
Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World by
Zayde Antrim

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This book is a re-publication of previously published articles or talks, as Antrim's entry on the faculty page of Trinity College, Hartford, CT reveals. It consists of an introduction and three chapters (homeland, cities, regions). It purports to establish that there was a 'discourse of place' in a broad range of texts and a more limited range of images (i.e., maps) that were produced, mostly in Arabic, during the first centuries of the Abbasid dynasty. In its three chapters, Antrim extracts anthologies, historical chronicles, and geographical works; and supplements this with further extracts from the occasional travel account, astronomical work, or religious treatise [2]. These brief extracts, which are never given in the original language, are joined by way of quotations and summaries in an easy flowing combination of the reformulated opinions and interpretations of previous researchers. The author's own contribution seems to consist in:

- the use of a relatively limited vocabulary of current academic jargon with terms such as: 'crafting', 'performing', 'constructing', 'imagining', 'invoking', 'evoking', 'body', 'discourse', 'strategy', 'nurture' and the like;
- the erasure of differences between genres, skills, beliefs, and values which, according to a more traditional approach to historical analysis, characterize poetry, historical writing, texts of the mathematical sciences, and the styles and models of descriptive *versus* mathematical geography and their ideas of mapping;
- the avoidance of any analysis of the various sources which she has mined for the alleged 'discourse of place'; and
- the thorough abstention from any contextualization of authors, copyists, and other actors, their works, and the traces that they have left behind.

I am certain that there will be other reviewers who praise this book as a new pinnacle of academic achievement. But I simply cannot join this chorus. Too many problems stand in my way. Antrim neither explains why she chose the period from the ninth to the 11th century for her claims that there was a ‘discourse of place’ and that ‘place had power’ [1]. All she offers is the statement that ‘the discourse of place is a conceptual framework’, which she uses

to bring together a wide variety of formal texts committed to the representation of territory in and of itself, rather than as a setting or backdrop of something else. [1]

She declares that such a discourse existed by attributing to ‘land’ as used in the chosen texts a ‘stimulation’ of ‘geographical imagination’ with the capacity to ‘(act) as a powerful vehicle for articulating desire, claiming authority, and establishing belonging’ [1]. Such a declaration is, however, not a proof that there was indeed such a thing as a ‘discourse of place’ nor an analysis of why that was the case and how this discourse functioned on the three claimed levels of ‘homeland’, ‘city’, and ‘region or world’ for achieving the proclaimed ‘goals’ (desire, authority, identity).

Certain passages, as for instance those on page 6, suggest that the supposed ‘discourse of place’ is merely ‘a representation of territory’ or the manner in which ‘Muslims imagined the territory where they lived and traveled’. That a geographical text deals with places in spaces does not signify yet that this was a discourse beyond and above there being merely the choice of the appropriate words for representing geographical knowledge. That there was a special type of poetry (which rarely used the word ‘awtan’, i.e., the plural of ‘watan’) that evoked nostalgia for a collection of things (animals, foods, plants, rivers, humans, and so on) left behind due to a nomadic lifestyle, other kinds of (real or imagined) travel or marriage does not prove without further substantiation that there was a ‘discourse of homeland’ or, in particular, that the word ‘awtan’ also had extraterritorial connotations (as the author herself states [11–29, esp. 14]. Moreover, the author admits that this word mostly appears in titles and headers of chapters but rarely in the text proper, where a variety of other terms is used [15–16]. The highly anthropomorphic and zoomorphic language of this ‘discourse of place’ as ‘homeland’ and its many references to themes of childhood and adolescence, as nicely brought out by the author, necessitate further arguments, preferably from anthropology,

for their use as evidence that it was indeed place as territoriality that was at stake in these poems. This is, however, not supplied by Antrim [17–19].

