

Yossef Rapoport, Emilie Savage-Smith, Lost Maps of the Caliphs. Drawing the World in Eleventh-Century Cairo, Chicago (The University of Chicago Press) 2018, 368 p., ISBN 978-0-226-54088-7, USD 59,00.

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In the year 2000, a unique Arab manuscript, written around 1200 in Egypt, was discovered. Two years later, after a few complications, it was acquired by Oxford University's Bodleian Library (MS. Arab. C. 90, ff. 48). It quickly became clear that this was an exceptionally illustrated copy of a lost masterpiece, entitled »Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-'uyūn« (»The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eye«), which was compiled between 1020 and 1050, most likely in Cairo. The author, copyist and patron of this unprecedented artifact are still unknown, but the surviving manuscript, which is enriched by large maps, diagrams and drawings, gives us significant information about the Fatimid view of the world. It describes the whole universe, from the stars, winds and comets to the earth with its seas, islands, rivers, exotic marvels and animals.

Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, two experts in Islamic medieval history and cartography, took on the challenge of studying this outstanding manuscript, and have dedicated nearly two decades of research to the task. They have published several articles and an edition with an English translation and annotations¹. The present volume is another highlight in this series. Here, the authors give an essential update with corrections and new material, a broader classification of the manuscript, and a comprehensive revisiting of their vibrant studies. They offer a profound analysis of this exceptional opus, and contextualize it within Fatimid Egyptian society and its political, astronomical, astrological, cartographic, and geographic practices. As the »Book of Curiosities« is divided into two parts, on heaven and earth respectively, the two authors have divided their responsibilities. In the first two substantial chapters, Savage-Smith explains the story of the manuscript's discovery and its astrological section (»Book of Curiosities«, p. 1–10). In the following eight chapters, Rapoport analyzes the representation of the world, its geographic form and earthly constitution, as well as the related evidence for global trade and wide-ranging communication networks (»Book of Curiosities«, p. 11–35).



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¹ Yossef Rapoport, Emilie Savage-Smith (ed., transl.), *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The »Book of Curiosities«*, Leiden 2014 (Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies, 87).

After a short introduction with a general overview, the first chapter (p. 7–28) describes the stunning discovery of the lavishly illuminated manuscript, of which only eight unillustrated copies had previously been known, all of them written later (between 1564 and 1741) and without the splendid colored maps. A significant point for our state of knowledge on the »Book of Curiosities« is that the research on the new manuscript is changing, in important ways, our understanding of Islamic medieval cartography and science in general. One of the related challenges is, for instance, the unresolved debate on the origin and dating of the circular world map, which is virtually identical with the well-known circular representation in six copies of al-Idrīsī's famous geographical work »Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq or Kitā Rujār« (»The Book of Roger«), completed in 1154. The central question is whether the map, never referred to by al-Idrīsī in his treatise, was (as Savage-Smith contends) already part of the original version of the »Book of Curiosities« around 1020–1050 and consequently a Fatimid object, which was subsequently adopted by al-Idrīsī and/or the copyists of his work. Rapoport, in contrast, assumes that it was inserted into the Bodleian MS 90 later as an additional illustration and is, therefore, an adapted Norman object. Such discussions demonstrate not only the thoroughness of the present examination, but also its intellectual consequences for the whole field.

The second chapter (p. 29–74) gives us an impression of the Fatimid perception of the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. Savage-Smith characterizes the book's description, which begins in space and moves downwards to earth, as a kind of humanistic approach to structuring the universe and its celestial phenomena, instead of a technical discourse on mathematical astronomy. She is able to demonstrate that this method is based on Hellenistic-Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Coptic, and Bedouin systems and traditions, without giving preference to any one of them. The comets, portrayed in four different ways, can additionally be attributed to the Hermetic tradition, a unique case in the literature of this time. This chapter is accompanied by an appendix (p. 255–270), which provides more information about horoscopic astrology, signs of the zodiac and their relationship to the planets.

