Scheiner Jens J.,
*Die Eroberung von Damaskus. Quellenkritiche Untersuchung zur Historiographie in klassisch-islamischer Zeit.*

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This ambitious work by Jens Scheiner is an application of Harald Motzki's *isnād-cum-matn* method of analysis to historical texts related to the Muslim conquest of Damascus. It is perhaps the most ambitious expansion upon Motzki's work to date. First, the sheer volume of material Scheiner examines is quite impressive. He analyzes 922 excerpts regarding the conquest of Damascus derived from a wide variety of sources spanning several genres. He breaks these excerpts down further, into 2022 discrete segments, each of which he analyzes thoroughly. Second, this is the first extensive application of the *isnād-cum-matn* method to historical *aḫbār*, a larger and more fluid body of material than the *ḥadīṯ* collections Motzki focused upon. Third, while the *ḥadīṯ* corpus is largely limited to Muslim scholars and sources, historical writing is not. Consequently, Scheiner found it necessary to examine non-Muslim sources in Persian, Syriac, Latin and Greek, in addition to Arabic sources. The result is an impressive, complex study of a broad array of sources.

The lack of consensus about events surrounding the Muslim conquest of Damascus produced numerous contradictions in the sources Scheiner examines, both complicating and enriching his study. The sources disagree about even basic elements of the conquest of Damascus, including questions about who led the campaign, whether the city was taken by force, by treaty, or by some combination of the two, who negotiated a treaty (assuming there was one), whether the city was overtaken once or twice, whether a siege was involved (and how long it may have lasted), and when precisely the city came under Muslim control. All of these questions have significant historical and legal implications.

For Scheiner, these disagreements in the sources create an organizational challenge. He sensibly divides the majority of the material into two long chapters, one examining reports in which Ḫālid b. al-Walīd is the central actor who arranges the treaty (*amān*) with Damascene leaders, and a second focusing on reports in which Abū ʿUbaydah b. al-Ǧarrāḥ plays this role. Later chapters address questions of the date of the conquest, provide an analysis of non-Muslim sources, and attempt to reconstruct a basic narrative of events. There is inevitably some overlap, but much less than one might expect.

Scheiner uses Motki's method both to establish the chronology in which reports on the same topic occur and to reconstruct narratives from fragmentary reports. He includes some 47 reconstructed reports, some of which reveal hints of earlier, lost sources and others of which correct chronological and lexigraphical errors. Scheiner's analysis suggest that, in general, the oldest extant reports emphasize Khālid's role and date from the first decades of the second century AH. Reports focusing on Abū ʿUbaydah are slightly newer, dating from the second half of the second century. In the conclusion of each chapter, Scheiner places the reports in his reconstructed chronological order and explains when different elements (e.g. siege, double conquest, date of conquest, role of treaty, etc.) entered the narrative. In his conclusion, Scheiner speculates a bit about the reasons new details appeared at different times, though beyond pointing to the ʿAbbāsid revolution as a dividing point between the oldest Khālid narratives and the Abū ʿUbaydah versions he offers no compelling suggestions about the motives of the narrators. One hopes that attention to the reasons for the shifting narrative he so adeptly describes will be the focus of future work.

Scheiner's work is painstakingly thorough and comprehensive. Not only does he examine virtually every available source covering the conquest of Damascus, he also notes variations in different editions of the texts and turns to manuscript sources when necessary. He also includes more than 200 pages of charts diagraming parallel readings of these reports. These are crucial for navigating the relationship between the numerous sources he examines. His brief discussion of non-Muslim sources is particularly important. He is able to show, convincingly in my mind, that these were not independent sources but that there was extensive interplay between Muslim and non-Muslim sources. This is especially significant for those who hope to use Syriac and other sources as an alternative to the Muslim narrative. Scheiner makes clear that non-Muslim scholars were not isolated from the Muslim scholarly tradition and must be read with an appreciation of the influence Muslim sources may have exercised on them.

This is a careful, thorough application of the *isnād-cum-matn* method to a voluminous collection of material. Scheiner recognizes the limits of his method for determining when particular narratives circulated and avoids too much speculation about what really happened during the conquest of Damascus, focusing on the construction of the narratives instead. At times his determination of what constitutes fictionalization is perhaps too convenient. I am not entirely convinced that the sources do not



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preserve authentic first person narration, for example. However, this is a concern about the method Scheiner applies rather than about his application of it. The debate about the validity of Motzki's approach will likely continue, and critics of Motzki will now have to take Scheiner's work into account as well.

One hopes that Scheiner and others will explore the implications of his dating of the sources more thoroughly in the future. A better explanation about why specific narratives came into vogue at particular times would greatly broaden our understanding of the milieu in which Arabic historical writing thrived. However, that is another study for another time.

While Scheiner's book is groundbreaking and will influence future scholarship tremendously, it may prove daunting if not overwhelming for many. Even by German dissertation-book standards, this work is challenging in its complexity and density. For the sake of the larger scholarly community, one hopes that Scheiner will produce a *muḫtaṣar* of his work, ideally in English.

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