381 Murūj, para 877, 883, 893
382 Ibid, para 874 ff
383 Ibid, para 874, the name of the king is corrupted in the mss; probably Kubrā Ibn Surūr (or perhaps Kiyumī Ibn Surūr? as in Istanbul MS. Feyzullah, No 1372, folio 97v)
384 Murūj, para 894-895
385 Murūj, para 894 ff
386 Murūj, para 873-4; 881-6
387 Ibid, para 875, 876, 887, 893
388 Murūj, para 876
389 Ibid, para 844; and 880: (where he mentions having given many details "on their kingdoms" in the first chapter of his (now lost) Akhbār al-Zamān)
390 Ibid, para 215, 244, 246, 872
391 Ibid, para 215
392 Ibid, para 872
393 Ibid, loc cit
394 Ibid, para 871, also 412
395 Ibid, para 872
396 Ibid, para 412 (for the kings of the world see Ibid para 395 ff)
397 Ibid, para 872

Chapter VI: AL-MAS'ŪDĪ ON THE BYZANTINES

1 Introductory

Of all non-Islamic polities the Byzantine Empire held a special place for Muslims. The Byzantines were not a mere foreign nation beyond the frontiers of Islam; but ever since the beginning of the Islamic conquests the Byzantines became the chief military adversary of the Arabs. It is true that by the mid 3rd century AH/mid 9th century AD the earlier hopes of universal conquest were no longer feasible. In fact a state of co-existence with the Byzantines was more or less conceded in practice, but, of course, not in theory. Although Arab-Byzantine frontiers had become more or less stabilized (before the period that concerns us here), yet annual war-fare or seasonal raiding remained the main characteristic of Arab Byzantine relations.[1] In Arabic sources and in the thought-world of Muslims, Byzantium or the land of the Rūm was the 'house of war' par excellence.

Arabic authors before al-Mas'ūdī: historians, geographers and men of letters, despite their obvious interest in the Byzantines as the enemy of Islam, show very little or no interest in the Byzantines as a people in their own right. Thus earlier Muslim histories give a brief account of the early Roman emperors but they all terminate their accounts with the reign of Heraclius at the time of the rise of Islam. After that the history of the Eastern Roman Empire is of no further interest to them. Henceforth the Byzantines figure only as the enemy; and the occasional mention of a Byzantine emperor or other personage

is usually only in the context of Islamic-Byzantine warfare. As a rule the 'King of the Rūm' is not named, sometimes he is given the ephithet 'tyrant' (ṭāghiya) or 'dog' (kalb) of the Rūm.[2]

It is noteworthy that even Christian historians who flourished in the Muslim world and wrote in Arabic did not include in their works a continuous account or even a list of Byzantine rulers after the Islamic conquests. (Although they do sometimes name emperors and mention certain events in Byzantium, and as Christians, they took special interest in the affairs of the Byzantine Church.)[3]

Arabic geographers offer a different type of information on Byzantium. Ibn Khurradādhbeh and Qudāma wrote about the administrative and military conditions of the Byzantine Empire, particularly on the military officials and the themes. Despite the value of their information and the fact that both writers were important men of letters it is evident that their interest as well as their main sources of information on Byzantium were directly related to the strategic needs of the Islamic State.[4] Both writers were state officials - Ibn Khurradādhbeh was head of the Postal Department which included the intelligence service, and Qudāma was a state-secretary responsible for the revenues. Qudāma explicitly states that he gives an account of Byzantine lands because "the Muslims should guard against the Byzantines more than any other enemy".[5] Other Muslim geographers who wrote before al-Mas'ūdī, most of whom were state officials such as Ibn Rusta, Ibn al-Faqīh and al-Ya'qūbī, do not give any systematic treatment of Byzantine lands. (Ibn Rusta only preserves an account of the prisoner Hārūn b Yaḥyā on Constantinople.)[6]

This preoccupation with their own lands is equally true of the Muslim geographers who flourished in the time of al-Mas'ūdī and shortly after. This is explicitly stated by al-Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Maqdisī (or al-Muqaddasī).[7] Al-Maqdisī remarks that "we do not deal with non-Muslim countries for we have not seen them, and because there is no benefit from writing about them, anyway", but adds that "we do mention the conditions of Muslims in those lands."[8] He has something to say about Constantinople - "for there is a special quarter for the Muslims ... which adjoins the palace of the 'dog' of the Rūm".[9] Further examples could be added.[10]

In other types of early Arabic literary works there are very few references and allusions to the Byzantines as such.[11] It is true that the Byzantines were considered in Arabic literary circles to belong to the category of civilized nations, alongside Arabs, Persians and Indians.[12]

But there was a tendency to belittle the achievements of the Byzantines and to pick up and often exaggerate the weak points in their way of life. For example, they were generally considered as adept in crafts but not in philosophy or the sciences; and the practice of castrating their children is stressed and reproached; they are also accused of carelessness as regards hygiene.[13] The historical and cultural connections between the Byzantines and the ancient Greeks, although vaguely realized by certain scholars (especially those versed in philosophy and medicine) were nevertheless ignored, sometimes even categorically denied. The dialectic and polymath al-Jāḥiẓ (d 869) states that the Greeks (al-Yūnān) were a nation that had long vanished like the ancient Arabian tribe of Thamūd.[14] He was anxious to deny that the Byzantines belonged to the same people as the ancient Greek philosophers whom he admired.[15]

It is evident that the picture of the Byzantines given in Arabic literature is not only confused but also sometimes deliberately distorted. Despite the requirements of diplomacy on an official level, and notwithstanding partial recognition of Byzantine cultural qualities, the general attitude of Muslims was characterized by a belief in the superiority and self-sufficiency of their own religion and civilization.[16] In the eyes of Islamic authors it was important and necessary to know about the Byzantines as the enemy with whom Muslims were at war. It was not felt necessary or even worthwhile to inquire about the Byzantines as a people in their own right.

Al-Mas'ūdī presents a striking exception in the way in which he treats the history and affairs of the Byzantines. This is reflected in his systematic account on Byzantium; the wide range of his information on its geography, history, religion and culture; in his extensive use of Christian sources and his personal inquiries into Byzantine matters; and above all in his fair attitude of mind.

2 Scope and Sources

Al-Mas'ūdī devotes considerable space in both the Murūj and Tanbīh to the history and contemporary conditions of the East Roman Empire.[17] The Tanbīh, though much smaller in size, contains a fuller treatment of Byzantium where the political history is updated to the time of writing (345/956), and a number of errors which occurred in the earlier account of the Murūj were amended. The Tanbīh includes in addition a description of the land of Byzantium, an account of the ransoming of prisoners between Muslims and Byzantines, and on the whole

it is more informative on the Christian Roman Empire of Constantinople. Al-Mas'ūdī's growing interest in Byzantine matters is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that his account on Byzantium in the Tanbīh is three times the size of the corresponding account in the Murūj, although the size of the Tanbīh as a whole is only about a fifth of the size of the Murūj.

Al-Mas'ūdī's knowledge of the history and contemporary conditions of Byzantium was based on his use of a wide range of authorities. His written sources include not only earlier Islamic writings, but more especially works written by Christian authors, both early and contemporary to al-Mas'ūdī himself. In addition his information on Byzantium after the rise of Islam and especially during his own life time, is derived from his inquiries among Muslim and Christian individuals especially Muslim officials and inhabitants of the frontier region. Here his journeys and sojourns in northern Syria are very important.

In considering al-Mas'ūdī's written Islamic authorities on Byzantine matters, it is necessary to make a distinction between histories or chronicles, works describing the land and administration of the Byzantine Empire and which it is customary to describe as geographical works, and finally other possible written sources, such as official documents. The first type of sources is restricted to the pre-Islamic history of the Romans and Islamic Byzantine relations; the other two types are concerned with matters primarily relating to Islamic warfare and the information considered essential for dealing with the Byzantines on the battlefield and in diplomacy.

