

\* كتاب وفيات الاعيان \*

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# BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY

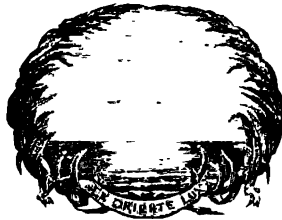
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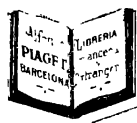


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# The Legend of the Grain of Wheat

ABU BAKR AS-SULI.

The *kātib* Abū Bakr Muhammad Ibn Yahya Ibn Abd Allah Ibn al-Abbās Ibn Muhammad Ibn Sūl Tikin, generally known by the appellation of as-Sūli as-Shatranji (*as-Sūli the chess-player*), bore a high reputation as a man of talent and an accomplished scholar. He delivered traditional information on the authority of Abū Dāwūd as-Sijistāni (*vol. I. p. 589*), Abū 'l-Abbās Thalab (*vol. I. p. 83*), Abū 'l-Abbās al-Mubarrad (*page 31 of this vol.*), and other great masters; Abū 'l-Hasan ad-Dārakutni (*vol. II. p. 239*), Abū Abd Allah al-Marzubāni, see the preceding article, and others have transmitted down the information which he imparted. He became one of (*the khalif*) ar-Rādi's boon companions, after having been his preceptor; the khalif al-

Muktafi and his successor al-Muktadir received him also into their intimacy on account of his convivial talents. He composed a number of celebrated works, such as the *Kitāb al-Wuzarā* (book of vizirs), the *Kitāb al-Waraka* (book of the leaf (?)), the *Adab al-Kātib* (the knowledge requisite for a kاتب), the *Kitāb al-Anwād* (book of species), the History of Abū Tammām (vol. I. p. 348), the History of the Karmats, the *Kitāb al-Ghurār* (book of brilliancies (?)), the History of Abū Amr Ibn al-Alā (vol. II. p. 399), the *Kitāb al-ʾIbāda* (book of devotion), the History of Ibn Harma (1), the History of as-Saiyid al-Himyari (vol. II. p. 241), the History of Ishak Ibn Ibrahim an-Nadīm (vol. I. p. 183), a biographical dictionary of modern poets, etc. The science which he chiefly cultivated was biography, but he knew by heart and transmitted down a great number of literary productions. Sincere in his religious belief and virtuous in his conduct, he merited the confidence which was always placed in his word. As a chess-player he remained without an equal, and, even to the present day, it is said proverbially of a player whose abilities are intended to be extolled, that *such a one plays at chess like as-Sūli*. I have met a great number of persons who believed that as-Sūli was the inventor of chess, but this is an erroneous opinion, that game having been imagined by Sissah Ibn Dāhir the Indian, for the amusement of king Shihram. Ardashir Ibn Bābek, the founder of the last Persian dynasty, invented the game of *nerd* (tables) (2), which was, therefore, called *nerdashir* (3). He designed it as an image of the world and its inhabitants, and, therefore, divided the board into twelve squares to represent the months of the year; the thirty pieces (*or men*) represented the days of the month, and the dice were the emblems of fate and the vicissitudes through which it conducts the people of the world. But, to expatiate on these points would lead us too far, and make us digress from the subject in which we are now engaged. The Persians count the game of *nerd* as one of the inventions which did honour to their nation. [Balhait was at that time king of India, and for him Sissah invented the game of chess. The sages of the time declared it superior to the game of *nerd*, and that for reasons too long to be explained] (4). It is said that, when Sissah invented the game of chess and presented it to Shihram, the latter was struck with admiration and filled with joy; he ordered chess-boards to be placed in the temples, and considered that game as the best thing that could be learned, in as much as it served (*as an introduction*) to (*the art of*) war, as an honour to religion and the world, and as the foundation of all justice. He manifested also his gratitude and satisfaction for the favour which heaven had granted him in illustrating his reign by

