

THE IDENTITY OF ONE OF THE ISMAILI *DĀ'ĪS* SENT  
BY THE FATIMIDS TO IBN ḤAFṢŪN

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Several years ago I obtained a manuscript copy of an early Ismaili work called simply *Kitāb al-Munāẓarāt* by a then obscure author from the time of Abū 'Abdallāh al-Shī'ī 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 Ismaili works called the *Kitāb al-Azhār*, compiled by the sixteenth century Yemeni Ṭayyibī authority Ḥasan b. Nūḥ al-Bharūchī. 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 Qayrawān 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 Shī'ī (Zaydī) family whose roots in Ifrīqiya went back to the era of the Muhallabid governors there. His full name is Abū 'Abdallāh Ja'far b. Aḥmad 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 Abū Yazīd, the famous Kharijite *Ṣāhib al-Ḥimār*, this same man saw fit to write this memoir in which he recalled his first encounters with Abū 'Abdallāh and his brother Abū'l-'Abbās. The brother had assumed the leadership of the Fatimid government for seven months while Abū 'Abdallāh was off rescuing the Imam in Sijilmāsa. Ostensibly then, the *Kitāb al-Munāẓarāt* 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 Ḥanafī and Mālikī '*ulamā*' 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 York: I. B. Tauris, in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000).

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 khurūjinā ilā al-Andalus wa mā jarā baynanā wa bayn al-qā'im 'alā Banī 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 Ṭālib, 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 Banī Umayya* can only apply to 'Umar b. Ḥafṣūn who, moreover, is reported to have declared in favor of the Fatimid al-Mahdī shortly after the latter came to power in 297/910. At that point al-Mahdī sent him two Ismaili *dā'īs* 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'māl 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 the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids* (by M. Bonner. Leiden, 1996, p. 280). 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'īs* 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.