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Cover

Māshad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran. Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī and the Islamic Republic of Letters*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2016 (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, s.n.), xxii + 362 pp.

İlker Evrim Binbaş focuses on the works and intellectual network of the Timurid historian Şaraf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī (d. 1454). His book represents an excellent example of investigation concerning Islamic culture in early modern epoch. In this period, the Muslim intellectuals created informal networks, which transcended the political and linguistic boundaries and spanned an area from the western fringes of the Ottoman state to bustling late medieval metropolies such as Cairo, Shiraz and Samarkand. In fact, the study of this kind of *koiné* is possible only by going beyond the limitation imposed by nationalist methodologies, established genres, and recognized literary and historical traditions. The question of how to study informal networks or to detect their existence in the first place within this context is not easy to answer. Informal networks were transregional organizations transcending political boundaries. They were not restricted to the Timurids and Timurid courts, and were additionally widespread in the Ottoman and Mamluk milieus. For the time being, we are in a very early stage of research – at least as far as late medieval and early modern Islamic history is concerned – in determining how these networks were really organized, what the nature of their organizational style was, and how hierarchical they were.

In Chapter 1, “Introduction” (pp. 1-25), the author explains that “the fundamental contention of this book is that the rise and fall of Yazdī’s fortunes, both as an intellectual and as a Timurid courtier, were intricately tied to the expansive intellectual network of which he was a part and which he had cultivated ever since his adolescence by traveling widely, as far as Cairo and Samarkand. In other words, the frustration that Yazdī expressed (...) was not simply a personal feeling, but also a reflection on half a century of engagement with a network of scholars in which Yazdī had played a prominent role” (*ibid.*, p. 3). Yet, in this book, İlker Evrim Binbaş explores two kinds of evidence in order to trace unusual impact patterns: dedication to a shared methodology, namely, the science of letters and the occult sciences as a scientific inquiry, on the one hand, and the (seemingly improbable) clashes between certain intellectuals and the political authorities, on the other. In fact, in the second half of the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth century, intellectual networks emerged as powerful actors in the public sphere. In the two centuries following the mid-fourteenth-century dissolution of effective Mongol rule in Iran and Central Asia, Sufi orders, millenarian intellectual movements, and various other kinds of collectivities became more and more influential and instrumental in the formulation of new kinds of political discourse.

In Chapter 2, “The making of a Timurid Intellectual” (pp. 26-73), Binbaş discusses Şaraf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī’s life based on his own writings and other contemporary sources. The primary aim is to reconstruct the Timurid intellectual’s life against the matrix of political patronage and informal networks. This chapter includes a fair amount of information related to the lives of these figures. It also highlights key moments of crisis in the early fifteenth century. In Chapter 3, “Informal intellectual networks in Timurid Iran” (pp. 74-113), İlker Evrim Binbaş analyzes the presence and influence of the informal networks in the public sphere in late medieval period. In Chapter 4, “The Prophet of Cairo and the Master of Isfahan” (pp. 114-64), he introduces two important intellectual figures: Şā’in al-Dīn ‘Alī Turka, the teacher and close friend of Yazdī and also the foremost theoretician of the science of letters in Timurid Iran, and Sayyid Ḥusayn Aḥlāṭī, the teacher of both Yazdī and Turka. Through Aḥlāṭī’s informal network, the reader has the opportunity to know the extent of Yazdī’s network in both Mamluk Cairo and Ottoman Anatolia and the Balkans. Chapters 5, “The Articulation of a Princely Political Discourse” (pp. 165-98),

and Chapter 6, “Writing History in the Timurid Empire” (pp. 199-250), are dedicated to testing the ground for what patronage really meant in the Timurid Empire. The focus of the author is on historiography, owing to Yazdī’s reputation as an historian, and he discusses how Timurid historiography evolved along the lines of patronage networks.

Chapter 7, “The King’s Two Lineages: the Evolution of a Politico-theological Idea” (pp. 251-86), focuses on a specific political idea as it developed in Yazdī’s historical works. In fact, Yazdī depicted the body of the sovereign as the culmination of two lineages representing two forms of political authority, one temporal and one sacred. Binbaş traces this idea to the members of Yazdī’s informal network and to Timurid tombstone inscriptions in Samarkand. Unfortunately, Binbaş does not identify the Neoplatonic origin of Yazdī’s ideas about sovereignty.

