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# Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī: Egypt as Part of the Maghrib

## 1 Ibn Saʿīd and his Geography

Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Mūsā Ibn Saʿīd al-ʿAnsī al-ʿAmmārī (610–685 H/1214–1286 CE) is one of the most important anthologists, writers, historians and geographers of the Islamic West, and the most celebrated member of the Banū Saʿīd family of Alcalá la Real, early supporters of the Almohads in their takeover of the Iberian Peninsula in the mid-6th/12th century. In al-Andalus Ibn Saʿīd witnessed a period of political turbulence and change, as Almohad control crumbled across the region and independent local powers emerged in the so-called third “*Taifa* Period”. Especially successful at the beginning was Ibn Hūd of Murcia (d. 635 H/1238 CE),<sup>1</sup> who conquered much of Almohad al-Andalus. Ibn Saʿīd served him as governor of Algeciras for one year (631 H/1233-4 CE), replacing his father Mūsā. Ibn Hūd was in turn overthrown by another Andalusī military leader, Muḥammad Ibn Naṣr, who eventually became the first Naṣrid sultan.<sup>2</sup> In Seville, Ibn Saʿīd witnessed the death of the governor of the city, al-Muʿtaḍid al-Bājī, at the hands of the Naṣrid leader,<sup>3</sup> and it was then – fearing the new ruler – that he and his father decided to travel to the East. They left al-Andalus in 636 H/1238-9 CE never to return. Ibn Saʿīd thus spent the majority of his life outside al-Andalus, and finally died in Tunis in 685 H/1286 CE.

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1 See Vidal Castro 2000; Vidal Castro 2012; Carmona González 1994; Molina López 1979.

2 See Boloix 2017.

3 See Ibn Saʿīd, *al-Mughrib* (1953), 2: 109.

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**Note:** This work was presented at the international conference “The Maghrib in the Mashriq”, which took place on 20–21 December 2018, and has been carried out within the research project *Local contexts and global dynamics: al-Andalus and the Maghreb in the Islamic East (AMOI)* (FFI2016-78878-R), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and co-directed by Maribel Fierro (ILC, CSIC) and Mayte Penelas (EEA, CSIC). I wish to thank both of them for their suggestions. English revision by Nicholas Callaway.

The vast majority of Ibn Saʿīd's works<sup>4</sup> – not only the well known *Mughrib* and *Mushriq* – base their structure and organization on geographical concepts that were the result not only of his long travels, but also of his concern for the science of geography.<sup>5</sup> The importance of Ibn Saʿīd's work as a geographer is evident in the composition of one of his most important works of geography, entitled *Kitāb Baṣṭ al-arḍ fī al-tūl wa-l-ʿarḍ* (Book of the extension of the Earth in longitude and latitude) or simply *Kitāb Jughrāfiyā* (Book of Geography),<sup>6</sup> preserved in three main manuscripts, one at the National Library of France in Paris (no. 2234), one at the British Museum in London (MS 1524), and a third copy at the Bodleian Library in Oxford (MS Selder superius 76).<sup>7</sup> *Kitāb Jughrāfiyā* was written after the year 658 H/1260 CE. It was widely used by subsequent authors, among them Abū al-Fidāʾ (d. 732 H/1331 CE) in his *Taqwīm al-buldān*, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmārī (d. 749 H/1349 CE) in *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, and later by al-Qalqashandī (d. 820 H/1418 CE) in his *Subḥ al-aʿshā*, and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845 H/1412 CE) in *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-l-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār*.

Ibn Saʿīd's work introduced new geographical concepts. For example, despite basing the division of the world on the seven climates and ten sections of al-Idrisī's (d. 560 H/1165 CE) *Nuzhat al-mushtāq*, he added two new climates, provided 432 new geographical coordinates on the positions of the different sites, and did not use the traditional meridian of water<sup>8</sup> as a starting point (he placed it at a latitude 16 degrees north). Moreover, he provided important information about the ports along the Bay of Biscay, and included data about routes along the Western and Eastern coasts of the African continent that he took directly from the little-known Ibn Fāṭima,<sup>9</sup> who apparently was a sailor.

Ibn Saʿīd's extensive geographical knowledge influenced the composition of his works, especially in their internal organization, as is the case with *al-Mughrib*

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<sup>4</sup> For a general perspective on the author and his work see Potiron 1965; Arié 1988; Cano Ávila/Tawfik 2007; Monferrer 2012; Alansari 1992; Vidal Castro 2002. For detailed bio-bibliographical information on Ibn Saʿīd see Iria Santás de Arcos's contribution to this volume.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to Ibn Saʿīd's geography, see Vernet 1953; Vernet 1958; Meouak 1996; Viguera Molins 1999; Rei 2003; Mazzoli-Guintard 2009; Mazzoli Guintard/Viguera Molins 2017. For a general perspective on geographical works written in al-Andalus see Muʾnis 1961–62; Tixier du Mesnil 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Saʿīd, *al-Jughrāfiyā* (1970); Kamal 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Studies have been carried out by Kamal 1987; Kropp 1992; Kropp 1995. This work and its manuscript tradition still require further, more exhaustive analysis. See Ducène 2016.

