The first Islamic military expedition towards India took place during 'Umar ibn al-Hattâb's caliphate (634-644) when 'Uthmân ibn Abî al-'Ašî al-Taqâfî governor of Bahrain and Oman sent some of his troops to Tânhâ near Bombay. This was only the beginning of a long series of invasions (often merely raids, typical of Bedouin nomads) which took Islam to the eastern boundaries of India in a limited time span.

With the spreading of Mamlakat al-Islam, Islamic Empire, the administrative and economic needs increased accordingly; civil servants of different levels were then sent to the new provinces to carry out various tasks: postal officers, prefects, tax collectors and so on. Some of these civil servants left behind reports, most of which concern specific aspects of their work: Ibn Hûrâdhâbîh for example was director of the postal service and wrote a treaty called al-Mâsâlik wa al-mâmâlik (Roads and places), to satisfy the caliph who needed this work for his journeys and for transferring his armies. Al-Yâ'qûbî himself was a prefect or a postal officer: in his journeys he carefully noted the precise amount of revenue tax, outlining the political aspect of the territories he visited. It appears that the earliest Arab historians to be concerned with the Indian Subcontinent were simply chroniclers who had very practical objectives.

2 Born in Hûrâsân around 820 and brought up in Ba'gdad, author of different books of great interest; see M. Hâdj-Sadok, Ibn Khûrâdhâbîh, in EI², vol. III, 1971, p. 863.
The first of these historians was al-Balāḍurī \(^5\), author of *Futūḥ al-balāḍūn* \(^6\), *The conquest of the Countries*. A chapter of this book narrates the conquest of Sind, starting from the first invasion which took place during 'Umar's caliphate, up to al-Mu'tasim's caliphate. In this lapse of time, between 634 and 842, al-Balāḍurī describes the raids and the military expeditions that led to Sind's conquest. The first impression must not have been too reassuring. When the caliph 'Uṭmān sent Ḥakīm ibn Ğubla al-‘Abdi \(^7\) to seek for information, this was his report: “Water is scarce, the quality of fruit is poor and thieves are very cunning; a little army would perish whilst a large one would starve.” \(^8\)

During Mu‘āwiya's caliphate the Muslims gained important military victories but it was thanks to the valiant actions of Muhammad ibn al-Qāsim \(^9\) with his six thousand men that the conquest of Sind was achieved. The author narrates an anecdote which gives us an idea of the kind of logistic difficulties that a large army could run into. He recounts that the governor of Iraq al-Haggā, took some carded cotton, dipped it in vinegar and dried it. He then turned to his army and said: “If you go to Sind you will have no vinegar because vinegar is scarce. Dip this cotton in water to cook and to prepare minced meat.” \(^10\)

The historian then makes a list of the conquered towns narrating in detail the siege of Daybul \(^11\), during which the enemy was defeated using a catapult. The Muslims destroyed the temple and took possession of the town after three days of fighting.

The meeting between Muhammad ibn al-Qāsim and some Buddhists or *Sumaṭiyyūn* of the town of al-Bīrūn is particularly interesting \(^12\). The Buddhists offered him a fattened animal in homage and acted as mediators between Muhammad and the inhabitants of Mahrān and Sadūsān. The Muslims granted them protection in return for a tribute.

Amongst the conquered cities there was also Multān, a town made rich by pilgrims who came from all parts of India to visit the

---


\(^6\) See note 1.

\(^7\) Informer for the governor of Iraq.

\(^8\) Taken from al-Balāḍurī, *op. cit.*, pp. 420-421.


\(^10\) *Al-Balāḍurī*, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

\(^11\) Karachi in Pakistan.

\(^12\) For further informations about Buddhists see Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Mīdāl wa al-Niḥal*, edited by Muḥammad Sayyed Kīlānī, Cairo 1976-1396, pp. 35-36.
temple. The town was so rich that Muhammad gave back to al-
Hağāqī twice the amount spent for the military campaign.

The author lists in detail all those who achieved the conquest of
Sind. He concludes by telling an anecdote about a king whose son
was severely ill. The king summoned the priests of a temple in which
an idol was worshipped. He told them to plead the idol, but their
prayers were useless because the king's son died. The king destroyed
the temple, broke the idol, killed the priests and, after having sent
for some Muslim merchants, converted to Islam. Examples of Islamic
morals are, in fact, often used by authors of the time to reinforce the
readers' faith.

