

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 75 (2021)
Heft: 2

Buchbesprechung: Comptes rendus = Book reviews

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 13.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

**Buchbesprechungen – Comptes Rendus –
Book Reviews**

Ahmet Turan Türk: *Erken Dönem Tatar Türkçesine Ait Çok Lehçeli Bir Metin: Tefsîr-i Nu'mânî* [A Multi-dialect text in Tatar: Tafsîr Nu'mânî]. Çanakkale: Paradigma Akademi, 2020; x + 756 pp. EAN 978-6257881470.

Reviewed by **Gulnaz Sibgatullina**, Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies, The University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, E-mail: g.r.sibgatullina@uva.nl. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5628-5920>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2021-0011>

Ahmet Turan Türk's recent work, published in Turkish, has been left mostly unnoticed by an English-speaking scholarly audience, despite the apparent value of the new book. It presents the result of Türk's painstaking efforts to transliterate and edit the voluminous nineteenth-century *Tafsîr-i Nu'mânî*, probably one of the first complete Qur'ân commentaries produced in the Türki-Tatar language. Türk's edition constitutes a gripping source for scholars specialised in vernacular Qur'ân translations and commentaries produced by non-Arabophone Muslims;¹ while the editor's lengthy review of linguistic features of the document will be of interest for colleagues working on the history of Turkic languages, the field that has a well-established tradition of reliance on vernacular *tafsîr* literature.²

In the first part of the book (pp. 1–10), Türk provides snippets of available information on the author of the *tafsîr*, Nu'mân b. Amîr Thamani. The latter is primarily known for being a disciple of Abû Naşr Qûrşâwî (1776–1812), a towering figure at the forefront of Muslim modernism in Russia.³ In fact, Thamani's *tafsîr* is an extension of Qûrşâwî's major work, a vernacular commentary on the seventh part of the Qur'ân, *Häftiyäk täfsîre*. Qûrşâwî commented on *sûras* 1, 36, and – with a few exceptions – on *sûras* 49–114, using thereby expressly a variant of Turkic accessible to Russia's Muslims with less proficiency in Arabic;⁴ Thamani, augmenting his teacher's work, abode by Qûrşâwî's intention of making the sacred text understandable to a broader public.

Türk's critical edition (pp. 69–749) draws on two printed versions of *Tafsîr-i Nu'mânî*, from 1907 (Orenburg) and, primarily, 1911 (Kazan), both published as two-volume books containing all 114 *sûras*. From Türk's description of the source text (pp. 4–5), it becomes evident that he is not aware of the existence of other documents related to the *tafsîr*. There are namely a manuscript and at least two

1 To name the few seminal works in the field: Pink 2011; Zadeh 2012; Wilson 2014.

2 E.g., Eckmann 1971; Birnbaum 1990; Boeschoten 2006.

3 On Qûrşâwî, see Kemper 1998; Spannaus 2019.

4 'Abd al-Naşr Qûrşâwî, *Häftiyäk täfsîre*, T-36 (the manuscript preserved in the library of Kazan State University). Kemper 1998: 242; Spannaus 2019: 68.

published version of Qūrṣāwī's *Häftiyäk täfsire* from 1861 and 1905, and, most importantly, the original manuscript of Thamani's *tafsir*. The latter is preserved in the library of Kazan State University (the Department of Manuscripts and Rare Books) in Russia.⁵ Michael Kemper, who previously analysed the manuscript consisting of two documents, noted that it dealt with the long *sūras* 2–6 (Vol. I) and 7–17 (Vol. II).⁶ This means that *sūras* 18–35 and 37–49 – absent in both Qūrṣāwī's *Häftiyäk täfsire* and Thamani's *tafsir* manuscripts but present in the printed 1907/1911 editions – must have been based on some other source. It would have been revealing to compare linguistic characteristics evident in different sections of *Tafsir-i Nu'mānī*; in this way, one could make an estimated guess about the authorship of the “added” *sūras*. By and large, this lack of reference to handwritten documents constitutes an unfortunate disadvantage of Türk's critical edition. Without a comparison to Qūrṣāwī's *Häftiyäk täfsire*, it is difficult to say anything about how Thamani engaged with and incorporated his teacher's work; while juxtaposing handwritten and printed versions of *Tafsir-i Nu'mānī* might have shed light on the agency of an editor⁷ and, in case of orthographic and stylistic variation, provide material for an analysis of language change.

