CHAPTER ONE

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Ibn Khaldun among the Ruins

He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day
Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with fleeting shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

—Shelley, "Alastor"

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The Captains and the Kings depart
. . . . . .
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

—Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional"

Let us start with a story from *The Thousand and One Nights*, "The City of Brass." (It should be more correctly rendered as "copper," *nuhas*, a word whose triconsonantal root can be seen as presaging ill omen, since, among the related words, *nahasa* means "to make someone unhappy" and *manhus* means "ill-fated.") It is said that in the days of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan there was a discussion at his court about the copper jars within which centuries ago the jinn (genies) had been sealed by King Solomon. Whereupon the caliph ordered Musa ibn Nusayr, the governor of North Africa, to outfit an expedition to find one of

those jars. After traveling for over a year in the trackless wastes, it became obvious that the expedition was lost. In their wanderings they came to the Black Castle, an abandoned palace that had once been the seat of King Kush of the tribe of ʻAd. Around his tomb they found many tablets bearing writings, which delivered stern messages about "the vicissitudes of life and the transitoriness of the world." For example:

> The people and their works lament the empire they have lost.
> The palace brings the last news of its lords, who all lie buried here.
> Death parted and destroyed them, throwing to the ground what they had gathered in.
> It is as though they halted here to rest, but then set off again in haste.[1]

After further adventures, including an encounter with a mighty jinni (genie), Musa ibn Nusayr's expedition reached the City of Brass. The great wall, which surrounded it, had no gate. Scattered on a neighboring hill they found tablets with more pious warnings for those who would be warned. Early attempts to scale the wall of the city failed, as each of the first ten men delegated to do so smiled on reaching the top of the wall before throwing himself down to his death. But then the spell was broken by a recitation from the Qur'an and so a deceitful and deadly mirage of the beckoning maidens was conjured away. On entering the city, the company made their way through a corpse-strewn labyrinth of streets until they reached the palace and entered a throne room. On the throne there sat a young woman, Queen Tadmur, who appeared to be alive, but on closer examination she turned out to be a corpse whose eyeballs had been filled with glittering quicksilver. Before her throne was a tablet informing them that the city was once ruled by Qush, son of Shaddad ibn ʻAd. It had been the center of a prosperous and happy empire, but suddenly famine had struck and all the wealth of the city could not save the people. Musa ibn Nusayr's company loaded up with lots of treasure and on their return journey they managed also to acquire a copper jar with a jinni sealed inside it. After they had delivered this jar to the caliph

in Baghdad, Musa, having seen all that he had seen, decided to become a hermit.[2]

The City of Brass also features in the *Muqaddima*. It is one of the many ruined or abandoned places in that work. Ibn Khaldun, who grew up in the shadow of ruins, compared them to "faded writing in a book."[3] (This was one of the stock similes of the pre-Islamic poets.) North Africa has an exceptional number of magnificent ancient ruins: Cyrene, Apollonia, Leptis Magna, Carthage, Volubilis, El Jem, Sbeïtla, and many others. It was obvious to a fourteenth-century observer that the region had once been more prosperous and more heavily populated than it was now. "Formerly the whole region between the Sudan (the lands of the blacks in general) and the Mediterranean had been settled. This (fact) is attested by the relics of civilization there, such as monuments, architectural sculpture, and the visible remains of villages and hamlets."[4] Ibn Khaldun wrote repeatedly of North Africa's vanished glories. When he settled down to write the *Muqaddima* in the Castle of Banu Salama in western Algeria, the place to which he had retreated was in the vicinity of Roman ruins.

From earliest times laments over ruins had featured prominently in Arabic literature. The *Jahili* (pre-Islamic) poets of Arabia conventionally began their *qasida*s (odes) with an evocation of an abandoned desert campsite or a ruin and this would furnish the pretext for a lament over past loves and lost youth. In the centuries that followed, the imagery of the desert poets of pre-Islamic times continued to be employed by the urbane poets of 'Abbasid Baghdad and Basra—as in these verses by the ninth-century poet Abu Nuwas, in which, while he writes of the decay of the great city of Basra, it is really his lost youth that he is mourning:

Musalla is no more, desolate
the dunes which saw me once,
The square of Mirbad, of Labab,

