



THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD AS SEEN BY IBN KHALDUN (732-808 AH/1332-1406 CE)

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Ibn Khaldun’s historical works have been extensively studied, as have his writings on economics and demography, though to a somewhat lesser degree. On the other hand, we find that this towering figure’s contribution to geography has been largely ignored, which is why Henri Chamussy (among others) has called for him to be accorded the recognition he deserves on the grounds that “today it is not possible for a geographer interested in the history of ideas to underestimate the importance of this major thinker.”

Chamussy notes that it was Lacoste – France’s leading scholar of political geography – who introduced Ibn Khaldun to modern European geographers.¹ In an article on the subject, he endeavours to highlight some of Ibn Khaldun’s contributions in that field, while at the same time noting that he cannot be seen as a substitute for a proper academic study of the subject.

¹ Henri Chamussy: *Ibn Khaldun*, article in *Hypergeo*.



The geography of the Islamic world – location and distinctive features

Where the Islamic world is concerned, geography is important for three reasons:

Firstly, the Islamic world covers a large area. In Ibn Khaldun’s day – that is to say, before the discovery of the Americas – it amounted to half the known world. Indeed, even today the Islamic world still covers about a quarter of the world’s land area.¹

Secondly, our Islamic world lies within a zone that is generally regarded as having a temperate climate. According to al Khaffaf: “This area covered by the Islamic world is in the eastern hemisphere, and most of its main area is within the warm tropical zone...It lies alongside the vast deserts which occupy the northern part of Africa and South-West and Central Asia.”²

Thirdly, the Islamic countries occupy an important strategic region of the globe. It was even more important before the later geographical discoveries, though even today it is still of major geopolitical importance. Al Khaffaf writes: “The Islamic world lies in a geographical location in the ‘heart of the world’, since it is the land bridge linking Asia with Africa; it is also very close to the continent of Europe [because of Europe’s proximity to] the Anatolian peninsula and the countries of the Arab Maghreb. It links the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Arabian Gulf, which open onto the Indian Ocean.”³ Its exceptional importance in the field of contemporary geopolitical studies has probably been highlighted most recently in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s book *The Grand Chessboard*.⁴

1 Abd ‘Ali al Khaffaf: *Jughrafiyah al ‘Alam al Islami*, Dar al Shuruq, Amman, 1st impression, 1998, p. 29.

2 Ibid. p. 11.

3 Ibid. p. 13, particularly on Eurasia and the Eurasian Balkans.

4 See Zbigniew Brzezinski: *Le Grand Echiquier (The Grand Chessboard)*, Hachette, Paris, 1977.

Muslim geographers

Muslim geographers have approached their subject from a number of different angles. They wrote about “*ilm al atwal wa’l ‘urudh*” (the science of longitudes and latitudes), or “*ilm al taqwim*” (the science of estimation), in which they devised imaginary lines – longitude and latitude – in order to pinpoint the geographical locations of cities and regions. They wrote about “*ilm al masalik wa’l mamalik*” (the science of roads and kingdoms), the prime purpose of which was to describe road links. They also wrote about “*ilm al aqalim*” (the science of regions) or “*ilm al buldan*” (the science of countries) in which they described specific regions such as – among others – the Arabian Peninsula, Persia and Andalusia. They classed astronomy as belonging to the “*ilm al hay’ah*” (science of form) category.

The geographical term or branch that would be most familiar to geographers today was “*surat al ardh*” (the image of the earth), which was also the title of one of the most famous and significant books on Arab geography - a collective effort produced by a large team of geographers headed by al Khawarizmi. Our tradition of dividing the world into seven regions, based on their degrees of latitude from south to north, dates from al Khawarizmi.

However, Muslim geographers did not all adopt the same system for dividing the regions. For example, al Istakhri divided the Islamic world into twenty regions based on each region’s geographical character, while Ibn Hawqal divided it into twenty-two based on political and administrative factors. Al Maqdisi divided it into seven Arab and eight ‘*Ajam*’ regions, also on an administrative basis.

Later, al Sharif al Idrisi reverted to the practice of basing the terrestrial divisions on the seven celestial regions. This was the system adopted by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah (Prolegomena)*.¹

¹ ‘Abdul Rahman bin Mohammad bin Khaldun: *Al Muqaddimah*, edited and indexed by Abu ‘Abdullah al Sa’id al Manduwah, Mu’assasat al Kutub al Thaqafiyah, Beirut, 4th impression, 1426/2005, pp. 49-56.



