Sonja Brentjes and Jürgen Renn, eds., *Globalization of Knowledge in the Post-Antique Mediterranean, 700–1500*. London: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 242. £120.00 (cloth).

This volume brings together a series of essays that focus on how knowledge was exchanged, received, and transformed in the postclassical world, that is, 700–1500 CE. The title of the work directs us to the Mediterranean, but in reality the scope of the book reflects a much larger territory, also encompassing West Asia, North Africa, and Arabia, areas that were all connected through long-distance trade and scientific, cultural, and intellectual cross-fertilization. Knowledge was transmitted in physical form, in carriers such as dictionaries, scholarly manuscripts, and entertaining literary texts, as well as in legends, legal practice, and cultural memory. In their various case studies, the contributors approach the topic of knowledge exchange in different ways, some adopting an extended diachronic focus starting in antiquity (Niehoff-Panagiotidis, Akasoy, Brentjes and Renn), and some focusing on long-distance connections within the same period in different cultural spheres (Burnett, Fancy).

Brentjes and Renn's chapter on Thābit ibn Qurra's thought in the field of the balance shows the connections over time between Greek learning, Arabic innovations, and their reception in the European Renaissance. Such long-distance and long-term connections may be broadly known, but, as the authors show, they can be understood better when looking at very diverse factors such as the ideological significance of the translation movement, the inclusion of mechanics into the Aristotelian framework in the Islamicate world, the practical need for balances, the accidental survival of fragments of certain Greek texts and not others, and the religious and ethical value of the metaphor of the scales. All these factors played a role in scholarly developments over the centuries and deserve to be studied on a micro level, without losing sight of the broader developments in centuries of knowledge production.

Ansari and Schmidtke describe how the Zaydi Shiis (followers of the fifth Imam, Zayd) founded their communities in northern Iran and northern Yemen and how knowledge was transferred between the two areas. The scholars who traveled to Yemen brought numerous works with them, including non-Zaydi writings, and many of them survive in Yemen to this day and await further study. How this knowledge was transformed and gave rise to new intellectual trends in Yemen is still to be mapped in greater detail. This is why the authors end their discussion with useful methodological considerations for future research into the Zaydi Yemeni heritage, for which a wide range of sources are still to be studied systematically.

An example of a study with a more local focus is Gruendler's essay, which provides fascinating insights into Baghdadi book culture in the period after the arrival of paper. In remarkable detail, she describes the intensification in the distribution of knowledge and concomitant cultural changes that were caused by the "book revolution," which caused a cultural change that allowed a new middle class to acquire religious and literary knowledge that in turn stimulated the production of new works.

Despite its monumental title, "From One Universal Historiography to the Other: The Reorientation of Ancient Historiography in Byzantium and Its Reception in Arabic—the Islamic Organization of Written Memory," the chapter by Johannes Niehoff-Panagiotidis is disappointing and fails to live up to its promise to "put the *sīra* into a late antique setting." In rather imprecise prose with quite a few factual errors, the author shows he is not up to the task of leading us from antique historiography all the way to the Islamic period. The apparent paucity of his knowledge of early Islam leads him to refer to a few major studies collectively in one footnote (23 n. 69) without engaging with their findings, and omitting the groundbreaking work of Robert Hoyland and Sean Anthony. He proceeds with irrelevant and bizarre details such as that the word for a short historical anecdote, *khabar*, is related to the Hebrew word for *friend*. Some statements are incomprehensible, such as that since Ṭabarī's exegesis of the Qur'an is verse by verse, "this is the reason (?) why the structure of the Arabic Islamic material is the same in his great history" (24). Whereas most of the chapter suggests that there are few connections between Islamic historiography and Byzantine or early Christian historiography, Niehoff-Panagiotidis presents Wahb ibn Munabbih at the very end and claims, surprisingly, that this south Arabian storyteller of Jewish descent might somehow form a link to Byzantine historiography.

The last chapter of the book, by Anna Akasoy, is the only one in which the author presents the topic in a methodological framework of inquiry. Her case study is a massive topic: the Alexander Legend in its many guises, in particular the "Islamic Alexander." The legend features in the Qur'an and later Islamic literature, in which Alexander becomes a Yemeni ruler with prophetic features or an Iranian hero. Akasoy gives brief introductions to these transformations of Alexander, but she is more interested in asking to what extent "religion" can be defined as a meaningful concept and as a tool to understand the metamorphosis of Alexander in the Islamic world. She questions the validity and usefulness of contrasting "religious" with "secular" and adopts Volkhard Krech's definition of religion to argue that, apart from other relevant aspects, the Alexander Legend had a religious appeal. We may ask, however, whether the horse is not put behind the cart when a definition of a concept, that is, "religion," is forced to fit one particular example, that is, this legend. The somewhat narrow discussion also does not seem to do justice to what is, in fact, a bafflingly complex cultural product that defies

comparison and by its very nature invites us to approach it from political, religious, legendary, literary, scientific, and philosophical angles.

Let me expand this point to the book as a whole. The editors present a neatly workable definition of "knowledge" in the introduction, but none of the contributors apply this definition in their research. This is understandable, because the processes of knowledge transfer that each of them describe are the result of a bewildering amount of factors and are very context-specific. How one should apply broad definitions and concepts to seemingly unique episodes in human history needs more discussion before historians will be able to produce models of knowledge exchange. This does not alter the fact that, in and of themselves, most of the book's chapters contain fascinating research that thrives on the integration of various academic disciplines.

Barbara Roggema

Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Arts.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 386. $115.00.

In a seminal essay of 1971, the late Roy Sieber—now considered the father of Africanist art histories—called for African arts to be understood according to their creators' "sensible and spiritual goals" rather than appreciated via twentieth-century modernist Western taste (in C. Jopling, ed., *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies* [New York: Dutton, 1971], 127–28; cited by Abiodun on 249). Enough already of Picasso's attraction to African materials as being "all" one needs to know about such expression! Rowland Abiodun takes up this gauntlet with aplomb as someone of Yoruba heritage who has participated in Yoruba artistic practices even as he has studied, written, and taught about them for decades. He is especially well-placed to "seek the Yoruba in Yoruba arts," that is, to paraphrase the subtitle of his brilliant monograph.

In gently assertive ways, Abiodun introduces his stance by comparing Michelangelo's turn-of-the-sixteenth-century *David* with a four-centuries-later Yoruba figure of a deceased twin (2–3). He demonstrates that each reflects aesthetic values of its culture-of-creation, and how absurd it would be to apply such criteria in either direction. Instead, Yoruba visual and performance arts must be situated in an epistemology made manifest through a narrative (and sometimes tonally drummed) idiom called *oríkì*. As an example of the author's larger point, it would be easy enough to define *oríkì* through the Greek-derived term *panegyric*, for among its purposes is to praise and remember those who have achieved grandeur according to Yoruba estimations. Doing so, though, would obscure