

INCoH 2017

The Second International Conference on Humanities

IBRAHIM BIN AL-AGHLAB: CHARISMA AND CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS THE AGHLABIDS DYNASTY

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Abstract

This article discusses historical biography of one prominent Islamic leader figure from the Aghlabids reign namely Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab. He founded the dynasty in the year 184A.H./800A.D. in Tunis after having been granted autonomy from the ‘Abbasid ruler to govern and manage his own country. This study aims to investigate the background of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab and analyses his charisma and contributions of in ensuring the strength and stability of his sovereignty. To achieve the outline objectives, this qualitative study employs literature review to analyse the data. The finding of this study reveals Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab as a competence figure in leadership which led the Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid to allow him to set up his own sovereign power of Aghlabids dynasty in Tunis. Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab had gained the trust and confidence from the caliph himself in light of the former’s success in defeating the insurgencies from the Idrisids rule and Kharijite of Ifriqiyyah. As such, his prowess as a war commander was not only feared but respected as well by the enemies, particularly the Byzantine.

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Keywords: Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab, Islamic leader, the Aghlabids dynasty, Ifriqiyyah, ‘Abbasid ruler.



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1. Introduction

The Aghlabids dynasty was a small sovereign country tucked in the North of Africa, known at present day as Tunisia. The dynasty was established in 184-296H/800-900M at the time of the 'Abbasid dynasty but was conferred autonomy status away from the domain of the administration of the empire. Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab, the founder of the small sovereign is of the Bani Tamim clan, hailed from Khurasan was also a notable Islamic warrior fighting for the empire. The Aghlabids dynasty managed to conquer Ifriqiyyah and established Qayrawan as the new capital for Ifriqiyyah. This city was of a vital importance as an administration centre as well as centre for socio-economic development.

The majority of the writings produced by the previous and contemporary scholars emphasize on the founder of the kingdom, the history of the establishment and the development of the Aghlabids dynasty and the territories that had been conquered in general. The work of Ibn al-Athir (1998), *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* is the main source regarding the history of the Aghlabids dynasty. This primary source contains important information on the establishment of the dynasty itself, the expansion of the territories and the administration of the government. The author, however fails to emphasize in respect of the charisma and inherent characters of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab. This is particularly so because he concentrates on the information regarding historical facts of the Islamic kingdom, the history of certain places, and he is not writing on detailed personal biography and characters of the said Islamic ruler.

Ibn 'Idhari (2009), in his book *al-Bayan al-Mughrib fi Akhbar Muluk al-Andalus wa al-Maghrib* describe in detail about the political affairs of the Aghlabids dynasty in administering and managing the territories they have conquered. Despite many successful conquests the government was forced to face numerous rebellions from the local insurgents from each captive territory. However, this book fails to show a detailed description of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab's background and provides little information about his characters and leadership.

One of the earliest and famous historians, al-Baladhuri (1991) in his book *Futuh al-Buldan* presents information on the conquest of the territories by Islamic governments, the geography of the region successfully conquered and Islamic figure instrumental to the expansion of the Islamic colonies and the ongoing wars. However, this book is very concise and does not touch on Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab who made the city of Qayrawan as the capital of the Aghlabids dynasty. Meanwhile, a book entitled *A History of Islamic Sicily* penned by Ahmad (1975) revolving around the development of Islamic knowledge. Flocks of scholars were brought in from Qayrawan to teach fiqh and at the same time set up the school of Maliki. This book gives information about the establishment of the Aghlabids dynasty and not writing in detail on the background and characters of the figure who established the government.

In his book, *The New Islamic Dynasties: Chronological and Genealogical Manual*, Bosworth (2004) discusses on Islamic sovereigns which managed their own territories. Unfortunately, this book is silent on the information directed to the biography of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab as well as prove of his characters and leadership. The study on a journal authored by Takayama (1992) states a list of governors appointed during the Aghlabids reign who consisted of army commanders and government officials (they use the title of guardian or sahib), and there were even Amirs of the Aghlabids dynasty who directly ministered Sicily without appointing a governor. However, the author fails to provide the necessary information with regards

to the biography and characters of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab and his contributions to the prominence of his kingdom.

The resulting writing shows the importance of the war figure, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab in enlivening the Islamic civilization at that point. Therefore, this article is very important and appropriate as an added value to the existing information regarding the Islamic history and civilization. Although Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab is the founder of a small kingdom but his charisma and personality as well as his contributions to Islamic civilization had a big impact on the Islamic world and the west.

