THE PSEUDO-MAHDI INTERMEZZO OF THE QARÂMIŢA 
IN BÂHRAYN

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According to the information furnished by Mediaeval Muslim chroniclers, the long-awaited Mahdi appeared among the Qarâmiţa of Bâhrayn in Ramadân, 319/September-October, 931.

These radical dissidents of the Ismâ‘îlî movement, that is the Qarâmiţa, had already earned a particularly frightful reputation in the Eastern as well as the Western territories of the Empire. This was due, first of all, to their military forces, which represented, at that time, the most dreadful and effective army in the whole of the Islamic World, and secondly, to their constant raids and devastating marauding campaigns against the caravan routes of Southern Iraq and the urban centres of the region. Their military presence posed a permanent threat to the whole area, and it was to become one of the principal factors contributing to the disintegration of the Caliphate. In 316/928, it was only with extraordinary luck that Baghdad escaped Qarmaţi occupation, unlike Mecca, which suffered hugely from their invasion in 319/930.

The Qarâmiţa justified their aggression against the existing order by propagating the reign of the legitimate imâm, descended from the “House of the Prophet”, the Mahdi, who is to rule over the world and restore justice and order, and whose appearance was expected to be very near. Parallel to their military offensives, the Qarmaţis of Bâhrayn gave expression to their firm belief in the imminent appearance

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2 The Qarmaţis and their predecessors, the earliest Ismâ‘îlis maintained that Muḥammad b. Ismâ‘îl who remained alive, was the Qâ‘îm and last of the great messenger-prophets. On his reappearance, he would bring a new religious law or šârī‘a, abrogating the one announced by the Prophet Muhammad (Daftary 1991: 230).

On the belief of the Qarâmiţa see an-Nawbaḫši, Fīrāq 62.9-10;

تَشَمِّيذُ فَرَقَةٌ [مِنَ المِّبَارِكِيَةِ] تَسَمَّى الْعَرَاََمَةَ وَزُوِّعَ أَنَّ مُحَمَّدَ بْنَ أُسْمَعَةُ حَلَّ لَمْ يُعْمَرْ وَإِنَّهُ مُغَفِّرُ الْمُعَلِّمِ وَمَعْتَمِمُ الْقَائِمِ عَنْهُمْ أَنَّهُ يُعِبْدُ بِالْمَسْلَةِ وَبِشَرَبَةٍ جَدِيِّةٍ يُنْشِمُهَا بِسَرِيْعَةٍ مَعْمُودُ صَلِّي الله عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ.

According to an-Nawbaḫši (Fīrāq 62-63) the Qarâmiţa formed their thesis of the abrogation of Islam by the religion of Mahdi on the well-known hâdîţ wîch ilâ is ascribed to the Imâm Ga‘far as-Sâdiq: “Islam began as a stranger (qarîbân) [meaning in Medina]; it will return as a stranger as it began. Good tidings therefore to the strangers.” So their attributed a great significance to it. (Cf. Madelung 1961: 83-84.)
of the Mahdi on several occasions. Abū Saīd al-Ǧannābī, one of the founding fathers of the daʿwa in Bahrain, claimed to be acting on behalf of the expected Mahdi who was to appear in 300/912. The unfulfilled expectations of the adherents quite probably caused internal frustration within the daʿwa, which may have contributed to the assassination of Abū Saīd and other leaders of the movement in the summer of 300/913.

Then his second successor in the leadership of the Bahrain community, his son Abū Ṭāhir, prophesied the Mahdi’s imminent arrival after the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 316/928, marking the end of the Islamic period and the beginning of the final religious era, as did other Qarmāṭī daʿīs in Northern Iran.

As the much awaited date was drawing near, the Qarmāṭīs increased their offensive activity against the dominions of the Caliphate. They embarked upon a series of raids against Southern Iraq and pillaging the haǧǧ caravans returning from Mecca, and in 315/927 they even made an attempt, unsuccessful though it was, at seizing Bagh- dad. As a result of the advances of “the Mahdi’s messengers” in Southern Iraq, the local partisans of the Mahdi revealed their allegiance in the Sawaʿd of Kūfa, attaching exaggerated expectations to the personality of Abū Ṭāhir. They said that the Truth had appeared and the Mahdi had resurrected: the ‘Abbāsids had come to their end, as had fuqahāʾ, qurrāʾ and abīl-ḥadīṯ. “We have not come to establish another dynasty, but to abolish šarīʿa” — they claimed; and they announced the realm of the Mahdi, and collected the poll-tax, but government troops very soon suppressed this uprising. Afterwards, at the beginning of 317/929, the Qarāmīṭa unexpectedly re-