Reasons behind the Muslims' interest in geography

All this raises the question: What is the reason behind the Muslims' interest in every branch and aspect of geography, to the extent that no other human civilization has produced so many books on the subject? Indeed, with the exception of the modern era, about half the Muslim world's literary output has been on geographical topics, and Europeans found the Islamic geographical heritage highly useful when they set out on their own voyages of exploration.

The reasons may be summed up as follows:

- While urging Believers to look at the heavens, the planets and the stars, the Holy Qur'an also exhorts them to travel through the earth, explore it and populate it.
- References include – among others – “Those who travel [for the Faith]” (*Al Tawbah 112*); believing women are described as “travelling [for the Faith]” (*Al Tahrim 5*), while other examples include “It is He who has made the earth manageable for you, so traverse ye through its tracts and enjoy of the sustenance which He furnishes; and unto Him is the resurrection.” (*Al Mulk 15*). This encouragement to travel is also clearly implied in the stories of some of the prophets and Dhu'l Qarnain, so it is for this reason that our heritage has produced a huge number of books on travel, and from a range of different angles.
- The Islamic Conquests created a need for Muslims to acquire a proper understanding of the lands they planned to occupy. Then after those lands had been conquered, there was an even greater need for precise and accurate knowledge so that the new territories could be administered efficiently; this included raising funds and taxes, sending *walis* (local governors) and state employees to their postings, establishing garrisons, regulating the trading seasons and protecting trade routes.
- The Hajj pilgrimage requires every Muslim to travel to Makkah if he (or she) is able to do so. This obligation encouraged Muslims to acquire a better understanding of geography – in both theory and practice – to enable them to perform this act of worship which is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

- Travel became widely understood as a means of acquiring knowledge – a concept best exemplified in the activities of the Hadith scholars. Other scholars of religion, literature, language and the natural sciences also recognized its importance in this regard.¹
- Curiosity and a desire to know about “the other” was another factor. Professor al Difa’ maintains that the Muslims excelled as geographers because they had travelled to China and Africa. This was something the Romans had never done.²

These and other factors gave the geographical sciences a new basis for their status in Islam, following which they evolved to an extent that had no historical precedent.

Geography in the life and travels of Ibn Khaldun

The Maghrebis’ interest in geography may be partly due to the fact that their countries were a considerable distance from the Arab East. One of these people was Ibn Battuta – a contemporary of Ibn Khaldun who spoke highly of him.

Ibn Khaldun grew up in a Maghrebi environment which always looked towards the East. We can conclude from what we know of his life that he travelled widely. Thus he had extensive experience of North Africa including its inhabitants, terrain and geography; his knowledge of the subject, therefore, was not gleaned solely from books since he was personally familiar with much of the civilized world of that time. This enabled him to acquire a deep understanding of geography and its impact on human life and society.³ Hence Kratchovsky says: “When we look at him in the light of his origins and life, we find that Ibn Khaldun represents an unusual blend of the cultures of that time.”⁴

¹ See *al Muqaddimah*, Ch. 42, p. 242. Learning is enhanced through travel in search of knowledge and to meet sheikhs of religion.

² ‘Ali bin ‘Abdullah al Difa’: *Ruwad ‘Ilm al Jughrafiyah fi’l Hadharat al ‘Arabiyyah*, Maktabat al Tawbah, Saudi Arabia, 2nd impression, 1993, p. 45.

³ For a brief illustrated overview of Ibn Khaldun’s travels, see Khalid ‘Azab and Mohammad al Sayyid: *Ma’a Ibn Khaldun*, Maktabat al Iskandariyyah, 2006.

⁴ Ignatius Kratchovsky: *Tarikh al Adab al Jughrafiy (A History of Geographical Literature)*, translated from the Russian by Salahuddin Hashim, Publication and Authorship Committee, Cairo, 1963, p. 439.



Ibn Khaldun himself has recorded details of those journeys in his unique autobiography, known as *Rihlat Ibn Khaldun Sharqan wa Gharban* (*Ibn Khaldun's Journey Eastwards and Westwards*). It is not a geographical text, but an account by the author of the main events in his life. Thus although Kratchovsky comments: "Ibn Khaldun's ideas on geography require clarification, on the basis not of his *Journey*, but of his massive historical output,"¹ the way Ibn Khaldun describes his journeys in this autobiography gives us a clear idea of his geographical and scientific background.

