



## AḤSAN AL-TAQĀSĪM

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**AḤSAN AL-TAQĀSĪM FĪ MA'REFAT AL-AQĀLĪM**, a celebrated geographical work in Arabic written towards the end of the 4th/10th century by Šams-al-dīn Abū 'Abdallāh Moḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Bannā' al-Šāmī al-Maqdesī al-Baššārī (thus named in one of the two surviving principal manuscripts of his work). The form al-Maqdesī is preferable to al-Moqaddesī; in Sam'ānī's *Ketāb al-ansāb* (Leiden, fol. 539b), we find only the former vocalization. The only biographical data on the author are in his book, apparently his only work. His paternal grandfather Abū Bakr al-Bannā' ("the architect, builder") had built the defenses of Acre ('Akkā) for Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn; his maternal grandfather, Abū Ṭayyeb al-Šavā, had migrated from Bīār (modern Bīārjōmand) in Khorasan, on the northern edge of the Great Desert, to Jerusalem (al-Bayt al-Maqdes). Not surprisingly, Maqdesī himself shows an aesthetic, if not technical, interest in buildings and fortifications. He seems to have been born in Palestine at some time between 331/942 and 334/945 and to have died at some point after 381/991. His book was, according to Yāqūt (I, p. 653), put together ca. 375/985; but one passage in the book suggests that it was written towards the end of the reign of the Hamdanid amir of northern Syria, Sa'd-al-dawla b. Sayf-al-dawla (d. 381/991).

Like other geographers of his age, such as Eṣṭakrī and Ebn Ḥawqal, Maqdesī was clearly a great traveler; his book contains the fruits of his explorations and his inquiries over a large sector of the central and eastern lands of the Islamic world. It shows that he knew Palestine and south Syria well, also the Arabian peninsula, and especially Iraq and Persia, but that he was less well-



informed about the Muslim west (the Maḡreb and Spain) and about Sind in the extreme east. In a somewhat bombastic passage near the beginning of his book, he details how he has traveled the Islamic lands, partly gaining his living by teaching, acting as a legal expert, and practicing various trades, and partly living in the traditional way for a student of knowledge, as a vagabond and sight-seer. He says that he has been a *faqīh* and *farā'ezi* (jurist and divider of inheritances); a Sufi, *'ābed* and *zāhed* (religious enthusiast and ascetic); a *tājer* (merchant); a *warrāq* and *mojalled* (copyist and bookbinder); an *emām* and muezzin; a *kaṭīb* and *modakker* (preacher and homilectician; pp. 43ff.). Confessionally, he seems to have held eclectic beliefs and attitudes and to have been far from fanatical and opinionated. He speaks with favor of the Karrāmiya sect of Nišāpūr and Khorasan, which he could also have been familiar with in Jerusalem; he was clearly sympathetic to Mu'tazilite doctrines; he was deeply interested in Sufism and gives an interesting description of the dervish *kānaqāh* of Abū Eshāq Ballūṭī in the mountains of southern Syria; and in more than one place he demonstrates his inclination towards Shi'ism, e.g., when he recounts how in the mosque at Wāseṭ he disputed with a man who was defending Mo'āwīa against 'Alī. It appears Maqdesī was a man of wide-ranging intellect, eager to search out the best in all the schools of philosophy and in the sects.

Our knowledge of the text of the *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* rests basically on two manuscripts in Berlin and Istanbul, though later, derivative manuscripts also exist. These were all used by M. F. de Goeje for his critical edition (BGA 3, Leiden, 1877; slightly revised edition, 1906). The Berlin manuscript is perhaps the younger redaction of the two; it is dedicated to one Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ḥasan and is enthusiastic about the Samanids of Khorasan and Transoxania. The Istanbul manuscript lacks this dedication and speaks more favorably of the Fatimids of Egypt and Syria, thus displaying the Shi'ite sympathies of our author. This manuscript gives to the work the title of *Ketāb al-masāfāt wa'l-welāyāt* ("Book of distances and governments"), a title very reminiscent of the standard designation for the "road-book" type of practical geographical and topographical guides, *Ketāb al-masālek wa'l-mamālek*. The local historian of Jerusalem and Hebron, Moḡīr-al-dīn al-'Olaymī, in his *al-Ons al-ǧalīl be-ta'rīk al-Qods wa'l-ǧalīl* (partial tr. in H. Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jérusalem et d'Hebron*, Paris, 1976, p. 11), refers to Maqdesī's book as *al-Badī' fī tafzīl mamlakat al-Eslām* ("The remarkable book concerning the preeminence of the Islamic lands"). A. Miquel has accordingly surmised that Maqdesī, an eminently practical person, may have made abridgements of his book or selections of



