Book Review

Joshua Mabra, *Princely Authority in the Early Marwānid State: The Life of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān (d. 86/705)*. Islamic History and Thought, vol. 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), bibliography, index. ISBN 9781463206321. Price: $76.00 (cloth).

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Those subject to Arab-Islamic rule are likely to have wondered at the life span of the new religio-political order at the close of the first/seventh century. The conquerors were a quarrelsome lot, as quick to engage in internecine violence as they were to subdue local opposition: the 'believers' were at each other's throats. From, in part, the accounts of a then burgeoning and variegated population of clients and slaves (*mawālī*), it is clear that a new religious program was taking shape. But sharp disagreements over its central precepts were no less obvious; divisions of belief ran as deep as those of kinship. How long could the new masters carry on this way?

The Christians of the Levant and Egypt had certainly a special interest in the fortunes of the nascent order given their majority standing. If, at first, somewhat detached, as some modern scholars have argued, following the clashes at Marj Rāhiṭ (c. 64-65/683-684) and a more aggressive assertion of Arab-Muslim authority, engagement with the new Umayyad rulers took on urgency. The policies of the newly ascendant branch of the Umayyad clan (the Marwānids) sought a new sectarian-style unity. The effort sparked a response from Christian communities and their respective elites against whom such policies were often aimed. Thus, in Egypt, attitudes shifted on the part of the Coptic Church and its adherents. Joshua Mabra, in his concise and understated new book, sees the shift as having taken place under ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān (d. 85/705), the newly appointed governor, and, again, in good measure, *because* of his approach to office.

ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz governed Egypt for twenty years—65/685 to 85/705—during which time he stood as heir to ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 85/705), the caliph, his far better known half-brother. The two men had assumed office, respectively, following the untimely death of their father, Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam ibn al-ʿĀṣ (d. 65/685). *Princely Authority in the Early Marwānid*

State brings together literary, numismatic, and archeological information in a close discussion of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's tenure in office. A political biography, it has much to say about ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz but also widens a useful window onto the quarrels of the new empire and emergent patterns of Arab-Islamic legitimation.

Mabra sees, as a failing of modern scholarship, its passing treatment of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. (A quick survey of the indices of modern studies of the Umayyad period confirms the point: mentions of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz are scattered and few). The lion's share of attention has been devoted to ʿAbd al-Malik. This is as it should be given the latter's achievements, and on many fronts: he is typically held to be the architect of the first Islamic state. ʿAbd al-Malik, more than any other Arab/Muslim leader, drew on Islamic symbols and rhetoric in a bid to join a fractious Muslim realm under Marwānid rule. But Mabra would have ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz play a "paramount role" (p. 10) in this regard as well. He makes a strong pitch for the significance of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's contribution and the lessons it offers on Umayyad politics. The book joins a now fairly substantial and growing library of revisionist scholarship on the early Islamic period. But it has problems, and I address these below.

Princely Authority opens with a discussion of the introduction of Umayyad family rule over Egypt, a situation that would prevail into the early second/eighth century. Mabra only gets to his main arguments at the close of the first chapter ("Egypt and the Early Umayyads"). This is a touch annoying: history writing ought not adhere to narrow formulas, but there is reason to provide direction early on.

His theses are two in number. There is his argument that the new governor sought independence from central authority; I take this up below. The other thesis is that Marwān assigned ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz over Egypt because of the legitimation conferred by his mother's "royal Kalbī lineage" (p. 11). Through her, Marwān and, following the latter's demise and his own ascent to office, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz himself, could count on the backing of the Quḍāʿa. This is to see ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz as having continued where Muʿāwiya had left off, decades earlier, in drawing support from the Syrian tribes, led by the Kalb. Modern scholarship has long recognized this feature of early Umayyad politics. But Mabra seems justified in seeing that modern (Western) historiography often moves too quickly through the intricate Arab tribal politics of the Second *Fitna*. It often overlooks, in particular, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's role in moving the Quḍāʿa-Marwānid alliance forward and, thus, consolidating the authority of the Marwānids following Marj Rāhiṭ and the collapse of the Zubayrids. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz provided continuity: he was the best choice to succeed his father as *amīr* of Egypt upon his (Marwān's) rise to the caliphate.

Mabra stays with tribal politics in his second chapter ("The Coalition of Kalb and Umayya"). He points to the strained efforts by Julius Wellhausen, among others, to explain the rise of the Marwānids. Why *that* Umayyad house? Again, Mabra locates Marwānid success, and does so convincingly, in the support from powerful Quḍāʿī circles following Marwān's marriage to Laylā bint Zabān ibn al-Aṣbagh from the ruling house of Dūmat al-Jandal, a key site linking Syria to the Najd (north-central Arabia).

The marriage was only one in a series: the early Muslim elite long knew to forge such ties to the Kalb powerhouse. Marwān did so in style, marrying twice, in fact, into the Kalb, then in his appointment of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz as governor and second heir to the caliphate (after ʿAbd al-Malik). Mabra provides two handy charts of these alliances, and in a rare addition to such charts, includes the women to whom the Marwānid chiefs were married (pp. 31-32). The marital ties were critical: "ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān was well aware of the value of his maternal lineage, and he leaned heavily on his mother's name and nobility" (p. 29).