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3 Abū Saīd’s prophecies on the Mahdi (ʿAbdallāḥbbr, Taḥbīt II, 379, 381):
قال إنه رسول الأمين الإمام حجة الله على خلقه وهو محمد بن عبد الله بن محمد بن محمد بن محمد بن محمد بن محمد) [sic] وهو مقيم في بعض هذه المجالي وإن له في سنة ثلاثمائة للحجرة [912] بخرج ويوم الأرض كلها، وكان هذا يقول وبالواعد من أبي سعود في سنين دين.


turned to Bahrayn, where construction works on a fortified “refuge” (dār al-hiğra), the prospective residence of the awaited Mahdi, had been completed near al-Ahsā’.

In 319/930, they arrived in Mecca during the pilgrimage season. Having succeeded in getting admission into the city by an appeal to a sense of Islamic solidarity, they, acting like infidels, massacred the pilgrims and the townspeople for several days and committed numerous acts of desecration. They finally tore out the Black Stone of the Ka’ba, presumably with the aim of symbolizing the end of the era of Islam, and carried it off to their new capital of al-Ahsā’. It is these disastrous events that lead us along to the obscure incidents in Ramadān 319/September–October 931 when Abū Tāhir handed over the power to a young stranger from Isfahān, only to dismiss and kill him eighty days later. This episode was already investigated by de Goeje (1886: 129–137), who made a translation of the then available source material as a part of his monograph that set the trend for the study of the Qarāmiṭa. He initiated his explanations for the events by stating that an impostor had appeared among the Qarāmīṭis in 319/930, who then succeeded in making himself recognized as the much-awaited “maître de la chose” (ṣāḥib al-amr). However, his conclusion that this adventurer could get recognition as the emissary of the Fāṭimid ʿUbaydallāh is now superseded (ibid. 136). Later researches, namely those of Massignon (1974: 220–223), Lewis (1940: 87–89) and Stern (1983: 206ff)9, viewed these events as a temporary forsaking of the Fāṭimid s by the Qarāmīṭis.

The Mahdi’s intermezzo, however, received but slight attention from scholars. Of modern Muslim experts on the subject, as far as our knowledge goes, it is only Naṣṣār (1977: II, 343–344), Zakkār (1987: I, 152–154) and Bazzūn (1988: 188–196)10 who analysed this issue in merít. Particularly surprising is the fact that the renowned Ismāʿīlī scholars Tāmir and Ġālib entirely avoid mentioning the episode in their relevant writings.

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7 On the dār al-hiğra: Ibn al-Ḡawzi, Muntazam VI, 326.14–15:

لما رجع التربط [Abū Tāhir]

Cf. Ṭābit, Aḥbār al-Qarāmīta I, 223; Ibn Tağribirdi, Niğām III, 220.

As Medina, the dār al-hiğra of the Prophet, was the place of the foundation of Islam, for the Ismāʿīlīs the dār al-hiğra was the residence of the Mahdi and the place of the foundation of his religion.

(Cf. Madelung 1956: 81ff)


9 Concerning his views, he told: “I am, I hope, not too far off the mark in suggesting that the adventurer from Isfahān claimed to be Muhammad b. Ismāʿīl reappearing from his century-old hiding and that he was for a time accepted as such by the Qarāmīṭas of Bahrayn”.

10 His appraisal on the Mahdi episode is remarkable but very controversial.
During the last decades two eminent scholars, Prof. Madelung (1959: 75-85; 1988: 96-100) and Prof. Halm (1991: 225-236), have carried out a thorough research and a reconstruction of accounts on the İsfahānī. We draw on their findings in our reappraisal of the heavily divergent aspects of this web of problems. In fact, our conviction is that this episode occupies a focal position in the history of the Qarmaṭi community of Bahrayn, being such a turning-point as can serve to provide an explanation, from both a political and an ideological point of view, to the various facets of the contradictory history of this regional movement turned state.

All the sources agree in stating that the youth was a young Persian, but different versions of his name have been reported. He is said to have been a Persian from İsfahān or Hurāsān. Some even asserted that he was a descendant of the Persian Kings and described him as a Zoroastrian[11].