And the great mosque which once combined
such gallantry and worship—
Withered and gone its courts and vast concourses.[5]

Basra's decline had begun with the sacking of the city by the rebel Zanj slaves in 871. In the next century it was sacked again by the Qarmatian heretics. Other Islamic cities were later to fall into ruin. Cordova, the capital of Muslim Spain, was sacked by Berber soldiers in 1013. Ibn Hazm, the eleventh-century author of *The Ring of the Dove*, a wonderful book on the etiquette of love, lamented the devastation of the city he had grown up in:

> I stood upon the ruins of our house, its traces wiped out, its signs erased, its familiar spots vanished. Decay had turned its cultivated bloom to sterile waste. In savagery after society, ugliness after beauty, wolves howled and devils played in the haunts of ghosts and dens of wild beasts that once had been luxurious and melodious. Men like swords, damsels like dolls, overflowing with riches beneath an ornamentation so palatial it reminded you of heaven, all were scattered with the change of time. Those elegant apartments, the plaything of destruction, were wilder now than the gaping mouths of lions, announcing the end of the world, revealing the fate of its inhabitants.[6]

Muslim North Africa's heyday had been under the Almohads in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when this Berber dynasty created an empire that extended from the Atlantic to Libyan Tripoli and also included southern and central Spain. In the East, the decay of Baghdad, the capital of the once-mighty 'Abbasid Caliphate, took a slow course, but when the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr visited it in 1184, he remarked that the place was "like statue of a ghost."[7] The sacking of the city by the Mongols in 1258 further contributed to the city's desolation.

RUINS DELIVERING MESSAGES

In fact, as in fiction, ruins were read as messages by pious and thoughtful Muslims. Nothing in this world lasts forever and the piling up of riches would not avail a man when death came for him. It was not by chance that Ibn Khaldun entitled his chronicle the *Kitab al-'Ibar*. '*Ibar* is the plural of '*ibra*, meaning "ad-

monition," "warning," "example," or "advice." As in the Qur'an: "Surely in that is an example for men possessed of eyes" (Qur'an 3:13) and "In their story was a warning (*'ibra*) for those with understanding" (Qur'an 12:11) and "So take warning, you who have sight" (Qur'an 59:2). The Qur'an stressed the importance of historical understanding in the sense of taking lessons from the past. "So relate the story; haply they will reflect" (Qur'an 7:176). "Has there not come to you the tidings of those who were before you—the people of Noah, Ad, Thamood, and of those after them" (Qur'an 7:149). "How many generations We have destroyed after Noah!" (Qur'an 17:17).

As Muhsin Mahdi has written: "The Islamic community was urged to view past events, both reported and experienced, as 'indications' that should awaken its moral sense and enhance its ability to act according to the demands of God: to penetrate behind the apparently meaningless succession of events and discern the ever-present design of the Creator. *'Ibra* meant both negative admonition, and positive guidance and direction for future action."[8]

The Qur'an repeatedly refers to past peoples who failed to heed the messages of prophets who were warners. The Deluge destroyed most of Noah's generation. The people of 'Ad, who came after those drowned in the Deluge, are frequently mentioned in the Qur'an. They inhabited a sandy desert between Oman and the Hadramawt. The Prophet Hud was sent as a warner to them, but they did not heed his message and so were doomed. The people of 'Ad were succeeded by the race of Thamud and the Prophet Salih was sent to call them to repentance, but they slaughtered a she-camel that emerged from a rock, which was sent to them as a divine sign, and so too they were doomed. Pharaoh who refused to listen to Moses was another who incurred God's wrath and consequently he was drowned. 'Ad, Thamud, and the Amalekites were known as the "vanished Arabs." In the *'Ibar* Ibn Khaldun shows himself to be oddly credulous about these peoples and, for example, he reported without further comment that 'Ad, the ancestor of his race lived for 1,200 years and fathered 4,000 males and 1,000 females.[9]

'Ibra had many layers of meaning and there was also a later mystical sense. According to Jonathan Berkey, it was among other senses "a technical term in the Sufi vocabulary which indicated right guidance in matters concerning good and evil, the distinction between outward form and inward truth, and by extension how souls pass successfully from this world to paradise."[10]

