

THE ARAB GEOGRAPHER AL-MUQADDASĪ
WITNESS OF POPULAR CUSTOMS
IN THE TENTH CENTURY

Dieter Sturm

University of Halle

In the 10th century the Arab geographer al-Muqaddasī (or al-Maqdisī) travelled through all of the “Empire of Islam” except Muslim Spain and India and gave a detailed description of all he saw in his book entitled *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, “The best of allotment: What has to be known about the countries (or “Provinces”, sc. of Islam). This book, as well as those of other geographers of the same time and of the same geographic “school” (al-Iṣṭaḥrī, Ibn Ḥawqal), certainly did not contain merely topographical material. The advantage of al-Muqaddasī’s book compared to those of his fellow geographers is his methodical approach which is more systematic and scientific, since at the end of each chapter dedicated to one country or province, i.e. after the description town by town, he adds a summary presenting the information he collected not in a geographical but in a systematical arrangement, and here as a rule we find a paragraph called *ar-rusūm*, “customs”. It is here where we can expect to find some data about popular customs and the attitude of the monotheistic religions towards them, as is indeed the case, there is such information there, although it is not confined to the paragraphs called *ar-rusūm* but scattered throughout the text.

As for the relationship between the customs and the religions, our author is in an ambivalent situation: On the one hand he expressly declares his intention to write about all the religions in an unprejudiced and objective way: “We shall speak about the prevailing religions we mentioned (i.e. of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Sabians), of every people in its place without prejudice and fanaticism, so God the Almighty will, and describe what advantages and disadvantages they have” (al-Muqaddasī 41.11). On the other hand he is a practising Muslim him-

self, and so, be it by design or not, he evaluates everything, customs not excepted, from the point of view of Islam.

The customs described by al-Muqaddasī in his book can roughly be divided into two groups, firstly those connected in any way with the religions and their ceremonies, and secondly those practised independently of the religions which, as a rule, are viewed from a religious perspective anyway. Furthermore, we can distinguish between traditions and customs originating from pre-Islamic times, some of them being later on not only tolerated but included into Islamic practice, sometimes unchanged, sometimes modified, and others initiated by Islam itself. Some customs mentioned by al-Muqaddasī are connected with the pilgrimage to Mecca and other holy places. So when describing the Great Mosque he speaks about the *maqām*¹, the standing point of Abraham, the origins of which, like those of the *ka'ba* itself, are supposed to go back to pre-Islamic times:

“The *maqām* is situated midway opposite that wall of the house (i.e. the *ka'ba*) in which the door is, and it is closer to the *ka'ba* than the well of Zamzam. It is included into the *tawāf* at the time of the pilgrimage. A large iron box reaching into the ground is placed upon it which is higher than a man's size. It is covered with a cloth. At the time of every pilgrimage the *maqām* is taken into the *ka'ba*, and when it is brought back a wooden box is put over it which has a door that is opened at the time of prayer. When the *imām* pronounces the *salām* he touches the stone, thereafter the door is closed. The stone bears the footprints of Abraham – peace be upon him – but reversed. It is black and larger in size than the black stone.”²

The caliph al-Mu'taṣim, who founded Samarra as a new residential town on the east bank of the Tigris, had a building resembling the *ka'ba* erected on the west bank surrounded by a site for the *tawāf* by which

¹ *Maqām Ibrāhīm*, cf. Q. 2,125; 3,97.

² al-Muqaddasī 72.11, cf. Ranking & Azoo 114.

he deceived his Turkish emirs when they demanded to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca fearing that they would leave him³. This episode, by the way, throws significant light on the geographical knowledge of those people. The town of Samarra was in ruins when al-Muqaddasī visited it, and so the deception of the false sanctuary cannot have lasted for long.