However, the reports on his appearance are contradictory, confused, and differ radically from one another. One group of sources, represented by Taḥbīt b. Sinān[12], who was followed by Miskawayhi (Taḡārib II, 55-56) and Ibn al-ʿAṭīr (Kāmil VIII, 351-352), states that Abū Tāhir was deceived into giving up power by his chief dāʿī, Ibn Sanbar, who wanted to use the İsfahānī to throw out one of his opponents. Then the İsfahānī proceeded to kill some prominent Qarmaṭi leaders and others until he was exposed by Abū Tāhir and put to death.

Another, rather more astonishing, version, given by Ibn Rızām[13] and mostly adapted by ʿAbdalghabbār (Taḥbīt II, 386-88) and partially by Nizām al-Mulk (Ṣiyāsātname 287-288), makes Abū Tāhir declare that the İsfahānī is god incarnate, and that he is restoring the true “religion of Adam” and has ordered the people to curse all the other prophets. He also commanded them to commit debaucheries and


[12] Taḥbīt, Abhār al-Qarāmīta I, 225-226:

[13] Ibn Rızām, Abū ʿAbdallāḥ Muhammad at-Ṭāʿī al-Kūfī, how wrote before 345/956 and his treatise, the Kitāb fī radd ʿalā al-ismāʾiliyya has been lost but parts of it have been preserved by various scholars.
the like. After a while Abū Tāhir discovered that he had been duped and had the Iṣfahānī murdered.

Most probable of all reports on his arrival is the one that makes the young man being carried off into slavery from North of Babylon, as the Qarāmīta returned from their campaign in Northern Mesopotamia in 316/928 (‘Arib, Sila 162.18–21).

It is also reported14 that the young man was of a very powerful character, excelled in intelligence and learning, soon being initiated into the affairs of the Qarāmīta. According to the explanation found in one of the reports (Ṭabit, Abbār al-Qarāmīta 255), Ibn Sanbar had initiated him into some secrets which Abū Tāhir had entrusted him alone and had instructed the youth thus: “Go to Abū Tāhir and tell him that you are the man to whose allegiance his father and he himself have summoned the people. If he then asks you for signs and proof, reveal these secrets to him”15.

Abū Tāhir had no doubts about the validity of these signs and announced to his adherents: “This is the man I have summoned you to follow, and to him belongs the command”16.

In another source17 it is stated that the proud and lordly appearance of the youth irritated his owner, the da‘ī Ibn Sanbar himself, who therefore brought him before Abū Tāhir. In this passage, there is a mention of a sign by which the Iṣfahānī was able to deceive Abū Tāhir and his brothers into believing that he was the “Expected One”.

According to al-Birūnī (Āṭār 313), the date of the Iṣfahānī’s arrival was chosen to coincide with the passing of 1,500 years from the death of Zoroaster, at the end of the year 1242 of Alexander’s era for which prophecies attributed to Zoroaster and Gāmāsp were predicting the restoration of the reign of the Magians. As has been mentioned before, the young Persian was said to be a Magian and a descendant of the

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14 ‘Arib, Sila 193.2–3; al-Birūnī, Āṭār 213.1–2; Miskawayhi, Taḡārīb II, 55.15–18.

15 Miskawayhi, Taḡārīb II, 55–56:
امض إلى أبي طاهر وعرفه أدرك الرجل الذي كان أوه وهو يدعو بالله فإذا هو ساكن عن المسألة والدليل أظهرت له هذه الأسرار.

16 Ṭabit, Abbār al-Qarāmīta 225:
فقال أبو طاهر هذا الذي ندعو بالله فأطاحوه ودانا له.