2. Problem Statement

A few great civilizations bore its origin from Islam and with them came numerous figures worth mentioning who fought for the greatness of Islam irrespective of localities and enemies and at the expense of their own lives. These selfless individuals are more often than they were not coming from a line of scholars but they are war lords who were more than willing to sacrifice their own lives for a greater cause of spreading the message of peace that Islam offers. However, these noble individuals are often unsung, leaving little to no recognition at all from the latter ummah in particular and much less generally from the world at large. The glory and excellence of the Aghlabids dynasty in developing and expanding their influence relies heavily on the Amirs who led the government. In the fold of Islamic civilization, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab is among the great leaders who have left a remarkable imprint in history for being a distinguished leader in politics, economy, social, military and cultural development of Muslims and non-Muslims in the territory of Ifriqiyyah that of which were revered by friends and foes alike. Yet his charisma and personality as well as his contributions to Islamic civilization, particularly to the Aghlabids dynasty are not much being highlighted by the scholars. Therefore, there needs to introduce the charisma and prominence of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab. This research tries to establish and prove the special background of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab that launch him to be distinguished and significant Islamic ruler of the Aghlabids dynasty.

3. Research Questions

This article is expected to answer the following questions:

- 3.1.** Who is Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab and what are the charisma belongs to him?
- 3.2.** What are the contributions of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab towards the development of the Aghlabids dynasty?

4. Purpose of the Study

This article aims:

- 4.1.** To investigate the background of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab and to analyse his charisma.
- 4.2.** To analyse the contributions of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab towards the development of the Aghlabids dynasty.

5. Research Methods

This research is a qualitative study that enables the researcher to explore, analyse and gain a deep understanding of the studied subject. Qualitative assessment methods are selected because this assessment does not involve measurement and statistical techniques and the findings also do not pass through statistical procedures or quantitative methods. This qualitative study uses full library research method. All the data and information in this research are compiled from the materials on biography and characters of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab and his contributions towards the glory of the Aghlabids dynasty. This assessment requires the researchers to procure materials from the primary and secondary references in the library to collect data. All the information acquired is mainly used to support, enhance and deepen the researchers' knowledge so that the understanding and appreciation of the research title can be well-mastered. The materials obtained are of varied medium of instructions such as Malay, English and Arabic.

6. Findings

The findings of the study are as follows:

6.1. The background of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab.

Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab bin Salim 'ikal al-Tamimi was born in 140H/756M in Khurasan and he was of Aghlab or Banu Taghib from the Banu Tamim tribe of Khurasan (Singh, 2005). His father, al-Aghlab was a strong supporter of the 'Abbasid movement along with Abu Muslim al-Khurasani (Hitti, 1951). At the age of ten, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab together with his family moved to Egypt because his father was appointed as a commander of the Islamic army of Egypt. Thus, his education began in Egypt by studying the foundations of knowledge in religion. Among his distinguished master was al-Layth bin Sa'ad. He began to venture into military field as early as 174A.H./790A.D. and successfully qualified himself to join the 'Abbasid army in Egypt. In addition, he was not only famous as the commander of the Islamic army and the political leader but he was also known as the Islamic scholar in fiqh and Arabic poet. Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab died on 21st of Syawal 196A.H./5th of July 812A.D. in Qayrawan after 12 years reigning the Aghlabids dynasty and he was replaced by his son, 'Abd Allah I (Singh, 2005).

6.2. Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab's Charisma.

- **Trusted and honest.** The 'Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid has given a high level of trust to Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab for his honest and trustworthy attitude. In 185A.H./801A.D., Harun al-Rashid had sent his newly elected governor, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab as the 'Abbasid Dynasty delegation to see King Charlemagne who ruled Vercelli and Ivrea in Pisa, Italy to surrender credentials in recognition of the king's order to govern his area with full force and the king does not interfere with the power of the Aghlabids dynasty (Dahlan, 2003).
- **Brave and mighty.** Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab was very active in maritime warfare which was an interesting aspect of the kingdom under the reign of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab. This is because of his expeditions by exploring the islands around the Mediterranean Sea where he and his rulers try to fuel the spirit of war in the sea. In addition, they also built fortresses to guard the Ifriqiyyah coast

from the Byzantine Empire, Pizza and Frankish invasions so that they have been designated as centuries-old seas by Western orientalists (Bujang, 1998).

