



## ABU'L-HAYṬAM GORGĀNĪ

**ABU'L-HAYṬAM AḤMAD B. ḤASAN GORGĀNĪ**, Isma'īli philosopher, for a long time one of the great unknown figures in the history of Irano-Islamic philosophy. A brief notice on him survives in the history of 'Alī b. Zayd Bayhaqī (a notice in which the proper names are very badly treated in the Indian edition). The historian says: "I have never found any trace of him outside of a *qaṣīda* in Persian on which Moḥammad b. Sorḡ Nišāpūrī commented." And although he swears to not having seen, himself, any work of Abu'l-Hayṭam which would permit him to pass judgment on its scientific value, he classes him at the outset among the common philosophers (*a'wāmm-e falāsefa*), i.e., "exoterists." This is false. Abu'l-Hayṭam was an Isma'īli philosopher, an esoterist (*bāṭenī*). Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow (d. between 465/1072 and 471/1078) reproaches him for having poorly posed the question of *ebdā'* (the primordial establishment of being) and relates that he was one of the adepts and friends of the *ahl-e ta'yīd* (those who receive heavenly assistance and inspiration); this term is characteristically used in Shi'ite vocabulary for designating the holy imams.

There is no doubt about the form of the complete name (given above) of master (Ḳvāja) Abu'l-Hayṭam. (He should not be confused with Ebn al-Hayṭam, the famous physician, astronomer, and mathematician, called Ptolemaeus Secundus, d. 430/1038.) He can be placed in the 4th/10th century, but not more precisely. His disciple and commentator, Moḥammad b. Sorḡ, in a vehement passage denounces the way in which Rūdakī (d. 329/940-41) and other Khorasani poets misinterpreted his thought. He would appear to be also



contemporary with two other famous Ismaʿili thinkers, Moḥammad b. Aḥmad Naḵṣabī (or Nasafī) and Abū Yaʿqūb Sejestānī.

Apart from these scattered pieces of information, we know only what the commentators on his *qaṣīda* tell us about him and his work. Although they mention other works of his, unfortunately without listing the titles, only his *qaṣīda* (“ode” or *canticum*, as the term would have been translated in Medieval Latin) has come down to us. It is composed of abstruse questions and allusive figures of speech. Apparently the author had intended to respond to it himself. For one reason or another he did not do so; consequently, in order to understand the meaning of the *qaṣīda* and the importance of the questions posed, it is indispensable to read it in conjunction with one of the two important commentaries which have survived. These two Persian commentaries, edited only some twenty years ago, are extremely interesting in that they present two forms of Iranian Ismaʿili thought based on the same exemplary text.

One of these commentaries is the work of the celebrated Iranian Ismaʿili philosopher Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow. The text of the *qaṣīda* was communicated to him in 426/1069-70 by an Ismaʿili prince with whom he had established ties of friendship—the reigning sovereign of Badakṣān, the amir ʿAlī b. al-Asad b. al-Ḥāreṭ. The prince had reconstructed the *qaṣīda* from memory and asked his friend to furnish the answers to the questions. Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow began on the work, which became one of the most important tracts presenting a comparative summa of Greek and Ismaʿili philosophy (*Jāmeʿ al-ḥekmatayn*). In the form that the amir transmitted it to him, the *qaṣīda* of Abu'l-Hayṭam contained eighty-two distichs (*bayt*), covering ninety-one questions: philosophical, logical, physical, grammatical, theosophic, and hermeneutic (*taʿwīlī*). In connection with each question, Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, utilizing both the truths of Greek philosophy and those of Ismaʿili philosophy, inaugurated in Persian the discipline of comparative philosophy. The importance of Abu'l-Hayṭam is measured by the fact that his *qaṣīda* instigated this discipline.

The other commentary, earlier in the date, is the work not of a celebrated philosopher, but of an intellectual who has remained obscure up to now: Moḥammad b. Sork (or Moḥammad-e Sork, “Moḥammad the Red”), a direct disciple of the master, is mentioned in Bayhaqī’s notice and may be placed in the 4th-5th/10th-11th centuries. His object was not to attempt a comparative undertaking, as did Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, but to furnish to the questions posed by the *qaṣīda* answers conforming to those his master would have given, had he



completed the task. In fact, he answered only seventy-six questions, but these he answered very relevantly. To a certain extent, he acted as a mouthpiece for Abu'l-Hayṭam, who himself reveals the meaning of the *qaṣīda*. Moḥammad b. Sorḵ, who was an Isma'ili (he speaks of *k'vājagān-e mā*, “our masters,” and *mardomān-e mā*, “our co-religionists”), introduced his commentary with these words: “Master Abu'l-Hayṭam has composed a poem in which he has raised many questions. He did not, however, go as far as to formulate replies to them, since he left this world. That is why certain friends of mine entreated me, saying that it was my duty to formulate replies to these questions. That is what I have undertaken to do here with the aid of the Heavenly Helpers (*koḏāvandān-e ta'yīd*, i.e., the holy imams) and of the friends of God (*awlīā-ye Īzād*).” In the final paragraph, he concludes: “Here are set down the replies to these questions. Everything that I have recorded here, I have read in the works of the wise men (*ḥokamā*) and have written according to them. In addition, I was the disciple (*šāgerdī kardam*) of Master Abu'l-Hayṭam for nine years, and everything that I have recorded here, I have heard formulated by him; I have invented nothing of my own.” Thus he has set down in writing what could be set down (leaving, in the fashion of a good Isma'ili esotericist, the opportunity for teaching orally which could not be set down).

We hear Abu'l-Hayṭam's voice over and over again in the course of the commentary. For example, in connection with the difficulties posed by the theosophy of history: “Our master, Abu'l-Hayṭam, has expressly declared: ” For years I was preoccupied with this question. The people that I asked were such that I found them still more destitute of knowledge than myself. But so great was the problem, it pleased God to render it possible in my discourse and that is why I have spoken.”” The disciple had heard his master make this admission forty years before. Of the personal subjectivity which constitutes the “I” of the first person (*manī-e man*) he says: “Over and over I immersed myself in this problem, and questioned many people. No one was able to tell me on whom I could rely in this matter . . . Finally I asked Master Abu'l-Hayṭam the question.” In connection with the fundamental *theologoumenon* of the primordial beginning of existence (*ebdā*) and its originator (*mobde*), the disciple states: “No one beside this eminent man treated the question.”

Thus the figure and work of Abu'l-Hayṭam emerge little by little. He ends his *qaṣīda* saying: “My object in posing all these questions has not at all been to vex the reader; I have posed them solely with the view to instruct.” Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow remarks, with a touch of bad temper, that it would have been still



better to announce his project of answering them. That is which Abu'l-Hayṭam's disciple had been forced to do, unbeknownst to him, before him. Consequently we have profited by two monuments of Isma'ili thought which deal with its most characteristic points, such as *ta'wīl* (the hermeneutics of the spiritual meaning of the Qur'ān) and the relation between the masters of Isma'ili thought and the philosophers of the Hellenic tradition. The two commentaries ought to be examined simultaneously. The present author has drawn up a preliminary comparative outline dealing principally with the relation between Isma'ilism and philosophy, the theosophy of nature, the reasons and the character of the Isma'ili polemic against the great physician Rhazes (Moḥammad b. Zakarīyā' Rāzī, d. between 313/925 and 320/932), the notion of the "I", angelology, astronomy, prophetology, etc. It is in proportion to and in direct measure with the progress made by Isma'ili studies and those of Shi'ite philosophy in general that the importance of Abu'l-Hayṭam, one of the earliest philosopher-poets of Iran, will be specified.

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