Zsuzsanna Godány

THE IMAGE OF TIBET IN MEDIEVAL MUSLIM SOURCES

MA Thesis in Comparative History, with a specialization
in Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies.

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Central European University

Budapest

May 2013

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by

Zsuzsanna Godány

(Hungary)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,

Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of the Master of Arts degree in Comparative History, with a specialization in

Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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Budapest, 23 May 2013

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INTRODUCTION

The Himalayan region has always had a dual image in the eyes of the so-called civilized peoples. It lay far from the central territories of the Greek and other high civilizations of the western part of Asia, which were traditionally considered to be the middle of the inhabited world. According to the Greek theory of the climates dividing the *oikoumene* into seven latitudinal zones, the Greek territories belonged to the most temperate climates, which provided their inhabitants with optimal and balanced environmental conditions. The farther the other peoples lived from the central lands the more they were exposed to cold and heat, which led to their physical or mental weakness and the more barbarous they were in character.[1] As a result, Inner Asia[2], especially the northern parts, were regarded as the fringes of the world where wild, barbarous, and infidel peoples lived without any political organization and religion. Beyond these fringes came the weird and the miraculous, such as the amazons or tribes eating human flesh or practicing other unnatural customs. Moreover, these lands were also populated by monsters and other supernatural creatures and were the home of precious and exotic commodities.[3] Geographical and ethnographic knowledge of Inner Asia had been increasing from the time of Herodotus to the second century BC when it reached its zenith with Ptolemy. These pieces of information were collected and transmitted by merchants and as such they were superficial and anecdotal at best, but the Greeks

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[1] Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[2] In this work the term Inner Asia will be used to refer to the vast area where the Tibetans threatened the other empires' territorial interests. This territory includes not only Central Asia but also present day Afghanistan, Mongolia and the north-western part of China.

[3] For ancient geographers' depictions of the region consult: Christopher I. Beckwith, "A Study of the Early Medieval Chinese, Latin, and Tibetan Historical Sources on Pre-Imperial Tibet" (Indiana University, PhD Dissertation, 1977); Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159-197; Albert Herrmann, *Das Land der Seide und Tibet im Lichte der Antike* (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler Antiquarium, 1938); A. H. Francke, "Two Ant Stories from the Territory of the Ancient Kingdom of Western Tibet," *Asia Major* 1 (1924): 67-75; Sven Anders Hedin, *Southern Tibet: Discoveries in Former Times Compared with my Own Researches in 1906*-1908, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Lithographic Institute of the General Staff of the Swedish Army, 1916), 22-41; Berthold Laufer, "Die Sage von den goldgrabenden Ameisen," *T'oung Pao* 9 (1908): 429-452.

indisputably had some general knowledge of the region. This knowledge had been forgotten in Europe and Inner Asia began to be rediscovered only in the thirteenth century.

However, four centuries prior to this rediscovery, the Muslim conquerors began to collect information about this remote part of the world as well, including the Tibetan Empire, which had come into existence in the first half of the seventh century. The name of Tibet first appeared in Muslim sources in the ninth century, but neither these nor later works contain detailed descriptions of the country and its people. Only short references, i.e., a few records of events of war between the Muslims and the Tibetans, some geographical data, and fabulous stories are included. Recently, a thorough and excellent volume has been published about Arab-Tibetan relations[4] that includes an exhaustive chapter[5] discussing the perception of Tibet in Islamic geographical literature, bringing together new Arabic and Persian sources containing information about the country. As a consequence, the main purpose of this paper is neither to add more sources nor to evaluate the development of Muslims' knowledge of Tibet over the centuries. According to Luciano Petech, who first dealt with this subject in detail in 1947, pieces of information about Tibet had been accumulated by the Muslims as early as the first half of the ninth century and this knowledge did not broaden later on.[6] He argued that six main motifs appear in Muslim sources about Tibet, i.e., the country's geographical position, Tibet as the source of the Oxus River, the country's conquest by Alexander the Great or its colonization by the Himyarites of Yemen, Tibet as a land of laughter and precious musk, and a description of the Tibetan ruler as khāqān.[7] Although recent publications on the subject prove that Muslim knowledge of Tibet broadened further after the first half of the ninth century, I will use the framework established by Petech in

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[4] Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, ed., *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
[5] Anna Akasoy, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography: A Survey of Arabic and Persian Sources," *Islam and Tibet*, 17-41.
[6] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella geografia musulmana," *Atti della Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di Scienze morali* 2 (1947): 55-70.
[7] Ibid., 56.

Chapter 4 when discussing the kinds of information about Tibet that occurred most frequently since I consider his categorization of information a good starting point for further examination.[8] In the following pages, I will attempt to reveal what other pieces of information, if any, can be added to Petech's list and how these details might have influenced the Muslim perception of Tibet. In doing so, I will ignore geographic data and pay attention only to cultural information. As a consequence, this thesis will focus, first of all, on the general image of Tibet created by Muslim sources and examine whether this perception changed in line with the broadening knowledge of the country between the ninth and the first half of the thirteenth century. Secondly, I will also attempt to determine if this image fits into the category of the Other that is common to all societies, was known the Greeks, and appeared in later civilizations. I will enumerate and discuss the main techniques by which the Greeks created the Other and emphasized the difference between their civilized people and the nomads and examine whether the Muslims followed the same pattern as the Greeks and other prestige cultures when writing about remote lands and their inhabitants.

As far as the sources are concerned, since I will not write a critique of the texts, and considering that most of the works I used have been translated from Arabic or Persian into English or French, I have consulted the translations. When translations were not available, I used the Arabic primary sources. I have selected works by Muslim authors who traveled extensively and might have had the opportunity to add accurate information about Tibet as well as Muslim sources whose authors are either unknown or never traveled farther than the heartlands of the caliphate, but whose works contain valuable information. Considering that it

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[8] The secondary literature that has been published since the publication of Luciano Petech's article demonstrates well Petech's mistake of claiming that the Muslims' knowledge of Tibet did not broaden after the reign of al-Ma'mūn. For more on the growing Muslim knowledge of Tibet, see: Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Location and Population of Tibet According to Early Islamic Sources," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarium Hung.* 53 (1989): 163-170; D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D.," *Islam Tetkikleri Enstitüsu Dergisi* 5 (1973): 301-318; Anna Akasoy, "Alexander in the Himalayas: Competing Imperial Legacies in Medieval Islamic History and Literature," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 72* (2009): 1-20. and "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography: A Survey of Arabic and Persian Sources," *Islam and Tibet*, 17-41.

is necessary to contextualize the sources in their time and place them in history, I will introduce the works and their authors in Chapter 3 when I write on the genres of Muslim literature to which the sources belong. However, by way of a brief introduction, I will enumerate them here in chronological order. They range in date from the ninth to the thirteenth century. The sources are: Ibn Khurradādhbih *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), al-Ya'qūbī's *Tārīkh* (History) from the ninth century, Ibn Rusta's *Kitāb al-A'lāḳ al-Nafisa* (The Book of Precious Gems), al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk* (History of Prophets and Kings), al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems), al-Iṣṭakhrī's *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), Ibn Ḥawqal's *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ* (Configuration of the Earth), al-Maqdisī's *Kitāb al-Bad' wa`l-Tārīkh* (The Book of Creation and History), and the *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam* (The Limits of the World) of an anonymous author from the tenth century, al-Gardīzī's *Zayn al-Akhbār* (The Ornament of Histories) from the eleventh century, al-Marwazī's *Tabā'i' al-Hayawān* (The Nature of Animals) from the twelfth century, and Yāqūt al-Hamawī's *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries) from the thirteenth century.

It is necessary to explain briefly why I have chosen the *Mu'jam al-Buldān* as the latest source in this thesis. First of all, Yāqūt collected and summarised all the contemporary knowledge about Tibet that was available to the Muslims at that time. Secondly, the period when Yāqūt worked on his encyclopaedia marks a turning point in the history of the Islamic empire as well as in world history. In 1258, Baghdad fell to the Mongols, who put an end to the Abbasid Caliphate. However, as early as 1221 the cities of Bukhara, Herat, and Samarqand had been taken by the Mongols, who had conquered all of Inner Asia by the mid-1220s. The thriving cultural centers of the Muslim world perished. At the same time, the appearance of the Mongols on the stage of world history had another effect. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the Tibetan Empire collapsed and fell into anarchy in 842. In

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the following centuries, Tibet did not have political relations with other empires, except some adjacent areas such as India, from whence venerated Buddhist scholars came to help the monks strengthen Buddhism in Tibet. This, the thirteenth century, was the last time the Tibetans came into contact with foreign civilizations and took part in the events of world history before the rediscovery of Tibet by the Jesuits in the eighteenth century.

In 1240, the Mongols attacked Tibet, plundering and destroying monasteries.[9] The Tibetan nobility decided to send the most venerated Buddhist lama to the Mongol court in order to reach an agreement with the new power. This embassy resulted in the establishment of strong Mongol-Tibetan relations,[10] and Tibetan monks, especially those of the Sa-skya order, stayed at the Mongol court and visited different regions of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, having considerable religious and political influence in the Empire. The presence of the Tibetans outside their country gave the opportunity to representatives of other nations to encounter them and collect information about the almost forgotten Tibet. Even Muslim authors had the opportunity to broaden their knowledge about the country that had been known to them four centuries before. The emergence of the Mongol Empire most certainly contributed to the appearance of new descriptions of Tibet, whether accurate or miraculous.[11]

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[9] According to late Mongol and Tibetan traditions, Genghis Khan attacked Tibet in 1206, but the king of Tibet surrendered. Then Genghis Khan, being interested in Buddhist doctrines, invited Sa-skya Pandita to the Mongol court. As a matter of fact, although Genghis Khan encountered Tibetan monks in the first decade of the thirteenth century, this encounter probably took place in the Tangut Empire. In fact, Tibet was attacked by the Mongols only in 1240, when Prince Köden, the second son of Ögödei, sent an army against the country, see: Luciano Petech, "Tibetan Relations with Sung China and with the Mongols," *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 173-203, and Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History* (New York: Potala Publications, 1984).

[10] Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skya Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: Instituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990).

[11] The first European records in which Tibet appears were written in this period. However, the description of Tibet in these sources is at least as superficial and obscure as the image of Tibet in Muslim literature, see: Peter Jackson, tr., *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Mönke 1253-1255* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1990), 158.

I. The Rise and Fall of the Tibetan Empire: A Sketch of Political History

The earliest period in the history of Tibet and the origin of its inhabitants are obscure. Although archaeological discoveries prove that the Tibetan plateau became populated in prehistoric times, it is still unknown which ethnic group these early inhabitants belonged to.[12] Most probably tribes with different ethnical and linguistic background, one of them was presumably Aryan, might have lived on the high plateau. Ultimately, a Tibetan-speaking population settled there. According to Tibetan tradition, theYar-klung Valley in central Tibet was the homeland and cultural center of these people for centuries, before Lhasa was made the capital in the seventh century AD. Little is known about ancient Tibetan history and its rulers. Tibetan traditions on the origin of the Tibetan ruling dynasty are pervaded by numerous mythical elements, and provide the reader with almost no factual data. These traditions agree that the first Tibetan ruler, Gnya' khri btsan po, was not a descendant of any of the tribes who lived on the high plateau in earlier or later times.[13] The well-established Bon tradition[14] teaches that the first king descended from the heavenly realms using a sky-rope and disappeared back to the heavens after his death with the help of the same rope.[15] However, the eighth king accidentally cut the rope, and his body was not able to return to the upper realms. From then on, the dead bodies of the Tibetan kings were left behind and buried

[12] For more information on the pre-Tibetan inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau, and influences on the proto-Tibetan society, consult: Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), Ibidem, "A Study of the Early Medieval Chinese, Latin, and Tibetan Historical Sources on Pre-Imperial Tibet", and A. H. Francke, *History, Folklore, and Culture of Tibet* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

[13] The Buddhists claim that the first king was the descendant of an Indian dynasty, whereas according to Bon tradition he was of Central Asian origin, see: Samten G. Karmay, "The Origin Myths of the First King of Tibet as Revealed in the Can Lnga," *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 282-309.

[14] Bon was the ancient pre-Buddhist religion of the Tibetans, see: Per Kvaerne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition* (London: Serindia Publication, 1995) and David L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon: Excerpts from Gzi-brjid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[15] On sacred kingship in Tibet, see: Giuseppe Tucci, "La regalita sacra nell`antico Tibet," *Studies on the History of Religions 4* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959): 189-203, Manabu Waida, "Symbolism of "Descent" in Tibetan Sacred Kingship and Some East Asia Parallels," *Numen* vol. 20, no. 1, (1973): 60-78.

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on earth.[16] This legend shows the sacred character of the Tibetan ruling dynasty. However, by cutting the rope linking the god-kings to the heaven, the mythical history of Tibet ends, and a new chapter of real history begins.

The seventh century was a period of great political, religious and social upheavals and changes in the history of Asia, from the Middle East to the easternmost territories.[17] In the West, the Prophet Muhammad united the Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, expanding West and East, whereas in Eastern Asia the Chinese Tang Empire (AD 618-907) was a significant military power. However, the first half of the seventh century witnessed the rise of another state, Tibet, which became the third most important factor in the history of Inner Asia until the middle of the ninth century.[18]

The rise of the Tibetan Empire began with the enthronement of Srong brtsan sgam po (c. 620-649) who laid down the foundations of an empire which, in its golden age, stretched from the borders of Bactria to China, from India to east Turkestan.[19]

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[16] The eleventh-century Persian author Gardīzī refers to this tradition in his work. I will discuss his version of the legend in Chapter 4.

[17] After the collapse of the First Türk Khaganate (552-581) the empire split into western and eastern parts. The Western Türks submitted to the Tibetans which resulted in a century-long alliance, whereas the Eastern Türks lived under Chinese overlordship. In 682, after several unsuccessful revolts against the Chinese, the Eastern Türks defeated the Tang forces and established the Second Türk Khaganate (682-744). In 712, under Kül Tegin, they established supremacy over the Western Türks, and began to control the main centers of Inner Asian trade. The Khaganate, which had weakened due to continuous Chinese and Muslim attacks was demolished by an Uyghur-Basmil-Karluk alliance in 742. After the victory, the Uyghurs, defeating their former allies, established the Uyghur Khaganate (744-840) which became the main military supporter of Tang China and caused significant territorial losses to the Tibetan Empire. Since the Chinese needed the Uyghurs' military power, the Khaganate conducted lucrative trade with the Tang. The Uyghur Empire started to decline at the end of the eighth century and finally collapsed in 840, see: Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire," *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 285-316; Denis Sinor, *Inner Asia: A Syllabus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) and István Vásáry, *Geschichte des frühen Innerasiens* (Szeged: Verlag Tibor Schafer, 1993).

[18] For more on the role of Tibet in world history see Christopher Beckwith, "The Tibetans in the Ordos and North China: Considerations on the Role of the Tibetan Empire in World History," *Silver on Lapis: Tibetan Literary Culture and History*, ed. Christopher I. Beckwith (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 3-11.

[19] The unification of the independent tribes of Tibet started with the reign of Gnam ri srong brtsan (c. 570-620). Prior to his time, the clan chiefs controlling the nomadic and sedentary population of the innumerable Tibetan valleys were not ruled by any common king. Centralized government was gradually introduced on the Tibetan plateau, but the influence of the chieftains remained strong. The unification process was completed by Srong brtsan sgam po (620-649). With the invention of the Tibetan script and the establishment of the administration system in the 630s, the chiefs of the noble clans became ministers and state officials of the Tibetan emperor (*btsan po)*. Their immense power was counterbalanced only in 779 when Buddhism was declared the state religion. See: Helmut Hoffmann, *Tibet: A Handbook* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1975).

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Having suppressed a rebellion that broke out after the murder of his father, Srong brtsan sgam po eliminated his political opponents and subdued their devotees. The Tibetan emperor carefully established marriage alliances with the other ruling dynasties of Inner Asia, especially with the Tang. These royal marriages, besides resulting in political alliances, had other consequences as well. Srong brtsan sgam po introduced Buddhism to the Tibetan court and became a lavish patron of arts and the main supporter of the great translation projects that produced Tibetan translations of the most famous and acknowledged Indian and Chinese texts. A prosperous cultural exchange took place with other royal courts during the decades of his rule.[20] However, Srong brtsan sgam po achieved his greatest successes in the field of diplomacy and on the battlefield. In 638, he concluded peace with the Tang Emperor T`ai Tsung (627-649) and this peace treaty was honored by both sides until the death of T`ai-Tsung in 649. The Tibetan king, who had spent his last years consolidating his power in the heartland of Tibet, died in the same year, only a few months after the Chinese emperor.

The successors of Srong brtsan sgam po continued to expand towards the East and West. During the reign of the next emperor, Khri mang slon rtsan (650-677), a Tibetan-Türk alliance started to threaten the territories of the Tang Empire in 659. In 662, Kashgar was lost to the Tibetan-Western Türk army. One year later, Tibetans conquered the northwestern region of the Tibetan plateau, and the Kingdom of Balur.[21] By the end of 677, Tibetans occupied all four garrisons, and took control of the whole Tarim Basin.[22]

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[20] Tibetan culture was primarily influenced by the cultures of the neighboring empires, such as India and China. However, as the Tibetan Empire grew so did its contacts with other countries lying farther from the Central Tibetan territories. Through these foreign contacts Tibet was affected by diverse traditions in the fields of architecture, literature, and the arts. Beside craftsmen invited from Nepal, Khotan, and Kashmir, Tibet established relations with the Byzantine Empire and the Persian court. According to Tibetan tradition, the Tibetan king borrowed court attire from Persia, and Persian influence on the eighth-century Tibetan armor is also discernible, see, R. A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 59, and *Ancient Tibet: Research Materials* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1986), 220. Greek and Arab physicians were invited by the Tibetan kings in the seventh and eighth centuries, see: Christopher Beckwith, "The Introduction of Greek Medicine into Tibet in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* vol. 99, no. 2, (1979): 297-313.

[21] The Kingdom of Balur was located in present-day Ladakh.

[22] The four garrisons were Kashgar, Kucha, Khotan, and Karashahr through which the Tang controlled the province. The garrisons were built between 648 and 658 by the Chinese.

