This contribution highlights aspects of scholarly activity in 10th/16th-century Zaydi Yemen after the arrival of the Ottomans. My focus is on Yaḥyā Ibn Ḥumayd al-Miqrāʾī (d. 990/1582), a close disciple and travel companion of the Zaydi Imām Šaraf al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Šams al-Dīn (d. 965/1557). The analysis of manuscripts of works by Ibn Ḥumayd, some of them combined in a multitext manuscript from the author’s personal library, sheds light on the methods of transmission of knowledge and the locales of scholarly life. Zaydi scholarship in Yemen is closely related to tribal culture and politics, and thus Islamic learning and the transmission of knowledge were not limited to major towns and administrative centers; rather, scholarship extended to smaller and more remote sites. Among these were “scholarly villages”, termed hiǧar (sg. hiǧra), the inhabitants of which were protected by tribes. The institution of hiǧra ensured that Zaydi doctrine could be sustained and spread, even during times of military threat and occupation. Ibn Ḥumayd, for example, spent many years in Wādī al-Sirr, a rural area in the vicinity of Ṣanʿāʾ, and his reports on the scholarly life there have come down to us. This contribution demonstrates that there remain significant periods of Yemeni history and religious culture preserved in manuscripts that have yet to be explored, and it takes a step toward illuminating this vibrant scholastic world.
The Reign of Imām Šaraf al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Šams al-Dīn

Šaraf al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Šams al-Dīn (b. 877/1473, d. 965/1557) was the grandson of the imām and influential scholar Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1436). In 912/1506, Yaḥyā b. Šams al-Dīn proclaimed himself imām of the Zaydīs in the city of Zafīr Haǧga and adapted the title al-Mutawakkil ‘alā llāh. The claim to the imamate (daʿwā) of Šaraf al-Dīn coincided with the beginning of a turbulent era in Yemeni history. While Zaydī rule always depended on finding a balance between tribal interests, the territory in the northern highlands and central plateaus of Yemen was not politically united in this period. It was threatened on several fronts. The Šāfiʿī Ṭāhirī dynasty controlled lower Yemen and the Tihāma. The Portuguese success in the Red Sea quickly roused the interest of the Egyptian Mamluks in Southern Arabia, who succeeded in capturing Zabīd and Hudayda, and even plundered Ṣanʿāʾ in 1517 CE. The fall of the Mamluk Empire that same year, after the Ottoman triumph in Cairo, helped Šaraf al-Dīn to expand his sphere of influence and to stabilize his power in the region, until he faced the Turkish armies arriving in Yemen in 1538–1539. From this point on, confronting the Ottoman invasion was the main political task for the Zaydis. In the following years, Ottoman troops occupied some of the major towns in the highlands, but they could not extend their power into the inaccessible mountainous areas. Šaraf al-Dīn was able to maintain some influence despite the invasion of Ottoman forces.