17 ‘Arib, Sila 163.2–4:
فلما نظر [عريفة] إلى قوله كلامه [زكري الخراساني] وجرأت حبكه وأمسك عنه وأنهو خبره إلى الجنايب al-Birūnī, Āṭār 313:
كان [ابن أبي زكرياء الطماسي] غلاما فاجرا ومؤجرا.
Persian kings. Isfahān, his home town, had long been associated by the astrologers with the rise of a Persian dynasty which would overthrow the Arab Caliphate. His clothes were depicted as being in accordance with the Persian fashion. He was sometimes titled as-Šafawi Dū n-Nūr19 (‘The Pure Possessor of Light’) or al-Ăşfar20 (‘[Dressed in] Yellow’/‘The Persian’). As Madelung has observed (1988: 97ff), the Isfahānī appeared, judging from his deeds, rather a restorer of Persian religion than that Expected One of the Prophet’s House who reveals the truth behind all previous religions. He ordered the worship of fire and the cursing of all prophets, and also initiated various extravagant ceremonies that disgusted the Qarāmīta21. It is well-known that the settled population of Bahrain, formally a province of the Persian Empire, consisted largely of Persians and Jews22. Abū Sa‘id, the founder of the da’wā, was a Persian by origin from Ganāfa, a town on the coast of Fārs, and he was active there as a dā‘i before being sent to Bahrain23. Some of his grandsons bore the names of Persian kings: Sābūr/Šāpūr b. Abī Tāhir, and Kiswa/Hosrō b. Abī l-Qāsim (Ibn Hawqal, Sārat al-ard 26). Notwithstanding all these arguments, Madelung draws our attention to a careful appreciation of the events in this respect. Then he adds that, while Abū Tāhir could perhaps expect a certain amount of sympathy for some aspects of Persian religious traditions among his adherents, his transformation of the Mahdi into a restorer of the Persian religion and kingship would have needed a complete refusal of much traditional Ismā‘ili doctrine and the expectations concerning the seventh Speaker Prophet, the Mahdi (Madelung 1988: 98). On the other hand, the Qarāmīta from the beginning of their activity depended upon the support of Arab tribes, and many of their leading men were of Arab descent. This fact could by no means have been disregarded by Abū Tāhir (Kennedy 1989: 287–292). Therefore, while keeping in mind the Persian background motives of the episode, we can safely state that it was not these motives that set the overall direction of events.

Among the accounts of the advent of the Isfahānī there is an eyewitness report, that of Abū Tāhir’s personal physician, a certain Ibn Hamdān, which Ibn Rizām

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19 Tābit, Abhār al-Qarāmīta 225.8.

20 Miskawayhi, Tağārih II, 58.4; ‘Abdalďabbār, Taḥbīb I, 107.9.

21 al-Birûnī, Āḏār 313:


(Miskawayhi, Tağrib II, 57–60) transmitted in his narrative of the events. This report, regardless of some less reliable details, was considered by Madelung (1959: 75ff) as being of particular interest. Halm (1991: 231ff) confirms that the information of the physician are trustworthy and consistent in all details with what we know about the Ismā‘ili da‘wā.

Ibn Hamdān reports a clear description of the young man’s appearance, as follows: “We came to the palace of the Qarmāṭī Abū Ṭāhir Sulaymān and there was a handsome young man. He was around twenty years old, and he wore clothes according to Persian fashion, and he sat upon a grey horse. His name was Abū ʿl-Faḍl the Zoroastrian”. After this the doctor tells us how the power was handed over: “The people, including the Qarmāṭī Abū Ṭāhir and his brothers, were staying around him. Then Abū Ṭāhir called out as loudly as he could: «You people! Know: We, and you also, were all donkeys! But now God has sent us this person» — and he pointed to the youth — «This is my Lord and your Lord, and my God and your God. We are all his slaves! The rule has now been transferred to him, and he will be king of us all!». Thereupon Abū Ṭāhir declared: «Know you people, that the [true] religion has now appeared! It is the religion of our Father, Adam, and all religions we have belonged to until now are null and void, and everything that the da‘īs have been telling you is null and void and false, all the talk about Moses, Jesus and Muhammad! The true religion is the original religion of Adam, and those are all wily deceivers, so curse them. Then the people cursed them including Abraham, Muhammad, even ʿAlī and his descendants».

In another version based on Ibn Rizām, that of ʿAbdalġābbār25, Abū Ṭāhir told his adherents that all the previous religions they had believed in were not valid. “This was a secret which we and our predecessors kept hidden for sixty years, but today we have uncovered it! This one here is our God and yours, our Lord and yours. If he punishes, then it is with justice; and if he forgives, then it is with mercy.”