In the opening of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun presented his life and those of the peoples he has studied as existing in a book; "Our lives' final terms, the dates of which have been fixed for us in the book (of destiny), claim us."[11] History consists both of events and the writing down of those events. Indeed, it is almost as if the events take place in order to be written down in a book, for both the events and the reporting of them serve as *'ibar*—warnings or lessons. According to Ibn Khaldun, "the purpose of human beings is not only their worldly welfare. This entire world is trifling and futile. It ends in death and annihilation."[12] The *Muqaddima* has to be read with this in mind. But, though Ibn Khaldun meditated upon the ruins around him, he took moral messages from them and he did not approach them as an archaeologist. An archaeological approach to ruins lay centuries ahead. (Nor, for that matter, did Ibn Khaldun attempt to apply source-critical techniques to documents.)

'Ibra and related forms of the basic triconsonantal root in Arabic feature prominently in the *Nights* story of "The City of Brass." When the caliph 'Abd al-Malik heard about the brass jars in which the jinn were imprisoned by Solomon, he expresses a great desire to see such things, for they would be "an example to those who are instructed by such examples" (*'ibra li-man-i'tibar*). Then, when Musa ibn Nusayr's expeditionary party discuss advancing on the Black Castle, an aged shaikh exclaims, "Let us approach this castle—*huwa 'ibra li-man i'tibabara*—which is a warning for whoso would be warned." And on one of the tablets in the castle, the party reads "O you who arrive at this place, take warning (*i'tabir*) from what you see." Inside the Black Castle there "is the last report concerning chieftains who have been gathered in the dust. Death destroyed them and scattered them, and they lost in the dust that which they had gathered." "Sermons in stone" indeed.

The story of "The City of Brass" can be seen as a fantastical prefiguration of the theme that so preoccupied Ibn Khaldun—the ruins of North Africa and the lessons to be learned from the past generations who once dwelt in those now ruined castles and palaces. *Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*? ("Where are those who came before us?") was also a question that often introduced reflections on mortality and the transience of life in medieval Latin poetry. Ibn Khaldun intended his readers to take warning lessons from his history, lessons that would be conducive to Muslim salvation. He wrote of the evidence of former grandeur surviving in an era of chaos and desolation: "Formerly the whole region between the Sudan and the Mediterranean had been settled. This fact is attested by the relics of civilization there, such as monuments, architectural sculpture, and the visible remains of villages and hamlets."[13] He asked himself how such grandeur had given way to desolation. He believed that the desolate state of North Africa in his own time was in large part due to the devastating invasion of the region in the eleventh century by the Egyptian Arab tribal federations of the Banu Hilal and the Banu Sulaym (and we shall return to this topic in chapter 3). Then the question arose, was the passage from imperial grandeur to desolation inevitable?

THE BLACK DEATH AND DESOLATION

Besides featuring in *The Thousand and One Nights*, "The Story of the City of Brass" also features in *The One Hundred and One Nights*, a rival story collection that was compiled in North Africa and that, in its oldest recension, may predate *The Thousand and One Nights*. The story was known as early as the ninth century and, as noted, al-Mas'udi transmitted it in the tenth century. But the historian Jean-Claude Garcin argues, on the basis of numerous details in the story that feature in the version that has come down to us in the nineteenth-century printed editions of the *Nights*, that this particular version must have been put together no earlier than the fourteenth century. Garcin goes on to argue that the real sub-

ject of the story is not the quest for bottled jinn, but rather the desolation of the land and the death that came to so many innocent people. "The Story of the City of Brass" is then a fictional reflection on the Black Death that devastated the Middle East and North Africa in 1348 and perhaps also a commentary on the famines that struck Egypt some decades later. All men are mortal. There is no escaping death.[14] The coming of the Black Death provided the impetus for the retelling of this story—just as it had impelled Ibn Khaldun first to reflect on how the world had changed and then to write the *Muqaddima*.

