Book Review

Christophe Picard, *La Mer des Califes: Une histoire de la Méditerranée musulmane*. (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2015), 439 pages, glossary, bibliography, maps. ISBN: 9782020983815, Price: €26.00/$31.00.

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La Mer des Califes, a challenging and erudite work, deserves a wide audience. It raises many new questions in centering the Mediterranean in early and medieval Muslim history *and* historiography. The sea, Christophe Picard argues, was a preoccupation of empire and the stuff of memory. A proper English translation is very much in order.[1] Readers should be forewarned that, particularly for modern works, Picard's annotation is rather spare. He furnishes citations, to be sure, but these are few relative to the wealth of his discussion; the decision is likely to have been editorial, as the volume seems intended for a broad audience. This is less a failing of an excellent book than a source of regret that one cannot more readily engage its many ideas.

Picard has produced to date a rich body of work on the Muslim presence in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, including *La mer et les musulmans d'Occident au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1997), *L'Océan Atlantique musulman de la conquête arabe à l'époque almohade: Navigation et mise en valeur des côtes d'al-Andalus et du Maghreb occidental* (Paris, 1997) and a long series of article-length studies. His many ideas are on display in this new volume. Given their range, however, the book eludes easy summary. It works on several levels (and, for this reason, would serve well in graduate seminars). Picard, again, argues for maritime concerns as essential to the course of Islamic imperial history from its very onset. This corrects, he argues, a long-held view, a "vulgate of medieval history" (p. 11), that underplays the engagement of early and medieval Islamic society with the Mediterranean. This seems right: consideration of Muslim naval warfare, for example, is often tacked onto discussions of the early conquests and subsequent periods of Islamic/Middle East military history. The

1. A translation, by Nicholas Elliot, is to be published by Harvard University Press in early 2018.

tendency in Western historiography has been to reduce the Arabo-Muslim presence in the Mediterranean to piracy and a secondary role in the commercial history of the Sea. Picard's central point is that, on the contrary, one sees a consistent commitment to maritime matters on the part of successive regimes, whether the Abbasid caliphate, the 'successor' states (eg. Tulunids and Aghlabids), the rival Fatimid and Umayyad caliphates or, finally, the Almohad state late in the medieval period.

Picard provides a full body of evidence; he has read widely, and his extensive, two-part bibliography is a contribution in its own right.[2] The book, which includes a useful set of maps (pp. 407-418), is made up of two parts. It opens with a précis of the main points: (i) a fresh look at the Islamic Mediterranean is in order, one that acknowledges the sea as the venue of close and deliberate interaction of the three medieval realms (Islamic, Byzantine and Latin); (ii) the extant written evidence, still our best source despite considerable archeological gains in recent decades, consists in largest part of works produced by traveller-scholars serving imperial agendas; and (iii), finally, the project, done properly, needs therefore to engage not simply the history proper but the sources themselves. The weave of interrogation, of events and texts alike, makes *La mer des califes* a very contemporary work of history.

Part One ("La Méditerranée des Arabes: entre représentations et appropriations") takes up both tasks: an assessment of Muslim imperial maritime policy set against a close look at the Sea as imagined in Arabo-Islamic sources. It consists of seven chapters. The first chapter, "La découverte de la Méditerranée par les Arabes," could stand easily on its own. Picard argues that the first generations of Arabo-Islamic scholars and writers took only mild interest in the sea. But, more to the point, this early material was shaped (*instrumentalisé*) to meet Abbasid caliphal needs: the aim was juridical, that is, an effort to define the fiscal standing of, say, Cyprus and coastal regions of the Levant, and legitimating, in that the Abbasids sought to frame their activity as taking up where the Prophet and his successors left off. The Mediterranean, in the latter sense, was framed principally as the venue of confrontation against Byzantium. Picard sees it as having also been, at this initial stage, secondary in interest to the Indian Ocean, the domain of maritime commerce. Only following the third/ninth century, with a proliferation of geographical writing, did the Mediterranean come into its own. Picard devotes the remainder of the chapter to the work of three notables of Arabo-Islamic letters: al-Masʿūdī (d. 344/956), al-Idrīsī (d. 560/1165) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 809/1406). He argues, with these works as evidence, for 'the creative

