



# Views of 13<sup>th</sup> Century Arab Travelers on the History of Early Christian Communities

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the depictions of Christian communities in the travel accounts of 13th-century Muslim geographers and travelers. The aim is to analyze their geographical spread, religious practices, social conditions, and interfaith relations within the broader Islamic world. Employing a qualitative historical analysis of primary Arabic sources, including works by Yaqut al-Hamawi, Zakariya al-Qazwini, Ibn al-Mujawir, and Abu al-Fida, the research highlights descriptions of Christian communities across the Middle East, East Africa, al-Andalus, and Central Asia. The findings reveal that Arab travelers not only documented Christian places of worship and practices but also emphasized coexistence and cultural plurality. The study concludes that such medieval Arabic sources provide invaluable insights into interreligious dynamics, tolerance, and historical thought in the Islamic world.*

**Keywords:** *Eastern Muslim travelers, medieval geography, Christian communities, Arabic sources, Zakariya al-Qazwini, Yaqut al-Hamawi, Ibn al-Mujawir, Abu al-Fida, Christians of Socotra, al-Andalus, Najran Monastery, Church of the Holy Sepulchre.*

## Introduction

The early centuries of Christianity and its presence within territories connected to the Islamic world have long attracted scholarly interest. By the 13th century, Arab geographers and travelers had become key sources of knowledge about the religious and cultural landscapes of the regions they explored. Their works reveal not only geographical and political data but also nuanced accounts of communities with diverse faiths. Among these, the Christian populations of the Middle East, East Africa, al-Andalus, and Central Asia occupy a significant place.

Muslim travelers such as Yaqut al-Hamawi, Zakariya al-Qazwini, Ibn al-Mujawir, and Abu al-Fida documented their encounters with churches, monasteries, and Christian social customs. These records provide scholars today with unique perspectives on interreligious interactions, tolerance, and coexistence in the medieval Islamic world. By examining their writings, this study seeks to understand how Arab travelers perceived Christian communities, the significance of these depictions for medieval Islamic scholarship, and the ways they shaped the intellectual traditions of geography and historiography.

## Methodology

Arab merchants crossed tropical Asia, subtropical countries, and temperate regions Eastern Europe and Central Asia. They penetrated African countries south of the Sahara Desert and even crossed the equator.

Due to extensive trade development, the Arabs produced prominent travelers and geographers who made significant contributions to the medieval world during the 9th to 14th centuries. Much of Asia became known to Western European peoples precisely through these medieval Arab geographers[1].

Starting from the 8th century, Arab merchant-travelers and various diplomatic envoys collected large amounts of geographical information about several regions of Europe.

Until the 9th century, there were no independent geographical works; only certain isolated pieces of geographical knowledge were preserved, which were reflected in later philological literature or in stories about legendary journeys.

The 9th century was a period of major transformation: on one hand, it brought familiarity with the works of Ptolemy, which led to numerous edits and revisions and launched the continuous development of scientific geography; on the other hand, different categories of descriptive geography began to form and even become distinguishable.

By the end of this century, geographical compendiums reference works for scribes and clerks as well as travel accounts also began to specialize: in some, realistic elements became dominant, while others still preserved legendary features.

The 10th century marked the pinnacle of this literature: we observe the formation of the Arab geographical school, which was primarily oriented toward the description of "routes and kingdoms" (*al-masalik wa-l-mamalik*). This school is connected to the "Islamic atlas," considered the highest achievement in Arab cartography.

From the 11th century, especially from the 12th century onward, new types of reference works emerged, such as geographical dictionaries and general descriptions of the world, the heavens, and the earth—so-called cosmographies.

After this period, Arab geographical literature ceased to create new forms, limiting itself to imitation of previous models and traditions, and its content gradually adapted to the needs of the time[2].

