

This is an Accepted Manuscript (peer-reviewed, copy-edited) for an article published in *Journal of Persianate Studies* 12.1 (2019). For the Version of Record, see <https://doi.org/10.1163/18747167-12341330>

From Blessed Lips: The Textualization of Abu Sa‘id’s Dicta and Deeds

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Abstract

This paper examines the formation and development of the Abu Sa‘id Abu’l-Kheyr hagiographic tradition. It shows how reports about the eleventh-century saint circulated within a shrine community of his descendants and disciples, both orally and in *ad hoc* notes, before being set down in writing. It argues that the *Asrār al-towhid*, the largest and best-known hagiography devoted to Abu Sa‘id, is not a natural outgrowth of this oral material, but a reworking for a broad audience of outsiders in light of the shrine community’s destruction by the Ghuzz Turks in the 1150s. In the case of the *Asrār*, textualization involved substantial rhetorical and linguistic changes in order to open up the material to a literary public of non-initiates; it also implied a new understanding of how Abu Sa‘id’s blessings would manifest themselves in the world.

Keywords

Sufism; hagiography; orality; textuality; Islam, Abu Sa‘id; mysticism; sainthood

Article

Abu Sa‘id Abu’l-Kheyr (967–1049), a mystical preacher active in Khorasan in the mid-eleventh century, is most often remembered for his extravagant lifestyle and love of *samā‘* (‘spiritual audition’), which earned him the hostility of more conservative religious leaders.¹ After his death, a shrine community grew up around his tomb in Meyhana, which became a site of pilgrimage managed by his descendants and their followers until the Ghuzz Turks ravaged the

¹ I would like to thank Michael Pifer, Pouye Khoshkhoo, and Franklin Lewis for reading drafts of this paper; Carlos Grenier and Julia Rubanovich for their questions and comments; and Maryam Sabbaghi for help locating sources.

area during the 1150s. His legacy largely rests on the *Asrār al-towhid fi maqāmāt al-Sheykh Abu Sa‘id* (The Secrets of Oneness in the Stations of the Sheykh Abu Sa‘id, 1178), a massive hagiographical work compiled by his great-great-grandson Mohammad Ebn Monavvar (fl. 1178) after the destruction wrought by the Ghuzz; it contains stories of the sheikh’s miracles, a loose account of his life, collections of his sayings and letters, and a selection of the verses that he recited.² It has been edited multiple times and is often cited as an example of stylistically strong prose (Safā, II, 982; Shafi‘i-Kadkani 2010, I, clxxi–clxxiv). The *Asrār* was preceded by an earlier hagiography, the so-called *Hālāt va sokhanān-e Abu Sa‘id* (The States and Stations of Abu Sa‘id, bef. 1147), which was compiled by Abu Rowh Lotfollāh (d. 1147) while the shrine community was still flourishing. It is much shorter than the *Asrār* and survives in a single manuscript.³

These two hagiographical works, especially the more comprehensive *Asrār*, have long been mined for data regarding Abu Sa‘id’s life, thought, and milieu. Meier, in his encyclopedic biography, has identified and evaluated an enormous amount of information on Abu Sa‘id, his descendants, and his interlocutors. Graham has argued that Abu Sa‘id represents a specific Khorasanian type of Sufism and Karamustafa has examined Abu Sa‘id’s methods of spiritual guidance in the context of *adab*. Safi has utilized hagiographical accounts of Abu Sa‘id in his analysis of how holy men used their spiritual blessing to negotiate with political figures. Finally, Shafi‘i-Kadkani’s introductions to his editions of the *Asrār* and the *Hālāt* contain valuable information on the saint and his community, as does O’Kane’s introduction to his translation of the *Asrār*.

The aforementioned scholars have done an admirable job using these hagiographies to unearth both the historical Abu Sa‘id and the dynamics of his sainthood as remembered and represented by his disciples. The hagiographical tradition on which this scholarship has relied,

² Editions include those by V. Zhukovski, Z. Safā, and M. R. Shafi‘i-Kadkani. An English translation has been published by J. O’Kane.

³ Editions have been produced by V. Zhukovski, I. Afshār, and M. R. Shafi‘i-Kadkani. The unique manuscript is held in the British Library under shelf number Or. 249. For a description, see Rieu, I, 342. Zhukovski previously ascribed the text to Abu Rowh’s son; see Shafi‘i-Kadkani 1987, 10–15.

however, has largely been taken as a given, and the *Asrār* has been uncritically treated as a natural outgrowth of the *Hālāt* and the community's oral material. A close examination of our sources shows that the emergence of an extensive hagiographical text like the *Asrār* was by no means a foregone conclusion. Although it may appear to be a straightforward expansion of the earlier *Hālāt*, the *Asrār* actually represents an attempt to textualize and refashion the community's oral and scattered written traditions for a new audience of non-disciples, for whom they perform a very different kind of work. The *Hālāt*, written before the Ghuzz attacks, was composed as an extension of a living oral tradition for members (and potential members) of Abu Sa'id's shrine community. As a text, it did not seek to displace the oral tradition, but to complement it. Ebn Monavvar's *Asrār*, by contrast, was written as a direct response to the community's dispersal by the Ghuzz. It seeks to capture the disappearing oral tradition as completely as possible in a fixed textual form at a time when Sufism was becoming more popular and the demand for Sufi texts was growing. Instead of addressing a flourishing shrine community, Ebn Monavvar aims to reconstitute a virtual community of literary devotees who are not necessarily members of any particular social group or order, which requires changes to the form, scope, and style of the material. Most significantly, it necessitates a rethinking of Abu Sa'id's spiritual blessing (*baraka*), which would now be made available to devotees not through pilgrimage or participation in a specific social network, but through literary engagement with the *Asrār* itself.

The present study will thus illuminate the intertwined oral and written genealogies of the Abu Sa'id hagiographical tradition in relation to the shrine's changing material circumstances. More broadly, it will also shed light on the interrelated processes of Sufism's vernacularization, literarization, and popularization during the twelfth century, when mystically minded authors began to write increasingly in literary Persian, addressing a broad

readership in self-consciously authorial texts.⁴ As the case of the *Asrār* demonstrates, these processes involved more than a simple rendering of oral sayings into a standard form of written Persian. They represented a creative reorientation of the material for a growing popular audience, and thus implied new notions of authority and community.

The Life of Abu Saʿid

Abu Saʿid was born in Meyhana, a small town in the desert of Khābarān near Sarakhs, on 07 December 967, and he died there on 12 January 1049.⁵ Much of what we know about his life is derived from the *Asrār* and the *Hālāt*, which include considerable legendary material and are not overly concerned with chronology, although they do attempt to stitch anecdotes together into a loose overview of his life.⁶ According to these hagiographical accounts, he first encountered Sufism in his hometown via Abuʿl-Qāsem Beshr Yāsin, who allegedly taught him a quatrain that functioned as his first *zēkr* (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 19). He then studied the religious sciences in Marv and Sarakhs, where one day a wise-fool character known as Loqmān led him by the hand to the *khānaqāh* of Abuʿl-Fazl Hasan, who became his formal spiritual guide. Eventually Abu Saʿid returned to Meyhana, where he continued to practice extreme austerities

⁴ The term “literarization” was coined by Sheldon Pollock; he distinguishes between “literization,” the process by which a vernacular language comes to be written and used for non-literary, everyday communications, and “literarization,” in which the vernacular is then used to produce self-consciously literary writing (Pollock, 23–25).

⁵ On Khābarān (often rendered as Khāvāran) and Meyhana (also rendered Mihana and Mehana), see Shafiʿi-Kadkani 2010, I, lxx–lxx.