The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), which would have been the only military power able to halt the Tibetan expansion, was engaged in internal conflicts at that time. Although during the reign of Muʻāwiya (661-680) the Muslims started to extend the borders of the caliphate towards the eastern territories and achieved great military successes, they could not strenghten their power in Transoxiana as a consequence of the civil war that broke out after the death of Muʻāwiya.[23] Moreover, since the reigning Tang Emperor, Kao-tsung (649-683), also died in 683 and his death was followed by a rebellion over the succession, neither the caliphate nor the Chinese Empire was able to challenge Tibetan control over the Inner Asian territories until 690.

Between 685 and 689, after Wu Chao (684-705) had established her power as empress, the Tang attacked the Tibetan forces several times, but without success. However, by the last decade of the seventh century, as a consequence of internal conflicts and severe rebellions against the Tibetans in the Tarim Basin, Tibetan control in Inner Asia became superficial, and the Tang were able to recapture the four garrisons in 692.[24] For a decade the Tibetan king was concerned with strengthening his power in Central Tibet. Meanwhile, the Umayyads successfully re-established their power in the Muslim heartlands. The succession of ʻAbd al-Malik (685-705) saw the beginning of the most glorious part of the rule of the dynasty in Damascus. He reunited the caliphate with the provinces conquered during the reign of Muʻāwiya, and further extended the empire's borders towards the east.[25]

In the year of 699, the Tibetans allied themselves with the Western Türks again, and, as the Tun-huang Annals report, the Türk khāqān himself led the Tibetan troops, a statement

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[23] The conquest of Persia opened up a way towards the East. The Muslims reached the borders of India, and also turned their attention to the northeast. Between 663 and 671 Umayyad troops occupied Khurasan, crossed the Oxus, and raided Bukhara in 674, see: Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: St Martin`s Press), 194.
[24] Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 54.
[25] During the reign of al-Walīd (705-715) the Caliphate reached the maximum of its extension; the empire stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the western borders of China. In the south, the Muslims crossed the Indus and conquered Kashmir and Punjab in northeastern India, see: *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.1, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 230-240.

that is confirmed by Chinese sources as well.[26] Moreover, the famous historian, al-Ṭabarī, informs his readers of a joint Tibetan-Türk attack on the Muslim forces at Tirmidh in 704.[27] However, the Muslim presence was not significant at that time.

The second period of the conquest, and the chapter of Tibetan and Muslim neighbors, began with the appointment of Qutayba b. Muslim to be the governor of Khurasan; he started his military career with the reconquest of Tokharistan in 705. In the following years, between 706 and 709, he occupied Bukhara, Khwarezm, and Samarqand, and led a successful military campaign against Ferghana from 713 to 715.[28]

The year of 715 witnessed two decisive events in Inner Asian history. Qutayba was murdered after the death of Caliph al-Walīd I (705-715), and the Muslims, in alliance with the Tibetans, started attacking Tang territories.

The Tibetan ruling elite found the alliance with the new power important considering that they obeyed Caliph ʻUmar II`s declaration demanding that Umayyad allies convert to Islam in 717. Tibetan envoys visited the governor of Khurasan in order to request him to send a Muslim teacher to Tibet. After the visit of the embassy, ʿAbd Allah al-Hanafī was appointed and sent to Tibet, but he converted no one.[29] On the whole, the Tibetan-Muslim alliance

[26] *Ancient Tibet*, 235.

[27] Ṭabarī gives a detailed description of the battle, the number of the participants and the injured, as well as the outcome of the battle, see: *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 23, tr. Martin Hinds (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 90-108.

[28] H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1923).

[29] Al-Yaʻqūbī notes this event in his *Tārīkh*, see: *Tārīkh al-Yaʻqūbī*, vol. 2, (Beirut: Dar Sader Publications, 1960), 302. However, the reception of the Muslim teacher at the Tibetan court could have been hostile at best, especially by the members of the conservative faction. It can be supposed that the Tibetan ruler was not interested in the doctrines of Islam and considered the new religion a tool which might strengthen imperial power further. See: http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/e-books/unpublished_ manuscripts/ historical interaction/pt1/history cultures 05.html (last accessed: April 2013). According to recent studies, Islam was introduced into Tibet by Muslim merchants from Kashmir and Ladakh in the fourteenth century.The Muslim population increased in the seventeenth century, when many people migrated to the country as a consequence of famine in the surrounding countries. See: http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/islam/historical_interaction/overviews/history _muslims_tibet.html (last accessed: April 2013). However, it is important to mention that the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, a tenth-century Persian source which contains the most accurate description of Tibet in the period, says that the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, had a mosque. See: *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, ed. V. Minorsky (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1982), 86. No reference to this early mosque appears in other traditions, but Muslim merchants traveled to China both overland and by sea from the eighth century. Since they were mere merchants engaged in trade they did not promote Islamic doctrine. Their presence, however, facilitated the spread of Islam in the Tang Empire

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remained honored by both sides until 720, when ‘Umar II (717-720) was succeeded by Yazīd II (720-724), who supported the expansionist view at the Umayyad court.[30]

In the following years, Tibetans frequently raided the Inner Asian territories of the Muslims, and caused, with the support of their Türk allies, great losses to the caliphate. Until the 740s there was no force that could stop the expansion of Tibet. In the course of these two decades, Tibetan troops simultaneously fought successfully against both the Chinese and the Muslims.

From the year of 740, the Tang armies met and defeated the Tibetans in a series of battles and recovered control over the Tarim Basin. By 750, the Chinese represented the only decisive power in the region, whereas the Tibetans touched bottom as a consequence of inner conflicts that resulted in the loss of conquered lands; even the Abbasids were able to recapture a few important cities. Having been united by the mutual enemy, the Muslims and the Tibetans found themselves fighting together against the Chinese in the battle of Talas in 751.[31] This battle had far-reaching consequences of world historical significance. The western expansion of the Chinese, who had gained control over Transoxiana after the fall of the Western Turkic Khaganate, was eventually put an end by the Islamic Empire. Driving the Tang out of the region, the cultural influence of the Chinese was greatly decreased and the Islamization of the Turkic peoples began.[32] At the beginning of 755, when the reigning Tibetan emperor, Mes Ag-tshoms (704-755), was murdered, it seemed that the empire would completely fall apart and disappear. At the same time, the Abbasid Caliphate, although it had not reached the zenith of its conquests yet, was able to achieve some military successes. Nevertheless, the political and military superiority of China was unquestionable at that time.

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which could easily have reached Tibet via the trade routes, see: Diana Altner, “Do All the Muslims of Tibet Belong to the Hui Nationality?,” *Islam and Tibet*, 341.

[30] Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 93.

[31] Despite the fact that both the Tang Empire, the Umayyads, and later the Abbasid Caliphates represented the most significant political and military factors in the history of Inner Asia, the armies of the two powers fought against each other only at the battle of Talas, see: David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (London: Routledge, 2002), 215.

[32] V. V. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub., 1992), 195-196.

The event which allowed the Tibetans to return one more time to the stage of world history was the An Lu-shan rebellion at the end of 755.[33] This revolt forced the Chinese to withdraw their troops from Inner Asia, which provided a great opportunity for the weakening Tibetan Empire to re-establish its presence in the region. Since China ceased to be an important military factor, Tibet became engaged in expanding toward the west, and by 794, Khotan had fallen into the hands of the Tibetans.

A new chapter opened up in the history of Muslim-Tibetan relations with the succession of Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809). Although the Tibetans regularly attacked the eastern border of the Abbasid Caliphate, in many cases without regard for their alliance, real war between the two powers broke out under Hārūn al-Rashīd, who terminated the Muslim-Tibetan alliance in 805. With the military collapse of the Tang, Tibet remained the only opponent of the Muslims in fighting for Inner Asian land, especially the westernmost part. In 809, when Rafi` b. Layth revolted in Samarqand, Tibet, together with the Karluk Türks, sent troops to help the rebels.[34]

After the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd, his son, al-Amīn (809-813), succeeded to the caliphate, while al-Rashīd's other son, al-Ma'mūn (813-833), came into possession of the eastern territories of the Abbasid Empire, including Bactria. Al-Ma'mūn was a talented military leader. On his appointment to the governor of Khurasan he encountered the constant military threat represented by the Tibetans and their Türk allies. Moreover, coincidentally, he became involved in a war for the caliphate. Finally, in 814, already the caliph, al-Ma'mūn established Marw as the new capital of the empire and declared *jihad* against his Inner Asian

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[33] The rebellion broke out on December 16, 755, when An Lushan, a military governor of Turco-Sogdian origin revolted against the Tang. The revolt, which lasted for eight years, caused immense bloodshed and losses to the participants, see: David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 212.
[34] Hārūn al-Rashīd left for Khurasan in order to suppress the rebellion, but died on the way on March 29, 809. *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 30, tr. C. E. Bosworth, 291-298.

enemies, including Tibet. The Muslims triumphed in the Kingdom of Kabul,[35] in Balur, and met with some military success in Ferghana.[36] In a short period of time, al-Ma'mūn not only recaptured the previously lost Inner Asian holdings, but farther extended the caliphate's borders towards the east. Tibet lost most of its possessions, apart from some holdings in the Pamirs that they were able to control until almost the middle of the ninth century.

In 842, Tibet was struck by internal turmoil again, but this time the empire was unable to overcome the difficulties. After the murder of the reigning king, Glang dar ma (838-842), Tibet sank into anarchy for centuries and could never re-establish its former position among the major powers fighting for control of Inner Asia.

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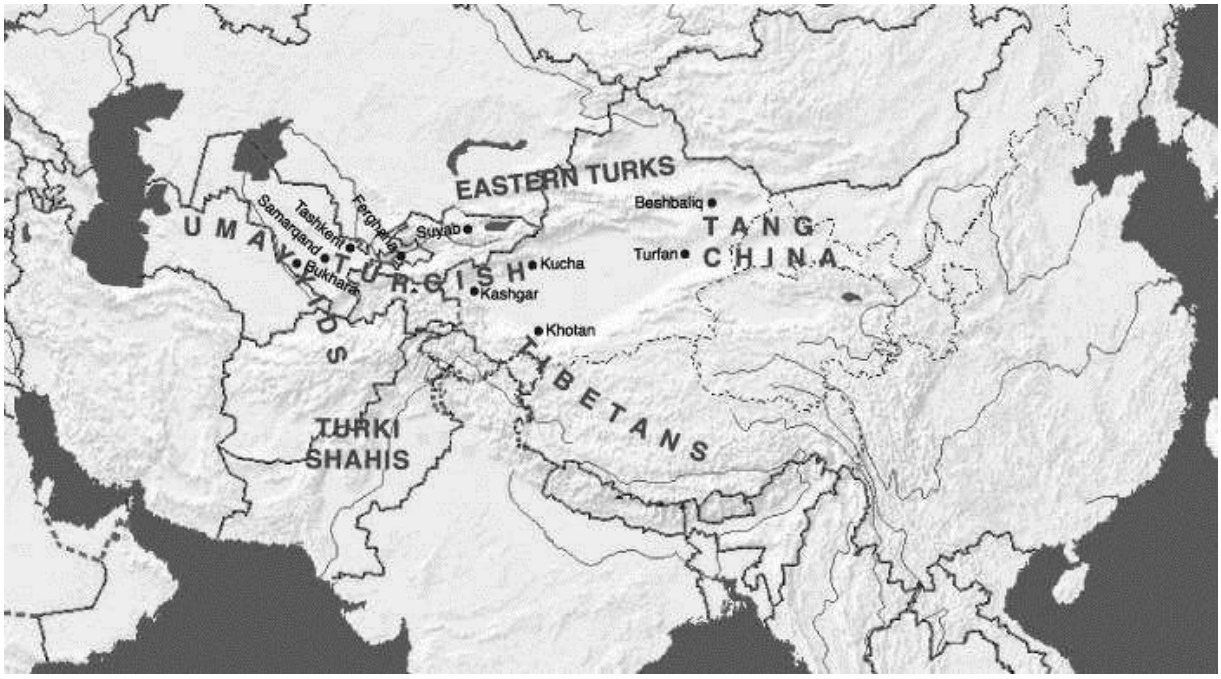
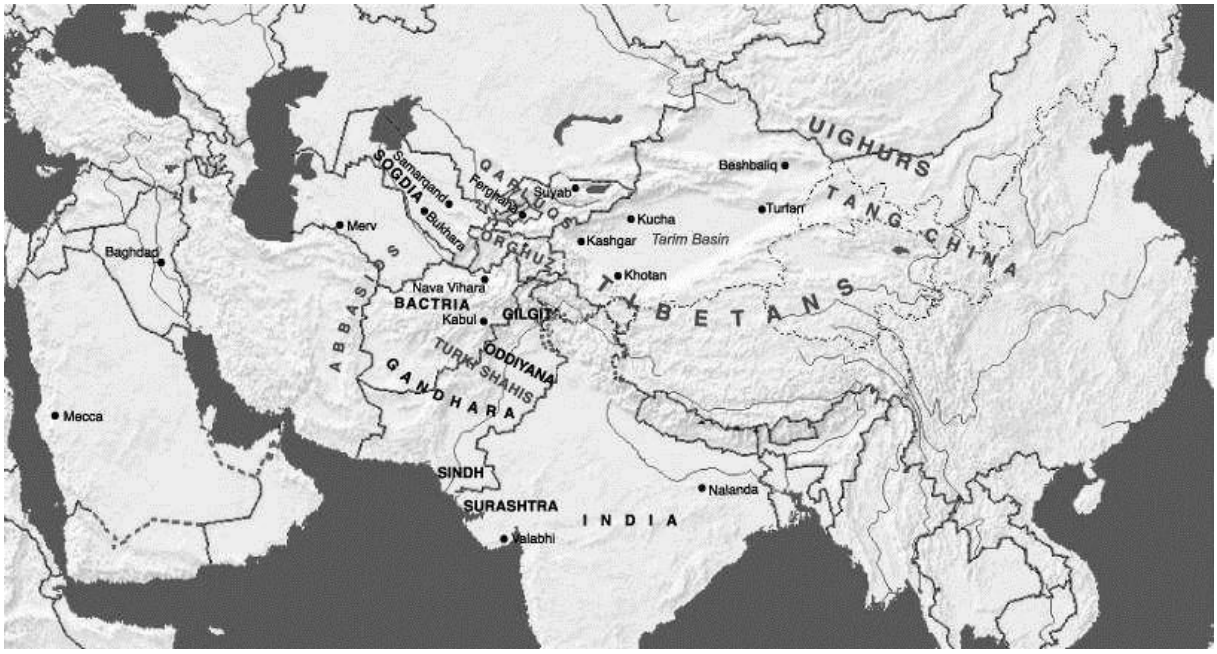
[35] After the capitulation the king of Kabul converted to Islam. As a token of his conversion, he sent a golden statue to al-Ma'mūn which might have been, as can be assumed from the description of al-Azraqī, a representation of Buddha. Al-Azraqī informs his readers that 'a king from among the kings of Tibet', i. e. the Kabul Shah who was the vassal of Tibet, became a Muslim. Al-Ya'qūbī also commemorates this event when writing that a golden statue was sent to al-Ma'mūn 'as the symbol of the Tibetan king's submission'. Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 161.
[36] Ibid., 160.



Map 1: Inner Asia around 720

Source: www.berzinarchives.com



Map 2: Inner Asia in the late eighth century

Source: www.berzinarchives.com

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II. The Use of the Barbarian: Creating the Other

The existence of the image of the Other is probably as old as humanity itself. Peoples have always regarded their own culture as the norm and perceived other societies through lenses determined by their shared cultural knowledge, inventing the Other that referred to the rest of humanity.[37] This way of perception led to the formation of ethnic stereotypes that served as universal symbols of difference and inversion.[38] Societies centered around urban life, with a prosperous economic life and agriculture, with high literary and cultural achievements always tended to regard peoples with lower cultural sophistication and a nomadic way of life as savages.[39] Moreover, the nomads' frequent raids on their "civilized" neighbors only reinforced this view, strengthening cultural stereotypes that proved to be ineradicable under all historical circumstances. These ethnic clichés justified racial prejudice and influence our perception of the Other even today.

The Greeks are a case study of the use of the image of the Other; they were the first to give a specific name to otherness in writing: barbarian. As early as it began to be used, this word always carried negative connotations, arousing feelings of fear and scorn among settled people. In Greek eyes the barbarians were "bad by nature, cruel, given to savagery, cannibalism, profligate sexuality, the feminization of men, and the masculine empowerment of women"[40]; these are all the opposites of what was considered proper and desirable in the Greek world view.[41] Although the term barbarian technically refers to "non-speakers of Greek," it also refers to the nomads of the Eurasian Steppe whose lifestyle differed from that

[37] This universal phenomenon is called ethnocentrism which is the belief in the superiority of one's own culture to any other and the tendency to measure all others by one's cultural standards. See: Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology* (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2002).
[38] See: Ulrich W. Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the 'Abbasids to Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 2 (1988): 175-196.
[39] See: W. R. Jones, "The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 4 (376-407).
[40] See: Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience: From the Archaic Period to the Age of Xenophon* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 124.
[41] Demonizing the enemy is a well-known propaganda strategy; by ascribing negative characteristics to another people it becomes easier to disregard them. See the propaganda technique of fear appeal: http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/ct.sa.fear.html (Last accessed: May 2013)

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of the Greeks to a great extent; other high civilizations contemporary with the ancient Greeks were also considered to be barbarian, but to a slightly lesser degree. Even the open-minded historian Herodotus regarded the Egyptians and Persians, like all non-Greek nations as barbarians. At the same time, he was fascinated by their cultures, extolling them above other humble peoples by emphasizing the resemblance between these two nations and the Greeks.[42] How did a people become barbarian in the less noble sense of the word in Herodotus' eyes? As Francois Hartog points out, being barbarian equaled being Scythian. Furthermore, how can someone be a Scythian? Is it possible in the simplest way, that is, by being a nomad.[43] This not-too-complicated image of the nomad was created and transmitted to Greeks by Greeks, civilized men sharing the same cultural background, who encountered or heard of these alien peoples while traveling. These peoples had customs and a certain way of life that differed from those of the Greeks to a great degree, and, therefore, they were difficult to interpret. In order to be able to translate these differences, the Greeks crystallized a stereotypical image of the barbarian that personified just the opposite of what the Greek ideal embodied. This image was far from being authentic, but helped express the sense of inversion. Otherness in this sense equaled anti-sameness and barbarian began to symbolize the perfect inverse of everything that was Greek. As a consequence of this, barbarians were described in negative terms, i.e., acts that they did not do and characteristics they did not have compared to a civilized Greek.[44] The Scythian, a "pure" nomad, became the symbol of this "anti-Greekness", embodying behavior and all characteristics that the Greeks despised.[45] The

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[42] Bernard Laurot, "Idéaux grecs et barbarie chez Hérodote," *Ktema* 6 (1981): 39-48; Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Egbert J. Bakker, Irene J. F. De Jong and Hans Van Wees (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
[43] Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 193.
[44] Ibid., 193-206.
[45] In his book Christopher Beckwith explains why this perception was completely wrong. Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

image of the Scythian as the archetype of barbarian was so well established that it marked all the nomads of the Eurasian Steppe not only for the Greeks, but also for the Romans later.[46]

This stereotypical way of expressing otherness was widely applied by later writers, be they Greeks or others. Authors did not attempt to create a more accurate image of the inhabitants of these remote lands, partly as a consequence of lack of information. Most travelers never traversed the territories on which they so eagerly reported; even Herodotus himself never encountered any Scythians. When writing about the nomads, he had to rely on vague second-hand information and hints transmitted by people who had visited the land of the barbarians or who had gleaned information about this part of the world only by hearsay. Apart from some fantastic stories, the edges of the *oikoumene* were almost unknown to the people of the time.[47] Since Herodotus was not among the few traveling beyond safe borders, his only means of verifying the reliability of a certain piece of information was his personal judgment.[48] However, he did traveled a great deal, and when traversing the lands that were more familiar to him he collected first-hand information, relying on his ear (*opsis*) and eye (*akoê*). Unlike his predecessors, who relied on divine inspiration when writing, direct investigation was Herodotus' primary source. Although the ear as a source of knowledge remained significant, the eye and information collected by sight became more important. Transmitted information was authorized by the eye of the person who had witnessed something, and the eyewitness could be either the author himself or a trustworthy informant.[49] In this way, gaining knowledge by sight was supposed to prevent the writer transmitting the unbelievable.

