

## Book Reviews

Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn. *The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu‘izz and His Era*. Translated with annotations by Shainool Jiwa. London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013. Pp. xii+291. ISBN 9781780765280. Hardbound. Price: Not listed.

The book under review is a translated edition of the seventh volume of *‘Uyūn al-Akhhār wa Funūn al-Āthār*, one of the very important sources on Fatimid history written by Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn (d. 1468) and translated by Shainool Jiwa. The translated text covers the period of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu‘izz li Dīn Allāh and is preceded by a lengthy and very informative introduction by the translator supported by well-researched and extensive annotations and footnotes from primary as well as secondary sources. Jiwa has made an effort to provide the necessary background information about the Fatimid rule and examined the Fatimid concept of imamate and *da‘wah* to explore the conceptual framework under which the book was written. In addition, she also applied the technique of historical criticism by providing a historiographical introduction of Idrīs followed by a comparison of him with a contemporary historian al-Maqrīzī. Jiwa also analysed important features of the reign of al-Mu‘izz along with briefly exploring the situation of neighbouring contemporary powers like Umayyads and Byzantines. The translator has also intelligently defined the situation of multi-religious and multi-creed societies living under the Fatimid rule and discussed their relations with the Fatimids. She likewise informs the readers about Fatimid’s treatment of the various Ismā‘īlī groups who were leading their own separate *da‘wah*.

The translated text originally written by Idrīs follows the common medieval Muslim style of writing. Along with narrating the incidents of the reign of caliph al-Mu‘izz, he also inculcated Fatimid political thought in his writings. The translator has also emphasised upon this particular approach of Idrīs and found that the book was written largely under the influence of the Fatimid framework. The translator thus explored the Fatimid concept of the Imām, the need for an Imām for every age and transfer of divine guidance

through Imāms. According to Jiwa, universalism was the main feature of the “religio-political vision of the Fatimids” (p. 4) which was eventually responsible for combining the religious and temporal authority in the person of Fatimid caliph Imām.

Jiwa further argued that the Fatimid caliphs “invested considerable effort in asserting their own legitimacy and sovereignty” (p. 6) in contrast to the Sunni Islam where *‘ulamā’* became the heirs of religious authority. In order to retain this religious authority, the institution of *da‘wah* was established by Fatimids and literature was produced. Al-Qāḍī ‘l-Nu‘mān’s writings in this regard were the most notable, who believed Imām to be “vested with the authority to interpret, provide worldly and spiritual guidance, and impart knowledge on the manifest and hidden realities of existence” (p. 7). The translator believes that al-Nu‘mān’s works portrayed Fatimids particularly al-Mu‘izz as extending his law and justice to all his subjects irrespective of their creed or religion which makes the imamate a universal and all-inclusive phenomenon.

The translated text begins with the discussion on the concept of imamate followed by an emphatic description of the virtues, merits, and inherited knowledge of caliph al-Mu‘izz. The translation includes a lengthy sermon delivered by al-Mu‘izz at his accession to power further stressing the role and stature of a caliph Imām. Idrīs has explicitly stated the privileged spiritual position of the Imām mainly visible from his character and thoughts. Thus he highlighted many of the distinguished qualities of caliph al-Mu‘izz; one of which for instance was patience and the quest for knowledge. Jiwa while offering her view on this part of the translation also seems to agree that Idrīs has portrayed al-Mu‘izz as the rightly guided Imām and has traced out the essential features of imamate in al-Mu‘izz for establishing his legitimacy. In addition, Jiwa argued that Idrīs has narrated the events of al-Mu‘izz’s reign in a way which further enhances “al-Mu‘izz’s status as inheritor of Divine wisdom” (p. 38).