Ibn Khaldun grew up in Tunis. The fact that it is in the central part of North Africa was significant in that it meant he was within relatively easy reach of the lands to the east and the west. His first journey was to Fez, where he lived for a time before moving on to Andalusia where he visited Seville, the land of his Bani Khaldun forbears. From there he travelled to Bejaiya and Biskra – both of which are cities in the central region of the Maghreb. Then after long years of travel and engagement in politics he went into seclusion for four years in Qala'at Salamah to the west of Tunis, where he wrote his historical encyclopaedia with its famous *Muqaddimah*.

During this phase of his life Ibn Khaldun acquired his extensive experience of the Islamic West.

The next phase began when he moved to Egypt and lived in Cairo, where he divided his time between teaching and the administration of justice. From Egypt he performed the Hajj Pilgrimage and visited the Hejaz before travelling on to Syria and Jerusalem.

Ibn Khaldun's life was a graphic demonstration of the fact that the cultural, emotional and human geography of the Islamic world was a single indivisible whole, despite its political divisions. This was why he (and others too) were able to travel unhampered from Andalusia to Egypt and Syria and take up residence in all those countries for extensive periods of time.

¹ Ibid. p. 441.

Geography in the *Muqaddimah*

Geography appears – though in substance rather than name – in several sections of the *Muqaddimah*, including Books Two, Three, Four and Five. Book Six, which is devoted to the sciences, does not mention geography as such, though Ibn Khaldun refers to a branch of it called *al jughrafiyah al falakiyyah* (celestial geography) during a discussion on *'ilm al hay'ah*.¹

This does not mean that he did not recognize “the science of geography,” since it was not his intention to include all the sciences; indeed, he does not even mention *'ilm al 'umran* (the science of ekistics) despite the fact that he himself invented it.

In the early books of his *Muqaddimah* Ibn Khaldun discusses what is referred to in modern geographical terminology as the “astronomical position” of the Islamic world.² In the postscript to Book Two he describes the seven regions one by one and lists the main features of each region including its peoples, tribes, islands, mountains, seas and rivers. He also notes that the earth’s central regions have the most advanced civilizations because of their temperate climates; thus – in his view – the civilized peoples in those temperate regions are basically the peoples of the Islamic world, Byzantium, India and China.³ These are the major historical civilizations, with the Islamic countries located at their centre.

Thus Ibn Khaldun was aware of the Islamic world’s strategic significance.

After describing the geography of the world in brief, Ibn Khaldun concludes: “Our main interest is in the Maghreb, which is the country of the Berbers, and in the Arab countries in the East.”⁴ This would suggest that the geographical region he was interested in was limited to the areas between Iraq in the east and Morocco in the west; that is to say, the Arab world (more or less).

¹ *Muqaddimah*, p. 184.

² This geographical concept is dealt with in: Abd 'Ali al Khaffaf: *Jughrafiyah al 'Alam al Islami*, p. 9.

³ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, pp. 89, 91.

⁴ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, p. 52.



In *Kitab al Tarikh (The Book of History)* Ibn Khaldun does not arrange his material in chronological order, but according to the ruling states in each region – in other words, he gives priority to geography over chronology.

His geographical sources

Ibn Khaldun took his material from several geographers. Those whom he names include Ptolemy (from his book *The Geography*) and al Idrisi (whom he describes as “author of the ‘*Book of Roger*’”)¹. However, sometimes his information is more detailed than al Idrisi’s, such as his account of the islands of the Atlantic Ocean or deepest Africa.²

Al Idrisi’s geography is important because it is the most complete work produced on the subject at that time. His book *Nuzhat al Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al Afaq (The Pleasure Trip of One Who Desires to Journey Through The Climes)* contains seventy maps and divides every region into ten longitudinal sections with a map for each section. These maps were put together by the German Orientalist Muller to form a single map with an area of approximately two square metres, which was the most accurate map produced before the beginning of the modern era. Idrisi’s maps were drawn on the basis of the earth being round.

Geography and history: Ibn Khaldun’s theory on the impact of the environment upon civilizations and states

In his postscript to Book Two of the *Muqaddimah* Ibn Khaldun attributes the higher level of Civilization in the northern quarter of the earth – compared with the southern quarter – to the former’s temperate climate.³ In Book Three he also wrote: “The civilized part of the known area of the earth is its centre, due to the excessive heat in the south and the excessive cold in the north,”⁴ which meant that the people of this central region

¹ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, pp. 49, 56-57.

² *Tarikh al Adab al Jughrafiy*, p. 443.

