



HAGIOGRAPHIC LITERATURE

HAGIOGRAPHIC LITERATURE in Persia and Central Asia. Hagiographic literature may be defined broadly as a biographical genre devoted to individuals enjoying an exclusive religious status as “saints” or “holy men” in the eyes of the authors. There is therefore a considerable overlap with other genres of biography. Since it is generally accepted that the biographies of the Prophet Moḥammad and the Shiʿite Imams represent distinct genres, this article will focus instead on the hagiographic literature produced in the Sufi tradition about the Muslim equivalent of saints, the *awliāʾ* (q.v.).

The first hagiographic works in the Persian cultural sphere are the Arabic *ṭabaqāt* (“generations”) collections of biographical notices devoted to Sufis, dating from around the turn of the 11th century C.E. The foundational work of this genre is the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣufiyya* by Abu ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Solami (d. 412/1021) of Nišāpur; it was soon followed by the *Ḥelyat al-awliāʾ*, which is traditionally attributed to Abu Noʿaym Eṣfahāni (q.v.; d. 430/1038). The first work of this genre to be written in Persian was the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣufiyya* attributed to ʿAbd-Allāh Anṣāri (q.v.; d. 481/1089), but compiled by later generations of students using the local dialect of Herat in the 12th century (Ivanow; Mojaddedi, pp. 69-96). The *Kašf al-maḥjub* by Abuʾl-Ḥasan Hojviri (q.v.; d. between 465 and 69/1072 and 77), the first manual of Sufism written in Persian (unless one accepts Moḥammad Rowšan’s claim in the introduction to his edition of Mostaʿmalī Boḳāri’s *Šarḥ al-taʾarrof* [Tehran, 1984] that it was written earlier), also contains a hagiographic section. It is in this way similar to the most popular of all manuals of Sufism, namely the *Resāla*, which was written in



Ara-bic by Abu'l-Qāsem Qoṣayri (d. 465/1072) who, like Solami, was a resident of Nishapur of Arab origin. The late 12th century Persian work, the *Taḍkerat al-awliā'* by Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār (q.v.) differs from these works because it is written from the perspective of a poet who finds inspiration and enjoyment in hagiographic material, rather than from the perspective of a member of a specific school or order of Sufism engaging with the past of his own tradition.

The primary purpose of the aforementioned 11th century works seems to have been to defend mysticism and its adherents in the face of the criticism of more conservative religious scholars (Abu No'aym, I, p. 4) by stressing that the conduct, characteristics and doctrines of the eminent Sufis of the past were in accordance with the texts of Muslim revelation, and that the current generation are the heirs of the Prophet through a continuous chain of succession. Thus, the portraits of the individual subjects of these hagiographic collections, in which biographies are arranged in an overall chronological pattern of succession, represent their respective compilers' specific ideals and agendas.

These collections were soon followed by works devoted to individual mystics; however, the extant manuscripts of the first two of these latter, both of which are devoted to individuals from Fārs, are not in their original Arabic form but in Persian translations or adaptations: the life of Abu 'Abd-Allāh Moḥammad ebn Kaḥfif (d. 371/981-82) by Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali b. Moḥammad Deylami (q.v.), translated into Persian by Rokn-al-Din Yaḥyā b. Jonayd Širāzi; and the life of Abu Eshāq Kāzaruni (q.v.; d. 426/1033) by Kaṭīb Emām Abu Bakr Moḥammad b. 'Abd-al-Karim, translated by Maḥmud b. 'Oṭmān (Meier, 1948). Next, Abu Sa'id Faḥl-Allāh b. Abi'l-Kayr (q.v.; d. 440/1049) became the subject of two hagiographies written by his descendants more than a century after his death. To the same period belongs the hagiography of Aḥmad-e Jām (q.v.). These works appear to be the only extant hagiographies from the pre-Mongol period, with the possible addition of texts about another native of Fārs, Ruzbehān Baqli (ed. M. T. Dānešpažuh, as *Ruzbehān-nāma*, written ca. 1300, about a century after Ruzbehān's death).

The emergence of hagiographic works devoted exclusively to an individual Sufi shaikh seems to correspond to a distinct change in mystical practice and its organizational structures; the authors of these works were often descendants of the shaikhs themselves or of one of their close companions, and the social context in which they were written was most probably that of a group living at the shrine (*mazār*) of the individual subject. Such biographies



of individual shaikhs served to increase the inner cohesion of this social group and enhance its prestige with outsiders; in fact, their status and livelihood may have depended entirely on their lineage leading back to the shaikh. These works are made up typically of anecdotes that the final “authors” had evidently obtained from the oral tradition, which always remained an important source for hagiographers; once committed to writing, the anecdotes still continued to circulate orally, and while their (oral) narrators may have been conscious of a written tradition this did not prevent them from adapting the material to meet their present needs. Thus the “hagiographic process” could have proceeded from events witnessed by the saint’s followers, to oral transmission, thence to written notes, eventually published as books, while the oral tradition was continually developing all the time.

