

VARISCO, DANIEL MARTIN. *Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science: The Almanac of a Yemeni Sultan*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995. xv + 349 pages. Map, Arabic text, bibliography, indices of place-names and major Arabic terms, general index. Cloth US\$40.00; ISBN 0295-97378-1.

This book is the sixth in the University of Washington's series on the Near East. The main section comprises a text of 256 pages, preceded by a foreword and followed by a detailed bibliography, an index, a gazetteer of place-names, and a general index.

The introduction contains information about Yemen, Islamic science, and the almanac tradition, as well as about Al-Malik Al-Ashraf, "Umar ibn Yusuf ibn Ali Al-Ghassani Al-Turkumani," the author of the almanac that is the subject of this book. A section on Varisco himself provides interesting information on his family, his ancestry, his education, and his previous work. His publications cover diverse subjects, such as agriculture, astronomy, and traditional medicine. The relationship between some of these works and folklore is quite evident.

Part 1 is entirely devoted to the text of chapter 32 of Al-Malik Al-Ashraf's *Al Tabsira fi ilm Al-Nujum*. The text is presented in the original and in English translation. Each is only about twenty pages in length, but from this small amount of material Varisco has produced a quite excellent study. His editing and analysis of the text is remarkable, indicating the dialects and usages used in the text.

Part 2, entitled "Context," forms the bulk of the volume and constitutes the major contribution of this study. It is subdivided into seven chapters: "Calendars," "Astronomy," "Meteorology," "Environment," "Agriculture," "Health, Humors, and Sex," and "Navigation." Each chapter contains very useful information on its subject, and the amount of ground covered is enormous. As an example let us look at the chapter on agriculture (chapter 5, which I choose because the book itself is basically devoted to medieval agriculture). Chapter 5 demonstrates the encyclopedic approach followed by the author, covering all aspects of the subject and providing as much detail as possible. Among the topics it covers are the agricultural cycle; harvest seasons; the agricultural taxation system; ceremonies and magic rites related to agriculture; cereal crops (sorghum, millet, wheat, etc.); fruits; vegetables; and oil seeds.

The bibliography provides a useful guide on different aspects of Yemeni history and culture, while the indices at the end of the book aid the reader in making the best use of this study.

The *Al Tabsira fi ilm Al-Nujum* is a work that draws heavily upon Yemeni folklore. Varisco's study directs our attention to the relevance of folklore in traditional science and technology, particularly in the areas of astronomy and agriculture. His approach is in line with the growing interest in applied folklore and indigenous technical knowledge. This is an approach that is greatly needed in many Arab countries, where folklore is equated with performance and literary genres.

Varisco's understanding of Arabic, his familiarity with Yemeni society and folklore, and his extensive knowledge of the literary sources relating to Arabic heritage in general and Yemeni history and culture in particular have enabled him to produce a work that is far more than a study of a single chapter of the *Al Tabsira fi ilm Al-Nujum*. It will be of great value not only to anthropologists, folklorists, and historians, but also to anyone looking for a useful introduction to Yemen and its climate, society, agriculture, and science.

Sayyid H. HURREIZ
United Arab Emirates University
Al 'Ain, U.A.E.