

Mohammad Rihan: *The Politics and Culture of an Umayyad Tribe. Conflict and Factionalism in the Early Islamic Period.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2014. 231 pp., ISBN 9781780765648

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DOI 10.1515/islam-2016-026

Studying early Islamic history of the Near East through the lens of an Arabic tribe seems to be en vogue. After Fred DONNER's analysis of Bakr b. Wā'il (1980), Ella LANDAU-TASSERON's publication on Asad (1985), Michael LECKER's study on Banū Sulaym (1989), Isaac HASSON's take on Judhām (1995) and Wilferd MADELUNG's paper on Rabī'a (2003) recently three PhD dissertations focused on political and social activities of 'Āmila (RIHAN 2005), Azd (ULRICH 2008) and Kinda (LEUBE 2014).¹ The monograph under discussion here is RIHAN's slightly revised dissertation on the southern Arab tribe of 'Āmila,² the name of which is unfortunately not mentioned in the work's title. RIHAN "proposes to set out the political history of 'Amila in the early Islamic age up to the late Umayyad period" (1). However, after a short introduction and the attempt to define the structure, function and dynamics of the tribe of 'Āmila (Chapter 1), the author dedicates the next chapter to the ancient, antique and late antique history of this tribe (Chapter 2). He then turns to the main focus of his study, which is the description of the role 'Āmila played during the Muslim (or believers') conquests (Chapter 3) and under Umayyad rule (Chapter 4). A final chapter discusses the relationship between 'Āmila, the so-called *Jabal 'Āmil* in southern Libanon and the spread of Shi'ism in that region. A brief epilogue, a section with endnotes, the bibliography and the index close the book.

¹ Fred M. DONNER, "The Bakr b. Wā'il Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam", *Studia Islamica* 51 (1980): 5–38; Ella LANDAU-TASSERON, "Asad from Jahiliyya to Islam", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 1–25; Michael LECKER, *The Banū Sulaym. A Contribution to the Study of Early Islam*, Jerusalem 1989; Isaac HASSON, "Judhām entre la "Jāhiliyya" et l'Islām", *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995): 5–42; Wilferd F. MADELUNG, "Rabī'a in the Jāhiliyya and in early Islam", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003): 153–170; Mohamad A. RIHAN, *The Tribal World in the Early Islamic Age. The Tribe 'Āmila up to the Late Umayyad Period* [Diss.], Cambridge 2005; Brian J. ULRICH, *Constructing al-Azd. Tribal Identity and Society in the Early Islamic Centuries* [Diss.], Madison 2008; Georg LEUBE, *Kinda in der frühislamischen Historiographie* [Diss.], Bayreuth 2014. ULRICH and LEUBE are currently preparing their dissertations for publication.

² The dissertation was first published in Arabic (under a different title). See M. RĪḤĀN: *Jund al-khalīfa. Ta'rikh 'Āmila ḥattā nihāyat al-ahd al-Umawī*, Beirut 2008. Unfortunately, I did not have access to the Arabic version.

Regarding the sources, the author relied on an array of literary accounts. From among the *futūḥ*-works, al-Azdī (d. ca. 178/794)³, al-Balādhurī (d. ca. 279/892), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the one ascribed to al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) are used, in addition to the *Taʾrīkh* by al-Yaʿqūbī (d. ca. 300/912) and some geographical and non-Islamic Greek works. Special emphasis is put on the *Dīwān* of ʿAdī b. al-Riqāʿ al-ʿĀmilī (d. ca. 102/720), who was a famous panegyrist of the Umayyads and belonged to ʿĀmila. However, whether his poetry really became “‘the official public record’ of the tribe”, as RIHAN claims, is questionable. In chapter 2, some documentary evidence is provided. From these (and some other) sources, the author extracted all he could find about ʿĀmila and composed his own narrative on the main political events that were transmitted in relation to this tribe. His aim is to show that members of the ʿĀmila played a significant role in the Near East from Antiquity to the end of the Umayyad rule after which they disappeared as influential political actors (131).