The second part of the book (pp. 11–69) focuses on the linguistic characteristics of Thamani's *tafsir*. Judging on Türk's previous academic work, it is possible to assume that his primary interest lies precisely in the language attributes of the document. Türk treats Thamani's *tafsir* as a multi-dialect text in Türki-Tatar given the visible influence of various other, closely-related Turkic languages, most prominent being Oghuz, Kipchak, and Chaghatay elements. He provides a detailed overview of the orthographic (e.g., the spelling of Turkic words in Arabic script), morphological (e.g. variation in suffixes that mark voice, tense, aspect of verbs), and lexical peculiarities of the *tafsir*. Türk's extended summary of features specific to this text has considerable merit. Yet, one misses its contextualisation in relation to other Türki-Tatar vernacular Qur'ān commentaries published in the same period.⁸

In general, this critical edition does an important step in making *Tafsir-i Nu'mānī* known and easily accessible to broader circles of scholars and students. Although Türk's contextualisation of the *tafsir* text has some shortcomings, for the editor does little to explain the socio-political and linguistic environment in which

⁵ T-33 (Vol 1), T-34 (Vol.2); Kemper 1998: 242; Spannaus 2019: 87.

⁶ Kemper 1998: 242.

⁷ For a discussion on the power of editors who operated in Muslim publishing houses in the nineteenth century, see El Shamsy 2020.

⁸ E.g., Shaykh al-Islām b. Asadallāh al-Ḥāmidī, *Al-Itqān fī Tarjumat al-Qur'ān* (Orenburg, 1907), Muḥammad-Ṣādiq Imānqulī, *Tashīl al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. 2 vols. (Kazan, 1910–11). For a brief analysis of linguistic features specific to these two works, see Zäynullin 1998: 33–7.

the text was created, this book nevertheless attracts due attention to the poorly studied vernacular *tafsīrs* in Turkic languages, inviting a more extensive comparative analysis on both lexical and interpretative levels.

References

- Birnbaum, Eleazar (1990): "On Some Turkish Interlinear Translations of the Koran". *Journal of Turkish Studies* 14:113–138.
- Boeschoten, Hendrik (2006): "Translations of the Koran: sources for the history of written Turkic in a multilingual setting". In: *Turkic-Iranian Contact Areas: Historical and Linguistic Aspects*. Lars Johanson & Christiane Bulut (eds.), 69–89. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Eckmann, János (1971): "Eastern Turkic Translations of the Koran". In *Studia Turcica*. Lajos Ligeti (ed.), 149–59. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- El Shamsy, Ahmed (2020): *Rediscovering the Islamic classics: How editors and print culture transformed an intellectual tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kemper, Michael (1998): *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789-1889: Der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft*. Berlin: Klaus Schwartz.
- Pink, Johanna (2011): *Sunnitischer Tafsīr in Der Modernen Islamischen Welt: Akademische Traditionen, Popularisierung und Nationalstaatliche Interessen*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Spannaus, Nathan (2019): *Preserving Islamic tradition: Abū Naṣr Qūrṣāwī and the Beginnings of Modern Reformism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, M. Brett (2014): *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zadeh, Travis (2012): *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zäynullin, Jämil G. (1998): *XVIII yöz– XX yöz bashında tatar rukhani ädäbiyatı: Qor''än täfsirläre, khädislär h.b. chiganaqlar*. Kazan: Mägarif.

Book Review

El Shamsy, Ahmed: *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, xvi + 295 pp. ISBN 978-0-6911-7456-3.

