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### **BOOK REVIEW: Karen C. Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016)**

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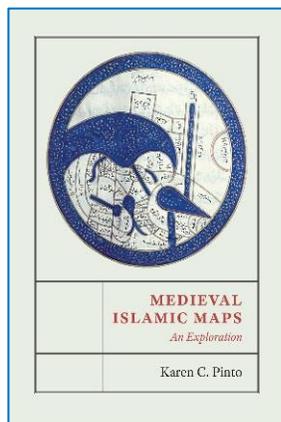
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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Book Review: Karen C. Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 406 pp., ill. notes pp. 291-353, bibliography pp. 355-392, index. ISBN: 978-0-226-12696-8 (cloth), 978-0-226012701-9 (e-book).

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This book is a selective inquiry into the history of Islamic maps and the practice of mapping from the 9<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The book's ambition is to use map analysis "to expand the boundaries" of the history of cartography and, more broadly, of Islamic history (p. 5). It also deliberately focuses on maps as part of the Islamic art tradition and the history of material culture, aspects rarely discussed in the existing academic research on Islamic cartography. Pinto is aided in doing so by the generally non-mimetic character of the existing corpus and by the schematic shapes of landmasses and bodies of water in these maps.

The book is largely focused on the round world maps, representative of the Balkhi school of Arabic cartography, sometimes also called "The Atlas of Islam." Pinto chose to create a new acronym derived from the genre of descriptive geography *Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamalik* (Book of Routes and Realms); the resulting abbreviation KKMS adds the "S" for *surah*, the Arabic term for picture or image. Groups of such maps form the center of her analysis of map construction and meaning especially in Chapters 3 and 4, and of patronage and value in Chapters 11 and 12. Iconography is discussed from the

epistemological perspective and in some decorative aspects. Some chapters draw on Pinto's own earlier publications and her Ph.D. dissertation.



**Figure 1** Earliest extant KMMS world map from Ibn Hawqal's *Kitab surat al-ard* (*Book of the Image of the World*), 1086, Iraq. Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul. Ahmet 3346, fols. 3b-4a. Photo: Karen Pinto.

KKMS maps allow Pinto to create an arc in place and time, connecting the emergence of the Islamic world map template in the 10<sup>th</sup> century or somewhat earlier, probably at Baghdad as the center of Abbasid imperial administration, with the group of such maps produced in the 15<sup>th</sup> century for the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II in the recently conquered Constantinople. Pinto discusses the popularity of this type of map that led to inclusion of round world maps in cosmographies and encyclopedias, genres that developed in the intervening centuries. She only briefly touches the subject of cartography produced in the western part of the medieval Muslim world (North Africa and Spain). The case of al-Idrisi (AH 493/1100 – 560/1165 CE) is explicitly omitted as “a unique tradition not

representative of the bulk of medieval mapping” (p. 24), although his narrative information about the seas is used, as well passages from al-Bakri (c. 433/1040 – 487/1094) and al-Zuhri (fl. 12<sup>th</sup> cent.).

The introductory Chapter 1, “Ways of Seeing Islamic Maps,” usefully identifies the purpose of each chapter in the context of the modern historiographical tradition of world geography and maps. Chapter 2 deals with Western approaches to Islamic cartography, while Chapter 3 guides the reader to the “Islamic Mapping Tradition.” This is where the KMMS map type is introduced, with some historical information regarding the existence and use of earlier Islamic Arabic maps and map-like images. Chapter 4 details the representation of the continents, land masses, and water features in these round-world maps and suggests why the images, distorted from our point of view, made sense and were sufficiently acceptable to the Muslim authors and reading public to last in books beyond the Middle Ages. Here, Safavid Persian and Timurid KMMS maps are introduced as well as some oblong maps. Pinto notes, correctly, that the representative function of the maps in later centuries declines, tentatively connecting this trend to Islamic mysticism (p. 69) and then returning to the Sufi connection in Chapter 7.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Pinto explores the iconography and ubiquitous symbolism of the Encircling Ocean, including the Biblical, Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist concepts of circumambulating seas before moving onto the Classical and medieval European traditions. This approach builds an argument against modern overemphasis on Greek (mostly Ptolemaic) heritage in Islamic geography (p. 117). Chapter 7 deals more specifically with the *Muslim Bahr al-Muhit*, its various parts, and the mountains of *Jabal Qaf*, supposed to enclose the ocean. Here Pinto discusses the vague geographical concepts referenced in Quranic verses, cities, and areas mentioned in the Hadith, the Quranic injunction to “travel and see” (p. 151), and the transcultural nature of the environment in which Islam spread and Muslims traveled and wrote.

Among the authors who traveled, she singles out al-Muqaddasi (*fl.* 375/985), who represents the apex of the KMMS literary tradition, the historian al-Mas`udi (d. 345/946) and the polymath al-Biruni (d. c. 440/1048), first introduced in Chapter 3 (p. 28). The dangers of sailing and the difficulty of navigating the Encircling Ocean are part of the historical and geographical lore discussed, from the Pillars of Hercules in the Atlantic (p. 159) to Paradise in the east. The maps from the *Cosmography* of Ibn al-Wardi, included in the book (maps 3.8, 7.4, 9.10, 9.11), are evidence of their popularity despite inferior geographic content. Enhanced with fabulous stories of the Ocean and the islands, it became a source to copy and emulate, as evidenced by some later KMMS-type maps. In examining the possible connection of the Ocean concept to the spiritual world, Pinto discusses the separation of sweet and salt waters, the number of the seas, as well as the multiple Encircling Oceans. Visual illustrations range from natural philosophy (Yaqut's four spheres surrounding the earth – water, air, fire, and the moon, p. 173) to architecture (reconstructed plan of Baghdad and the dome of Sultan Ahmet mosque in Istanbul, pp. 175, 182) to fine and applied arts (pp. 171, 174, 176-181).

