

CHAPTER ONE

The Man

A Bibliographical Sketch of Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī¹

Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī/أبو العلاء المعري was born in 973 Common Era (363 Islamic Era) in the small Syrian town of Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān (معرفة النعمان), from which is derived his *laqab* (لقب) or *agnomen*. The town is situated in northern Syria about 20 miles south of the city of Aleppo. It lies in a semiarid region that is devoid of running water, although with the aid of cisterns and wells the population has long been able to sustain a fairly bountiful agriculture consisting of vineyards, orchards (olives, pistachios, almonds), and fields of wheat and barley. Writing in the fifth century of the Islamic Era, the Persian poet, philosopher, and traveler Nāṣir-i Khusraw (ناصر خسرو), passing through Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān on a trip the principal destinations of which were Mecca and Cairo, could write of having seen the town’s productive agriculture as well as flourishing bazaars: و بزارهاي او بسيار معمور ديدم . . . و کشاورزي ايشان همه گندمست و بسيار است و درخت انجير و زيتون و بشته و بادام و انگور فراوان است.²

In the seventh century of the Islamic Era (hereafter IE), the Andalusian traveler and geographer Ibn Jubayr speaks of the town having arable land (سواد) devoted entirely to olive, fig, and pistachio trees, adding that he regarded Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān as “one of God’s most fertile and productive lands” (وهي من أخصب بلاد الله وأكثرها أرزاقاً). “It is a small, lovely city most of whose trees are pistachio and fig” (المعرة مدينة صغيرة أكثر شجرها) (التين والفسق), wrote the eighth-century (IE) Moroccan geographer Ibn Baṭṭūṭah/ابن بطوطة upon his visit.³

Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān lies at strategic crossroads running both north and south and east and west. To the south lie the cities of Ḥamāh (حماة), Ḥimṣ (حمص), and, finally, Damascus. The road north leads to Antakya (Antioch) and İskenderun in present-day Turkey (الإسكندرونة and أنطاكية respectively in the Arabic). To the west lies Latakia (اللاذقية) on the Mediterranean, and to the east, the upper reaches of the Euphrates, which allow for riparian access to the heartlands of Iraq, including most notably Baghdad. In al-Ma'arrī's time, the area stretching on the south-to-north axis from Ḥamāh through Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān and on to Aleppo was regarded as the locus for the frontier metropolitan strongholds (العواصم), the first line of defense against Byzantine Christian irredentism directed against Syria both as a valuable possession in and of itself and as an avenue of access to even more valuable territories of the Islamic commonwealth to the south (e.g., Palestine and Egypt). These frontier strongholds were also stepping stones for counteroffensives by organized Muslim armed forces. At the same time, in what amounted to a tripartite geopolitical dismemberment of Syria by rivals, the expansionist Ismā'īlī Shī'ī (Fāṭimid persuasion) imām-caliphs in Cairo, and the semiautonomous Ḥamdānid/حمداني princes (who were Shī'ites but non-Fāṭimid, i.e., probably Ithnā'asharī) centered in Aleppo, were active in promoting and protecting their own dynastic interests in the area. For the Fāṭimid imām-caliphs, this meant especially the attempt to establish suzerainty over Damascus if not areas to the north as well; for the Ḥamdānids, this meant control of Aleppo if not as well Ḥamāh and Ḥimṣ and by extension Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān (administratively regarded as falling under the suzerainty of Ḥimṣ or Ḥamāh the latter of which in turn was subject to the oversight of Aleppo).⁴ Added to this mix of rivalries were (1) the growing political ambitions of the Banū Kilāb/بنو كلاب, Arab bedouins who had migrated to northern Syria from the Najd in the Arabian peninsula (eventually to establish their own dynasty centered in Aleppo), and (2) the ambitions of one or another slave page (غلام) or slave soldier (مملوك) and the troops at their disposal, who were of diverse ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Turkish, Kurdish, and Daylamī) with decidedly fluid loyalties.

All of these factors gave Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in the tenth and eleventh centuries of the Common Era a geopolitical importance most

disproportionate to the town's size, an importance that was arguably its most remarkable feature. It lay in the way of the approach to Aleppo by invading forces moving on the city from south to north and in the way of the approach to Damascus by invading forces moving on the city from north to south. Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān was close enough to Aleppo to be considered key to its defense. Several armed expeditions of the period, whether on behalf of a major or minor dynasty or a strongman with his own narrower interests at heart, laid siege to the town with the aim of taking it over permanently or occupying it merely as a temporary base from which to regroup in the midst of wider conflicts. (Specific examples of both cases, as well as the larger, more comprehensive political picture of which they were a part, will be given in chapter 2 of this study.)