<sup>8</sup> In relation to this meridian, see Comes 2014a; Comes 2014b.

<sup>9</sup> Kropp 1992; Kropp 1995.

*fi ḥulā al-Maghrib*, a literary anthology – composed mainly of poetic texts alongside important geographical and historical data – aimed at compiling a selection of the literary production of authors belonging to the Islamic Maghrib.<sup>10</sup> He also wrote another work, *al-Mushriq fi ḥulā al-Mashriq*,<sup>11</sup> following the same criteria as those used in the *Mughrib*, but with regards to the Islamic East.

## 2 Egypt as part of the Maghrib

The only extant copy of the *Mughrib*<sup>12</sup> is divided into fifteen chapters: six dedicated to Egypt, three dedicated to Ifrīqiya and the Maghrib, and six dedicated to al-Andalus, the Christian kingdoms and Northern Europe. Ibn Saʿīd’s decision to classify Egypt as part of the Islamic West is unusual; one would expect it to have been included in the *Mushriq* instead. It is therefore worth asking what motivated Ibn Saʿīd to make this decision. Was he alone in this geographical conception or did he follow an approach also found in other authors? Did he follow it only in the *Mughrib* or is it a constant in his production?

Before attempting to answer these questions, there is another geographical concept that also affects the internal division of Ibn Saʿīd’s works. In both the *Mughrib* and the *Mushriq* he orders the authors according to geographical criteria,<sup>13</sup> following a system based on a former territorial organization of al-Andalus used mainly under the Umayyads and Almoravids.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Saʿīd classifies the biographical entries by “kingdoms” (*mamālik*), with every *mamlaka* divided into districts (*kuwar*) and cities (*mudun/madāʿin*). Finally, within each of these, Ibn Saʿīd classifies the biographical entries into five social categories: emirs, viziers, scholars, poets, and other less prominent but socially significant literary figures. This geographical arrangement is not an original feature of Ibn Saʿīd. It had already been used in al-Andalus in the 6th/12th century, for example in the literary compilation by Ibn Bassām (d. 543 H/1148 CE), *al-Dhakhira fi maḥāsini ahl al-Jazira*, and coexisted with other criteria, such as the chronological ordering found in *ṭabaqāt* works or biographical repertoires. What is unique about Ibn Saʿīd’s

<sup>10</sup> Mazzoli-Guintard 2009, 560–561; Potiron 1966, 151–155.

<sup>11</sup> Potiron 1966, 155–156.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Saʿīd, *al-Mughrib* (2003), 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> As recently stated by Mazzoli-Guintard/Viguera Molins 2017, 102–103.

<sup>14</sup> See Mazzoli-Guintard 2009.

*Mughrib*<sup>15</sup> is that his geographical approach differs from that of other Andalusí geographers, dividing each administrative or political territorial section into three parts: eastern, central and western, thus establishing a tripartite structure. In the part of the *Mughrib* dedicated to Egypt,<sup>16</sup> this general division is adapted to the country's topographical peculiarities. Thus, Ibn Sa'īd divides the Egyptian territory into three parts – upper, middle and lower – but following the traditional South to North distribution marked by the course of the Nile, each part having its respective “kingdoms” or *mamālik*. Each of these three parts is then divided into eastern and western districts (*kuwar*). Cairo and al-Fuṣṭāṭ belong to the eastern *kuwar* of the central “kingdom”, and specifically to the *kūra* of ‘Ayn al-Shams.<sup>17</sup> The *Mughrib*'s tripartite organization of the territory and subdivision into “kingdoms”<sup>18</sup> is the first of its kind. According to Mazzoli-Guintard, its origin possibly resides in the tripartite administrative division established in al-Andalus by the Almoravid government, which he then extended to other regions that had not been subject to Almoravid rule.<sup>19</sup>

### 3 Egypt in other geographical sources

Did Ibn Sa'īd decide to include Egypt in the Islamic West (*Maghrib*) because he had encountered this conception among his written sources?<sup>20</sup>

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15 Ibn Sa'īd follows the same literary criteria and geographical concept in the *Mushriq* as he himself expresses in the introduction to this work. See Ibn Sa'īd, *al-Mughrib* (2003), 18.

16 This part of the *Mughrib*, containing valuable information, has not yet been sufficiently studied.

17 The name of the chapter dedicated to this *kūra* is “Kitāb Ladhdhat al-lams fi ḥulā kūrat ‘Ayn al-Shams”, and the chapters dedicated to Cairo and al-Fuṣṭāṭ are respectively entitled “Kitāb Nujūm al-zāhira fi ḥulā madinat al-Qāhira” and “Kitāb al-Ightibāṭ fi ḥulā madinat al-Fuṣṭāṭ”. See Ibn Sa'īd, *al-Mughrib* (2003), 29–30.

