THE IDENTITY OF ONE OF THE ISMAILI DÀ ÍS SENT BY THE FATIMIDS TO IBN ḤAFṢŪN

Paul E. WALKER
University of Chicago

Several years ago I obtained a manuscript copy of an early Ismaili work called simply Kitâb al-Munàzaràt by a then obscure author from the time of Abū ‘Abdallâh al-Shï‘i and his conquest of the Aghlabid state in North Africa. This treatise had, until that moment, remained unexamined in modern scholarship, although it had been copied verbatim into Part Six of a massive collection of IsmaiH works called the Kitâb al-Azhàr, compiled by the sixteenth century Yemeni Ŧayyibi authority Hasan b. Nûh al-Bharûchî. After some hesitation, I began to investigate the text in detail and only then realized its importance as a major new source for the intellectual history of Qayrawân at the end of the third/ninth century and of the Ismaili revolution in the Maghrib.

It turned out that the author of the «Book of Discussions» was a member of a prominent Arab Shi‘î (Zaydî) family whose roots in Ifriqiya went back to the era of the Muḥallabîd governors there. His full name is Abû ‘Abdallâh Ja‘far b. Ahmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Aswad b. al-Haytham. Immediately after the Fatimid victory he joined the Ismaili da’wa and thereafter served the new rulers in various capacities. Much later, at some point during the revolt of Abû Yazîd, the famous Kharijite Ŧâhib al-Ĥîmâr, this same man saw fit to write this memoir in which he recalled his first encounters with Abû ‘Abdallâh and his brother Abû‘l-‘Abbâs. The brother had assumed the leadership of the Fatimid government for seven months while Abû ‘Abdallâh was off rescuing the Imam in Sijîlmâsa. Ostensibly then, the Kitâb al-Munàzaràt constituted a record of Ibn al-Haytham’s «discussions» with the two brothers during that critically important year of their rule in 296-97/909.

A closer look, however, revealed that it includes much more than an account of various conversations with the two brothers. Partly in response to queries posed by one or the other brother, Ibn al-Haytham told them—and thus added to his own recollections of these «discussions»—a great deal about himself, his background, education, and family history, including fascinating details about his relationship with the major Ḥanâfî and Mâlikî ‘ulamâ’ of his native city.

Convinced finally of its exceptional value, I proceeded to the preparation of a critical edition of the Arabic text along with a complete translation into English.
with a full introduction and extensive notes. Prof. Wilferd Madelung joined me
in this effort and together we have now published the whole in a volume entitled
The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shi‘i Witness (London and New

Among several cryptic references about the author’s later career in the Ismaili
da‘wa which occur at the beginning of the text, one mentions al-Andalus. At
first, however, exactly what he meant by it was far from clear to us. Ibn al-
Haytham states simply that what he is about to relate —meaning presumably the
following memoir itself— explains, in part, “the reasons for our leaving for al-
Andalus and what happened between us and the one who rose there against the
Umayyads...” (sabab khurūjinñ ilā al-Andalus wa mā jarā baynāna wa bayn al-
qā‘im ‘alā Bani Umayya). He goes on to mention all-too-briefly «...and what we
planted with those people and the inhabitants of Cordova about the superiority of
‘Alī b. Abī Ta‘lib, the Commander of the Faithful, may the blessing of God be
upon him, and the excellence of the family of Muḥammad, peace be upon him»
(Arabic text, p. 2, trans. pp. 63-64; see also the introduction, p. 53).

Unfortunately, the work says nothing more about this one event in the
author’s life and initially, unsure of what he was referring to, we were inclined to
search for a way to amend the text. Prof. Madelung, however, soon realized that
the text is in fact correct as it stands and that Ibn al-Haytham’s reference to al-
qā‘im ‘alā Bani Umayya can only apply to ‘Umar b. Ḥafṣūn who, moreover, is
reported to have declared in favor of the Fatimid al-Mahdî shortly after the latter
came to power in 297/910. At that point al-Mahdî sent him two Ismaili dā‘is
who, according to Ibn al-Khaṭīb, brought with them robes of honor. They stayed
with Ibn Ḥafṣūn for some time and even attended several of his battles against
the Umayyads. On this incident in general, see Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s Kitāb A‘mal al-
a‘lām (ed. E. Lévi-Provençal, p. 32); also Heinz Halm, Das Reich des Mahdi:
Der Aufstieg der Fatimiden (Munich, 1991, p. 250); Eng. trans. The Empire of
Clearly then one of the two Ismaili missionaries must have been Ibn al-Haytham
whose own memoir now, at the least, reveals his identity. It was characteristic of
the Ismaili da‘wa always to send dā‘is in pairs, which explains why there were
two in this case, but whether or not it will ever be possible to identify the other
remains at the moment doubtful.