Book Review

Chase Robinson, *Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives: The First 1,000 Years* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 272 pages. ISBN: 978-0520292987, Price: $29.95.

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The technique of using biography to make history accessible to newcomers is alive and well. Oneworld publishes the Makers of the Muslim World series, and Oxford University Press has The World in a Life. Textbooks often introduce chapters with an illustrative biography, such as the travelers in Valerie Hansen and Kenneth Curtis's *Voyages in World History*.[1] The Islamic world also has its own tradition of *ṭabaqāt* and *maʿājim* biographical literature highlighting worthies of different fields and serving as reference material for hadith criticism. Referencing the latter tradition, but certainly in harmony with the former, Chase Robinson has used brief accounts of 30 prominent men and women to introduce readers to the first millennium of Islamic history. These thirty chapters are more than just biographies, for the author is also concerned with the afterlives of his subjects and the sources on which our knowledge is based. As he says at one point, "A leitmotif throughout this book has been the task of disentangling the legendary from the reliable." (189)

The book's 30 chapters are divided into four chronologically defined parts, each of which begins with a few pages of historical background to contextualize the biographies it contains. Covering such a broad subject as "Islamic civilization" from 600 to 1525 naturally involves choices, and one aspect of this review will be to highlight the choices which have been made. This is usually not meant as criticism, and the present reviewer is in fact impressed with the amount of ground covered. Robinson defines "civilization" as "the distinctive yield, in lived experience and especially high culture, of the religious and political project undertaken by Muslims (11)." This "project" was shaped by military, political, and economic conditions, thus leading to an emphasis on conquerors and rulers.

1. Valerie Hansen and Kenneth Curtis, *Voyages in World History*, 3rd edition (Boston: Cengage: 2017).

In addition, according to Robinson, it was the elite who produced "the exemplars, the notables, the stars, the powerful, and the influential (11)." A further principle of selection seems to have been an emphasis on figures whose contributions remain evident today, as opposed to those involved in movements or trends which did not last.

The first section of the book has as its theme the creation of the early Islamic empire as the crucible of Islamic civilization. This empire was born of the creative transformation of the cultural material of Late Antiquity in ways that, in Robinson's interpretation, completed in the Middle East a process begun when Constantine the Great began making the Roman Empire into a Christian political order. More might have been said here about the Sasanian background, though the example of Damascus as "a model of change" is useful.

The individuals treated in this first section are characterized as "participants in the project of fusing prophecy and politics." The first biography, perhaps naturally, is that of Muḥammad himself. In this chapter, the author informs readers about the complexities of the sources, giving examples of legend and polemic while offering a standard account of his prophetic career and historical context in the Ḥijāz. He defines "jihad" as "religiously sanctioned warfare" (24) and translates the verbal form as "fight" in his Qurʾanic quotations (26). Robinson reads the motive for this warfare as the desire to ensure that monotheistic worship was possible in and around Mecca because of the Kaʿba. There follow biographies of ʿAlī and ʿĀʾisha, which establish the division between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam while further explaining the nature of the primary sources for the period. The biography of ʿĀʾisha also uses key episodes in her life—her marriage, the accusation of adultery against her, and her role in the Battle of the Camel—to illustrate what recorders of traditions about her found important and why. Robinson does not discuss the origin of the Kharijites, nor is there much about the beginning of Muslim historical memory, which could have involved ʿĀʾisha's later years as a source for Muḥammad's life.

The next two biographies, those of ʿAbd al-Malik and Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, establish aspects of Islam's imperial high culture while continuing to highlight the types of primary sources available to historians. The biography of ʿAbd al-Malik calls attention to his coinage and its significance alongside monumental building and other "mass media of the day" in the establishment of a more centralized government for an empire with the developing religion of Islam as its ruling ideology (47). The centralized polity was run by officials such as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, whose illustrative career is described alongside his literary output, an output which is used to highlight both the existence of *adāb* culture and the passing into Islamic civilization of elements of Sasanian high culture. Robinson then uses Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya to represent Islam apart from the ruling class, highlighting the ways in which the Sufis of later centuries claimed her as one of their own. His assertion that her renunciatory brand of Islam "transformed...the psychological terrain of late antique religion" (54) seems questionable, however, given the ascetic traditions of late antique Christianity. The section concludes with a biography of al-Maʾmūn dealing with his rise to power

and impact of the civil war it entailed, his own brief choice of an Alid successor, and the *miḥna,* all of which highlight the disputes over religious and political authority which served as crucial context shaping the reign.

