ARABICA

SMITH, G. Rex — A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir's *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*. Translated from Oscar Löfgren's Arabic text and edited with revisions and annotations by -. (Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, Third Series, No. 19). Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Hampshire, 2008. (25,5 cm, XIX, 341.) ISBN 978-0-904180-91-6. ISSN 0072 9396.

'The text of *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*,' Professor Smith tells us at the start of the introduction to his annotated translation of it, 'is the early thirteenth-century account of a journey made by a businessman (or someone profoundly interested in business) in the Arabian Peninsula.' (p. 1) It is, however, a lot more than a simple travelogue: 'So broad are the contents,' Smith admits, '… [that] they ideally require the treatment of a whole committee of scholars.' (p. xvii) It is that breadth of subject-matter that, more than anything, makes the long-awaited appearance in English of Ibn al-Mujāwir's Arabic text a major event in the world of Arabian studies.

Rather than describing a single trip as suggested by that opening sentence, Ibn al-Mujāwir, in the manner of the earliest Arabic geographical literature, organizes his book round a series of routes. Each of these takes the reader from one place to another via a number of stated points, with the distances between the points given in parasangs. In addition, places of particular interest are described at greater or lesser length, the descriptions focusing on historic buildings, defensive walls and so on. Eleven major towns, together with a group of fortresses and the island of Socotra, are also illustrated by schematic plans: eschewing attempts at naturalism and relying instead on simple geometric forms, these are somewhat in the style of the maps that illustrate the early geographical works of the so-called 'Balkhī school'. As a source on the historical topography of Arabia, and particularly of the populated areas of its southern half, *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* ranks high in importance after al-Hamdānī's earlier *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-ʿArab*.

Ibn al-Mujāwir's account, however, goes far beyond topography. Of a naturally curious and digressive frame of mind, it is the wanderings away from his stated itineraries and antiquarian descriptions that make his book so rich. Paramount among his interests is a concern with almost every aspect of commerce — the various grades of, for instance, leather goods and swords; the minutiae of weights and measures, of customs and excise and taxes. It is a concern that is almost an obsession: at one point he even dreams of taxes. The fact that *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* is the major source, along with documents from the Cairo Geniza, for a recent monograph on regional commercial history (Roxani Margariti's 2007 *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade*) bears witness to its importance in this respect.

It is important in many other respects too. Ibn al-Mujāwir had a magpie's eye that took in much of anthropological interest — marriage customs, magic, heterodox sectarian beliefs and practices, dress, food and so on — and eagerly sought out *ʿajāʾib*, 'wonders'. He also had an ear for tall stories and a nose for the salacious. Much of the marvellous farrago of information that results is thus decidedly anecdotal. Much is also *sui generis*: whether we wish to believe, for example — or even particularly want to know — that in al-Nahrawān in Iraq depilation of the anal area is aided by the barber inserting into the orifice, then partially withdrawing, a wooden ball on a string (p. 152), we will probably search in vain for an alternative account. (That most prurient — and inaccurate — of translators, Sir Richard Burton, would have loved *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*.) Much of what might at first sight appear dubious can in fact be of considerable value. For example, there

is a curious passage on '*Protection arrangements among the Arabs*' (p. 229), concerning captives and the periods of immunity from death that they enjoy as a result of consuming various types of food and drink in their captors' houses. Not only is this evidence for the antiquity of an apparently strange legal notion, one that reappears in more recent tribal statutes, but it also goes on to explain the logic behind it.

Then again, it would be almost as hard to find an Arabic work of its period, or indeed of most others, written with such sustained verve and humour. Leaving aside the more mannered comedy of the *maqāmāt*, perhaps only Usāmah ibn Munqidh's *Kitāb al-Iʿtibār* is written with anything approaching the unforced wit of *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*. Ibn al-Mujāwir is a natural raconteur, and some of the stories he tells — for example, one in which a merchant unwittingly slights the ruler of Aden to his face (pp. 146-7) — are as funny now as they were 800 years ago. If independent evidence of the quality of his narrative material were needed, a story he tells about two slaves bidding madly for the last fish in the market (p. 122) was good enough to have lasted — albeit the fish had turned into a ram — until the time of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's visit to Aden, over a century after Ibn al-Mujāwir. Even more enduring is a joke involving circumcision and decapitation (p. 62), still told in Yemen with slight variations today; it was probably doing the rounds long before Ibn al-Mujāwir.