Reviewed by **Arafat A. Razzaque**, Department of Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, 4 Bancroft Avenue, Toronto, ON, M5S 1C1, Canada, E-mail: a.razzaque@utoronto.ca

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2021-0014>

The classical Islamic tradition is manifestly recognizable today on bookshelves, in numerous Arabic tomes by well-known names effectively comprising an established canon. When and how did these medieval texts become the familiar classics they are now? This is the fundamental question that Ahmed El Shamsy sets out to answer in *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*. The book meticulously charts the historical conditions that fostered an Arabic literary revival since the 19th century, a development that has thoroughly redefined the Islamic tradition. The agents of this intellectual revolution were a host of largely unsung philologists, editors and publishers who are the protagonists of El Shamsy's narrative: they were the men who recuperated texts like al-Shāfi'ī's *Risālah* or Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah* from elusive manuscripts and made them available in print. The effects were far-reaching, implicating not only the foundations of modern Islamic thought as we know it, but also the very notion of classical Islam as a centripetal reference point for the tradition.

The book is likely to surprise some readers. It opens with a rather bleak picture of the early modern Middle East, showing how Arabic texts from the earlier centuries of Islamic history were increasingly both neglected and inaccessible during the “postclassical” period, defined here as the 16th to the early 19th century. The author finds two main reasons for this. Firstly, a sheer depletion in books (chapter 1). Madrasas and libraries declined since the Mamluk era and countless manuscripts were being taken away elsewhere, legally or otherwise. In fact, the rise of Orientalist scholarship was linked to this “book drain” from the Middle East—a checkered history of acquisitions palpable to anyone familiar with Islamic manuscript holdings in Europe. But the traffic was not only westward, and El Shamsy highlights the long-term cultural consequences of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Syria in 1517 and the subsequent pull of a new imperial center. The 14th-century Maḥmudiyya madrasa library in Cairo began with four thousand volumes, but dwindled to a mere 58 books by the late-19th century. Many of the lost manuscripts ended up in Istanbul, including significantly an early work of Islamic law by al-Buwayṭī that was the basis of El Shamsy's first monograph on al-Shāfi'ī and also spurred the research for this

second book. In a poignant episode mentioned halfway through the book, the Egyptian scholar and bureaucrat Aḥmad Zakī (1867–1934) realized the enormity of the displaced heritage when researching in the Topkapı Palace library in Istanbul around 1908, being ostensibly the first member of the public to be allowed access in some four centuries.

Narratives of decline have fallen out of fashion in recent academic historiography, so El Shamsy's argument runs clearly against the grain. This is especially so with the second part of his thesis: classical Islamic texts receded from view not only materially but also intellectually, due to what he terms scholasticism and esotericism (chapter 2). The former denotes the postclassical mode of learning dominated by commentaries and super-commentaries that mediated the classics through a formalistic and fragmentary approach, resulting in a canon of curriculum texts prioritized over the earlier sources themselves. More broadly, El Shamsy argues that the appeal of book learning itself waned in a time of widespread esotericism. By this he means a range of phenomena: from occultist ideas and Sufi critiques of bookish knowledge, to *ḥadīth* transmission by long-lived *jinn* and truth claims based on inspiration.

Readers may well wonder if the author overstates his case here, or perhaps echoes too strongly his late-19th century subjects, who were reacting against what they viewed as a time of intellectual decay and rampant superstition in religious life. But the subtleties of his analysis are compelling and pose new questions. For one thing, the book invites serious consideration of central versus provincial dynamics in the Ottoman Middle East: if the libraries of Istanbul flourished while those in Cairo or Damascus languished, what kinds of regional variation in Islamic scholarship might we expect? In the same vein, how did the shifting fortunes of Arabic relate to the rise of vernacular Islamic literatures in Persian, Turkish, and other languages? Does Sufism necessarily involve neglect of critical philology? A related question also arises about possibly differential trends across genres or disciplines. El Shamsy suggests that loss of earlier texts would hamper fields like law, history, or literature more significantly than the rational sciences such as logic or philosophy. It would seem therefore that the stimulating insights of recent scholarship on the latter may not be representative of postclassical Islamic thought as a whole.