⁶ Limited information about Abu Saʿid can be found in a number of other sources as well, such as Hojviri’s *Kashf al-mahjub* (250–51), which is not only external to the Meyhana tradition, but also very early, being composed *circa* 1058. Abu Saʿid also appears in the Ahmad-e Jām (d. 1141) hagiographical tradition, where he foretells the coming of the latter; although doubtlessly apocryphal, the story shows the extent to which Abu Saʿid was accepted as a saintly authority in the region (Moayyad and Lewis, 16–17). Biographies of the saint in later sources, such as Jāmi’s *Nafahāt al-ons* (305–12), have generally been considered derivative and unreliable. Shafiʿi-Kadkani, however, has suggested that the *vita* of Abu Saʿid found in some late manuscripts of ʿAttār’s *Tazkerat al-owliyāʾ* (Memorial of God’s Friends), which was almost certainly added to the work by another author after ʿAttār’s death, was based on an earlier hagiographical text that emerged outside of the *Hālāt/Asrār* tradition (Shafiʿi-Kadkani 2006, 65–107). It is not clear, however, who actually wrote this *vita* or when. In any case, it does not substantially change Abu Saʿid’s biography as known from the traditional sources.

under Abu'l-Fazl's direction from Sarakhs, such as reciting the entire Qur'an while suspended upside down in a well (*ibid.*, 30–31). At some point, Abu Sa'id was sent by Abu'l-Fazl to Abu 'Abd al-Rahmān Solami, where he was invested with the *kherqa* and completed his training (*ibid.*, 32–33). Later, after Abu'l-Fazl's death, he travelled to Āmol, where he stayed for at least a year with Abu'l-'Abbās Qassāb, who invested him with a second *kherqa* (*ibid.*, 45).⁷

During his maturity, Abu Sa'id split his time between Nishapur and Meyhana—according to Lotfollāh (1963, 125), he spent summers in the former and winters in the latter—maintaining his spiritual community in both locations. The sources do not state exactly when he first established himself in Nishapur, but Meier has deduced (52–59) that it must have been around 1024, when Abu Sa'id would have already been fifty-five years old. In Nishapur he attracted a large number of followers and maintained a *khānaqāh* on 'Adani-Kuyān street that supported resident dervishes as well as traveling Sufis. At some point he also acquired a large house (*sarāy*) in Meyhana, facing which he constructed a tomb (*mashhad*) to house his body after death (Harrow, 198–99; Ebn Monavvar 2010, 348, 363). From the time that he established himself in Nishapur, Abu Sa'id is no longer presented as an ascetic, but as a joyful mystic given to music, food, and *samā'*. O'Kane suggests (17) that we may be dealing with two separate hagiographic traditions, and that the compilers attempted to harmonize them by attributing asceticism to his youth and more permissive mysticism to his maturity.

In both Nishapur and Meyhana, Abu Sa'id would deliver regular “assemblies (*majāles*)” or sermons. According to the hagiographies, when in Nishapur, he would preach from a platform set up either inside of the *khānaqāh* or in front of it, and, when in Meyhana, he would preach from a platform in front of his tomb (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 148, 168–69). Men and women would

⁷ For further information on Abu Sa'id's early years, see Böwering; Meier, 39–45.

attend his assemblies, although they seem to have been segregated. Multiple miracle stories involve women or children falling from the roof during Abu Sa'id's sermons and being miraculously suspended in the air and saved from harm (*ibid.*, 58, 80, 184). This suggests that men may have clustered around Abu Sa'id at ground level, while women sat on the roof of the *khānaqāh*, *sarāy*, or other nearby buildings. As for the sermons themselves, no complete example has come down to us. The hagiographies only preserve snippets of his assemblies, which often serve merely as a backdrop to some display of his miraculous power. Nonetheless, they do offer a few clues as to how a typical assembly may have unfolded, or at least how they were imagined to have unfolded by later hagiographers, which may also represent contemporary practices at the time they were writing. The sermons are presented as interactive affairs, with audience members asking questions and Abu Sa'id calling out specific listeners—his legendary mind-reading ability was often on display during assemblies as he would exactly address the concerns of listeners without any apparent prompting (O'Malley, 138–39). He is said to have incorporated poetry into his sermons, which earned him the animosity of some of his contemporaries (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 68–69). The recitation of a striking or particularly apt verse could trigger states of ecstasy in his audience, or lamentation and wailing.

In their affective power, Abu Sa'id's mystical assemblies bear a great resemblance to his *samā'* sessions, in which music and poetic recitation would produce ecstatic movement in participating dervishes. Based on the accounts found in the hagiographic tradition, Abu Sa'id seems to have kept a signer (*qavvāl*) in his company and he would often instruct him to recite specific verses for *samā'* (*ibid.*, 53, 72). The hagiographies are full of stories of spiritual rivals who opposed his *samā'* practice—including Qāzi Sā'ed, Qoshayri, and Bu 'Abdallāh-e Bāku—but who eventually saw the error of their ways and accepted Abu Sa'id's spiritual authority, often after a display of the latter's miraculous power. Another point of contention seized upon by Abu Sa'id's

critics was his fondness for sumptuous banquets featuring candles, lavish foods, incense, and other extravagances. The hagiographies detail a number of episodes in which Abu Saʿid receives large donations and rather than hoarding the money, spends it immediately on feasts for his dervishes and followers. Other times he causes food to miraculously appear for such feasts or money to pay the debts incurred thereby.

The later tradition has remembered Abu Saʿid as a composer of verses, and hundreds of quatrains have been attributed to him in a variety of works (Nafisi). According to Lotfollāh (1963, 92), Abu Saʿid claimed never to have composed poetry himself, but rather to have quoted verses from earlier sheikhs, especially Abuʿl-Qāsem Beshr. Ebn Monavvar reports (2010, 202–3) that, despite rumors to the contrary, Abu Saʿid “was too immersed in his own state of witnessing God to be able to compose verse,” but he also quotes two snippets of poetry that he attributes to Abu Saʿid.⁸ Both hagiographers portray the sheikh as a lover of poetry who always had a verse ready at hand; he is said to have memorized thirty thousand verses of pre-Islamic poetry as a student and to have once recited over one thousand verses in a single day (Lotfollāh 1963, 13; Ebn Monavvar 2010, 20, 142). The scholarly consensus has generally been to take the hagiographers at their word and dismiss later attributions as spurious (Meier, 210–13; Rypka, 234; de Bruijn, 16–17). Some, however—most prominently Nafisi and Shafiʿi-Kadkani—have argued otherwise (Graham, 94–106; Shafiʿi-Kadkani 2006, 41–43; cf. Shafiʿi-Kadkani 2010, I, cv–cxv). In any case, even if Abu Saʿid did compose quatrains or *qetʿas*, there is no reliable way to judge the authenticity of the vast majority of attributions, many of which are also ascribed to other poets.

Abu Saʿid attempted the *hajj* once but did not complete it; he turned back at Bestām after

⁸ All translations are my own.

visiting the tomb of Bāyazīd Bestāmi. On the same journey, he also visited the famous Sufi Kharaqāni. In his later years, probably around 1046, according to Shafi‘i-Kadkani’s reckoning, he left Nishapur for the last time and returned to Meyhana, where he died in 1049 and was interred in the tomb (Shafi‘i-Kadkani 2010, I, lxxiii).

