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AN ARAB TRAVELER IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE - 1872

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Arabic literature of course includes considerable works on *Rihlât*, or travels throughout the medieval Arab world; in addition, an even larger number of travel accounts of the modern Middle East have been written by visitors from outside the area¹. However, one finds that insufficient attention has been devoted to recent Middle East travel accounts written by people living in the area itself, whether Turks, Arabs², Jews³ or others. This seems unusual, as there are two advantages to studying such accounts. Firstly, in many cases, local people were liable to better understand what was really going on, in that they were much more familiar with the inner workings of native society. Secondly, their interpretation of events and situations were also indicative of their own attitudes and beliefs as members of the very groups of people whom they were visiting and describing.

One travel account meriting close examination is an Arabic manuscript, now in the British Library (formerly the British Museum)⁴. The following is a preliminary report of my analysis of it; more detailed research is anticipated shortly. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only extant manuscript of this *rihla* and is apparently as yet unpublished. Composed of eighty-four pages of 16.7 x 14 cms. (6³/₄ x 5¹/₂ inç), in quite readable *Sülüs* script, it bears the title of *Rihlat Al-Sayyid Humûd Ibn Ahmad ibn Sayf al-Bû-Sa'îdî*. The author, apparently an Arab Muslim from Zanzibar, does not seem to have been very proficient in literary Arabic. His account frequently transgresses the stringent rules of Arabic accidence and syntax and his spelling is not always accurate; furthermore, he introduces colloquialisms in a manner rarely, if ever, done at that time.

1 For one collection of excerpts from such travels, translated into Hebrew, see M. Ish-Shalom, *Massa'ey Notsrim le-Erets Israel*, Tel-Aviv 1965. See also J. M. Landau, «Russian Travel Accounts of the Middle East,» *Middle Eastern Studies* (London), XIII (3): Oct, 1977, pp. 386-389.

2 For example, see J. M. Landau, «Muhammad Thâbit: A Modern Arab Traveller,» *Journal of Arabic Literature*, I: 1970, pp. 70-74.

3 Which I intend to discuss more fully in a separate paper.

4 Ms. Or. 8085/25.

The author started out from Zanzibar, traveling first to the Hejaz as a pilgrimage to the 'House of Allah' in Mecca, on 26 Shawwâl 1288 (January 8, 1872). He then visited Egypt, Palestine and Syria, reaching as far north as Damascus. Afterwards, he returned to Beirut and sailed back to Port Said, where he spent fourteen days waiting for an Ottoman ship to take him home (since he preferred, as he says, «the ships of Muslims»), via Suez and Jidda. The entire trip lasted several months.

The author has essentially divided his travel account into five sections, indicating its general scope. These sections, preceded by an introduction devoted to the praises of Allah, are: 1. The Hejaz: a religious pilgrimage, chiefly to Mecca and Medina and the neighboring holy places. 2. Egypt and its Wonders: including not only Cairo, Alexandria and other localities, but also the recently completed Suez Canal, Egypt's museums, architectural marvels and luxurious vegetation. 3. Syria and its Wonders: from Jaffa to Jerusalem and Hebron, to Beirut and Damascus (which he calls *Jannat al- dunyâ*, 'The Garden of the World'), 4. Transportation and communications: the hiring of ships and riding animals, reasonable fares for both adults and children (and the tying-up of pets aboard ship) and the required insurance. 5. Visiting holy tombs, which he considers most befitting for Muslims.

The author does not merely desire the reader to share the thrill of travel: his objectives are didactic throughout and he takes great pains to describe all he considers worthwhile in the minutest details, including the interior of mosques, the name, registration, dimensions and captain's name of every ship he has used etc. He dutifully collects data, some of which is rather significant, e.g., that during his visit, al-Azhar comprised 200 teachers and 5,800 students and that Cairo and Alexandria had 900,000 and 300,000 inhabitants, respectively; most of Port-Said's residents were Christians and Jews, and its Muslims owned merely one mosque; while only a quarter of Beirut was populated by Muslims and three-quarters by Christians and Jews, Jerusalem comprised only 2,000 Muslims, 24,000 Christians and more Jews than Christians (he underestimates the number of Muslims in Jerusalem then): very few Jerusalem Muslims, only about 400, came to the Friday prayer he attended (to his keen disappointment); a female singer in Egypt receives 300 riyâls per night of singing; later, he estimates the total might of the Ottoman army at 250,000 to 280,000 men and claims that military service in it is of six years' duration.

What interests our traveler? Many things, and he is ever alert to notice, describe and evaluate them. He is firstly and foremostly concerned with everything pertaining to religion, chiefly, although not exclusively, Islam. The author is a passionate visitor of mosques as well as tombs of prophets, Companions of Muḥammad, saints, and other meritorious souls, even the places where al-Burâq, Muḥammad's horse, was tied up. However, he also enters churches and synagogues, as well as the tomb of Alexander the Great (for all of which he later apologizes to the reader,

arguing that he did not do so for fun or out of a desire to sin, but only in order to learn about these and consequently become more entrenched in Islam).

