



Tarek Kahlaoui. *Creating the Mediterranean: Maps and the Islamic Imagination.* Handbook of Oriental Studies: The Near and Middle East Series. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017. 370 pp. \$173.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-34619-2.

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Published on H-Ideas (June, 2018)

Commissioned by Madeleine Elfenbein (Lichtenberg-Kolleg, University of Göttingen)

Tarek Kahlaoui's *Creating the Mediterranean*, a comprehensive contribution to the study of Islamic geographical approaches to the Mediterranean, is a study in both cultural and art history. As a cultural historian, Kahlaoui presents a challenge to Fernand Braudel's expansive Mediterranean and Henri Pirenne's divided one, and lays out the Mediterranean as a space present and autonomous in the Muslim imagination. Drawing inspiration from Christophe Picard's 2015 *La Mer des Califes* and other recent works, Kahlaoui covers a wide range of geographical writings and maps by Muslim geographers from the Abbasid through Ottoman periods. His narrative aims to chart the "*longue durée* history of Islamic geographic and cartographic depictions of the Mediterranean" (p. 19).

To this lofty ambition Kahlaoui adds a second set of concerns, skillfully interwoven into each chapter: the cartographic arts and their relationship to this geographic corpus. Kahlaoui aims to show how premodern maps constitute an evolving visual language that is both a schematic and a mimetic expression of ideas about human and physical geography. Along the way, he reveals how the framework of the Islamic Mediterranean and the visual languages that illustrate it depend on the position of the geographer.

Throughout, Kahlaoui is motivated by a desire to show variety where others have essentialized, and to depict the cartographic and geographic tradition against the backdrop of a historically dynamic Islamic Mediterranean. Kahlaoui thus opens with a productive discussion of the sea's changing names. He traces a trajectory from Bahr al-Rum, the sea's earliest Arabic name—a term relating to Byzantium and Christendom—to terms like al-Bahr al-Mutawassit, "the Middle Sea," which characterize the Mediterranean as a multicultural space of passage. Challenging Karen Pinto's characterization of the sea as a hostile place in the Islamic imaginary, Kahlaoui argues that the Mediterranean soon became a sea that could, at least in principle, be fully "controllable for Muslim sailors" (p. 48).[1]

Kahlaoui spends the next chapter introducing the approach toward the Mediterranean taken by the administrative geographers of the Abbasid period. For the ninth-century geographers Ibn Qudama and Ibn Khurradadhbih, the Mediterranean was a frame for linear land and sea itineraries from Baghdad and Syria toward the Maghrib; al-Ya'qubi supplements these administrative itineraries with information on human geographies. This perspective was modified by what Kahlaoui calls the "classical school" of the tenth

century, when al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal, and al-Muqaddasi recentered the “clime” of the Bahr al-Rum and even gave it a somewhat “Braudelian” scope. Subsequently, Kahlaoui embarks on a meticulous analysis of the cartographic approach of these tenth-century classical geographers. Showing how each uses a specific cartographic language, he draws a contrast between mapmaking that is “more schematic” (al-Istakhri, al-Muqaddasi) and the more “mimetic” variety (Ibn Hawqal) (p. 86). Though their Abbasid originals are lost, Kahlaoui carefully argues, the distinct and independent traditions of al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal, and al-Muqaddasi were reproduced until the late medieval period—each representing a certain way of imagining the sea at the heart of the Islamic lands.

The monograph’s second section turns to the Maghrib. Kahlaoui focuses on the predecessors to the Sicilian al-Idrisi’s famous twelfth-century *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq*, the most well known of medieval Arabic cartographic works. In particular, Kahlaoui is interested in the relationships between these geographers, represented best by the Andalusian al-Bakri, and the portolan and *periploi* traditions of the western Mediterranean, as well as with Fatimid geographies and their Byzantine source-texts. This meticulous analysis relies on careful comparison of toponyms and stylistic features that ultimately yields a detailed reconstruction of the genealogies of western Mediterranean geographical visions. Al-Idrisi, working for Roger II of Sicily, synthesized his predecessors with fresh information gathered by Roger’s informants across the Mediterranean, and brought in a new concern with populations and infrastructures. More properly labeled “Idrisian” (Kahlaoui emphasizes that the *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq* was a collective project), the *Nuzhat* map deeply influenced Ibn Khaldun, who used toponyms from the sectional maps in his own work.

In this monograph’s capacious third section, Kahlaoui charts the development of cartography

as an applied science in the late medieval and early modern periods. Andalusian and Maghribi cartographers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries adapted Italian and Catalan maritime maps to create a new Islamic cartographic style that befitted a new age of maritime trade and piracy. Kahlaoui looks in great detail at the sophisticated sixteenth-century atlases of Ali al-Sharfi of Sfax, in today’s Tunisia, in which the development of a “mimetic” perspective extended even beyond that of the Idrisian tradition. Al-Sharfi’s atlases combine formally sophisticated maritime charts with the strong political awareness of an “Ottomanophile,” describing a maritime space of Ottoman-Hapsburg competition.

Kahlaoui reserves his last chapter for the Ottoman imperial vision of the Mediterranean and its manifestation in particular in the famed *Kitabi Bahriye* of the sixteenth-century admiral and cartographer Piri Re’is. He reviews and expands on earlier arguments that trace its heritage to Iberian maps and to Italian *isolarii*. Other maritime atlases participate in this “intercultural process,” in which Islamic mapmakers are neither ignorant of European traditions nor merely producing copies of them (p. 254).

Creating the Mediterranean is a truly accomplished tour across a complex terrain of settings and subjects that stretches from Abbasid administrators to Ottoman renegades. It is also a study that is exceptional in its methodological variety. In Kahlaoui’s monograph, textual history mingles with visual analysis. Analyses of toponyms are supplemented by careful attention to codicological histories. On the whole, it is an exceptionally rigorous work. As a theoretically sophisticated synthesis of secondary literature on Islamic geography and cartography of the Mediterranean, it is also hard to criticize. Kahlaoui casts an appreciative and sometimes critical eye on generations of scholars writing on Mediterranean geography, from Andre Miquel to Karen Pinto and Palmira Brummett, as he places himself in conversation

with a wide array of scholars writing in French, Italian, and Arabic. Kahlaoui accomplishes what he sets out to do: to liberate our understanding of Islamic maps from Braudelian bounds and to integrate it into both a cultural-historical and art-historical framework.

In light of these accomplishments, criticisms are restricted to matters fundamentally superficial and stylistic. At times, Kahlaoui's narrative loses out to the ever-changing dynamic details of the Islamic Mediterranean imaginary. It was sometimes, from my perspective as a textual historian, hard to know what is to be learned from the book's extensive tables of toponyms. In chapter 2, the author casually discusses the "classical" or "Balkhi" school before introducing it properly in the following chapter. Perhaps most important, the Maghribi tilt of this work may have led to a relative inattention to geographies and maps produced in the eastern Mediterranean, especially those from Mamluk contexts. Despite these minor issues, Kahlaoui's *Creating the Mediterranean* is a vitally important contribution to literature on the Islamic Mediterranean. It deserves to be read by any scholar or student interested in the history of cartography, in the cultural history of geography and geographers, and in the sciences in the Islamic world more generally.

Note

[1]. Karen Pinto, "Surat Bahr al-Rum," in *Eastern Mediterranean Cartographies*, ed. George Toulas and Dimitris Loupis (Athens: Institute for Neohellenic Research, 2004), 234-241.

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Citation: Carlos Grenier. Review of Kahlaoui, Tarek. *Creating the Mediterranean: Maps and the Islamic Imagination*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. June, 2018.

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