Orality and Textuality in a Shrine Community

After his death, leadership of the community fell to Abu Sa‘id’s descendants. According to the hagiographies, Abu Sa‘id’s son Abu Tāher was named the “pole (*qotb*)” by his father on his deathbed, and ten of the sheikh’s relatives were marked as recipients of special blessings—five of his sons, three of his grandsons by Abu Tāher, as well as the husband of an unnamed daughter and their son (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 340–41; Shafi‘i-Kadkani 2010, I, cvl). Although these traditions are doubtlessly intended to bolster later claims of family control—especially the line of Abu Tāher, which produced both of our hagiographers—the familial inheritance of a saint’s spiritual authority was an expected pattern at this time.

Although this organization never evolved into a trans-regional *tariqa*, the shrine complex at Meyhana was a major center for cultic and economic activity under the control of at least four generations of Abu Sa‘id’s descendants. Ebn Monavvar lists (2010, 341–42, 350) some of these activities: five ritual prayers would be performed every day in congregation, two communal meals would be served, the entirety of the Qur’an would be recited over Abu Sa‘id’s tomb every morning, candles would be lit at dusk and dawn, and *samā‘* would be performed. At its apogee, the shrine complex housed over one hundred descendants of Abu Sa‘id and resident dervishes, as well as visitors and pilgrims (*ibid.*, 341). There seems to have been a specific yearly pilgrimage, although some devotees came more often as well, and O’Kane speculates that there may have been a festival on the anniversary of the sheikh’s death (*ibid.*, 341–42; O’Kane, 46 n. 85). Pilgrims

came to receive spiritual blessings from the sheikh's tomb and via various relics maintained on the site. The most celebrated of these relics was a piece of the robe that Abu Sa'īd was wearing when he uttered his famous ecstatic utterance, "There is naught but God in this robe!" As he spoke these words, he slipped his hand under the robe and onto his "blessed chest," and his "blessed index finger" passed miraculously through the fabric, leaving a small hole. According to Ebn Monavvar (2010, 201–2), this piece of robe with the hole from the sheikh's finger was on display at the shrine complex, and after pilgrims visited the tomb, they would make their way to see it. Several other relics (*āṣār*) are mentioned, including the platform from which the sheikh delivered his sermons, as well as the stool that he used to mount the platform, and another stool that he used while performing ablutions. These were apparently held in high esteem by the community, and would also be visited by pilgrims (*ibid.*, 348–49). A myrtle tree planted by the sheikh was also a favorite site for both locals and visitors, being thought to transmit his spiritual blessings (*ibid.*, 42).

Abu Sa'īd's descendants led this community and wielded considerable local and regional political clout. They mediated between the people of Khābarān and members of the political-military elite, facilitating compliance and submission in return for safety, security, and material support. For example, Abu Rowh Lotfollāh, the compiler of the *Hālāt*, was the leader of the community during the Kh'ārazm-Shāh's incursions into Khorasan. He interceded with the Kh'ārazm-Shāh when he arrived with his army in the environs of Meyhana, going out to meet him, attending to him personally, and regaling him with anecdotes about Abu Sa'īd. The Kh'ārazm-Shāh's decision to spare Meyhana is presented by Ebn Monavvar (2010, 378–80) primarily as a result of the miraculous intervention of the deceased Abu Sa'īd, but the anecdote also shows how Abu Sa'īd's descendants functioned as local notables, meeting regional military powers, negotiating submission, and ensuring the safety of their community. According to the

biographer Samʿāni, Lotfollāh was also part of a delegation (*vafd*) from Khābarān to the Saljuq capital of Marv; although no further details are given, this also suggests his status as a regional leader (Samʿāni, II, 134; Shafiʿi-Kadkani 1971, 249; Meier, 522). As for Ebn Monavvar, he reports that he, like other leaders of the family before him, served as the primary representative of the people of Khābarān before the Saljuq sultan:

In all matters relating to the welfare of the province, only the descendants of the sheikh could speak. If anyone else attempted to intercede, they would not be heard. The headman (*raʿis*), tax collector (*āmel*), overseer (*shahna*), and all other functionaries could only carry out their duties with the approval of the sheikh’s descendants. If any of them committed any injustice against anyone, the leader and *pir* of the sheikh’s descendants would simply write “so-and-so should not be in Khābarān.” Someone would take the note to the army camp to present to the Sultan, who would immediately write an order dismissing the offender. (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 349-50)

Ebn Monavvar himself received gifts of grain and cash from Soltān Sanjar (*r.* 1118–57) for the shrine after the first round of Ghuzz attacks, resources that the headman of the Meyhana was unable to secure on his own (*ibid.*, 349–50). Clearly, the sheikh’s descendants were local authorities of some note, even taking into account the expected familial self-glorification.

A lively oral tradition developed in this environment, with Abu Saʿid’s dicta and stories of his miraculous feats circulating among his descendants, resident dervishes, and visiting pilgrims. Ebn Monavvar writes nostalgically of this community and the oral tradition they supported:

All knew the greater part of the states and stations of our sheikh, as well as his sayings (*favāʿed-e anfās*) and deeds (*āṣār*), and they passed their time discussing them. For this reason, our sheikhs did not busy themselves with compiling those reports. Because all thoughts were illuminated with them, all ears were fragrant with their mention, and all tongues spreading the perfume of their recitation and dissemination ... they did not require a collection. (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 4)

Ebn Monavvar paints a vivid (if likely embellished) picture of a thriving community, in which stories and sayings of the sheikh were memorized and transmitted orally—perfuming the hearts and tongues of the devotees—so that the community had no need for a written collection (*jamʿ*). He does recognize the collection of his predecessor, Lotfollāh, who wrote in the first half of 1100s, but he emphasizes (2010, 6) its “brevity (*ijāz*)” and “abbreviation (*ekhtesār*),” as well as the fact that Lotfollāh wrote in an “upright age (*ahd-e isteqāmat*)” when the oral tradition was still maintained. Lotfollāh, for his part, indicates (1963, 9–10) the ongoing importance of memorization within the oral tradition when he writes that he spent a lifetime “seeking out the deeds and sayings of that great one, and collected them in memory,” until, at the urging of his devotees, he set them down in writing. The resulting textual compilation represented only a small fraction of the oral tradition available to him, since Abu Saʿid’s sayings were “more than written pages could contain” (*ibid.*, 96). Likewise, he incorporated only a few of the circulating miracle stories, specifically those that were “easiest to understand,” for the sake of “brevity” (*ibid.*, 80). Besides their direct references to the oral tradition, both of our hagiographers also point in more indirect ways to the large oral tradition from which they drew. For example, they often claim to have “heard” particular anecdotes or sayings, and they sometimes name their sources explicitly. When narrated orally within the community, these traditions would often have been accompanied by full chains of transmission back to Abu Saʿid and his companions on the model of Prophetic hadith and Ebn Monavvar explains (2010, 8) that he dropped these chains of transmission in his textual collection so as not to weary the reader.