18 Although, as I have said previously, Ibn Sa'īd stated that in the *Mushriq* he had followed the same organization and structure as in the *Mughrib*, the real content and structure of the preserved *Mushriq* manuscript has not yet been studied in depth. It is our intention to prepare a critical edition of this work in the near future.

19 Mazzoli-Guintard 2009, 568.

20 For the literary sources of the *Mughrib* see Meouak 1993.

Ptolemy had divided the world into an eastern and western part,<sup>21</sup> as had other Arab-Islamic geographers. However, the latter expressed a variety of opinions in establishing which territories fell within the East and the West.

In addition to the division into climates and sections, the majority<sup>22</sup> describe the territory of the Islamic Empire on the basis of a political and administrative distribution by countries (*buldān*), using the word East (*mashriq*)<sup>23</sup> when describing the territories east of Syria and Iraq, such as Samarkand, Fars, Transoxiana, India or China. For them, Egypt is never part of the *Maghrib*, regardless of how its borders are defined. In fact, some geographers even conceive of Egypt as an intermediate territory between the eastern and western parts of the Islamic world. Thus, in chronological order:

1. Ibn Ḥawqal (4th/10th century) in his work *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* divides the world into regions/countries, even though he was familiar with the division by climates (*iqlīm*, pl. *aqālīm*) established by Ptolemy. He tells us that Egypt has its western limit in the Maghrib, located according to some in the city of Barqa and according to others near Alexandria.<sup>24</sup> He does not explicitly state whether Egypt itself belongs to the East or the West. For him, the East includes the territories of Khūzistān (Susiana), Fars (Persia), Kirmān and Sind (the lower Indus).<sup>25</sup> Thus, it would seem that for him there is also a central region of which Egypt is part.

2. Al-Muqaddasī (334–380 H/945–990 CE) in his work *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm* divides the world into fourteen climates (= provinces), seven inhabited and seven uninhabited.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, he distinguishes between Arabized and non-Arabized territories. He is one of the few geographers who explicitly defines his conception of East and West, stating that<sup>27</sup>

Every time we say *mashriq* we are referring to the states of the Sāmānids (*dawlat al-Sāmān*), i.e. Khurāsān, Transoxiana, Sijjān, Jurjān, al-Rayy and Ṭabaristān. When we say *sharq* we

<sup>21</sup> See the testimony of al-ʿUmārī citing Ptolemy, *al-Radd* (2009), 79–80, 92–93. For Ptolemy’s geographical texts see Berggren/Jones 2000, 3–23.

<sup>22</sup> Some of these authors are analysed below. For the rest see *EP*, s.vv.

<sup>23</sup> For a general overview of this concept see Miquel, “*Mashriq*”, *EP*, and in relation to Maghrib see Yver, “*al-Maghrib*”, *EP*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (1964), 1: 57–59, 131–135.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (1964), 1: XV.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1963); al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1991).

<sup>27</sup> Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1963), 24; al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1991), 7–8.

refer to Fārs, Kirmān and Sind. The word *maghrib* designates the province that bears this name (that is, North Africa); while the word *gharb* refers to Egypt and Syria.<sup>28</sup>

Later, when he discusses the province of Egypt, he states that the city of al-Fuṣṭāṭ marks the dividing line between the West (*al-Maghrib*) and the Arab territories, and is also the pantry (*khizāna*) of the West and the refuge (*maṭraḥ*) of the East.<sup>29</sup>

3. Al-Bakrī (405–487 H/1014–1094 CE) in his work *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, which was one of the direct sources of Ibn Saʿīd, describes the Islamic Empire on the basis of political and administrative criteria.<sup>30</sup> Without expressly mentioning Egypt as part of the East, he does establish a separation between Egypt and the Maghrib and Ifrīqiya, whose eastern border he situates in the city of Sirte, in the province of Barqa.

4. Al-Idrīsī's (d. 560 H/1165 CE) *Nuzhat al-mushtāq* was Ibn Saʿīd's main source for his geographical work. Al-Idrīsī follows a division based on climates (*aqālīm*) in which Egypt is for the most part placed in climate three, section four. As with al-Bakrī, al-Idrīsī explicitly situates the border between Egypt and the Maghrib, placing it in the city of Barqa, but he does not describe Egypt as part of the Islamic East. A notable exception is a single instance where he does seem to consider this to be the case:<sup>31</sup> in climate two, section three, he speaks of the alum merchants of the city of Ankalās who in the East sell their wares in Egypt, and in the West sell them in the city of Wārqaḷān as well as in *al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (the far *Maghrib*).

