

D. Sources

Introduction from Aḥmed Bīcān Yazıcıoğlu's *‘Acā’ibü’l-maḥlūkāt*

With more than forty copies, Aḥmed-i Bīcān (d. after 1465)’s abridged translation of al-Qazwīnī’s *‘Ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt* is one of the most copied Ottoman geographical texts. Aḥmed-i Bīcān was an Ottoman scholar and mystic from Gelibolu. He was a disciple of Ḥacı Bayram Velī and he got the sobriquet “Bīcān”, ‘lifeless’ due to his ascetic way of life.

The copy of his translation at the Sadberk Hanım Museum contains chapters on the description of the universe, planets, angels, days, months, seas, mountains, rivers, minerals, stones, animals and plants. It also presents a south-oriented world map where the southernmost part of the map is marked by the Mountains of Moon, attributed as the source of the Nile and the northernmost part is marked as the lands of Bulgar and the land of Gog and Magog. The world is surrounded by the all-Encompassing Ocean, and the names of the seas are dispersed within it due to lack of space. Gelibolu, the town where Aḥmed-i Bīcān lived is inserted into the map between Europe (*Frenc*) and Istanbul.

Copyright: © 2021 The Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH and the Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Acā’ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural is an open access journal published by the Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH.

Coşkun, Feray. 2021. “Introduction from Aḥmed Bīcān Yazıcıoğlu’s ‘Acā’ibü’l-maḥlūkāt”. *Acā’ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural* 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26225/kxq2-2z32>

[1b] This book is *Wonders of Creation*. In the name of Allāh the compassionate, the merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe, and blessings and peace be upon the most blissful of (all) creatures, Muḥammad, and his family and his companions altogether.¹ Thereafter, says Yazıcıoğlu Aḥmed Bīcān—may Allāh be pleased with him—an affectionate friend of learned men and a servant of the poor: The reason for [the composition of] this book occurred to me while I contemplate about the creations that I should compile some wonders of the universe. Specifically, universal rulers in the time of Alexander had gathered and revealed all strange things in the universe, from the Throne of [God] to the Earth. However, since that work was in Arabic, the uneducated of our land were unable to make use of it. Thanks to the high endeavor of my Sheikh, Ḥācī Bayram Velī, the Sultan of Sheikhs, the Pole of the seekers of truth, I compiled this book. I hope that it will be read.

It is not an attainment [of skill]² to look at the universe only by eye; even an animal looks at it [in this way] like man does. On the contrary, [attainment of skill] is to think about the intention of what is perceived. To know the truths of the universe by fair means is the cause of earthly pleasure [2a] and ethereal benefits. And they only accrue for those informed about the conceivable and the perceived.

I compiled this book in Gallipoli when Ġāzī Meḥmed Ḥān conquered Istanbul in the year of 857. It shall be known that, by wonder, philosophers refer to the astonishment that befalls man when he does not know the reason for something or does not know the characteristics of its effect. Now reflect on the greatness and sublimity of the present universe and even reflect on the heavens revolving differently, some [revolve] like a mill, some like a baldric, some like a water-wheel, and reflect on some spheres standing without pillars, or stars whose risings and settings vary. Although the cycles of the heavens vary, [the stars] move uniformly on [the sphere] of the signs of the zodiac; and reflect on the forms of the heavens; some are white, some scarlet, some silver, some gold and some ruby, and some in the shape of a pearl. And reflect on the movement of the Sun in the fourth heaven; it passes through 28 [lunar] houses in a year and arrives back at its spot and it shows much variety day and night [?]. [2b] And reflect on the Moon, how much light it acquires from the Sun and how it substitutes for the Sun during the night, and how it becomes a full moon and a crescent, and even how the Sun and the Moon are unveiled [following