A virtue of Mabra's book is his keen sense of Umayyad politics: he is a close reader of his sources, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, al-Kindī, and al-Ṭabarī among the Arabic writers. Mabra knows, in other words, how to build an argument. It is ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's shaping of a "power network" (p. 34) that concerns the third chapter, "Al-Ḥasham: A Provincial Power Base." Echoing Wilfred Madelung and Patricia Crone especially, Mabra points to the predominance of the Yamānī "super tribal bloc" in Egypt and the new governor's efforts, following the Second *Fitna*, to further consolidate his ties (through his Kalbī connections) to that same bloc. A key decision was to marry the granddaughter of ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, Egypt's original boss. No less a measure was the acquisition by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz of a series of properties in central Fusṭāṭ. This is a useful insight on Mabra's part. He argues that the properties, surrounding the original congregational mosque, gave the governor access to Egypt's best families: the properties provided proximity and prestige alike.

Poetry is the stuff of Chapter Four: "The Poetic Battle for Succession." As would be the case of future Egyptian claimants, local poets did much to serve political ambitions along the Nile. (Michael Bonner has demonstrated as much for Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn of third/ninth century fame[1]). Two poets, in particular, lauded ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz: Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt (d. 85/705) and al-Aḥwaṣ al-Anṣārī (d. 105/723). Six poems survive, four from Ibn Qays, two from his counterpart, and Mabra investigates them with care. He includes selections, both in the original Arabic and in serviceable translation. I find the latter passages often too close to the Arabic: here, as in other ways, Mabra should have been better served by his editor and reviewers. But, again, he has studied the poems carefully, and draws out telling evidence that, in particular, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz relied heavily on his maternal lineage in gilding his claims, both as *amīr* and as heir apparent.

Mabra turns to the second of his overall theses in the final two chapters. The argument, I believe, is new: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz insisted on ruling Egypt on his own terms, rather than those set out in Damascus by ʿAbd al-Malik. Mabra refers to it as independence on the governor's part: "he ruled with almost no involvement from his brother, the *amīr al-muʾminīn* ʿAbd al-Malik...[refusing] to participate in a number of his brother's Islamicizing and centralizing reforms." (p. 11). Again, it seems to me, this is a significant statement in the light of a near scholarly orthodoxy, which holds that, following ʿAbd al-Malik's sweeping reforms, the interlocking streams of Islamisation and Arabisation swept forward across the Muslim realm.

1. "Ibn Ṭūlūn's Jihād: The Damascus Assembly of 269/883," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 130:4 (2010), 573-605, see, on the poetry, 593-597.

Rather than counter this view outright, I think, Mabra complicates it. It would have been helpful had he opted to extend his thinking on this score: again, his style is very understated.

So, how did ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz proceed in constructing his "Independent Polity" (Chapter Five)? Mabra relies on the evidence contained in the Aphrodito documents (P.Lond. IV) and the so-called ABAZ coin, "the first completely original [copper] coin minted in Islamic Egypt" (p. 113). The former body of evidence, in Mabra's reading, points to a refusal by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz to share Egypt's fiscal and human wealth with the empire: the governor kept revenue and tradesmen at home for his own purposes. The coin, for its part, speaks to the effort by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz to nurture relations with Egyptian Christians. It was, Mabra states, "a compromise coin," designed to avoid the overtly Islamic program put in place by ʿAbd al-Malik. The aim, in other words, was to address political challenges at a regional (Egyptian) level quite in contrast with his brother's more universal (Islamic) program. The latter program thus comes off as less uniform, less imperial, less sweeping. And, as Mabra demonstrates, citing al-Yaʿqūbī and al-Kindī, both writers well acquainted with Egypt's recent political history, the governor's stance had as much to do with a fraternal clash: ʿAbd al-Malik, at one point, sought to convince ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz to step down as heir apparent in favor of his own offspring, an offer he rejected out of hand.

A further virtue of the book lies in turning our lens from center to periphery, which is to say, the dynamics internal to Egypt this early in the Arab/Islamic period. Mabra shares ground with at least two recent publications, Petra Sijpesteijn's *Shaping a Muslim State* (Oxford, 2013) and Majed Mikhail's *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt* (London & New York, 2014), from which we learn a very great deal of the shaping of Islamic-era Egypt. Mabra appears to have relied on Sijpesteijn's doctoral thesis of the same name (Princeton, 2004), although it is a bit difficult to tell (see below). The turns of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's busy career were, in many cases, predictable, given the significance of Egypt: these were matters of tribute and imperial administration. But other matters had a longer ripple effect: so, for example, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, standing up to ʿAbd al-Malik, did so at one point by rejecting the standardized version of the Qurʾanic text produced by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf and ordering up an 'Egyptian' *muṣḥaf*, a legitimating gesture paralleling that of his rival in Damascus. But the wider point, again, goes to Egypt's often edgy relations with the imperial center, not simply in the Umayyad period, but through the first Abbasid period as well, that is, into the first part of the fourth/tenth century and the destruction, by an Abbasid force, of the Tulunid polity.