³ *Muqaddimah*, p. 53.

⁴ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, p. 88.

were the ones who could boast a civilization and a history. They were the ones with religions, literature, arts and crafts etc. Their neighbours, too, enjoyed nearly the same levels of civilization and temperateness of climate. However, “as for the others – the inhabitants of those corrupted regions to the south and north – religion is unknown to them and knowledge is lacking in their case, and all their conditions are far removed from the conditions of [civilized] mankind and close to the conditions of dumb animals. ‘And He creates [other things] of which ye have no knowledge.’”¹

In Ibn Khaldun’s view, the core civilizations in those temperate regions are the civilizations of Islam, Byzantium, India and China.² The Arab countries lie in their centre, so geographically the Arab/Islamic countries comprise “the centre of the centre”: “It is well known that historians of ancient history and archaeologists assert that our Arab nation – which forms the heart of the Islamic world – is the cradle of civilizations... It was this region that was familiar with writing and produced the earliest recorded history, as well as the first human settlements that engaged in agriculture, domesticated a large number of plants and animals and invented the wheel. This part of the world was also the birthplace of the three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.”³

This notion of a relationship between civilization and the environment was highly advanced for its time. Few people had suggested it before and nothing like it appeared in the European intellectual heritage until Montesquieu wrote *De l’Esprit des Loix (The Spirit of the Laws)*. According to Malkaoui: “Some Ibn Khaldun scholars – including ‘Ali ‘Abdulwahid Wafi, the editor of the *Muqaddimah* – maintain that Ibn Khaldun believed the influence of environment on culture and civilization was inevitable, which would mean that he and Montesquieu shared an identical view... However, a closer examination of Ibn Khaldun’s observations on this subject will reveal that, while he affirmed the impact of climatic and environmental factors on the characteristics that

¹ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, p. 89, including verse 8 from *Surat al Nahl* (Holy Qur’an).

² *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 3, pp. 89, 91.

³ Abd ‘Ali al Khaffaf: *Jughrafiyah al ‘Alam al Islami*, p. 16.



distinguish one people from another – as well as phenomena such as human progress, civilization and development – he did not state that this impact was an inevitable and predetermined fact. Evidence for this can be seen in his references to the nature of civilization in the different regions; these amounted essentially to a description of something that lay at the boundaries of what was known about the true nature of that civilization, based on observation and corroborated reports.” This is because “civilization is a progressive, graduated process which acquires from what is there, rather than holding back from it. Accordingly, Ibn Khaldun attributed much of human development and progress to causes that bore no relation whatsoever to the environment...One thing that clearly illustrates his position on this issue is his insistence on the significance of a specific factor affecting civilization and development when taken in isolation from other factors.

“The reality is that the culture of any society is influenced by a combination of interlocking natural, political, economic and social factors. Anyone who makes a close study of the entire *Muqaddimah* will see that the author wishes the reader to understand that the book is about human development or civilization, and that the numerous factors which influence that civilization include region, politics, religion, education, economics, customs and traditions.”¹

It was Ibn Khaldun who wrote the first academic work on a branch of human geography that came to be called social geography - a discipline which studies how the world’s human societies are distributed and the impact of natural phenomena such as soil, climate and water upon people, their customs, their ethics and their arts and crafts, as well as factors affecting the demographics of cities, towns and villages. It also includes other areas which are covered in considerable detail in the *Muqaddimah*.

1 Article on Ibn Khaldun’s worldview by Fathi Hasan Malkaoui; a paper presented to the symposium on “The religious dimension and its role in Ibn Khaldun’s thought”, organised by Zaytuna University, Tunis, in February 2006, pp. 21-22.

Ibn Khaldun and the political geography of the Islamic peoples

Scholars believe that the earliest writings on political geography are to be found in ancient Chinese books on military strategy such as *The Art of War*, as well as in various Greek texts, particularly the works of Aristotle.

When Ibn Khaldun appeared on the scene, he developed a number of important ideas on the subject. Comparing the state to a human being, he asserted that states and civilizations have a lifespan just as humans do. They are born, then they reach their full strength, then they grow old and die. In his view the first sign of the collapse of a state is when it becomes divided against itself: “I know that the first indication of senility in a state is when it becomes divided...the division gives rise to more than two or three states...”¹

Ibn Khaldun wrote extensively about the nature of the state and its affairs and his writings on that subject have been studied at length.

