

THE PSEUDO-MAHDĪ INTERMEZZO OF THE QARĀMIṬA IN BAĦRAYN

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According to the information furnished by Mediaeval Muslim chroniclers, the long-awaited Mahdī appeared among the Qarāmiṭa of Baḥrayn in Ramaḍān, 319/September-October, 931.

These radical dissidents of the Ismāʿīlī movement, that is the Qarāmiṭa¹, 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 Qarmaṭī occupation, unlike Mecca, which suffered hugely from their invasion in 319/930.

The Qarāmiṭa justified their aggression against the existing order by propagating the reign of the legitimate *imām*, descended from the "House of the Prophet", the Mahdī, who is to rule over the world and restore justice and order, and whose appearance was expected to be very near². Parallel to their military offensives, the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn gave expression to their firm belief in the imminent appearance

¹ After the schism in 286/899 these dissident Ismāʿīlīs who broke with ʿUbaydallāh the future Fāṭimid imām-caliph, al-Mahdī and refused to acknowledge his claim to the imamate retained their original belief in the Mahdīship of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, as the expected *Qāʾim* (Daftary 1991: 230; 1993: 138ff. Cf. Madelung 1961: 59ff; Halm 1987: 202, 206).

² The Qarmaṭīs and their predecessors, the earliest Ismāʿīlīs maintained that Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl who remained alive, was the *Qāʾim* and last of the great messenger-prophets. On his reappearance, he would bring a new religious law or *ṣarīʿa*, abrogating the one announced by the Prophet Muḥammad (Daftary 1991: 230).

On the believes of the Qarāmiṭa see an-Nawbaḥtī, *Firaq* 62.9-10:

تشعبت فرقة [من المباركية] تسمى القرامطة وزعموا أن محمد بن أسماعيل حي لم يموت وإنه في بلاد الروم وإنه القائم المهدي ومعنى القائم عندهم أنه يبعث بالرسالة وبشريعة جديدة ينسخ بها شريعة محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم.

According to an-Nawbaḥtī (*Firaq* 62-63) the Qarāmiṭa founded their thesis of the abrogation of Islam by the religion of Mahdī on the well-known *ḥadīṭ* wicḥ *ṣṛīs* ascribed to the Imām Gaʿfar aṣ-Ṣādiq: "Islam began as a stranger (*ḡarībān*) [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 Mahdī on several occasions. Abū Saʿīd al-Ġannābī, one of the founding fathers of the *daʿwa* in Baḥrayn, claimed to be acting on behalf of the expected Mahdī who was to appear in 300/912³. The unfulfilled expectations of the adherents quite probably caused internal frustration within the *daʿwa*, which may have contributed to the assassination of Abū Saʿīd and other leaders of the movement in the summer of 300/913⁴.

Then his second successor in the leadership of the Baḥrayn community, his son Abū Ṭāhir, prophesied the Mahdī'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 Qarmaṭī *dāʿīs* in Northern Iran⁵.

As the much awaited date was drawing near, the Qarmaṭīs increased their offensive activity against the dominions of the Caliphate. They embarked upon a series of raids against Southern Iraq and pillaging the *ḥaġġ* caravans returning from Mecca, and in 315/927 they even made an attempt, unsuccessful though it was, at seizing Baghdad. As a result of the advances of "the Mahdī's messengers" in Southern Iraq, the local partisans of the Mahdī revealed their allegiance in the *Sawād* of Kūfa, attaching exaggerated expectations to the personality of Abū Ṭāhir. They said that the Truth had appeared and the Mahdī had resurrected: the ʿAbbāsids had come to their end, as had *fuqahāʾ*, *qurrāʾ* and *ahl al-ḥadīth*. "We have not come to establish another dynasty, but to abolish *šarīʿa*" — they claimed; and they announced the realm of the Mahdī, and collected the poll-tax, but government troops very soon suppressed this uprising⁶. Afterwards, at the beginning of 317/929, the Qarāmiṭa unexpectedly re-

³ Abū Saʿīd's prophecies on the Mahdī (ʿAbdalġabbār, *Taṭbūt* II, 379, 381):

قال إنه رسول الأمين الإمام حجة الله على خلقه وهو محمد بن عبد الله بن محمد بن الحنفية [sic] وهو مقيم في بعض هذه الجبال وإنه في سنة ثلاثمائة للهجرة [912] يخرج ويملك الأرض كلها. وكان هذا القول والوعد من أبي سعيد في سنتي نيف وثمانين ومائتين للهجرة [892].