To return to ruins, they also featured in Muslim literature as material evidence of bad government. In the course of his discussion of monarchical injustice in chapter 3 of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun inserted the following fable: The Sassanian king Bahram ibn Bahram, on hearing the cry of an owl, asked the Mobedhan, the chief religious dignitary among the Persians, what the cry meant. The priest replied with a fable: when a male owl wanted to marry a female owl, she demanded twenty ruined villages, so that she could hoot in them. But the male replied that that would be no problem as long as King Bahram continued to rule in the way that he was doing, since the owl would be able to give her a thousand villages. Hearing this, the ashamed King resolved to manage the affairs of his kingdom better.[15]

After Ibn Khaldun had left Granada in 1365, Ibn al-Khatib, the cultivated vizier of the ruler of Granada, wrote to Ibn Khaldun eloquently (but very possibly insincerely) expressing his sadness at his departure and claiming that he now "sought remedy [for loneliness] in morning visits to abandoned ruins."[16] During his own earlier exile in the Maghrib Ibn al-Khatib had produced a melancholy travelogue about his movements around North Africa including many gloomy reflections on the transitoriness of life provoked by the contemplation of the ruins he saw there.[17] (The life and works of Ibn al-Khatib will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.)

It is hardly possible to overestimate the devastating effects of the Black Death. Throughout his life Ibn Khaldun was to be stalked by tragedies and the first of these occurred in 1348 when

the plague reached North Africa from Egypt. At the age of seventeen, Ibn Khaldun lost his parents as well as many of his teachers and friends to the plague. In the *Muqaddima*, he was to write as follows:

> Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems was similarly visited though in accordance with and in proportion to [the East's more affluent] civilization. It was if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whoever is upon it.[18]

AL-MAS'UDI, THE HISTORIAN WHO HAS TO BE SURPASSED

The leading Arab historians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Ibn al-Khatib, Ibn Khaldun, and al-Maqrizi, all produced works of history that were saturated with melancholy and pessimism. People moved among abandoned houses and deserted villages. The contrast with, say, Whig historians, such as Macaulay in nineteenth-century England, is striking. The Arab historians had no belief in the progress of humanity. Instead they waited for God to declare the End of Time. Ibn Khaldun did not expect the world to get any better and he had no hopes for the future. Since the Black Death had changed everything, the new circumstances called for the writing of a new kind of history that would embody

warnings from the past from which men must take heed. The kind of chronicle represented by the *Muruj al-dhahab* would become obsolete.

The *Muruj al-dhahab wa ma'adin al-jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Jewels) was the literary masterpiece of Abu Hasan 'Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'udi (896–956), a historian and geographer who wrote in 'Abbasid times. Al-Mas'udi traveled extensively in Iraq, Iran, India, Ceylon, Arabia, and elsewhere and he wrote copiously, drawing on his own observations and interviews, as well as on his remarkably wide reading. (It is not clear where this freelance scholar's income came from.) Al-Mas'udi was steeped in the writings of the ancient Greeks in a way that Ibn Khaldun never was. In his masterpiece, the *Muruj al-dhahab*, al-Mas'udi not only provided a chronicle of the Arabs, but he also covered the history of the six other great nations: Chaldaeans, Indians, Chinese, Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians. Unlike Ibn Khaldun, he was most curious about the non-Islamic world, including the lands of the *Franj* (that is, the Europeans). It is evident that Mas'udi thought of himself as working in the broad genre of *adab*—that is to say "culture," "refinement," or "belles-lettres." His book provided the sort of information that could inform a civilized conversation over dinner. The information he provided was diverse and, perhaps because of this, he described himself as a "woodcutter by night." In the *Fihrist*, the enormous catalog of Arabic literature compiled by the bookseller Ibn al-Nadim in the tenth century, al-Mas'udi's writing was placed in the section devoted to court companions, singers, and jesters. He was indeed a specialist in learned and entertaining digressions. Even so, the *Muruj* is more than just a work of entertainment, for al-Mas'udi was the first Arab historian to reflect seriously upon the underlying principles and purposes of history and Ibn Khaldun praised him for this.[19] In another later work, *Kitab al-tanbih wa-al-ishraf* (The Reminder and Summary Overview), al-Mas'udi refers to earlier works, now lost, in which he discussed the various types of government, the relationship between kingship and religion, and the causes of political and religious decline.[20] Though he boasted of having produced thir-

ty-six books, there is curiously little trace of any of them, apart from the *Muruj* and the *Tanbih*.

