



KHAYYAM, OMAR I. LIFE

Uncertainty surrounds the details of the biography of Omar Khayyam (ʿOmar Kayyām), including significant dates in his life. Apart from ʿOmar, the other constituents of his name and sobriquets vary from source to source. In some, including his own mathematical works such as his *Maqāla fi'l-jabr wa'l-moqābela*, his patronymic (*konya*) appears as Abu'l-Faṭḥ (Woepcke, Arabic text, p. 1), while in other sources it is replaced by Abu'l-Ḥafṣ, a more frequently used *konya* in conjunction with ʿOmar, and the one used by his near contemporary, ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Kāzeni in his *Mizān al-ḥekma*, written in 515/1121 (p. 270).

Most references in Arabic sources, though by no means all, refer to the poet and philosopher as “al-Kayyāmi” while Persian sources opt for “Kayyām.” This discrepancy had, in turn, led in the past to further speculations, now discarded, proposing the existence of two entities: a poet Khayyam and a mathematician Khayyami (see KHAYYAM ii).

The dates of Khayyam's birth and death are also a matter of dispute. In the case of his death date, confusion arises from the different wording in manuscripts of the *Čahārmaqāla* (q.v.) by Neẓāmi ʿAruẓi (fl. 504-51/1110-56), where he states (p. 100) that he had visited Khayyam's grave in Nishapur in 530/1136. Some manuscripts specify the date as four years (*čahārsāl*) after his death, while others have some years (*čandsāl*), thereby leaving it unspecified. Regarding his birth, Ẓahir-al-Din Bayhaqi (q.v.; d. 565/1169-70) in his *Tatemmat Šewān al-ḥekma* (ed. Šafiʿ, p. 112) recounts visiting Nishapur in his youth and meeting Khayyam there. He also notes Khayyam's horoscope (ed. Šafiʿ, p. 112).



Based on this, Govinda Tīrtha has calculated that his birthday fell on 26 Du'l-qa'da 439/18 May 1048 (Tīrtha, pp. xxxii-xxxiv).

Bayhaqī's account also suggests that Khayyam belonged to an old and well-established family in the city. That Khayyam exerted considerable local influence and authority is also implied in a letter addressed to him by the poet Sanā'i (d. ca. 525/1131), in which he sought Khayyam's assistance to redress an unfounded accusation against his servant and subsequently against himself during a journey in Khorasan (Sanā'i, *Makātib*, pp. 70-77; Minovi, 1950, pp. 209-15). There are also allusions to Khayyam's prestige and eminence in the divan and letters of Kāqāni Šervāni (q.v.). In an elegy on the death of his uncle, Kāfi-al-Din 'Omar b. 'Oṭmān, Kāqāni praises his uncle's piety and sagacity by putting him on a par with the second caliph, 'Omar b. Kaṭṭāb, and Omar Khayyam (Kāqāni, *Divān*, p. 58). He also recounts an anecdote in a letter to Jalāl-al-Din Šervānšāh (Kāqāni, *Monša'āt*, pp. 333-34) referring to the Saljuq sultan Malekšāh's approval of Khayyam's scathing comments regarding the superiority of men of science to officials of high bureaucratic status (Dashti, tr., pp. 51-52).

Ebn al-Aṭir (q.v.) reports that in 467/1074-75 the Saljuq sultan Malekšāh (r. 465-85/1072-92) summoned a number of astronomers, including an "Omar b. Ebrāhim al-Kayyāmi," to construct an observatory (X, pp. 67-68; tr. Richards, p. 189). It was probably located in Isfahan (Bayhaqī, p. 163; Sayili, p. 161), and there are indications in some of Khayyam's own works that he was traveling or residing in that area during that period. His commentary on the problems of certain postulates of Euclid, *Resāla fišarḥmā aškala men mošādarāt ketāb Oqlides*, was completed at a city, the name of which is missing in the manuscript, in late Jomādā I 470/end of December 1077 (Leiden University Library, MS UBL Or.199[8]; Homā'i, p. 222). Khayyam states that he composed his Persian translation of a short sermon (*koṭba*, q.v.) by Avicenna (q.v.) in 472/1079 at the behest of some "brethren in Isfahan" (Ḥabibi, p. 94; *Safina-ye Tabriz*, p. 323). In his treatise *Jawābanle-talāt masā'el* (facsimile in Reżāzāda Malek, p. 419), Khayyam refers to a treatise he had composed in 473/1080 for Abu Ṭāher, the chief judge (*qaṣi al-qoṣāt*) of Fārs. It seems likely, therefore, that Khayyam spent the years 467-72/1074-79 traveling in the western parts of the Saljuq empire while in the service of Malekšāh.

