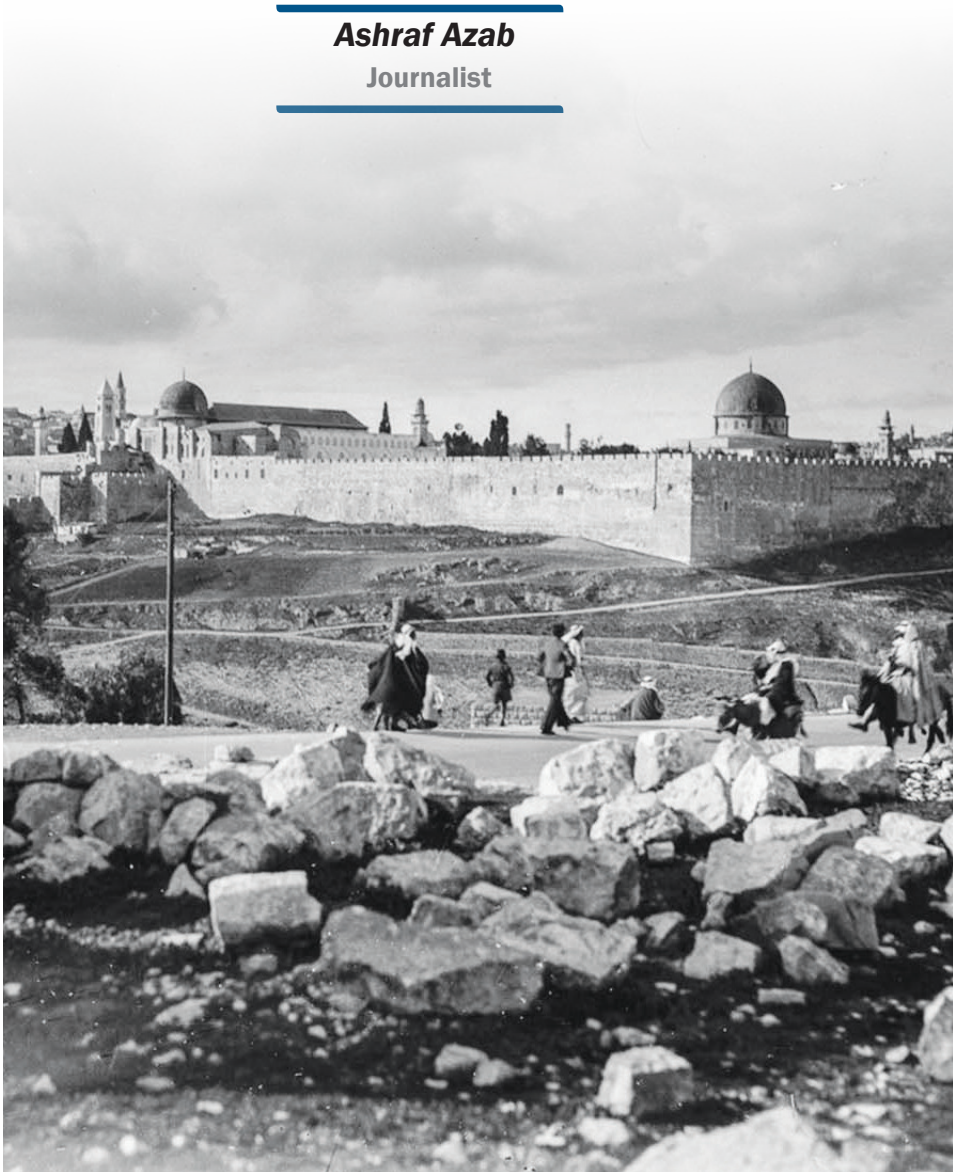


***Shams al-Din al-Maqdisi, the Great Traveler
The Greatest Geographer in Human History***

Ashraf Azab
Journalist



The French Larousse encyclopedia, in its entry on Arab geography, states:¹ “If the reader seeks a marvel of geography in the eleventh century, they should not look to Europe, which had descended into barbarism, but rather to the Arabs.”

When scholars—both Arab and Orientalist—unanimously recognize a particular work as extraordinary, their consensus carries immense weight. And when rigorous research affirms this consensus, the work in question becomes all the more valuable and worthy of reverence. Among the rare works to have earned such distinction is *The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions* (Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-Aqālīm) by al-Maḡḍīsī. This book has commanded admiration across generations, celebrated for its originality and insight.

