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YĀQŪT-GEOGRAPHER, COMPILER OR ADĪB?
ACCORDING TO THE PREFACE TO HIS DICTIONARY

The beginning of the thirteenth century saw the decline of original Arabic literature and also stagnacy in many fields of science. The original works were replaced by various compilations; dictionaries, encyclopaedias, commentaries or anthologies which were based on the achieved Arabic literary output of the anterior period. These books, when discussed in different elaboratories, are always classified by the field of science which dominates in them; i.e. geography, history, cosmology, theology, biographical works, and treated only as the representatives of these sciences. Hardly ever is their literary value noticed, the same being true for the various literary "technics", worked out by the preceding generations employed in them. Obviously not all books possessed these values but some of them were, and still are, real literary works.

Undoubtly one of them is Yāqūt's dictionary *Mu'ğam al-buldān*. Up till now, mainly its scientific value has been stressed. Gibb describes it as "the most important work of Arabic geography."¹ and Le Strange as "a storehouse of geographical information, the value of which it would be difficult to over-estimate."² Nicholson calls Yāqūt "the greatest of Moslem geographers"³.

It is known that Yāqūt is not only the author of geographical works, though that work is the most famous one. But it is the most famous not because it is the best of his books but simply that comparative works to Yāqūt's had not been produced, either earlier or later, if the clarity and solidity of the presented information is to be considered. Among Yāqūt's works that have survived to our days, only two - *Mu'ğam al-buldān* and *Kitāb al-Muštariḳ waḏ^{an} wa'l-muhtaliḑ suq^{an}* - can be reckoned to geography. Although the latter with some limitation. The other books are *Kitāb Iršād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb* - biographical dictionary, also known as *Mu'ğam al-udabā*, and the book on the Arab genealogy - *Kitāb al-Muqtadab fī'l-ansāb*, the manuscript of which is now in Cairo.

It is to be remarked that before composing *Mu'ğam al-buldān*, Yāqūt had written seven works⁵, the subject matter of which remains unknown. However with regard to his surviving works, it seems to be an over simplification to describe Yāqūt as a geographer. He knew geography very well but it does not seem that he treated this science as the main realm of his interests. More probable is that he was interested in all knowledge which comes under the heading humanistic.

It does not result, from the preface to the *Mu'ğam al-buldān* that Yāqūt regards himself as a geographer. It also does not result that the motives for composing the dictionary only arose from his geographic interests. Although the introductory chapters are a perfect lecture summing up all the achievements of the preceding generations in that field of science.

As Yāqūt informs us, the direct motive was a controversy which occurred in Merv in the year A.D. 1218/19 [A.H.615] during one of Yāqūt's visit in this town. And so, Yāqūt was asked about the word *Ḥubāša* and maintained that *ḥ* should be vocalized with *ḍamma* not with *fatha* as was done by the narrator of the *ḥadīṭ* in which the word appeared. Yāqūt wanted to put an end to the dispute and tried to find more information about it in different books, i.e. books of rare *ḥadīṭs* (kutub ġarā'ib al-aḥādīṭ) and lexicographic dictionaries. Unfortunately, it turned out to be very difficult. He failed to find the book that would help him in solving the problem, nevertheless the town was well-known of its abundant libraries which Yāqūt describes⁶. He became convinced of the necessity for a book which would univocally smooth away all doubts connected with the correct vocalization of many geographical names and decided to create the work by himself.

Therefore the desire to set hitherto attained geographical knowledge in order was not the main motive for the composition of the dictionary, but rather it was the wish to emend all errors in existing geographical terminology. So, the motives were closer to teaching than science. He

stressed that in this work he would need *naql* than *ʿaql*. Meaning - correct transmission not mind or reason.

The other arguments enumerated in the preface also point out that Yāqūt's main purpose was the desire to correct mistakes in Arab geographical nomenclature, and extending the entries of geographical, ethnographical, etymological, historical information constituted the background.

Yāqūt mentioned an anecdote about a certain imām who had written a book on the interpretation of the *Maqamāt* composed by al-Ḥarīrī. Probably this book would have been a success if it were not for the mistakes in geographical nomenclature and other errors which resulted from an uncritical treatment of the books upon which he based the composition of his commentary. So, for instance, he describes Tabrīz, already then a well-known town, as one of the principal towns of Syria (balda mīn ʿawāṣim aš-Šām). Yāqūt gives also some other examples which prove imām's ignorance of geography. Then he regrets there is no book not only on correct geographical terminology but providing information on towns, rivers, mountains etc. as well. In this case, Yāqūt's motives are closer to geography, but geography perceived as knowledge *ma'rifa* not as science *ʿilm*.