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24 Miskawayhi, Tağrib II, 58.1–12 [the spot of the events is in the port of al-Qatif on the Gulf]:

25 ʿAbdalġābbār, Taḥḥīt II, 386.10–12: [وَقَالَ ʿأَبُو طَأْهَرَ] وَهُوَ سَمْرِ كَتَانُهُ وَمِنْ قَينَالِيَاتِ مِنْ سَهْرِ سَنَةَ وَالِيَّمِينُ أَدْمَيْنُ وَهَذَا ʿالِهْنَٰلِ وَالْهَلْكِ وَرِبَّ وَرِبِّ يَعْنِي

ذِكْرَةِ الإِسْمَعِيْلِيِّينَ فَإِنْ عَلَقَ فَقِيْحٌ وَإِنْ عَقَفَ فَبَذْلَاءٌ.
As witnessed by these passages, the innovation of the Isfahānī consisted mainly of the abolition of the religious laws. The other sources which are independent from the doctor’s statements confirm that he did declare the religious law abolished. Madelung observed that the antinomian tendencies that characterized a major part of the Ismāʿīlī movement, and which now came to the surface, brought about a radical turn in this event. The lawgivers, the prophets were, without exception, utterly rejected. It is the true religion of Adam, the lawless religion, that was now being revived by the “Expected One” turned god.

Ibn Ḥamdān’s report further states that the Isfahānī encouraged various sorts of extreme behaviour. Abū Ṭāhir and the people used to circle around him, completely naked, and shout: “Our God, he is mighty and exalted!”. These ritual ceremonies were regarded by Halm (1988: 219; 1991: 232ff) as a Qarāḍī attempt at restoring the Adamite religion, a way of “returning to Paradise”. He moreover states that it is by no means a unique notion held only by the Qarāḍīta. A century later quite similar ideas were to emerge among the Druse, who were also Ismāʿīlī heretics (Bryer 1975: 54–56; 1976: 21ff).

There were already Adamite sects in late antique gnosticism, which is one of the roots of Ismāʿīliyya. Halm calls attention to the fact that the signs of these Adamite communities are always the nakedness of the participants in the rituals, and sexual freedom; since no sooner have they entered the condition of prelapsarian innocence than their bodies become incapable of sinning. The Qarāḍīta in their turn worshipped, completely naked, the visible Creator-God, the focus of circumambulation (tawwāf) being him in the same manner as the Kaʿba traditionally is.

While the Persian background and the antinomian tendencies of the movement are now manifest, the true impetuses of the events are still to be seen. The reign of the Isfahānī Mahdī lasted for only eighty days. Several leaders of the dēʿāva were dismissed from power and killed by his order. Therefore, those who had doubts about

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26 Niẓām al-Mulk, Siyāsāt-nāme 288:
[He commanded public cursing of the prophets.]
Cf. al-Bīrūnī, ʿĀṯār 313:
ولعن [أبو زكريا] من مخى الأبوين، وأصحابهم فأناهم كانوا محتالين ضللين.


28 Miskawayhi, Taģārib II, 58.12–14:
وكان أبو الفضل المجوسی (بمعنى العلماء الامیر) قد سن لهم اللوام ويکاف الأخوات وأمر يقتل الأسرة الممتنة وكان أبو طاهر ليطوف هو والناس عرضا بيهوولون "إلهنا عز وجل".
Cf. al-Bīrūnī, ʿĀṯār 313.2–5; ʿAbdalghabbār, Taḥīt 387.3–7; Niẓām al-Mulk, Siyāsāt-nāme 288.2–8.

the authenticity of the Mahdi pressed Abū Tahir to put the Isfahāni to a test. After the falseness of his claims were proven, he was put to death.30

The Qarmats community was shocked by the episode; while rumours were fast spreading among allied tribes. Abū Tahir and the chief dā'īs were forced to invent excuses to calm down their followers.

According to our main source31, Ibn Sanbar made a speech to the people. He asked them not to give an occasion to the Muslim community to feel triumphant over them. Furthermore, he tried to convince them to give up all that Abū Tahir had told them and return to the previous teaching according to which they were preparing the way for the Mahdi and they were Believers and šī'ites. He also said: "We have always told you that a frightful trial (fitna) must befall the believers, which is then immediately followed by the appearance of the Truth (baqq)." It is this utterance that Halm32 claims provides the key to both the previous disturbances in Mecca and the puzzle of the Mahdi’s intermezzo.

Therefore, the hideous crimes committed in Mecca, served as the expected sign of the arrival of the Revealed God. It seems as if Abū Tahir and Ibn Sanbar arranged this act deliberately so that it should facilitate the appearance of the expected Mahdi. De Blois (1986: 18ff) points out that a common feature of the two groups of sources is that they represent Abū Tahir as if he had been deceived in supposing the Isfahāni to be someone that he actually was not, which is why he handed over the power willingly to him. Now, if we take into consideration the facts mentioned before, this view does not seem to be acceptable.

