

Ibn Khaldun: life and times, by Allen James Fromherz, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, x + 190 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7486-3934-2; £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7486-4483-4

Historians are always pleased to see new books featuring famous and respected historians. This work by the American scholar Allen Fromherz will exceed expectations in this regard. Ibn Khaldun seems to have replaced Cassandra as the de facto patron saint of historians in recent years, partly because he was a real person and partly because his personal gift was that of genuine and penetrating intellectual percipience. The breadth and depth of the author's knowledge about medieval Arab and Berber society is impressive and amply demonstrated. This appealing and exciting biography of the famous Muslim historiographer Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad bin Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī, or Ibn Khaldun for short, explores new ground and offers a profoundly novel insight into one of the Islamic world's most famous polymaths. Fromherz's work is based on a re-examination of the often ignored Ibn Khaldun autobiography. The back page précis sums the book up quite eloquently: 'Rejecting portrayals of this intellectual as a modern mind lost to obscure medieval thinking, Allen James Fromherz demonstrates how historical context and personal motivations shaped Khaldun's ideas on tribalism, identity, religion, and history.'

The book is divided into seven chapters: 'Historian meets history', 'Ibn Khaldun's early life', 'Ibn Khaldun the statesman', 'Egypt', 'Ibn Khaldun's method', 'Modernity' and 'On being Ibn Khaldun'. This is perhaps the most significant biographical study on the celebrated Tunisian since Muhammed Abdullah Enan's book *Ibn Khaldun: his life and works* (2007) or perhaps Walter Fischel's tome *Ibn Khaldun in Egypt: his public functions and his historical research, 1382–1406. A study in Islamic historiography* (1967). Fromherz borrows liberally from both but brings in his own unique interpretation and hermeneutical paradigms. The main thrust of his argument is that Ibn Khaldun's memoir – frequently dismissed as the customary if supercilious Arab list of ancestors, mentors, events, dates and superlatives – reveals in fact a great deal about the man: how he perceived himself and how he wanted others to perceive him. 'What Ibn Khaldun did not say in his autobiography was sometimes just as important as what he did say' (p. 40). This of course challenges the basic premise of both Franz Rosenthal and Walter Fischel, Ibn Khaldun's most famous interlocutors, who argued that there was not enough information for a substantial biography of the Tunisian scholar. Fromherz asserts convincingly that it is particularly those seemingly obtuse 'excurses and surveys' (p. 173) that spell out Ibn Khaldun's real biography.

The second salient strand of thought running through Fromherz's book is that Ibn Khaldun and his writings at the Sufi retreat of Qalʿat ibn Salama cannot be properly understood outside the society he lived in. The author contends that, whilst much of what he wrote parallels current and popular philosophical perspectives on a sometimes bewilderingly wide variety of subjects, it remains a serious anachronistic mistake to consider Ibn Khaldun a kind of post-Renaissance man-of-letters, orphaned in some abstract point in the past – 'a lonely and exiled modern mind removed from history' (p. 4). This merely demonstrates how little we really know or comprehend of fourteenth-century North Africa. In fact, Ibn Khaldun was very much a product of, and participant in, the society in which he resided, was educated and worked. For example, Fromherz reminds us that much of the famous *Muqaddima* that is translated is the bold 'logical and innovative explanations' (p. 5) material directly relevant to a fairly educated modern audience. Little of his extensive writing on numerology, astrology and magic, or Sufism and the 'saints', has been translated or presented to contemporary readers simply because it

is deemed superfluous, irrelevant or simply distracting from Ibn Khaldun's real genius in the field of history and historiography.

My only criticisms of this erudite volume would be that a few more images somewhere inside its 190 pages might have been helpful, especially in illustrating the social environment of North Africa. For example, after a fascinating discussion in Chapter 6 about the famous (or notorious, depending on one's views of the Bourguiba regime) 1978 Ibn Khaldun statue in Tunis, and the legacy of the man in modern Arab society and history, a photograph of the sculpture itself would have been apposite and useful. Also, whilst the Timeline and Bibliography are munificent, some sort of *dramatis personae* would have been very helpful for non-specialist readers.

Certainly, Fromherz's book summarizes and supersedes much of what has been written before. It is thus an excellent addition to contemporary scholarship on both Ibn Khaldun himself and also fourteenth-century North African studies in general. It will appeal mostly to academic readers, although one hopes it will find a wider audience as it is very well written and a gripping read about a life that deserves to be better known.