

Nadja Danilenko. *Picturing the Islamicate World: The Story of al-Iṣṭakhri's Book of Routes and Realms*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. xiv + 301 pages. ISBN: 9789004439856.

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*Picturing the Islamicate World* is a survey of 59 manuscripts of al-Iṣṭakhri's (d. ca. 350 AH/961–962 AD) *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* [Book of Routes and Realms] with a focus on the maps found in these manuscripts. The author attempts to examine the transmission history of al-Iṣṭakhri's work after its composition in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, the historical and intellectual context of its translation into Persian in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, and that of its Ottoman translation at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD.

The book opens with a general history of geographical knowledge in the Islamic world prior to al-Iṣṭakhri. Rejecting any imposition of pre-modern or modern disciplinary boundaries on pre-modern geographical texts, Danilenko suggests that the formation and evolution of geographical knowledge up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD should be envisioned “as a collection of texts dealing with human life in spatial structures” (28). In view of this approach, the author selects six geographical texts composed prior to al-Iṣṭakhri and attempts to show how they “lay the groundwork for understanding al-Iṣṭakhri's contribution to the field” (29).

The earliest of these six works is Ibn Khurdādhbih's<sup>1</sup> (d. ca. 300 AH/913 AD) *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* [Book of Routes and Realms] written in 232

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1 Ibn Khurdādhbih's name is transliterated incorrectly as Ibn Khurrādādhbih throughout the book. Switching the place of 'ā' and 'a' will make it Ibn Khurrādādhbih, which is the transliteration of the Arabic pronunciation of Ibn Khurdādhbih's name.

AH/846–847 AD.<sup>2</sup> Aside from having the same title as al-Iṣṭakhri's work, they share the common aim and structure of describing the geographical localities and features of different regions as being chained along the routes connecting them. We see this commonality in two other works on Danilenko's list: *al-A' lāq al-Nafisa* [*Precious Rarities*] written around 300 AH/913 AD by Ibn Rusta (fl. 290–300 AH/903–913) and the sixth part of *Kitāb al-Kharāj wa-Ṣinā'at* (or *Ṣan'at*) *al-Kitāba* [*The Book of the Land-Tax and the Scribal Art*] written between 316 AH/928 AD and 320 AH/932 AD<sup>3</sup> by Qudāma b. Ja'far al-Kātib (d. 337 AH/948 AD).<sup>4</sup> In contrast, al-Ya'qūbi's (d. after 292 AH/905 AD) *Kitāb al-Buldān* [*Book of Countries*] completed in 278 AH/891 AD and Ibn Faqih's book of the same title written in 289–290 AH/902–903 AD are organized around localities as individual encyclopedic entries and place less emphasis on distances and routes. Finally, al-Jāhiz's (d. 255 AH/869 AD) *Kitāb al-Awṭān wa-l-Buldān* [*Book of Homelands and Countries*] seems to be the most distinct in content and structure among the six texts.

Danilenko concludes that, despite the different preferences that the authors had in presenting their respective material, the six texts are the same in that they divide the world into “spatial containers” and fill them with literary items from various religious, historical, and astronomical sources (36). Unfortunately, this conclusion is far too general for a study that aims at contextualizing a certain geographical text within the broader tradition of geographical writings in the Islamic world. This problem is exacerbated when the author supplements her very general conclusion with a strong claim from negative evidence, that “geographic writing did not hold any special position in the Islamicate world, apparent from the lack of court geographers and geographers not meriting entries in biographical dictionaries” (37).

The invalidity of such assertions is evident both logically and methodologically. In order to situate al-Iṣṭakhri's work in its proper historical and literary context,

- 2 Michael Jan de Goeje, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* [*Liber Viarum et Regnorum*] (Leiden: Brill, 1889; reprinted in Bagdad: Maktabat al-Muthanná, 1960), xx.
- 3 Only the second half of *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> *manzila*) has survived and has been published by De Goeje, *al-Masālik*, 184–266. For a study of this work, see Paul L. Heck, *Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization: Qudāma b. Ja'far and His Kitāb al-Kharāj wa-Ṣinā'at al-Kitāba* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
- 4 Abū al-Faraj Qudāma b. Ja'far al-Kātib al-Baghdādī was a “philologist, historian, and one of the first scholars to introduce the systematic study of the figures of speech in Arabic literature.” His date of death is uncertain. Sources mention his death to have been “during the reign of al-Muqtadir” (i.e., not later than 932 AD), or in 939–940 AD, or 948 AD. See: S.A. Bonebakker, “Qudāma,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed.*, Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, accessed August 29, 2021, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_4478](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4478).

the author ought to have undertaken a precise, detailed, and systematic study of its structure and content with the aim of discerning the method by which he had composed the work as well as the earlier sources upon which he had relied. Doing so would have enabled Danilenko to identify and classify specific sub-genres under the main genre of geography. Such a dynamic concept of genre is especially suitable for an evolving literary tradition in which particular features of texts undergo change according to a variety of factors, such as the purpose and process of writing or the needs of the target audience. In this sense, genre refers not to a form into which content is fashioned but rather to the relationship between similar forms and contents. With this approach, the defined genre would in fact capture “all kinds of flavors at the same time,” as the author sought to do but ultimately did not (27).