For the first category, our starting point is perhaps to look at al-Mas'ūdī's own bibliographical list in the introductory chapter of Murūj and to consider those works in this list which have come down to us. Thus an examination of the works of al-Ṭabarī of the Traditional school of Islamic 'universal' history, al-Ya'qūbī or Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī, shows that what al-Mas'ūdī would have found in such works on Byzantine history, relates only to pre-Islamic times.

Among the earlier works listed by al-Mas'ūdī in his bibliographical introduction to the Murūj,[18] the work of Abū 'Īsā Ibn al-Munajjim, is of especial interest. Al-Mas'ūdī describes the book as "the history (Chronography) of Abū 'Īsā Ibn al-Munajjim according to the Tawrāh and others concerning the Chronology of Kings and prophets". But again insofar as this work may have dealt with Roman/Byzantine history it would presumably have stopped with the advent of Islam.[19]

More important is al-Mas'ūdī's use of histories written by Christians. In his Murūj he alludes, without specifying, to some Christian histories which he consulted, especially among the Melkites,[20] and states that he saw Christian chronicles in the Qisyān church of Antioch. In the Tanbīh he names some Christian writers whose works were known to him.[21] The earliest of these is a book by an Egyptian monk from Alexandria named Annianus.[22] E Honigmann has shown that this is the same Annianus who lived in the fifth century AD and whose chronicle was utilized by later Eastern Christian historians like George Syncellus, Elias Nisibius, Ibn al-'Ibrī (Bar Hebraeus) and Michael the Syrian.[23] In fact al-Mas'ūdī's description of Annianus' chronicle agrees with what Michael the Syrian will have to say about it much later, namely that it was a "chronicle of world history from Adam to Constantine the Great".[24] Al-Mas'ūdī does not say whether he used an Arabic translation of this chronicle or whether he was able to consult it in the original (presumably Greek) language. He seems to have known something about the Greek language and he uses a few Greek terms,[25] and in one instance he even attempts to transcribe a word or two in the Greek script. It is however doubtful whether he could read Greek on his own. He does, however, state in a general way that he 'consulted' some Greek works. Speaking of the Roman emperors before Constantine the Great, he indicates that their names and length of their reigns were variously given in the histories of the Melkite Christians, "most of which are in Greek: but we have related of these what was possible for us to describe".[26] Al-Mas'ūdī may have relied on the services of some bi-lingual person for the purpose of translation or at least perusal - perhaps a Christian priest, a Greek convert to Islam, or an inhabitant of the frontier region. Elsewhere he states that he sought assistance of this kind in reading a Syriac inscription in Ḥarrān.[27] This practice of seeking the aid of a bi-lingual (especially in the case of Greek) was not uncommon among those Muslim authors who shared al-Mas'ūdī's type of intellectual curiosity.[28]

The majority of the Christian sources used by al-Mas'ūdī were, however, written in Arabic. He consulted works written by representatives of various Christian churches: Melkites as well as Jacobites, Nestorians and Maronites. He names two major works written by two contemporary Melkite priests: The Patriarch of Alexandria, Sa'īd (Eutychius) b al-Biṭrīq (d 940) whom he knew personally,[29] and the Bishop of Manbij Maḥbūb (Agapius) b Qusṭanṭīn al-Manbijī (wrote circa 942).[30] Both of these works are still preserved; though that of al-Manbijī only in an incomplete form. Eutychius' history is entitled al-Kitāb al-Majmū' 'alā al-Taḥqīq wa' l-Taṣdīq (the Book that is carefully and faithfully put together).[31] It is a 'universal' history from

the creation until the year 326/938. As the book stands now it is divided into two sections: the first of which deals with biblical and Christian history up to the reign of Heraclius and the Muslim conquests; the second is devoted to Muslim history with only few and occasional references to Byzantine affairs.

Manbijī's book, entitled Kitāb al-'Unwān, is also a 'universal' history written more or less along similar lines.[32] In its preserved form it goes only as far as the second year of the reign of the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Mahdī (that is 160/777).

It is not possible to trace actual quotations from either of these works in al-Mas'ūdī's accounts, although certain borrowings are discernible. This is particularly so in connection with the pre-Islamic period of Byzantine history. It is possible for example to point to certain cases where al-Mas'ūdī appears to be summarising details from Eutychius or from Agapius;[33] although there are some differences between his accounts and those of the two Christian historians. For example al-Mas'ūdī spells the names of some emperors, patriarchs or other persons differently from the way they are spelt by Eutychius or Agapius,[34] and the lengths of reigns in his account differ sometimes.[35] Al-Mas'ūdī, however, does not include certain details found in Eutychius or Agapius - especially those dealing with miracles and lives of saints, with consecration of patriarchs and bishops, or with certain theological disputes on which the two Melkite priests expounded their own views. On the other hand, he includes some details that are not to be found in either of the two Christian authors' accounts - for example two non-Christian traditions relating to the Conversion of Constantine the Great and to the apostasy of the Emperor Julian.[36] There are also some details which he probably derived from non-Melkite Christian authorities.

He does in fact allude to three books on world history including Byzantine and Church history written by three non-Melkite scholars or priests; one of these was a Jacobite priest whom he knew personally and whose name is given as Abū Zakariyyā Dankhā; the second was a Nestorian secretary (Kātib), named Ya'qūb b Zakariyyā al-Kaskarī (after Kaskar in northern Syria); and the third a Maronite scholar named by al-Mas'ūdī as Qays al-Mārūnī.[37] It is not possible to determine al-Mas'ūdī's indebtedness to any of these non-Melkite authors, for their works are not known to have survived. However, it appears that his information on the three Christian Churches of the Jacobites, Maronites and Nestorians and their respective positions as regards theological controversies, was on the whole derived from representatives of those churches.[38]

The sources of al-Mas'ūdī's account on Byzantine history after the rise of Islam cannot be easily determined. A comparison between this account and the scanty information available in the preserved works of Eutychius and Agapius shows very few similarities. The two Christian historians paid very little attention to the affairs of Byzantium in this period. Although they include, now and then, some information relating to the accession of an emperor or the consecration of a Patriarch in Constantinople, this is not done systematically.[39] It is true that some of the errors in al-Mas'ūdī's less developed account in Murūj, are to be found also in the work of Eutychius and can therefore be ascribed to his use of this work or of a common source.[40]

Al-Mas'ūdī's additional information on Byzantine history after the rise of Islam, particularly the account in Tanbīh, must be attributed to other sources. It is an open question whether some of this information goes back to the non-Melkite historians already cited. But if the Melkite Eutychius and Agapius had little to say on Byzantine history after the Islamic conquests, the non-Melkite historians would have had even less.

The impressive details and the generally accurate chronology given in al-Mas'ūdī's Tanbīh suggest that he must have utilized further sources. This would also raise the question of whether he may have made use of Byzantine sources - books or reports that may have found their way to the Islamic side, perhaps through an ambassador, a convert, a prisoner of war or a merchant coming from Constantinople. The scarcity of details about events in Byzantium which is reflected in the preserved works of other Muslim historians cannot be attributed simply to unavailability of information in the Muslim world about such events. As al-Mas'ūdī's works clearly demonstrate the question is not merely one of existence of information, but rather of curiosity and attitude of mind. There is evidence, for example, that at least a list of Byzantine emperors up to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959) was available in Baghdād soon after the beginning of the latter's reign, probably sometime before 306/918. Al-Mas'ūdī's younger contemporary, Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (wrote circa 350/961), who preserves this list, tells us that he copied it from a book written by a Baghdād judge called Wakī'. Significantly enough, Wakī' is quoted by Ḥamza[41] as stating that he had obtained this list from a book (or perhaps a letter: Kitāb) of the Byzantine Emperor, and that it was translated into Arabic by a certain Secretary (Ba'ḍ al-kuttāb). There is little doubt that this was the same

Wakī' (d 306/918) who was personally known to al-Mas'ūdī himself, and whose book, al-Sharīf (now lost) is mentioned in the bibliographical introduction of Murūj.[42] Thus it seems that al-Mas'ūdī utilized this same list.[43]

However, Wakī' 's account as preserved by Ḥamza is only a bare list of rulers with the length of their reigns. On the other hand, al-Mas'ūdī, as will be seen, gives more details about the same emperors, about political events in Constantinople, and Byzantine foreign relations. His information on these and other details must be attributed to other sources.[44]

Al-Mas'ūdī's knowledge of the land of the Byzantines, the sea routes to their capital and main ports, was derived from a variety of sources different from the ones so far discussed. This includes earlier and contemporary written works as well as oral sources of information. Al-Mas'ūdī was familiar with earlier Arabic geographical works, which contained valuable information on the administration of the Byzantine Empire, such as the works of Ibn Khurradādhbeh and Qudāma. Similarities and differences between al-Mas'ūdī's account and the extant works of these authors will be indicated further below. More important in this connection is his use of the works (now lost) of an earlier Arabic writer - namely Muslim b Abī Muslim al-Jarmī, who wrote around the middle of the 3rd/9th century. The works of al-Jarmī were also used by Ibn Khurradādhbeh and Qudāma and the common details between the accounts of these two writers and that of al-Mas'ūdī may in part be attributed to this fact.