Other references to Khayyam's travels cannot be dated with any degree of certainty. Zāhir-al-Din Bayhaqī mentions Khayyam's status as a companion and attendant (*nadim*) to Malekšāh, as well as his enjoying an even higher



status at the court of the Kāqān Šams-al-Moluk (ed. Šafi‘, p. 115) at Bukhara. The latter is presumably the Ilak-Khanid (q.v.) amir Šams-al-Moluk Naşr II b. Ebrāhim Tamgāč-kān (460-72/1067-79; on him, see Barthold, pp. 314-16; Zambaur p. 206), and it seems likely that Khayyam’s stay at Bukhara pre-dated his stay in Isfahan in the years 1074-79.

According to Zahir al-Din Bayhaqi (ed. Šafi‘, pp. 114-15), the warm reception that Khayyam had experienced at Malekšāh’s court did not continue into the reign of Sanjar (q.v.). Bayhaqi traces their apparently frosty relationship to the time when the young Sanjar was afflicted by smallpox and Khayyam had been asked by his vizier, Mojir-al-Dawla, to attend to him, and Khayyam had a negative prognosis for the boy’s condition (*al-şabi maḳuf*). Sanjar was displeased when this was reported back to him and was subsequently hostile toward Khayyam. If this report is credible, it is likely that it belongs to the period when Sanjar was the subordinate sultan in Khorasan (490-511/1097-1118) and during Mojir-al-Dawla’s vizierate (490-97/1097-1103; Zambaur, p. 224). Some details are confirmed by other sources: Rāvandi describes Sanjar’s face as marked by smallpox (*ābela-neşān*, p. 167) and records his age at accession as eleven (p. 185).

According to contemporary or near contemporary accounts, Khayyam had spent most of his time during the reign of Sultan Sanjar in Khorasan and Transoxiana. Neẓāmi ‘Aruzi, in his celebrated account of Khayyam’s foretelling his place of burial (Neẓāmi ‘Aruzi, p. 100, tr., p. 71), mentions meeting him and Abu Ḥātem Moẓaffar Asfezāri (q.v.) in Balk (q.v.) in 506/1112-13, and in the next anecdote (p. 101, tr., p. 72) locates him in the winter of 508/1114-15 at Marv, lodged in the house of the vizier Şadr-al-Din Moḥammad b. Moẓaffar (Şadr-al-Din Abu Ja‘far Moḥammad b. Faḳr-al-Molk, d. 511/1117). Most of the other accounts relating to this period, some possibly apocryphal, appear in Zahir-al-Din Bayhaqi’s *Tatimmat Şewān al-ḥekma* and describe Khayyam’s encounters with philosophers, mystics, and astronomers.

Bayhaqi (ed. Šafi‘, p. 114) mentions an encounter between Khayyam and Abu Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazāli (q.v.; 450-505/1058-1111). Although the passage in Bayhaqi sounds anecdotal and fictitious, there may be some truth in it. Bayhaqi also claims that ‘Ayn-al-Qoẓāt Hamadāni (q.v.; 492-526/1098-1131) was a student of Ġazāli’s younger brother, Aḥmad Ġazāli (q.v.; ca. 453-517 or 520/1061-1123 or 1126), which is well attested by other sources, and also of ‘Omar Khayyam. This is possible, given the fact that Bayhaqi goes on to say that, in his *Zobdat al-ḥaqā’eq*, ‘Ayn-al-Qoẓāt had combined the discourse of the



Sufis with those of philosophers (ed. Šafi', pp. 117-18), and he may well have drawn on Khayyam's teaching. Other meetings and debates with contemporary philosophers and astronomers are also briefly cited by Bayhaqi, including those with Abu Ḥātem Moẓẓaffar Asfezāri, Šaraf-al-Zamān Ilāqi, and Moḥammad b. Aḥmad Ma'muri Bayhaqi. The last mentioned is included among those who had taken part in setting up the observatory in Isfahan (ed. Šafi', p. 163).

