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LABOR LIMAE
Atti in onore di Carmela Baffioni

Prefazione di
Wilfrid Madelung

A cura di
Antonella Straface - Carlo De Angelo - Andrea Manzo
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INDICE

**Historica – Philosophica - Scientifica**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreword (W. Madelung)</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentazione (A. Straface)</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pubblicazioni di Carmela Baffioni (a cura di A. Straface)</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARFÉ P., Le dimore delle stelle nel Prologus super Artem geomantiae di Ugo di Santalla</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIANCHI L., Maometto II nel Dictionnaire historique et critique di Pierre Bayle</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUTTERWORTH C. E., Alfarabi’s Political Teaching: Theoretical Premises and Practical Consequences</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARPENTIERI L., Antecedenti greci nell’atomismo di Abû Bakr al-Râzî</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARUSI P., Al-Tugrâ’î vs. Ibn Sinâ: la risposta di un alchimista allo sciant artifices</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORTESE D., Upper Egypt: a ‘Shia’ powerhouse in the Fatimid period?</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAFTARY F., The Early Nizârî Ismaîlis and their Spiritual Resurrection</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAIBER H., Ambiguity (tashkîf) of being in Mullâ Ŝadrâ. A Common Philosophical Problem between Córdoba and Isfahân</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’ANCONA C., “Porfirio” cita “Aristotele”, al-Kindî, la pseudo-Teologia e il De Caelo</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE CALLATAÝ G., From Ibn Masarra to Ibn ‘Arabi: references, shibboleths and other subtle allusions to the Rasâ’il Ikhwân al-Ṣafâ’ in the literature of al-Andalus</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE SMET D., La Risâla al-Jâmi’a attribuée aux Ikhwân al-Ṣafâ’ : un précurseur de l’ismaélisme ṯâyyîbîte?</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL-BIZRI N., Defining Place with or against Aristotle: The case of the Brethren of Purity and Alhazen</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAMDANI A. - SOUFAN A., The Imân Speaks about His Shi’a in an Epistle of the Rasâ’il Ikhwân al-Ṣafâ’</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUGONNARD-ROCHE H., L’Épître de Sévère Sebokht à Aitilaha sur le Peri Hermeneias. A propos des propositions métathétiques et privatives, et de l’existence du possible</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LORCA A.M., Crítica y renovación en tres pensadores árabes contemporáneos</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARÓTH M., An Unknown Source of al-Khwârizmî’s Kitâb sūrat al-ard</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARTINI BONADEO C., A reference to al-Fârâbî’s Kitâb al-hurûf in Averroes’ critique of Avicenna (Tahâfut al-Tahâfut, 371,5-372,12 Bouyges)</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ROSELLI A., L’Ippocrate di Apollonio di Cizio 453
SANNINO A., Oro te, o spiritus qui lates in illo corpore: Guglielmo d’Alvernia e il Liber de quattuor confectionibus 475
SCARCIA AMORETTI B., La questione della genealogia fatimidica nell’opera del nassaba ibn ‘Inaba (m 1424): una notarella 495
SCOTTI M., Tra apologia e polemica: il dibattito teologico-filosofico nel Mūtaṣṣar al-‘aṣṣil di ‘Alī ibn Muhammad ibn al-Walīd (m. 612/1215) 507
STRAFACE A., Profeti e profezie in contesto ismailita: la storia “misteriosa” di ‘Īsā ibn Maryam 527
ZONTA M., Shakhṣ “person, individual” in Arabic logic. A comparative history of the term and its meanings found in other languages of culture in the Near, Middle and Far East 549
Upper Egypt:
a “Shia” powerhouse in the Fatimid period?*

Delia CORTESE

When arriving in Aswan, the visitor’s attention cannot help being captured by the sighting of the most enchanting landmark to adorn the western bank of the Nile. At the top of a hill, a solemn yet simple domed mausoleum towers over the hustle and bustle of life on the river below. The landmark is the resting place of His Highness Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (d. 1957), the 48th Ismaili Imam. Opposite to the mausoleum, on the east side of the Nile, another burial site reminds the visitor of the age-long association of Egypt with Ismaili history: the so-called “Fatimid cemetery”, disfigured by a century-long toxic combination of misguided archaeological practices and adventurous urban planning. That the Ismaili Imam chose Aswan as the place where to return to “the land of his fathers,” opposite the Fatimid necropolis - thus reinforcing through architecture - a sense of continuity between past and recent Ismaili history in Egypt is -at first sight- somewhat intriguing. What role did Upper Egypt play in Ismaili history that was so significant as to merit its choice as the Imam’s resting place? Why is it that we find in Aswan -of all places- a necropolis that is the only landmark in the whole of Egypt that today formally features the term “Fatimid” in its nomenclature?