De Blois regards the Isfahāni as a puppet created by Abū Tahir, who arranged the whole intermezzo in order to fulfil his plans of gaining more power. Halm (1991: 235ff) even depicts these events as a well-designed scenario, which comprises the capture of the youth (316/928), the arrangement of the predicted catastrophe with the

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30 On the different versions of the pseudo-Mahdi’s exposure: Miskawayhi, Ta’āribī II, 59.13–15; Ibn al-Aṭīr, Kāmil VIII, 351–352. Of the two groups of sources, one cites a remarkable confession of the pseudo-Mahdi (Miskawayhi, Ta’āribī II, 59.8–9):

فقال [أبو الفضل المجوسى]: لا تعجل على وداعي أخذ دواه كما أن يأتي أمي فان كنت سرقت منه العلمة فجري في رأيه.

When drawing conclusions of the failure, Ibn Sanbar made this remark (ibid.):

قال لهم: إن هذا الفعلم ورد يكتب سرقة من معدن حق وعلامة موه بها فانعثاءه لذلك... فخالطاه.

31 'Abdalğabbār, Taḥḥāth II, 388.3–5:

وقال لهم ابن سنير: إن شئت أن تنهزوا فانهوا. كما تعرفكم السبب [وافصاء] ثم قال لهم: يا قوم لا تنضحو وآبنفسكم، ولا تختتم بانا المسلمين ولكم، وارجعوا عن جميع ما قالكم أبوي تأهرا إلى ما كنت عليه وكننا من قبل ذلك، من أصابحك المهدى، والدعاء إلى المهدى، والمؤمنون والشيعة.

(Cf. Miskawayhi, Ta’āribī II, 59.14–17.)

32 ‘Abdalğabbār, Taḥḥāth II, 388.6–7; Miskawayhi, Ta’āribī II, 59.15–16:

( Cf. Halm 1991: 235ff.)
disgrace of the sanctuary in Mecca (317/930), and also the disclosure of the youth’s divinity to the community (319/931). Notwithstanding the above arguments, persuasive as they are, we have not yet got a clue as to why Abū Tahir had to resort to these measures. We opine that the antecedents reach back to the times prior to his ascension to power. ad-Dahabi\(^3\) has very instructive remarks concerning this point, saying: “In 305/913 [Abū l-Qāsim] Sa‘īd [the eldest brother] handed power over to his brother Abū Tahir, and a group of people rallied to Abū Tahir’s cause, being won over by him as he had led them to some treasures he alone knew from his father. It so happened that he was informed of a well and its exact location in the desert, so he said [to his followers]: ‘I want to dig up a well here.’ The answer was: ‘No water gushes forth here!’ He insisted and went on digging, and soon water gushed forth. This further increased their attachment to him.” As must be obvious from this quotation, Abū Tahir, although extremely young, displayed extraordinary skills at both orientation in the desert and, as witnessed by his successful raids, the military art. His personality strengthened the influence of the military cadres within the movement at the expense of the conciliative policies of his predecessor Abū l-Qāsim Sa‘īd, representing urban and commercial interests. ad-Dahabi\(^4\) furthermore indicates that exaggerated expectations were attached to Abū Tahir’s personality by his followers, like those we mentioned in connection with the uprising in the Sura‘id of Kūfa. He completes his account by saying that, “given no more delay by God, [Abū Tahir] felt that his downfall was near, so he handed his power over to Abū l-Fadl al-Maghāsī al-‘Ağamī.” The charisma of Abū Tahir was seriously impaired by the failure of the invasion of Baghdad, the tragic turn of the events in Mecca, and the frustration felt by the Qarmatis over their unfulfilled expectations of the Mahdi’s arrival. This situation heightened the tension between the two opposing factions of the leadership. Abū Tahir had to face this situation immediately after his sudden return to Bahrayn from the Baghdad raid.