According to al-Mas'ūdī himself, who is incidentally our only known source on al-Jarmī's life and works,[45] al-Jarmī was a Muslim warrior of the Syrian marches who was captured by the Byzantines and subsequently ransomed in the year 231/845. Al-Mas'ūdī describes him as having been "an eminent man in the frontier region",[46] and "well acquainted with the lands of the Byzantines on which he wrote a number of books (or reports)". Al-Jarmī's works, as al-Mas'ūdī indicates, dealt with the political history as well as with the administrative and military matters such as the way in which Muslim raids should be conducted and the recommended seasons for such raids.[47] Al-Jarmī's writings also included information on the northern neighbours of Byzantium in his day, such as the Avars, Bulgars, Khazars and Slavs. It is possible that much of al-Mas'ūdī's account on the description of Asia Minor and Byzantine themes was derived from the works of al-Jarmī.[48]

Al-Mas'ūdī also refers in a general way to works dealing mainly with Muslim-Byzantine warfare. Such books, or perhaps manuals, whose authors are not named by him, are described as Kutub al-Ṣawā'if: literally 'books of summer expeditions'. It seems that these manuals not only described raids against the Byzantines, but also, as al-Mas'ūdī indicates, included accounts of ransoming of prisoners.[49] Presumably written for the use of Muslim warriors and based on such reports as the works of al-Jarmī and other material available for the Muslim war intelligence service, these manuals also contained information on routes, fortresses, the topography of Asia Minor and the approaches to Constantinople.[50]

Of particular significance is al-Mas'ūdī's personal inquiries, especially in the thughūr region, where he was able to obtain valuable information, from knowledgeable persons, on aspects of the Byzantine Empire. His inquiries among different individuals is in line with his practice of seeking information on lands which he did not personally visit, or recent events on which no written sources were available.[51] Al-Mas'ūdī's informants on Byzantine matters were on the whole well-placed individuals from whom he derived first hand information on geographical details, or recent developments. It is significant to note that they included prominent Muslims and converted Byzantines, and possibly a Byzantine diplomat. Among these were Muslim naval admirals and sailors, other Muslim warriors, and dignitaries of the thughūr, ex-prisoners of war, Byzantine converts, and merchants who visited Byzantine lands.[52]

Of these knowledgeable informants al-Mas'ūdī mentions a few by name. One of these is a certain 'Abd Allāh b Wazīr whom he describes as the master of the port of Jabala - near Laodicea on the north Syrian coast, who was an old admiral and had considerable experience of naval warfare against the Byzantines. Al-Mas'ūdī adds concerning this man: "there is no other living person at this date, 332 AH (= 944 AD) better acquainted with the Mediterranean, or more senior in years than he is; nor can any sea captain or sailor deny his knowledge, piety, or experience in the jihād in this sea".[53] It is curious that the activities and even the name of this Muslim admiral are not mentioned by other known Arabic sources.

An important Muslim admiral from whom al-Mas'ūdī obtained information on Byzantine matters was a well-known Byzantine convert to Islam. This was no less than Leo of Tripoli whose name is given by al-Mas'ūdī as Abū' l-Ḥārith Lāwī or Lāwun, the page (ghulām) of

Zarāfa.[54] This man who came originally from the Byzantine port of Attalia,[55] attained a high position in the Muslim navy and was, according to al-Mas'ūdī, the master of the Syrian port of Tripoli. He is known for his naval operations against the Byzantines, especially his spectacular expedition in which he sacked Thessalonica in 291/904.[56] Al-Mas'ūdī met this admiral in Tripoli sometime "after 300 AH/912 AD" as he puts it.[57] Leo is believed to have perished in a subsequent naval expedition in 921 or 922 AD.[58] Al-Mas'ūdī is the only known Arabic author to give both the Arabic kunya: Abū' l-Ḥārith and the original Greek name of this admiral: Lāwī or Lāwun (= Leo). Other Arabic sources refer to him simply as "the page of Zarāfa",[59] or in one case give his adopted Arabic name, Rashīq al-Wardamī.[60] Although al-Mas'ūdī only quotes him on details concerning the Mediterranean Sea,[61] it may be presumed that he also obtained some historical information from him and from his crew. It is probably thanks to his acquaintance with this admiral and some of his sailors that al-Mas'ūdī was able to record certain details of the expedition against Thessalonica and to realize the importance of this city.[62]

An even more important personage from the Islamic-Byzantine marches, was the Arab warrior and diplomat, Abū 'Umayr 'Adī b Aḥmad b 'Abd al-Bāqī. Abū 'Umayr was the chief of the frontier town of Adana for almost half a century (until his death in 337/949).[63] He came from a celebrated family of the tribe of Tamīm,[64] and was considered as the 'Shaykh' of the Syrian marches and the one most highly regarded and obeyed among his fellow men.[65] He was bi-lingual and his fluency in Greek and the prestige of his family, gained him an important position as the official entrusted to accompany Byzantine envoys to Baghdād[66] or Damascus,[67] and as Muslim ambassador to Constantinople on several occasions,[68] in addition to his responsibility in the thughūr. Abū 'Umayr was also a distinguished man of learning - who besides his knowledge of the traditional Muslim sciences, was an authority on the history and lore of Arab-Byzantine warfare.[69] Al-Mas'ūdī met Abū 'Umayr more than once between 309/921 and 334/948. He describes him as "the shaykh of the Syrian marches (Shaykh al-thughūr al-shāmiyya) in the past and in our own day" and as "highly esteemed among his people" as well as "a learned man". This latter quality of Abū 'Umayr accords him a special, if brief mention in one or two Arabic biographical works devoted to Muslim scholars.[70] Abū 'Umayr's knowledge of the history of Arab-Byzantine relations and diplomacy, of Byzantine lands and of the Byzantine capital was thus based on first hand

knowledge and experience. His knowledge and interest in the traditions of the frontier marches must have been further enriched by the fact that he belonged to a family with a long and distinguished record in warfare and diplomacy and in the administration of the important frontier town of Adana and possibly also Tarsus. These qualities and his first-hand acquaintance with the Byzantine capital and imperial court made Abū 'Umayr perhaps the most important and reliable of al-Mas'ūdī's oral authorities on Constantinople and the routes to it, and on recent events in the Byzantine Empire. As will be seen, al-Mas'ūdī actually quotes him on geographical, topographical and historical matters.[71] It may well be that much of al-Mas'ūdī's information on recent events in Constantinople are due to this old Arab diplomat.