Even in the early 1980s, when this literature was not yet as widely known as it is today, the historian of the Crusades, Prutz, wrote: "The best of their works have no equivalent in the literature of the West from that period. It is enough to read the works of Arab historians and compare them with the best examples of Western historiography of that era, and there is no doubt as to where greater historical feeling, political insight, stylistic elegance, and narrative art are to be found"[3].

In the works of travelers who were active in the 13th century, attitudes toward Christian communities can be classified according to the travel routes of these travelers.

## Result and Discussion

**Those who collected information about Christians in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Arabia, Egypt):**

Yaqut al-Hamawi (Shihab al-Din Abu Abdullah Yaqub ibn Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi) was a famous traveler, geographer, writer, and historian from Asia Minor. He was taken captive as a child. He was bought in the city of Hama, Syria, by the Baghdad merchant Asqar al-Hamawi, who gave him the name Yaqut and the nisba "al-Hamawi." At the age of 20, after being freed from slavery, he went to Baghdad and continued his studies. At the beginning of the 13th century, he lived in Marv, Khorasan. In 1213, he set out on a journey that lasted 16 years, during which he traveled in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, southern Arabia, Iraq, Iran, present-day Afghanistan, and Transoxiana, collecting information on geography, history, philology, and ethnography. According to sources, about ten works by the scholar are known. Among these, his 14-volume toponymic work "Mu'jam al-Buldan" ("Dictionary of Countries"), completed in 1224, contains information on the cities and villages of the Fergana Valley. His seven-volume "Mu'jam al-Udaba" ("Dictionary of Literati") is a biographical work gathering information about nearly 1,100 writers and scholars who lived from the 7th century to the early 13th century and wrote in Arabic. This work, in particular, mentions the names of scholars from Khwarezm, Bukhara, Marv, Akhsikath, Samarkand, Fergana, and Farab in Central Asia. The manuscripts of these two major works have reached us and are preserved in libraries in Europe and the Middle East. The author's works are important sources for the study of the geography, literature, language, and history of the period up to the 13th century.

In Mu'jam al-Buldan, Yaqut al-Hamawi includes an Arabic translation of an inscription written on the façade of a church in the city of Hira, commissioned by Queen Hind. The inscription reads: "This church was built by Hind, the daughter of al-Harith ibn 'Amr ibn Hujr (al-Kindi). She is a queen, the daughter of kings, and the mother of King 'Amr ibn al-Mundhir. She is a servant of Jesus the Messiah, the mother of His servant, and the daughter of His worshippers. This construction was completed during the reign of the King of Kings, Khosrow Anushirwan, and under the episcopate of Mar Ephrem"[4]

The author further writes: "Bethlehem is a flourishing town near Jerusalem, known for its market and trade activities. It is here that the cradle of Mary's son, Jesus, is located. When Umar ibn al-Khattab came to Jerusalem, a monk from Bethlehem approached him saying: "I have a protection document from you for Bethlehem." Umar replied, "I know nothing of this." The monk then showed him the document. Umar recognized it and said, "This is authentic, but wherever Christians have places, we cannot forgo building a mosque." The monk responded, "In Bethlehem, there is a place in the direction of your qibla. Build a mosque there for Muslims and do not destroy our church." Umar agreed, prayed in that building, converted it into a mosque, and assigned the Christians the responsibility to illuminate, maintain, and keep it clean. After that, Muslims began to regularly visit Bethlehem to pray there, and according to tradition, they referred to it as "the place of Umar ibn al-Khattab." This location remains renowned even today. Even when the Franks conquered the region, they did not alter it. It is said that both David and Solomon (peace be upon them) are buried there"[5].