Despite his pungent voice and his all-seeing eye, Ibn al-Mujāwir — unlike the self-revealing Ibn Baṭṭūṭah — gives away almost nothing, at least directly, about himself. He is an all but invisible spectator. Smith, in fact, is the first commentator to establish the author's full name beyond reasonable doubt. The identity of the author, however, is a problem that pales beside the difficulties of his text. For a start, the language, like the contents, is *sui generis*. Smith began by wondering why Ibn al-Mujāwir should have chosen to write his book in 'Middle Arabic' (pp. 18-19). More recently, he has inclined towards a more obvious conclusion — that Ibn al-Mujāwir's knowledge of literary Arabic was simply deficient (p. 22). In addition to his extremely non-standard grammar, Ibn al-Mujāwir also scatters his writing with dialecticisms, some still to be heard in southern Arabia today — which might well suggest long acquaintance with or residence in the region on his part. Add to the linguistic problems a huge number of highly localized toponyms and a lag of nearly four centuries between the book's composition and the date of the earliest surviving manuscript, and all the ingredients are there for a mangled text. Oscar Löfgren struggled valiantly to disentangle its confusions; but the Arabic version he published in the 1950s, on which Smith has based his English version, is still littered with tentative readings and gaping lacunae. The task of translating it is often more akin to decipherment. It is therefore not altogether surprising that Smith worked on his version for over twenty years (that ideal 'committee of scholars' would have taken for ever…) Nor is it surprising that it has finally appeared, by the translator's own admission, with 'blemishes and all' (p. xvi). What is more surprising is the number of these blemishes.

Some of these are mere slips of the pen or the mind, such as 'virginal' for 'vaginal' (p. 162) and 'hemistitch' for 'hemistich' (n. 2, p. 218 and elsewhere). There is however a greater number of lapses than might be expected in such an edition, and occasionally they impede understanding: '*Bi'r al-Rubāniyyah*' (or, later in the same paragraph, 'al-Bi'r al-Rubbāniyyah' — the additional 'al-' is from Ibn al-Mujāwir, but not the necessary extra b) (p. 243), for example, should read '*Bi'r al-Rubbāḥiyyah'* for its derivation from *rubbāḥ*, 'monkey', to make sense. In addition, there are many other basic editorial problems, which would have been cleared up by the simple expedient of copy-editing. These include inconsistencies in page references (at times to the printed Arabic text, at others internally to the translation, apparently without reason for the differentiation), in the use of italics in the transcription of Arabic, and in the use of miles versus kilometres. In one notable example of an elementary editorial slip, the plan of al-Janad (p. 175) has been printed upside-down. These errors give the impression that the text was rushed through the press — a strange notion given its twenty-plus years of gestation.

Apart from other basic errors such as occasional omission of an Arabic phrase from the translation (e.g. on pp. 215, 266, 274, 276 and 285) and in one case omission of a footnote (n. 7, p. 127), other problems perhaps arise from that long gestation period: the intermittent nature of work on the text and notes seems to have resulted in insights being incorporated into them at some points but not others (as the Yemeni saying goes, *mā ṭuwul wa ʿuruḍ dakhal fīh miyat shayṭān*, 'if an affair becomes long and wide, a hundred devils will get into it' — or, perhaps, 'the longer the job, the more the gremlins'). Thus, for example, the place-name *ʿ.w.ḍ* is identified vaguely, by quotation from Yāqūt, as 'A far-off land in the middle of India' (p. 132 and n. 7), whereas only two pages later it recurs as *ʿu.w.ḍ* and is correctly pinpointed as Ayodhya (p. 134). Similarly the incompletely pointed word *a.ḥ.r.ʔ.h* is not understood in one place (n. 7, p. 270), but read soon after as *aḥribah* and glossed as 'anchors' (n. 8, p. 278). A glaring example of the same problem is Smith's assertion regarding 'Saʿd al-Khuzāʿī, one of the tubbaʿs' that he 'can find no trace of this man' (p. 197 and n. 2) when, a few pages before, 'Asʿad al-Khuzāʿī' — clearly the same person — was identified as Tubbaʿ Abū Karib Asʿad (p. 191 and n. 8).

Concerning the translator's use of English, he himself admits that his versions of poetry are not 'poetic' (p. 26). Granted, fashions change, and the elegantly archaic rhyming and scanning translations of verse by Sir Hamilton Gibb in the earlier volumes of the Hakluyt edition of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *Travels* (incidentally, the last translation from Arabic published by the Society before this one) may not be to some readers' tastes today; apart from which, elegance takes even more time. But some of Smith's renderings of verse seem, even if they are literal, almost wilfully *anti*-poetic. E.g.