However, the interpretation RIHAN offers is built on a methodologically weak basis and is too conjectural to be convincing. Let me give an example from my own field of expertise, i.e. the author’s treatment of the ʿĀmila during the early Muslim conquests. The author quotes several passages from literary sources in which the ʿĀmila are variously depicted as having supported the Byzantines, the Muslims or to have changed alliances (76–83). Without giving a reason or evaluating the various traditions, RIHAN concludes that “the advent of the Muslims allowed ʿĀmila to leave its role as subordinates to the Byzantines and to become real partners and decisions makers in the new Muslim order” (83). Furthermore, he speculates that this “new alliance with their Arab kinsmen was *probably* [emphasis mine] a key factor in the Muslim victory” (83). Speculative statements like the latter are found in high numbers throughout the monograph and expressions like “it is possible that”, “it is not unlikely”, “would have been” and “is almost certain” (all on one page, 44) permeate the text. Due to the scarcity of traditions in his sources, the author has to pursue unconvincing lines of argumentation, which he has to support or complement with speculations. He seems to be aware of this fact, since he acknowledges this short-coming in several places (e.g. 95, 100). Moreover, when ʿĀmila are not mentioned in traditions at all, for instance in traditions pertaining to the battle of Ṣiffīn, the one of al-Ḥarra or the conquests under the amīr-caliph Hishām, according to the author “it can hardly

³ RIHAN’s chronological description of al-Azdi is contradictory. On the one hand, al-Azdi is presented to have written in the early 3rd/9th century (9); on the other hand, he is placed together with al-Wāqidī in the 2nd/8th century (76). His death date is given in the bibliography as “Third Hijra Century” (199).

have been” the case that ‘Āmila did not participate in these events (see 99 and 102, 121 for similar statements; for another case see 177, n. 75: “Although ‘Āmila was not mentioned in the text, it is most certain to assume its existence alongside its sister tribes”). Hence, RIHAN is filling the gap in the sources with more or less convincing speculations in order to achieve his narrative aim.

In addition to such a speculative mode of writing, the author’s formulations are far too general and use many commonplaces. Expressions like “it is well established [...]” (63) or “almost all Arabic sources attest [...]” (67) are often found in the book. Such a style of presentation and the many weak points in the argumentation make it hard or even impossible for the reader to find the information that is correct or plausible, which is present in the work as well (for example individual members of ‘Āmila are introduced and analyzed).

Some minor points which have also to be addressed, but not discussed in depth here are first the insufficient discussion (and usage of secondary literature) on what constitutes a tribe (see the discussion on 5–23 and the trivial conclusion reached on 11–12, 23); second the unawareness (or at least they are never discussed) of *topoi* in the quoted narratives and hence the taking for granted of the information found in the traditions; third the inconsistent and sometimes erroneous usage of the transliteration (e.g. wa al- vs. wal vs. wal-, 199–201; the hyphens representing ū, 27, 55, 200; the dots representing š, 201); fourth the many editorial mistakes in the bibliography, the division of which (in particular the sections “Primary Byzantine and Crusades Sources”⁴ and “Periodical Literature”) makes it hard for the reader to find a specific title; fifth the discussion of the *Futūḥ al-Shām* ascribed to al-Wāqidi is erroneous and inconsistent (176, n. 57).

What finally remains from this work is a highly conjectural personal narrative that serves as a collection for traditions pertaining to ‘Āmila. Very early in his book the author states “due to the extreme paucity of sources, it is very difficult to establish a detailed history of the ‘Āmila tribe as an independent unit” (37). This motto holds true for all chapters of the work, and hence the work proves that the approach to write the political history of ‘Āmila in the early Islamic period failed to a large extent.

⁴ To list Jewish authors (like Benjamin of Tudela), Syriac Sources (like Sebeos) and secondary literature (like Robert HOYLAND’s *Seeing Islam*) in this section is strikingly inconsistent.