

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARABIAN GEOGRAPHERS.

Geography entered upon a flourishing era at the time of the highest development of power in the Empire of the Caliphs, and from that time a whole series of great Arabian scholars wrote their descriptions of the different countries of the earth. Ptolemy's astronomy was translated under the title of *Almagest* and became a kind of fundamental codex to the Arabian geographers. Great parts of their works are devoted to Asia, and even the kingdom of Tibet did not escape their attention, though they had only a very vague conception of that country. The Arabians who have so much to tell us about India, Iran and Turan, and even something about China, know Tibet only from hearsay, and have often rather fantastic ideas about the mountainous country, its situation, and its character.

The Arabians reckoned the Tibetans amongst the Turks, as they did with all more or less unknown nations and tribes in the east and north of Asia.¹

Richthofen has shown that much of the information which the Arabian writers attributed to Tibet, in reality referred to Khotan; for even Edrisi's sources belong to a time, when the name of this place was not known, and, as the nearest great city of trade, it also represented the kingdom of Tibet to the conception of the Arabs.²

In the following pages I have tried to collect some extracts from the more important Arabian writers, in which will be found how far they knew our mountains north of India, the kingdom of Tibet, and the sources of the great rivers.

¹ Or as REINAUD puts it: »Chez les écrivains de l'antiquité, les peuples du nord de l'Asie et de l'Europe étaient des Scythes; chez les anciens écrivains arabes, ce sont des Turks; chez les écrivains postérieurs, ce sont des Tatars. De leur côté, les Chinois se sont fait un plaisir de donner à ces populations des noms quelquefois bizarres, souvent arbitraires.» REINAUD could easily have added that even so late as in his own days many European travellers who approached the frontier of Tibet from the Indian side, called the Tibetans Tartars. *Relation des Voyages faits par les Arabes et les Persans dans l'Inde et à la Chine dans le IX^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne . . . par M. REINAUD. Tome I. Paris 1845, p. CXLI.*

² China, I, p. 566.