5. Al-Zuhri (second half of the 6th/12th century) in his *Kitāb al-Jaʿrāfiyya* divides the world into seven zones (*ajzāʿ*),<sup>32</sup> each of which is subdivided into three

**28** Al-Muqaddasī does not specify whether, within the Islamic Empire, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula belong to the East or the West; rather they seem to be treated as a central and independent territory between the two entities. He only states that both territories are the first two of the six Arab provinces, which are the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Aqūr, Syria, Egypt, and the Maghrib, while the non-Arab provinces are the Mashriq, Daylam, Riḥāb, al-Jibāl, Khūzistān, Fārs, Kirmān, and Sind. See al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1963), 28, 123; al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1991), 9, 10, 47.

**29** Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm* (1991), 197.

**30** Al-Bakrī, *al-Masālik* (1913), 48–49; al-Bakrī, *al-Masālik* (1992), 671–672.

**31** Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq* (1866), 46.

**32** As Manfred Kropp has demonstrated, the manuscript dealing with geography entitled *Kitāb al-Badʿ wa-l-taʿrīkh*, though often wrongly attributed to Ibn Saʿīd, is in fact the work of al-Shāwī al-Fāsī (d. 977 H/1570 CE) who copied much of the work of al-Zuhri but added his own corrections. See Bramon 1991, XI, XXVIII–XXIX; Kamal 1987, 1088–1093.

sections (*aṣqāʿ*).<sup>33</sup> This division does not respond to scientific-geographical criteria, but rather is a system based on the imaginary route known in Greek as the *bustrofedon* (= route made by a pair of oxen when ploughing the earth). Al-Zuhri simply tells us in relation to Egypt, which is in the second zone, third section, that “it is the gateway to the Maghrib, which begins in the mountains of Barqa”.<sup>34</sup>

6. Contemporaries of Ibn Saʿīd are Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (575–626 H/1179–1229 CE), author of *Muʿjam al-buldān*, and al-Qazwīnī (600–682 H/1203–1283 CE), who follows Yāqūt in his *Āthār al-bilād*.<sup>35</sup> In his introduction to *Muʿjam al-buldān*, Yāqūt follows the climate-based division of al-Idrīsī, and in speaking of the third climate – as well as the second – he enumerates the cities found in each climate, “starting from the East, China, Hind, Sind, Kabul, Kirmān (...) through Fars, Syria and among the cities of Egypt: Tinnīs, Dumyāt, al-Fuṣṭāṭ, Alexandria, Fayyūm (...) and in the Maghrib: Barqa, Kairouan”, which implies that Egypt is not part of the Maghrib.<sup>36</sup> The entry on Asia indicates that the custom of dividing the world into two parts is espoused by the Egyptians themselves, who call “what extends to the right of their territories ‘Maghrib’ and what extends to the left ‘Mashriq’, in which they include themselves”. This means that by Egyptians’ own accounts their country would have belonged the East, but not according to Yāqūt, for whom Egypt seems to constitute a bridge-like zone between West and East, with part of the territory belonging to the East and part to the West.<sup>37</sup> His discussions of the Nile<sup>38</sup> give the impression that he views the river as a natural frontier between East and West. He also states that some Egyptian cities such as Qifṭ and Aswān fall in the East.<sup>39</sup>

7. In Ibn Jubayr’s *Rihla* (540–614 H/1145–1217 CE), Egypt also seems at times to be an intermediate territory between East and West, and its westernmost border is situated near Alexandria. In other instances, however, it seems to be a

33 See Bramon 1991, IX–X, XXVIII–XXIX, XXXV–XXXVI.

34 Al-Zuhri, *al-Jaʿrāfiyya* (1991), 84; al-Zuhri, *al-Jaʿrāfiyya* (1968), 200–201.

35 Al-Qazwīnī divides the world, according to the Ptolemaic tradition, into seven climates, and within each climate the countries/regions are arranged in alphabetical order, as is the case with Yāqūt. In the entry devoted to Egypt, he tells us that it borders on the West at Barqa, but does not specify whether Egypt is part of the East. He only uses the word *mashriq* expressly to refer to regions such as China, Khurāsān, India and Fars. See al-Qazwīnī, *Āthār al-bilād* (1990), 37–44; al-Qazwīnī, *Āthār al-bilād* (ca. 1960), 263–270.

36 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (2007), 1: 28–31.

37 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (2007), 1: 54.

38 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (2007), 5: 334.

39 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (2007), 4: 383.

proper part of the East.<sup>40</sup> When describing the kindness of a person from Mecca named Jamāl al-Dīn, Ibn Jubayr tells us that he “repaired all the roads of the Muslims in the countries of the East, from Iraq to Syria and up to the Hejaz”, i.e. excluding Egypt.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, in praising the orthodoxy of the Almohads, he tells us, “There is no true Islam except in the countries of the Maghrib... In the other [countries], in these eastern regions, there are passions, reprehensible innovations (*bidaʿ*)...”<sup>42</sup> As he is writing in Egypt, the phrase “these eastern regions” seems to indicate that he regards Egypt as an eastern land.

