

Atlas of Islamic History, by Peter Sluglett and Andrew Currie, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 112 pp., £24.99/\$44.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-82130-9; £90.00/\$150.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-13-882128-6

It is a rare pleasure to review a book on a subject so complex and to find the product so pleasingly erudite and well presented. The text modestly proposes “to illuminate the dynamic nature of the history of Islam, bringing alive the processes of change and movement over time” (10). A good map can contribute significantly to a reader's comprehension of the subject matter and this atlas well illustrates the principle themes and trajectories of the Muslim past from the immediate pre-Islamic era to 1920. Peter Sluglett's meticulous text is both thorough and insightful. He has examined contemporary scholarship in this field and elucidated it for the benefit of bibliophiles, who will also undoubtedly gain from Andrew Currie's excellent cartographic skills. Sluglett does a commendable job of undertaking a condensed analysis of the subject matter and Currie, a geography graduate of the University of Edinburgh, is practically an artist in his presentation of manifest Islamic spatial issues. This is an outstanding production; Sluglett and Currie have made their points well, and I can think of only a few minor criticisms here.

Atlas of Islamic History contains 43 glossy maps spread over 71 pages. The tome ends with several pages of helpful appendices, including a chronology of Islamic and world history, and two glossaries listing “Islamic and Other Terms” and “Place Names.” These appendices also feature an informative bibliography, an index, and a demographic and political survey of Muslim nations today. Map 1 of the atlas features “The Arabian Peninsula c.570” and provides a broad geographic outline of the (named) Arab tribes and their respective regions and kingdoms, plus the outlying realms and empires of Persia, the eastern Mediterranean, Nubia and Aksum. The map legend demarcates and colours the different regimes, important socio-economic and religious centres, and Jewish and Christian settlements in Arabia, whilst arrows detail military expeditions and trade routes. Below the map is a textual elucidation of the period. Map 2, “The Near East and the Mediterranean at the Advent of Islam c.600,” spans two pages and explores the territories of southern Europe, northern Africa, Arabia, Persia and western India in a broader manner. The remaining maps continue in this pattern right through to the final entry, “The Islamic World since c.1900,” which stretches out over Africa, Asia, India and all the way to South East Asia.

Generally speaking, there is a serious conundrum in the definitions and representations of Islamic space: which lands and societies are properly Muslim, and which should be included or excluded in a project such as this? Foucault (1980, 68) has argued that the process of mapping is not simply the production of maps per se but a manifestation and fabrication of political knowledge: “*Territory* is no doubt a geographical notion, but it's first of all a juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power.” Ultimately, maps and cartography remain an illustration of the real world as perceived by those in power, which is utilized by the masses. Foucault continues: “*Field* is an economic-judicial notion ... *Soil* is a historico-geological notion. *Region* is a fiscal, administrative, military notion.” Sluglett and Currie neatly sidestep this and any similar concerns. Their maps reflect to some extent the fact that Muslim leaders, scholars and authorities over the centuries have sought to reshape and represent the physical and spiritual environment they encountered into an image aligned with their theology and their particular hegemony. Together, the author and illustrator here have summarized and illuminated a grand meta-narrative with a surplus plethora of supportive maps that concisely chart over a thousand years of complex Muslim socio-political evolution. Even those with

poor geographical reading talents will learn something here and the various topographical examples should leave even the most sceptical observers satisfied.

If I were to proffer some constructive criticism, it would be that there are perhaps too many broad-brush strokes and not enough examples of some of the more complicated or finer micro-geographic issues: the minutiae. Employing larger scale images is very instructive for the reader trying to grasp wider regional matters and affairs (the direction of reform factions and mobile armies and so forth). However, it is also helpful – and occasionally a relief – for an atlas to periodically explore urban geography or the details of a particular battle in order to demonstrate how these big-picture events affected folk at a smaller scale. In *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, for example, Alex Metcalfe (2009, xxii) presents a simple but detailed map of “Palermo in the later Islamic period,” which provides readers with an immediate and succinct grasp of the spatial realities of that particular Sicilian Muslim city. I would also like to have seen one or two examples of actual contemporaneous Muslim maps, such as the *Tabula Rogeriana* or a sample the corpus of al-Khwārizmī, if only to better understand how early Muslims themselves perceived their immediate external environment.

Overall, this genuinely attractive book will serve as an excellent exhibition of both the intricacies and tensions of Muslim history and the significance of cartography in the field of historical studies. Inevitably, it will be compared with Ruthven's widely popular (if flawed and much criticized) *Historical Atlas of Islam* (2004), the *Historical Atlas of Islam* by Freeman-Grenville and Munro-Hay (2002), or even the slightly dated *Cultural Atlas of Islam* by Faruqi (1986). However, this need not distract us overly. Every map by Currie is in full lucid colour and the imagery utilizes the most modern cartographic and innovative design techniques available to chronicle the ever evolving internal and external borders of Islam. These are supplemented by Sluglett's intelligently articulated texts, which clarify and underline the important topics. Above all, this atlas presents readers with crucial insights into the geographical challenges and ambiguities of the world of Islam over the past 14 centuries. Lavishly illustrated, rich in narrative and visual detail, *Atlas of Islamic History* will become an indispensable reference book for undergraduates studying Asia, the Middle East, Islam and Muslim history.

References

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