

DANIEL DE SMET, *LES FATIMIDES. DE L'ÉSOTÉRISME EN ISLAM*, CERF, PARIS 2022, (ISLAM. NOUVELLES APPROCHES), 265 PP., ISBN: 9782204151535.

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In recent decades, our knowledge of the political and religious history of the Fatimid Caliphate has increased considerably, thanks to fundamental works by authors such as Wilferd Madelung, Farhad Daftary, Michael Brett, Paul Walker, Shainool Jiwa and other important scholars who are part of the praiseworthy Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. *Les Fatimides. De l'ésotérisme en Islam* by Daniel De Smet, on the one hand, is placed within the framework of this new flowering of studies on the Fatimids; on the other hand, it presents itself as a splendid novelty, both in terms of content and methodology. The book collects and reworks a series of essays by the author – one of the greatest contemporary authorities on Ismaili thought – on Fatimid themes with a very precise common thread, which primarily concerns the field of philosophical-religious thought but at the same time touches on strictly historical-political topics, helping to clarify many historiographical enigmas and providing new keys to understanding the phenomenon of Ismailism in power.

Les Fatimides. De l'ésotérisme en Islam includes an introduction (p. 11–30), a rich bibliography (p. 221–248), a list of Ismaili imams and Fatimid caliphs (p. 249–250), an *index nominum* (p. 251–258) and an index of Arabic terms (p. 259–262). The book is structured into eleven chapters (p. 31–219), guiding the reader through the doctrinal and political history of an Islamic state ruled by an *elite* of initiates. It places particular emphasis on seemingly marginal topics – such as semi-legendary traditions, ceremonies, festivals, cult of relics, food customs, and both ancient and modern myths – which, nevertheless, provide new perspectives on fundamental issues. These include the relations between Shiites and Sunnis in the Fatimid Caliphate, the importance of Druze documentation in understanding the most problematic aspects of Ismaili philosophical-religious thought, and the exchange between the Ismaili and Druze intellectual elites and the medieval, modern, and contemporary West.

In the introduction, the author outlines a brief history of the Ismaili phenomenon from both a historical-political and a philosophical-religious point of view. He clearly and distinctly highlights the controversial points of the

tradition – such as the issue of the so-called ‘*taqiyya* of names’, the split between Ismailis and Qarmatians, the Druze revolt – at the origin of the ‘imbroglio’ connected to the formation of the Fatimid dynasty.

The first chapter of the work (p. 31–51) focuses on the question of Ismaili Shiite propaganda in Fatimid Egypt, pointing out the root of what Henry Corbin calls the «drama of the Fatimids» – that is, the need to make an esoteric community compatible with the official organization of a state. In particular, De Smet analyzes the various forms of Ismaili preaching (from exoteric preaching to the various levels of esoteric preaching), the problem of *taqiyya*, and the complex relations between the Ismaili elite and the Sunni substratum of Egypt.

Chapters two (p. 53–63) and three (p. 65–77) are dedicated to festivals and games, used by the Fatimid caliphs as an instrument of propaganda and a vehicle of consensus. In this regard, De Smet highlights the different role of specifically Shiite festivals (‘*Āshūrā*’, the feast of Ghadīr Khumm) compared to festivals that involve the whole *umma*, such as the feast of the Prophet’s birth (*Mawlid*), which, although originally from the Shiite tradition, over time became one of the most important Egyptian festivals even for Sunnis. In addition, the author dwells on the role of games (also destined to great fortune in the post-Fatimid epoch), whose ideological function, in the Fatimid context, is to tacitly encourage transgression of Prophetic law (which calls for avoiding frivolity) and to promote the typically Ismaili concept of the divinity of futile things.

Chapter four (p. 80–94) deals with the apparently specious but, in reality, fundamental problem of calculating the beginning and end of the fast during the month of Ramaḍān. Following the events related to the imposition of the Ismaili calculation (the Sunni tradition was based on simple observation), De Smet shows, on the one hand, how the Fatimid intellectual elite perceived the Ismaili method as being linked to Greek wisdom and a rational worldview, and on the other hand, how the oscillation between tolerance and imposition of the Ismaili method reflects the various attitudes of the Fatimid caliphs towards their Sunni subjects.

The fifth (p. 95–113) and sixth chapters (p. 115–129) contain a very interesting analysis of the complex of traditions concerning the most important ‘relics’ of the Islamic world: the corpse of the prophet Muḥammad and the head of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, the famous Shiite martyr of the battle of Karbalā’. Using archaeological, epigraphic, hagiographic, and historical sources, the author highlights the political use of the relics (especially in an anti-Abbasid function) implemented by the Fatimid elite, and in particular by the caliph al-Ḥakim, the most enigmatic and interesting caliph of the dynasty, to whom we also owe some mysterious food prohibitions discussed in the seventh chapter of De Smet’s book (p. 131–150). The author considers these dietary rules as part of an Ismaili ‘messianic’ program based on food taboos of Pythagorean and Neoplatonic origin.

The eighth chapter (p. 151–168) and the ninth chapter (p. 169–187) are dedicated to topics concerning the Druze cult. In particular, the eighth chapter, starting from the question of the various places of worship of the sect, examines in a broad and detailed way some fundamental characteristics of the Druze rites, highlighting the close relations between Druze and Ismaili doctrines, while the following chapter deconstructs the belief, very widespread in the academic field, of a supposed Druze cult of the Golden Calf.

The last two chapters of the book (chapter ten, p. 189–203, chapter eleven, p. 205–219) respectively address the idea, initially widespread in the West and then transplanted in the Druze world, of a supposed Druze origin of European Freemasonry – where esoteric motifs are combined with elements of colonial propaganda – and the famous ‘theory of the three impostors’, which the author masterfully traces back to anti-Ismaili pamphlets composed within the Sunni sphere.

Even the simple summary of the contents of De Smet’s book highlights the breadth and variety of the topics covered, the sophistication of its analysis and the usefulness of this kind of work, positioned at the intersection of history, philology and philosophy. An innovative and unique book, destined to become a classic of the Ismaili and Fatimid studies.