

MEDIEVAL MUSLIM TRAVELERS TO CHINA

By Raphael Israeli

ABSTRACT

Arab/Islamic knowledge of China relied basically on early *Rihla* literature which provided information to traders. In spite of the later development of historical and-geographic literature, China did not figure prominently in the Arab world view, and the only reports given there on China were quoted from the rihla travelogues. Only upon the advent of Ibn Battuta in the 13th century was the Arab/Islamic knowledge of China enriched and updated.

Travel in Early Islam

People in general, in all countries and cultures, places and times have always been curious about the world surrounding them and have moved around from site to site, allegedly in search of specific goals, probably in an insatiable and restless lust to grasp the "other," the mystical, the different, in order to extend oneself beyond the familiar horizons and into the vast uncertainties of unknown frontiers.

Great conquerors, like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Napoleon and the like, may have rationalized their uncontrollable desire for conquest in terms of military necessity, political constraint, or economic value just in order to cover up their personal craving for fame and glory. Plain adventurers of all brands may have justified their longing for the world at large, just in order to conceal their flight from personal distress or their real greed for economic or personal gain. Missionaries, explorers and travelers, often under the cloak of a *mission civilisatrice*, strove, at great risk for their lives, to save many "native" cultures from themselves, telling in the process their story from the vantage point of the hunter. Others went to pilgrimage, or ventured to fight against "unbelievers" of all sorts in defense of one's own culture and religion, or in an irrepressible elan to eliminate others. All this vanity of goals has converged and culminated in the colonization of much of the world by the European Colonialist drive and by Imperialists of all brands in modern times.

The Arabs and Persians, the two major peoples of early Islamic civilizations, were no different. The initial zeal of the Arabs for conquest and empire was soon overtaken by Arab and Persian avidity for culture, openness to the world, and travel. Travels among Muslims grew initially out of a need to fulfill the tenet of pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*), as the Islamic Empire extended into the far-flung corners of the world, then to render visits to saints and their tombs (*Ziyara*) and even to acquire knowledge (Talb al-'Ilm). It is no coincidence that the famous *Hadith* often quoted the Prophet himself, who urged Muslims to go even "unto China," in search of knowledge.

All these high motives were further reinforced by the growth of the *Hadith* literature which required of its conscientious scholar-authors to examine the lives, whereabouts, family backgrounds and personal integrity of transmitters of traditions, with a view to ascertaining the validity and credibility of *Hadith* stories. And exactly as the canonization of the Qur'an had opened the way to Arabic grammar and the literature of commentaries, the collections of the *Hadith* lent momentum to the growth of topographical, geographic and historical writings.

These novel avenues of scholarly endeavor were associated with, indeed demanded, extensive travel, and produced the literary genre of *Rihla* (travel) which will concern us in the next few pages. Thus, the *Rihla*, as a literary genre, weaves together into a powerful fabric of fact, decorated with rich designs of fancy, many of the overt and hidden agendas of the travelers.

Muslim Travelers to the East

If one were to judge by Sam Gellens' yardsticks,¹ travel to the East/Far East should have been much less appealing to Muslim travelers in search of knowledge, due to the far more magnetic immediate periphery of Islam, where most of the great scholars of early and medieval Islam were located (some Central Asian scholars excepted). How did China, then, enter into the travelogues of Muslims? Many a Western writer² has aptly remarked that the Arabs who sprung from the desert were eager to learn about the world and were particularly curious about feats and marvels that seem insignificant to us. On the one hand, they produced works. They described and categorized places, animals, cultures and countries which they encountered in the worlds they conquered, but on the other hand, their thirst for the occult, the strange and the miraculous proved insatiable. Even historical, geographical and topographical treatises were interspersed with recondite events which, rather than reflecting an objective truth, were calculated to fire aesthetic pleasure to the *adib*, the well-rounded and cultured reader of these accounts.³

And so it went for history and geography, which were always full with exotic facts, startling marvels and miraculous creatures. Remote and mysterious China provided an almost natural object of such stories which could neither be verified nor disputed⁴ and therefore its stories could easily be categorized into the three literary genres of the time which drew both a cultured readership and an avid oral audience to story tellers:

- a) The *Rihla* (travelogues);
- b) The '*Aja'ib* (miracles);
- c) *Al-Faraj ba'da a-Shidda wa-l-diq* (succor following distress and despair), a genre which brought the reader/listener to a dramatic peak where the hero was hopelessly cornered and then rescued, to the relief of the audiences.