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[46] Stephanie West, "Scythians," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 439.
[47] Klaus Karttunen, "The Ethnography of the Fringes," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 459.
[48] Paul Cartledge and Emily Greenwood, "Herodotus as a Critic: Truth, Fiction, Polarity," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 361.
[49] See: Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience*, 205. and Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 261.

All the same, Herodotus' *History* contains most of miraculous tales of his time, and these descriptions seem to contradict the statement that Herodotus' used his rational mind to verify the reliability of information transmitted to him. The incorporation of these fictitious elements in his work can be explained in two ways. First of all, for Herodotus, who had never visited faraway lands in person, it might have been almost impossible to ascertain whether the pieces of information he transmitted were authentic indeed. Second, it is also important to emphasize that Herodotus not only wished to educate the people of his time, but to entertain them. Therefore, it is difficult to decide whether he himself invented curiosities in order to amuse the audience, but he definitely wrote about all sorts of curious topics that, in his opinion, would interest his readers.[50] At the same time, the image of the barbarian was not the only method for communicating otherness. Reporting marvels (*thoma*) was another means of translating differences that could not be absent from any traveler's report.[51] *Thoma* helped create the impression of the exotic, and emphasized the differences between 'us' and 'them' in the geographic sense, i.e., between the ordinary that can be found here and the unusual that exists there. This expresses the contradictory feelings of cultured people of all times who perceived the world in polarity. Despite the fact that the fringes of the known world were inhabited by savage and primitive peoples, "civilized" men were thirsty for marvels and legends about these strange peoples. Furthermore, these distant people also possessed exotic and fine products that, besides being symbols of otherness, were needed by the "civilized" part of the world. As Hartog demonstrates, mysterious spices were one of the donations of nature from these remote lands that created a sense of difference.[52]

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[50] Paul Cartledge and Emily Greenwood, "Herodotus as a Critic: Truth, Fiction, Polarity," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 361.

[51] As Hartog points out, reporting the incredible lends authenticity and trustworthiness to a work based on the view that no one is able to invent such unrealistic things. Furthermore, since the audience expected these marvelous accounts, authors had to satisfy their thirst for curiosities, see: Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 235.

[52] The Muslims also followed this pattern, for example, Tibetan musk represented the exotic to them. See Chapter 4.

The image of the barbarian transmitted by Herodotus was based on behavior, habits, and morals that were ascribed to the nomads in contrast with Greek norms. Some of these behavioral characteristics were considered to be learned, whereas others were regarded as innate. The innate bad nature of the barbarians was stressed by a theory in the fifth century BC that taught the influence of physical environment on man.[53] According to this theory, the inhabited world was divided into seven latitudinal zones (*klimata*) and each of these zones affected the temperament, the moral characteristics, and the physical appearance of the inhabitants in a different way. The southernmost fringes lying close to the equator were subject to excessive heat, while the northern edges were affected by extreme cold. The central zone, being the fourth and the most temperate, which comprised the land of the Greeks, produced people excellent both in appearance and intelligence, while the peoples living on the fringes acquired bad characters. For example, peoples living on the northern fringes of the *oikoumene* were considered talented fighters, but unintelligent at the same time, while the southernmost peoples were intelligent, but weak.[54] Besides the climates, other environmental conditions, for example humidity, wind or the elevation of the land and social and political institutions were also important and influenced peoples' characters. This theory was devoid of any observation and was based on sheer stereotypes, but was widely applied by later on.

The Romans, Byzantines and medieval Europeans followed the Greek method in depicting the barbarians of their times, adapting the image to fit the ruling historical circumstances. So did the Muslims, who adopted, together with the theory of the climates, the same stereotypic image.[55] However, unlike the other powers, their interpretation of the barbarian was not as narrow as those of the Greeks and Romans. Although the Muslims also

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[53] The first treatise dealing with this theory was *Airs, Waters, Places*, ascribed to Hippocrates, see: Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 79.
[54] Ibid., 82.
[55] L. E. Goodman, "The Greek Impact on Arabic Literature," *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston, T. M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant and G. R. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 483-496.

applied the same clichés when writing about other peoples, their judgment was never as rigid as that of their predecessors and medieval European writers. The Muslim perception of the Other, being the most tolerant conquering power, stemmed from the idea of the construction of sameness.[56] This phenomenon might be explained by the unique circumstances under which Islam evolved. The cradle of the new religion, Mecca was an important center of long distance trade where many peoples with different ethnic and cultural background came into contact with each other and conducted lucrative trade. This cultural diversity and the presence of the believers of many religions, Jews and Christians in particular, influenced not only the way of thinking and teachings of Muhammad but the later Muslim attitude to otherness.[57] Although after the birth of Islam this open-minded atmosphere became less perceptible and the difference between Muslims and unbelievers was inevitable, the absence of ethnic prejudice in the Qur'an clearly showed the new religion's tolerant character.[58] Unlike the other high civilizations of history, the Muslims were never reluctant to seek knowledge outside their own community. Whereas the Greeks regarded all peoples who did not follow their moral, political, and cultural ideals as primitive, Muslims acknowledged the cultural and political merits of non-Muslims and were ready to assimilate every achievement of other cultures which were consistent with the principles of Islam.[59] As Houari Touati points out, this approach derived from the open-mindedness of Muslims, who applied the ideal of

[56] Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2010), 3. However, it is important to bear in mind that the formative period of Islam and the construction of Muslim society and, as a result, that of Muslim identity lasted almost three centuries which period witnessed numerous crises. In these critical times Muslims proved to be less tolerant, let alone hostile than in time of peace. See: Róbert Simon, *Islam and Otherness* (Szombathely: Savaria University Press, 2003), 11.
[57] Róbert Simon, *Islam and Otherness*, 11.
[58] Sulayman Bashir, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 114. and Patricia Crone, *God's Rule – Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 332. Naturally, Arabs also thought themselves to be the supreme of all nations as God's chosen people and as the possessors of His last revelation which resulted in ethnic tensions and conflicts within the borders of the caliphate. However, since the aim of this paper is to focus on the perception of the peoples living in the *dār al-Ḥarb* I do not discuss this topic.
[59] As Hassan Hanafi argues, the great achievements of the Islamic civilization were the results of the interaction between the Muslim I and the Other. The Muslims, who had once been students of the Greek, Persian and Indian Other became the tutor to the West, see: Hassan Hanafi, "The Dialectics of the Ego and the Other: A Study of Tahtawi's Takhlis Al Ebriz," *Imagining the Arab Other: How Arabs and non-Arabs View Each Other*, ed. Tahar Labib (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 157.

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sameness when constructing their identity.[60] The Greeks had preferred the opposite way of self-definition, emphasizing the differences between them and the rest of the human race. However, the Muslim focus was on sameness when defining themselves, consequently the line between "us" and "the others" was not as sharp as in Graeco-Roman culture. Since the Greeks also had traded with distant lands and encountered alien cultures with great achievements the question might arise why Muslims applied such a different approach in judging other peoples. As Róbert Simon argues, contrary to most of other religions, before the advent of Islam no fully developed society existed in the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, the nascent religion and the formative society in which it came into existence could mutually shape each other.[61] The recently formed Islamic society was further influenced in the times of conquests when more and more peoples came under the rule of the caliphate, strengthening the empire's multicultural character. In the course of this process the cultural heritage of the conquered peoples became an important and indelible part of Muslim culture which, together with the significantly growing number of Muslim believers of different ethnic background, facilitated to create the sense of a sort of sameness as well. This approach was accepted within the borders of the *dār al-Islam* (the abode of Islam), which, despite its cultural diversity, was considered to be a unity by its inhabitants who had been brought together by the belief in a common god and prophet.[62]

In early eighth-century Europe, the barbarian became identified with the pagan, and the opposition of the civilized and the savage was replaced by that of the believer and the pagan.[63] The geographic borders of Europe served as a line of demarcation between Christian civilization and the barbarian world. One might assume that the Muslim perception also was

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[60] Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, 3.
[61] Róbert Simon, *Islam and Otherness*, 14.
[62] Franz Rosenthal, "The Stranger in Medieval Islam," *Arabica* (1997): 36.
[63] W. R. Jones, "The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe:" 388.

permeated by the new religion,[64] and Islam, similarly to Christianity, became a decisive factor in shaping the image of the Other. However, as Aziz Al-Azmeh points out, although Muslims were sensitive to extreme religious practices, religion itself played little role in the construction of the Other.[65] In spite of the fact that the borders of the caliphate also divided the world into two, the *dār al-Islam* (the abode of Islam) and the *dār al-Ḥarb* (the abode of war), the multicultural nature of the empire made the Muslims more tolerant even when depicting the otherness of the barbarians.

Which factors shaped the Muslim perception of the barbarian? The origin of the image of the Other constructed by the Muslims is obscure[66] and quite complex, compared to the Greek model. In the beginning, the Arabic term *'ajam* or barbarians initially referred to the pre-Islamic Iranians whom the Muslims encountered at the earliest stage of their expansion and who, besides being infidels, were also considered by the Muslim Arabs to be living in extreme social inequality.[67] Not only did the Muslims bring Islam to the Persians, but they also put an end to inequality among them. As the caliphate was growing after the conquest of the Sasanian Empire more and more different peoples fell into the category of the barbarian. However, despite the fact that Islam as a religion was a secondary factor in perceiving other cultures, it is important to bear in mind that, similar to Christians, the Muslims thought the world to be constituted by two groups, too, i.e. believers and infidels. However, the general Muslim judgment of infidels was mitigated by some other considerations. On the one hand, Jews and Christians as monotheistic believers were closer to Muslims and as the People of the Book they enjoyed protection.[68] On the other hand, as mentioned above, the Muslims respected the cultural achievements of polytheistic

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[64] Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *The Muslim Perception of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999).
[65] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in the Arab Eyes," *Past&Present* 134 (1992): 6.
[66] Ibid., 6.
[67] Patricia Crone, *God's Rule*, 332.
[68] Ibid., 358.

civilizations as well, which attitude also softened the perception of non-believers.[69] In addition to that, the Muslims followed the Greek theory of the climates when dividing the world into seven zones (*aqālīm*).[70] The central zones, i.e., the third and fourth climates, where the Islamic heartlands were located, were considered to be the most temperate, providing their inhabitants with optimal conditions, whereas the peoples of the northern and southern regions had the worst moral and physical characteristics. However, apart from Persia, the lands of great civilizations were not located in the central zones and were seen as subject to less optimal environmental conditions. In order to verify the excellence of these nations, Muslim scholars emphasized the influence of other geographical and environmental factors that diminished the effects of the climate upon their inhabitants.[71]

Understandably, the perception of the peoples living beyond the borders of the *dār al-Islam* was different. Especially the Inner Asian parts were thought to be no man's land where people lived without legal order and other blessings of civilization. Muslims were not allowed to dwell permanently in these territories which were depicted as the end of the world. At the same time, Muslims were also less critical when writing about the barbarians of *dār al-Ḥarb* with whom they conducted trade. There were also some factors in the case of the nomads that mitigated the less optimal environmental conditions of the zones they lived in, for example, political and social institutions were of major importance.[72] However, these factors softened the image of the nomads, but did not eradicate their barbarous nature.

[69] In the Abbasid period the nations of the world were divided into two categories. The first category incorporated the nations whose scientific knowledge was worthy of transmission, i.e., the Greek, Hindu, and Persian scientific traditions. All other nations belonging to the second category had nothing to contribute to Muslim culture, see: Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2010), 6. Considering the cultural influence of China and India on Tibet, the comparison of Tibet with these two countries might seem more relevant. However, on the one hand, both the Chinese and Indian scientific traditions were highly esteemed by the Muslims, whereas the Tibetans had nothing to contribute in the field of sciences, and on the other hand, Muslim authors themselves regarded the Tibetans as Türks, just like every other people living beyond the Oxus. Therefore, I have decided to compare the Tibetans to the Türks.

[70] See the entry of *iklīm* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis, V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1986), vol. 3, 1076-1078.

[71] Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975) 73, and Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in Arab Eyes:" 8.

[72] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in Arab Eyes:" 7.

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Although the Muslims proved to be more tolerant than other civilizations, their perception was as much culturally determined as that of the Greeks. As a result, the image of the nomadic Other had been invented before they encountered these barbarous peoples, and the Muslims only colored the image that they had created in advance.[73] What they experienced when meeting the nomadic Other completely lived up to all their expectations and verified the theoretical image of the barbarian.[74]

Nonetheless, in the case of some northern peoples the word barbarian did not convey only negative connotations. One of these nations was the Türks, who, in spite of being warlike and wild as were most of inhabitants of the sixth zone, enjoyed some respect among the Muslim people.[75] Although the climate where they lived made them barbarous, they were not barbarian in the strict sense of the word, and had some features of the civilized world.[76] However, Muslim authors fell into the trap of generalization and regarded many of the nomadic tribes of Inner Asia with different ethnic origins and languages as Türks.[77] This generalization seems reasonable. On the one hand, from the sixth century on different tribes of Turkic origin controlled the vast land of the Eurasian Steppe. Although the population of these nomadic empires was heterogeneous from both the ethnic and linguistic points of view, all subjects were identified with the ruling elite, i.e., the Türks. On the other hand, the Turkic empires often allied themselves with tribes who followed the same nomadic way of life and were as warlike as the Türks, but with different ethnic backgrounds. These peoples usually

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[73] Munzer A. Kilani, "The Rhetoric of Anthropological Speech: Universality, Comparison and Hierarchy," *Imagining the Arab Other*, 12.
[74] As Aziz Al-Azmeh points out there were decided signs of barbarism such as filth, bizarre funerary rites, and profligate sexuality, see: Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in the Arab Eyes:" 7.
[75] The initial positive perception of the Türks might have been influenced by the Persian division of the great nations of Antiquity. Persian tradition divided the world into seven kingdoms including that of the Türks. Muslim scholars such as al-Mas'ūdī adopted this tradition, although the Türks enjoyed the lowest reputation, see: Tarif Khalidi, *Muslim Historiography*, 101.
[76] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in the Arab Eyes:" 7.
[77] Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Turk Empire," *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 285-316. and Ulrich W. Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the 'Abbasids to Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 2 (1988): 177.

lived far from the central lands of the caliphate, and Muslims were not able to distinguish between the Türks and their allies who resembled the Türks in both physical appearance and behavior. Ulrich W. Haarmann claims that the farther from the central territories of the Islamic empire these lands were, the less the Muslims paid attention to them.[78] Probably they did not ignore these lands intentionally. They acquired authentic knowledge about many different peoples during their conquests, but some parts of the world and their inhabitants remained inaccessible to them. In the reign of al-Ma'mūn (813-833), officials, by the order of the caliph, began to collect information systematically about less well known lands as well.[79] As the troops of the caliphate approached the fringes, so the interest in the population of the peripheral territories and their political significance grew. However, with the break of direct connections between the caliphate and these lands, the flow of information stopped and these remote parts became unknown to the Muslims again.[80] As a consequence, Muslims authors had to continue to rely on vague information transmitted by merchants and other travelers. This situation facilitated the transmission of miraculous stories about these regions that became just another means to express the otherness of the unknown.

As mentioned above, most of the warlike nations of Inner Asia fitted into the category of the barbarous created by the Muslims. So did Tibet, which lay far away from the central lands of the caliphate, but whose people resembled the Türks in nature. Moreover, as a northern land enclosed by mountains and unapproachable, it proved to be one of the best places for fostering curiosity. In Chapter 4 I will discuss how the generalization of the image of barbarous nomads and the enclosed nature of their country affected the Muslim perception of the Tibetans.

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[78] Ulrich W. Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity:" 177.
[79] The topic of otherness in Muslim culture was first created during this period, see: Tahar Labib, "The Other in Arab Culture," *Imagining the Arab Other*, 63.
[80] Tahar Labib refers to Aziz Al-Azmeh when writing that the rupture of the direct Arab-Chinese and Arab-Indian connections resulted in the transformation of stories about these countries into wonders. This statement is true in the case of other distant lands such as Tibet. Ibid., 60.

