



## ABŪ ZAYD BALĪ

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**ABŪ ZAYD AḤMAD B. SAHL BALĪ**, in his day a noted scholar in both Islamic and philosophical disciplines, but now known chiefly as a geographer. He was born in the village of Šāmeštān, near Balḵ in Khorasan, ca. 235/849 and died there in *Ḍu'l-qa'da*, 322/October, 934. His father was a schoolmaster from Sejestān. As a young man he left home and traveled on foot as far as Iraq with a company of pilgrims bound for Mecca. He spent eight years in Iraq, assiduously studying many different subjects. Of his teachers the only one mentioned is the well-known philosopher Abū Yūsof al-Kendī (d. 255/868-69 or a year or two later). Along with philosophy Abū Zayd studied other Greek sciences such as medicine and physics; he is said to have been especially interested in astronomy/astrology. At this period, it was unusual for students of the philosophical or “foreign” disciplines to pay any attention to the Islamic disciplines, but Abū Zayd combined the two sets of studies and gained a high degree of mastery in both. Of the Islamic disciplines he seems to have been most interested in Koranic studies and *kalām*. It is possible that after his eight years of study in Iraq, he traveled in other neighboring lands. He eventually returned to Balḵ by way of Herat and became a teacher of the subjects he had mastered. Nothing is recorded of his life in Balḵ, however, until after the accession of Naṣr b. Aḥmad Sāmānī in 301/914, when first the general Ḥosayn b. 'Alī Marvarrūḏī and then the vizier Jayhānī broke off friendly relations with him because of some of his books. The first was a Qarmaṭī and the second a dualist. The books in question were written from a Sunnite point of view, although Abū Zayd had originally been an Imamite. When the amir Aḥmad b. Sahl b. Hāšem arrived in Balḵ in 306/918, Abū Zayd was offered the post of



vizier, but he declined this and instead became a secretary for about a year. There is a story of how the man who became vizier, Abu'l-Qāsem Ka'bī, voluntarily gave up 100 dirhams of his monthly salary of 1,000, so that Abū Zayd might have 600 instead of 500. Through the generosity of the amir and his vizier, Abū Zayd was able to buy a small estate in his native Šāmeštān; and this estate passed to his descendants. He refused an invitation from the Samanid amir to go to Bokhara and seems to have spent the last part of his life on his estate.

Ebn al-Nadīm (*Fehrest*, p. 138) lists forty-three of his books, and Yāqūt (*Odabā' I*, pp. 125, 142-52) fifty-six; but of these only one relatively unimportant work still exists as such. The titles of the books cover most of the fields he had studied. The books on religious subjects were much appreciated, especially one called *Naẓm al-Qor'ān*, which is often cited. Strangely enough, the book which eventually became the most influential of all is not clearly mentioned in either list. This was apparently called *Šowar al-aqālīm* or *Taqwīm al-boldān*; although it is not extant as a separate book, it is in a sense contained in the geographical works of Eṣṭakrī and Ebn Ḥawqal. Indeed Eṣṭakrī's book was described by M. J. De Goeje (see bibliog.), who studied the matter in detail, as a second, greatly enlarged edition of BalĪ's work. It has been suggested, since the title *Tafsīr šowar* occurs in the lists of books, that the geographical work was essentially a commentary on maps of the various "climes" (probably in Eṣṭakrī's sense of "provinces"). Even if this is the case, however, it would seem that BalĪ went far beyond previous writings on geography, which did little more than supply information about the post-routes of the empire. Geography was now conceived as including descriptions, not merely of the physical features of countries, but also of their climate and natural products and the influence of these on the structure and activities of the population. On such grounds BalĪ has been hailed as the founder of the classical school of Arabic geography.

A biography of BalĪ was composed by one of his pupils Abū Moḥammad Ḥasan b. Moḥammad Wazīrī, and this was utilized in a later book about him by Abū Sahl Aḥmad b. 'Obaydallāh b. Aḥmad. From this, information passed to biographical dictionaries, such as that of Yāqūt.



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