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A New Source for the History of Fatimid Ceremonial: The *Rasā'il al-‘Amīdī*.

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A NEW SOURCE FOR THE HISTORY
OF FĀTIMID CEREMONIAL:
THE *RASĀ'IL AL-‘AMĪDĪ*

Students of Fātimid ceremonial have always had to depend primarily on descriptions of caliphal processions embedded in the works of Mamlūk writers. The works of al-Maqrizī, Ibn Tağrī Birdī, and al-Qalqašāndī are invaluable as anthologies of earlier (mostly lost) Fātimid sources, but they are necessarily limited. In recent years, a very few Fātimid sources have been uncovered that have come to us directly, unmediated by Mamlūk historians. While these sources have often been fragmentary, they have added richly to the available corpus of materials on Fātimid history¹.

The late Prof. Rudolf Mach brought one of these sources to my attention. The *Rasā'il al-‘Amīdī* is a collection of the correspondence of the Fātimid *kātib* Abū Sa‘id Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-‘Amīdī (d. 433/1042). The Garrett collection of Princeton University Library possesses two manuscripts of this work².

Little is known about the author of the collection. Abū Sa‘id al-‘Amīdī served in different capacities under the Fātimid caliphs az-Zahir (r. 411-427/1021-1036) and al-Muṣṭansīr (r. 427-487/1036-1094). We know only the bare outlines of his career. He served under az-Zāhir as supervisor (*mutawallī*) of the *dīwān at-tartīb*, but was dismissed in 413/1022 (we do not know when he was appointed to this post). The only other post he apparently held was as the head of the *dīwān al-inshā’* under al-Muṣṭansīr. He was appointed to this post after Ibn Khairān was dismissed in Ṣafar 432/1040. He died the following year³.

1. For a discussion of the sources for the Fātimid period, see Aymān Fu’ād Sayyid, “Lumières nouvelles sur quelques sources de l’histoire Fātimide en Égypte,” *Annales islamologiques* XIII (1977), p. 1-41.

2. Ms. 4059 [Cat. 4365] in the Mach catalogue of the Garrett Collection. The letter presented here is found in fols. 24-25. I have learned recently that Prof. İhsān ‘Abbās is preparing a critical edition of the *Rasā'il al-‘Amīdī*.

Al-‘Amīdī was the author of a number of works of *adab*, according to Yāqūt. One of his

works (not among those listed by Yāqūt) has been published. It is *al-Ibāna ‘an sariqāt al-Mutannabī*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī al-Bisāṭī (Cairo : Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1961). I am grateful to Dr. Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid for bringing this work to my attention.

3. The longest biographical entry we have for him is in Yāqūt’s *Mu’ğam al-Udabā’*, vol. 17, p. 212, no. 68. He is mentioned in al-Qalqašāndī, *Şubḥ al-‘Aşhā’*, vol. 1, p. 96 under his description of the organization of the ‘inshā’ in Egypt, as following both Ibn Khairān and Wāli al-dawla

The text presented here is a description of a Fātimid procession in a letter to one Ibn Maslama, about whom no other information seems to be available. Major caliphal processions were always announced in the Fātimid period to the provinces in letters issuing from the *dīwān al-inshā'*. A number of these literary specimens remain, most from the pen of the celebrated *kātib* Ibn as-Şayrafī⁴. But these letters are much longer and far more ornate in style. It is likely that this letter was not an official document, but rather a personal letter. This might account for several difficulties in establishing the proper context for the letter.

One problem is the identification of the procession itself. The Fātimid caliphs went in procession from Cairo to Fustāṭ on several occasions during the year: on the first day of Ramaḍān, on some Fridays during the month of Ramaḍān and for the cutting of the canal at the inundation of the Nile. The caliphs also paraded to Fustāṭ on the New Year, but the first mention in the standard sources for a New Year procession is in the year 517/1123, nearly a century after al-‘Amīdī died. On the Two Festivals and the day of Ḥadīr Khumm, the Fātimids paraded north of Cairo or stayed within its walls⁵.

The only clue in the text itself is the initial reference to a procession on Thursday. If we take al-‘Amīdī's period of literary production to be the entire reign of az-Zāhir and the early years of the reign of al-Muṣṭansīr (the only times for which we have documentation of his activities), the following possibilities emerge. The first of Muḥarram and the first of Ramaḍān each fell on Thursdays on three separate occasions during the period from 411 to 433. The descriptions of processions on the New Year and the first of Ramaḍān include references to the decoration of the streets from Cairo to Fustāṭ. If one of these occasions was, in fact, a New Year's procession, then this letter would now constitute the earliest reference we have to New Year's processions in the Fātimid period.