As well as Bayhaqi's account of Khayyam's encounters with friends and other philosophers or students, there are also references to him in the works of some other contemporary philosophers, astronomers, and mathematicians, and these furnish further details of his life and travels. Ebn al-Qeḫṭi (568-646/1172-1248) refers to his pilgrimage to Mecca as well as his visit to Baghdad (p. 244). Badi'-al-Zamān Aṣṭorlābi (d. 534/1139-40), a famous astronomer and maker of astrolabes (Rosenthal, p. 555; Ma'şumi Hamadāni, pp. 114-15), describes his encounters, at least once in Baghdad, with Omar Khayyam ("Ḥojjat-al-Ḥaqq 'Omar al-Ḳayyāmi") in the preface (f. 168) to a treatise that he had composed on astrolabes (*Ketāb al-'amalbe'l-korah*) and relates his scientific discussion with Khayyam and the latter's complimentary remarks about him (Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Marsh 663, no. 8., ff. 164-89; see Rosenthal, pp. 556-57 for the attribution of this text to Aṣṭorlābi).

In a short treatise entitled *al-Resāla al-zājara*, Abu'l-Qāsem Maḥmud Zamaḳṣari (467-538/1075-1144), the celebrated Mu'tazilite exegete, also describes his meeting and debate with Khayyam in Ḳvārazm (Zamaḳṣari, p. 626; Foruzānfar, pp. 1-29). Although Zamaḳṣari narrates with relish, in a self-congratulatory manner, how he won the debate with Khayyam, the laudatory epithets that he bestows on Khayyam show how highly Khayyam was regarded by a distinguished contemporary figure.

Taken together, sources dating from the 6th/12th century, contemporary with Khayyam's lifetime or shortly thereafter, share certain common characteristics. First, though there are some verses in Arabic by him dating from this era, no Persian verses are cited until almost a century after his death. Second, some of Khayyam's significant and authentic works do not appear in the list of his works from this same period. Third, it was assumed until recently that none of these early sources had expressed reservations or hinted at any criticism regarding Khayyam's outlook on life and religion and that such a critical stance against the views expressed in his poetry had originated later, from the beginning of the 7th/13th century onward. This



assumption had also been used in support of the now discredited theory of the two Khayyams mentioned earlier. As described below (KHAYYAM ii), there were poems by Khayyam in circulation from as early as the second half of the 12th century that support the contention that Khayyam the poet, the mathematician, and philosopher were all one and the same person. Furthermore, as implied in the account of the mixed reception of his quatrains, the very fact that he was regarded as a follower of Avicenna affected the way his verses were interpreted and at times denounced. In other words, much of the criticism leveled against him in the earliest sources was directed at Khayyam as a philosopher following Avicenna (Ma'şumi Hamadāni, pp. 132-33).

With reference to the accounts of Khayyam's meetings with Badi'-al-Zamān Aştorlābi and Abu'l-Qāsem Zamaḡşari, and as already noted above, he was viewed as an esteemed authority by some contemporary theologians and astronomers. He also appears as a figure capable of wielding some local influence, as suggested above in the letter by the poet Sanā'i (Minovi, 1950, p. 210). But here, as in the case of some other assessments of his legacy, there is an element of ambivalence, suggesting that the acknowledgment of his eminence did not necessarily embrace an approval of his general outlook on life and hereafter as expounded in his verses. In a couple of quatrains, Sanā'i appears to challenge Khayyam's attitude toward death by implicitly alluding to his quatrains (Mirafzali, 2015, p. 5).

One of the first direct citations of Persian verses by Khayyam appears in an exegetical treatise on four suras of the Qur'an by Faḡr-al-Din Rāzi (d. 606/1210), entitled *Resālat al-tanbih'alaba'ż al-asrār al-muda'a fi ba'ż sowar al-Qor'an al-ażim* (see KHAYYAM ii for further details). Faḡr-al-Din Rāzi quotes Khayyam's *robā'i*:

Dāranda čo tarkib-e ṭabāy' ārāst / bāz az če sabab fekandaş andar kam o kāst?

Gar ḡub nayāmad in banā ' ayb kerāst? / v'r ḡub āmad , ḡarābi az bahr-e çerāst ?

Why did the Maker adorn the forms of creation

And then cast them down to decay and decrease?

Should the forms be ugly, whose fault is it?

And if pleasing they be, why cause their ruin?



(Najm-al-Din Rāzi, tr., p. 54; another tr. in Dashti, tr., p. 36).