It is generally accepted that before, during and after the Fatimid rule in Egypt, the people in that country were and continued to remain pre-

* Parts of this paper were presented at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association of America, held in New Orleans in October 2013, within a panel kindly sponsored by The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. I wish to thank Dr Horváth Máté, Budapest University, for his suggestions and comments. I am solely responsible for any shortcomings that might be featured in this paper.

1 As stated in the epitaph on his tomb inside the mausoleum.
dominantly Sunni and that the Fatimids never actively or forcefully pursued a policy of mass conversion to Ismailism. Consequently, the impact of Shiism on Egypt’s religious, cultural and social life has been assumed -with two notable exceptions- to have been negligible and therefore not worthy of in-depth investigation. Yaacov Lev was the first to challenge this assumption commenting on the Ismaili tenor and character of religious life in Fatimid Egypt and to draw our attention to aspects of Shiism activism in the Fatimid capital. More recently Devin J. Stewart has provided a nuanced picture of the Shiism presence in Egypt, by combining linguistic and historical evidence, which brings him to conclude that the extent of Shiism influence in medieval Egypt has been underestimated.2 The limited attention paid so far to Shiism in Fatimid Egypt is partly due to a predominantly Cairo-centred scholarly approach to the study of Fatimid history.3 If we consider instead tackling the history of this period as a “history of Egypt under the Fatimids” and thus looking at the “provinces” rather than the centre of government, one unlocks a complex picture in which “Shiism” -used broadly here to cover a spectrum of entities ranging from varied forms of ‘Alid affiliations to Ismaili adherences- emerges as having played a significant part in shaping the life of Egypt and the destiny of the dynasty. The seemingly limited impact that Shiism has had on past and present Egypt as a whole, renders the information given on Upper Egypt by the Medieval historian Ja’far b. Tha’lab al-Udfuw† (d. 748/1347), particularly relevant for this paper. He states that when Aswan was under the Fatimids, Shia prevailed among its people and that Shiism had


been there from a long time before. He claims that in his native town, Edfu, Shia was widespread and he goes as far as detailing that people were either Ismailis or Imamis. In Esna, he adds, Shiism and *rafid* were extensively present. The town of Afsun was renowned for its Shi'i population and many Shiis were in Armant too. Eventually - he states - Shiism declined in all these centres. But even so, since Shiism made no significant inroads elsewhere in Egypt, the question remains: what made Fatimid Upper Egypt, of all places, become fertile ground for Shiism to the point of allegedly becoming -all be it briefly- the dominant Muslim denomination in Aswan?

The earliest association of Upper Egypt with ‘Alid families goes back to the time of the conquests. The town of Qift, near Qus, had been donated as land grant to ‘Alids since the caliphate of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. Tomb stones from the Fatimid cemetery in Aswan, the earliest dating from middle of the 3rd Islamic century, point to the presence of ‘Alids in Aswan. Epigraphic evidence also shows that a relatively growing number of ‘Alids were buried in Aswan between the 4th and 6th Islamic centuries. This is explained by the fact that over time many of the Arab tribes that came to settle in Upper Egypt had ‘Alid ancestry. There is evidence that in a number of instances the Fatimids pursued a deliberate policy of “Alidisation” of the region by displacing tribes that had inhabited the area long before their arrival, to replace them with ‘Alid clans of the Quraysh. The measure was intended to secure the Fatimids’ control over Aswan and the towns along the upper Nile valley, as they gained increasing commercial and administrative strategic importance for the life of the regime. In addition to the region being rich with gold and precious stones mines, these centres became entrepôts for the traffic of trade coming into Egypt from the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen in particular), India and East Africa.

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7 See Taqî al-Dîn Ahmad al-Maqrizî, *Al-bayân wa’l-i’rab ‘amnâ bi-ard Miṣr min al-‘arab*, al-Maktaba al-Azhariya li’l-Turâth, al-Qâhira 2006, pp. 32, 34, 40, 121-122. About descendants from tribes of Ja’farite ascent whose resettlement in Egypt was favoured by the Fatimids that are still extant today in Manfalut, Samalut, Qus and Aswan, see in addition p. 159.
Ultimately, securing the allegiance of tribes with whom the Fatimids claimed to share their lineage was part of a broader anti-Abbasid strategy that had seen the Fatimids favouring Hasanid and Husaynids tribes since the days of al-Mahdi in North Africa. It is perhaps because of the strong ‘Alid association with the region that, on the basis of local legends, the belief grew that illustrious descendants of the Prophet Muhammad such as al-Hasan, al-Hasayn, Sayyida Nafisa and the Shii Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin were buried in Aswan’s necropolis.

Our contemporary Egyptian scholar Mahmūd al-Huwayrī in his history of Medieval Aswan plays down the presence of Shiism in the town. He disputes al-Udfuwī’s assertion on the basis of lack of substantial evidence from the town’s burial site of an extensive number of Shī tribes having inhabited the area before and during the Fatimid period. Instead, he argues, that what al-Udfuwī might have meant by tashi‘ was membership to families of ‘Alid ascent and political, rather than religious, support of local vassals to the regime in Cairo. As he rightly observes, ‘Alids were not necessarily or automatically Shī. The epigraphic data provided by al-Huwayrī to sustain his claim would be conclusive, if it was not for the words of caution pronounced by Ugo Monneret de Villard- the first scholar to study systematically the Aswan necropolis -who, commenting on the level of disturbance the Fatimid cemetery site had suffered over decades, said: “today it is no longer possible to write on firm basis the history of Muslim architecture of Aswan”. Also, while one could suspend judgement on al-Udfuwī’s accuracy in describing the people of Aswan, it would be highly unlikely of him to misrepresent the religious adherence of the people in his own town, Edfū, especially given that he had Shīs and even Ismaiils in his own extended family and therefore had direct knowledge about Shiism in the region. Also, al-Udfuwī’s contemporary, Muhammad b. Shākir al-Kutubī (d. 718/1318-19) appears to confirm al-Udfuwī’s claim, by describing the population on the western side of the Nile valley (that is, in Esna, Edfū and Asfun) as belonging

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10 See Al-Huwayrī, Aswān fi l-‘uṣūr al-wustā, cit., pp. 159-163.
11 See U. Monneret de Villard, La necropoli musulmana di Aswan, cit., p. 3.
Upper Egypt: A “Shia” powerhouse in the Fatimid period?

Was there an extensive Shii presence in Upper Egypt at the time of the Fatimids? If so, why, when and how did Shiism appear in that region? What brand of Shiism might this be? Faced with the lack of material evidence, the contextualised analysis of information provided in a variety of literary sources, ranging from historiographies and chronicles to travelogues and documents, will be used as tools to address those questions.

The earliest reference in Ismaili historical sources to the transit of Shiis through Egypt, probably via its southern regions heading north - at the dawn of the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate- can be found in al-Qaḍī al-Nu‘mān’s 4th/10th century Ismaili historical work Iftitāh al-da‘wa. According to his account, Mānṣūr al-Yaman, the man in charge of the Ismaili da‘wa in Yemen in the late 3rd/9th century, first sent his appointed successor in the da‘wa Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās to preach in Egypt. Later Mānṣūr al-Yaman dispatched Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shī‘ī -the dā‘ī who eventually masterminded the enthronement of al-Mahdī as the first Fatimid caliph in Raqqada- to preach in Egypt. Upon arriving in Egypt, ʿAbd Allāh’s intention was to remain there as instructed by his master, but was eventually persuaded by fellow Kutāma Shii travellers he had met in Makka, to head for the Maghrib on account of the fact that trade in Egypt was scarce. We are not told about the route Abū ʿAbd Allāh took but, coming

to the extreme Shia. He adds that this was the situation in Esna before the restoration of Sunnism. The situation was apparently similar in Qift. Finally, another 6th/14th century local historian, Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Rahīm al-Isnawī (d. 772/1370), states that remnants of the ṭafīda and the Shia were to be found in Esna and other neighbouring towns. According to al-Isnawī, many of these people had not converted to Shia as a result of the Fatimid rule, due to the great distance between their region and Cairo and Fustat. He claims that many had adopted Shiism after the Fatimids’ demise in 567/1171.

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from the Arabian Peninsula, he must have travelled along what was
the then standard trade -pilgrimage route of sailing from Jedda to Qur-
zum- then inland and heading north to the delta, travelling up the Nile.
Al-Nu’mân’s account is important here because it shows Egypt as the
very first destination of choice for the expansion of the da’wa from the
Yemeni outpost and points to a certain amount of pro-Shii/Ismaili preach-
ing having taken place there in preparation for greater things to come.16
That pro-Shii/Ismaili preaching in Upper Egypt had not been totally
transitory and transient is indicated by the fact that the da’wa must
have found there significant support since it was by sizing the Fayyum
and the Ša’‘id, that the would-be second Fatimid Imam-caliph, al-
Qâ’im -while in North Africa- had launched with the support of the
Kutâma troops -the first serious Fatimid attempt to annex Egypt.17