¹ Sam I. Gellens, "The Search for Knowledge in Medieval Muslim Societies: A Comparative Approach" in D.E. Eckelman and J. Pescatori (eds.), *Muslim Travelers*, London, 1990, pp. 50-68.

² Cesar Dubler. "El Extreme Oriente visto pro los Musulmanes anteriores a la invasion de los Mongoles en el Sigle XIII," Barcelona, 1954, pp. 1-10 (pp. 465-75 in the collection of which this booklet is part).

³ See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture or Islam*, Vol. 453-4.

⁴ See R. Israeli, "An Arabic Manuscript on China and Tibet," Arabic. XXXIX, 1992, pp. 207-215.

In view of the difficulty to travel to China, the writers who could not carry out their own voyage used, by way of *Isnad* (chain of transmission), or simply by copying others' accounts without acknowledging it, to reproduce what they had heard or read from their contemporaries. Cities, which were centers of culture and where all those marvels happened, were a particular focus of attention to Arab travelers and story writers. Kings, princes, strange buildings, hidden treasures, peculiar animals or plants, elixirs of life, people's livelihood, were more interesting to them, and presumably to their readership, than political and economic history. Personal observations, rather than scientifically examined documents or accounts, was what stirred their minds. In that sense they conducted more of a descriptive field study like anthropologists or folklore scholars would do in our times, than an historical analysis of events, trends, opinions, statistics and personalities, based on documentary study and analysis of cause and effect.

Arab-Muslim historical and geographical accounts were usually categorized into *Iqlims* ("climes"), a term drawn from Greek and Sanskrit traditions where it designated those parts of the globe known to the ancient and medieval worlds, i.e., north of the Equator, which were marked off in degrees of latitude and longitude according to their different geo-political characteristics. *Lisan el 'Arab* speaks of seven *Iqlims* as the divisions of the earth, a clear indication that the concept that had penetrated into the tongue of the Arabs had been adopted by Arab geographers and historians. However, while Arab writers, like Ya'qubi, conceived of their world order in terms of Baghdad as the center of the universe, and the *Iqlims* as provinces, dependently connected to that hub, the ancient Iranian tradition had understandably arranged its world in its political-centrist terms: Iran at the center and six other kingdoms around it: China, India, the Land of the Turks, Russia, Africa and Arabia. From the original "Seven Kingdoms", other writers developed many more partitions, dividing the world into 14, 16 or even 20 climates.

Ultimately, *Iqlims* came to describe well-defined units, including towns, cities, mountains and rivers, where an autonomous cultural or political entity reigned. This explains the permanent increase in the number of *Iqlims*, insofar as distinct political authorities kept emerging, commensurate with the break-up of empires, the rise of centrifugal forces in the medieval world, or the growing awareness of Muslim geographers of countries they did not know before. *Iqlims* consisted primarily of cities, according to these accounts, and cities were located in terms of travel distances. In each place, a list of exotic objects was drawn, as if trying to lure new adventurers and explorers to that particular location, or, knowing the

unlikelihood of anyone getting as far as those remote confines of the world, the authors gave unbridled freedom to their imaginations.

Geographic and historical accounts of this sort were more revealing about the writers' cultural milieu than about their ostensible object of description. They satisfied a socio-cultural need more than they fulfilled a scholarly quest. However, many geographers did also provide important data on the countries where they travelled. These data were significant in terms of trade routes to be followed, of exotic goods to be purchased, of places, peoples, customs and events that they encountered. Moreover, in areas like China, where travel also engendered permanent settlement of Muslims on the China coastline, these reports can hint to us about the beginnings of the thousand year-old history of Chinese Islam.