1 A customary Arabic phrase used at the beginning of the text to praise Allāh and the Prophet Muḥammad.

2 In some other copies it appears as *kemāl-i ma'rifet*.

an eclipse]. Reflect on how the stars fall from the heavens³ and thunder and flashes of lightning become fire, and how stone rains, and rain and snow fall and various winds come about, and [reflect on] how the clouds carry water across the air and how they revolve in compliance with the wisdom of the elements of the universe and how drops from the clouds get separated and become rain. If drops were gathered together in a certain place and then flowed from there, they would riddle the Earth with holes and destroy the crops and rain in streams; animals would perish and they [the drops] would permeate into their skin.⁴ And reflect on the winds; some drive the clouds, some scatter the clouds, and some gather them again, and some squeeze them until it rains, and some make trees grow leaves, yield fruit, and shed leaves. Each of them is [a different] variety. In total, there are thirty-two varieties. And even reflect on at the lands, how they were spread so that they became a bed for the people, and He [God] made the upper side of ground an abode for the living while underneath is an abode for the dead, and held the Earth firm with mountains [3a] so that it keeps still.

He created water on the peaks of the mountains, like treasure, always emerging below to grow clean grass for the animals to feed on and not to perish. And reflect on the seas: each is like a gulf from the Encircling Ocean, and in comparison with the Encircling Ocean, the inhabited world is like a small island, and there are twice as many extant things in the seas as there are on land, or even more, and reflect on the mother of pearl in the water, and then the pearl inside that, and reflect on how coral and ambergris come from the water. And reflect on the minerals, some melt like gold and silver and naphtha, sulfur and tar, and some do not, like turquoise. And reflect on the various plants and the kinds of fruits and the different forms, colors, tastes, and scents, and reflect on how one seed forms several fruits and in every fruit there are plentiful benefits, and reflect on the meadows, and reflect on the animals: some fly, some walk, and some have eight feet while some have forty and some one hundred. Part on the Days: Now the days are six in number. God decrees in His Noble Qur'an as follows: "He [God] who created the heavens and the Earth in six days."⁵ So seven celestial spheres are created in stages. Here it is [3b]

3 Probably refers to perseid (göktaşu yağmuru) or shooting stars.

4 Here the text says "derisine sinir akmazdı". In another manuscript I read it as "postuna sinip akmazdı". Therefore I translated it as "sinip" rather than "sinir".

5 This is a reference to the Quranic verse 7:54.



You are to know that God created the substance of the Earth in one day, and in one day He created the forms of the whole Earth, and in one day He created the substance of the heavens, and in one day He created all forms, and in two days He created all the mountains and the stars and He created the people, and He created the creations on Earth from that wind, and He created some of them from fire and water, and some from water and Earth.

Those were inanimate creations. After that, the minerals, and then plants, and [then] animals and [then] men were created. Part: It should be known that all extramental entities are divided into two: The first [type] are those for which we never know the true essence and form, such as the Throne and the Footstool, and the angels, djinn, and humans. We never know the reality of these. And the second [type] are those that we know all about. We can understand the lands and the heavens and the stars by observing how they revolve around each other. We know about the mountains and the mist and mineral[s] and plant[s] and animal[s], and what is between the Earth and the heavens through to the clouds, the rains, the snow, and flashing thunderbolts. All of these are things [4a] that can be observed. None of them act without wisdom.

Part on the description of Spica [the star α Virginis]: Philosophers surmised that heaven is a simple body, its form is spherical, it is nested, and its centre moves. Upon this centre, the heaven is neither light nor low nor hot. It is neither cold nor

humid, nor dry. The first of heaven is made of green chrysolite. The second one is of yellow ruby. The third is scarlet ruby. The fourth is white silver. The fifth is scarlet gold. The sixth is white pearl. The seventh is made of white light. They are all one sphere.

