

## ‘Alī ibn Riḍwān

Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Riḍwān ibn ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far al-Miṣrī

DATE OF BIRTH 998

PLACE OF BIRTH Cairo

DATE OF DEATH 1061 or later in the 1060s

PLACE OF DEATH Cairo

### BIOGRAPHY

‘Alī ibn Riḍwān gave extensive details about his life and character in an autobiography, which was used by Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybi‘a. He was born into a poor family and, because he could not afford teachers, he taught himself about medicine from books. Despite this disadvantageous start, his reputation grew and he attracted a following of students. He was appointed physician to the caliph and was given the position of chief medical authority in the Fatimid state. He was jealous of his position and learning, and was known for his attacks on predecessors and contemporaries who took different views from his own. This has been attributed to his deep-seated insecurity about his origins and education.

Among the many medical works that Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybi‘a lists for Ibn Riḍwān, including diatribes against the physicians Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873) and his own contemporary Ibn Buṭlān (who sought his patronage), both Christians and from Baghdad, there are some of a more theological and philosophical nature. These include the *Maqāla fī ḥudūth al-‘ālam*, ‘Treatise on the contingency of the world’ and *Maqāla fī tawḥīd al-falāsifa wa-‘ibādatihim*, ‘Treatise on the monotheism and devotion of the philosophers’. Such works show Ibn Riḍwān’s interest in religious matters and a certain defensiveness about the orthodoxy of those who advocated Greek learning, among whom he counted himself.

### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### *Primary*

Al-Qifṭī, *Ta’rīkh al-ḥukamā’*, pp. 443-44

Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybī‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’*, ed. N. Riḍā, Beirut (s.d.), pp. 561-67

Ibn al-‘Ibrī, *Tārīkh mukhtaṣar al-duwal*, ed. A. Ṣāliḥānī, Beirut, 1890, pp. 331-34

#### Secondary

M.Ḥ. Nashshār, *‘Alī ibn Riḍwān wa-falsafatuhu al-naqdiyya*, Cairo, 2006

L. Conrad, ‘Ibn Buṭlān in *Bilād al-Shām*: the career of a travelling Christian physician’, in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam*, Leiden, 2001, 131-57, pp. 139-42

J. Seymore, *The life of Ibn Ridwan and his commentary on Ptolemy’s ‘Tetrabiblos’*, New York, 2001 (Diss. Columbia University)

F. Sezgin (ed.), *‘Alī ibn Riḍwān (d. c. 453/1061) and al-Mukhtār ibn Buṭlān (d. 458/1066). Texts and studies*, Frankfurt am Main, 1996

L. Conrad, ‘Scholarship and social context. A medical case from the eleventh-century Near East’, in D. Bates (ed.), *Knowledge and the scholarly medical traditions*, Cambridge, 1995, 84-100

M. Dols and A. Gamal (eds and trans), *Medieval Islamic medicine. Ibn Riḍwān’s treatise ‘On the prevention of bodily ills in Egypt’*, Berkeley CA, 1984, pp. 54-66

J. Schacht and M. Meyerhof (eds and trans), *The medico-philosophical controversy between Ibn Butlan of Baghdad and Ibn Ridwan of Cairo. A contribution to the history of Greek learning among the Arabs*, Cairo, 1937, pp. 33-51

#### WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Maqāla fī l-radd ‘alā Afrā’īm wa-Ibn Zur‘a fī l-ikhtilāf fī l-milal*, ‘Treatise in refutation of Ephraim and Ibn Zur‘a concerning the difference between religions’

DATE Unknown; before about 1060

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

#### DESCRIPTION

The work is lost and is known only from the list of Ibn Riḍwān’s works in Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybī‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, p. 566. It was written against two of Ibn Riḍwān’s contemporaries, the Jewish doctor, Afrā’īm ibn al-Zaffān, who was his own pupil in Cairo (*‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, pp. 567-68), and the Baghdad Jacobite doctor, Abū ‘Alī ‘Īsā ibn Zur‘a (d. 1008) (q.v.), whose reputation and works he presumably knew. It is

impossible to say definitely why he directed his attack at these particular individuals, though their medical expertise and religious affiliations must clearly be part of the explanation. The starting point may have been a response by Afrāʾim to anti-Jewish arguments written by Ibn Zurʿa, to which ‘Alī in turn replied.

From its title, the work could have been a mainly theoretical discussion about the reasons for the diversity among religious communities. It is also likely to have contained some examination and refutation of the claims of Judaism and Christianity, maybe in terms of the supersession of both faiths by Islam.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The work perhaps points to the continuing problem that followers of all three faiths faced in explaining how other faiths could be allowed to exist alongside theirs by a God whom they believed favored their own.

MANUSCRIPTS —

EDITIONS &amp; TRANSLATIONS —

STUDIES —

*Maqāla fī baʿth nubuwwa Muḥammad min  
al-Tawrāt wa-l-falsafa*, ‘Treatise on the dispatch  
of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad from the  
Torah and philosophy’

DATE Unknown; before about 1060

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

## DESCRIPTION

The work is lost, and is known only from Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa’s list of ‘Alī’s works (*Uyūn al-anbaʿ*, p. 567). Its title indicates that it was an apology for the prophethood of Muḥammad, and thus an example of *dalāʾil al-nubuwwa* works, though with the particular feature of philosophical arguments in addition to the traditional biblical proof-texts. Since the latter came only from the Torah, it is likely that the treatise was directed mainly at Jewish opponents, possibly ‘Alī’s student Afrāʾim or his friend Yahūdā ibn Saʿāda, to whom he addressed two other works.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The treatise continues the well-established tradition of works to prove the prophetic status of Muḥammad, though it stands out from other known examples in including proofs not only from scripture, but also from the philosophical tradition. It cannot be ruled out that the latter made use of ideas promoted by such philosophers as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, that prophets were geniuses who taught in narrative and pictorial forms. In making transcendent truths accessible to the in-expert, they functioned as necessary elements in the divine plan.

MANUSCRIPTS —

EDITIONS &amp; TRANSLATIONS —

STUDIES —

**David Thomas**