The author correctly recognized that all six of these works were products of a certain era of the Abbasid caliphate characterized by territorial disintegration and internal power struggles. However, she vastly underestimated the significance of this historical context in shaping and forming these texts. The constant need for reconquering lost territories in order to regain power and meet the financial needs of the army and administration had resulted in the expansion of the Abbasid bureaucratic system. One aspect of this expansion that is especially relevant to the development of geographical writing was the formation of a class of chancellors who were knowledgeable in fiscal districts and regional topography, and who used that expertise to carry out certain financial and intelligence responsibilities.

This period is when we see a fair number of geographical works produced either by chancellors or for chancellery purposes, which can be categorized under the genre of routes and realms. Shortly after this time, works of routes and realms came to be viewed as constituting a coherent genre of geographical writing by scholars such as Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. after 440 AH/1048 AD) and Bahā' al-Dīn al-Kharāqī (d. 553 AH/1158 AD), and later by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672 AH/1274 AD).<sup>5</sup> Danilenko's concern about designating “a term from outside the Islamic world” to the genre would have been ameliorated had she engaged al-Bīrūnī and others

5 Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥdīd Nihāyāt al-Amākin li-Taṣḥīḥ Masāfāt al-Masākin*, Ed. P. Bulgakov & I. Ahmad (Cairo 1962), reprinted Frankfurt: Institute for History of Arabic-Islamic Science, 1992, *Islamic Geography*, vol. 25, 38; 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Kharāqī, *Muntahā al-Idrāk fī Taqāsīm al-Aflāk (The Utmost Attainment on the Divisions of the Orbs)*, Ed. Hanif Ghalandari (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2020), 278; Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *al-Risāla al-Mu'iniyya (al-Risāla al-Mughniyya) and its supplement*, ed. Sajjad Nikfahm-Khubravan and Fateme Savadi (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2020), 133; Fateme Savadi, “The Historical and Cosmographical Context of *Hay'at al-arḍ* with a focus on Quṭb al-Dīn Shirāzī's *Nihāyat al-Idrāk*,” PhD dissertation (Montreal: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2018), 132.

as interlocutors rather than mistakenly expecting works on the classification of sciences to offer “a unified scheme for accommodating all writing” (27).

Danilenko’s failure to develop a productive conceptualization of the genre to which al-Iṣṭakhri’s work belongs and to thereby locate al-Iṣṭakhri in the evolution of that genre led to her problematic claims in the second chapter about the authorship of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work: “Three authors created the *Book of Routes and Realms* in the tenth century: Abū Zayd Ahmad b. Sahl al-Balkhī, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Muhammad al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭakhri and Abū al-Qāsim b. Ali al-Naṣībī Ibn Ḥawqal who amended the *Book of Routes and Realms* for his own *Ṣurat al-Arḍ* [*The World’s Image*]” (49–50).

To try to make sense of this puzzling assertion, we should first distinguish two separate but related notions concerning medieval texts. In the first place, such texts emerge from a process of composition that may include several facets, such as the assembly of a draft, addition of material from earlier and contemporaneous sources, and revision of the text by the author. The transmission of the text, in turn, may involve one or more authorial revisions, revisions by others—whether authorized by the author or not—and interventions at the hands of later readers, students, and scribes in the course of the text’s circulation. All of these factors should serve to nuance what we mean when we understand a text to be a single, coherent work attributable to a proper author—with all of its complex processes of composition and transmission—without having to make recourse to reified notions of the author’s so-called original or master copy or, in Danilenko’s own words, “unfortunately, al-Iṣṭakhri’s original also vanished into thin air, leaving us with a book whose evolution is difficult to unravel” (55).

