

Misconceptions of a tenth-century muslim traveler

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Historical and cultural accounts are important documents in order for the next generation to mirror the past and learn from the early people. If such accounts are incomplete and biased, the people being described may be underestimated and the readers may be misled. The essay written by Al Mas'udi on the natives of Oman or the Zanj tribe is one example of a cultural account lacking in information and depth.

As a merchant, Al Mas'udi gave a commercialist account of what can be found in Oman. In focusing much on what he could benefit from in the country, he failed to give a truthful observation of the people—their culture, beliefs, and traditions. This narrow point of view by a merchant traveler, if given serious consideration, may be dangerous as it may picture the people of Oman differently.

In his essay, the author regarded the sail to the sea of Oman as the most dangerous, saying, “ I do not know of one more dangerous than that of the Zanj.” This introduction could lead the readers to be disappointed from going to the place because of the danger he stated. Also, Mas’udi used the term Zanj to refer to all the people in Oman, but this is not proper because the word has a connotation that may demean his subjects. Such terms are said to be taboo, just like the term “ Negroes” for Black Americans for this remind the Blacks of their painful past.

The journal of Mas’udi also contained misconceptions about the natives of Oman as he pictured them to be like savages who “ do not use [elephants] for war or anything but only hurt and kill them.” This statement is too rude as it depicts a tribe that did not pay respect for animal life, but a tribe that was so cruel and uncivilized.

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On the positive side, though, the author mentioned that the people had a beautiful language and they had a preacher to teach them about God. However, he said that there were no religious laws, which leads us to asking, what do the preachers preach aside from the law of their god? Truly, this statement gives a confusion on the people's beliefs.

As a traveler, one thing that Mas'udi must have done was to respect the people he observed and carefully write about them, without missing out on details which could lead the audience to misconceptions. This is similar to the term lesbian which was given a misconception from its original meaning of " people of Lesbos," an island where the poet Sappho originated. The term was later given negative interpretation due to interpretations of the author's poems which depicted platonic love between women. Indeed, we can see, " A little knowledge is a dangerous thing!" (Pope 1709)

Work Cited

" Lesbos Lived on an Island." Pearl's Rainbow Key West. 3 December 2007.

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