

Book Review

Ibn al-Mujāwir, Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad. *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman wa-Makka wa-ba‘ḍ al-Ḥijāz al-musammāt Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim (Sanaa: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 2022). 493 pp. 15 b/w images, 7 indices.

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In the first quarter of the seventh/thirteenth century, a traveler named Ibn al-Mujāwir, who knew Persian and appears to have come from Khurasan, visited Mecca, Yemen, and Oman. His travel text, known as *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, begins with a description of Mecca, providing information on its naming, local inhabitants, marriage customs, local food, rulers, currency, weights and measures, and distances to nearby places, such as al-Ṭāʿif and Jeddah. The account continues down the Red Sea coast from Jeddah to al-Maḥālib on the Red Sea coast and eventually to Zabīd with a focus on placenames, legendary history, and marriage customs. A brief description of the local Ziyadid rulers is provided. A lengthy discussion is presented on Aden, especially the geography of the port and how arriving merchant ships were treated. Although there is no evidence the author traveled into the highlands, he provides descriptions given to him of the fortress of al-Dumluwa, Taʿizz, al-Janad, Dhū Jibla, Sanaa, the Maʿrib dam, al-Jawf, the northern town of Ṣaʿda, Shibām in the Ḥaḍramawt, various islands along the southern coast, Dhofar, and Socotra. In the Persian Gulf he describes Qalhāt, the island of Qays, and Baḥrayn. The range of the commentary is extensive and makes for entertaining as well as informative reading.

As suggested by G. Rex Smith, the British historian who has translated the Arabic text into English, Ibn al-Mujāwir’s full name was probably Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. Masʿūd b. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. al-Mujāwir al-Baghdādī al-Naysābūrī.¹ Earlier authors attributed the text to Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Faṭḥ Yūsuf b. Yaʿqūb b. Muḥammad, but this is in error. No manuscripts of the text exist from the time of the author. The earliest is located in the Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi in Istanbul (Ayasofya 3080), dated to 1003/1595. Three nineteenth-century copies exist in Leiden, Paris, and London. The first Arabic edition was made by the Swedish

1. G. Rex Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir’s Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* (London: Ashgate for The Hakluyt Society, 2008), 3, who notes that an error identifying the author as Yūsuf b. Yaʿqūb had crept in over the centuries.

Orientalist Oscar Löfgren (1898–1992), based on the Istanbul and Leiden manuscripts and published in two parts in 1951 and 1954. Unfortunately neither introduction nor indices were included. In 2008, Smith translated the edited text of Löfgren into English with corrections and extensive footnotes, including lists of the routes taken by the author, the genealogies and dynastic lists of the time, and the author’s literary sources. While there is little evidence that Löfgren ever visited Yemen, Smith is a scholar with extensive research in Yemen and on Yemeni historical texts. However, he was not able to fill in all of the gaps in the Arabic edition.

A new edition of Ibn al-Mujāwir’s travel text has recently been published by the Yemeni historian Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim. This edition won the 2022 Abdulaziz al-Maḳaleh Book Award for Yemeni Heritage from the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS). Yemen has a rich tradition of contemporary historians who have edited historical Yemeni manuscripts and Jāzim is one of the best. He has previously edited a late thirteenth-century Rasulid administrative and archival compendium entitled *Nūr al-ma‘ārif fī nuḏum wa-qawānīn al-Yaman fī al-‘ahd al-Muḏaffarī al-wārif*, which complements much of the content of Ibn al-Mujāwir’s work on the port of Aden.² Jāzim also published an edition of an early fourteenth century Rasulid tax revenue document, which he entitled *Irtifā‘ al-dawla al-Mu‘ayyadiyya*.³ As early as 1976 he obtained a copy of Löfgren’s Arabic edition, but noticed quite a few errors, especially in terms of geography. For this new edition Jāzim had access to the Istanbul, Leiden, and London manuscripts. Unfortunately, he was not able to view a copy said to be in Yemen’s national manuscript library (*Dār al-makhṭūṭāt*). With Ibn al-Mujāwir’s text in hand, he visited many of the same areas in Yemen that are described in the text. Thus he is able to provide corrections and details not available to Löfgren or Smith in his English translation.