In 358/969, led by the general Jawhar al-Šiqilli, the Fatimid army fi-
nally conquered Egypt. Since 359/970 Ğawhar was conscious of the
strategic potential of Upper Egypt as it was there that residual Ikhshidi
resistance movements took shape. One of the earliest major diplomatic
moves instructed by Jawhar was to send a man originally from Aswan,
Ibn Salûm al-Aswâni, on a mission south to seal a trade pact with the
King of the Nubians, to invite him to convert to Islam and demand
payment of tributes to the new regime. As the ambassador chosen to
represent formally the newly established Shiî Ismaili regime in Cairo
to Christian royalty, it is safe to assume that al-Aswâni must have been
a Shiî sympathiser at the very least. Al-Aswâni’s mission must have
started between 359/969-970 and 363/973 and continued well into the
reign of the Imam-caliph al-‘Azîz (365/975 - 386/996), since it was
for him that al-Aswâni wrote his history of the Nubians.18 Ğawhar had
placed Upper Egypt under the control of a member of the Banû Kilâb
tribe, ‘Abd al-‘Azîz b. Ahyaj (d. 362/973) who must have been an os-

16 ‘Abd Allâh, the future Imam-caliph al-Mahdî, hid in the guise of trader in
Egypt while on his way to Sîjîmâsâ where the religious-political nature of his mis-
ion eventually would be fully revealed. He was escorted by Abû ‘Abd Allâh al-
Shi’î’s brother Abû al-‘Abbâs. However, while in transit in Egypt, they kept to the
northern part of the country and there is so far no indication of them having spent time in
the south. See al-Qâdî al-Nu’mân, The Founding of the Fatimid State, cit., pp. 112-124.
17 See ibid., p. 228. Al-Qâ’îm’s Egyptian campaign is discussed in great details
18 See G. Troupeau, “La description de la Nubie d’al-Aswani”, in Arabica 1 (1954),
tensibly pro-Shiite commander at first. However, in 362/973 this com-
mander defected in favour of the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tasim swaying his
followers to uphold the authority of the caliphate in Baghdad. That
this must have been a mass defection is indicated by the report that, to
repress it, Jawhar sent a contingent of 40 ships on the Nile equipped
with men and weapons, led by a Nubian military commander Bishara.
This military division was supported by a massive land army led by
Tazrif, a commander who had distinguished himself in the Fatimid
campaigns in Syria in ca 359/970. The operation succeeded: Upper
Egypt was brought back under control, Ibn Ahyaj fled to Baghdad, his
possessions were confiscated and the heads of the many dissenters paraded
across Egypt as a sign of warning to others.19

More Shi'i presence in the region is attested in 363/973 in the shape
of Qarmatian spies who arrived in the area. The Qarmatian 'Abd Allâh
b. 'Ubayd Allâh, better known as Akhû Muslim, penetrated into the
Sa'id, all the way to the vicinity of Asyut and Akhmim. The Qarmati-
ans ransacked properties and killed people, attacking particularly Ma-
ghribis whom the Fatimids had installed there as part of their demo-
graphic reworking of the region. The Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz inter-
vened with a large army to repel Akhû Muslim, rounding up the youth
of Ikhshidi stock within his army, to prevent them defecting for the
Qarmatians. The Qarmatian rebellion was eventually quashed in
364/975.20 During the reign of the Imam-caliph al-'Aziz, in 368/978,
Jawhar al-Siqilli had to crush another defection in Aswan, that of Hamza b.
[lacuna] al-Kutami -the mutawalli of the town. The episode is interesting
on two counts: because it shows Kutamas- and therefore Shiis, proba-
bly Ismailis -in charge of what was at the time the most important cen-
tre in the region, and because it shows betrayal by a member of a
closely allied tribe but one that felt that he had strong enough local
support to assert his autonomy from his Cairo masters.21

The implementation of a pro-Shiite tribal policy in Upper Egypt proved
providential in the quashing of the pro-Umayyad revolt mounted against
the Fatimid regime by the Sunni Andalusian Abû Rakwa in 395/1005.
In the course of his venture, Abû Rakwa had taken refuge in the Upper

19 See Idris 'Imad al-Din, The Founder of Cairo, cit., p. 254.
20 See Taqi al-Din Ahmad al-Maqrizi, Itti'az al-?idâ'iyin al-umma al-
fattimiyin al-khulafâ', ed. J.D. Shayyâl - M.H.M Ahmad, Lajnat ihyâ' al-turâth al-
21 See ibid., pp. 245-246.
Egypt where, for a while, he was able to assert his authority until he was overcome by the amir of Aswan, Abü’l-Makārim Hibat Allāh. This shaykh was member of the Banū Rabi’a, whose control over the mines in the region had been consolidated by the Fatimids. In retribution for the loyalty shown to the dynasty in the Abū Rakwa affair the Imam-caliph al-Ḥākim proclaimed Abü’l-Makārim kanz al-dawla, a title that became hereditary within his family.22 There is no evidence however that the Kanz embraced Shiism: tombstones of members of the Banū Kanz do not mention any association with Shia; no indication of their association with Shiism appears in the verses of their panegyrist and none of the eighty or so figures listed as friends of the Kanz in al-Udīfwī’s biographical compendium are said to be of Shia persuasion.23

