

Muhammad al-Idrisi

Father of Modern Geography and Maps!

1099, Ceuta, Spain - 1161, Sicily, Italy

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Abu Abd Allah Muhammad al-Idrisi al-Qurtubi al-Hasani al-Sabti commonly known as Al Idrisi was a great Muslim geographer, cartographer and traveler could be rightly called as the father of modern Geography and Maps! He belonged to an era when Great Muslim Empire had suffered from decline and had shown some cracks due to their drifting away from Quran. He was born in Ceuta, where his great-grandfather had been forced to settle after the fall of Hammudid Malaga to the Zirids of Granada. He spent much of his early life travelling through North Africa and Al-Andalus and seems to have acquired detailed information on both regions. He visited Anatolia when he was barely 16. He is known to have studied in Córdoba

Apparently his travels took him to many parts of Europe including Portugal, the Pyrenees, the French Atlantic coast Hungary, and Jórviik also known as York, in England. Like Muslim geographers before him, Al-Idrisi traveled many distant places, including Europe, to gather geographical data. The Muslim geographers had already made accurate measurements of the earth's surface, and several maps of the whole world were available. Al-Idrisi combined this available knowledge with his own findings to create comprehensive information for all parts of the known world. As his fame spread, he gained the attention of European sea navigators and military planners and eventually that of Roger II, the Norman King of Sicily, who invited him to produce an up-to-date world map.

At the court of King Roger II in Sicily he produced magnificent *The Nuzhat al-mushtaq fikhtiraq al-afaq* ("the book of pleasant journeys into faraway lands") also known as *Tabula Rogeriana* (After Roger) in 1154, one of the most advanced ancient world maps. Modern consolidation, created from the 70 double-page spreads of the original atlas. Al-Idrisi worked on the commentaries and illustrations of the map for fifteen years! At an early age he traveled to Islamic

Spain, Portugal, France and England, and visited Anatolia when he was barely 16. Because of conflict and instability in Al-Andalus al-Idrisi joined contemporaries such as Abu al-Salt in Sicily, where the Normans had overthrown Arabs formerly loyal to the Fatimids.

Al-Idrisi incorporated the knowledge of Africa, the Indian Ocean and the Far East gathered by Islamic merchants and explorers and recorded on Islamic maps with the information brought by the Norman voyagers to create the most accurate map of the world in pre-modern times, which served as a concrete illustration of his book. It was also emblazoned on a gigantic disc of solid silver, two metres in diameter.

On the geographical work of al-Idrisi, S.P. Scott wrote in 1904: The compilation of Edrisi marks an era in the history of science. Not only is its historical information most interesting and valuable, but its descriptions of many parts of the earth are still authoritative. For three centuries geographers copied his maps without modification. The relative position of the lakes which form the Nile, as delineated in his work, does not differ greatly from that established by Baker and Stanley more than seven hundred years afterwards, and their number is the same. The mechanical genius of the author was not inferior to his sophistication. The celestial and terrestrial planisphere of silver nearly six feet in diameter, and weighed four hundred and fifty pounds; upon the one side the zodiac and the constellations, upon the other-divided for convenience into segments-the bodies of land and water, with the respective situations of the various countries, were engraved.

Al-Idrisi inspired Islamic geographers such as Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun and Piri Reis. His map also inspired Christopher Columbus and Vasco Da Gama.

He mentioned Ireland; "from the extremity of Iceland to that of Great Ireland," the sailing time was "one day." Although

historians note that both al-Idrisi and the Norse tend to understate distances, the only location this reference is thought to have possibly pointed to, must likely have been in Greenland. Al-Idrisi mentioned that Chinese Junks carried leather, swords, Iron and Silk. He mentions the glassware of the city of Hangzhou and labels Quanzhou's silk as the best.

The Commander of the Muslims Ali ibn Yusuf ibn Tashfin sent his admiral Ahmad ibn Umar, better known under the name of Raqsh al-Auzz to attack a certain island in the Atlantic, but he died before doing that. Beyond this ocean of fogs it is not known what exists there. Nobody has the sure knowledge of it, because it is very difficult to traverse it. Its atmosphere is foggy, its waves are very strong, its dangers are dangerous, its beasts are terrible, and its winds are full of tempests. There are many islands, some of which are inhabited, others are submerged. No navigator traverses them but bypasses them remaining near their coast. And it was from the town of Lisbon that the adventurers set out known under the name of Mughamarin [Adventurers], penetrated the ocean of fogs and wanted to know what it contained and where it ended. After sailing for twelve more days they perceived an island that seemed to be inhabited, and there were cultivated fields. They sailed that way to see what it contained. But soon barques encircled them and made them prisoners, and transported them to a miserable hamlet situated on the coast. There they landed. The navigators saw there people with red skin; there was not much hair on their body, the hair of their head was straight, and they were of high stature. Their women were of an extraordinary beauty.

Professor Muhammad Hamidullah reports, after having reached an area of "sticky and stinking waters", the *Mugharrarin* (also translated as "the adventurers") moved back and first reached an uninhabited island where they found "a huge quantity of sheep the meat of which was bitter and uneatable" and, then, "continued southward" and reached the above reported island where they were soon surrounded by barques and brought to "a village whose inhabitants were often fair-haired with long and flaxen hair and the women of a rare beauty". Among the villagers, one spoke Arabic and asked them where they came from. Then the king of the village ordered them to bring them back to the continent where they were surprised to be welcomed by Berbers.

Al-Idrisi also made major contributions in the science of medicinal plants and wrote several books, the most popular entitled 'Kitab al-Jami-li-Sifat Ashtat al-Nabatat.' He reviewed and synthesized all literature on the subject and as-

sociated drugs available to him from Muslim scientists with those from his own research and travels. He contributed this material to the subject of botany with emphasis on medicinal plants, describing the names of the drugs in several languages including Berber, Syriac, Persian, Hindi, Greek, and Latin. Al-Idrisi also called on knowledge gained through travels to write on zoology and fauna.

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