He had many ideas on the roles played by some of the major Islamic peoples. For example, he recorded some of the Arabs’ negative traits, particularly at the end of the second chapter of Book One; his observations include the claim that when the Arabs conquer countries, those countries quickly go to rack and ruin, and that the Arabs are the “furthest of nations from the politics of governance”.²

These observations are reflected in the decline of the Arab role in the history of Islam and the rising importance of the Turkish, Persian and *Amazigh* (Berber) peoples. This is a striking example of historical progression, in which the first Arabs established genuine states and created a great civilization; for evidence of this we need look no further than the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods.

Writing of the roles of the Turkish, Berber and Kurdish peoples in Islamic history, Ibn Khaldun asserts that they were savages. In Chapter 21 he explains that when a nation is in a state of savagery it succeeds in imposing

¹ *Muqaddimah*, Section 45, Ch. 3, pp. 311-312.

² *Muqaddimah*, pp. 158, 160.



its rule over a larger territory than would otherwise be the case, since such nations are able to wage war upon other peoples and states, as well as having an inclination to migrate and move from place to place. “Thus they do not limit themselves to ruling their area and the adjacent countries, nor do they stop at the far edges of their horizon; rather, they advance in leaps and bounds to far distant regions and conquer remote nations.”¹

Another of Ibn Khaldun’s geopolitical observations was that the Arabs only dominate flat lands. This is indeed the case and explains why the plains of the Arab world became Arabised while it took longer to Arabise the mountain areas – if indeed they were ever Arabised at all. This can be seen in the mountainous regions of Morocco and Algeria as well as the Kurdish mountain areas.

As a general rule, however, this could apply to any military conqueror, since it is easier to dominate the plains. That is why the Romans in North Africa limited their rule to the coastal plains.

Demographics and their effect upon the size of a state’s geographical area

Among Ibn Khaldun’s penetrating observations in this regard is his recognition of a correlation between a state’s geographical size and its religious or political legitimacy. An empire – as a kind of “great realm” (which he describes as “*duwal ‘aamah*”, or “general states” in his terminology) – needs a moral basis, rather than repression or tribalism, in order to be able to rule and enjoy stability.²

However, regardless of how strong they might be, all states (including empires) are limited by geographical boundaries. Ibn Khaldun attributes this to demographics, since expansion requires manpower in the form of soldiers, garrisons and administrators of public affairs. When there are no longer any of them left, the state’s ability to expand ceases. This, in Ibn Khaldun’s view, was the reason why the Islamic Conquests stopped: “Look,

¹ *Muqaddimah*, p. 154.

² *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 1, Ch. 3, p. 167.

too, at the situation of the Arabs in the early days of Islam. When they had ample troops, see how quickly they conquered the neighbouring countries of the Levant, Iraq and Egypt. Then they went further – to Sind, Abyssinia, Ifriqiyah and the Maghreb. Then to Andalusia. But as they became dispersed across kingdoms...and their numbers became more thinly spread, their conquests ceased, Islam's mandate came to a halt and they did not pass beyond those borders. In some cases the state declined until Allah declared its extinction; and such was the situation of the states subsequently. Every state's condition is determined by the numbers of people – whether great or small – who sustain it. When the numbers become exhausted through dispersal, they can no longer conquer and take possession; that is the Law of Allah for His Creation.”¹ This was one of the main reasons why the Rightly-Guided Caliph ‘Umar Ibn al Khattab refused to divide the lands of Iraq between the Arab conquerors – i.e. his intention was to ensure that the drive towards further conquests did not stop as a result of the soldiers settling in the conquered territories and becoming farmers.

Ibn Khaldun observed that one of the main driving forces behind the Islamic states in their early stages was population growth. This was because “when tribal people acquire possessions and luxuries, their birth rate goes up. Their numbers increase, they acquire more servants and material objects and their later generations grow up in an atmosphere of ease and comfort. In such a situation they add numbers to their numbers and strength to their strength because of the rising number of men under their command.”²

For this and other reasons Ibn Khaldun states in Chapter Eight that a state's greatness, the extent of its authority and the length of time it will continue to exist are determined by the numbers of people – whether great or small – who sustain it. The Fatimid State existed for the longest period and held the greatest area of territory because it enjoyed the commitment and loyalty of the Kutama tribes. The Almohades were less strong than them because the Masmoudah tribe was less numerous. After them came the less numerous Zenatah tribes with a still smaller state... and so on and so forth...³

¹ *Muqaddimah*, p. 172.

² *Muqaddimah*, Ch. 16, p. 184.