Yaqut al-Hamawi also provides information about two other traditional sites regarded as the birthplace of Jesus. One is a cave on Mount Rubwa near Damascus, and the

other is the widely recognized town of Nazareth: "An-Nasira (Nazareth) is a village located thirteen miles from Tiberias. There, Jesus the Messiah, son of Mary, was born. It is from this place that the Christians derive their name. However, the people of Jerusalem reject this claim and insist that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem, where clear signs of the event remain. They assert that Mary later moved the child to Nazareth. I, calling myself "a weak servant in need of God's help," affirm the following: According to the text of the Gospel, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Mary's husband, Joseph, fearing the schemes of King Herod, heard a voice in a dream: "Take him to Egypt, and do not return until I command you." This was so that what was spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Joseph lived in Egypt until Herod died. Then, he received a dream instructing him to return to the land of Israel, and he set off for Jerusalem with Jesus. But upon hearing that someone else had taken the throne in Herod's place, he was afraid. Again in a dream, he heard a voice: "Take him to al-Khalil." So, he went to al-Khalil and eventually settled in the town called an-Nasira (Nazareth). That is why in the Gospel, Jesus is often referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth." Yet, true knowledge rests only with God." [6]

Najran - a monastery bearing this name also exists in the Ḥawran region of Damascus province, near the city of Buṣra. It is said that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) visited this site, and that the monk Bahira recognized him there. This story is well known in the accounts of the Prophet's miracles. The monastery was large and beautiful. In its honor, heralds would ride through cities crying out: "Whoever has made a vow to blessed Najrān, let them fulfill it!" Each city had such a herald. The donations brought to the monastery also served as a source of tax revenue for the ruling authorities [7].

In another part of the work, it is stated: "There is a grand, beautiful, and prosperous church in Najran, built upon marble columns and adorned with mosaics. This blessed place is supported by donations from both Muslims and Christians" [8].

Qumama - among the churches in Jerusalem belonging to Christians, Qumāma is the largest. Its beauty, wealth, and abundance of decorations make it difficult to fully describe. It is located in the center of the city and is surrounded by a wall. Within it (i.e., according to the Christians) is a tomb, which they refer to as al-Qiyama ("The Resurrection"), because they believe that Jesus the Messiah was resurrected there. However, its original name is Qumama ("Garbage Heap"), as the city's residents once dumped their waste there. It was located outside the city walls; criminals would have their hands cut off there, and robbers were crucified. After Jesus was crucified there, the place began to be considered sacred and became venerated. The Gospel also mentions this site. There is a rock there which, according to Christians, split open when the cross was placed upon it, and Adam (peace be upon him) is said to have emerged from beneath it. They also believe that there is a garden dedicated to Joseph (peace be upon him), referred to as "The Righteous Joseph," which is visited by pilgrims. They possess a lamp that, according to their belief, ignites on its own with fire descending from the sky on a certain day. One government official, desiring to uncover the truth of this phenomenon, stayed near the lamp. As he was a high-ranking official, the Christians could not drive him away. He told me this story: "A priest who had been watching me for a long time said: "If you don't leave us soon, you'll damage our

reputation." I asked, 'Why?' He replied: "Because if you discover what we are really doing, which we show differently to our fellow believers, it will be exposed." I responded, "No, I must see what you are doing." I then found a note in one of their books which said: "The priest brings the candle close to the lamp, and the flame immediately ignites it, but the people do not witness this. They believe it to be a miracle and have no doubts"[9].

Zakariya ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmud al-Qazwini was born in the year 600 AH (1203–1204 CE) in the city of Qazvin, Iran, into an Arab family of jurists. He traces his lineage to Anas ibn Mālik, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Al-Qazwini studied Islamic law in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. It was there that his interest in knowledge was awakened and the foundations for his two great works — an encyclopedic treatise on natural science and a book of geography — were formed. He lived during the reign of the last Abbasid Caliph, al-Mustaʿsim, and served as a judge in the cities of al-Wasit and al-Hilla in Iraq. Both of his famous works were composed in al-Wasit, where he was personally appointed judge by the caliph[10].

His fame is based on two works which sometimes merge or are closely associated. The first may be conventionally referred to as a cosmography, and the second as a geography. The wide dissemination and popularity of both works have complicated the matter of their various textual editions.

