Nomad world and urban world

Thirteenth-century Arab manuscripts, and particularly illustrations of literary works such as the Maqamat (Arab manuscript ST847 preserved at the French National Library) and a certain number of books of pharmacology such as the Kitab al-diraj ("Book of Antidotes"), offer a particularly rich vision of the world as it appeared to the merchant classes of the great Arab cities and towns. It seems likely that this vision also held true for a much wider world that ran from Morocco to Central Asia, but such a conclusion must be treated with caution.

So what did these representations contain? First and foremost, they reflected the inseparable presence at this period of the Bedouin, the nomadic peoples who criss-crossed the Arab world and whose parallels also existed in Africa and Central Asia.

There are camels (figs. 68 and 69) shown humorously, as if in a military parade, who, curiously, are under the guidance of a Bedouin woman, a surprising feature that is unexplained by the rest of the Maqamat. Camels were used for the transport of people and goods and were part of the everyday life of nomadic peoples. For example, one painting shows a traveler sitting on a camel's back, his pots and camel leading the way; and the camels are also at rest (fig. 62). Another, more harmoniously composed image, shows a traveler sleeping on some rocks, a camel at rest, an intruder about to stroke the traveler and a second mount whose presence draws the eye towards some beings or objects hidden behind the rocks (fig. 64). Sometimes on the way to Mecca with the mamluks—the small skirins carried each year at the time of pilgrimage—a caravan might stop to listen to a preacher (fig. 62). Men's were prepared in the open air, so one-of-a-kind camels are shown being slaughtered while a servant does what he can to keep the fire going under a large cooking pot and a woman brings food to the men waiting in a tent (fig. 65). The way all these figures are shown is not without irony, though the satire is a pleasant one.

Strangely, there are few illustrations of agricultural work, except in a small number of pseudo-scientific manuscripts, for example showing plowing in relation to slave labor (fig. 66). Among the mass of detail that appears in many Tonyan miniatures there may be a gardener or a shepherd, but they seem more like theatrical figures than real workers.

In towns such as the one we have chosen for the Albuin, there are houses where women are shown occupied in various ways such as spinning wool (fig. 68), while the men go off to listen to music and eat outside around a fountain fed by hydraulic machinery (fig. 67). In the evening they may go drinking in establishments that make their own wine (fig. 69) or visit a doctor-pharmacist (see fig. 12 p. 20), passing by the slave market with its highly original wooden architecture on the way (fig. 70).

The detail of the 12th century from many countries represents mainly the town, if we take the example of a palace in India in which we can see (fig. 13) or imperial or palaces of royals and members of the court.

One home is the image of the world.
the routine of an Arab town and board an Indian boat (note the dark skin and exotic body types of the sailors compared with the travelers who are clearly Arab) and go off in search of fortune elsewhere (see p. 9), or instead stay at home and claim to be ill so that friends come to his bedside (fig. 76).

The detailed precision of thirteenth-century Maghribi, particularly of the 1237 manuscript preserved at the French National Library, is in many respects unique in the history of painting in Muslim countries and indeed in the Middle Ages altogether. All sorts of representations of towns and nomadic life will be found later, but mainly as a background to various stories. Apart from a few exceptions, it was not until the seventeenth century that a style of painting focused on urban life and agriculture really emerged. The manuscripts and self-contained productions produced under the Mughals in India are often dominated by country landscapes, the detail of which sometimes shows the influence of Western painting (see p. 141); or they may depict the buildings and variety of the great imperial cities (fig. 78). Also, under the Ottomans, the houses and palaces of Istanbul are shown in books describing the great commemorative celebrations of the empire (see p. 62) and the towns conquered and visited by the sultans, often shown in great detail.

One humorous example of the precision of Ottoman manuscripts is the image of the street sweepers of Istanbul (fig. 77).