⁴ al-Masʿūdī, *Tanbih* 394; an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XXV, 243; Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz* VI, 61; Maqrīzī, *Ittīʿāz* I, 164. Cf. Halm 1991: 225.

⁵ On the prophecies of Abū Ṭāhir: ʿAbdalġabbār, *Taṭbūt* 381; al-Baġdādī, *Farq* 287. Cf. de Goeje 1886: 122ff. The expectation of the Mahdī is also reflected in a propagandistic poem by Abū Ṭāhir. In it he designates himself as the one who summons to obey the Mahdī. The fragments of the poem: al-Birūnī, *Āṭār* 214; al-Baġdādī, *Farq* 287. Cf. de Goeje 1886: 113–115; Madelung 1959: 79ff; Naššār 1977: II, 341–342; Halm 1991: 229.

⁶ On the details of the military events: Miskawayhi, *Tag̡arib* I, 172–177. Cf. Bowen 1975: 266–275; Halm 1991: 226–228. On the *baqliyya* revolt in the *Sawād* of Kūfa: ʿArib, *Šila* 132ff; 137; 162; ʿAbdalġabbār, *Taṭbūt* II, 383. Cf. Madelung 1959: 82–84; Halm 1991: 227–228.

turned to Baḥrayn, where construction works on a fortified "refuge" (*dār al-ḥiğra*), the prospective residence of the awaited Mahdī, had been completed near al-Aḥsā⁷.

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-Aḥsā⁸. It is these disastrous events that lead us along to the obscure incidents in Ramaḍān 319/September–October 931 when Abū Tāhir handed over the power to a young stranger from Iṣfahān, 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 Qarāmīta. He initiated his explanations for the events by stating that an impostor had appeared among the Qarmaṭīs in 319/930, who then succeeded in making himself recognized as the much-awaited "maitre de la chose" (*ṣāhib al-amr*). However, his conclusion that this adventurer could get recognition as the emissary of the Fātimid 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 Fātimids by the Qarmaṭīs.

The Mahdī'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 Naššār (1977: II, 343–344), Zakkār (1987: I, 152–154) and Bazzūn (1988: 188–196)¹⁰ who analysed this issue in merit. Particularly surprising is the fact that the renowned Ismāʿīlī scholars Tāmir and Ġālib entirely avoid mentioning the episode in their relevant writings.

⁷ On the *dār al-ḥiğra*: Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Muntazam* VI, 326.14–15:

لما رجع القرمطي [Abū Tāhir] من سفره بنى دارا سماها دار الهجرة ودعا إلى المهدي.
Cf. Tābit, *Aḥbār al-Qarāmīta* I, 223; Ibn Tağribirdī, *Nuğūm* III, 220.

As Medina, the *dār al-ḥiğra* of the Prophet, was the place of the foundation of Islam, for the Ismāʿīlīs the *dār al-ḥiğra* was the residence of the Mahdī and the place of the foundation of his religion. (Cf. Madelung 1956: 81ff)

⁸ ʿAbdalġabbār, *Taḥbūt* II, 384–386; on the different opinions about the events in Mekka: Sha'bān 1977: 167ff; Naššār 1977: 339–340; Zakkār 1987: I, 153; Kennedy 1989: 290ff.

⁹ Concerning his views, he told: "I am, I hope, not too far off the mark in suggesting that the adventurer from Iṣfahān claimed to be Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl reappearing from his century-old hiding and that he was for a time accepted as such by the Qarmaṭians of Baḥrayn".

¹⁰ His appraisal on the Mahdī 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 Iṣfahānī. 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 Qarmaṭī 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 Iṣfahān or Ḥurāsān. Some even asserted that he was a descendant of the Persian Kings and described him as a Zoroastrian¹¹.

However, the reports on his appearance are contradictory, confused, and differ radically from one another. One group of sources, represented by Tābit b. Sinān¹², who was followed by Miskawayhi (*Ṭağārib* II, 55–56) and Ibn al-Aṭīr (*Kāmil* VIII, 351–352), states that Abū Ṭāhir was deceived into giving up power by his chief *dā'ī*, Ibn Sanbar, who wanted to use the Iṣfahānī to throw out one of his opponents. Then the Iṣfahānī proceeded to kill some prominent Qarmaṭī leaders and others until he was exposed by Abū Ṭāhir and put to death.