In verses in his *dīwān* (collection) of poetry entitled *Saqt al-Zand* (سقط الزند) (*The Spark of the Fire Drill*), probably inspired while away from Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān during his trip to Baghdad (undertaken in his late twenties), al-Ma'arrī could speak longingly of his homeland and particularly “the water of Ma'arraḥ [al-Nu'mān].”⁵ Around 400 (IE), in one of his many personal letters or epistles (الرسائل) that have been preserved, he vowed upon his return from Baghdad “to remain in the city [of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān] even though the inhabitants have fled through fear of the Greeks.”⁶

In other letters, however—these coming from Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān—al-Ma'arrī writes caustically that

Ma'arraḥ [al-Nu'mān] is like the two months called Spring, which originally were at the beginning of the year, but afterward shifted to the middle, and two others called Frost, which from the days of frozen water have shifted to those of windless heat And were it not that dust and stones are unable to assume the character of their neighbour, the squares of Ma'arraḥ would by now be devoted to learning, and the supplies of eloquence would be drawn from its inhabitants.⁷

Were it not for the Kāḍī Abu Ja'far [أبو جعفر] his [the reference is to one Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad/أبو الحسن محمد] visit to this city would be like the vulture, who is a king and chieftain among birds, and from whose limbs there issues a musk-like odour, falling on a

foul carcass. This is such an epithet as may be applied to Ma'arrāh, which is the opposite of the Paradise described by the Koran. . . . Her very name "mischief" is ominous; God save us from it! The water-courses are blocked up, and the surface of its mould in summer is dry. It has no flowing water, and no rare trees can be planted there.⁸

Then I was brought up in a city which contains no scholars, and the vine cannot grow without trellis-work to cling to.⁹

According to the thirteenth-century (CE) chronicler al-Qiftī/القفتي, al-Ma'arrāī bemoaned to his students that the affluent in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān were so miserly that they would not provide for the students studying under his supervision, he himself not having the means for this.¹⁰

Most of the families of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in al-Ma'arrī's time were of the Banū Sāṭī' (بنو الساطع) division of the Tanūkh (تنوخ) tribal confederation, house of Sulaymān. Originally of south Arabian origin, the Tanūkh eventually migrated to al-Hīrah (الحيرة) in south central Iraq ("they were the first to build it and live therein" according to the thirteenth-century [CE] biographer and historian ابن العديم/Ibn al-'Adīm¹¹), where, however, they were soon engaged in war by the Sassanian Persians and forced to move to central Mesopotamia, that is, the Sawād (السواد). Here, too, the Tanūkh were not free from wars and armed skirmishes initiated by the kings of Persia, although they managed to establish effective hegemony over, and flourish in, al-Ḥaḍr (الحضر), a small city in the vicinity of Takrīt (تكريت). When they allied themselves with the Byzantine emperor (ملك الروم), at his request, in response to Persian attacks on his territories, and when furthermore they provided the emperor with effective armies in confronting the Persians, they were rewarded with—among other things (including monetary remuneration)—“a feudal estate consisting of Syria and the surrounding lands, up to [the area of] al-Jazīrah” (الجزيرة)¹² (al-Jazīrah in this instance referring to the uplands and plains of northwestern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Anatolia). They moved on to northern Syria (e.g., Qinnasrīn [قنسرین]; Ḥamāh; Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān) in the early Islamic Era while advancing with the forces of 'Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Jarrāh/عبيد الله بن الجراح—this according to Ibn al-'Adīm. Shortly thereafter, some of the confederation, which

at that time was Christian (*'alā dīn al-naṣrāniyyah*/على دين النصرانية), agreed, albeit not without protestations, to pay the land tax (*al-kharāj*/الخراج) as opposed to the poll or capital tax (*al-jizyah*/الجزية), the latter being the mark of non-Muslim subjects living under Islamic rule. These members of the Tanūkh tribal confederation settled in fixed homes; that is, they became sedentary. The ancestors of Abū al-'Alā' were among this group. Some embraced Islam. Others moved on to Byzantine-ruled territories, taking their Christian faith with them.

Once settled in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān, the House of Sulaymān of the Tanūkh confederation provided most of the judges (قضاة) of the town right up until the time of the Crusaders' attack on and occupation of it (492 IE; 1099 CE), a span of more than 200 years. The judges were often among the town's notable men of learning, a learning that included poetry and belle-lettres (*adab*/أدب). It was either Abū al-Ḥasan Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān ibn Da'ūd ibn al-Muṭahhar who was the first of the house to assume the judgeship of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān—هو أول من تولى منهم قضاء معرة —or his son, al-Ma'arrī's great grandfather Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad.¹³ This would have been around 290 IE. Abū Bakr has been described as a generous and beneficent head of the Tanūkh in whom could be found honorable distinction for those who sought it.¹⁴ He was also a poet.¹⁵ His son, grandfather of Abū al-'Alā', Abū al-Ḥasan Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad, became judge (*qāḍī*/قاض) of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān on or around 331 of the Islamic Era. Soon thereafter, he became judge of Ḥimṣ as well. He, too, was a poet; and an eloquent man of learning and refinement who was a transmitter of narrative reports (*aḥādīth*/أحاديث) about the Prophet Muḥammad. His son Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh and his grandchildren Abū al-'Alā' and Abū Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad Ibn al-Muhadhhab—among others—transmitted *aḥādīth* on his authority. He died in Ḥimṣ in 377 IE (988 CE).

At this point in time, Abū al-'Alā's father, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān, became judge of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān. Like his father before him, he also composed verse and was noted for his overall literary and cultural refinement as well as expertise as a scholar of *aḥādīth*. As a new field of scholarly expertise in the family, language study is also associated with his name.¹⁶

Al-Ma'arrī's father had three sons: the eldest, Abū al-Majd Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh; Abū al-'Alā', close to Abū al-Majd in age; and Abū al-Haytham 'Abd al-Wāḥid ibn 'Abd Allāh, the youngest. Abū al-Haytham was a poet with a *dīwān* reportedly transmitted to his son Zayd ibn 'Abd Allāh by Abū al-'Alā'. A brother to Zayd, Munāfir, put down in writing some of what Abū al-'Alā' composed.

Abū al-Majd Muḥammad was also a poet with a *dīwān* to his credit. He had two sons, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sulaymān and Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sulaymān, both of whom became judges in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān. Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh, like his cousin Munāfir, also wrote down some of Abū al-'Alā''s compositions and personally looked after him. In addition to being judge of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān, a poet, and an author of epistles, he delivered sermons for the congregational prayers on the Muslim sabbath and oversaw the administration of religious endowments (وله ديوان شعر ورسائل حسنة وتولى القضاء بمعرفة النعمان وخطاباتها والوقوف بها).¹⁷

His son Abū Muslim al-Wāḍhi' (أبو مسلم الوازع) (the name and *agnomen* were chosen by Abū al-'Alā', his father's uncle) was not only judge of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān immediately after him, but also reportedly a fine poet, the author of beautiful epistles, and overall a learned and refined man. Moreover, it has been recorded that he was the principal leader and elder of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān to whom general oversight or general superintendence of affairs was entrusted.¹⁸

The above-mentioned family members may not have constituted the trellis upon which al-Ma'arrī hoped to grow his learning, a trellis that he alleged was lacking in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān; but surely they would have allowed him an estimable stake for starters.

Al-Ma'arrī's mother was of the house of Sabīkah, and his maternal grandfather was from Aleppo (according to Ibn al-'Adīm, the most comprehensive of the medieval chroniclers).¹⁹ Little else about her and her family can be gleaned from the medieval chronicles, although al-Ma'arrī wrote letters to her brother Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī ibn Sabīkah in Aleppo on at least four occasions that have been documented,²⁰ one of which²¹ was prompted by the death of a brother in Damascus (who is mentioned by name: Abū Ṭāhir), and another of which²² was prompted when Abū al-'Alā' learned of his mother's death on his return to Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān

from Baghdad (400 IE/1010 CE). The letter prompted by his mother's death, one of his shorter and more accessible pieces of epistolary prose, is an expression of a son's grief and sorrow albeit coupled with a resolve not to overindulge in emotions.

I can hope for no good after her death, nor can I do anything but plunge deeper and further into misery. . . . Were it not that the death days are fixed in writing, gladly should I have been killed for her sake in cold blood! Howbeit I tell her that I was bent on traveling, and that I was fully intent thereon, and she gave me leave. Maybe she thought it an idle fancy, the lightning of a cloud without water! However "the term of each is fixed in writing," and my grief over her loss is like the pleasures of Paradise, which are renewed so oft as they are consumed, and to dilate thereon would weary the hearer and be waste of time.²³

In one short poem in *Saqt al-Zand*,²⁴ the mother's death is also lamented in more elusive and elliptical verse, notwithstanding the straightforward cathartic line "My mother has been summoned by God; would that I had been summoned before her, even if the warm middays were to become later afternoons" (دعا الله أمًا لبيت أني أمامها / دُعيت ولو أنَّ الهواجر أصال). Another (long) poem²⁵ expresses similar sentiments: "A mother has gone before me to the grave; it sorrows me that she has departed before I have" (وأمتني) (الأجدات أم / يعز علي أن سارت أمامي). A long poem eulogizing the father is also among the poems of *Saqt al-Zand*.²⁶

When not yet four years old, Abū al-'Alā' was stricken with smallpox. This left him with noticeable scars on his face, completely blind in his left eye, and almost completely blind in his right eye. It is doubtful that he was ever capable of seeing well enough to read. In one of his letters,²⁷ he speaks frankly of the limitations imposed upon him by his loss of sight: "How is it possible for me to be learned when I am blind,—a misfortune which it is sufficient to name?" According to Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, he referred to his blindness as one of his "prison houses," the other being self-imposed seclusion in his home.²⁸ However, he is also reported to have defiantly praised God for the loss of his eyesight "the way others praise Him for having it" أنا/أحمد الله تعالى على العمى كما يحمده غيري على البصر remarking additionally:

People say that blindness is an ugly spectacle;
I say it's a trifle when losing sight of you all.

I swear to God, there's nothing in existence
losing sight of which eyes must need lament.

قالوا العمى منظر قبيح قلت بفقدانكم يهون
والله ما في الوجود شيء نأسى على فقده العيون²⁹

Al-Ma'arrī's life was essentially one dedicated almost exclusively to learning. If his life may be spoken of as having been eventful or remarkable, it was so primarily in that sense. With respect to language and grammar, his education began at his father's knee but also with others in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān (قوم من بلده) such as members of the Kawthar clan (بنو كوثر), associates of Ibn Khaluwayh, a grammarian brought to the court of the Ḥamdānid Prince of Aleppo Sayf al-Dawlah, and the grammarian (النحوي) Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Sa'ūd ibn Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Faraj. On the authority of his father as well as his grandfather,³⁰ and also on the authority of fellow townsman Yaḥyā ibn Mus'ar al-Tanūkhī,³¹ al-Ma'arrī became a transmitter of *aḥādīth*. He learned the various styles of Qur'ān recitation from a number of learned men (*shuyūkh*/شيوخ) whom he sought out for that art.³² *Al-Dhahabī*³³ recorded that al-Ma'arrī began to compose and dictate verse when he was eleven years old.

Between 987/988 and 994/995 of the Common Era, or when he was between fourteen and twenty-one years of age, Abū al-'Alā' according to several medieval biographers³⁴ continued his studies in Aleppo, the intellectual life of which must still have been quite remarkable if not as brilliant and scintillating when the city was the principal seat of authority for an essentially autonomous principality dominated by the potentate and patron of the arts and sciences Sayf al-Dawlah (d. 967 CE) of the Ḥamdānid dynasty. (The Ḥamdānids were a Shī'ite Muslim tribal grouping, originally nomadic, of northern Iraqi ascent.) It is said that in Aleppo, Abū al-'Alā' studied under the disciples of the grammarian and Qur'ān expert Ibn Khaluwayh, and with the grammarian Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sa'd, who was also an expert transmitter (*rāwī*/راو) of the

poetry of al-Mutanabbī. Perhaps al-Ma'arrī accompanied by an amanuensis also made use of Aleppo's libraries, one of which was supposed to have contained 20,000 volumes. Al-Qifṭī³⁵ has him going to Tripoli as well as Latakia and Antioch at some point between 987/8 and 994, this in order to augment his education. Al-Qifṭī reports that the people of means had endowed some libraries in Tripoli and that there stood a monastery (Pharos) (دير الفاروس) at Latakia with a monk who knew something about the "sciences of the ancients"; from the monk, al-Ma'arrī "heard the rudiments of the beliefs of the philosophers."³⁶ The other major classical biographical sources are at variance over the travels at this point in al-Ma'arrī's life. Al-Dhahabī records only the trip to Tripoli, whereas al-Ṣafadī and al-'Abbāsī record the trip to Tripoli and the visit to the monastery at Latakia.³⁷ Ibn al-'Adīm³⁸ makes no mention of the Tripoli and Latakia sojourns but observes that reports about a trip to Antioch cannot be true because the city was taken from the Muslims by the Byzantines by the time al-Ma'arrī turned twenty-one. (The suggestion seems to be that political realities, if nothing else, would have made the visit virtually impossible.)

In 994 CE, Abū al-'Alā' was back in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān. From that year until 1008, he occupied himself with the teaching of philology and literature. These years were also ones of considerable literary productivity on his part. Works produced during this period include a number of letters addressed to several contemporaneous men of letters (*udabā'* / (أدباء); a collection (i.e., *dīwān*) of descriptive poetry on armor (entitled *al-Dir' iyyāt* / الدر عيات), most of which are included in the Beirut edition of *Saqṭ al-Zand*); much if not most of *Saqṭ al-Zand*, a *dīwān* of poems of various genres (including particularly poems of lament); and possibly *Mulqā al-Sabīl* / ملقى السبيل (*Cast Out on the Road*), a very small collection of short paragraphs interspersed with poetry, touching upon material of a predictable moral and pietistic nature that al-Ma'arrī was wont to weave into his works over the course of his lifetime.

In 1008, Abū al-'Alā' again took leave of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān. His travels this time took him to Baghdad. He was to stay in the city for approximately seventeen months. The primary reason for his quitting Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān and going to Baghdad was probably a desire to enhance his literary and philological training and interact in more illustrious circles.

That all of this may have been, as Margoliouth has suggested, “the preparation for a lucrative career to which blindness was no obstacle” seems most plausible.

In the Aghani we read of many blind poets, and indeed of one [‘Alī ibn Jabalah] whose blindness was brought about by the same malady which deprived Abu ‘l-‘Alā of his sight. The custom of bestowing large sums of money in return for complimentary odes was inherited by the Caliphs from the pre-Islamic dynasties; and what the Caliphs did on a large scale was also done by their ministers, provincial governors, and in general by men of wealth and station in scarcely less lavish fashion.³⁹

Baghdad at this time was still arguably the intellectual capital of the entire Islamic world, the most vibrant place to be for someone interested in intellectual pursuits, although the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph’s authority and effective control were being frittered away by dynasties competing for power and authority as well as scientific, literary, and cultural preeminence. In early eleventh-century CE Baghdad, al-Ma‘arrī would have found additional well-stocked libraries of the sort that (according to some) prompted his earlier travel to Aleppo. At the libraries as well as organized learned gatherings in homes or mosques or other public spaces (e.g., at the shops of book dealers or even city gates), he also would have had the opportunity to interact with many intellectuals and literary figures of considerable achievement and renown. Notwithstanding all of these compelling intellectual and career-driven reasons for leaving Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān and going to Baghdad, it should not be discounted that al-Ma‘arrī arranged for this relocation with the thought of escaping the escalating political turmoil in northern Syria. At this period in its history, northern Syria, and above all Aleppo, had become the arena for a major armed struggle for supremacy on the part of three competing ruling entities: to the south the expanding Shī‘ite (Fāṭimid persuasion) dynasty centered in Cairo, Egypt; to the north the already well-established Byzantine Empire, never totally quiescent on its borders with Syria; and, in between, ensconced primarily in Aleppo, the remnants of the Ḥamdānids (Shī‘ites but not of Fāṭimid orientation), who

seemed determined to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy if not outright independence. To add to this regional tension and instability, an eventual fourth participant in the struggle for political and/or religious dominance in northern Syria—the Mirdāsīd dynasty (of Syrian Arab semi-nomadic origin, possibly Shīʿite but non-Fāṭimid)—was beginning to make its presence and agenda felt. Like the Ḥamdānids, the Mirdāsīds seemed to aspire to considerable independence in northern Syria, if not as well to the promotion of a nascent Syrian-focused Arab nationalism. As a consequence of all of the conflicting interests and competing dynasties, at the turn of the eleventh century of the Common Era, Aleppo and its environs including Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān became more and more the targets of attacks and/or sieges and counter attacks, whether on the part of Fāṭimid or Byzantine armed forces and their allies or on the part of troops pledging loyalty to Ḥamdānid or Mirdāsīd potentates.

In the very same letter to his maternal uncle Abū al-Qāsim ʿAlī in which he expresses his grief over hearing of his mother’s death, al-Maʿarrī states that after turning twenty, he never had any thoughts about seeking out learning from either Syrians or Iraqīs; it was the presence of the library in Baghdad that led him to the city (ومنذ فارقت العشرين من العمر ما وجدت نفسي باجتماع علم من عراقي ولا شام . . . والذي أقدمني تلك البلد مكان دار الكتب بها).⁴⁰

In the letter from roughly the same time, composed on route from Baghdad to Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān once he had resolved to return to his home town, al-Maʿarrī relates that he did not go to Baghdad in order to gain materially or to make more acquaintances, but he went in order to take up residence “in a place of learning”; he found, he said, “the most precious of spots” وأحلف ما سافرت أستكثر من النشب ولا أتكثر بقاء الرجال ولكن آثرت وأحلف ما سافرت أستكثر من النشب ولا أتكثر بقاء الرجال ولكن آثرت “the most precious of spots”⁴¹ الإقامة بدار العلم فشاهدت أنفس مكان

Al-Qifṭī states that objections raised by officials in Aleppo over an endowed income of thirty dinars a year—al-Maʿarrī’s sole source of income—is what compelled al-Maʿarrī to go to Baghdad; that is, he went there specifically in order to raise a complaint concerning said Aleppan officials.⁴²

Al-Qifṭī notes⁴³ that al-Maʿarrī gained fame in Baghdad, particularly for the recitations of his *Saqt al-Zand*, and that among others he met with al-Sharīf al-Rādī and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, the two renowned sons of Abū Aḥmad al-Mūsawī, *naqīb*/نقيب or head of the ʿAlids, that is, those

supporting the descendants of ‘Alī as the rightful leader of the Islamic Commonwealth. He also visited the library that was under the custodianship of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Baṣrī, a.k.a. al-Wājīkah, a savant of note, being an أديب (*adīb*) or man of letters, a transmitter of *aḥādīth*, and a Qur’ān reciter.

Ibn al-‘Adīm⁴⁴ adds that al-Ma’arrī received instruction from Abū ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ḥākim al-Sukkarī, a linguist and grammarian; and, although he sought out one ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā al-Raba’ī for instruction in grammar, he refused to return to him after his first visit. Al-Raba’ī angered him when he bid him to enter his home with the words “Let the blind man come in.”

According to Ibn al-‘Adīm, another insult was hurled at al-Ma’arrī when, on his very first day in Baghdad, he went to pay his condolences to al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, whose father (Abū Aḥmad al-Mūsawī, a.k.a. al-Sharīf al-Ṭāhir) had just died. As al-Ma’arrī tried to make his way through a room crowded with mourners, he stepped on people, causing someone to yell out, “Where are you going, dog?” إلى أين/“يا كلب؟”. After responding with the words “The dog is anyone who does not know all of the various names for dog” الكلب من لا يعرف للكلب كذا وكذا اسماً, al-Ma’arrī proceeded to take a seat at the very back of the assemblage, until it came time for the recitation of poetry for the occasion, when he stood to recite a poem eulogizing Abū Aḥmad, after which al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā showed him great honor and respect, having surmised his identity.⁴⁵

Although already the *madrasah* (plural *madāris*) (مدرسة؛ مدارس) or more formal institution for higher studies was in existence in the Islamic commonwealth, especially in Nīshābūr (Khurāsān), this period of time was slightly before the flourishing of Nizām al-Mulk (1018–1092 CE), the minister of the Seljūk Turkish sultāns Alp Arslān and Malik Shāh who founded the *madrasah* in Baghdad that bears Nizām’s name (the Nizāmiyyah; dedicated in 1067 CE), after which other *madāris* were established and soon became more commonplace as sites especially reserved and equipped for maintaining (i.e., boarding) as well providing instruction for students. Otherwise, “the circle, or the school, of a teacher in [this] period . . . must be understood in an informal sense. The school consisted of a teacher, his home, books, colleagues, pupils, and occasional visitors. The teacher

sometimes met with individuals or small groups.” As for scholarly discussions and exchanges among peers, there was the venerable institution of the *majālis* (sing. *majlis*)/مجلس؛ مجالس (meetings or gatherings), arranged by ministers or princes or scholars themselves. These could take place at a private residence or royal court. Scholarly discussions were also held in mosques; in gardens, markets, and commercial shops; at city gates; and in bookshops, “the most prominent of [the] less conventional academic forums” in Baghdad and found in great number. Teaching (as opposed to discussion) consisted of the recitation of texts as well as the teacher’s commentary. Discussions followed a dialectical approach whereby theses and antitheses were advanced following the statement of an issue of concern or proposition to be considered (*mas’alah*/مسألة). Study and discussion of the religious sciences—for example, *aḥādīth*—typically occurred in mosques. Teachers’ homes were sites for subjects such as speculative theology (*kalām*/كلام) and study of language and *adab*.⁴⁶

Al-Sharīf al-Rāqī (d. 1015 CE), a poet, student of Imāmī Shī’ite theology, scholar of the Qur’ān, and compiler of *Nahj al-Balāghah*/نهج البلاغة (*The Path of Eloquence*, the sayings and speeches of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib), organized an “academy,” or house of learning, with a view to promoting and sponsoring the gathering of the learned. A more illustrious institution of this sort was established in the Karkh quarter of Baghdad in 993 CE by Abū Naṣr Sābūr ibn Ardashīr, minister (*wazīr*/وزير) to the sulṭān Bahā’ al-Dawlah (ruled from 998 to 1012 CE), in whose family’s hands (i.e., the Būyids, the tribal grouping of Shī’ite Muslims from Daylam on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea) belonged real as opposed to titular power in Baghdad and the surrounding district of al-‘Irāq during the years 945 to 1055 CE. The minister

dedicated this building to use by men of learning. Among the books collected, numbering 10,400, there were a hundred copies of the Qur’ān written by Banū Muqlah and many autographs of famous writers. Sābūr also prepared a catalogue of books in the library, entrusting it to the care of two members of the ‘Alid family and a Qāqī and appointing the Shaykh Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī supervisor of the establishment. . . . The Academy of Sābūr became a rendezvous for men engaged in literary pursuits.⁴⁷

Abū al-‘Alā’ seems to have made use of this great public library-cum-academy founded by the Būyid minister Abū Naṣr Sābūr ibn Ardāshīr. In the letter numbered XIX in Margoliouth’s collection, he addresses one “Abū Maṣṣūr, Custodian of the Academy in Baghdad”/وكتب إلى أبي منصور/خازن دار العلم ببغداد.⁴⁸ He proceeds in the letter to express his longing for “the Academy” (which incidentally may have been intended more specifically in the letter for which Margoliouth translates دار العلم as the generic “place of learning”; see above), for Baghdad, and, last but not least, for the companionship of his correspondent:

Of truth I am fluttering more with anxiety than pleasure, so that those who would blame me say “Is thy passion for the ‘House of Learning’ from folly or sound sense?”

My desire for you and the rest of my friends is like that of a ring-dove, full of learning with nothing to excite it. . . .

Each time the raven says caw! I fancy it is a mounted messenger from Baghdad. . . . I ask of God’s mercy that we may be brought together again. . . .⁴⁹

In a line of verse attributed to al-Ma’arrī by Ibn Khallikān, there is specific reference to Sābūr, دار العلم, and an evening gathering that included a performance by a songstress, suggesting (if true) that music and song—and by women—could be part of a convocation (if not indeed the sole purpose) at a site associated with pursuit of scholarship.⁵⁰

Abū al-‘Alā’ continued to compose while in Baghdad; principally for the collection of poems comprising *Saqt al-Zand* (judging from some of its eulogies), to a lesser extent for some of his other works, the vast majority of which, based on what the bio-bibliographical chronicles report in the way of the chronology of his compositions, were yet to come. Taking up residence in the city seemed the logical progression in his quest for learning and scholarly camaraderie during a period in the history of the Islamic commonwealth especially noted for the pursuit of knowledge. However, although there is evidence that he was not without a circle of friends and acquaintances in the great Iraqi metropolis—for

example, Abū al-Salām al-Wājīkah, Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī (a curator at دار العلم), al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, the distinguished man of letters al-Qāḍī al-Tanūkhī, a second curator at Sābūr’s library (‘Abd al-Salām al-Baṣrī), and the grammarian Abū ‘Alī ibn Furrajah—he left never to return after a stay of approximately sixteen months.

He writes with considerable ambivalence about his decision to leave. In a passage of one of his letters, characteristically studded with proverbs and quotations from other poets, he speaks as though he has few regrets. There was a surfeit of knowledge in the city, it did not afford him a truly warm and rewarding reception, and hence it really offered him “nothing.”

‘Every occasion has its proper formula,’ every season its fruit, every valley its acacia. I found Baghdad ‘like a pie’s wing,’ fair, but carrying nothing.

‘Truly Iraq is no home for my people. . . .

So pile the carriage upon some powerful camel. . . .’

‘It whined for far-off Nakhlah; but I said “Fie for shame!” Trouble is there; so make for Syria. For Iraq has no people that we love; its people are of proud looks.’”

. . . and I found learning at a greater discount at Baghdad than gravel at the ‘Aqabah heaps, cheaper than dates at Medinah, more common than palm-branches in Yemameh, more copious than water in the ocean. However, there is some obstacle in the way of every blessing.⁵¹

In the very same letter, however, al-Ma’arrī adds that

The favor of God is upon all those whom you know in Baghdad; they treated me with singular courtesy, and spoke well of me in my absence, and honoured me above my equals and my peers. And when they learned that I was getting ready to leave them, and, indeed, on the point of going, they manifested great sorrow and said many kind words

God reward them! If what they did was out of kindness, it was a great benefit; and if they did it for pretense, still it was an act of good fellowship; and so I left Baghdad, with my honor still in a vessel that did not leak; not one drop of it had I spilt in quest of either wealth or learning.⁵²

Of similar gracious attitude toward the people of Baghdad is the closing to his letter addressing his townsfolk just prior to his arrival at Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān after taking leave of Baghdad:

. . . And may [God] give good recompense to the people of Baghdad, for they praised me more than I deserved, and testified to my merits before they knew them, and quite seriously offered me their goods. Albeit they found me not fond of praise, neither eager for other people's charity.⁵³

But in verses in *Saqt al-Zand* that address his "brethren between the Euphrates and Damascus," al-Ma'arrī speaks of being distanced from supporters and what little income he had; hence, materially, somewhat deprived in fact. He also claims to have been "envied" merely because of his "superiority" (فأصبحت محسودا بفضلتي وحده على بعد أنصاري وقلة مالي).⁵⁴

His sense that in general he was the object of envy, irrespective of domicile, was allegedly repeated in the presence of a fellow poet. When the poet asked him, "What is there to all that is said and related about you?" (ما هذا الذي يروى عنك ويحكى؟), the reply was, "They have envied me and lied against me"⁵⁵ (حسدوني وكذبوا عليّ). Envy may have been suspected in an incident that Margoliouth believed "probably gives us the real reason why Abu 'l-'Alā left Baghdad; for such a humiliation was so likely to bring others in its train that it was unsafe for him to remain."⁵⁶ According to several traditionally cited sources that Margoliouth undoubtedly had in mind, while al-Ma'arrī was in the presence of al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā one day, on the occasion of a *majlis*, mention was made of the poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 965 CE), whom al-Murtaḍā despised but whom al-Ma'arrī greatly admired, regarding him as the greatest Arab poet of the post-Jāhilī, post-Umayyad eras. Al-Murtaḍā began to detract from al-Mutanabbī and pursue his faults, to which al-Ma'arrī reacted with

the words, “Had al-Mutanabbī composed no more than the poem with the words ‘You have, O stations of the heart, many stations,’ that alone would have sufficed to demonstrate his superiority.” Upon hearing this, al-Murtaḍā was so angered that he ordered that al-Ma’arrī be dragged away by his feet. Someone else in attendance at the *majlis* was puzzled, wondering out loud what may have been the point of the rejoinder to al-Murtaḍā on the part of al-Ma’arrī, inasmuch as al-Mutanabbī composed better poems that al-Ma’arrī neglected to mention. Al-Murtaḍā answered the question by saying that al-Ma’arrī wanted to draw attention to another line in the al-Mutanabbī poem (which he [al-Murtaḍā] regarded as a personal insult), namely “And if disparagement of me comes to you from someone who is flawed, then that is proof that I am perfect.”⁵⁷

One needs to wonder to what extent this report may have been greatly embellished if not entirely fabricated. Margoliouth finds it “too circumstantial to be fictitious.” One might reasonably counter that it is almost too outlandish to be true. Even if true, that it was probably “the real reason why Abū al-‘Alā’ left Baghdad” seems rather implausible. More likely—the more important point that the incident, even if apocryphal, seems designed to bring into sharper relief—is the considerable challenge that al-Ma’arrī faced in trying to secure patronage or remuneration for teaching and/or declaiming poetry in a large city that had no shortage of men of extraordinary erudition (literary and otherwise), as al-Ma’arrī himself conceded. At the same time, although Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān was subject to certain troubling vicissitudes, particularly strife as a result of the armed conflicts resulting from dynasties competing for suzerainty over northern Syria (with one of the combatants representing non-Muslim rule), Baghdad was hardly immune from its own troubles because of (1) Shī’ite-Sunnī sectarian rivalries that often erupted into riots, (2) revolts on the part of recalcitrant and ambitious Turkish chieftains among the soldiery, and (3) urban gangs that engaged in banditry and thuggery. Baghdad at this time was already an enormous city. The urban unrest and turmoil there, and the resulting uncertainty that they imparted to life, would have been on an even larger scale than whatever in the way of similar such challenges may have been afoot in Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān. As for the other reasons traditionally mentioned to explain Abū al-‘Alā’’s leaving Baghdad, these include the news of his mother’s having

fallen seriously ill (in point of fact, she died before he made it back to Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān) and the disappearance of a small family estate that had been deposited for him in his country of birth.

The decision to leave Baghdad, writes al-Ma'arrī, was coupled with the resolve to remain isolated for the remainder of his life:

Being unable then to remain in the spot I had chosen, I decided upon isolation such as should make me like an antelope in its lair, and should completely cut me off from mankind, except, indeed, those with whom God should join me as the arm is joined to the hand, or night to morrow.⁵⁸

Such course of action was not determined precipitously, according to al-Ma'arrī, whose own account here certainly merits our regard before taking into consideration the speculation of others:

I have found the best course for me to pursue in the days of my life is to go into retreat. . . . So I decided upon this course after asking God's help, and revealing my idea to a few friends on whose characters reliance could be placed, all of whom thought it was wise, and considered it could be carried out with prudence. And it is a matter "over which night-journeys have been undertaken. . . ." It is no offspring of the hour, no nursling of a month or a year; it is the child of past years and the product of reflection.⁵⁹

According to the classical biographers, from the date of his return to Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in 1010 CE until his death forty-seven years later in 1057, Abū al-'Alā', true to his own word, scarcely ventured beyond his home, let alone the town; although he was hardly the total recluse that some of his letters make him out to be. The very composition of the letters alone belies this. The letters were addressed to specific individuals. The collection translated by Margoliouth is but a small part of a collection made by al-Ma'arrī himself, "the lowest estimate [of which] would give us a work of 3,200 pages."⁶⁰

Among the specific individuals addressed in the extant letters is Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn, a notable son of an even more notable father (ʿAlī

ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī). Abū al-Qāsim (a.k.a *al-wazīr al-maghribī*, the North African minister) was a student of Ibn al-Qāriḥ, to whom al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness*/رسالة الغفران was addressed. He enjoyed the patronage of Abū Ghālib Fakhr al-Mulk (appointed *'amīd al-juyūsh*—head of the armies—under the Būyid Prince Bahā' al-Dawlah [ruled 998–1012 CE], and as such was responsible not only for oversight of the armies but also the day-to-day administration of Baghdad). By 1023, Abū al-Qāsim *al-wazīr al-maghribī* was minister to Būyid prince Musharrif al-Dawlah (ruled as *amīr* of Baghdad 415–16 IE; 1024–25 CE), on the way to that post also having become secretary (*kātib*/كاتب) to Qirwash, the 'Uqaylid Arab leader whom the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Qādir (ruled 991–1031 CE) officially granted possession of Mosul (entailing among other things revenue farming of the city).

