

Arabic Conquests and Early Islamic Historiography: The *Futuh al-Buldan* of al-Baladhuri

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RYAN LYNCH

Ryan Lynch's *Arabic Conquests and Early Islamic Historiography: The Futuh al-Buldan of al-Baladhuri* offers a new analysis of the famous history *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān* (The Book of the Conquest of Lands) by the 3rd/9th century Abbasid scholar Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī (d. ca. 279/892). Lynch handles the source well, supporting his own close reading of the text with a wealth of references to offer nuanced insight into the purpose, context, and content of this seminal source on early Islamic governance. His core thesis is that Balādhurī composed this text as a handbook for the Abbasid court officials who had been struggling to balance the court budget, collect provincial taxes, and keep the imperial administrative system running in a politically-distraught time. Although Lynch's argument is not entirely new, his study, which is based on an admirably detailed analysis of Balādhurī's work, will most likely serve as the standard reference book in the field.

With a refreshingly simple structure, the book has six chapters, each of which analyzes a distinct dimension (manuscripts, context, sources,

content, genre and reception) of *Futūḥ al-buldān*. Chapter 1 presents a history of the text's extant manuscripts. Though Lynch builds off of existing studies of its manuscript history, he also fills in significant gaps, most notably by bringing attention to a manuscript which is likely the earliest extant version of the *Futūḥ* known today. Here Lynch manages to spotlight this manuscript while also offering perhaps the most comprehensive manuscript and publishing history of the text to date.

Chapter 2 focuses on Balādhurī's career and the contextual circumstances which may have influenced his work. Lynch provides a biography of Balādhurī with a particular attention to the broader military, economic, and political developments of the contemporary Abbasid court. Written in a time when the central administration was collapsing under the weight of an oversized military budget and decreasing revenues following the privatization of state-controlled lands, Balādhurī's *Futūḥ* focused on the triumphant early conquests of Islam and was thereby "preserving the memory of a unified caliphate; of a time before the upheaval and disintegration" (55). With these contextualizations, Lynch provides us with a convincing framework for understanding the intersection of Balādhurī's life and his scholarship.

In Chapter 3, Lynch analyzes the sources of *Futūḥ*, following in the footsteps of Sezgin and Fleischhammer by classifying the citation styles Balādhurī uses for different reports in his collection. Lynch also identifies Balādhurī's most commonly used sources, which includes famous scholars like Ibn Sa'd as well as relatively understudied figures like Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, bringing a greater appreciation to the latter's role in early Islamic historiography.

Chapter 4 surveys the content and themes of the *Futūḥ*, seeking to understand Balādhurī's intended goal for the text by analyzing his choices of inclusion and exclusion in collecting reports. Lynch identifies several key themes that Balādhurī consistently highlights in his curation, primary among these being discussions of the exact nature of the 7th century conquest settlements and the legal precedents they provide for 9th century administrative policies. Lynch observes that in forming this collection, Balādhurī leaves out a great body of narrative traditions that other early historians use to tell a more colorful story of the Islamic conquests. His

purpose, Lynch argues, was not providing a narrative of the conquests, but rather “ensuring that the administrators of the court handling the state’s finances were aware of what could and could not be expected of regions, as well as how tax law could and could not be applied” (117). Additionally, Lynch notices that Balādhuri’s curative choices propagate the image of a “unified and authoritative Islamic state of the past” by consistently excluding reports that portray caliphs in a negative light (15). This, Lynch argues, was meant to preserve the integrity of the caliphal office in a time when the caliph himself was becoming nothing more than a figurehead with only nominal control over the sprawling Abbasid empire.

Chapter 5 discusses the issue of classification and genre, arguing that Balādhuri’s text defies standard categorization and highlighting the flaws in any strict separation of genres, at least in this early period of Islamic historiography. Lynch compares the text to the field’s commonly used genres of “conquest literature (*futūḥ*), judicial texts on fiscal administration (*kharāj, amwāl*), geographical texts, and secretarial texts (bureaucratic/grammatical works)” and concludes that the *Futūḥ* does not exclusively belong to any one of these categories (16). Therefore, Lynch suggests, historians ought to reconsider the strict application of standard genre classifications on works of early Islamic historiography.

The final chapter studies the reception of the *Futūḥ* by charting instances where the work was quoted in six other historical texts. Lynch uses digital analysis to locate quotations from *Futūḥ al-buldān* in these texts, and concludes by the nature and volume of references to the *Futūḥ* that the work was held in high esteem by other Muslim scholars of the era. Lynch expands these conclusions beyond this one text to draw wider conclusions on the nature of citation in pre-modern Islamic historiography.

Over the course of this study, Lynch counters several long-standing generalizations about Balādhuri’s text, his aim as an author, and the nature of early Islamic historiography, especially regarding issues of genre, citation, and textual reuse. Such insights represent the fruits of a careful and nuanced reading of any historical text. However, in this same point of praise is my chief reservation, which is that Lynch’s work is a monograph dedicated solely to a text that has already been extensively studied. Studies like Lynch’s, skillful though they may be, beg the question: how

many fruitful insights can be gained from reanalyzing one famous text before the diminishing returns are no longer worth discussing? Lynch touches upon this in his introduction, arguing that “with our access to new sources of information – especially the material culture of much of the Middle East – unlikely to expand significantly in the near future, confronting the challenges of the surviving Arabic sources is more necessary than ever before” (3). But is this lack of new sources really a hard limit, or is it tied to a culture of training in which graduate students see projects like manuscript work or collection cataloging consistently take a back seat to the tried-and-true process of rehashing the major Arabic texts of the field? Elsewhere, in justifying his choice to focus on the *Futūḥ*, Lynch writes that “the availability of these texts in critical editions has heavily predisposed modern scholars...to look first to these texts before – if ever – turning their attentions to the huge amount of unedited and uncatalogued Arabic manuscripts which reside in collections around the world” (25). Such pragmatism may be necessary at the individual level, but that makes it no less disheartening to repeatedly see historians who are capable of complex manuscript study and who recognize the untapped potential of manuscript collections decline to focus their own work on this wealth of uncatalogued manuscripts. This field-wide critique cannot be levelled personally against Lynch or any other individual researcher, but this monograph on *Futūḥ* serves as an unnerving reminder of looming reckonings in the study of early Islamic historiography.

That being said, if famed texts *are* to be revisited, then Lynch’s work provides a strong example of how this can be done well. Given the prominent role of *Futūḥ* in the field of early Islamic history, his book will likely become a key reference for newcomers and experts alike. More specifically, Chapters 2 and 5 could fit nicely in an undergraduate syllabus on classical Islamic history, and the text in its entirety would be a useful source for graduate courses on Islamic historiography.

ALI CEBECI
PHD CANDIDATE, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC