Early Years and Education

The difficulties involved in studying the childhood and adolescence of any individual in pre-modern times are acute in the case of the medieval Islamic world. Rarely does a writer reveal anything about his youth, and those scattered instances make it hazardous to risk generalizations. Qadi Ḥusayn Maybudī is no exception. Nonetheless, information about the world in which he grew up does exist, however aggravating in its paucity. Marshaling those facts allows us to draw a sketch of the young man, if not a detailed portrait. When further research permits a comparison of that sketch with those of his contemporaries, we can better appreciate the social sphere in which the Iranian provincial elite developed during the fifteenth century. The three most fruitful subjects of study for Maybudī's early years are the geographic and political environment in which he matured, his family, and his scholarship, which offers evidence of his education.

Yazd From Pre-Islamic Times to the Mongols

Contemporary references to Qadi Ḥusayn’s name often include either ‘Maybudī’ or ‘Yazdī’ to indicate his place of origin, and it was with the city of Yazd that historians generally associated him. Located in the medieval geographers’ third clime, at the heart of a nexus of roads that crossed the desert to Khurasan, Yazd was an ancient city. According to legend, Alexander the Great founded the city of Katha on Yazd’s present site. The name ‘Yazd’ was adopted under the Sassanians, under whose rule the city was known for its fire temples. Early Islamic geographers record the persistence of the fire temples and Zoroastrianism in general well into Islamic times.

Yazd continued to grow and change in character. It acquired Islamic monuments, the most important being the congregational mosque built in the latter half of the eleventh century, as well as a wall and moat. Sometimes considered part of Fars and sometimes of ‘Iraq-i ‘Amīd, it seems to have been subordinate

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to Istakhr at least until the Mongol invasions. Writers of the thirteenth century and later emphasized the area’s agricultural prosperity and important silk industry. Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283), for example, describes Yazd in Mongol times as a well-populated area producing many cereals and fruits and states that skilled craftsmen in the silk brocade business produced enough to export their wares to other regions. One reason for the health of its agriculture was an extensive system of canals, essential in a dry climate where the average annual precipitation is 67.5 mm., most of that falling in the winter. Another feature of the city was the renown of its learned men. Abū al-Fidā’ (d. 733/1333) remarks that many scholars came from Yazd, as well as from Maybud.

As the remarks about agriculture suggest, most often the name ‘Yazd’ refers to a general region, rather than just the city itself. Seldom is the city discussed in isolation from its surrounding villages. One of those subordinate towns was Maybud, presumably Maybudī’s birthplace. Since pre-Islamic times, Maybud was a relatively large village within the sphere of Yazd. According to legend, it was built by a commander of Yazdigird 11 (r. 438/9–457 CE). The early geographers paid it less attention than they did Yazd, frequently just listing it among the villages in the province of Istakhr, along with Abarquh, Naʾin, and others. Yāqūt gives the most complete information about it, noting that it had a fortified citadel and that the historian and hadith scholar, ‘Abd al-Rashīd b. ‘Alī al-Maybudhī, who studied in Isfahan and Baghdad, came from there. The regional histories of the fifteenth century provide more details, Kātib asserting that most of the people of Maybud were happy, talented, literate, rich, honored, and lucky. Just as it was subordinate to Yazd, in turn twenty-four vilāyats were dependent on it when he wrote.

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5 Jaʿfarī, 29. Although Kātib gives that legend, he later says it is more likely that Shah Qubād b. Firūz built Maybud after the recovery there of his son from a serious illness. Kātib, 30, 38. The town’s name is written both Maybudh and Maybud.

6 Kātib, 38–41.