The text continues with a description of significant events of the period of caliph al-Mu‘izz. The caliph was reported to go on a successful campaign in the Awras Mountains after his accession. Idrīs has recorded a detailed account of al-Mu‘izz’s naval encounter with the Umayyads and the Byzantines. It has also enlisted a few of the revolts that were curbed by al-Mu‘izz. There is also a detailed discussion on the conquest of Egypt and issuance of guarantee of safety to its people, along with an account of founding of Cairo. Idrīs relates that finally the caliph himself decided to migrate to Egypt and provides the detailed description of the whole episode. Jiwa while analysing the main features of the reign of al-Mu‘izz, concluded that al-Mu‘izz’s reign was

significant particularly because of the large conquests he made in North Africa specially in Egypt. She additionally related al-Mu'izz's success with his inclusive and conciliatory policy towards the outside forces like Umayyads, a few other Muslim states, the Byzantine Empire and the various religious sects of his own empire. Jiwa felt that the most significant characteristic of al-Mu'izz's reign was his tolerance and conciliatory policy towards the people of other religions and creeds particularly towards Sunnis living in different parts of North Africa and Egypt. Jiwa further added that al-Mu'izz also tried to conciliate different sections of Ismā'īlī *da'wah*. As a consequence of his efforts, many Ismā'īlīs of Iran and central Asia accepted Fatimid rule. Yet, along with following a conciliatory policy, Jiwa observed that al-Mu'izz equally paid attention to the promotion of Fatimid *da'wah* and learning.

Apart from conquests, Idrīs has narrated certain other significant events occurred during the caliphate of al-Mu'izz. He, for instance devoted a portion of his work on explaining the virtues and works of al-Qāḍī 'I-Nu'mān and his bond with the caliph. Idrīs also threw light on the system of *da'wah*, specially narrated a few accounts of the *da'wah* in Sindh. He similarly also tried to explore the public image of al-Mu'izz by narrating a few incidents of his interaction with the common people specially on the occasions of 'Īd or certain other festivities. The text is also followed by occasional poetry. Another important incident recorded by Idrīs was nomination of 'Abd Allāh and after his death al-'Azīz bi Allāh as heir apparent. The volume ends with the description of the death and burial of caliph al-Mu'izz.

The translation done by Jiwa primarily relies on Ya'lāwī's edition published in 1985. A few references from Fakhūrī and Kamāl's edition, published in 2007 were also given in the footnotes. The translation is followed by extensive notes either explaining certain terminologies or giving cross references or at times referring to differences in different editions of *'Uyūn*. The references are mainly given from *'Uyūn* and a few other primary sources on the Fatimid history particularly al-Maqrīzī along with providing certain notes from the secondary sources.

Jiwa has not only translated *'Uyūn* but also tried for herself and for the reader to comprehend the proper background in which the book was written. Thus apart from analysing the contemporary political and social conditions, she also provided a historiographical comparison of Idrīs with al-Maqrīzī, another eminent historian on Fatimids for a better understanding of the frameworks in which Fatimid history was written. This discussion has briefly analysed the sociocultural background of both the historians and the ways in which it determined their interests. Al-Maqrīzī was a Shāfī'ī jurist but traced his genealogy to Fatimids. Jiwa believed that al-Maqrīzī's interest in Fatimid

history developed first, due to genealogy and second, from his conviction in the significance of Fatimid rule in Egypt. Thus majority of the historical writings of al-Maqrīzī recorded the achievements of Fatimids in Egypt. The work of al-Maqrīzī, moreover, contained the quality of surpassing the sectarian approach of looking at history from either a Shī'ī or Sunni perspective. He instead looked at the Fatimid history from a sociological view.

On the contrary, Idrīs was *al-dā'ī 'l-muṭlaq* of Ṭayyibī Fatimid *da'wah* in Yemen. Thus it was natural for him to view history from a particular Fatimid framework. In the words of Jiwa,

For Idrīs, the establishment of the Fatimid state was not simply the coming to power of a particular dynasty, as it may have been for other medieval historians such as al-Maqrīzī. Rather it was a preordained, prophesied and providential manifestation of the *da'wat al-ḥaqq*, "the true mission." (p. 33)

The translator further believes that Idrīs was able to access the Fatimid sources extensively and was able to provide "an insider's perspective on the key issues and developments."

The book is a useful source specially for researchers working on Fatimid history. The translator of the book herself arose the question of the value of Idrīs' work along with its shortcomings and found the answer in a mature historian's understanding of believing the medieval historical text not to be tested on modern "benchmarks of scientific objectivity and empiricism" (p. 44). She thus highlighted the significance of historical works of medieval historians like Idrīs and al-Maqrīzī by arguing that "their writings provide an informative reading of the key concerns that exercised the author and the significant issues of the times to which they were responding" (ibid.).

**Rafia Riaz**

