

Stephan Reichmuth. *The World of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732-91):
Life, Networks and Writings*, Cambridge: The E. J. W. Gibb
Memorial Trust, HC, xxiv+400 pp. ISBN: 978-0-906094-60-0.

An impressive study on the life and work of one of the last Muslim scholars who lived in a world about to disappear in a catastrophic encounter with Western civilization, marred by an unusual transliteration scheme and Teutonic English perhaps marked by the author's native German, typographical errors, shreds of Christology (Abū Bakr b. ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAydārūs is called the "patron saint of Aden" (36)), and occasional slips in translation of technical terms (*ibāda* is translated as "an obligatory act", 313). Divided into five chapters and printed on glossy paper, this 2009 publication neatly fits the objectives of the Gibb Memorial Trust, a charity "founded in 1902 by the wife of a Glaswegian wine merchant to commemorate the death at the age of 45 of her son Elias John Wilkinson Gibb," who, according to the description on the website, "devoted his life to researching the history, literature, philosophy and religion of the Turks, Persians and Arabs."

The first chapter, "From India to Cairo: Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's Life and Times," sets the stage for the entire work, describing al-Zabīdī's life arc, his teachers, his travels, and his times. It takes the reader from his place of birth, Bilgram, India, to a chaotic Cairo at the time of his sudden death in Shaʿbān 1205/April 1791. His birth "within the first ten days of God's month Muḥarram in 1145 [that is, between 24 June and 3 July 1732]" (2), his early years in India, and his teachers and family are masterfully researched, as is the historical situation of India at the time. He left India for the Ḥijāz nine years after the plunder of Delhi in 1152/1739 by Nādir Shah and his troops, "presumably during the season of the east-bound winds of the dry monsoon (October-April) [1162/1748-9], at an age of about sixteen" (13). Al-Zabīdī's departure from India took place under the shadow of the first Carnatic War (1740-48), just when the Mughal Empire was about to disintegrate and the British and French imperial designs for India were in their first stage. He was never to return to his place of birth; rather, he preferred to be known as al-Zabīdī after the ancient town of Zabīd in the fertile valley of the Tihāma, Yemen, where he spent the most

important years of his life (1749-54), making frequent and extended visits to the Hijāz. The last and the longest of the three sections of this chapter (39-80) describes al-Zabīdī's life in Cairo (1167-1205/1754-91), where he established himself as a leading scholar and where he completed his celebrated works, including his lexicon, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, begun around 1174/1760 and finished fourteen years later, and *Ithāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn*, his extensive commentary on al-Ghazālī's *Ihyāʾ*, begun in 1190/1776 and finished in 1201/1787, just four years before his death. Reichmuth's reconstruction of this extraordinary life remains a patchwork of information extracted from source material; it is an abstract and impersonal account which fails to shed any light on his days as they were lived. The author misconstrues erotic motifs in sufi poetry ("The strongly erotical colouring of the poetry produced by the Sufis and scholars of the Hijaz in this period appears typical for this time," 37) and inaccurately depicts al-Zabīdī as a shrewd businessman who was as interested in promoting his works as he was in collecting pocket watches (71-73). But how did he write those marvelous, extensive works if he was so interested in amassing wealth? What was the daily rhythm of his household? How could he pack so much into his days? Such aspects of Zabīdī's life remain unexplored in this study.

"Zabīdī's Writings," the second chapter of the book, provides a useful alphabetical list of 225 works of Zabīdī "based on extant manuscripts and prints and on the different lists and references which were given by Zabīdī and others" with the claim that "it has been attempted here to go beyond what has been done thus far by Brockelmann, Šallāš, Koçak, Lārī, and others and to check and describe a large number of the available texts" (98). In addition, Reichmuth includes a list of 36 poems and 34 Ijāzāt extant in publication or manuscript form or attested as such by a previous study by Kattānī. This is, indeed, the most comprehensive list of Zabīdī's writings to date, although further works may yet be found. No effort has been made to analyze these works in this chapter, although some general features of his works are mentioned along with remarks on the large publication enterprise which he seemed to have established in Cairo.

The lengthy third chapter, "Personal Network and Sentimental Memory: Zabīdī's Autobiographical Lexicon (*Muʿjam*)" (149-222), provides a description and analysis of a unique work by Zabīdī which he himself had described as a "special lexicon mentioning those of my šayxs and fathers from whom I received the sciences and the different sorts of knowledge" (149). Colored maps and tables provide quick graphic representation of the content of the work which defies categorization as it fuses various genres. Reichmuth indicates nine established genres (154-160) which can be found in the *Muʿjam*, although the list is not exhaustive. He rightfully notes that the *Muʿjam* "is a unique document of the personal network of an eighteenth-century Islamic scholar as described by himself" (160).

