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Book Review:

“The Druze Emir in Renaissance Europe,” Review of Gorton, Ted J., *Renaissance Emir: A Druze Warlord at the Court of the Medici*, Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-56656-963-7

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Ted J. Gorton, a leading expert on the history and culture of the Levant, offers in this book a solid and well-documented biography of the Druze emir Fakhr ad-Din Ma'n, one of the most intriguing figures of the Early Modern Levant and of the wider Mediterranean and Renaissance Europe, by virtue of his unique trajectory.

A descendant of a princely Druze family from Mount Lebanon, Fakhr ad-Din assumed leadership of his domain toward the end of the sixteenth century, as a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, ruling over territory that stretched across what is today Lebanon, Israel, and Syria. In the early seventeenth century—like many others in that period—he rebelled against the Ottoman authority yet managed to avoid the worst consequences and eventually obtained the sultan's pardon. Renewed tensions, however, forced him to flee to Europe in 1613. After roughly five years in exile, two of which were spent in Medici Tuscany, he returned under another Ottoman amnesty and ruled for nearly two decades, in a period described as one of remarkable prosperity. His life ended abruptly in 1635, when Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623–1640), unwilling to tolerate a former rebel who might rise again, ordered his arrest and execution in Constantinople.

Divided into twelve chapters, the book's structure ensures that no aspect of the emir's life is treated superficially. This is particularly valuable in the opening chapters, which establish the essential background: the origins of Fakhr ad-Din and his family (Ch. 1), the Druze community to which he belonged and that is still largely unknown to Western readers (Ch. 2), and the geopolitical landscape of the Levant between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Ch. 3). These sections not only provide the essential framework for understanding the broader historical context of his life, but they also guide the reader toward a more evident appreciation of Druze culture, particularly the second chapter. They highlight its origins and distinctive features, which led Europeans of the period—alongside many other scholars worldwide—to regard the Druzes as a peculiar "sect". Although this is not the appropriate place for an extensive discussion of the Druzes—whether they were, as many believed and as Fakhr al-Dīn himself maintained to legitimize his claims in the eyes of Christendom—descendants of the first Crusaders or rather a Muslim sect, it is nonetheless helpful to bear in mind that Fakhr al-Dīn was a Druze. This consideration may illuminate certain aspects of his life; not so much his diplomatic conduct, which was shaped by pragmatic principles of real-politik, but somewhat his social background and the authority he wielded within the Druze community.

A substantial portion of the book (Ch. 4–7) focuses on Fakhr ad-Din's stay in Tuscany, at the court of Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici (r. 1609–1621). This episode exemplifies the encounter between an "Oriental" ruler and Christian Europe, and here it is conventionally framed as a moment of "discovery of the Other." Yet Early Modern Europe was far from unfamiliar with Muslims or "Orientals:" many of them were enslaved people captured by Christian corsairs, or were converts, while others served as intermediaries, go-betweens, or dragomans active in European ports and courts. Fakhr ad-Din, however, was a reigning prince, belonging to a distinct social sphere that was part of a shared courtly culture across the broad Mediterranean world, transcending religious and linguistic boundaries. However, moments of cultural misunderstanding or fascination were not absent, as shown by Fakhr ad-Din's exposure to Florentine carnival (85–86) or his contact with the Medici banking world (94–95)—episodes of striking historical interest also documented by contemporary Levantine sources. Yet the emir adapted quickly to European customs, just as European courts readily integrated their "Oriental" guest, showing that the encounter with the "Other" did not necessarily imply mutual incomprehension or incommensurability. Indeed, in his proposals to Catholic rulers for reclaiming Jerusalem (Ch. 8), Fakhr ad-Din even appears to have entertained the idea of promoting a new Crusade (115–117)—a Western concept already obsolete, according to the author, yet still resonant in Catholic states like Tuscany, which invoked the fight against the infidels to justify their aggressive policies in the Levant, as highlighted by Géraud Poumarède (2009). It is unlikely, however, that this reference to crusading ideals indicates, as Gorton suggests, an inability to grasp the political realities of his time (177). More plausibly, it was a calculated strategy to secure European support for the recovery of his domains. Invoking a higher cause such as the liberation of the Holy City could—in the Catholic sovereigns' perspective—conveniently mask more pragmatic objectives, including privileged access to Levantine trade routes.

Only one chapter (Ch. 9) addresses the emir's remaining years in Europe, while the final section (Ch. 10–11) provides a detailed account of the last phase of his rule. Particularly noteworthy is the concluding twelfth chapter, which explores the legacy of Fakhr al-Dīn's career. This inheritance has been interpreted in various ways, including through the lens of modern politics and what we would now describe as nation-building. This is especially evident in modern Lebanese historiography, which regards his rule as a crucial period in the laying of the foundations of modern Lebanon. Nevertheless, it may be more accurate to argue that his primary

contribution lay in strengthening the collective identity of the Druze community and, in a certain sense, in legitimizing their presence in the Levant, where they remain dispersed today.

If the book has a potential, albeit minor, weakness, it lies in prose, which is not consistently academic in tone—though this contributes to its readability. Indeed, Gorton's style remains both engaging and rigorous, demonstrating clarity of exposition, precision in historical reconstruction, and the use of a scientific bibliography that, while not always exhaustive, is more than sufficient to sustain the argument. The author's literary sensibility enhances the narrative without compromising scholarly integrity.

The title appears designed to attract readers fascinated by the Renaissance and the Medici court, effectively inviting them to discover a figure who navigated cultural, religious, and political boundaries with remarkable skill. However, labelling Fakhr ad-Din as "Renaissance" may reflect a Western interpretive framework imposed retrospectively—a notion that, as Gorton rightly observes in his prologue, would have been foreign to the emir himself (xiii), as such categories serve more as analytical tools for modern readers rather than reflections of Early Modern self-perception.

While some interpretive nuances may invite debate, they do not diminish the overall strength of Gorton's reconstruction. On the contrary, they reveal both the complexity of the subject and the author's critical engagement with it. The result is a biography that constitutes a significant contribution not only to historical scholarship but also to the study of religion, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and the broader themes of Otherness and Orientalism—but also, and above all, to the understanding of Druze history and culture.

We may conclude by noting that T.J. Gorton succeeds in introducing the remarkable and emblematic figure of Fakhr al-Dīn to a broader audience, whose life illuminates an era too often interpreted solely through the prism of a "clash of civilizations." Instead, the work offers a more nuanced portrayal of coexistence, interaction, and the permeable boundaries of culture and faith that characterized the early modern Mediterranean world. Finally, the work goes a step beyond the two existing Italian biographies of Fakhr al-Dīn—one by the Maronite Father Paolo Carali (Bulus Qar'ali) (1936) and the other by Kaled El Bibas (2010)—and integrates the studies of Alessandro Olsaretti (2008).

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