It had been customary among Muslim historians to support their historical data by *isnad*s, chains of oral transmission that authenticated particular items of information. For example, "I heard on the authority of Abu Ishaq, who heard it from al-Sijistani, who was told by Ibn Waqidi that . . ." Al-Mas'udi, who did not think much of traditionists, dispensed with this formality and as a consequence was regarded with some disfavor by most Arab historians, though not by Ibn Khaldun, who also rarely bothered with *isnad*s.[21] Ibn Khaldun preferred to rely on his sense of the inherent probability of an alleged fact. He thought that there were certain ways in which things happen in human society and other ways in which they do not.

Ibn Khaldun's admiration for al-Mas'udi was immense and he called him "the imam of the historians"—that is, the leading historian. He admired al-Mas'udi's universalistic scope and readiness to tackle the history of non-Arabs and infidel cultures, as well as his emphasis on geography, climate, and race. Al-Mas'udi had also taken pains to organize his information systematically and to cross-reference it. Ibn Khaldun quoted him frequently.[22] It also seems likely that Ibn Khaldun's cult of the nomad was inspired by al-Mas'udi. The account given in the *Muruj al-dhahab* of Arab history begins with a presentation of the Arabs as essentially nomads and as such to be compared to the Kurds, Turks, Berbers, and others. Moreover, "the ancient Arabs (*al-qudama' min al-'arab*) chose desert life because they saw in urban settlement shame and shortcomings . . . the knowledgeable amongst them (*dhawu al-ma'rifa*) declared that the desert was more healthy and more conducive to a strong, salubrious life."[23]

But Ibn Khaldun's admiration was mixed with stern criticism, since al-Mas'udi had written to entertain, as well as to instruct, whereas Ibn Khaldun conceived of his sort of historiography as offering only instruction. It is for this reason that in the opening section of the *Muqaddima*, in which Ibn Khaldun set out the reasons why historians often get things wrong, he often took his examples

from al-Mas'udi and this in turn explains why there is a discussion of the City of Brass in the *Muqaddima*.

This is what Ibn Khaldun wrote:

> Then there is also al-Mas'udi's story of the "Copper City." This is said to be a city built wholly of copper in [the] desert of Sijilmasah which Musa ibn Nusayr crossed on his raid against the Maghrib. The gates (of the Copper City) are said to be closed. When the person who climbs the walls of the city, in order to enter it, reaches the top, he claps his hand and throws himself down and never returns. All this is an absurd story. It belongs to the idle talk of storytellers. The desert of Sijilmasah has been crossed by travelers and guides. They have not come across any information about such a city. All the details mentioned about it are absurd.

And Ibn Khaldun went on to note that it was most improbable that enough copper could be amassed to build a whole city out of it.[24] But what Ibn Khaldun would not admit is that al-Mas'udi, who was a highly intelligent man, almost certainly did not believe in the story of the City of Brass himself and it is most unlikely that he expected his readers would believe it either, but he included the story in the hope that it would entertain them. So he placed it in a chapter devoted to the seas and the marvels of strange lands.[25] He was producing literature and accounts of mirabilia were an important part of medieval Arab literature.

WHERE AND WHAT WAS IRAM OF THE COLUMNS?

Another legendary abandoned place attracted the interest of the compilers of *The Thousand and One Nights*, as well as of al-Mas'udi and Ibn Khaldun. This was Iram of the Columns. The place is briefly and cryptically referred to in the Qur'an: "Did you not see what your Lord did with 'Ad—Iram, that of the pillars?" (Qur'an 89: 6–7). According to Qur'anic commentators, in pre-Islamic times Shaddad, son of 'Ad, created a garden in Yemen, which he blasphemously intended to rival Paradise and he called it Iram, but when he and his courtiers set out to admire the completed

garden, it and they were destroyed by a terrible noise from heaven. An elaborate version of this exegesis appears in *The Thousand and One Nights* as "'Abd Allah ibn Qilaba and Iram City of the Columns."[26] In this story 'Abd Allah ibn Qilaba got lost in the desert when he went looking for two stray camels and then he stumbled across the wondrous city of Iram and "in it were lofty pavilions, all containing chambers made of gold and silver, studded with sapphires, coloured gems, chrysolite, and pearls, and the leaves of their doors were as beautiful as the fortress itself." The story of Iram of the Columns was subjected to ruthless scrutiny by Ibn Khaldun. He asked how it was that there were no credible reports of travelers in Yemen coming across this city. Also it seemed likely to him that *'imad* had been mistranslated and meant "tent poles" rather than "columns."[27]

