

The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions (*Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*). By al-Muqaddasī, Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Translated by Basil Collins. (Great Books of Islamic Civilization). Pp. 426. Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001. £18.00.

This translation of Muqaddasī's (334–390/945–1000) celebrated geographical treatise of the 4th/10th century forms part of a larger project which seeks to make available to the English language reader a diverse selection of classical compilations from the formative years of the Islamic tradition. The project focuses on those works distinguished within their respective fields of learning and will include traditional disciplines such as the Qur'anic sciences, the Prophetic traditions, jurisprudence and theology, together with works on sciences of a rather more abstract nature such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine and fields of study such as geography and horticulture; given the extensive nature of these works and their conceptual variety, the selection of Muqaddasī's remarkable text for this series of translations is especially fitting for whilst it represents a geographical account of the lands of Islam as depicted through the eyes of an itinerant geographer, it also creatively places conventional scientific abstraction, empirical investigation, and a well-embellished literary narrative within an Islamic framework; besides, this cohesive blending of approaches was one of the definitive features of the so-called Balkhī or Classical school of geography and Muqaddasī was its most renowned exponent.

The contents of this book and its primary purpose are eminently circumscribed by Muqaddasī's preliminary remarks which establish the framework for the work. He states that it was intended to be 'an account of the Islamic regions, with the deserts and the seas in them; the lakes and rivers there; a description of their famous metropolises, and noted settlements: the way stations that are well used and the roads that are frequented', adding 'I will state in my account the ingredients of their medicaments and drugs, the sources and cargoes of commerce; the diversity of the peoples of the countries in their expressions, intonations, languages, complexions; their doctrinal schools, their measures, their weights, their coins, large and small; with particulars of their food and drink, their

fruits and waters' (p. 1). Moreover, he boasts that this was to be 'a work travellers and merchants cannot do without'. It was the meticulous attention to detail expressed so stylistically which rendered Muqaddasī's text so valuable, serving as a portal into the classical Islamic world.

It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Muqaddasī's text has been the subject of a translation. Collins' preface to this publication includes an elaborate survey of the various manuscripts of Muqaddasī's work and the different translations. This is followed by an introduction which provides a refined digest of the development of Islamic geography, highlighting the eminent status of this text not only within the classical Islamic tradition but also within contemporary Western scholarship: it was the subject of no less than six previous translations. These appeared in German, French, and English; however, they were not complete renditions of Muqaddasī's treatise, instead they focused on specific chapters and selected passages from the work. The most comprehensive of which was the effort by G. Ranking and R. Azoo, which was published as fascicles in 1897, 1899, 1901 and 1910, covering pp. 1–202 of this text, whilst the translation of A. Miquel also covered extended parts of the text and included an in-depth commentary. The manuscript source of all these translations was scrupulously derived by Michael Jan de Goeje from two apographs and first published in 1877 as the third volume of *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*: this was revised and published as a second edition in 1906. The previous translations of Muqaddasī's work were all based on de Goeje's derived text, which did not include the maps found in the two apographs, although Collins, like others before him, made use of this illustrative material. Furthermore, Collins was also responsible for one of these earlier translations. This was published under the title *Al-Muqaddasī: The Man and His Work; With Selected Passages Translated from the Arabic*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974). Given his earlier translation of representative sections of Muqaddasī's text which includes his authoritative study of its author, it is evident that Collins not only has an assured command of the literary sources for Arabic geography but he also shows a profound appreciation of the significance of this text. And this is reflected in his assiduous approach to its translation.