In the year 414/1023 a large contingent of soldiers from among the slaves, the Barqiyya and the Bāṭiliyya regiments in Cairo, were sent to Upper Egypt to support the local governor, Haydara b. ‘Aqiyābān, in his suppression of a revolt mounted by a Khariji activist who had managed to rally support from a confederation of tribes hostile to the Fatimid, particularly their arch-enemies, the Juhayna. As more sedition erupted in that same year, Haydara proved his loyalty to the regime by capturing an insurgent from the Banū Ḥusayn tribe who was then charged with being the culprit of the Imam-caliph al-Ḥākim’s murder.24 It was perhaps as a result of this volatility that, around this time, diplomatic, administrative and commercial relations between the regime in Cairo and Upper Egypt appear to have intensified: a certain Ibn Makārim b. Abī Yazīd from al-Muḥadditha (a town north of Aswan) travelled by boat up the Nile to ingratiate himself to the Imam-caliph al-Ḥāfir by personally presenting him with a gift which included 20 horses, a number of black slaves, a “chita”, Nubian sheep, birds, monkeys and elephant tusks. Dignitaries from Upper Egypt took firm-


23 See al-Huwayri, Aswān fī’l-ʿuṣūr al-wuṣṭā, cit., pp. 159-163.

er charge of the Diwān of the Kutāma: one was a certain Sā‘īd b. Mas‘ūd and the other was the Jewish merchant Šadaqa b. Yūsuf al-Fallāhī. 25 This latter had arrived in Cairo from an earlier posting in Upper Egypt, only to be met with the hostility of Raṣad, the Abyssinian (or Sudanese) woman who became wife of Imam-caliph al-Žāhir and mother of his successor, al-Mustanṣir. Her role in reshaping the demographic composition of the Fatimid army -by privileging black elements over Turkish ones- was to have lasting repercussions on the fate of the dynasty. Eventually, the Fatimid caliph al-Āmir entered into alliance with a tribe of Upper Egypt by marring ‘Alam who came from that region.

In 441/1050 that we have further evidence of a Shī‘i presence in the Upper Egypt, with the testimony of the Ismaili missionary and poet, Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, who travelled to that region in that year on his way to Makka. In his travelogue, Nāṣir-i Khusraw describes his encounter in Aswan with a local savant and merchant, Abū ‘Ubayd Allāh Muhammad b. Falj. This man gave Nāṣir-i Khusraw a promissory note to hand to one of his agents in the port of ‘Aydhāb, should Nāṣir need money (which he eventually did). The note, quoted in the travelogue, ended with the praise of āmīr al-mu‘āmin ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib, a typical Shī‘i formula, thus indicating that Nāṣir-i Khusraw must have moved within a network of Shī‘is in Aswan and ‘Aydhāb. That Shī‘i individuals in ‘Aydhāb were not just a random occurrence may be inferred by Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s claim that when he arrived at the port - from where he was to set sail three month later to reach the Arabian coast- the people asked him to deliver the khutba. He took the office for the whole length of his stay and, as an Ismaili missionary he must have delivered a ḥutba in the name of the Fatimids at the request of like-minded people.26

By the time of Nāṣir-i Husraw’s travel through Upper Egypt and in the decade that followed, Qulzum had long been abandoned as the port of choice to cross the Red Sea, in favour of the ‘Aydhāb-Aswan or ‘Aydhāb-Qus routes. The privileging of these routes grew with the establishment of the Ismaili ‘Ulayḥids and other sub-groups, as vassal

dynasties of the Fatimids in Yemen. In time, the loss of their prominence as military and commercial players in the Mediterranean region was to force the Fatimids to re-direct da’wa and trading activities southwards, with Yemen becoming a vital outpost through which commerce with the Indian Ocean ports could be maintained. This shift of interest made it imperative to secure the flow of da’wa and commercial traffic between the Egyptian and Yemeni regimes and, as a result, the strategic importance of Upper Egypt as distribution centre for the Fatimids increased further. With that, however, so also grew the potential for stakeholders in the region to hold the Cairo regime at ransom. It was indeed in Aswan that the tension in the Fatimid army caused by Rasād’s patronage of Black troops at the expense of the Turks had escalated into full confrontation. Around 454/1062, the Ṣulayḥid ruler of Yemen ʿAlī b. Muḥammad reportedly had dispatched his envoys to escort the delivery an elaborate gift for al-Mustansir. In Aswan, and subsequently in Asyut, the gift was impounded as a troop of some 30,000 Turks and the Blacks begun to fight about what faction had the privilege of overseeing its shipment to Cairo. 27 Eventually the conflict between Black and Turks was to escalate to the point of being regarded as one of the factors that eventually sparked the šidda al-mustansirīyya (457-64/1065-72) the turbulent years of the economic, political and social collapse that hit Egypt during the reign of al-Mustansir.