Despite the richness of the oral tradition, both hagiographers obliquely reference written material that preceded their own textual enterprises. In particular, Ebn Monavvar claims to have come by a handful of traditions not aurally, which would have been the standard mode of transmission at the time, but textually. For example, he recounts a miracle story

according to which the sheikh was miraculously saved one night when, performing devotions at the edge of a cliff, he fell asleep and began to fall. The story itself is rather unremarkable, but the mode of its transmission is not: Ebn Monavvar reports (*ibid.*, 28–29) to have seen the account written down in the hand of Abu'l-Qāsem Joneyd b. 'Ali Sharmaqāni, a companion of the sheikh who had heard the story directly from him. There are at least five other traditions in the *Asrār* that Ebn Monavvar reports (*ibid.*, 105, 184, 291, 322) having seen written down in the handwriting of specific transmitters known to him. Three of these were written down by one Abu'l-Barakāt, a great-grandson of the sheikh (Shafi'i-Kadkani 2010, I, cli). Although he wrote these traditions down, Abu'l-Barakāt had apparently received them aurally since he includes full chains of oral transmission, all the way back to the reports' originators, in his written versions. The sheikh's sayings and feats may also have been recorded in his own lifetime, as implied by a tradition in which Abu Sa'id rebukes a dervish who wrote down stories (*hekāyathā*) about him at the request of another disciple; the offending dervish is admonished not to be "someone who writes stories," but rather to be "someone that they tell stories about" (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 187). The anecdote is used by Ebn Monavvar to illustrate Abu Sa'id's humility, but it also suggests that accounts of his feats might have been committed to text by his immediate disciples while he was still alive, even if the practice was frowned upon. Abu Sa'id himself often wrote down verses, blessings, and other short pieces of text, which he gave to his disciples and sent to various interlocutors (*ibid.*, 116–117, 202, 238, 331–332). Some of these were likely saved by the community after his death. Finally, Lotfollāh claims (1963, 96) that "nearly two hundred of his [Abu Sa'id's] homiletic assemblies [*majles*] are in the hands of the people." The phrasing of the sentence suggests that these are textual records of Abu Sa'id's sermons, and both Meier and Shafi'i-Kadkani have taken it that way (Meier, 21–22; Shafi'i-Kadkani 2010, I, clxxvi).

How does one reconcile these hagiographers' repeated allusions to copious textual

material, some apparently dating from the lifetime of Abu Sa'id himself, with Ebn Monavvar's insistence that, before Lotfollāh, the community did not produce any textual compilation of the sheikh's sayings and deeds? The apparent contradiction can be resolved if we understand the earlier textual material not to have been full hagiographies, as Shafi'i-Kadkani suggests (2010, I, clxxvii), but rather private, *ad hoc* notes, used primarily for memorization and to support oral transmission. Schoeler, in his study of orality and textuality in the Arabic intellectual traditions, borrows (21) the classical Greek distinction between *syngramma* and *hyponēma*. Whereas a *syngramma* was a full literary work, containing a developed authorial voice that addressed an anonymous readership and was meant for wide circulation, a *hyponēma* was composed for private use and often served as an *aide-mémoire* to support further oral transmission. The early textual material produced in Abu Sa'id's shrine community, which has not survived but whose existence is obliquely documented in the later hagiographical tradition, should be considered a species of *hyponēma*, not *syngramma*. The dervish whom Abu Sa'id rebukes for writing down stories was not composing a hagiography for a literary public, but rather writing out a "few stories for another dervish who asked for them" (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 187). This is not a formal commission for a literary work, but a personal request for private notes. Ebn Monavvar, for his part, chanced to see others' notes on occasion, and he likely had many of his own, but the bulk of his narrations, when he specifies his sources, are based on oral transmission. Thus, we have a situation in which stories of the sheikh's deeds and sayings circulated primarily through oral channels, but this oral tradition was bolstered by private, informal written accounts. When Ebn Monavvar writes that there was no "collection" before Lotfollāh's *Hālāt*, he does not mean that there were no textual accounts of the sheikh's sayings and feats—he himself indicates multiple times that there were—but rather that there was no extended authorial work that was explicitly composed to circulate among the entire community or other audiences.

In the first half of the twelfth century, Abu Rowh Lotfollāh drew on this oral tradition to compile not a private record of the sheikh's sayings for his own use, but something closer to a *syngramma*—a literary work addressed to a local community of pilgrims, disciples, and potential recruits. Little is known about Abu Rowh himself, except that he was Abu Sa'īd's great-great-grandson. According to Sam'āni, he had heard *hadīṣ* from his forefathers, was born before 1097, and died in 1147 (Sam'āni, II, 134). He appears to have been the leader of the shrine community, as illustrated by his reception of the Kh'ārazm-Shāh and his participation in the delegation from Khābarān to Marv. We cannot be exactly sure when his compilation was written, but even if composed at the end of his life, this would have been before the height of the Ghuzz onslaught in the mid-1150s. Lotfollāh's work is self-consciously textual. It has an extensive introduction, directly addresses an anonymous readership, references its own written nature, and is endowed with a clear structure. It contains five chapters, thematically arranged. The first gives a loose chronology of Abu Sa'īd's early life and his introduction to Sufism. The second covers his ascetic feats and later spiritual training. The third deals with his miracles, the fourth his sayings (*favā'ed-e anfās*), and the fifth his death and testament. The work also includes a couple of the sheikh's letters. Each chapter begins with a *hadīṣ* with a complete chain of transmission back to Mohammad, so that "you might know the mystical way (*tariqat*) is not incompatible with the law (*shari'at*)," which perhaps indicates a certain defensiveness regarding Sufism's orthodoxy (Lotfollāh 1963, 11). Unlike the stories and sayings jotted down by earlier devotees, the *Hālāt* was intended to circulate among disciples and pilgrims, so that "by studying these sayings, the devotion of the people to the sanctified shrine (*rowza-ye moqaddas*) might increase" (*ibid.*, 10), and presumably Lotfollāh's own authority as leader of the community would also be reinforced.

Unlike the later *Asrār*, this written collection was never intended to replace the community's living oral tradition, but rather to complement it by attracting new devotees into

the community and highlighting a core set of traditions for memorization and recitation. As Lotfollāh himself reports, the text contained only a small part of the many traditions known to the community, all of which would have continued to circulate orally. The shrine continued to be a hub for the oral transmission of knowledge related to Abu Saʿid, including the oral transmission of the *Hālāt* itself, a process which has left its mark on the text with the incorporation of phrases like “The Glorious sheikh, the Imam, Abu Rowh Lotfollāh b. Abi Saʿid, reports ...” (*ibid.*, 27, 45). These phrases are unlikely to have been included by Lotfollāh; rather, they would have been inserted as the text was being dictated, either by the reciters who read the text aloud or by the scribes transcribing it (Shafiʿi-Kadkani 1987, 14–15). Such formulae are textual vestiges of the continuing importance of oral transmission within specific communities, even in the case of fixed literary texts. Despite the *Hālāt*’s self-conscious textuality as an authorial work, the manuscript acknowledges the continued significance of the oral tradition from which it arose and through which it continued to be disseminated and transmitted.

Although determining the reach of a medieval work is always somewhat speculative, the *Hālāt* likely never enjoyed wide circulation outside of the shrine network. Besides the fact that it exists in only a single manuscript, several other pieces of internal evidence suggest that it was intended to be read within the community, where it largely remained. First, the *Hālāt* lacks a proper title, which would have facilitated its circulation among a dispersed, heterogeneous readership. The unique extant manuscript bears no title at its head. Nor is there any indication of a title within the work itself. The title by which the book is now known is taken from the later *Asrār*. Ebn Monavvar explains (2010, 6) that Lotfollāh compiled a text in which he began every chapter with a *hadīṣ* before “turning to the states and stations of our sheikh (*makhlas be hālāt va sokhanān-e sheykh-e mā bāz āvarda*).” Scholars have generally understood “states and stations” as a proper name, but it seems more likely to be simple description of content, and from the

perspective of someone within the community at that (cf. Meier, 19; Shafi'i-Kadkani 2010, II, 457). There is no indication that Lotfollāh or his immediate readers felt the need to name the text and thereby distinguish it from the oral tradition of Abu Sa'id's "states and stations" that it extends and complements. This is quite different from the later *Asrār*, which has a fixed, authorially chosen, rhyming title—*Asrār al-towhid fi maqāmāt al-Sheykh Abi Sa'id* (The Secrets of Oneness in the Stations of the Sheykh Abu Sa'id)—and was thus explicitly conceptualized by its author as a discrete textual entity, separate from the larger tradition upon which it rests.