Part Two, "The Islamic Commonwealth 850-1050," focuses on the high culture of the post-imperial age as the crystallization of Islamic civilization. Given his focus on a "*polyfocal* Islamic world" with "a multitude of ruling courts and wealthy cities," it is unfortunate that Robinson's eight biographies are all of people who flourished in Iraq or further east, and most of them are deeply connected to Baghdad (72). The section would have greatly benefited from having one or two figures from the Mediterranean world, such as the Ikshidid eunuch Kāfūr, the Fatimid historian-jurist Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, or al-Muqaddasī, the Jerusalem-born geographer. However, the eight biographies do cover much thematic ground. The introduction to this section alludes briefly to Iberia becoming independent while also highlighting as two major transitions the shift of economic power from Iraq to other regions and an increasing rate of conversion.

Two of the biographies, those of the Abbasid singer ʿArīb and the vizier and calligrapher Ibn Muqla, deal simultaneously with the arts, court life and politics. ʿArīb's career provides a lens with which to examine gender, elite slavery, and the culture of performance art, while Ibn Muqla's administrative career serves to illustrate the political lives of high government officials even as his calligraphy is the occasion for discussing that distinctive Islamic art form. Religious developments within Islam are explored through al-Ḥallāj and al-Ṭabarī. Al-Ḥallāj, of course, is an example of ecstatic Sufism, though as with Rabiʿa, Robinson notes he was not truly claimed by Sufis until a later period. Al-Ṭabarī's Qurʾan commentary is set amidst the debate over the proper uses of prophetic tradition and human reason, while his history is an example of how the leadership debates of the early caliphate were theologically resolved under the Abbasids.

With Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, Robinson explores Abbasid "free-thinking," locating his medical advances in a willingness to criticize received wisdom that he also applied to religion. Robinson here discusses how the technological conditions of knowledge transmission in premodern societies made the preservation of unpopular ideas much less likely. Ibn Faḍlān and his diplomatic journey to Russia display "Baghdad's curiosity about an unknown world." (99) With Maḥmūd of Ghazna, Robinson introduces the role of regional military leaders, Turks, and the Muslim expansion into India and emphasizes the role of Persian Islamic culture in the eastern Islamic world, including the authorship of the *Shāhnāmah.* Notably, neither here nor elsewhere in the book is there a discussion of military slavery. The section concludes with al-Bīrūnī, who is situated within the Ghaznavid context and brought knowledge of and from India into his wide-ranging intellectual endeavors.

The geographic panorama grows more extensive in the book's third section, "A Provisional Synthesis 1050-1250." In this part's introduction, Robinson treats two major background themes for the period. One is the inauguration of a pattern of Turko-Mongol sultanates with the coming of the Saljuqs. The other is the prominence

of Mediterranean powers in the form of the Fatimids and Latin Christians. The first three biographies of the section lay out religious developments that represent an aspect of the "provisional synthesis." The Andalusian polymath Ibn Ḥazm appears primarily for his role in the Ẓāhirī school of Islamic jurisprudence, which focused on the explicit meaning of texts and rejected analogy. Despite often tying his material to the contemporary world, Robinson explains how the school lost out to the four surviving madhhabs, but does not mention the Ẓāhirī's revival by modern Salafis. In the next biography, Karīma al-Marwaziya is used to explore the world of hadith transmission and the role of women therein. Finally, al-Ghāzalī's life and harmonization of Sufism and rationalism is discussed alongside a critique of orientalist decline narratives, narratives in which al-Ghāzalī is said to have robbed Islam of its intellectual vibrancy.

The third section's remaining four biographies are an eclectic mix that deal with different facets of the period. The career of Abū al-Qāsim Ramisht opens a window onto the world of seaborne trade and the preservation of wealth through waqf endowments. Al-Idrīsī's biography displays how ancient traditions of geography and cartography were developed by Muslims and passed on to European civilization. With his biography of Saladin, Robinson again explores both the life of his subject and the development of later legend, beginning with his own contemporary biographers. Although the book views Crusading as a Mediterranean-wide phenomenon, the chronological view is narrow, as the author states that "by the end of the thirteenth century, Crusading was a spent military and political force." (161) The last biography in the section is that of Ibn Rushd, where there is an exploration of the differences among his own ideas about reason and revelation and the debates sparked in Western Europe by their Latin translation.