8. Upon arriving in Cairo, the traveller al-ʿAbdarī (d. after 688 H/1289 CE)<sup>43</sup> described the city “as the capital of Egypt” and “one of the cities of the kingdom in the territories of the East (*madīnat al-mamlaka bi-l-bilād al-mashriqiyya*)”. He, too, situates Egypt’s border with the Maghrib in the province of Barqa, specifically between the cities of Ajdabiya and Alexandria.<sup>44</sup>

9. Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776 H/1374 CE) used the works of Ibn Saʿīd as a source, and some of them he even completed and tried to surpass.<sup>45</sup> In his *Kitāb Aʿmāl al-aʿlām*, he follows a tripartite structure and divides the Islamic world into three parts: the first, the East, the second, al-Andalus, and the third, North Africa and Sicily. In the first part, the one covering the East, he tells us that it “includes what concerns the eastern territories (*al-bilād al-mashriqiyya*) up to Barqa [beginning of the Maghrib]”,<sup>46</sup> and that “the Maghrib, which borders on the Mashriq, begins in Ifrīqiya”.<sup>47</sup> When dealing with the Fāṭimids,<sup>48</sup> he says that “they launched into the conquest of the East, seizing Egypt, Syria, the Hejaz, and then Iraq”. Clearly, for Ibn al-Khaṭīb Egypt is part of the East.

In summary, Arab-Islamic geographers and travellers had different views about how to situate Egypt geographically. While they saw the political and administrative division of the territories and their boundaries clearly, it is not so

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40 On the travels of Ibn Jubayr in relation to those of al-ʿAbdarī and Ibn Saʿīd see Marín 1995; Marín 2005; M’Ghirbi 1996.

41 Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla* (1988), 154–156.

42 Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla* (1988), 102.

43 See Calasso 2014.

44 Al-ʿAbdarī, *Riḥla* (1968), 87–88, 125.

45 Ibn al-Khaṭīb was well acquainted with and admired the work of Ibn Saʿīd. The vizier of Granada wrote his *Kitāb al-Siḥr wa-l-shiʿr* in an attempt to complete and surpass Ibn Saʿīd’s *ʿUnwān al-murqīṣāt wa-l-muṭribāt*, and also wrote *al-Tāj al-muḥallā fi musājalat al-Qidḥ al-muʿallā* to rival Ibn Saʿīd’s *al-Qidḥ al-muʿallā fi al-taʿriḫ al-muḥallā*.

46 Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl al-aʿlām* (2003), 346.

47 Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl al-aʿlām* (2003), 44.

48 Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl al-aʿlām* (2003), 230.



evident what exactly forms part of the East or the West – which is not surprising given that these divisions, contrary to the others, are relational concepts. There appears to be a tacit assumption that everything which is not the Maghrib is the Mashriq, as if the Maghrib were easier to define than the Mashriq. In the earliest geographers and travellers, at least until the 6th/12th century, the words Mashriq/Sharq are usually used to designate the territories from Syria onwards – with the exception of al-Muqaddasī – and Egypt appears as a territory of transition. From the second half of the 7th/13th century on, geographers and travellers increasingly situate Egypt as a territory belonging to the East, especially after the Mamlūks’ rise to power. By the 8th/14th century, Egypt is clearly regarded as part of the East. This could be related to the territorial re-organization at the end of the 6th/12th century, and especially from the 7th/13th century onwards with the disintegration of the Almohad Empire in al-Andalus and North Africa, the fall of the Ayyūbids, the rise to power of the Mamlūks in Egypt and Syria, and the Mongols’ conquest of Baghdad in the year 655 H/1258 CE and Aleppo in 658 H/1260 CE. While the Mamlūks did not attempt to expand westwards, they certainly did grow eastwards, and this “Eastern” inclination may be what cemented Egypt firmly in the Mashriq.

## 4 Egypt in other works by Ibn Saʿīd

Ibn Saʿīd’s designation of Egypt as part of the West goes against not only the consensus among other geographers of his time, but even the opinions of his own family. Ibn Saʿīd quotes a letter from his paternal uncle, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Saʿīd (d. 616 H/1220 CE), who wrote from Bukhārā to his relatives telling them about his trip. In the letter he says that after having crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, he marched towards Ifrīqiya “which is the door of the East”.<sup>49</sup>

Ibn Saʿīd’s geographical conception of Egypt as Western is not limited to *al-Mughrib*, as elsewhere he adopts the same perspective, albeit with minor variations. In his *Kitāb al-Juḡhrāfiyā* Egypt sometimes appears as part of the West and others as part of the East. In the second climate, section four, he discusses the new route that pilgrims have to follow because of the Crusaders, through the port of ‘Aydhāb via the Red Sea to the port city of Jidda. He then says that “on the road from [the city of] Aswān, on the eastern side, there is the path to the Hejaz, for

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49 Al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb* (1968), 2: 370–371; Potiron 1965, 88–89; Hoenerbach 1991, 773.