This conceptual corrective alone is sufficient to refute Danilenko’s assertion that the *Book of Routes and Realms* was “created” by three authors. Still, since this assertion is so central to her study, let us give it further consideration. Danilenko’s evidence for Abū Zayd al-Balkhī’s (d. 322 AH/934 AD) authorship of a geographical work and its relation to al-Iṣṭakhri’s work is based on two alternate readings in De Goeje’s 1906 edition of al-Muqaddasi’s (aka al-Maqdisi, d. after 381 AH/991 AD) *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma’rifat al-Aqālim* [*The Best Records on Knowing the Regions*]. One reading was admitted to the edited text by De Goeje, the other was given as a variance in a footnote. The former constitutes a report about the revision of a work by Abū Zayd al-Balkhī that had been written by him in 20 parts, which the report characterizes as being of no use because al-Balkhī omitted descriptions of many major cities. The latter reading concerns the misattribution of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work to al-Balkhī and to someone else.

One possible way to reconcile these two readings, which De Goeje reports as being mutually exclusive, is to deduce a relative temporal order of the two readings based on their content. According to the variant reading, al-Muqaddasī came across three different copies of the same work at different times and places: one in the library of a certain official whom he simply referred to as Ṣāhib and attributed to al-Balkhī, one in Nishābūr without an authorial attribution although the author was believed to be Ibn al-Marzbān al-Karkhī, and one in Bukhārā with the author's name given as Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Fārisī,<sup>6</sup> our al-Iṣṭakhri. Al-Muqaddasī considered the last identification as the soundest because he had met a group of people who witnessed al-Iṣṭakhri's composition of the work, of whom al-Muqaddasī specifically mentions two names.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, by this third encounter, he had not yet become familiar with al-Balkhī's proper work; otherwise, why would he have needed others to attest to the fact that the work was not by al-Balkhī but instead by al-Iṣṭakhri? It seems that, at some later time, al-Muqaddasī came to know al-Balkhī's work properly and revised his report in order to clear up the confusion and give his evaluation of al-Balkhī's work, which is the main reading given by De Goeje. From this it is possible to infer that al-Balkhī had a work of his own that is ostensibly his and not al-Iṣṭakhri's.

Given the state of De Goeje's edition and the complicated nature of this passage, we cannot derive any conclusions from this passage as it stands. What is clear, even from De Goeje's edition, is that al-Muqaddasī's work was a product of the medieval practices of composition, revision, and transmission and cannot

6 See, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-Taqāsim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqālim*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (1906; repr. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 5:

«رأيت كتاباً بخرانة الصاحب ينسب إلى أبي زيد البلخي... ورأيت به بعينه بنيسابور... غير مترجم زعموا أنه من تصنيف ابن المرزبان الكرخي، ورأيت به بخارا مترجماً لإبراهيم بن محمد الفارسي.»

7 See Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsim*, 5:

«وهذا أصح لأنني لقيت جماعة ممن لقيه وشاهده يصتفه منهم الحاكم أبو حامد الهمداني، والحاكم أبو نصر الحريري (الحريري).»

For French translation see, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqālim (La Meilleure répartition pour la connaissance des provinces)*, trans. André Miquel (Damas: Institut Français De Damas, 1963), 14–15.

For modern discussions of the Balkhī-Iṣṭakhri authorship dispute/confusion, see Barthold's preface to the *Ḥudūd al-Ālam* in: Vladimir Minorsky, *Ḥudūd al-Ālam: 'the Regions of the World,' a Persian Geography, 372 A.H. –982 A.D.*, preface by V.V. Barthold, ed. Clifford Edmund Bosworth (London: Luzac, 1970), 19; Gerald R. Tibbetts, "The Balkhī School of Geographers," in *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 1: Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, Eds. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 109–10; and for arguments against Balkhī's authorship, see Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Iṣṭakhri, *al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, ed. Muḥammad Jābir 'Abd al-'Āl al-Ḥini (Cairo: The United Arab Republic, Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, General Culture Administration, 1961), 8–9.

serve as reliable source for historical argumentation without first being subject to careful textual criticism. Because Danilenko's argument for a tripartite authorship of al-Iṣṭakhri's work depends principally on al-Muqaddasi's reports, she ought to have first scrutinized the manuscript tradition of al-Muqaddasi's work in order to produce a more solid basis upon which to build her argument.

Even so, neither of the readings supplied by De Goeje nor their combination can serve as convincing evidence for Danilenko's claim of shared authorship. Even if one were to assume that she means by "authorship" a complex and dynamic notion of composition, including the practice by medieval authors of incorporating the texts of their predecessors into their own texts, the invalidity of her claim is so glaring that she herself tried to soften it by adding: "Keeping the book's evolution in mind, I will refer to al-Iṣṭakhri as its author because al-Balkhi's work disappeared and we can discern the *Book of Routes and Realms* from Ibn Ḥawqal's (d. after 367 AH/978 AD) *The World's Image*" (56).