The quatrain is quoted in the context of his commentary on sura 95 vv. 4-5: “We have indeed created man in the best of moulds / Then do We abase him (To be) the lowest of the low” (tr. A. Yusuf Ali).

Rāzi cites Khayyam’s lines to point to the problems (*eškāl*) that the Qur’anic lines pose for those endowed with and relying exclusively on intellect (*al-’oqalā*). Although Rāzi proceeds to rebut these challenges, there is no overtly personal criticism leveled at Khayyam, whose lines are cited in passing as a sample of a philosopher’s questioning stance (Minovi, 1957, pp. 71-72; Dashti, tr., pp. 36-37; Mirafzali, 2003, pp. 23-24; Ma’şumi Hamadāni, p. 124).

The same verses are cited again a few decades later in an often-quoted manual of Sufism, *Merşād al-’ebād men al-mabda’ elā’l-ma’ād* of Najm-al-Din Rāzi (q.v.; d. 654/1256). Here, having referred to these verses along with another quatrain by Khayyam, Najm-al-Din launches into a sustained diatribe against Khayyam as “that sightless wanderer” (*sargašta-ye nābinā*; Najm-al-Din Rāzi, p. 31). Khayyam’s skeptical and confused state of mind is contrasted with the assured certainties of the devout and sincere disciple (*morid*) who “will perceive who he is, whence, how, and for what purpose he has come; whither and how he shall go; and what his goal and destination are” (Najm-al-Din Rāzi, p. 31, tr., p. 53) once he has faithfully followed the path set out for him in *Merşād al-’ebād*. These disapproving remarks about Khayyam, and the outright denial that he had any Sufi sympathies, are also shared by the translator of Rāzi in a lengthy footnote where he underlines the significance of the passage “as a decisive refutation of claims, ancient and modern, that Ḳayyām was in reality a Sufi” (Najm-al-Din Rāzi, tr., p. 54, n. 10).

As Hamid Algar, the translator, mentions in the same note, Khayyam also appears in an unfavorable light in Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār’s (q.v.; ca. 1145-1221) *Elāhi-nāma* (‘Aṭṭār, p. 326, ll. 4746-53, tr., p. 252). Here he is recalled and described by a seer able to convey Khayyam’s emotional state from beyond the grave as “a man in a state of imperfection” (*mardist andar nātamāmi*). His soul has remained in perpetual turmoil after his departure from this world, and his lifelong certainties have proved false in retrospect, when viewed from beyond the grave:

Now that his ignorance has been revealed to him / he perspires because of the confusion of his soul.



He is left between shame and confusion / his very studies have made him deficient (‘Aṭṭār, tr., p. 252).

But as the verses that follow this anecdote and appear as direct comments by the poet suggest, “I have traversed the whole world a hundred times / I have found no cure and I am utterly helpless” (‘Aṭṭār, p. 326, line 4758 tr., p. 253), the emphasis is on the absurdity of overconfident metaphysical speculations by philosophers relying solely on their intellect and their refusal to accept with due humility the limitations of human understanding confronted by an unfathomable divine order, a frequently expressed sentiment in both lyrical and narrative poetry in Persian.

There also seems to be a more sympathetic allusion to the quatrain that Najm-al-Din Rāzi had quoted (p. 31) in the two anecdotes a few lines later in the same *maṭnawī* by ‘Aṭṭār. Here, he introduces one of his favorite stock characters, “the delirious fool or madman,” with the fool questioning the Almighty with a direct reference to another similar verse from the Qur’an (13.39; ‘Aṭṭār, p. 327, line 4772; ed.’s comm. p. 667; tr., pp. 253-54; Ritter, 1952, pp. 1-15; 2003, pp. 165-87). It is Khayyam’s refusal to acknowledge the limits of human understanding, rather than his questioning tone, which bears the blame.

The description of Khayyam in the discourses (*maqālāt*) of Šams-e Tabrizi, the spiritual guide of Jalāl-al-Din Rumi (604-72/1207-73), is closer to Najm-al-Din Rāzi’s portrayal of Khayyam as a muddled thinker, clinging to his own set of certitudes and railing against others to compensate for his own deficiencies. He quotes Khayyam as saying that “No one has arrived at the mystery of love, and he who has arrived, remains perplexed.” Šams then proceeds to analyze the reasons behind this quoted paradox. Khayyam’s statement, according to him, reflects his state of mind. Feeling confused and perplexed, he looks outside and beyond himself for targets to blame. In turn, he berates the heavens, or fortune, or the Divine Presence Himself, wavering between negation and proof or prevaricating by inserting a hesitant “if,” taking refuge in dark, disordered, and confused words. Šams, like Najm-al-Din, contrasts this state of wandering and chaos to the clear and coherent world of the believer, rightly secure in his certainties (Šams, p. 301, tr., p. 374).