III. Medieval Muslim Sources

3.1 The Geographical Tradition

The seventh century witnessed the rise of a new world power in the Middle East, the Umayyad Caliphate, which occupied immense territories within a short period of time, conquering numerous peoples of different cultural backgrounds. Retaining control over the newly conquered lands and striking down perpetual revolts required the constant presence of the Umayyad forces on the borderlands. Moreover, as a consequence of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the recently conquered provinces, the early caliphate faced the urgent need to establish a new administration system. Under such troublesome circumstances, one might assume that the caliphate was not able to make any effort to patronize culture and the sciences.[81] Muslim scholarship, which began to be shaped several years after the death of Muhammad, however, opened the door to the rise of a new type of historiographical tradition based on the events of the establishment of a new world empire.[82] Through conquest, the Arabs came into contact with civilizations with great intellectual achievements and the transmission of Persian and Indian cultural heritage began.[83] The fact that the caliphate was ruled by religious law precluded educated Muslims neither from being interested in the secular culture of foreign empires nor from creating literary traditions that were not under strict religious control. This milieu gave rise to the birth of *adab*,[84] the culture of the Arab

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[81] Mihály Kmoskó, *Mohamedán írók a steppe népeiről: Földrajzi irodalom* (Muslim Writers on the Peoples of the Steppe: Geographical Literature) (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2000), 29.
[82] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14.
[83] Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) and André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle: Géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050* (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1967), 8.
[84] For more information consult the entry *Adab* in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol. 1 (1986), 175; André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*; *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T. M. Johnstone, J. D. Latham, R. B. Serjeant and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

elite connected with the court. Having come into existence in the capital, *adab* became a stylish amusement of educated circles.[85]

The Greek tradition, although some Greek works had already been translated into Arabic during the reign of Muʿāwiya I (661-680), strengthened only after the Abbasid revolution and replaced, or at least diminished, the earlier Persian and, especially, Indian influence.[86] The impetus to the transmission of Greek knowledge was given by the indefatigable work of Syriac-speaking Christians in the caliphate, which resulted in a spectacular and rapid development of sciences that lasted until the middle of the ninth century.[87] In the newly founded capital of the empire, Baghdad, numerous philosophical, medical, and geographical writings of Greek authors were translated into Arabic, including the works of Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Ptolemy.[88] The translation of Syriac and Pahlavi texts into Arabic had already started in the reign of al-Manṣūr (753-775).[89] The translation movement continued and developed during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809) and reached its zenith in the time of al-Ma'mūn (813-833), who was personally interested in Greek scholarship. In his reign, Baghdad became the center of a thriving cultural and scientific life where all kinds of foreign traditions were brought together under the aegis of Islam and Muslims became the transmitters of ancient knowledge.[90]

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[85] The perfect cultivator of the *adab*, the *adīb* of the Umayyad period, acquired excellent knowledge of the heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia, poetry, rhetoric and other corresponding sciences. The interest of early Muslims in Persian history and culture is discernible as well as Sasanian influence on early *adab* that was one of the most important factors in shaping this typical Arabic literary genre, see: C. E. Bosworth, "The Persian Impact on Arabic Literature,"*Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, 483-496.

[86] L. E. Goodman, "The Greek Impact on Arabic Literature," *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, 472; André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*, 8.

[87] R. Y. Ebied, "The Syrian Impact on Arabic Literature," *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, 497.

[88] L. E. Goodman, "The Translation of Greek Materials into Arabic," *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), 477-497.

[89] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 298.

[90] Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (New York: Routledge: 1999).

As most of works of the Hellenic tradition were translated into Arabic and became available to members of the Muslim elite, scholars embraced the Greek scientific and philosophical heritage and started to shape it in accordance with the needs of Muslim society. The newly acquired Greek scientific knowledge left its imprint on *adab* literature as well. With the expansion of the cultural horizons, the *adīb* of the early Abbasid period became more educated in non-Arab sciences and literature. Not only did he excel in the ancient Arab tradition, but he also imbibed foreign scientific knowledge as well. The study of Arab tradition remained the most prestigious scholarship theme, but the knowledge possessed by a perfect *adīb* was supplemented with natural sciences and geography, foreign history and poetry.[91] However, even though most of *adab* works treat scientific subjects, the genre should be regarded as literature. The primary aim of *adab* was entertainment and items of scientific knowledge were often sacrificed for the sake of poetry. In order to amuse people, the *adīb* combined facts and fiction. He provided his readers with exact scientific observations and pleased them with wonders and miracles of faraway lands in the same piece of work. However, *adab* is edifying as well. As mentioned, *adab* literature was not strictly permeated by religion, thus the author had the opportunity to use his personal judgment and express his opinion when writing about events and wonders of lands lying inside or beyond the borders of the caliphate. In this way, besides entertaining his readers, the *adīb* also educated and encouraged them to regard the stories in a broader context.[92] In the early Abbasid time of expansion and economic growth, the intellectual horizons also widened, enabling more and more people to enjoy or cultivate the *adab* all over the empire.[93] *Adab*, which had been the privilege of the Arab elite during the Umayyad era, reached and edified a broader audience in Abbasid times.

[91] Ibid., 239.
[92] For more information consult Peter G. Hoyland, "History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam," *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (New York: Routledge, 2006), 16-46.
[93] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 96.

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As a consequence of this open-minded atmosphere, the ninth century witnessed a florescence of the literature of *adab*, which started to influence other disciplines as well.[94] One of these sciences was historiography that, stemming from the same source as the Tradition and Hadith and, in consequence deeply religious in character, gradually adopted a more secular approach.[95] On the one hand, this change was partly a response to the military success. As more and more peoples with different cultural backgrounds were conquered and united in the Islamic Empire, historians had to react to the challenge and incorporate these nations into the history of the caliphate. On the other hand, due to the Arabs' early interest in Persian history, Arabic literature contained many non-Islamic materials. The first historians to record the historical events of the non-Muslim world as well had to rely on their own critical judgement, especially when writing about remote lands and their unknown inhabitants. Whereas early Muslim historians enthusiastically studied the history of the Peoples of the Book, the scope of some later scholars included pieces of information deriving from Greek, not to mention Chinese sources.[96] The diversity of sources and channels through which they obtained information made it difficult for scholars, who had to be careful about the accuracy and reliability of the data they worked with. Some historians, like al-Ṭabarī[97] and al-Ya'qūbī, the author of the earliest surviving world history, followed the tradition in writing history and paid attention only to the Judeo-Christian and Persian historical sources.

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[94] Ibid., 83-130.
[95] Historical writing was one of the transmitted religious sciences in Islam. Its subject matter was primarily the life and sayings of the Prophet, the history of his community, the triumphs and failures of the Muslims and those of the earlier communities who had inhabited the world and followed God's will. All these reports were verified by *isnād*, the chain of transmitters. However, during the conquests numerous non-Muslim peoples came under the rule of the caliphate and historians were compelled to interpret history from a broader perspective. As the caliphate appeared on the stage of world history, *isnād* became irrelevant when reporting on foreign peoples. A more secular approach to writing history evolved in the ninth century which provided government officials and scholars with information necessary for the affairs of the continuously growing empire. Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, xi-xiii. and Ibidem, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 28-82.
[96] Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 110.
[97] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 73-81.

However, in spite of the fact that their approach was strictly religious, their works also bore testimony to critical thinking and the importance of personal observation.[98]

The Muslim geographical tradition also came into existence and flourished in the ninth century, bequeathing the earliest works of geographical literature to later scholars. The earliest piece of mathematical geography in Arabic is al-Khwārizmī's *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ* (The Image of the Earth), based on the tradition of Ptolemy. The astronomical observations of Greek geographers started to be corrected and refined as early as the reign of al-Ma'mūn. Contrary to mathematical geography, which dealt with astronomical data, human geography discussed the enthnography and history of different regions and also included legends and descriptions of marvels. The earliest surviving work of human geography is the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik*, written by Ibn Khurradādhbih in the mid-ninth century. These types of geographical works proved to be important to an empire of such vast dimensions and were composed in order to help the work of state officials. Following the Greek tradition, Arab geographers divided the globe into seven climes, ascribing particular traits to the inhabitants of each clime. Within the confines of this division, Muslim scholars could place all nations of the known world, explaining the history and cultural development of these peoples by the influence of the environment where they lived in. However, although scholars relied heavily on Hellenistic knowledge they also recorded accurate information deriving from personal observations.[99] At the same time, although these works served primarily administrative and military purposes, the flexible framework of the nascent genre opened the door to the transmission of anecdotes and marvels as well. The humanistic nature of this new type of geography was the result of the influence of *adab* literature. Authors like Ibn Khurradādhbih cannot be considered geographers in the modern sense of the word, they were *kātibs*, educated officials writing on numerous disciplines, including topics related to geography. As

[98] Robert G. Hoyland, "History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam," *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, 40.
[99] André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*, 76.

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a result, geographical works might be considered a form of *adab* literature that gives preference to entertainment as well. In the first half of the tenth century a new school of Muslim geography was founded by Abū Zayd Al-Balkhī. al-Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Muqaddasī followed his approach to geography, wishing to compose an accurate description of the world based on observation.

Despite the crystallized and highly developed historiographical tradition that had come into being in the first century of Islam, by the beginning of the tenth century the geographical and historical approaches were slightly intertwined. Geographical writings started to include historical data, demonstrating the geographers interest in historical perspectives, and historians also embraced the geographical knowledge that became available to them as a result of the continuous expansion of the empire.[100] Al-Ya'qūbī, mastering both subjects, did not cultivate history and geography together; he devoted separate volumes to these two disciplines. The situation changed with the emergence of a new type of historiography. Scholars belonging to this new school wanted to establish the most precise and authentic history of the Muslims and the neighboring countries, and, at the same time, to describe the physical world where history happened as accurately as possible.[101] The first scholar who openly combined history with geography was al-Mas'ūdī. In his works, the Greek scientific tradition and Islamic theology complemented and reinforced each other. Nevertheless, in spite of the critical scientific approach, historians were also *adībs* who regarded the style of their works as at least important as the content of the text. However, while still wishing to entertain their readers, they accumulated a great deal of accurate knowledge that later historians copied enthusiatically without adding new items of information. The greatest historians of the ninth and tenth centuries tirelessly searched of knowledge and became globetrotters, taking the risk of traveling in order to acquire

[100] Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 107.
[101] Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, xiv.

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experience and information in person. However, as geography reached its zenith in the thirteenth century these types of works based at least partly on direct observation were replaced by compilations.[102]

3.2 Travel in medieval Muslim society

The idea of travel[103] is deeply rooted in the culture of Islam. Prior to Muhammad, the Arab tribes had been on the move incessantly like all nomadic peoples, and trade, especially with distant lands, was also impossible without a great deal of travel.[104] The prophet, who had often taken part in long travels, not to mention his *Hijra* in AD 622, served as an example to pious Muslims, urging them to "travel on earth and see."[105] Moreover, Muhammad encouraged his followers to seek knowledge even if they had to go as far as China.[106]

However, from the beginning, Muslims also took the road for less high reasons than pursuing knowledge. Just to mention the most important ones, trade, diplomacy, and war also forced people from all social strata to leave their homes for strange and unknown parts of the world. On these journeys, people encountered many different nations and acquired information about their lands, customs, and beliefs. Travelers were especially sensitive to acts completely opposed to their own cultural norms that were completely unexplainable to them. Their personal interpretations of what they had seen resulted in the creation of marvels and tales, a process that was not deliberate in all cases.[107] By telling others about what they had

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[102] Paule Charles-Dominique, *Voyageurs arabes: Ibn Fadlân, Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Battûta et un auteur anonyme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), xxxii.
[103] For more on the forms of travel in Islam, consult: Ian Richard Netton, *Golden Roads: Migration, Pilgrimage and Travel in Medieval Islam* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993); Roxanne Leslie Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*
[104] Paule Charles-Dominique, *Voyageurs arabes*, x.
[105] Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*, 21.
[106] See the entry for *Ṛihla* in the *Encyclopaedia of the Islam*, vol. 8, 528.
[107] These travelers enjoyed the advantages of urban life and were completely unfamiliar with nomadic life, which could result in misinterpretations, see: Charles-Dominique, *Voyageurs arabes*, xiii.

experienced, they made their own contributions to the collection of marvels. These accounts were copied widely by later travelers and scholars.[108]

At the same time, from the advent of the Islam, travel had strong religious significance.[109] Although Muslim men of letters are often labelled armchair scholars, not all of them collected information exclusively from written sources. Many members of the literati undertook *al-ṛihla fī ṭalab al-ʻilm* (travel in search of knowledge),[110] undertaking the dangers and vicissitudes of travel in order to receive education from scholars of high reputation in the Muslim world.[111] However, it has to be emphasized that these voyages took place primarily within the domain of the *dār al-Islam* (the abode of Islam) and most knowledge-seekers never crossed the borders of the caliphate. The *dār al-Harb* (the abode of war) was rather imagined, based on vague knowledge acquired by earlier travelers, especially merchants and people of low social stratus.[112] On those occasions, when Muslim men of letters visited foreing lands they did so for political reasons, never motivated by a thirst for knowledge.[113]

All the same, some devoted scholars did not hesitate to go even as far as India and China seeking knowledge. Historians[114] like al-Yaʻqūbī and al-Masʻūdī traveled a great deal in order to see with their own eyes what others wrote down about the lands that, probably, these authors had never visited. Al-Yaʻqūbī, although considered one of the greatest

[108] The earliest images about other peoples transmitted by these miraculous reports enjoyed great popularity and were widely circulated over the centuries. From the beginning of the ninth century, curiosities and marvels found their way into literature, establishing the genre of *ʻAjā'ib*. See the entry on *ʻAdjā'ib* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1, 203.

[109] Ian Richard Netton, "Arabia and the Pilgrim Paradigm of Ibn Battuta: A Braudelian Approach," in *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

[110] At the beginning of the tenth century travel in search of knowledge was still evolving, stimulated by the intellectual growth of Iraqi and Syrian cities, see: Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, 15. After a centuries-long history, the framework of the genre of *ṛihla* was established in the twelfth century. Similarly to other genres, it has to be regarded as a form of literature that conveys information, but the entertaining aspect of the work is at least as important as its edifying nature, see: C. F. Beckingham, "The Ṛihla: Fact or Fiction," in *Golden Roads*, 73.

[111] Travel was dangerous, especially for men of letters who were used to urban lifestyles. Bandits, diseases, and the natural environment presented constant dangers to travelers. Moreover, it was expensive. Even the great historian al-Ṭabarī faced trouble and hardship when traveling in search of knowledge.

[112] Robert G. Hoyland, "History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam," *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, 40. Perceptions of the peoples living beyond the borders of *dār al-Islam* will be discussed in the next chapter.

[113] André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*, 10.

[114] Al-Ṭabarī was also an indefatigable traveler, but he never crossed the borders of the Muslim world.

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historians, was the first in the history of Islam to started traveling in order to write as accurate a geographical work as possible. Furthermore, he was a pioneer in realizing the importance of direct observation (*ʻiyan*) and independent judgment, the means that had been strongly emphasized by al-Ṭabarī.[115] As for al-Masʻūdī, he seems to have made most of the voyages that he claimed, acquiring immense geographical knowledge.[116] Although his main focus was on history, this did not prevent him from taking, similarly to his Greek predecessors, an interest in geography and making vast contributions to the subject. Al-Masʻūdī and his successors also considered the eye as a source of knowledge. The more a scholar traveled the more detailed and accurate knowledge he acquired of the world. In this way, travel and direct observation became indispensable to the historians and geographers of the tenth century. They did not rely exclusively on written sources and oral reports, but they themselves took to the road and collected eye-witness experience. As a consequence, the Muslims possessed a more accurate image of the inhabited world than any other tradition, be they ancient or contemporary with them.

3.3 The sources of this thesis

The sources I use can be divided into four types according to the genre, i.e., geographical and *adab* literature, world history, and encyclopaedias; they are introduced in chronological order.

The *Kitāb al-Masālik waʻl-Mamālik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), the geographical work by Ibn Khurradādhbih is the earliest surviving piece of human geography written between 844 and 848. Little is known about his life; he was of Persian origin, probably born in Khurasan in the 820s. He grew up in Baghdad, receiving an excellent

[115] However, collecting information from travelers also remained an important means of gathering information. Al-Yaʻqūbī himself, while taking part in voyages, used this method to acquire data about lands he did not manage to visit. Having judged the veracity of what he was told and the credibility of the informant, he decided whether the piece of information was worth recording.
[116] Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, 119.

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education, and became a government official and a polymath. He died at the beginning of the tenth century, probably in 911. His *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* describes the main trade routes and provinces of the caliphate, but also includes legends and marvels. Being the first work with this title, Ibn Khurradādhbih is credited with establishing this model of geographical writing. Later scholars relied heavily on him; the *Kitāb al-Masālik* circulated widely.

Al-Ya'qūbī was a historian and geographer of great importance. He was a native of Baghdad who lived in Armenia and in Khurasan under the patronage of the Ṭāhirids. He was an enthusiastic traveler, collecting a significant amount of first-hand information. Being tirelessly interested in faraway lands, he made an outstanding personal contribution to geographical knowledge. His *Kitāb al-Buldān* (The Book of Lands), which deals primarily with the administrative geography of the Islamic lands, was completed in 891. He incorporated not only his personal experiences in his work, but also quoted other authors, and recorded what he heard from other travelers about countries he did not manage to visit. His *Tārīkh* (History), the first universal history written in Arabic, deals with the cultures of pre-Islamic peoples and discusses the history of Islam up to 872. He died in Egypt at the beginning of the tenth century.

Ibn Rusta was a native of Isfahan, but scant information is available about his life. In his *Kitāb al-A'lāḳ al-Nafisa* (The Book of Precious Gems), written sometime between 903 and 913, he discusses numerous subjects, including human geography and history, providing his readers with detailed descriptions of lands lying beyond the borders of the caliphate. As a good *adīb*, Ibn Rusta wrote about all kinds of subjects that might have interested the educated classes of his time.

Al-Ṭabarī, an excellent historian and Qur'an commentator, was born in Amul in 839. At a young age he was trained well in the Qur'an and Tradition. He studied in al-Rayy, Basra,

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Kufah, Baghdad, and sought knowledge while traveling in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. Finally, he settled down in Baghdad, devoting himself to teaching. He died here in 923. His supreme universal history, the *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk* (History of Prophets and Kings) deals with world history from the Creation, the history of the People of the Book and their prophets, pre-Islamic Persian history, the life of Muhammad, and the history of the Islamic world up to 915. Al-Ṭabarī was the first scholar to emphasize the importance of independent judgment, encouraging other scholars to follow his example.

