

**Makram Abbès, Marie-Céline Isaïa (dir.), Liberté de parole. Les élites savantes et la critique des pouvoirs, Orient et Occident, VIII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Turnhout (Brepols) 2023, 445 p. (Bibliothèque d'histoire culturelle du Moyen Âge, 23), ISBN 978-2-503-59726-3, EUR 95,00.**

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*Parrhèsia*, translatable into English as »freedom of expression« or »speaking out« is a concept that recurs in many different cultures throughout the medieval period, drawing on a range of precedents from antiquity, whether classical or scriptural. In French, it becomes *liberté de parole*. In English, a phrase often used to express this idea is that of speaking truth to power. This solid volume offers eighteen separate studies illustrating how writers from various kinds of elite groups, whether learned, monastic, clerical, or simply professional, invoked this idea to challenge and persuade those in positions of power, to modify their policies, at the same time as reasserting their own influence within society. This is a volume that crosses a range of cultural traditions, in particular Latin, Greek, and Arabic. Given that most medievalists will claim expertise in only one of these major groupings, this collection will prove instructive to many in its presentation of unfamiliar literary and intellectual traditions. Makram Abbès, a specialist in Islamic political thought, and Marie-Céline Isaïa, who works on the intersection between Christian and Muslim cultures in the medieval period, are to be commended for introducing such cultural diversity to their readers. In two opening studies, one by Michel Senellart on the Christian concept of *parrhèsia* from a 1929 essay by Erik Peterson to Foucault, the other by Isaïa, it is demonstrated that this phenomenon of speaking out is preserved in many different cultures, albeit in a variety of ways. Within the Latin tradition, there is no exact equivalent to the Greek term, but it certainly was manifest within a prophetic tradition, paradigmatically for Christians in the figure of John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness. Inevitably there is a tendency in each of the subsequent papers within this volume to get immersed in the scholarly detail of one or other cultural group or situation. Nonetheless, the process of scanning across cultures serves to alert those more familiar with the Latin tradition of the complexity and sophistication of both Greek Christian and Islamic writers in the medieval period. The editors divide the volume into three sections (on *porte-paroles*, *communications* and *politiques*), taking care to examine a variety of cultural traditions within each category.

The first of the more specific studies presented here is that of Makram Abbès on the influence of an Arabic translation from the eighth century CE of *Kalila and Dimna*, a story originally recorded



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in Sanskrit and then put into Middle Persian, about two humanised jackals serving in the court of a king, the lion. This is a story with many equivalents in different cultures across Asia. Abbès shows how the genre of a fable can provide a sophisticated manual of advice about governance, drawing in varying degrees on stories about ancient philosophers and rulers. Although not a specific focus in any of the chapters in this volume, the treatise translated into Latin as the *Secretum secretorum*, reportedly letters of Aristotle to Alexander, is one other such text that crossed into a number of different linguistic traditions. Louise Marlow reflects on mirrors of princes within the Persian Samanid dynasty during the tenth and eleventh centuries. There are a number of other papers in this volume that introduce gems of Arabic literature that deserve to be better known. One of these is by Mohamed Ben Mansour on the vitality of poetry in the Abbasid period (the eighth and ninth centuries CE), in which the power and prestige of rulers was made manifest by their patronage of sometimes outspoken voices, who might both question and celebrate the actions of those in power. He shows how easy it was for invective to move into flattery. A similar theme emerges in an essay by Nequin Yavari about the so-called »liberal« and progressive tendencies within eleventh-century Ash'arite thought, generated in criticism of Seljuk authority. Her study warns against facile adoption of slogans about rationalist Islam, without recognition of the political context in which such great thinkers (like al-Ghazzālī) emerged. Vanessa van Renterghem explores the prolix preaching in Baghdad of Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 1201), much concerned with the justice, but delivered in a way that helped support the prestige of the caliph. Olivier Brisville-Fertin offers a not dissimilar perspective, but in relation to a later period, namely Islamic writing in Iberia during the period of Christian expansion. The example of the wise sage advising the ruler never went out of fashion.

The volume includes a number of studies relating to the Byzantine and Eastern Christian world. In his study of Theodore the Studite, Vincent Déroche makes clear that Theodore was an outspoken monastic critic of both the Emperor and ecclesiastics upholding the iconoclast position. His outspoken criticisms suggest that he saw charisma as more powerful than ecclesiastical canons in challenging authority. Nonetheless, they manifest a rigidity that cannot be denied. The paper of João Vicente de Medeiros Publio Dias explores criticism and self-representation in the diatribes of another outspoken monk, John the Oxite, directed against Alexios I Komnenos. This is a text not widely known outside Byzantinist circles. While Alexios might be known through Anna Comnena's *Alexiad*, we learn that Byzantine elites in the late eleventh century were then just as divided as those in the Latin West. Rosa Benoit-Meggenis offers a more wide-ranging study of monastic writing between the ninth and thirteenth century showing how rhetorical criticisms of abuse could serve the interests of imperial authority by showing their theoretical willingness to listen to the voice of God. Another culture where similar themes evolved was in the Armenian kingdom, where Benjamin Bourgeois considers the writing of George of Skevra, a thirteenth-century monk, who

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adopted the mantle of a prophet in criticisms of the Armenian ruler, Het'um II.

The editors also offer a range of studies relating to the Latin West between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, similarly placed within one or other of the three guiding subthemes to the volume. Thus Warren Pezé looks at writing about power from early in the reign of Charles the Bald in the mid-ninth century, adding translations of various capitularies from this period. He shows how such criticism was integral to an evolving contractual arrangement between the king and the leading elites of his realm, both noble and clerical. Giacomo Vignodelli offers a rich study of the unjustly overlooked writing of tenth-century satirists, in particular of Rather of Verona and Atto of Vercelli. Their own allusive way of speaking out was shaped by their reading of classical authors, including Juvenal and Horace. Writers became bolder in the eleventh century, with a greater debt to scriptural and monastic precedent, as evident in Leidulf Melve's essay about the period of the investiture crisis. Peter Damian provided a precedent for such speaking out, taken up further by Gebhard of Salzburg, Wenrich of Trier, and Bernold of Constance. In the twelfth century, classical and scriptural inspirations blended seamlessly in the writing of Peter of Blois about the court of Henry II, as shown by Maité Billoré. She includes a translation into French of a fascinating imagined dialogue between Henry II and the abbot of Bonneval, as imagined by Peter of Blois. By the thirteenth century, the art of speaking out became particularly linked to the Franciscan Order, as shown by Gisèle Besson in relation to the diatribes of Salimbene de Adam in his *Chronicon*. She argues that while famous for directing invective against abuse of power by Frederick II and others in the Church, he still supports the established social order, while rebuking those he sees as betraying its values.

Anyone reading through this volume will find themselves crossing a wide range of political, intellectual, and religious traditions. Yet this is also its value, of making us aware that medieval culture is much more internally diverse than commonly imagined. In a concluding essay, Benoît Grévin and Annick Peters-Custot offer a most stimulating discussion of the different ways and frameworks in which *parrhèsia* or freedom of expression can become manifest. While they observe its common contemporary manifestation tends to be couched in the rhetoric of democracy, theologically structured cultures also have their own accepted ways of speaking out through prophecy, just as in classical antiquity the philosopher was perceived as potentially able to speak truth to power. They, along with all the contributors to this volume, are to be congratulated for collectively broadening the framework of our vision.

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