Muslim Travelers to China

The beginnings of Arab/Persian contacts with China lay in the misty past. Some extant Arabic and Persian sources, as well as Chinese and Chinese-Muslim sources, do provide a few hints about the genesis of these contacts as well as of the early settlements of Muslims in China. However, most of these accounts are difficult to ascertain or to pinpoint in terms of time and space. A tradition in *Marwazi's Taba'I' Al-Hayawan* (The Nature of Animals, ca. 1120) relates the story of Shi'ites who had allegedly left Khurasan in 749 due to Umayyad persecutions and they ultimately settled down in China and acted as mediators between the Chinese and foreign traders. Other apocryphal sources even claim that Islam entered China as soon as the Prophet's lifetime, and that one of the Companions of the Prophet, Sa'ad ibn Waqqas, was dispatched to the Chinese. Chinese sources speak about the incursion of Arab and Persian pirates (Da-Shi) into Canton in 758 and the massacre by the Chinese of the foreigners, which resulted therefrom in 762.⁵ All throughout this period, i.e., 7-8 centuries, commercial ties did exist between China and the Abbasid world, which was in fact a continuation of the previous relations between China and the Sassanid Empire.⁶ It is noteworthy that since the Arabs had little experience in those days in the circumnavigation of Arabia and India into the China Sea, it was the Persians who played the major role in these trade routes, even after the takeover of that commerce by the Arabs. Arabs, especially from South Arabia, learned the seafaring trade and gradually became dominant in the Far Eastern

⁵ See, for example, the story of Khanfu (Canton) in Akhbar al-Sin wal-Hind, J. Sauvaget, *Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde*, Paris, 1948, p. 7.

⁶ For a summary of these events. see R. Israeli, *Muslims in China*, Curzon, 1978, pp. 80-2.

waters from the 10th century onwards.⁷ Expectedly, trade relations between China and the Islamic Empire reached their climax during the 9th century when the prevailing stability in both permitted this sort of international exchange.

b. From the Red Sea, where outside elements such as the Jewish Radhanites could graft themselves onto the existing routes.

The existence of these two routes as early as the 9th century provided the background for the first Arab/Persian geographical accounts of China and the way thither, which were to serve as guides or encyclopedias of sorts, with a view to bringing together the known and available information of these times. Following D. Leslie, who worked on Arabic sources to the voyages to China, these sources could be divided into two categories:

- a. *Rihla* accounts (see above), sort of travelogues of travelers who did go to China or simply imagined that they did:
- b. Straightforward geographic works which purported to organize the material according to *Iqlims* (see above) or to sort out its flora, fauna, cities, governments and miraculous sites and happenings.

The Early Rihla Literature

To this genre belong *Akhbar a-Sin wal-Hind*⁸ (Notices of China and India); an anonymous writing of the 9th century, *Silsilat a-Tawarikh* (The Chain of Chronicles) attributed to Abu Zayd a-Sirafi; *'Aja'ib al-Hind* (The Miracles of India) imputed to Buzrug Ibn Shahrihar, and the various Sindbad stories. These accounts are mainly based on stories collected from actual seafarers who traveled to China, not necessarily first-hand evidence of the author/reporter. Here there are lengthy stories of the routes to China, the Chinese cities where the ships were anchored, or environing cities whose marvels were reported to the ship crews during their ground visits. At times descriptions of Chinese customs, especially the most out-of-the-ordinary among them, as well as reports about the Chinese administration and short chapters on Chinese history, made up these early works.

In the 10th century, Abu Duluf al-Yanbu'i also wrote a detailed account of his voyage, which remains extant only in some of its parts that were cited by geographers such as Yaqut,

⁷ The peculiar place of the Persians in this trade between China and the Islamic world is learned from the extant lists of boat captains and seafarers with Persian names or of Persian descent.

⁸ Two editions-cum-translations exist in French 1) Jean Sauvaget, *Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde*, Paris 1948 ; 2) M. Reinaud, *Relation des Voyages en Chine et en Inde*, Paris, 1845.

Ibn al-Nadim and Qazwini. These accounts were supplemented by great historical collections like those of Tabari, Mas'udi and others, and such specific works of *Adab* as al-Marwazi's. It is noteworthy, however, that these genres do not always exist by themselves, for in Arabic literature we can find historical and geographic materials: in history books some geographic data are included, and vice versa. Here we shall concern ourselves, in some detail, with the major *Rihla* books which have inspired generations of historians, geographers, *adibs* and travelers of all sorts.

1. *Akhbar a-Sin wal-Hind* is probably the richest extant early Arabic source on China, and especially the route thither. Some researchers have attributed it to Suleyman the Merchant, but it seems more likely to be the summary of various eyewitnesses or hearsay reports and information collected from traders and seafarers, and edited together by some anonymous author around 851. This book is not organized by chronological or geographic yardsticks, but is rather a hodgepodge of various pieces of information which attempt to capture the interest or prospective travelers to those parts of the world.