Mabra's contribution, and, again, his discussion overlaps particularly with Mikhail, is to insist on paying closer attention than is normally the rule to the evidence provided by Coptic sources, chief among them the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. As Mikhail points out (see, for example, *Islamic Egypt*, 41-42), ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's policies towards the church were singular in their aim of integrating Coptic officialdom into the new Arab/Islamic administration. Mabra moves forward with this same evidence. First, he sees the governor's policies as extending well beyond a warming of relations with

the Coptic religious establishment: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz worked deliberately to wield close authority over the church. But, more to the point, he did so as part and parcel of the effort to consolidate an autonomous authority. The difference, in other words, is that Mikhail seems content to see this new relationship as a step in the extension of Muslim/imperial hegemony, whereas Mabra appears to be arguing for a break occasioned by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's particular political and administrative strategies. I liked this chapter in particular for its reliance on a mix of literary, numismatic and archeological evidence.

I have described the book as understated: Mabra is a reticent writer, for all of his clarity. Perhaps this is proper in a first book, and fair enough. But Mabra has a way of stopping just short of a full argument. So, for example, he treats the critical part played by maternal lineage, as indicated above, and names several of the Kalbī women in question, but could underscore the point that, without the perspective of gender, a retelling of Umayyad history falls short. He might also have said more about the use of the physical landscape. He speaks to the purposes to which property and city-building were put by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, especially in his discussion of Ḥulwān, the governor's new capital. He sees it, properly, as an ideological use of brick and mortar, and comments, in this regard, on the later construction of al-Ramla by Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 99/717), which he treats similarly in symbolic terms. But I thought it right for Mabra to offer a wider comment that, in this way, as in many others, the Umayyad house developed patterns of legitimation—including city-building—that flourished well beyond the dynasty's fall.

I wondered, too, about the counter-evidence. It perhaps goes without saying that, largely due to the vagaries of transmission (oral and written), Arabic sources on the first Islamic period contain contradictory and inconsistent evidence. Purely by happenstance, I noted a reference to ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz in Christophe Picard's new study of the 'Islamic Mediterranean,' *La Mer des Califes* (Seuil, 2015).[2] Picard quotes a long passage from al-Bakrī's *Kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik*, so admittedly a later (fifth/eleventh century) Andalusian geographical text. It has ʿAbd al-Malik, as caliph, order ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, as governor, transfer a population of one thousand Coptic shipbuilders and their families to Tunis, where they were to construct a new fleet with which to engage the Byzantines. It has ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz work out the details with the governor of Ifrīqiya, Ḥasān ibn al-Nuʿmān. There is much here: the passage evinces a practice of population transfer on the part of the Umayyads that one reads of in other sources as well (and which was very much a practice of most ancient and medieval empires). It complicates Mabra's account: first, it has ʿAbd al-Malik working *with* his brother at a point when, if we follow Mabra, the two men were at odds and, second, it has Ibn al-Nuʿmān on the scene when, according to Mabra (p. 93), ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz had replaced him years earlier as governor of Ifrīqiya. This is not to challenge Mabra—I find his theses very well supported—so much as to suggest that an engagement with uncomfortable evidence makes for richer history.

2. See my review of Picard's book in this same issue.

Finally, the book is marred by two problems that, unfortunately, appear to have become common to academic publishing. One wants not to be naïve as regards the perilous state of book publishing, but the volume is far too expensive. And the shame of it goes to its availability to instructors. As perhaps other colleagues have as well, I have used Chase Robinson's *ʿAbd al-Malik* (Oneworld, 2005) with students to good effect. It works well in part because of its brevity, focus and the narrative 'story' inherent to biography. I could see using Mabra's book—it bears the same features—in similar fashion. But the cost is prohibitive. One hopes that Gorgias Press will see to an affordable paperback edition.

The second problem is more serious: the lax editing of the book. It contains, first of all, no small number of typographical errors. More serious are the problems of citation: I checked only a handful of the notes, and in random fashion, and found at least four that needed correcting, which suggests others exist as well. The citation to al-Kindī (p. 94, note 33) should be to p. 58 not 55; the references to Petra Sijpesteijn's *Shaping a Muslim State* (eg. p. 100, note 49 and p. 105, n. 61) are misleading in that they apparently refer to Sijpesteijn's 2004 Princeton dissertation, which bears the same title as her later monograph (Oxford University Press, 2013), but Mabra makes no effort to distinguish the two works; and, finally, Phil Booth's *Crisis of Empire* (University of California Press, 2013), is cited (p. 141, note 59) but does not occur in the bibliography. Casual errors, perhaps, and certainly not exceptional, but they are pernicious nonetheless in that they reduce confidence.