The German scholar Sprenger² hails al-Maḡḍīsī as “the greatest geographer humanity has ever known” and asserts that no one before him matched the breadth of his travels, the depth of his observations, or the meticulous structure he imposed upon his findings. The Dutch Orientalist Kramers³ regards him as “the most original of Arab geographers” and deems his work “one of the most valuable geographical compositions in Arabic literature.” The Russian scholar Kratchkovsky⁴ acknowledges his “authenticity, ingenuity, and remarkable powers of observation” and describes him as “a towering geographer and one of the greatest Arab writers of all time.”

Lé Strange⁵, a leading scholar of Islamic geography, considers *The Best Divisions* “superior to all other works by Arab geographers and the most original among them.” Dr. Shawqī Daif calls it “a true marvel”—akin to a cinematic reel that

1 - Muhammad Farid Wajdi, *Encyclopedia of the Fourteenth Century*, vol. 13, Cairo, 1386 AH / 1967 CE, p. 122.

2 -Aloys Sprenger: An Austrian-born orientalist who later acquired British citizenship (1893–1813).

3 -The Dutch orientalist Kramers (1951–1891).

4 -Ignatius Kratchkovsky (1951–1883), a Russian orientalist and one of the founders of the Russian school of Oriental studies.

5 -Guy Le Strange (1934–1854), an English orientalist specializing in the historical geography of Arabia and Persia.

vividly portrays the inhabitants of the world in all their distinct traits. Meanwhile, Dr. Nicola Ziadeh describes it as “a model of scientific writing—meticulously structured, systematically organized, and scrupulously classified.”

The French Orientalist Régis Blachère, in his Excerpts from the Most Important Arab Geographers of the Middle Ages, asserts that al-Ma'qdisi's work is indispensable for understanding the Islamic world of that era. He credits the geographer's “ever-alert curiosity, exceptional tolerance, and rare capacity for comprehension” with making his book “a magnificent depiction of the world as he saw it, in all its vibrant complexity.”

In 1906, the Dutch scholar De Goeje⁶ republished al-Ma'qdisi's work in Leiden, while the German geographer Walter Christaller later drew upon his studies when formulating his Central Place Theory—a model of urban distribution in southern Germany in the early twentieth century.

According to Ibrahim Said, in his book *Al-Ma'qdisi's Contributions to Geography and Regional Studies*, al-Ma'qdisi stands at the pinnacle of Islamic geographical scholarship, alongside luminaries such as al-Istakhri, al-Balkhi, al-Hamdani, al-Mas'udi, and Ibn Hawqal al-Bagdadi. His meticulous depiction of the Islamic world in the fourth century AH (tenth century CE) remains unparalleled in precision and vibrancy. Said further asserts that “al-Ma'qdisi holds a unique status in Arabic geography, unmatched by any Arab or non-Arab geographer, whether medieval or modern—especially in his regional methodology and approach to the study of territories.”

Birth and Early Life

Shams al-Din Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abi Bakr al-Banna’ al-

⁶ -Michael Jan de Goeje (1909–1836), a Dutch orientalist and a member of the Oriental Society in Leiden. His works include the critical editing and publication of Arabic geographical texts by al-Ya'qūbī and al-Balādhuri.

Shami al-Maqdisi al-Bishari was born in 335 AH (947 CE⁷) in Jerusalem to a native Jerusalemite father—hence his title, al-Maqdisi —and a Persian mother from the al-Shawa family, whose lineage traces back to the city of Biyar in the Qumis region near Khorasan. This blend of Arab and Persian heritage profoundly influenced his intellectual inclinations.

The thirteenth-century geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi referred to him as al-Bishari, while al-Maqdisi himself recounts with great pride his grandfather’s contributions as a builder, including his involvement in the construction of Acre during the Tulunid dynasty. His inquiries into construction techniques reveal a deep-rooted affinity with his grandfather’s craft, as he frequently engaged in discussions with builders in the regions he visited.

Throughout his writings, he frequently mentions his maternal uncle, ‘Abdullah al-Shawa, and his grandfather, Abu al-Tayyib al-Shawa. He also provides an extensive description of Biyar and its people—where he stayed for four months—justifying this detail by noting that his maternal relatives hailed from there.

Travels

Al-Maqdisi embarked on his journeys in 356 AH (966 CE), setting out from Jerusalem to the Hijaz for the purpose of pilgrimage. From there, he traversed Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Egypt, and Morocco. He also ventured into non-Arab lands, beginning with the eastern provinces of the Islamic world, including Daylam, Ar-Rihab, the mountains of Persia, Khuzestan, Faris, Kirman, and Sind.

He later moved to Baghdad, where he studied under its scholars and immersed himself in its vast libraries. His passion for geography led him to delve deeply into the existing geographical literature, meticulously examining what had been written before him and recording his own observations as he roamed the lands.