The lowest are determined according to the [four basic] elements. First is the sphere of the Moon, above that is the sphere of Mercury, and then the sphere of Venus; above that is the sphere of the Sun, and then the sphere of Mars; above that is the sphere of the Jupiter and then the sphere of Saturn; above that is the sphere of the Fixed Stars, and above that, finally, is the greatest sphere. Each sphere has its own place. It moves in its own orbit. It does not transfer to anywhere else and the movement of the heavens is the fastest. It became evident in the science of geometry that the Throne moves nine thousand miles, just as a riding horse lifts its foot [4b] and puts it back on the ground again. And the movement of the Throne is from the East to the West, and it gets seventy-thousand different colors every day, and the sphere of the Fixed Stars and the spheres of the planets are from West to East, and those nine spheres contain the circle yet the center is the center of the universe and there is a sphere which does not contain a surface like the sphere of epicycles, and there is also a sphere that has only one star while there is a sphere whose star we do not know, like the Fixed Stars, and there is a sphere that has no star like the Throne. It is called the sphere of Atlas [the Ninth Sphere].

Part: The philosophers came to an agreement that the thickness of the Moon is a hundred and eighteen thousand sixty-six (118,066) miles. In the science of mathematics, the Moon's gain [of the light] comes from the Sun, and the Moon is related to common people, liars, informers, and the envious; and it stands still for every two nights and a third of a night, and it covers the sphere in a distance of a month, and the mass of the Moon constitutes one part of thirty-nine parts of the Earth and its cycle is a hundred fifty-two [152] miles and its diameter is four hundred and forty [440] miles. And its mass is dense, dark and disposed [to the light?]. [5a] In terms of light, it appears like a two sided mirror. One of its sides faces the Sun and the other faces the Earth. Whenever it approaches the Sun, its light decreases; when they do not face each other, the light of the Moon increases. This is how the full moon and the crescent appear. And the reason for its eclipse is that the shadow of the Earth comes between the Sun and the Moon. In this situation, the Moon reverts to its own dark essence since the Sun is larger than the Earth. In this situation, the shadow of the Earth adopts the shape of a cone and therefore the lines of the external rays do not coincide with the Sun.

When it is connected to the circuit of the Earth, the direction of the Moon chang-

es. [The shadow of] the Earth takes on the form of a cone. When the width of the Moon is not larger [than the shadow of the Earth], the whole of the Moon is eclipsed from the Ninth Sphere[?]. When the width of the Moon becomes [to the shadow], then part of it [sees the Sun] and part of it [sees] the Earth and then it is partially eclipsed. When it is eclipsed, while the light of the Moon increases, the meat and skin of animals become dry and their hair becomes long. Bird eggs become white, men tend to sit and sleep more, and fish become fatty and wild beasts have more prey, and there are more fruits and the harvest is good and scents [5b] become pleasant. And when the Moon is in its last quarter, all of these conditions are reversed.

Part on the Milky Way: In the sky, the Milky Way is composed of small stars that clustered together. Arabs referred to it as the Mother of the Stars. Some [of the stars] cover some others, and they appear exactly like clouds. *Part on Mercury:* Regarding its motion, it arrives in the East from the West in one year and its thickness is three hundred thousand eighty-eight (300,088) miles and its nature is composite. It becomes auspicious with the auspicious [planets] and inauspicious with the inauspicious [planets], and its mass is equal to one part of twenty-two parts [of the mass of the Earth]. Its cycle is four hundred twenty (420) miles and its diameter is two hundred seventy-three (273) miles. It remains in each sign of the zodiac for about twenty-seven (27) days. It is associated with viziers, members of the council of state, scribes, standard-bearers, merchants, and teachers.

Part on Venus: It is known as “the Little Auspicious”. In terms of motion, it is similar to Mercury, but sometimes it goes before the Sun or sometimes after it, and the thickness of this sphere is three thousand seven hundred ninety-five (3795) miles. It is associated with servants, women, musicians, and libertines, and its mass is equal to one part of thirty-four parts of it and its diameter is four hundred ninety [6a] four [494] miles, and it stays in each sign [of the zodiac] for twenty-nine (29) days. Anyone who becomes disheartened and stares at Venus has their low-spiritedness disappear.