Al-Mas'ūdī may have also obtained further knowledge of contemporary Byzantium and its civilization, through the arrival of an important Byzantine envoy in Damascus during one of al-Mas'ūdī's sojourns there in 334/946. He may even have met this envoy and thus encountered an official representative of the Byzantines and their culture. Al-Mas'ūdī himself tells us that this Greek ambassador arrived in Damascus during the month of Dhū-l-Qi'da 334 AH/July 946 AD. Accompanied by the same Abū 'Umayr b 'Abd al-Bāqī, he was presented to the Muslim master of Egypt and Syria at the time, Muhammad b Ṭugh al-Ikhshīd (who died soon after that). Al-Mas'ūdī also tells us that when the Byzantine envoy and Abū 'Umayr arrived in Damascus "I was in the city that day".[72] It is just possible that al-Mas'ūdī may have met this diplomat then. Such a meeting could have been arranged by Abū 'Umayr who was in charge of the movements of the envoy; moreover al-Mas'ūdī tells us elsewhere that he had access to the court of al-Ikhshīd.[73] Whether or not al-Mas'ūdī met this diplomat - it is certain that he was able to form some fairly good idea about him and what his country was like. This is reflected in the manner in which he gives his full name and titles as Yuānis al-Ansībaṭūs al-Batrīqūs al-Misdiqūs al-Mutarrahib (ie John the proconsul, Patrician, mystic and ascetic). The manner in which al-Mas'ūdī transliterates the name and Greek titles of this envoy into Arabic is remarkable. So is his description of him as "a man of insight and understanding (wa kāna dhā ra' yin wa fahm)."[74]

The identity of this envoy can be tentatively suggested. It is evident that al-Mas'ūdī is not here confusing, as thought by some scholars, between John 'Mysticus' and the 'Domesticus' John Curcuas the well-known army general, (active 923-944).[75] It is clear that al-Mas'ūdī's description perfectly fits an actual John Mysticus who is known to have

been created Patrician and Anthypatus (proconsul) as early as April 19th, 925; and to have been already active in the Byzantine diplomatic service earlier in 924, when he accompanied the Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus on his visit to the Bulgar Symeon; and who after a successful but short career as the Chief Foreign Secretary was removed from court (925).[76] Although the Emperor Romanus continued for a while to have recourse to his sound judgement and resolution, John was soon forced by circumstances to flee to a monastery and become a monk.[77] It would appear that after the fall of Romanus Lecapenus (944), John Mysticus recovered his former position under Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

Al-Mas'ūdī's informants also included "some of our brethern who had been prisoners of war in the land of the Byzantines";[78] "a certain Byzantine who had embraced Islam and become a good Muslim",[79] "certain merchants who traded between Constantinople and the ports of Syria and Egypt".[80]

It is evident that al-Mas'ūdī did not simply come across information on Byzantium in an incidental manner. His accounts reflect his genuine attempt to acquire knowledge and to verify reports by inquiry and constant questioning. Al-Mas'ūdī may to a large extent be justified in his statement concerning the manner in which he sought to obtain information on internal events in Byzantium - he speaks of "... our proximity to their [the Byzantines'] country, our inquiry into their akhbār (history and news) and our frequent movement between the Syrian marches, Antioch, [other parts of] Syria, and Egypt".[81]

Al-Mas'ūdī's information on the Byzantine Empire covers diverse aspects. He tries first to explain who the Rūm were and why they were thus named, and records more than one opinion concerning this. He gives the views of earlier Arabic genealogists who linked the Rūm with a certain personage of the same name and with biblical genealogy.[82] But in accordance with his general approach when dealing with non-Islamic peoples he prefers the view which was, as he puts it, "held by the Rūm themselves", namely that "they were named after their city of Rūmiyya which is known in their language as "Rūmās" (ie Rome). He realized that the Byzantines "called themselves Rūmayus and the people of the frontier region knew them only by this name".[83] This is, of course, the Arabic transcription of Romaios, the singular form of Romaioi (ie Romans) which is indeed the name the Byzantines applied to themselves. He also knew that the name of the city of Rūmiyya (Rome) was in turn derived from its legendary founders, and earliest

kings: "Romulus and Remus the twin sons of the she-wolf".[84] Al-Mas'ūdī also points out that the land of the Byzantines was called by them Rumānyā (Romania).[85] He compares this to the name Sūryā (Syria) which they applied to al-Shām and which is related to the name of the Syrians.[86]

3 The land of the Byzantines

Al-Mas'ūdī's account of the Byzantine themes, though showing similarities to earlier Muslim accounts by Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Qudāma and Ibn al-Faqīh, nevertheless contains more details and shows considerable divergence.[87] It is true that he followed the view expressed by other Muslim writers to the effect that the Byzantine Empire was always divided into fourteen military provinces (ie themes) - an idea which probably goes back to the works of al-Jarmī. A comparison between al-Mas'ūdī's list of Byzantine military provinces and the earliest preserved lists of Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Qudāma, and Ibn al-Faqīh, indicates that he made better use of the works of al-Jarmī, and probably consulted other sources for this purpose.

Al-Mas'ūdī designates a Byzantine theme by the term Band (plural bunūd) probably from the Greek βάνδον which denoted a small military division smaller than a 'thema'.[88] He however uses this term to denote a proper 'theme' and employs the Arabic term 'amal to describe a smaller military unit.[89] It is interesting that al-Mas'ūdī draws an analogy between the Byzantine themes and the Islamic system of the ajnād (singular jund), which was especially prevalent in Syria. He does not however elaborate on this, but he does point out that the Byzantine themes were much larger in size than the Islamic ajnād.[90]

Al-Mas'ūdī's account differs from earlier Arabic lists mainly in two respects. It is arranged in a considerably different order - whereas the earlier lists begin with European themes, al-Mas'ūdī's survey starts by enumerating the Asiatic provinces. And it contains three more themes which are not mentioned by Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Ibn al-Faqīh or Qudāma. These earlier Arabic writers list eleven Asiatic and three European themes.[91] Al-Mas'ūdī states that there were nine Asiatic themes "on this side of the straits: Dūn al-Khalīj";[92] but he actually mentions eleven Asiatic themes, three of which he regards as small military divisions. Thus he describes the Charsianon (Kharshana), Colonea (Qulūnya) and Seleucia (Salūqya) as small units, respectively within the larger themes of the Armeniacon, Paphlagonia and a third theme which he calls Decapolis (Diqābulī) or Banṭilyā. This

latter which is not mentioned by earlier Arabic writers, probably corresponds to the Cibyrraeots theme of Byzantine sources.[93] Colonea is not mentioned by either Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Qudāma or Ibn al-Faqīh. On the other hand, al-Mas'ūdī omits the theme of Chaldia known to his predecessors. Whereas these earlier lists mention three European themes, Thrace, Macedonia and the enigmatic Ṭāblā,[94] al-Mas'ūdī gives five: adding the two important themes of the Peloponnese and Thessalonica.[95] Thus he in fact names seventeen themes, although in his list three of these are considered as sub-units within other themes.

With one exception the themes listed by al-Mas'ūdī are all identifiable with themes known from Byzantine sources. This exception is the so-called Ṭāflā/Ṭāblā or Ṭāylā which is supposed to have comprised Constantinople and its environs.[96] But this has been shown to be most probably based on a misunderstanding, and no theme with such a name seems to be mentioned by Byzantine authors.[97] The other themes in al-Mas'ūdī's list are all mentioned by Constantine Prophyrogenitus in his treatise on the themes with the exception of two of them: Cappadocia and Charsianon which are missing from the emperor's work "(for no apparent reason)".[98]

Al-Mas'ūdī's list of Byzantine themes however does not represent actual conditions in the Empire at the time of his writing the Tanbīh (345/956). In fact, at the beginning of the tenth century (ie before al-Mas'ūdī wrote any of his extant works) there were in the Byzantine Empire no less than thirty military provinces (themes).[99]

Modern specialists who studied the Byzantine administrative system emphasize the fact that the origins of the theme system, which had been already overshadowed by the Exarchates, go back to the seventh century and most probably to the reign of Heraclius (610-641).[100] It has also been shown that the organization of the various themes was undertaken under several Byzantine emperors and "had been brought to a conclusion by the end of the ninth and the beginnings of the tenth centuries".[101] "As a result of the gradual division of the original large themes into smaller ones and the introduction of the system into new regions the number of themes had considerably increased".[102] This historical development was not perceived by al-Mas'ūdī or other Muslim authors.