Al-Mas'ūdī was a historian of Iraqi origin. He was born in Baghdad at the end of the ninth century, where he grew up and received an excellent education, but spent a significant part of his life in Egypt. He was an indefatigable globetrotter, traveling extensively within and beyond the borders of the Muslim world, and a scholar approaching his subject from a scientific point of view. Not only did he master the Islamic sciences, but he was also learned in the Greek tradition and ancient history. Furthermore, besides his interest in natural sciences and philosophy, he also recorded marvels. In 943, he composed the famous *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems), which was revised in 947 and 956. The first part of the *Murūj* contains the history of pre-Islamic Arabia up to the time of the Prophet and world history, ethnographic, and geographic descriptions, whereas the second part deals with the history of Islam. Similarly to al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mas'ūdī's personal scientific contribution is invaluable.

Al-Iṣṭakhrī represents the new school of geography founded by al-Balkhī, based on direct observation. No biographical data are available about Iṣṭakhrī. His *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), written at the end of the tenth century, was revised and corrected by his student, Ibn Ḥawqal.

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Ibn Ḥawqal wrote in the second half of the tenth century. He was born in Nasibin and traversed the length and breadth of Muslim lands. His main work, the *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ* (Configuration of the Earth) is a corrected and extended edition of al-Iṣṭakhrī's work.

Al-Maqdisī is an almost unknown author of the tenth century. He wrote an encyclopaedia entitled: *Kitāb al-Bad' wa`l-Tārīkh* (The Book of Creation and History) around 966. The critical approach he takes is exceptional, not to mention his extensive knowledge of different religions and cultures.

Ḥudūd al-'Ālam (The Limits of the World) is a compilation by an anonymous writer of the tenth century. Although the author himself probably never visited the lands described in his work, the *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam* contains a great deal of reliable information on the Eastern part of the world. Like many other pieces of literature of the era, the *Ḥudūd* was based on Jayhānī's lost *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik*, written in the first half of the tenth century.[117]

Al-Gardīzī was a Persian historian, but biographical data about him is scant. His *Zayn al-Akhbār* (The Ornament of Histories) was written between 1049 and 1052 and quotes Jayhānī and Ibn Khurradādhbih. The work deals with the pre-Islamic history of Persia, the history of Muhammad, the caliphs, and the Muslim conquests and comprises short papers on the Greek sciences, India, and ethnographic descriptions.

Little is known about the life of al-Marwazī. He was probably born in Marw and died around 1120. He worked as a physician for the Seljuk sultan, Malik-Shah, and wrote on natural sciences and geography. He owes his reputation to *Tabā'i' al-Hayawān* (The Nature of Animals), a treatise on zoology that contains important descriptions of human geography. Al-Marwazī also relied on the lost *Kitāb al-Masālik* of Jayhānī.

The *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries) composed by Yāqūt al-Hamawī is an encyclopaedia of toponyms. The author, of Greek origin, was born in 1179. Captured by

[117] Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: die Ǧayhani-Tradition (Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, Hudūd al-'Ālam, al-Bakrī und al-Marwazī)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001).

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slave traders, he was sold to a Muslim merchant. His master released him in 1199. Before the Mongol invasion he managed to visit the libraries in Marw, where he spent some years. Having lived a life full of vicissitudes, he died in Aleppo in 1229. The *Mu'jam al-Buldān* was completed in 1228, and, although a compilation that does not contribute anything new to the subject of geography, the work summarizes the geographical knowledge accumulated by Muslim scholars between the ninth and twelfth centuries.

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IV. Views of Tibet

4.1 Tibet in the Muslim Geographical Tradition

With the expansion of the Islamic Empire, Muslims came into direct contact with many foreign peoples, including the Tibetans, who, depending on the ruling political climate, allied themselves with the Muslims or fought against them. As mentioned previously, the systematic collection of information about unknown peoples started during the reign of al-Ma'mūn. These records served military and political purposes; the caliphs wanted to know as much about all the nations living outside their borders as possible, including the powers threatening their interests in Central and Inner Asia. As a result, these data are mostly administrative in nature although some miraculous anecdotes were also preserved.

According to Luciano Petech, Muslims acquired data from three sources about the Tibetan Empire: reports from government officials, geographical and historical literature, and travelers.[118] They might have started to collect information as early as the conquest of Transoxiana in the first half of the eighth century. These early items of information were of a legendary nature; Muslim soldiers might have learned the conquered peoples' knowledge and tales about the Tibetans. As Petech argues, the first records pay attention to legends, which demonstrates the primary interest and receptiveness of the Arabs to the folklore of foreign peoples.[119] In addition, a good deal of knowledge of Tibet was collected during the reign of al-Ma'mūn (813-833) by government officials serving in the borderland of the caliphate and recording administrative data. The information thus accumulated was further enriched by the Persian Jayhānī tradition in the tenth century. Jayhānī and later Persian writers, relying on his

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[118] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella geografia musulmana:" 55-70. In this article the author also argues that the name Tibet does not necessarily refer to the country of Tibet, it refers to Khotan.
[119] Ibid., 56. Since the Alexander legend was known to the Arabs, not to mention the heroic legends of the South Arabian Tubba' conquering the Far East, which is also based on the same story, the Muslims combined their legendary heritage with the newly acquired lore. In this way, Tibet appears in both the Arabic Alexander legend and the Himyarite legend, which will be discussed in detail below.

Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik, composed their works in Khurasan and Transoxiana.[120] The third source that contributed to the growth of knowledge about the Tibetan Empire was reports from Muslim travelers.[121]

The earliest of the three types of sources include the legend of the conquest of Tibet by Alexander the Great or by the *Tubba'* as well as reports on historical events. As a consequence of the weakening of the Chinese Empire and Göktürks, the Muslims and the Tibetans were the two strongest military powers in the eighth and at the beginning of the ninth centuries in the history of Central and Inner Asia; therefore, Muslim sources include accounts of the significant episodes of Muslim-Tibetan encounter. Al-Azraqī, al-Balādhurī, and al-Ṭabarī report on the events of the Arab-Tibetan war, military campaigns, and alliances, as well as the submission of the Tibetan king to al-Ma'mūn and a Tibetan embassy asking for Muslim teachers.[122] These descriptions provide information about historical events up to 818. As Dunlop points out, from that time Muslim writers did not mention Tibet from a historical point of view, probably due to the break of direct connection between the two polities.[123] Since commercial interests were at least as important as political considerations, the sources also mention special products of Tibet such as shields and musk, which will be discussed below.

The authors of the second group of sources, living and composing in Central Asia, were able to collect reliable information about Tibet even after its collapse. These are the works of Jayhānī and other Persian writers such as Gardīzī, Marwazī, Maqdisī, and the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam,* written by an anonymous writer. The *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* is outstanding among these sources. It contains geographical knowledge about Tibet that is not accurate in all cases,

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[120] Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi, "*Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*"
[121] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella geografia musulmana:" 55.
[122] See Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Location and Population of Tibet According to Early Islamic Sources," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarium Hung.* 53 (1989): 163-170, and D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D.," *Islam Tetkikleri Enstitüsu Dergisi* 5 (1973): 301-318.
[123] D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D.:" 312.

but the author gives the correct Tibetan names of some regions as well as other data that do not appear in other works.[124]

As has already been mentioned, according to Petech, there are six general motifs that appear in Muslim sources about Tibet. Two of them are geographical in nature, i.e., Tibet's geographical position and the country as the source of Oxus River. In addition, the authors mention the Himyarite or Alexander legends, the Tibetan ruler as khāqān, and depict Tibet as the land of laughter and musk.[125] Relying on Petech's analysis, I will give an outline of the items of information contained in Muslim sources about Tibet, focusing exclusively on the cultural details.

The conquest of Tibet by Alexander the Great can be found in the works of Ibn Khurradādhbih, al-Ṭabarī, and al-Masʿūdī.[126] The authors mentioning the Himyarite legend are al-Ṭabarī, al-Masʿūdī, al-Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal, Gardīzī, and Yāqūt.[127] The description of Tibet as the land of laughter appears in Ibn Khurradādhbih, Ibn Rusta, al-Masʿūdī, al-Maqdisī, Marwazī, Yāqūt and the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*.[128] Here I only enumerate the sources briefly, since I deal with the Himyarite legend and the anecdote of laughter in detail below.

[124] Vladimir F. Minorsky, "*Hudud al-ʿĀlam*" and Christopher Beckwith, "The Location and Population of Tibet According to Early Islamic Sources:" 168-170.
[125] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella geografia musulmana:" 62.
[126] Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (Leiden: E. J. Brill: 1973), 204-205; Moshe Perlmann, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1987), vol. 4, 94; and al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 2, tr. Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteille (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1914), 249-250.
[127] *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 4, 79-80; al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 352; al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1870), 10; and Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, ed. J. H. Kramers (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1938), 15. For Gardīzī, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982), 128-130. For Yāqūt, see: Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 314.
[128] Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 132; al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 351; M. Huart tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī* (Paris: Ernest Leroux: 1907), 89; Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī on China, the Turks and India: Arabic Text (circa A.D. 1120)* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), 28; Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 92; for Yāqūt, see: Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 314.

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Aside from these two topics, Ibn Khurradādhbih, al-Masʿūdī, the *Ḥudūd al-ʾĀlam*, Gardīzī, Marwazī, and Yāqūt refer to the Tibetan ruler as the khāqān.[129] Since Antiquity, authors had always paid great attention to the political organization of other peoples living beyond the borders of the great civilizations. This subject appears in Muslim sources as well, where political institutions also served as a factor mitigating the purportedly unfavorable effects of the climates on their inhabitants. In addition to the legend of Yemeni roots, which definitely represents the most exclusive version concerning the Tibetans' origin, many Muslim authors also reckoned the Tibetans to be Türks, as they considered many unknown tribes on the eastern and northern fringes Türks. Some of the sources only mention that the Tibetan ruler bears the title of khāqān, but several writers deal with the topic in a more detailed way.[130]

The following short references can be found in al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab*:

> Among the Tibetans some are settled, the others are nomads. The latter, of Türk origin, are innumerable, and no other Türk tribe is equal to them. They are very honored by all the nomadic tribes of the Türk race, because the kingship once belonged to them, and the others believe that the kingship will return to them one day…[131]

> Among all the Türk tribes the most noble are those inhabiting Tibet, because they are the descendants of the Himyars, as we have said above when speaking of the Tubba' who settled in this country.[132]

> A fraction of the descendants of Amur reached the borders of India where the climate had such influence on them that they no longer had the color of the Türks, but rather that of the Indians. They live either in cities or in tents. Another part settled in Tibet, and submitted to a king who was the subject of the Khāqān, but because as we have said, the supremacy of this sovereign has ceased, the inhabitants of Tibet give the title of khāqān to their leader, in memory of the ancient Türk kings who bore the title of the khāqān of khāqāns.[133]

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[129] Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 51; al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 3, 253; Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *Hudūd al-ʾĀlam*, 92; for Gardīzī, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks:" 130. Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī*, 28; for Yāqūt, see: D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 314.
[130] Abu Dulaf also gives a short account of the Tubbat Türks. However, since it is slightly obscure and does not show parallels with any other sources I decided to ignore it.
[131] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 350.
[132] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 3, 253.
[133] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 289.

The *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* reports that: "when the Tubbat-Khāqān dies and from the same tribe no one remains," the people elect a ruler from another tribe.[134] Marwazī repeats the same statement when writing that: "when the Tibetan Khāqān dies childless and there is no one else in the Khāqān`s family, a man from among them is elected and made Khāqān". However, Marwazī adds that the Tibetans resemble the Chinese, the Türks, and the Indians, but they have their own king and their language differs from those of these peoples.[135] The same information was provided by al-Iṣṭakhrī two centuries before Marwazī. Al-Iṣṭakhrī declared that the Chinese and the Tibetan languages are different from the Turkic languages.[136] Al-Maqdisī writes that the Tibetan people is an intermediate category between the Türks and the Indians. They have the flat noses of the Türks, and the dark complexion of the Indians.[137] Yāqūt transmits al-Masʿūdī's description.[138]

The identification of the Tibetans with the Türks seems to have been a common phenomenon in Muslim sources. One of the reasons for this confusion might have been that the Muslims called most non-Persian-speaking nomadic peoples living beyond the Oxus Türks. Moreover, Tibet lay far from the Islamic heartland and its geographical isolation did not make the country a desirable destination for travelers. In addition to geographical inconvenience, as Akasoy emphasizes, the lack of a thriving cultural life and that of a common language also diminished the significance of the country in Muslim eyes.[139] It seems probable that no Muslim traveler ever visited Tibet proper in the Middle Ages and due to the lack of personal observation, Muslim authors had to content themselves with hints of information about the country. From these snippets the writers attempted to create an image

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[134] Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *The Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 93.
[135] Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī*, 28.
[136] Al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 9.
[137] M. Huart tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī*, 59.
[138] D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 314.
[139] Anna Akasoy, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography: A Survey of Arabic and Persian Sources," *Islam and Tibet*, 18.

of Tibet that, in some cases depicted the inhabitants as a Turkic tribe. However, in addition to the lack of accurate knowledge of the region there might have been other factors that facilitated this image. The first explanation may be rooted in the military co-operation between the Tibetans and the different Turkic tribes. There were Tibetan-Türk alliances from the seventh to the early ninth centuries, and without the support of the Türks Tibet would have been unable to accomplish its military achievements. As has already been noted, the term Türk referred not only to Turkic entities, but also to peoples with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who were subordinate to the supreme Türk khāqān and pursued a nomadic lifestyle. However, sources confirm that in 699, in the course of a Tibetan-Türk military expedition, the Tibetan army was led by the Türk khāqān himself.[140] As a consequence of this, the identification of the Türk khāqān as the ruler of the Tibetans might have seemed reasonable and convincing to Muslims who did not know much about the growing new power.

Another explanation for this perception might have stemmed from some real cultural resemblance between the Tibetans and the Türks. Although the Tibetan language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language group, their culture shows striking parallels to those of the Central and Inner Asian peoples, which might have caught the Muslims' attention. As Christopher Beckwith emphasizes, there were many cultural elements shared by most of the peoples of the Eurasian Steppes.[141] One example of this common heritage is the legend of the heavenly origin of the Tibetan king mentioned in the Introduction. This myth was intended to establish the sacred character of the king of Tibet just as much as the supreme rule of the Türk khāqān was also confirmed by his heavenly origin. There are other examples of this common cultural

[140] Christopher Beckwith provides another event which might have confirmed this view. Referring to Chinese sources, he writes that after the khāqān of one of the Onoq tribes had the other khāqān killed, and then committed suicide for unknown reasons, the Western Türks who remained without a leader, submitted to Tibet, see: Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 32-33.

[141] Christopher Beckwith calls the collection of cultural elements shared by the peoples of Central Eurasia the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, see: Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 12.

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complex, for example the *comitatus*, the mountain cult, the importance of gold in society, and other elements that were shared not only by the Tibetans and the Türks, but by most peoples in Inner Asia.[142]

As far as musk is concerned, longer or shorter descriptions are given in Ibn Khurradādhbih, al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mas'ūdī, Ibn Ḥawqal, the *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam*, Gardīzī, Marwazī and Yāqūt.[143] The topic of Tibetan musk is indisputably the most frequently mentioned feature of Tibet. Musk, gathered from muskdeer, was used for a variety of purposes. The first source containing a reference to Tibetan musk is the *Akhbār al-Ṣīn wa'l-Hind* (An Account of China and India). The first half of the work was collected by a merchant called Sulaymān around 851, whereas the second part is attributed to Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, who lived in the tenth century. This book became the most important source for later authors, who widely quoted al-Sīrāfī's work. As Anya King demonstrates, musk was the most prestigious aromatic substance in the Near East and it played a distinguished role in Islamic civilization.[144] Musk, which was introduced to the Arabian Peninsula in pre-Islamic times, was considered valuable, partly due to the fact that it had to be imported from eastern Asia. Its origin in distant lands inevitably contributed to the high respect for it. An expensive commodity, it became the privilege of the rich, and was widely used in perfumery and for medical purposes. However, as King argues, musk bore some spiritual connotations as well. It symbolized purity and holiness, and was connected to the notion of paradise.[145] Tibetan musk was

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[142] For more on cultural similarities see: Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* and Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[143] Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 51; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 179; al-Mas'ūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 353; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*; Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *The Ḥudūd al-'Ālam*, 92; for Gardīzī, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks:" 129; Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī*, 29; for Yāqūt, see: D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 315.

[144] Anya H. King, "The Musk Trade and the Near East in the Early Medieval Period" (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 2007).

[145] Anya H. King, "The Musk Trade and the Near East in the Early Medieval Period, 142; Ibidem, "Tibetan Musk and Medieval Arab Perfumery, *Islam and Tibet*, 145-161; and Anna Akasoy and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, "Along the Musk Routes: Exchanges Between Tibet and The Islamic World," *Asian Medicine* 3 (2007): 217-240.

considered to be of the best quality and Muslim sources often depict the country as the land of musk. The exotic and complex image of this substance in Islamic society most probably contributed to the miraculous image of Tibet. Tibet's immense distance from the center of the Islamic world and its obscurity might have facilitated the formation of the unrealistic perception of the country that was the homeland of the desired precious aromatic substance. The high value of musk is well demonstrated by its appearance in legends as the lavish gift of rulers. Although Ibn Khurradādhbih mentions only Chinese musk as a commodity of his time, he lists Tibetan musk among the presents of the Tibetan king to Alexander the Great. This role is further emphasized by al-Masʿūdī, who refers to the Tibetan King's hypothetical letter to Anūshīrwān. The Tibetan King sent the Persian ruler hundred coats of mail, a hundred bucklers, and four thousand donkey loads of musk as a tribute. Although speaking of Tibet in the time of Anūshīrwān would be an anachronism it demonstrates both the spiritual and material value of musk.