At this stage, we should definitely mention two leading figures of the da‘wah who, as attested by our sources, played an outstanding role in the events, one of whom, Ibn Sanbar, was the scion of an indigenous lineage which was the first to side with the cause of Abū Tahir, who even married into the family. Due to this situation, the

\(^3\) Miskawayhi, Ta‘ārib II, 57.13–16:

\(^4\) Ibid. II, 57.17–22:
Sanbar clan always had the upper hand in the affairs of the Qarāmita, yet their status as town dwellers makes it likely that they represented urban and mercantile interests within the community. According to one set of sources, Ibn Sanbar himself was instrumental in the handing over of power by initiating the youth into the secrets of the da'wa on the one hand, and, on the other, by persuading Abū Tahir, through his protégé, to relinquish his power. His deeds were motivated, according to the sources, by the wish to get rid of his adversaries and, chiefly, of Abū Hafs aš-Šarīk. Another set of sources (Abdalgabbār, Taḥbit II, 387-388), however, makes Ibn Sanbar’s role much more contradictory. He appears to have been a trend-setter of events at first, along with Abū Tahir, seizing the initiative as the head of the opposition later when events took to an inauspicious course, and coercing Abū Tahir to put the Iṣfahānī to a test. The other leading personality at issue is Abū Hafs ʿUmar ibn Zurqān aš-Šarīk, who was none other than the husband of Abū Tahir’s sister Zaynab. His links to the leadership of the da’wa and the ḡannābī clan were therefore also strong. The first group of sources (Masūdī, Tanbih 392.1-3) portray him as the arch-enemy of Ibn Sanbar, yet we are also told that he was the soundest-minded, most knowledgeable and most intelligent among them, that is, one of the ablest leaders. The other group of sources informs us that Abū Hafs played an outstanding part in the seizure of Mecca, being the person who, mounted on a horse in front of the Ka’ba sanctuary, recited the Qur’ānic text in mockery while his companions were busy belying the sacred revelation. After the Iṣfahānī rose to power, Ibn Zurqān was the first victim of his rule, followed by his child, whereas his wife was taken into the Iṣfahānī’s possession. Ibn Zurqān was probably a representative of the wing of military cadres recruited from militant, nomadic elements in the conflict of internal forces in the background of the Mahdi’s intermezzo.

In final assessment, our opinion is that Abū Tahir, a successful military leader, was caught up in a sort of legitimacy crisis caused by the above-mentioned factors. He sought to solve this crisis by arranging a kind of theocratic coup-d’état, that is, the intermezzo of the pseudo-Mahdi. Because of the eschatological nature of the whole movement, such a solution is an integral part of the requisites of the Iṣmā‘īliy-

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35 Abdalgabbār, Taḥbit II, 385.7-12:
وأبو حفص عمر ابن زرقان صهر أبي سعيد واقفًا حذاء البيت والسيف يأخذ الناس، وهو على فرصة يضحك ويقول: "إيلاف قريش" حتى وصل إلى قوله: "أتمهم من خوف" قال: ما أتمهم من خوفنا، ننظر الباطل به أهل مكة، حجوه إلى البحرين وهاجرها إلى الأحساء، من قبل أن نحلم وجهها قدرها على أدابها.

Miskawayh, Taqārib II, 59.1-4; Nizām al-Mulk, Siyāsatnāme 229; al-Ma‘arri, Risāla III, 30.

36 Abdalgabbār, Taḥbit II, 387.12-15:
وقتل بني زرقان ونبي سلMAN ومن وجهه عسكره... وأمرهم (الإسباهاني) بأن يعرضوا عليه نساءهم من بني أبي سعيد وغيره فعبروا هم ناخذ مهن من أراد فكان من أخذ ربيبة بنت أبي سعيد أمّة عمر بن زرقان وقد كان قتل روجها وكان له منها ابن قاصر تذكره أبي طاهر يتبنيه فأخذ أب أبي طاهر خاله فذبح.
ya. In other places, in other historical periods, similar methods or means can be observed.

Watt (1963: 75) points it out when he speaks on the features of the Ismāʿīliyya: “This was a political movement masquerading as a religious and philosophical one. Though there were ismāʿīlite doctrines, the leaders of the movement do not seem to have been committed to any definite doctrines, but rather to have manipulated the doctrines to serve their political ends”.

This unfortunate experiment with the incarnate god had seriously demoralized the Qarāmīṭa in Bahrayn and weakened their influence over the Ismāʿīli communities in the east. However hard did Abū Ṭāhir try to propitiate them, many of his tribal allies left Bahrayn to serve during the following decades in the armies of various local rulers. The movement’s ideologists in the Eastern territories tried to restore the ideological unity of Qarmaṭī Ismāʿīlisim, with but little success (Madelung 1988: 98-100). Abū Ṭāhir and his advisors were, nevertheless, able to maintain their power.