7 -He did not explicitly state the year of his birth; however, he mentioned that he authored his book in 375 AH / 985 CE after reaching the age of forty. Thus, his birth year can be inferred as 335 AH / 946 CE.

He spent long years of his life journeying across the Islamic world, gathering knowledge for his book. He traveled through Iraq, Jazīrat Aqūr, Egypt, Arabia, the Levant, Persia, and the lands of the Maghreb. As a result, his work, *The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions*, became an exemplary model of masterful geographical writing.

In his travels, he would disguise himself, change his name, and integrate into different communities to observe their customs and way of life. He risked his life on multiple occasions, often compelled to adopt a new identity from one region to another to ensure his safety and gain access to information. Over time, his aliases exceeded thirty, as he himself recounts:

“I have been called and addressed by thirty-six names, such as Palestinian, Egyptian, Maghrebi, Khurasani, Salmi, Reciter, Jurist, Sufi, Saint, Ascetic, Wanderer, Scribe, Stationer, Merchant, Preacher, Imam, Muezzin, Orator, Stranger, Iraqi, Baghdadi, Shami, Hanafi, Disciplined One, Inheritance Scholar, Master, Sheikh, Dāneshmand (Scholar), Neshāsteh (Starch maker), Rider and Messenger—names I assumed to suit the many lands I traversed and the countless places I entered.”

His approach to cartography was remarkably vivid. He represented roads in red, golden deserts in yellow, seas in green, rivers in blue, and mountains in earthy tones, striving to make descriptions more tangible and accessible to the mind’s eye.

His methodology was rooted in firsthand experience, meticulous observation, exhaustive inquiry, and the insights of scholars and jurists he met along his journeys. He diligently measured distances in farsakhs (parasangs), studied administrative divisions, and meticulously calculated land taxes. He describes his work with unwavering confidence:

“You should know that I built this book on solid foundations, reinforced it with strong pillars, and pursued accuracy with utmost diligence, seeking the wisdom

of discerning minds...”

Accuracy was his guiding principle, ensuring that every study was founded upon rigorous research and systematic organization. His scholarship was held in such high regard that Adam Mez⁸ considered his book the pinnacle of Arabic geographical literature, unmatched in its portrayal of lands and their peoples.

His presence pervades his work so thoroughly that biographical sources of his time and those that followed make little mention of his life, as if his writings alone sufficed to reveal him. Perhaps this is because his scholarly contributions were largely confined to this one magnum opus—a common trait among the great geographical travelers of the era.

A seeker of knowledge, he explored prevailing schools of thought before ultimately dedicating himself to the Hanafi doctrine and the teachings of Abdullah ibn Amir. This decision profoundly shaped his intellectual path, leaving a visible imprint on his book.

In various passages, he recounts the hardships he endured during his travels, among the most remarkable and personal sections of his work. So striking were these accounts that they were translated individually into Dutch, German, Italian, Russian, French, and English between 1875 and 1946, under the title *An Account of the Hardships I Witnessed*.

Yet, his writing was not without its challenges. His penchant for ornate, rhymed prose often made his style difficult to grasp, even for scholars of Arabic. The Russian orientalist Kratchkovsky remarked, “His language and style belong not merely to the most challenging school of Arabic geographical writing but to the most complex linguistic expressions in the entire corpus of Arab geographers. His text is rich in rare and obscure words, as he had a distinct inclination for the unusual.”

8 -Adam Mez (1917–1869) was a Swiss-German orientalist who specialized in Arabic literature of the 4th century AH and beyond.

His Vision of Geography

He affirmed that the earth was spherical, divided by the equator into two equal halves, with the southern part predominantly covered in water and the northern part largely land.

True to his meticulous structuring, he adhered to the number seven in dividing the world's regions, believing, as he wrote, that:

“God Most High created the heavens and the earth in sevens, the days and nights in sevens, provisions in sevens, and the Quran was revealed in seven modes. Even the sacred mosques are seven in number.”

While following the prevailing system of geographical classification, he acknowledged its conventions, stating:

“Every scholar in this field has categorized the regions into fourteen—seven inhabited and seven desolate. I have heard astrologers claim that all of humanity resides in the western part of the world... We adopt their accounts and the knowledge of esteemed astronomers, for such studies are essential in determining the qibla's direction.”

He begins to trace the seven regions, whose delineation is based on the length of the shadow when day and night are of equal duration, specifically at noon. The first region begins where the noontime shadow, when day and night are balanced, measures one foot, one-half, one-tenth, and one-sixteenth of a foot, and it ends where the shadow at that time reaches two feet and three-fifths. The second region starts where the shadow, under the same conditions, measures two feet and three-fifths at noon.

