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**Buchbesprechungen – Comptes Rendus –  
Book Reviews**



## Book Review

**Gruendler, Beatrice:** *The Rise of the Arabic Book*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-6749-8781-4.

Reviewed by **Letizia Osti**, Università degli Studi di Milano, Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature, Culture e Mediazioni, Milan, Italy, E-mail: letizia.osti@unimi.it. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7501-7654>

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It is all but commonplace to acknowledge the importance of paper and books in the development of pre-modern Arabic culture. Ground-breaking work by, for example, Pedersen, Touati, Schoeler, and Bloom (on the book, libraries, transmission of knowledge, and paper respectively) has paved the way for research in material and intellectual history that continues to yield exciting results—for instance, with studies on text reuse and the organization of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Beatrice Gruendler’s monograph offers a strong contribution to research on the history of the Arabic codex, exploiting its interdisciplinary nature to the full, and ensuring that, going forward, it will be part of the academic debate beyond the confines of medieval Arabic and Islamic studies.

A substantial introductory chapter is followed by four thematic ones, each devoted to a category of people connected to the book (scholars, poets, stationers, book owners and readers), investigating them through extended, contextualised case studies. This is an effective way of conveying the practicalities and development of book production and use; the author should be praised for not falling into the trap of plucking snippets of information from a variety of sources with little attention to chronology or geography—sadly, not an infrequent occurrence elsewhere. On the contrary, she anchors her discussion in a setting, early third/ninth century Iraq, which is universal in its specificity, providing the specialist with an erudite apparatus but, at the same time, making the volume accessible to experts in other periods and areas.

The key to this accessibility is that Gruendler’s rationale is based on a comparative observation: while Chinese culture took two whole centuries to accept the new technology, in the Arab world “resistance to the book—an attitude more often adopted for show than a reflection of reality—was surprisingly short-lived” (p. 7). This observation forms the basis of the book’s core questions: “Why did the Arabic paper codex gain acceptance so rapidly? How and by whom were books

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Pedersen 1984 (originally published in Danish in 1946); Bloom 2001; Touati 2003; Schoeler 2009 (and many other studies on the subject); Osti and Weaver 2020; Savant and Seydi 2021.

used and produced? What did the new medium mean to those who read and wrote, rewrote and excerpted, collected and compiled, or bought and sold books?” (p. 5). Some general answers are anticipated in the introductory chapter: paper arrived in Baghdad at a stage when Arabic culture was ready to exploit it—it had both a common systematised language and a large amount of literature, especially poetry, already in circulation through oral transmission. On its own, however, oral transmission had become inadequate to preserve the vast cultural production of the first Islamic centuries, hence the increasing importance of the written word. “The two essential ingredients, a common written language and a rich body of literature, were thus in place when the third ingredient, rag paper, became available in Baghdad at the end of the eighth century” (11).

After presenting the volume’s rationale, the Introduction continues as a chapter in its own right: Gruendler plunges into the details, describing the earliest extant books as well as their formats and materiality. She then proceeds to tell the story of the Arabic codex through snapshots of cultural life in third/ninth century Iraq.

Grammar, of course, is the foundation of that common language which Gruendler identifies as one of the causes for the success of the codex. Thus, it is not surprising that the first Chapter, “Scholars”, begins with the dispute between two philologists, al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 828) and Abū ‘Ubayda (d. ca. 822–828), whose clash over how to describe a horse represents a much more profound, fundamental debate raging in Baghdad and involving many scholars of the same generation: can a book be used as a source unmediated by a teacher? Can a scholar use somebody else’s written material as source? Does owning a book dispense a scholar from memorizing material by heart? Chapter Two, “Poets”, concentrates on the main source for philology, and on the evolving ways of disseminating it in writing at various stages of its production, such as individual notes, notebooks and, as finalized corpora, collections in the form of full-length books.

Chapters Three and Four are the most fascinating to this reader, as they explore the physicality of books not as a separate topic but on the same level as their contents and use. Thus, in Chapter Three we see stationers (Gruendler’s English rendering of *warrāqūn*) investigated through biographical collections and presented as flesh-and-blood individuals rather than nameless stock characters. Gruendler parses the profiles of the 68 stationers listed by al-Dhahabī as having died between 200 and 350 AH. She uses the data to investigate not only their professional specialisation, but also their own scholarly activity. She then integrates this information with accounts of specific cases: the stationer, she notes, was not a mere copyist and, as such, “had to have a basic understanding of the content of the books he reproduced” (p. 139).

Similarly, chapter Four, on “Book Owners and Readers”, integrates general information about libraries and book collectors with specific cases of book

commerce and book use. The final example, that of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, provides the opportunity to discuss the importance of format in the presentation of content. Focussing on this complex and influential work also allows the reader to see past the exceptionality of the Arabic book and to understand it in its wider context, as part of a global development process where translation was a crucial element.

For the book historian, then, this volume can be an access point to the Arabic codex and its crucial importance in book history. For the specialists in premodern Arabic and Islamic culture, it makes a convincing case for a more holistic reading of the sources, textual or otherwise, a reading which shows awareness that culture has an unavoidable physical element that may not be ignored.

Moreover, this book can be taught. All chapters, including the introduction, can by and large stand on their own and may be read independently. This is a great advantage for the classroom, as are the many examples and extended quotations throughout the volume, as this reader has already had the opportunity to experience.

My only real criticism is directed at the publisher rather than the author: it is a great pity that all the beautiful images are in black and white. While, of course, production costs are a valid concern, one may perhaps hope for a second edition in colour, or for a companion website.

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