The book is replete with descriptions of the dangers awaiting the intrepid traveler, places where food and water could be purchased, and a variety of exotic goods is detailed for the interest of the traveling merchant. The very information given on China seems to be geared to the practical use of the itinerant trader. For example: Chinese trade regulations, the monetary system there,⁹ as well as the methods of trade and entrepots.¹⁰ The book also carries what we would call today anthropological data relating to Chinese dietary customs, purification and funeral ceremonies, and the like. Of all Chinese cities, Khansu (Canton) gets most attention, although some sporadic bits and pieces are also devoted to other cities and places.¹¹

2. *Silsilat al-Tawarikh*. The book was published ca. 916 by Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, who did not visit China himself, but collected enough intriguing information about it as to turn his account into one of the *Rihla* classics, a voyage by remote control or by subterfuge one might say. The information was gathered from sailors and merchants and covered the latter part of the 9th century. Thus details are given

⁹ E.g., see Sauvaget, pp. 15-16, with a detailed description of precious metals which serve for monetary exchanges.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

about the dramatic drop in the volume of trade between China and the Gulf at that time, as well as the massacre of foreigners (Muslims, Christians and Jews) in Canton in 878. This *Rihla* also told the story of Ibn Wahab, a Muslim descendant of the Prophet, who traveled to China from his native Basra and obtained an audience with the Chinese Emperor. Abu Zayd attests personally to the reliability of Suleyman's *Akhbar*, discussed above.¹² It is noteworthy that due to the inclusion of Suleyman's book in Abu Zayd's, both are sometimes referred to as *Akhbar al-Sin wal-Hind*, as an alternative title to *Silsilat al-Tawarikh*, whose two components are distinguished as Part I (Suleyman's) and Part II (Abu Zayd's).¹³

In Ibn Wahab's encounter with the Chinese Emperor an interesting dialogue is related which, although apparently apocryphal,¹⁴ nevertheless reflects the early Muslims' geographical viewpoint. For in that interview the Chinese Son of Heaven is said to recognize the existence of five emperors on earth: the Arab Emperor, who is the mightiest of them all,¹⁵ the Chinese, the Turkish, the Indian and the Byzantine (Rum). It is evident that since no Chinese emperor would recognize his kingdom as one of many rather than the universal *Tian-xia* (all under Heaven), the story must be apocryphal. Moreover, this order of things reflected the science of *Iqlims* known to the Arabs and Persians more than the Chinese world order.

It stands to reason that the writer had a stake in expanding the trade relations between the Islamic world and the East, and he intended his book to be not a travelogue in the classic *hla* style, but rather an encyclopedia of names, places, ports of call, local customs and trade regulations to aid prospective traders and give comfort and familiarity of those remote lands to seafarers and adventurers of all boards.

3. *'Aja'ib al-Hind* was written ca. 953 and it includes, like its predecessors, stories and accounts of sailors. The editor, Buzrug Ibn Shahrihar, was himself a Persian naval captain. Unlike the previous books, which at least preserved the similitude of a practical guide to a world of reality, *'Aja'ib*, true to its title, crosses the threshold to the world of hearsay and imagination. It is therefore better categorized under the *'Aja'ib* (Miracles) genre of literature than under the *Rihla* type, which kept the pretense of a journey even when there was hardly one. The crossing of this

¹² See M. Reinaud, *Relation des Voyages...*, Paris, 1845, Vol. II, pp. 60-62.

¹³ See Maria Kowalska, « From Facts to Literary Fiction : Medieval Arabic Travel Literature », in *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 5-6, 1987-8, pp. 357-403.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Reference is made by the Arab narrator to the Abbasid King.

watershed indeed turned the *Rihla* literature into stories of fantasy which, far from fulfilling their initially intended function of travel guides, have shifted their emphasis to entertainment of the readership. And while the former *Rihla* books did contain some accounts of geographic and historical significance, the latter amount to no more than literary fiction,¹⁶ which may have its charm and attraction all right, but it is just fiction.

Other writings of this genre are of lesser importance, either because they are no longer extant or only oblique references or second-hand quotations from them have survived. One *Rihla* report, '*Aja'ib al 'Buldan* (Miracles of Countries), was written in the 10th century by Abu Duluf al-Yanbu'i, a poet in the Samanid Court. It described the journey overland from Khorasan in Eastern Iran to Turkish Central Asia as far as the Uighur territory (now Xinjiang in northwestern China). Although the book disappeared, extensive citations from it have survived in Ibn Nadim's *Kitab al-Fihrist* and Yaqut's *Mu'jam al-Buldan*. Other reports of this sort were picked up by geographers and historians who quoted from them liberally although, as we shall see in the next section, they were supposed to create a scientifically-oriented new literary endeavor.