- **Visionary.** Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab is an ambitious and far-minded leader in determining the direction of his life and his kingdom to be in good and stable condition from various aspects of life. Among his high ambitions is the attempt to conquer the Sicily island, which in the sense that the island is highly valued. The island has a high potential to be set up as a socio-economic centre, as well as a political and military base (Glubb, 1963). However, his ambition was not immediately implemented because he was very busy with the domestic and foreign affairs. His ambition was later being fulfilled by his second son, Ziyadat Allah I (Ibn al-Athir, 1871).
- **Heartbeat.** The inner strength of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab has made him as a military commander and authoritative political figure that not easily to give up and has a strong fighting spirit. He was able to prove that the Aghlabids dynasty under his leadership was one of the Arab Islamic dynasty that succeeded in ruling Ifriqiyyah (McKenna, 2010). In fact, as a whole, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab also strives to ensure that the barbaric community is able to accept its power (al-Nasr, 1987).

6.3. The contributions of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab.

Based on this study, there have been some contributions given by Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab in ensuring the Aghlabids dynasty well develop and stable. Among the contributions are as follows:

- **Build his own kingdom.** The ‘Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid had faced two major dangers which threatening his authority, the rebellion that occurred in the western part of Ifriqiyyah. The first was the rebellion by the Idrisids Government and the second was the rebellion by the Kharijites. Both threats forced the caliph to place his army under the command of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab (Dahlan, 2003). Hence, it has indirectly opened a larger space to highlight the influence of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab until he was elected as the governor of Ifriqiyyah by Harun al-Rashid. He was then able to build his own ruling dynasty in Tunis. For more than a century, Ifriqiyyah was ruled by this dynasty with 11 rulers (Dhaiyaf, 1992).
- **Obtained autonomous power.** In order to gain autonomous power status over Ifriqiyyah, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab has promised to give a sum of 40,000 dinars per year to the ‘Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid (Bosworth, 2004). Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab was unwilling to render to the government in Baghdad. Gaining the autonomous power means that Ifriqiyyah became a full autonomous region of the Aghlabids dynasty and ruled by themselves, although they still recognizing the caliphate in Baghdad. He was also succeeded in pursuing his own political administration including determining his successor without the intervention of the central power in Baghdad (Singh, 2005).
- **Making agreement with his enemies.** In order to provide the best security and protection to his people and territories, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab was forced to sign a peace treaty with Constantine, the Byzantine King in Sicily for ten years due to the threat of the Byzantine army in the Mediterranean Sea (Ahmad, 1975). During this period, Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab sought to rebuild the strength of his navy army and increase his government’s wealth in the trade sector between the countries along the Mediterranean Sea (Thohir, 2009).

- **Gold dinar forging.** The Aghlabids dynasty had its own factory to forge the money since 189A.H./804A.D. The Golden Dinar of Aghlabi was named Rub' or Ruba'ya. This Aglabi Golden Dinar has been used by all its colonies including Sicily island. In addition, this gold dinar was widely used in the thriving trade sector at that time in the transaction of Qayrawan and Sicily import-export goods with its surrounding areas (Bates, 1987).
- **Improvement of the Aghlabids' economy.** The Aghlabi Golden Dinar was able to achieve international currency value and expand rapidly in the colonial territories during the reign of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab. Moreover, it has also proven that the credibility of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab is highly dependent on his government's economy status to be transformed in order to make it more vibrant, competing and promising in the fisheries, industrial and trade sectors of agriculture (Basile, 1941).

7. Conclusion

Indeed, the charisma of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab has proven when he succeeded to reign a small dynasty whose population was barbaric while he was an Arab. His sovereign has had a profound effect on Muslims around Tunis and non-Muslims on the European side. It was his idea that the *futuhat Islamiyyah* on the Sicily island in southern Italy began. Great contributions have been done by Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab in ensuring that the Aghlabids dynasty can last longer and be able to develop from various aspects of life. Thus, the charisma of Ibrahim bin al-Aghlab reveals him as a cunning political leader who can influence the 'Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid to allow him set up the Aghlabids dynasty with their own autonomous powers.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia under post-doctorate scheme.

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