³ *Muqaddimah*, p. 173.



However, Ibn Khaldun's genius was such that he refused to accept this fact without attaching an important caveat, which he deduced (as usual) from his study of history rather than from mere Greek-style philosophical speculation. He explained that a big population in itself might not necessarily enable expansion to take place if it is not homogeneous; indeed, a lack of homogeneity could pose a threat to a state's stability and cohesion. This is the topic he tackles in Chapter Nine: "Territories with numerous different tribes and tribal loyalties rarely enjoy the conditions in which a state can become firmly established." This was the situation in the countries of the Maghreb because of the large numbers of Berber tribes and their widely differing allegiances; on the other hand, the peoples of Syria, Egypt and Andalusia lived in towns and settled communities, so when they were conquered they tended to be docile and pacific.¹

Human migrations and their role in the formation of the Islamic states

The Arab migrations were a major factor in determining the role of Islamic history in helping to shape the world's political geography. The location of the Arabian Peninsula and its surrounding lands meant that it formed a bridge between the three continents and between east and west. This encouraged the Arabs – particularly post-Islam – to engage in trade and seafaring activities, and that is how they came to be found in many different parts of the world. They reached as far as China and the Malay archipelago – particularly Java – as well as East Africa and the Sahara.²

Ibn Khaldun refers to this on numerous occasions, in the *Muqaddimah* and in his *History*, and he writes of the contradictory evidence on the arrival of the Bani Hilal and Bani Salim tribes in the countries of the Maghreb.

Ibn Khaldun contemplates the role of the sea in Islamic history

The Islamic world lies on six seas which – taken together – form the shape of the letter Z in the Latin alphabet, connecting the Mediterranean,

¹ *Muqaddimah*, pp. 174-176.

² Abd 'Ali al Khaffaf: *Jughrafiyah al 'Alam al Islami*, pp. 17-22.

the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean to the east and the Atlantic to the West. This placed it in an advantageous position to become a great maritime power.

As Ibn Khaldun points out, this was true of the mediaeval Islamic world. According to Christophe Picard, an expert in the maritime history of the Western Mediterranean during the mediaeval period, Ibn Khaldun's writings on the subject comprise the most precise and comprehensive material that has come down to us from a historian who lived through some significant periods of the Islamic world's seafaring history.¹

Ibn Khaldun classes "command of fleets" as being in the category of "royal posts"² and begins by saying that this applies particularly to Ifriqiyah and the Maghreb; he attributes this to their connection to "*al Bahr al Rumi*" (the "Sea of Byzantium") and to the fact that the coastal inhabitants around the shores of that sea were skilled and experienced seafarers as both fighters and merchantmen.

In Ibn Khaldun's view there is no difference between land-based power and naval power. Where the sea is concerned, the state passes through the same stages of birth, full strength and senility. Initially it builds up its naval forces; this happened during the early Islamic period and was followed by Islam's domination of the sea during the reigns of the major Umayyad and Fatimid Caliphates. The third stage was one of steady decline in Muslim naval power in favour of the Latins.

Ibn Khaldun begins by discussing the Islamic state's early connection with the sea during the reigns of 'Umar and Mu'awiyah. He notes that initially the Arabs were reluctant sailors owing to their Bedouin traditions; however, as they became more firmly established in power and began to rule seafaring nations, they learnt the arts of seamanship, built up naval fleets, established harbours and became a maritime nation.

He takes a close look at the leading Islamic states with notable naval fleets, particularly those in the Islamic West – that is to say, the 'Ubaidis

¹ From the Bait al Hikmah symposium in Tunis from 13th to 18th March 2006. Christophe Picard: *Ibn Khaldun, le Pouvoir Musulman et la Mediterranee*.

² See Section 34 of Ch. 3 of Bk. 1.



(or Fatimids), the Aghlabids in Ifriqiyah and the Umayyads in Andalusia (particularly during the era of Abdul Rahman al Nasir). Of the eastern states he singles out the Umayyads of Syria for particular mention.

That was a time when Islam ruled the waves. According to Ibn Khaldun: “The Muslims at the time of the Islamic State conquered this sea from all its sides and their assaults on it and power over it became ever greater, to an extent that the Christian nations with their fleets were never able to achieve before...”¹ At that time Europe only held some of the north-eastern coast.

