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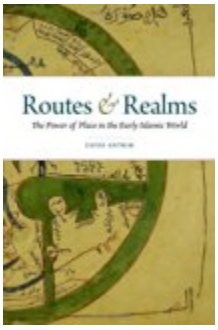
Zayde Antrim. *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Maps. xviii + 212 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-991387-9.



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Land and Belonging in the Medieval Islamic World

At a time of dramatic social upheaval in the Middle East, it is easy to lose sight of the continuities that have characterized the relationship between peoples of the area and the lands they call home. Since at least World War I, modernists have dismissed ancient attachments between Middle Easterners and their homelands. How often have we heard that Palestine was nothing more than an administrative (Roman at that) expression until the clash with Zionism? Likewise, it did not take long after the recent upheavals in Iraq and Syria for us to hear that both entities were fabrications to suit the needs of colonial powers or local oligarchs. The book under review sheds new light on the relationship between peoples and lands. The question is not purely academic.

Appropriately for a book on land, Zayde Antrim's *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* breaks new ground in medieval Islamic history in at least three ways. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study of land and belonging in the premodern Islamic world. Second, Antrim develops a methodology she calls "discourse of place" that enables her to mine a host of texts across genres and place that reveal a deep seated and active engagement in the subject (and related sentiments) among medieval scholars and between authors and their readers. Finally, though the book is firmly rooted in the sources and contexts of the earliest period of written Islamic scholarship, Antrim's insights have implications far beyond the immediate periods and places covered by this study.

The key word to understanding the significance of this book is "belonging." This is not the first work on land and geography in early Islamic history. The author acknowledges the importance of works like the encyclopedic four-volume tome by Andre Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11esiècle* (1967-88). On the one hand, such research represents an archive of geographical writing by Muslim scholars and an evaluation of the geographical veracity of premodern scholarship. It is descriptive and often critical of premodern powers of observations. Antrim, on the other hand, is not interested in land or geography per se. She presumes (and why wouldn't one?) the reality of the territories the sources discuss and with which their audiences identified. She is interested in the texts themselves and how they reflect *belonging*. She concludes that "in the early Islamic world, from the Iberian Peninsula to the river valleys of the Indus and Oxus, land was an object of desire and a category of belonging" (p. 8).

Her sources are texts composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries CE throughout the Muslim world. This is the earliest period of sustained written production by Muslims. By the twelfth century, there is a degree of localization and of systematization of transmission of knowledge that marks a new stage in the history of the discourse of place.

"Discourse of place" describes Antrim's methodology. Her sources cross the conventional disciplines of Muslim scholarship and include geographies, literary

anthologies, topographical histories, religious treatises, travelogues, and poems. Between these genres, Antrim discovers patterns that reflect shared experiences, methods, vocabularies, and materials that make the case for land-based categories of belonging. The parallels across texts and genres imply associations that extend beyond the texts themselves in ways that connect authors to their audiences. Here, Antrim borrows the concept of "textual performance" from the fields of philosophy of language and critical theory to explore the ways in which texts about places were written to inspire their readers to think, to see, and to act in specific ways. Thus, a treatise on Jerusalem could prompt a particular visualization of the city that, in turn, might motivate its reader to travel, to go on a pilgrimage, or to emigrate. Authors are connected to one another across time and place through the discourse of place in a variety of ways, not the least of which was the citational tradition borrowed by many disciplines from Hadith studies linking scholars from one generation to the next.

Routes and Realms is divided into three parts, each devoted to separate, if overlapping, manifestations of belonging to lands. The first focuses on the literature of "longing for home." A discussion of how cities are rooted in distinct conceptions of land follows. The last part, the most innovative section of the book, bridges the gap between nostalgia and the localism of cities by making the case for the power of regionalism as a locus of belonging for medieval Muslims.