Another historian already mentioned was al-Yaʾqūbī, who carried
out studies about India and wrote Kitāb al-buldān and Taʾrīḫ
Yaʾqūbī. Unfortunately the parts of Kitāb al-buldān relative to
India, to China and to the Byzantine Empire have been lost, but the
author dedicates a chapter of Taʾrīḫ Yaʾqūbī to India. His analytical
approach, unlike al-Baladhuri, considers the history of the Country
and the philosophical and astronomical knowledge of the time. In the
chapter of his universal history called Mulūk al-Hind, the author
starts by saying that the first king of India recognized by all histori-
rians is Brahman. He then quotes Indian astronomy books later
translated by the Arabs as a source of knowledge. Following the
tradition al-Yaʾqūbī develops his treaty with the division of the
world in seven climatic areas, listing the boundaries, the capital of
each and underlining the different time zones. Once again the author
makes his passion for astrology and calculations clear: he states the
duration of the world in days "from the moment in which the con-
stellations started to turn to the moment they gathered in Capricorn
as they did when they were created."

Al-Yaʾqūbī talks about king Faur, who fought against Alexander
the Great drawing up an army in which elephants were the chivalry.
Their strength seemed difficult to match even for a skilful leader as

---

16 For further informations see C. A. Nallino, Raccolta di scritti editi e inediti,
18 Better known with the name Porus, Indian king of the IV century B.C. whose
kingdom extended between the rivers Indus (Jhelum) and Acesine (Chinab), in
Punjab.
the Macedonian. However Alexander defeated Faur by using a trick: he prepared some brass dummies, filled them with red hot charcoal and placed them in front of his soldiers. When the elephants tried to break through they seized the dummies with their trunks but got burnt and were forced to retreat.\footnote{See \textit{Al-Ya'qūbi}, \textit{Tārīkh}, op. cit., vol. I, p. 87}

Amongst the kings of India al-Ya'qūbī mentions Dabašlim, under whose command Baidabā drew up the book \textit{Kalīla wa Dimna}.\footnote{Pehlevi text translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa during the VIII century.} He was, in al-Ya'qūbī's words, “the wisest of men and wrote the book so that a lesson could be acquired from it.”\footnote{\textit{Ibidem}, vol. I, p. 88.} Then follows a general description of every chapter in which moral and philosophical themes are developed.

By describing futile activities such as playing backgammon, al-Ya'qūbī explains the zodiac and time divisions into hours, days, months and years. Later he uses the game of chess to describe war and military strategy. This image is picked up once again: queen Hāsār's son had been killed and nobody knew how to tell her. A wise man was called to solve the problem. He built a chess board and pieces, went to the queen and started playing with one of his apprentices. When one of them declared check mate the queen understood the message and gave the wise man an adequate reward.\footnote{\textit{Ibidem}, vol. I, p. 92.}

Al-Ya'qūbī gives some titles of medical and astronomical works. The pronunciation of these is very interesting. The author quotes an Indian medical book called \textit{Śark} which is thought to be the medical work better known by the sanskrit name \textit{Caraka} (in sanskrit the stress falls on the first syllable if there are no long vowels). At first this was transformed into the medieval hindī pronunciation \textit{Cark} and later transcribed into the arabic \textit{Šārk}. Another medical work quoted by al-Ya'qūbī is the book \textit{Sasard}, better known by the sanskrit name \textit{Suśruta} (the stress is always on the first syllable). This was changed into the medieval hindī pronunciation \textit{Suśrt} (in medieval hindī the short -\textit{u-} sound is similar to an -\textit{o-}) and then transcribed as \textit{Sasard} in arabic. Regarding astronomical works, al-Ya'qūbī mentions \textit{Sindhind}, more commonly known by its sanskrit name \textit{Siddhanta}. In medieval hindī this became \textit{Siddhant} (the short -\textit{a-} sound is infact