As is known, the Persian-Islamic model of kingship adopted by the Safavid dynasty from the beginning is connected to the idea of a special status of the monarch not only from a social and political point of view, but also from that of his ‘ontological’ nature, so to speak. In the Islamic world, the doctrinal reflection on this issue has its roots in ‘Platonic’ (or, more precisely, Neoplatonic) political thought, which was elaborated by authors such as al-Fārābī and especially, for what concerns the Persian background, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274). The latter was the author of a famous mirror for princes, the *Ahlāq-i Nāsiri*, which had a great influence on many Timurid and Safavid scholars. This vision has its philosophical foundation in the work of one of the greatest philosophers of medieval Persia, Šihāb al-Dīn Yaḥya b. Ḥabaš al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), the founder of the “science of illumination” (*ḥikmat al-iṣrāq*) which, not surprisingly, enjoyed a great revival during the Timurid and Safavid ages in Central Asia, Persia, and India.

The philosophy of illumination has its place of origin in Isfahan, where Avicenna had lived for a long time and where al-Suhrawardī entered for the first time in contact with the Avicennian tradition.¹ As already reported by H. Corbin,² an important centre of Illuminationism, especially in the early Safavid period, was also Shiraz, the city of the great *iṣrāqī* scholar Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī (d. 710/1311), the author of a famous commentary on al-Suhrawardī’s treatise on the *Ḥikmat al-iṣrāq*.³ These two ‘schools’ represent the two sides of the same *iṣrāqī* coin, as is shown, among other things, by the continuous exchange between the scholars of the two cities. As Corbin has effectively demonstrated, it is possible to identify a real ‘chain’ of *iṣrāqī* philosophers (from Šams al-Dīn al-Šahrazūrī to Sa’d b. Maṣṣūr Ibn Kammūna; from Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī to Mīr Ḥaydar Amulī; from Šā’in-al-Dīn Turka Iṣfahānī to Ibn Abī Ġumhūr),⁴ whose circles become even more closely

¹ See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, II, *Suhrawardī et les platoniciens de Perse*, Gallimard, Paris 1971, pp. 13-29. Cf. Id., *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, I, Institut franco-iranien - Adrien-Maisonneuve, Téhéran-Paris 1954 (Bibliothèque Iranienne, 4), pp. 315-20, and G. Endress, “Athen - Alexandria - Bagdad - Samarkand. Übersetzung, Überlieferung und Integration der griechischen Philosophie im Islam“, in P. Bruns (ed.), *Von Athen nach Bagdad. Zur Rezeption griechischer Philosophie von der Spätantike bis zum Islam*, Borengässer, Bonn 2003 (Hereditas, 22), pp. 42-62, part. pp. 59-62.

² Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, II, pp. 346-61. Cf. now R. Pourjavady, *Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran. Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Nayrizī and his Writings*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2011 (Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies, 82), pp. 1-44.

³ On Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī see J. Walbridge, *The Science of Mystic Lights: Quṭb al-Dīn Shirazi and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge (Mass.) 1992.

⁴ On these personalities see especially Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, II, pp. 346-61; S.J. Ashtiyani, *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens depuis le XVII^e siècle à nos jours*, I-II, Département d’Iranologie de l’Institut franco-iranien de recherche, Paris-Téhéran 1972-1975; R. Pourjavady - S. Schmidtke, *A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad. ‘Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284) and his Writings*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2006 (Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science. Texts and Studies, 65).

knitstarting from the Timurid period, contemporary with the rise of the great absolute monarchs such as Tamerlane and Akbar. On the other side, the Safavids themselves were inspired explicitly by the model of mystic and illuminationist authority that manifests itself under the Timurids, identifying in the latter their direct predecessors.⁵ In fact, in the Safavid age a true *išrāqī* revival took place, which reached its height in the era of Shāh ‘Abbās, and saw the rise of two notable philosophers such as Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā. This revival, however, will remain as a philosophical and political element recurring well beyond the end of the reign of this great sovereign.

The volume ends with an “Epilogue” (pp. 287-92), the Appendix “Yazdī and his informal network” (pp. 293-4), a general Index (pp. 227-39). *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran* is a fundamental work, which teaches us how the cultural modern Islamic world took shape and how it looked from the vantage point of one of its main protagonists.

Marco Di Branco

⁵ On the association between Timurids and Safavids in the Safavid historical sources see S.H. Quinn, *Historical Writing during the Reign of Shah ‘Abbas. Ideology, Imitation and Legitimacy in Safavid Chronicles*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 2000, pp. 86-91 and 130-6.

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