Chapters four and five are insightful studies of Zabīdī's lexicon, *Tāj al-*

ʿarūs (*The Bridal Crown*), and *Ithāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn* (*The Gift of the God-Fearing Sayyids*). Here Reichmuth excels in providing a deeper understanding of these works, despite the inauspicious beginning to chapter four detailing the reaction of a journalist reporting on the conference held to celebrate the publication of the new forty-volume edition of the *Tāj* in 2002. The chapter is organized under three broad headings, each containing several subsections. The first heading, “The Struggle for Authorship: Aims and Sources of the *Tāj*,” begins with a wonderful insight into the title of the work:

[the Bridal Crown] might be regarded as a rather bold metaphor. Zabīdī might have chosen the “Bridal Crown” (*Tāj al-ʿarūs*) in imitation of the famous Sufi Ibn ‘Aṭā’ [Allah] al-Sikandarī (d. 709/1309) who had used it for a collection of his sermons. The second part of the rhymed title, “from the Gems of <The Ocean>” (*min jawāhir <al-Qāmūs>*) comes in more smoothly. The gems (*jawāhir*) which he brought to light from the ocean (*qāmūs*) of the Arabic language include a lasting compliment to the wealth of his reference text, Firūzābādī (d. 817/1414), *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*. The “crown” may be also associated with one of the most revered Arabic dictionaries, Jawharī (d. ca. 400/1009), *Tāj al-luġa wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-ʿarabiyya*; another major source text of Zabīdī’s commentary. The adopted title of ‘bride’ would seem to serve as a common image of beauty and desire, like those which decorate the headings of two of his further writings.¹ In addition, a more private allusion was also quite possibly intended, as the author married shortly after he had finished the first volume of the *Tāj* and had launched it with a lavish ceremony in 1181/1767. If this is viewed together with Zabīdī’s strong attachment to his wife, a bond clearly evident from his elegies on her death, it becomes reasonable to infer the title as a hidden dedication to her. (227)

Reichmuth situates *Tāj* within the tradition of Arabic lexicons, identifies its sources, compares certain features of Zabīdī’s work with those of its parent lexicon (Fayrūzābādī’s *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*) as well as with others, such as Jawharī’s *Ṣiḥāḥ*, Azharī’s *Tahdhīb*, and Ibn Manzūr’s *Lisān*, and provides statistical data which shows the comprehensiveness of *Tāj*, which contains 11,978 roots compared to 9,273 of *Lisān* and 5,618 of *Ṣiḥāḥ* (237). Zabīdī himself hoped that his work would supersede others: “God willing, its use will be great because of what it contains. Its content will leave no need of any other [dictionary]; rather will every work else be in need of it. [...] The unification of all these sources and topics has been achieved in this collection which has no taken the position of the [major] source and those others that of [mere] branches” (237).

The second section, “The Promise of Arabic,” seems a slight digression in a chapter devoted to the study of Zabīdī’s lexicon, but Reichmuth keeps it narrowly focused as he brings out specific examples from the *Tāj* and explores various of Zabīdī’s linguistic concerns in six appropriately named subsections:

1. *al-ʿArāʾis al-majhwūwa* and *al-ʿArūs al-majliyya*.

“Arabic: a prophetic legacy in a post-caliphal age”; “Linguistic framework”; “Semantic wealth of the Arabic language”; “Majāz and language development”; “Etymology, loans and the adaptive qualities of Arabic”; and “Reclaiming the scientific potential of Arabic”. The third section of the chapter, “The Islamic World of the *Tāj al-ʿArūs*”, delves into the geographical and cultural landscape of the *Tāj*. Here Reichmuth explores Zabīdī’s sources as well as additions which he made to the repertoire of regions, cities, town, peoples and their origins, local histories, biographies of scholars, hadith scholars, poets, and Sufis. He singles out certain entries in Zabīdī’s lexicon for further elaboration (Arabia, Anṭākiya, Egypt, Constantinople, Iṣfāhān, India, Maghrib and Andalus, and Sahara and Sub-Saharan Africa).

The chapter on the *Iḥāf* begins with preliminary remarks on al-Ghazālī’s magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, and then identifies four features of al-Zabīdī’s commentary on it “as threads running th[r]ough Zabīdī’s whole oeuvre. If taken together with his crowning efforts in the fields of philology and lexicography and also with his merger of the different strands of Sufi transmission, they add up to a quite specific anthropological perspective which focuses on the dignity of the man and on his unique position in the cosmos which he has been endowed with by his Creator” (271). The four features which Reichmuth identifies are: “Fusion of Knowledge”; “Prophetic Piety and Islamic Historicism”; “Man and his Dignity as Vicegerent of God: Knowledge and Experience”; and “Theodicy and the Manifestation of God’s Wisdom in Nature and Society”. A large section is devoted to the sources and references used by Zabīdī, listing 106 works from the second through sixth centuries of Islam and nine additional works which have not been identified. The richness of material provided by al-Zabīdī in his commentary is pointed out with specific examples along with Reichmuth’s commentary. “15 different definitions of knowledge (*ʿilm*) are presented by Zabīdī, with statements and opinions from several theologians and philosophers like Faxr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Sayyid al-Šarīf (al-Jurjānī) and al-Āmidī. He criticizes many circular definitions which presuppose a naïve congruence between knowledge and reality and which cannot distinguish between false and correct impressions and opinions” (314).

Given the paucity of studies on al-Zabīdī, this is a most welcome addition and one hopes that a second edition will correct the numerous spelling errors, remove glaring translation mistakes, and employ the services of a competent copyeditor so that the work can find its rightful place among studies of the luminaries of Islamic intellectual tradition.

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