Places lying on the pilgrimage routes had to be prepared to supply for the great number of people passing by every year, which resulted in certain customs. al-Qādisiyya, for instance, situated at the edge of the desert, was very crowded during the pilgrim season. "All kinds of good things" were brought here, obviously food supplies for the inhabitants and the pilgrims. Apart from the main canal of the town there was a second one at the town gate towards the desert, which was filled with water at the time of the pilgrimage (al-Muqaddasī 117.4), supposedly to provide the pilgrims with drinking-water. Al-Muqaddasī himself once started on the pilgrimage without having bothered about provisions, as he reports in his description of the Arab desert (al-Muqaddasī 255.7), but to his surprise he found people everywhere, even when crossing the desert, who were ready to give him things to eat and drink. Hospitality was an indispensable condition for travelling in those times, especially where large numbers of pilgrims are concerned, and this is true not only for those going to Mecca but in general, for there were many other places visited by pilgrims. This holds true for instance for Hebron, *Bayt al-Halīl*, where the tombs of the patriarchs Abraham, *Halīl Allāh*, and his son Isaac were the aim of faithful pilgrims not only of Islamic creed. The village of Hebron, as al-Muqaddasī tells us, was distinguished by its permanent hospitality. There was a public guest house, where cooks, bakers and servants were employed, who offered lentils cooked with olive oil to every poor person arriving, and they even offered it to wealthy people if they wanted it⁴.

³ al-Muqaddasī 122.17, cf. Ranking & Azoo 196.

⁴ al-Muqaddasī 272.7, 172.13, cf. Ranking & Azoo 282.

In the Ḡazīra or Northern Mesopotamia not far from Mosul there was the hill of Tawba with the mosque of Jonas which also played a part in popular belief, for seven visits to this mosque were said to be equal to one pilgrimage to Mecca⁵. In Syria, too, there were holy mountains, among them the Ḡabal Ṣiddīqā, the mountain of Siddīq, the son of the prophet Ṣālih, and this is what al-Muqaddasī says about it:

“The mountain of Ṣiddīqā is situated between Tyrus, Qadas, Baniyās and Sidon. There the tomb of Ṣiddīqā is to be found with a mosque nearby. In the middle of the month of *ṣāʿbān* a festival is held here and a great number of people flock together out of the towns mentioned. Even the deputy of the sultan takes part. I once happened to be in this area on the middle day of *ṣāʿbān*, a Friday, when the *qādī* Abū l-Qāsim ibn ʿAbbās approached me and asked me to deliver the *ḥuṭba* to the people that had gathered in the place. In my speech I encouraged them to rebuild the mosque. They did so and added a pulpit (*minbar*) to it. I heard them saying that a dog pursuing a wild animal when reaching the boundaries of this holy place will abstain from pursuit, and other stories of this kind”⁶.

While this tradition may go back to pre-Islamic times, a tradition in Damiette in Egypt seems to be of Islamic origin. In this town several monasteries of partisans of the faith (*ribāṭāt*) were found. An annual festival was held and *murābitūn* from all regions came together here⁷. We have to take into consideration that at the time of al-Muqaddasī a considerable part, if not the majority, of the inhabitants of Egypt were still Coptic Christians (al-Muqaddasī 193.11, 193.15). There were monks’ cells in the Muqattam which people used to visit (al-Muqaddasī 209.11), and the fact that they did so preferably on Friday evening, as

⁵ al-Muqaddasī 136.6, cf. Ranking & Azoo 221.

⁶ al-Muqaddasī 188.10, cf. Ranking & Azoo 309.