This fact may be partly explained in the context of a notion among Arabic writers according to which the Byzantine Empire was always divided into 'fourteen' military provinces, a division which was wrongly thought to have been both old and final.[103] It may, however, have been due also to lack of information available to these authors. It is noteworthy that the two European themes of the Peloponnese and Thessalonica – listed by al-Mas'ūdī but wanting in other Arabic lists – were already established as early as the beginning of the ninth century (ie before Ibn Khurradādhbeh or Qudāma or even al-Jarmī wrote).[104] Charsianon and Seleucia which are considered by al-Mas'ūdī as smaller units are actually known to have been created originally, together with Cappadocia, as small military units, most probably under Theophilus (829-842) forming three frontier zones or 'mountain passes', kleisurai.[105] But in the early tenth century the three zones appear as themes in Byzantine sources. Thus al-Mas'ūdī's inclusion of Cappadocia as a theme reflects the new status of this province. He does not, however, note a similar position in the case of Charsianon or Seleucia.[106] Similarly al-Mas'ūdī's description of Colonea as a small military unit ('amal, ie kleisura) does not in fact reflect its actual rank. For Colonea was a theme with a Strategus as early as 863.[107]

Al-Mas'ūdī's account of the land of Byzantium is not confined to the military and administrative aspects. Unlike some earlier Arabic writers (eg Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Ibn al-Faqīh and Qudāma), he includes no information on the heirarchy, numbers or finance of the Byzantine military organization. He is mainly concerned with geographical matters: thus he enumerates the crossing points from the Asian side to Constantinople, gives a description of the straits of the Hellespont, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus, and offers some information on the Byzantine capital itself. These details, most of which are not found in the earlier Arabic accounts of Ibn Khurradādhbeh, Qudāma or Ibn al-Faqīh, are probably based partly on the lost works of al-Jarmī, but perhaps more so on oral sources such as Muslim prisoners, warriors, sailors and envoys to Constantinople.

He gives an original description of the ports on the Asiatic side from which it was possible to reach Constantinople by sea or at which passengers or armies sailing from the capital could land.[108]

Al-Mas'ūdī's description of the sea route to Constantinople is largely based on accounts of Muslim naval captains and reports of envoys who reached the capital itself. He actually quotes Abū 'Umayr b 'Abd al-Bāqi, the leading frontier dignitary and sometime Muslim envoy to Constantinople mentioned above. The account of Abū 'Umayr is related to a description of the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus (the two are, as a rule, collectively denoted by the term 'Khalīj al-Qusṭanṭiniyya' (Gulf or Bay of Constantinople).[109] Al-Mas'ūdī states that –

"Abū 'Umayr b 'Abd al-Bāqī ... who has long been and still is to our own day the Shaykh of the Syrian frontier region, and who is a learned man, told me that when he sailed on this Khalīj to Constantinople [to arrange] for a truce and a ransoming [of prisoners] he was able to distinguish the water current and its flow from the Black Sea; also he would find that the closer he came to the Mediterranean the warmer he could feel the water."[110]

The direction of the current in the Bosphorus seems to have interested al-Mas'ūdī as a geographical question. Abū 'Umayr's testimony must have convinced him that the current was actually from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean; for elsewhere al-Mas'ūdī states this as an established fact.[111]

4 The City of Constantinople

Despite its brevity and shortcomings, al-Mas'ūdī's description of Constantinople is to be appreciated in comparison to earlier and contemporary Arabic authors. The knowledge which is preserved in works of Muslim writers on the Byzantine capital is partly legendary, often inaccurate, and sometime intentionally misleading. Whether legendary or factual Islamic concepts of the Byzantine capital reflect the general attitude of Muslims.[112] A true appreciation of how Constantinople looked was, on the whole, hindered not merely by the kind of reports arriving back with Muslim prisoners-of-war, but often also obscured or distorted by the attitude of Arabic authors. For example, Ibn Khurradādhbeh's information is very meagre and sometimes false.[113] And the account of Ibn Rusta (based on the report of the ex-prisoner Hārūn b Yaḥyā), despite its interest, contains only general and vague impressions about particular events and ceremonies rather than a description of the Byzantine capital.[114]

Similarly, al-Maqdisī's digressional remarks about Constantinople already alluded to would be of little significance if it were not for his comments which perhaps reflect the general attitude of Muslim authors towards the Byzantines. After having stated that he only mentioned Constantinople because there was a quarter in it for Muslims, al-Maqdisī adds that knowledge of the Byzantine capital and the route to it was also relevant to "Muslim needs, especially in the event of war or ransoming prisoners; for commercial and other purposes". He also observes that among Muslims "controversy and fabrications concerning it abounded, especially as regards its size, buildings and its conditions". What al-Maqdisī himself writes on the description of Constantinople is however not only meagre but also misleading. He states that in size "it is as large as Baṣra or even smaller". On its fortifications he remarks that "it is fortified just like other cities, and protected only by a single wall, no more". He thought that only one side of the city faced the sea. The rest of his remarks are concerned with the residence of Muslim prisoners and their conditions there.[115] In such accounts even the most outstanding features of the Byzantine capital are not apparent.

Al-Mas'ūdī's brief description of Constantinople though using some information from earlier Arabic authors, offers correctives for certain prevalent misconceptions, and adds fresh details. His account deals with several aspects of the Byzantine capital, thus giving a clearer picture of it to Muslim contemporaries. Moreover in his description one notes the absence of any prejudice or any attempt at distortion.

It is noteworthy that al-Mas'ūdī knew several names for the Byzantine capital. The name that is most frequently used by him is al-Qusṭanṭīniyya (ie Constantinople) which, with very few exceptions, was the only name of the city known to other Arabic authors.[116] He also knew that the ancient name of the city was Byzantium (Būzanṭiyā)[117] - a term which he also employs to denote environs of the capital.[118] It is quite remarkable that al-Mas'ūdī uses two descriptions which were usually given to Constantinople by the Byzantines themselves. One is the description malikat al-mudun (ie 'queen of cities' βασιλὶς πόλις) commonly applied to Constantinople as early as the fourth century (eg Eusebius) and until later times, and which he may have known from a Byzantine informant or perhaps from a written Christian source.[119]

Perhaps even more significant is his knowledge of yet a fourth appellation applied to their capital by the Byzantines. He states that "in our days the Rum called it Ibulīs (ἡ πόλις) or Būlin (πόλιν) and when they wish to refer to it as their greatest city they would say "Istanbūlin" (εἰς τὴν πόλιν)".[120] The Byzantines in fact often referred to their capital as 'the City'. Al-Mas'ūdī must have heard this term applied to Constantinople from a Byzantine person or from a Muslim who knew the Greek language and the Byzantine usage. This information preserved by al-Mas'ūdī constitutes a fairly early piece of evidence - actually the earliest known in Islamic sources to correct a general misconception and to

show that the name 'Istanbul' was not after all entirely a later name given to Constantinople by the Ottomans.[121]

As for the geographical location of the Byzantine capital, al-Mas'ūdī states that "Constantinople stands on the western side of the Khalīj [ie the Bosphorus] and is bound by water from three sides, and from the west it is connected with the mainland".[122] He realizes that the Byzantine capital was in Europe: "Constantinople is in the great landmass (al-Arḍ al-Kabīra) which includes the land of Rome, al-Andalus and the countries of the Franks, Slavs as well as other peoples of the north".[123]

His description of the walls and gates of Constantinople and his reference to some of its buildings, although occasionally showing a lack of specific details, reflect a considerable knowledge. Thus he knew that on the western side, the city had more than one wall, which varied in height - a reference to the series of land-walls and fortifications built on the western side of Constantinople, first by Constantine the Great (324-337) and especially by Theodosius II (408-450). He describes the southern wall as being the highest. He accurately mentions that along the water of the Khalīj the city had only one wall.[124] In this case the term Khalīj would obviously not only describe the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus as indicated above, but would also include the Golden Horn. He observes that there were numerous gates for the city: "It is said that it had thirty gates; some claim that there were a hundred gates large and small".[125] But he specifically mentions the "Golden Gate" of the Theodosian fortifications.[126]

