

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about an ocean and the lands that lie on its shores, about the ships that cross it and the cargoes they carry. In its own words, it is a book about

the Sea of India and China, in whose depths are pearls and ambergris, in whose rocky isles are gems and mines of gold, in the mouths of whose beasts is ivory, in whose forests grow ebony, sapan wood, rattans, and trees that bear aloewood, camphor, nutmeg, cloves, sandalwood, and all manner of fragrant and aromatic spices, whose birds are parrots and peacocks, and the creeping things of whose earth are civet cats and musk gazelles, and all the rest that no one could enumerate, so many are its blessings.¹

It might have been the inspiration for John Masefield's quinquireme of Nineveh in his poem "Cargoes," with its

cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

(And, yes, there is sweet white wine in this book too, made from the sap of the toddy palm.) But it is about more than that, for there is a whole human landscape: ships' captains and customs men, kings and courtiers, princes and paupers—and a few cannibals and kid-nappers, to add spice.

What's more, the book describes a real, live world, almost palpably real, despite the passing of eleven centuries. It is built from facts, not sailors' yarns. As the author says in his closing words, "I have avoided relating any of the sort of accounts in which sailors exercise their powers of invention,"² sailors, according to his illustrious predecessor al-Jāhīz, not being "respecters of the unvarnished truth. The stranger the story the more they like it; and, moreover, they use vulgar expressions and have an atrocious style."³ Reality and solidity are what are implied by the first word of the title: *akhbār*, accounts, are reports from credible witnesses. And each *khābar*, each account, fits in with the others to be assembled into a jigsaw picture of a world not unlike our own, a world on the road to globalization.

It is a short book, but it has a sweeping perspective, from the Swahili coast to a rather mistily glimpsed Korea. It is therefore one of those books that seems bigger than it is. And, like the ports of that immense Afro-Asiatic littoral, its pages are busy with people and piled with goods, not just with the luxuries listed above but also with a priceless cargo of information, especially on China. Here are the first foreign descriptions of tea and porcelain, and a whole panorama of Chinese society, from the Son of Heaven and Confucian ethics down to toilet paper and bamboo urinals.

And all this marvelous, mundane world is contained in the compass of a novella. As its own last words say, *wa-in qalla awlā*:⁴ Less is more.

DATING AND AUTHORSHIP

If *Accounts of China and India* is good value in its geographical and material coverage, there is a bonus: it is, in fact, two books.

Book One, according to the author of Book Two, dates to the year 237/851–52.⁵ There is no reason to doubt this date, and internal evidence supports it.⁶ The author of Book One, however, is unknown. It does not help that the first pages are missing from the only manuscript copy known to have survived; these might have

given an author's name. Nor does it help that another writer, Ibn al-Faqīh, a writer much closer in time to the composition of Book One than we are, quoted some of its text with an attribution to one Sulaymān al-Tājir.⁷ This Sulaymān the Merchant was undoubtedly one of the informants for Book One; he is the only one mentioned in it by name.⁸ Commentators in search of authors have therefore leapt on Sulaymān and credited him with the whole book. It is perfectly usual in Arabic books of the time for their authors to appear in the text, as Sulaymān does, in the third person, as if I were to interject suddenly, "And Tim Mackintosh-Smith said . . ." This is, in itself, no obstacle to the attribution of authorship to Sulaymān, but it is likewise not an argument for it. Much ink has been shed over the question, but, in the end, we have no incontrovertible evidence for Sulaymān or anyone else being the author of Book One.

There is a further possible element of mystery: the author of Book One may have been unknown even to the author of Book Two. It is certainly strange that the latter, in the evaluation of Book One that forms the preamble to his own work,⁹ does not say who wrote that earlier book. Later on, when he has another chance to name the author of Book One, he seems intentionally to avoid doing so: he calls him merely "the person from whom that First Book was taken down."¹⁰ To me there seems to be only one entirely cogent reason that the author of Book Two did not mention his predecessor's name, which is that he himself did not know it.

