



KETĀB AL-FOTUḤ

KETĀB AL-FOTUḤ (or *Ta'riḵ al-fotuḥ*), an important early Arabic historical text by Ebn A'tam Kufi (d. 314/926?), which was translated, at least in part, into Persian towards the end of the 6th/12th century. Though the Persian translation enjoyed considerable popularity and has long been well known to Western scholars, the original Arabic text fell into obscurity and has only recently been recovered and edited. Research on this work is thus still very limited, and much remains in question about its provenance and significance.

The Author. Virtually nothing is known for certain about the life of Ebn A'tam. Yāqut (*Odabā'*, I, p. 379) says his name was Abu Moḥammad Aḥmad b. A'tam Kufi Aḵbāri. Ḥāji Kalifa (II, col. 1239) referred to him as Moḥammad b. 'Ali, apparently mistaking the name of the copyist of a manuscript as that of the author. Modarres Tabrizi (VII, pp. 386-87) identified him as Aḥmad or Moḥammad b. 'Ali A'tam and suggests that A'tam may have been the honorific (*laqab*) of 'Ali. To add to the confusion, one of the Arabic manuscripts (Gotha 1592) gives the name as Luṭ (?) Aḥmad b. Moḥammad b. A'tam Kufi, while another (Aḥmad III 2956) has Abu Moḥammad Aḥmad b. A'tam Kufi. It is thus somewhat difficult to be sure whether A'tam is a proper name or title and whether it should be applied to Ebn A'tam's father or grandfather (or even to the author himself, as his work is sometimes referred to as *Tāriḵ-e A'tam Kufi*). According to Lawrence Conrad (1998), A'tam Kufi was the author's father and "one of the students or tradents of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765)," but the documentation to support this claim has apparently not yet been published (see bibliography, below).



These inconsistencies in naming, though minor, have some implications for establishing the dates of the author's life and his work. Although several of the early bio-bibliographical sources (e.g. Yāqut, *Odabā'* I, p. 379; Şafadi, VI, p. 256) have notices about the author, they provide no birth or death dates. According to Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, Ebn A'tam died in 1003/1504 (not 393/1003 as given in Conrad, 1992, n. 90), but this is totally implausible and based on the erroneous date found in Gustav Flügel's edition of Ḥāji Kalifa (*Kašf al-ẓonun* IV, p. 380). Christian Fraehn, without citing any evidence, proposed a death date of 314/926-27, and this has been followed by other scholars such as Charles Storey (I/1, p. 207), Fuat Sezgin (I, p. 329), and Modarres. Recent research by Ilkka Lindstedt has also supported Fraehn's dating for several reasons, most notably the presence in Sahmi's *Tāriḳ Jorjān* of a tradition attributed to "Abu Moḥammad Aḥmad b. A'tam b. Naḍir b. Ḥobāb b. Ka'b b. Ḥabib Azdi Kufi, who was in Jorjān and related it," supposedly on the authority of Abu 'Omar Emām Ḥarrāni (d. 266/880) to Ebn 'Adi Ḥāfez (d. 365/976). On the assumption that this individual is the same as the author of the *Ketāb al-fotuḥ*, Lindstedt (p. 17) argues that the "information preserved in the isnād places, with high probability, Ebn A'tam's date of death to the first half of the fourth/tenth century. In any case, Fraehn's date can certainly be taken as a reasonable *terminus ante quem*, since Ebn A'tam's work was known to the mid-4th/10th century historian Abu 'Ali Sallāmi Bayhaqī (Yāqut, I, p. 379, says he quoted one of Ebn A'tam's verses), and his *Fotuḥ* is very likely the work by that title, which is cited in the *Tarjama-ye Tāriḳ-e Ṭabari* by Abu 'Ali "Amirak" Bal'ami (d. ca. 363/974; e.g., Bal'ami, tr. Zotenberg, IV, p. 150; mistakenly given in Bal'ami, ed. Rowšan, II, p. 824, as *Tāriḳ-e Abu'l-Fotuḥ*).

However, there is reason to believe that Ebn A'tam was writing at an even earlier time. M. A. Shaban, for example, has argued in favor of a revised dating (*EI*² III, p. 723; idem, 1970, p. xviii). As he noted, Ebn A'tam's most important source is 'Ali b. Moḥammad Madā'eni (d. 225/840), and in quoting him Ebn A'tam often uses the phrase *ḥaddatāni*, implying that he heard accounts directly from him and not from intermediaries or written sources (Lindstedt, p. 15, questions whether Ebn A'tam really employs the term in so systematic a way). His list of other proximate authorities (Ebn A'tam, 1968-75, II, pp. 147-49) is consistent with that same time period, including such figures as the historian Moḥammad Wāqedi (d. 207/823), the genealogist Hešām b. Moḥammad Kalbi (d. 204/819 or 206/821), and (perhaps less plausibly) the traditionist and historian Abu Meknaf (d. 157/774) and the Shi'ite traditionist Naṣr b. Mozāhem (d. 212/827). If Ebn A'tam did in fact study with all these