As is claimed by Petech, these four topics formed the backbone of the descriptions of Tibet in Muslim sources. However, other pieces of information are also included sporadically. A few other interesting motifs appear in the works of al-Yaʿqūbī, al-Masʿūdī, al-Maqdisī, Gardīzī, Marwazī, Yāqūt, and in the *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, although these details did not become as widespread as the four examples noted above. The description of Tibet transmitted in al-Yaʿqūbī's *Tārīkh* is a good example of the author's scientific approach. Al-Yaʿqūbī refrained from giving exotic details, focusing on practical information. He writes that Tibetan craftsmen are better than Chinese and that the Tibetans are a wise people, but they are idolators.[146] This is the first reference in Muslim sources to the religion of the Tibetans,[147] and it is confirmed by the Persian authors. The *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, al-Maqdisī and

[146] Al-Yaʿqūbī's statement about the wisdom of the Tibetans is confirmed by al-Maqdisī, who claims that Tibet has a literary and scientific tradition, see: M. Huart, tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī*, 59.
[147] Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 179.

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Gardīzī also mention that the Tibetans worship idols, adding that they have many idol temples, probably referring to Buddhist monasteries.[148] The fact that Muslim authors did not pay more attention to the religious interest of the Tibetans seems to verify the statement that religion played little role in the creation of Otherness by the Muslims.[149] Apart from these details, there are two other stories about the Tibetans that demonstrate the Muslims' passionate interest in the miraculous. The first example is the tale of the Poison Mountain transmitted by al-Maqdisī and Gardīzī and quoted by Yāqūt.[150] Whereas Yāqūt only mentions the existence of the mountain, al-Maqdisī and Gardīzī give a short description, writing that the people approaching it cannot breathe because the mountain exhales dangerous vapor. As a result of that bad vapor, travelers' tongues become thickened and many of them die. Although this phenomenon can be explained as altitude sickness from a scientific point of view, the story clearly shows the way in which Muslims interpreted the curious phenomena they experienced.[151]

The other interesting anecdote is about gold. Ibn Rusta mentions that many gold mines can be found in the land of Tibet without going into details.[152] However, the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* not only claims that the country is rich in gold, but also provides the reader with an interesting story about the Tibetans' attitude to gold. As is written in the *Ḥudūd*, although there is gold in abundance in the mountains of Tibet, the people do not collect it, because of their belief that if anyone collects these nuggets of gold and takes them home "death strikes

[148] Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *The Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 93; M. Huart, tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī*, 59; for Gardīzī, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks:" 131.
[149] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarians in Arab Eyes:" 4.
[150] M. Huart, tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī*, 55; for Gardīzī, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks:" 130; for Yāqūt, see: D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D:" 315.
[151] As Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi point out, this description refers to the symptoms of oxygen deficiency characterizing altitude sickness that travelers experience from 4500 meters above the sea level. Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi, "*Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*", 133.
[152] Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-Aʿlāḳ al-Nafisa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892), 93. Arabic sources often mention Tibetan gold as a gift to powerful rulers. In Ibn Khurradādhbih, Alexander is given 4000 donkey loads of gold, and, according to al-Masʿūdī, Anūshīrwān was also presented with gold by the Tibetan King. Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 204.

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that house until the gold is replaced in its place."[153] Marwazī transmits exactly the same report.[154] Besides the entertaining value of this anecdote, the description is important because it shows a parallel with a later European source. William of Rubruck, a thirteenth-century Franciscan missionary who visited the Mongol court between 1253 and 1255 as the envoy of King Louis IX of France, gives an account of a similar story. Rubruck mentions that Tibet is rich in gold, but he claims that people do collect gold, but they only take as much as they need and put the rest back, because God would deprive them of gold if they take too much.[155]

As one can see, the description of Tibet in Muslim sources is fabulous. Due to the remoteness and isolation of the country, authors did not manage to collect first hand information about its inhabitants, and they had to rely on hearsay information told by travelers who probably did not visit Tibet, either. As a consequence, Muslims who did meet the Türks and gave a detailed account of their lifestyle and customs did not provide their audience with the same types of descriptions of the Tibetans. As a consequence of the lack of direct observation, the authors did not depict them by the general criteria of barbarousness.[156] However, since Tibet did not represent a prestige culture to the Muslims and its people were considered to be similar to the Türks, they were inevitably regarded as barbarous. At the same time, whereas the Otherness of the Türks and other nomadic peoples was demonstrated through the well-established image of the barbarian, the otherness of the Tibetans was emphasized by miraculous anecdotes and in the context of an exotic aromatic substance, musk. Commercial and political considerations also shaped the depiction of Tibet, but the sources clearly reflect the Muslims' primary interest in legends and tales. The two topics that

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[153] Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *The Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 93.
[154] Vladimir F. Minorsky, tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī*, 29
[155] Peter Jackson tr., *The Mission of William of Rubruck*, 158. This superstition was confirmed by the travelogue of the American diplomat William Rockhill, who writes that mining is not allowed in Tibet because if nuggets of gold are removed from the earth no more gold will be found, see: William Woodville Rockhill, *The Land of the Lamas: Notes of a Journey Through China, Mongolia and Tibet* (New York: The Century Co., 1891), 209.
[156] See Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarians in Arab Eye:" 3-18. Yehoshua Frenkel, "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Arabic Geographical Literature," *Mongols, Turks and Others*, 201-241; Ulrich W. Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the Abbasids to Modern Egypt:" 175-196.

captured the imagination of the Muslim writers the most are the Himyarite legend and the story of Tibet as the land of laughter.

4.2 The Legend of the Himyarite Origin of the Tibetans

One of the frequently cited *topoi* about Tibet is the Himyarite[157] origin of its inhabitants. According to this legend, the Himyarites of Yemen, led by their *Tubba'*,[158] left the Arabian Peninsula for the Far East, going as far as China and Tibet, where they left some tribes that became the ancestors of the Tibetan people. The Arabic name of the country, Tubbat, also appears to support this legendary origin.[159]

Luciano Petech claims that the legend was composed in the time of the Arab occupation of Transoxiana in the eighth century, when Yemeni troops fought in the army of the caliphate. During these conquests they could obtain information from local peoples about Tibet whose name was similar to the title of their former powerful South Arabian rulers.[160] Although Petech's argument seems reasonable, the legend might have come into existence earlier than the first half of the eighth century.

The earliest people who are credited with having given literary form to the ancient Yemenite legends and epics and bequeathed them to later authors are the South Arabian 'Abīd or 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya al-Jurhumī[161] and Wahb Ibn Munabbih[162] who first arranged and transmitted the earliest events of the history of South Arabia.[163]

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[157] The first Himyarite Kingdom existed from 115 BC to 300 AD in ancient Yemen. The second Himyarite Kingdom was established around 378 and finally collapsed in 525. Tubba' Shammar Yar'ash and Tubba' Abū-Karīb As'ad Kāmil (385-420), who are credited with the conquests of Persia and Central Asia, were the rulers of the second Himyarite Kingdom, see: J. R. Potter, "Arabia Felix: Israelites, Jews and Christians," *Arabia and the Gulf*, 3-17.

[158] *Tubba'* is the dynastic title of the Himyarite rulers controlling the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula from the late third to the sixth centuries. See the entry of *Tubba'* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, 576.

[159] The Arabic name of Tibet, which later spread in the world, derives probably from the Turkic word 'Töpan' or the Chinese 'T`ou-fan', see: Louis Bazin and James Hamilton, "L`origine du nom Tibet," *Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde* 26 (1991): 244-62.

[160] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella georafia musulmana:" 2.

[161] Modern scholars question whether 'Abīd Ibn Sharya al-Jurhumī was a historical figure. Data about his life are scant; the date and place of his birth are unknown. He might have been born at the end of the sixth or at the beginning of the seventh century, and probably spent almost his whole life in Yemen. Around 663, he visited the court at Damascus, obeying the command of Mu'āwiya (661-680), where he entertained the caliph with the tales

In his *Kitāb al-Tījān fī Mulūk al-Himyar* ('The Book of Crowns concerning the Kings of Himyar'), which is preserved in the recension of Ibn Hishām[164], Wahb commemorates the glorious past of Yemen and the kings` heroic deeds. In the legend transmitted by Wahb, al-Ra'īsh, after receiving precious gifts from India, took to the sea and made an unsuccessful attempt at conquering it. It was al-Ṣa'b Dhū'l-Qarnayn who finally conquered India and China.[165]

The image created by the *Akhbār al-Yaman wa-Ash'āruhā wa-Ansābuhā* ('The History, Poetry, and Genealogy of the Yemen'), attributed to 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya, was also intended to impress the audience, in this case Caliph Mu'āwiya (661-680), with the glorious acts and accomplishments of the Yemenite rulers.[166] According to Ibn Sharya, the Himyarite ruler, Shammar, who lived in the second half of the third century, left for China with the desire to conquer it. On his way, a former advisor to the Chinese Emperor joined Shammar and promised him to lead the Yemeni troops across the wasteland lying at the entrance to China. However, the Chinese official deliberately led the army to get lost in the desert and die of thirst. Shammar ordered the official to be executed and his soldiers to save themselves. Most of them were killed by thirst, but thirty thousand soldiers reached the fertile land of

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of the early rulers of South Arabia. His work is the earliest text of its genre. Crosby accepts his authorship; Elise Werner Crosby, *Akhbār Al-Yaman wa-Ash'āruhā wa-Ansābuhā: The History, Poetry, and Genealogy of the Yemen of 'Abīd b. Sharya Al-Jurhumī* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), 5-18.

[162] Wahb Ibn Munabbih was born in Dhimar as an *abnā'*, a Yemenite of Persian origin. His father had been deployed to South Arabia in pre-Islamic times, and converted to Islam. Wahb himself was a pious Muslim, and, at the same time, deeply devoted to the Yemeni cultural heritage. Having studied jurisprudence, he held the position of *qāḏi*. He became famous for his extensive knowledge of old texts. In addition to the ancient Yemeni history, he also transmitted Jewish materials known as *Isrā'iliyāt* and other materials. He seems to have mastered Syriac and Hebrew. Wahb's date of birth is unknown, but probably he was born at the beginning of the seventh century, considering that Arab authors give the date of his death between 725 and 737 at the age of ninety, see: Raif Georges Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972).

[163] 'Abd al-'Azīz Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 135.

[164]Almost nothing can be known about Ibn Hishām. Likely of Himyarite origin, he was born in Basra, and probably died in 829 or 833. He is known as the editor of the bibliography of the Prophet Muhammad written by Ibn Isḥāq.

[165] Fritz Krenkow, "The Two Oldest Books on Arabic Folklore," *Islamic Culture* 2 (1928): 63.

[166] Elise W. Crosby, *The History, Poetry, and Genealogy of the Yemen*, 7.

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Tibet and settled there.[167] Having received Chinese silk, porcelain, musk, and other precious products from the Indian ambassador, Shammar`s grandson, al-Rā'id, assembled an army and led a military campaign against China, plundering the country and leaving twenty thousand horsemen from Himyar there who continued to claim a South Arabian origin.[168]

As mentioned, only scant data is available about Ibn Sharya and his existence as an historical figure is dubious. However, he is one of the few South Arabian authors who were credited with establishing the framework for ancient Yemenite history in early Umayyad times. He might have been a South Arabian who took the opportunity to tell about the glorious past of his ancestors when Caliph Mu'āwiya (661-680) invited him to court. Early Umayyad interest in the cultural heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia facilitated the composition of works about the legendary history of the South, and contributed to the spread of South Arabian elements in later Muslim literature.[169] As far as Wahb is concerned, he was known to be devoted to the ancient Yemeni tales and legends and drew information from oral traditions as well as from written sources. Aside from reviving South Arabian legends, he utilized Syriac and Jewish sources, and he also combined the Yemeni heritage with foreign tales such as the Alexander legend.[170] These borrowed elements helped the authors create a more magnificent image of South Arabians, and express their consciousness and pride in literary form. As Anna Akasoy and 'Abd al-'Azīz Dūrī point out, this cycle of legends based on the deeds of Alexander was intended to demonstrate, at the time of the northern Arab conquests, the superiority of the South Arabians, and their rich cultural heritage.[171] The Alexander legend can also be found in the Islamic tradition, where Alexander is depicted as a true

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[167] Ibid., 55.
[168] Ibid., 57.
[169] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 69.
[170] Minoo S. Southgate, "Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-Romances of the Islamic Era," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97, no. 3 (1977): 283, and L. E. Goodman, "The Greek Impact on Arabic Literature," *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, 464.
[171] On the establishment of tradition supporting South Arabian legacy, see: Akasoy, "Alexander in the Himalayas:" 1-20; Ibidem, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography," *Islam and Tibet*, 23-4; and 'Abd al-'Azīz Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, 131.

believer fighting for religion, as the bravest and the most righteous of all rulers in the world, and as a person passionately interested in the marvels of distant lands. Ibn Khurradādhbih transmits the legend by writing that Alexander, after having defeated and killed Porus, the king of India, sent his army to Tibet and China, whereas he himself stayed in India and spent seven months there. After receiving the news that the kings of the East had surrendered to him, Alexander left India with thirty thousand soldiers for Tibet. The king of Tibet greeted the conqueror and praised him for his righteousness and trustworthiness, and offered his kingdom to Alexander. Then he presented Alexander with four thousand monkey-loads of gold and musk of the same amount, but Alexander refused to accept them. When he finally did, he commanded the Tibetan king to lead him to China.[172] Al-Ṭabarī who writes about the Himyarite conquest of the Far East also transmits that Alexander became the ruler of the whole earth after conquering India, Tibet, and China, although he does not mention the submission of the Tibetan king and the presents he offered.[173] Apart from the Tibetan king's speech, al-Masʿūdī transmits the same story about Alexander's conquest of China and Tibet as Ibn Khurradādhbih.[174]

Being story-tellers, neither author paid attention to historical accuracy, and thus neither of the works can be regarded as historical writing in the modern sense of the word; they are historical romances[175] in which real events and historical figures are intertwined with

[172] Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik,* 204.
[173] Moshe Perlmann, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 4, 94.
[174] Al-Masʿūdī adds that some scholars tried to identify Dhū'l-Qarnayn with Alexander the Great, but he expresses scepticism towards this view, see: *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 2, 247-248.
[175] As Anna Akasoy argues, the legend of the Himyarites conquering the Far East seems to have been created as a counter-narrative to the Alexander legend by the Southern Arabs, see: Anna Akasoy, "Alexander in the Himalayas:" 1-20.
This portrait was influenced by the Greek Alexander legend by Pseudo-Callisthenes and other, especially Syriac, versions, as well as by Arab folklore and Islamic tradition. Moreover, Alexander even appears in the Qur'an as Dhū'l-Qarnayn. However, certain authors, for example, Ibn Hishām, were convinced that the Dhū'l-Qarnayn of the Qur'an was in fact Ṣaʿb, the king of Yemen, and later writers made no effort to resolve the controversies that evolved around these figures and the deeds attributed to them. For the impact of the Alexander legend see: Anna Akasoy, "Alexander in the Himalayas:" 1-20; Minoo Southgate, "Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-Romances of the Islamic Era:" 278-284; Yehoshua Frenkel, "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Arabic Geographical Literature," *Mongols, Turks and Others*, 225-227; and Andrew Runni Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations* (Cambridge, 1932).

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fictitious and mythical details. Ibn Sharya and Wahb Ibn Munabbih, like both Northern and the Southern Arabs, were passionately interested in ancient fables and legends. The world in their eyes was inhabited by miraculous creatures, heroes and rulers visiting or conquering faraway, no less miraculous lands. These stories reflect not only the Arabian heritage but also Persian, Greek, and Indian influence on Arabic legends. South Arabian lore assimilated and combined stories of different cultural traditions, including oriental elements, and invented a model legend from which later Muslim authors could draw inspiration.[176] One of the borrowed components seems to have been the conquest of China and India; moreover, Ibn Sharya's work contains numerous references to peoples who must have been unknown to the Arabs in the first century of Islam.[177]

One of these peoples Ibn Sharya mentions is Tibet, which raises the question of whether South Arabians were aware of the existence of Tibet in the second half of the seventh century. Since storytellers enthusiastically combined real historical events with anachronistic historical details, it might be that the word Tibet is only an interpolation by a later writer who wanted to impress his audience or it was an attempt to integrate the growing geographical knowledge of his time into the Yemeni heritage, further emphasizing the greatness of South Arabians and their military accomplishments. Another explanation may be that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were informed about foreign peoples by merchants taking part in long-distance trade between China, India, and the Middle East. The Far East had already been known to the Greeks, not to mention the military expedition of Alexander the Great against India in 326 BC, and commercial and diplomatic relations

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[176] H. T. Norris, "Fables and Legends in pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, 374-386; and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[177] As Crosby points out, the table of nations in the Book of Genesis was known to early Muslim authors, but only scant information could be known about the Türks, the Slavs or other distant peoples. At the same time, it seems unlikely, although not impossible, that Ibn Sharya participated in the earliest raids of the Arabs in Central Asia and acquired information from local peoples. It cannot be proved that Ibn Sharya did not know these peoples, see: Elise W. Crosby, *The History, Poetry, and Genealogy of the Yemen*, 98.

established thereby continued to exist.[178] The fact that the occupation of China and India was incorporated into the legendary history of Yemen shows the importance, prestige, and, at the same time, exotic nature these remote civilizations had in the eyes of Muslim literati, who attributed to them wisdom and sciences worthy of transmission as well as precious luxury products they needed. Since there was no thriving cultural or scientific tradition in Tibet that could interest the West at that time, it is a question why any South Arabian author would have mentioned the country at all. Furthermore, Tibet was also added to the list of the conquered countries in the Arabic Alexander legend. One explanation may be that, as has already been mentioned, Tibet abounded in musk, a substance that was such a desired product in the Middle East. This abundance in a product that was needed in the West might have raised desires to conquer that remote part of the world and discover its other wonders as well. Already the Greeks considered the fringes of the *oikoumene* to be places where some of the rarest and most excellent "blessings of nature" could be found.[179] Tibet might have been regarded by the Muslims as the end of the inhabited world, and as such it had to be conquered.

