



ABŪ DOLAF AL-YANBŪ'Ī

ABŪ DOLAF AL-YANBŪ'Ī, MES'AR B. MOHALHEL AL-ḲAZRAJĪ, Arab traveler, poet, and frequenter of the Buyid court (ca. mid-4th/10th century). Reliable details concerning Abū Dolaf's life are few because of the questionable truthfulness of his two travel accounts. In these works he implies acquaintance with the Samanid court of Naṣr b. Aḥmad (d. 331/943) and mentions Abū Ja'far Moḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Layṭ as the ruler of Sīstān. A Saffarid amir with a similar name, Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. Moḥammad b. Ḳalaf b. Layṭ, ruled Sīstān from 331/942 to 352/963. Abū Dolaf is not commonly mentioned in the works of other authors, Ebn al-Nadīm refers to him in the *Fehrest* (completed 377/983) as a personal acquaintance and relates geographical information from him; and Ṭa'ālebī places him in the circle of the Buyid vizier Ṣāḥeb b. al-'Abbād (d. 385/995) in *Yatīmat al-dahr* and at the Šīrāz court of the Buyid amir 'Azod-al-dawla (d. 372/983) in *Laṭā'ef al-ma'āref*. In the latter reference he is depicted bantering with Abū 'Alī Aḥmad al-Hā'em al-Madā'enī, a courtier who died in 380/990. It seems likely, therefore, that the travels of Abū Dolaf's youth provided the anecdotes that he related for the entertainment of court society in his old age.

The first of Abū Dolaf's two *resālas*, which purport to recount his personal travels and were extensively used as sources by Yāqūt, has frequently been studied. The consensus of those who have studied it is that the journey never occurred. The trip was allegedly made in the company of a delegation sent from Bokhara by the Samanid Naṣr b. Aḥmad to negotiate a marriage alliance which had been proposed by the ruler of China. The itinerary through Central



Asia to the “Chinese” court at Sandābel, identified by Marquart with Kanchou, the capital of the western Uighur kingdom, consists of a series of brief and sometimes fanciful descriptions of Central Asian peoples in a quite unreasonable geographical order. After the Samanid delegation returned to Bokhara, Abū Dolaf claims to have stayed on in Sandābel and to have subsequently returned to Iran by way of China, Malaya, and India. Once again the itinerary is unbelievable, and the reported information doubtful. Several authors have observed that the information that Abū Dolaf strings together in this *resāla* could have been obtained without great difficulty in Bokhara or some other trading center.

The second *resāla* gives a much stronger impression of being an actual travel account. Minorsky has unraveled the itinerary in a careful study and has judged the entire account reliable. There is a distinct difference in this *resāla*, however, between the quality of information pertaining to western Iran and that pertaining to eastern Iran. The western Iranian material is not only more abundant, but it contains a great deal of archeological observation and legend about the pre-Islamic history of various places that bears the stamp of having been collected locally. East of Ray the sketchy itinerary takes in only Georgia and Khorasan as far as Herat, and the return trip from Nīšāpūr to Isfahan is made in one jump, in striking contrast to the detailed itinerary through Azarbaijan and Kurdistan. It is also noteworthy that while consistent and apparently expert mention is made of mineral deposits characteristic of different localities in western Iran, no mention is made of the famous turquoise mines near Nīšāpūr. Reference is made instead to a huge copper mine there which is not mentioned in other geographical sources. For these reasons it seems likely that Abū Dolaf supplemented a genuine account of his travels in western Iran with vague memories or bits and pieces of information he had picked up about eastern Iran.

The unnamed patrons to whom Abū Dolaf dedicated his *resālas* have not been identified, and question has been raised as to who would be likely to have been taken in by the obvious fabrication of the first account. No name can be suggested here, but there is some indication that political and religious differences led to a significant decrease in communications between Buyid western Iran and Samanid eastern Iran in the third quarter of the 4th/10th century (see R. Bulliet in *JESHO* 13, 1970, pp. 195-211). It seems likely, therefore, that the patrons with the greatest curiosity and least knowledge about Central Asia would be found in Buyid territories. Similarly, the local



legends recounted in the second *resāla* would have held greatest interest for patrons in western Iran. Since Abū Dolaf is otherwise associated with different Buyid courts, it is likely that his patronage for the two *resālas* came from this source.

The third preserved work of Abū Dolaf is directly connected with the patronage of Ṣāḥeb b. ‘Abbād. It is a *qaṣīda* on the Arabic jargon of the Banū Sāsān, a term used to designate an underworld of rogues, confidence men, and tricksters whose activities are catalogued in the poem. This *qaṣīda*, together with an explanatory commentary by its author, has been preserved in Ṭa‘ālebī’s *Yatīmat al-dahr* and has been studied in C. E. Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld*, Leiden, 1976. The poet’s interest in *adab* and in providing entertainment for court patrons, as suggested in Ṭa‘ālebī’s introduction to this poem and by an anecdote in his *Laṭā’ef al-ma‘āref* in which Abū Dolaf gives a bravura display of his knowledge of geographical peculiarities, indicate that the intended purpose of his two *resālas* may have been entertainment and that the question of their actual accuracy may not have weighed heavily with his original patrons.

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