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Franziska Kabelitz | 2022

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Review of *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival* by Yasser Tabbaa
(max. 1,100 words)

Review

Tabbaa explores transformative features of meaning in the context of Islamic art and architecture with a focus on the Eastern Mediterranean region during the Sunni revival. Originating in Baghdad and Khurasan under the Abbasids and Seljuks in the tenth century¹ and peaking under the patronage of Zengid ruler Nur al-Din,² the Sunni revival is described as a political and theological movement that called for the return to traditionalism and restoration of Abbasid supremacy through Sunni unity based on Ash'ari belief in response to a period of increased Shi'a dominance.³

Mapping the visual expressions of rupture, the author determines calligraphic and ornamental forms “were not part of a timeless Islamic essence”⁴ but were “produced within specific religio-political, social and technological contexts.”⁵ Historic moments of political division including “[c]onflict, challenge and controversy”⁶ constituted critical factors that drove the transformation of meaning as “[a]rt, like cultures and even religions, defines itself against its opponents, and the more intense the conflict, the sharper this self-image.”⁷ Tabbaa's analytical framework challenges essentialist, positivist, ethno-nationalist and Orientalist scholarship, which had emphasised continuity rather than disruption.

Tabbaa acknowledges that previous publications by Necipoğlu and Grabar influenced his work,⁸ and similarly to these authors grounds his theses in a temporally and culturally specific perspective. However, Tabbaa's analysis further expands and illuminates their theories by focusing on the transformative power of one key political, sectarian conflict, i.e. the schism between the Ismaili Fatimids of Egypt and other proponents of Mu'tazili doctrine, and the reaffirmation of Sunni ideology as a marker of identity and supremacy by the Abbasids, Seljuks, Zangids and other pro-Sunni political entities.

Tabbaa suggests three pathways which might have facilitated the Sunni revival's visual manifestation and serve as the foundation of his analysis: Firstly, the establishment of distinctively Sunni institutions of learning, devotion and administration as a demarcation

¹ Due to word limitations, this paper lists Gregorian dates only

² Tabbaa, 2001, pp. 3, 23

³ Tabbaa, pp. 13, 22-23

⁴ Tabbaa, p. 167

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tabbaa, p. 7

⁸ Necipoğlu, 1995; Grabar, 1973 and 1992

against Shi'ism in general and rival Fatimid Egypt in particular.⁹ Secondly, the proliferation of khutbah sermons and devout inscriptions, which brought the general public into more direct contact with promulgated Sunni tenets.¹⁰ And thirdly, the use of cursive script in Qur'anic manuscripts and religious inscriptions.

The author argues that in order to reassert their political identity and set themselves apart from Shi'a antagonists through doctrine, Sunni revivalists supported a Qur'anic writing change from angular Kufic to cursive script, which had previously been used only for administrative and literary purposes. Importantly, this was a switch from a hardly legible script that had served as a prompt for a select few (preachers, reciters) to a more accessible script that opened Qur'anic writing to a wider audience. Cursive came to symbolically stand for the triumph of Sunni traditionalist ideology, which in turn represented the Abbasid caliphate and its supporters.¹¹ Crucially, the new cursive script was then circulated in the form of manuscripts and public inscriptions throughout Islamic geographies as a conscious effort to promote Abbasid identity and hegemony, not only by the Abbasids themselves but also by the Seljuks, Zangids and other pro-Sunni polities. Hence, the visual unity in cursive writing often perceived by previous scholars was actually born out of a conflict and power struggle that arose within a specific historical context. Cursive was charged with highly political rather than purely aesthetic meaning as "[t]he actual image - not just the content - of the Word became the symbol of the most important principle of the Sunni revival".¹²