The assemblage of anecdotes which constitutes a typical hagiography in an early collection cannot easily be re-arranged into chronological order, but later examples often include specific sections devoted to the shaikh’s birth, childhood, and apprenticeship, as well as the last moments (or months) of his life. Moreover miracle-stories became increasingly prominent in hagiographies after the 11th century, eventually accounting for the bulk of the contents (e.g., Jāmi’s *Nafahāt al-ons*). Therefore it is certainly difficult, if not always impossible, to attempt to piece together a “biography” in the modern sense of the genre out of hagiographic material. At the same time it is evident that merely recording the details of the outward life of a saint was not the primary concern of hagiographers; life-stories of saints are written in order “to transmit to a believing and pious audience matters of practical spiritual value; the specifically ‘human’—the whole stuff of modern biography—is trivial and profoundly uninteresting from a traditional viewpoint” (Algar, p. 134). Events, sayings, and stories tend to have more than one meaning or significance and, as is well-known, Sufism presupposes an outward (*zāher*) and a hidden or inner (*bāṭen*) meaning of dicta and narratives. Hagiography can be seen as a technique for making events meaningful or, conversely, for expressing doctrines in the form of narratives, as a specific sub-genre of historiography.

The Mongol period witnessed a temporary demise of the “official” ulama and a corresponding rise of Sufi piety. This was a time of experimentation and new currents in Islamic mysticism. In this period, the formal Sufi “orders” also developed, often from a nucleus based on a hereditary lineage. Prominent hagiographies illustrating this hereditary type of development are those



written about Ṣafi-al-Din Ardabili (d. 735/1334) and Jalāl-al-Din Rumi (d. 672/1273; Ardabili and Aflāki). Hagiography became increasingly a means of debating issues fundamental to the development of Islamic mysticism and its organizational forms at the time of writing, such as the chain of mystical transmission through initiation (*selsela*) and the role of the Sufi guide (*pir*). Authors were no longer so much concerned with defending the Sufi tradition as a whole against common enemies as debating internally about competing mystical practices and the heritage of the eminent masters of the past. At the same time, elements were continuing to be introduced into the works from the ongoing oral tradition.

This trend continued into the Timurid period when a greater number of eponymous founders of Sufi orders or other prominent representatives of them, including Bahā’-al-Din Naqšband (q.v.; d. 791/1389), ‘Ali Hamadāni (q.v.; d. 786/1385) and Šāh Ne‘mat-Allāh Vali (d. 834/1430-31) became the subjects of individual hagiographies. A number of hagiographic collections were also compiled during the 15th and 16th centuries, both in Persia and Central Asia. It does not seem possible to link them all to the goal of “propagandizing” particular Sufi communities (DeWeese, 1993). Thus, Wā‘eḏ Kāšefi’s *Rašahāt ‘ayn al-ḥayāt* is not only centered on the K̄vājagān/Naqšbandi *selsela*, but it also tries to subsume the Yasavi tradition (DeWeese, 1996a). On the other hand, measured by what it includes and what it omits, ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi’s (d. 898/1492) *Nafahāt al-ons* does not seem quite so single-minded; rather, it includes distinct clusters of biographies devoted to the predominant Sunni orders still represented in Jāmi’s day in the vicinity of Herat, as well as traditions associated with a further selection of illustrious Sufis of the past, such as Rumi and Ebn al-‘Arabi (q.v.; Mojaddedi, pp. 151-76).

Locality also became a focus of hagiography collections, since they had also been influenced by the tradition in Persian historiography to focus on a specific place, a procedure that can be traced back to the pre-Mongol work, the *Faḏā’el-e Balk*. Some hagiographic works of the 15th and 16th centuries focus on the specific tombs at a given location and there are also works with a combined focus on both locality and *selsela* (e.g. Karbalā’i). While fewer works of hagiography seem to have been produced inside Persia after the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (Gramlich, 1965, I), the compilation of (Sunni) hagiographies in Persian continued unabated in Central Asia, although most of these works remain unedited.

Hagiographic works reflect not only the development of Islamic mysticism in



its organized form, but also that of popular piety. It can therefore serve as an important source for the study of the history of different levels of Islamic society. However, such literature has usually been considered only a minor source for the history of Islamic society and culture, being judged as less reliable than historiography narrowly defined. Its use has been restricted to the study of mysticism, where theological and philosophical issues have tended to be the focus of scholarly interest. In consequence, hagiography remains a relatively neglected area of study. While it is true that hagiographic texts should be used only with extreme caution for the reconstruction of the historical events they mention, nonetheless they remain valuable for social and cultural history. Hagiography provides a perspective missing from historiography; while it may not be a direct expression of the ideas, wishes, aspirations, and concerns of ordinary people, these factors had to be taken into account by hagiographers and must therefore be reflected to some degree in their writings. This is distinctly evident in the biographies devoted to individual shaikhs and destined for use at their shrines. As Jean Aubin has observed, the voices of ordinary people can be heard in these texts: “Nous y saisissons le mode de vie, les préoccupations quotidiennes, la voix même des couches modestes, mieux qu’aucun autre document de l’époque ne les enregistre. Avec les restrictions, toutefois, qu’implique le genre hagiographique” (Aubin, 1976-77, p. 85). This approach has recently been developed by Monika Gronke, who also offers an example of how hagiographic and documentary sources can be used in a complementary way. Another recent study is based on the meticulous analysis of narrative elements employed in hagiographic and other historiographical texts, which are treated on the same basis (DeWeese, 1994). Since historical information about daily life in Muslim societies is not readily available, the fact that hagiography is one of the few genres where the concerns of ordinary people are expressed at all has led to recent attempts at using such works accordingly. The items of information about the past that are provided in these works may be unreliable, and so it has been proposed to study the mention of individuals and events in hagiographic texts in a quantitative way (Paul, 1990). It has also been suggested that the focus of attention should be re-oriented to the function of hagiographic collections for the time in which they were produced, both through the redefinition and restructuring of the past for present needs as well as in the clues provided about the social context of their compilation (Mojaddedi). Another promising approach has been comparative, with the function of hagiography in other religious traditions (Aigle).



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