> 'Tis as if the wine, the rain-bearing clouds,
> the aroma of lavender and the diffusion of [the sweet odour] of aloes
> Once again bring about cool canine teeth'

(p. 52; placing of brackets *sic*). That faintly anachronistic first word somehow serves to exacerbate the discomfort of the ending; plus, what does that last line *mean*? Smith's prose, however, can also be infelicitous. Take: '[O]n the day of Resurrection a fire will come forth from Ṣīrat ʿAdan driving people to the Meeting Point' (p. 134), in which the last two words translate *al-maḥshar* — perhaps, rather, 'the Place of Congregation', i.e. where all humanity will be gathered for divine judgement. For this possibly over-sensitive reviewer, 'Meeting Point' brings eschatology down to the level of fire safety notices ('… Do not use the elevator. Assemble at the Meeting Point in the car park…') Similarly uncomfortable is 'mis-

fortune has dropped [on us] like a thousand bowel movements' (p. 144), where the attempt at euphemism in the last two words (the Arabic has the earthy monosyllable *jiʿs*, 'turd') somehow manages to make the simile unintentionally more disgusting than the original. Occasionally, a lack of literalness saps the force of the Arabic. For example, when Ibn al-Mujāwir writes 'and there remained nothing encompassed by name or letter but it had a tax on it,' Smith renders the phrase, weakly, 'Absolutely everything had a tax upon it' (p. 164). At times, the English takes on an Arabic syntactical tinge: 'I saw in a vision… and I was reading' (p. 82) is good Arabic, but a strange way of saying, 'I dreamed… *that* I was reading.'

These latter criticisms are mostly to do with questions of English literary taste, and should not be pressed too hard. Neither should instances where a footnote misses a trick, as in Smith's branding the famous early Islamic ascetic Uways al-Qaranī 'Unidentified' (n. 5, p. 109), or his being 'not sure of the implication of "Dāʾūdī"' (n. 6, p. 215) in reference to the manufacture of chain-mail — it is an allusion to Quran 21:80.

To turn to more substantial matters of a) reading and b) interpretation, there are very many points on which this reviewer would differ from both Löfgren and Smith. This is certainly not the place to set these out in full, but a few examples of each sort may serve to illustrate the kind of textual and exegetical debates that might be opened — and which are indeed invited by Smith, who admits that he has had recourse to 'educated guesses' (p. xvii):

a) The migration of the people of Libyan Tripoli 'to Bārī and Tūliyah', glossed respectively as a village near Baghdad and, following 'Ibn Khurdādhbah…, a town on a lake behind al-Ṣaqālibah (?)' (p. 198 and n. 8), might be more credible if it were redirected to Bārī and Būliyah, i.e. Bari and Puglia in Italy.

A troublesome phrase read by Löfgren and Smith as *fānūs taf ʿīl ʿajīb* (nn. 1 and 2, p. 222) would make more sense in the context as *raʾs naqīl ʿajīb*, i.e. 'the top of the ʿAjīb Pass'. A comparable expression is to be found in a very similar context — that of lights being visible at high and distant points — in the eighth volume of al-Hamdānī's *Iklīl*.

A largely unpointed phrase tentatively read as *shāribīn ʿasāsīl maqdūdīn makdūdīn* and uncomfortably translated as 'drinkers, honey makers, bulky and overworked' (p. 252 and nn. 12 and 13) might work better as *shāribīn ghasāsil al-qudūr dhāt al-kudūr* (which is also nearer the text as found), 'drinkers of the washings of pots in which there is murk'.

b) The 'leprosy', *baraṣ*, supposedly caused by the ingestion of lizards' (or perhaps more precisely geckoes') saliva (p. 116) is more likely to be the affliction known as leucoderma or vitiligo.

The *raṣāṣ*, Smith's 'stones', used in the building of the Mārib Dam (p. 205 and n. 6), may in this case be 'lead' (the more common meaning of the word), the use of which in the dam's construction can still be observed in its remains today; compare also the Quranic account (18:96) of the barrier of Yaʾjūj and Maʾjūj.