\footnote{\textit{Ibidem}, vol. I, p. 94.}
silent in medieval hindī) and later Sindhind. This evolution was favoured by the closeness of the -n- and the -d- sounds. Another example of an astronomical work is al-Arġabar\textsuperscript{26}, known as the sanskrit Āryabhaṭa, changed into Ārghabhaṭ (the -ya- in medieval hindī is pronounced -ja-). This was transcribed in arabic as Arḡabhar: in medieval hindī -r- was a dental consonant which was read -r- by a foreigner. At the time of al-Ya‘qībī, towards the end of the ninth century, the classical pronunciation of sanskrit no longer persisted but was substituted by medieval hindī or khaṛī bolī, a language spoken in the thirteenth century. Before that time prakṛt popular languages were common in India. The pronunciation of these is unknown, but it appears to be somewhere between sanskrit and medieval hindī. The few examples given above demonstrate that the prakṛt languages of the ninth century had the same pronunciation of medieval hindī or khaṛī bolī.

Another author who dealt with India in his work titled Masālik wa al-mamālik\textsuperscript{27} was al-Īṣṭahrī\textsuperscript{28}. He was one of the most outstanding representatives of the new tendencies that arab geography was developing in the tenth century. Whereas the works of the two authors previously mentioned were historically oriented, al-Īṣṭahrī’s work considers the strictly geographical aspects.

In the chapter concerning the region of Sind the author starts by giving an accurate description of the physical boundaries of the geographical area examined. He then lists the towns in each territory and provides general information about them; he states: “From Kanbāya to Şaymūr and in the town of Balharā there are different kings of India, and this is a Country of misbelievers. There are however some muslims and Balharā was the first town to be governed by a muslim; there are even some mosques where the community prayer is held on fridays.”\textsuperscript{29}

The author turns his attention to the various aspects of the territory, describing for instance the agricultural products, the local currency, the relative exchange rate to the arab currency, and also the type of clothing worn by the local population. As far as the currency is concerned he states: “Their monetary unit is the qāhirīyya and one dirham is equivalent to about five dirham called taṭārī. The weight of one dirham is equivalent to one dirham and two thirds and they also

\textsuperscript{26} Ibidem, vol. I, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{29} Al-Īṣṭahrī, op. cit., p. 173.
use dīnār." Observing the clothes he notes: "Their garments are the same as those worn by the inhabitants of Iraq, except for kings who wore clothes similar to those worn by the kings of India: a fur coat with long sleeves and collar." 31

Al-Iṣṭahri then gives a detailed description of the town of Multān and of the idol which was the destination of pilgrimages from the whole of India and Sind. The worshippers brought all sorts of riches; the author states infact: "Multān was called farāq bait al-

dahab because it was conquered at the beginning of Islam in a time when muslims were poor, but they found heaps of gold in the town and improved their situation." 32

The reader is confronted with a list of towns and villages but one can often find information that goes beyond the strictly geographical interest. An example of this is given when al-Iṣṭahri writes about al-

Budha territory: "It is inhabited by nomads whose prosperous camels are exported to the regions of Hūrāsān and to Persia." 33

Another example is his description of the town of Kizkānān: "It is situated in a fertile region, the prices are cheap, grapes and pomegranates grow, as well as fruits of the cold regions, but there are no palm trees." 34 The author is also interested in language itself: "The languages spoken by people from al-Manṣūra, from Multān and the nearby regions are arabic and the language of Sind, whereas the inhabitants of Mākrān speak persian and the local dialect (al-mak-

kariyya)." 35

Al-Iṣṭahri then gives the walking distances, measured in days, which separate a town from another. He describes the rivers that flow through the territory; referring to Mihrān 36 he writes: "It is a large river with drinkable water and is said to be infested by crocodiles like the Nile and is as large as the Nile itself. Moreover it often overflows and the surrounding fields are cultivated like the ones in Egypt." 37

The chapter ends with the reference to the Zutt tribe which lived in a swampy land near Mākrān. Al-Iṣṭahri describes their miserable

---

32 Ibidem, p. 175.
33 Ibidem, p. 176.
34 Ibidem, p. 177.
35 Ibidem, p. 177.
36 Indus river.

298
conditions: "Those who live near these waters dwell in huts, eat fish, aquatic birds and everything they can put together." 38

The interest of the author embraces different domains, giving an overall image of the territory examined and of the life system of the various populations. The indications given by the geographers of the time sometimes also include ethnological elements.

