

An introduction to

Islamic Social Sciences

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Introduction

The title above is by no means an accurate representation of what contents and subjects this section will include. Here, indeed, will be incorporated subjects that would otherwise form their own heading; i.e trade, social, legal and economic organization, political administration etc... Many subjects might also be objected to for their placement under such a heading, seeming rather alien; necessity obliges, though. Technical requirements more than any other reason, at present, necessitate such a procedure. Ultimately, some items might find their own, or other headings. Also some issues raised here could normally find their place under headings considered elsewhere (i.e geography, historiography...), or will touch upon disciplines seemingly un-related. It is very difficult, though, to keep matters within a strict set of corridors; nothing scholarly works in such a way. In the meanwhile, no compromise will be made in the matter of strict adherence to rules of scholarship in terms of contents included here.

Amongst items to be included under this subject are writings by Muslim scholars on social sciences. Master of the discipline is, of course, Ibn Khaldun. Nothing, indeed, in the annals of history precedes the quality of his work; whilst much follows him, including those well-known treatises by the so called masters of social sciences such as Montesquieu and Rousseau. Ibn Khaldun, it was, indeed, who shaped the whole subject, setting up foundations upon which his successors built, not just in terms of methodology and contents, but also structure and approach. Before Ibn Khaldun, however, other Muslim scholars, although less accomplished, started raising matters and making studies of subjects, which Ibn Khaldun corrected, improved, and developed. These scholars and their achievements will also be looked at.

Under this heading, finally, will also be considered the matters debated by those scholars; matters which include trade, social organization, living conditions, etc, and how they evolved in the land of Islam, and through the times.

In this introductory article, will be considered one of the earliest Muslim scholars, Al-Muqaddasi, who touched on various subjects of interest to this subject, and also seen is Ibn Khaldun's position on taxing farmers.

Social scientists of Islam prior to Ibn Khaldun would not, if a rigorous modern methodology or approach was pursued, be included in the same realm as modern social scientists. Their writing, indeed, evolved, often, outside a structured methodology. This, however, is the case of every science, beginning first with rougher edges, and then gradually accepting the refinements of time and labour of the multitude.

Al-Muqaddasi: An Encyclopaedic Scholar

Al-Muqaddasi (or Al-Maqdisi)¹, (b.946-d.end of 10th century), originally from Al-Quds (Jerusalem), hence his name, is by far one of the most instructive of all early Islamic writers on the society of Islam. His works, generally, can be found under the subject of geography. His best known treatise *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Ma'arifat Al-Aqalim*² (the best divisions in the knowledge of the Climes) was completed around 985. A good summary of it is given by Kramers,³ extracts of which can be found in Dunlop's Arab Civilisation.⁴In this work, Al-Muqaddasi gives an overall view of the lands he visited, and gives the approximate distances from one frontier to the other. Then, he deals with each region separately. He divides his work in two parts, first enumerating localities and providing adequate description of each, especially the main urban centres. He then proceeds to other subjects: population, its ethnic diversity, social groups... moves onto commerce, mineral resources, archaeological monuments, currencies, weights etc, and also the political situation. This approach is in contrast with his predecessors, whose focus was much narrower, whilst Al-Muqaddasi wanted to encompass aspects of interest to merchants, travellers, and people of culture.⁵ Thus, it becomes no longer the sort of traditional 'geography', but a work that seeks to understand and explain the foundations of Islamic society, and not just that, the very functioning of such society. Out of this, excellent information, regarding many subjects can be gleaned.

Water Management

On water management and hydraulic technology, much can be learnt from Al-Muqaddasi's treatise. In Egypt, it is the description of the Nilometer, which grabs attention most, which goes:⁶

'It is a pond in the middle of which is a tall column whereon are the marks in cubits and fingers; in charge of it is a superintendent, and around it are doors that fit together tightly. A report is presented to the ruler every day of the amount the water has risen, whereupon the herald proclaims, 'God hath augmented today the blessed Nile by so much; its increase last year on this day was so much; and may God bring it to completeness!'" The rise is not proclaimed until after it has reached twelve cubits, it is announced to the ruler only, for at twelve cubits the water does not extend to the cultivated villages of the countryside. However, when the height of the water reached fourteen cubits, the lower portion of the region is watered; but if it reaches sixteen cubits, there is general rejoicing, for there will be a good year.'