Cosmography, commonly known as "Aja'ib al-Makhluqat wa-Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat" ("Marvels of Creatures and Strange Phenomena of Existence"), is one of al-Qazwini's most famous works[11]. It is also said that he personally oversaw the illustrators who created the images for this book. The work gained widespread fame during his lifetime. Al-Qazwini passed away in 1283 and spent the last twenty years of his life in Baghdad, which at that time was under the governance of the Mongol representative and renowned historian 'Ala' al-Din Ata Malik al-Juwayni the author of the famous "Tarikh-i Jahan-gusha" ("The History of the World Conqueror"). In 1263, al-Qazwini dedicated his "Aja'ib al-Makhluqat" to al-Juwayni and continued his scholarly activity under his patronage.

Al-Qazwini's second major work, commonly referred to as his "Geography", is known in two distinct versions. The first, titled "Aja'ib al-Buldan" ("Marvels of the Lands"), dates to 1263. The second is a thoroughly revised and significantly expanded version, titled "Athar al-Bilad wa-Akhbar al-'Ibad" ("Monuments of the Lands and Reports about the Servants of God"), compiled in 1275. The edition published by the orientalist Wüstenfeld[12] is based on this second version. The work describes the Earth's surface using the well-known system of seven climatic zones. Within each zone, various regions, cities, mountains, islands, lakes, rivers, and other geographical features are described alphabetically. Each entry provides architectural, historical, and noteworthy details. Special attention is given to biographies of famous individuals born in those locations. In structure and style, the work closely resembles the geographical dictionary of Yaqut al-Ḥamawi. In fact, al-Qazwini heavily relied on Yāqūt's work and frequently quoted it[13].

Al-Qazwini's geographical work encompasses the Near and Middle East, Central and Southeast Asia, China, India, Ceylon, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and al-Andalus. It is known that al-Qazwini personally visited many countries and, while

traveling with merchant caravans, recorded stories from travelers, merchants, and dervishes. Some of these stories are based on legendary oral traditions, leading some researchers to describe his work as the first scientific-fantasy treatise. In his introduction, al-Qazwini writes that he considers books to be one's best companions, and that he left home to pursue knowledge.

In his work, al-Qazwini mentions a church in Bethlehem which contains a room with a piece of a date palm tree said to be the same tree from which Mary (Maryam) ate dates — as mentioned in the Qur'an: "Shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you..." (Maryam, 19:25). There is also a spring there, referred to as al-Ma'budiiya (the sacred water), flowing from a stone, which is held in high esteem by Christians[14].

2) Information about Christians in the Arabian Sea and East Africa (Sokotra, Zanzibar):

Ibn al-Mujawir (Abu al-Fath Jamal al-Din Yusuf ibn Ya'qub ibn Muhammad, 1205–1292) was a traveler and merchant. He journeyed south from Mecca through the Red Sea and along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula to the Persian Gulf. During his stay in the city of Aden — then entering a period of medieval prosperity under Ayyubid rule — he observed port operations and provided detailed information about its administration, taxes, markets, customs, currency, weights, and measures. He continued his journey along the southern coasts of Arabia and documented the historical ties between the Gulf of Aden and India, even adapting parts of the Indian epic Ramayana to a local Arabian context[15].

He is best known for his travelogue, "Tarikh al-Mustabsir" (or "Tarikh al-Mustansir") — "The Chronicle of an Intelligent Observer". In it, he describes the cities, commerce, local dynasties, and social customs of southern Arabia. This chronicle is a key source for the economic history and everyday life in 13th-century southern Arabia and the island of Sokotra.

Ibn al-Mujawir provides extensive detail about the culture and daily life on Sokotra Island, including references to ancient religious beliefs, especially those related to good and evil spirits. He notes that two different groups lived on the island: the indigenous mountain-dwellers and immigrant communities living along the coast[16].

Yaqut al-Hamawi also mentions the Christian communities of East Africa: "Whoever travels to the land of the Zanj will pass by the island of Sokotra. Most of its inhabitants are Arab Christians. From this island come aloe and the resin of a tree that grows only there"[17].