2. To the Arabic sources, one can add al-Balawī's fourth/tenth-century *Sīrat Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn* (ed. Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, Damascus, 1358/1939), which contains additional references to relevant activity by the Tulunid regime (*Mer*, pp. 265-267). Regarding modern sources, A. Borrut's studies, "L'espace maritime syrien au cours des premiers siècles de l'Islam (VII^{e}-X^{e} siècle) : le cas de la région entre Acre et Tripoli," *Tempora. Annales d'histoire et d'archéologie* (Université Saint-Joseph) 10-11 (1999-2000), 1-33, and "Architecture des espaces portuaires et réseaux défensifs du littoral syro-palestinien dans les sources arabes (VII^{e}-XI^{e} s.)," *Archéologie islamique*, 11 (2001), 21-46 , are cited but missing from the bibliography, while M. McCormick's two publications and A.-L. de Prémare's *Les Fondations de l'Islam* (Paris, 2002) are listed out of order.

wealth of Arab geographical literature, particularly as it relates to the maritime space' (p. 50).

The second chapter, "L'écriture arabe de la conquête de la Méditerranée," begins Picard's more substantial discussion. It takes up the evidence on the Arab/Islamic conquests and its careful shaping by Abbasid-era scholars. The first Muslims produced full accounts of the conquests, works that in turn underwent not simply (selective) transmission and collection but, critically, a reframing by bureaucrat-scholars writing on behalf of the Abbasid court. A similar process, but one that produced a counter-narrative to that of the Baghdadi and Samarran courts, ensued after the later third/ninth century in Aghlabid (then Fatimid) Ifriqiya and Umayyad Spain. In each case, one chased legitimation by reworking the past. So, in the case of the Abbasids, it was a matter of reworking (Syrian) Umayyad history, first, to align the '*ghāzī*' caliphs (eg. Hārūn al-Rashīd) with the 'heroes' of the previous age (eg. Maslama) then, second, justify a shift in the dynamics of jihad—for which the Mediterranean played an obvious role—from the offensive thrust of the conquest era to the defensive posture of their own age (the shaping of a frontier politics on the Taurus range and along the coasts). In this case, the Abbasid court made much of the decision by ʿUmar II to rethink imperial policy vis-à-vis the Byzantine foe, in halting the conquests in favor of a new policy of consolidation.

Picard takes up the Abbasid shift to a new-style jihad in his third chapter, "Les silences de la mer." The conquest of Constantinople now beyond reach, and notwithstanding Abbasid sorties into the Anatolian interior, the Muslim-Byzantine frontier stabilized and, thus, the caliphs and the scholars writing on their behalf reframed the terms of conflict. It was a shift in ideology and politics: the caliphs now sought to demonstrate Islam's superiority—its universality—a task achieved by the staging of elaborate receptions for Byzantine diplomats and, more grandly, laying claim to knowledge itself, through targeted translation of Greek and Sasanid works, and rituals of polemic. It was, no less, the pursuit of a new military strategy of, on the one hand, investment on an imperial scale in a defensive infrastructure (forts, ports and so on) and, on the other, the redefinition of jihad itself. The Abbasids played their part in shaping and projecting the ceremonial figure of the warrior (*ghāzī*) caliph.

The legacy of Baghdad—the cradle of Arabic geography and chronography—is the subject of chapter four, "La Méditerranée des géographes." Picard, drawing heavily on the work of André Miquel, sees the new discipline of geography as having turned on two objectives: fixing the Islamic realm (and Baghdad itself) at the center of the universe, and mapping for all to see the sovereignty of the caliph. If a first step introduced classical, above all Ptolemaic, principles, a second produced 'administrative geography,' as represented by the work of al-Yaʿqūbī and Ibn Khurradādhbih. A shift occurred with a second generation of these author-travellers: if al-Muqaddasī (much like al-Yaʿqūbī) limited themselves to a description of Muslim-held regions of the Mediterranean, it fell to Ibn Ḥawqal (fl. second half of the fourth/tenth century) to fully breach the mental frontier separating the eastern and western regions of the Islamic realm. The Mediterranean

became whole (*un ensemble singulier et cohérent*), and, over which, for Ibn Ḥawqal, the Fatimid imamate exercised true sovereignty. The sea was now a venue of frontiers: Ibn Ḥawqal, among other writers, references a maritime world of confrontation and commerce between Muslims, Byzantines and Latins.