Regardless, the force of El Shamsy's argument is to explain the impact of the Arabic print revolution. The technology of movable type was adopted in tune with a rapidly growing readership in the 19th century, whereas until then *ad hoc* manuscript copying of books better served a relatively small community of scholars. El Shamsy's account of early printing in Egypt (chapter 3) brings to fore the overlooked role of the *muṣaḥḥiḥ* or "corrector." These were scholars employed by the presses to proofread printed texts based on whatever manuscripts were

available. Their work reflected a crossover of scribal practices, as also observed in a relevant paper by Islam Dayeh published almost simultaneously as the book under review.¹ Initially, most books printed by the state press at Bulaq since the 1820s continued with the postclassical canon, and only just over half the output was in Arabic. That began to change from the 1850s onward thanks to the new reading public (chapter 4), led by an emergent class of intellectuals engendered in literary salons, and who were mostly educated civil servants rather than traditional *‘ulamā’*. They sought to achieve a cultural renaissance through the recovery and publication of forgotten classics, especially *belles lettres*. These efforts required philological research and expertise beyond the scope of correctors, giving rise to the *muḥaqqiq* or editor (chapter 5). Pioneering this turn was the aforementioned Aḥmad Zakī, who adopted new scholarly solutions to produce critical editions of manuscripts he had photographed during the visit to Topkapı. These included works by the famous early Islamic thinker Ibn al-Muqaffa’, which Zakī also lobbied successfully to be added to the Egyptian national school curriculum.

Rediscovery of the classical heritage was thus closely tied to an impetus for social reform in a changing Middle East, and El Shamsy illustrates through several richly detailed case studies the arena in which Arabic print culture unfolded (chapters 6 and 7). In religious thought, textual revivalism entailed a “backlash” against the postclassical era, enabling reformist *‘ulamā’* to question the settled orthodoxies of the later Islamic tradition, especially Sufi practices. Once marginalized for his maverick scholarship, Ibn Taymiyya now gained a newfound influence that needs no emphasis today. Unlike the familiar strictures of recent Salafism, however, the ideas advocated by its predecessors like the Damascene bibliophiles Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī (1852–1920) and Jamal al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1866–1914) represent a more expansive vision of tradition that would diversify the possibilities of Islamic thought, which they cultivated through wide scholarly and publishing networks that also reached beyond the region to India, the Maghreb, and Europe.

We hardly think of philology today as a cultural battleground, but that was precisely an upshot of the foregoing developments. Textual criticism became a focal point of fierce debates on both scholarly method and the normative weight of the past, most notably in the scandal over Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s (1889–1973) famous albeit plagiarized critique of the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry. El Shamsy ends his study with a discussion of particular interest for Arabists (chapter 8), demonstrating how certain aspects of “indigenous” philology in the Middle East differed from the standard methodologies such as stemmatics that were devised by European classicists but which do not suit the Arabic manuscript tradition as well. Such

¹ Dayeh, Islam (2019): “From *Taṣḥīḥ* to *Taḥqīq*: Toward a History of the Arabic Critical Edition”. *Philological Encounters* 4: 245–299.

technical concerns dovetailed with qualms about the ethos of scholarship in the colonial context, in which the influence and prestige of Orientalists was often hard to separate from the implications of their epistemic disposition towards the Islamic tradition. As El Shamsy points out, the debates on method among modern Arab philologists yield sharp insights that “underscore the distinction between a critical stance and a skeptical one”, a constructive nuance that could speak to the challenges of historical criticism that still animate the field of Islamic Studies.

To recognize these perspectives uncovered by El Shamsy is perhaps also to rewrite the history of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the modern academy, in which the dominant record of critical scholarship rarely accounts for the Orientalists’ counterparts in the Middle East. The latter were not merely reactionaries in the face of colonial modernity, argues El Shamsy, but had their own terms of agency and engagement with a vast and complex intellectual tradition. *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics* maps the terrain of their thought with profound erudition, making a timely and necessary contribution to the study of Islamic modernism. For the growing field of Islamic book history, it reveals a need for further research especially on the role of Arabic printing in India and its connections to the Middle East, ostensibly beyond El Shamsy’s focus but the significance of which he alludes to frequently. The book similarly points to avenues for future inquiry on nearly every aspect of Islamic intellectual history both pre-modern and modern. This study on the making of the Islamic classics is sure to thus become a classic in its own right.