In Biyar, in the Al-Daylam region, he notes the scarcity of water, pointing out that water is distributed by waterclock, whilst the millstones are below ground, and the water flowing down. This being the desert, he observes, there is no other choice.⁷ And in Al-Ahwaz, in Khuzistan he notes:⁸

'On the stream is a number of wheels which the water turns, and they are of a kind called na'ura. Here also the water flows in raised canals to reservoirs in the town. Some channels flow to the gardens. The main stream flows from beyond the island about shouting distance to a reservoir, remarkably built from the rock, and here it forms a pool.... On the reservoir are gates which are opened when the water rises.... At

the lower portion at a place called Karshanan, whence the boats sail to Al-Basra. There are some remarkable mills on the river'

Still on water, but on a more anecdotal note, Al-Muqaddasi makes the following observation:⁹

'Should you want to assess the water of a place, visit their clothmakers and druggists, and scrutinize their faces. If you see water in them, you may know that the excellence of the water is in proportion to the freshness of countenance; if they appear to you like the faces of the dead, and you see their heads are drooping, make a hasty retreat from there!'

Fiscal Issues and Finance

Currency, its uses, and its users, as well as its fluctuations, constitutes a major aspect of interest for Al-Muqaddasi. Dinar, Dirhem, their multiples, and sub-multiples, as well as each region's local currencies are dealt with in their most intricate functions. Thus, for the Maghrib region, Al-Muqaddasi states:¹⁰

'The coinage: in all the provinces of this region, as far as the boundaries of the province of Damascus, the standard is the dinar, which is lighter than the mithqal by a habba, that is to say a grain of barley. The coin bears an inscription in the round.

There is also the small rub', (quarter of a dinar); these two coins pass current by number, [rather than the weight]. The dirham also is short in legal weight. A half dirham is called a qirat; there is also the quarter, the eighth part, and the sixteenth part which is called a kharnuba.. All of these circulate by number [rather than by weight], but their use thus does not bring any reduction in price. The sanja (counterpoise weights) used are made of glass, and are stamped just as described about the ratls.

The ratl of the city of Tunis is twelve uqiya (ounce), this latter being twelve dirhams (weight).'

Quotations from one currency to the other also receive attention from the author, as well as their emission, control, regulations, and much else. The wealth of those involved in currency dealing is also garnered.

Prices, their fluctuations, varying in relation to size and wealth for every market place, are considered; Cairo, a place, which Al-Muqaddasi notes, has so low prices as to surprise him deeply.

Al Muqaddasi could hardly ignore taxes, he himself being a trader on occasions, finding them light and bearable in some places, and perverse and disastrous in others. Thus, in parts of the Arab peninsula, we can observe that:¹¹

'At Adan, merchandise is appraised in terms of Zakawi dinars, then one tenth of the value is exacted in Athari dinars. It is estimated that one third of the wealth of the merchants reaches the treasury of the ruler, for here the inspection is strict. The levies at places on the coast are light, except at Ghalafiq. Tolls are levied by land: on the caravans going between Judda and Makka, at Al-qarin, and batn marr-at each place half of a dinar... The ruler of Sa'ada does not levy a tax on anybody, except that he takes the quarter of the tithe from the merchants.

In Uman a dirhem is levied on every date palm tree. I have found in the work of Ibn Khurradadhbih that the

revenue of Al-Yaman is six hundred thousand Dinars; I do not know what he means by this, because I did not see it in Kitab Al-Kharaj (the Book of Tribute). In fact, rather, it is well known that the Peninsula of the Arabs is on a tithing system. The province of Al-Yaman formerly was divided into three departments, a governor over Al-Janad and its districts, another over Sana'a and its districts, and a third over Hadhramawt and its districts. Qudama bin Ja'afar Al-Katib has noted that the revenue of Al-Haramayn (the two sacred cities) is one hundred thousand dinars, of Al-Yaman six hundred thousand dinars, of Al-Yamam and Al-Bayrayn five hundred thousand dinars, and of Uman three hundred thousand dinars.'

Weights and Measures

For weights and measures, Al-Muqaddasi shows the same attention to specific detail. For each province, he names, measures, compares and explains fluctuations and variations each measure and weight applies to. He would also dwell on the history of each; and so minute it all becomes in the detail, it ends like the finance page of a broadsheet newspaper, with values, stocks and shares exhibited in all their minute variations, so tedious for the general reader, fascinating to the expert.¹²

City and Urban Developments

The Islamic urban setting, its evolution, diversity, complexity, economy and politics is what attracts most of the attention of Al-Muqaddasi. It re-occurs in each chapter, for every region and place he visits. A. Miquel,¹³ in French, though, offers an excellent summary of Al-Muqaddasi's interest in the subject. Al-Muqaddasi differentiates between town and city by the presence of the great mosque, and its minbar, symbols of Islamic authority. In connection with this, he states what follows:¹⁴

'Now, if someone should say: 'Why have you considered Halab the capital of the district, while there is a town bearing the same name?' I reply to him: 'I have already stated that the capitals are compared with generals and towns with troops. Hence it should not be right that we assign to Halab, with all its eminence, and its being the seat of government and the location of the government offices, or to Antakiya with all its excellence, or to Balis, with its teeming population, the position of towns subordinate to a small and ruined city.'

