

Keaney, Heather N. *Medieval Islamic Historiography: Remembering Rebellion*. Series: Routledge Research in Medieval Studies. London: Routledge, 2013. Pp. xx, 187, including 6 maps. \$125/\$125. ISBN 978-0-415-82852-9 (hkb) / ISBN 978-0-203-52054-3 (ebk).

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No ruling elite, in any society, can afford to ignore a legitimacy crisis brought on by mass protests seeking to renegotiate the limits of executive privileges. This observation is the starting point of Heather N. Keaney's study of how Muslim authors have treated the murder of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (r. 644–656 CE), the third caliph after the death of Muḥammad. Although the writers she considers range across Arabic sources from the ninth to the fourteenth century, Keaney stresses the relevance of her analysis of Islamic historiography to the understanding of twenty-first-century Middle East politics:

In the context of the Sunni Arab Muslim world, the tension between justice and stability (more commonly expressed as “unity”) manifested itself almost immediately on the Prophet Muhammad's death... It was... a few years later ... that the ideological vocabulary and underpinnings of these competing ideals took the form that has endured in Sunni Islam until the modern period. (xv)

The death of 'Uthmān was the first politically motivated killing of a Muslim ruler, and among its consequences were the constitution of the supporters of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (r. 656–661), 'Uthmān's rival and successor, as the first Shi'ite group in Islamic history (<i>shī'at 'Alī</i>; lit. “party of 'Alī”), and the transformation of the caliphate into a hereditary office. Keaney therefore begins her introductory first chapter with the observation that

the two sides in the revolt came to represent in Islamic collective memory and political discourse some of the key tensions in the pursuit of Islamic government—namely, religious versus political authority, and preserving unity versus pursuing justice. These tensions have been debated ever since and indeed have yet to be resolved. (1)

Keaney chose 'Uthmān for her “comparative historiographic analysis” (19), because he figures prominently in diverse literary genres. Since he was a companion of the Prophet, and thereby could give eyewitness testimony regarding Muḥammad's actions, anecdotes (sing. <i>khabar</i>, <i>qīṣṣa</i>, <i>ḥadīth</i>) about 'Uthmān are an integral component of the literature about the Prophet. Yet 'Uthmān is also an important figure in his own right, because he was a caliph during the transition period (ca. 632–661) before the Umayyad caliphate (661–750). Treating political and religious authority as separate but related spheres of power, Keaney divides her sources into annalistic chronicles on the one hand and biographical literature on the other, and distinguishes between “two modes of remembering the past” (6): “caliph-oriented and Companion-oriented history” (ibid.).¹ She observes that the portrayals of 'Uthmān in <i>faḍā'il</i> (pl. “excellent qualities”) and <i>manāqib</i> (pl. “virtues”) works “are hagiographic in nature and bear similarity to sacred biographies in other traditions” (4). From this observation she moves without further ado to her working thesis that there are “Islamic sacred biographies of the Companions of the Prophet” (5; cf. xvi) and a “sacred memory of the individual and the collective.” (5)

Keaney describes “the nature of Arabic historiographical writing as a process of creative editing” (136), and argues that “writers expressed an authorial voice by choosing one genre over another and then,

through carefully selecting, editing, and arranging their sources, ... these authors engaged in ongoing religio-political debates” (2). Taking the universal histories of Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) as the cornerstones of Islamic historiography (16),² Keaney juxtaposes the discussion of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate in annalistic chronicles with his treatment as Muḥammad’s companion in biographical dictionaries (<i>ṭabaqāt</i>) and collections of traditions (<i>ḥadīth</i>) between the ninth and fourteenth centuries (16–19). The result of her analysis is the insight that “Companion-oriented biographies ... could function as a political critique by evaluating a ruler or regime based on an idealized past” (19). Referring to Konrad Hirschler’s study of two Muslim historians from thirteenth-century Syria (142 n. 73),³ Keaney describes the continued relevance of the formative history of the Muslim community “as utterly other worldly and thus, ironically, irrelevant for contemporary political life” (19), and yet reaches the conclusion that nonetheless “the texts are there, latent, and can conspire to promote political change” (ibid.).

In a preface, five chapters, and a conclusion, Keaney organized her wide ranging selection of Arabic sources both chronologically and thematically. In the first chapter (1–20, 137–142) she presents the state of research on ‘Uthmān in the early twenty-first century (6–11), and identifies the four debates that she will compare in the Arabic sources: “History versus Hagiography” (11–12), “Sunni versus Shi’i” (12–13), “Religious versus Political Authority” (14–15), and “Preserving Unity versus Pursuing Justice” (15). In the following four chapters, she examines ‘Uthmān in historiographical sources of the ninth (21–46, 142–149), twelfth (47–74, 149–156), thirteenth (75–103, 156–162), and fourteenth (104–133, 162–168) centuries. Each of these four chapters is divided into the sections <i>Context</i>, <i>Narrators</i>, and <i>Narratives</i>. Each <i>Narratives</i> section is, in turn, broken down into four subsections in which Keaney summarizes her findings on the four debates around which she has organized her study. She wraps up her analysis with a short conclusion (134–136, 168).

