



BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN VI. HISTORY AND CHRONOLOGY

BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN

vi. History and Chronology

Bīrūnī's main essay on political history, *Ketāb al-mosāmara fī ak̄bār K̄vārazm* (Book of conversation concerning the affairs of K̄vārazm) is now known only from quotations in Bayhaqī's *Tārīk-e mas'ūdī* (ed. Fayyāz, pp. 906ff.). In addition to this various discussions of historical events and methodology are found in connection with the lists of kings in his *al-Āṭār al-bāqīa* (q.v.; esp. chap. 6, ed. pp. 72-143, tr. pp. 84-140, and the supplementary material provided by Garbers) and in the *Qānūn* (bk. 2, chap. 5; vol. 1, pp. 148-68) as well as elsewhere in the *Āṭār*, in *India* (see Khan, 1976), and scattered throughout his other works.

Though Bīrūnī often quotes the Qur'ān as an irrefutable source of truth, his attitude toward the human sources of historical fact, whether written or oral, is characterized by intelligent skepticism. His method is, briefly, to collect as many traditions as he can concerning a topic, to subject them to impartial assessments of their plausibility, rejecting those that are contrary to reason or to nature, and to compare the remainder in a search for the most believable and consistent solution to any contradictions. He recognizes that this task can never be completely carried out, both because of the limitations of time and



resources available to the historian and because of the loss or corruption of much relevant material, but feels it to be his duty to make the attempt for the benefit of future scholars (*Ātār*, pp. 4-5, tr. Sachau, pp. 3-4).

Examples of this methodology are easily found in the *Ātār*. He assembles from books and from oral informants seven different versions of the Persian names of the five epagomenal days, but has no means for determining which, if any, is more authoritative than the others (pp. 43-44, tr. pp. 53-54). In chapter six he collects every available king list and records them accurately even when he is aware that they are full of scribal errors (p. 84, tr. p. 98), but is seldom able to resolve their differences (p. 100, tr. pp. 108-09). Only in the case of the Aškānīān, i.e., Parthians, was he able to solve this problem by comparing the lists with the evidence of Mānī's *Šābuhragān* (pp. 112-19, tr. pp. 116-22), which enabled him to condemn the Sasanian king list reconstructed by Kesrawī (pp. 129-31, tr. pp. 127-28).

Bīrūnī's rejection of historical traditions that contain logical incoherencies or inherent implausibilities is best exemplified by his discussion of different stories concerning Du'l-Qarnayn and forged genealogies of famous people in chapter four of the *Ātār* (pp. 36-42, tr. pp. 43-51). His frequent application of his knowledge of astronomy to the criticism of historical sources is seen, for instance, in his treatment of the determination of the length of Ramaẓān (pp. 64-68, tr. pp. 76-81). But those who are subject to his most sarcastic diatribes in the *Ātār* are the astrologers such as Abū Maš'ar Balkī (q.v.), who reconstructed history to fit their own theories of astral influences (pp. 25-27, 78-83, tr. pp. 29-31, 90-97). This repugnance, however, does not deter him from expounding, though with apologies, Abū Maš'ar's theory of cycles in the final chapter of the *Qānūn* (bk. 9, chap. 12, vol. 3, pp. 1471-82; see Pingree, 1968, pp. 59-63).

Finally, Bīrūnī's insistence on the historian's maintaining impartiality in confronting two contradictory historical traditions is most evident in his investigations into various Jewish and Christian views of Old Testament chronology (pp. 15-23, 72-78, tr. pp. 18-27, 85-90). Both sides justly receive his criticisms of their historical methodology. Similarly, in his discussion of the religious calendars of the Harranians, Jews, and Christians he carefully describes the computations upon which each is based and points out their numerous scientific errors while appealing to all three groups to accept his complete objectivity (p. 322, tr. p. 319).

Unhappily, Bīrūnī's intelligent criticism at times leads him into the error of



distorting intellectual history because of his false assumption that people raised in cultures other than his own must develop philosophy and science from the same foundations that were available to him. Thus he seriously misrepresents Indian astronomy in *India* and the *Qānūn* by attempting to interpret it through Aristotelian physics and Euclidean geometry (see Pingree, 1975). Notwithstanding this failing, Bīrūnī's inquisitiveness, thoroughness, technical ability, and honesty make the corpus of his surviving works a prime source of materials clarifying the history of the ancient and medieval Orient both as it actually was and as it was perceived to be.

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