Part on the Sun: It is the most auspicious [planet]. The cycle of the sphere of the Sun is three hundred sixty (360) days in a year and its motion is from the East to the West, and the thickness of its sphere is three hundred thousand times fifty-five thousand seventy-four (300,000 x 55,074) miles. In terms of mass, it is the greatest star, and in terms of light, it has more light than any other star, and in the sphere, the Sun is like the Sultan and the stars are like soldiers; the Moon is like a vizier and Mercury is like a scribe and Venus is like a servant and Mars is like a commander

and Jupiter is like a judge and Saturn is like a treasurer. The sphere is like regions, while the sign [-s of the zodiac] are like cities, and degrees are like villages and minutes are like neighborhoods, and the Fixed Stars are like stations.

The Fourth Heaven is there so that the whole universe will be in order and its benefit becomes complete. If [the Sun] were positioned higher, the universe would perish, and if it were positioned lower, the universe would be destroyed because of the heat. The mass of the Sun is one hundred sixty-six (166) times that of the Earth plus one-quarter [of that amount], plus one-eighth [of that total] and its diameter is forty-one thousand and ninety-nine (41,990) miles. [6b] The reason for [the Sun's] eclipse is that the Moon comes in between the light of the Sun and us, and that is why the mass of the Moon looks like a black ball, covered beyond. When it comes closer, the Sun is eclipsed between the tail and the head [of the Moon].

Part on Mars: It is known as the "Little Inauspicious" and its nature is hot and dry. It completes its circulation around the twelve signs [of the zodiac] in one year, ten months, and twenty-two days and returns to its place [of origin], and its thickness is twenty thousand times one thousand [20,000 x 1000] and three hundred thousand [300,000] and seventy-six thousand [76,000] and nine hundred and ninety-eight [998] miles. It is in the Fifth Heaven and is related to executioners, highwaymen, and intriguers and its mass is equal to one and a half as related to the Earth and it stays in each sign for forty days.

Part on Jupiter: Its nature is warm-blooded. It circulates through all the signs in eleven years, ten months, and fifteen days and its thickness is twenty thousand times one thousand and three hundred thirty thousand and four hundred and thirty-two [20,000 x 1000 + 330,432: 20,330,432], and it is the most auspicious planet. It is related to chiefs, sultans, and viziers and its mass equals eighty-four times that of the Earth; its diameter equals four times that of the Earth and it moves five minutes in one day.

Part on Saturn: [7a] It circulates through all the signs [of the zodiac] in twenty-nine years, five months, and six days and its thickness is twenty times one thousand and six hundred thirty-six thousand and six hundred and six (20 x 1000 + 636,000 + 606). It is related to Turks and commoners [the common people], and its nature is cold and dry. It is the most inauspicious [planet] and its mass is equal to eighty-one times that of the Earth and its diameter is forty times that of the Earth. If they ask how you measure the heavens and the stars with regard to miles, the answer is: In the science of geometry, it becomes evident with certain proofs that for every type

of work there are [capable] men [*Fe-inne li-küllü 'amelin ricālen*]. The inhabitants of the heavens are angels and angels are made of a simple essence. They have life and logic [stemming] from the sacred [Being]. They are [removed] from darkness of desire, and carnal afflictions and they are creature[s] of various forms, they are creations for the betterment of the [other] creations. If they ask how it is known that there are angels in the spheres of space, the answer is [to ask] how it would be compatible with the wisdom of God if He made the spheres devoid of His light? This is the situation of creation: [God] did not leave the space of the deepest part of the seas devoid of animal species and God did not leave the air devoid of various kinds of birds and He did not leave the dry land devoid of kinds of predators [7b] and wild animals and He did not leave the darkness devoid of species of reptiles and insects.

SOURCE: Aḥmed Bīcān Yazıcıoğlu, *'Acā'ibü'l-maḥlūqāt*. Sadberk Hanım Museum Library, No. 481-I, fols 1b–7b.

Translation by Feray Coşkun.⁶

6 I am grateful to Taha Yasin Arslan, Marinos Sariyannis, Uğur Köroğlu, Selim Sırrı Kuru and A. Tunç Şen for their comments on my translation.