The geographer Ibn Ḥawqal 39 dealt with India in his work called Kitāb al-maṣālik wa al-mamālik 40 dedicating a chapter to the region of Sind 41. The book follows the outlines set by al-Iṣṭahārī whom the author met 42. Ibn Ḥawqal infact includes in his book a map drawn by al-Iṣṭahārī and at the beginning of the chapter explains the boundaries of Sind accurately. He also reports the great difficulties encountered in reaching the farthest places: "Indian towns are very widely spread, there are dry mountain paths and villages hidden in the depths of the valleys... the countryside is vast and no foreign merchant would adventure himself there, nor would a traveller because of the isolation and the deseases that one could run into." 43

Although this work is similar to al-Iṣṭahārī's one, there are several original contributions. An example of this is the description of the muslim social condition inside the indian society: "Muslims only accept to be governed by a muslim. They do not take the responsibility of controlling their boundaries and do not witness against misbelievers if not under trial. If it happens that in a kingdom the number of muslims diminishes, they submit to the kingdom's inhabitants, but if the muslims declare that one of them has been wounded by a rival, then they will bear witness and truth will be established according to their words." 44 Another example refers to the town of Multān of which the author narrates: "Amongst its people there is interest for the Koran, for religious studies, for islamic law and for the seven methods of reading the Koran. There are people who carry out studies of litterature and science amongst whom, however, it is possible to meet bad tempered individuals." 45 Regarding this town Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Iṣṭahārī and al-Balāḍurī give a

---

41 Ibidem, pp. 317-330.
42 Ibidem, p. 329.
44 Ibidem, p. 320.
45 See Ibn Ḥawqal, op. cit., p. 322.
description of the temple which was the destination of pilgrimages from all over India. Ibn Hawqal and al-Iṣṭahārī describe in greater detail the idol worshipped in the temple: “This idol is human shaped, sitting with its legs crossed on a brick and chalk stool. The whole body is covered with a red leather-like maroquin skin leaving out the eyes. Some people maintain that the body is made out of wood, whilst others say quite the contrary. In any case it is not possible to uncover the idol. The eyes are two gems and on its head there is a golden diadem. Sitting with its legs crossed on the stool, it rests its arms on its knees and its hands in a position as if it is counting four.” It is to be noted that Multān in sanskrit is written Mūlasthānīpura and that the idol described by both authors was destroyed a few years later by an iraki called Jelem, who belonged to the Qarmati sect. Moreover the hands are described in the position of vitarka mudrā which is a conventional gesture for the exposition of the doctrine. Monnier William in his Sanskrit-English dictionary translates Mūlasthānī as an attribute of the goddess Gauri who is the šaketi of Śiva according to the tantric traditions Kanphatu yogi. It is therefore a hindu idol.

Ibn Hawqal writes about the various types of land you can find in the region of Sind. He reports: “The land of al-Budha is similar to the berbers’ desert: the inhabitants live in huts or in woods near swamps.” Moving further south the morphology changes radically: “There are fertile fields between the Mihrān river and Qāmuhul; many citizens move there to take holidays and go for walks.”

Unlike al-Iṣṭahārī, Ibn Hawqal states that near the town of Qāmuhul indian nut is used to make a liquor, to get drunk and to obtain vinegar. The author promptly informs: “I swear to God that I have no idea what it is.”

Ibn Hawqal, as mentioned earlier, was a fervent estimator of journeys and reports and chanelled this passion into his work. We also have the impression that he opens his heart to the reader revealing the reasons behind his choice to become a geographer. He was

---

46 See Al-Balāḏurī, op. cit., p. 427.
50 Ibidem, p. 324.
51 Ibidem, p. 324.
52 Ibidem, p. 329.
well and truly an enthusiast where geography is concerned, and, as he says himself, so fully dedicated to the point of never parting with the books written by authors such as Ibn Ḥurdādbih, al-Gihāni and Qudāma. There is no doubt that the author took most of his information relative to the Sind from al-Iṣṭahri. A close examination of both their works would be necessary, however, to reveal with precision the influence they had on one another. In this condition of uncertainty we can only quote Ibn Ḥawqal who significantly stated: “I concluded, describing everything between the eastern boundary and the furthermost border of Islam, and God willing I have not omitted anything I have visited; gathering this information my objective was not to increase my personal prestige, nor was it to denigrate this region through falsehood.”

54 Ibidem, p. 328.