Other sources present a more ambivalent assessment of Khayyam. One of the most frequently cited sources on the biography of Khayyam is Ebn al-Qeṭṭī’s *Ta’riḵ al-ḥokamā’*, written most probably after 1231 (and preserved in an



epitome composed in 647/1249). On the one hand, the section on Khayyam begins by endowing him with fulsome titles, acknowledging his high status in Khorasan and his matchless erudition. Ebn al-Qeṭṭi then proceeds to describe him as a proponent of purifying body and soul in seeking the one universal God and as a follower of Greek political philosophy (Ebn al-Qeṭṭi, pp. 243-44; tr. in Ross, pp. 354-55; tr. in Woepcke, pp. v-vi, Arabic text, p. 52). But the tone of the passage becomes increasingly critical of Khayyam. His avowed sympathy for Greek philosophy is viewed critically as being in direct conflict with the teachings of religion and implicitly as a rival to it. Ebn al-Qeṭṭi proceeds to express his alarm at the way Khayyam's verses had ensnared later Sufis who had failed to grasp their true significance and how as a freethinker he had indulged in a life of ingenious dissimulation, referring to his pilgrimage to Mecca as an example of duplicitous subterfuge. He then quotes the same *qet'a* of four verses that appear in the anthology composed by 'Emād-al-Din Kāteb Eṣfahāni (q.v.; 519-97/1125-1201; see also below, KHAYYAM ii). As the present contributor has suggested elsewhere (Ma'ṣumi Hamadāni, pp. 120-22), for a variety of reasons it seems likely that Ebn al-Qeṭṭi had based his section on Khayyam on material from 'Emād-al-Din, or else they had both relied on an earlier source. The indebtedness of Ebn al-Qeṭṭi to 'Emād-al-Din had also been briefly referred to in a letter written by Vladimir Minorsky to Moḥammad Qazvini (qq.v.) while Minorsky was engaged in writing his entry on Khayyam for the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (letter dated 1 August 1934; in Mo'in, pp. 309-10).

In some ways, the various debates about the interpretation of Khayyam's quatrains resemble those appearing later in the context of Hafez (q.v.; 715-92/1315-90) and his ghazals. 'Aṭṭār's relatively compassionate but nevertheless critical remarks on Khayyam are to some extent echoed in Bādī'al-Zamān Foruzānfar's (q.v.; 1903-70) posthumously edited lecture notes. He contrasts Khayyam's pessimistic negation of afterlife, which endows his *carpe diem* advice with an underlying note of foreboding and despair, with Hafez's similar celebratory themes but with an unabashed joyful underpinning, borne out of a mystic's willing submission to Divine Will (Foruzānfar, 2001, pp. 37-38).

Also, as in the case of Hafez, Khayyam has been subjected to systematic commentaries in order to explicate and recover supposedly esoteric meanings. Khayyam's sympathetic attitude toward Sufism in his short treatise, *Dar 'elm-e kolliyāt-e wujud* (On the existence of universals; see Reżāzāda Malek, p. 389), is



used to imply a close connection with his contemporary Sufis (Aminrazavi, p. 136).

In more recent times, ever since the remarkable popularity of Khayyam through translations, particularly after those by Edward FitzGerald (q.v.; 1809-83) in 1859 and J. B. Nicolas (1814-75) in 1867, and as reflected below in several entries on translations of Khayyam, has itself led to a profusion of different readings and interpretations of the poet, often by critics with varying degrees of familiarity with the original Persian, favoring either an esoteric poet in need of decipherment (Aminrazavi, p. 135) or an exceptionally outspoken freethinker writing for an intimate circle of friends (Lazard, 1995, pp. 177-82; 1997, p. 8, p. 11 [quoting Théophile Gautier]). As noted above and in other entries (see KHAYYAM ii), apart from a relatively small number of verses attributed to Khayyam in the oldest sources, the authenticity of many of the quatrains ascribed to him remains in doubt, making it hard if not impossible to offer a comprehensive overview of the corpus, unless of course only those verses are selected that support a pre-conceived notion of the poet, regardless of their origin and authenticity.

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