But before we delve into geographical and historical literature, it is worthwhile to expand a trifle upon the Sindbad stories which emerged in Baghdad and Basra during the 9th - 10th centuries and which fantasized about imaginary seafarers who accomplished miraculous feats. Sindbad, an earlier version of Popeye the Sailor, was an extraordinary traveler whose accomplishments grew out of the stories which were mentioned in '*Aja'ib al-Hind* and where fantasy and reality dwelt together. For example, that and other *Rihla* accounts were replete with stories of mysterious giant birds which could carry people and rescue them from isolated islands where they had been abducted: or dragons which dwelt in the seas but could fly in the skies; huge sea turtles and whales which were mistaken for islands and served as temporary and tragic landing grounds; or islands populated by Amazons, etc.

These stories, which contributed to the creation of the literary genre, *Al-Faraj ba'da a-Shidda wa-l-diq* (Succor after distress and despair), were elaborated to their perfect peak in the Sindbad tales. Basra and Baghdad were frequented by a host of sailors from all over the world who competed in manufacturing these miraculous accounts and in erecting their intricate plots into one thousand-and-one night-style soap operas. Audiences were so taken by

¹⁶ Maria Komwalska, op. cit.

these accounts that writers (*adibs*) made it their life mission to collect them and then to elaborate upon them with ornate events and to work them into masterpieces of literary art. In Hodgson's words:

When the adib studied biology, for instance, he was not so much interested in learning the structure of organisms as in finding out all the strange things that could be said of them. A discourse on animals commonly reads more like Ripley's "Believe It or Not" than a text in zoology. The aesthetic propriety of various ways of making literary references to the animals discussed was a major concern. All knowledge was a means of adorning and enriching literature.¹⁷

According to Kowalska,¹⁸ these stories, which had a set structure, usually began with a disaster which beset the travelers, followed by an unfolding rescue and success, and ending in a fortuitous return to base. She believes that the development of these stories traces the evolution of the Rihla genre into its four successive steps:

1. Initially authentic accounts and practical guides were written, based on actual findings and travelogues (e.g., Suleyman's story);

2. Later, people like Sirafi transmitted to the public their factual findings as their first priority, but accompanied by ornamental stories:

3. Third stage came Shahrihar, who put his emphasis on entertaining stories. Indeed, in his anthology of such stories, the transmission of facts and eye-witness reports was only incidental;

4. Sindbad's stories effected the transition from scientific data and factual reports to the world of the imaginary.

Geographical and Historical Writings

Like the Rihla literature, geographical and historical writings began evolving in the 8th and 10th centuries. We have already discussed the Arab views of geography, which were deeply influenced by earlier Persian and Greek works. Here, we shall only mention the geographers and historians who reported about China and the East.

¹⁷ Hodgson, op. cit., pp. 453-4.

¹⁸ Op. cit.

1. The first great work reporting about China and the East was Ibn Khurdadhbih's *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l Mamalik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms). The writer, Persian by origin, was in charge of the post office and information in many areas of the Abbasid Empire. His great work was published first in 846 and again in 885. He is far more systematic in his descriptions of China than the *Rihla* books discussed above, although he is also far less entertaining. His depiction of the naval route to China is different from the one reported in *Akhbar a-Sin wal-Hind*. He gives details of port cities of China which do not appear in the *Rihla* book. Ibn Khurdadhbih's book became the standard reference work from which later writers quoted extensively. For example his report that there were 300 cities in China is widely repeated in later sources.
2. *Mukhtasar Kitab al Buldan* (The Concise Book of Countries) by Ibn al-Faqih (902) is typical of the geographic writings of the 10th-13th centuries in that it repeats without criticism or update reports of previous works, thus neutralizing the dynamic discussion otherwise inherent in geographical and historical books which dwell on change as well as on continuity. For example, the author copies verbatim earlier reports from the *Rihla* books and from Ibn Khurdadhbih,¹⁹ or repeats the details given by *Akhbar al-Sin wal-Hind* about dietary customs of the Chinese.
3. Other geographical works by al-Maqdisi (985) and his contemporary al-Istakhri, do not add any information on China, although they teach us something on the evolution of the geographical thinking of those famous Arabic writers. An anonymous account, dating from 982-3, adds some precious material regarding Chinese Turkestan and its populations. Later geographic accounts from the 11th-14th centuries, confused between previous sources and reported the annals of Tang China's (600-900) society, politics and economics as if they had remained unchanged when reported during the Song (960-1279).
4. Tabari's *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l Muluk* (The History of Prophets and Kings), as well as Ya'qubi's *Ta'rikh* (History) and Mas'udi's *Muruj al-dhahab* (Golden Prairies) and *Kitab al-Zaman* (The Book of Annals) are among the

