Book Reviews


The present book is a new edition with a short introduction (pp.1-15) and fully annotated English translation along with Arabic text of Abū ‘Ali Maṃṣūr al-‘Azīzī al-Jawdhari’s biography of Al-Ustādh Jawdhar (d. 973), the Sirāt al-Ustādh Jawdhar.

The Ismā‘īli Fatimids State was established in 909 in North Africa and flourished mostly in Syria, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and Hijaz. The founder and first caliph of the Fatimids was, al-Mahdī Abū Muḥammad ‘Ubayd Allah al-Mahdī bi-Allāh (873–934). The Fatimid was, in fact a movement against the Abbasids (750–1258) organised through their dā‘īs. In Egypt, Fatimid Ismā‘īli Caliphate was established in 969 and remained in power till 1171. They founded al-Qāhirah (Cairo), built Jāmi‘a al-Azhar in 970 and Dār al-‘Ilm in 1005 and patronised educational and research activities, besides giving economic prosperity to Egypt.

Jawdhar started his career as a head servant of one of the royal palaces and after the death of al-Mahdī, the succeeded caliph Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad al-Qā‘īm bi Amr Allah (d. 946) showed his full confidence on the al-Ustādh Jawdhar and he used to share his personal affairs with him. Again, under Al-Maṃṣūr bi-Allāh (d. 953), Jawdhar assumed greater eminence and he was the third most important person of the Fatimid dynasty after the caliph and the heir apparent. (pp. 3–4). Jawdhar was well informed about the confidential
matters, including the disputes within the royal family. Some of them have been cited in the book, perhaps for the first time. He was a trusted courtier of the first four Fatimid caliphs who ruled in North Africa from 910 to 973 and in recognition of his services, which he done for the dynasty, the fourth Fatimid Caliph Abū Tamim Ma'ad al-Mu'iz al-Dīn li Allah (932–975) himself led his funeral prayer.

The compiler-cum-author of this work, Abū ‘Alī Mansūr al-‘Azīzī al-Jawdharī was appointed as a private secretary of Jawdhar in 961 and he treated him on the best grounds as he was being treated by the Fatimids. Besides holding other important official posts, Abū ‘Alī Mansūr al-Jawdharī also served as director of endowments and market inspector. As ‘Alī Mansūr remained in the service of al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar more than twelve years, he had easy access to archival material held by him, including letters he had received from the caliphs and was also privy to secrets that al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar confided to him. After Al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar’s death in 973 at Barqa, Caliph Ma'ad al-Mu'iz al-Dīn li Allah appointed ‘Alī Mansūr to succeed him. The author had a great respect, regards for his mentor, and wished to commemorate his services. Keeping this in his mind, ‘Alī Mansūr compiled the Sirat al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar. The book presents not only a biographical sketch of one of the most prominent statesmen of the early Fatimid period, al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar but more importantly, it contains oral statements, correspondence and other archives, mostly from the reign of al-Mu'izz from the period spanning over sixty years of Fatimid rule in North Africa. (p. 11).

The Sirat al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar was written during the time of al-Mu'izz’s successor, Abū Mansūr Nīzar al-‘Azīz bi-Allah (r. 975–996). The original Arabic text is divided into two parts. The first part contains, an incomplete account of the life and career of al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar, from his entering the service of the Fatimids under the first Caliph al-Mahdī until his appointment at the new Fatimid capital, al-Mansūriyyah, and to his death in 973. Documents in the first part include sermons of the Fatimid caliphs and their letters to al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar on different subjects both personal and political. The second part is largely a documentary collection of eighty-six letters, directives, recorded conversations, and letters of the Fatimid caliphs addressed to al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar and their replies.

The dā‘īs were least interested in recording or writing anything about the dynasty, due to its religio-political thought, so, it was very rare to find authentic source about the Fatimids. The Sirat al-Ust通知书 Jawdhar is one of the most important and reliable primary sources available on the Fatimids. The policies of al-Mu'izz, including those pertaining to theological and juristic issues are amply documented in this book. [Farhad Daftary, A Short History Of
Hamid Haji consulted three Arabic manuscripts for editing and did its first-ever translation in English. The first was a manuscript from the collection of the Ismaili Society, Bombay (now Mumbai) which was copied in the British India (1858–1947) in the late nineteenth century. The other two came from Fyzee and Zahid ‘Ali Collections, now part of the library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London (1977). (pp. 12–14). Haji has also given a chronology of important events that gave rise to the Fatimid State and maps of North Africa and Sicily in the tenth century and genealogical tables of the Fatimids of Ifriqiya and the Kalbids of Sicily. Footnotes with detailed references have also been given to make the work more useful for the readers and remove lacunas left in some previous studies. A bibliography (pp. 167–176) and indexes both of English and Arabic texts are also given at the end of the book. The editing and translation is done in such a way that both academicians and students working on the Fatimids can be benefited alike.

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