

British Foundation for the Study of Arabia Monographs No. 12

Series editors: D. Kennet & St J. Simpson

# Navigated Spaces, Connected Places

Proceedings of Red Sea Project V  
held at the University of Exeter, 16–19 September 2010

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BAR International Series 2346  
2012

Published by

Archaeopress  
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
England  
bar@archaeopress.com  
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2346  
British Foundation for the Study of Arabia Monographs No. 12

*Navigated Spaces, Connected Places: Proceedings of Red Sea Project V held at the University of Exeter,  
16–19 September 2010*

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ISBN 978 1 4073 0929 3

Front cover: Detail from a Gujerati map of the Red Sea, drawn by an inhabitant of Kutch. Given the Alex Jones by a pilot in June 1835. © Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

Printed in England by 4edge, Hockley

DTP by Athena Trakadas

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# The Fatimids and the Red Sea (969-1171)

David Bramoullé

*“The sea of al-Qulzūm [i.e. the Red Sea] stands within the territory of Egypt. It [the Red Sea] has this territory on its West, its East and on its North”.*<sup>1</sup>

While this statement, made in the 1030s by al-Qudā‘ī, a Fatimid administrator, clearly describes the Red Sea as an internal sea penetrating territories under Fatimid control, the policy and the actions of the Ismaili masters of Egypt in this area remain poorly known. In a previous article, Bernard Lewis writes that, upon their arrival in Egypt in 969, the Fatimids deliberately tried to redirect the continental trade routes linking Asia and the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and Aden in particular. Lewis assumes that the Ismaili predication, the *da‘wa*, was orientated towards that goal in order to weaken the Abbasids.<sup>2</sup> In his *India Book*, recently edited by Professor Morderchai A. Friedman, Professor Shelomo Dov Goitein develops another theory. He explains that economic expansion in North Africa during Fatimid times (909-969) created the condition for Jewish traders particularly active in the Red Sea to search for new outlets for Maghrebi products.<sup>3</sup> The Ismaili propagandists would then have benefited from this economic boom in developing the Fatimid *da‘wa* in these same areas. Both theories, as attractive as they might look, cannot really be confirmed or refuted. In any event, it seems obvious that the Fatimid conquest of Egypt was an opportunity for them to take control of the shores of the Red Sea and create direct links with this new maritime space. It also allowed them to consolidate the long-term relationship they had established with the territories along this sea, from remote and mountainous Yemen to the sacred Hijaz.

The sources – Arabic chronicles, the Geniza letters, and Fatimid official correspondence with the Ṣulayḥid sultans in Yemen – show what might be seen as a reinforcement of Fatimid relations with the Red Sea region. The texts report the strengthening of relations between the two areas during a period when the dynasty, after having experienced a period of great power, was increasingly challenged by the Crusades. During the two centuries of Fatimid power in Egypt, the Mediterranean context changed totally: the Egyptian civil war in the 1060s, the advance of the Seljuk Turks into Syria, and finally the Crusades, changed considerably the first objective of this Ismaili dynasty. The ‘Baghdad dream’ and the subjugation of Abbasid Iraq, which was the Fatimids’ major political goal since 909,

vanished, and the rulers in Cairo had to adopt a *realpolitik* dictated by a survival instinct.

The texts invite us to wonder about the underlying logic that steered these closer relations, and try to determine whether the Fatimids really had a policy concerning the Red Sea, or whether they just let the ‘invisible hand of the market’ rule it for them.

From 969 to 1073, the Red Sea does not seem to have been of much interest to the Fatimids. During this period, the Fatimid imams were engaged in an ideological struggle with the Abbasids, and the main territory for this battle was the Hijaz and its holy Muslim cities. The period after 1073, and especially the 12<sup>th</sup> century, can be considered as a time of pragmatism. The ideology that seems to have dictated Fatimid actions since the very beginning of the dynasty disappeared under the extensive reforms of Badr al-Jamālī. Keeping the Red Sea open for trade became the new goal of Fatimid interventions in the area.

## **The Fatimids and the Red Sea: The Time of Ideology (969-1073)**

### *The Propagation of the Da‘wa*

After 969, it was the territories bordering the Red Sea, especially the Hijaz, which drove Fatimid interest to aim for more than control of the maritime space. The Fatimids wanted ardently to increase their ideological influence in the Muslim world, rather than their power over a new maritime space.

Following the creation of the Fatimid Caliphate, the Ismaili imams sought to expand their influence to the symbolic places of the Muslim world. Taking control, even theoretically, over Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities of the Islamic world, emerged as a key issue for this dynasty, which represented a minority in the Sunni world. Entering Egypt, al-Mu‘izz (953-975) and his successors wanted to keep alive the traditional adage that the “Hijaz has always been under the control of Egypt because [Egypt] is the source of its supplies.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Fatimids never ceased to seek having the Friday prayer proclaimed in the holy cities in their names, even if they had to use military force to achieve it, as in 990.<sup>5</sup> As al-Qudā‘ī said (as cited in the introductory sentence of this article), they reached their goal, and by the 1030s almost

1. Al-Qudā‘ī, quoted in al-Maqrīzī 2002, 1: 40.

2. Lewis 1949-50: 50-4; 1972: 287-95.

3. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 22.

4. Al-Muqaddasī: 105.

5. Al-Maqrīzī 2002, 2: 16. Surūr 1957: 14.

all the territories bordering the Red Sea were in Fatimid hands.<sup>6</sup>

Fatimid eyes also turned towards Yemen, where the *da'wa* had already been established in a remote area of the country in the 1040s, when 'Alī al-Ṣulayhī (d. 1067) officially called the prayer for the Fatimid caliph.<sup>7</sup> Slowly al-Ṣulayhī took control of the major cities of the area. Zabīd fell into his hands in 1061, and Aden followed two years later. From this moment until the final Fatimid collapse, there were pro-Fatimids emirates in Yemen.

