

Report on the Post Doctoral Writing Fellowship
British Institute for Libyan & Northern African Studies

Project: Between Qum and Qayrawan: Reconstructing Fatimid Libraries of North Africa

Recipient: Kumail Rajani, University of Exeter

Here is a comprehensive report on the progress and achievements made during the tenure of the writing fellowship granted by the British Institute for Libyan & Northern African Studies for my project, "Between Qum and Qayrawan: Reconstructing Fatimid Libraries of North Africa."

Project Overview

In undertaking the ambitious endeavour to reconstruct the Fatimid libraries situated in the historic city of Qayrawān during the 3rd/9th century, the primary focus of the project was directed towards the nuanced examination of the sources generated in North Africa. This particular genre, emerging in the wake of the Fatimid ascendancy, encompasses a diverse array of intellectual pursuits, including works on history, theology, law, polemics, esoteric sciences, allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an, and biographical literature, among others.

The overarching goal of the project was twofold. Firstly, it sought to meticulously unearth and detail the obscured sources that served as intellectual bedrocks for Fatimid scholars during this pivotal period. The Fatimids, in consolidating their influence over North Africa, engaged in a profound intellectual enterprise that required them to draw upon earlier collections from diverse regions such as Medina, Egypt, Yemen, Baghdad, and Qum. These sources, although no longer extant, were fundamental in equipping Fatimid scholars with the raw material necessary for the formulation and systematisation of various aspects of Isma'ili beliefs and practices. By painstakingly reconstructing these lost sources, the project aimed to shed light on the intellectual landscape that shaped the development of Fatimid thought.

Secondly, the project aspired to underscore the distinctive and significant contribution of North Africa to the broader tapestry of Arabic literature. By delving into the 'ulūm Āl al-Bayt, which emerged as a response to the unique sociopolitical context of Fatimid rule, the research aimed to unravel the intellectual richness and literary creativity that characterised North Africa during this period. Beyond merely cataloguing historical facts, the project sought to contextualise the intellectual milieu, bringing to the forefront the vibrant intellectual exchanges, cross-cultural influences, and the synthesis of diverse scholarly traditions that occurred within the Fatimid libraries.

In essence, the project embarked on a scholarly journey to resurrect the intellectual legacy embedded within the Fatimid libraries of Qayrawān, not only to piece together the

mosaic of lost knowledge but also to emphasise the profound impact of North African scholarship on the broader narrative of Arabic literature.

Milestones Achieved

During the fellowship period, I successfully achieved several milestones in line with the project's goals. My primary focus was on producing chapters for my forthcoming monograph, shedding light on the written heritage of Fatimid libraries in North Africa.

I. Presentations and Conferences

I presented three chapters from my monograph at various conferences, reaching diverse audiences and receiving valuable feedback. The titles of these presentations align with the chapters of my monograph:

1. 29/9/2023:

Title: The Exoteric Tradition of the Fatimids: Sources, Reception, and Interpretation

Venue: Islamic History and Thought Lecture Series at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London)

With a particular focus on the exoteric tradition of the Fatimids, this chapter scrutinised the sources that shaped, received, and interpreted the profound knowledge emanating from the Fatimid North African libraries. This in-depth examination delves into the intricacies of the scholarly landscape, elucidating how the Fatimid scholars engaged with their intellectual inheritance and translated it into the multifaceted disciplines encapsulated within the 'ulūm Āl al-Bayt genre.

The Exoteric Tradition of the Fatimids: Sources, Reception, and Interpretation

Islamic History and Thought Lecture Series
(The Institute of Ismaili Studies)
29/9/2023

Kumail Rajani
University of Exeter



Image 1: First slide of my presentation at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 29/9/2023

2. 29/11/2023

Title: In Search of the Sources of the Sources: Exploring Fatimid Libraries of North Africa

Venue: BILNAS Lecture Series (online)

A slightly modified version of a chapter of my forthcoming monograph was presented in the esteemed venues of the BILNAS Lecture Series, entitled “In Search of the Sources of the Sources,” delving into the archives of the Fatimid libraries themselves. This exploration, presented with meticulous detail, not only aimed to uncover the literary treasures that once graced the shelves of these libraries but also sought to provide insights into the intellectual crossroads where the various threads of knowledge converged.

In Search of the Sources of the Sources: Exploring Fatimid Libraries of North Africa

BILNAS lecture

Kumail Rajani
University of Exeter
29/11/22



Image 2: First slide of my presentation for the BILNAS lecture (online), 29/11/2023

3. 12/3/2024

Title: Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s Composition Between Ḥadīth and Fiqh (submitted)

Venue: Normative Practices in tenth century Ifrīqiya, University of Lausanne (forthcoming)

Abstract:

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān began producing legal material for the Fatimid state with the aim of elucidating (*al-Ṭdāḥ*) the legal doctrines of Ahl al-Bayt, and his work culminated in defining the pillars of Islam (*Da‘ā’im al-Islām*). In between he wrote several law manuals that addressed the immediate needs of judges, governors and bureaucrats. Though his writings differed

stylistically and structurally, his legal conclusions remained consistent. One can argue that his opinions became increasingly decisive in *Da'ā'im*, moving away from the reconciliatory tone found in *al-Ṭḍāḥ*. I contest the idea that the *Da'ā'im* was 'the last in a series of more controversial, more rudimentary legal works composed by al-Nu'mān' and is a 'clear, neat and well-organised dogmatic exposition of the tenets of Ismā'ili positive Law'. I will argue that al-Nu'mān's first legal work, *al-Ṭḍāḥ*, was neither controversial nor rudimentary, but the most sophisticated analytical legal work he produced in his entire scholarly career. I will examine this proposition by showcasing three examples: *tathwīb*, *basmala* and the utterance of *āmīn*.

II. Monograph Progress and next steps

I am pleased to report the completion of three chapters for my monograph, each delving into critical aspects of the Fatimid libraries' influence on Ismā'ili beliefs and practices. The chapters cover topics such as the exoteric tradition, exploration of library sources, and the composition of Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān between Ḥadīth and Fiqh. These achievements during the fellowship period not only represent a significant step forward in the scholarly pursuit of understanding the Fatimid libraries but also lay a solid foundation for the comprehensive monograph that is poised to make a substantial contribution to the scholarly discourse on Arabic literature and intellectual history in North Africa. Moving forward, I plan to finalise the remaining chapters of the monograph, incorporating insights gained from conference presentations and feedback. Additionally, I aim to submit the completed manuscript to Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgments

I express my sincere gratitude to the British Institute for Libyan & Northern African Studies for providing the invaluable writing fellowship, enabling me to make significant progress on this research project. I look forward to sharing the completed monograph and further contributing to the understanding of the Fatimid libraries' impact on Arabic literature.

Thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,
Kumail Rajani, University of Exeter