This first chapter on *watan* does not even convince me that ‘watan’ indeed signified ‘homeland’, a concept that sounds conspicuously modern. A study of the semantic field of this rarely used term would have been very helpful to understand whether such a value-laden translation is indeed appropriate. The question whether the ‘nostalgic longing for *watan*’ constituted a ‘discourse of place’ or was rather an element of an altogether different discourse such as that studied by Scott Savran in his thesis *Eloquent Tribesmen, Dignified Sheikhs, and Pompous Kings: Conceptualizing Early Islamic Historical Accounts of Arab-Sasanian Encounters in the Context of the ‘Abbasid High Culture* [2011] is not even considered. For Savran, this discourse concerned struggles for cultural and political preeminence between Arab and newly converted Muslims in the new socio-political atmosphere of a universal Islam with career opportunities for all Muslims. He argues, among other things, that collecting Bedouin poetry in all its richness and using it in historical chronicles as well as in other texts, in combination with negative stories about Sasanian nobility, their arrogance, and pompousness, served as central components of a long-lived discourse that elevated Arab Bedouins to the pedestal of high civilization and interpreted the defeat of the Sasanian royal army at the hands of impoverished and unrefined nomads as a divinely preordained way of redemption of Arabs and Khurasanians alike and their joining in the ‘universalist’ community of believers [see, e.g., Savran 2011, 11–15, 254–257]. Places and spaces like al-Qadisiyya, al-’Iraq, or Khurasan, to name only a few, were central to these narratives but, according to Savran, apparently did not appear to form a discourse separate from that about the cultural roles and worth of Arabs and Iranians.

Antrim’s explanations of why she excluded certain types of texts that either focused on depictions of territory (travel accounts of territories outside the Islamic world or quotations of poetic verses on place or space in the biography of a poet or a scholar, for instance) [6] are equally problematic and do not convince me of their conceptual or methodological validity, although I certainly accept that the number of texts studied had to be limited so that the work could be completed within the period of her fellowship. But claiming that quotations of verses about places or spaces in a biography of a person ‘function primarily to portray an aspect of the author’s life or an example of

his intellectual production' [6] but not as an element of the 'discourse of place' illustrates her weak notion of the concept of discourse. This decision also reflects a lack of familiarity with the multitude of ways in which biographies were composed as complex, multi-leveled narratives.

The same applies to the exclusion of territories that she labels 'exotic' [6]. For the study of discourses, such exceptional things are of equal, if not even greater, methodological relevance if one is to discover the main discursive elements and to uncover their textual as well as ideological, emotive or mental functions and operations.

These and other silences, omissions, and simplifications speak as loudly against praising Antrim's work as do the various nominalizations and 'post-modernizations' that she uses. After reading continually that authors of the ninth, 10th, or 11th centuries 'crafted' their poems, histories or scientific texts or that these writings performed on three levels (for instance, that of the nostalgically longed for past, that of the writer's writing time, and that of the later authors' use of such earlier textual residues), I nostalgically longed for the times when academics simply wrote, discussed, analyzed, argued, gave a talk, or held a lecture. I am certainly not adverse to some effort at performance in teaching or public presentation and to serious efforts to accomplish a well-written text. But I do not wish to be drowned in and bored by an overdose of such a vocabulary at the expense of all other verbs and nouns available to depict texts, authors, readers, and other objects and human actors. I find it particularly annoying when adherence to this kind of jargon comes with a complete obscuration of the academic author's application of methods drawn from the rich arsenal of techniques available today for analyzing stories, narratives, maps, tables, mathematical procedures, theories, metaphors, and other textual and visual elements. I do not doubt that Antrim did apply some methods and did spend time analyzing the sources that she used. But she has covered her work in this empty rhetoric to such a degree that they are no longer recognizable. The situation is particularly problematic when she combines such rhetorical emptiness with technical or historiographical misunderstandings and straightforward mistakes.

A few examples of such jargon or overstatement will have to suffice.