The development of the *da'wa* and control over new territories are the two main aspects of the letters exchanged between the caliph al-Mustansir (1036-1094) and the Ṣulayhids. Troubles occurred between two clans fighting for control of Mecca and Medina, and the pilgrimage had to be stopped for several years. 'Alī al-Ṣulayhī was sent to Mecca in order to act in the name of the Fatimid caliph. He gave advice to the caliph as to which local personalities to support.<sup>8</sup> He even had to use his own troops in March 1063, and again in 1064, when the disorder became critical.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Mustansir wished for peace in the Hijaz for the security of pilgrims.<sup>10</sup> After several years of interruption due to insecurity, the resumption of the yearly pilgrimage brought credit to the Fatimids, and was obviously a victory over the Abbasids. By way of gratitude to 'Alī al-Ṣulayhī, al-Mustansir gave him the honorific title of *Support of the Caliphate* (*'umdat al-khilafa*), one of the greatest honorific titles of the time. When 'Alī died, his son, al-Mukarram, followed the path of his father in the Hijaz and became the armed wing of the Fatimids in this area. Nonetheless, the situation was about to change. As early as 1069, the prayer was no longer called in the name of the Fatimids in Mecca and Medina, but was called in the name of the Abbasids: the Iraqi caliphs took advantage of the critical situation of the Fatimids in Egypt, where civil war had been undermining the caliph's authority since 1065. The Abbasids also benefited from the expansion of the Seljuk Turks.<sup>11</sup> In spite of all, however, the Ṣulayhids remained the Fatimids' armed force in Yemen. Moreover, after 1067, they were also put in charge of the Ismaili mission in Oman and India.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the civil war in Egypt was shattering the dreams of the dynasty. Al-Mustansir no longer had influence over his army and, in 1069, when the opportunity came to establish an Ismaili enclave in India, the caliph did not encourage his local propagandist to take the last step.<sup>13</sup> Then, in order to avoid 'Alī al-Ṣulayhī discovering the state of dereliction of the caliphate, the caliph repeatedly refused to allow him to come and meet him in Cairo.<sup>14</sup> The caliph's argued that 'Alī's trip to Egypt would allow his enemies to take power in Mecca and in Yemen, where some of his allies were experiencing trouble.<sup>15</sup> Al-Mustansir explained that it was in the highest interest of the dynasty to put out these rebellious sparks. No word exists in this correspondence about the tragic situation in Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Development of Trade: an Alibi?*

During this period, historical sources contain some references to gifts sent to Cairo, or to the products of the *khums* (*'fifth*'), a specific Ismaili tax collected by every propagandist outside of Egypt.<sup>17</sup> No texts give insight into the development of trade between Yemen and Egypt at that moment. That does not mean, however, that there was no trade at all. Before 969, the famous geographer Ibn Ḥawqal pointed out the presence in Suwākin of traders from Persia, as well as a group of merchants from the Rabī'a tribe in the Maghreb, both of whom were still calling the prayer in the name of the Fatimids at that time.<sup>18</sup> The author does not use the word "propagandist" (*dā'ī*, pl: *du'āt*), but the verb of the same root (*yud'ā*). It makes one think that these men were Fatimid missionaries acting under the cover of the commercial activity.<sup>19</sup> Trade was used by many Ismaili propagandists as a pretext to hide their official mission.

At that time, the major port of the Red Sea was al-Qulzum, modern Suez.<sup>20</sup> It was a point of export for barley bound for the holy cities, and for the embarkation of pilgrims. Naṣīr-ī Khusraw, the Persian traveller, went on pilgrimage via al-Qulzum twice during the 1050s. On his second return trip he was even accompanied by the Emir of Mecca.<sup>21</sup> During the 10<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the al-Qulzum route was the most common linking Egypt and the Hijaz: we might also say it was the most official. The sea journey to al-Jār or Jeddah, about 15 days, was very dangerous because of treacherous winds and reefs.<sup>22</sup> The control that the Fatimids were able to establish in Egypt's

6. Al-Muqaddasī: 105.

7. The Palestinian geographer al-Muqaddasī wrote that during the years 980-990, Ismaili propaganda was very active in the Sind area, around the city of Multan, and the Friday sermon, the *khuṭba*, was pronounced in the name of the Fatimid caliphs of Cairo. This lasted until 1010. Al-Muqaddasī: 485; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 1984: 222; Halm 1996: 286-8.

8. *Sijillāt* 4: 38.

9. *Sijillāt* 7: 47; Ibn al-Athīr 1979, Vol. 10: 19; Wiet 1937: 243.

10. Regarding the interruption of the pilgrimage, see *Sijillāt* 3: 34.

11. Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 303.

12. Alī al-Ṣulayhī had first sent his religious judge (*qādī*) Lamak b. Mālik al-Ḥammādī to Egypt in 1061. Al-Ḥammādī stayed for five years in Cairo. There he studied with the chief propagandist (*dā'ī al-du'āt*) of the dynasty; al-Mu'ayyad fi-l-dīn al-Shirāzī. Cf. Al-Mu'ayyad 1949: 102-3; Daftary 1990: 209-10.

13. *Sijillāt*, 60: 196; Hamdānī 1955: 226, 318; Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 303; Halm 1996: 385-92.

14. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 108-9.

15. *Sijillāt*, 3: 34; 4: 38; 7: 47, 60: 196; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 102-10.

16. *Sijillāt*, 41: 140; 60: 196.

17. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 84; Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 222.

18. "*Yud'ā fihā li-ṣāhib al-maghrib*"; Ibn Ḥawqal 1938-39: 48.

19. Ismaili missionaries often took on the appearance of traders in order to travel without attracting too much attention from the Abbasid police. Cf. Stern 1949: 298-307.

20. Ibn Ḥawqal 1939: 53; Al-Muqaddasī 1967: 97, 196. On the word *furḍa*: Dozy 1991, 2: 254-5.

21. Naṣīr-ī Khusraw 2001: text 76, 78, 79-80; tr. 76, 78-80.

22. Concerning these kinds of difficulties, especially around the straits of Tiran and the one of Gubal, see: Al-Muqaddasī 1967: 11-2.

