AL-HAMDĀNĪ AS A SCHOLAR

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Sā‘id b. Sā‘id al-Qurtubi, a pupil of Ibn Hazm and qādī of Toledo, says in his Tabaqāt al-umam, written in 460/1068 about the ilm al-falsafa: wa-lā a’lamu ahadan min samāmi l-arabī shuhra bi-hī ilā Abā Yūsufa Ya’qūb bna Ishāqa l-Kindiyya wa-Abā Muḥammadīn l-Hasana l-Hamdānī2.

As D. M. Dunlop remarked in 19573, it had hitherto been difficult to see al-Hamdānī as a philosopher linked with al-Kindī, the faylasūf al-‘arab, however wellknown al-Hamdānī was as a historian and a geographer on the basis of his famous works al-Iklīl and Ṣifat ǧazīrat al-‘arab.

What is a faylasūf? Let me try a very short definition: an Arab philosopher is a scholar who, in the Greek tradition, studies man’s and the world’s place in the universe. With this definition, and our increased knowledge of al-Hamdānī’s works, I think we can understand and confirm the verdict of Sā‘id.

As a philosopher al-Hamdānī is interested, in his book on gold and silver, K. al-Ǧawharatayn al-atīqatayn, in the generation and corruption of matter, in the transmutation of one element into another and in the influence of the heavenly bodies upon the earth. Thus far he is a follower of the Greek philosophers, and he quotes works of Aristotle concerning the generation of heat. But in his astronomical work Sarā‘ir al-ḥikma he

3 D. M. Dunlop, Sources of gold and silver in Islam according to al-Hamdānī, Studia Islamica 8/1957.29-49, p. 33.

Arabica, Tome XXXI, Fascicule 3
opposes Aristotle, maintaining that each part of the celestial sphere is connected with a corresponding part of the earth.

The celestial sphere is divided according to the signs of the Zodiac, and this division also governs that of the seasons. In the K. al-Ğawhরatayn al-Hamdānī gives a survey of the seasons with the qualities, elements and cardinal humours belonging to each season, and he also tells us which substances are related to which planet or sign of the Zodiac: lead, e.g., belongs to Saturn of the planets and to Capricorn of the signs of the Zodiac. The influence of the planets on their substances varies according to their positions and the season of the year.

The influence occurs according to similarity: fire can influence only what already contains fire. We find a similar remark in a work of Aristotle’s.

The idea that you can set fire only to objects which already contains fire calls to mind al-Nazzām’s teaching on al-zuhûr and al-kumûn. Al-Nazzām and his disciples taught that fire could not spring up from the fire-stone if it were not already contained in it.

Otherwise al-Hamdānī is at variance with al-Nazzām’s theories according to which generation and corruption are only seeming since everything either comes out (zuhûr) of its latency or again becomes latent (kumûn). Furthermore, al-Nazzām denied the existence of accidental properties whereas al-Hamdānī explicitly speaks about the accidental dryness of silver slag.

Thus we have seen that al-Hamdānī was well acquainted with Aristotle’s views. But, as we shall see in the following, Aristotle is not the only Greek philosopher known to al-Hamdānī. When al-Hamdānī compares the earth as round and globular and situated in the middle of the likewise round and globular sphere with the center in the circle, he is repeating a comparison already to be found in a quotation by Archimedes from Aristarchos (I owe this information to the late Prof. Willy Hartner, Frankfort).

Also in his historical work, al-Iklīl, ancient conceptions of the world as being eternal or created are said to be discussed.

Some influence from the theory of atoms seems to be found in expressions such as iğtimā’ (having a three-dimensional body, properly signifying the fusion of atoms into a body) and the repeated use of the word âğzā’. Greek influence is shown also in the terminology of measures and coins.

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