3) Travelers who gathered information about Christians in Western Europe and Asia Minor:

Abu al-Fida (Imad al-Din Abu al-Fida Ismail ibn Ali ibn Mahmud ibn Muhammad ibn Umar Shahanshah ibn Ayyub al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad) was born in 1273 in Damascus. His close ties with the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, and his active participation in the fight against the Crusaders brought him to the forefront of governance in the city of Hama[18]. Muhammad ibn Qalawun appointed him as the Sultan of Hama, and sources mention that he held full autonomous authority over the city. His close relations with Mamluk rulers continued until the end of his life. His scholarly

reputation is based on two major works: the historical chronicle *al-Mukhtasar fi Akhbar al-Bashar* ("A Concise Account of Human History") and the descriptive geographical work *Taqwim al-Buldan* ("The Survey of Countries").

Abu al-Fida first mentions al-Andalus in the fifth section of his book, in the chapter on the "peoples of the world," where he discusses al-Nasara (Christians). The chapter begins with an explanation of the term al-Nasara and other theological reflections on Christianity. He then includes a section titled "Nations Who Converted to Christianity." In this section, Abu al-Fida refers to al-Andalus as a geographical reference point for locating the Iفرانج (i.e., Western European Christians). According to him, the lands of the Iفرانج are contiguous with the Iberian Peninsula and lie to its north. He further notes: "The Iفرانج have taken control over much of the Iberian Peninsula"[19] Abu al-Fida uses the term Iفرانج in a general sense to refer to Western European Christians, clearly distinguishing them from Byzantine Christians, whom he calls Rum.

From a geographical perspective, Abu al-Fida describes al-Andalus as a clearly defined peninsula containing both Christian and Muslim territories[20].

Ibn Battuta (Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Lawati al-Tanji) is considered one of the most famous Muslim travelers of the 14th century. He was born in 1304 in the city of Tangier, Morocco. His journeys extended far beyond the borders of the Muslim world, covering nearly all prominent regions of his time. Ibn Battuta set out in 1325 initially for pilgrimage (Hajj), but this journey turned into a series of long and far-reaching explorations. Over the course of 25 years, he traveled more than 130,000 kilometers by land and sea, through deserts and mountains.

He visited Africa (Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, the Sahara, Mozambique), the Middle East (Medina, Mecca, Syria, Iraq, Yemen), Central Asia (Volga region, Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand), India and South Asia (Delhi, Malabar, Maldives, Sri Lanka), China (under the Yuan dynasty), and Europe (Byzantium – Constantinople).

The main source of his journeys is the work *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Gharaib al-Amsar wa Ajaib al-Asfar* ("A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Marvels of Cities and the Wonders of Travels"), commonly known as *Rihla* ("The Journey"). He dictated this book in 1356 in the city of Fez, and it was edited into literary form by the scholar Ibn Juzayy of Granada. The work contains not only geographic data but also detailed descriptions of the customs, religions, laws, trade, and daily life of various peoples.

During his 28-year journey, Ibn Battuta visited hundreds of towns and villages in North and West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India and Spain, Turkey and Iran, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and finally China. His *Rihla* contains such an abundance of fascinating accounts of distant lands and peoples that many of his contemporaries viewed some of the stories with skepticism, considering them to be imaginary or exaggerated[21].

In his work, Ibn Battuta describes Constantinople as follows: "The city is extremely large and is divided by a great river, where the rise and fall of water is observed. There used to be a stone bridge here, but it has collapsed, and now people cross the river by boat. The part of the city on the eastern bank of the river is called Istanbul. This is where the imperial palace, the nobles, and the general population reside. Its markets and streets are spacious

