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**Daniel G. König**, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, xiv + 436 pp., ISBN-13: 9780198737193.

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The eminent scholar of Middle Eastern studies Bernard LEWIS passed away in May 2018 after a career spanning some seventy years. Among his over thirty books and hundreds of articles and essays, LEWIS's 1982 study, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, was particularly influential. Based on a homonymous article published in 1957, it asserts that Muslim knowledge about Europe in the Middle Ages was limited, distorted, and largely unchanging, and LEWIS ponders why, in his view, Muslims were "uninterested" in Europe. He argues that it was because the latter held a particularly low prestige in the Islamic world, relative to other civilizations on its borders. Muslims "looked on Europe as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief, offering nothing of interest and little of value." At the same time, LEWIS asserts that a basic curiosity about other cultures defined medieval European thought, setting the stage for Europe's rapid expansion as a global power in the early modern period. "It was a peculiarity of the European and one can, indeed, be more specific, of the Western European during a certain period in his history, to exhibit this kind of interest in alien cultures."<sup>1</sup> LEWIS's argument has had a preponderant influence on subsequent representations of Muslim attitudes about and knowledge of Christian Europe (for example, in scholarship by Francesco GABRIELE, George MAKDISI, Carole HILLENBRAND, and Jacques WAARDENBURG). Despite critical assessments by Edward SAID, Oleg GRABAR, and Nizar

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard LEWIS, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982, 9.

HERMES, among various others, many other scholars have continued to accept LEWIS's basic paradigm as a starting point for research on Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages.

This ambitious study by Daniel KÖNIG offers sufficient evidence to call LEWIS's assertions into question. KÖNIG argues that extensive knowledge about the geography, languages, culture, and history of Latin Europe did indeed penetrate the Islamic world. He states unequivocally that, "in recording the histories and describing the contemporary societies of non-Muslims, Arabic-Islamic scholars clearly acknowledged that the non-Muslim sphere, including medieval Western Europe, merited attention" (vi). KÖNIG's work marks a major contribution to the historiography of Christian-Muslim contact in the Middle Ages and constitutes a valuable collection of research on the history of the Latin West according to non-Latin sources.

KÖNIG carefully situates his argument in relation to previous studies of the question, and also opens a dialogue with the recent work of Brian CATLOS, which labels three sorts of Muslim-Christian relations (a "macro," "micro," and "corporate" level of contact, i. e. religious/dogmatic, quotidian/personal, and social/legal, respectively).<sup>2</sup> König's focus on various channels of transmission by which the Arabic-Islamic world received information about the Latin West involves all three of these levels. It also goes beyond them in pointing to the formation of ideas based neither on direct contact at the local or legal levels nor on abstract religious paradigms, but instead on non-polemical historiographical and geographical categories. By challenging the traditional notion of Islamic knowledge as guided exclusively by a polemical religious self-sufficiency, while also building on recent work aiming to develop a more nuanced and complete picture of the multiple levels of Muslim-Christian interaction, KÖNIG's study fruitfully alters the standard narrative concerning Arabic-Islamic knowledge about and interest in the world on its borders.

KÖNIG develops his argument over the course of nine dense chapters, with the first serving as an introduction and the last as a sort of conclusion that reassesses the dominant paradigm on the basis of his foregoing analysis. In addition to defining the scope of his corpus of sources – which includes not only Arabic texts of geography, polemics, ethnography, and historiography, but also records in other languages and even those by non-Muslims – he begins, correctly in this reviewer's understanding, by calling into question the general categories of his overall argument as tools of historical analysis. First, he points out that the very

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<sup>2</sup> Brian CATLOS, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, c. 1050–1614*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

notion of an “Arabic-Islamic world” is a broad generalization that does not refer to a homogeneous group with one overriding historical perspective. He also demurs from the approach of generalizing about mentalities on the basis of a small set of documents produced by a very particular subset of the population. One cannot speak of a single “Muslim worldview” in any period, and thus, “it is methodologically unsound to regard each written record produced by a Muslim in Arabic as the manifestation of an over-riding ‘Muslim’ attitude toward the non-Muslim world” (2). He offers similar caveats about the use of the words “Latin-Christian,” which “can only function as a label to be used with caution when generalizing, comparing, and juxtaposing on a macro-historical scale” (4). The first justification that he provides for why such terms need to be used at all – i. e. to offer interpretive categories that follow coherently previous scholarly discourse and also that provide coherent keywords for use in the age of modern digital scholarship – is only weakly compelling. Yet KÖNIG also provides an alternative justification that is of singular value: A history in broad strokes is necessary and useful to provide “an external point of view on how Western Europe evolved” (5). In this sense, even though the scholarly details provide abundant information about the state of knowledge in the Arabic-speaking Muslim world, another real value of this study lies in tracing how the growth of Latin Europe was perceived in the context of the wider world.

Chapter two considers the potential channels of transmission by which information about the Western Latin world may have reached the Arabic-Islamic sphere. Beginning with a brief consideration of pre-Islamic views of the lands and peoples to the west of Arabia, he soon turns to the texts of the early Islamic world, noting that the early centuries of Islamic expansion did not immediately produce conditions that were amenable to an active intellectual written culture. Although it seems somewhat obvious after being stated, KÖNIG’s argument that “a large number of factors determine in which period, area, and social milieu fruitful exchange can take place” (51) merits repetition. In addition, KÖNIG makes the important observation that “Arab-Islamic scholars only constituted a relatively small group among those involved in the relations with medieval Western Europe and generally occupied a place at the end of rather long chains of transmission” (26).