The author of the dictionary mentions some groups of people for whom this knowledge is needed in their every-day life on account of their "practiced profession". They are jurists, creators of the *siyar*, the *aḥbār*, the *aḥādīṭ* and *tawārīḥ*, and adds "geography is the mainstay of their knowledge, for rarely is a leaf, a page, or even a line of their book without it"⁸. Then he writes of men of wisdom, physicians, astrologers and, in the end, men of letters (ahl al-adab), lexicologists, grammarians and poets.

He composes his dictionary upon what which had been created earlier. He does not present himself as a geographer par excellence. His own opinions and remarks included in the text are not closely connected with science. Generally it is lexicological, biographical or anecdotal material. What is interesting, is that in some entries his previous "profession" of merchant appears, for he very often mentions different goods that one can buy in a given place, or he informs the reader what kinds of goods are imported to a given place and describes their quality. These remarks are placed under the entries referring to towns which Yāqūt knew from his travels in his master's service as well as from the later period.

Many of Yāqūt's travels are reflected in the *Mu'ğam al-buldān*. The main aim of these journeys, with the exception, of course, of those during his service, was the attainment of the

most extensive knowledge, and was not restricted to geography alone. Even Wüstenfeld noticed that Yāqūt had not written any notes⁹ during his journeys which could resemble a travel description.

Assuming that the year 1218/19 [A.H.615] is the time when he decided to compose the *Muġam al-buldān*, all his travels during A.D.1219 - 1224¹⁰ [A.H. 616 - 621] must have been subordinated to this aim. However it does not result from entries of places which he visited at that time, that his knowledge about them would be especially extended of additional remarks from the journeys. Moreover, most of these places he had also visited before the above mentioned period. His own remarks concerning the places he knew, have the same character as those referring to the regions visited before A.D.1218 [A.H. 615].

Every long entry, besides pure geographical information, contains the history of the place, the customs of the inhabitants, citations from the poetry and usually brief biographies of celebrated men connected with the place.

In his work he took advantage of extremely abundant sources¹¹, the result of the work of many previous generations. He treated the sources very critically compiling and arranging them with the solidity of a real scholar and with the intuition of a brilliant compiler. He listed the collected material in alphabetical order but this encyclopedic arrangement of the *Muġam* has not deprived the dictionary of its literary value.

The main aim of the dictionary is the providing of as much interesting information as possible, not a well-ordered lecture. All this information is presented in a light style. It does not bore the reader, but provides practical knowledge, needed not only for the people mentioned in the preface, but for every cultured individual.

Regarding the *Muġam* in this way, the author of the work could be described as an *adīb*. Although it would be difficult to compare him with the great representatives of *adab* from the ninth century - al-Ġāhiz, Ibn Qutayba or al-Mubarrad - the more so as each of these *adībs* had his own "adab technic", the *adab* each of them differs. Yet, the "technics" which Yāqūt employed in his work were "adab technics", considering the *adab*, of course, as a literary genre.

From the acme of *adab* - the ninth century - till Yāqūt's time, there were approximately 400 years. As yet, that phenomenon of the Arab culture - *adab* - has not been thoroughly examined and elaborated. Most scholars pointed out various works and determined them as *adab* works or not, and the opinions concerning the same books were very often differed. Probably the

divergence was caused because in many cases they perceived *adab* as it was in the ninth century. Still *adab* regarded as a culture as well as a literary genre must have changed together with many changes occurring in the caliphate.

I hope that this subject will be undertaken in my dissertation in near future.

¹ H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature. An Introduction*, Oxford University Press 1963, p. 127.

² Cf. Le Strange in R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge 1969, p. 357.

³ R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge 1969, p. 357.

⁴ *Kitāb al-Muštariḳ* was perhaps the last Yāqūt's work, composed in A.D. 1229 [A.H. 626]. Cf. R. Blachère, E. I. s.v. *Yāqūt al-Rūmī*.

⁵ F. Wüstenfeld, *Jācūt's Reisen, aus seinen geographischen Wörterbuche beschrieben*, ZDMG 18(1864), p. 493. Very similar two of Yāqūt's works, *Muġam al-udabā'* and *Kitāb al-Muqtadab*, should be included in these seven works.

⁶ *Jacut's geographisches Wörterbuch*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig 1924, vol. IV, pp. 506 ff.

⁷ *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 3.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4, cf. also W. Jwaideh, *The Introductory Chapters of Yāqūt's Muġam al-buldān*, Leiden 1959, p. 5.

⁹ F. Wüstenfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

¹⁰ According to Wüstenfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 478, Yāqūt left Merv in A.D. 1219 [A.H. 616]. In March 1224 [Safar 621] the rough draft of the *Muġam* was completed.

¹¹ The best and most comprehensive study of *Muġam's* sources is F. J. Heer's work *Die historischen und geographischen Quellen in Jacut's geographischem Wörterbuch*, Strassburg 1898.