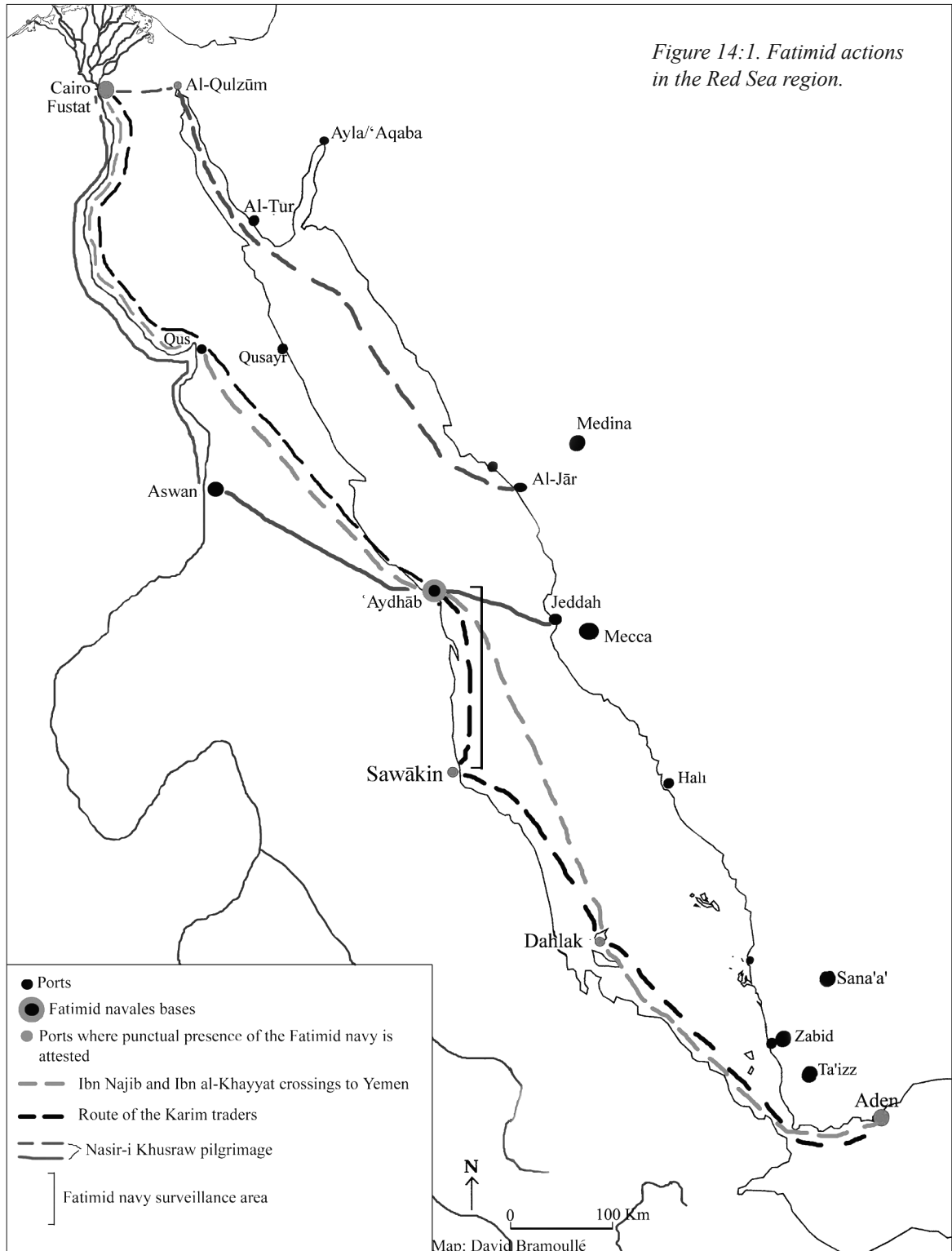


Figure 14:1. Fatimid actions in the Red Sea region.

Upper Sa'īd between 969 and 1050 was associated with the dangers of the trip between al-Qulzum and the Arabian ports, and contributed to the decline of the port, which at the time gave its name to the Red Sea, which was usually called the "Sea of al-Qulzum" (*Baḥr Qulzum*). Even though Naṣīr-i Khusraw travelled to the Arabian Peninsula through this port (Figure 14:1), its decline had started a few years before. During his reign, al-Ḥākīm (996-1021) exempted al-Qulzum's inhabitants from paying tax on boat traffic (*mukūs al-marākib*). This decision could be seen as

a privilege, but it could also mean that by that time the sums levied on boats in the port were so small that the treasury had no real need for the revenue, while the local population was starting to grow poorer.<sup>23</sup>

The ascendant Egyptian port was the southern town of 'Aydhāb. Closer by sea to its Arabian counterparts,

23. Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 15.

‘Aydhāb’s rise began at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it was already known as a modest commercial port, but it was also a transit point for North African pilgrims bound for Jeddah.<sup>24</sup> In August 1050, Naṣīr-ī Khusraw had to stay in this small, dry town as he waited for a suitable wind to sail to Jeddah. He wrote about the customs duties that the Fatimids were levying on merchandise coming from Abyssinia, Zanzibar and Yemen.<sup>25</sup> Once the Ṣulayhīds took control of Yemen, they regularly sent gifts and money to their overlords in Cairo. In 1062, gold, silver, slaves, weapons, amber, musk and handcrafts reached Aswan via ‘Aydhāb.<sup>26</sup> All these elements prove clearly that economic relations did exist before the great growth in trade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but the historical sources give us the impression that the Red Sea trade was not the Fatimids’ main interest. Rather, it was direct control or influence over territories bordering the sea, especially the Hijaz, which drew all the attention of the Egyptian caliphate during this period. That Fatimids levied taxes in al-Qulzum and Aydhāb is not under discussion here. Nothing permits one to say that at that moment the Fatimids tried to have any kind of influence over trade in the Red Sea, as Lewis writes.<sup>27</sup>

The documentation, albeit scanty, gives the impression that between 969 and 1073, ideology and religion prevailed over any other consideration. During these years, Fatimid policy in the Red Sea was very indirect. It consisted essentially in trying to improve their ideological influence over the eastern territories bordering the sea, but the sea in itself did not seem to be of major interest to the dynasty. Between the failure of General al-Basāsīrī’s attempt to take Baghdad in the name of the Fatimid caliph in 1058-1059 and the First Crusade of 1098, the Fatimids underwent a series of changes that forced them to reconsider totally their links with the Red Sea.

### The Red Sea: A Major New Stake for Fatimid Policy (1073-1171)

#### *A Redirected Da‘wa, and a More Active Diplomacy*

A second phase in the relationship between the Fatimids and the Red Sea began with the arrival in Egypt of Badr al-Jamālī. During this period, Fatimid policy had to respond to new objectives.