and paved with stone; each market is secured with gates that are closed at night. Most of the merchants and artisans are women. The city is situated at the foot of a hill that stretches about nine miles along the sea, and its width is about the same or even more. On top of this hill are a small fortress and the emperor's palace. The city is surrounded by strong walls, and it is nearly impossible to conquer from the sea. Within this area, there are about thirteen residential settlements — villages. The main church is located at the center of this section of the city. The western part of the city on the opposite shore is called Galata, and it is inhabited by Frankish Christians. Here live Genoese, Venetians, Romans, and French. They are under the rule of the king of Constantinople, but they elect one of their own as a leader, who is called a comes (count). Each year they are required to pay tribute to the king, though they often rebel, and the king wages war against them. Then the Pope intervenes to restore peace. These Franks are engaged in trade, and their port is among the largest in the world. The markets in this area are good, but dirty. A polluted stream with little water flows through it. Their churches are also unclean and modest in appearance"[22].

On another page of the work, the author states: "I only saw the exterior of this large church, not its interior. It is called Hagia Sophia. According to legend, it was built by Asaf ibn Barkhiya, the cousin of the Prophet Solomon. This is one of the most sacred churches of the Greek Christians, and it is surrounded by such a large wall that it resembles a small independent city. It has thirteen gates and a sacred courtyard. The courtyard is about a mile long and is closed with a large gate. No one is forbidden from entering this courtyard; I entered it together with the emperor's father. The place looks like a large marble-covered assembly hall. Inside flows a spring originating from the church. Outside the courtyard, there are wooden stalls and shops, where their judges and scribes sit. Only those who have prayed in front of the great cross are allowed to enter the church's interior. According to their claims, this cross includes a piece from the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. It is enclosed in a gold box about ten cubits tall. Another gold box is placed perpendicularly, forming the shape of a cross. The gate itself is covered with gold and silver, and the handles are made of pure gold. It is said that thousands of monks and clergy live in this church, some of whom are even descendants of the apostles of Jesus. Inside the church, there is a separate area for women only, where over a thousand virgins and many elderly women live in devotion. Every morning, the king, nobles, and common people visit this church. The Pope, however, visits this place only once a year,"[23] he emphasizes.

In the same work, Ibn Battuta writes: "There are many monasteries in the city of Constantinople. Among them is a monastery built outside of Istanbul, opposite Galata, by King George. Additionally, to the right of the main church (Hagia Sophia), there are two monasteries built along a stream flowing through a garden — one for men, and one for women. Each monastery has its own church and is surrounded by cells for the men and women devoted to religious life. Each monastery has endowments (waqf) that cover the clothing and living expenses of the ascetics. Also, each monastery has a special room designated for a king who wishes to devote the rest of his life to worship. Many kings, upon reaching the age of 60 or 70, hand over the throne to their children, put on woolen clothes, and live out the rest of their days in religious devotion. They exhibit great enthusiasm and

splendor when building these monasteries — adorning the buildings with marble and mosaics. I visited one such monastery with a Greek man assigned to me by the king. It housed five hundred virgin girls, all wearing woolen garments, with shaved heads and wearing felt bonnets. A young man sat at the pulpit reading the Gospel in a beautiful voice, surrounded by eight other young men doing the same, along with a priest. As soon as one finished reading, another would begin. The Greek man with me said: ‘These girls are daughters of kings, who have dedicated themselves to service in this church. The boys reading scripture are also children of kings.’ I also visited other churches where the daughters of viziers, emirs, and prominent city figures, as well as elderly women and widows, resided. In other churches, monks lived, each housing around a hundred people. A large portion of the city’s population consists of monks, ascetics, and clergy. The number of churches there is so great, it defies counting[24]”, these lines provide valuable information about Christian communities.

## Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the works of 13th-century Muslim travelers serve as valuable and reliable sources for understanding the existence, living conditions, religious practices, and interactions of Christian communities in the medieval world. The descriptions of churches, monasteries, religious customs, and geographic locations illustrate the diversity of Christianity and its interaction with Muslim societies. Furthermore, these works reflect the presence of religious tolerance, cultural plurality, and interfaith dialogue in the historical thought of the East. Therefore, Arabic geographical and ethnographic sources are of immense significance for contemporary religious and historical research.

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