authorities, he must have been writing at a time no later than the second quarter of the 3rd/9th century. Conrad (1998) has also dismissed the death date given by Fraehn as “an old Orientalist error.” Assuming Conrad is correct about the identity of Aṭam Kufi, it is indeed unlikely that the father of a 4th/10th-century author would have been a contemporary of Imam Jaʿfar al-Šādeq. Moreover, the Persian translation (p. 3) says specifically that “Kvāja Aḥmad b. Aṭam wrote the *Ketāb-e fotuḥ* in the year 204/819.” Conrad (1992, p. 349 n. 90) initially suggested that the translator may have misread 204 for 254/858, but this is unlikely since dates in manuscripts are usually spelled out instead of written using numerals; he later (Conrad, 1998) revised this view and accepted 204/819 as an accurate date for the first recension of the text.

The Arabic Text. Yāqut (I, p. 379) says that Ebn Aṭam was the author of a *Ketāb al-maʿluf*, a *Ketāb al-fotuḥ* that went down to the time of Hārūn al-Rašid (r. 170-93/786-809), and a *Ketāb al-taʾriḫ* that was “essentially an appendix” covering the period from al-Maʿmun (r. 198-218/813-33) “to the last days of al-Moqtader” (r. 295-320/908-32). Yāqut notes that he had seen the “two books” himself, but he was likely misled by problems arising from the process of textual transmission. One of the two main surviving manuscripts, Gotha 1592, begins with an account of the deliberations at the *saqifa* of the Banu Sāʿeda leading to the accession of Abu Bakr as caliph and ends with an unusual account of the conquest of the island of Arwād and a brief note that the caliph ʿOṭmān was killed “in this year.” A note at the end of the manuscript indicates that it was the first of two volumes, with the second being about the caliphate of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb. The Istanbul manuscript, Aḥmad III 2956, commences more or less where the Gotha manuscript ended, with accounts of the last years of ʿOṭmān’s caliphate (r. 23-25/644-56). However, the introduction and listing of authorities in its first folios certainly give the impression of the beginning of a new work rather than a continuation of one. It also extends well beyond the caliphate of ʿAli. After a very brief mention of Hārūn al-Rašid, there is a notation that “the *Ketāb al-fotuḥ* ends” (fol. 236a; VIII, p. 244 of the printed text). However, the manuscript continues with an account of an interview between Hārūn and Imam Šāfeʿi the jurist and brief notices of various events down to the caliphate of al-Mostaʿin (r. 248-52/862-66). This material is so out of character with the rest of the work that it must have been added in whole or in part by another author or authors. The three titles mentioned by Yāqut would thus seem to correspond to the three sections of these manuscripts, one on the early caliphate, one on the caliphate down to time of Hārūn al-Rašid, and the probably spurious appendix (of which yet



another version may have extended to the caliphate of al-Moqtader as claimed by Yāqut).

The Persian translation. There is nothing to suggest that Ebn Aṭam's work was ever of much influence in the western parts of the Muslim world; it was unknown to bibliographers such as [Ebn al-Nadim](#) and not mentioned by Ṭabari or other classical Arabic historians, but it must have been more popular in the Islamic East to have been used by Sallāmi and probably Bal'ami, as well as being mentioned in Abu Naṣr Aḥmad Boḳāri's *Tāj al-qeṣaṣ* (Kurat, p. 275). Its prestige was such that it was eventually translated into Persian. The preface to the translation indicates that it was begun by Moḥammad b. Aḥmad Mostawfi Heravi as commissioned in 596/1199-1200 by a dignitary on whom he lavishes honorifics and styles "the glory of the grandees of Chorasmia and Khorasan" (*eftekār-e akāber-e K̄vārazm wa K̄orāsān*). According to Mirza Kazem-Beg (p. xx), this was none other than 'Alā'-al-Din Moḥammad K̄vārazmšāh, but the evidence for this is doubtful. (It may have been suggested only by the date or by indications in the manuscript he used; the honorifics in the lithograph text, for instance *ṣadr al-ṣodur*, seem to suggest a minister.) Whether the patron was the K̄vārazmšāh himself or a lesser official, the main themes of the translation, namely its interest in the wars against the "infidels" (*koffār*) and its sympathies for the Shi'ite Imams 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb and Ḥosayn b. 'Ali, would seem to parallel the anti-caliphal and militaristic policies of the late Chorasmian period. Mostawfi Heravi died shortly after beginning work on the translation, which was then finished by another Moḥammad b. Aḥmad, whose *nesba* is garbled in the manuscripts but seems to be Mābiḏanābādi (see Kazem-Beg, p. xx; Storey, I/2, p. 1260).