Three subsequent chapters complete the first part of the book. The three chapters track the course of Muslim supremacy over the Mediterranean, from the late third/ninth century through the heyday of the fourth/tenth century, and its subsequent demise, with the waning of the Almohad state, in the mid-seventh/thirteenth century. From the fourth/tenth century on comes a wealth of evidence. Chronicles, works of geography, juridical texts and, notably, the Cairo Geniza documents, bespeak a remarkable flourishing of scholarship and commerce. But, so too, a 'media war' (p. 142) conducted by the Umayyad and Fatimid courts against one another, and against their Latin and Byzantine opponents. At the center stood the sea: control of the Mediterranean served aims that were ideological—again, the claims to universality on the part of successive dynasties—and strategic alike.

Students of Muslim military and economic history will find much to take away from these middle chapters. Picard recounts at length the considerable level of investment in fleets, ports, and coastal fortresses (*ribāṭ*s) on the part of each dynasty in turn. The Umayyads of Cordoba, for their part, imposed tighter administrative and fiscal control over Iberian ports, fleets and sailors; Tortosa, along the Ebro River in Catalonia, and Almería, on Spain's southeast corner, each flourished as military and commercial hubs with direct caliphal support. The Fatimids, Picard seems to suggest, moved matters even further, devoting rhetoric and investment alike in making a bid for authority over the Sea. And, finally, there is the case of the Almohads: "the texts make frequent mention of the attachment to the sea of the [Almohad] sovereigns, and, above all, their personal interest in the fleet and their sailors" (p. 214).

To the second part of the book—"Les stratégies méditerranéennes des califes"—falls discussion of the scale and complexity of Muslim maritime investment. Picard, though not explicit as to how the two parts of the book relate to one another, insists that, from as early as the reign of Muʿāwiya (41/661-60/680), the character of Muslim engagement with the Sea was extensive and diverse. If, in other words, the sea remained, through the early and medieval Islamic periods, a venue of confrontation, the Geniza documents, among other sources, make clear that it became a good deal more beside. The Umayyad sovereign, alongside ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, was quick to exploit the naval resources abandoned by the Byzantines in Egypt and Syria. The Abbasids, in their turn, as described in Chapter Eight ("La Méditerranée des deux empires") faced a resurgent Byzantium in the later third/ninth century, and thus saw little option but to sustain investment in their navies and the infrastructure of ports and coastal defenses. The Abbasids also carried forward an 'island strategy,' that is, a determination to take in hand the large seabound territories of both the western and eastern reaches of the Sea, Sicily most notably. Picard is mostly silent on the references to slaves and collective enslavement contained in reports of the major Umayyad assaults

on Cyprus. He barely mentions slavery, in fact, anywhere in the book, a missed opportunity, particularly in light of Michael McCormick's sweeping ideas on the significance to medieval European and Abbasid history of the slave trade, much of which, after all, was conducted at sea.[3]

I would also comment on two issues raised by Picard in his ninth chapter ("Contrôler la Méditerranée"), which is devoted to the shaping of an Abbasid 'model' of jihad. The model was taken up by successor regimes even as the Abbasid state surrendered authority beginning in the later third/ninth century. Once again, its ingredients were a 'formidable' material investment in coastal defenses and a 'remarkably effective' program of propaganda (p. 287). My first comment is brief: I would have liked Picard to elaborate on a passing observation (p. 253) that the Abbasid recruitment of 'eastern' forces—Iranian forces by al-Maʾmūn and Turks by al-Muʿtaṣim—reframed jihad as having more to do with cavalry than fleets. He suggests a shift in attitude in military circles but also, I think, in logistics and planning. But he cites no texts as evidence and I wondered if he had any particular ones in mind.

The second comment concerns the impact of investment in coastal and frontier defenses, by Byzantium and Muslim powers alike, but especially the Abbasid state. Picard sees it as having driven demographic and economic growth in these same areas, growth closely tied to the transfer and settlement of soldiers, artisans, workers and other populations (pp. 280-287). It is here, for example, where one wishes for better annotation: direct references are few. But, regarding one particular locale, Tarsus and its hinterland (the *Thughūr*), Picard seems clearly reliant on an argument developed by Peter von Sivers concerning the emergence and rivalry of, in effect, power interests in Tarsus—the one military, the other landed/commercial.[4] Michael Bonner[5] has raised objections of this argument, and I would follow suit: evidence for the socio-economic organization of Tarsus in the late third/ninth century does not appear 'thick' enough to support a description of the nature, extent and impact of transregional commerce along the frontier. The existence of *un véritable système économique* (p. 280) sustained by military and commercial investment is certainly plausible, but the question remains of whether it is borne out by the sources.

