

and cross-cultural comparisons. It is less likely to provide satisfactory answers to the major chronological issues that still divide the antagonists and protagonists of radiocarbon dating techniques in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East.

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LUXENBERG, Christoph — *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*. Das Arabische Buch, Berlin, 2000. (23 cm, ix + 311 pp., bibliography, no index). ISBN 3-86093-274-8. € 29,-.

Christoph Luxenberg's *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran* is a page-turner — if you know Arabic, some Aramaic or Syriac, and are roughly familiar with Koranic studies and traditional Muslim Koran interpretation.

The shape of a large number of Arabic characters does not allow the reader to decide which of the letters of the Arabic alphabet he is confronted with. The reader frequently needs diacritical ("distinguishing") dots. These dots are added to the letter, and are physically separate from it, like the German *Umlaut*. These added dots decide which character precisely a shape represents. One shape has no less than five possibilities (b, t, *t*, n, y) if the dots would be omitted, many have two (r, z).

The early manuscripts of the Koran do not have these dots. The earliest occurrence of diacritical dots is in an inscription from 58 AH. Adding these dots became slowly more and more common in the second and third century of the Muslim era (Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie*, II, Vienna 1971, p. 41).

So now the question arises: Are these dots nevertheless already part of the divinely inspired text of the Koran, or could it be that Muslim scholars in the past have made mistakes when adding them to the dot-less but inspired skeleton of the text of the Koran? If there would have been a perfect oral transmission of the text of the Koran from the days of the Prophet, this question, of course, is meaningless and superfluous. But the bulk of traditional Muslim Koran exegesis suggests that there has not been such a perfect oral transmission. Even a relatively simple traditional Koran commentary like the one known as *Al-Galālayn* (ca. 1500 AD) often admits that more than one possibility exists as far as the dots are concerned. The commentator, in such cases, is not embarrassed to show that he does not know whether it should, e.g., be *yaqūl* or *naqūl*, "He says" or "We say". Nevertheless, in traditional popular piety no allowances are made for such ambiguities in the holy text — on the contrary.

But if one, if only for the sake of argument, would accept the possibility of mistakes in the placing of diacritical dots in the text of the Koran, several obscure or odd passages start to look as good as new. For instance, the son of Zacharias (Luke 1, Koran 19) is called *Yaḥyā* in the present punctuation of Koran 19:7, but the consonantal shape certainly allows us to read *Yuhannā*, or 'John' (Luke 1:13). It is hard indeed to imagine that traditional *Yaḥyā* is the correct reading. If it were not for the sensibilities of orthodox Muslims, few scholars would be willing to consider the possibility that *Yaḥyā* is the correct reading (see R. Bell, *A commentary on the Qur'ān*, vol. I (University of Manchester 1991; Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 14, eds. C. Edmund Bosworth & M.E.J. Richardson), p. 502).

Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym) offers a startling number of repunctuations that need to be considered seriously. By far the most spectacular case he adduces is Koran 44:54 and 52:20. Here we read in a description of the fate of the pious dead the phrase "We have paired them [with maidens]", *zawwaḡnāhum*. With different dots the same characters could easily be read as "We gave them rest", *rawwaḡnāhum* (p. 226). Few would disagree that resting, at least for the pious dead, is an activity much more proper than marrying maidens. Nevertheless, for young men who want to sacrifice their lives for what they see as true Islam, this is bad news.

Whether the dots necessary to read and interpret the text of the Hebrew Bible are as inspired as its sense, words and letters, has been debated widely in Christianity. For instance, in 1678 the Calvinists of Geneva

by a special canon, forbade that any minister should be received into their jurisdiction until he publicly confessed that the Hebrew text, as it today exists in the Masoretic copies, is, both as to the consonants and vowel points, divine and authentic (A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, New York 1896, quoted from repr. 1993, vol. II, p. 178).

As late as the eighteenth century this debate was settled, and it is since then that the old sacred theory as to the origin of the Hebrew vowel points may be considered as dead and buried. The Arabic dots, however, are still very much seen as sacred, with, of course, the exception of a small number of cases that are enshrined in the traditional Koran commentaries. Few people are familiar with these exceptions, and the cases that tradition tolerates, anyhow, do not seriously affect the sense of the verse in which they occur.