Al-Muqaddasi delves most particularly on the defensive structures of every city. Walls, their height, thickness, distances between each, fortifications, access in and out, their location according to the general topography, and in relation to the rest, artificial obstacles, in particular, draw his attention. And so do daily concerns as trade and exchanges, markets and the urban economy as a whole. Al-Muqaddasi studies markets, their expansion and decline, providing also a bill of health for each, the revenues derived from them, both daily and monthly, and how such revenues are distributed.¹⁵ How a location is run, and its citizens act, he also studies carefully, dwelling most particularly on such factors as order, cleanliness, morality and state of learning, all of which he considers for each and every place visited.

Considering the links between topography and urban expansion, he notes that in places such as Arabia, it is the sea alone that explains the presence of towns and people, opening up frontiers beyond the sea itself for trade and exchange.¹⁶ Thus on Adan, in the Yemen, he notes:¹⁷

'It is the corridor of Al-Sin, the seaport of Al-Yaman, the granary of Al-Maghrib, and entreport of various

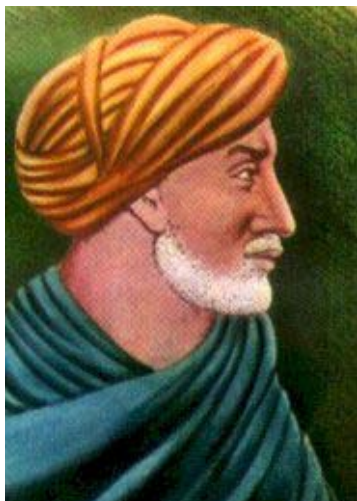
kinds of merchandise. There are many mansions in it. It is a source of good fortune to those who visit it, a source of prosperity to those who settle in it.... The Prophet-God's peace and blessings be upon him, gave his blessing to the markets of Mina and Adan.'

The impact of space and climate on physical features are well observed, too, the author noticing that colder places, such as Ferghana and Khwarizm, thicken beards and increase amounts of fats in bodies. But it is some local customs which form a major point of his interest, one from Pre-Islamic and Newly Islamised Egypt of very good interest, and which Al-Muqaddasi narrates:¹⁸

'It seems that when Egypt was conquered, its people came to Amr Ibn Al-As during the beginning of the month of Bawna and they said: 'Oh Prince, regarding this Nile of ours there is a practice embodied in tradition without which it will not flow. On the twelfth night of this month we select a virgin girl who is the firstborn to her parents, and we recompense them both. We dress her in jewellery and raiment the best there are, then we cast her into the river.' Said Amr to them, 'This will not come to pass, ever, because Islam supersedes what was there before it.' So they waited that month, and the next month, and the following month, but the Nile flowed with not a little and not a lot. As a result the people were on the point of emigrating, on seeing which Amr wrote to Umar bin Al-Khattab on the matter. He replied, 'you acted correctly in what you did, for Islam supersedes whatever preceded it,' and he sent a slip of paper within his letter, saying to Amr, 'I have sent you a slip of paper which you should throw into the Nile.' When the letter arrived, Amr opened it and perceived what was on the slip of paper: 'From the servant of God, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to the Nile of Egypt, now then! If you flow by your own power alone, then flow not! If, however, it be the One God, the Conqueror, that causes you to flow then we ask Him-exalted be He-to make you flow.' Amr threw the paper into the Nile before the festival of the Cross, for the people had been preparing to emigrate. But when they arose on the morning of the Festival of the Cross, God had caused the river to flow so that it reached a height of sixteen cubits. God had thus prohibited that evil custom among them to this day.'

Diets, clothing, dialects, discrepancies of all sorts, form other elements of study for the many ethnic groups of the vast Muslim land. A diversity in union, which Miquel notes in his conclusive words, was to be completely shattered by the Mongol irruption.¹⁹

Ibn-Khaldun on Taxes



Nearly four centuries would elapse after Al-Muqaddasi before Ibn-khaldun enters the frame of Islamic scholarship, associating both intellectual might and near perfect organisational skills to set the foundations for our modern social, economic, historical and political sciences. No need to go into the life and works of Ibn Khaldun here; so much exists already, and is of very good quality. There are a couple of web-sites devoted to him, some of which quite good, and a few excellent. In this particular instance, it is looked at Ibn-Khaldun's attitude towards taxing farmers, a simple text, and yet perfection as to the aims and the construction of the argument.