Furthermore, the *Hālāt* displays some non-standard dialectical features, which suggests a local orientation and sphere of circulation. In particular, the second-person plural verbal ending is usually—but not always—written as *-it* instead of *-id*. The word *chun* is also written without a *vav*, an unusual orthographical convention. Because only a single manuscript exists, it is unclear if these features should be traced to Lotfollāh or the scribe of this particular manuscript. Copied by one Mahmud b. 'Ali b. Salma in 699/1299, the extant manuscript also includes a collection of sayings attributed to the saint Kharaqāni, entitled the *Montakhab Nur al-'olum* (Selections from the Light of Sciences), which displays the same unusual verbal ending as the *Hālāt*, but not the dropped *vav* in *chun*. Shafi'i-Kadkani believes (1987, 21) that these features were introduced by the scribe, presumably because the unusual verbal ending is found in his copies of both the *Hālāt* and the *Montakhab Nur al-'olum* and his writing is admittedly careless. Nevertheless, I think it unlikely that a scribe would "correct" the text to accord with his or her local dialect at the end of the thirteenth century, when the Persian literary idiom was already well established. It seems more plausible that this usage is an original feature of the texts. Because Kharaqāni is closely connected to Abu Sa'id in the latter's hagiographical tradition, it is possible that both texts—the *Hālāt* and the *Nur al-'olum*—originated in Abu Sa'id's shrine community before the mid-1150s, which would explain their shared dialectical features and also

the reason for their association. This is, however, an indicator that Lotfollāh had a local readership in mind for his hagiography, since he retained the features of his local dialect rather than composing the *Hālāt* in standard literary Persian.

In short, although accounts of the sheikh's sayings and deeds were written down as far back as the eleventh century, and perhaps in the lifetime of Abu Sa'id himself, these were primarily *hyponēma*—*ad hoc* notes and *aides-mémoire* for private use. The first hagiography, in the sense of an authorial work intended for broader circulation, was the *Hālāt* of Lotfollāh. It did not aim to replace the oral tradition, but rather to complement and standardize it. It was written within the community and for the community, with the express aim of bolstering readers' devotion to Abu Sa'id and his shrine.

An Endangered Legacy

But this flourishing shrine complex, and the regional network that it anchored, was destroyed in the Ghuzz incursions of the 1150s, meaning that Ebn Monavvar's *Asrār* stands in a very different relationship to the oral tradition and community than its predecessor. Likely composed in Herat around 1178, several decades after the attacks, Ebn Monavvar describes the Ghuzz assault as catastrophic (Shafi'i-Kadkani 2010, I, clxviii).⁹ One hundred and fifteen descendants of Abu Sa'id were killed, and many others fled to other cities and regions (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 4). The shrine itself seems to have remained standing, but other buildings that made up the complex were damaged or destroyed. All in all, the community was dispersed and activity at the complex more or less ceased.

⁹ At one point, Ebn Monavvar speaks (2010, 342) of thirty-four years having passed since the attacks; if this is measured from the beginning of the period of Ghuzz depredations, which he places one hundred years after Abu Sa'id's death, this would mean Ebn Monavvar was writing in 1178/574.

There seem to have been several phases of dispersal and destruction. The Ghuzz depredations, according to Ebn Monavvar, began exactly one hundred years after Abu Sa'id's death (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 341). If we accept this dating, it would mean that they commenced in 1146/540, by the lunar reckoning, or 1149, by the solar. But this was only the prelude to greater destruction. According to biographical sources from outside the community, five prominent descendants of Abu Sa'id were killed by the Ghuzz in 1154–55/549 (four in Meyhana, one in Marv), which would be nine years after the centennial of the sheikh's death, and which corresponds with the most violent period of the Ghuzz attacks as known from other sources (Meier, 520–22). According to Ebn Monavvar, the majority of the sheikh's descendants fled to Iraq, while he himself stayed in the region. In an attempt to rebuild the community, he journeyed to Marv and appealed for funds from Soltān Sanjar, who had himself just been released from Ghuzz captivity. Given a grant of cash and seed, which he used to establish a *vaqf*, Ebn Monavvar managed to attract around fifty people back to the shrine complex and to restart its cultic activities. But Sanjar died in 1157, and his successor Mahmud Khān was defeated by the Ghuzz in 1158. The Ghuzz raiders then returned to Khābarān, “and this time, they destroyed the complex (*boq'a*) completely, and things turned out as they did” (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 349–51).¹⁰ Ebn Monavvar then left Meyhana, perhaps for Herat, where he would later compile the *Asrār* and eventually was buried (Shafi'i-Kadkani 2010, I, clxv–clxvii).

Still, the area was not completely abandoned. After a period of two years, a few people returned to Meyhana and took up residence in a small fortified area of the town. This fortification was “quite a distance” from the shrine complex, which no longer supported residents and was generally ruined. Still, an old man, one Mohammad b. 'Abd al-Eslām,

¹⁰ *Boq'a* must indicate something other than just the tomb here, since the tomb itself was one of the few buildings to escape total destruction.

continued to care for the tomb itself—which apparently was still standing—for a period of twenty years. Occasionally pilgrims would arrive, and Ebn Monavvar returned to Meyhana himself “after a long while,” but it seems to have only been a brief visit (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 380–81). The shrine’s former prosperity, like that of Meyhana itself, lay in the past. The shrine would be repaired and embellished several times, once during the late twelfth or early thirteenth century—likely after the composition of the *Asrār*—and at least once during the Timurid period (Harrow, 206–7). Pilgrims would visit occasionally, and we have an account by the Safavid bureaucrat Shāh-Hoseyn Sistāni, who arrived there around 1600. The shrine’s economic and spiritual importance, however, remained but a shadow of its former glory, and there is no indication that Abu Sa’id’s final resting place ever again supported a large community of dervishes as it had done during the early twelfth century.

It was the destruction of this community, and the subsequent risk to the oral tradition that they maintained, which drove Ebn Monavvar to compile the *Asrār*. In former times, Ebn Monavvar nostalgically remarks, people did not need a written compilation of Abu Sa’id’s words and deeds because everyone memorized them. But with the scattering of the sheikh’s descendants and their followers, “out of what had been remembered, much was forgotten because of the passing of time, worry for the children and survivors, and the various traumas and trials brought on from torture by the Ghuzz” (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 5). Ebn Monavvar’s primary purpose in compiling the *Asrār* was to set these accounts down in a book so that “more of his [Abu Sa’id’s] deeds, states, and stations would remain among the people of this age and humankind, and some of that which has been effaced or obscured by the trials and tribulations of the Ghuzz might be recovered” (*ibid.*, 6–7). The *Asrār* is thus an attempt to preserve an endangered oral tradition. Whereas the *Hālāt* had been composed as a complement to a living oral tradition, the *Asrār* is meant to be its substitute: a literary, textual record that will survive

the community's decline. Ebn Monavvar, like many members of the community, had likely started collecting material as a young man living in Meyhana, and he may have even made written notes (*hyponēma*). The compilation of those notes into a massive hagiography, however, was motivated by the Ghuzz attacks (*cf.* Algar).

Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the *Asrār* is much longer than the *Hālāt*: about five times longer, in fact. It is marked by an encyclopedic scope, as if Ebn Monavvar were eager to record as much reliable material from the community as he could manage. The work is dedicated to the Ghurid sultan Abu'l-Fath Mohammad b. Sām I (r. 1163–1203) and is composed of three books (*bāb*), which loosely correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of the sheikh's life. The first book focuses on his childhood and spiritual training. The second book includes separate sections devoted to the sheikh's miracles, sayings, prayers, and letters, as well as the verses he recited. The third book contains sections regarding his final testament, the circumstances of his death, and posthumous miracles. Whereas Lotfollāh “had travelled the route of brevity and condensation,” Ebn Monavvar claims (2010, 6, 9) to have compiled the most complete (*jāme'-tar*) and beneficial (*fāyeda-tar*) compilation that a disciple had ever composed regarding the deeds and sayings of his master (*pir*).¹¹

This is not only a matter of more stories, more sayings, and more miracle accounts, but also of expanding those items that had been previously included in the *Hālāt* with greater description and dialogue. The following passage is a typical example of the *Hālāt*'s abbreviated narrative style. It recounts how the Karrāmis and Hanafis of Nishapur—presented as opponents of Abu Sa'id—reacted after Soltān Mahmud Ghaznavi (r. 998–1030) sent a letter approving their

¹¹ In several hagiographic traditions, the trend towards encyclopedic compilation is balanced by the production of abridgments for less committed readers. Although not operative in Abu Sa'id's case, one finds later condensations made of the long hagiographies devoted to Ahmad-e Jām and Rumi. See Moayyad and Lewis, 55–56; Lewis, 260.

request to test Abu Sa'id's orthodoxy and "do what the religious law requires":

This letter arrived on Thursday during the evening prayer. The Karrāmis and People of Reason were greatly delighted, and the People of Hadith and the Bench (*soffa*) and the disciples were all pained, but no one dared to tell the sheikh about this event. (Lotfollāh 1963, 51)

Now compare this with the analogous passage in the *Asrār*:

This order arrived on Thursday. The deniers were delighted and sat together and said: "Tomorrow is Friday. On Saturday, let us call an assembly and string up the sheikh and all the Sufis on the gallows at the head of the market." They all agreed on this, and rumors of it spread through the city. The devotees were pained, and all the Sufis were saddened, but no one dared to speak to the sheikh about it. But no one ever had to tell the sheikh about any event, because he would know and see whatever occurs by virtue of his miraculous foresight. (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 69)

Given similarities in vocabulary and the story's position within the *Asrār*, it is clear that Ebn Monavvar had Lotfollāh's work in front of him as he composed this passage. But he also significantly alters and expands on his source. The introduction of the term "Sufi" is notable, as is his interest in clarifying motivation and causation. Ebn Monavvar has the deniers congregate and explicitly articulate their plan to hang the sheikh and his followers. Likewise, he explains exactly how the sheikh's disciples found out about this letter and the deniers' nefarious intentions: specifically, rumors of the planned hanging had circulated throughout the city. Finally, he clarifies for his audience that the sheikh already knew about this event because of his miraculous foresight.

Over the *longue durée* of Persian literary history, prose texts display increasing syntactic complexity, but the *Asrār* and *Hālāt* were written only a few decades apart. These differences, then, cannot be easily attributed to global changes in Persian prose style. Rather, they are the result of a conscious rhetorical decision to both preserve the oral tradition and open it up to a

new kind of audience. Compiled in the city Herat, a distance of six hundred kilometers from the community's former center, Ebn Monavvar was forced to write for a broader, less devoted, and less informed audience than the disciples and pilgrims for whom Lotfollāh had been writing. Ebn Monavvar expands the various stories to provide important context that, unlike Lotfollāh, he could not simply assume, such as Abu Sa'id's gift of clairvoyance. Other elaborations, such the account of the deniers' plan to hang Abu Sa'id, likely represent material in the oral tradition that Lotfollāh felt no need to record in his condensed text for a more familiar audience. Ebn Monavvar, however, had to include this material since his readers could not ask reciters or transmitters for elaboration or clarification.

Given this broad readership, Ebn Monavvar also sought to standardize the particular idiosyncrasies of Abu Sa'id's speech as it had been preserved in the oral and written hagiographic traditions. The unusual second-person plural ending *-it*, ubiquitous throughout the unique manuscript of *Hālāt*, was replaced with the standard *-id* in the *Asrār*.¹² By recasting Abu Sa'id's sayings into a standard Persian literary idiom, Ebn Monavvar makes them more accessible for a literary public that far exceeds the local readership of the *Hālāt*. Indeed, other editorial interventions in Abu Sa'id's sayings are explained by Ebn Monavvar in his introduction in precisely these terms. In particular, he refers to Abu Sa'id's unusual habit of referring to himself in the third-person plural, which he changes to first-person plural for the benefit of readers from outside of the Meyhana tradition.¹³ The passage is worth quoting in full:

Know that our sheikh never said "I" or "we." Whenever he referred to himself, he would say: "they (*ishān*) said such-and-such, they did such-and-such." If, for the sake of blessings (*tabarrok*), I was to retain within the present collection this particular usage and

12 Compare, for example, Lotfollāh 1963, 102 and Ebn Monavvar 2010, 337–38.

13 It should be noted that this usage does not appear in the *Hālāt*. It must therefore refer to sayings in the oral tradition, or perhaps informal written sources.

construction just as it was uttered by his blessed tongue, then it would fall far from the understanding of ordinary people. Some readers—most of them, in fact—would be led into error in terms of form and meaning. It would be difficult for them to keep constantly in mind that the sheikh was referring to himself with “they (*ishān*).” People would fall into error, especially those who do not read the introduction to this book and note this point, but simply pick it up with the aim of reading an anecdote. Thus, with this excuse, wherever the sheikh has uttered “they,” I have recorded it as “we,” since this is the common and expected usage, and therefore will be easier for readers to understand. (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 15).

This bit of meta-discursive commentary is noteworthy for several reasons, not least because it gives us some idea of how people read lengthy compilations: starting from the beginning was not necessarily to be taken for granted. But it also shows the steps Ebn Monavvar was willing to take to make his work accessible for a wide audience. The great Iranian literary critic of the twentieth century, Malek al-Sho‘arā Bahār, famously argued that pre-modern scribes were reluctant to change the sayings of Sufi saints and, all things being equal, Ebn Monavvar also displays a preference for leaving them unchanged. As he puts it, there are “blessings” to be had in retaining the exact manner of Abu Sa‘id’s speech. But, because he is attempting to introduce Abu Sa‘id’s legacy to readers without access to or familiarity with the community’s oral traditions, he decides to standardize Abu Sa‘id’s sayings and bring them closer to “common and expected usage,” so that they “will be easier for readers to understand.” As he seeks to textualize the oral tradition as far as possible, he must alter the material to make it immediately understandable to outsiders.

In other ways, too, Ebn Monavvar curates his material to make it accessible and spiritually valuable for a readership that is presumably sympathetic to mysticism and saint veneration, but is nonetheless uninitiated into his own community’s customs and traditions. For example, he removes the chains of transmission that would have accompanied the sayings and anecdotes when they were formally transmitted within the shrine community “for the sake of

brevity and concision, and to ward off boredom and tedium” (*ibid.*, 8). This is not because Ebn Monavvar was unconcerned with the authenticity of these reports—on the contrary, as he assures readers elsewhere, he strives to verify everything he transmits—but rather because the chains of transmission would have been of little use for readers outside of a community of disciples familiar with the transmitters, their reputations, and their contexts (*ibid.*, 6, 54).¹⁴ Similarly, he chooses not to follow Lotfollāh, who, in his *Hālāt*, introduces each chapter with an Arabic *hadīṣ* and full *esnād* from Abu Sa‘id or a subsequent leader of the community all the way back to the Prophet. Ebn Monavvar imagined a broad but educated readership that would have understood Arabic—he actually includes more of the sheikh’s Arabic sayings than Lotfollāh—but they would not have had detailed knowledge of the community’s oral tradition or its carriers, nor would they have been invested in a *hadīṣ esnād* testifying to the pious credentials of Abu Sa‘id’s descendants.