Another, rather more astonishing, version, given by Ibn Rizām¹³ and mostly adapted by ʿAbdalḡabbār (*Ṭaṭbūt* II, 386–88) and partially by Niẓām al-Mulk (*Siyāsatnāme* 287–288), makes Abū Ṭāhir declare that the Iṣfahānī 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

¹¹ Concerning the names of the stranger from Iṣfahān: Miskawayhi, *Ṭağārib* II, 58: *Abū l-Fadl al-Mağūsī*; ʿArib, *Ṣila* 162: *Zakarī al-Ḥurāsānī*; Masʿūdī, *Tanbih* 391: *az-Zakarī min abnā Mulūk al-Aʿāğim min bilād Iṣfahān*; ʿAbdalḡabbār, *Ṭaṭbūt* I, 28: *Dakīra al-Iṣfahānī*; I, 107: *al-Asfar* [the Dressed in yellow]; II, 386–388: *Dakīrat al-Iṣfahānī al-Mağūsī*; Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme* 288: *Zakīra* [the] *Ġabrā* [Zoroastrian from] Iṣfahān; al-Baḡdādī, *Farq* 270 & al-Birūnī, *Āṭār* 213: *Ibn Abī Zakariyyaʿ aṭ-Ṭamāmī al-Iṣfahānī*; Miskawayhi, *Ṭağārib* II, 55; Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Kāmil* VIII, 351; ʿUyūn IV, 389; an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XXV, 302: *al-Iṣfahānī*; Tābit, *Aḡbār al-Qarāmīta* I, 225: *aṣ-Safawī Dū n-Nūr* [from] *Iṣfahān*.

¹² Tābit, *Aḡbār al-Qarāmīta* I, 225–226:

ان رجلا منهم [من القرامطة] يدعى ابن سنبر من خواص أبي سعيد والمطلعين على سره له عدو من القرامطة اسمه أبو حفص الشريك، فقص ابن سنبر الى اصبهان لصاحب له هناك يدعى الصفوي ذو النور، فتكلم معه وقال له: بما إني واقت على أسرار أبي سعيد وغوامض أحوال القرامطة وعلومهم وإشاراتهم، أريد أن أرشدك الى ذلك كله، حتى أجعلك سيدا عليهم يطيعونك فيما تأمر وينتهون بنهيك بشرط أن تقتل عدوي أبا حفص الشريك.

¹³ Ibn Rizām, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭāʿī al-Kūfī, how wrote before 345/956 and his treatise, the *Kitāb fī radd ʿalā al-ismāʿiliyya* has been lost but parts of it have been preserved by various scholars.

the like. After a while Abū Ṭāhir 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 Qarāmiṭa returned from their campaign in Northern Mesopotamia in 316/928 (‘Arīb, *Ṣila* 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 Qarāmiṭa. According to the explanation found in one of the reports (Tābit, *Ahbār al-Qarāmiṭa* 255), Ibn Sanbar had initiated him into some secrets which Abū Ṭāhir had entrusted him alone and had instructed the youth thus: “Go to Abū Ṭāhir 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 Ṭāhir 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 *dā‘ī* Ibn Sanbar himself, who therefore brought him before Abū Ṭāhir. In this passage, there is a mention of a sign by which the Iṣfahānī was able to deceive Abū Ṭāhir and his brothers into believing that he was the “Expected One”.

According to al-Bīrūnī (*Ātār* 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 Gāmasp 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

¹⁴ ‘Arīb, *Ṣila* 193.2–3; al-Bīrūnī, *Ātār* 213.1–2; Miskawayhi, *Tagārib* II, 55.15–18.

¹⁵ Miskawayhi, *Tagārib* II, 55–56:

امض الى أبي طاهر وعرفه أنك الرجل الذي كان أبوه وهو يدعوان اليه فإذا هو سألك عن العلامات والدليل أظهرت له هذه الأسرار.

¹⁶ Tābit, *Ahbār al-Qarāmiṭa* 225:

فقال أبو طاهر هذا الذي ندعو اليه فأطاعوه ودانوا له.

Miskawayhi, *Tagārib* II, 56.4–5:

وقال [أبو طاهر] لأصحابه: هذا هو الذي كنت أدعوكم اليه والأمر له.

