IBN RUŠD AND THE ALMOHAD CONTEXT

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The relationship between philosophy and political power has always been a matter of discussion. In recent times, scholars have focused on the interaction between Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Rušd (520/1126–595/1198), known in the West as Averroes, and the Almohad dynasty which he served, and they have discussed whether and how he contributed to their doctrine, and reciprocally. In the following lines, I shall examine Ibn Rušd’s activity within the Almohad context, the basic principles of Almohadism and those of Ibn Rušd’s philosophy in an attempt to explain some features of their relationship.

Personal or Institutional Connections

The Almohad chronicler Ibn Ṣaḥib aṣ-Ṣalāt (d. 594/1198) reports that Ibn Rušd accompanied the caliph Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184) on his failed campaign against the fortress of Wabda/Huete in 567/1172.¹ The chronicler points out that the caliph had around him some scholars called the ṭalabaṭ al-ḥaḍar, “the court scholars,” and that he conducted a study session with them while his troops were fighting to take the fortress. He seems to blame his absence from combat caused by this session for the defeat of the Muslims.

The ṭalaba held one of the highest ranks within the Almohad hierarchy, and they were divided into two classes, ṭalabaṭ al-muwahḥidīn, “the divine unity scholars,” and ṭalabaṭ al-ḥaḍar. They were not based on tribal affiliation, but on religious scholarship. The ṭalabaṭ al-ḥaḍar class

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accompanied the caliph and assisted him with reading and interpreting the Koran and the works of the mahdi Ibn Tūmart. Thus, they were the institutional preservers of the Almohad doctrine.

Ibn Ruṣd was, no doubt, a member of the caliph’s inner circle, which does not mean that he was one of the ṭalaba. The Almohads had conquered Cordova in 1149, and as early as 548/1153 he must have met the Almohad sultan ‘Abd al-Mu’min (r. 1130–1163) in Marrakech. In his Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s book On the Heavens, when he offers evidence for the spherical shape of the earth, Ibn Ruṣd says:

The star Canopus (Suhayl) is not seen in this our land, i.e., the Peninsula of al-Andalus, but it is said that it is seen from the mountain of Canopus (Fuengirola). It is seen in the land of the Berbers, beyond the sea that stretches between us and them, called the Strait. When in Marrakech in the year 548, I saw a star, which is not seen from our country, on Mount Daran, it was said to be Canopus.

In his monograph on Ibn Ruṣd, the Moroccan philosopher Muḥammad ‘Abīd al-Ǧābīrī (d. 2010) follows al-‘Abbās ibn Ibrāhīm al-Marrākušī, author of a biographical repertory, stating that Ibn Ruṣd went to help the sultan ‘Abd al-Mu’min “perhaps to organize the schools that the latter had founded in Marrakesh.” But al-‘Abbās al-Marrākušī (d. 1959) is a modern source, and the information itself is conjectural.

Ibn Ruṣd had not written his first philosophical works at that time. As for his Middle and Long Commentaries on Aristotle, the historian ‘Abd al-Wāḥīd al-Marrākušī reports that the caliph Abū Ya’qūb Yūsuf had complained to Abū Bakr ibn Ṭūfayl about the difficulty of understanding Aristotle and expressed the desire that someone would paraphrase his works. Ibn Ṭūfayl was too old, too busy, he complained, and passed the order on to Ibn Ruṣd, who explicitly says: “And so it came to pass...”

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3 Ahmad al-Maqṣari (d. 1038/1632) corroborates the fact in Naḥṣ at-tīb min ǧūsn al-Andalus ar-ratīb. Edited by I. ‘Abbās, vol. 1 (Beirut, 1988): 164.
5 Ibn Ruṣd, Sīrā wa-fikr (Beirut, 1998; 2nd ed. 2001).