However, it is not impossible that in South Arabia there was knowledge about the country as early as the late seventh century. As has already been mentioned, Wahb Ibn Munabbih's father, a native of Herat, was one of the numerous Persians sent to pre-Islamic Yemen during the reign of Anūshīrwān (531-579). As the Yemeni soldiers deployed in Transoxiana had the opportunity to gain information about the rising Tibetan Empire, so the Persians could have spread their knowledge of Central Asia in South Arabia. The Yemeni authors in this study were keen to glorify the deeds of their ancestors and the story of the colonization of Tibet was a good means of doing so. With the incorporation of Tibet, in

[178] Anya H. King, *The Musk Trade and the Near East in the Early Medieval Period*, 128-136; David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," *Iran* 11 (1973): 29-49; Ildikó Ecsedy, "Early Persian Envoys in Chinese Courts," *Studies in the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia*, ed. János Harmatta (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972), 153-162.
[179] Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 235.

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addition to China and India, into the tradition, the Himyarites became the legendary rulers of the three most significant empires of the Far East -- a success that symbolized their superiority over other lands. Not only did they conquer the two great powers of the East, but they also incorporated the third military force, the Tibetan Empire, into the South Arabian legacy by referring to the Himyarite origin of its people. Be that as it may, Tibet does not appear in these early sources as a geographical entity, but rather as a mysterious land that, despite its remoteness and geographical isolation, was conquered by the powerful *Tabābiʿa* of Yemen. The farther away a land was located, the greater the miraculous character was attributed to it. This remote location might have been used by the authors to create a sense of otherness and to satisfy their audience's thirst for exotic details.

This pre-Islamic heritage continued to be influential under the Abbasids, when story-telling flourished.[180] *Adībs* made use of legends and tales of South Arabian and Persian origins in order to entertain and educate their audience. These miraculous stories found their way into other genres of Arabic literature, and even appeared in the works of world history. Even scholars with critical judgment transmitted the Himyarite legend, in some cases without expressing any opinion about its authenticity.

Al-Ṭabarī, in his *History* written at the beginning of the tenth century, repeated the story transmitted by Ibn Sharya, but with some modification. According to him, al-Rā'id sent one of his men, Thābit[181], to China with a large army, but he was wounded. Then, al-Rā'id took the lead, plundered the country and slaughtered the population. Before returning to

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[180] H. T. Norris, "Fables and Legends," *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, 136-145.

[181] The character of Thābit might have been influenced by the figure of the famous poet of the Umayyad period, Thābit Kutna, who had taken part in expeditions on the eastern borders of Khurasan and against Transoxania, where he was killed in 728, see: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, 429. The figure of Thābit appears only in the works of al-Ṭabarī and Gardīzī, which will be discussed below.

Yemen, he left twelve thousand horsemen from Himyar in Tibet, who, as al-Ṭabarī puts it, "were Arabs in constitution and pigmentation" even in his own time.[182]

Al-Masʻūdī writes the following in his *Murūj al-Dhahab*, quoting the poem of Diʻbil[183]:

> Tibet is a separate kingdom from China. The population consists largely of Himyarites including some descendants of the Tubbaʻ…
> Therefore this country was named after the troops of Himyarites who had settled down after having been placed in garrisons. It started to be called Thubbat because of their permanent settlement. This etymology is still the most widespread among those that were proposed. Thus, Diʻbil b. ʻAlī al-Khuzāʼī boasts of this fact in a poem where he is disputing with al-Kumayt[184]. He exalts the descendants of Qahtan[185] above the ones of Nizār[186]:
>
> They are those who put an inscription on the gate of Marw,
> and on the gate of China, and they are those who wrote.
> They are who gave the name Shimr to Samarqand,
> and planted the Tibetans there.
>
> …In ancient times, the kings bore the title of Tubbaʻ after the name of the Tubbaʻ, the king of Yemen. Afterwards, as a consequence of the vicissitudes of the times, the language of the Himyarites disappeared and was replaced by the language of neighboring peoples, and the kings adopted the title of khāqān.[187]

In the chapter on the kings of the Yemen, al-Masʻūdī adds that Shammar went to the East, built Samarqand, and left some Himyar tribes there, as well as in China and Tibet.[188]

[182] Moshe Perlmann, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol 4, 94.
[183] Diʻbil ibn ʻAlī al-Khuzāʼī (765-860) was an Abbasid poet who satirized the caliphs frequently. His birthplace is unknown, but probably he was a native of Kufa, where he grew up. Later, he served as governor in Tokharistan. See the entry "Diʻbil" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 2, 248-249.
[184] Al-Kumayt, a poet born in Kufa in 680, by profession was a schoolteacher in one of the mosques of the city, and was considered to be extremely educated. Later his poetic talent gave him a great career. He became famous for his poem called al-Mudhahhaba directed against the Yemenites. Al-Kumayt was killed by Yemenite soldiers in 743. See the entry Al-Kumayt in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 5, 374-375.
[185] The term of the peoples of Qahtan refers to peoples of Southern Arabian descent, especially from Yemen. They traced their origins back to the mythical Qahtan who is identified with the biblical Yoktan. The Himyar are one of the groups descended from Qahtan. See: R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (New York: C. Sribner's sons, 1907), 17.
[186] The people of Nizār refers to the Arabs of the north, although the term cannot be identified with a historical tribe. The term was an invention which was often contrasted with the people of Qahtan, i.e. the Southern Arabs and served primarily political purposes. See the entry Nizār b. Maʻadd in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 8, 82.
[187] Al-Masʻūdī, *Les prairies d`or*, vol. 2, 350.
[188] Luciano Petech, "Il Tibet nella geografia musulmana:" 4.

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As far as the etymology of the word Tubbat is concerned, al-Masʻūdī gives two possible theories. According to the first explanation, Tubbat was a corrupted form of the word *Tubbaʻ*. The second etymology, which al-Masʻūdī claims was the most widespread, asserts that the word derives from the Arabic verb *thabata*, which means "to stay", referring to the soldiers who settled in the country.[189]

Al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal did not pay too much attention to the legend and each devote only one sentence to this topic when writing that Tibet has its own king who is said to have originated from the dynasty of the Tubbaʻ, but they express their incredulity by adding that God knows best.[190]

In his toponymical lexicon (*Muʻjam al-Buldān*) written in 1228, Yāqūt quotes al-Masʻūdī, adding some further information:

> Tibet is so called by the men of Himyar who were established Thubbita and reared there. Then the *th* was changed to *t*, because *th* is not found in the language of the non-Arabs. The story is that Tubbaʻ al-Aqran marched from al-Yaman till he crossed the Jaiḥūn (Oxus), passed the city of Bukhara and came to Samarqand, which was waste. He built it and continued there. Then he marched towards China through the lands of the Turks for a month, till he came to broad lands, rich in water and pasturage. There he built a great city, and settled in it 30000 of his companions who were unable to march with him toChina. He named it Thubbat. Diʻbil b. ʻAlī al-Khuzāʻī boasts of that in a qaṣīdah in which challenges al-Kumait:
>
> It is they who wrote on the gate of Marv,
> and on the gate of China they were the writers.
> It is they who gave Samarqand its name in ancient times,
> and they who planted there the Tibetans.
>
> Its people, as some assert, like the Arabs, to the present time. They are skilled in horsemanship and brave, and have subdued all the different kinds of Turks who are round about them. Formerly they called everyone who reigned over them Tubbaʻ, in imitation of the first of them. The time wrought its changes, their outward appearance and language changed to those of their Turkish neighbors, and they called their kings khāqān.[191]

[189] Al-Masʻūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 3, 224.
[190] Al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 10. and Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, 15.
[191] D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th Centuries A. D.:" 314.

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The interpretation of the legend given by the Persian author Gardīzī is a striking example of Abbasid story-telling based on the South Arabian tradition. The description incorporated in the *Zayn al-Akhbār*, written around 1050, is much more detailed and more miraculous than the other records. According to Gardīzī, there was a famous man of the Himyarites, Thābit, who was an official of the king of Yemen, who was called *Tubba'*. When the king appointed him to be governor, Thābit's mother sent a letter to her son in which she told about one of the great kings who had gone to the Far East and arrived in a country of incredible natural beauty and wealth.[192] Having read the lines of his mother, Thābit mustered a powerful army and left for this country. After arriving in Tibet he recognized all the features previously described, and started rejoicing. Then suddenly darkness set in and Thābit was lifted up by demons and was put down on top of a high mountain where he was confined for twenty days. Then the Devil (*Iblīs*) appeared to him in the guise of an old man and forced him to become his servant and to have sexual intercourse with him. Afterwards,

> the Devil made Thābit`s hair hang down exactly like women's hair, hung coral beads on him, brought a turban and bound it on his forehead, and then took a louse from Thābit`s flank, threw it into his mouth and swallowed it, saying that whoever wants that his life should be prolonged and that he should have no enemies, must eat of this animal.[193]

Then the Devil commanded Thābit to kill seven of his commanders, promising him the country and the title of khāqān in return. Then, when the Devil brought him down from the mountain, they saw a man from Thābit`s army who told them that after the disappearance of their leader discord had occurred among the people. When the man asked Thābit what had happened to him, the Devil answered that he had been taken to God by angels who had sent him back with orders. When Thābit arrived back in the camp, he acted in accordance with the commands of the Devil, killed the seven commanders, and became khāqān. As Gardīzī summarizes, this is why "Tibetans eat lice, sodomize one another, let their hair hang down

[192] Here Gardīzī refers to another often-quoted characteristic of Tibet when writing that the game of this country is the muskdeer, see: A. P. Martinez, "Gardīzī`s Two Chapters on the Turks:" 129.
[193] Ibid., 129.

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like women" and "the Khāqān of Tibet pretends that he has come from heaven and has a cuirass of light."[194]

The story transmitted by Gardīzī is a masterly example of combining the Islamic and foreign cultural elements. Although the Islamic elements dominate in Thābit's legend, it also includes some accurate ethnographic information about Tibet. Kidnapping, the protagonist descending from the sky, and the fertile and rich land can all be found in other Islamic legends and tales.[195] Probably, Gardīzī, upon hearing about the myth of the Tibetan kings' origin, who descended from heaven with the help of a sky rope and returned there at the end of their earthly rule, attempted to incorporate the familiar story into the framework of Muslim story-telling. However, the fact that this myth seems not to appear in any other Muslim sources suggests that Gardīzī might have collected this and other pieces of information about the Tibetans in person. His description of the appearance of Tibetan people shows parallels with later ethnographic records that verify the authenticity of Gardīzī's knowledge.[196] However, besides the accuracy of information, the story is also a good means of depicting the Other. As van Leeuwen argues, Islamic tales, especially those from The Thousand and One Nights, contain a system of boundaries that divide the heterogeneous geographical world into different parts. Not only geographical boundaries, for example, mountains and deserts, separate these parts of the world.[197] Enclosed, half-open, and natural spaces can also serve as borders, not to mention supernatural boundaries.[198] These symbols also form the backbone of Thābit's story. Thābit, who left his home, crosses the boundary separating the world he belongs to from the realm of the unknown. This unknown realm is not only geographically

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[194] Ibid., 130.
[195] See: Francesca Bellino, "Tamīm a-Dāri the Intrepid Traveller: Emergence, Growth and Making of a Legend in Arabic Literature," *Oriente Moderno* 89, no. 2 (2009): 197-225; and Hasan M. El-Shamy, *A Motif Index of The Thousand and One Nights* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2006).
[196] William Woodville Rockhill, *Notes on the Ethnology of Tibet* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), 243-244; and David MacDonald, *Cultural Heritage of Tibet* (New Delhi: Light&Life Publishers, 1978), 157-158, 164.
[197] Richard van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 23.
[198] Ibid., 23.

determined, but it is also a magical world. The story contains many types of boundaries, including the line between his home and the other parts of the world, and the top of the mountain, which is one of the natural spaces symbolizing a boundary. Moreover, Thābit also enters the supernatural realm when he is kidnapped by *Iblīs*. The story reflects the idea that a person going far from home and finding himself in a strange land unavoidably experiences mysterious things that might be dangerous to him.[199] These mysteries can be those of nature or supernatural power. The distance between the known and unknown lands further enhances the miraculous nature of the new place. A remote country which was separated by seas, mountains or deserts as well as by taboos from the known world and was located on the extremities of the earth had the strongest mysterious character.[200] Tibet, which was geographically isolated and lay far from the central part of the caliphate, perfectly fulfilled these requirements. As a result, one can assume with Anna Akasoy that Tibet might have symbolized the end of the world for Muslims, where geography was gradually replaced by cosmography.

At the same time, Gardīzī also makes use of some practices of the Barbarian in order to emphasize otherness when he relates the sodomizing character of the Tibetans, the feminization of men, and their strange custom of eating lice. Sodomy and the feminization of men had already been regarded as bad by the Greeks, and medieval Muslims also considered strange sexual practices and profligate sexuality to be the manifestations of barbarousness.[201] The sodomizing character of the Türks was one of the favorite topics of Muslim authors when writing about them and about their customs.[202] Besides sexual practices, the diet of the

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[199] Ibid., *The Thousand and One Nights*, 122.
[200] Richard van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 121.
[201] Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience*, 124; and Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarian in Arab Eyes:" 7.
[202] Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, ed., *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 47-68.

nomads was another subject to which the Muslims paid great attention.[203] Since the Türks had many strange eating habits in the eyes of urban people, Muslim travelers might have considered lice and other insects to be part of the nomadic diet. Since Gardīzī provides some authentic information about the Tibetans it is possible that they ate lice.[204] However, a parallel to this custom appears in Ibn Fadlān, who reports that the members of a Turkic tribe, the Bashghirs "will pursue one (louse) through the seams of his coat and crack it with his teeth".[205] This observation obviously does not prove that either the Tibetans or the Bashghirs ate lice. We can only see the way in which Gardīzī and Ibn Fadlān interpreted what they observed. As both of them belonged to the urban elite and as such they were alien to a nomadic lifestyle, they probably misinterpreted a custom and that misinterpretation proved to be one more trope to stress the difference between the Muslims and the Others.[206]

4.3 Tibet as the Land of Laughter

Another frequently cited motif in Muslim sources concerning Tibet is about laughter. Since laughter is a universal phenomenon, it is necessary to, first of all, pay some attention to the basic meaning of laughter in human life. Although it is a fundamental aspect of life in all societies, the cause provoking laughter differs from culture to culture.[207] In most cases,

[203] Yehoshua Frenkel, "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in the Middle Ages," *Mongols, Turks and Others*, 213-214.

[204] Although Anna Akasoy writes that the louse symbolizes long life in Tibetan tradition, I have not as yet found any reference to this statement in the literature. Norbu Chopel transmits a Tibetan superstition about this insect. According to the belief, the sudden appearance or disappearance of lice predicts death and it is not the sign of fortune. Moreover, people have to avoid killing lice on the fifteenth day of each month, "otherwise their karmic wisdom will diminish." Anna Akasoy, "Alexander in the Himalayas:" 6; Norbu Chopel, *Folk Culture of Tibet* (New Delhi: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1983), 57., 102.

[205] Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, tr., *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2012), 23.

[206] It is also possible that the two authors deliberately used the experienced habit in order to express the immense difference between the Muslims and the barbarous Türks or Tibetans. A good technique for depicting Otherness was to arouse fear by reporting on unnatural customs and habits about which civilized peoples did not even want to know. Eating insects was one of these fearsome practices that emphasized the inhuman behavior of the people consuming it. See: http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/ct.sa.fear.html (Last accessed: May 2013)

[207] Albrecht Classen, "Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical and Psychological Reflections, also an Introduction,"

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scholars discuss laughter in connection with humor, and consider it to be a response to a stimulus. The study of these stimuli gives an insight into the cultural values and morals of a society.[208] According to the oldest theory of laughter, people laugh in order to express their feeling of superiority over others.[209] The incongruity theory represents a different point of view, considering laughter a reaction of people who experience something unusual or unexpected. This stimulus can be anything that does not fit into the cultural patterns of the observer.[210] With the widening of geographical horizons, the number of these stimuli increased. In the course of trade, conquests or pilgrimage, peoples with different cultural backgrounds came into contact with each other and acquired information about the others. This knowledge of foreign peoples became part of the cultural heritage of the observers and the collected pieces of information were transmitted to later generations.[211] As a result, later authors worked within the stereotypical framework established by their predecessors when writing about other peoples and their funny, laughable, even ridiculous customs. Late Antique authors applied the combination of these two theories and made puns on the peoples they considered barbarians.[212]

However, in Muslim sources it is the barbarous people of Tibet who laugh and their unknown and strange land has such a curious impact on foreigners that they also reported to become overwhelmed with joy while staying in the country.

Ibn Khurradādhbih reports that when a foreigner arrives in Tibet, he experiences, without knowing why, a feeling of happiness and well-being that persists until he leaves the

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Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 12.

[208] Apte L. Mahadev, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 147.

[209] John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 4.

[210] The third main theory of laughter is the relief theory which regards laughter as a safety valve relieving psychical pressure, see John Morreall: *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 15. Carnival laughter demonstrates well this theory. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rableais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[211] Guy Halsall, "Funny Foreigners: Laughing with the Barbarians in Late Antiquity," *Humor, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 92.

[212] Apte L. Mahadev, *Humor and Laughter*, 108.