specific chapters as pocket-guides for statesmen and officials. If one categorizes Maqdesī's work in the evolution of Islamic geography, it has to be attached, in general, to the school of Abū Zayd Balkī (d. 322/934), followed previously by Eṣṭakrī and Ebn Ḥawqal; as with these last, the principal manuscripts of the *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* are accompanied by maps (reproduced by K. Miller in his *Mappae arabicae* I-V, Stuttgart, 1926-31). Maqdesī's aim was a grand one; he intended to widen the scope of geographical writing, which had previously been either of the strictly utilitarian, road-book type, or else largely falling within the genre of *adab*, a recounting of wonders and marvels. His approach to geography was similar to the modern one; for his subject matter included the whole of the physical habitat and the activities of the people in it—professional, economic, commercial, and religious; even questions of anthropology and ethnology were included. In his introduction he defines his coverage as comprising geographical descriptions of the Islamic world, its seas, rivers, deserts; of the cities and towns and the roads connecting them; of the characteristic drugs and herbs, and the centers of trade and commerce; of the distinguishing characteristics of the various region in regard to population, their language and physical appearance; of different religious beliefs, weights, measures and coins; of the local foodstuffs, plants and types of irrigation; of the praiseworthy and blameworthy features of the local populations; of local exported and imported products; of the roads through deserts and dangerous places, with their staging-posts and distances; of the topography and geology of various regions; of the rich and fertile areas, compared with the poor and barren ones; of the shrines and pilgrimage places.

Maqdesī's procedure in all this was essentially based on personal experience and eyewitness records (*'eyān*); in the first place, his own, otherwise those of reliable authorities and informants. These he supplemented by recourse to official archives and libraries, such as those of the great Buyid amir, 'Azod-al-dawla, and the vizier Ṣāḥeb Esmā'il b. 'Abbād. He also consulted the geographical works of his predecessors, such as Jāḥeẓ, thereby paying lip service at least to one of the basic principles of Islamic scholarship, imitation of the ancients. Nevertheless personal knowledge was always the mainspring of his writing, which continually displays his questing and incisive mind. Hence Maqdesī is often a valuable source on historical events in his time; and he gives information about the ways of life, dress, customs, and superstitions of local communities. E.g., he tells us that his home town of Jerusalem still had a majority of Jews and Christians among its inhabitants, the Christians being



described as rough and boorish; consequently, Jerusalem's intellectual vitality as a center of Muslim scholarship was feeble (p. 167). Likewise, he expatiates on the decline of Baghdad after the turmoil and strife of the previous decades (p. 36). He notes the strictness of endogamous marriage among the Daylamīs, and tells how, when in a caravanserai in

Daylam, he once witnessed the pursuit to death of a man who had contracted an exogamous marriage. Of extraordinary value to the religious historian, since his information is hardly to be found anywhere else, are Maqdesī's copious observations on religious beliefs and local sectarian conflicts (*maḍāheb wa ta'aṣṣobāt*). He is the sole authority in demonstrating to us the extensiveness of the Karrāmīya sect's network of *kānaqāhs* and circles of adherents throughout the central and eastern Islamic lands. He mentions the survivals of Kharijism in Herat and Bādġīs. He is especially detailed on the mutually sectarian groups (perhaps with a social basis?) which were then a feature of the urban life of Khorasan and Sīstān, naming the opposing factions and sometimes explaining their names.

The section dealing with the Iranian world and the east (the *aqālīm al-a'ājem*) comprise sections on Mašreq (Khorasan, Transoxania, K̄vārazm, and Sīstān); Daylam (the Alborz mountains from Gorgān west to the Caucasus); Reḥāb ("the upland plains," Azarbaijan and Armenia); Jebāl (Ray and western Persia); K̄ūzestān; Fārs and Kermān; Sind (including Makrān and what is now Baluchistan); and the Great Central Desert, regarded as being enclosed by all these other *eqlīms*. In these sections Maqdesī shows a clear sympathy for the Samanids, despite his own apparent pro-Shī'ite inclinations, against the Shī'ite Buyids; thus he attributes much of the state of insecurity within the Great Desert to the past neglect of Buyid amirs (p. 487, n. p) and stated that "even if a tree rose up in rebellion against the Samanid dynasty, it would wither" (p. 338). The Arabic style of the book is not always easy, due to the author's predilection at times for rhymed prose (*saġ'*) and the compressed, note-like way in which he often conveys information; but it amply repays profound study as a prime document on the human as well as the physical geography of the 4th/10th century Islamic world.



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