(1) Overstatements

Although knowledge of the literatures and areas of inquiry opened up through contact with the Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Persian, and Sanskrit heritages was also prized among *udabā'*, there was simply no way to succeed in the world of *adab* without a firm command of this Arabic heritage. [15]

(2) Extreme hyperbole

This star-studded and far-flung cast of authors suggests that the idea of home as land-based category of belonging enjoyed as broad a currency in the world outside the text as it did in the discourse of place. [16]

What is striking about the claims to belonging and authority produced by each strategy is their overwhelming inclusivity and openness to heterogeneity. This suggests that cities in the early Islamic world were imagined more as sites of negotiation and compromise than as symbols of Islamic purity and triumphalism. [3]

(3) Meaningless sequence of misused or misunderstood terms

The geographical transferability of this idea of home and the universalism of its gravitational pull made it a powerfully flexible vehicle for associating land and belonging and for expressing diverse and changing loyalties, both in *adab* anthologies and elsewhere in the discourse of place. [29]

(4) Limited scope and repetition of jargon

The larger scale of the region allowed for an even greater degree of inclusivity and heterogeneity in crafting territorial categories of belonging in the discourse of place. [87]

These strategies, like those used to evoke cities, crafted regions as categories of belonging in open-ended and universalist terms while maintaining the particularity of their political and religious associations. [88]

(5) Ridiculous rhetorical compounds

the omnivorous sensibilities of the world of *adab* [88].

Furthermore, chapter 3 of Antrim's book shows that she did not understand very well the technicalities, whether at the scientific or the historiographical level, of the texts she that worked with. One major problem consists in her using older types of literature whose authors do not share at all her post-modernist leanings. Since I have known some of these authors personally

for many years, I can easily state that they would be either appalled by her interpretations and rhetoric or simply dismiss them as unsound. But, even if they took a more positive stance towards her postmodernist parlance, the unquestioning use of their claims and results as simple, ‘factual recycables’ in a project of such a profoundly different type than theirs remains methodologically unacceptable. Yet, as little as Antrim has analyzed the vocabulary, rhetorical figures, narrative plots, and discursive properties of the medieval Arabic and Persian sources, so little did she try to understand the conceptual distances between her own perspectives and the books, chapters, and articles by Miquel, King, Berggren, Jones, Tibbetts, Lorch, Gutas, Karamustafa, Sezgin and other scholars of a generation or two older. Indeed, the only one in this list of names who might perhaps sympathize with her ‘longing to craft a performative text on a discourse of place’ is Karamustafa, though I doubt that he would applaud her results. Measuring the degree of compatibility between one’s research approach and that of older colleagues is, however, only one task that a younger scholar who wishes to mine previous research literature for her own purposes has to undertake. She also needs to establish whether those older results, even if only taken as matters of fact, change their status and content when displaced from their proper context into a new one. As I know from my own experience with changing perspectives, methods, and concepts, many results cannot be separated from their theoretical and methodological context and basis. Combining bits and pieces from older research treatises without question in a kind of patchwork does not yield new, better, or otherwise more convincing narratives about the past. Only if they are carefully investigated as to their compatibility with other paradigms and languages does the opportunity arise for a closer approximation by the new narrative to the complexities of intellectual, material, and emotive histories of the past.

Mistakes appear in different sizes and kinds in Antrim’s text. I ignore all those that might be viewed as dependent on her chosen perspective and limit the following list to a few that are wrong in an absolute sense:

- (1) Greek and Hebrew literature in the general sense formulated by Antrim was never translated into Arabic. Sanskrit, Pahlavi and Syriac literature was translated but in a very small number of texts. The *udabā*’ as a socio-cultural group were not generally interested in Arabic translations of Greek, Pahlavi, Sanskrit or Syriac scientific,

medical, philosophical or religious texts; indeed, some were quite hostile towards these forms of knowledge and others ridiculed men spending too much time for reading such works. Only in the 10th century did a greater interest arise among the *literati* for the scientific, medical, and philosophical teachings of their contemporaries and their authorities. How much of this interest was still at work one century later is unknown to me, since, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have so far been undertaken [15].

- (2) There was never something like ‘human geography’ recognized as a member of the family of scholarly disciplines described in classifications of the ‘sciences’ often called *aqsam al-’ulum or maratib al-’ulum*. Nor did it flourish (only or particularly) from the ninth to the 11th century: repeating Miquel for backing up such a claim does not replace the study of Arabic original sources [88].
- (3) It is too general and, thus, incorrect to claim ‘that the earliest Muslims possessed knowledge of their position on the earth and its interrelation with the cosmos’ [88]. King’s *World Maps for Finding the Direction and Distance to Mecca: Innovation and Tradition in Islamic Science* [1999], given here as backup, contradicts this claim by documenting the different *qiblas* used by those earliest Muslims and their non-scientific character.
- (4) We know almost nothing about ‘the scholarly classes of the Ummayyad (caliphate)’. Hence, evidence is needed if one wishes to claim with Antrim that ‘the scholarly classes of the Umayyad and early Abbasid Caliphates developed competing notions of how to measure and divide the world’ [88–89].
- (5) The sentence,