The fourth and final section of the work is titled "Disruption and Integration 1250-1525," referring to the Mongol conquests and the resulting integration of the "*Pax Mongolica*." The subjects of the first two biographies share a reputation for literary output in Persian. The first is the Sūfī poet Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī. Robinson here situates him and his poetry in a thirteenth-century Anatolian environment as a corrective to his modern reception as an example of "New Age religiosity" which is "often reduced to anodyne droplets of near-homeopathic concentration (188)." Thereafter, Rashīd al-Dīn serves as the exemplar for the multiculturalism of the Ilkhanate. The next two biographies are both those of theologians, al-Ḥillī and Ibn Taymiyya. The former is the occasion to focus on the development of Shiʿism over the centuries, with a particular focus on the development of Twelver Imamis, a contrast between the sectarian politics of early 21st century Iraq and integrated intellectual world of the thirteenth century, and the influence of rationalism on Shiʿite thought. A hiccup occurs when Robinson describes the Buyids as promoting Zaydism without mentioning their turn to Twelver Shiʿism as their power developed. The chapter on Ibn Taymiyya, in turn, seems to oppose him to al-Ḥillī, and focuses on the Sunni reactionary's ideas and their relationship with modern Islamists; unfortunately, the author seems to conflate that term with its

most extreme and violent examples.

A biography of Timur discusses his image over the centuries, including his use by modern Uzbek nationalists, before discussing the ways in which he fused Mongol and Islamic traditions of rule, including as patron of arts and letters. Next is Ibn Khaldūn, whose career and work are ably summarized, as is the interest shown in his work by recent figures such as Ronald Reagan. The final two biographies highlight the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, with which the book concludes. Robinson's biography of Mehmed II sets him against the background of the Ottoman dynasty and connects him to the Mediterranean Renaissance, including his interest in ancient Greece and Rome. Finally, Shah Ismāʿīl is seen as the progenitor of modern Iran as both a political unit and Shiʿite religious culture.

This last section begs the question of what we mean by the "Islamic" in "Islamic civilization." Robinson's definition of "civilization" is mentioned above, but he does not address the former term except implicitly with that definition's "undertaken by Muslims." If that is the only criterion, then by the dawn of the sixteenth century, there is definitely a need to move beyond the stereotypical "Islamic world" of the belt from Central Asia through North Africa. Mansa Musa, Bābā Farīd, Ruqaiya Sultan Begum and Malik Ambar are among the candidates one or two of whom could have represented the ongoing geographic spread of Islamic civilization, recalling Marshall Hodgson's line that, "In the sixteenth century [...] a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim."[2]

Each of the biographies has at least one illustration, and maps are found in the introductory material to parts one, three, and four. The book's copyright information occupies part of a column on the last page of the index (272). The glossary has only 18 entries; more would have been useful. There are also minor editing notes, as Rashīd al-Dīn and Ibn Sīna both come up before they are properly introduced, while the Mamlūks were mentioned enough to merit at least a bit more explanation. The "Suggestions for Further Reading" section has between three and five works for each biography. These include both primary and secondary sources and general works on broad topics in addition to those specific to the individual portrayed, e.g. books on the Crusades as well as those specifically on Saladin.

Readers of this review may doubtless be most interested in the book's potential for teaching. In a survey course covering the period, Robinson's would make an excellent text to use to introduce more in depth and comprehensive material. The engagingly written biographies will make the topic more accessible to students while also drawing out the variety of individuals who made up "Islamic civilization." The author's attention to political economy will in simple fashion help students grasp underlying concepts with which they sometimes struggle. Finally, the attention to source material, from Abbasid-period

2. Marshall Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam*, and World History, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 97.

biographies of Muḥammad through Ibn Khaldūn's autobiography to an inscription which confirms part of Shah Ismāʿīl's biography, will illustrate how historians study the past and stimulate thought and discussion, not only on what we know, but why we think we know it. Overall, the work is a sound introduction to the field from which people can learn much.