Arabic literary anthologies devoted to the theme of homesickness, *al-hanin ila l-awtan*, created the concept of *watan* (pl. *awtan*) as homeland. Among the most important works in this genre is a book with that very phrase as its title by the stylist al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE). Plots of land provided political, social, material, and spiritual nurture. The development of this sentiment derives from a time in which expansion and dispersal of populations resulted in constant moving and missing of home. Some of its tropes derived from pre-Islamic Bedouin literature which was rich in metaphors for absence from home. Antrim emphasizes the physicality of such associations to accentuate the material as well as spiritual and psychological aspects of this longing. This physicality is illustrated by a "lexicon of territoriality," including terms like "abode" (s. *dar/* pl. *diyar*); "soil" or "ground" (*turba*); "dwelling" (*manzil/manazil*); "country" (*balad/bilad*); "residence" (*mahall*); "land" (*ard*); and "birthplace" (*masqat al-ra's*) (p. 15). The physicality implied by such words is magnified by the association between lands and people by a tendency to anthropomorphize the link through metaphors that compare a land to a lover or parent, especially a nursing mother. Antrim notes that al-Jahiz and others in the *hanin ila l-awtan* tradition referred to the homeland as that which suckles, as a wet nurse, and as the site of physical nourishment. These anthologies constructed a universal concept of the homeland as an object of desire and belonging.

Those familiar with Muslim scholarship and literature are familiar with the ubiquity of books that focus on cities and the importance of cities to the biographies of Muslim scholars and litterateurs. The second part of *Routes and Realms* makes the case for cities as part and parcel of the discourse of place independent of associations with homelands and regions. Among the richest sources for this research are topographical histories of cities and *fada'il* books that celebrate the merits of particular cities. Antrim identifies four strategies medieval Muslim writers used to recognize plots of lands as cities while distinguishing them from homelands and regions. These strategies include foundation and conquest narratives, descriptions of the built environment, "citational performance" to anchor one's narrative within a larger body of work, and promotion of loyalty to one city over others and over other categories of belonging. Specific examples from topographical histories of Mecca, Jerusalem, and Baghdad illustrate both parallels and contrasts. Foundational and conquest narratives make the case for the longevity of a city (often well before the advent of Islam) as well as the connection between a city and its hinterland. Descriptions of the built environment demonstrate textual strategies geared toward evoking mental cityscapes that differentiate cities from other landscapes. Antrim devotes considerable attention to Muhammad al-Azraqi's (d. 855 or 864 CE) *Akhbar Mekka* in which the author described the city "cubit by cubit" thus demonstrating the lengths to which some observers went to be original and precise in their documentation. At the same time, the citational traditions shared by Hadith scholars and *adab* (literary) stylists meant that describing a city required locating oneself within shared bodies of literature which could be assimilated or subverted depending on an author's purpose. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071 CE), author of *Tarikh Baghdad*, wrote at a time when Baghdad's glory days were behind it and thus necessitated particular strategies to reclaim its place in history and among the author's contemporaries. By al-Baghdadi's time, rivalries between cities and scholars were such that these texts played active roles in the religious and political disputes of the time. Antrim concludes: "The strategies of naming and locating a city,

assembling a foundation or conquest narrative, and describing an urban built environment emphasized connectivity and facilitated diverse claims to allegiance and authority in a proliferation of texts–*fada'il* treatises, topographical histories, and geographies–that may have neutralized otherwise controversial material. More than ever at a time of political fragmentation and decentralization, attachment to land made possible the expression and legitimization of pluralist forms of belonging" (p. 83).

Scholars of *adab* have studied the nostalgia anthologies for a long time. Likewise, topographical histories of cities and *fada'il* works have long informed the study of medieval Muslim cities. Antrim deserves credit for subjecting these sources to new uses by means of the discourse of place. In the third part of the book, Antrim makes her most innovative assertion, and, as with the entirety of the book, it is backed up by a wealth of evidence from a host of authors writing in a variety of genres representing the length and breadth of the Muslim world between the ninth and eleventh centuries CE.

Ever since I realized how ubiquitous the term "Bilad al-Sham" (geographical Syria) was among premodern Syrian scholars, I have wondered why the subject of regions and regionalism is virtually nonexistent in the scholarship on premodern Muslim history. Scholars generally focus on very broad units of analysis, usually religion or empire, or very narrow ones, such as neighborhood, city, or some other locality. In-between identities or attachments, like those to region or ethnicity, are absent from most of the scholarly literature.

