

RESEÑAS

ZADEH, TRAVIS, *Wonders and Rarities. The Marvelous Book That Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos*, Cambridge (MA)–London, Harvard University Press, 2023, 464 pp.

In the year 1259 or 1260, in a period of widespread upheaval that saw Iranshahr and the heart of Islam invaded twice by the armies of Gengis Khan and then Hülegü, Abū Yaḥyā Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī published his *‘Aḡā’ib al-maḥlūqāt wa-ḡarā’ib al-mawḡūdāt* (‘Wonders of Created Things and Rarities of Existing Beings’, in Zadeh’s translation), a compendium of natural history that was to remain a best-seller for centuries. The work consists of three parts, respectively concerned with the heavenly spheres, the sublunar world, and the three kingdoms of minerals, plants and animals. It also includes a vast array of illustrations that contributed to its immense popularity across Islam and beyond, as evidenced today by the numerous manuscripts and lithographs preserved in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. Qazwīnī’s natural history has long attracted attention of scholars. An old but rather defective edition was provided in 1848 by Wüstenfeld, hopefully to be replaced soon by the one currently being prepared by Wheeler Thackston. Translations exist in several modern languages, and various important studies, such as Syrinx von Hees’s *Enzyklopädie als Spiegel des Weltbildes. Qazwīnīs Wunder der Schöpfung – eine Naturkunde des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 2002), have been devoted in recent years to the author, his work, and the iconography that accompanies it.

The book under review here is different from all these studies, as it adopts a quite distinctive approach. Though evidently central to the story throughout the 400-odd pages of this essay, Qazwīnī’s work is here rather taken as a pretext or a common thread to address an incomparably more ambitious design, namely, to paint a large-scale portrait of the circulation of ideas in Islamicate cultures *over the longue durée*. As reflected in the title of his book, which in turn mirrors that

of Qazwīnī’s compendium, Zadeh focuses his investigation on the notion of wonder, a notion that conveys a plurality of meanings. As he argues, ‘In the introduction to the *Metaphysica*, Aristotle famously builds on Plato’s earlier association of wonder with the development of philosophy, stating that it is through the act of being astonished that humans began to philosophize’ (p. 118). On the other hand, as he also contends, ‘wonder and its corollaries of astonishment, awe, curiosity, perplexity, and bemusement conditioned the horizons of experience and the limits of what could be known with certainty in the face of the sublime power of a transcendent and yet immanent God’ (p. 4). With its encyclopaedic scope, Qazwīnī’s *‘Aḡā’ib al-maḥlūqāt* purported to offer his readers a faithful and accurate image of the world around us. At the same time, speaking of the numerous wonders of this world – be it the mysterious power of a magnet, the perfect geometry of a spider’s web, or the sudden vision of a mermaid in the ocean – prompted him to explore the very limits of what a human understanding may deem real or trustworthy. The debate was not so much in Qazwīnī’s time and the following centuries as it was in the 19th century and its colonialist bias, when modern Europeans imposed their criteria to define what is science and what is superstition, and their reasons to reject this latter as a typical product of Oriental fantasy. Qazwīnī’s book is massively imbued with what was then commonly referred to as ‘hidden’ or ‘strange’ sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-ḥāfiyya/al-ḡarība*) — like astrology, alchemy, divination, and others —, by which were technically meant those ‘occult’ sciences that extrapolate from the visible to the non-visible (as do most of modern astrophysics and medicine). As Zadeh writes in his introduction:

‘Faced with a world that can only conceive of itself as having two hemispheres orbiting a distant sun, and divested of occult properties, Qazwīnī does not fare well’ (p. 8).

Like Qazwīnī’s *Wonders and Rarities*, Zadeh’s work is divided into three main parts. The first (“A World Within Words”), traces up the historical record about Qazwīnī’s life, from his early years in Qazvīn near the Zagros Mountains to his death in the city of Wasit, in the middle of Iraq, after a long and distinguished career as a scholar, teacher, judge and author. Zadeh shows there, for instance, the paramount significance of judicial astrology by placing Qazwīnī’s testimony in a broad perspective. Bitterly condemned by Ibn Sīnā and others in the past, the faith in the power of the stars could also draw on a long and prestigious tradition of scholars chronologically closer to al-Qazwīnī, including Abū l-Faḍl Muḥammad al-Ṭabaṣī, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, and Sirāḡ al-Dīn al-Sakkākī. It was also endorsed by countless rulers and functionaries of the time, to begin with ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Atā’ Mālik al-Juwaynī, Qazwīnī’s patron and the governor of Iraq under the new Mongol elite. This elite, we are reminded, was also ‘deeply concerned with the predictive power of the planets, scrupulously seeking propitious timings for their affairs and concluding nothing until their astrologers had given approval’ (p. 80). In the second part (“Wonders To Behold”), Zadeh now focuses on the compendium itself, ‘roughly following the topics that Qazwīnī developed — from his influential discussion of wonder and rarity, to the heavens and then to the realms of earthly diversity’ (p. 6). Here again, one cannot but be impressed by the quality of Zadeh’s recontextualizations in every place, which enable him to bring Qazwīnī into a permanent dialogue with an astonishing number of people, patrons, artists, and leaders in the history of Islam and beyond. The third part (“Distant Shores”) is dedicated to the reception of Qazwīnī’s opus, another admirable treatment which ultimately brings us back to the starting-

point of the inquiry. With impeccable erudition and a laudable effort at making reading enjoyable (which inevitably recalls Qazwīnī’s own methods), Zadeh guides his readers through the thousand and one reverberations of the ‘*Aḡā’ib al-maḥlūqāt wa-ḡarā’ib al-mawḡūdāt*’ until the present time. A case in point is a sixteenth-century Ottoman copy of Qazwīnī’s *Wonders and Rarities*, which includes a map that features the New World (figure 7.3, p. 203) in replacement of the traditional representation with the ecumene entirely encircled by the outer ocean. The Ottoman cartographer Piri Reis became aware of Columbus’s discovery of America through Christian sources. Why should this matter us? Post-colonial European Orientalists have become accustomed to give Qazwīnī’s work no more than a curious interest, relegating it to the status of a pleasant diversion for readers in search of exoticism. Like anything produced in Islam after the Arabic-into-Latin translation movement of the 12th and 13th centuries, they deem it scientifically irrelevant. By a curious twist of fate, there are today in Islam other types of scientific reformists who argue, against the testimony of sources, that the first discoverers of America were Muslims, and that they predate Columbus’s expeditions. As with so many other facts of history reported in this study, a broader perspective is needed, and Zadeh does it excellently. He achieves the tour de force of offering an ambitious study that is at the same time thought-provoking, well-informed, and very pleasant to read. The book includes some beautiful reproductions of manuscripts and a solid, most up-to-date set of notes (although it is regrettable that these notes are grouped together at the end of the volume, which makes them uneasy to consult). It also includes an extended index. Yet, one may wonder why the volume does not contain anything like a systematic bibliographical list.

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