(Cf. ‘Uyūn IV, 389.14–15; Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Kāmil* VIII, 351.11–12; an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XXV, 302.18)

¹⁷ ‘Arīb, *Ṣila* 163.2–4:

فلما نظر [عريفه] الى قوة كلامه [زكري الخراساني] وجرأته هابه وأمسك عنه وأنهو خبره الى الجنابي.
al-Bīrūnī, *Ātār* 313:

كان [ابن أبي زكرياء الطمامي] غلاما فاجرا ومواجرا.

(Cf. Miskawayhi, *Tagārib* II, 59.14)

Persian kings¹⁸. Iṣfahān, 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 aṣ-Ṣafawī Dū n-Nūr¹⁹ ('The Pure Possessor of Light') or al-Aṣfar²⁰ ('[Dressed in] Yellow'/'The Persian'). As Madelung has observed (1988: 97ff), the Iṣfahānī 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 Qarāmiṭa²¹. It is well-known that the settled population of Baḥrayn, formally a province of the Persian Empire, consisted largely of Persians and Jews²². Abū Sa'īd, the founder of the *da'wa*, was a Persian by origin from Ganāfa, a town on the coast of Fārs, and he was active there as a *dā'ī* before being sent to Baḥrayn²³. Some of his grandsons bore the names of Persian kings: Sābūr/Šāpūr b. Abī Ṭāhir, and Kisrā/Hosrō b. Abī l-Qāsim (Ibn Hawqal, *Sūrat 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 Ṭāhir could perhaps expect a certain amount of sympathy for some aspects of Persian religious traditions among his adherents, his transformation of the Mahdī into a restorer of the Persian religion and kingship would have needed a complete refusal of much traditional Ismā'īlī doctrine and the expectations concerning the seventh Speaker Prophet, the Mahdī (Madelung 1988: 98). On the other hand, the Qarāmiṭa 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 Ṭāhir (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 Iṣfahānī there is an eyewitness report, that of Abū Ṭāhir's personal physician, a certain Ibn Ḥamdān, which Ibn Rizām

¹⁸ Mas'ūdī, *Tanbih* 361.15–16; 'Abdalḡabbār, *Taḥbūt* I, 107; II, 387; Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme* 288.

¹⁹ Ṭābit, *Ahbār al-Qarāmiṭa* 225.8.

²⁰ Miskawayhi, *Taḡārib* II, 58.4; 'Abdalḡabbār, *Taḥbūt* I, 107.9.

²¹ al-Bīrūnī, *Āṭār* 313:

وسن لهم هذا الغلام أن تشق بطون الموتى وتغسل وتحشى خمرًا وقطع يد من أطفأ نارًا بيده وقطع لسان من أطفأها بنفخه والفجور بالغلما... وأمرهم بعبادة النيران وتعظيمها ولعن من مضى من الأنبياء وأصحابهم فأنتهم كانوا محتالين ضالين.

²² Naḡm 1973: 46–49. Cf. de Goeje 1886: 36.

²³ al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz* 107. Cf. Madelung 1988: 97.

(Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* 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'īlī da'wa*.

Ibn Ḥamdān reports²⁴ a clear description of the young man's appearance, as follows: "We came to the palace of the Qarmaṭī 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 l-Faḍl the Zoroastrian". After this the doctor tells us how the power was handed over: "The people, including the Qarmaṭī 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 *dā'īs* have been telling you is null and void and false, all the talk about Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad! 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, Muḥammad, even 'Alī and his descendants»".

In another version based on Ibn Rizām, that of 'Abdalḡabbār²⁵, 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."

²⁴ Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* II, 58.1–12 [the spot of the events is in the port of al-Qaṭīf on the Gulf]:
فخرجت فإذا الناس يهرعون الى أن أتينا دار أبي طاهر سليمان القرمطي فإذا بخلام حسن الوجه درى اللون خفيف العارضين له نحو عشرين سنة وعليه عمامة صفراء تعميم العجم وعليه ثوب أصفر وفي وسطه منديل وهو راكب فرسا سهباء اسمه أبو الفضل المجوسي والناس قيام وأبو طاهر القرمطي وأخوته حوله فصاح أبو طاهر بأعلاء صوته: يا معشر الناس من عرفني فقد عرفني ومن لم يعرفني فأني أبو طاهر سليمان بن الحسن اعلموا أنا كنا وإياكم حمير وقد من الله علينا بهذا (وأشار الى الغلام) هذا ربي وربكم والهي الهكم وكلنا عباده والأمر اليه وهو يملكنا كلنا... ثم قال أبو طاهر اعلموا يا معشر الناس أن الدين قد ظهر وهو دين أبينا آدم وكل دين كنا عليه فهو باطل وجميع ما توصلت به الدعاة اليكم فهو باطل وزور من ذكر موسى وعيسى ومحمد إنما الدين دين آدم الأول وهؤلاء كلهم دجالون محتالون فالعنوهم. فلعنهم الناس.

