
The present volume offers eight articles (seven reprints and one original publication) by the historian of science Sonja Brentjes. The common subjects of these essays are travelers from Western Europe who visited the Ottoman and Safavid Empires between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, their role in the transmission of scientific knowledge, and their significance for the Western historiography of Middle Eastern science. The author exploits a vast amount of scientific and geographical treatises, travel reports, diaries and letters, many of which until now either have been unpublished or neglected. The sciences covered include above all geography and medicine, but also botany, astronomy and mathematics. Philosophy, history and literature were also of interest to visitors, among whom we find physicians and botanists, pilgrims and missionaries in addition to gentlemen travelers and merchants.

The volume begins with a detailed and illuminating introduction that will be useful especially for those interested in general arguments regarding the history and historiography of science. Here Brentjes’s scholarship fills important gaps. As she points out, historical investigations of the transmission of scientific knowledge and cultural encounters between ‘the Islamic world’ and ‘the West’, more generally speaking, have focused on two areas: the medieval translations from Arabic into Latin in the North-Western Mediterranean (when, according to an older view, an essentially European, Greek heritage was recovered) and the journeys of Europeans to the Far East in the colonial age. Traditional considerations of these two areas were part of a teleological historiography of European science that emphasizes the superiority of its rationalism, for which Europe was rewarded economic, political and military domination.

Brentjes is one of several critics of this historiography. Unlike many others who have joined the nowadays rather popular academic choir, however, she contributes not only to a deconstruction of the conventional narrative, but also to the formulation of an alternative account. She stresses the continuity of Muslim study of philosophy and science as well as the continuity of the transfer of knowledge. One result of this revised history is that she establishes the Middle Eastern element in humanism, which is frequently reduced to a cherishing of the Greek and Roman legacy. (Similar arguments have been made by other historians for the Renaissance.)

Brentjes makes a number of salient arguments, illustrating them convincingly in numerous ways. One of them concerns the discrepancy between what travelers are likely to have witnessed in the Middle East (based on their letters and on evidence from local sources) and what they presented in their published reports. In the latter, they were writing for an audience that expected certain images to be confirmed. Even if early modern travelers found the ideas derived from earlier sources not to be timeless, they reproduced these traditions in order to secure a positive reception for their publications. One such stereotype, addressed in several articles in this volume, is the alleged...
antagonism between a refined Persian culture and crude Turkish brutality. This idea developed, among other reasons, from antecedents in classical literature and as the result of the differing degree of threat posed by the Ottomans, who had conquered Constantinople, and the Safavids, who were geographically more remote and were also the enemy’s enemy. Contrary to the prominent literary representation in Europe, however, Brentjes points out that the learned cultures of the two empires differed very little from each other.

What distinguishes Brentjes’s scholarship is her combination of making primary sources available, analyzing them within the context of cultural and social history, and addressing more general historiographical issues. Among the prevalent methodological principles she challenges is, for example, the “search for the primeval locus or form” or a “method, or subject matter, an institution or an observation or the reduction of the matter of inquiry to scientific content” (p. xiv). Instead of engaging in questions of priority or superiority, Brentjes offers multifaceted accounts of the production and transmission of knowledge within specific contexts. Thus, she connects the interest of European travelers in knowledge and texts with the practical aspects of acquiring manuscripts (as well as botanical specimens and instruments), the networks of patronage and cultural institutions, and the contacts in the Middle East needed to conduct this trade. Likewise, she emphasizes that because of its focus on East Asia, scholarship has largely neglected journeys of missionaries to the Middle East, where they learned local languages and compiled dictionaries. Brentjes also admirably combines an expertise in scientific theories and practices in the Middle East with an understanding of why these were sought after and represented in specific ways by Western European circles.

Although this volume (like many others composed of discrete articles) contains a number of repetitions if read as a monograph, the style is generally very readable. The only weakness the present reviewer would like to point out concerns the small number of references to publications of other authors who engage in projects similar to Brentjes’s. The idea of a decline of science and philosophy in the Middle East after the twelfth century or thereabouts may well be alive in popular publications, but in academia it has meanwhile turned into a straw man. It would have been interesting to know how the author views the results of her own scholarship in relation to those of George Saliba, for example, whose *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 2007) includes some similar arguments, or that of Dag Nikolaus Hasse, whose research has moved from medieval to early modern philosophy. The last few years have also seen the publication of a number of studies on Orientalism that are pertinent to the subject.

As is often the case with collections of reprinted articles, a well-stocked library may already count most of the original publications in its collection and will probably avoid the considerable expense of this volume. Given the wealth of the primary sources cited and its useful introduction, this book will however be a valuable addition to those libraries that are not quite as well equipped. The volume will be of interest to those concerned with the history of science, especially in the Middle East and Europe, and