such an invention, and he said to Sissah. "Ask me for whatever you desire." — "I then demand," replied Sissah, "that a grain of wheat be placed in the first square of the chess-board, two in the second, and that the number of grains be progressively doubled till the last square is attained : whatever this quantity may be, I ask you to bestow it on me." The king, who meant to make him a present of something considerable, exclaimed that such a recompense would be too little, and reproached Sissah for asking so inadequate a reward. Sissah declared that he desired nothing but what he had mentioned, and, heedless of the king's remonstrances, he persisted in his demand. The king, at length, consented, and ordered that quantity of wheat to be given him. When the chiefs of the government office received orders to that effect, they calculated the amount, and answered that they did not possess near so much wheat as was required. These words were reported to the king, and he, being unable to credit them, ordered the chiefs to be brought before him. Having questioned them on the subject, they replied that all the wheat in the world would be insufficient to make up the quantity. He ordered them to prove what they said, and, by a series of multiplications and reckonings, they demonstrated to him that such was the fact. On this, the king said to Sissah : "Your ingenuity in imagining such a request is yet more admirable than your talent in inventing the game of chess." — The way in which this doubling of the grains is to be done consists in the calculator's placing one grain in the first square, two in the second, four in the third, eight in the fourth, and so on, till he comes to the last square; placing in each square the double of what is contained in the preceding one. I was doubtful that the amount could be so great as what is said, but having met one of the accountants employed at Alexandria, I received from him a demonstration which convinced me that their declaration was true : he placed before me a sheet of paper in which he had doubled the numbers up to the sixteenth square, and obtained thirty-two thousand seven hundred and sixty-eight grains (5). "Now," said he, "let us consider this quantity to be the contents of a pint measure, and this I know by experiment to be true;" — these are the accountant's words, so let him bear the responsibility — "then let the pint be doubled in the seventeenth square, and so on progressively. In the twentieth square it will become a *waiba* (peck), the *waibas* will then become an *irdabb* (bushel), and in the fortieth square we shall have one hundred and seventy-four thousand seven hundred and sixty-two *irdabbs*. Let us suppose this to be the contents of a corn store, and no corn store contains

“ more than that; then, in the fiftieth square we shall have the contents of one  
 “ thousand and twenty-four stores; suppose these to be (*situated in*) one city — and  
 “ no city can have more than that number of stores or even so many—we shall then  
 “ find that the sixty-fourth and last square gives sixteen thousand three hundred and  
 “ eighty-four cities (6). Now, you know that there is not in the world a greater num-  
 “ ber of cities than that, for geometry informs us that the circumference of the globe  
 “ is eight thousand (7); parasangs so that, if the end of a cord were laid on any part  
 “ of the earth, and the cord passed round it till both ends met, we should find the  
 “ length of the cord to be twenty-four thousand miles, which is equal to eight thou-  
 “ sand parasangs. This (*demonstration*) is decisive and indubitable.”—Were I not  
 apprehensive of extending this article too much and being led away from my sub-  
 ject, I should render this evident, but, in my notice on the sons of Mûsa, I shall  
 touch again on the subject (8). You know also that the inhabited portion of the  
 earth forms about one quarter of its surface.—These observations have caused us to  
 digress, but as they convey some useful information and a curious piece of reckon-  
 ing, I decided on inserting them so that they might come under the notice of such  
 persons as treat with incredulity the result obtained by doubling the squares of  
 the chess-board, and oblige them to acknowledge its exactitude; the demonstration  
 here given clearly proves the truth of what has been said on the subject. — Let us  
 return to as-Sûli. Al-Masûdi relates, in his *Murûj ad-Dahab*, that the *imâm* (or  
*khalif*) ar-Râdi billah went to a delightful garden filled with flowers, at one of his  
 country seats, and asked the boon companions who accompanied him if they ever saw  
 a finer sight. They all began to extol it and describe its beauties, declaring that  
 nothing in the world could surpass it; on which ar-Râdi said : “ As-Sûli’s manner  
 “ of playing chess is yet a finer sight and surpasses all you could describe.” It is  
 related, says the same author, that when (*the khalif*) al-Muktafi (*billah*) first heard of  
 as-Sûli’s extraordinary talent in that game, he had already taken into his favour a  
 chess-player named al-Mâwardi, whose manner of playing had excited his admiration.  
 When as-Sûli and al-Mâwardi were set to play in the presence of al-Muktafi, the  
*khalif* yielded to his partiality for the latter, and, led away by the friendly feelings  
 which a long acquaintance had established between them, he prompted him and en-  
 couraged him so openly that as-Sûli felt at first embarrassed and confused. However,  
 as the game went on, he recovered his self-possession and vanquished his adversary  
 so completely that no one could gainsay it. Al-Muktafi being thus convinced of his

talent, lost all his partiality for al-Māwardi and said to him : "Your *md-ward* (*rose water*) is turned into urine." — Innumerable anecdotes are told of as-Sūli and his adventures; yet, with all his talent, his acknowledged learning, humour, and elegant taste, he met with a depreciator in Abū Saïd al-Okaili, who attacked him, but not severely, in a satire : as-Sūli had a room filled with works composed by himself and all in differently coloured bindings; these he used to call the fruits of his studies (9), and, when he had occasion to refer to any of them, he would tell his boy to bring him such and such a book. This led Abū Saïd to compose the following lines :