²⁵ 'Abdalḡabbār, *Taḡbūt* II, 386.10–12:
[وقال أبو طاهر] وهو سر كنا نكتمه ومن قبلنا منذ ستين سنة واليوم قد أظهرناه وهذا الهنا والهكم وربنا وربكم يعني ذكيرة الإصفهاني فإن عاقب فيحق وإن عفا فيغضل.

As witnessed by these passages, the innovation of the Iṣfahānī consisted mainly of the abolition of the religious laws. The other sources²⁶ which are independent from the doctor's statements confirm that he did declare the religious law abolished. Madelung²⁷ observed that the antinomian tendencies that characterized a major part of the Ismā'īlī 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 report²⁸ further states that the Iṣfahānī 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 Qarmaṭī 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 Qarāmiṭa. A century later quite similar ideas were to emerge among the Druse, who were also Ismā'īlī heretics (Bryer 1975: 54-56; 1976: 21ff).

There were already Adamite sects in late antique gnosticism, which is one of the roots of Ismā'īliyya. 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 sinning²⁹. The Qarmaṭīs in their turn worshipped, completely naked, the visible Creator-God, the focus of circumambulation (*ṭarwāf*) being him in the same manner as the Ka'ba 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 Iṣfahānī Mahdī lasted for only eighty days. Several leaders of the *da'wa* were dismissed from power and killed by his order. Therefore, those who had doubts about

²⁶ Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme* 288:

و یفرمود تا بر پیغامبر ان آشکارا لعنت کردند.

[He commanded public cursing of the prophets.]

Cf. al-Bīrūnī, *Āṭār* 313:

ولعن [أبو زكرياء] من مضى الأنبياء وأصحابهم فأنهم كانوا محتالين ضالين.

²⁷ Madelung 1979: 76ff. Cf. Halm 1988: 203.

²⁸ Miskawayhi, *Ṭaḡārib* II, 58.12-14:

وكان أبو الفضل المجوسي (يعني الغلام الامرد) قد سن لهم اللواط ونكاح الأخوات وأمر يقتل الامرد الممتنع وكان أبو طاهر ليطوف هو والناس عراة به ويقولون "إلهنا عز وجل".

Cf. al-Bīrūnī, *Āṭār* 313.2-5; 'Abdalḡabbār, *Ṭaḡbūt* 387.3-7; Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme* 288.2-8.

²⁹ On the Adamite religion and sects: Halm 1988: 203; 1991: 233.

the authenticity of the Mahdī pressed Abū Ṭāhir to put the Iṣfahānī to a test. After the falseness of his claims were proven, he was put to death³⁰.

The Qarmatī community was shocked by the episode; while rumours were fast spreading among allied tribes. Abū Ṭāhir 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 Ṭāhir had told them and return to the previous teaching according to which they were preparing the way for the Mahdī 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 (*ḥaqq*)". It is this utterance that Halm³² claims provides the key to both the previous disturbances in Mecca and the puzzle of the Mahdī'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 Ṭāhir and Ibn Sanbar arranged this act deliberately so that it should facilitate the appearance of the expected Mahdī. De Blois (1986: 18ff) points out that a common feature of the two groups of sources is that they represent Abū Ṭāhir as if he had been deceived in supposing the Iṣfahānī 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 Iṣfahānī as a puppet created by Abū Ṭāhir, 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

³⁰ On the different versions of the pseudo-Mahdī's exposure: Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* 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-Mahdī (Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* II, 59.8-9):

فقال [أبو الفضل المجوسي]: لا تعجلا علي ودعاني أخدم دوابكما إلى أن يأتي أبي فإنني سرقت منه العلامة فجرى في رأيه.

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

قال لهم: إن هذا الغلام ورد يكذب سرقه من معدن حق وعلامة مؤه بها فاطعناه لذلك... فقتلناه.