About the author of Book Two there is no doubt. He is there at the outset, staking his third-person claim to authorship in the book's opening words, "Abū Zayd al-Ḥasan al-Sirāfi said . . ."¹¹ If we knew nothing else about him, we would know from his surname that he was from—or at least had some connection with—the city of Sirāf on the Iranian shore of the Gulf, which for much of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries was the most important port for long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean. But we do know a little more, from no less an authority than the great historian-geographer al-Mas'ūdī: he met Abū Zayd in Basra and says that he "had moved

there from Sirāf in the year 303 [915–16].” Al-Mas’ūdī then gives a lineage for Abū Zayd (in which the names of earlier ancestors show an Iranian ethnic origin) and adds that he was “a man of discrimination and discernment,” that is, that he was a man of learning, with a well-developed critical sense.¹²

In contrast to Book One, in Book Two it is the date that is the problem. It was obviously being written well after the end of the Huang Chao rebellion in China, suppressed in 271/884, and some considerable time into the ensuing decades of anarchy; these events are reported near the beginning of the book.¹³ Book Two was finished, as will become clear below, by the time al-Mas’ūdī was working on his own *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems* (*Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma’ādin al-jawhar*) in 332/943–44. But that still leaves a wide range of possible dates. We will return to the question.

There is another question to ask and to return to. Immediately after declaring his authorship, Abū Zayd says, “I have examined this foregoing book (meaning the First Book), *having been commanded* to look carefully through it, and to verify the information I find in it,” and moreover to supplement it “with other reports . . . known to myself but not appearing in the book.”¹⁴ These supplementary accounts grew into Book Two. Abū Zayd undoubtedly wrote Book Two, but who was its instigator, the mysterious figure who commanded or instructed him to do so? If he was some important literary patron, why not commemorate him by name? Why hide him with a passive verb, the “anonymous” voice of the Arabic grammarians? Throughout Book Two, that nameless presence peers over the author’s shoulder.

Then again Abū Zayd and his predecessor, the writer of Book One, were, strictly speaking, compilers, not authors. The material of both books came from the informants who contributed their *akhbār*, their eyewitness accounts. Other than Sulaymān the Merchant and a certain Ibn Wahb, whose report of his visit to China is incorporated into Book Two,¹⁵ they too are nameless. But these two suggest identities for the anonymous remainder. The other

contributors were almost certainly merchants like Sulaymān (rather than mere yarning sailors); they were probably from the Gulf region—Ibn Wahb was from the Iraqi port city of Basra at its head—and especially from Sirāf, that great trans-oceanic terminus. Most important, they all seem to have visited and spent time in the places they talk about. There is a glimpse of them as a group at the end of Book Two, where the writer apologizes for his lack of information on al-Silā (Korea): “None of our circle of informants has ever made it there and brought back a reliable report.”¹⁶ These are the true authors, this circle of ex-expatriates, old China and India hands back home, swapping memories of far-off lands like a coterie of Sindbads—and all the more wonderful for being real characters with real stories.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Those merchant-informants traveled through an open world. Arab expansion—and especially what could be called the Asianization of the Arab-Islamic polity under the Abbasid dynasty from the mid-second/eighth century on—had thrown open an eastward-facing window of trade and travel. The new age is summed up in a saying attributed to al-Manṣūr, the second Abbasid caliph and builder of Baghdad. Standing on the bank of the river of the recently founded imperial city and watching the silks and porcelain unloading, he exclaimed, “Here is the Tigris, and nothing bars the way between it and China!”¹⁷ At the same time, and at the other end of that eastward way, the Chinese were discovering new far-western horizons, with the Tang-dynasty geographer Jia Dan describing the maritime route to Wula (al-Ubullah, ancient Apologus) at the head of the Gulf, then up to Bangda (Baghdad).¹⁸

