



EBN ẔORDĀDBEH, ABU'L- QĀSEM 'OBAYD-ALLĀH

EBN ẔORDĀDBEH (or Ẕorradādbeh), ABU'L-QĀSEM 'OBAYD-ALLĀH b. 'Abd-Allāh (fl. 3rd/9th century), author of the earliest surviving Arabic book of administrative geography. He was not, apparently, the first geographer to write in Arabic, but he is the first whose book has survived in anything like its original form. His grandfather Ẕorradādbeh was a Zoroastrian who converted to Islam at the urging of the **Barmakids**. His father 'Abd-Allāh was by 201/816-17 al-Ma'mūn's governor in Ṭabarestān, where he campaigned in the mountains and dislodged the local ruler Šahrīār b. Šarvīn (Ṭabarī, III, pp. 1014-15; tr. XXXII, p. 64; cf. Rabino, p. 262). His son seems to have been born in Khorasan but grew up in Baghdad, receiving there the cultured education of an *adīb* and studying music with his father's friend, the celebrated singer **Ešhāq Mawṣelī**, who kindled in him a lifelong interest in music. On reaching maturity, he became director of the caliphal *barīd* or postal and intelligence service in Jebāl, and then in Sāmarrā' and Baghdad. It was obviously the experience gained here which he utilized for his road-book, the *Ketāb al-masālek wa'l-mamālek*, put together in its first version when he was at Sāmarrā' in ca. 232/846. Much of his later life was spent as the boon-companion (*nadīm*) of the caliphs, and Mas'ūdī (*Morūj* VIII, pp. 88-100; ed. Pellat, V, pp. 125-31) describes how he gave the caliph al-Mo'tamed a lengthy exposition of the lute (*'ūd*) and its development, for which he received a robe of honor.



The *Fehrest* (ed. Tajaddod, p. 165, tr. Dodge, p. 326) lists eight works of his: geography (*Ketāb al-masālek*) and books on the etiquette of listening to music (*Adab al-samā'*), on the genealogy of the Persians and of “deported and transplanted peoples” (*Ketāb jamharat ansāb al-fors wa'l-nawāqel*), on cooking (*Ketāb al-ṭabīkò*), on drinks (*Ketāb al-šarāb*), on music and musical instruments (*Ketāb al-lahw wa'l-malāhī*, ed. I. A. Khalifa, Beirut, 1964), on the risings and settings of the stars (*Ketāb al-anwā'*), and on boon companions (*Ketāb al nodamā' wa'l jolasā'*). Mas'ūdī (*Morūj*; ed. Pellat, I, p. 14) and Ta'ālebī (*Ġorar*, p. 130) also mention his *Ketāb al-kabīr fī'l-ta'rīk*, which Mas'ūdī praises for its careful composition and detailed information on the kings of Persia and other nations; unfortunately, all we know of this history comes from brief citations by later historians. Mas'ūdī had a lower opinion of his geography; it was good on roads and distances but without information on rulers and their territories and, accordingly, only useful for couriers (*Morūj* II, pp. 70-71; ed., Pellat, I, p. 241).

Despite these strictures, the *Ketāb al-masālek wa'l-mamālek* has its importance in the development of the science of geography in the Islamic world. Ebn Ẓordādbeh provides very detailed information on the postal routes across the caliphate, the staging posts, and the distances between them, expressed in farsaks. He begins with the Sawād of Iraq and extends north and east through Persia to the land of the Turks, Farġāna, and Sind, and then south and west to the Arabian peninsula, Syria, Armenia, the Byzantine marches, Egypt, and the Maghrib. He includes details of the tax yields of several of the provinces of the Islamic world, and he seems to have had a special concern with the titlature of various local rulers, their officials, and their commanders, including the Byzantines.

Mas'ūdī, writing some two or three generations later, had to concede that it was, in his time, still the best work of its kind. It was extensively utilized by Ebn al-Faqīh and by the Samanid vizier Jayhānī for his lost roadbook. Ebn Ḥawqal always took a copy with him on his travels (p. 329, tr. Kramers, p. 322). Moqaddasī (p. 5), who asserted that Ebn Ẓordādbeh's work was too compressed to be of value, shamelessly used its itineraries for his own book. In fact, Ebn Ẓordādbeh's work is more than a catalogue of routes and stages, and includes much parahistorical material of an *adab* type—e.g., he is the first to give the narration of al-Wāteq's envoy Sallām the Interpreter's journey through Central Asia to the Wall of Gog and Magog (pp. 162-170), much repeated by later geographers from Ebn Rosta onwards, and also that of this



same caliph's despatch of the astronomer Moḥammad b. Mūsā K̲v̲ārazmī to investigate the cave of the Koranic *Aṣḥāb-al-Kahf* "Men of the cave" (pp. 106-07).

Ebn K̲ordāḍbeh's value to the historian of Persia stems not only from his material on the historical geography of Persia and Transoxania in his own time, but also from material pertaining to earlier periods. Thus he gives figures for the tax yield of the Sawād going back to the Sasanian Qobād (Kavād I) (p. 14). He gives the titles of various vassal rulers, neighboring princes, and Iranian and Turkish potentates on the far eastern fringes of Persia in the time of *Ardašīr Bābakān* (pp. 17-18, 39-41). He lists administrative divisions of the Sasanian empire and its *marzbāns* (frontier provincial governors; p. 18). Of particular importance for 'Abbasid financial history is the detailed breakdown, by town or district, of the tribute paid to the caliphs by the governor of the East, 'Abd-Allāh b. Ṭāher (pp. 34-39).

As noted above, the first version of his geography was written in al-Wāteq's reign (227-32/842-47), but Ebn K̲ordāḍbeh apparently made successive additions to it, until a second recension emerged in 272/885 or thereafter; the editor of the printed text, de Goeje (with Fr. tr., Leiden, 1889, 2nd ed., 1967), used an abridged version of the whole which seems to contain material from both (see his introduction).

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His biography can only be pieced together from passing references in Mas'ūdī's *Morūj al-dahab*, Abu'l-Faraj Eṣfahānī's *Ketāb al-aḡānī*, and Ebn al-Nadīm's *Fehrest*. Barthold, *Turkestan*², p. 7.

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