⁷ al-Muqaddasī 202.3, cf. Ranking & Azoo 330.

al-Muqaddasī reports, suggests that the visitors were not only Christians and the purpose was not purely religious. Within earshot of al-Fuṣṭāṭ was al-Qarāfa. There was a Mosque and good drinking places (for pilgrims, *siqāyāt*, *suqāyāt*). A group of believers lived there and a hermitage, a market for those longing for the eternal world and a fine Friday mosque could be found (al-Muqaddasī *ibid.*). Every religious group had its own feasts, and in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance members of different groups not only tolerated each other's feasts but often took part in their pleasures. When dealing with the customs of Syria al-Muqaddasī writes⁸:

“Among the feasts of the Christians which are observed by the Muslims, too, and according to which they determine the seasons of the year, there is Easter at the time of Nayrūz⁹, Whitsun (Pentecost) at the time of the heat, Christmas at the time of the cold, and the feast of St. Barbara¹⁰ at the season of rain, and people say: ‘When St. Barbara’s feast comes, the mason may play the flute’ that is he can sit at home; and (as another Christian feast) the feast of the Kalends¹¹, then their saying is ‘When the Kalends come warm yourself and hide’ and (more Christian feasts are) the feast of the Cross when the grapes are gathered¹² and the feast of Lydda¹³ celebrated at the time of sowing.

⁸ al-Muqaddasī 182.16, cf. Ranking & Azoo 300.

⁹ Here obviously the Persian Nourūz at March 21st or 22nd is meant and not the Coptic at Thoth 1st, cf. Lane 1863-85:2783.

¹⁰ 4th of *kānūn* I - December, cf. al-Muqaddasī 45.3.

¹¹ 1st of *kānūn* II - January.

¹² 13th resp. 14th of *aylūl* - September.

¹³ According to Ranking & Azoo this is the feast of St. George celebrated at 23rd *naysān* = April, Ranking & Azoo 300 note 4.

In the paragraph on the customs of the Arab Peninsula al-Muqaddasī reports¹⁴:

“At Aden they decorate the roofs of their houses two days before the beginning of Ramaḍān and beat the drums upon them, and when Ramaḍān begins groups of people gather at daybreak to march about until the end of the night reciting *qaṣīdas*. When the feast (supposedly *‘īd al-fīṭr*) comes they levy duties from the people. At the feast of Nayrūz they make canopies which they carry around, and visit their neighbours taking their drums with them and collect considerable amounts of money. At Mecca they establish canopies on the eve of *‘īd al-fīṭr* and decorate the market between aṣ-Ṣafā and al-Marwa, they beat the drums until the morning. When they say the morning prayer the slave girls approach, embellished and carrying fans in their hands, and they surround the house...”

Especially as far as events in the sphere of the family such as marriage and burial are concerned, traditional elements seem to have survived. In the chapter on ad-Daylam, the regions south and south-east of the Caspian Sea, al-Muqaddasī writes (al-Muqaddasī 368.16):

“There are strange customs in ad-Daylam: They marry exclusively partners of their own. I once happened to be in a guest house (*ḥān*), when a girl passed by running and a man followed behind her with his sword drawn determined to kill her. I asked: What crime did she commit to have deserved death? He said: She married someone who is not of local origin and it is our duty to kill everyone who does so”.

Soon after he relates (al-Muqaddasī 369.6):

“They have a market on Friday in the plain, in each village on a certain day. When they finish the market, men and women retire to a secluded place where they (i.e. the men) wrestle with each other. One man sits there holding a string in his hands making a knot every time one of the wrestlers is victorious.

¹⁴ al-Muqaddasī 100.10, cf. Ranking & Azoo 152.

When a man falls in love with a woman he goes with her (to her house) and her relatives will receive him with delight and give him a hearty welcome, and they boast with him if he asks for their generosity and show hospitality to him for three days. Then after he has lived with her for one week in seclusion in a house belonging to him the herald will publicly proclaim (the engagement), and people gather around and mark the place for their common house (? *yahṭattūna*). I asked Abū Nābita al-Anṣārī saying: Did he touch her before the marriage was settled by treaty? He said: If they discovered such a thing they would kill him! I often took part in marriages with the inhabitants of Biyār. People meet after nightfall and every man carries with him a bottle filled with rose water. Lamps are lighted above the doors of the rooms of the fiancé and the bride. One of the sheiks present raises his voice to an eloquent speech addressing both the fiancé and the woman, then another one answers him on behalf of the bride in the most pleasant way, and indeed, most of them are well educated orators. Thereafter the treaty of marriage is concluded. Now the men holding the bottles with rose water get up and spray the walls of the house and each of them is offered a piece of *afrūša*¹⁵, and nowhere all over the world one can find *afrūša* as good as they prepare it.