Thanks to the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun’s patronage of scholarship and the ‘translation movement’ he sponsored, texts from Indo-Persian and Hellenistic traditions of learning were translated into Arabic, revised, and in many cases improved in Baghdad in the ninth century.

is permeated by half-truths and misconceptions. The translation movement began many years before al-Ma’mun under his father, grandfather, or great-grandfather (depending on one’s reading of the texts), and dividing the cultures from which scientific, medical and philosophical texts were translated into two big blocks, namely, Indo-Persian and Hellenistic, is a distortion. Moreover, offering Gutas’

Greek Thought, Arabic Culture [1998] as one of her two sources for this second claim misrepresents Gutas' analysis.

(6) That claim that the theories which Ptolemy

advances in the *Almagest*, ..., and the *Geography*, ..., contributed greatly to efforts to determine the shape and size of the earth and to bring the contours of its surface into relationship with celestial bodies [89]

is in conflict with what we know. Scholars working in Baghdad since the second half of the eighth century on astronomical and geographical issues did not try to determine the shape of the Earth because they already 'knew' that it was spherical. Nor did they try to bring the contours of the Earth's surface into relationship with celestial bodies because they had learned from Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* the astrological division of the planet's surface, if this is what Antrim has in mind. The point of importance was in fact the new determination of the size of the circumference of the Earth by al-Ma'mun's astrologers and craftsmen as well as the new observations and recalculations of various astronomical parameters. This difference between elementary information available in numerous books and articles by authors quoted by Antrim such as King, Kunitzsch, or Lorch and her incompetent summary highlights the problems that Antrim's search for 'a discourse of place' encompasses.

(7) The origin of the 'seven climes' is disputed. There is evidence for it in Avestan literature, i.e., centuries before Ptolemy wrote his *Almagest*. But it is understood and used differently from its application in *Almagest* 2.12. This overlapping of two geographical and astronomical traditions and the simplicity of the seven-clime scheme explain perhaps the preference given by Muslim and Christian scholars in Islamicate societies for it to the more complicated scheme of 33 climes in the cartographic part of Ptolemy's *Geography*. Nonetheless, some Arabic authors like al-Idrisi applied like Ptolemy a greater number of parallels (10 or 11) when dividing the northern and southern hemispheres. Hence, Antrim's claim that 'Ptolemy eschew(ed) the clime system completely' is factually wrong. Equally false or superficial are the conclusions derived from this false claim [90]:

- 'the seven-clime system...is only very loosely Ptolemaic in origin',
- '(i)t is perhaps not surprising that no Arabic translation of Ptolemy's *Geography* survives, if one was ever made',

and that

- (i)t may have been that Ptolemy was a name,...more useful for conferring the authority of an ancient tradition on systems of dividing the world than it was for shaping the particulars of those systems.

There are more unacceptable claims, superficial remarks, and misrepresentations in Antrim's book than I have presented here. But I think that the lack of familiarity with, and control of, scientific and other traditions in Arabic and Persian exhibited in it have become evident. If Antrim had indeed wanted to argue against the textual evidence in extant sources that no Arabic translation of Ptolemy's *Geography* had been made in the ninth century, she should have shown that these sources were unreliable. This kind of painstaking textual research is, however, nowhere documented in her book. Otherwise, she should have flown to Istanbul and studied two manuscripts of an Arabic translation of Ptolemy's *Geography* produced for the Ottoman sultan Mehmet Fatih in the 15th century. Antrim's speculation that Ptolemy was merely a household name but not the representative of a complex set of theories, techniques, parameters, and models that were studied, excerpted, and applied in different manners indicates further her failure to understand these sources and their impact on intellectual projects in Islamic societies as well as of her limited efforts to familiarize herself with these texts, their successors, and their current historiographical interpretation.

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