

The tomb of Ibn 'Arabī continues to live its paradoxical history. It incarnates the popular and spiritual Islam of a district and also a mystical, intellectual, and universal Islam.

The tomb of a saint, as a high-ranking place of Islam, only lets us see, at first glance, the sacred function of the place: the intercession and *baraka*. But it also shows in its own way the life and death of the saint as well as the position that the collective imagination gives to him. It is a living testimonial, in the same way that hagiographical books are. The mausoleums and the domes are, in Islamic lands, hagiographies of stone on which are written the history of saintliness.

Translated from the French by Cecilia Twinch

The Hidden Secret Concerning the Shrine of Ibn 'Arabī

A Treatise by 'Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulusī

Translated by Paul B. Fenton

'When the Qāf will be embraced by the Shīn,
then will appear the shrine of Muḥyi-Dīn.'¹

Introduction

The present treatise, *as-Sirr al-mukhtabī fī ḍarīḥ ibn al-'arabī*, 'The Hidden Secret concerning the Shrine of Ibn 'Arabī', translated here into English for the very first time, was written in the year 1678 by the celebrated Syrian mystic 'Abd al-Ghanī b. Isma'īl an-Nābulusī (1641–1731).² As indicated by its title, this as yet unpublished treatise is devoted to an esoteric description of the last resting place of Muḥyi d-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī. As such it is not only a tribute to the Great Shaykh, but also an interesting testimony to the manner in which the Sufis envisaged the visit to the shrine of a master. Ibn 'Arabī departed this world on the 22 rabi' II 638/1240 in Damascus,

1. My personal variation on a theme in the *Shajara an-nu' māniyya*. Here the *Qāf* stands for *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) and the *Shīn* for *ash-Sham* (Damascus). The Arabic root *SHQQ* has the connotation of brotherhood. May the Shaykh al-Akbar intercede towards bringing these two letters together in the spirit of the concluding prayer to this epistle 'unite our hearts and guide us to the paths of peace'.

2. On this author, see C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte des Arabischen Literatur*, Leiden, 1945–49, vol. II, pp. 454–8.

where he was buried in the family vault of the Ibn Zakīs, a dynasty of illustrious qāḍīs who had become his protectors during his stay in the Syrian capital. There, in the Ṣālihiyya district, his tomb is still to be found and is a place of pilgrimage for numerous visitors.

Besides the ascription of this work to an-Nābulusī in the present text, his authorship is further confirmed by the fact that he refers to it in his *al-Ḥadra al-unsīyya fi r-riḥla al-qudsīyya*, an account of his journey from Damascus to Jerusalem in 1690.³ As is known, an-Nābulusī belonged to the Qādirī and Naqshabandī Sufi orders and was a fervent, spiritual disciple of Ibn 'Arabī. His biographers recount that he remained a recluse in his house for seven years while studying the writings of the Shaykh al-Akbar, he being so absorbed therein that he neglected to cut his hair and nails. He commented on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ*, and Prayers (*aṣ-ṣalāt al-fayḍīyya*) and wrote a defence of his doctrines.⁴ Moreover, an-Nābulusī lived out his last years in the Ṣālihiyya district, where he died and was interred in the vicinity of Ibn 'Arabī's tomb.

THE TOMB

At the time of the Ayyubid cultural flowering, Damascus had become a haven for Ibn 'Arabī's adepts. Later, however, the winds changed and prior to the Ottoman conquest the figure

3. Cambridge University Library Ms. Qq 300, introduction. See R. Nicholson, *Descriptive Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts in the Collection of E.G. Browne*, Cambridge, 1932, pp. 257–9. On this work, see J. Gildemeister, 'Des 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nābulusi Reise von Damascus nach Jerusalem', *ZDMG*, XXXVI (1882), 385–400, and also E. Sirriyah, 'The Journeys of 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nābulusi in Palestine (1101/1690) and 1105/1693', *JSS*, XXIV (1979), 55–69.

4. See O. Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabī*, Damascus, 1964, vol. I, p. 251, vol. II, pp. 471 and 535. Defences of Ibn 'Arabī: *Ḥatīk al-astār fi 'ilm al-asrār* and *the Radd al-matin 'alā muntaqāṣ al-'arīf muhyiddin*.

of Ibn 'Arabī, accused by the theologians of holding the heretical doctrines of *ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *ittiḥād* (union with the Divine), had fallen into discredit in Damascus. This attitude was reflected in the manner in which his tomb was treated in former times. Indeed the historian Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣafadī observes as early as the fourteenth century that it was used as a waste-dump, and was the object of other desecrations.⁵

'Ali ben Maymūn al-Fāsī (d. 1511) a Moroccan Sufi who undertook a journey to the East, provides us with a precise description of the state of the tomb in his unpublished *Tanzīh aṣ-ṣiddīq 'an waṣf az-zindīq* ('Cleansing of the Friend from the Accusation of Heresy'), and confirms these violations. None would dare mention Ibn 'Arabī's name, and even less indicate the whereabouts of his tomb, for fear of reprisals:

When in 1499 Allah willed that I make a halt in Damascus, I happened to hear certain wretched individuals, steeped in passion and error, who claimed to be scholars, levelling contemptful criticism against the master gnostic, unequalled in the perfection of his knowledge of the Divine sciences, Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad Ibn al-'Arabī, aṭ-Ṭa'ī al-Maghribī al-Andalusī (. . .). I knew not where he was interred, but when that year (. . .) Allah made known to me the place of his grave, I made my way there, with the help of the master gnostic 'Abd al-Qādir Ṣafadī,⁶ whose acquaintance I had made in Safed during the month of Sha'bān 904/1498 and who, while

5. Khalil aṣ-Ṣafadī (attributed to), *Sharḥ ash-shaḡara an-nu'māniyya*, Ms. Damascus, 4398, fol. 113. See also Muḥammad Raḡab Hilmi, *al-Burhān al-azhar fi manāqib ash-shaykh al-akbar*, Cairo, 1326H, p. 37.