³¹ Abdalğabbār, *Taḥbūt* II, 388.3-5:

وقال لهم ابن سنبر: إن شئتم أن تذهبوا فاذهبوا، فما نعرفكم السبب [واقعة] ثم قال لهم: يا قوم لا تفضحونا وأنفسكم، ولا تشمتوا بنا المسلمين وبكم، وارجعوا عن جميع ما قاله لكم أبو طاهر إلى ما كنتم عليه وكنا من قبل ذلك، من أنا أصحاب المهدي؛ والدعاة إلى المهدي، والمؤمنون والشيعية.

(Cf. Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* II, 59.14-17.)

³² Abdalğabbār, *Taḥbūt* II, 388.6-7; Miskawayhi, *Tağārib* II, 59.15-16:

فإنه كنا نحدث أن ستكون للمؤمنين زلة وهي هذه...

(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 Ṭāhir had to resort to these measures. We opine that the antecedents reach back to the times prior to his ascension to power. *ad-Dahabī*³³ 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 Ṭāhir, and a group of people rallied to Abū Ṭāhir'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 Ṭāhir, 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-Dahabī*³⁴ furthermore indicates that exaggerated expectations were attached to Abū Ṭāhir's personality by his followers, like those we mentioned in connection with the uprising in the *Sawād* of Kūfa. He completes his account by saying that, "given no more delay by God, [Abū Ṭāhir] felt that his downfall was near, so he handed his power over to Abū l-Faḍl al-Maḡūsī al-ʿAḡamī". The charisma of Abū Ṭāhir 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 Qarmaṭīs over their unfulfilled expectations of the Mahdī's arrival. This situation heightened the tension between the two opposing factions of the leadership. Abū Ṭāhir had to face this situation immediately after his sudden return to Baḥrayn from the Baghdad raid.

At this stage, we should definitely mention two leading figures of the *da'wa* 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 Ṭāhir, who even married into the family. Due to this situation, the

³³ Miskawayhi, *Taḡārib* II, 57.13-16:

فلما كان في سنة ٣٠٥ [916] سلم سعيد الأمر إلى أبيه طاهر فاستجاب لأبي طاهر خلق وافتتنوا به بسبب أنهم دلهم على كنوز كان والده أطلعها عليها وحده فوقع لهم أنه علم عينا وتخبر موضعها عن الطحراء وقال: أريد أن أحفر هنا عينا. فقيل له: هنا لا ينبع ماء فخالفهم فحفر فنبع الماء. فازدادت فتنتهم به.

³⁴ *Ibid.* II, 57.17-22:

وزعم بعض أصحابه أنه [أبو طاهر] ومنهم من زعم أنه المسيح ومنهم من قال "هو نبي" وقيل "هو المهدي" وقيل "هو الممهد للمهدي" ... وثم لم يمهل الله بعد ذلك [الحوادث في مكة] فلما أشفى على التلفت سلم ملكه إلى أبي الفضل ابن زكريا المجوسى العجمى [sic].

Sanbar clan always had the upper hand in the affairs of the Qarāmiṭa, 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 Ṭāhir, 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 Ḥaḥṣ aš-Šarik. Another set of sources (‘Abdalḡabbār, *Taṭbīt* 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 Ṭāhir, seizing the initiative as the head of the opposition later when events took to an inauspicious course, and coercing Abū Ṭāhir to put the Iṣfahānī to a test. The other leading personality at issue is Abū Ḥaḥṣ ‘Umar ibn Zurqān aš-Šarik, who was none other than the husband of Abū Ṭāhir’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 (Mas‘ūdī, *Tanbīh* 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 sources³⁵ informs us that Abū Ḥaḥṣ 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 possession³⁶. 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 Mahdī’s intermezzo.

In final assessment, our opinion is that Abū Ṭāhir, 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-Mahdī. Because of the eschatological nature of the whole movement, such a solution is an integral part of the requisites of the Ismā‘īli-

³⁵ ‘Abdalḡabbār, *Taṭbīt* II, 385.7–12:

وأبو حفص عمر ابن زرقان صهر أبي سعيد واقف حذاء البيت والسيف يأخذ الناس، وهو على فرسه يضحك ويتلو: “لإيلاف قريش” حتى [وصل] الى قوله: “وأمنهم من خوف” قال: ما آمنهم من خوفنا، ظهر الباطن يا أهل مكة، حجوا الى البحرين، وهاجروا الى الأحساء من قبل أن نطمس وجوها فنردها على أديبارها.

