the Arabs intended as Arabic-speaking peoples (and therefore not including the Asian Muslim—but non-Arab—lands), from the origins up to the advent of the Ottoman empire, with a relatively brief incursion on modern and contemporary history of the region. There are six large sections. The first (“The Pre-Islamic Age”) begins with a physical description of the Arabian peninsula and of the different peoples, religions, and cultures present on the eve of Islam. “The Rise of Islam and the Caliphate” details the life of Muhammad, the tenets of Islam, and the early caliphate. “The Umayyad and ‘Abbasid Empires,” besides covering the political and military history of the two dynasties up to the Mongol invasion, devotes several chapters to the cultural and social history of these centuries. The fourth part looks at the Arab domination in Spain and Sicily, while the fifth (“The Last of the Medieval Moslem States”) studies the post-‘Abbasid dynasties and the Crusades, reaching the beginning of the Ottoman empire. The last section, “Ottoman Rule and Independence”, summarizes the centuries between then and 1970.

Since its first publication in 1937, *History of the Arabs* was met by a warm welcome,[1] as it filled what had been until then a gap in Western scholarship. That there were ten editions (the last as late as 1970), each of them reprinted several times, as well as translations in

many languages, is a proof of the enormous success this book enjoyed. Notwithstanding the importance of Hitti’s other works, this book was, in a sense, his masterpiece, as not only did he write it over a period of ten years (as he mentions in the preface to the tenth edition, p. ix), but he also continued to revise and update it up to a few years before his death.

As mentioned above, this presents itself as a *revised* tenth edition of Hitti’s book. However, nothing has been revised in the contents since the 1970 edition. It is simply a reprint, as Walid Khalidi notes in his short preface, which is the only element added in this 2002 issue. Here Khalidi explains the reasons for such an operation: it is a response to the renewed Western interest in the Arab world and Islam, especially since September 11th, 2001, an interest paired with a low level of understanding of Arabic and Islamic history and culture: “never before,” says Khalidi, “has there been a greater need in the Western world and particularly in the United States—its paramount leader—for an authoritative and scholarly work on the Arab and Muslim peoples to tell the story as it is without passion or partisanship” (p. v). This situation appears to be quite similar to that in which the book was first published. “We are beginning to know more, comparatively speaking, about the Arctic and Antarctic regions than we do about most of Arabia,” writes Hitti in his first chapter (p. 3). Although it only refers to part of the Arab world, it seems significant that this remark has remained in all successive editions of the book.

It is true that, today even more urgently than in the past, the West needs to know more about the Arabs, and the fact that this need persists might make one reflect on how effective the impact of serious scholarship has been in countering legends and stereotypes on this sub-

ject. It is also true that, sixty-five years from its first edition, *History of the Arabs* remains an excellent work, the completeness, objectivity and erudition of which is difficult to challenge. However, the book cannot be used today without keeping in mind that its bulk was written in 1937 and last updated more than thirty years ago. This involves a few problems for the reader of today.

As the adage goes, a book aspiring to be immortal cannot have footnotes, as footnotes become obsolete soon after being published. Although it may sound cynical, this is true of Hitti's book: its footnotes are certainly detailed and informative but they refer mainly to primary and secondary sources published in the 1930s or before, many of which will be hard to find for the student or layperson who wants to read further on a subject. Moreover, the footnotes are difficult to use, as a full citation is given only when reference to a work is first made, while successive quotations cite only the author's name or a shortened title. In a book with 750 pages and no separate bibliography, it becomes rather difficult to trace the details of a source quoted. However, a very comprehensive index does help retrieve references to the primary sources, which are also often described and discussed in the main text.

Not all primary and secondary material published in the past thirty-two years will be of interest to the general reader. For instance, it will not be important for a student with little or no knowledge of Arabic to know of the 1970 edition of the *Kitab al-Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadim (d. 308/990) which, using a newly-found manuscript, restored the parts missing in the Fl=gel edition (although one may be interested in the studies reappraising the text in its new form). The same reader, however, will probably want to know that an English translation of the *Fihrist* now exists.[2] In the same way, a beginner should not necessarily know of each and every secondary source published since 1970; however, one should be informed, for example, of the emergence of several radi-

cally different approaches to the primary sources for pre- and early Islamic history, which now coexist with Hitti's traditional "descriptive approach." [3] Instances like these abound throughout the book, making it difficult for a beginner in the field to distinguish between outdated interpretations and still usable information.

Notwithstanding the problems exemplified above, there is no doubt that the reprint of this monumental work will benefit many scholars and general readers interested in the history of the Arab world. However, it should be viewed more as a testimony to the progress of Arabic studies in the twentieth century than as a learning tool for beginners in the subject. In the opinion of this reader, two additions would make the book more usable today from the latter point of view: a bibliography of works cited and a chapter summarizing the trends in scholarship and the new results that have emerged since the last revision. Both these operations, while not intruding into the text, would probably be in the spirit of its author, who not only always tried to take into account the results of new research, but also had originally intended selected bibliographies to appear at the end of each chapter.[4]

Notes

[1]. See for example Levi della Vida's review in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59, pp. 121-126.

[2]. Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*. The three editions are, respectively: (1) ed. Gustav Fl=gel (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1871-72); (2) ed. Reza Tajaddud, second ed. (Tehran, 1973/1393); (3) ed. and translated by Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

[3]. F. Donner summarizes and classifies the various approaches in his *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin, 1998); see p. 7 especially.

[4]. Preface, p. xi.

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