The *Muruj al-dhahab* also related the story of the discovery of this deserted city by an Arab searching for his two lost camels on the authority of a certain Ka'b al-Ahbar. But al-Mas'udi also had his doubts: "Many learned men believe stories of this sort to be apocryphal lies invented by storytellers to gain favor with kings. It is these men who gave their contemporaries the idea of preserving these tales and repeating them in their turn." And al-Mas'udi went on to observe that such stories featured in various collections, including a Persian one, "which is known to the public as *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is the story of a king, his vizier, the vizier's daughter, and her slaves, Shirazad and Dinazad."[28]

Incidentally, the fantastical and damned Iram City of the Columns reappeared in some of the stories of the twentieth-century horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (who from childhood had been an enthusiast for the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*). "Emaciated priests, displayed in ornate robes, cursed the upper air, and all who breathed it; and one terrible final scene showed a primitive-looking man, perhaps a pioneer of ancient Irem, the City of the Pillars, torn to pieces by members of the elder race. I remembered how the Arabs fear the nameless city, and was glad that beyond this place the grey walls and ceilings were bare."[29] The Arab who has ventured into the nameless city in quest of Satanic knowledge is driven mad by what he has seen. Again, in "The Call

of Cthulhu" (first published in 1926), a mestizo sailor called Castro reveals what he knows about the ancient and gruesome rites of The Old Ones. "Of the cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless deserts of Arabia, where Irem, the City of the Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched."[30]

Before tackling the story of "The City of Brass" in the preliminary remarks that are part of book 1 of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun had this to say about another strange story: "Students often happen to accept and transmit absurd information that, in turn, is believed on their authority. Al-Mas'udi, for instance, reports such a story about Alexander. Sea monsters prevented Alexander from building Alexandria. He took a wooden container in which a glass box was inserted, and dived in it to the bottom of the sea. There he drew pictures of the devilish monsters he saw. He then had metal effigies of these animals made and set them up opposite the place where the building was going on. When the monsters came out and saw the effigies, they fled. Alexander was thus able to complete the building of Alexandria."[31]

Ibn Khaldun, quite reasonably, doubted this story on the grounds that a ruler would not dare take such a risk and indeed his subjects would not allow him to do so. Also the jinn are shape-shifters and are not confined to one specific form. Moreover, the cool air in the box would soon run out, so that the man inside would overheat. Although the story of Alexander and the sea monsters does not feature in the *Nights*, a variant, shorter version is given in "The Story of 'Arus al-'Ara'is and Her Deceit, as well as the Wonders of the Seas and Islands," which is one of the fantastic tales in a parallel story collection, the *Hikayat al-'ajiba wa'l-akhbar al-ghariba* (Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange).[32]

Ibn Khaldun was also hostile to what he judged to be al-Ma'sudi's fictions about the 'Abbasids. During the caliphate of Harun al-Rashid (786–809) the Barmecide clan of Persian administrators, headed by Ja'far, had seemed to be all-powerful in Baghdad, until in 803 Ja'far was suddenly arrested and executed and the rest of the Barmecide clan were imprisoned and their goods confiscated.[33] Ibn Khaldun dismissed the story found in the *Muruj al-dhahab* and other chronicles, according to which Harun, who was very fond

of his sister al-'Abbasa, wanted her to attend his drinking parties and, in order to effect this, he married her to Ja'far stipulating that they must not sleep together. But al-'Abbasa tricked Ja'far into having sex with her when he was drunk and she became pregnant. When Harun found out he determined that Ja'far had to die.[34] In al-Mas'udi's chronicle the story provides the pretext for poems devoted to the transience of earthly glory, power, and wealth. The downfall of the Barmecides also features in some versions of *The Thousand and One Nights*.[35]