whoever goes to the East has to go by the way of al-Waḍḥ”.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, in climate three, section four, he mentions the mountain of Jālūt (= Goliath)<sup>51</sup> located in south-eastern Egypt, whose name, Ibn Sa‘īd explains, refers “to Jālūt; as they say, when he escaped from Palestine, Jālūt went there before he was killed, and settled in this mountain, and from there entered with his children and his people into the Maghrib”.<sup>52</sup>

Moving now to Ibn Sa‘īd’s more literary works, in the prologue to his *‘Unwān al-murqīṣāt wa-l-muṭribāt*, a compilation of poetic fragments classified on the basis of their ability to thrill the reader, he tells us that he will follow the same criteria he used in the *Mughrib* and the *Mushriq* of separating the Eastern authors from the Western ones.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, in the chapter dedicated to the Western authors he begins by mentioning “the poets of the Maghrib, from the first territory of Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean (*shu‘arā’ al-maghrib min awwal al-diyār al-miṣriyya ilā al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*)”.<sup>54</sup>

In the small fragment that has been preserved of Ibn Sa‘īd’s *al-Ghuṣūn al-yāni‘a*, specifically the eighth chapter, which contains several biographies of 7th/13th-century writers, he also distinguishes between Eastern and Western authors. In this case, however, Ibn Sa‘īd changes his geographical classification of Egypt: here it becomes a central territory that separates Easterners (Syrians and Iraqis) from Westerners (Maghribis and Andalusis), and as such he dedicates an independent section to Egyptian authors.<sup>55</sup>

The dates for these works by Ibn Sa‘īd are as follows: the *Mughrib* and *Mushriq* were written first (the first version dates from 641 H/1243 CE), followed shortly thereafter by *‘Unwān al-murqīṣāt*, which adopts the same approach as the previous two. Subsequently he wrote *al-Ghuṣūn al-yāni‘a* (Ibn Sa‘īd dates it 657 H/1258-9 CE in the introduction),<sup>56</sup> and finally the *Kitāb al-Juḡhrāfiyā*, which can be dated to after 659 H/1260 CE. Thus, Ibn Sa‘īd started out placing Egypt squarely in the West, but then came to consider it as an intermediate territory between East and

50 Ibn Sa‘īd, *al-Juḡhrāfiyā* (1970), 116.

51 Vajda, “Djālūt”, *EP*; Boisliveau, “Goliath”, *EP*. Abū al-Fidā’ in his work *Taqwīm al-buldān* tells us that Jālūt is the generic name to designate the Philistine kings. See Abū al-Fidā’, *Taqwīm al-buldān* (1848–83), 2: 86, n. 3.

52 Ibn Sa‘īd, *al-Juḡhrāfiyā* (1970), 129.

53 Ibn Sa‘īd, *‘Unwān al-murqīṣāt* (1896), 3–4; Ibn Sa‘īd, *‘Unwān al-murqīṣāt* (1949), 7.

54 Ibn Sa‘īd, *‘Unwān al-murqīṣāt* (1896), 56 (my translation).

55 Ibn Sa‘īd, *al-Ghuṣūn* (1977), 73–74.

56 Ibn Sa‘īd, *al-Ghuṣūn* (1977), 1.

West, until finally deciding that part of the territory belonged to the East and part to the West, with the Nile forming a natural boundary between the two.<sup>57</sup>

## 5 Syrian/Egyptian reactions to Ibn Saʿīd's geographical conception

The geographical approach proposed by Ibn Saʿīd generated controversy, especially among Mamlūk authors in Egypt, in particular three of them: Abū al-Fidāʾ (672–732 H/1273–1331 CE), Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī (700–749 H/1301–1349 CE) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845 H/1442 CE). The most severe and critical with Ibn Saʿīd was al-ʿUmarī.

The core of the debate was the Andalusī author's "Maghribization" of Egypt in his geographical works, in particular in the chapter of the *Mughrib* entitled "al-Shuhub al-thāqība fi al-inṣāf bayna al-mashāriqa wa-l-maghārība" (Penetrating flames in the fair discernment between Easterners and Westerners). This chapter has not been preserved in the manuscripts available to us. It was known to al-Maqqarī<sup>58</sup> and a large part was preserved by al-ʿUmarī, who responded to Ibn Saʿīd by dedicating the entire fifth volume (*sifr*) of his extensive work *Masālik al-abṣār fi mamālik al-amṣār* to this issue.<sup>59</sup>

In a general sense, this confrontation took place on two levels.

