



EBN AL-AṬĪR, 'EZZ-AL-DĪN ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALĪ

EBN AL-AṬĪR, 'EZZ-AL-DĪN ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALĪ b. Moḥammad Jazarī (b. Jazīrat Ebn 'Omar [modern Cizre, in eastern Turkey] 4 Jomādā I 555/13 May 1160; d. Mosul, Ša'bān 630/June 1233), major Islamic historian and important source for the history of Persia and adjacent areas from the Samanids to the first Mongol invasion.

Life and works. Ebn al-Aṭīr's family were landowners and officials of the Zengid dynasty in Mosul. His elder brother, Majd-al-Dīn (d. 606/1209), was an administrator and author. His younger brother, Zīā'-al-Dīn (d. 637/1239), was a vizier and literary critic. There is no evidence that he himself held any official position. Writing about Ṭabarī, he mentions approvingly "his contentment with his income from a village in Ṭabarestān left him by his father" (Ebn al-Aṭīr, VIII, p. 136). Some similar arrangement may have allowed Ebn al-Aṭīr to follow his scholarly career. He studied in his home town and Mosul, and, after a pilgrimage to Mecca in 576/1181, in Baghdad. After the recovery of Jerusalem, he was for a while with Saladin in Syria. From 584/1188 until his death he alternated between Mosul, where he enjoyed the patronage of Badr-al-Dīn Lo'lo', and Syria, where the atabeg of Aleppo, Šehāb-al-Dīn Ṭoḡrol, supported him (Ebn Kallekān, ed. 'Abbās, III, p. 349).

Ebn al-Aṭīr wrote two histories: *al-Kāmel fi'l-ta'rikò* (The complete history), a universal history ending in 628/1231, and a monograph on the Zengid dynasty,



al-Ta'riḳ al-bāher fi'l-dawlat al-Atābakīya (The brilliant history of the Atabeg dynasty, ed. A. A. Tolaymat, Cairo, 1962). The latter was written sometime between 609/1212 and 615/1218, when its patron, the Zengid Sultan Qāher, died. It has much in common with the corresponding parts of the *Kāmel*, but, being didactic and dedicated to the dynasty, it is more partial and selective. It deals mainly with events in Mesopotamia and Syria. Two other works of Ebn al-Aṭīr survive: *al-Lobāb fi tahḏīb al-ansāb*, a revised version of Sam'ānī's famous manual of *nesbas*, and *Osd al-ḡāba fi ma'refat al-ṣaḥāba* (Lions of the thicket concerning knowledge of the Prophet's companions; *GAL* I, pp. 402, 422-23, S I, p. 587).

Ebn al-Aṭīr on Persian history. The *Kāmel* is an important source for Persian history, both for Ebn al-Aṭīr's times and for preceding centuries. In it he made intelligent use of a wide range of sources, many of them no longer extant. Its first draft, entitled *al-Mostaqṣā fi'l-ta'riḳ* (A study of history), was completed in about 600/1203. At the command of Badr-al-Dīn, Ebn al-Aṭīr revised, enlarged, and retitled his chronicle in about 620/1223. Five years later he probably made further additions and then did so regularly until the end of 628/1231 (Richards, pp. 76-84).

In his detailed introduction Ebn al-Aṭīr says that he intended to create a single convenient compilation from the writings of Ṭabarī and his continuators, aiming at a balanced coverage of the whole Islamic world. His style, while sensitive to literary effect, avoids over-elaborateness. He tried to give his narrative a flowing character, conflating his sources into a single consistent version whenever possible and often devoting an extended section to connected events stretching over a number of years. This breaking of the strict annalistic form was not his own innovation, although he has at times been given exaggerated credit for it. On the other hand, he has been criticized for his general failure to identify his sources. Even when it is possible to make lexical and structural comparisons with extant works or with what is thought to have been the content of lost works, one can never be sure whether Ebn al-Aṭīr used texts directly or through intermediary compilations, possibly some unknown to us.