Ibn Khaldun praises the Umayyads for their success in capturing the Byzantines’ naval installations at Acre, and for establishing the first naval fleet on Mu’awiyah’s orders. The other name he mentions is that of the Caliph ‘Abdul Malik, in connection with his policy of setting up shipbuilding facilities. Ibn Khaldun also refers to ‘Abdul Rahman al Nasir in Andalusia, who built a powerful fleet at his base in Almeria. The Fatimids’ capital at al Mahdiah was also a naval base.

The Almohades in the Islamic West were another naval power mentioned by Ibn Khaldun. His deductive, practical mind led him to observe that the builders of naval forces in our civilization were mainly the same people who established the Caliphal states, which means that the possession of naval forces is primarily a political decision taken by larger states which can boast significant human and material capabilities. Hence when Ibn Khaldun noted that Islamic naval power in the east had been waning from a relatively early time (since “the fleets in the states of Egypt and Syria grew steadily weaker until they ceased to exist; [those states] did not give them any attention, while the attention that had been given to them in the ‘Ubaidi state exceeded all bounds”²), his explanation for the loss of naval supremacy was “a lack of attention to the naval fleets and their [combat] readiness by the states of Egypt and Syria during that era and the one following it...”³

¹ *Muqaddimah*, p. 269.

² *Muqaddimah*, p. 270.

³ *Muqaddimah*, p. 271.

Thus the Islamic state's naval supremacy passed from the east to the west: "all traces of it disappeared there while it remained specifically in Ifriqiyah and the Maghreb, so that during that period the western end of this sea was full of fleets firmly endowed with power and strength, safe from violations or attack by any enemy."¹

At this point Ibn Khaldun points to the pinnacle of Islamic naval power during the Almohade era, particularly in the reign of the Caliph Yusuf bin 'Abdul Mu'min, when "the Muslims' fleets were of a size and quality that they never attained either before or after, as far as we are aware."² This explains why Salahuddin al Ayyubi sought the help of the Almohade navy against the Crusaders.

The Almohades lost their maritime supremacy to the Marinids, whose navy was less powerful than that of their predecessors had been, though they were able to maintain a naval balance of power with the Christian kingdoms.³ "Then the Muslims' naval power declined due to the weakness of the state and maritime revenues were overlooked due to the high volume of Bedouin revenues in the Maghreb and the loss of revenues from Andalusia, where the Christians reverted to their religion...and the Muslims became like foreigners."⁴

Another significant element in Ibn Khaldun's thinking – and one which is referred to by Picard – is that, contrary to what is sometimes believed, he did not see that decline as being due to the coastal peoples of Southern Europe (particularly the Venetians and Genoans) enjoying any innately superior seafaring skills. In his view sea power was not the specific province of the peoples of a particular country. Rather, it was determined by the state itself – i.e. whether or not it had a naval policy and whether it had the will to develop an effective naval force. Secondary to this was the question of seafaring experience and marine expertise.

This approach indicates an advanced level of awareness on Ibn Khaldun's part.

¹ *Muqaddimah*, p. 270.

² *Muqaddimah*, p. 270.

³ *Muqaddimah*, p. 271.

⁴ *Muqaddimah*, p. 271.



Islands and their strategic importance

Ibn Khaldun was highly knowledgeable about islands and recognised their importance. Writing about the “Mediterranean and the Levant”, he comments: “It has numerous large inhabited islands such as Crete, Cyprus, Sicily, Majorca and Sardinia.”¹ He regarded the islands of the Mediterranean as being of exceptional strategic importance and in his view the Muslims’ gradual loss of those assets had contributed significantly to the decline in their power, since they formed a kind of first line of defence for their mainland territories. So when the Muslims controlled the Mediterranean, they “held its islands that were separated from the coasts such as Majorca, Minorca, Ibiza, Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica, Malta, Crete and Cyprus...”² Conversely, when the Islamic navy lost its power in the Islamic East, the first thing they lost was those islands: “The Christians reached out their hands towards the islands in the sea to the east such as Sicily, Crete and Malta, and took control of them.”³ Then when the Islamic West’s naval power also declined, they lost the islands at the western end of the Mediterranean.⁴

Ibn Khaldun’s unique qualities as a geographer

While Ibn Khaldun’s contributions to human knowledge were many and varied, scholars are agreed that his most valuable work was in the fields of human population and development and the interpretation of the history of the Islamic states. Professor Malkaoui states: “However much scholars may differ in their assessments of Ibn Khaldun’s genius, they are all agreed that the pivotal element of his creativity was in the theory of social history, or the theory of population and development. To put it very briefly, it is a holistic vision designed to understand how human society operates and how it develops from one stage to the next and from one state of civilization to another; it also seeks to show the factors which influence the birth of states and the rise and fall of civilizations, with particular reference to the causal relationships and laws governing social phenomena.”⁵

¹ *Muqaddimah*, Bk. 2, p. 49.