The change of policy was not immediate. At first, the Hijaz remained highly attractive to the Fatimids: indeed, al-Mustanṣir was perhaps the last of the Fatimids to be inspired by the original theories of Ismaili ideology.<sup>28</sup> Ruling over Mecca was the last dream of this dynasty, which could

no longer pretend to wage universal power over the Muslim world as it did at its beginning. Badr re-established the prayer in the name of the Ismaili imam in Mecca. The caliph asked al-Mukarram to exercise control over the Sharif of Mecca, who played the Fatimid and Abbasid sides against each other in order to retain power in the holy city.<sup>29</sup> Thus, during the 1070s and 1080s, the prayer was alternatively pronounced in the name of the Fatimids and the Abbasids, depending on the political and military context which became more and more unfavourable to the Egyptians.<sup>30</sup> Acting in the name of the Abbasids, the Seljuk Turks were pushing the Fatimids out of Syria. Badr, the real ruler of the Fatimid Caliphate, defined a new strategy. He did not want to carry on the former Fatimid policy in Syria and the east since the Seljuks had moved into this area. Fighting back against the Seljuks to regain power over Damascus or northern Syria was no more a priority for Badr, who rather preferred keeping control over the Syro-Palestinian coastal cities such Tripoli, Tyre or Ascalon.

Judging the new attitude of the Fatimids toward the territories bordering the Red Sea can be more interestingly seen not in the relations with Mecca but the reorientation of the *da‘wa* towards Bahrain, Oman and India. In 1076, al-Mustanṣir suggested to al-Mukarram that he should try to take advantage of political troubles in Bahrain to send missionaries there in order to help the Ṣulayhīds bring the whole area under the former’s influence.<sup>31</sup> This Fatimid renewal of interest in territories such as India, where the Ismaili message had been dispatched already long before the 1070s, could find an explanation in the newly pacified situation in Egypt. The Caliph had now to try to extend the *da‘wa* and make up for time lost during the civil war.

However, if the Fatimid imam and the great *dā‘ī* in Cairo were officially in charge of the *da‘wa* in Egypt and its propagation all over the Muslim world, Badr al-Jamālī’s arrival seems to have had an effect on the mission. In fact, the *da‘wa* and its entire organisation fell into Badr’s hands. He became the one who set the orientation and made choices, not the caliph. For example, al-Mustanṣir indicated to al-Mukarram that he had already signed the decrees nominating the new missionaries in India and Oman but in fact they were issued through Badr’s council (*majlis*). In the eyes of the Ṣulayhīds, the Fatimid caliph was still the vivid incarnation of the hidden imam. He represented the only source of spiritual and political authority. Theoretically, he was the sole interlocutor. In the Egyptian reality, however, unknown to the missionaries and the Ṣulayhīds, al-Mustanṣir was only a puppet in Badr’s hands. It seems that after 1078, once the situation in Egypt had been settled, Badr understood what he could do with the *da‘wa* organisation outside Egypt. In that year, the caliph asked al-Mukarram to follow Badr’s orders and advice. After

24. Al-Ya‘qūbī 1892: 335; Al-Istakhrī 1967: 29, 35, 54; Al-Mas‘ūdī 1861-77: 1: 238; 3: III: 32.

25. Naṣīr-ī Khusraw 2001: text 85, tr.: 85-6.

26. Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn 2002: 84.

27. Lewis 1972: 287-95.

28. Al-Mustanṣir considered this failure a sign that he should give up on this dream. Cf. Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn 2002: 74.

29. Sijillāt, 54: 176; 63: 203.

30. Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 303, 320-2.

31. Sijillāt, 54: 176.

1086, al-Mustansir also asked the Ṣulayḥids to add the name of Badr and Badr's son al-Afḍal to his own in the Friday sermons.<sup>32</sup> These changes show that Badr was using the *da'wa* as a tool to meet his own objectives. The caliph urged the Ṣulayḥid queen al-Ḥurra to exert stronger control over the Ismaili missionary in Oman because the missionary had given up his orders in favour of trading activity. This was another sign that the *da'wa* and trade were still closely related. The caliph asks the queen to continue her efforts in India, and he showed great interest in the situation in Yemen, where tribal chiefs were trying to destabilise Ṣulayḥid power. The caliph even wrote to the local chiefs to persuade them to remain faithful to Queen al-Ḥurra.<sup>33</sup> When Badr al-Jamālī and al-Mustansir died in 1094, the Ṣulayḥids continued to follow the official *da'wa* as al-Ḥurra and al-Afḍal, the new Fatimid vizier, wished. The severing of formal ties between the two dynasties occurred with the death of Caliph al-Āmir in 1130, when al-Afḍal chose not to allow the official heir to the throne, al-Ṭayyīb, take the caliphate. Al-Ḥurra decided to encourage the creation of a new Ismaili mission, and refused to recognise the new caliph, al-Ḥāfiẓ, as imam.<sup>34</sup> At that moment, links between Egypt and Yemen were about to become strained just as the Fatimids were facing great difficulties in the Mediterranean in the form of the Crusades. In the face of al-Ḥurra's defection, the Fatimids had to find quickly new allies in Yemen. The honorific title of *dā'ī* was given to the Zuray'īd Dynasty, which had ruled Aden in the name of al-Mukarram and al-Ḥurra since the 1060s.<sup>35</sup> The Zuray'īds always had a troublemaker attitude toward Ṣulayḥid power, even though they never officially ceased relations with them or with the Fatimids. The Cairo masters were only too happy, even when relations with the Ṣulayḥids were still peaceful, to see a counter-power to the Ṣulayḥids emerge in the key city of Yemen. We know that al-Mustansir had close relations with the Ṣulayḥids, but he also wrote to several others local chiefs in Yemen. No record of this correspondence survives, but it would be very surprising if none had been sent to the ruler of the main city of the area.<sup>36</sup> Al-Ḥāfiẓ officially gave the title of *dā'ī* to 'Alī b. Saba' who died before the caliph's messenger arrived with the decree.<sup>37</sup> Muḥammad, 'Alī's brother, received the title instead. He benefited from the help of Bilāl b. Jarīr, the vizier of Aden, and the most powerful man in the city.<sup>38</sup> From 1138 until the end of the Zuray'īd

Dynasty, the *dā'ī* title remained in Zuray'īd hands. 'Umāra al-Ḥakāmī shows that, during these years, the spirituality of the *da'wa* vanished within the Fatimid Caliphate itself. The men in power for most of the 12<sup>th</sup> century had no interest in maintaining the original purity or orthodoxy of the Ismaili cause.<sup>39</sup> They were ready to make important concessions, such as granting the honorific title of *dā'ī* to Aden's rulers in a hereditary manner.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, the *da'wa* became an instrument to keep Aden, the key to Red Sea trade, under Fatimid influence.

