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ew women rose to positions of political prominence in the medieval *dar al-Islam*, and, perhaps with the major exception of Sayyida Hurra, none can be cited for having attained leadership in the religious domain. A host of diverse factors have accounted for a lack of active participation of women in the political and religious affairs of the Islamic world during the medieval and later times; and the associated complex issues are still being debated among scholars in the West and among Muslims themselves. Be that as it may, there were occasions dependent on to this rule in the medieval *dar al-Islam*, indicating that opportunities did in principle exist for capable women to occupy positions of public prominence under special circumstances



significant to note that the ascendancy of these women to political prominence was not challenged by the Fatimid establishment or the Ismaili *da'wa* organization; and, in time, al-Mustansir not only acknowledged Sayyida Hurra's political leadership in Yemen but also accorded the Sulayhid queen special religious authority over the Ismaili communities of Yemen and Gujarat. It is indeed within this general Fatimid Ismaili milieu that the queen Sayyida's status and achievements can be better understood and evaluated in their historical context.

Sulayhid dynasty – early accounts

The earliest accounts of the Sulayhid dynasty, the queen Sayyida's career, and the contemporary Ismaili *da'wa* in Yemen are contained in the historical work of Najm al-Din `Umara b. 'Ali al-Hakami⁴ the Yemenite historian and poet who emigrated to Egypt and was executed in Cairo in 569/1174 for his involvement in a plot to restore the Fatimids to power. Ismaili historical writings on the Sulayhids and on the contemporary Ismailis of Yemen are, as expected, rather meager. Our chief Ismaili authority here is again the Yemenite Idris 'Imad al-Din (d. 872/1468), who as the nineteenth chief *da'i* of the Tayyibi Ismaili community was well-informed about the earlier history of the Ismaili *da'wa*. In the final, seventh volume of his comprehensive Ismaili history entitled *'Uyun al-akhbar*, which is still in manuscript form, Idris has detailed accounts of the Sulayhids and the revitalization of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Yemen under the queen Sayyida; here I have used a manuscript of this work from the collections of the Institute of Ismaili Studies Library.⁵ In modern times, the best scholarly accounts of the Sulayhids and the queen Sayyida as well as the early history of Ismailism in Yemen have been produced by Husain F. al-Hamdani (1901-62), one of the pioneers of modern Ismaili studies who based his work on a valuable collection of Ismaili manuscripts preserved in his family.⁶

Yemen

Yemen was one of the regions where the early Ismaili *da'wa* achieved particular success. As a result of the activities of the *da'is*



for almost one century. Sulayhid rule was effectively terminated in 532/1138, on the death of the queen Sayyida, the most capable member of the dynasty.

Asma bint Shihab

'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi was married to his cousin Asma bint Shihab, a remarkable woman in her own right. Noted for her independent character, Asma took an active part in the affairs of the state and also played an important role in the education of Sayyida Hurra, who was brought up under her care at the Sulayhid court. 'Ali al-Sulayhi fell victim to a tribal vendetta and was murdered by the Najahids of Zabid in 459/1067; he was succeeded by his son Ahmad al-Mukarram (d. 477/1084), who received his investiture from the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustansir. The queen Asma assisted her son Ahmad, as she had assisted her husband, until her death in 467/1074. Thereafter, Ahmad's wife, Sayyida Hurra, became the effective ruler of Sulayhid Yemen.

Al-Sayyida al-Hurra

The queen [*al-malika*] al-Sayyida al-Hurra [the Noble Lady] al-Sulayhi, who evidently also





Due to the close relations between Sulayhid Yemen and Fatimid E



his death. This is supported by an epistle of al-Amir sent by a certain Sharif Muhammad b. Haydara to the Sulayhid queen of Yemen, announcing the birth of Abu'l-Qasim al-Tayyib in Rabi` II 524AH.¹⁵ The historical reality of al-Tayyib is also attested to by Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278),¹⁶ and other historians. At any rate, al-Tayyib was immediately designated as al-Amir's heir. On al-Amir's death, however, power was assumed by his cousin, Abu'l-Maymun `Abd al-Majid, who was later in 526/1132 proclaimed caliph and imam with the title al-Hafiz al-Din Allah.



the first of the absolute *da`is*, who have followed one another during the current period of *satr* in the histor



Notes:

1. See Idris `Imad al-Din b. al-Hasan, *`Uyun al-akhbar wa funun athar*, ed. M. Ghalib (Beirut: Dar



732/1332), who reproduces Ibn Malik's list of the Yemenite *da`is* in his *Akhbar al-Qaramita bi'l-Yaman*, ed. and trans. Kay, in his *Yaman*, text pp. 150-52, translation pp. 208-12. See also al-Hamdani, *al-Sulayhiyyun*, pp. 49 - 61.

8. A. Hamdani, "The Da'i Hatim Ibn Ibrahim al-Hamidi [d. 596 H/1199 AD] and his Book *Tuhfat al-Qulub*," *Oriens* 23-24 (1970-71): especially 270-79.

9. See Abu Tamim Ma'add al-Mustansir bi'llah, *al-Sijillat al-Mustansiriyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im Majid (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1954), and H.F. al-Hamdani, "The Letters of al-Mustansir bi'llah," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies* 7 (1934): 307-



pp. 323-30.

20. I owe this information to Tim Mackintosh-Smith, a long-time resident of Yemen.