While Tabbaa certainly lays out convincing arguments underscoring the importance of theology's dynamic nature and relationship with art as a vehicle for the transformation of meaning, his theses' strength is diminished by choice of evidence. For example, Tabbaa argues, the adoption of cursive stood in particular opposition to the Fatimids' continued use and dissemination of angular, foliated script, which they preferred as a visual representation of the dualism of surface and deeper meaning inherent in Ismaili doctrine.¹³ It could thus be implied that they, too, appropriated script as an agent of political meaning. However, Tabbaa presents only one example of Fatimid Qur'anic writing¹⁴ as opposed to many along the angular-to-cursive Sunni transition. Moreover, by not addressing Fatimid architectural cursive inscriptions and cursive manuscripts in the Fatimid treasury by Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab,¹⁵ whom he cites as instrumental for the canonisation of cursive as a visual symbol of Sunni ideology,¹⁶ Tabbaa conceals potential weaknesses in his reasoning and makes himself vulnerable to the critique of selection bias. These imbalances of evidence ultimately undermine his own argument's robustness.

Similarly, Tabbaa argues that muqarnas were widely disseminated across Sunni revival territory, whereas this formal element did not proliferate in Fatimid lands. Again, he infers a political motive.¹⁷ Here I would like to point out the case of Norman Sicily, which was culturally closely linked to Fatimid Egypt and whose surviving architecture displays

⁹ Tabbaa, p. 23

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tabbaa, pp. 42-43, 48, 164

¹² Tabbaa, pp. 25-52

¹³ Tabbaa, p.50

¹⁴ Tabbaa, pp. 50-51

¹⁵ George, 2010, pp. 134-143; O'Kane, 2013, pp. 421-422 ; also see Blair, 1998, pp. 175-176

¹⁶ Tabbaa, pp. 34-51

¹⁷ Tabbaa, pp. 103-162, especially 135, 162, 164

myriad examples of muqarnas.¹⁸ Thus, a hypothesis could be put forward that muqarnas might not have been as uniquely Sunni revivalist as Tabbaa suggests, but that simply no Fatimid examples survive. This line of reasoning becomes particularly relevant in light of our knowledge of other forms shared by Abbasid and Fatimid visual culture, e.g. figural embellishment.¹⁹ Therefore, while I agree with Tabbaa that historically specific moments of rupture constitute salient spaces for negotiations of new or transformed meanings, angles of continuity should not be dismissed a priori. The geographical region under discussion has a long history of interconnectedness through trade and pilgrimage, yet this fact is overlooked by Tabbaa's focus on political aspirations. An emphatic failure to consider aspects of shared artistic culture across and beyond the Sunni-Shi'a divide is perhaps, then, the book's greatest short-coming.

Finally, as clearly reflected by our discipline's ongoing terminology debate,²⁰ broad art historical constructs such as *Islamic* art need to be continuously evaluated and re-defined. At the time of publication in 2001, this debate was in its infancy. However, assessed within current politically and culturally highly charged academic spheres, an acknowledgement of terminology implications would be imperative for the author.

As established by the post-publication academic discourse,²¹ Tabbaa's book not only constitutes a valuable extension to the discipline of Islamic art and archaeology, but also opens a critical debate on our field's historiography. Yet while the author's conceptualisation of moments of change is vital for our broader understanding of a multivalent Islamic past and present, his exhaustive application of a political Sunni-Shi'a divide to meaning in visual culture appears schematic. There can never be a truly complete interpretation of meaning. Any attempts at such should be inclusive, investigating both ruptures and continuities and contemplating terminology.

¹⁸ e.g. Johns, 2015, especially p. 62; Massaiu, 2016

¹⁹ Flood, 2002; Pancaroğlu, 2017

²⁰ E.g. Blair and Bloom, 2003; Carey and Graves, 2012; Daftari, 2006; Flood, 2007; Keshmirshakan, 2017; Naef, 2010; Necipoğlu, 2012; Rabat, 2012; Shalem, 2012; Shaw, 2019. Directly applying to Tabbaa see Desai, p. 565

²¹ E.g. Blair and Bloom, 2003; Desai, 2002; Flood, 2002

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