Mūsā b. al-Hasan as head of the chancery. Neither Ibn Taġrī Birdī's *an-Nuġūm az-Zāhira* nor al-Maqrīzī's *‘Itti’āz al-Ḥunafā* makes any mention of him. There are, however, brief references in as-Şafādī's *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafayāt*, vol. 2, p. 75-76.

A curious story concerning him is reported by al-Muṣabbiḥī, *Aḥbār Miṣr*, ed. ‘Aymān Fu’ād Sayyid and Thierry Bianquis (Cairo: IFAO, 1978), p. 13. According to al-Muṣabbiḥī, in Rağab 414/Sept. 1023, al-‘Amīdī was appointed as *muhtasib* in Fustāṭ. He apparently balked at the idea and asked to be excused from the office, protesting, “I was previously a companion (*ğalīs*) of the Commander of the Faithful and master of his purse (*Şāhib harīṭatihī*). Should I now become a *muhtasib*? I cannot!”

Clearly, al-‘Amīdī felt that the office of *muhtasib* was too common relative to his former position.

4. See al-Maqrīzī, *al-Hīṭāṭ* (Būlāq edition), vol. 1, p. 456-457, 479; al-Qalqashandī, *Şubḥ al-‘Aṣḥā*, vol. 8, p. 314-315, 316-319, 320-329; *as-Sīgillāt al-muṣtansīriyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Māgīd (Cairo, 1954), no. 1, 13, 64.

5. On the history of Fātimid ceremonial, see Paula Sanders, “The Court Ceremonial of Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt” (Ph. D., Princeton, 1984). Dr. ‘Aymān Fu’ād Sayyid has gathered all of the relevant texts on Fātimid processions and is publishing them as an appendix to his forthcoming edition of Ibn at-Tuwayr's *Aḥbār Miṣr*.

It is peculiar, however, that no mention is made of either the New Year or of Ramaḍān. One would expect to find some specific reference to the occasion itself. In official proclamations, like those preserved in *as-Siġillāt al-muṣtanṣirīyya* or *Šubḥ al-Āshā*, the occasion itself is often the subject of a large part of the letter.

There are other peculiarities in the description of the procession. We know that the Fāṭimid caliphs traditionally had a *mizalla* carried over them when they went in procession outside of the walls of Cairo. These *mizallas* often matched the costume of the caliph. And they were always worthy of some mention by chroniclers. But there is no mention of a *mizalla* in this letter, nor to any of the insignia of sovereignty.

What, then, do we learn from this small and problematic text? Its simplicity and its seeming lacunae may be what are most important about it. In official letters, the interest in describing insignia of sovereignty and costumes, and in the use of highly ornate and metaphorical language about both the ruler and the occasion, was not only a function of epistolary convention. It was also a reflection of the intense concerns about legitimacy (and, of course, the symbols of legitimacy) that pervade official texts of all kinds. Perhaps this little epistle provides a kind of snap-shot for us of how a literate man who had served at court — but who was unconstrained either by the conventions required of official correspondence or the court's concern to express symbolically its own legitimacy — saw a procession.

- (١) الى ابن مسلمة بذكر ركوب امير المؤمنين من القاهرة الى مصر رتبها على جناح طير
- (٢) كتبت هذه الرقعة غداة يوم الجمعة يشتمل الدولة المؤذنة بالسعادة
- (٣) المتصلة بذكر ما تجده امس الخميس وهو اسعد يوم اسفر عنه صباح
- (٤) ولاحظت على وجهه غرر واوضاح من النعمة بركوب امير المؤمنين
- (٥) في صبيحته من قصر الخلافة الى مصر على الطريق الشارع لابسا
- (٦) من ملابس العز افخره واعلاه ومن نفائس الجوهر ازهره واغلاه
- (٧) في طبقات الاولياء ووجوه الاشراف والامراء والاعيان والعيال
- (٨) والقواد واصناف العساكر والاجناد ومواكب حسدت [كواكب] السماء
- (٩) [الارض] لزيتها وعظم اقدارها وغبطت النجوم الترب بحلاله اقدارها
- (١٠) وقد كانت القاهرة المعزية الى مصر من عدة الايام زينت بانواع
- (١١) الخل وخلل وبدایع والدیباج والوشی والثیاب المنذهبة والانماط
- (١٢) الطمیمة المستغربة حتى لم يبق من الارض فيها الا وهو مزین
- (١٣) ولا فر الا وهو مستبدع مستحسن ووقع الاجماع بان هذا اليوم
- (١٤) المذكور اجل يوم ارخت فيه الايام وعجز عن وصفه الانام وتزيينت
- (١٥) بجماله بطون الدفاتر وتشرفت بذكره رؤوس المتابر ثم عاد الى قصر
- (١٦) الامامة ومقر العز والكرامة مؤيدا منصورا سالما مخصوصا