al-Muqaddasī also notes that meals on the occasion of feasts and marriages in this province always consisted simply of *tarda* (a soup with bread), meat without bones and fresh *afrūša* (al-Muqaddasī 370.5). Of greater importance to the subject under discussion is the following information:

¹⁵ Cf. Steingass 1970:82: "A dish made of butter, honey and flour; bruised wheat or barley, and victuals dressed with it; a confection made of almonds; a dish made of yolk of egg, milk and syrup". What al-Muqaddasī thinks of becomes clear from a description following some time later: A dish made of flour, grease and syrup of grapes and dates, al-Muqaddasī 370.3.

“Never will you see a woman there at daytime. They only come out of the house at night wearing black garments, and never will a woman whose husband has died marry again. If she does, the young men will smash earthenware against the door of her house” (al-Muqaddasī 370.8).

In the way funerals were performed in some places, Islamic use seems to have amalgamated with older local tradition. Among the customs of the Iraqis al-Muqaddasī notes that they used to set up high domes roughly manufactured upon the biers of women¹⁶. In Syria the fact that the graves had the shape of mounds attracted his attention. “They walk behind the bier, and they draw the body with the head foremost to the grave. When somebody dies, they visit his grave for three days following his death to recite the Qur’ān completely”¹⁷. In the Maghrib they take the body to the grave either with the head or the feet foremost (al-Muqaddasī 238.18), but to take the body with the head foremost, as in Syria, seems to have been the prevailing custom, at least in the opinion of al-Muqaddasī, for in the chapter on the Mašriq he writes:

“Their customs differ from those of the provinces of the Arabs in most respects, as, for instance, they carry the body from the direction of the qibla to the grave while the authorities of analogy (*ra’y*) and tradition (*ḥadīth*) are present (and approve of it), except the Šī‘īs, for they draw the body head foremost to the grave (like in Syria). One day I said to the inhabitants of Abīward: ‘You are people following the *madḥab* of aš-Šāfi‘ī – may God have mercy upon him – and you are masters of your country, so why don’t you draw the body head foremost to the grave?’ They answered: ‘How could it happen that we should follow the practice of the Šī‘a and act in contradiction to the Muslims!’” (al-Muqaddasī 327.1).

¹⁶ al-Muqaddasī 129.7, cf. Ranking & Azoo 207.

¹⁷ al-Muqaddasī 183.12, cf. Ranking & Azoo 207.

In Fars funeral practice, in this respect, resembled that of Syria: “They take the body head foremost to the grave. Men walk in front of the bier, women behind it, in *Hūzistān* they walk at both sides of the bier. At the obsequies and at the grave they play the *zamr* (some kind of oboe) and beat the drums. In the provinces of the non-Arabs they do not know the custom of visiting the grave three days after a person’s death to read the Qur’ān completely, they rather sit three days in the mosque for mourning” (al-Muqaddasī 440.19). When there was a funeral in ad-Daylam people flocked together uncovering their heads while the consoler covered his, and the consoler was wrapped in garments which they wound around their heads and beards (?) (al-Muqaddasī 369.1.).