The hemiglobal scope of commerce comes across in the diversity of goods described in the *Accounts*: Indian rhino horn, Tibetan musk, Gulf pearls, Chinese porcelain, Sri Lankan sapphires, Maldivian coir, Arabian and East African ambergris, Abyssinian leopard skins. It also comes across in the sheer mobility of individuals

mentioned—people like the merchant from Khurasan in eastern Iran, who “made his way to the land of the Arabs, and from there to the kingdoms of the Indians, and then came to [China], all in pursuit of honorable gain,” in his case from selling ivory and other luxury goods. In China, his merchandise was taken illegally by an official, but his case reached the ears of the emperor, who chastised the official concerned: “You . . . wanted [this merchant] to return by way of these same kingdoms, telling everyone in them, ‘I was treated unjustly in China and my property was seized by force!’”¹⁹ By rights, the emperor said, the official should have been put to death for his action. The message is plain: bad publicity would damage China’s reputation as a stable market and a serious trading partner, and that damage would spread across the whole vast continent of Asia. Then, as now, it was supply and demand that propelled and steered the ship of trade, but it was confidence that kept it afloat.

More literally, however, what drove the ships along the “maritime Silk Road” of the Indian Ocean was the great system of winds with its annual alternating cycle, taking vessels eastward in one season and back west in another—the Arabic for “season,” *mawsim*, giving English (via the Portuguese *moução/monção*) its name for that system, “monsoon.”²⁰ The two great termini of the monsoon trade were Sīrāf in the Gulf and the Chinese city of Khānfū—which was, according to Abū Zayd, home to 120,000 foreign merchants in the later third/ninth century;²¹ the ports of Kūlam Malī in southwestern India and Kalah Bār on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula were the two major havens and crucial entrepôts along the way. Of these four, Kalah Bār has never been pinpointed, while Kūlam Malī survives, sleepily, as the Keralan town of Kollam; only Khānfū remains the great emporium it was, the Chinese megalopolis of Guangzhou. As for Sīrāf, birthplace of Abū Zayd and, in a sense, of this book, it is now the site of a small village; but the village crouches on the ruins of the palaces of rich ship owners and traders, merchant princes of the monsoon who dined off the finest Chinese

porcelain and whose wealth grew ever greater through that climactic third/ninth century.²²

And then, in the last quarter of that century, disaster struck. As Abū Zayd puts it, “the trading voyages to China were abandoned and the country itself was ruined, leaving all traces of its greatness gone.”²³ From 260/874 on, China was convulsed by one of those rebellions that seem to well up there every few centuries; the emperor’s fears of instability came home to roost, in the heart of his palace in the Tang capital, Chang’an, captured by the rebel leader Huang Chao in 266/880. As for bad publicity, it could hardly have been worse than news of the wholesale massacre of foreign merchants in Khānfū/Guangzhou. The Gulf’s direct seaborne trade with China withered away. “China,” Abū Zayd goes on, “has remained in chaos down to our own times.”²⁴ The lesser Indian trade remained, and Gulf merchants still struck deals over Chinese goods, but only at the halfway point of Kalah Bār. Book Two is haunted by the knowledge that the good old days were over.

THE LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Books of *akhbār*, oral accounts set down in writing, are very old indeed. An *akhbār* collection on the ancient Arabs attributed to the first/seventh-century ‘Abīd ibn Sharyah is, by some accounts, the oldest extant Arabic book, after the Qur’ān.²⁵ Moreover, the fact that this ‘Abīd was a professional storyteller demonstrates how the genre sits on the division—or maybe the elision—between spoken and written literature. And if those ancient *akhbār* had as their subject matter pre-Islamic battles and heroes, then the inspiration for the overarching theme of this book is almost equally old. Time and again, the Qur’ān tells its listeners to “go about the earth and look.”²⁶

Akhabār, then, are supposedly verbatim oral reportage, a secular parallel to the literature of hadith, which records the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. And although a full-scale science of *akhabār* never developed as it did for hadith, there was some attempt at classification. Al-Mas‘ūdī,

for example, identifies two types of oral report, those that are on everyone's tongues and those that have been passed down a chain of narrators.²⁷ He also neatly defines *akhbār* by what they are not: his own book is one of *khābar*, not of *baḥth* and *naẓar*—that is, it presents facts as they are reported but does not analyze them through research and investigation.²⁸ In other words, *akhbār*, like journalism today, were seen as the first draft of history—and, in the case of *Accounts of China and India*, of geography, ethnology, economics, zoology, and much else besides.

