

Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/BSO>

Additional services for *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



M. ISMAIL MARCINKOWSKI: From Isfahan to Ayutthaya. (Contemporary Islamic Scholars Series.) xiv, 121 pp. Singapore: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd, 2005. £40.

GEORGE LANE

Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 69 / Issue 02 / June 2006, pp 327 - 329

DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X06270149, Published online: 06 June 2006

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0041977X06270149

How to cite this article:

GEORGE LANE (2006). Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 69, pp 327-329 doi:10.1017/S0041977X06270149

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

from the perspective of a modern sceptical attitude towards religion which might distort the content of the Sufi treatise. A pessimistic view of the world has always been part of certain strands of Sufism which stress the necessary renunciation of the world as part of the mystical journey. The final resolution offered by the Prophet Muhammad is not just an appeasement of orthodoxy but expresses the Sufi understanding of divine realization which occurs in the moment of introspection, as illustrated in *The Conference of the Birds*, for example. Kermani, one might argue, turns 'Attar into a sceptical humanist by viewing him from the lenses of post-Enlightenment philosophical discourse on theodicy. Regardless of these possible misapprehensions, Kermani's book is both important and timely as it illustrates the familiarity of religious and philosophical discourses in various cultures and thereby counters increasingly common notions of an inevitable clash of civilizations.

OLIVER SCHARBRODT

M. ISMAIL MARCINKOWSKI:

From Isfahan to Ayutthaya.

(Contemporary Islamic Scholars Series.) xiv, 121 pp. Singapore: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd, 2005. £40.

One of the by-products of Marcinkowski's many years at Kuala Lumpur's International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation [ISTAC] was an interest in Thailand which eventually led to his academic research into contacts between the old Thai capital at Ayutthaya and the Safavid court of Isfahan in the medieval period. Marcinkowski has already produced an annotated translation and analysis of the Safavid manual of administration, the *Dastūr al-Malūk*, and his intimate knowledge of the Safavids is evident in this current book on the Persian delegation to the Siamese court and role of the mysterious Shaykh Ahmad and the Iranian community of Ayutthaya in the seventeenth century. Marcinkowski's study is based on the official report of an embassy to Siam written by Ibn Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, a scribe in an envoy sent to the Siamese capital by the Safavid Shah Sulayman. The envoy was one of many which flocked to Ayutthaya at this time, and it is their intrigues and machinations which the Persian scribe observed and recorded in his notes. Today the report is better known as the *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī* (Tehran, 1999), translated into English as *The Ship of Sulayman* (New York: John O'Kane, 1972). Marcinkowski's book, however, is more than just an account of the *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī*, a study of which he delivered in a paper presented at the International Conference on Iran and the World in the Safavid Age held at SOAS on 6–8 September, 2002. *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya* explores contacts and relations between Iran and Siam in the seventeenth century and diplomatic and economic activity generated by the Safavid administration and the Siamese authorities based in Ayutthaya from the middle ages onwards. In fact Persians played a significant role in Siamese life for some centuries, and even before the arrival of the Safavid envoy were involved in the political and commercial affairs of Ayutthaya. In his introduction to Marcinkowski's book, Ehsan Yarshater claims that descendants of those medieval Safavid Persians still hold distinguished positions in present-day Thailand. He applauds Marcinkowski's study for bringing to light the 'by no means marginal Iranian–Siamese connection' and focusing the attention of a wider circle of readers and scholars on a neglected area of academic interest.

The *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī* was written by the embassy's secretary Moḥammad Rabī' b. Moḥammad Ibrāhīm, known generally as Ibn Moḥammad Ibrāhīm, and constitutes one of the most important primary sources for the study of the history of the reign of King Narai of Siam. It consists of four chapters referred to as *tuhfah*, 'rare objects given as gifts', which O'Kane has translated as jewels. The text is written in a highly embellished style interspersed with quranic verses and quotations from Persian poets, including a number of poetical compositions which are the work of the author Ibn Moḥammad Ibrāhīm himself. The book identifies its author by name and informs its readers that he was a scribe to the contingent of the *tufangchī* corps, or royal musketeers (p. 20) and continues with a passage in exaggerated praise of the Safavid Shah, Sulaymān. Ibn Moḥammad Ibrāhīm evidently held the Siamese king, Narai, in high esteem, though he admits that cultural misunderstandings and a lack of familiarity with Siamese protocol caused some problems in the relationship between the hosts and their foreign guests. The author explains that this embassy, for which he acts as the official scribe, was sent in response to a Siamese embassy to Iran in 1682 headed by an Iranian, Ḥājji Salīm, a representative of the Siamese king and former ambassador. Interestingly, when the party stopped on their sea journey to Siam at Mergui in modern-day Burma, the author mentions that the governor of the Siamese province was an Iranian, Moḥammad Ṣādiq. Ḥājji Salīm had a good command of the Siamese language and was charged with introducing and explaining aspects of the local culture to King Narai's Persian guests.

