



ABŪ SA'ĪD ABI'L-ḲAYR

ABŪ SA'ĪD FAẒLALLĀH B. ABI'L-ḲAYR AḤMAD MĒHANĪ (or **MAYHANĪ**), famous Iranian mystic, born 1 Moḥarram 357/7 December 967 at Mēhana, a small town in Khorasan, about fifty miles west of Saraḡs, and died there 4 Ša'bān 440/12 January 1049. The major sources for his biography, two Persian hagiographies, were compiled by descendents of Abū Sa'īd about a century and a half after his death and reflect a tendency to embellish the saint in family tradition. They are the *Hālāt o soḡanan-e šayḡ Abū Sa'īd Abu'l-Ḳayr Mēhanī* (ed. V. Zhukovskiĭ, St. Petersburg, 1899; ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1341 Š./1963), compiled by Jamāl-al-dīn Abū Rawḡ Loṭfallāh b. Abī Sa'īd Sa'd b. Abī Sa'īd As'ad b. Abī Ṭāher Sa'īd b. Abī Sa'īd FaẒlallāh (d. 541/1147), and the *Asrār al-tawḡīd fī maqāmāt Šayḡ Abī Sa'īd* (ed. V. Zhukovskiĭ, St. Petersburg, 1899; repr. A. Bahmanyār, Tehran, 1314 Š./1969 and 1354 Š./1975; Arabic tr. E. 'A. Qandīl, Cairo, 1966; French tr. M. Achna, *Les étapes mystiques du shaykh Abū Sa'īd*, Paris, 1974), compiled between 574/1179 and 588/1192 by Loṭfallāh's cousin Moḡammad b. Nūr-al-dīn Monawwar b. Abī Sa'd As'ad, who based his work on the *Hālāt* and dedicated it to the Ghurid sultan Ġiāt-al-dīn Abu'l-Faṡḡ Moḡammad b. Sām (r. 558-99/1163-1203). *Asrār al-tawḡīd* became the principal source for the accounts of Abū Sa'īd in the Sufi *taḡkera* literature, e.g., the *Nafaḡāt* of Jāmī (d. 898/1492) and the supplement to the *Taḡkerat al-awliā'* of 'Aṡṡār (d. 617/1220). Significant minor sources for Abū Sa'īd's biography that antedate and modify the family tradition of the *Asrār* are: *Kašf al-maḡjūb* by Abu'l-Ḥasan Hojvīrī (d. 465-9/1072-77), *Tamḡīdāt* by 'Ayn-al-qozāt Hamadānī (executed 525/1131), and *al-Siāq le ta'riḡ Naysābūr* (cf. R. N. Frye, ed., *The Histories of Nishapur*, The Hague, 1965, facsimile) by 'Abd-al-Ġāfer al-Fāresī (d.



529/1134).

The major features of Abū Sa'īd's biography, which is inextricably intertwined with legend, appear to be the following. In his youth Abū Sa'īd studied the Qur'ān and grammar with a master at Mēhana. He also became acquainted with Sufi practices through his father, a druggist by profession, who took the boy to the performances of Sufi dance (*samā'*) at Mēhana and introduced him to the Sufi poet Abu'l-Qāsem Bešr Yāsīn (d. 380/990), Abū Sa'īd's first teacher in mystical devotion. As a young man Abū Sa'īd proceeded to Marv to study Shafe'ite law for five years under Abū 'Abdallāh Moḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ḳezrī (d. between 373/983 and 390/1000) and for five more years under Abū Bakr 'Abdallāh b. Aḥmad al-Qaffāl (d. 417/1026). He then continued his studies in *tafsīr*, Hadith, and *kalām* at Saraḳs with Abū 'Alī Zāher b. Aḥmad (d. 389/999). At Saraḳs Abū Sa'īd made the acquaintance of the "saintly fool" Loḡmān Saraḳsī, who directed him to the Sufi Abu'l-Faẓl Ḥasan Saraḳsī (possibly in 387/997). The latter became his *pīr*, inducing him to espouse Sufism entirely, and sent him back to Mēhana with the instruction to practice the *dekr* repetitions of the word Allāh. Abū Sa'īd spent the next fifteen years of his life mainly in seclusion at Mēhana and in the solitude of the neighboring mountains and deserts. During this period at Mēhana, he now and then traveled to Saraḳs to be guided in his ascetic exercises and spiritual queries by Abu'l-Faẓl, whose guidance he continued to seek in later years by visiting his grave at Saraḳs. After the demise of his master, Abū Sa'īd traveled to Āmol via Nesā to join the Hanbalite Sufi Abu'l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Moḥammad al-Qaṣṣāb, who, after a year of spiritual training, recognized him as a mature mystic and bestowed on him the patched frock (*ḳerqa*, possibly the *ḳerqa-ye tabarroḳ*). According to a blurred account of the *Asrār al-tawḥīd* (cf. F. Meier, *Abū Sa'īd*, p. 45), Abū Sa'īd earlier had received the *ḳerqa* (possibly the *ḳerqa-ye aṣl*) in Nīšāpūr from the celebrated Sufi historian Solamī (d. 412/1021), to whom he is said to have been sent by Abu'l-Faẓl Saraḳsī upon the completion of his spiritual training.