For Ebn al-Aṭīr the whole of human history is an unfolding of God's purposes for mankind. All actions are subject to the will of God, which is the ultimate explanation of all events. Without taking account of the contradictions involved in his constant invoking of God's sovereign will, Ebn al-Aṭīr also applied moral judgements to history. He looked upon history as a source of



“good example” (*‘ebra*) and a moral proving ground, in which those who adhere to Islamic norms win just rewards and lasting repute (Richards, pp. 93ff.). In practice, the *Kāmel* takes account of political aims and interests.

Ṭabarī was his fundamental source for early periods, supplemented by other sources. For pre-Islamic Persian history the *Kāmel* follows Ṭabarī, but Ebn al-Aṭīr expresses disdain for the “inane fabrications of the Persians.” He only includes them to show “the folly of the Persians,” who affect to despise the ignorance of the Arabs, and because there would otherwise be a blank in the record (I, p. 66; cf. pp. 76, 166, 247). Ebn al-Aṭīr’s history of the Islamic east down to the 3rd/early 10th century is also based on Ṭabarī’s history, which ends in 302/915 (Ebn al-Aṭīr, I, p. 3). For the later years, sketchily treated in Ṭabarī, he begins to rely on the fuller accounts of such continuators as [Meskawayh](#). Ebn al-Aṭīr gives us concise and usable accounts of Samanid and Buyid history (vols. VII-IX). He probably used the history of the Samanids by Sallāmī, for Gardīzī’s Persian quotations from it resemble Ebn al-Aṭīr’s account (Barthold, *Turkestan*3, pp. 10-11). Basic to the historiography of the 4/10th century and the first half of the 5/11th century are the writings of members of the Šābe’ family, whose interests centered on Iraq and the ‘Abbasid caliphate. Ṭābet b. Senān, the first of them, was probably known to Ebn al-Aṭīr through the *Tajāreb al-omam* of Meskawayh, which he names four times, mostly to dispute a point (VII, p. 118; VIII, pp. 86, 186, 321). Cahen speculated that Ebn al-Aṭīr’s detailed account of the first half of the 5/11th century was based directly on the work of Ṭābet’s successor, Helāl Šābe’ (Cahen, 1962, p. 60).

For the Great Saljuqs (5/11th-6/12th centuries), who did not have their own dynastic historians, Ebn al-Aṭīr gives the most complete and continuous account available (IX, p. 473-XII, p. 108). He used the continuators of the central ‘Abbasid tradition, whom he often characterizes simply as “the Iraqis,” although he names Ebn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200; *Kāmel* XI, p. 333). For the semi-legendary early history of the Seljuqs, Ebn al-Aṭīr used an Arabic version of the *Malek-nāma*, originally written in Persian for Alp Arslān (Cahen, 1949). The lost *Mašāreb al-tajāreb* of [Ebn al-Fondoq Beyhaqī](#) was probably an important source for his account of the Seljuq decline in the east and the rise of the K̄vārazmšāhs. Unfortunately, the only explicit citation of this work concerns the events of 568-595/1172-1198, although Beyhaqī is thought to have died in 565/1166. Cahen has argued that this work would have been particularly valuable for Ebn al-Aṭīr because it was written in Arabic, and there is no real evidence that he knew Persian. However, his younger contemporary, the



historian Nasawī, citing the scope of Ebn al-Aṭīr's coverage of eastern lands, speculates that he must have had Persian-language sources (Nasawī, p. 34). There is no obvious Arabic source, for example, for his detailed information on Ghurid history for the period 559-604/1163-1207.

His celebrated account of the initial Mongol attack on the Islamic east is based on first-hand accounts of merchants, envoys, and refugees. In one of his set-pieces he vividly expresses the horror of these events (XII, pp. 358-68). He did not, however, attach eschatological significance to the coming of the Mongols, seeing them as a passing scourge and viewing the Franks as a greater danger to Islam.

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