The fourth/tenth century brought the adoption of caliphal claims by the Umayyad and Fatimid states. Picard takes up the policies of both regimes, and their Almohad successors, in the final chapters of the book. Two developments occurred: the confrontation of the two caliphates, in which control over maritime waters stood front and center, and a heightened engagement with the Latin and Byzantine realms. If the two empires set their rhetorical sights on Baghdad and the overturning of the Abbasid house, their

3. See his *Origins of the European Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4. "Taxes and Trade in the ʿAbbāsid Thughūr, 750-962/133-351," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 25:1 (1982): 71-99, see especially 89-93.

5. *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1996): 152-153.

real target was one another. Chapter Ten, "Contrôler la Méditerranée," sets the stage with a discussion of the Aghlabid commitment, very much in the Abbasid style, to the campaign against Sicily. Here, again, a central regime joined an ideological program to material investment in fleets and coastal infrastructure. Similar initiatives occurred to the west, with the Moroccan Salihid dynasty—a polity little discussed, it seems, in modern scholarship—and the early Umayyad state. In each case, jihad and measures to assure coastal security gave way to a more ambitious program of expansion and confrontation. The great flourish of activity—the stuff of Chapter Eleven, "L'impérialisme maritime des califes méditerranéens au x^{e} siècle"—involved not simply sustained military campaigning—jihad against Latin and Byzantine territory, and war of one caliphate against another—but new and vigorous commercial engagement as well.

Picard cites evidence provided by the Arabic geographers but, so too, a growing body of archaeological data in treating a burst of economic exchange across the fourth/tenth century Mediterranean. A key point is that it is likely to have been Mediterranean in origin, linking local and regional development—new productivity at the level of villages and local markets on both sides of the Sea—with heightened military and fiscal investment on the part of the Byzantines, Umayyads and Fatimids. This is less a rejection of the notion, developed by Maurice Lombard, among others, that trade flowing from the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and the Sahara fueled Mediterranean commercial growth, than an effort to assign credit to the Mediterranean region itself. A greater sense of security also explains the spread of European, Jewish and Muslim merchant networks; in the case of the Jewish networks, in particular, and here the Geniza letters serve their purpose, Fatimid support was decisive. Umayyad investment proved no less decisive further west: intense economic activity joined new Umayyad diplomatic engagement with the Latin powers. The same interplay of confrontation (read: jihad), on the one hand, commercial relations joining Latin, Byzantine and Muslim markets, on the other, was a hallmark of the Almohad period. Only with the waning of this last medieval Mediterranean Muslim power—the subject of Chapter Twelve ("La souveraineté maritime")—could the Latin maritime powers come into their own.

Picard concludes by insisting that naval men, operating in the Mediterranean across the medieval period, stood among the heroes of Arabo-Islamic tradition. Their campaigns, carried out in the name of imperial masters, the latter driven by a determination to project Islamic universality (read: hegemony), rendered the Mediterranean "the sole maritime venue of caliphal jihad" (p. 347). And, throughout, an eye to material gain remained: conquest and profit went hand in hand. And it was in this manner that later Arabic writers, al-Idrīsī, Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Khaldūn among them, would remember the Sea, the frontier from which to pursue expansion of the Islamic realm.

These comments only scratch the surface: *La mer des califes* is awash with compelling ideas and I have touched on only the main ones. Picard, as amply demonstrated by his long list of publications, has been working on the topics that inform this volume for many

years. Mediterranean studies has a long pedigree in Western scholarship; one thinks, of course, of Henri Pirenne and Fernand Braudel, and, more recently, of Chris Wickham and Michael McCormick.[6] In obliging us to reconsider the history of the (Islamic) Mediterranean—and, thus, perforce, the conclusions of his predecessors—Picard surely has earned a place in this worthy company.

6. Picard, acknowledging the contribution of Pirenne's much-discussed *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1937), wrote the preface to a reedition of the work (Paris, 2005).