Identifying Abū ‘Alī

Ibn Bahlūl cites the passage treated in the preceding chapter as written by a certain Abū ‘Alī, who gives the account based on a personal acquaintance with some of the Șābians whom he met in Bağdād. Our understanding of the circumstances around its composition will be enhanced by identifying this author. This will in turn provide some insight into the history of the Mandaean. Two modern scholars have attempted to identify Abū ‘Alī, but neither of their guesses can be correct. The text’s modern editor, Joseph Ḥabbī, suggests that he was the astrologer Abū ‘Alī al-Ḫayyāṭ, but this is ruled out by the fact that he must have died decades before the reign of al-Mu’taḍid.1 Sezgin, who published the facsimile of the sole complete manuscript, assumes that Abū ‘Alī is to be identified as one Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim al-Sinnī.2 The latter name occurs as the author of an otherwise unknown book called al-Fihrist ("The Register" or "The Catalogue"), named in the table of contents original to Ibn Bahlūl’s Kitāb ad-Dalā’il as the source of the immediately preceding, fortieth chapter, on the calendar of the Șābians of Ḥarrān. It is the immediately subsequent chapter, the description of the Mandaean translated here, which is attributed in the text to Abū ‘Alī. Sezgin apparently has assumed that the two different incomplete names referred to the same person, and that the two consecutive chapters came from the same source. In fact, Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī is not quite completely unknown: he is cited by name in Syriac and Arabic about nineteen times in Ibn Bahlūl’s Syriac-Arabic Lexicon (in Syriac as Bar Ḥātem). Ibn Ḥātim was a source for Ibn Bahlūl on several ancient Greek as well as Syriac words.3 The medieval geographers tell us that Sinn, near the confluence of the Lower Zab and the Tigris, was a primarily Christian town in this period.4 Thus he must have been like Ibn Bahlūl: an educated member of the Church of the East bilingual in Arabic and Aramaic.

1 The astrologer al-Ḫayyāṭ was a student of Māšā’allah, who died circa 815.
2 GAS VI.231.
3 Duval 1901: 3.xv. Duval adds, “I have no idea who this Syrian was” (Quis fuerit hic Syrus nescimus). Now we know from the Kitāb ad-Dalā’il that Yahyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī, also known as Bar Ḥātem, was a bilingual East-Syrian scholar who wrote a work known as a Fīrīst. Presumably this otherwise unknown book was the source of the words cited as from him by Ibn Bahlūl in his Lexicon as well as the Ḥarrānian calendar he provides in chapter forty of his Kitāb ad-Dalā’il.
4 Le Strange 1895: 35; 1905: 91. See also Fiey 1968: 93–97.
The identification, however, of this Yahyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī with the Abū ʿAlī who wrote the passage on the Mandaeans cannot be correct. Although there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that an East-Syrian secretary could have worked for some female members of the family of the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, as the author of the reported account says that he himself did, this description of the Mandaeans bears several signs of having been written by a Muslim who did not speak any dialect of Aramaic. He begins by stressing that the status of the Ṣābians of these villages as *ḏimmī* is sound (*ḏimmatuḥum ṣaḥīḥa*), not something that one would expect a Christian to judge or to wish for on behalf of these non-Christians. Abū ʿAlī also compares the belts of the Mandaeans to those of the Christians as a removed observer. He does not say “their belts resemble our belts,” for example. He even feels the need to report the Mandaeans’ word for their belt, although this is an ordinary Aramaic word, as Ibn Bahlūl’s Syriac-Arabic Lexicon shows.\(^5\) An author like as-Sinnī, already fluent in Aramaic, would not have been likely to report an ordinary word for a common item of clothing as if it were a remarkable fact, nor would he have been likely to be impressed by the Mandaeans’ Aramaic speech and letters. Finally, the preceding chapter on the Ḥarrānian calendar, which we can connect definitely with Yahyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī’s *Fihrist*, is entirely schematic, just a list of months along with the religious festivals that take place in them. It is the sort of thing that one might expect to derive from a work named *Fihrist* (meaning “catalog” or “register”) whereas the subsequent chapter on the Mandaean Ṣābians of the Marshes has a different character, being a lengthy retrospective anecdote enlivened by a spirit of curiosity. The two chapters of Ibn Bahlūl’s book must have different sources.

We should expect, therefore, that this Abū ʿAlī was a Muslim secretary, not a Christian. He was, however, also well-known enough that Ibn Bahlūl would expect his readers to recognize him by his *kunya* Abū ʿAlī alone rather than by a fuller name. If he was someone who was formerly a minor secretary in the house of the caliph, as implied by the introduction to the passage (“in the days of my service as secretary to Sāra ...”), then he probably wrote the passage later in life from a higher rank. There is just one well-known secretary named Abū ʿAlī from the early tenth century that fits this description: the famous vizier Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad ibn Muqla (885/6–20 July 940), who lived in the midst of the decline of the caliphs’ power during a period of intense court intrigue in which he and many other secretaries were involved.\(^6\) As the more illustrious

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5 Duval 1901: 1.637.