The establishment of the Ismaili dynasties in Yemen must have de facto increased the transit of Shiis and Ismailis in Upper Egypt. 28 Beside the episode mentioned earlier testifying to the presence of Ṣulayḥid envoys

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28 In a broader regional context, it is worth mentioning the presence in the 4th/10th century of several Shīi communities on the shores of Fars. See [Ṣhām al-Dīn al-Muqaddas], The best divisions for knowledge of the regions: a translation of Aḥāsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrīfat al-aqālīm, Garnet Publishing, Reading 2001, (En. tr. by Bāṣil Anthony Collins), pp. 356-357. It should be noted that Sirāf, once one of the major ports of the Islamic world, on the Fars coast, declined severely due to earthquake with its citizen reported to have migrated to the Yemeni coast cities around 500/1105-7. Also ʿAlīd dynasties that were established in Yamama since 3rd/9th century continued to prosper until the early 440s/1050s. See B.I. Beshir, The Fatimid Caliphate 386-487 A.H./996-1094 A.D., School of Oriental and African Studies, London 1970, PhD thesis, pp. 105, 116.
in Aswan and Asyut, indirect evidence of Ismaili presence in that region is provided by the extensive epistolary correspondence between Fatimids and Šūlayhids brought by emissaries in commercial caravans as well as information on the traffic of dā‘īs travelling back and forth between Yemen and Cairo. Given that unfavourable travel conditions and distances could impose a permanence in the Upper Egypt of some three months and often much longer, these Shiis and Ismailis had plenty of time to leave their mark, if not necessarily doctrinally, certainly commercially. The importance for Fatimids and Šūlayhids of ensuring stability in the Upper Egypt for mutual benefit is reflected in letters sent by al-Mustanṣir to the Šūlayhid sovereign of Yemen to reassure him about of the pacification of that region which, he says, had totally escaped the control of Cairo and about new efforts to maintain order there. In the aftermath of the shidda, tribes and local rulers, some of whom had shown longstanding loyalty to the Fatimid regime, tried to assert themselves as autonomous powers. In 469/1076 Kanz al-Dawla Muḥammad revolted in Aswan; near Akhmim the tribes of Šuḥayna, Tha‘lība and Ja‘fira formed an anti-Fatimid coalition and Black troops that had been chased by the Turks to Upper Egypt continued to cause havoc. Badr al-Jamāl, the Armenian general who had been summoned to Cairo in 466/1074 to restore order in the Fatimid domains, was then dispatched to Upper Egypt to quash these seditions and bring the region back under Fatimid authority. It is from Qus that in 513/1119 a Fatimid expedition was assigned with the task of helping establish order in the Šūlayhid domains. In the meantime caliphal correspondence continued to show the Fatimids’ attentiveness in keeping the Šūlayhids informed about the situation in Upper Egypt.

32 See al-Sijillāt, cit., nos. 64, 66.
The Šulayhids were not the only Shii Ismaili dynasty in Yemen and the relevance of Upper Egypt to Yemeni Shii Ismaili dynasties did not end with their demise in 532/1138. In Aden there were the Zuray‘id princes (473-569/1080-1173) -originally sub-vassals of the Šulayhids -who were openly pro-Shia, had adopted the title of dā‘is as propagators of ‘Alid doctrines, and recognised the legitimacy and the authority of the Fatimids of Egypt. In 534/1139 Muḥammad b. Saba’ b. Abī’l-Su‘ūd b. Zuray‘ al-Yamān al-Hamdānī (d. ca 550/1155) took over the leadership of the dynasty from his father who had prospered from the flourishing trade between Fatimid Egypt and India that passed through the Red Sea. He was designated dā‘i, a title confirmed by a decree of investiture brought from Cairo, in the name of the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥāfiz. To deliver the investiture, in 539/1144 al-Ḥāfiz appointed as his envoy a man from the Upper Egypt: al-Qādī al-Rashīd Ahmad b. al-Zubayr, member of one of the most distinguished scholarly families of Aswan. There is no evidence however that he ever embraced Shiism, let alone Ismailism.