Moving beyond traditional geographical classifications, he sought to redefine the Islamic world's spatial order. Rather than adhering to the established notion of

the world's division into latitudinal zones aligned with the equator, he embraced a more dynamic model, untethered from rigid conventions yet still rooted in the knowledge of his time.

In his description of the Islamic realm, he wrote:

“You should know that the realm of Islam, may God safeguard it, is not uniform in shape—neither square nor strictly elongated or wide. It is a vast expanse with intricate branches, best understood by studying the sun’s rising and setting points, traveling its lands, traversing its routes, and measuring its regions in farsakhs.”

He sought to determine its dimensions, sometimes using farsakhs, at other times measuring by travel stages and days’ journeys.

It is worth noting that the exclusive focus on describing the Islamic world, rather than the entire globe, marked a shift in tenth-century geographical thought. Kratchkovsky classified this movement as the “classical school” of medieval Islamic geography, tracing its origins to Abu Zayd al-Balkhi of Balkh⁹. This tradition was later expanded by Abu Ishaq al-Farisi al-Istakhri¹⁰, whose work influenced Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hawqal, an explorer who personally met al-Istakhri in 951 CE. Ibn Hawqal, in turn, dedicated his work to mapping the Dar al-Islam—the Abode of Islam.

Following this tradition, the Islamic world was divided into fourteen distinct regions: six Arab territories—Arabia, Iraq, the Jazira, the Levant, Egypt, and the Maghreb—and eight non-Arab lands—Khorasan, Daylam, the Ruhab, the Jibal, Khuzestan, Faris, Kirman, and Sind.

9 -Abū Zayd Aḥmad ibn Sahl al-Balkhī was born in 850 CE in the province of Balkh, Greater Khorasan.

10 -Abū Ishāq al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭakhri, also known as al-Karkhī.

*Explaining his exclusive focus on
the Muslim world in The Best Divisions, he states:*

“I did not include non-Muslim lands, nor did I see any benefit in mentioning them, for my concern lay solely with the regions of Islam.”

Al-Maqdisi delineated each region—north, south, east, and west. Notably, his division relied on religion as the primary bond uniting the regions he examined, thus replacing the traditional measure of shadow length with faith. He then classified Islamic regions based on language, distinguishing between Arab and non-Arab territories. Within the Arab lands, his classification followed administrative and political considerations. For al-Maqdisi, a region was defined by religious, linguistic, and administrative criteria. The vast expanse of the Islamic world, encompassing diverse natural and human phenomena, necessitated such divisions to facilitate comprehension of similarities and differences within them.

At times, al-Maqdisi defended his regional classification by comparing it to other existing systems. He wrote: “If someone asks why I have paired Yemen with the East and the West, the answer is that the Prophet (peace be upon him) determined its placement when he set its pilgrimage stations. As for Khorasan, Abu Zayd divided it into two regions, and he is an authority in this field, especially in his homeland. There is no fault in my following suit. But if someone asks why, after citing him as an authority, I then unified Khorasan into a single region, my response is twofold: first, I did not wish to divide the realm of the Samanid dynasty; second, Abu Abdullah al-Jayhani¹¹, also an authority in this science, did not divide Khorasan either.”

Al-Maqdisi further subdivided each region into kuwar (districts), each of which had a capital, and each capital encompassed cities. He described this hierarchy, stating: “You should know that we have likened the great cities to kings, the district capitals to chamberlains, the cities to the army, and the villages to the common people.”

11 -Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Nasr al-Jihani was a vizier to one of the Samanid princes.

Al-Maqdisi's Sources in Regional Studies

Al-Maqdisi classified his sources into three categories: “The first is what I have witnessed firsthand. The second is what I have heard from trustworthy sources. The third is what I have found in written works.”

By “what I have witnessed,” he referred to firsthand field research—gathering information from personal travel, engaging with local populations, meeting scholars, conversing with judges, studying under jurists, and attending literary circles.

As for “what I have heard from trustworthy sources,” he elaborated: “I inquired of those known for intellect and avoided those prone to confusion and ignorance. For distant regions I could not personally reach, I recorded only what was agreed upon, discarding disputed claims. That which did not sit well with my reason, I attributed to its source or prefaced with ‘it is said.’”

Al-Maqdisi also scrutinized many books, reading them critically and identifying their flaws. He did not spare any text from his critique. For instance, he remarked: “As for Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani, he took a different approach, mentioning only the grandest cities, failing to arrange districts or military divisions, and inserting irrelevant sciences into his book. Al-Jahiz and Ibn Khurdazubah¹², on the other hand, were excessively concise, offering little practical benefit.”

