

Review of Kristina Richardson, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* (I.B. Tauris, 2022)

The title of this book is deceptive. It is not primarily about Roma, but about the Banū Sāsān, “the Sons of Sasan,” a term used in the medieval Islamic world to denote a constellation of people often associated with irreputable activities such as begging, robbery, and charlatanry, and mythologized as descendants of the pre-Islamic Sasanian emperors of Iran. The received view on the Banū Sāsān, largely indebted to Clifford Bosworth, is that they included individuals from most ethnic groups in the Middle East, and spoke an argot based on Arabic with loan-words from Persian, Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Akkadian. In line with the consensus, Richardson initially describes the Banū Sāsān as a “tribal confederation”: a “multiethnic, multiconfessional group” (15) that largely followed peripatetic occupations as diviners, preachers, astrologers, herbalists, entertainers, or beggars. In contrast with previous work, she presents the Banū Sāsān not simply as marginal outcasts but as central culture brokers, whose influence stemmed precisely from leveraging their minority status and itinerant way of life. Richardson presents original research on the group’s language, Sīn (ch. 2), demonstrating that it is a proper mixed-language rather than mere argot (see the impressive glossary in appendix 1); on the group’s previously overlooked literary culture (ch. 3); and on its habitation and settlement practices (ch. 4). These chapters challenge stereotypes of Banū Sāsān illiteracy, nomadism, and roguery. The real highlight comes in chapters five and six, which propose that the Banū Sāsān had an important impact on medieval Islamic book culture. Richardson argues that the Banū Sāsān developed a new genre of illustrated Shī‘i astrological books, called Bulhāns, which had considerable influence not only on astrology but also on the development of monumental book painting (84ff). In chapter six, she argues that Banū Sāsān astrologers were key players in the use and spread of blockprinting technology, which they used to mass-produce amulets and talismans, as well as pilgrimage certificates. The way that Richardson redraws the map of Islamic print culture exemplifies the originality of her approach: Written testimony of blockprinting is contextualized by discussions of the material culture of printing, transnational technology transfers, the economic niches of Banū Sāsān and other religious and ethnic minorities, as well as philological arguments based on Richardson’s knowledge of Sīn.

This is groundbreaking work on the Banū Sāsān, but what does it have to do with the Roma? Richardson tells us (18-21) that by the late thirteenth century, the Banū Sāsān became known as *ghurabā’* (“strangers”). Such a generic term obviously knew many uses, and one wishes that Richardson spent more time untangling them. One use was as an imprecise ethnonym functioning much like the English term “gypsies” once did. It is the first clue to the Roma in the title: The book’s topic was originally “*Gypsies in the Medieval Islamic World*” (cf. 11), and it still appears under this title in a number of online book sellers’ catalogues. Unfortunately, the title appears to have been changed hastily, without reworking the manuscript sufficiently to make a coherent argument about Roma rather than generic “gypsies.”

The book does present a set of arguments that involve the Roma, primarily in the introduction and chapters 1 and 7. These provide a frame narrative to the core studies on the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā’*. The first of these arguments, which greets the reader on the opening pages, is mindboggling. In an attempt to show “How the *Ghurabā’* Fell Out of History,” the main target is not the biases of medieval Middle Eastern historiography, but, surprisingly,

post-war Roma activists. Their sin, apparently, was to make the “gypsies” of Richardson’s original book title a politically incorrect term. She writes that the “name change” from “Gypsy” to “Roma” has been the most influential achievement of Roma activism, and laments that this change “flattens differences” and “presents certain challenges for specialists” (11). Since Banū Sāsān used to be called gypsies but are not considered Roma, they have become invisible, the argument goes. Richardson chose “a capitulation” to “the most recognizable term for contemporary readers;” but treating “Roma” as simply a less offensive word for “gypsy,” rather than as a specific, though contested ethnonym for a number of related minorities in Europe and beyond, is also a capitulation to gypsylorism under a new name.

A proper critical discussion of the category “Roma” would have been a good idea, not least in order to clarify Richardson’s own work with the term. But that is not what we get. Instead, the introduction charges unnamed and unspecified Roma activists of racism for wanting to defend their chosen ethnonym. We read that “the Roma reinforced racial pseudoscience to represent themselves before European publics as a racialized nation” (9). Richardson presents the Nuremberg Laws’ definitions of who were and were not a “gypsy” (*Zigeuner*) in Nazi Germany before asserting, without any argumentation whatsoever, that nameless “Roma activists adopted wholesale the racial criteria of the Nazi regime and began redefining themselves as a nonterritorial nation” (11). Sadly, these are gross and tendentious mischaracterizations of the Romani struggle for rights and reparations following the Roma holocaust.

