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EBN ROSTA, ABŪ ʿALĪ AḤMAD

EBN ROSTA, ABŪ ʿALĪ AḤMAD b. ʿOmar (d. after 290/903), Persian author of a geographical compendium. He was from Isfahan, where the name Rosta is attested in this period (Ebn Rosta, I, p. 151; Abū Noʿaym Eṣfahānī, pp. 162, 316), and it was probably there that the book was written. He himself mentions in his book that he had been in Medina—apparently his only significant journey outside his native Persia—in 290/903 (pp. 73, 75; tr. Wiet, pp. 79, 81). His book is extant in two manuscripts (British Library, Add. 23,378; Cambridge suppl. 1006) and is apparently the seventh part of the *Ketāb al-aʿlāq al-nafīsa*, which must have been an extensive encyclopedia dealing with many branches of knowledge. The surviving volume deals with geography and other related subjects.

The book begins with celestial and astronomical geography, citing authors such as the geographer Abū Ṭayyeb Saraḵsī (d. 286/899) and the famous astronomer Abū Maʿšar Balḵī (d. 272/886) and expounding views taken from the Greeks (pp. 3-22). Then he passes to a description of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, with much detail on topography and on the buildings and outstanding features of the sacred enclosures (pp. 24-78). Dealing now with the rest of the world, he describes its seas and rivers (pp. 83-96); the seven climes (following the Greek system of *klimata* rather than the Persian *kešvar*s, pp. 96-103); the regions of the Dār-al-Eslām (beginning with Īrānšahr and the Sawād of Iraq, pp. 103-18), treated very cursorily; Byzantium and its emperors, in considerable detail (pp. 119-30); Rome, about which he could find only sparse information (pp. 130-32); and the non-Islamic lands and their races,

including India, the Turkish peoples of Inner Asia, the Magyars (al-Majḡarīya), Slavs (al-Ṣaqlabīya), Rūs (al-Rūsīya), Alans, etc. (pp. 132-49). He then reverts to a description of Persia, particularly Isfahan (pp. 151-63) and describes the major highways of the empire, with special attention to those of Persia (pp. 163-91). He finishes with snippets of information on *awāʾel*, "first occurrences," notable families, pre-Islamic and post-Islamic sects and heresies, etc.(pp. 191-229).

Ebn Rosta's method developed out of the road-book geographies (he obviously took his itineraries and distances from Ebn Ḵordāḏbeh, although he names him only once (p. 149), but it became wider in scope, so that his book becomes rather like a concise encyclopaedia of cosmological, geographical, and historical lore. His work may be placed in the so-called "Iraqi" school of geographical writing rather than the "Balḵī" school of Abū Zayd Balḵī (d. 322/934; cf. Maqbul Ahmad, "Djughrāfiyā" in *EI* ², pp. 579-81), which took its inspiration from Koranic geographical concepts. His approach is literary, that of an *adīb* (littérateur) intrigued by notabilia and the curious aspects of things.

The information on his home town of Isfahan is especially valuable. Ebn Rosta states that, while for other lands he had to depend on second-hand reports, often acquired with great difficulty and with no means of checking their veracity, for Isfahan he could use his own experience and observations or statements from others known to be reliable (p. 151). Thus we have a description of the twenty districts (*rostāqs*) of Isfahan containing details not found in other geographers' works. Concerning the town itself, we learn that it was perfectly circular in shape, with a circumference of half a farsakh, walls defended by a hundred towers, and four gates (pp. 160-61).

His information on the non-Islamic peoples of Europe and Inner Asia makes him a useful source (to the Muslims) for these obscure regions (he was even aware of the existence of the British Isles and of the Heptarchy of Anglo-Saxon England; p. 130) and for the prehistory of the Turks and other steppe peoples. His description of Constantinople (pp. 119-27), taken from a Muslim prisoner there, Hārūn b. Yaḥyā, has proved valuable for Byzantine scholars.

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