² *Muqaddimah*, p. 269.

³ *Muqaddimah*, p. 269.

⁴ *Muqaddimah*, p. 271.

⁵ Article on Ibn Khaldun’s worldview by Fathi Hasan Malkaoui, p. 15.

Where Ibn Khaldun's particular contributions to the field of geography are concerned, we can endorse Abdel Fattah Wahibeh's view that "although he was not a geographer, his *Muqaddimah* contains new ideas on the relationship between the environment, man, the geography of human development and economic geography that were unknown to Europe until several centuries later."¹ According to Kratschovsky: "None of these questions about the influence of climate and geography upon human life were investigated in a methodical manner before Ibn Khaldun. In this respect he must certainly be regarded as an innovator. Moreover, ideas such as these only appeared in Europe several centuries later, beginning with Montesquieu."² Another area in which Ibn Khaldun demonstrated striking creativity was in his thoughts on Muslim naval history.

It was because of the significance of his ideas that many people saw Ibn Khaldun as the founder of human geography. In fact, Yves Lacoste regards him as that discipline's true father,³ while Professor al Difa ' says: "Historians and geographers concur that Ibn Khaldun was the first person to adopt a clear scientific approach towards environmental phenomena and their positive and negative effects upon the lives of different peoples, including their political, economic, moral and intellectual systems."⁴

French imperialism turns to the *Muqaddimah* to understand history and geography

It is not surprising that the French used the *Muqaddimah* as a tool for colonising North Africa. Ibn Khaldun was the leading thinker on the history of that region and the main historian of the *Amazigh* – the inhabitants of that extensive territory that the French were seeking to colonise. This is why that great work was translated into French by Noël Desvergers in Paris as long ago as 1841 – that is to say, before it

¹ Abdel Fattah Muhammad Wahibeh: *Makanat al Jughrafiyah min al Thaqa'afah al Islamiyyah*, Arab University of Beirut Publications, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1979, p. 28.

² Ignatius Kratchkovsky: *Tarikh al Adab al Jughrafi* (*A History of Geographical Literature*), translated from the Russian by Salahuddin Hashim, Publication and Authorship Committee, Cairo, 1963, p. 444.

³ Laurent Testot: *Relire Ibn Khaldun*, in *Sciences Humaines*, No. 179, Feb. 2007.

⁴ 'Ali b. 'Abdullah al Difa ' : *Ruwad 'Ilm al Jughrafiyah fi'l Hadhara al 'Arabiyyah*, p. 217.



was first printed in Arabic by the Bulaq Press and before its first partial translation into English.

In 1847 a better and more accurate version appeared. Translated by Baron de Slane and printed on the orders of the French Minister of War, its purpose was to provide France with information about the western Islamic region so that it could be conquered and colonised.

Some Western scholars – such as Gabriel Cross – still maintain today that the *Muqaddimah* is a useful tool for understanding the underlying social systems and structures of contemporary Arab/Islamic societies.¹

It would be generally true to say that the question of Europe's acquaintanceship with the *Muqaddimah* is one that requires an independent study. I hope such a project will be undertaken by Ibn Khaldun scholars or students of the Orientalist heritage.

Conclusion

Reflecting their region's general decline, the Muslims' contributions to geography began to wane after the 5th century AH. According to Professor al Difa ' : "The Arab and Muslim geographers reached their peak in the 3rd and 4th centuries AH...Unfortunately, the 6th century AH was a time of increasing anarchy which shook the Islamic State's power and authority. This more or less brought the era of geographical discoveries to an end, with the result that Arab and Muslim geographers had to rely on what their predecessors had written on the subject. And this marked the beginning of the age of dictionaries and encyclopaedias."² This brought Ibn Khaldun into even sharper relief, since it was he who was able to place geography and its relationship to history and civilization within a completely new methodological context.

Our Arab and Islamic history has produced no other geographer like him, and this is something that we all need to acknowledge.

¹ Laurent Testot: *Relire Ibn Khaldun*.

² 'Ali b. 'Abdullah al Difa ' : *Ruwad 'Ilm al Jughrafiyah fi'l Hadharat al 'Arabiyyah*, p. 59.