Al-Maqdisi's Approach to Regional Studies

Al-Maqdisi pioneered new methodologies in regional studies, striving to highlight the unique character of each region—an approach that aligns with modern geographical studies. He wrote: “The most charming region is Iraq, lightest on the heart, and sharpest for the mind... The most scorching, arid, and palm-laden is the Arabian Peninsula. The region with the most devout worshippers, scholars,

12 -He was Abu al-Qasim Ubayd Allah ibn Khurdazubah, born in Khurasan in the year 205 AH, though some sources claim he was born in 211 AH.

wealth, trade, specialties, and crops is Egypt.”

He followed the conventional method of his time, known as astronomical geography, progressing from the general to the specific. He began with a description of the globe, then delineated the seven climatic zones, before defining the Islamic realm, which he divided into Arab and non-Arab regions.

His focus on the religious aspect was evident, as he commenced his study with the Arabian Peninsula—home to the Kaaba and the Prophet’s city. He noted each region’s direction of prayer, religious sects, and protected communities, integrating these aspects into what may be termed religious geography.

Al-Maqdisi’s vision of the Islamic world unfolds like a vast, intricate tapestry, woven with the myriad contours of its lands and waters. He speaks of its ports, seas, lakes, and rivers, tracing the veins of civilization that pulse through its empires. He conjures the splendor of its renowned cities and storied towns, the well-trodden paths and bustling trade routes that bind its people together. His words capture the essence of commerce and craft—the alchemy of medicines and machines, the wealth of minerals, and the treasures of trade.

He lingers on the diversity of its inhabitants: the cadence of their tongues, the timbre of their voices, the hues of their skin, the ways of their faiths. He counts the measures of their markets, the weights of their wares, the currency of their dealings. He notes the taste of their food and drink, the sweetness of their fruits, the purity of their waters. He records their virtues and flaws, the riches they send forth and the bounty they receive.

He maps the perils that lurk along the journey—the vast distances, the treacherous sands, the salt flats and rugged heights, the fertile lands of plenty and the barren stretches of want. He speaks of sacred shrines and celestial observatories, of the unique customs and laws that shape their dominions. He marks the boundaries of their realms, the frontiers that divide them, the artistry of their hands, the wisdom of their minds. He gathers the echoes of their disputes and the weight of their

traditions, the whispers of their prayers and the shadows of their sacred rites. His most innovative contribution was summarizing the distinctive features of each region in a concise section titled “The Essential Traits of This Region.” These summaries included climate characteristics such as temperature and rainfall, dominant religious sects, prevalent languages and dialects, commercial activities, market conditions, and notable commodities. They also examined water sources, public health risks, mineral wealth, historical sites, social customs, tribal distributions, tax structures, and transportation routes. His exhaustive approach divided geographic knowledge into two main fields: physical geography and human geography.

Al-Maqdisi and Human Geography

Muslim geographers devoted significant attention to human geography. There is scarcely a subfield of contemporary human geography that was left untouched by them. In *Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Ma‘rifat al-Aqalim*, Al-Maqdisi examined regions in terms of linguistic differences (linguistic geography), trade and exchange (commercial geography), agriculture and food production (agricultural geography), cultural traits and social customs (civilizational geography), religious sects and recitations (religious geography), and urban planning and population distribution (urban geography).

A proper introduction to any scholarly work must define its discipline, for this dictates its direction and ensures its integrity. Al-Maqdisi, with his broad and comprehensive vision, did not overlook this. At times, his perspective was tinged with pride, believing his work—and himself—to be unparalleled. He explicitly defined his field as the study and description of Islamic regions and their characteristics. In applying this vision, he encountered numerous challenges, forcing him to rely on judgment and adaptation. He acknowledged that his classifications served a specific function, aligning with Abu Zayd al-Balkhi’s view, whom al-Maqdisi revered. He quoted al-Balkhi approvingly: “Combining or separating these regions serves no greater purpose than clarifying their cities



and rivers, easing explanation and representation.” He then added: “By my life, he spoke the truth! No right is denied nor falsehood upheld in these divisions. Have you not seen how scholars of the past held differing views, advanced and retracted, inherited and innovated, permitted and prohibited—and the people accepted it? No wise person found fault in this. Even the Prophet (peace be upon him) endorsed it when he sent Mu‘adh to Yemen, and the Companions acted upon it. So why should we not, too, form our own perspectives and exercise judgment in this science?”