The value of the travel account by Ibn al-Mujāwir has been described in detail by Smith in several publications apart from his annotated translation.⁴ The primary importance

2. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, ed., *Nūr al-ma‘ārif fī nuḏum wa-qawānīn al-Yaman fī al-‘ahd al-Muḏaffarī al-wārif* (Sanaa: al-Ma‘had al-Faransī li-l-Āthār wa-l-‘Ulūm al-Ijtimā‘iyya bi-Ṣan‘ā’, 2003–05).

3. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, ed. *Irtifā‘ al-dawla al-Mu‘ayyadiyya* (Sanaa: Deutsche Archäologisches Institute and Centre français d’archéologie et de sciences sociales, 2008).

4. These include: “Three Tales from Arabia—Story-telling in Ibn al-Mujāwir’s 7th/13th Century Guide,” *New Arabian Studies* 6 (2004): 124–32; “More on the Port Practices and Taxes of Medieval Yemen,” *New Arabian Studies* 3 (1996): 208–18; “Have You Anything to Declare? Maritime Trade and Commerce in Ayyubid Aden: Practices and Taxes,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 25 (1995): 127–40; “The Language of Ibn al-Mujāwir’s 7th/13th Century Guide to Arabia, *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*,” in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature*, ed. J. R. Smart, 327–51 (London: Routledge, 1996); “Magic, Jinn and the Supernatural in Medieval Yemen: Examples from Ibn al-Muḡāwir’s 7th/13th Century Guide,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 13 (1995): 7–18; “Some ‘Anthropological’ Passages from Ibn al-Mujāwir’s Guide to Arabia and their Proposed Interpretations,” in *Studies in Oriental Culture and History: Festschrift for Walter Dostal*, ed. Andre Gingrich, S. Haas, G. Paleczek, and T. Fillitz, 160–71 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993); “Ibn al-Mujāwir’s 7th-13th Century Guide to Arabia: The Eastern Connection,” *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* 3 (1990): 71–88; “Ibn al-Mujāwir’s 7th/13th Century Arabia: The Wondrous and the Humorous,” in *Miscellany of Middle Eastern Articles: In Memoriam Thomas Muir Johnstone 1924–83*, ed. A. K. Irvine, R. B. Serjeant and G. R. Smith, 111–24 (Harlow: Longman, 1988); “Ibn al-Mujāwir on Dhofar and Socotra,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 15 (1985): 79–92. The articles published before 1997 are reprinted in his *Studies in the Medieval History*

of the text is the observations made, especially on geography, for which there are over 1,200 placenames. Description of the local culture in the coastal town of Zabīd and the system of customs duties at the port of Aden are the most detailed from the time period. Ibn al-Mujāwir quotes from several noted earlier scholars, such as the *Tārīkh al-Yaman* of ‘Umāra al-Yamanī (d. 569/1175),⁵ al-Mas‘ūdī, al-Bīrūnī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. There are several places where Ibn al-Mujāwir quotes someone he met from outside Yemen, such as a man he met in India commenting on the way Mecca was referred to in India. As noted by Smith, Ibn al-Mujāwir was especially interested in local folklore, magic, and the bizarre. Included in the Istanbul and Leiden manuscripts are thirteen maps or town plans, although these are not as detailed as those found later in the fourteenth-century *Irtifā‘ al-dawla al-Mu‘ayyadiyya*.⁶ It is not clear if these were drawn by Ibn al-Mujāwir or added later.

