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'Abbās b. Firnās

Abū l-Qāsim 'Abbās b. Firnās b. Wardūs (d. 274/887) was an Andalusī poet and astrologer at the Umayyad court of Córdoba.

All of the available biographical information about him derives from *al-Muqtabis* by Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 469/1076), in which he is described as a *mawlā* (client) of the Umayyad family, of Berber ancestry, whose family was originally settled in the district of Tākurunnā (Ronda, Málaga), although the poet and anthologist 'Ubāda b. Mā' al-Samā' (d. 421/1030) claims that he was a *muwallad* (an Arabised native Hispano-Roman). 'Abbās b. Firnās studied in Córdoba, where he was born, and was familiar with all branches of secular knowledge, including philosophy, magic, music, prosody, astronomy, astrology, alchemy, and mechanics, which led him to be sometimes accused of heresy (*zandaqa*). As a scholar of poetry, he could explain the books on prosody by al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791) and write a treatise of his own on the topic.

'Abbās b. Firnās is credited with inventing a water clock, probably featuring

automata (Samsó, 55), building an armillary sphere, and introducing the method of cutting rock crystal into al-Andalus (Vernet). His ingenuity led him to build in his house a representation of the celestial sphere, with stars, clouds, lightning, and thunder, perhaps not a genuine planisphere but a display he intended to be arresting for spectators (Samsó, 54–5). He also devised a gadget with wings to fly, but it proved unsuccessful. This failed attempt invited some jesting remarks from his contemporary fellow poets. The story of 'Abbās b. Firnās' unsuccessful flying machine is retold in a seventeenth-century Spanish ballad and in some modern Arabic short stories by the Syrian short-story writer Zakariyyā' Tāmir (b. 1931).

The career of 'Abbās b. Firnās as a poet and courtier spanned eight decades, from the reign of al-Ḥakam I (180–206/796–822) to that of Muḥammad I (238–73/852–86), reaching its peak during the rule of 'Abd al-Raḥmān II (206–38/822–52), who assigned him two salaries as both a poet and an astrologer. 'Abbās's rivalry with the poet Mu'min b. Sa'īd (d. 267/881) and their mutually insulting verses are duly reported in