This use of the *da'wa* was not the only way the Fatimids acted in the Red Sea. Sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> century seem to indicate there was a diplomatic conflict between the Fatimids and the regional rulers of the southern Red Sea. The *qādī* al-Rashīd and 'Umāra, a close friend of several Yemeni potentates, made several visits between Egypt and Yemen in the 1140s, 1150s and 1160s.<sup>41</sup> The Fatimids were in no doubt that the real master of Aden was Bilāl b. Jarīr (d. 1151). He received numerous sumptuous gifts and the title of "Fortunate Shaykh, Respectable and Just" (*Shaykh al-Sa'īd al-Muwaffaq al-Sadīd*).<sup>42</sup>

#### Closer Relations with the Trader Community?

The sources do not confirm the presence of Fatimid merchantmen in the Red Sea,<sup>43</sup> but the Fatimids could have tried to exert influence over some of the major actors in the region's trade: Jewish merchants. One way in which to play such a role was to intervene in the religious affairs of the Jewish community. This kind of intervention had already been tried with the Coptic Church, when Badr al-Jamālī forced the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria to live in Fustat, and asked him to send a new representative to Nubia and Abyssinia in the form of a man who had promised to guarantee regular commercial relations with Egypt.<sup>44</sup>

As early as the 1030s, the Fatimids had established relatively close relations with the Jews of Egypt.<sup>45</sup> Thus, as Marc Cohen explains, after 1073, the Fatimids may have

32. Sijillāt, 51: 169; 20: 76; 14: 58; 15: 63.

33. Sijillāt, 14: 58; 26: 90; 48: 161; 52: 171; 63: 203.

34. Al-Ḥāfiẓ was accused of being an impostor because he was not designated as the official heir by al-Āmir, who had instead designated his son, al-Ṭayyīb. Al-Ṭayyīb was already an adult, and the vizier wanted a young boy as caliph, as he would be easier to control. Cf. Daftary 1991: 256-7.

35. Cleverly, al-Mukarram had appointed two brothers to govern Aden and the surrounding areas. One was in charge of the port and the coast, while the other ruled the hinterland.

36. Sijillāt, 38: 128; 22: 79.

37. The caliph waited for the end of the civil war (1136-1138) between the two branches of the ruling family in Aden. Daftary 2001: 276-8.

38. 'Umāra 1892: 50, 55; Bā Maḥrama 1950, 2: 32, 216.

39. This phenomenon was clearly felt as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the future great *dā'ī* al-Mu'ayyad *fi-l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī*. When he arrived in Egypt from Shiraz he understood that the *da'wa* was no more in the hands of people really concerned by the purity of the Ismaili ideology. Al-Mu'ayyad 1949: 80-3.

40. This title was supposed to remain valid only for the lifetime of the beneficiary. Officially, it was not hereditary.

41. On al-Rashīd, see 'Umāra al-Ḥakāmī 1892: 78; Abū Shāma 1956, 1: 147-8; Ibn Khallikān 1970, 1: 143-6; 2: 343; Al-Suyūfī 1967, 1: 311; Derenbourg 1893: 18, 207, 289, 419, 532.

42. 'Umāra 1897: 26-7.

43. But they have merchantmen in the Mediterranean. Cf. Ibn Muyassar 1981: 135; Canard 1954: 125-46.

44. Ibn al-Muqaffa' 1949, II/3: 329-30, 347-51; Beshir 1975: 15-24.

45. For example, the Tustarī brothers were bankers for al-Zāhir (1021-1036) and al-Mustansir. They had key positions in the Fatimid administration, and Ibrahīm al-Tustarī had sold al-Zāhir the black female slave who gave birth to al-Mustansir. During al-Mustansir's youth, his mother had great influence on her son, and on the administration in general. She made her former master her *wāsiṭa*, a kind of personal vizier while Faḍl, Ibrahīm's other brother, was appointed as secretary (*kātib*) of the Fatimid army in Syria; Gil 1981: 37-43; Bareket 2004: 192-3.

taken advantage of the chaotic situation in Palestine with the Seljuks and the Crusaders' expansion to encourage the creation of the title of the *nagīd* (chief) among the Jews of Egypt, and in 1127 to establish the Palestinian *Gaonate* (academy) in Fustat. This was one of the main authorities that appointed the heads of local Jewish communities in Egypt and, for example, in Yemen and India.<sup>46</sup>

The Zuray'īd vizier, Bilāl b. Jarīr, had close relations with a man called Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan b. Bundār.<sup>47</sup> Between 1130 and 1150, Maḍmūn was at the same time a great trader, the official representative of the Jewish merchants (*wakīl al-tujjār*), a ship owner, and the supervisor (*nāzīr*) of the port of Aden, to which he was appointed by Bilāl.<sup>48</sup> Maḍmūn had a strong influence over all the commercial activities in the city. He also was the local leader (*nāgīd*) of the Jewish communities in Yemen and even India. He had been appointed as *nāgīd* in 1140 by the Palestinian *Gaon*, which had moved to Egypt by that time.<sup>49</sup> In addition to his allegiance to the Palestinian academy, Maḍmūn was also the local representative of the Babylonian Academy. He had also to remain faithful to those whose had made him superintendent of the port of Aden.

