

'IBN AL-ATHIR'

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Throughout its long history Islamic civilization was distinguished by its unique contributions in religious, scientific, and literary fields. Historiography was also a sphere of its excellence. History writing flourished through the efforts of major figures like al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari, and Ibn al-Athir, the subject of our present book review. Those historians helped to change history writing from a mere record of anecdotes and legends into a science that inquires into the causal affinities between events and the wisdom to be found therein.

The book in our hand on 'Ibn al-Athir', published by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Information, 1983, includes an introduction and seven chapters. The first chapter deals with 'Ibn al-Athir' — his upbringing and early life.' He is Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali b. Abi 'l Karam Mohammad b. Abd al-Karim b. Abdul Wahid al-Sheebani known as Ibn al-Athir, and nicknamed 'Ezz Al-Dīn'. He was born in Djazīrat Ibn 'Umar in 4 Djumādā I, the year 555 Hidjira (1160 A.D.) and was one of three brothers who achieved remarkable prominence in literature, language and Tradition (Hadith) 'Sciences': the other two are Madjd Al-Dīn and Diyā' Al-Dīn. His father was

governor (Vali) of Djazirat Ibn 'Umar and in-charge of its land tax revenues during the reign of the Zangid dynasty. At the age of 24 his family moved to Mosul in the month of Rajab 579 A.H. where he carried on his studies in its mosques and colleges.

The second chapter concentrates on Ibn al-Athīr's age. It was a period of turbulence, adversities and different struggles among many forces in the vast Islamic world. That was the closing century of the Abbasid Caliphate that witnessed the most serious and challenging dangers to the State. Our historian lived under the patronage of the Zangid dynasty founded by Emad al-Dīn Zangid in the year 521 A.H. He was contemporaneous to the Crusaders' invasion of the Islamic Orient, as well as the devastating Mongolian and Tartari sweep.

In the third chapter we have a study on 'Mosul during Ibn al-Athir's time', the city that the historian loved most and lived in for more than half a century. At his time the city was endowed with a favourable cultural climate.

Ibn al-Athir's education is the subject of the fourth chapter. He himself provided some information about the shaikhs and 'Ulemas' who influenced him and were recognized as masters in different branches of knowledge: Tradition (Hadith), jurisprudence (Fiqh), vocalisation of the Quran, Law of Descent and Distribution ('Ilm al-Fara'id), logic, arithmetic, astronomy, literature, historiography and genealogy. Ibn al-Athir was very much praised by his contemporaries like Ibn Khallikān, Yakūt al-Hamawī, Ibn al-Djawzī and others.

In the fifth chapter we are acquainted with some aspects of Ibn al-Athir's life and personality. Though we don't know much about his childhood, upbringing and private life Islamic historiographers all agreed upon his nobility of character. They said he was of refined nature, modest, noble-minded, indignant to all moral abuses and deceptions, hateful of avarice, averse to high ranking offices and devoted to his studies.

'Ibn al-Athīr as historian' is dealt with in the sixth chapter. It explains his methodology which is not based only on annalistic historiography but also on the aggregation of diverse facts bearing upon a single event in a particular place with observance of chronological order. He believed that there are moral lessons to be learnt from history and good examples to be followed by rulers of states. The contemplation of history inspires man with endurance in the face of fatal disasters and helps him to renounce worldly vanities.

In chapter seven we have an analytical study of his famous book **'al-Kamil fi Al-Tarikh'** (The Complete In History). The chapter provides answers to some questions as to the book's title, sources, importance in studying Arabic history and the nature of its content. It describes the economic conditions, the availability of food-stuffs, the price rises and falls, fires, floods, epidemics and natural phenomena as solar and lunar eclipses and earthquakes. We have also a survey of cultural life and its prominent figures including transmitters of Prophetic Traditions, jurists, writers, poets, historians, preachers and mystics (Sufis). The study covers, as well, aspects of administration, systems, institutions and social life. In his book **'al-Kamil'** Ibn al-Athir possessed a historical and critical

insight. He did not take for granted tales of history whose truthfulness was questionable.

The eighth chapter deals with 'Other books by Ibn al-Athīr'. These are : '**al-Tarikh al-Bahir Fi al-Dawla al-Atabekiyya**', (The Glorious History of The Atabek State) written in the year 608 Hidjira on the Atabek dynasty of Mosul, '**Usd al-Ghaba Fi Ma'rifat al-Ṣahaba**' which is a collection of biographies of men and women around the Prophet; a third book is '**al-Lubab Fi Tahtheeb al-Ansab**' (The Gist in Tracing Family Trees) which is an improvement and completion of al-Sam'ani's book '**al-Ansab**' (Genealogy).

Dr. al-Samer ends his book by surveying the critical attacks upon Ibn al-Athir's extremely partial attitude in support of the Zangids. His most vulnerable point, in the view of different Arab scholars, was his negative response to Saladin the Ayyubid in the Sultan's attempt to consolidate the Islamic front against the Crusaders.

The author has done his best in introducing the life history of that famous historiographer especially in the chapter on '**al-Kamil**' wherein he supplied statistical lists of economic affairs, natural phenomena, popular scholars and public figures. But it is to be noted that the book, under study, is nearly void of footnotes or acknowledgement of the greater part of the author's quotations. Even when the author acknowledges his sources there is no mention of the page number, the chapter and sometimes the edition. On the other hand the author has devoted extensive pages to describe the urban growth of Baghdad as mentioned in '**al-Kamil**', which is a departure from the main topic and should have been done in a more specialized, not a general study.