All this means that there is an immediacy to the information. Particularly in Book Two, there are snippets of “writerly” commentary that stitch together the patchwork of accounts, but most of the text has the feel of having been told and taken down directly. An example is the account, mentioned above, of the aggrieved merchant. First, Abū Zayd has his word as literary anchorman—“The Chinese used to monitor their own system, in the old days, that is, before its deterioration in the present time, with a rigor unheard of elsewhere”—but he then gives the nod to his informant, who launches straight into his tale: “A certain man from Khurasan . . . came to Iraq . . .”²⁹ And the tale spools out spontaneously, occasionally getting lost in its own subordinate clauses as we all do when we speak. To listen to these accounts is to hear the unedited voice of oral history.

“Unedited” does not mean “unrehearsed”: as with all travelers' tales, the accounts had no doubt already acquired a polish in the telling and retelling. Nor is it likely to mean “verbatim,” for Abū Zayd and his anonymous predecessor probably further burnished their informants' grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Despite this, some of the language is slightly wayward. It is not bad Arabic, as the French scholar Ferrand claimed;³⁰ rather, it preserves features of the spoken Arabic that it represents on the page—even today, actual spoken Arabic is nearly always standardized before it goes down on paper. The multiplicity of contributors and the duality of compilers also make for occasional repetitions and very occasional contradictions.³¹ Geographically and thematically, too, although

the compilers did their best to organize the material, the book as a whole is no disciplined Baedeker—it has more in common, in fact, with the online, interactive travel websites of our own age—nor, of course, does it have the neatness of a discrete journey by a single traveler. Instead, it weaves the threads and fragments of many journeys together into a text that, for its size, must be one of the richest in all the literature of travel and geography.

There is a danger, with all this richness and denseness, of losing one's audience. The leaps from India to China and back, the excursions to Sarbuzah and the Islands of Silver, the sidetracks into the lives of Shaivite sādhus and *devadasi* prostitutes could all be too disorienting for readers back in Basra or Baghdad. But there are always cultural “navigation aids.” Inevitably, some of them do not work for us, the readers of more than a millennium later: who, for example, were the Kanifiyyah and the Jalidiyyah, to whom rival Indian gangs are compared?³² Perhaps the Sharks and the Jets of fourth/tenth-century Iraq; the precise reference seems to be lost. But there is also the enduring cultural compass of Islam and Arabdom.³³ It orients the traveler to what he sees, how he sees it, and how he reports it, and the reader to how he receives the report. It works on many levels, from the way the Chinese urinate (standing, not squatting) and why,³⁴ to interpretations of Buddhist iconography.³⁵ This constant guiding presence not only enables the traveler-traders—merchants in musk and silk and porcelain, but also in knowledge—to make cultural translations for their immediate audience back home. For us, their audience removed in time, it points not just to where those travelers got to but also to where they came from.

It also may explain a few cases in which the informants' vision is apparently distorted. An example is that of Ibn Wahb's audience with the Tang emperor. Assuming the meeting did in fact take place—and Abū Zayd, that scholar of discrimination and discernment, accepted that it did—would the emperor, in his palace at the heart of the Middle Kingdom, the navel of the civilized earth,

really have viewed Baghdad, the barbarian Bangda, as the center of the world and the Abbasid caliph as above him in the international order of precedence?³⁶ Perhaps he (or his interpreter) was being exceedingly diplomatic. Or perhaps Ibn Wahb was doing what later, European, writers were to do, notably the author of the travels of Sir John Mandeville, in that dubious knight's even more dubious audience with the Mamluk sultan:³⁷ using the figure of the wise infidel king to make a point about one's own society.