Extracts from Ibn khaldun's Muqqadima on his passage on the cause which increases or reduces the revenues of empire, in Bulletin d'Etudes Arabes, Vol 7, pp 11-15, extracted from De Slane's edition, vol II, pp 91-4;

In an empire that has just been founded, taxes are light, and yet bring much revenue. However, when it (the empire) approaches its end, they become heavy and bring very little revenue. Here is the reason: if the founders of the empire follow the road of religion, they only apply the taxes authorized by Divine law, that includes Zaqat (alms), Kharaj (land tax), and Djizyia. The amount of each is not too hard to bear, as everybody knows that tax on corn and livestock is not heavy; it is the same for Djizia and Kharaj. The rate of such taxes is fixed by law and so cannot be raised. If the empire is founded on a tribal system and conquest, civilisation must have been first that of a nomadic sort. The impact of such civilisation is to engage the rulers towards kindness, forbearance, and indifference towards the acquisition of wealth, except in rare cases. Thus, taxes and personal duties which finance the revenues of the empire are light. This being the case, the subjects carry their tasks with energy and enthusiasm. Work on the land grows because everyone wants to make the most of the lightness of the taxes, and this in turn raises the numbers of those engaged in the task, hence raising the revenues of the state.

When the empire has endured a rather long period, under many successive sovereigns, the heads of states acquire more ability in their business, and lose with their habits (links with) nomadic life. Then simplicity of manners, forbearance, and casualness which characterised them hitherto disappear. The administration becomes more demanding and harsh; sedentary customs promote shrewdness amidst state employees, and they become more able men of business. And as they experience well being and pleasure, they also indulge in a life of luxury, and acquire new needs. This drives them to raise taxes on all, including farmers. They want taxes to bring in more revenues to the state. They also impose duties on farm products on sales in towns and cities.

Expenditure on luxuries gradually rise in the government, and as the needs of the state increase, taxes rise further, and become heavier to bear by the people. This charge appears, however, as an obligation due to the fact that the increase has been imposed gradually, without it being too much noticed, and who did it remaining unseen. The increase, thus, taking the form of an obligation long accustomed to. With time, taxes grow beyond the bearable, and destroy in farmers the urge and love for work. When they compare their charges and expenses with what their profits, they become disheartened; and so many leave farming. This leads directly to a fall in taxes collected by the state, which affects its revenues. Sometimes, when the heads of states notice such a fall, they believe they can resolve it by raising taxes further, and so they do more and more until the point is reached whereby no profit could any longer be made by farmers. All charges and taxes leave no hope whatsoever of any profit. In the meantime, the government is still raising taxes. Farming is now abandoned. Farmers leave the land which has become worthless.

All ill consequences fall upon the state... The reader thus gathers that the best way to make agriculture prosper is to reduce as much as possible the charges that the state imposes. Then farmers work with enthusiasm knowing the great benefits they derive-and God is the Master of all Things.

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- ¹ Not to be confounded with George Maqdisi, a scholar of our time, and the expert on the madrasa.
- ² Al-Muqaddasi: *Ahsan at-taqasim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*; is in M.J. de Goeje ed., *Bibliotheca geographorum arabicum*, 2nd edition., III (Leiden, 1906); a partial French translation is by Andre Miquel, Institut Francais de Damas, Damascus, 1963. There are also English and Urdu versions of the work.
- ³ J.H. Kramers: *Analecta Orientalia*, i, 182-3.
- ⁴ D.M. Dunlop: *Arab civilisation to AD 1500*; Longman, 1971.
- ⁵ S.M. AhmadL Al-Maqdisi, in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, C.C. Gillispie editor in Chief, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, , Vol 9; at p. 88.
- ⁶ Al-Muqaddasi: *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, a translation of his Ahsan... by B.A. Collins, Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization, Garnet Publishing Limited, Reading, 1994. At p.189.
- ⁷ Ibid. at p. 314.
- ⁸ Ibid, at pp. 365-6.
- ⁹ Ibid, at p.93.
- ¹⁰ Ibid at p. 215.
- ¹¹ Ibid;, pp 95-6.
- ¹² For more and nearly everything on the subject of Islamic weights and measures, see the article by Eliyahu Ashtor: Levantine Weights and standard parcels, A contribution to the Metrology of the later Middle Ages, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 45, 1982; pp. 471-88.
- ¹³ A. Miquel: *La Geographie Humaine du Monde Musulman*, Vol 4, Ecole des hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1988.
- ¹⁴ Al-Muqaddasi: *The Best Divisions*, tr B.A. Collins, op cit, at p. 143.
- ¹⁵ A. Miquel: *La Geographie*, op cit, pp 237-9.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, at, p. 221.
- ¹⁷ Al-Muqaddasi, *the Best Divisions*, op cit, at p.83.
- ¹⁸ Ibid at p. 190.
- ¹⁹ A. Miquel: *La Geographie*, op cit, p. 347.

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