This book is an important contribution to the study of Arabic historiography before 1500: Keaney’s decision to track the reception of a single figure across six centuries of Islamic historiography is an intellectually attractive project. Nonetheless I missed a more comprehensive explication of sacred biography and collective memory vis-à-vis authorial intention, since these are the crucial heuristic concepts of her analysis.

Keaney does not explain why hagiography and sacred biography are meaningful categories for a diachronic analysis of Islamic historiography. Terms such as biography, sacred, <i>ṭabaqāt</i>, hagiography, kingship, and rebellion are notably absent from the index which focuses on Arabic proper names. Footnotes (138 nn. 17–19) indicate that Keaney borrowed the concept of a sacred biography from Thomas Heffernan’s study of Christian virgin martyrs in Middle English literature:⁴ I wish she had shared with her readers her reasons for adapting this concept to Islamic historiography. Moreover, her assumption that <i>faḍā’il</i> and <i>manāqib</i> works preserve the sacred biographies of Muslims (4–5, 138–139 n. 21) posits an explicitly religious context for some genres of Islamic historiography. Consequently, in order to follow her argument, it would have been helpful to learn more about her understanding of the “sacred” in Islamic theology as well as in the culture of premodern Muslim societies.

In her survey of the state of research on narrative in Islamic historiography (3–4) Keaney intimates that, in the past, Middle East historians felt defensive about their sources. Even though the historiographical works in Arabic and Persian are rich, most of the extant texts are compilations, containing a great deal of hearsay, considerably fewer eyewitness statements, and even less outright authorial analysis and commentary. Making matters worse is that historiographical works in Arabic and Persian constitute the bulk of the preserved written sources of Islamic history until 1500, so that it is rarely possible to

confirm, or reject, literary statements with archival documents, archeological evidence, or contemporary sources in languages other than Arabic and Persian. But after the 1980 publication of Marilyn Waldman's study of the Persian chronicle by Bayhaqī (d. 1077),⁵ Middle East historians began to pursue questions about narrative in Islamic historiography, and the interpretation of these written texts as literature is now a widely accepted alternative to scrutinizing them for hard facts and finding precious few. Keaney begins her second (21, 142 n. 1) and fourth (75, 156 n. 1) chapters, as well as the conclusion (134, 168 n. 1), with quotations by Hayden White. Drawing implicitly on narrative theory since she is employing the distinction between story (*fabula*) and plot (*syuzhet*), Keaney considers the different ways, in which Muslim authors plotted the story of 'Uthmān's murder, as an expression of authorial intention. Yet not everyone will share her confidence that the interpretation of a written text can reveal authorial intention beyond the literary work, in the real world. Keaney did not include a single example of a detailed textual analysis in order to demonstrate more concretely her argument that editing was an expression of an authorial voice. While the page references in the endnotes reveal Keaney's deep familiarity with the Arabic canon of Islamic historiography, the book itself presents a much condensed synthesis of its interpretation.

Middle East historians, however, not only feel defensive about Arabic and Persian sources which seem to defy Western expectations of historiographical literature, they also prefer a pragmatic approach to textual criticism. Consequently, Middle East historians are not expected to accompany any research project with an excursus about the available versions of the cited sources. For example, the universal history of Sibṭ ibn Jawzī (d. 1256) is the only work for which Keaney is using the microfilm of a manuscript (156 n. 4, cf. 171). Since the *Mir'āt al-zamān* is a universal chronicle with a complicated history of transmission and publication in print,⁶ Keaney's decision to use a manuscript instead of any of the printed versions is not surprising. Still, the manuscript stands out among her printed sources, and she does not offer any information whatsoever about this manuscript beyond its shelf-mark. This textual pragmatism suggests that the field of Middle East Studies continues to struggle with establishing itself as a post-Orientalism discipline: Textual criticism is shunned because it is identified with philology, which in turn is seen as integral to Orientalism.⁷ Even though this line of reasoning is a false syllogism, it explains the field's hands-off attitude regarding textual criticism. Keaney's silence on the textual condition of her sources reflects the field's unresolved methodological challenges following from its staunch rejection of philology. This silence is nonetheless noteworthy. After all, Keaney is arguing for the agency of Muslim historians because they edited their sources. Her silence could imply the assumption of an ideal process of textual transmission in which a historian edits her sources in order to fashion a historical narrative, which afterwards will be faithfully transmitted by her readers without any editorial interventions of their own. Since Keaney does not engage with any questions about the transmission of the historiographical works in which she detects a Muslim historian's "creative editing" (136), she is comfortable with arguments *ex silentio* whenever she interprets the absence of a particular tradition about 'Uthmān as a conscious authorial decision, as is the case in her discussion of a biographical dictionary about the Prophet's companions by Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233):