Judging from the manuscript evidence, Ebn Monavvar was successful in his efforts to preserve and popularize Abu Sa‘id’s legacy. Whereas Lotfollāh’s *Hālāt* is known to us from a single manuscript, at least eleven copies of the *Asrār* have been identified, dating from the early 1400s (Storey and de Blois, I, pt. 2, 929–930; Monzavi, II, pt. 1, 1028; Shafi‘i-Kadkani 2010, I, ccxxx).¹⁵ Although such numbers can only be a rough guide, they suggest that the *Asrār* was, over the long term, a more popular text with a greater reach. True, many manuscripts of the *Hālāt* may have been destroyed in the Ghuzz incursions, which would have limited its chances of further dissemination. This is, however, precisely the point: the *Hālāt* emerged and circulated

14 Despite this explanation, Ebn Monavvar does occasionally provide *esnāds*, and often the name of the first transmitter. Furthermore, when Ebn Monavvar relies directly on the text of Lotfollāh, he does not remove the chains of transmission provided by the latter. When discussing the omission of *esnāds*, therefore, he must be referring to other sources, perhaps the oral tradition in general, or informal written material.

15 Two of these manuscripts are abridgments (Shafi‘i-Kadkani 2010, ccxxv, ccxxix).

within a specific, sociologically-bounded community, and its own fortunes were closely tied to that group. It must have continued to have been copied occasionally after the shrine community was destroyed—the unique extant manuscript dates from 1299—but it was soon displaced by the *Asrār*, a far more complete and linguistically standardized text that was self-consciously directed to a broad audience without access to the Abu Saʿid oral tradition.

Textually Transmitted Baraka

Even though he dropped the chains of transmission and standardized the language, Ebn Monavvar still had to provide reliable accounts of Abu Saʿid's life and sayings if he was to meet his religious and rhetorical goals: namely, to provide readers with a conduit to Abu Saʿid's blessings. In many mystical circles, there was a belief that saintly figures were God's representatives on earth who mediated between him and his creatures. Saints could thus harness divine power to miraculously aid their devotees or punish their deniers, even from beyond the grave. This charismatic power, or *baraka*, was closely associated with the saint's body, and many of the miracle stories in the *Asrār*, as well the hagiographical tradition more broadly, involve touch or other forms of bodily contact. After Abu Saʿid's death, when his descendants were leading the community and managing the tomb, disciples would undertake pilgrimages to the shrine and visit relics of the sheikh so they could obtain the blessings of his continuing *baraka*. With the destruction of the shrine community, however, old vectors for the distribution of *baraka* were disrupted. In response to this situation, Ebn Monavvar's work implies a new model of *baraka*, in which the saint's words themselves, codified within the text of the *Asrār*, become the primary route for accessing his spiritual blessings.

The *Asrār*, like most hagiographies, is full of miracle stories that demonstrate the power inherent in the body of its saintly hero. What is noteworthy, however, is that many of these

miracle stories focus on the sheikh's mouth as a particularly potent source of spiritual favor. For example, in one memorable anecdote, a woman's blindness is cured when, on Abu Sa'id's instructions, she dips his used toothpick (*khalāl*) into a glass of water, which she then uses to wash her eyes (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 73–74; Lotfollāh 1963, 58–60). According to another anecdote, Abu Sa'id gave three toothpicks that he had carved himself to Bu 'Amr Bokhshavāni, who then established a *khānaqāh* in the environs of Nasā. Bokhshavāni would dip the toothpicks in water, which he would then distribute to the sick, who would be cured “through the *baraka* of both sheikhs” (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 154). The toothpick, along with other objects that have come into contact with the sheikh's mouth, provide a procedure for accessing his body through mediated oral contact across time and space. According to Ebn Monavvar, the famous Hanbali sufi 'Abdallāh Ansāri (d. 1089) was, as a young man, afflicted by a condition in which he would swear uncontrollably. One day, however, he met Abu Sa'id, who was eating a turnip. Having eaten half of it himself, the sheikh then placed the remainder in Ansāri's mouth. After that, Ansāri never uttered obscenities again (*ibid.*, 230). In still another anecdote, Abu Sa'id is invited to blow on a jug of water, so that a sick person may drink it and be healed (*ibid.*, 267).

After Abu Sa'id's death, his shrine, as his body's final resting place, became a locus of spiritual power for his descendants and followers. Indeed, Lotfollāh equates (1963, 110) the “sanctified shrine” (*rowza-ye moqaddas*) with Abu Sa'id's “blessed body” (*shakhs-e maymun*) and implores God never to deny humanity its benefits. A number of miracles recounted by both Lotfollāh and Ebn Monavvar take place at the tomb—as is expected in the hagiographical genres—demonstrating the continuing activity of Abu Sa'id's spirit as protector and patron of his community. Even though Abu Sa'id was no longer alive to distribute turnips or toothpicks, he still wielded spiritual dominion over Meyhana and especially the shrine itself; it was a place where the prayers of pilgrims were answered, and God “provide[d] for any need” (*ibid.*, 138). For

Ebn Monavvar, the site's spiritual power was metonymically indexed by the myrtle tree Abu Sa'id planted there with his "own blessed hand" (*dastkesht-e mobāarak-e sheykh*). When studying with Bu'l-Fazl Hasan as a young man, Abu Sa'id allegedly turned away from the exoteric sciences, buried all of his books, and then planted a myrtle tree over them. According to Ebn Monavvar, the myrtle was always green and healthy, and residents of Meyhana would make use of its branches when their children were born and when enshrouding their dead. Pilgrims visiting the area would cut branches from the tree to take home with them as blessing-bestowing souvenirs. The tree remained vibrant until the Ghuzz attack, when it began to decline, and "its condition worsens every day and it will not be long until, like his other relics (*āṣār-e mobāraka-ye u*) it ceases to exist" (Ebn Monavvar 2010, 42). Even if the tomb itself was still standing, with the scattering of the shrine community, Abu Sa'id's *baraka* had begun to wilt.

One of Ebn Monavvar's primary—if unstated—motivations for compiling the *Asrār* was to open a new route for accessing Abu Sa'id's spiritual blessings in the absence of the shrine community. By preserving the sheikh's sayings and deeds in a fixed form, he created a textual object imbued with the saint's *baraka*. As a literary relic, the *Asrār* distributes the spiritual blessings of Abu Sa'id, not just to a specific group of pilgrims and resident dervishes, but to a virtual community of readers; whoever picks up the manuscript is invited to partake of the blessings contained therein. Given this attempt to transmit the saint's *baraka* textually, Ebn Monavvar frequently casts Abu Sa'id's sayings and aphorisms as physical extensions of his body. He repeatedly characterizes verses and sayings as having "fallen from the sheikh's blessed tongue (*zafān-e mobārak*)" or "from his blessed lips (*lafz-e mobārak*)," and variations of this formula are found dozens of times throughout the *Asrār*.¹⁶ The term is constructed according to

16 For examples, see Ebn Monavvar 2010, 6, 36, 142, 179, 243, 329, 334.

a paradigm in which body parts of the sheikh are described as “blessed (*mobārak*),” especially in a context in which their blessings might be transferred onto nearby physical objects, and from there be transferred to pilgrims and devotees. Thus the myrtle tree was planted by his “blessed hand;” the cloak on display at Meyhana had once covered his “blessed breast” and been penetrated by his “blessed finger;” and, now, the sayings and verses collected by Ebn Monavvar are described as having passed his “blessed lips.” These repeated references to the blessed tongue and lips, whether used consciously or not, emphasize the bodily origins of the sayings collected in the *Asrār* and thus their potential to channel the sheikh’s spiritual blessings to readers who engage the text.