During the reign of the last Fatimid caliphs, Upper Egypt was theatre of extensive internal turmoil and acts of dissent against the central government. Meanwhile, at the Fatimid headquarters in Cairo, Ismailism had become spent force, having maintained only nominally its recognition as state religion in the person of the caliph. In 543/1148, the caliph al-Ḥāfiz sent troops to Upper Egypt to fight against a man from the progeny of Nizār -the eldest son of al-Mustanṣir- who had gathered followers as rightful claimant to the throne. According to the 7th/15th century historian Ibn Taḥrīrībdī the conflict resulted in many deaths on both sides, thus indicating the presence of large, if counter-opposed, pro-Ismaili factions. As for the Shii presence in the Ša‘īd under the reign of al-Fā‘iṣ, we note the appointment of the Imami Shii al-Awhad b. Tamīm as the governor of Asyut and Akhmim. He had been dispatched

33 See F. Dāftary, The Ismā‘īlīs, cit., p. 256.
35 At the death of al-Mustanṣir in 591/1094, rather than Nizār, it was his younger brother, al-Musta‘ī that came to be installed on the Fatimid throne. The supporters of Nizār’s right to the imamate came to form the Nizārī branch of Ismailism, primarily based in Iran and Syria.
there by the Imami vizier al-Šāliḥ ʿalāʾi’ b. Ruzzik, who had been wāli of Qus, Aswan and Upper Egypt³⁷, to avert al-Awḥad’s presumed closeness to the caliph. Once in Upper Egypt, al-Awḥad took the allegiance of the local rulers and imposed a tax on every wilāya under his control for a period of six month, causing the remonstration of the people.³⁸

With the Ayyubid take-over of Egypt in 567/1171 and the restoration of Sunnism as state religion, the Shiis, who were once on the winners’ side as long as the Fatimid rule lasted, took refuge in Upper Egypt. Once again the Šaʿīd served as a launch pad for subversive action against the dominant regime. It is in relation to a series of pro-Fatimid revolts staged in the Šaʿīd after 567/1171 that we have the strongest evidence yet of a substantial Shīi population in that region. In 570/1174, the Fatimid general and wāli of Aswan, Kanz al-Dawla, conspired against the Ayyubids. Two years later revolt returned, this time in Qift. There was there one of the early dāʿīs from among the ‘Abd al-Qawiyy tribe, who managed to gather around him a substantial number of people supporting the restoration of the Fatimid caliphate. About 3,000 people were killed in the course of the Ayyubids’ quashing of the rising. In 577/1181 two men from Esna appeared in the Upper Egypt who called for the return of the Fatimids.³⁹

As late as 697/1297-98, long after the fall of the Fatimids, a certain Dāʿūd who had claimed in Upper Egypt to be a descendant of the last Fatimid caliph al-ʿAḍīd, failed in his campaign to re-establish Fatimid rule.⁴⁰

Over the course of the two centuries of Fatimid rule in Egypt, there was ample opportunity for Shiism of various strands to grow among the population of Upper Egypt. During the first Fatimid century, “Shīis” in Upper Egypt consisted of people who transited in the region for trading and religious reasons; ‘Alids who might have been also Shīis to reinforce their bond with the dynasty that patron them; Kutāmas and Maghribis who had been relocated in that region according to the regime’s tribal policy; pro-Shīi local rulers and administrators; Shīi activists who did not recognise the authority of the Fatimid imams; opportunist Shīa sympathisers who changed allegiances as convenient. During the second Fatimid century, the growing presence of Shīis in

³⁷ See ibid., vol. 5, p. 292.
³⁹ See ‘A.M. Mājid, Zuhūr khilāfāt al-Fātimiyīn wa suqūṭihā fī Misr, cit., pp. 493-495.
⁴⁰ See D.J. Stewart, “Popular Shiism in Medieval Egypt”, cit., p. 57.
that region was the result of the increased strategic and commercial relevance of Upper Egypt as *trait d’union* area between the Shii Ismaili Fatimids and their Shii Ismaili vassal dynasties in Yemen. In keeping with standard trading practices typical of the area at the time, the securing of a continuous and safe flow of communication between the two regimes rested on the presence of trustworthy residents who would act as agents, brokers and safe keepers. With the demise of Ismaili dynasties in Yemen first and the end of Fatimid rule later, Shiis who once benefitted from friendly regimes, either took refuge or found themselves stuck in Upper Egypt. Far from being only political allies of Shii regimes -as argued by al-Ḥuwayri- the Shiis of Upper Egypt were mostly ordinary and trading people who came to settle there in waves and under different affiliations for mundane reasons, with practical interests to protect and further. The Shiis of Upper Egypt of the Fatimid period left no evidence of a significant intellectual tradition behind them. This does not necessarily mean that Shii scholarship was absent but rather that there was no local incentive or specific demand in recording it for posterity. If obscure as individuals, as a community, the Shiis of Upper Egypt made nevertheless a meaningful enough impact to deserve a place in the history of the region under the Fatimids.