Maḍmūn and Bilāl had business in common. Maḍmūn provided his own vessels to Bilāl for a naval expedition against a man from Zabīd whom had not paid his taxes.<sup>50</sup> The number of boats equipped as men-of-war for this single expedition leads us to think that the real goal of the attack was not only to retrieve money from a tax-evading trader, but also to raid the Zabīd area as had already been done in 1143 when the Zuray'īds first raided the city.<sup>51</sup> Maḍmūn also established a matrimonial alliance with Abū Zikrī Kohen Judah b. Joseph, a senior representative of the traders in Fustat, the main commercial town in Egypt.<sup>52</sup>

As Professor Goitein explains, it seems that Maḍmūn enjoyed the confidence of the various local chiefs who controlled the maritime and terrestrial routes. This can be in-

terpreted as proof that he had agreements with emirs or pirates located on these roads between India and Egypt in order that the latter did not prevent his vessels, indeed all vessels passing through Aden, from sailing freely in the Red Sea.<sup>53</sup> Even though the Geniza letters contain no reference to any kind of recognition or submission by Maḍmūn to the Fatimids, it is nevertheless very interesting that the rapprochement between rabbinical authorities and the Fatimids is almost concomitant with the rise of Maḍmūn in Aden, with his nomination as *nāgīd* of the Palestinian yeshiva of the Jewish communities in Yemen and India, and of course with the strong political rapprochement between the Fatimids and the Zuray'īds at a time when the Fatimids needed firmly to establish their influence in the region.<sup>54</sup> Without texts it is of course very difficult to confirm that all this was written down, but let us conclude at least that there was a set of convergent interests among all actors operating in the Red Sea.

### Direct Military Interventions

Thanks to their fleet, the Fatimids could ensure the security of maritime trade routes. Nonetheless, they did not intervene directly in the Red Sea before 1118.<sup>55</sup> In that year, boats at anchor in 'Aydhāb were looted by pirates sent by Qāsim b. Abī Ḥāshim, the *Amīr* of Mecca. In order to protect the merchantmen, the Egyptian vizier al-Afḍal sent five fire-launcher vessels (*Ḥarrāriq*) to 'Aydhāb.<sup>56</sup> The establishment of this first Fatimid flotilla in the Red Sea gave the starting signal to a series of direct Fatimid military interventions in the sea, and more particularly in Yemen (see Figure 14:1),<sup>57</sup> where about 20 horsemen were sent in 1119 under the orders of Ibn Najīb al-Dawla.<sup>58</sup> Officially, their mission was to help Queen al-Ḥurra take back the city of Zabīd whose position was a threat to navigation in the Red Sea should a hostile dynasty take control. Before this intervention, trade had come to a standstill because of the animosity between al-Ḥurra and the new master of Zabīd. Ibn Najīb brought the rebel city back into the queen's realm, and with it Yemen returned to a more peaceful situation. The action clearly helped trade, which resumed thereafter.<sup>59</sup> The new Fatimid vizier, al-Ma'mūn al-Batā'ihī supported this first expeditionary force by sending 400 archers and 700 soldiers, and by giving full powers to Ibn Najīb over the populations of central Yemen.<sup>60</sup>

46. Cohen 1980: 84-5, 231-2; Gil 1992: 774-6. The Palestinian *Gaonate* first fled to Egypt from Jerusalem because of the Seljuks. The Palestinian *Gaon* took refuge in Tyre, then in Damascus, before going to Egypt in the 1120s. Marc Cohen thinks that the Fatimids did not appreciate the fact that the *Gaon* stayed in Tyre while the city was rebelling against the Fatimid authority. This attitude would have encouraged Badr al-Jamālī to support the emancipation of the Egyptian Jewish community.

47. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 14.

48. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 37-47, 283-400; Goitein 1967, 1: 186-92; Margariti 2002: 285-9.

49. The other Talmudic academy was in Babylon, Iraq. Maḍmūn also received honorific titles from the head of this academy. Thus, Maḍmūn was under jurisdiction of the two main Jewish academies and was able to adjudicate the problems that occurred between his co-religionists, whatever Talmudic *yeshiva* they followed; Goitein & Friedman 2007: 38.

50. ULC Or 1080 J 171., tr. Margariti 2002: 268.

51. Bodl. Ms. Heb. D. 66 (Cat. 2878), fol. 61, tr. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 704; 'Umāra 1897: 26-7.

52. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 40.

53. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 396-7, n. 6.

54. I would like to thank Professor Mordechai A. Friedman from Tel-Aviv University who confirmed that there are actually no Geniza letters that refer to direct Fatimid influence over Maḍmūn.

55. We put aside one or two direct land interventions in the Hijaz in 990 and another during the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

56. Al-Maqrīzī 1973, 3: 57-8.

57. Al-Qalqashandī 1987, 3: 597.

58. More than a general, Ibn Najīb was certainly a Fatimid missionary. He is described as a poor cavalier and he was in charge of the palace library before he went to Yemen; 'Umāra al-Ḥakāmī 1892: 42-4; Ibn Muyassar 1981: 93-5; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 233; Hamblin 1985: 135-6.

59. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 233.

60. 'Umāra al-Ḥakāmī 1892: 43; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 238; Bā Maḥrama 1956, 2: 133.



Such a significant movement of troops is quite astonishing for the period. Shipping élite soldiers as far as Yemen while the Franks were threatening Egypt should be considered to be proof of the growing Fatimid interest in Yemen and the Red Sea. Clearly, they wanted to take control of the area instead of local emirs, even those who were their allies. This Egyptian interventionism was poorly perceived by the Zuray'ids. Around 1125-1126, Zabīd rebelled once again and Ibn Najīb failed to take back the city but he tried unsuccessfully to take direct control over Aden.<sup>61</sup>

Al-Ma'mūn decided to send an emissary to Yemen with military powers. This man, al-Kadhhab, was head of the Cairo police, a key function in the capital city. The meeting between him and Ibn Najīb occurred in Dhū Jiblah, the Ṣulayhids' capital, but it went so badly that al-Kadhhab decided to slander Ibn Najīb, alleging that he was calling into question the Fatimid caliph's legitimacy.<sup>62</sup>

