

Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages. Houari Touati. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780226808772.

Touati begins his introduction by stating that “Muslim men of letters were mad for travel” (1). This assertion of the passionate connection between knowledge (*ilm*) and travel (*rihla*) is the heart of Touati’s discussion of the “art of travel” (1) in the Islamic Middle Ages. Travel has long been understood as central to Western self-fashioning, especially in its constructions of the “the monstrous races” as binary opposites of European civilization; however, Touati’s central theme is that while medieval European travelogues were traditionally motivated by a desire to confront *alterity* at the limits of their geography, Muslim travelogues’ “aim was not to push back the known frontiers of the *oikoumene*, but rather to define a geographically delimited space that some called the ‘abode’ (the ‘house’ or the ‘territory’) of Islam (*dār al-islām*) and others the ‘empire’ (*mamlaka*) of Islam” (3). Thus, Muslim travel within *dār al-islām* is defined by the text as the pursuit of intimate self-knowledge.

In his preface to this English language translation (the original study was published as *Islam et voyage au Moyen Âge: Histoire et anthropologie d'une pratique lettrée*, Editions du Seuil, Octobre 2000), Touati notes that some reviewers of the French edition were disappointed to find that the *hajj* was not part of his discussion of Muslim travel and self-discovery. He defends his choice by noting that the religious pilgrimage of *hajj* is not intended to function as part of the production of objective knowledge; however, the authors Touati addresses aimed at nothing less than an Islamic epistemology of the world through travel defined by “‘audition’ or hearing (*sama*)...and sight (*autopsia*, *‘iyān*)” as a sensory-based knowledge of the world of Islam (viii).

Hearing and seeing are ideas that repeat throughout the larger division of the *rihla*/travel narrative into three divisions of the text based on Tradition, language, and space. Tradition is explained as the pursuit of a “science of traditions” or “science of religion” through the “genealogical” tracing of “chains of transmission” (*isnād*) regarding the Prophet and the Qur’an, which is also defined as *hadīth* (18–19). *Hadīth* alone guaranteed *sunna* (correct behavior, tradition, rules) for the *umma*, “the emotional community of Muslims” (6). These chains were dependent on lists of “guarantors” who might be uninterrupted (*ittisāl*) or interrupted (*irsāl*, *mursal*, *mawqūf*) (33). The pursuit of the “best,” “highest,” “golden” chain of Tradition/ *hadīth* is what occupied the first set of travelers Touati discusses.

Shu‘ba ibn al-Hajjāj (d. 160/776) traveled to Mecca, Medina, Basra, Kufa, and Damascus in search of *ittisāl*. Shu‘ba epitomizes two concerns repeated about *rihla* in the book: the first is the primacy of hearing over seeing; as the period Touati primarily focuses on is the Abbasid reign (750–1258), the goal of the travel experience to find *isnād* was based on hearing first-hand what was said of earlier generations that could no longer be seen. The second concern is what Touati calls “the catastrophic theory of knowledge” that posited a decline in knowledge, memory, and history beginning with the death of the Prophet (25). Hence, “the voyage appeared to be essential to ward off forgetfulness” (25).

The desire to remember by hearing is what also drove the second set of travelers Touati discusses, as they enter the “school of the desert” to listen to Bedouins speak. Abū ‘Amr ibn al-‘Alā’ (d. 154?/770?) and Ibn al-A‘rabī (d. 231/845) were among the first and most famous of these traveling lexicographers/philologists in search of the rarest and most esoteric knowledge of early Arabic. The desire to learn obscure words (*gharīb al-lughā*) was not simply a pursuit of religious scholars but also that of poets and prose writers. Here, the belief in the “purity” of lost

or archaic language followed the nostalgia for “Tradition” and its invention that characterizes many Abbasid pursuits.

The second half of the book addresses “space” and how traditions regarding hearing (*sama*) were superseded by seeing/direct observation (*‘iyan*) as the authoritative means of knowledge within the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Touati credits Mu’ttazilite theologians, in part, for the shift from the primacy of hearing. The reader might also infer the growing distance from visible reminders of earlier ages as influencing this hermeneutic drift. Jāhiz (d.255/868), “the popeyed man,” and his *Book of the Round and the Square* are also credited with “promoting sight to the dignity of a positive tool for knowledge (105). (Here too, Touati might have noted how the Abbasid organized project of translating ancient Greek texts influenced changes in Islamic philosophy and epistemology.) The dividing line between *sama* and *‘iyan* is exemplified by the famous Muslim geographer/historian/philosopher al- Muqaddasī/ Muhammad ibn Ahmad Shams al-Dīn (d. ca. 261/990), author of *The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions*. Much like Western travelers, Muqaddasī approached the edge his confessional boundaries in order to better understand his own community of faith. It is in the transitional spaces of religious practice that Touati’s claim for a uniquely Muslim “art of travel” begins to stretch.

The central chapters (5–6) read as an *excursus* on Muslim mysticism and its contact with Christians and Jews in Jerusalem and the Levantine desert following the “autopsy of the gaze” (101–198). The connection between peaceable contact within the desert between Sufi mystics and Christian “desert fathers” and “desert mothers,” and Chapter 6, “The Ulemas and Jihad,” addresses the distinction between combat (*ghazw*) and “being neighbors of God” (*mujāwara*) by living in Mecca or the frontier (207). Touati discusses theories regarding the difference between *jihad* as war and *djihad* as travel to the frontiers as a form of meritorious practice. His reading of

the *Book of Jihad*, credited to ‘Abd-Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), and his analysis of numerous 810<sup>th</sup> century texts on *jihad* is best summarized thus: “[w]hat is less sure is that any great numbers of learned men went to the frontier to fight and seek martyrdom” (219). Although travel to expand *dār al-islām* by combat composes part of the genre of *rihla*, Touati clearly does not regard it as part of Islamic *belles-lettres*.

The final chapter addresses the *khavar/voyage* as a genre with a “dual nature” (225). “In its principal of organization, it is a narrated and fragmentary discourse in which the author-transmitter is not confused with the narrator...it seemed enough to the traveler-scholars that their peers know that they had a voyage to their credit and that the dictionaries in which their names would appear after their death relate some of their tales of their adventures” (225). To return to Touati’s analysis of Islamic travel as a passionate pursuit of knowledge, it is not the journey, *qua* movement, that matters, but the pursuit of *‘ilm* as the defining characteristic of *rihla*.

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