Al-Maqdisi’s insistence on immediate, firsthand description lends his work a literary quality, yet he firmly retained its core as a work of geography. He declared: “Knowledge in this field is too vast for mere repetition, borrowing from other books, or plagiarism—except in cases of necessity.”

His work is distinguished by two major qualities:

1. A rigorous scientific methodology, which, as Brockelmann noted, provided an exceptionally clear and richly detailed depiction of the Islamic world.
2. An emphasis on direct field study, which fostered a strong personal presence in his work. This balanced the content, steering it away from dry scientific formalism while avoiding excessive subjectivity.

Al-Maqdisi: An Ethnographic Traveler

Travel accounts are invaluable historical records, offering firsthand observations of political, economic, social, and cultural conditions, as well as geographical landscapes. They also serve as rich biographical sources for scholars overlooked by traditional biographical works.

Al-Maqdisi stands as a quintessential ethnographic traveler, blending travel with

ethnographic¹³ study in his descriptions of the Islamic East. Some scholars even consider him the founder of ethnographic methodology among medieval Muslim travelers.

When al-Maqdisi describes a place, he does so as though painting an intricate, finely detailed tableau, where historical and geographical knowledge intertwine seamlessly. His keen appreciation of architectural beauty, his refined aesthetic sense, and his deep awareness of human conditions are all evident. He conveys his observations and impressions with the precision of a camera capturing reality in all its contradictions.

Al-Maqdisi was, by and large, an astute observer—a meticulous scholar and a discerning critic. He was scrupulous in verifying the information he transmitted, and he took a particular interest in curious anecdotes and peculiar customs. One such account describes how the doors of Baghdad’s grand mosque were flanked by ablution stations where people paid a fee to use them. Elsewhere, he summarizes the significance of Aden with a striking phrase: “It is the vestibule of China, the port of Yemen, the treasury of the Maghreb, and the wellspring of commerce.”

The term ethnography—an Arabized word—refers to the descriptive study of a people’s way of life, their customs, traditions, values, artifacts, arts, and folklore over a defined period. It is, in essence, a meticulous and interconnected portrayal of human cultures. Put differently, ethnography concerns itself fundamentally with the description of regions, the character of their inhabitants, and their modes of living. The preface to al-Maqdisi’s *Ahsan al-Taqasim* offers a comprehensive elucidation of the themes and subjects pertinent to the study of regions, human temperaments, and social customs—all of which are integral to the ethnographic portrayal of a society’s lifestyle.

More significantly, al-Maqdisi may well have been the first to recognize the necessity of establishing an academic discipline dedicated to these inquiries, given their broad utility for both scholars and the general public. He articulates



13 - Ethnography: The description of peoples is the systematic study of people and cultures.

his vision for such a field of knowledge, writing:

“Scholars have long aspired to compose books so that their legacies do not fade, and their knowledge does not perish. Wishing to follow their path, I sought to establish a science that would preserve my name and benefit humankind, thereby pleasing my Lord. I found that the scholars before me had pioneered various sciences, classifying and refining them. Yet, I noticed that they had neglected—if not entirely overlooked—one particular field: the study of Islamic regions, their seas, lakes, and rivers; the renowned cities and settlements; the roads and trade routes; the sources of medicinal herbs and tools; the mines that yield goods for commerce; the linguistic and phonetic variations of peoples; their dialects, complexions, beliefs, weights, measures, currencies, and trades; their food, drink, and produce; their customs, virtues, and shortcomings; the goods imported and exported; the waystations and distances between towns; the deserts, mountains, and valleys; the fertile lands and barren expanses; the shrines and observatories; the defining traits of regions; the political borders; the crafts and sciences; the places of worship and pilgrimage. This, I realized, was a field indispensable to travelers and merchants, essential to the pious and the wise. It is a science coveted by kings and nobles, sought by judges and jurists, cherished by the common folk and the elite alike. Every traveler benefits from it, and every merchant profits from its knowledge.”

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Within this passage lies a lucid reference to numerous cultural and civilizational elements—both tangible and intangible—that are the very concern of ethnographers. His approach integrates environment and humanity, presenting a holistic account of the lifestyles and traditions of diverse peoples. Furthermore, he highlights the scholarly value of such descriptive knowledge regarding regions, inhabitants, and their customs. In his rich depictions of various lands, al-Maqdisi provides an abundance of detail on the moral fabric, societal structures, and daily lives of their peoples.