According to the traditional account of the *Asrār al-tawḥīd*, Abū Sa'īd entered upon the public phase of his Sufi career in the fortieth year of his life, about 400/1009 in the appraisal of Nicholson (*Studies*, p. 25) and Dānešpažūh (*FIZ* 1, 1332 Š./1953, p. 184), or about 407/1016 according to the critical examination of Meier (op. cit., p. 50). Until his death he led the life of a sedentary Sufi and maintained two centers for his activity, residing partly at his hermitage (*ṣawma'a*) and house (*sarāy*) in the remote Mēhana, which he called *mašhad*,



and partly at a convent (*kānaqāh-e 'adanī-kōbān*, said to have been founded by [Abū] 'Alī Ṭarsūsī, who may have been his father-in-law; cf. Meier, op. cit., p. 423) in Nīšāpūr. His occasional travels (to Marv, Marvarrūd, Herat, Qāyen, Kāraqān, and Dāmḡān) did not lead him beyond the northeastern regions of Iran. Though Abū Sa'īd once set out to perform the pilgrimage (*hajj*) with his wife and son, Abū Ṭāher, he never reached Mecca. Traveling via Kāraqān, he visited one of his Sufi forebears of Khorasan, **Abu'l-Ḥasan Kāraqānī** (d. 425/1033), a resident mystic (*moqīm*) who laid claim to the spiritual succession of **Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī** and was the rival of the leading Sufi Shaikh of the Ṭayfūrīya tradition in Baṣṭām Abū 'Abdallāh Dāstānī (d. 417/1026). During the encounter Abū Sa'īd is said to have refused to speak in the presence of the shaikh, who received him with great honor in his *kānaqāh* and succeeded in dissuading him from continuing on his pilgrimage (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 148-50; Hojvīrī, *Kaṣf al-maḥjūb*, p. 205; tr. Nicholson, p. 163; cf. *Nūr al-'olūm*, pp. 194-95).

Abū Sa'īd may have settled in Nīšāpūr for the first time about 415/1024, hardly prior to the death of Solamī and certainly after the death of Abū 'Alī Daqqāq (d. 405/1015), whom he had met as a student in Marv. In Nīšāpūr Abū Sa'īd preached before large audiences and displayed himself as a spiritual guide. He also encountered distrust and reticence on the part of leading Shafe'ite Sufis and Aṣ'arite theologians of the city, among them Abū Moḥammad Jovaynī (d. 478/1085), Esmā'īl Ṣābūnī (d. 449/1057), the famous 'Abd-al-Karīm Qoṣayrī (d. 465/1074) and Ebn Bākōya (d. 428/1037), who directed Solamī's convent after his death but died himself at Šīrāz. Ebn Bākōya, a widely traveled Sufi and an opponent of Sufi dance and music (*samā'*), criticized Abū Sa'īd's comfortable way of life and Sufi conduct. In particular he took exception to Abū Sa'īd's habit of reclining on comfortable cushions when giving ascetic advice and his accepting young men into the company of their seniors during *samā'* performances. Because of his extravagant lifestyle and unconventional Sufi practice, Abū Sa'īd also was drawn into quarrels between local Mu'tazilites and Hanafites on the one hand and Shafe'ites and Aṣ'arites with whom he appears to have sided, on the other hand. The Karramite Abū Bakr Moḥammad b. Eṣḥāq b. Maḥmaṣāḍ made common cause with the Hanafite *qāzī* Abu'l-'Alā' Sa'īd b. Moḥammad and accused Abū Sa'īd of giving lavish feasts, reciting poetry from the pulpit, and having young men perform *samā'* in public. A written charge sent to Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd (d. 421/1030) led to an inquiry which Abū Sa'īd managed to turn to his favor through his skill in thought-reading (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 77-82). Similar accusations were also