His knowledge of some of the buildings in the Byzantine capital although wanting in specific details, nevertheless, indicates the right locations. For example, he remarks that "there was a palace adjoining the western wall", and another "palace with numerous towers and watch-towers in the direction of the Khalīj".[127] The first palace may be identified with the Palace of Blachernae in the north-western part of the city, while the second probably refers to the Great Palace on the coast of the Sea of Marmara. He also notes that the city is "surrounded by numerous churches",[128] which may be a general allusion to the many churches and monasteries known to have existed in the outer regions and suburbs of Constantinople.[129]

He also observes that the climate of Constantinople was influenced by its geographical location which makes it subject to high humidity and changeable winds.[130]

5 Byzantine History

Al-Mas'ūdī's treatment of the history of the Byzantine Empire is equally significant; and certainly shows a living scholarly interest in its affairs. In his survey of Roman and Byzantine history, he distinguishes three main phases. The first is the period of the "Pagan (ḥunafā' or Ṣābi'ūn) Roman emperors whose capital was Rome",[131] this contains a list of early Roman emperors to Diocletian (284-305). The second is what he calls the period of "the Christian Roman emperors of Constantinople" covering the reigns from Constantine the Great (324-337) to Heraclius (610-641).[132] The third phase is actually a sub-division of the second, covering Byzantine history after the rise of Islam. Al-Mas'ūdī who alone among his earlier and contemporary Muslim (and also Christian Arabic) historians devotes an independent and systematic account to this period of Roman history - designates it as "the history of the Byzantine emperors after the rise of Islam",[133] or "the history of the emperors of the Rūm from the Hijra (622 AD) to the year 345 (956 AD)".[134]

His account of the first of these periods (ie Roman History up to the reign of Constantine the Great) is beyond the scope of this study. His treatment of the second period (Constantine to Heraclius), although admittedly it does not add to our present knowledge of this period, nevertheless deserves a brief consideration. It is mainly due to his extensive

use of Christian sources that his remarkable accuracy in the survey of the successive emperors and the length of their reigns is maintained. His lists in Tanbīh as well as Murūj, containing twenty-two emperors, on the whole fits in with the number of imperial reigns in Constantinople in this period;[135] and the same is true of the length of reigns.[136]

Apart from its accuracy and sheer length in comparison to the earlier Muslim accounts, al-Mas'ūdī's treatment of this early period of Byzantine history has three further significant characteristics. First, he places more emphasis on certain outstanding events or achievements, as for example the two most important undertakings of Constantine the Great (324-337): "his foundation of Constantinople - a city which he built and fortified and made his seat of government (dār mamlakatin lahu)";[137] and his adoption of Christianity.[138] Another example is his reference to some of Justinian I's buildings.[139]

Secondly, al-Mas'ūdī gives more attention to the affairs of the Christian Church in this period. He gives a detailed account of the first Six General Councils of the Church[140] using the Greek term for Council (Sunūdus or Sunhūdus) which was used, as he states, by Christians in Syria and Egypt, and which he renders into Arabic by the words Majma' or Ijtimā' (Council or Assembly).[141] He deals with the position of the various emperors as regards Christianity pointing out the role they played in supporting a certain doctrine or suppressing another.[142] In his description of the Christological controversies and the triumph of Orthodox (Melkite) doctrines, he shows an interest in details and reflects a deeper understanding of the importance of the Christian Church in the Eastern Roman Empire.

The third important aspect of al-Mas'ūdī's treatment of this period is his remarkable familiarity with non-Muslim sources and traditions. For his information not only testifies to his acquaintance with Christian sources representing the views of Melkites, Jacobites, Nestorians and Maronites, but also shows his endeavour to incorporate the opinions of a non-Christian (and non-Muslim) party - namely the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān.[143] Thus in his treatment of the question of Constantine's conversion to Christianity he remarks that there was a controversy between Christians and Ṣābians regarding the circumstances of this event. He states that according to the Christians, Constantine saw an illuminated cross in the sky - "some say that the cross appeared to him in a vision, others claim that he actually witnessed it in daylight"; but in either case the Emperor was told: "seek victory with this and you shall conquer your enemy"[144] - clearly a free translation of the

well-known "in hoc signo vinces". He adds that in their opinion Constantine then adopted the cross as a sign on his standards, was victorious and as a result adopted Christianity.[145] He then introduces the opinion of the Ṣābians which he most probably obtained from some of their scholars at Ḥarrān, that Constantine suffered "from leprosy ... and this according to their creed rendered the person who had it unsuitable for government ... whereas Christianity does not ban such a man from becoming emperor".[146] Similarly, al-Mas'ūdī gives the views of both Christians and Ṣābians on the apostasy of the Emperor Julian (361-363). He writes: "the Byzantines call him Bārabadīs ie παραβάτης which means al-Murtadd (the apostate); and the Sabians: Usibiūs (Eusebius) meaning the 'faithful' or the 'pious'; all Christians, however, disassociate themselves from him, some of them call him al-Buztāṭ (ie Apostates)".[147]

Far more significant is al-Mas'ūdī's treatment of Byzantine history after the rise of Islam. He is the only known Arabic historian to undertake research (within the terms of his time and place) on this period of the history of the greatest and closest enemy of the Muslims. It is evident that his knowledge of Byzantine affairs is based on various sources of information, both written and oral; and it would seem that it was oral information that most contributed to his knowledge of events which took place in Byzantium during his own lifetime.

The details which al-Mas'ūdī gives on Byzantine history, after the Islamic conquests indicate the type of knowledge available in the Muslim East about events in contemporary Byzantium and throw some light on certain aspects which most interested al-Mas'ūdī himself, such as contemporary history of non-Muslims, very recent events, and cultural aspects. His fair attitude towards non-Muslims is particularly reflected here.

His account in the Tanbīh contains an accurate list of successive emperors with the length of their reigns, corresponding more or less to the generally accepted Byzantine Chronology.[148] It is perhaps noteworthy that whereas al-Mas'udi's list in the Murūj on this period of Byzantine history is rather confused and sometimes inaccurate his account in the Tanbīh is more accurate, up to date, and all in all, more developed. It appears that when writing the Murūj al-Mas'ūdī could not find or establish an accurate chronological sequence and length of reigns of the East Roman emperors after the rise of Islam. In fact he begins his chapter dealing with this period of Byzantine history by indicating the confusion in Muslim chronicles and histories concerning the name of the

Emperor in whose reign the Prophet Muḥammad was born.[149] The interest of this account lies mainly in that within the framework of a list of Byzantine emperors after the rise of Islam (as opposed to Muslim Caliphs) he includes important details on Arab-Byzantine relations. The military and diplomatic exchanges between Nicephorus I (802-811) and al-Rashīd (786-809) are given considerable attention. It also reflects certain characteristics of method, style and literary taste that are peculiar to the Murūj as a whole - for example, vivid descriptions of events (such as details of the capture of Heraclia by al-Rashīd in 803,[150] a preference for the literary anecdote, and the inclusion of poetry composed at the time of the wars between the 'Abbāsid Caliph and the Byzantine Emperor). But the Murūj account also shows al-Mas'ūdī's living interest in Byzantine affairs, especially in later years.

In both accounts, al-Mas'ūdī includes ecclesiastical as well as political history, takes account of external relations of the Byzantines not only with the Muslims, but also with others; and also pays especial attention to certain aspects of the Byzantine administration, Church and civilization.