Luxenberg describes the method which he used in this volume in detail (pp. 9-15). He has not chosen at random the Koranic passages he wishes to clarify with the help of Aramaic — which usually implies newly reconstructing the dots. He selected passages marked as problematic by both Western Koran translators and in the encyclopaedic traditional commentary by Aṭ-Ṭabarī (839-923 AD). He then, nevertheless, tried to find an Arabic solution with the help of the great Arabic dictionaries like the *Lisān al-ʿArab*, that had not been available to Aṭ-Ṭabarī. Then he checked whether an Aramaic homonym of the Arabic could supply a satisfactory solution to the meaning of the verse under consideration. Then he tried a number of hypothetical possibilities of pointing the text differently, only using Arabic vocabulary. This, he says, often produces convincing results. If it did not, he tried the same, now also using Aramaic. In innumerable cases this produced, according to the author, a meaning that was definitely more logical, “*einen entschieden logischeren Sinn*” (p. 11).

If the same would be merely possible with any other text known to mankind in general and scholarship in particular, such a text, and especially such a new possibly fruitful approach to it, would be in the centre of interest all over the world. It is not difficult to see why pious traditional Muslims might have great difficulty with Luxenberg's work. But why would non-Muslim scholars hesitate to debate his views and to applaud him for his original approach — even if he might be wrong some of the time?

Back to the fate of the souls of the pious in the Afterlife. Are they out for a sexual treat or are they simply resting from their manifold toils? Parallels to both can be found. Luxenberg mentions convincing parallels taken from St. Ephraem the Syrian (fourth century AD). The texts to which Luxenberg refers must have been widely known in the milieu in which Islam came into being. On the other hand, I found one example of “girls in silk shawls”, supplying the pious dead with “full cups of red wine”. This, however, is taken from an Athenian play, probably around 438 BC (see J.N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, London/New York 2002, p. 7, and pp. 119-21, where it is pointed out how luxuriant growth and meadows — both frequently implied or mentioned in the Koranic description of the Afterlife — may evoke sexual associations.). Someone who wants to argue in favour of the reading that is now the traditional Muslim one, so it appears, can find oriental parallels as well.

It cannot be doubted that Luxenberg's book will cause distress to many pious Muslims. That is a sad thing. But, on the other hand, it is not the duty of Western scholarship to

protect the Muslim masses from spiritual distress. Moreover, nobody will dare to accuse the ‘*ulamā*’ of not being able to protect the Muslim masses adequately against such distress. It is, then, to be hoped for that Christoph Luxenberg will take a look at the whole text of the Koran, apply his unique method, and will soon publish his findings, that will consequently become the subject of a wide debate.

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FUESS, Albrecht. — *Verbranntes Ufer*. (Islamic History and Civilization, Vol. 39). E.J. Brill Publishers N.V., Leiden, 2001. (24 cm, XIV, 516). ISBN 90-04-12108-2; ISSN 0929-2403. € 137,-/\$159,00.

Port cities are essentially different from inland cities. As other towns, they are related to regional urban networks and administrative configurations which make them part of their hinterland. They are also directed at the sea, however, and integrated in networks of other coastal towns, sometimes at a considerable distance, with which they share the ‘culture’ of the sea, trade activities, specific industries, linguistic particularities, layout and architecture, culinary traditions, etcetera. These relationships set them off from the core regions of their nations and place them into an economic and cultural margin which often determines the course of their history. They are vulnerable to attacks from outside, since they are border towns of a specific kind and because they are focal points of infrastructures and economic interests, as entrepôts and centres of trade and transit. But they can also easily seek support from the outside against domination by the administrative centres of their hinterland, enabling foreign powers to interfere in domestic politics.

The special nature of the port towns justifies a separate treatment of coastal urban networks in historical research. Several questions can be formulated to illustrate their specific position and to explain their relationship with forces from the inland and from the outside. They are part of different domains which overlap and interact mainly through their function as links and places of exchange. An effort to describe such a ‘coastal history’ is made by Albrecht Fuess in his study *Verbranntes Ufer: Auswirkungen mamlukischer Seepolitik auf Beirut und die syro-palästinensische Küste (1250-1517)*. As the title indicates, his aim is to analyse the historical development of the Syrian coastal towns from the perspective of Mamluk maritime policies. Therefore, in spite of its regional focus, the book covers a broad historical range, linking regional history to imperial politics and the vicissitudes of world trade and international rivalries. As loci of economic and military penetration, the port towns of Syria were the focus where these forces converged.

The author has analysed a large amount of historical sources not only to reconstruct Mamluk policies towards such towns as Beirut, Tripoli and Acre, but also to give an image of the social structure of these towns and the many events which influenced their history in the period under study. The information derived from these source results in a mass of historical data and details. Although the wealth of historical details is profitable in itself, it should be remarked that their analysis as part of historical processes is rather shallow. The