The tendency to materialize and embody speech is also present in the term *favā’ed-e anfās*, used by both Lotfollāh and Ebn Monavvar to refer to the sheikh’s aphorisms, and which might be translated as “useful exhalations.” The dicta of spiritual heroes are often called *favā’ed* in Perso-Arabic sacred biography, a term that connects to notions of utility (*fā’eda*) and points to the pragmatic aims of the genre. The sayings of the saints are valuable tools for shaping oneself and the world and thereby bring benefit to those who learn and engage with them. Within the Abu Sa’id hagiographical tradition, however, the dicta are also often referred to as *anfās*, or “breaths.” The terms *favā’ed* and *anfās* are used seemingly interchangeably, and they also appear together in the compound *favā’ed-e anfās*: utility is thus directly connected to the breath of the saint.¹⁷ His dicta are not just words, but also exhalations; their sounds have been formed by the flesh of his mouth and the air of his lungs. By engaging with these texts, readers can not only learn something useful, but establish a more intimate, bodily connection with the saint. By mouthing his aphorisms, they intermingle their breath with his. This terminology takes

17 See Lotfollāh 1963, 10, 81, 96; Ebn Monavvar 2010, 4, 54, 189, 191, 243.

on special significance in the *Asrār* when read in conjunction with Ebn Monavvar's focus on the sheikh's sayings and verses as physical extensions of his lips and tongue, which are in turn presented as bodily sources of spiritual blessings. In the absence of physical relics, the work thematizes the physicality and spiritual power of speech, which, ironically, is elided with the written word as a carrier of *baraka*. Within the *Asrār*, the saint's body itself is made available through textual renderings of his (oral) speech.

The spiritual power of textualized speech is encapsulated in a subtle but significant change that Ebn Monavvar makes to a conventional optative wish in the earlier hagiography. Near the end of his text, Lotfollāh prays (1963, 110) for the continued efficacy of the shrine as a channel for the sheikh's spiritual blessings: "May God not cut the people off from the blessing (*baraka*) of that holy body and sanctified shrine!" Ebn Monavvar, by contrast, makes no mention of the shrine, but prays (2010, 54) for the maintenance and efficacy of the sheikh's sayings: "May God not cut us and the rest of the people off from the blessings (*barakāt*) of the sheikh's aspiration and precious exhalations! (*anfās-e 'aziz*)!" In light of the decimation of the community and the destruction of the Meyhana complex, the sheikh's "exhalations," conveniently translated into a textual form by Ebn Monavvar himself, have replaced the saint's shrine as the locus of his spiritual power for a new brand of literary devotee.

In hindsight, the *Asrār* appears to have been a natural progression from the *Hālāt*, but it would not have seemed that way to Ebn Monavvar. If the community had not been dispersed, he may not have put pen to paper, or he may have written something that looked more like the *Hālāt*: a far more abbreviated work directed to an audience of insiders and initiates, not a broad literary public. Before the Ghuzz assault, the shrine community had no need for a work like the *Asrār*, and after the assault, it could not recover its previous success, despite the *Asrār*'s

popularity. Indeed, the compilation of the *Asrār* seems to have been an attempt by Ebn Monavvar to monetize his relationship to Abu Sa'īd after his career as local sheikh had been cut short. In the 1150s, he had acted as a local notable, leading a community of regional importance and securing fiscal benefits for his faction from Soltān Sanjar. In the 1170s, by contrast, he presented himself to the Ghurid sultan not as a local notable, but as an author seeking patronage for a textual compilation of a saint's dicta and feats. The change in social position is striking, as is the nature of the authority he performs: having lost his socio-spiritual dominion over a specific region and community, he compiles a religio-literary work for a mystically minded public in the hopes of royal patronage instead.

Conclusion: The Rise of a Persian Literary Sufism

The *Asrār* is far more than a simple expansion or continuation of the earlier *Hālāt*; it is a major reorientation of hagiography for a new kind of audience. In these two works, we can trace the development of the Abu Sa'īd hagiographical tradition from early notes designed to serve as private *aides-mémoire* to an unabashedly textual and encyclopedic work targeting a wide readership beyond any particular sociological community tied to Abu Sa'īd and his tomb. The process of textualization that culminated in the *Asrār* was an act of lexical and social translation, through which the shrine community's knowledge was reshaped in literary Persian to accord with the tastes, expectations, and capabilities of a broad reading public of sympathetic outsiders.

This process was not an inevitable one, but the result of the community's dispersal at the hands of the Ghuzz. Nonetheless, it was only possible because Ebn Monavvar, writing in the 1170s, was able to imagine a new kind of reader for his hagiography: someone sympathetic to Sufism and saint veneration, who had perhaps heard of Abu Sa'īd and respected him, but who was not affiliated with the then-dispersed community of devotees that Ebn Monavvar was no

longer attempting to reconstitute. The fact that Ebn Monavvar was able to imagine such a reader shows the extent to which Sufism had become a dominant mode of piety in the region, closely bound up with saint veneration, a process that has been well noted in the scholarship (Karamustafa 2007, 130–34). But as the *Asrār* shows, the rise in saint veneration involved more than the propagation of local or regional cults; it was also marked by the catapulting of certain saints' legacies into wide literary circulation independent of any shrine or pilgrimage network. Abu Sa'id's fame, thanks to the *Asrār*, increasingly spread throughout the Persian-speaking world, even as his local community dwindled and disappeared.

Ebn Monavvar's project thus testifies not only the importance of sainthood during this period, but also to the ongoing vernacularization and literarization of Sufi textual production. Prior to the twelfth century, most Sufi texts produced in greater Iran were written in Arabic for Sufis themselves or other interested scholarly elites and circulated in school contexts: the manuals of Qoshayri (d. 1072), Kalābāzī (d. c. 994), and Sarrāj (d. 988) are prime examples, as are the bio-hagiographical works of Solami (d. 1021) and Abu No'aym Esfahāni (d. 1038). Alongside these Arabic works we also find technical works in Persian, including those of Hojviri (d. c. 1073 or 1077) and 'Abdallāh Ansāri, many of which seem to be more lecture notes than authorial works are written in a specific dialectal form. By the twelfth century, however, Sufi authors began to write texts in literary Persian that self-consciously targeted a broad, mystically-minded popular readership beyond scholarly circles and outside of any specific school or shrine community: this includes hagiographies like Ebn Monavvar's *Asrār* and 'Attār's *Tazkerat al-owliyā'* (Memorial of God's Friends), as well as non-hagiographical works like Ghazzālī's *Kimiā-ye sa'ādat* (The Alchemy of Happiness). Such a shift, of course, is only possible because of the development of a standardized literary Persian idiom, but it was consciously adopted by Sufi authors to reach an emerging popular audience for their works. Even as Sufism became more institutionalized,

Sufi writers were increasingly able to envision and address an anonymous, sympathetic readership beyond their own institutional and scholarly affiliations and self-confidently intervene in their material for rhetorical and aesthetic reasons.

Ebn Monavvar's *Asrār*, like most hagiographies in the Islamic tradition, has been examined primarily for what it can tell us about Abu Sa'īd and his community. This is certainly a worthy scholarly endeavor and one which has borne much fruit. But we should also keep in mind that authors and compilers produced their texts for specific audiences, and that the audiences they targeted changed over time. When we diachronically examine how hagiographic texts imagine their audiences, make their material relevant, and transmit the spiritual blessings of their subjects, we can uncover important trends in the popularization of Sufism that would otherwise be missed, providing us with new vectors for understanding the intertwined religious and literary history of medieval Iran.

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