١٧) بصنيع الله واقباله محفوظاً بالملائكة من عن يمينه وشماله فبادرنا
 ١٨) هذه البشارة العظيمة إليك لتعرف قدر الموهبة فيها من "الله تعالى بها له
 ١٩) من السلامه ولحضرته الشريفة من الانظام والاستقامة وتدفع ما جرى في الخاصة وال العامة
 ان شاء الله

*Translation*⁶

1. To Ibn Maslama, an account of the procession of the Commander of the Faithful from Cairo to Fustāt⁷, which was organized in a wing formation⁸.
2. This letter was written on the morning of Friday the Day of Congregation, which enfolds the *dawla* that has been called to prayer with the happiness
3. of remembering what was done anew yesterday on Thursday, the happiest day the dawn has unveiled.
4. Flashing signs and blazes of honor⁹ shimmered on the face of the day of the procession of the Commander of the Faithful
5. that morning from the Caliphal Palace to Fustāt along the main road, wearing
6. the finest, most magnificent, glorious costumes¹⁰, and the costliest and most brilliant gem
7. amidst the ranks of "the friends,"¹¹ and the prominent *ashrāf*, the amirs and notables, the servants [of the dynasty]
8. and the commanders, the various regiments of the military, in such corteges that the heavenly planets envied
9. the earth for its ornamentation [*i.e.*, the caliph] and great dignity, and the stars envied the dust its glorious rank¹².

6. I am grateful to Prof. Roy Mottahedeh for reading the translation of the text. Any errors are, of course, entirely my own responsibility.

7. The text has *misr*, the common designation of the period for the city of Fustāt. On the vocabulary for the two cities, and on the relationship between Cairo and Fustāt in the Fātimid period, see S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), p. 10-12. For a discussion of the expression of this relationship in Fātimid ceremonial, see Paula Sanders, "From Court Ceremony to Urban Language: Ceremonial in Fātimid Cairo and Fustāt," in *The Islamic world from classical to modern times* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), p. 311-321.

8. Lit., "on the wings of a bird," a common description for a military formation. It is possible, however, that the text should be emended to read "rakabahā [for: ratabahā]

"*alā ḡanāḥ tāyir.*" E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. I, p. 469, gives this phrase, meaning "to quit one's home."

9. On the term *ni'ma*, the important quality of the ruler's beneficence, see Roy P. Mottahedeh *Loyalty and leadership in an early Islamic society* (Princeton, 1980), esp. p. 73-79.

10. The phrase *malābis al-izz* is a common designation for the costumes of the caliph and his entourage in descriptions of Fātimid processions.

11. The term *awliyā'* may have the specific meaning here of *Ismā'ilis*.

12. These are references to the great glory that the presence of the *'imām* lends to the earth, a common convention in Fātimid poetry. See, for example, Ibn Hāni', *Diwān*, no. I, 38: "The (true) heaven of God isn't the one you see; the earth which contains [the *'imām*] is (truly) heaven."

10. [The road] from Cairo the Mu‘izzī¹³ to Fustāt had been decorated for some days with all sorts of
11. ornaments and gala costumes and marvelous things, brocade and embroidery and cloths shot with gold threads, and astonishing *tamīm*¹⁴ mats,
12. until there wasn’t a bit of earth that wasn’t adorned
13. or that didn’t seem new and beautiful. The consensus was that
14. this day was the noblest day of all the days that have ever been set down, a day that can’t be described.
15. The interiors of the registers were adorned by the beauty of that day and the tops of the minbars were ennobled by its mention. Then [the caliph] returned to the Palace
16. of the Imamate — the seat of glory and generosity — strengthened, victorious, safe, revered, distinguished
17. by God’s bounty, guarded by angels on the right and left. I rushed
18. these great good tidings to you so you would know the extent of this gift which God the exalted granted to the
19. noble presence of safety, organization and uprightness, so you could spread the news of what took place among the distinguished and the common¹⁵, God willing.

13. The common designation for Cairo, which was built by the Caliph al-Mu‘izz.

14. A precious brocade, see R. B. Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles* (Beirut, 1972), p. 18 and 159. There are numerous references to *tamīm* fabrics in descriptions of Fātimid ceremonies, but they seem to have been used primarily in clothing.

15. The terms *Hāssa wa-‘āmma*, used together,

refer commonly to the basic distinction between levels of society, particularly between those associated with the ruling elite and the ordinary people. On these distinctions, see Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership*, p. 120-122. In Ismā‘ili usage, the terms can refer to Ismā‘ilis (*al-ḥāssa*) and non-Ismā‘ilis (*al-‘āmma*).