6. 'Abd al-Qādir ibn Ḥabīb, who died in Safed in 1509. On this notable spiritual disciple of Ibn 'Arabī and his relationship with Ibn Maymūn, see M. Winter, 'Sheikh 'Alī ibn Maymūn and Syrian Sufism in the Sixteenth Century', *Israel Oriental Studies*, VII (1977), 281–308. Al-Ṣafadī suffered from the same disrepute as Ibn 'Arabī and could only visit Damascus in the absence of the local orthodox theologians. It is noteworthy that Safed continued to be a centre of Sufi activity. The mystic master Aḥmad b. Bitris resided in Safed where he died in 1520,

discussing Ibn 'Arabī, apprised me of the location of his shrine which is situated in the suburb of Ṣāliḥiyya to the North of Damascus, at a distance of slightly more than a mile from the city (. . .). When I arrived at Damascus I found none to direct me, for all were frightened of the tyranny of the wretched clergy (follows a lengthy curse against the *fuqahā'*). I then enquired about this blessed mausoleum and it was pointed out to me in the distance, saying 'ask for such and such a place and when you get there, you will find a bath-house, to which the cemetery is adjacent.' I finally arrived at the bath-house and requested of the keeper to open the door for me so that I could enter the shrine to see the tomb. Using a subterfuge, he scaled the wall and opened the door for me. I found the shrine to be devoid of any trace of visitors. The grass had withered, thus proving that none had frequented the place. In reality, this neglect was a sign of distinction, for in these corrupt times Allah had not allowed this site to become a place of pilgrimage (for saint worship). Thus He had preserved the saint, both in life and death, from humiliation. (. . .) I then sat at his blessed feet, as it behoves. No, in fact I acted in the most unseemly manner. Propriety would have required me to remain standing outside of the shrine in the manner of him who implores intercession. I committed a sin and ask forgiveness of Allah (. . .). Thereupon I read the epitaph which adorned his tomb and which bore the Qur'ānic verse: 'Call to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and have disputations with them in the best manner; thy Lord best knows those who go astray and those that follow His path' (Q. 16: 125). Upon reading this verse, the light of my belief in the saintliness of the master waxed stronger.⁷

shortly before the great flowering of the Cabbala in that city. On him see al-Chazzi, *al-Kawākib as-sā'ira*, vol. I, Beirut, 1945, pp. 132-3.

7. *Tanzih*, Ms. Damascus 7511, fols. 1b-2a. A French version of this text is quoted by R. Atlagh in his article devoted to Ibn 'Arabī's tomb: 'Paradoxes d'un mausolée' in *Lieux d'Islam*, Autrement Collection Monde, n° 91-2, Paris, 1996, pp. 136-7. See C. Twinch's English translation of this article in the present number of this journal. The *Tanzih* is part of a considerable corpus of polemical epistles exchanged by numerous scholars on the question of Ibn 'Arabī's orthodoxy.

The disrepute described by al-Fāsī endured for a few more years, as later illustrated by the fierce opposition encountered by a certain Aḥmad Ibn as-Sumaydi (d. 1504) when he expressed the desire to build a mausoleum (*turba*) over the Master's tomb, which, until then, had had no distinguishing feature.⁸

The conquest of Damascus by the Ottomans in 923/1517 brought about a profound change of fate in the history of the tomb. Popular tradition, based on the pseudo-akbarian *ash-Shajara an-nu'māniyya*, claims that Ibn 'Arabī had predicted the rise of the Ottomans. No wonder that the Turkish Sultans adopted him as the patron saint of their dynasty. Immediately after the fall of Damascus, Sultan Selim I Yavuz ('the Grim'; reg. 1512-20) purchased the tomb and its surroundings in order to build a mosque and a *takkiyya*, which was to bear the name Takkiyya Selimiyya, and where he would pray on Fridays.

The circumstances of the shrine's construction, completed within the record time of three months, are well known thanks to the account left by Ibn Tulūn (d. 1546), a noted chronicler of the period, and who, having lived most of his life in the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter, was also appointed as the first imām of the tomb's mosque. In order to avoid provoking the inhabitants, construction work took place under the cover of night, the cupola being completed in 1517 and the *minbar* the following year.⁹ Selim endeavoured to popularize Ibn 'Arabī by exempting the residents of Ṣāliḥiyya from taxes and by staging religious festivities at the tomb that rivalled those held at the Umayyad mosque. He visited the mausoleum prior to undertaking the conquest of Egypt. Henceforth, the tomb became a place of pilgrimage, especially for the Turks who would make the journey to Damascus for the purpose of visiting it. In 922/1517, the

8. Cf. al-Ḥiškafī, *Mut' at al-adhān*, n° 119, Ms. quoted by E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie*, Damascus, 1995, pp. 459-60.

9. Ibn Tulun, *Mufākhāt al-khillān fi ḥawādith az-zamān*, t. II, Cairo, 1962-4, pp. 72-7.