Like the Christians, the Zoroastrians at that time observed their own feasts. In *Kāzarūn* in Fars there was a dome which the Zoroastrians held to be the centre of the world and where they celebrated an annual festival (al-Muqaddasī 46.4). The town of *Kāriyān*, situated in Fars as well, was famous for its fire temple from which the Zoroastrians carried the holy fire in all directions¹⁸. Just as Muslims in Syria took part in the feasts of the Christians, so they joined the Zoroastrians in Fars in the celebration of *Nayrūz* and *Mihrgān*¹⁹. Islam in some cases tolerated pagan practices; al-Muqaddasī says, for instance, that he saw the use of talismans in Egypt, Syria and Fars, which were held to have been created by the prophets. In al-*Ġifār* in Egypt such a talisman was in use against the sands that threatened to smother towns and villages (al-Muqaddasī 211.17). In other cases pre-Islamic customs were abolished. In the chapter on Egypt, al-Muqaddasī tells the following story with a complete *isnād*:

“When Egypt was conquered by Islam the inhabitants met ‘Amr ibn al-*Āṣ* when he entered it in the month of *Bawna* and

¹⁸ al-Muqaddasī 427.12, cf. Le Strange 1905:255.

¹⁹ al-Muqaddasī 441.1, *Mihrgān* being the feast of the Autumn equinox.

said to him: 'O Amīr, there is a custom in honour of our Nile and he will never flow without it having been practised: As soon as it is the eve of the twelfth day of this month we go to a virgin girl living with her parents whom we shall calm. We adorn her with the most precious ornaments and dress her in the most beautiful garments one can imagine. Then we throw her into the Nile.' 'Amr said to them: 'Never shall this happen again! Islam puts an end to what was practised before.' They waited this month and the following and still another one, and the Nile did bring neither high nor low water so that at the end they thought of evacuating the country. When 'Amr became aware of this he sent written information to the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, who in his turn wrote to him: 'You did right in what you did, for indeed, Islam puts an end to what was before.' He sent 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ a card together with his letter and wrote to him: 'I am attaching a card to the letter, throw it into the Nile.' When 'Amr received the letter he opened it and found the card with the following text: 'From 'Abd Allāh 'Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to the Nile in Egypt: If you are unable to flow out of your own might so abstain from flowing, but if it is God the Unique and Almighty who makes you flow, so we ask Him who is omnipotent to cause you to flow.' 'Amr threw the card into the Nile just before the feast of the cross, while the people got ready for emigration. Then the day of the feast of the cross came and God made the Nile flow and rise to sixteen ells. Thus God took away from them this evil custom up to the present day" (al-Muqaddasī 207.3).

The feast of the cross was an important date in respect to the annual flood of the Nile, for on that day a lock near 'Ayn Šams was opened in the presence and by order of the sultan to allow the inundation, and in this way the irrigation of the lower parts of the countryside (al-Muqaddasī 206.3).

There were, of course, more customs considered religiously irrelevant. In Wāsiṭ as soon as the first boat carrying fresh dates was seen approaching the town at the time of the date harvest the merchant used to decorate the way from the embankment of the river to his shop with rags and curtains in honour of this event (al-Muqaddasī 129.4).

Some rulers were well aware of the importance of festivals and pleasure, of presenting to the people *panem et circenses*. When ʿAḍud ad-Dawla founded his new residential town Kurdu Fannahosrou he initiated an annual feast, and people were allowed all kinds of amusement, but the town fell to ruins and the feast vanished after the amir's death (al-Muqaddasī 431.5).

REFERENCES

- al-Muqaddasī = al-Muqaddasī, Šams ad-Dīn Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Bannā' al-Baššārī, *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*. Edited by Michel Johann de Goeje. (= *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* 3). 2nd ed. Leiden 1906.
- Lane, Edward William. 1863-85. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. London & Edinburgh.
- Le Strange, Guy. 1905. *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*. Cambridge.
- Ranking & Azoo = Ranking, G. S. A. & R. F. Azoo, transl., *Aḥsanu-t-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm known as al-Muqaddasī*. (= *Bibliotheca Indica* 1). Calcutta 1897-1910. Reprint ed. by Fuat Sezgin in: *Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften*, Reihe B, Nachdrucke Abt. Geographie. Vol. VIII. Frankfurt/Main 1989.
- Steingass, F. 1970. *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*. Beirut (repr.).