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country.[213] Ibn Rusta quotes Ibn Khurradādhbih word for word.[214] The author of the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* writes that "One of the marvels of Tibet is that whoever visits it, without any reason, becomes (of) smiling (countenance) and merry heart until he leaves that country."[215] Al-Maqdisī gives a short account of the same story.[216] Marwazī also mentions that "a particular feature of their country is that whoever enters in and settles in it becomes ever gay and smiling without knowing the reason for it, and never a sad (face) is seen in it" when writing about Tibet.[217] Al-Masʿūdī ignores the miraculous details, but he also has some information to add about the cheerful character of the Tibetans.[218] He applies a scholarly approach when using the theory of the climates in order to explain this unusual phenomenon. He reports that people are always happy and smiling, that sadness and anxieties affect neither the old nor the young. He uses humor pathology when telling that the humor of the blood dominates both humans and animals in that country. As a result, everybody smiles and so do the animals. Even grief does not affect people and they do not indulge in much mourning when someone dies.[219] Yāqūt quotes al-Masʿūdī's description word for word.[220]

With the exception of al-Masʿūdī and Yāqūt, who represent a more sober approach to the subject, the authors, exclusively Persians, report the same exotic story. As Melikian-Chirvani argues, there are some allusions to the visits of Persians to Tibet in Persian literature. He suggests that this legend "must have originated in Iranian travellers' oral accounts of the smiling images of Buddhist iconography and the contented expressions of Tibetan bonzes."[221] Although the Persian influence cannot be ignored, Akasoy points out that

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[213] Ibn Khurrdadādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 170.
[214] Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-Aʿlāk al-Nafisa*, 82.
[215] Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 92.
[216] M. Huart tr., *Le livre de la creation et de l'histoire de Moṭahhar ben Ṭāhir el-Maqdisī*, 89.
[217] Vladimir F. Minorsky tr., *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī*, 28.
[218] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. 1, 351.
[219] Anna Akasoy claims that it was al-Bakrī, the eleventh-century Andalusian author, who first added these pieces of information to the anecdote. However, al-Bakrī seems to have quoted al-Masʿūdī, see: Anna Akasoy, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography: A Survey of Arabic and Persian Sources," *Islam and* Tibet, 32.
[220] D. M. Dunlop, "Arab Relations with Tibet in the 8th and early 9th centuries A.D.:" 312.
[221] Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Iran to Tibet," *Islam and Tibet*, 94.

it was Jāḥiẓ of Basra who first mentioned the happiness of those visiting Tibet and who provided the later authors with the pattern of the anecdote.[222] Jāḥiẓ, who was an *adīb* with the primary aim of entertaining his audience and making them laugh, reports that: "the merchants of Tibet maintain that whoever stayed in the heart of Tibet is overwhelmed with joy; he does not know the reason for it, and does not stop smiling, laughing without astonishment, until he departs from it".[223] Jāḥiẓ found entertainment so important that he incorporated some interesting stories and jokes even in his purely scientific works.[224] He had a special attitude to laughter and discussed it often, considering it to be a basic characteristic of human nature, whereas other Muslim scholars claimed laughter to be unnatural.[225] As a result, it is difficult to decide whether Jāḥiẓ referred to something concrete or this account served only the purpose of entertaining and the authenticity of the transmitted pieces of information was of secondary importance. Jāḥiẓ came from a lower social class, and kept in touch with people of the lower social strata including sailors. As a result, he might have gathered information from these travelers and dedicated his knowledge to literary purposes without paying attention to accuracy.

Jāḥiẓ's example demonstrates the complex and sometimes controversial nature of laughter in Muslim society. The Muslim perception of laughter was influenced by the Greek, and probably the Judeo-Christian approaches to the subject. The study of laughter started as early as the time of Plato and the basis of the theories of laughter was laid by Greek

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[222] Anna Akasoy, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography: A Survey of Arabic and Persian Sources," *Islam and Tibet, 28*. Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr b. Maḥbūb al-Kinānī al-Baṣrī was a famous Abbasid theologian and *adīb*. He was born in Basra around 776 and died at the end of 868. He did not travel further than Syria, however, he kept in touch with people of lower social strata. He wanted to stimulate his readers' critical examination. In his Kitāb al-Ḥayawān (Book of Animals) he deals with numerous subjects in addition to zoology.

[223] Anna Akasoy, "Tibet in Islamic Geography and Cartography," *Islam and Tibet*, 29.

[224] Charles Pellat, "Al-Jāḥiẓ," *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, 78-95.

[225] Referring to God's saying in the Qur'an claiming "that it is he who makes men laugh and weep, that it is he who makes men live and die," Jāḥiẓ relates laughter to life. He adds that the Prophet and the saints also laughed and enjoyed jokes and jests. His argument also represents a more scientific approach to laughter when asserting that laughter enriches babies' blood, see: Charles Pellat, ed., *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ: Translations of Selected Texts* (London: Routledge: 1969), 239.

authors.[226] Aristotle regarded laughter as a human characteristic and as the dividing line between humans and animals.[227] Relying on Greek sources, Muslim authors formulated their own opinions about laughter, speculating on its causes from a medical point of view and discussing its effects on the body. In Muslim scientific tradition, laughter was regarded as an indicator of astonishment, insanity, and loss of control.[228] As for the religious aspect of laughter, the Greeks, the Romans, but especially the Jews and early Christians considered laughter to be a serious weakness of character; only moderate laughter was allowed and accepted.[229] The Judeo-Christian attitude to laughter is well demonstrated by the fact that all the examples of laughter in the Old Testament can be considered mocking laughter.[230]

Despite the strictness of Islam, Muslim scholars were interested in the causes and origins of laughter.[231] Moreover, Muslim believers loved humor and jokes. Naturally, there were some theologians and ascetics who refused to laugh, but laughter was not forbidden to Muslims, although it is modest smiling that was recommended.[232]*Adab*, as noted in the case of Jāḥiẓ, contained many jokes and these funny stories and anecdotes were welcomed by the audience.[233] Some authors considered laughter a means of helping people collect energy, since having laughed at a joke, they could return to their duties with renewed power.[234] However, the measure of laughter was important, and Muslims had to avoid overdoing it.

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[226] Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge: 1997).
[227] Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.
[228] Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1956), 133-134.
[229] Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 66.
[230] Ibid., 24.
[231] Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, 2.
[232] Christopher Melchert, "The Piety of the Hadith Folk," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 34, no. 3 (2002): 425-439.
[233] Charles Pellat, "Seriousness and Humour in Early Islam," *Islamic Studies* (1963), 359.
[234] G. J. H. van Gelder, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 3 (1992): 83-108 and 169-190. Gelder quotes Jāḥiẓ, Rosenthal quotes an-Nuwayrī who are of the same opinion about laughter, see: Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, 5. This approach is actually a less elaborated version of the relief theory.

Even the prophet himself laughed or smiled sometimes, although only for good reason, i.e., astonishment or joy.[235]

As far as religious literature is concerned, laughter occurs only a few times in the Qur'an and, similarly to the Old Testament, in most cases it correlates with mockery. Laughter appears primarily as an expression of religious superiority, when infidels laugh at and mock the believers, and it is also regarded as a symbol of disbelief in God and the prophet. Only three of these few references do not depict laughter as a sinful act; laughter is portrayed only in one case as a reward for true believers on the Day of Judgment.[236] Although laughter was considered to be a human feature and no laughing on the part of God is mentioned in the Qur'an, in Hadith literature some references can be found which discuss God's laughter. In these Hadiths, God's laughter can be considered mockery when He laughs at the disbelievers, but also love when the laughter of God appears to believers.[237] Considering these examples, it can be claimed that laughter does not have an unambiguous reputation in Islam and it has rather negative connotations.

However, considering Muslims' interest in myths and legends, it seems more probable that the description of Tibet as the land of laughter has no Islamic connotations and might have been influenced by Inner or East Asian lore. As was mentioned above, Melikian-Chirvani is of the opinion that the information in which this anecdote is rooted was spread by Iranian travelers and the story of laughter might have referred to the happy faces of Buddhist monks and those of Buddha statues. However, Persians were familiar with Buddhist monks and iconography almost a millennium prior to the seventh-century introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. As a consequence, it seems quite unlikely that Iranian travelers would have paid

[235] Ludwig Ammann, *Vorbild und Vernunft: Die Regelung von Lachen und Scherzen im mitteralterlichen Islam* (Hildesheim: Olms Georg AG, 1993), 42-69.

[236] For more on the subject consult the entry on Laughter, *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), vol. 3, 146-149; and Georges Tamer, "The Qur'ān and Humor," *Humor in der arabischen Kultur*, ed. George Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), vol. 8, 3-28.

[237] For the types of God's laughter, see: Livnat Holzman, "Does God Really Laugh? Appropriate and Inappropriate Descriptions of God in Islamic Traditionalist Theology," *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 165-200.

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any attention to the smiling Buddhist icons or statues. However, Buddhism might have facilitated the birth of this legend in another way. Miraculous lands exist in many Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions where, depending on the religion, believers wish to be reincarnated or enter this realm still in their lives. The best known mythical realm is probably Shambhala of the Buddhist Kālacakra tradition.[238] The depiction of Shambhala in Kālacakra literature was influenced by the Hindu myth of Kalki, which can be found in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*. Hindu tradition portrays Shambhala as a mere village of unknown location where Kalki, the Brahman warrior, will be reincarnated in the future and rid the earth of unbelievers.[239] This legend was borrowed by the Kālacakra tradition, whose authors modified the myth and depicted Shambhala as a holy land of Buddhist men enclosed by snowy mountains. This tradition came into existence in the eleventh century, so it could not have been known to any ninth-century Muslim traveler. The reason why I mention Shambhala here is that this tradition had the greatest impact on Western perceptions of Tibet.[240] However, similar myths about this kind of miraculous realm can also be found in other earlier traditions, for example, the Western Paradise of Sukhāvatī in the Pure Land schools of Buddhism, which is depicted as the land of joy and splendor.[241] Moreover, the pre-Buddhist Tibetan Bon religion also tells about a holy land which is imaginary but can also be found in the material world. This realm is called 'Ol mo lung rings, the cradle of the Bon tradition, which is enclosed by high mountain ranges, and people without miraculous power cannot enter it.[242] What is common in these teachings is the depiction of the land as a

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[238] Geshe Lhundub Sopa, Roger Jackson, and John Newman, *The Wheel of Time: The Kalachakra in Context* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1985).
[239] Dan Martin, "'Ol-mo-lung-ring, The Original Holy Place," *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Tony Huber (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1999), 270.
[240] Martin Brauen, Renate Koller, and Markus Vock, *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* (Weatherhill, 2004).
[241] Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 201-209.
[242] Samten G. Karmay, "A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon," *The Arrow and the Spindle*, 104-107; and Dan Martin, "'Ol-mo-lung-ring, The Original Holy Place," *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places*, 258-301.

paradise-like place where beauty and happiness prevail. Reaching and entering these realms either on the supernatural or material level were the ultimate desire of believers, be they Buddhists or others. However, there is another common factor shared by these depictions, namely that all of the above-mentioned traditions tell about a place enclosed by the highest mountains. The symbol of mountain appears in Hindu, Buddhist and Bon cosmology as well as in the beliefs of Inner and East Asian folks; and in all cases it links the lower and upper realms. The legend of the first Tibetan king who descended from heavens have already been mentioned several times in this paper, but here I would like to emphasize another detail of the myth. King Gnya khri btsan po descended on top of a mountain which can be considered a passage between the world of humans and the upper realms or heavens.[243] According to their myths of origin, so did numerous nomadic founding fathers of Inner Asian as well as Japanese dynasties. The motif of descent from heaven was intended to prove the celestial ancestry of the first rulers and their successors.[244] In the beliefs of all these peoples, which indisputably are of Inner Asian origin, mountain symolized the connection with the ancestors or protecting spirits and through them with the upper realms. With the introduction of Buddhism to some of these nomadic peoples the role of the mountain was transformed. Although the mountain remained the link between the human and the celestial spheres, its significance increased, especially in cosmology. As has been mentioned, the Hindu tradition heavily influenced both Buddhist and Bon teachings, which adopted the Hindu cosmological elements including the concept of the great world mountain. According to Hindu cosmology, Mount Mēru constitutes the center of the universe, penetrating it from the lowest realms to the heavens and it is considered to be the abode of gods. The sun, the moon and the stars revolve around Mēru surrounded by seven mountain ranges. Furthermore, as Hindu doctrines influenced other religions, it shows parallels with Zoroastrian teachings, according to which

[243] Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire*, 231.
[244] Manabu Waida, "Symbolism of "Descent" in Tibetan Sacred Kingship and Some East Asia Parallels," 62.

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the great world mountain Harā is the axis of the universe, around which the stars and the planets revolve, and it is the source of all other mountains. The similarity between the two cosmological systems would be of little significance itself if the Zoroastrian tradition did not contain a legend related to laughter.[245] According to this, Zoroaster was born laughing and not crying, which would have been natural. Although the birth of religious founders are usually accompanied by miracles, Zoroaster's laughter is still uncommon among these miraculous events. Whereas other religions found laughter objectionable, it seems that Zoroastrians did not regard it as a sinful act; quite the contrary, laughter seems to have been the manifestation of the supernatural or joy. Considering this unusual interpretation of laughter and that the world mountain plays an important role in numerous Iranian legends,[246] our Muslim authors might have drawn inspiration from ancient traditions when transmitting or shaping this entertaining anecdote of Tibet. It would be difficult here to give full justice to the richness of these traditions and their many intertwinements; I have only been able to give a few examples for myths and teachings with which Muslim travelers might have been familiar. As can bee seen, it is clearly impossible to decide whether the teachings of any of the above-mentioned religions contributed at all to the creation of the legend in which Tibet was depicted as a place where people are overwhelmed with joy. All the same, it does not seem completely implausible that a Muslim traveler, after hearing of this miraculous realm full of joy and beauty that was enclosed by snowy mountains, imagined the land to be located in Tibet as did numerous Buddhists and Bon followers. Considering that Muslims regarded joy, besides wonder, as an appropriate reason for laughter, and that Tibet reputedly abounded in gold, gems, musk and natural beauty, they might have seen Tibet, which they knew only from hearsay, as an earthly paradise. Moreover, since this mythical realm was simultaneously

[245] Arthur Hambarisumian, "The Armenian Parable "Zoroaster's Laughter" and the Plot of Zoroaster's birth in the Literary Traditions," *Iran&The Caucasus* 5 (2001): 27-36.
[246] See the entry of Alborz in Encyclopaedia Iranica: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alborz-massif-iran#pt2 (Last accessed: August 2013)

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material and supernatural, it had to be placed in an inaccessible region where ordinary people without miraculous power could not discover it. The exotic country of Tibet might have seemed to be a reasonable choice.

As already noted, it is impossible to reveal the factors influencing the Muslim authors who found the anecdote of laughter worthy of attention. However, it can also be probable that the Tibetans' positive attitude and the mountain ranges enclosing the country simply captured the Iranian Muslim writers' attention and imagination, and their perception resulted in the creation of an anecdote which did not bear any religious connotations but which became one of the most often quoted *topoi* about the land of snow.

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V. CONCLUSIONS

Twenty years after Yāqūt summarized most of available information about Tibet in his time in an entry in his *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries) the first vague references to Tibet appeared in Western European sources. The European missionaries devoted only a few lines to this unknown and inaccessible region, depicting Tibet as the land of barbarians with strange and inhuman customs. These Western travelers never visited the country, relying exclusively on hearsay when writing about Tibet, and the lack of direct observation resulted in the creation of an image of a miraculous country. This perception was not unusual; Muslim authors and travelers followed the same pattern four centuries prior to the European missionaries' visits to the Mongol court and so did the Greeks when writing about the Himalayan region from the fifth century BC. However, looking at Yāqūt's entry on Tibet it is striking how accurate the Muslim knowledge of the region was compared to that of the ancient Greeks or late medieval Christians. Due to the direct contact between the caliphate and the Tibetan Empire, Muslims could acquire information about the country as early as the eighth century, whether fighting against or in alliance with Tibetan troops. As a result, the first references to Tibet are reports on battles and embassies between the two great political powers of the time augmented by some administrative information collected by government officials working in the borderlands. However, being interested in tales and legends of foreign peoples, Muslims collected local anecdotes or created new legends themselves, combining the new knowledge with Arabic lore. With the rupture of direct contact between the caliphate and Tibet in the ninth century, information serving political purposes were increasingly scarce, whereas fascinating anecdotes about the country became more numerous in Muslim sources. Since commercial interests were of primary importance, musk remained the most often quoted motif concerning Tibet over the centuries. In addition

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to musk, authors primarily transmitted interesting anecdotes about Tibet and these stories became the most important factors in shaping the Muslim perception of the country.

Looking at the Muslim sources, it can be claimed that the general perception of Tibet started to change in the tenth century. Tibet, which had been considered a military power threatening Muslim interests in Central Asia, began to be perceived as a miraculous land which abounded in musk and gold, where strange things could happen. Although all Muslim sources contained legends and miraculous motifs, from the second half of the tenth century these miraculous accounts started to be quoted extensively by authors. For unknown reasons, pieces of accurate and less fabulous information contained by sources such as the *Ḥudūd al-ʻĀlam* or Al-Yaʻqūbī's *Tārīkh* were not mentioned by later authors. On the contrary, Muslim authors began to transmit new legends concerning Tibet that also came to be widely quoted. The process indisputably reached its peak with Gardīzī, who, using the anecdote of the Tibetans' Himyarite origin, composed a detailed and fabulous description. This transformation of the image of Tibet can be explained by several reasons. First of all, after the break in Muslim-Tibetan relations, Muslims could not collect first-hand information about the country and authors had to rely on earlier travelers' observations when reporting on Tibet. As Anna Akasoy has pointed out, since Tibet did not have great centers of learning with a flourishing cultural life, Muslims were not interested in the country. Last but not least, Tibet's geographical isolation and remote position, which resulted in the lack of direct observations on the country, also facilitated the development of this miraculous image.

As can also be seen, Muslims followed the same pattern as the Greeks when depicting Otherness. They used the image of the Barbarian, miracles, and exotic products in order to express the difference between their own civilized culture and the way of life of "barbarous" peoples. Since Tibet lay far from the heartlands of the caliphate and, in consequence, Muslims did not know much about the customs and behavior of the Tibetans, the authors

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could not depict them by the general criteria of barbarousness. In this way, the Otherness of the Tibetans was emphasized primarily by miraculous elements and in the context of musk, a precious and exotic aromatic substance. Since the pattern of creating Otherness is universal, Muslims perceived and depicted the Other in the same way as the Greeks and later Christian missionaries. As a consequence, Tibet was portrayed as a fabulous land in Western traditions, i.e. traditions of civilizations lying to the west of Tibet. Finally, due to the Mongol invasion and the unification of the vast swathe of Eurasia, in the thirteenth century this image also began to change gradually, but miraculous anecdotes of the country continued to play an important role for centuries.

This study has demonstrated that the Muslim knowledge of Tibet was broadened primarily by miraculous anecdotes of the country. The stories that can be added to Petech's list of the often-quoted motifs are those of the Tibetan attitude to gold and the Poison Mountain. These anecdotes seem to have appeared in the second half of the tenth century and they demonstrate well the Muslims' deep interest in legends which most influenced their perception of the Other. A comparative study of the pre-Mongol and later Muslim sources up to the sixteenth century would be necessary to get a broader picture of the general Muslim knowledge of Tibet and of its development over the centuries.

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