From another perspective, Dr. Anwar Abdul Aleem, in his book *Navigation and*

Maritime Sciences Among the Arabs, notes that the earliest known reference to Arabic nautical guides appears in al-Maqdisi's Ahsan al-Taqasim, written in the tenth century. Al-Maqdisi recounts his extensive travels, saying:

“I traversed nearly two thousand parasangs, circumnavigating the entire island [Arabian Peninsula], from the Red Sea to ‘Abbadan, aside from those occasions when our ships drifted toward its islands and open waters. I accompanied elders who had been born and raised in those maritime realms—shipmasters, pilots, astronomers, agents, and traders. I found them to be the most knowledgeable people regarding its coasts, anchorages, winds, and islands. I questioned them on its mysteries and boundaries, and I saw the nautical manuscripts they studied and relied upon, from which they derived their knowledge and navigational expertise.”

Al-Maqdisi's Account of Jerusalem

Among the extensive chronicles of Arab and foreign travelers to Palestine, none surpasses the eloquence and completeness of al-Maqdisi's descriptions of Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. His unparalleled text on the Levant, as recorded in Ahsan al-Taqasim, serves as a geographical, historical, social, and economic document that captures the region during a pivotal period—one marked by the transition from Abbasid to Fatimid rule.

The scholar Zakaria Muhammad, in an article titled The Geographer al-Maqdisi and the Text of Palestinian Identity (al-Tareeq magazine, Ramallah, Issue 23, April 2005), argues that al-Maqdisi was the first Arab scholar to explicitly articulate a Palestinian identity in historical writing. He substantiates this claim by referencing passages from Ahsan al-Taqasim, asserting:

“We possess at least one definitive text that proves Palestine had an identity at least a thousand years ago—written by none other than one of its greatest intellectuals and one of the finest minds of classical Arab culture: the geographer al-Maqdisi.”



Al-Ma'qdisi, describing his birthplace—Jerusalem—offers a meticulous and evocative portrayal of the city, the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Dome of the Rock. His account provided the foundation upon which later scholars, such as Ya'qut al-Hamawi in his *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, would build. He writes:

“There is no city within the provinces greater than it, though there are capitals smaller, such as Istakhr, Qa'in, and al-Farama. It is neither intensely cold nor oppressively hot, and snow seldom falls upon it. When Judge Abu al-Qasim ibn Qadi al-Haramayn asked me about its climate, I replied: It is mild—neither too hot nor too cold. He responded, That is the very description of paradise. Its buildings are of stone, unparalleled in beauty and craftsmanship. Its people are virtuous and chaste, its way of life delightful, its markets pristine, its mosque grander than any other, and its sacred sites abundant. Its grapes are unrivaled, and its doctors and scholars are the finest. Every day, it welcomes strangers into its fold.”

In another anecdote, al-Ma'qdisi recounts a conversation in Basra where he steadfastly defends the supremacy of his homeland:

He says:

“One day, while I was in the assembly of the esteemed judge, al-Mukhtar Abu Yahya ibn Bahram in Basra, the conversation turned to Egypt. I was then asked: Which city is the most exalted?”

I replied, “Our city.”

They asked, “And which is the finest?”

I said, “Our city.”

They asked, “Which is the most virtuous?”

I said, “Our city.”

They asked, “Which is the most beautiful?”

I said, “Our city.”

They asked, “Which is the most abundant in blessings?”

I said, “Our city.”

They asked, “And which is the greatest in size?”

I said, “Our city.”

The assembly marveled at his words, and someone remarked, “You are a learned man, yet you have claimed something beyond acceptance. Your case is like that of the man with the she-camel before al-Hajjaj.”

I replied, “As for my statement that it is the most exalted of cities, it is because it unites both the temporal and the eternal. Whoever is devoted to worldly pursuits but seeks the hereafter will find the path to it here. And whoever belongs to the hereafter yet yearns for the blessings of this world will find them in abundance. As for its air, it is neither the stinging chill of bitter cold nor the oppressive scorch of searing heat. As for its beauty, I have seen no city more exquisitely built, none cleaner, none more immaculate than its mosque. As for its plentiful bounty, God has gathered within it the fruits of the valleys, the plains, and the mountains, bringing together contrasting wonders: citron and almonds, fresh dates and walnuts, figs and bananas.

As for its merit, it is the courtyard of the Resurrection, the gathering place of souls, the site of the final awakening. If Mecca and Medina surpass it, it is only by virtue of the Kaaba and the Prophet—peace and blessings be upon him. But on the Day of Judgment, those two sanctuaries shall be brought to it, and then shall it encompass all excellence. As for its vastness, all creation shall be gathered upon its land—what earth, then, could be more expansive than this?”

They found my reasoning sound and acknowledged its truth.