In the verse on p. 272

> My tears have written a line on my cheek;
> God have mercy on one who approaches and receive him with hospitality!

the last five words, in Arabic *fa-qarāhu*, may be better translated 'and reads it [i.e. the line of tears],' assuming that the *hamzah* has been dropped from *fa-qaraʾahu* in order to meet metrical needs.

With a text as corrupt and often obscure as Ibn al-Mujāwir's, there are enough points such as these for that ideal committee of scholars to argue over till the doomsday fire appears from Ṣīrat ʿAdan. However, there are more than a few cases where this reviewer believes the translation to be unquestionably wrong. A somewhat surprising number of them could be classed as mistakes of an elementary nature — for example translating *mūmiyā*, 'mummy' (in this case the substance extracted from embalmed corpses is meant), as 'indicate' (p. 166), as if it were from the verb *awmaʾa*; or reading *bayt shaʿr*, 'a hair tent' (p. 231), instead of *bayt shiʿr*, 'a line of poetry'. No scholar is immune from error: Homer sometimes nods, and so too — very rarely — does Gibb in his Hakluyt Ibn Baṭṭūṭah. The noddings in the present volume, countable in dozens, are more numerous than might have been expected.

There remains one final matter, perhaps more substantial than the others. Professor Smith suggested in an article written when he was still in the early stages of his work on *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* that, in view of the many problems associated with them that are insoluble by other means, Ibn al-Mujāwir's travels should 'ideally … be repeated with his text in hand'.[1]) It is to be regretted that this ideal was never realized, and that quite so much of the book's landscape, both literal and metaphorical, remains *terra incognita*. Smith has benefitted from the experience, warmly acknowledged, of some of those who know or knew Ibn al-Mujāwir's territory on the ground (notably Francine Stone, Daniel Varisco and the late Professor R.B. Serjeant — one of the co-dedicatees of this volume). His translation is nevertheless a creature of the library, and a huge number of toponyms are impossible to check in the literary sources. He himself acknowledges this and apologizes (p. 11) for the 'tedious' repetition of that footnote, 'Unidentified,' referring to place-names. In some cases there are ten or more such gaps-in-the-map on a single page (e.g. p. 125).

Many of Ibn al-Mujāwir's toponyms will probably elude identification for ever. Some, though, are still there on the ground for the *mustabṣir* to find (curiously, Smith does not appear to have translated the title: *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* is *The History of One Who Seeks to Perceive Clearly*). These include, for example, Wādī Sāriʿ (p. 239 and n. 10), which flows south between the massifs of al-Maḥwīt and Ḥufāsh to join Wādī Surdud at Khamīs Banī Saʿd; the alleged cave (one of many in different lands) of Ahl al-Kahf, on which Ibn al-Mujāwir comments at some length (pp. 170-2), in a hamlet of the same name not far from the summit of Jabal Ṣabir; and, looking further afield, al-Maʿbar and Saylān which — far from being unidentified (nn. 3 and 4, p. 286) — are the usual Arabic names of the period for what are now the Coromandel Coast and Sri Lanka.

More place-names will probably be pinned down on the map by the Yemeni scholar Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, who is currently working on a new Arabic edition of *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir* and has the advantage of being *in situ*. And what else, beside toponyms, may survive undiscovered on the ground? The only way to find out is to respond to the tacit call

[1]) "Some 'anthropological' passages from Ibn al-Mujāwir's Guide to Arabia and their proposed Interpretations", in A. Gingrich *et al*. (eds), *Studies in Oriental Culture and History: Festschrift for Walter Dostal* (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, etc., 1993), p. 161.

of Ibn al-Mujāwir's book — a call made explicit in another far-ranging work of historical topography of the age, al-Harawī's *Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt* — 'to roam the earth and to confirm with heart and pen what I have said'.

Smith's translation and annotation of this beguiling but highly challenging text is a labour of love; or perhaps more exactly the child of a long and passionate, if at times inconstant, affair. Despite its blemishes and inevitable guesses it is a work of considerable scholarship. Prominent among its many strengths are the attention given to elucidating Ibn al-Mujāwir's often garbled accounts of contemporary and earlier political and dynastic history, and to commenting on his dense information concerning trade, commercial practice, taxes, weights and measures. Most important, through his twenty years of textual travels in and around *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*, Professor Smith has opened up the broad landscape of Ibn al-Mujāwir's Arabia, in all its richness, strangeness and — not least — comedy, to a wide new readership.

Sana'a, Yemen, September 2008 Tim MACKINTOSH-SMITH