¹⁹ Ibn Khurdadhbih's report on the Radhanite Jews, who were itinerant merchants in the East, is summarized by Ibn al-Faqih without remarks or quotations.

most important historical writings of the 9th and 10th centuries which mention something of China. Tabari's book tells us about trade with China, as well as about its major ports of trade and the goods imported from there. Ya'qubi, by contrast, is very vague and general, and his information does not contribute much to our knowledge. In all these sources the same stories recur in several versions. For example, Ya'qubi and Mas'udi begin their historical account with an attempt to analyze the ethno historical descent of the Chinese and they both come to the conclusion that they are the offspring of 'Amur, the son of Japhet. They then relate the idolization of one of the ancient kings of the Chinese, with Mas'udi indulging in much detail copied directly from Abu Zayd. Mas'udi supplements his predecessor's account with his own story on the "far corner of China" where a precious stone occasioned many struggles and wars. This story was picked up by a later historian, Qazwini, and is very reminiscent of the story in R. Israeli's article mentioned above.²⁰

5. Other Arabic sources, which are not necessarily, categorized under the above literary genres, also sporadically report bits and pieces of China. For the most part, this information is cited from the *Rihla* books or historical and geographic writings. Only rarely is there any new addition to those already chewed and ruminated accounts. Great writers like Jahiz and al-Biruni give details of Chinese goods imported to Basra or about Chinese precious stones that they were aware of Qazwini (d. 1283) summarized previous stories since the 9th century, quoted Ibn Khurdadhbih (300 cities in China, etc.), the distances between them, Mas'udi and the rest. In Ibn Nadim's *Fihrist* (985/7) and Marwazi's *Taba'i' al-Hayawan* (The Nature of Animals) (1120), new data are given about China, apparently all cited from ancient sources which have disappeared. For example, Ibn Nadim discusses the Chinese writing system and reports some details from a Christian informer who had allegedly visited China and met with the Emperor there.

²⁰ "An Arabic Manuscript on China and Tibet," *Arabica*, XXXIX, 1992, pp. 212-215.

Summing up

Arabic sources on China began, as we have seen, with the first travelers who genuinely strove to provide to Arab traders, guides for their ventures routes eastward in order to respond to a growing need. Thus, in spite of the degeneration of this precious literature into fairy tales, the early *Rihla* works remained the primary source on which generations of later writers relied. It was not until Marco Polo and the 14th century Ibn Battuta that substantial new data were added to the pool of information of those early years.

This may seem strange at first sight because it was precisely at the end of the 9th century that Arabic historiography began to outgrow its initial Islamic straight jacket which had focused on early Islam, to become a legitimate and independent branch of inquiry and scholarly endeavor. One would expect, then, that information about China and the East would abound and diversify, not shrink and mythologize. However, one has to realize that "world histories" like those of Mas'udi and Ya'qubi did not indulge in the origins of the world (the creation, origins of countries and peoples etc.), for their own sake, but only as a preface to Islamic history. For since the advent of Islam, Arabic historiography showed little or no interest in the history of other countries or nations outside the Islamic world.²¹ This, coupled with the dramatic drop in the volume of trade between the Islamic world and China and the destruction of Siraf in an earthquake (977) drove the geographic and historical interest of the Arabs in those countries into the literary (*adab*) realm.

Therefore, despite the tremendous Arab and Persian historiography and works of geography, the Arab/Islamic knowledge of China and the Far East remained sporadic, ill-informed and replete with gaps and misconceptions. This is the reason why Ibn Battuta's *rihla* to China during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) was, expectedly, the first opportunity of the Arab/Muslim world to renew contact with China and to gain, after a chasm of three centuries, an updated picture thereof. It turns out then that unofficial history writing (travelogues and *Rihla* literature) did more to make China familiar to the Arabs than all the great works of history and geography which had failed to do so.

²¹ See H. Gibb and J. Landau, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*, Ch. 5, "The Golden Age". Oxford University Press, 1963.