raised in the writings of the Zahirite Ebn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), who branded Abū Sa'īd as an infidel for wearing now wool, then silk, saying a thousand prayer units one day and none the next (*al-Feṣal fi'l-melal*, Cairo, 1321/1913, IV, p. 188). The well-known Hanbalite Sufi 'Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), who visited Abū Sa'īd twice in Nīšāpūr, also voiced his reservations about Abū Sa'īd's Sufi doctrine and practice, although he showed respect for his host by presenting him with his turban and overcoat as a gift (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, p. 244; cf. S. de Laugier de Beaucueuil, *Khwādja 'Abdullāh Anṣārī*, Beirut, 1965, pp. 62-63, 68-69). It is unlikely, however, that Abū Sa'īd ever received the famous philosopher Ebn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) at Nīšāpūr for discussions on the nature of philosophy and mysticism, although the sources highlight the punchline of the story about the alleged encounter, in which Ebn Sīnā declares “all that I know, he sees” (*har če man mīdānam ū mībīnad*), and Abū Sa'īd retorts “all that we see, he knows” (*har če mā mībīnīm ū mīdānad*). But the two may have met incidentally in 391/1001 at Mēhana (cf. A. H. Zarrīnkūb, *MDAT*, 1353 Š./1974, no. 3, pp. 86-87) and subsequently may have exchanged letters while Abū Sa'īd was at Nīšāpūr (cf. Meier, *Abū Sa'īd*, p. 28). Towards the end of his life, probably in 437/1046, Abū Sa'īd left Nīšāpūr for good and returned to his native Mēhana, where he died.

Abū Sa'īd appears to have been the first Sufi to record ten basic rules for the inmates of a convent (*kānaqāhīān*). He is said to have dictated them to his scribe Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-Mo'addeb al-Bayhaqī al-Ostowā'ī (d. after 477/1085) and to have initiated an oral tradition of ten additional rules for the Sufi shaikh and ten for the novice (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 329-30; cf. Nicholson, *Studies*, p. 46; Meier, *Abū Sa'īd*, p. 310). Abū Sa'īd instructed his listeners either in the mosque or from a seat raised on a platform at the door of his house. Most of his listeners, who are said to have numbered a hundred, some being dressed in blue frocks, remain anonymous in the sources, while others such as Abū 'Alī Fārmaḍī (d. 477/1084), a student of Qoṣayrī, and Abū'l-Qāsem Korrakānī (d. 469/1076), who also frequented the Sufi sessions of Abū Sa'īd in Nīšāpūr and Mēhana, are cited by name. Among his listeners the sources mention a group of principal disciples, the so-called ten disciples (*aṣḥāb-e 'ašara*), only two of whom can be identified, namely a certain 'Abd-al-Šamad, a native of Saraḳs, and Abū Sa'īd, known as Dōst-e Dādā (d. 477/1084), who between 451/1060 and 466/1074 founded a *rebāṭ* at Baghdad that became the residence of the Sufi *ṣayk al-šoyūk* under Dōst-e Dādā's descendants in the middle of the 6th/12th century. At one occasion Abū Sa'īd, through his wife, invested a woman, Īšī Nīlī of Nīšāpūr, with a *kerqa* (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 82-83).



Abū Saʿīd's disciples may also have included his close associates: Ḥasan Moʿaddeb, his steward, who was buried at Mēhana; ʿAbd-al-Karīm, his personal servant; and Abū Bakr Moʿaddeb, his scribe and the educator (*adīb*) of his sons.

Abū Saʿīd was survived by five sons: Abū Ṭāher, who was buried in his father's shrine at Mēhana in 479/1086; Abu'l-Wafā' Moẓaffar; Abu'l-ʿAlā' Nāṣer, who died at Mēhana in 491/1098; Abū Moṭahhar; and Abu'l-Baqā' Mofaẓzal, who took over his father's convent at Nīšāpūr and died there in 492/1099. Abū Ṭāher, the oldest son, who had received a modest education, undeservedly occupies a prominent place in the family tradition (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 352-53), which depicts him as having been appointed from his father's deathbed as successor (*k̄vāʾja*) to Abū Saʿīd's spiritual suzerainty and as its pivot (*qoṭb*). The story that Abū Saʿīd on his deathbed appointed **Aḥmad Jām** (441-536/1050-1141) as his successor is a legend that was spread by the latter's family tradition in the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries. Some of Abū Saʿīd's followers established convents in the name of their master's spiritual suzerainty, one at Šervān (south of the Caucasus mountains), erected by Abū Naṣr Šervānī on Abū Saʿīd's order, another at Bašk̄vān (near Nesā), founded by Abū ʿAmr Bašk̄vānī (d. 472/1080), the local representative (*nāʿeb*) of Abū Saʿīd, and a third at Šökān (west of Saraḡs), built by Moḥammad Šökānī, a rich man who had embraced Sufism upon the direction of Abū Saʿīd. Abū Saʿīd's shrine at Mēhana and his convent at Nīšāpūr were destroyed in 549/1154 during the devastation of Khorasan by the Ğozz, and some 115 members of his family were tortured and put to death at Mēhana.