The genre of works entitled *al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* (books on routes and realms) represented the earliest examples of geographical literature. It was a secretary by the name of Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. 272/885) whose work was to provide a 'blueprint' for subsequent Arabic geographical literature. (See Maqbul Aḥmad's entry entitled 'Djuḡhrāfiyā' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn). It is maintained that this work must have been based on antecedents; moreover, an extrinsic influence is also perceptible in the conventions and divisions employed in this and other early works; such material was largely patterned on Greek, Iranian and Indian concepts. Despite being replete with geographical, mathematical, and astronomical data, several of the authors of these early works were secretaries and administrators. It is argued by both Collins and Aḥmad that the works of this early period were plainly 'secular' in their perspective. A transformation in respect of approaches was intrepidly ventured with the advent of the Balkhī school and its putative founder Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), the author of a work entitled *Ṣuwar al-aqālīm*. It is the Islamic element that becomes particularly pronounced not only in the general philosophy of these writings, but also in respect of their specific focus: literature by geographers of the Balkhī school concentrated only on the realm of Islam (the geographical compass of the *masālik wa'l-mamālik* works was more extensive). Indeed, Muqaddasī asserts that he did not concern himself with the terrain outside the realm of Islam ('the countries of unbelievers') unless of course there were Muslim inhabitants therein (p. 8 of Collins' translation). Moreover, the literature of the Balkhī geographers revealed a concerted attempt to reconcile and illustrate geographical description with Qur'anic and Prophetic dicta, giving the Islamic element greater definition; this was coupled with the use of cartography (see pp. 312–15 of the article entitled 'Geographical and Navigational Literature' by J. Hopkins, *Religion, Learning, and Science in the Abbāsīd period*, ed. M. Young (et al.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Muqaddasī did have predecessors who were adherents of this school: figures such as Iṣṭakhrī (d. 350/961) and Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 380/990); the former was the author of a treatise incidentally entitled *al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik*, supposedly based on Abū Zayd's text, and the latter wrote a work entitled *Ṣūrat al-ard*. However, Muqaddasī's text was to surpass the works of his predecessors: for it integrated scientific, religious and literary

components with such dazzling effect. Indeed, Muqaddasī in his rather candid summary of previous geographical literary endeavours does speak of his dissatisfaction with previous writings in the field: this inspired him to take upon himself the task of composing his text. Whilst he certainly consulted previous writings, often referring to works by earlier geographers, much of the work was derived through his own experiences as an itinerant geographer: he spent 20 years passing through the different towns, cities, and provinces of the Islamic regions: in his own words, ‘I could not complete the compilation of it until after my travels throughout the countries, and my visiting the regions of Islam; until after I had met the learned, and been of service to princes, had meetings with the *qawāḍī*, and studied under the jurists; had frequented the society of men of letters, the readers of the Qur’an, and writers of the traditions; had associated with ascetics and the Sufis’ (p. 2 of the translation). Collins mentions that Muqaddasī personally traversed most of the Islamic regions with the exception of al-Andalus and al-Sind (see p. 19 of *Al-Muqaddasī: The Man and His Work; With Selected Passages Translated from the Arabic*). The description of his trials and tribulations is a harrowing one: he recounts how he was close to drowning, robbed by highwaymen, confined in prison, and accused of being a spy; indeed, he even speaks of a plot to murder him (p. 42 of the translation). It is this fascinating and often witty narrative furnished by Muqaddasī which provides the text with a very personal quality and Collins has skilfully managed to retain this in his translation, conveying the dynamic combination of features which engagingly distinguished Muqaddasī’s text. Whether one is referring to its utility as a source of political, historical, social and linguistic documentation or indeed the value of the religious material which it ingeniously preserves, Muqaddasī’s text is invaluable.

It is intriguing to note that a cursory comparison of Collins’ earlier translation of sections from Muqaddasī’s text with this current work shows a large number of changes and refinements made to his earlier translation; however, this would seem to indicate the sustained nature of the effort made by Collins in his quest to capture the substance and style of the original text; moreover, it also highlights the complexities and difficulties inherent in translating classical texts of this nature. Collins has presented a thoroughly readable and entertaining translation: this is no mean achievement given the variegated

nature of Muqaddasī's text and his inclination to resort to the use of rhymed prose for rhetorical effect. The translation crucially enables its reader to savour the tenor of the Arabic original. Furthermore, this is all accomplished without departing immoderately from the literal language of the text. Besides, the text is also replete with defined lists of place names, commodities, and material of a technical nature in addition to theological, juridical, exegetical and linguistic anecdotes.