The last third of Antrim's book contains the first sustained study of the topic of regionalism in the premodern Muslim world. Muslim writers and their readers understood the world to be divided into regions. Some subscribed to climatic divisions, known as climes (*iqlim/aqalim*), developed by Hellenistic geographers. Others followed the Indo-Persian practice of linking regions, *kishwar*, with the boundaries of ancient kingdoms. Some offered systems that blended the two. Eventually, more self-consciously Islamic forms of dividing the world developed, such as those that privileged the Hejaz or oriented divisions of the world according to the qibla. In all cases, authors and their readers recognized regions in which natural, ethnographic, and historical determinants defined specific territories in precise ways. Many of these territories are recognizable today. Iberia or Andalusia (Andalus), the Maghreb or Ifriqiyya (North Africa), Egypt (Misr), Yemen (Yaman), the Hejaz (al-Hijaz), Syria (al-Sham), Iraq, Persia (Fars), and Pakistan (Sind) are among the Muslim lands; Ethiopia, Byzantium (al-Rum), Armenia, India (Hind), and China are among the non-Muslim lands.

Antrim goes one step further in making the case for *regionalism*, sentiments and acts performed through texts that demonstrate *belonging* to specific regions. Regionalism is reflected in the strategies used to elevate or diminish the natural, ethnographic, historical, religious, or political significance of one region over another. Techniques of composition, including the use of maps, are geared to elicit regionalist sympathies among scholarly readers and lay audiences. The Iraqi historian-geographer Ali b. Husayn al-Mas'udi (d. 956 CE) elevated Iraq to pride of place by referring to Babylon in order to accentuate its historical glory and its suitability as a center of empires in his own (Abbasid) period and beyond. Here is the Palestinian Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Muqaddasi (d. 991 CE) waxing poetic on his *watan*: " 'The region of Syria is of glorious prestige! It is the abode of the prophets, station of the substitutes, and desire of the meritorious. It is the first *qibla* and the site of congregation [on Judgment Day] and the Prophet's Night Journey' " (p. 126).

Al-Muqaddasi was among three tenth-century geographers, including the Persian Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Istakhri (d. 957 CE) and indefatigable traveler Muhammad Ibn Hawqal (d. 988 CE), who distinguished themselves by adding maps to their descriptions of regions. In the case of the maps in al-Muqaddasi's *Kitab ahsan al-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim* (*The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*–the title itself marks this text as an intervention among fellow geographers), the author is explicit about the didactic purpose of his project: " 'We divided each region (*iqlim*) into provinces (*kuwar*), assigned them metropolises (*amsar*), mentioned their capitals (*qasabat*), and classified their chief cities (*mudun*) and military districts (*ajnad*). After that we depicted them and sketched their borders (*hudud*) and internal boundaries (*khitat*). We designated their well-known roads in red, and we made their golden sands yellow, their salt seas green, their well-known rivers blue, and their foremost mountains dust-colored. Thus would the portrayal be readily understandable and accessible to both a specialist and a general audience' " (p. 114). (My only complaint about the book under review is that the black-and-white images of maps like this do a disservice to the originals and to the historian's objectives.) Al-Muqaddasi aimed to add to a body of scientific knowledge and simultaneously impress upon his audiences the stark contours of the regions that were the keys to the best understand-

ing of the world. Among Antrim's historiographical contributions to the field of Islamic history is that highlighting the bounded and discrete nature of the medieval understanding of regions challenges the city-centrism that dominates the study of medieval Islam. Furthermore, Antrim's careful reading of these maps and their labeling indicates strategies that amplify regionalism to point of minimizing the separation of the domain of Islam from the non-Muslim world. Thus, regionalism can be defined by "something other than the presence or absence of a Muslim ruler" (p. 100). Islam so dominates the study of the medieval Middle East that such an insight amounts to more than a contribution to the historiography of medieval Muslim geography. It asks us to review basic assumptions about the loyalties and attachments of medieval Muslims.

Routes and Realms is a welcome addition to the study of medieval Muslim history. It challenges us to think about identity and belonging in new and compelling ways. It employs an innovative methodology for the analysis of texts that traverse conventional disciplinary boundaries and that highlights their extra-textual significance. It successfully makes the case for regionalism as a powerful category of belonging during the medieval period. Such deeply rooted attachments cannot but have resonance down to our own day. Antrim's work may inspire scholars to explore continuities in categories of belonging that bridge premodern and modern history.

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