**ABSTRACTS**

Under Fatimid rule the population of Egypt had remained Sunni. The Upper Egypt region, however, is distinctive in that it constitutes an exception since Shiism (though not necessarily the Ismaili brand) enjoyed growing popularity and -for a short period- even became the majority denomination in cities like Aswan. The aim of my paper is to (a) explore the influence that Fatimid governance had in shaping the cultural, religious and intellectual life of the region and (b) appraise the reasons that caused Shiism to rise. From the reign of the imam-caliph al-Mustanṣir until the mid of the 12th century, Upper Egypt came to occupy a strategic role as the nerve centre of a flourishing international community of traders, scholars and pilgrims, following the Fatimids’ establishment of *da’wa*, political and trading alliances with their Ismaili vassals in Yemen, the Šulayhids. I will argue that the favour that Shiism enjoyed in Upper Egypt in the period under discussion was not due to doctrinal preferences among locals resulting from *da’wa* activities but was rather “imported” through the traffic of people who converged in the region for mundane/practical reasons. Beside the
Upper Egypt: A “Shia” powerhouse in the Fatimide period?

most widely used primary sources used for the study of the Fatimids I will base my research on biographical dictionaries compiled at a time close to the period under discussion.

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Sous le pouvoir des fatimides la population de l’Égypte était restée sunnite. La région de la Haute-Égypte, cependant, était remarquable en ce qu’elle constituait une exception car le chiisme (mais pas nécessairement Ismaélien) connut une popularité croissante et -pour une courte période- même était devenue la dénomination de la majorité dans des villes comme Assouan. Le but de mon article est (a) d’étudier l’influence que la gouvernance fatimide eut dans l’élaboration de la vie culturelle, religieuse et intellectuelle de la région et (b) d’apprecier les raisons qui ont amené le chiisme à accroître son influence. Depuis le règne de l’imam-calif al-Mustan¡ir jusqu’au milieu du 12ème siècle, la Haute-Égypte était venue à occuper un rôle stratégique comme centre névralgique d’une communauté internationale prospère de commerçants, savants et pèlerins, suite à la mise en place par les fatimides de la da‘wa, alliances politiques et commerciales avec leurs vassaux Ismaelins au Yémen, les şulayhides. Je soutiens que la faveur dont le chiisme a joui en Haute-Égypte dans la période à l’étude n’était pas due à des préférences doctrinales parmi les habitants issus des activités de la da‘wa mais a été plutôt “importé” par le mouvement de personnes qui ont convergé dans la région pour des raisons pratiques. Outre les principales sources les plus largement utilisés pour l’étude des fatimides je fonde mes recherches sur les dictionnaires biographiques compilés durant la période examinée.

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Durante il periodo fatimide, la popolazione musulmana egiziana rimase sunnita, con l’eccezione dell’Alto Egitto. Qui, infatti, lo scisma (non necessariamente ismailita) godette di una popularità crescente e, per un breve periodo, divenne addirittura la religione maggioritaria in città come Aswan. Scopo del presente contributo sarà quello di esaminare: a) in che modo l’amministrazione fatimide influenzò la vita culturale, religiosa e intellettuale della regione, e b) quali furono le ragioni che determinarono la popularità dello scisma in quella regione. Le alleanze politiche e commerciali che i fatimidi strinsero con i Şulayḥīdī, loro vassalli ismailiti in Yemen, unitamente all’attività di propaganda, fecero dell’Alto Egitto, dal regno dell’imam-calif al-Mustanṣir fino alla metà del XII secolo, il centro nervale di una fiorente comunità cosmopolita di mercanti, dotti e pellegrini. Il lavoro cercherà anche di dimostrare che la popularità di cui godette lo scisma in Alto Egitto, durante il periodo esaminato, fu determinata non tanto da scelte dottrinali, conseguenza dell’attività di propaganda condotta tra la popolazione locale, quanto piuttosto dal traffico di persone che, confluendo nella regione per motivi di ordine pratico, vi “importarono” anche il loro credo sciita. Il
presente contributo si basa, oltre che sulle principali fonti primarie generalmente utilizzate nello studio sui fatimidi, anche su dizionari bibliografici redatti in un periodo contemporaneo, o quasi, a quello qui trattato.