Smith has identified the language of this thirteenth-century text as Middle Arabic, which he defines as “a literary Arabic which is a mixture of non-classical Arabic elements and pure classical Arabic elements—and by classical Arabic, I mean the language described by the classical grammarians.”⁷ Smith noted that the nineteenth-century Leiden text corrects many of the non-classical Arabic aspects into classical Arabic, indicating that later copyists disapproved of the original Middle Arabic rendering. In his later analysis, Smith argues that Ibn al-Mujāwir was probably a Persian speaker who “had less than complete grasp of the Arabic language.”⁸ There are also notes on local dialect in the work, such as on Arabic-speaking Jews pronouncing the *qāf* as a glottal stop.

The new edition by al-Jāzim follows closely the rendering of Löfgren, but without noting the many Arabic corrections made in the later Leiden copy. Only a few of the footnotes provided by Löfgren are reproduced. There are a number of corrections to gaps and lacunae in the Löfgren edition. This is especially the case for placenames that the copyists of all the manuscripts did not know or miscopied. One example is found in the section describing the travel from the highland city of Sanaa to the coastal area of al-Maḥālib. Both Löfgren and Smith were unable to read the name of the shaykhs who founded the town of Thulā’. Jāzim notes that these were the Banū Maqḥaf, with Maqḥaf reputed to be the son of Thulā’, stemming back to Ḥimyar al-Aṣghar (p. 297). He further provides the correct names of several other local placenames. A passage that both Löfgren and Smith were unable to fully understand discussed the personal names of people around Zabīd; this is corrected by Jāzim (p. 154).⁹ On folio 93a of the Istanbul manuscript the bird called *dalanquq* is discussed. This is described as piebald (*ablaq*), but neither Löfgren nor Smith could establish what

of the Yemen and South Arabia (Hampshire: Ashgate, 1997).

5. It is possible that some of these quotations came from later copyists, as noted by Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 15.

6. For a discussion of these maps, see D. M. Varisco, “Reading Rasūlid Maps: An Early 14th-Century Geographical Resource,” *Der Islam* 98, no. 1 (2021): 100–152, at 121–25.

7. Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 21. He provides specific examples in his “The Language of Ibn al-Mujāwir’s 7th/13th Century Guide,” 330–46.

8. Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 22.

9. Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 113.

it was compared to; Jāzim notes that it is said to resemble the bird known as *ifr* (p. 341). On folio 96b of the Istanbul manuscript there is a discussion of a coastal well dug by a baboon (*rubāh*). Löfgren was unable to read a passage that talks about the sweet well water, assuming it must have been a placename, as did Smith.¹⁰ Jāzim reads the gap as *ḥawla ‘uqad nabāt* in the sense of the water gushing to the level of the joints of a plant stalk (p. 349). In the same passage Jāzim reads the name of a local fish as *‘ayda* rather than *ghayrih* by Löfgren, who notes *‘ayda* in a footnote. There are many other examples where the new edition by Jāzim corrects and fills in gaps in the earlier editions.

The importance of the travel account by Ibn al-Mujāwir has not been sufficiently recognized, given the attention scholars have paid to earlier Islamic geographical texts and the well-traveled travelogue of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. However, Ibn al-Mujāwir visited the area a century before Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and provides far more details on local customs and geographical placenames than any other traveler to Yemen. His visit to Yemen coincided with the eclipse of Ayyubid rule, when the future Rasulid sultan al-Malik al-Manṣūr ‘Umar had already achieved major power as a trusted emir. Smith has provided a window into the content and style of Ibn al-Mujāwir’s text, although he was limited by the problems Löfgren encountered in editing the Istanbul manuscript. It should be kept in mind that the Istanbul copy was written four centuries after Ibn al-Mujāwir made his trip, so it cannot be assumed to be true to the original, as its many gaps make evident. For future study of this early thirteenth-century text, it will be necessary to read Smith’s translation alongside the Arabic edition of Jāzim.

10. Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 243. There is a printing error in Smith where the name of the well is labeled *al-Rubāniyya* (!).