The first chapter of the *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī* recounts the sea journey from the Persian port of Bander Abbas to India and the adventures, hardships and people the envoy encountered on the journey. The second 'jewel' details the journey from India to the Siamese port of Tanāsuri, in modern-day Burma, the initial contacts with the Siamese welcoming parties and the reception the Iranians received. The third 'jewel' concentrates on the state of the Siamese kingdom, with an explanation of the term *Shahr-i-Nāv*, the name by which the country and its capital, Ayutthya, were known. As well as interior affairs this chapter gives an account of the conflict between Siam and neighbouring Pegu. The final 'jewel' is concerned with some of Siam's neighbours—the Spanish-dominated Philippines, Indonesia, China, and even Japan, but for the most part the information is derived from hearsay. In addition Ibn Moḥammad Ibrāhīm includes his observations on Siamese flora and fauna, and his rather fanciful views on the effects of the tides on the land. The author includes a detailed appendix on the Mughal conquest of Haydarabad ruled by the Shiite Qubtshahs. The final report concerns the escape of the Mughal prince Akbar to the court of Iran in 1682. The author provides useful information about the collapse of the southern Indian Shiite kingdoms in the face of the Mughal irruption, since he had travelled through the region shortly after that time.

What makes the period covered by *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī* of particular interest is that, unlike the situation after the Burmese invasion of 1767, the majority of the Muslims domiciled within Siam were Shiite, many of them with links with Iran. Siam lost all contact with Iran and the Shiite states of the Indian sub-continent after the demise of King Narai. This can be attributed to three main causes: first the collapse of the Safavid administration in 1722 and the devastation of Isfahan in the aftermath of the Afghan invasion; second, almost mirroring events in Iran, the destruction of Ayutthya by the Burmese in 1767; and the activities of the Greek Phaulkon whose influence was particularly strong towards the end of the reign of King Narai. Though relations with Iran were effectively severed after the reign of King Narai, the descendants of the mysterious Shaykh Aḥmad remained influential until the

twentieth century. This is a neglected period of history and the *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī* is a rich and absorbing source key to seventeenth-century Siam. Marcinkowski's timely study serves as an excellent introduction to both this period of history and to the *Safīneh-ye-Sulaymānī*.

GEORGE LANE

CENTRAL ASIA

MICHAL BIRAN:

The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World.

(Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization.) xvi, 279 pp.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. £45.

Though the Qara Khitai or Western Liao have attracted a certain amount of research over the years, it is a great pleasure to welcome the first monograph in English devoted entirely to their history and culture. The topic calls for a rare combination of skills both in Chinese and Muslim sources and in the related scholarship in a number of languages that very much calls to mind the golden age of Pelliot—though like Pelliot, the author does not seem at home with Japanese, and so the publications of scholars like Haneda or more recently Nagasawa that touch upon her topic are not amongst those laid under contribution. Even so, the results are impressive, and this volume is surely bound to remain a key work on the Western Liao for many years to come. Given the nature of the sources, there are, no doubt, many points on which future readers may find cause to quibble. On the religious composition of the empire it is of course only right to note (p. 180) Waley's reservations over the observation by the Daoist leader Qiu Chuji that there were Daoist priests to be found in its former territories shortly after its demise, but his rather tentative suggestion that they were actually Manichaeans is by no means supported by more recent research (cf. p. 175, and the recent work of T. Moriyasu), and it is of course unfortunate that Waley's name is misprinted both here and in the bibliography. The criticism of the sixth volume of the *Cambridge History of China* on p. 131, for stating that 'Western Liao history is associated with Central Asia not China' also appears to this reviewer a little captious. In context this remark is not made as a blanket statement about the nature of the regime—the Chinese elements of which are certainly very well brought out by Biran's study—but about its political and military interaction with its neighbours. In this respect Biran's research largely confirms the notion that any efforts made by its leaders to re-establish themselves in East Asia were of little significance compared with their interaction with the Islamic world.

But while quibbling and counter-quibbling is an agreeable academic pastime, it should not distract us from the very real contribution that this volume makes not simply to the history of the twelfth century but also to larger issues in Eurasian history. The Western Liao was essentially a refugee regime that had upped sticks and moved from East to Central Asia following the defeat of its parent regime at the hands of Jurchen conquerors. Such a relocation of a basically sedentary or semi-sedentary polity was a somewhat unusual event in the west of Eurasia during this period—one thinks of Little Armenia at the time of the Crusades, but by and large the experience in late antiquity of mobile regimes like that of the Vandals has probably disposed us to take a dim