

Published in: *Mediävistik* 28 (2015), pp. 618–620

Alexander Markus Schilling, *Mögliches, Unwahrscheinliches, Fabelhaftes: Die “Historia trium regum” des Johannes von Hildesheim und ihre orientalischen Quellen* (Jenaer Mediävistische Vorträge, 2). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, 93 p., includes 5 black/white ill.

This slim paperback presents the text of a lecture (p. 7), in which Schilling, a specialist of Christian Arabic literature at the University of Jena, suggests that the Carmelite friar John of Hildesheim (d. 1375; cf. VL², 4, cols. 638–647) could have been familiar with the Coptic *Kitāb al-majāll* (Book of the rolls). For his *Historia trium regum* (*HTR*), John collected all information available about the relics of the “wise men from the East” (AV Mt. 2,1). Schilling considers the work a ‘summa’ of the Magi’s Eastern and Western traditions (p. 16), and proposes to read John literally when he writes that the “principes de Vaus detulerunt secum de India libros caldayce et hebrayce scriptos de vita et gestis et omnibus materijs trium Regum: qui in Accon in gallicum fuerunt translati... et ex istis libris... hec sunt conscripta” (ed. Horstmann, p. 215). The *HTR* circulated widely in Latin as well as in vernacular translations, in manuscript and in print, on the Continent and in the British Isles (*Repertorium Fontium* 6, pp. 332–333; for Latin manuscripts, see the online databases *Repertorium Chronicarum* and *Mirabile*). Its rich history of reception reflects the Magi’s importance in popular piety between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and is mirrored in the work’s modern editions and studies. While agreeing with Marianne Elissagaray, the editor of a French translation (Paris, BNF MS fs. 982), that there is a connection between the heraldic use of the Star of Bethlehem by the dukes of Baux-Luxembourg and John’s references to the princely house of Vaus and the observatory on “mons Vaus” (pp. 24–25 n. 33; pp. 34–35 n. 59), Schilling disagrees with Frank Schaer, the editor of an English translation (London, Lambeth Palace MS 491), who approaches John’s reference to Chaldean and Hebrew books as a rhetorical device without any base in reality (p. 33 n. 55).

In the preface Schilling declares that he will show “die Dynamik des inneren Zusammenhangs” (p. 7) in order to move beyond mere heuristics and comparatism. But he pursues literary connections without paying much attention to the intellectual history of late medieval Europe, and the wider historiographical implications of the circulation of apocryphal literature of the Eastern churches among members of the Catholic clergy remain unexplored. How should the diffusion of exegetical traditions across Eurasia be modeled: As an imaginary border-crossing from East to West or as translation networks around the Mediterranean? Schilling does not comment on the fact that John studied in Avignon when it was the seat of the Curia, and that his preserved letters situate him in an intellectual network that included Italian Humanists (VL², 4, cols. 639–641). Yet he muses (p. 58 n. 113) that John might have learned about the *Kitāb al-majāll* during his stays in Avignon, Paris, or Rome. Although the lecture title signals the speculative character of Schilling’s hypothesis, he does not touch on the methodological predicament posed by the absence of direct quotations from Eastern sources in the *HTR*. How much weight can be accorded to plausible access to written texts in arguments about the circulation of Eastern exegetical traditions in Western Europe? It is salient that Schilling does not mention that he shares this methodological predicament with his medieval author. John wrote the *HTR* in order to shed more light on the obscure Magi (Mt. 2,1-12), while Schilling has no access to John’s working library.

Schilling makes three assumptions in order to conclude that John might have used a lost Latin translation of the *Kitāb al-majāll*. The first is to identify the toponym “mons Vaus” (ed. Horstmann, p. 213) with the “mons victorialis” of the apocryphal tradition of the *Liber Seth* as preserved in the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaeum* (p. 38). He then isolates four literary motifs in the exegetical tradition to suggest its indirect transmission to Western Europe (pp. 39–54, 65–68 test. 6–15 in Syriac, Greek, Arabic, Geez, French and Old Turkic, though none in Persian as claimed in the blurb). The second assumption is that stories about the “mons victorialis” are related to Syriac stories about the mount Nōdh, the oldest Arabic version of which are preserved in the Coptic *Kitāb al-majāll*. Since the lost *Secreta Sancti Petri* is thought to have been a Latin translation of the *Kitāb al-majāll* (pp. 56–60, 68 test. 16), Schilling interprets the *HTR*'s mention of the *Secreta* (ed. Horstmann, p. 284) as evidence for its use by John. Despite the importance on this interpretation for his hypothesis, Schilling marshals no textual criticism to strengthen its plausibility. He regrets that Carl Horstmann's synthetic text (London 1886, pp. xi-xii, 206) has not been superseded by a better edition (p. 25 n. 35), but does not comment on the fact that Horstmann's apparatus marks the *Secreta* passage as a marginal note in witness B (Berlin, SB theol. lat. 2° 47, dated 1413). Schilling mentions a fifteenth-century Latin version in Jena (ThULB Ms. El. q. 14) that was overlooked by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (pp. 21, 71 fig. 2), but there is no reference to a Latin version, dated 1385, unknown to Horstmann in the 1880s (Bremen SUB cod. msb 0002; cf. VL², 4, col. 643). The third assumption is the emendation *Yaus because of related letter forms in the Arabic and Syriac alphabets. Schilling posits *Yaus as the missing link between the *HTR*'s Vaus and the toponyms Nōdh and Yaun in published Syriac and Arabic versions of the *Opus imperfectum* and the *Kitāb al-majāll*, respectively (pp. 60–61, 68 test. 17).

In 2011 Achim Thomas Hack (*Abul Abaz: Zur Biographie eines Elefanten*, Badenweiler: Bachmann, 2011, p. 7) established a new “Series minor” for innovative Medieval Studies research, and decided that lectures should not be revised for publication in order to preserve the vibrancy of the spoken word in print. Unfortunately, Schilling's text could have benefitted from more extensive proofreading and copyediting. The meandering footnotes are burdened with full bibliographical references that are diligently cross-referenced within the footnotes despite the separate bibliography (pp. 84–92). While there are few typographical errors, transliteration is used inconsistently (p. 61: not all Arabic and Syriac words in Schilling's reasoning for the emendation *Yaus are transliterated), acronyms from the bibliography are explained in footnotes (p. 24 n. 31: LexMA and VL²; p. 47 n. 90: El²), and titles were not double-checked (p. 49 n. 92: *Encyclopaedia of Iran* instead *Encyclopaedia Iranica*). As in Hack's *Abul Abaz*, illustrations (pp. 70–74) are separated from both the text (pp. 11–63) and their credit lines (p. 93). Moreover, two of the reproduced manuscripts (pp. 72, 74) are missing from the list of sources (p. 79). In an age of shrinking library budgets and serious online publishing on blogs, how can a printed lecture, priced with 29 EUR as a rather expensive paperback, promote cutting-edge research?

Dagmar Riedel, Columbia University, Center for Iranian Studies, 450 Riverside Drive, Suite 4, New York, N.Y. 10027, dar2111@columbia.edu