The mysticism of Abū Saʿīd is marked by eccentricity, dichotomy, and paradox. His spiritual itinerary is said to have included two phases: The first forty years or so he lived as an austere ascetic, the second part of his life as a cheerful mystic. In his early career Abū Saʿīd subjected himself to exercises of severe self-denial, shutting himself off from people, breaking all bonds with this world, castigating his body, spending his nights in prayer, observing extreme fasts, visiting ruins and solitary places, wandering for months in the desert with herbs as his only sustenance, sweeping mosques, cleaning latrines, and begging for the poor. He was also known to have practiced the *čella-ye maʾkūsa* (performing prayers while standing on his head with the feet tied to a nail in the wall), the Indian origin of which is by no means established (cf. A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 242; S. Vryonis, ed., *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, Wiesbaden, 1975, pp. 121-22). In his later years Abū



Sa'īd hardly led the life of an ascetic but rather that of a sultan, as 'Awfī remarked (cf. Barthold, *Turkestan*¹, p. 311), indulging in luxury, giving sumptuous meals, arranging extravagant entertainments, taking pleasure in the dance of boys, and spending his time listening to music and poetry recitals. In particular Abū Sa'īd is known to have enjoyed the Sufi *samā'* as a kind of social event that included chanting, dancing, and crying out, and culminated in ecstatic rapture when the dancers threw off their clothes, tore them to pieces and distributed them around (*kerqabāzī*).

The transition from a life of self-mortification to a life of divinely inspired joy appears to have been marked by a vision in the mosque of Mēhana (*Asrār al-tawḥīd*, pp. 38-39; cf. Nicholson, *Studies*, p. 16; Meier, *Abū Sa'īd*, p. 72). In this vision, inspired by the Koranic phrase “is not your Lord enough for you” (41:53), Abū Sa'īd realizes that his striving for God through exercises of self-denial leads to self-centered religious practice, which implicitly negates the Sufi goal of actualizing the divine oneness by blotting out one's self-awareness. Abū Sa'īd expressed this realization in paradoxical claims, which fall into the category of theopathic statements (*šaṭḥīyāt*) uttered by Iranian Sufis since Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 261/874). For example, Abū Sa'īd claimed to be the compass for mankind (*qeb-la-ye kalq*; *Asrār al-tawḥīd*, p. 248), exclaimed that “there is nothing inside my cloak except Allāh” (*laysa fī jobbatī sewā Allāh*; *ibid.*, p. 217) and proclaimed that he had attained the ideal of selflessness, calling himself “Nobody, the son of Nobody” (*hēčkas b. hēčkas*; *ibid.*, p. 278). His sayings and sermons do not form a coherent system of thought, but offer glimpses into many facets of his mystic experience. In his followers' memory Abū Sa'īd continued to live as a saint who was credited with many miracles and charismatic gifts (*karāmāt*), in particular with the gift of thought-reading (*ferāsat*). He stands out in the history of Iranian Sufism as great teacher and preacher, who combined the spiritual and antinomian currents of Islam with its more legalistic doctrines and practices. He also occupies a significant place in the transition from 3rd/9th and 4th/10th century Sufism to the organization of Sufism into affiliations and orders in the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries.

The authenticity of the works ascribed to Abū Sa'īd can not be demonstrated. It is doubtful whether he ever wrote the Arabic *Maṣābīḥ*, attributed to him by 'Ayn-al-qozāt Hamadānī (*Tamhīdāt*, p. 350). The Persian tract *Maqāmāt-e arba'īn* (ed. M. Dāmādī, *Ma'āref-e eslāmī* 12, April, 1971, pp. 58-62; cf. F. Meier, *Der Islam* 24, 1937, p. 25), a succinct description of forty stages on the mystic path, appears to have been compiled later than the 5th/11th century and



resembles the *Čehel maqām-e šūfīya*, which is questionably attributed to ‘Alī Hamadānī. Although Abū Sa‘īd is said to be the author of a collection of quatrains of a mystical nature (cf. Nicholson, *Studies*, p. 48), which are scattered in various sources, the poetical legacy ascribed to him appears the work of others (cf. Rypka, *Hist. Iran. Lit.*, p. 234; Šaffī Kadkanī, *Soḡan* 19, 1348 Š./1969, pp. 690-93; F. Meier, *Abū Sa‘īd*, p. 212). The correspondence of Abū Sa‘īd with Ebn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), however, may be authentic (cf. M. T. Dānešpažūh, *FIZ* 1, 1332 Š./1953, pp. 189-204 and *Dāneš* 3, 1331-34 Š./1952-55, pp. 325-30; G. C. Anawati, *Essai de bibliographie avicennienne*, Cairo, 1950, passim, nos. 260, 266, 268).

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