There was certainly a point to be made in the third/ninth century—that the still young Arab-Islamic civilization of the West had not only joined the club of Asian cultures but had also outstripped its ancient fellow members in global importance. If this is indeed the subtext of that strange imperial pronouncement, then it is made more subtly and more eloquently, not by emperors but by unknown merchants, on every page of this book: for it is a book that tells us, by reflex, so to speak, as much about the energy and enterprise of Islam in that age as it does about China and India.

ABŪ ZAYD AND AL-MAS'ŪDĪ

Al-Mas'ūdī, the Herodotus of the Arabs, as he is often and aptly called, was quoted above on Abū Zayd and on the meaning of *akhbār*. Those quotations are from his main surviving work, *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*. But there is more to be said on the relationship between the two authors and their works, for significant portions of the material in *Accounts of China and India* appear also in the pages of al-Mas'ūdī. Who got what from whom?

There is, of course, no question about matter taken from Book One, finished some eighty years before al-Mas'ūdī was working on his *Meadows of Gold*. Regarding information appearing in our Book Two and in *Meadows of Gold*, however, the picture is more complicated. Commentators have homed in on the meeting between the two authors, which they have placed in the years soon after Abū Zayd's move to Basra in 303/915–16; the meeting, in Miquel's analysis, enabled Abū Zayd to pass on to al-Mas'ūdī

the information contained in the full and finished *Accounts*.³⁸ This looks at first like a reasonable assumption, and it would, if correct, give a rough date of the early 310s/920s for the compilation of our Book Two. Certainly as regards the flow of information, it appears to be from Abū Zayd to al-Masʿūdī: the latter's language is the more polished, his organization of the material much better planned; Abū Zayd's work is the raw original from which he has drawn.³⁹ The only snag is that in the case of one *khobar*, the macabre story of an Indian who cuts pieces off his own liver before burning himself to death, al-Masʿūdī states that he himself witnessed the scene in India in 304/916–17.⁴⁰ If we take al-Masʿūdī's bona fides as read, and if we accept that the details of the story are so bizarre and precise that it is unlikely that another witness would independently have given the story to Abū Zayd, then it seems possible that al-Masʿūdī himself is one of the anonymous informants of the *Accounts*.

To those two pending questions, concerning the date of Book Two and the identity of its patron or instigator, there are no firm answers to be drawn from all this, but there are some comments to be made:

1. The meeting between al-Masʿūdī and Abū Zayd, whenever it happened, does not provide a fixed terminal date for the *Accounts*. The final version of the book might have been put together at any time up until 332/943–44, the year in which al-Masʿūdī was writing his *Meadows of Gold*.
2. There seems to have been a two-way exchange of information between the two men at their face-to-face meeting. Ultimately, however, by far the greater flow of material was from Abū Zayd to al-Masʿūdī.
3. Al-Masʿūdī was a busy writer: *Meadows of Gold*, which runs to over 1,500 pages of Arabic in the edition I have, is the smallest of three compendious works that he wrote (the other two seem to be lost),⁴¹ quite apart from at least one other single-volume book. He would probably have been more than happy

to make use of material amassed over the years by Abū Zayd, the patient and discriminating collector of *akhbār*.

4. Lastly—and this is no more than a hunch founded on circumstantial evidence—it might be that al-Mas‘ūdī himself is that shadowy figure who “commanded” Abū Zayd to check through and supplement Book One, thus providing more rough gems to be mined, cut, polished, and inserted into his own more finely wrought *Meadows of Gold*.

THE LITERARY LEGACY

Al-Mas‘ūdī was not the only writer to delve into the *Accounts*’ rich lode of data. Other writers were to draw from it—either directly, via al-Mas‘ūdī, or via each other—for centuries to come. They include some celebrated names in Arabic geography: Ibn Khurradādhbih, who, as early as the third/ninth century, borrowed from Book One material on the maritime route east; in the fourth/tenth, Ibn al-Faqīh and Ibn Rustah; later on, al-Idrīsī and al-Qazwīnī; and, later still, the ninth/fifteenth-century Ibn al-Wardī.

