David Durand-Guédy. *Iranian Elites and Turkish Rulers. A history of Iṣfahān in the Saljūq period*

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REFERENCES

David Durand-Guédy. *Iranian Elites and Turkish Rulers. A history of Iṣfahān in the Saljūq period*. London, Routledge, 2010, xxiv, 435 p.

- 1 This is one of the most important publications in the field of Iranian medieval history of the last years. Its significance and potential impact has been noted by a number of reviewers. Before I give my own account, I quote some of these.
- 2 Richard Bulliet, *Iranian Studies*, 44.4, 2011, p. 590-2 wrote: “No other study of Seljuq Iran has ever attempted such a complex interweaving of imperial and local politics. Nor have previous efforts to analyze the factional rivalries that characterized Iranian urban life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries combined such detail about family and patronage structures with an equally detailed narrative of the relationship between these factions and the vagaries of dynastic politics [...]. [H]istorians of Iran should embrace the complexity that the sources offer for their perusal. [...] Rather than looking for a tidy but unrealistic political narrative that might bridge the chaotic centuries between the waning of Abbasid power and the coming of the Mongols, historians should take Durand-Guédy’s study as a guide to exploring the actual complexity of the era, and as a goad to doing so.” Bulliet also insists on the use David Durand-Guédy makes of his sources, noting that Durand-Guédy has used practically everything available on Iṣfahān in the given period, including poetry, chronicles, *inšā’* documents, and biographical dictionaries besides remnants of material culture, including archeology and numismatics.

- 3 Another reviewer was Elton Daniel, *American Historical Review*, 116.2, 2011, p. 548. Daniel situates the book in recent developments in research on medieval Islamic history: “Durand-Guédy’s book reflects several significant trends in recent research on early Islamic History. One is the emphasis on regional and urban history, which gives us a much more nuanced and credible understanding of the dynamic, interactive, and pragmatic political life of the period than older work written from an ‘imperial’ point of view. Moreover, recent scholars tend to take the broadest possible approach to source material, and Durand-Guédy likewise makes good use not just of the standard corpus of historical text but also an array of chronicles, narrative histories, geographies, biographical dictionaries, poetry, and documents.”
- 4 The third reviewer I want to quote is Andrew Peacock, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 8.1, 2011, p. 114-6: “[T]here is no doubt as to the value and importance of this work. It is a major contribution to our understanding of the neglected Saljuq period and the mediaeval history of Iran more generally and sheds fresh light on many neglected or misunderstood issues while handling an impressive array of sources with dexterity.”
- 5 Other reviewers include George Lane, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, 20.4, 2010, p. 546-9, and myself in my review article “Recent publications on the history of Iran under the Seljuqs”, *Eurasian Studies*, 9, 2011, p. 263-275 (on the book in particular: p. 266-8).
- 6 The first point which has to be underlined thus is the remarkable complexity and scope of the sources used. This is indeed a feature which should set standards: there is much to be found in sources other than the usual historiography. In particular, Durand-Guédy has made use of the *inṣāʾ*-collection *al-Muḥtārāt min al-rasāʾil*, and also of poetry. In his use of the sources, he shows a high level of reflexion; he never pushes his argument beyond what the sources bear out. As I remarked in my 2011 review article: “At first sight, the sources for Isfahan did not look particularly promising, but the author has succeeded in bringing together scraps of evidence from all quarters [...] This gives the book the additional quality of being a demonstration of the use of scant sources”.
- 7 Besides this, reviewers also note the appendices. Among them, Appendix F gives the “Original texts of the extracts”, extended quotes from Arabic and Persian sources in the text (p. 330-378) which enables the reader to check the translations. Other appendices include a “Chronology of Iṣfahān from 420/1029 until 633/1235-6” (Appendix A, 303-6); Appendix B consists of eight genealogical tables showing the main actors, both local and imperial; Appendix C is a list of books dedicated to Iṣfahān before the Mongol period. In Appendix D – an overview over the presence of the Great Saljūq sultans in Iṣfahān – Durand-Guédy prepares the lines of research he has since followed (“Ruling from the Outside”). Appendix E is a list of governors of Iṣfahān after the time of the Great Saljūqs, from 1130 to 1228. George Lane in particular expresses his gratitude that these materials (which in his words tend to be omitted from PhD dissertations on their way to publication) have been kept in this particular case.
- 8 The main import of the book – besides its model character for the use of the sources – lies in the way Durand-Guédy treats the relationship between imperial rulers and the city of Iṣfahān. This point refers to both the sultans (and the Turkish emirs) and the urban notables (Iranian elites). Here, Durand-Guédy convincingly shows that the acculturation of the Turkish rulers to Iranian ways of government took much longer

and was in general less full than had been previously assumed. Even if Iṣfahān was the “capital city” (at least for Malikshāh; the city lost this status soon after when Hamadān gained in importance because it is strategically better located), this does not mean that the sultan ever lived there. This (by necessity, one might add) enhanced the role of the urban notables. The urban notables, in particular the leaders of the “Khurāsānī networks”, both the Šāfi‘ī Ḥujandīs and the Ḥanafī Šā‘ids, emerge fully after the deaths of both Niẓām al-Mulk and Malikshāh in 1092. A central point in the argument is the war against the Ismā‘īlīs (during the first years of the 12th century) which Durand-Guédy is able to follow in great detail. He proves that it was the urban notables who led the fight, and the urban militias who at the end succeeded in ending the Ismā‘īlī presence in and around Iṣfahān.

- 9 The greater distance of imperial rule is one of the factors for the growing intensity of factional strife in Iṣfahān. The post-1115 history of the city in many ways is a history of the struggle of the “Shāfi‘ī” against the “Ḥanafī” faction, led by the families named above. And as in other cities, Iṣfahānī notables did not refrain from using the Mongols as allies in their own interest, and as in other cities, they had to realize that they were unable to reap the profits they had expected...
- 10 Another central point, as Richard Bulliet and Elton Daniel also have noted, is the local perspective which Durand-Guédy adopts throughout. Only by changing the perspective from imperial to local is he able to assess the changes which the coming of the Saljūqs brought about. And it is only in the local perspective that one can hope to ascertain the workings of what Marshall Hodgson has called the *amīr-a’yān*-system: the representative of the sultan holds ultimate power in the city (due to his superior military resources), but the urban notables do most of the effective ruling, and the amir cannot hope to stay in control without the consensus of the *a’yān*; in the case of Iṣfahān, the notables controlled military resources as well in considerable quantity: Durand-Guédy points out the importance of the city walls, but also of urban militias who were important throughout, from the beginning of the Saljūq period and most notably in their fight against the Ismā‘īlīs to the Mongol invasion when Jalāl al-Dīn Manburnī the Ḥwārazmshāh succeeded in defeating a Mongol detachment with their help in 1228 (p. 292-5).
- 11 Insisting on local networks as the main instrument of local politics, putting to good use all the available source material, taking into account all the complexity of local as well as dynastic (regional and imperial) politics, Durand-Guédy has provided us with a most brilliant example for a study of the *amīr-a’yān*-system. This book is going to set the benchmark not only for the particular place and period which it studies, but also, methodologically and in its perspective, for the pre-Mongol history of Iran and probably other regions of the Islamic Middle East.

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