Camilla Adang, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.)


Neither a comprehensive reference work nor yet an ordinary collection of conference papers, this massive volume is an engaging read and a perfect starting point for anyone venturing into the study of Ibn Ḥazm. Its value stems in part from the editors’ decision to include not only the papers from a 2008 workshop in Istanbul but also several previously published pieces that were translated and updated for this volume. Five major articles by José Miguel Puerta Vílchez, Adam Sabra, and Samir Kaddouri, which had not received sufficient attention in English-language scholarship, form the backbone of the book; the shorter papers build upon them, offering more tentative and focused insights in implicit dialogue with that prior scholarship and with one another. To call the papers uneven would miss the point; they have different aims and origins, and they serve complementary purposes in this magnificent collection.

The book’s topical arrangement – life and times, law, linguistics, aesthetics, logic and theology, polemics, and reception history – gives it the appearance of a reference work, in keeping with the aims of Brill’s Handbooks of Oriental Studies, but it cannot really function as such for several reasons: it lacks a subject index; the interpretations it offers are too often dated, tentative, speculative, or contradictory; and it is far from comprehensive. (There is little attention to Ibn Ḥazm’s poetry or his views on *ḥadīth*, and the section on Zāhirī linguistics says little about Ibn Ḥazm himself.) A better way to read the book is all at once but out of order. To begin, an excellent overview of Ibn Ḥazm’s multifaceted intellectual life can be gained from the “Inventory of Ibn Ḥazm’s Works” by Puerta Vílchez, which includes titles of lost books and detailed summaries of extant and partially preserved ones, along with selective references to citations,
manuscripts, editions, and relevant scholarship. (Note that #75, *Masāʾil uṣūl al-fiqh*, does not appear to have been composed as a separate work; it consists of material from the introduction to #80, *al-Muḥallā*, mainly about reports, consensus, analogy, and *ijtihād*, that was republished by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī al-Dimashqī in *Majmūʿ rasāʾil fī uṣūl al-tafsīr wa-uṣūl al-fiqh* (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat al-Fayḥāʾ, 1331/[1912–13]), pp. 27–52.) Turning next to the “Biographical Sketch,” also by Puerta Vílchez, one gets the other side of Ibn Ḥazm’s life: a rather disjointed compilation of information about his travels, acquaintances, and variable fortunes. This supplies a helpful baseline for the three essays that follow, which reinterpret the biographical data (sometimes in mutually incompatible ways) to offer more focused interpretations of specific aspects of Ibn Ḥazm’s social and political relationships. Bruna Soravia offers a revisionist account of Ibn Ḥazm’s political life, stressing his involvement in an Amirid brotherhood; Alejandro García-Sanjuán investigates the rural family estate near Huelva where he eventually retired; and David J. Wasserstein explores again the puzzle (to which Soravia has just offered a persuasive answer) of his true political loyalties.

Wasserstein’s entertaining essay concludes that whatever else Ibn Ḥazm may have been, a historian he was not. In the following chapter Gabriel Martínez-Gros agrees but goes on to sketch a grand tension in Ibn Ḥazm’s intellectual life between universals like the rational sciences and human passions, which he saw as powerful but dangerous, and “history” in the sense of transmitted knowledge of particular events, which he regarded as the path of safety and salvation. This brief and evocative portrayal continues the tradition of Ignaz Goldziher and Roger Arnaldez, who stressed Ibn Ḥazm’s reliance on traditions and his literalism, respectively. As the rest of this volume demonstrates, however, this interpretation no longer holds sway over Ḥazmian studies. When his legal and theological literalism are understood in the larger context of his general theories of universals, perception, epistemology, and language, Ibn Ḥazm turns out to be above all a confident rationalist and empiricist who, like many of the Muʿtazila, was led by that very rationalism to apply revealed texts strictly and literally within the limited domains to which he said reason had no access.

This relatively recent shift in our understanding of Ibn Ḥazm will appear most clearly if one turns next to the third foundational contribution by Puerta Vílchez, the lengthy chapter on “Art and Aesthetics,” which is far more than its title suggests: a brilliant interpretation of Ibn Ḥazm’s overall theory of reality, perception, knowledge, language, emotion, and the soul. This brings together two strands in Ḥazmian studies that have too long been separate: fascination with his poetic writing on love, and a more dour preoccupation with his strident literalism. Puerta Vílchez shows that these are complementary pieces of a