To conclude, we cannot but strongly emphasize the primary importance of the intermezzo of the pseudo-Mahdī in the development of the views, policies and state organization of the Bahraynī Qarāmīṭa community. Only as a result of their learning the lessons provided by the dénouement of the above-mentioned events did changes appear in their policy, which we have described in a previous article (Hajnal 1994: 16ff) as being a revival of the “peace–for–privileges” policy that gave priority to economic interests over ideology, a policy that had already proven to be successful in the time of the early daʿwa, under the leadership of Abū l-Qāsim Saʿīd, eldest son of the community’s founder, Abū Saʿīd.

So much about the political aspect of the events. As for ideology, it is rather more complicated and difficult to assess, as reliable information about the “post–intermezzo” period of Qarmaṭī statehood is all but lacking. The Islamic rite was restored to its rightful position, since the Mahdī still had not arrived. As noted, according to Ibn Hawqal (Sīrat al-ard 25), one fifth of the taxes was set aside for the “Lord of the Time”, and al-Muqaddasi (Taqsim 94) mentions a treasury of the Mahdī in the capital of Bahrayn, in al-Aḥsā’. A century later, Nāṣir-ī Ḥosrō reported

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37 On the conciliatory attempts of the Qarmaṭī leadership: Ābdalghābār, Taḥbī II, 388–389.

38 Nāṣir-ī Ḥosrō, Safarāname 82.12–15:

[Abū Saʿīd told them that he would come among them again after his death, and his tomb, a fine shrine, is located inside the city [al-Aḥsā’].]

Ibid. 88.28–35:

وهبوسته اسبی بن سعيد بن مهور وسرافسار بندر کورخانه آوی سعید به تدوین داشته باشد روز روز شب یکی جهان آوی سعید بن خزیز بن آیس سه شاهنامه و کویوندن آوی سعید کننده است. قریندان چونر که جهان می‌پیماییم شما مرادن باز تشاندید. نهان آن باشد که مرا باشمیت می‌توان در حال جهان کردن اکثر می‌باشد، به خاطر سبب بهداشته است.
the Qarāmīta of Bahrayn still believed they were in the era of the Prophet of Muḥammad and Islam, and they abstained from drinking wine. He also relates the interesting detail, certified for the most part by Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri, that the community had continued to await the Šarīf Abū Saʿīd’s return from the dead, as he himself had promised. The old idea of the Mahdi had, in about a century, crystallized as a myth, and some facets of the theocratic attributes of the Imām-Mahdi were inherited by the founder of the dāʿwa in the region, as was bound to happen in other areas and times in a Šīʿite milieu. It is not clear, however, whether Abū Saʿīd had in fact replaced Muḥammad b. Iṣmāʿīl as the expected Mahdi for the Qarāmīta of Bahrayn.

REFERENCES

A. Primary sources


[A horse outfitted with collar and crown is kept always tied by the tomb of Abū Saʿīd, and a watch is continually maintained day and night for such time as he should rise again and mount the horse. Abū Saʿīd said to his sons, “When I come again among you, you will not recognize me. The sign will be that you strike my neck with my sword. If it be me, I will immediately come back to life”. He made this one stipulation so that no one else could claim to be him.]

39 al-Maʿarri, Risala III, 235:

وَهَكَانِي أَنَّ الْقَرَاسَةَ بِالْأَخْسَاءِ بَيْنَ يَزِمَرُونَ أَنِّي إِمَامُ يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُ وَيَكُونُونَ عَلَى بَابِ ذَلِكَ الْبِتَّةِ فَيَخْرُجُ وَيَلْحَجُّ وَيَعْلَمُونَ لِلْسِّحْيَ وَالْطَّلَامِ: “هَذَا الْفَجْرُ لِلرُّكَابِ المُهَدِيِّينَ يَرْكُبُونَ مَسَىٰ بَيْنِهِمْ”

[It was said to me that the Qaramita had a house in al-ʿAḥṣāʾ from which their Imam would come out. So they put a horse with saddle and bridle in front of that house. They used to say to the masses: “This horse will be mounted by the Mahdi. He will sit on it when he appears”.]

[Naṣṣ al-Dawr bi Sūrī Dīnī Tarkī]

B. Secondary sources


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