He relates the main military, political and ecclesiastical problems of the Emperor Heraclius; his wars of restoration against the Persians and his defeats and losses before the Armies of the Islamic conquest.[151] He also refers to the Monothelete controversy over the question of the Divine Will which was finally condemned at the Sixth General Council (680-1).[152]

Among the internal events in the Byzantine Empire plots, coups, and similar developments which led to the deposition of one emperor and the accession of another, seem to have particularly interested al-Mas'ūdī. He gives fairly accurate details about such events, putting them in their historical context, and does not simply relate them as isolated anecdotes.[153] Thus he describes how Heraclius was chosen emperor after having come at the head of a fleet to Constantinople and was able to end the period of anarchy under Phocas (610).[154] He gives an interesting account of the two reigns of Justinian II (685-695 and 705-711) whom he describes as al-Akhram (slit-nosed - Rhinotmetus); his first overthrow and the ineffective slitting of his nose and tongue; his fruitless adventures seeking aid in Khazaria; and his final success in regaining his throne with the help of Tervel (Ṭarbalā) the Khan of the Bulgars.[155] He also mentions the successful efforts of Leo III (717-741) in obtaining the throne and withstanding the Arab siege of Constantinople (717-718).[156]

Similarly he describes how the Empress Irene undertook to get rid of her son as partner on the throne, Constantine VI (780-97), by blinding him.[157] He describes this episode in a way which shows great interest in and knowledge of details. He writes:

> [Constantine VI's] policies were renounced by his subjects and his mother plotted against him aiming to retain the authority for herself. She ordered that a mirror be heated and that [Constantine] be hastily woken up from his sleep and closely confronted with the [hot] mirror; having opened his eyes so suddenly, he lost his sight. The period of his reign was seventeen years jointly with his mother, and then she ruled alone for five years.[158]

He also relates how Irene

> was forced to pay tribute to Hārūn al-Rashīd, and that this caused anger against her and led to her overthrow by Nicephorus, the former Lughuthīṭ (logothete) of the treasury,[159] who was supported and backed by others. She was deposed in the year 187 (ie in 802), while she was in her own palace known as Balāṭ al-Ibtārū (ie τό παλάτιον τοῦ 'Ελευθερίου) and with her was her counsellor al-Yāṭus (ie the eunuch Aetius) who was a man of resolution and ability.[160]

Al-Mas'ūdī's account of the reign of Nicephorus I (802-811) contains some interesting details which indicate an oral source of information; for some of these details reflect popular stories and do not precisely present known historical facts. For example, Nicephorus is credited with being the first Byzantine Emperor ever to wear a beard.[161] It is however, known that a number of the late Roman or early Byzantine emperors were bearded - for example Julian (361-363), and Constantine IV (668-85). It is true that Julian the Apostate who is depicted with a long beard of a Greek philosopher had come to the throne after a succession of close-shaven emperors;[162] and the long beard of Constantine IV was probably considered as unusual by his contemporaries who nicknamed him 'Pogonatus' (the bearded).[163] But it is also known that most emperors from the seventh century onwards are represented with beards on Byzantine coins.[164]

Al-Mas'ūdī also records a tradition, prevalent among contemporary Muslims, which considered Nicephorus I of Arab stock either from the Ghassanid house of Jafna or from another Christian Arab tribe, Iyād.[165] Al-Mas'ūdī adds that this emperor was said to have ob-

jected to the Byzantine practice of calling the Arabs by the abusive name of Sārāqinūs (Sarakinoi, 'Saracens'), an appellation which according to al-Mas'ūdī "meant the servants of Sara - a defamatory reference to Hagar and her son Ismā'īl (Ishmael), and that she was a slave-girl of Sara".[166] He adds that, despite Nicephorus' disapproval of this name, "the Byzantines still call the Arabs 'Saracens' to our own time".[167] Al-Mas'ūdī's knowledge of this Byzantine usage was no doubt due to his acquaintance with the frontier region and with a number of Muslim warriors and diplomats.

Al-Mas'ūdī also states that Nicephorus I was the first Byzantine emperor to name his own son as his heir to the throne and to consider him as his co-emperor; and, adds that the imperial correspondence during Nicephorus' reign was in the name of "Nicephorus and Stauracius: Kings of the Rūm".[168] It is however known that earlier Byzantine emperors had appointed a son as co-emperor and heir to the throne in their own life-time, and therefore this institution was not really initiated by Nicephorus I.[169]

Perhaps more interesting in this connection is al-Mas'ūdī's statement that "the kings of the Rūm prior to Nicephorus' reign used to write in their correspondence 'from the king of Christendom', but Nicephorus wrote 'from the King of al-Rūm'."[170] Al-Mas'ūdī, who appears to consider this sudden change as a mere personal decision by Nicephorus, was obviously unaware of the significance of this change and its connection with the conflict between Byzantium and Charlemagne, the newly created Western Roman Emperor.[171] However, al-Mas'ūdī's statement is true in one sense, namely that after Nicephorus' reign the official title 'Emperor of the Romans' βασιλεὺς Ῥωμαίων was almost always used. It is true that the Byzantines always considered their emperor as 'the Emperor of the Romans';[172] and there is evidence of official, if rare, usage of this title prior to the days of Nicephorus I (for example the imperial seal of Leo III 717-744). But nevertheless it is recognized by modern scholars that "before 812 the title Basileus seldom appeared with the addition Ῥωμαίων and after 812 seldom appeared without this".[173]

Among later events in Byzantium al-Mas'ūdī mentions the conspiracy of Leo the Armenian whom he calls 'the Patrician' (al-Baṭrīq) against Michael I Rangabe (811-813) which led to the deposition of the latter and the accession of Leo the Armenian (Leo V, 813-820).[174] However, in summarizing the events which surrounded the subsequent downfall and murder of Leo V himself, al-Mas'ūdī attributes the role

of Michael the Amorian to the already deposed Michael Rangabe. Thus he states that Leo "detained his predecessor and made him suffer ... then the followers of Michael plotted against [Leo] and freed Michael who assassinated Leo and regained the throne. It is said that Michael had become a monk during Leo's assumption of authority".[175] As a result of this confusion al-Mas'ūdī postulates a second reign of Michael I for nine years instead of the reign of the founder of the Amorian dynasty, Michael II (820-829).[176]

Al-Mas'ūdī also describes the circumstances in which Basil I 'The Macedonian' (867-886) was able to become emperor establishing a new dynasty. He relates how Basil originally came to seek his fortune in Constantinople and how his physical strength and courage as well as his knowledge in taming horses opened the way for him into the court of Michael III the Amorian (842-867).[177] Al-Mas'ūdī states that, "It is said that Tawfīl[178] had brought Basil over when he knew his qualities"; and that Basil "moved from one position of authority to another including that of Barākunumīs: this means the manager of the emperor's affairs,[179] then he killed his master and became the sole emperor". It is evident that al-Mas'ūdī is here referring to the title of the Grand Chamberlain (Parakoimomenos) which Basil actually held in the imperial court, before Michael eventually made him his co-emperor.[180] Al-Mas'ūdī's understanding of the office of the Parakoimomenos, although perhaps rather vague, is not altogether inaccurate. He uses the Arabic term (al-mudabbir lil-Malik or lil-Mulk) and it is not clear whether this rendering is based on his knowledge of the theoretical function of the Grand Chamberlain (ie administration of the imperial household), or an awareness of the more considerable authority which Basil as Grand Chamberlain is known to have actually enjoyed.[181]

Al-Mas'ūdī describes Basil I as the Slav (al-Ṣaqlabī), and observes that he was so called after his mother who was a Slav - a tradition which was known to other Arabic historians.[182] But it is noteworthy that al-Mas'ūdī knew that Basil came originally from the European theme of Thrace,[183] and realized that this Basil "was the grandfather of Constantine [VII Porphyrogenitus] son of Leo [VI the wise] ... - the present emperor of the Byzantines at the time of the writing of this book [Tanbīh] which is the year 345 [956] ".[184]

6 Recent History

Particularly interesting is al-Mas'ūdī's account of internal events during the times of the Byzantine emperors who were his own

contemporaries: Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959) and Romanus I Lecapenus (920-944) - especially the successive plots and palace coups which culminated in the final fall of the Lecapeni. The account given by al-Mas'ūdī illustrates not only his knowledge of contemporary events in Byzantium, but also his endeavour to obtain information on the most recent developments in Constantinople. Towards the end of his account on Byzantine history in that part of Murūj written in 332/944 al-Mas'ūdī remarks:

> At present the kings of the Byzantines are three: the most senior and the one who actually administers the affairs is Romanus the Usurper (al-Mutaghallib); the second is Constantine son of Leo son of Basil, and the third king is a son of Romanus who is also addressed as king and his name is Stephen (Isṭifānus); Romanus has also made another son of his as the 'master of the seat' of Constantinople, that is the great Patriarch who directs their religious affairs; he had previously had him castrated, and attached him to the Church. Thus the affairs of the Byzantines in our time evolve round these above-named kings ... Here ends the account of their history as we have mentioned; and God knows best what may become of them in future.[185]