His discourse on Jerusalem concludes with mention of its perpetual charities and the presence of appointed cooks and servants, who daily prepare lentils with oil for every impoverished soul who comes seeking sustenance. He then continues, describing the lands surrounding the heart of Jerusalem: a short distance away, at a farsakh from Hebron, rises a small hill overlooking a tranquil lake near the

villages of Lot. There, Abu Bakr al-Sabahi built a mosque that houses the resting place of Prophet Ibrahim—peace be upon him. His tomb has sunk into the rocky ground by nearly a cubit. It is said that when Ibrahim beheld the villages of Lot suspended in the air, he lay down upon that very spot and declared, I bear witness that this is the ultimate truth.

Al-Maqdisi offers a unique delineation of the sacred bounds of Jerusalem, stating:

“The limits of al-Quds extend from the outskirts of Iliya to a radius of forty miles, encompassing its heartland and its satellite towns, stretching twelve miles into the sea, and including Sughar and Ma’ab. Five miles extend into the desert, while to the south, its boundary reaches beyond al-Kasifa and its environs. To the north, it borders the lands of Nablus. This is the blessed land, as proclaimed by God Almighty—its mountains adorned with trees, its plains fertile with crops that flourish without irrigation or rivers. As the two men said to Musa ibn ‘Imran, We have found a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Al-Maqdisi then turns to al-Ramla in Palestine, believed to be his ancestral city, offering this portrayal:

“Al-Ramla is the capital of Palestine, splendid and beautifully constructed. Its waters are light, its fruits abundant, its air gentle. It brings together contrasting elements: noble villages and thriving cities, sacred shrines and prosperous hamlets. Trade flourishes, and livelihoods are bountiful. Nowhere in Islam is there a mosque more resplendent than its grand jami‘, nor streets more graceful, nor a province more blessed, nor fruits more delightful.

Set amidst illustrious ribats, it boasts elegant inns, pristine bathhouses, spacious homes, and magnificent mosques. Its streets are wide, its avenues vibrant. It lies upon a plain, near both mountain and sea, cultivating both figs and palms. Its fields yield crops watered by rainfall alone, and it abounds in bounty and virtue. The only flaw is that it sits upon an island of mud, and in summer, its sand turns

to fine dust.”

The Dome of the Rock

Al-Bishari al-Maqdisi describes the Dome of the Rock in these words:

“At the heart of al-Aqsa Mosque lies an elevated platform, accessible by broad stairways from all four sides. At its center stands the Dome of the Rock, built upon an octagonal foundation, with four grand gates—each aligned with a stairway. These are the Southern Gate, the Gate of Israfil, the Gate of the Trumpet, and the Gate of the Women, all opening westward. Each gate is adorned with gilded doors of exquisite cypress wood, commissioned by Umm al-Muqtadir Billah.

Within, three arcades encircle the space, upheld by columns surpassing even marble in grandeur and craftsmanship, without equal in all lands. These arcades rest upon inner corridors, enclosing another circular arcade that surrounds the sacred rock—not an octagon, but a true ring—supported by intricately crafted columns and graceful arches. Above these rises a soaring structure, suspended in air, with grand arched windows illuminating its expanse.

The dome itself, rising from this foundation, soars a hundred cubits from its base, capped by a magnificent spire that gleams from afar. It is clad in gilded brass, a spectacle of wonder.

The dome consists of three layers: the first, adorned with painted panels; the second, reinforced with an iron framework to withstand the force of the winds; and the third, a wooden shell covered in shining plates. At its center, a concealed passage allows craftsmen to ascend for maintenance and repairs. When the sun’s rays strike its surface, the dome radiates brilliance, and the entire structure shimmers with an ethereal glow. In all the lands of Islam—and indeed in all the realms of idolatry—there exists no dome to rival it.”



Conclusion

The words of Dr. Muhammad Mahmoud Muhammadain, written in the preface to his study *The Holistic Nature of Geographical Thought in Classical Literature* (April 1984), serve as the most fitting conclusion to this discourse on the geographer and traveler al-Maqdisi al-Bishari. His words, rich in meaning and devoted to the revival of our intellectual heritage, echo with wisdom:

“A nation on the rise accords great importance to its scholarly heritage, for it is the legacy of its forebears. A people who neglect or forsake their past are left bereft of cultural identity. The preservation of heritage must go beyond mere cataloging of books and mapping their locations, beyond the acquisition of manuscripts or the superficial praise of their authors. Rather, it must inspire rigorous research, for despite the wealth of studies on our Islamic geographical heritage, much remains in dire need of sincere and thorough reevaluation. We must return to this legacy with a critical and objective lens, illuminating its obscured depths and bringing to light the profound contributions that Muslim scholars have made to the intellectual cartography of the world.”

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