Ibn al-Athīr's *fadā'il* jumps [sic] from 'Uthman's oath of allegiance to 'Uthman's murder: it is not surprising that he skips 'Uthman's caliphate as it did not reflect the essence of his character. (97)⁸

A final twist to the role of editing in historical scholarship is provided by Keaney's book itself, and writing this review made me wish for alternatives to the accepted modes of academic publishing in North America and Western Europe.⁹ Keaney's book is a thoroughly revised and updated version of her dissertation,¹⁰ and its publication with a recognized academic press like Routledge was most likely one

of the requirements for tenure. I did not find her dissertation in an Open-Access Academic Commons database, but the full text is available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, the official digital dissertations archive for the Library of Congress which also offers a range of Print-On-Demand¹¹ services. Routledge has now also issued the revised dissertation in two formats, though the ebook is as expensive as the printed book. Probably in order to reach a wider audience, Keaney's book was included into a general Medieval Studies series. While I am very much in favor of interdisciplinary research among Medievalists, to me it is unclear what the unnamed series editors at Routledge imagine the expectations of a general audience of Medievalists to be. Keaney has converted and condensed the dissertation's footnotes into endnotes (137–168), and replaced the dissertation's scholarly transliteration of the Arabic with a hybrid system of transliteration and Anglicization (xiii), as if Medievalists accustomed to reading Anglo-Saxon, Provençal, or Byzantine Greek would be put off by diacritics. Even though the Routledge editors were obviously concerned with making Arabic historiography accessible to non-Arabists, the slender book was, for example, not enhanced with an appendix, providing a few representative English excerpts of Arabic works not yet available in English translation. The book's typographical errors, taken together with features such as the poorly reproduced maps and a rather minimal index (183–187), suggest that Routledge, like most academic commercial presses nowadays, required Keaney to submit a print-ready manuscript, providing no assistance whatsoever with copy-editing or indexing. In sum, the revisions seem to primarily reflect the economic realities of academic publishing for a niche market, such as Middle East history before 1500. There is considerable irony in the fact that pragmatic considerations determined Keaney's editing of a book in which she explores editing as an authorial strategy of Muslim historians.

Against this backdrop, it must be acknowledged that Keaney's book, whatever my reservations, presents one possible solution to the very formidable challenge of updating and synthesizing a complex research project covering six-hundred years of Arabic historiography into less than two-hundred pages in such a way that the topic seems relevant to current Middle East politics and meets her publisher's criteria of suitability for a general audience of Medievalists.

¹ Keaney capitalizes *Companion* (*ṣāḥib*, pl. *ṣaḥāba*) throughout the book in order to highlight the elevated station of Muḥammad's contemporary followers among the later generations, although in phrases such as "caliph-oriented and Companion-oriented history" (6) it strikes one as an odd spelling, if not a typographical error.

² Both works are available in English translations: Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, tr. by Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols., London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1958. Ṭabari, *The History*, gen. ed. Ehsan Yarshater, 40 vols., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985-2007; translators vary.

³ Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors*, London: Routledge, 2006. In Keaney's footnote note, read p. 120 or 11 instead of 129.

⁴ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. In Keaney's footnotes (138) and bibliography (174) Heffernan and 1998 are typographical errors.

⁵ Marilyn Waldman, *Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study of Perso-Islamicate Historiography*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980. The extant fragment is now available in an annotated English translation: Abū'l-Faḍl Bayhaqī, *The History: The History of Sultan Mas'ud of Ghazna, 1030–1041*, tr. by C. E. Bosworth and fully revised by Mohsen Ashtiany, 3 vols., Boston, Mass.: Ilex, 2011.

⁶ A summary of the publication history up to the 1960s is provided by Claude Cahen, “Ibn al-Djawzī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed., 3, 1971: 753–754. To Cahen’s survey should be added: Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt al-zamān*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, Beirut: Dār al-shurūq, 1985.

⁷ For Edward Said, philology was implicated in the Orientalist project: “Almost without exception, every Orientalist began his career as a philologist” (*Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979: 98).

⁸ Keaney uses a simplified transliteration system (xiii) of dizzying complexity: Some diacritics—in particular ‘ayn—are always preserved in anglicized words (e.g., ‘Ali, ‘Uthman), while only some Arabic words, under certain circumstances, retain their full transliteration. This complexity most likely explains why Keaney did not consistently apply her own rules, such as the full transliteration of italicized technical terms (e.g., *fadā’il* (2 et passim) instead of *faḍā’il*; *al-fitna al-kobra* (xv) instead of *al-fitna al-kubrā*; *na’ib* (88) instead of *nā’ib*).

⁹ For a recent survey of the challenges to the publication of scholarship, see Robert Darnton, “The World Digital Library Is Coming True,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 May 2014: 8–11.

¹⁰ Heather N. Keaney, “Remembering Rebellion: ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān in Medieval Islamic Historiography,” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003. (ProQuest AAT 3103437)

¹¹ The Print-On-Demand acronym POD is read by some as Publish-On-Demand.