In one of his rare poems of praise (*madh*/مدح; in *Saqt al-Zand*; poem in the rhyme *dimāmu*/ذمامه), al-Ma'arrī praised the father of Abū al-Qāsim ('Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī) for his military skill and prowess. 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī was a confidante of the Ḥamdānid ruler of northern Syria Sa'd al-Dawlah (ruled 967–991 CE), and, for a brief period, his minister before becoming minister to Bakjūr, the Caucasian *mamlūk* army general in the employ of the Ḥamdānids but who revolted against Sa'd al-Dawlah from his base at Raqqah, with the approval of the Fāṭimid imām-caliph in Cairo (al-'Azīz) (although the revolt was at the instigation of 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī). Bakjūr was thwarted in an attempt to seize control of Aleppo (circa 990 CE) and captured and executed at the orders of Sa'd al-Dawlah, shortly after which 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī fled to Kufa and later to al-'Azīz's court in Cairo to become the imām-caliph's chancellor-secretary (*kātib*). In this capacity as well as his having been appointed *mudabbir al-jaysh*/مدبر الجيش (organizer of the army), the redoubtable 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī managed to have the imām-caliph appoint the Fāṭimid-approved governor of Damascus, the Turkish *mamlūk* Banjūtākīn, *amīr al-juyūsh*/أمير الجيوش (commander of the armies), in preparation for an expedition against Aleppo (991 CE) with the view to bringing northern Syria as well as southern Syria under the suzerainty of the Fāṭimids in Cairo. ('Alī was recalled from northern Syria by al-'Azīz after the initial expedition against Aleppo failed to conquer the city and led to several additional failed expeditions between 991

and 994 CE. He was executed circa 1009–10 CE by order of the Fāṭimid imām-caliph al-Ḥākīm [ruled 996–1021 CE], at which point the son Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn sought refuge in Arabia; from there, before finding the patronage of Fakhr al-Mulk in Baghdad, he endeavored to support an attempt to overthrow al-Ḥākīm.)

The “Sulṭān” in al-Ma’arrī’s letter that is addressed to “some of the Sulṭān’s ministers”⁶¹ is according to Margoliouth “probably” ‘Azīz al-Dawlah. The letter to Abū Maṣṣūr is to the custodian of Abū Naṣr Sābūr’s “Academy” in Baghdad (the site of which would have been Sābūr’s home).⁶²

The letter to Abū Naṣr Ṣadaqah ibn Yūsuf al-Fallāḥī⁶³ was written within the context of al-Fallāḥī’s trying to bring al-Ma’arrī closer to the *amīr* ‘Azīz al-Dawlah, al-Ḥākīm’s governor in Aleppo. In *Saqt al-Zand* al-Ma’arrī has verses in praise of Banjūtakīn and ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Maghribī (see for the former the poem with rhyme *ḥimyarū/حيمير* and for the latter the poem with rhyme *wiṣālu/وصال*; both discussed in detail by Pieter Smoor⁶⁴). In the same collection of poems are verses of praise to Abū Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Salām al-Baṣrī (who was a custodian of Dār al-Kutub [the Library] in Baghdad; see poem with rhyme *arbu’i/أربع*); to Abū Maṣṣūr, custodian of Sābūr’s Academy library (see poem with rhyme *al-khaṭṭu/الخط*); and to Abū al-Qāsim ‘Alī ibn al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī (see poem with rhyme *bi-takrīta/بتكريت*), the son of the noted author of *Nishwār al-Muḥāḍarah wa Akhbār al-Mudhākarah* (نشوار المحاضرة وأخبار المذاكرة), the Ḥanafī Judge (قاض) Abū ‘Alī al-Muḥassin ibn ‘Alī.⁶⁵

According to Ibn al-‘Adīm,⁶⁶ Abū Shujā’ Fātik ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Rūmī, a.k.a. ‘Azīz al-Dawlah, Banjūtakīn’s emancipated Armenian slave who ruled the Citadel of Aleppo (with Fāṭimid caliph-imām al-Ḥākīm’s investiture), and eventually all of Aleppo and surrounding districts by dint of his own resolve and wiles (until 413 IE [1021–22 CE], when he was assassinated by one of his slave guards), “had a high regard for [al-Ma’arrī] and used to accede to his intercession. He even visited him in Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān.” Much of al-Ma’arrī’s *Epistle of the Horse and the Mule* touches upon issues and events during the rule of *amīr* ‘Azīz al-Dawlah, and the work was dedicated to the *amīr* with a view to petitioning him with respect to a matter of taxes involving al-Ma’arrī and some of his family.⁶⁷ “Abū al-‘Alā’ must have been acquainted with life at [‘Azīz al-Dawlah’s]