1. The debate initially centred on geography: Al-ʿUmarī did not accept Ibn Saʿīd's division of East and West, and above all objected to Egypt, the seat of the Mamlūk government, being considered part of the Maghrib. The Mamlūk author quotes the Andalusī as writing phrases such as "Egypt is the beginning of the West and Syria that of the East", and "Egypt, which according to Ibn Saʿīd is part of the Maghrib",<sup>60</sup> to which al-ʿUmarī replies that "The question of what is the West and what is the East is relative".<sup>61</sup> Al-ʿUmarī looked for different types of arguments to respond with, among them referring to Ibn Saʿīd's work on geography, *Kitāb al-Jughrāfiyā*, where, according to al-ʿUmarī, Ibn Saʿīd had claimed just the opposite. Al-ʿUmarī ultimately ends up recognizing in spite of himself

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<sup>57</sup> As previously mentioned, a more exhaustive analysis of the content and manuscripts of his main geographical work, *Kitāb al-Jughrāfiyā*, is needed in order to understand better the evolution of his geographical conception and his understanding of the world.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Maqqarī, *Naḥḥ al-ṭib* (1968), 1: 210.

<sup>59</sup> Part of this fifth volume (*sifr*) can be consulted in al-ʿUmarī, *al-Radd* (2009).

<sup>60</sup> Al-ʿUmarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 43, 80.

<sup>61</sup> Al-ʿUmarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 80.

that “it is true that Egypt is part of the West; nevertheless, this does not cancel out whatever virtues it may possess”,<sup>62</sup> and that “both territories possess things that deserve praise and criticism, but in the end the victor prevails and although God mentions East and West in different places of the Qur’ān, he evidently started with the East”.<sup>63</sup> That said, al-‘Umarī goes on to attack the Maghribis, who “lack any external or internal virtue”, stating that “if any of the [Maghribi] kings enjoy pleasures, they are nothing [in comparison] with those available to a person from the East”.<sup>64</sup> He goes on to attack Ibn Sa‘īd himself, who in his view “certainly reached the limit of favouritism [towards the Maghrib] in the work entitled *al-Mughrib fi ḥulā al-Maghrib*”,<sup>65</sup> adding that “if this virtuous man had felt shame, he would not have cited the *jund* (army) of the West along with the praiseworthy things of the *jund* of the East. If he did it, it was only because he had made Egypt part of the Maghrib”.<sup>66</sup> Al-‘Umarī continues to lambast Westerners in this vein, until taking his argument to a second level.

2. From this point on, al-‘Umarī tries to discredit Ibn Sa‘īd and his work, and the best way to do so is to accuse him of partiality and favouritism towards the Maghribis. By contrast, he defines himself as “an impartial person, since there is no need for the opposite ... because the pre-eminence of the East is evident as the sun”.<sup>67</sup> Al-‘Umarī develops his argument on the basis of a passage he attributes to Ibn Sa‘īd comparing the Earth with the parts of a human body, where India and China are its head and the West (*gharb*) is at its foot, adding that<sup>68</sup> “with this comparison the Easterners would be extremely proud, if the Westerners would recognize it”, to which al-‘Umarī replies, “Westerners ought to recognize [the superiority] of the Easterners in all matters, whether they want to or not, except in a few things that do not admit any discussion”.<sup>69</sup> Al-‘Umarī then launches into an elaborate discourse questioning the existence of any virtue or merit among the territories and people of the Maghrib. Here, the East always proves superior to the West: its provinces and cities are larger and more populous; its people are kinder, wiser and more beautiful; and it is the birthplace of writing, the sciences, trade and commerce. Above all, he supports his arguments on the Qur’ān and the

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<sup>62</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 75.

<sup>63</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 40.

<sup>64</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 86–87.

<sup>65</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 80.

<sup>66</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 156.

<sup>67</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 39–40, 74.

<sup>68</sup> Al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 42.

<sup>69</sup> Al-‘Umarī does not specify which things do not admit discussion. See al-‘Umarī, *al-Radd* (2009), 42.

Sunna, which tell us “that in the East the prophet Muḥammad was born, there the Revelation took place, there the prophets were born and spread the word of God, their graves are found in those territories...”.<sup>70</sup> And so he continues in this vein, offering arguments whereby the East is always the first and the best in every respect, as in the following passage about the prophets:

Are not all the holy places of the prophets – the blessings of God be upon them – in the East? Except Yūsuf, Mūsā and Hārūn – the blessings of God be upon them – who were in Egypt, [a land] that according to the opinion of Ibn Saʿīd belongs to the Maghrib, either because its inhabitants acknowledge this, or because others maintain that it is so. In addition, even if it were accepted that Egypt is part of the Maghrib, it would not matter, because these venerable prophets are really of the East: they arose in Syria, were natives of that place, and there, in the East, had their cradle. All the prophets – the blessings of God be upon them – are from the East, because they were born there, there the prophetic missions of their envoys took place, their graves are there and it was there that the spirit of Revelation descended upon them.

As regards the entrance into Egypt of Yaʿqūb, the tribes of Israel (al-Asbāṭ), Yūshaʿ and the Messiah – the blessings of God be upon them – they did not actually enter to settle there, nor did they settle in any place; they are not counted among the prophets [of Egypt], nor is news about them mentioned in the chronicles [of Egypt].