Having dismissed contemporary constructs of Roma by associating them with “Nazi German racial classifications,” chapter one, surprisingly, argues for connections between the Banū Sāsān and the Roma in part on genetic grounds. The Banū Sāsān is inscribed in “premodern Romani history” by connection with the Zutt, apparently accepting the now overturned consensus of nineteenth-century gypsologists like Charles G. Leland (1887) or Michael de Goeje (1903) that the Zutt, thought to descend from the Jhāt tribes of north-western India, constitute the ancestor population of the Roma, Dom, and Lom peoples alike (all labelled “gypsies” in Orientalist literature). Richardson provides some evidence that the multi-ethnic Banū Sāsān also included some Zutt people (27-28), and references one single medical-genetic study purportedly indicating a relation between contemporary Pakistani Jat and Roma to support her case. Ethnicity now appears directly linked to genetics. Even if we were to accept that premise (which we should not), more up-to-date DNA surveys on the South-Asian ancestor populations of the Roma do not support a strict Jhāt connection, and emphasize admixture events that are not easily squared with the narrative provided here. In Richardson’s narrative the supposed (proto-)Roma essence of the Zutt/Jhāt rubs off on the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā*’ as a whole, who go from “multi-ethnic” in the beginning of the book to having “consisted of Roma and Roma-adjacent groups” in later chapters (e.g. 69). Similar conceptual slips throughout the book make it hard to understand who are and are not Roma in Richardson’s narrative, and why that is important.

The connection to Romani history is more straight-forward and relevant in the final chapter. Here Richardson argues that the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā*, via the early-fifteenth-century arrivals now thought to have been Roma, may have brought blockprinting technology to Europe and helped foster the European print revolution. The argument is speculative, as Richardson herself admits (127). We have no evidence that the people from “Little Egypt” had this technology, and we cannot (yet) explicitly link them to milieus, such as monastic ones, that did adopt blockprinting in Europe at this time. It is also worth noting that Richardson builds her argument on questioning whether these early immigrants really were all Roma, or in fact included Muslim and Sīn speaking Banū Sāsān (now once more distinct from Roma) who could have carried the technology (135).

While inconclusive, Richardson's open questioning of often-quoted sources in this chapter is refreshing. It is for example true that the letters of safe conduct from king Sigismund under which the early Roma travelled as pilgrims affords reading them as converts from Islam – or at least as having returned to Christianity after a short spell of having been Muslim. This clue does deserve more attention than Romani historiography tends to give it. That they appear to have followed pilgrimage routes in central Europe likewise deserves more attention, for example by searching for contacts with mendicant orders that may have left traces in monasteries (136-137).

The persistent search for links of cultural diffusion does however come with dangers of its own. We see this clearly in an appendix arguing that the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā*, via the Roma, carried divination by tarot cards to Europe. Based on etymological speculations about Sīn and Arabic words that phonetically sound a little like *tarocchi*, and on the *ghurabā*'s "strong reputation for occult expertise," Richardson holds this thesis of diffusion to be "a plausible one" (160). The problem is that we know quite a lot more about the history of tarot than Richardson lets on, and it contradicts her thesis. Tarot developed in northern Italy from Mamluk playing cards, and for the first three centuries of its existence appears to have been used exclusively as a card game. We have no evidence that the cards were used for divination or other occult purposes until the late eighteenth century. Richardson's narrative of the tarot is in fact far from new: it was already concocted by nineteenth-century French occultists who exoticized "gypsies" as carriers of ancient "magic," and is still present in tarot lore. We should not fall into the trap of continuing this exoticization.

Roma in the Medieval Islamic World is an uneven and above all astonishingly mistitled work. It contains an original and quite brilliant study of the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā*, which is likely to be of interest to scholars of West-Asian cultural history. With more patient editing, rewriting of central passages, and an up-to-date engagement with critical Romani studies it could also have been a valuable contribution to the subject signaled by its title. As it stands, however, the book's unfinished and sometimes irresponsible engagements with Romani studies in key passages instead risk perpetuating old myths about the Roma as well as introducing new ones.

Egil Asprem
Stockholm University