Miskawayhi, *Ṭaḡārib* II, 59.1–4; Niḡām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme* 229; al-Ma‘arrī, *Risāla* III, 30.

³⁶ ‘Abdalḡabbār, *Taṭbīt* II, 387.12–15:

وقتل بني زرقان وبني سلمان ومن وجوه عسكره... وأمرهم [الاصيهاني] بأن يعرضوا عليه نساءهم من بيت أبي سعيد وغيره فعرضوهن فاختر منهم من أراد فكان فيمن أختار زينب بنت أبي سعيد امرأة عمر بن زرقان وقد كان قتل زوجها وكان له منها ابن فأمر بكيرة أبا طاهر بذنب به فأخذته أبو طاهر خاله فذبحه.

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 *Ismā'īliyya*: "This was a political movement masquerading as a religious and philosophical one. Though there were *isma'īlite* 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 *Qarāmiṭa* in *Baḥrayn* and weakened their influence over the *Ismā'īli* communities in the east. However hard did *Abū Ṭāhir* try to propitiate them, many of his tribal allies left *Baḥrayn* to serve during the following decades in the armies of various local rulers³⁷. The movement's ideologists in the Eastern territories tried to restore the ideological unity of *Qarmaṭī Ismā'īlism*, 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 *Baḥraynī Qarāmiṭa* 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 *da'wa*, under the leadership of *Abū l-Qāsim Sa'īd*, eldest son of the community's founder, *Abū Sa'īd*.

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 Ḥawqal* (*Ṣūrat al-ard* 25), one fifth of the taxes was set aside for the "Lord of the Time", and *al-Muqaddasī* (*Taqṣīm* 94) mentions a treasury of the *Mahdī* in the capital of *Baḥrayn*, in *al-Aḥsā'*. A century later, *Nāṣir-i Ḥosrō*³⁸ reported

³⁷ On the conciliatory attempts of the *Qarmaṭī* leadership: 'Abdalḡabbār, *Taṭbīṭ* II, 388-389.

³⁸ *Nāṣir-i Ḥosrō*, *Safarnāme* 82.12-15:

أبو سعيد ايشانرا گفته است که من باز پيش شما آيم يعنى بعد از وفات وگور او بشهر لخصا اندر است و مشهدى نيكو جهت او ساخته اند

[*Abū Sa'īd* 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:

وپیوسته اسپى تنك بسته و با طوق و سرافسار بدر كورخانهء ابو سعيد به نوبت بداشته باشند روز و شب يعنى چون ابو سعيد بر خيزد برآن اسپ نشيند و كويند ابو سعيد گفته است. فرزندان خویش را که چون من بیایم شما باز نشناسید نشان آن باشند که مرا باشمشیر من بر کردن بزئید اگر من باشم در حال زنده شوم و آن قاعده بدان سبب نهاده است

the Qarāmiṭa of Baḥrayn 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-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī³⁹, that the community had continued to await the Šarīf Abū Sa‘īd’s return from the dead, as he himself had promised. The old idea of the Mahdī had, in about a century, crystallized as a myth, and some facets of the theocratic attributes of the Imām-Mahdī were inherited by the founder of the *da‘wa* in the region, as was bound to happen in other areas and times in a Šī‘ite milieu. It is not clear, however, whether Abū Sa‘īd had in fact replaced Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl as the expected Mahdī for the Qarāmiṭa of Baḥrayn.

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تاكسى دعوى بو سعيدي نكند.

[A horse outfitted with collar and crown is kept always tied by the tomb of Abū Sa‘īd, and a watch is continually maintained day and night for such time as he should rise again and mount the horse. Abū Sa‘īd 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-Ma‘arrī, *Risāla* III, 235:

وحكى لى أن للقرامطة بالأحساء بيتا يزعمون أن إمامهم يخرج منه ويقيمون على باب ذلك البيت فرسا بسرج ولجام ويقولون للمهج والطغام: “هذا الفرس لركاب المهدي، يركبه متى ظهر”.

[It was said to me that the Qarāmiṭa had a house in al-Aḡsā’ from which their Imām 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 Mahdī. He will sit on it when he appears”.]

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