The Caliph al-Āmir decided to send another general, Ibn al-Khayyāt, to arrest Ibn Najīb and bring him back to Cairo. The general embarked with 100 horsemen.<sup>63</sup> Ibn Najīb was arrested in Dhū Jibla and brought to Aden into a cage. There, a vessel from Sawākin was waiting. The boat sailed towards Egypt but never reached its destination. After embarkation, the captain "was ordered to wreck the ship"; the prisoner and gifts to the caliph from al-Ḥurra and the queen's deputy, Ibn al-Azraqī, were thrown into the sea.<sup>64</sup> It is difficult to know precisely on whose orders Ibn Najīb was drowned, but it seemed that his presence now bothered the Fatimid caliph or his vizier. He had to be killed.<sup>65</sup>

The reports of Ibn Najīb and Ibn al-Khayyāt's expeditions to Yemen show that they both made a stop in the Dahlak Archipelago.<sup>66</sup> These islands appear regularly in the texts as a stopover between Egypt and Aden.<sup>67</sup> However, during the expeditions of Ibn Najīb and Ibn al-Khayyāt, it was not merchantmen but men-of-war of a foreign power that stopped there. It is quite difficult to consider these stops the mere fruit of maritime contingencies.<sup>68</sup> The archipelago was a pirate's nest.<sup>69</sup> In the 1070s, relations between

the Fatimids and the Dahlaki sultans were quite good.<sup>70</sup> But during the 1080s, the islands were used as a refuge for the Najahid rulers of Zabīd who had fought against the Ṣulayhids.<sup>71</sup> Tombstones found on the islands attest that there was in the archipelago a dynasty that may have been close to the Seljuk Turks.<sup>72</sup> Dahlak's sultans forced merchantmen to stop in Dahlak in order to pay taxes.<sup>73</sup> Such acts would have been disturbing to Cairo's interests. The caliph might therefore have decided to put pressure on the Dahlaki rulers. Ibn Najīb was perhaps mandated to negotiate with the sultan so that the latter did not disturb commercial traffic between Egypt and Aden. Ibn al-Khayyāt's stopover in Dahlak should be seen as a confirmation of the agreement between Ibn Najīb and the Dahlaki sultan. These references to the stop-over in Dahlak also bring us to the traders of the Kārim.

### The Fatimids and the Beginnings of the Kārim Trade

The so-called merchants of the Kārim have often been associated with a period (Mamluk Egypt), with a social category (major traders), with a religion (Islam), and with a category of goods (spices and incense).<sup>74</sup> The Geniza documents and some Arabic sources indicate that the expansion of trade in the Red Sea is concomitant with the Kārimi traders' appearance, although their largest growth post-dates the Fatimid period. Goitein highlights the fact that the first known reference to the Kārimi traders is from 1134.<sup>75</sup> Some elements in the Geniza letters suggest that it was then a seasonal convoy.<sup>76</sup> In one letter from 1140, the author points out to his interlocutor the arrival of the "Kārim of the year" (*Kārim al-sana*), and in another document Joseph b. Abraham wishes his friend a safe arrival in 'Aydhab with "all the Kārim" (*jāmi' al-Kārim*).<sup>77</sup> The recent research of Eric Vallet into Aden during the Rasulid sultanate has allowed some clarification of who the Kārim were. He demonstrates that the words 'Kārim' and 'Kārimī' were not references to a category of individual merchants – the great traders of the Red Sea – as it has been supposed.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, it is not by the specialisation of these merchants in a few specific goods that we can define who they were. In all likelihood, they were defined primarily by the navigation season, running from June to November, which in the documents is called the "Egyptian Kārim" (*Kārim miṣrī*).<sup>79</sup> Thus the Kārimīs were the traders who

61. At that moment the Zuray'ids were not the Fatimid missionaries; cf. Ibn al-Mujāwir 1936: 121-5; 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 44.

62. 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 45-6; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 242.

63. 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 46; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 242-3.

64. 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 47-8, tr. 63-4; Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 242-3; Bā Maḥrama 1956, 2: 71, 133, 202.

65. Ibn Muyassar proposes an alternative version to Ibn Najīb's demise: he was taken back to Egypt and crucified with the vizier al-Ma'mūn, who was accused of being at the origin of the Nizārī propaganda that Ibn Najīb was alleged to have spread; Ibn Muyassar 1981: 104, 106; Al-Maqrīzī 1973, 3: 119, 122.

66. The most complete works concerning these islands are by Basset 1893: 77-111; Wiet 1952: 90-5; Schneider 1983: 24-42; Margariti 2010.

67. Goitein 1954: 181-97.

68. Texts relate that Ibn Najīb stopped in Dahlak in order to meet al-Ḥurra's emissary, who was to instruct Ibn Najīb in the subtleties of the Ṣulayhid court. This explanation is not very satisfactory.

69. Goitein 1957: 458; Margariti 2008: 543-77.

70. A fugitive was chased by the Egyptian authorities. He was arrested by the master of Dahlak (*sāhib Dahlak*) and transferred to the Fatimids; Ibn al-Muqaffā' 1949, II/3: text: 21; tr.: 329.