Danilenko's tendency to argue from negative evidence and her indirect and circumventing approach toward primary sources are apparent in the analytic discussions throughout the book. She writes at length about non-extant texts and maps yet stays silent about many extant and published materials that are of great relevance to her study. In one such case regarding Ibn Ḥawqal's reference to his sources, namely the works of Ibn Khurdādhbih, al-Jayhānī (d. 313 AH/925 AD) and Qudāma b. Ja'far, Danilenko says, "Whether he chose the books based on their authors' insights into the administration or due to the diverse approaches they represented remains unclear" (56).

Why should the nature of Ibn Ḥawqal's approach towards his most important sources "remain unclear" when they are in fact other exemplars of the genre of routes and realms and Danilenko's whole book is about another such exemplar written by Ibn Ḥawqal's contemporary? This halfhearted approach is especially indefensible because the works of Ibn Ḥawqal, Ibn Khurdādhbih, and Qudāma b. Ja'far are available in print, and even fragments of al-Jayhānī's lost work have been preserved within the works of other scholars, such as al-Birūnī.<sup>8</sup>

Danilenko's cursory approach is likewise apparent when she identifies the different branches of transmission of the manuscripts of the *Book of Routes and*

8 Abū Rayḥān al-Birūnī, *al-Āthār al-Bāqiya 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliya (the Vestiges of the Past), the Chronology of Ancient Nations*, ed. Parviz Azkæi (Tehran: Mirāth-i Maktūb, 2001), 283, 328–329, 336, 352, and 393. Referring to al-Jayhānī, al-Birūnī uses "dhakara al-Jayhānī" or "ḥakā al-Jayhānī fi Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik."

*Realms* based not on her own philological and textual critical efforts but “on the footnotes in the editions” and what she calls “previous textual scrutiny” (59). On this basis, she distinguishes three main groups: (1) Baseline, whose manuscripts contain the common denominator of all branches; (2) TransIraq, whose manuscripts supplemented the Baseline in the sections on Iraq and Transoxania, and (3) TransArmIraq which in turn supplemented TransIraq with descriptions of Armenia, Arrān, and Azerbaijan.

According to Danilenko, the key feature that distinguishes each of these three branches of transmission from the others is their outlines of the Persian Sea. She then analyzes the world map and some regional maps of a well-preserved 13<sup>th</sup>- or 14<sup>th</sup>-century copy of the *Book of Routes and Realms* and claims that “the analysis applies to all versions of al-Iṣṭakhri’s maps,” even though “the copy’s map design deviates from other manuscripts,” on the sole basis that the manuscript’s good condition makes its maps suitable for a detailed study (61).

Despite all the above-mentioned fundamental problems in the analytical sections of the book, Chapters 3 and 4 should be acknowledged as the pay-off of Danilenko’s formidable survey of 59 manuscripts of the *Book of Routes and Realms* and its translations. In Chapter 3, following an introduction about the relative prominence of Persian leading to Arabic from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward, Danilenko turns her focus to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and tries to contextualize the translation of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work into Persian. She recognizes three different translations of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work, which she calls (1) “the odd one,” featuring some curious illustrations; (2) “the lonely one,” surviving only in one manuscript; and (3) “the popular one,” surviving in 32 manuscripts.

Chapter 4 tells the story of 15 copies of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work, their acquisition and migration in Ottoman libraries alongside a codicological description of some, and the description of the four copies of the Persian translation and the one Ottoman translation of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work that were held in Ottoman libraries.

Danilenko concludes her book with some statistics about the manuscripts of al-Iṣṭakhri’s work and its translation, offering some remarks about their readership and transmission history. The two appendices of this book are quite useful and informative. The first reproduces map outlines for the different extant versions of the *Book of Routes and Realms*. The second contains comprehensive lists of the manuscript copies of the work in question arranged in five tables based on different criteria, with three “possible” stemmata based on the criteria that she had previously established, namely, the outline of the Persian Sea.

Ultimately, the lack of technicality and precision in Danilenko's writing frequently yields statements that are ambiguous at best and outright invalid in many cases. This problem is compounded by her uncritical reliance on outdated and erroneous secondary sources, placing her too far removed from the primary sources to weigh-in on contested research questions with any degree of certainty. In turn, this disparity gave way to her failure to adequately conceptualize the written scientific traditions of the pre-modern Islamic world or to effectively locate al-Iṣṭakhri within them. If not for these methodological issues, given all the data available to her, the author could have produced a much more fruitful work that would have succeeded in addressing some of the historical, historiographical, and textual questions regarding the genre of routes and realms, questions that remain open despite her efforts.