Of all men, as-Sūli possesses the most learning — in his library. If we ask him for an explanation on a point of science, he answers : " Boys ! bring here such and such a packet of " science (10). "

As-Sūli died at Basra, A. H. 335 (A. D. 946-7), or 336; he had sought concealment there to avoid the active search which people of all ranks were making after him with the intention of putting him to death. The crime imputed to him was his publishing a certain Tradition relative to (*the rights of*) Ali, the son of Abū Tālib. Some time previously, he had been obliged, by straitened circumstances, to leave Baghdad. — We have already spoken of the word *Sūli* in the life of Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Abbās as Sūli (*vol. I. p. 22*), the uncle of Abū Bakr's father. — *Sissah* is to be pronounced with an *î* followed by a double *s* and then an *h*. — *Dāhir* is pronounced with an *î* in the second syllable. — *Ardashîr* is thus spelled by ad-Dārakutni; another author says that it is a Persian word signifying *flour and milk*; *ard* means *flour*, and *shîr*, *milk*. Some say that *Ardashîr* means *flour and sweetness* (11), and others state that it should be written *Azdashîr*. It was this prince who overthrew the provincial kings (*Mulūk at-Tawāif*) and formed, out of their empires, a kingdom for himself. He was the ancestor of that Persian dynasty which ended in Yazdajird (*Yezdegird*) and was overthrown in the thirty-second year of the Hijra, in the khalifate of Othmān Ibn Affān. Their history is well known. This dynasty must not be confounded with the first series of the Persian kings which terminated in Dārā (*Darius*), the son of Dārā, him who was slain by Alexander. This conqueror established provincial kings throughout the country, and he gave them this name because each of them had a different people under his rule; these states had previously belonged to a single man. Ardashîr was one of the provincial kings, but he succeeded in subduing the

others and establishing the empire in its primitive unity. The country had remained under the provincial kings during four hundred years. The last Persian dynasty subsisted for the same period.—I am unable to fix with certainty the orthography of *Balhait*, the name of the king of India, but I found it thus written, with the vowels, by the copyist of the book which I consulted. It may or it may not be correct.

(4) " In A. H. 176 (A. D. 792-3) died Abû Ishak Ibrahîm Ibn Ali Ibn Maslama Ibn Aâmir Ibn Harma al-Fihri ( *أبو فحري* ), a celebrated poet of whom al-Asmâi said : ' Ibn Harma was the last of the poets.' No testimony can be stronger than this in favour of his talents." — (*Nujûm*.)

(2) Hyde has treated of these games in his treatise *De Ludis Orientalium*.

(3) Ibn Khallikân, or the author whom he copies, seems, therefore, to have considered the word *nerdashtr* as the equivalent of *nerd Ardashtr* (*Ardashtr's nerd*).

(4) If the passage here placed between crotchets be not an interpolation, the author has been led into a contradiction by his forgetting to compare the additional notes which he inserted in the margin of his work with what he had already written. It may be here mentioned that nothing positive is known of Sissah, Shihram, and Balhait.

(5) This is perfectly exact.

(6) These sums are exact.

(7) The reasoning which follows is so inconclusive, that we must suppose our author to have misunderstood what was said.

(8) The life of Muhammad Ibn Mûsa Ibn Shâkir will be found in this volume ; but it does not contain the slightest allusion to the arithmetical problem of the chess-board.

(9) Literally : *his hearing* ; that is, what he learned at his master's lectures.

(10) The grammatical construction of this last verse is incorrect : for *فلانة* we should read *الفلانة*.

(11) These derivations, which have been already given (vol. I. p. 555), are too futile to merit attention.

## AL-HATIMI.

Abû Ali Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn al-Muzaffar, surnamed al-Hâtimi, a native of Baghdad, a *kâtib* and a philologer, was one of the most eminent among those learned men who had attained celebrity by their extensive information and numerous productions. He studied the belles-lettres under Abû Omar-az-Zâhid (*page 43 of this vol.*),