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IBN BLIHID AS A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE
STUDY OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES OF

SAUDI ARABIA

BY

DR. ASS'AD S. ABDO

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF RIYADH,

SAUDI ARABIA.

Introduction

There are two famous Arab geographers in the field of the study of geographical names: Al-Bakri and Yakut. The first lived in the eleventh century and wrote Mu'jam Ma U'stu'gim. The latter, who was born in the second half of the twelfth century, wrote Mu'jam Al Buldan. The two books were confined to the study of place-names in the Muslim World. However, as far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, Ibn Blihid, who lived from about 1893 until 1957, contributed to the study of geographical names more than any other. It is so because he visited almost all the places which he studied, while Al Bakri and Yakut did not, and because his work was done in the present century. The first two volumes of his major book, Sahih Al Akhbar were published in 1951.

This paper is specially prepared for presentation to the Sixth Session of the United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names, New York, 5-21 March, 1973. The first part of it is a summary on Ibn Blihid. The other part shows his contribution to the study of place-names in Saudi Arabia.

Ibn Blihid

Ibn Blihid is a Najdi geographer, poet and geneologist. His name is Muhammad Ibn Abdullah Ibn Blihid. He added Al Najdi to indicate that he was from Najd. He was born around 1893 in a small Najdi town named Gasslah, located at Al Washm District about 200 Kilometers to the northwest of Riyadh.

Ibn Blihid grew up at his birth place, where he was taught the Koran and the principles of elementary education. His real school was, however, the land and people of Saudi, Arabia. At an early age he was fond of travelling, as well as of trade and camel transport. He spent about forty years of his life in almost continuous travel, crossing wadis and desert sand dunes, carrying trade, mainly dates, from one oasis to another.

Ibn Blihid's name spread among the people of Saudi Arabia, particularly of Najd, not only as a trades man and a traveller, but also as a poet. He admired the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, and he used to write poems that praised the king, and describe his battles and courage. However, his intellectual interest and years of continuous travel gave him an enormous knowledge of Saudi Arabia, particularly of Najd.

His Contribution

As was mentioned above, Ibn Blihid contributed to the study of the geographical names of Saudi Arabia more than any other. He, however, did not write on geography until he was about fifty years of age. His first attempt was in publishing a few newspaper articles on the location of Suq Okaz, and on some of the geographical names which were mentioned in the pre-Islamic poem. In 1951, he published the

first two volumes from his major geographical work: Sahih Al Akhbar. Soon after, he wrote the other three volumes of this book. In 1953 he published Sifat Jazirat Al Arab, a book which was written by an Arab geographer named Al Hamadani in the tenth century and which is still one of the major references for the geography of the Arabian Peninsula. Ibn Blihid died before publishing his last geographical work, a small book which he wrote on places in Saudi Arabia that have the same name but different locations. Ibn Blihid's contribution can, however, be summarized in the following:

First Newspaper Articles

As was said above, Ibn Blihid started writing on the geographical names of Saudi Arabia by publishing articles in the local newspapers on Suq Okaz and on some of the geographical names mentioned in the pre-Islamic Arabic poem. He published two articles on the location of Suq Okaz; a place near Mecca, where in pre-Islamic time the Arabs held every year a trading and poetry festival. Though important as such in the Arabic culture, the modern Arabs did not know the exact location of Suq Okaz, and it was Ibn Blihid who published the first attempt on the study of the location of this important site. Not less important were the articles in which he studied some of the geographical names that were mentioned in the pre-Islamic poem, a topic which he later on made the subject of a book entitled Sahih Al Akhbar.

Second: Sahih Al Akhbar

Sahih Al Akhbar Amma Fi Belad Al Arab Min Al A'thar or "The Truthful Tellings About What is in Arabia From The Past," is the most valuable book that has been written on the study of the geographical names of Saudi Arabia. It consists of five volumes and in

which nearly 2,000 place-names were studied.

The whole book is a study of geographical names, of Saudi, Arabia, but the first two volumes have a different theme from that of the last three volumes. At first Ibn Blihid's intention was confined to the study of the geographical names that were mentioned in the pre-Islamic Arabic poem. He believed that such study was needed for a better understanding of that poem and thus of the Arab heritage.

Being a poet, and a traveller at the same time, Ibn Blihid was able to study about 700 place-names that were mentioned in the pre-Islamic Arabic poem. In his study of each name he explained whether it was for a town, a wadi, a well, a mountain, or any other geographical feature. He also stated all of the poems and other literature in which the name of the place was mentioned, and added to that his own knowledge, which he gained from personal observation while visiting the place. In rare cases when Ibn Blihid did not visit a certain place, he sent special missions to inform him about that place. He stated in the introduction to his book that he sent a mission to a place named Rakes, to collect some information that was needed for his study.

The last three volumes of Sahih Al Akhbar were a study of place-names in Saudi Arabia mentioned in Al Bakri and Yakut books. Ibn Blihid wanted to update, extend and correct what was written by Al Bakri and Yakut, who did not visit most of the places which they wrote about. Thus while in many cases all that they said about a certain place was, "it is a place in Arabia." Ibn Blihid may write about that place more than one page as he did with the places which he studied in the first two volumes, he tried to find out whether or not the name of each place was still in existence, if it was retained, whether or not it still had the

same , similar or a different name.

Third: The Publication of Kitab Sifat Jazirat Al Arab

This is a book which was written during the tenth century by an Arab geographer named Al Hamadani. His title may be translated to "The Description of The Arabian Peninsula." Al Hamadani's book drew the attention of Ibn Blihid as the best book for the study of the place-names of the Arabian Peninsula. This book remained unpublished until Ibn Blihid annotated and published it in 1953.

Fourth: Ma I'etalafat Asma'oho Wa Ikhtalafat Assqa'oho

The title of this book, which Ibn Blihid died before publishing may be translated as, "Places with the same names but different locations." In Saudi Arabia, as probably in some other countries there is more than one place with the same name, a matter which drew the attention of Ibn Blihid, and which was his last contribution to the study of the geographical names in Saudi Arabia. This book, unfortunately, has not been published.