Chapters 8-9 focus on a case study of the Beja people in Northeast Africa, remarkable mostly for the contrast between their constant presence on KMMS maps and their relative insignificance in narrative geography. In particular, Pinto points out that, while other African populations were often marked on maps only once, the Beja had two designations – as people (“the Beja”) and separately in the “Deserts of the Beja,” located between the Nile and the sea. By way of approaching the question “Why Beja?” Pinto notes the silence about the people in standard histories of Islamic North Africa (pp. 190-191). By contrast, medieval Muslim maps place the Beja in the territory approximating their modern settlement. They are described as riff-raff, but their land possesses gold mines. In Chapter 9 Pinto concludes that the growing Abbasid need for gold was behind the increased conflicts between Beja and Egyptian authorities, as recorded by Muslim historians. Richer sources of gold elsewhere in Africa led to the abandonment of the mines, but not of their

cartographic representation, which Pinto traces in Timurid, Aqqoyunlu, and Ottoman KMMS maps. This detailed analysis serves Pinto's effort to illustrate the use of cartography as a tool of historiographical revision (see esp. pp. 214-217).



**Figure 2** Close-up view of Aqqoyunlu KMMS Map from al-Istakhri's *Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamalik* (*Book of Routes and Realms*). Ottoman Empire, Turkey, c. mid-late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul. Ahmet 2830, fol. 4a. Photo: Karen Pinto.

Chapters 10-12 are an exercise in the history of patronage and transmission of knowledge. Focusing particularly on Mehmet II's love of maps (and pictures), she identifies an "Ottoman cluster" of KMMS maps produced in Istanbul c. 1474 as part of the illustrated set of manuscript copies of Istakhri's *Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamalik*, c. 340/(951-52) (p. 233). Analysis of colophons, paper, watermarks, and scribal production

allows Pinto to identify MS Aya Sofia 2971a as the earliest copy in the cluster, made with freehand (rather than traced) maps drawn from the maps in another, non-cluster KMMS manuscript in Istanbul. She also notes an ideologically significant alteration in the text of the cluster MSS, whereby the description of the Arabian Peninsula is moved ahead of the global introduction which identifies Iranshahr as the mightiest empire. She proposes (p. 237) that the direction may have come from Mehmet II himself, “in keeping with Ottoman political ambitions in the Arab world,” yet to be conquered by Mehmet’s grandson Selim I (*r.* 1512–1520). Importantly, she concludes that the KMMS manuscripts with the “standard” set of 21 maps (the world and 20 regions) were not known in Ottoman circles before Mehmet II’s reign (p. 250).

The conquest of Istanbul was followed by the removal of copyists and artists from the former capital Edirne. Their work was characterized by “the unsophisticated hand and lackluster painting technique” (p. 241). What a contrast then with “an exquisitely illuminated copy” of Istakhri’s book, which Pinto identifies as the “master” copy at the origin of the “Ottoman cluster” manuscripts (p. 263). It was presented to Mehmet in the early 1470s as part of the Aqqoyunlu ransom payment, with full knowledge of his interest in books and maps. The author goes to some length to explain the mixture of illumination styles in the manuscript (Ahmet 2830 at Topkapi in Istanbul), concluding that it is a fully Turcoman product with a “high degree of style hybridization” as manifested after the Turcoman conquests absorbed, within a short period, the artists from the courts of Anatolia to Baghdad, to Shiraz, and Herat. In maps, those of the Ottoman cluster are amended to reflect the Inner Asian background of the Turks (p. 274) as well as Mehmet’s conquests in Europe and further ambitions, especially in the Indian Ocean (p. 276).

The book is lavishly illustrated; most maps are reproduced in high-quality color copy, many photographed by the author. Some maps are made available in print for the first time. Pinto’s method is to identify maps by the date in the manuscript colophon or other indicators of copy production, not the date of authorship. This information is very

valuable, though much of the chronology of cartographic production inevitably moves the reader to later periods than the origin of *the Routes and Realms* genre in the third century of Islam. Confusingly, on page 157 Pinto dates Ibn al-Wardi “(d. 861/1457),” seemingly associating him with the so-called “pseudo Ibn al-Wardi,” much later than the author of *Kharīdat al-‘Ajā’ib wa farīdat al-gharā’ib* (“The Pearl of wonders and the Uniqueness of strange things”), Abu Hafs Zayn al-Din `Umar ibn al-Muzaffar Ibn al-Wardi, 691/(1291/92) – 749/(1348/49). Pinto is painstaking with regard to visual details of map ideography and decoration, while expressing hope that art historians will turn their attention to illustrations in scientific manuscripts (248). Her work is both meticulous and imaginative – truly an exploration. 🐼

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