Rapoport's explanations of the various maps and their context are equally fascinating. In the third chapter (p. 75–100), he examines the rectangular world map and its calibrated scale. His focus on the map's hybridity reveals how the scientific knowledge in maps and texts was transmitted from the mathematical geography of Late Antiquity to the adaptations in early Islam from pre-Islamic Greek and Syriac-speaking Middle Eastern cultures. The conceptualization of the Nile, the Mountain of the Moon and the White Sand Dunes in Arab cartography confirms similar modes of transmission, according to the fourth chapter (p. 101–124), but has to be seen within the imperial framework of Muslim conquests in West Africa.

Despite the abstraction of the maps, the representations of maritime space (discussed in Chapter Five, p. 125–153) give the



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impression that the author of the »Book of Curiosities« was providing an »unprecedented wealth of material on the quality and size of anchorages and harbors, sailing distances and wind directions«, well before the Christian portolan charts dominated the conception of the Mediterranean. He must have developed his skills in a military and naval context, because he presents the perspective of a seafarer, making a rigorous effort to simplify and to privilege accessibility over mathematical precision. Chapter Six (p. 155–180) continues to emphasize the book's inherent logic of water. It exemplifies Fatimid power on three island-city maps, which are embedded in textual explanations. The maps show the most important ports held by the Fatimids, besides Alexandria: the city of Palermo, highlighted on the island of Sicily; the first Fatimid capital Mahdia; and the subsequently lost city of Tinnīs in the Nile delta. All of them are represented in their strategic and symbolic significance for the Fatimid empire and in sharp contrast to other Islamic city maps. The depictions of their strong fortifications, impregnable walls, gates and ports, as well as the omission of other public or religious buildings, are part of a refined aesthetic language of political sovereignty, which indicates the total Fatimid control over the Eastern Mediterranean. The seventh chapter (p. 181–195) complements this picture of a great familiarity with the Mediterranean by establishing the Fatimids as part of a shared maritime culture, combining the Greek nomenclature for the winds, the Arab translation of Greek place-names and the dynamic trade activities with Byzantium.

The last three chapters deal with Fatimid ambitions for global power and their universal mission. Chapter Eight (p. 197–213) presents astonishingly detailed maps of the Indian Ocean, with the Asian and East African coasts; of the River Oxus in Central Asia; and of the river systems of the Indus and Ganges, with the realm of Sind (in modern Pakistan) and the route to China. Chapter Nine (p. 215–228) shows detailed first-hand knowledge of the Gulf of Aden and the Swahili coast. While the Red Sea is completely absent from the »Book of Curiosities«, the Indian Ocean is characterized as a space of strategic importance for Fatimid politics, for their Isma'ili mission and their commercial ambitions, even though it was composed of disparate, only loosely connected segments. The tenth chapter (p. 229–247) evaluates the organization of the material, the variety of approaches and the new information in the »Book of Curiosities« as a whole.

What is remarkable is the turn from mathematical geography to imperial communication, and the difference from the Balkhi school geographers, who described only the regions of the Islamic world. But the most exciting innovation is the shift from land routes to sea power and ports, with a clear hierarchy of seas, lakes and rivers. This is why Rapoport's conclusion (p. 249–254) argues that the author of the »Book of Curiosities« regarded water as the substance of life. The extraordinary combination of textual and visual material suggests that he had access to naval military records and Fatimid state officials, that he had visited Palermo, Mahdia and Tinnīs in person, and that he was close to the Isma'ili



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missionary network. The author's »unprecedented confidence in the ability of maps and diagrams to convey information« (p. 249) and his reflections »on the purposes and functionality of his maps« (p. 250) might mean that a mapmaker with an unusual spatial understanding was responsible for the visual constructions. I would add that it might be necessary to differentiate even further between the author of the 11th-century *œuvre* and the creator of the extant illustrated composition from around 1200, given that the copyist may have been more independent than expected.

Overall, this erudite and well-grounded study changes pre-existing categories of medieval Islamic science and its interaction with other traditions. It demonstrates how one important and well-researched manuscript can provide a wealth of highly illuminating material. The new analysis of the interplay between text and image offers a productive approach not only to Islamic cartography before the Crusades but also to European scientific practices during and after the Crusades. The comprehensive endnotes (p. 275–305), a thorough bibliography (p. 307–336) and an index (p. 337–349) serve as helpful points of orientation. This well-written volume, with 15 colored plates, is an exciting example of a source-oriented publication, which will stimulate not only Islamic and medieval studies but also the history of science, art history and Byzantine studies.



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