For centuries, then, the *Accounts* was the mother lode of information on the further Orient. There are several reasons. First, after that catastrophic Chinese rebellion in the later third/ninth century, there was little direct contact between the Arab world and China until the time of the cosmopolitan Mongol dynasty, the Yuan, in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries. In the meantime, concerning the subcontinent of India and the rest of the Indian Ocean world, the only other sources of information were either suspect or, in one case, so abstrusely detailed as to be off-putting.

At the head of the first category is al-Rāmhurmuzī’s *Wonders of India* from about the year 390/1000, in which the yarning sailors are finally given their say. In fact, many useful matters of fact do lurk in its picturesque jungles of legend, but a process of fabulation had clearly set in that would reach its climax in the Sindbad tales. Alone in the second category is the work of the highly serious early-fifth/eleventh-century indologist al-Bīrūnī. Faced, however, by chapter

headings loaded with Sanskrit terms, such as “An Explanation of the Terms ‘Adhimāsa,’ ‘Ūnarātra,’ and the ‘Ahargaṇas,’”⁴² geographical encyclopedists, such as Yāqūt and al-Qazwīnī, must have scratched their heads.

In contrast, the material of the *Accounts* is reliable, valuable, and accessible. For a true successor to those traveling merchants of information, the Arabic reading world would have to wait until Ibn Baṭṭūṭah in the eighth/fourteenth century. As Miquel has said, that curious, objective, and tolerant traveler is their true heir.⁴³

THE LEGACY ENDURES

Today, the *Accounts* is not only a major repository of historical information; it also shows us what endures. Much of the book may be literally exotic, but it is also strangely familiar (or, perhaps, familiarly strange): the irrepressible Indianness of India, with its castes and saddhus and suttees; the industrious orderliness of China, whatever the period and the political complexion, punctuated by paroxysms of revolution. The *Accounts* reminds us how those ancient civilizations mark time by the *longue durée*; how, as Jan Morris has said, “a century . . . [is] an eternity by British standards, a flicker of the eye by Chinese.”⁴⁴

Perhaps above all, the *Accounts* shows us a world—at least an Old World—already interconnected. It is composed of meshing economies, in which, even if communications were slower, repercussions of events were no less profound. Because of a rebellion in China, not only does a Tang emperor lose his throne, but the ladies of Baghdad, a 12,000-kilometer journey away, lose their silks,⁴⁵ and the brokers and merchant skippers of equally distant Sīrāf—the men who make the cogs of the economy turn—lose their jobs.⁴⁶

Shades, or foreshadowings, of subprime-mortgage default in the United States and real-estate agents fleeing distant Dubai.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The Arabic of the *Accounts* is often compressed, especially in Book One. In a translation that aims for clarity and ease of reading,

interpolations are needed. Many are of a minor nature, for example, conjunctions (in which Arabic tends to be poor) and clarifications of whom or what a pronoun refers to. Interpolations of greater substance have at times been necessary to help the text make sense. English versions of two short quotations from the Qur'an are this translator's own.

The only other English version of the *Accounts* was published in London in 1733 as *Ancient Accounts of India and China by Two Mohammedan Travellers, Who Went to Those Parts in the Ninth Century*; the translator's name does not appear on the title page. It has been reprinted as recently as 1995, in New Delhi. This version was done, however, not from the Arabic but from a French translation of 1718 by Abbé Eusèbe Renaudot. Sauvaget judged Renaudot's version to be good for its period though marred by "too many errors in reading and interpretation."⁴⁷ Despite improvements on the translations of both Renaudot and Reinaud, a new French version published in 1922 by Ferrand was also deemed by Sauvaget to include erroneous readings and interpretations, particularly in the field of geography.⁴⁸ This is, therefore, the first new English translation of the *Accounts* in nearly three centuries and the first made directly from the Arabic.⁴⁹