The Persian translation is clearly based on the Arabic text as it has now been recovered, but there are important differences between the two. The most obvious is that, whereas the Arabic text covers the period from the death of Prophet Moḥammad down to at least the early years of the reign of Hārūn al-Rašid, the translation ends with a long account of the martyrdom of [Imam Ḥosayn](#) at Karbalā'. The translator gives no indication that the text was to continue beyond that point, so it is impossible to know whether the translation was not finished, part of it has been lost, the translator was working from an incomplete manuscript, or, as Conrad has suggested, he was using a copy of the first recension of the text that had ended at that point. The Persian text is also by no means a literal translation of the corresponding parts of the Arabic text, and there are quite a few places where it includes material either lost



from or have not ever been part of the Arabic original, especially in the case of the sections dependent on the highly defective Gotha manuscript: They include accounts of the campaigns of ‘Eyāz b. Ġanem; Mo‘āwia’s campaigns in Syria; the conquests of Nubia, Eṣṭakr, Nišāpur, Ṭus, Marv, Herat, Bušanj, Saraḳs, Nasā, Fāryāb, Ṭālaqān, Sistān, Marv al-Ruḍ, and Balk; and some correspondence between ‘Oṭmān and his commanders (passages from the Persian translation which can fill in such lacunae have been included in the notes to the edition of the Arabic text).

Significance of the texts. Perhaps the chief interest of the *Fotuḥ* to modern researchers is the antiquity of the text. There is, as noted above, a distinct possibility that Ebn A‘ṭam was a historian of the early 3rd/9th century, not the 4th/10 century as often thought, and the *Ketāb al-fotuḥ* should accordingly be ranked as one of the oldest Arabic historical texts to have survived more or less intact. This would mean that the author should be seen as a precursor, rather than a contemporary, of the major classical Arabic historians, not only Ṭabari but also [Balāḍori](#) and Ya‘qubi; and his work thus provides an important means of assessing the later generation’s use of the sources common to both them and Ebn A‘ṭam. Moreover, if Ebn A‘ṭam was indeed writing in 204/858, it would mean that he was active at an exceptionally important moment in the history of the caliphate, the very year that al-Ma‘mun entered Baghdad and abandoned his philo-‘Alid policies, a circumstance which, as Conrad suggested, may explain the apparent revision of the text as well as some of its other characteristics.

Yāqut (I, p. 379) says explicitly that Ebn A‘ṭam was “a Shi‘ite and a poor authority” (*kāna šī‘ian wa howa ‘enda aṣḥāb al-ḥadiṯ ḡa‘if*). At least in terms of the author’s Shi‘ism, this perception has certainly been reinforced by the peculiarities of the Persian translation (because of its apparently exaggerated interest in the events leading to the Battle of Karbalā’), and it has to some extent been reinforced with the availability of the full Arabic text. Both the translation and the Arabic text can certainly be characterized as pro-‘Alid and critical of the Omayyads. Virtually all of the proximate sources named by Ebn A‘ṭam, with the notable exception of Madā‘eni, were regarded as sympathetic to the Shi‘ite cause, and he occasionally cites a source that he identifies as the *ḥājeb* of Ja‘far al-Šādeq, lending some credence to Conrad’s assertion of a connection between A‘ṭam and that Imam. If, however, Ebn A‘ṭam was writing as early as 204/819, there remains some question about exactly what kind of “Shi‘ism” he was reflecting. It should be noted that even the Persian



translation speaks respectfully about Abu Bakr, ‘Omar, and ‘Oṭmān, and it preserves a surprising amount of information about the military exploits of Mo‘āwia. The Arabic text goes on to display a definite interest in the revolt of Mokṭār Ṭaqafī, the activities of Moḥammad b. Ḥanafīya, and the life of the poet Komayt b. Zayd Asadī (e. g., Ebn A‘ṭam, 1968-75, VI, pp. 73-288 passim; VIII, pp. 82-107), all of which arouse suspicions of an affiliation with the Kaysāniya or Hāšemiya and distinctly militant varieties of Shi‘ism. At the same time, it gives a unique and rather positive account of al-Saffāḥ’s assumption of the caliphate and has virtually nothing to say about any of the anti-‘Abbasid Shi‘ite movements. It might also be noted that Ebn A‘ṭam’s primary sources, again excepting Madā’eni, were not only Shi‘ite but Kufan, and Ebn A‘ṭam reflects both perspectives: He is clearly philo-‘Alid, but he is also interested in anything having to do with Kufa. Of course, the two often overlap, as in his account of ‘Ali lavishing praise on the virtues of the congregational mosque in Kufa (Ebn A‘ṭam, 1968-75, I, pp. 286-87). Further research is really needed to clarify the author’s sectarian orientation and the light his work may shed on the formation of Shi‘ite historiography.

Finally, the *Ketāb al-fotuḥ*, true to its title, is a work of considerable importance for the history of the Muslim conquests, especially in the east and when they involved Kufan forces. The most important of these accounts, as has been noted by several scholars (e.g., Kazem-Beg; Kurat), are those that deal with the wars in Armenia and the Caucasus and against the Khazars. These can now be identified with some confidence as the ultimate source of similar information found in the histories of Bal‘ami and [Ebn al-Aṭir](#).

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