In the East the ascent of the angels – the blessings of God be upon them – took place, there the book of God was revealed, the sources of Islamic law were developed, the pavilions of faith were raised, the [different] sects were propagated, the sciences branched apart and works spread east and west. There the Arabian Peninsula is located, whose sultan is the Sultan and whose language is the Language.<sup>71</sup>

With regard to Abū al-Fidāʿ, his criticisms were more objective, based mainly on questions of a geographical nature<sup>72</sup> related to latitudes and longitudes. Regardless of this, he never failed to recognize the great value of Ibn Saʿīd’s works, mainly the *Kitāb al-Juḡhrāfiyā*, the *Muḡhrib* and the *Mushriq*.<sup>73</sup>

Al-Maqrīzī, who made extensive use Ibn Saʿīd’s works, supported al-ʿUmārī in his attacks against the Andalusī author. In his work *al-Khiṭaṭ*<sup>74</sup> al-Maqrīzī

<sup>70</sup> Al-ʿUmārī, *al-Radd* (2009), 43, 85–87.

<sup>71</sup> Al-ʿUmārī, *al-Radd* (2009), 43.

<sup>72</sup> Abū al-Fidāʿ, unlike Ibn Saʿīd and other geographers, places the first meridian on the coast of the African continent, with a difference of ten degrees with respect to Ptolemy. His work, *Taqwīm al-buldān*, although it refers to climates, is not organized according to them. It is based on the political-administrative divisions of the Islamic Empire. Within each region/country, the main cities are listed one by one, placing them in their respective climates, with their longitude and latitude.

<sup>73</sup> Abū al-Fidāʿ, *Taqwīm al-buldān* (1848–83), 2: 254; Abū al-Fidāʿ, *al-Mukhtaṣar* (1907), 3: 177.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ* (1997), 2: 167–170, 210–214.

brings up the chapter of the *Mughrib* describing Cairo, where Ibn Saʿīd is critical of the city and its people, to which al-Maqrīzī counters that “this [text] is full of attacks and prejudice”. Al-Maqqarī, who saw this remark, replied, “The one who looks from impartiality will know that the attacks in [the words of Ibn Saʿīd] are proportional to the attacks he received, God Most High and Conciliating [knows well]”.<sup>75</sup>

Ibn Saʿīd was thus criticized for his partiality toward the Maghribis, despite the fact that he always expressed the need to be impartial and fair when making a judgement. He says, for instance, that “the impartial man is the one who examines [literary works] at length, without limitations, who does not admit the superiority of one age over another, nor of one territory over another”, or, similarly, “I did not stop at any consideration of demerit or merit, nor did I worry about issuing an unfavourable or favourable judgement, I only wanted to offer some prose texts, one after the other, and verses of poetry...”.<sup>76</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

The new geographical approach proposed by Ibn Saʿīd in his main works, the *Mughrib* and the *Mushriq*, generated an intense debate and put the focus on the question of which territories belonged to the Maghrib and which to the Mashriq. This issue seems to have become controversial especially in the 7th–8th/13th–14th centuries, taking into account the new geopolitical shifts in the territory of the Islamic Empire, with the fall of the Almohad Empire and the Mongol conquest of Baghdad and Aleppo.

It is difficult to establish the exact reasons that led Ibn Saʿīd to include Egypt as part of the Islamic West. It could be that the experience he gained through his travels provided him with a new outlook, leading him to propose a new division of the Earth, perhaps in the belief that the inclusion of Egypt as part of the Maghrib led to a more balanced distribution between East and West. Also, the new division may have been seen as better adapted to a literary context, yielding a more balanced array of Eastern and Western authors. However, the fact that Ibn Saʿīd does not make any statement regarding such literary criteria, along with the

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-ṭīb* (1968), 2: 349.

<sup>76</sup> Ibn Saʿīd, *Unwān al-murqīṣāt* (1896), 3–4; Ibn Saʿīd, *Unwān al-murqīṣāt* (1949), 5, 9; Ibn Saʿīd, *al-Muqtataf* (1984), 41–44; al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-ṭīb* (1968), 3: 152–153.

strong criticisms of al-ʿUmarī, seems to indicate that Ibn Saʿīd based his decision more on geographical than literary concepts.

Ibn Saʿīd was always a Maghribi to the eyes of Eastern scholars, for many of whom the West had always been inferior, so that his new conception of integrating Egypt in the Maghrib was not prone to be accepted by Egyptians. Nevertheless, even al-ʿUmarī in his *Masālik al-abṣār*, despite his harsh rebuttal of Ibn Saʿīd, recognized the value and the integrity of the Andalusī author, saying:

He is my teacher (*ṣāhibī*) with whom sometimes I agree in this book of mine, others I condemn him, other times I coincide with him, and a few others I am against him. He is an overflowing sea and a torrential rain [of wisdom], endowed with an exquisite and clear eloquence, whose information flows like the water and his excellences shine like the stars.<sup>77</sup>

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