Ibn Khaldun ridiculed the notion that Harun al-Rashid regularly drank wine together with his cup companions.[36] Although Harun's wine-drinking and occasional drunkenness feature frequently in the *Nights*, all the historical evidence suggests that in reality he was a pious and strictly observant Muslim. On similar grounds, Ibn Khaldun had doubted the story given in the tenth-century anthologist Ibn 'Abd Rabbih's *'Iqd al-farid* (The Unique Necklace) of how Harun's son al-Ma'mun was wandering by night through the streets of Baghdad when he saw a basket being lowered by pulleys and cords from a high window. He clambered into the basket and was hauled up to a chamber in which he encountered a beautiful maiden, with whom he drank wine and had sex.[37] Ibn Khaldun rejected this story as being incompatible with what other sources tell us about al-Ma'mun's piety. Again, there is a similar story in *The Thousand and One Nights*, but there the adventure is attached to a contemporary of al-Ma'mun, the singer and poet, Ishaq al-Mosuli.[38]

WEIRD SCIENCE

To return to al-Mas'udi, Ibn Khaldun also attacked the earlier historian's contention that the first men created by God had perfect bodies and extraordinarily long life spans. "Thus in the beginning, the world had (people whose) lives had their full duration and whose bodies were perfect. Because of the deficiency of matter it steadily deteriorated to its present condition, and it will not stop deteriorating until the time of complete dissolution and the de-

struction of the world."[39] Ibn Khaldun rejected this as being a hypothesis that was unsupported by any convincing evidence. It is perhaps noteworthy that in criticizing al-Mas'udi, Ibn Khaldun relied on common sense and simple logic, rather than any very sophisticated philosophical methodology. But perhaps the *Muruj al-dhahab* did have to be attacked in order to create space for the *Muqaddima*.

The presence of such vast ruins as the Pyramids and the Persian Reception Hall of Khosraw raised the question of whether such gigantic constructions might not have been built by giants, as al-Mas'udi had argued. (This sort of fantasy was not confined to Islamic lore. For example, in the twelfth-century verse romance the *Roman de Brut*, a giant helped Merlin build Stonehenge, and the cyclopean masonry of the Ggantija Neolithic temples on the Mediterranean island of Gozo was long thought by antiquarians to have been the work of giants.) Ibn Khaldun mocked the view of those "who imagine that the ancients had bodies proportionate to (those monuments) and that their bodies, consequently, were much taller, wider, and heavier than (our bodies), so that there was the right proportion between (their bodies) and the physical strength from which such buildings resulted."[40] In particular, he attacked the widely held notion that the monuments popularly attributed to the ancient race of 'Ad were so enormous because the 'Adites were giants. The reality was that large monuments were the product of superior social organization and the skillful use of machinery.

Though Ibn Khaldun's readiness to employ logic and make generalizations based on logic and observation may make him seem rather modern, there were limits to his rationality. Some of his ideas about the way the world worked would be classified today as weird science. Not only that but many of his contemporaries would have found those ideas a bit strange too. For instance, in the course of discussing the supposed giants of antiquity, he wrote this: "One of the strangest of these stories is about Og, the son of Anak, one of the Canaanites against whom the children of Israel fought in Syria. According to these storytellers, he was so tall that he took fish out of the ocean and held them up to the sun to be cooked."[41] Earlier historians such as al-Tabari and al-Thalabi had testified to

the giant stature of this king of Bashan, who was alleged to sleep only twice a year and who was so tall that the sea only reached up to his knees. Ibn Khaldun quite reasonably mocked the account of the giant, which had been produced by grossly ignorant storytellers, but then he dismissed the possibility that the giant held fish up to cook them by the heat of the sun in this fashion: "They believe that the sun is heat and that the heat of the sun is greatest close to it. They do not know that the heat of the sun is (its) light and that its light is stronger near the earth (than it is near the sun) because of the reflection of the rays from the surface of the earth when it is hit by the light. Therefore, the heat here is many times greater (than near the sun) . . . The sun itself is neither hot nor cold, but a simple uncomposed substance that gives light."[42] So he believed that the further the sun's rays traveled from the sun, the hotter they became. Ibn Khaldun believed that the sun was neither hot nor cold. It was just a luminous star. It is hard to guess where he got this notion.

