

UPSC Preparation

Al Masudi [AD 896 - AD 956]

Al-Masudi full name Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī is an Arab scholar who came to India in 10th century AD. The greater part of Masʿūdī's life was spent in travelling and he mentions his travels in the book "Murūj-ul Zahab" (Meadows of Gold).

Al Masudi was the first Arab writer to combine history and scientific geography in his works and thus was hailed as the 'Herodotus of the Arabs'. Masudi was a prolific writer, and is said to have authored more than 34 books.

Al Masudi – Personal Life Facts

1. Al-Masudi was born in Baghdad, Iraq towards the end of the 9th century, somewhere before 893 CE but the exact year of his birth is not known.
2. Al Masudi was a descendent of Abdullah Ibn Masud, a companion of Prophet Muhammed.
3. Besides enriching geography and history, Al-Masudi contributed to cosmology, meteorology, oceanography, study of landforms, astronomy, Islamic law, and the Arabic folklore.
4. The titles of more than 20 books attributed to him are known, including several about Islamic beliefs and sects and even one about poisons, but most of his writings have been lost.
5. His famous works are – Akhbār al-zamān ("The History of Time"), Kitāb al-awsaṭ ("Book of the Middle"), Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawāhir ("The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems"), Kitāb at-Tanbih wa-l-'Ishraf ('Book of Admonition and Revision), Kitāb Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar, Kitāb al-tanbīh wa al-ishrāf ("The Book of Notification and Verification"), among others.
6. Al-Masudi was an avid wanderer. His travels extended to Syria, the shores of the Caspian Sea, Iran, Armenia, the Indus valley, India, Sri Lanka, the east coast of Africa, Oman, as far south as Zanzibar and, possibly, to Madagascar. However, his travels to Persia, India, East Africa and China are seldom questioned.
7. Visiting distant lands throughout his young age, he finally settled in Fustat (modern Cairo) in about 947 CE. He died there in 956 CE.

Al Masudi Visit To India – UPSC Prelims Facts

1. From Baghdad, Al Masudi travelled to Mansura (the capital of the province of Sindh) and Multan (today's Pakistan). He travelled to the Indus Valley, and other parts of India. His visit to India can be traced during the 10 Century AD.
2. From Mansure he proceeded to Surat in Gujarat. Here the young traveler had first hand contact with the Hindu civilization which had given the works of Aryabhata. He also visited the western Indian port town of Khambhat in Gujarat.
3. Al-Masudi, traveling further South, landed in Malabar on the Western coast of India.
4. He visited Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malacca in modern Malaysia. He describes that there was a brisk trade between the eastern seaboard of India and Malacca. The Straits of Malacca were the conduit for ships from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.
5. Al-Masudi gives the Atlantic Ocean the name of the Dark-Green Sea and was of the opinion that the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean are connected with each other.
6. Retracing his course around the rim of the Indian Ocean, Al Masudi traveled South to the island of Madagascar.
7. Al-Masudi was one of the well-known climatologists of his time. He gave a good account of the periodic winds (monsoons) of the Herkend (Bay of Bengal). He has given the

example of the windmills that he found in the desert of Sajistan on the western frontier of India.

8. Al Masudi sailed on the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea.
9. In his opinion, the Turks who emigrated to India lost their national characteristics and acquired new characteristics suited to the new environment.

Al Masudi description of India in his book Murúj-ul Zahab

1. The first half of the book starts with a history of the creation of the world and the following chapters describes the social life, religious customs, history and geography, of non-Islamic lands, such as Greece, Rome, and India.
2. He mentions that India is a vast country, it borders on the country of Zábaj, which is the kingdom of the Maharáj, whose dominions separate India and China, but are considered as part of India.
3. India extends over sea, lands, and on the sides of the mountains to Khurásán and Sind, as far as Tibet.
4. The language and religion in the Indian kingdoms are greatly different, and most of them are frequently at war with each other.
5. Al Masudi compared India and Italy and called Rome as 'Benares', on the River Tiber. In his opinion India and Italy may be compared in its geographical position and character.
6. He called river Ganges as 'Jinjis' and gave an interesting account of it saying that "the Ganges (Jinjis) ... is a large river in India; ... it rises in the mountains of the most remote parts of India, towards China, not far from the Turkish frontier, and falls, after a course of four hundred farsangs, into the Abyssinian Sea (Behr al-Habshi), on the coast of India".
7. About the town Khambhat in Gujarat, he describes that he visited a town Kambayah (Present-day Kamboya) which is situated on an estuary as wide as the Nile, or like the Tigris. One can see one sees towns, villas, cultivation, gardens, palms, coconut-trees, guinea-fowls, parrots, and other Indian birds on the bank of this estuary. The city is two days distant from the estuary.
8. About Kashmir he describes that it forms a powerful kingdom as it is unapproachable from three sides as it is surrounded by mountains of such height that neither men nor wild animals can climb over them. Where there are no mountains, there are inaccessible valleys, trees, jungles, and rivers which defend the place by their rapidity. It comprises sixty to seventy thousand towns and villages.
9. Al Masudi, like other foreign visitors, was enamoured by the sight of Indian Elephants. They were used for carrying burdens, drawing carriages, threshing rice, and other sorts of grain, etc and not just for wars. He mentions that the trunk of the elephants are covered with mail and iron and the body is protected by an armour of iron and leather. In any war elephants are surrounded by five hundred men, who protect him from behind. An elephant, like a horse with a rider on his back, advances, retires, goes round (and makes the military evolutions). These are the manoeuvres of the elephants of the Hindus in all their wars.
10. To the conduct of Indian Kings Al Masudi mentions that , No king before 40 years of age can succeed to the throne in India. Their sovereign can never appear before the public, except at certain distant intervals. If the public gets the gaze of Kings frequently, the kings lose their dignity and bring contempt on their privileges. In their opinion, the government is only maintained by good feelings and by respect for the various dignities of the state.