There are a number of passages in the translation which do deserve consideration. In the resourceful chapter on 'Dhikr al-madhāhib wa'l-dhimma', translated by Collins as 'Account of the *Madhāhib* (Schools of Islamic Law) and the *Dhimma* (Free Non-Muslim Subjects)', Muqaddasī initially identifies the principal legal and theological schools of Islam before moving on to assert that these schools were divided into innumerable sub-groups and often granted secondary labels. However, Muqaddasī's point was that these schools were in essence already enumerated in his earlier classification; the secondary designations, of which there were four classes, were no more than allusions to these previously identified schools. These included nicknames; names denoting commendation; names intimating an opprobrious trait; and in the final class were those labels concerning which there was a difference of opinion. Referring to the passage which identifies the opprobrious class, Collins states: 'Disavowal: al-Kullābiyya, who disavow divine constraint on man; al-Ḥanbaliyya, disavowed for their hatred of °Alī; those who do not recognise the attributes of God and are disavowed because of their anthropomorphism; and those who disavow all the attributes of God' (pp. 34–5 of the translation). Given that Muqaddasī is referring in these two instances to a pejorative connotation inherent in the use of such labels, it would seem logical that the Kullābiyya are actually accused by their opponents of adopting *jabr* (a deterministic bent) and labelled accordingly, despite any protestations against such accusations. Similarly, the Ḥanbalites are referred to as *ahl al-naṣb*, which Lane's lexicon confirms, through references to *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīt* and *Tāj al-°arūs*, was an allusion to a sect of possible Khārijite origins who felt it was a matter of religious obligation to bear intense hatred for °Alī; the same term is used disparagingly to refer to the Ḥanbalites, obviously by their detractors (a detailed discussion of this is presented in the notes of Ranking and Azoo). There is also the context in which the terms

are themselves introduced: Muqaddasī is referring to that fact that these conventional schools are known by other labels. Complex passages of this nature present the translator with a perplexing choice and yet the way they are translated is critical to a precise understanding of the text, although in fairness to Collins he does class these theological schools under the heading ‘disavowal’.

Moreover, it is the next part of the translation which is problematic because of the contradiction it creates. The Arabic reads ‘*wa-munkirū al-ṣifāt yunkirūn al-tashbīh; wa-muthbitūhā yunkirūn al-ṭa‘īl*’ (p. 37 of the Arabic text), which means those who deny the attributes (do so in order to) reject anthropomorphism; whilst those who affirm (the attributes) reject (any) negation (of them). Collins’ translation reads ‘those who do not recognise the attributes of God and are disavowed *because of* their anthropomorphism; and those who disavow all the attributes of God.’ It is interesting to note that the rendition of this whole passage by Ranking and Azoo reads: ‘The blamed ones are: Kullābiyya, condemned for the doctrine of compulsion in human actions; al-Ḥanbaliyya censured for their hatred of ‘Ali; the *muthbitū al-ṣifāt* (attributists) condemned for representing God as similar to man; *munfū al-ṣifāt* (deniers of attributes) blamed for rejecting all eternal attributes of God’ (pp. 52–3: Ranking and Azoo). The version translated in these passages was obviously based on the first edition of de Goeje’s manuscript (1877) and the variant wording found therein is referred to in the footnotes of the 1906 revised edition. To their credit the translation of Ranking and Azoo did comprise an illuminating commentary, with many of the aforementioned intricacies explained with a profusion of references to primary source material. It is perhaps useful to note that Watt adduces a reference to the Kullābiyya comprised in these introductory passages to argue that in the early tradition they were the true precursors of the Ash‘ariyya, but that Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī was subsequently made the eponym of this school, although this can in no way attenuate the significance of his contribution to a synthesis of Sunni orthodoxy (see *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997, p. 311).

In the same chapter Muqaddasī's reference to *ahl al-ra'y* and *ahl al-ḥadīth* (p. 35 of the translation) is qualified by Collins as 'people of subjective opinion – followers of the *madhhab* of Abū Ḥanīfa' and 'followers of tradition – the *madhāhib* of Mālik, Shāfi'ī, and Ibn Ḥanbal' respectively. Studies have tended to show that the term *ahl al-ra'y* was not just a reference to the tradition of Ḥanafī jurists, rather its semantic compass was much greater as it denoted those schools of jurisprudence who upheld the validity of legal reasoning; and thus it encompasses a number of the other traditional schools of jurisprudence (see pp. 14–15 of W. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; cf. pp. 57–8 of *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987).