In the course of a dismissive account of alchemy and the possibility of transforming base metal into gold, Ibn Khaldun nevertheless conceded that the spontaneous generation of scorpions, bees, and snakes did occur, since these things had actually been observed.[43] When he came to discuss the superiority of the crafts in Egypt to those practiced in the Maghreb, he said that he had heard that Egyptians had actually succeeded in teaching donkeys and other quadrupeds to speak.[44]

He was not more rational on the causes of the Black Death and other plagues. First, he suggested that it was a product of too much civilization and the consequent density of population, which gave rise to corruption of the air.[45] On the other hand, he also maintained that the presence of lots of people moving around in one place kept the air moving and prevented putrefaction.[46] Ibn al-Khatib, Ibn Khaldun's friend and rival, was sharper about the causes of plague, for he had deduced that it was spread by contagion. There were numerous other irrational elements in Ibn Khaldun's thinking. For example, when he discussed Alexander's submarine, he failed to realize that the emperor was more likely to die from suffocation than from overheating. Elsewhere in the *Muqaddima* he

included a discussion of divine intervention as a deciding factor in certain battles.[47] As we shall see in future chapters, he also had some strange ideas about dieting and about sorcery.

RUINS, BAD GOVERNMENT, AND GOD'S JUDGMENT

As already noted, besides delivering messages about mortality, transience, and the vanity of riches, ruins served as indicators of bad government. But there is an apparent ambivalence that runs all the way through the *Muqaddima*. For most of the time, Ibn Khaldun argued that ruins are the product of natural causes or social developments—perhaps plagues, bad government, the extravagance and softness of townspeople, or the destructiveness of nomadic Arabs. "Time wears us out."[48] But at other times he feels obliged to state that human settlements are doomed by God's decree. "When God desires to destroy a village, we order those of its inhabitants who live in luxury to act wickedly. Thus, the word becomes true for it and we destroy it" (Qur'an 17:16). (The chronicler al-Maqrizi, who had been a student of Ibn Khaldun in Cairo, used the same citation in his *Ighathat al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma*, a treatise on high prices and famines.)[49]

There are stories in *The Thousand and One Nights* that deliver messages about communities doomed by the decree of God—as for example the tomb inscription, the reading of which concludes the story of "'Abd Allah ibn Qilaba and Iram, City of the Columns":

> Be warned, you who have been deceived by length of life,
> I am Shaddad ibn 'Ad, lord of the strong castle,
> A ruler of power, might and great strength,
> All the world obeyed me, in fear of force and threats.
> Through the greatness of my power I held both east and west.
> We were summoned to the true way by a rightly guided man,
> But we did not obey and called out: "Is there no refuge?"
> Then came a cry out of the far horizon;
> We were cut down as though we were a harvest field.
> Shut in our graves, we wait for Judgement Day.[50]

So, as far as Ibn Khaldun is concerned, is it social developments or God's will that determines the doom of dynasties, cities, and villages? Both, for it seems that he conceived of God working through natural causes. God made the inhabitants of a certain place sinful in order that he might justly destroy that place. In the same manner, the eleventh-century scholar al-Ghazali had argued in *The Incoherence of Philosophers* that there is no link between cause and effect unless God wills it to be so.

As we shall see in chapter 4, according to Ibn Khaldun's thesis about the workings of *'asabiyya* (social solidarity), after a newly triumphant ruler and his tribal following have installed themselves in a city, in the course of three or four generations, an inevitable decay will set in, as the regime slowly comes to indulge in luxury and extravagance. Moreover, as the bonds created by tribal solidarity and nomadic austerity weaken, the ruler comes to rely on mercenaries and slave soldiers and, in order to pay for these troops, he starts to impose taxes that are not sanctioned by Islam. So it is that the fall of a dynasty is the product of social developments that are more or less inevitable and yet at the same time it will be the sinfulness and greed of the dynasty and its followers that justify the Divine decree determining the end of a people who have gone astray. So a single observed effect has been determined by two causes, when either alone would have been sufficient. (This sort of overdetermination will be familiar to readers of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.)

Ibn Khaldun's approach to social science is moralistic and throughout the *Muqaddima*, he like the Muslim theologians and philosophers who came before him, had problems in dealing with issues concerning predestination and causality. Indeed, he did not like thinking about causality at all. Perhaps theorizing about the divinely ordained nature of causality was too like probing the mind of God, something that might be close to blasphemy. He did not think that it was possible for ordinary mortals to understand the nature of causality and he wrote of the hypothetical philosopher who might seek to investigate this subject that "I can guarantee him that he will return unsuccessful. Therefore we were forbidden by the Lawgiver (Muhammad) to study causes."[51]