Chapter three considers in more detail the factors that determined how Arabic-Islamic scholars acquired information. He thus elaborates on the circumstances that explain why areas of greatest contact with the Latin West – Islamic areas in the western Mediterranean – nevertheless “lagged behind [the East] with regard to the many preparatory developments necessary to facilitate large-scale processes of transmission, reception, and assimilation” (75–76). Here he considers the Arabic translations of a few key sources that played an important

role as sources of information about the history of Latin-Christian lands in the West. Most influential was the *Kitāb Hurūshiyūsh*, the Arabic version of Orosius of Braga's *Historiae adversus paganos* (early fifth century) produced in the Caliphate of Córdoba in the late ninth or early tenth century.

Chapters four through eight offer case studies of the degree of knowledge in the Arabic-Islamic sphere about specific aspects of Western history. Chapter four looks at Arabic discussions of Roman history. Chapter five considers the extent of knowledge about the Visigoths. Chapter six looks at Arabic-Islamic sources about the Franks and Frankish history. Chapter seven looks specifically at knowledge about the papacy, and chapter eight traces awareness of and reactions to European economic and political expansion following the Crusades, the Norman conquest of Sicily, the Christian conquest of Muslim al-Andalus, and the rise of Italian city-states such as Genoa. Although very diverse in focus, these five chapters form a coherent group and all draw from a common group of texts, albeit with some variation as well. Key sources that appear in multiple case studies include works of Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 238/853), al-Ya'qūbī (d. after 292/905), al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956), Ṣā'id al-Andalusī (d. 462/1070), Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī (d. 469/1076), and Ibn Khaldūn, with the most extensive and constant attention being given to al-Mas'ūdī because of the extent of his knowledge on a variety of topics. These examples fit a pattern in which knowledge about European lands and cultures remained very limited and distorted on most subjects until a notable turning point in the ninth century. While scholars in the Mashriq seem to have acquired advanced knowledge about the Latin West sooner than in the Maghreb, Andalusī learning also sometimes flowed east, as was the case with the history of the Visigoths and of the Romans. The final chapter offers a valuable reassessment of the state of the question, underscoring the critical necessity of eschewing any homogeneous view of knowledge about Western Europe in the medieval Islamic world.

The breadth and erudition of this study are without parallel among any similar treatments of Arabic-Islamic knowledge about Western Latinity. The bibliography of both primary and secondary sources is extensive and thoroughly up to date, and the critiques of related studies made by the author are always measured, specific, and justified. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer a few observations about issues that could be treated differently or in more detail. For example, one of the most interesting elements of this discussion of channels of transmission is KÖNIG'S overview of the linguistic impediments that slowed the Muslim reception of Latin sources and histories. Navigating this topic is challenging in part because it is not always clear if a reference to a language denotes the same reality as that understood by the same reference in a European context. For example, while Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) refers in various places to *al-lughā al-Lātīniyya*, presumably

Latin, he also notes about members of the ancient Arabian Balī tribe living north of Cordoba that “they cannot speak *laḡīniyya* well, but only Arabic,”<sup>3</sup> suggesting that “Latin” in this context could denote a nascent Romance vernacular as well as written Latin. By contrast, later writers such as Ibn Khaldūn’s contemporary, Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1375), transcribes numerous Romance words (317) and seems to comprehend a difference between written and spoken registers of European languages. As KÖNIG himself concedes, European languages “d[id] not seem to have constituted the prime field of interest of Arabic-Islamic scholars” (89) and, in fact, the Latin-Christian world had, on the whole, “little to offer” (92) to the Arabic-Muslim world in intellectual terms. How, then, to explain this evolution in knowledge? A deeper exploration of the consequences of Latin’s low prestige in some circles of the Islamic world would enhance the value of conclusions about the evolution of their linguistic knowledge.

In any case, in the face of KÖNIG’s careful reading of a rich variety of Arabic sources – historiographical, geographical, religious, and otherwise – the notion that the Islamic world, on the whole, lacked either interest in or knowledge about Latin Europe can no longer be maintained. On the contrary, those examples of indifference, ignorance, or critical derogation vis-à-vis the Latin West that do exist in Arabic sources – although there are quite a few – cannot be taken to form a pattern attributable to any single cause, but instead must be read as natural and varied consequences of geographical distance and the uneven availability of fragmentary written sources. At the same time, the notion that such indifference or ignorance was more pronounced in the Arabic-Islamic world than in the Latin West is equally untenable. Accepting this also requires us to discard LEWIS’s claim that there existed a uniquely keen European interest in the others on its borders. “There is no reason to believe that Western Europeans exhibited an interest in other cultures that can be classified as extraordinary ... Medieval Latin-Christian records on the Arabic-Islamic sphere are as fragmentary and as prone to ideological othering, if not more so, as Arabic-Islamic records on the Latin-Christian sphere” (341). In achieving the paradigm shift implied by this and similar conclusions, KÖNIG’s magisterial study helps us to view the history of intercultural contact in its complexity rather than reduce it into factitious and self-aggrandizing generalizations.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharat ansāb al-‘arab*, ed. A. Hārūn, Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘ārif, 1962, 443 (my translation).