He frequently mixes fact and tradition, not to say fact and fiction. Thus, he writes that the Pyramids were built following a dream, by Sârbad, a King of Egypt who reigned 300 years before the Deluge; he naively believes that, in one of the Jerusalem synagogues, the picture of Moses is hidden in one of the niches; or claims that one of the mountains in Jerusalem is made of a stone which burns like coal. However, more realistically, he also observes local customs, especially those relating to religion, such as funeral rites in Egypt (he notices differences from those in Zanzibar), the three *Mawlids* in Tanâtâ along with the attendant fair, how Christians and Jews pray and fast (in comparison to Muslims), the baptism of Christians, the sprinkling of holy water, etc.

Distances between places are of interest to him; he indicates not only linear distance but also time intervals, which he calculates to the minute, often emphasizing the fact that he is measuring time in hours, rather than days, as was prevalent for former, slower means of transportation. The author traveled by train from Cairo to Alexandria in nine hours, a trip which would have lasted six days by camel; then by carriage (see below) from Beirut to Damascus in twelve and three quarter hours, a three-day ride on horseback (incidentally, he informs us that carriages depart twice a day in each direction). In this context, he is keenly interested in all means of transportation: the ship, which is for him just *bâbûr* (pl. *bawâbîr*): the train, to which he refers as *bâbûr al-barr*, 'ship of the land': the carriage, which he calls *karûsa*, 'carosse' telling us that it carries fifteen persons and is harnessed to six horses, changed at stations during half-hour rest stops; the boat, donkey, horse and camel are also considered according to the author's own experiences.

Noticing the climate everywhere, the author seizes upon the unusual, such as the coolness of Tâ'if even on the hottest days. Furthermore, he notices agricultural produce: their abundance in the Tâ'if area provides Mecca with excellent fruit all the time; Egyptian fruit is exported via the Suez Canal; Egypt has marvelous sugar plantations and its fruit trees line its river canals; the oranges near Jaffa are of a particularly tasty variety. Similarly, he comments on the artisans and their work: Egypt's paper mills (using rags and banana peels), printing presses and candle factories; Damascus' inlaid wood, silk handwork and metalwares; Port Said's iron workshops and dockyards. In this context, mechanical matters appeal to him: the ships and trains he rides and the dredging devices used in Egypt, especially at Port Said.

The travel account contains relevant information about the various sorts of coinage in use and their relative values for different places and purposes. The author has evidently recorded carefully the amounts he has disbursed every stretch of the way, in order to assist future travelers. He notes bargains approvingly, such as

the fruit in the Jaffa area which, he tells us, costs just half of its price in the Mecca region. In addition, one learns that a *kîs*, 'purse', is worth five *bûns*, a *bûn* five *riyâls*, and a *riyâl* five francs. He recommends that travelers going to Egypt provide themselves with *pintos*, 'napoleons' and those going to Jerusalem with 'white' *mejidiyes* due to the difference in the value of the different currencies and coins.

Furthermore, the author lists useful information about the quarantine practice, along with some fascinating descriptions of the stringent customs regulations and the strict search of the travelers which does seem rather odd to those visualizing the Ottoman Empire as one political and economic unit. Essentially, travelers were allowed to carry a certain sum with them, which varied according to the class they were sailing in: the more expensive the class, the more money the passengers were allowed to carry. Fines were imposed for additional sums carried, as well as for valuables, particularly jewelry. In addition, a special fine of 20 piastres was imposed on any letter was one carrying, presumably to discourage the practice of bypassing the post office, an important source of revenue.

Keen-eyed travelers have sometimes favored us with out-of-the-way information, for which readers ought to be properly grateful. al-Bû-Sa'idî is no exception. Among other subjects, he reports not only that the synagogues in Jerusalem are much less ornate than the churches; but also that the camels of Egypt are swifter than those of Hejaz; that gaslight in Cairo is a real wonder (it surely was for him!); that all of Zanzibar equals only an eighth of Cairo in size; that in Egypt one may see men, completely naked, riding water-buffaloes; that practically all men and women in Hebron are old; that there is an astounding amount of water in Damascus, where every single home has its own pool, or even two; and that the *îdhân*, the 'call to prayer', at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is a collective call by several people.

Summing up these brief remarks, one may attempt to draw a few tentative conclusions. The travel account manuscript is interesting in several respects; not only is it highly informative, providing new data on a number of points, as suggested above, but also indicates the unity of the Ottoman Empire of over a century ago, when a traveler could wander about in relative security and enjoy himself. This applied particularly to Muslims; our author, himself a devout Muslim, found Muslims everywhere ready to assist him in advice and deed. Ḥumûd ibn Aḥmad ibn Sayf al-Bu-Sa'idî was an alert traveler, interested not only in visiting mosques and tombs, but also in quite a few other, more mundane matters which he investigated unhesitatingly and then duly recorded for posterity.