Amongst the other parts of the translation warranting brief attention are the following: the phrase '*fa-hiya aḥaqqu bi-finā'ihā*' in the chapter on the *jazīrat al-ʿarab* (the Peninsula of the Arabs) is translated as 'the greater right attaches to the surrounding space' (p. 69 of the translation). This occurs in the context of Abū Ḥanīfa's advice to the caliph concerning the purchase of property in the vicinity of the Ka'ba in order to extend and renovate the sacred precincts and should read 'it (*al-ka'ba*) has more right to its surrounding enclosure'; in Muqaddasī's recounting of the exquisite merits of *iqlīm al-shām* (the Clime of Syria), he resolves to enumerate some of its drawbacks and defects (*ʿuyūb*), translated by Collins as 'disadvantages', moving on to state '*al-mastūr mahmūm; wa'l-ghanī maḥsūd; wa'l-faqīh mahjūr; wa'l-adīb ghayru mashūd*'. This is translated by Collins as follows: 'the blameless are aggrieved, the rich envied. The jurispudent is in solitude, and the man of letters disregarded' (p. 141 of the translation); whilst Ranking and Azoo's translation reads: 'The meek are molested and the rich envied; jurisconsults remain unvisited and erudite men are forgotten' (p. 274). The phrase *al-mastūr mahmūm* might be translated as 'the person of modest means is aggrieved', particularly as an antithesis is implied with the phrase *al-ghanī maḥsūd*; whereas *al-faqīh mahjūr* suggests a ruefully neglected or shunned jurist. Finally, the expression *wa'l-adīb ghayru mashūd* must refer to the littérateur not being frequented. In the same chapter (p. 144) Muqaddasī mentions a spring located in the village of Sulwān, describing its waters as sweet (*ʿadhbiyya*, although several variants of this term are cited in the manuscript's footnotes, p. 171 of the Arabic text,

including *‘adhiba*). This is translated by Collins as ‘water of moderate quality’ and Ranking and Azoo as ‘fairly good water’ (p. 280). It is the case that the lexicon of Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) entitled *Mujmal al-lugha* records that *al-‘adhb* is *al-mā’ al-ṭayyib* (fine water) (vol. 2, p. 656); however, it also confirms that the renowned 2nd/8th century Kufan philologist Liḥyānī refers to *mā’ fihi ‘adhiba(tun)*, as ‘water containing impurities’; and yet one wonders whether sweet water was actually intended in Muqaddasī’s text given that he relates how these waters fed magnificent gardens.

In respect of its production, this is an accomplished edition. Not only is the pagination of de Goeje’s original included in the margins of the book, but Collins has also provided variant versions and additions to this text collated from different manuscripts. He has also isolated the various lacunae in the manuscripts used for this edition. Having also included twenty maps, he has painstakingly provided English keys to these maps in the book’s appendix. It is, however, difficult to understand why a full-system of diacritics was not used in the transliteration of the Arabic given the overall quality of this book: the text only makes use of macrons along with apostrophes to denote the guttural and glottal stops. Moreover, the index for this volume is less than comprehensive and given the book’s value as a reference source, this needs to be addressed. Amongst the typographical errors which I came across were: the inside cover of the first page refers to authorisation by al-Ahzar instead of al-Azhar; Khwārij instead of Khawārij (p. 34); Yaḥṣībī instead of Yaḥṣubī (p. 36); all of the page headings for the section entitled *madhāhib* (p. 34) read *madhāib*; al-Ḥujjāj ibn Yūsuf instead of al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (p. 334).

It should be said that anyone with an interest in the classical Islamic tradition would want to acquire this volume. Collins’ translation leaves one with the distinct impression he has successfully presented a generally accurate, fluent, and discerning rendering of the original Arabic text. This will be especially appreciated by readers with recourse only to the English language, given the academic value of Muqaddasī’s text. And this fulfils one of the objectives of this book series. Additionally, students of Arabic and Islamic studies

will also find this text of use, particularly in exploring techniques used in the translation of classical material. This publication is highly recommended.

MUSTAFA SHAH