71. Schneider 1983: 30-1.

72. Wiet 1952: 92; Schneider 1983: 36-7.

73. Those who sought not to pay the taxes were pursued by the Dahlaki sultan's vessels; cf. Margariti 2010: 563-6.

74. Labib 2003: 666; 1965: 60-1; Fischel 1958: 164.

75. Or. 5549, III, f. 5, b., l. 6, margin. TS NS J 23. TS Misc. 28, f. 33, ed. Goitein 1958: 175-84.

76. Goitein 1958: 181.

77. TS Misc. 28, f. 33. ENA NS 48, f. 4, b. l. 11-13, tr. Goitein, 1968: 356-7.

78. Vallet 2006: 407-8

79. Vallet 2006: 409-10.

sailed during this season, whatever their wealth or ethnicity. In addition, these traders did not sail on the typical, modestly-sized Red Sea vessel, the *jalba*, which specialised in coastal shipping and in coast-to-coast navigation. Instead, these traders are often associated with the expression “large vessel” (pl. *marākib al-kabīra*). These boats were thus of larger tonnages than the *jalbas*, and because of their size, they were able to transport more goods. They also used a more direct route between Aden and Egypt. These vessels stopped at only a few points, primarily the Dahlak Archipelago and Suwākin (see Figure 14:1).<sup>80</sup> It is difficult to know whether such ships sailed in convoy as Goitein suggests, but it should be recalled that after a certain year, the vessels were protected by the Fatimid navy.<sup>81</sup> In the light of the low number of Fatimid vessels listed in the Red Sea (five, then three), the protection could be effective only if the vessels to be protected sailed in a convoy. Even though it is difficult to confirm that the Fatimids protected these boats as early as 1137, it should be noted that the corpus of Geniza letters concerning the Red Sea trade so far edited by Professor M.A. Friedman shows a clear concentration in the period 1130-1160. About 60% of the letters are from those three decades.<sup>82</sup> One might imagine that the Fatimids protected the merchants with their vessels in the northern Red Sea, while the Dahlaki sultans played the same role in the south. Surprising as it may seem, such an agreement had already been sealed in the Mediterranean in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>83</sup> We should add to this that some Arabic letters found in Qasr Ibrim, in the south of Egypt, seem to show that another trade network, maybe more specifically handled by Muslims, was operating next to the Jewish network in the Red Sea. The few known letters, which are as yet unpublished, talk about a Fatimid official, or at least personalities close to the Fatimid court, who were ship owners in ‘Aydhāb in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>84</sup>

### Conclusion

The changing role of the Red Sea to the Fatimid Caliphate is manifested through the strengthening and the diversification of the nature of Fatimid actions in this area. These transformations have several causes. In the early period, the Fatimids aimed to win their ideological battle against the Abbasids. They dreamed about seizing Baghdad, converting the men to their creed, and gaining leadership over the Muslim world. Their action against Mecca and the Hijaz can be explained by their ideology. During this first period,

extending up to 1073, the Fatimids were more politically and militarily interested in the Syro-Palestinian coast, and in particular northern Syria and Aleppo, which they were endeavouring to conquer and control by all means in order to move towards Iraq. During this time, the *da‘wa* was a complete ideological tool serving both an ideological and political goal. Trade in the Red Sea did exist, and appeared to be a pretext for the expansion of the *da‘wa* towards the south and east. This strategy almost succeeded in 1058-1059, when a Turkish general took Baghdad in the name of the Fatimid caliph.

After 1073, things changed. The imperialist dream of the dynasty was abandoned by Badr al-Jamālī, who was not a devotee of the Ismaili cause. The political and military context marked by the progression of the Seljuks into Syria prompted Badr to change the orientation of Fatimid policy and with it to define a new objective: to survive in Egypt. During al-Afdal’s vizierate, the very first years of the Crusades, before Jerusalem’s fall, were characterised by negotiations between the Egyptians and the Crusaders. Al-Afdal believed they could strike a deal with the Franks to repel the Seljuk Turks. But the Fatimids understood that this was in fact a fight to the death. The equation was then quite simple: in order to withstand the Seljuk Turks, and after them the Crusaders, the Fatimids needed a great deal of money, not only to pay their soldiers, but also to buy materials for shipbuilding, since the fleet was the only efficient weapon the Fatimids had against the Franks.

Trade with the Christians, which the Fatimids first developed as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century when they were still in Ifrīqiya constituted the essential means to obtain not only the funds, *via* the customs taxes, but also the wood and iron needed to build and maintain the fleets and therefore effectively protect Egypt. Wood and iron were not very common goods in the Fatimid territories. Because the Fatimids needed a lot these strategic materials, especially under al-Mu‘izz’s reign (953-975) when the fleet was greatly developed, they first dealt with the Amalfitans, and after the conquest of Egypt with more and more Italian cities.<sup>85</sup>

The Fatimid tax system as described by al-Makhzūmī allows us to understand why the Red Sea became the major strategic space for the Egyptians. The Fatimids could not allow the Red Sea trade to be blocked, and they needed to ensure that the sea remain open by whatever means necessary. The Arabic and Latin documents highlight that the Europeans, and among them the Italians perhaps more than others, first arrived in Egypt to buy the Egyptian products, mainly flax. However, after the conquest of Sicily by the Normans during the 1060s, high-quality Sicilian flax became easily accessible to Europeans. Moreover, during the Crusades, Palestinian flax production also fell into European hands. Thus, it was more and more India-trade products that attracted these European traders to Egypt. The

80. Vallet 2006: 410.

81. Al-Qalqashandī 1987, 3: 536, 598.

82. This corpus consists of some 165 documents. The three decades comprise, respectively: 50 letters for the 1130s, 21 for the 1140s, and 29 for the 1150s. We find only three letters for the 1160s.

83. In the 1040s, Jabbāra, the ruler of Barqa in modern Libya, protected merchantmen sailing between Tunisia or Sicily and Egypt against Christian ships. The Fatimids allowed Jabbāra to levy a tax, the *ghifāra*, on the traders. TS 13 J 9, f.27, b. l. 6. TS 16.13, b, l. 22-24. Bodl. MS Heb. A3 Cat. 2873, f. 26, b. l. 28, ed. Gil 1997, IV: 167-73; Goitein 1967: 327-8.

84. Plumley 1972: 101-6. These letters are being edited by Geoffrey Khan.

85. Citarella 1967: 310-2; Cahen 1954: 3-8.

main reasons for foreign merchants to come to Alexandria lay more and more in the opportunities they had to find spices, silk, and incense that could be sold easily and at great profit in Europe.

According to the Egyptian tax system, European merchants who arrived there with strategic raw materials enjoyed certain tax exemptions on Red Sea products. Against wood or iron, they could export products from Egypt at lower prices and sell them at large profits.<sup>86</sup> It is easy to understand that if such products were about to disappear from Egyptian markets, then the Italians would no longer have any reason to come to Egypt with their strategic goods and weapons which, incidentally, the ecclesiastical authorities had forbidden to be sold in Muslim territories.<sup>87</sup> The men in charge of Egypt knew that if the Red Sea trade stopped, Egypt would not be able to resist to the Crusaders with the country's resources alone. So it was essential to keep maritime commercial traffic in the Red Sea alive.

In this new context, and with this new objective, Fatimid strategy was totally overturned. The *da'wa* thus became a tool in service of trade. Bernard Lewis's assumption, according to which the development of the *da'wa* toward India was intended to divert the traditional trade routes out of the Persian Gulf and into the Red Sea in order to weaken the Abbasids, is not unfounded, but it is valid only until the 1070s. Thereafter, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Red Sea became essential to the very survival of the Fatimid Dynasty.

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