

‘Alī ibn Ṭāhir al-Sulamī

Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ṭāhir ibn Ja‘far ibn
‘Abdallāh al-Qaysī al-Sulamī al-Naḥwī

DATE OF BIRTH 1039 OR 1040
PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown
DATE OF DEATH 19 November 1106
PLACE OF DEATH Unknown

BIOGRAPHY

Al-Sulamī is an obscure figure, and what little we know about him comes from only four short entries in biographical dictionaries. He was a teacher of grammar in the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, where he had a *ḥalqa* (circle of students), upon whom he endowed his collection of books. However, al-Sulamī was not merely a teacher of grammar; he also took an interest in jurisprudence, being himself from a family of Shāfi‘ī religious scholars, and was regarded by others as a *thiqa* (a reliable transmitter of Hadith).

Over the course of the year 1105, at the mosque of Bayt Lihyā in the *ghūṭa* (the rural area surrounding Damascus), al-Sulamī publicly composed a treatise entitled *Kitāb al-jihād* (‘Jihad’). In doing this he sought to encourage his co-religionists, and particularly the political authorities of the time, to take up arms against the crusaders, who had conquered Jerusalem six years earlier and were continuing to expand their territory in the Levant. Al-Sulamī’s call, however, seems to have had little immediate effect, even though the most important part of his work was again read in public once before and once after his death, with the last dictation being conducted in the Great Mosque in Damascus.

Al-Sulamī’s text is unfinished, with gaps waiting to be filled in. Given that al-Sulamī died less than a year after his work’s composition, it seems likely that it was his death rather than a lack of motivation that prevented him from adding these finishing touches to it.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Kitāb al-jihād, ‘Jihad’

DATE 1105

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

DESCRIPTION

Al-Sulamī’s *Kitāb al-jihād* survives only in a single, partial manuscript that is itself split over two codices. The original manuscript runs to a total of 165 pages. The entire work is written in one hand (with the exception of some later annotations) and appears to have been taken down by the scribe as the author was composing it aloud in public.

As noted above, al-Sulamī’s work was composed with the express purpose of summoning his fellow Muslims to the *jihād* against the crusaders. It forms part of an ongoing tradition of works devoted to the topic of the *jihād*, although it is also a multifaceted work showing elements of a variety of genres, thus being not only a theological tract and public moral exhortation, but also at times a historical account,

a collection of Hadith, *maghāzī* and *sīra* material, a judicial text, a grammar treatise, a *faḍā’il* collection and even a poetic anthology. As such, it was clearly influenced by a wide range of writing traditions.

SIGNIFICANCE

Despite its lack of immediately discernable impact, the *Kitāb al-jihād* is an important work. It is one of the few contemporary texts that we have for the aftermath of the arrival of the First Crusade in the Levant, and as such it gives us a vital insight into initial Muslim reactions to the crusades. Of particular note is al-Sulamī’s reference to the crusaders’ activities as a *jihād*, which suggests that the Muslims were more aware of the nature of the crusaders’ campaigns than other sources might have us believe. In addition, it is clear that al-Sulamī’s ideas, and those of others like him, circulated among scholars in the years that followed and were eventually influential in the development of the Muslim counter-crusade.

Al-Sulamī’s text is also significant for its place in the development of Muslim *jihād* doctrine as a whole, in as far as it was written at about the time that the theory of greater *jihād* (*al-jihād al-akbar*, cleansing one’s soul of disobedience to God and speaking or writing in defense of the faith) and lesser *jihād* (*al-jihād al-aṣghar*, military activity for the faith) was crystallizing under the influence of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) (q.v.) and others. The text provides an early example of discussion of this doctrine and hence is important as a witness to this change in Muslim thought.

Finally, as a multi-genre work, the *Kitāb al-jihād* offers a variety of avenues for future study of a number of topics, including developments in theological and legal thought and practice, oratory techniques, Arabic grammar, poetry, and the writing of historical and biographical texts, particularly in the form of *sīra* and *maghāzī* works.

MANUSCRIPTS

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