In the Tanbīh, written about ten years later, al-Mas'ūdī supplements his previous account and gives a fairly detailed description of the fates of these persons and their roles in subsequent events. He relates with vividness and considerable accuracy the main developments - elaborating on the usurpation of authority by Romanus, and describing the virtual confinement of Constantine Prophyrogenitus, the overthrow of Romanus by his two sons, Stephen and Constantine, the exile of the two young Lecapeni by their brother-in-law Constantine Prophyrogenitus and the final emergence of this latter as autocrator.[186]

The details of this account appear to be based on more than one source. The information on the events leading to the two successive palace coups during the winter of 944-45, was most probably mainly derived from the Arab ambassador Abū 'Umayr b 'Abd al-Bāqī, already mentioned.[187] Abū 'Umayr was sent in 946 on a mission to Constantinople where in the month of May he was received by the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus himself who now was the actual emperor after the fall of the Lecapeni.[188] Abū 'Umayr returned to Syria and was in Damascus in July of the same year, having brought with him a Byzantine envoy to complete the arrangements for a truce and a ransoming of prisoners. Al-Mas'ūdī who records the arrival of Abū 'Umayr and the Greek John Mysticus, was himself in Damascus at that time and met Abū 'Umayr and, possibly also the Byzantine envoy.[189]

Al-Mas'ūdī's account, however, contains details of some later developments which took place after the return of Abū 'Umayr from the Byzantine capital and even after Abū 'Umayr's death.[190] For example, al-Mas'ūdī knew that Romanus Lecapenus had since died after having spent four years in a monastery (948),[191] that one of his two exiled sons, Constantine Lecapenus, was killed on another island where he had been exiled and his head was sent to Constantinople where his brother-in-law the Emperor Constantine Prophyrogenitus expressed sorrow at his death;[192] he also knew that Stephen, the other exiled son of Romanus, was still alive on yet another island at the time of writing (956).[193] Information about these later events was obtained, al-Mas'ūdī himself states, "from envoys (rusul) and merchants coming from Constantinople and arriving by boat at Fusṭāṭ in Egypt".[194]

There is no record of an embassy between Constantinople and Fusṭāṭ in the period under consideration (946-956) and al-Mas'ūdī's statement must refer to some envoy or messenger of whose mission nothing more seems to be known.[195] There was, however, a ransoming of prisoners which took place in the port of Alexandria in the summer of 953,[196] and al-Mas'ūdī's informants may have been among such envoys involved in the negotiations of this ransoming.

Al-Mas'ūdī's details on these particular internal events in the Byzantine Empire are thus worth consideration as a non-Greek source of information and may be compared (not unfavourably) to the account of the Latin writer and ambassador Liutprand, Bishop of Cremona (wrote 958-962).[197] This contemporary author similarly obtained his information from an earlier Latin ambassador who was at Constantinople when some of these events took place.[198]

It is interesting and important that most of al-Mas'ūdī's details are remarkably accurate - for example the fact that Romanus' two sons remained in power for about forty days after the deposition of their father;[199] that Romanus died after four years of monastic life;[200] that father and sons spent their years of exile in three separate islands; and that Romanus was put in a monastery which he himself had built on an island quite near to Constantinople.[201]

In addition to these details, a particular aspect of the fall of the Lecapeni is worth consideration. It is connected with the conspiracy of the two young Lecapeni co-emperors against their father. "Accounts

differ as to how the intrigue started", - writes Sir Steven Runciman in his study on the reign of Romanus Lecapenus; "later chroniclers, who for some reason disliked the Porphyrogenitus, accuse him of having incited the sons against their father; but ... such subtle villainy was very alien to his [Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus] amiable mildness".[202] The contemporary Latin account preserved by Liutprand of Cremona goes as far as saying that the plot was "without the knowledge of Constantine Porphyrogenitus".[203] Al-Mas'ūdī on the other hand states that "the two sons of Romanus conspired with (wāṭa'a) Constantine son of Leo to overthrow their own father",[204] and in fact his subsequent narrative may be taken to imply that the three actively participated in the execution of the plot with the support of others.[205] It seems therefore that Constantine's implication in the plot against his father-in-law was not simply a product of later chroniclers. Al-Mas'ūdī's remark clearly contradicts the statement of Liutprand of Cremona who depicts Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus as unaware of the plot of the two young Lecapeni. It is true that al-Mas'ūdī's report does not actually describe Constantine VII as inciting his brothers-in-law against their own father. Nevertheless his words make it clear that the two young Lecapeni plotted against their father not only with the knowledge of the Prophyrogenitus but also with his connivance and possibly his active support.

Al-Mas'ūdī's interest in Byzantine history was by no means confined to palace coups or to internal political events alone. For he also gives considerable attention to the external relations of Byzantium with its neighbours and with other polities. For the pre-Islamic period he gives details on Sāsānid-Byzantine relations.[206] For the period after the rise of Islam he not only deals with Arab-Byzantine relations, but also has something to say on the foreign policy of the Byzantines and their dealings with their neighbours such as the Bulgars, Khazars and Russians; and alludes to the Byzantine diplomatic position and influence in the West.

He refers for example to the relations with the Khazars and the Bulgars in connection with Justinian II's attempt to restore his throne, and states that the emperor had to pay a subsidy to Tervel (Ṭarbalā) the King of the Bulgars.[207] He accurately dates the outbreak of the war between Krum's Bulgaria and Byzantium in AH 193 (AD 809) and states that Nicephorus I was killed in battle during these wars.[208]

More important however, is his knowledge of, and interest in, later developments on the northern frontiers of the Byzantine Empire connected with the attacks of the Bulgars under Symeon (893-927), and

of the Magyars and other warlike Turkic peoples.[209] However, al-Mas'ūdī at one point (in the Murūj) confuses the Balkan Bulgars with the Bulgars of the Volga whose king had recently embraced Islam.[210] The latter are credited with raiding deep into Byzantine territory and threatening Constantinople itself.[211] Al-Mas'ūdī also speaks of contacts in 312/924 between Muslims of Ṭarsūs and the Bulgars who were engaged in fighting against the Byzantines. He states that in this year a Muslim flotilla reached a certain bay past the Hellespont where it encountered certain Bulgars who told the Muslims that the camp of their king was nearby, some Bulgars came with the Muslim boats to the port of Ṭarsūs.[212] These contacts do not appear to have been reported by other Arabic sources.[213] Al-Mas'ūdī's confused account may be partly due to his reliance on some informants who may have seen fit to attribute such wide-reaching activity to the newly converted northern Bulgars. But in Tanbīh - where a number of his errors are corrected explicitly or implicitly as in this instance - al-Mas'ūdī states that the Bulgars who ravaged the Byzantine themes of Macedonia, Thessalonica and Thrace, and who also threatened the Byzantine capital were in fact Christians.[214]

Al-Mas'ūdī also knew of the impact of the westward migrations of the Magyars and Pechenegs upon the Byzantine territories in the Balkans. He states that some time after 320/932 these tribes were able to ravage most of the European themes of the Empire; and that the menace of these raiders was considerable.[215] He also knew that the Magyars raided far westward into other parts of Europe.[216]

Al-Mas'ūdī's knowledge also extended to contemporary Byzantine-Russian relations. He refers to certain naval attacks by the Rūs on Constantinople stating that the Byzantines took special precautions in the form of fortifications or barriers to prevent these northerners from sailing down the Bosphorus and reaching the capital.[217] He knew, however, that there were also commercial relations between the Russians and the Byzantines,[218] and that certain Russians served in the imperial forces.[219]

Of particular interest is his reference to the relations between Constantinople and the West. Al-Mas'ūdī speaks of the 'master of Rome' who, according to him, had long been subordinate to the 'master of Constantinople' even before the Islamic era and until about 340 (950), when this ruler, as al-Mas'ūdī puts it, "put on the purple and assumed the imperial title" which led the Byzantine emperor to attempt waging war against him, though he eventually resolved to maintain