A CONTRIBUTION TO A TEXTUAL PROBLEM:

IBN SULAYM AL-ASWĀNĪ'S

KITĀB AKHBĀR AL-NŪBA WA-L-MAQURRA
WA-L-BEJA WA-L-NĪL

PAR

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This paper is an attempt to throw light on the very illustrious Fatimid envoy, known as Ibn Sulaym al-Aswānī, and his lost work. The main task is to glean the text from the different sources that have quoted him, isolate it, and translate it.

Nothing is known of Ibn Sulaym apart from what he himself has mentioned somewhere in his lost work. This is quoted by Maqrīzī in his unpublished M.S., al-Muqaffā. It tells that he was sent by the Fatimid general Jawhar, to preach Islam and to demand the Baqt arrears. As regards the first task he relates that he took part in a debate with the King and the intelligentsia of the court of Maqurra that ended with a message from the King to Jawhar encouraging him to accept Christianity. As for the second aim nothing has reached us. He also tells that he presented his book, entitled Kitāb Akhbār al-Nūba wa-l-Maqurra wa ‘Alīwa wa-l-Beja wa-l-Nīl wa man Sūllayih wa Qaruba minhu min Ghayrihim, to the second Fatimid caliph, al-‘Azīz.

In the light of this information one may give a general frame for the time of Ibn Sulaym’s visit and the writing of his work. Jawhar arrived in Egypt in 358/968 and continued as a representative of his master, al-Mu‘īz, until 362/973 when the latter arrived. Between these dates Ibn Sulaym must, at least, have started his visit to Nubia. It is difficult to determine whether he came back during the reign of Jawhar or after the arrival of al-Mu‘īz in Egypt. The fact that Ibn Sulaym had raised a banner with the name of al-Mu‘īz when he went out of Dongola to conduct the ‘īd prayers is taken by Troupeau as evidence of his stay in Nubia after the arrival of


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al-Mu'iz in Egypt. The difficulty in believing this assumption is that banners usually bore the name of the Caliph and not the general, especially in matters of spiritual guidance. So it seems we have nothing that may help determine the date of the end of Ibn Sulaym's visit. However, without much speculation one may say that during the five year period between the arrival of Jawhar and that of al-Mu'iz Ibn Sulaym began his tour. If Ibn Sulaym had started early in the reign of Jawhar he would have come back during the same reign; two years are more than enough for such a tour, to say the least.

Ibn Sulaym had presented his book to the second Fatimid Caliph in Egypt, al-'Aziz (365/975-386/996). Again there is nothing that may help in fixing a definite date for the presentation of this work or the date of its writing. Although the declared aim of Ibn Sulaym's visit were the two mentioned above, the fact that the mission resulted in a book gives the impression that the visit was a fact-finding one. This may have been the most important and undeclared aim of the Fatimids. Moreover, it was by no means possible that Fatimid policy—unlike those before and after it—would have been formulated without a thorough knowledge of their southern neighbours acquired from a reliable source like the work of Ibn Sulaym. It is only in this respect that the work of Ibn Sulaym attained its importance for its contemporaries. That is to say that his book was compiled mainly for policy makers. This may explain the puzzling disappearance of Ibn Sulaym's book until the time of al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1445). Being for policy makers, it was not much in circulation and so few copies of it were available. Even during its day no reference was made to it. If one is to draw a parallel we have the works of al-Muhallabī and al-Musabbaiḥī, who both wrote, like Ibn Sulaym, in the Fatimid period, and their works were lost.

The difference is that both are quoted by authors earlier than the time of al-Maqrizi³.

³ The frequency with which works were lost during the Fatimid period may have two causes. The first is the Shi'ites' belief that their Imam encircles earthly as well as heavenly knowledge. It follows that books were written exclusively for him and those whom he authorized to read them. Thus the number of copies was limited. The second may be sought in their Sunni foes persistent policy of destroying the Shi'ites works. See Marwa, H., al-Nazā'at al-Mādīyya fi l-falsafa l-İslāmiyya l-İrābiyya, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1980), vol. 1, p. 493. Thanks to Dr. Beshir who has drawn my attention to such an explanation.