

Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī

‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289) is one of the most famous Persian mystical poets, who lived during the 7th/13th century, one of the richest centuries in terms of intellectual and mystical thought. Our sources for his life include an anonymous biography based on oral traditions, many no doubt pious and legendary, which may have been written in the 8th/14th century, as well as one by a 9th/15th century Sufi (Ni‘matullahi) poet Dā‘ī of Shiraz. Other details can be gleaned from his *Dīwān* (collection of poems), although there is some disagreement amongst scholars as to whether all the poems attributed to him are actually his¹.

His full name was Ibrāhīm b. Buzurgmīhr b. ‘Abd al-Ghaffār, and he was born near Hamadān in western Iran to a family of scholars in approx. 609/1213. The story of his youth is interesting: after learning Quran at the age of 8, he finished his education at the age of 17 and started teaching at the *madrasa* (college) in Hamadān. A group of wandering dervishes called Qalandars arrived and recited the following ghazal (A):

We have moved our bedrolls from the mosque to the tavern

We have scribbled over the page of asceticism and erased all miraculous graces

Now we sit in the rank of the lovers, in the street of the Magians (fire-worshippers),

We drink a cup from the hands of the drunks (*rindān*) of the tavern

If the heart should beat the drum of respectability, why not?

for we have raised the flag of good fortune to high heaven

Beyond self-denial, beyond mystical stations, we have passed on,

have we not drained from all that the cup of hardship?²

Unsettled, ‘Irāqī saw among the group a boy of extraordinary beauty and fell in love. When the Qalandars left town, he threw his books away, abandoned everything and followed after them. He is said to have shaved off his eyebrows (like them), and travelled with them in western Iran (perhaps for three years or more). Eventually, they arrived in Hindustan in the town of Multan (present-day Pakistan) and visited the *khānaqah* of Bahā’ al-Dīn Zakariyyā (d. 661/1262, the founder of the Indian branch of the Suhrawardiyya). Apparently ‘Irāqī was challenged by the Shaykh to drop his love-affair with the young man ("leave that desire and sit with us; that is the

¹ For example, the *Ushshāq-nāmāh* (*Song of Lovers*, translated by Arberry) is regarded by Baldick as spurious – Julian Baldick, ‘The Authenticity of ‘Irāqī’s *Ushshāq-nāmāh*’, *Studia Iranica* Iii (1973), pp. 49-60.

² Adapted from *Divine Flashes*, trans. Chittick and Lamborn-Wilson (intro), p. 34.

metaphor, this the reality, chosen one!") and went off to rejoin his Qalandar friends – as they left the town, they were hit by a whirlwind and separated. ‘Irāqī found himself at the city gate again and rejoined Bahā’ al-Dīn. The shaykh said: ‘Irāqī, you fled from us”, to which he replied (in verse, B):

"From you my heart not for one moment flees
for how can the body dispense with the spirit?
The nursemaid of your kindness took me to her breast,
and even before my mother, fed me a hundred kinds of milk"³

Evidently the shaykh thought very highly of him since he immediately sent him into retreat (*khalwa*). After 10 days he experienced an ecstasy and recited the lines:

"The first wine they put in the cup
they borrowed from the drunken eyes of the fair ones..."

These were reported to the shaykh, who instead of following the usual practice of requiring him to only recite Quran and hadith, said to his other students: "It is forbidden to you, not to him". Eventually after a few more days, his verses were being recited in the local bazaar and tavern, so the shaykh called him out of the cell. Weeping, ‘Irāqī recited:

"In the street of the taverns, when
should I pray? since my
drunkenness and sobriety
are all the same as prayer.
There, no-one accepts the coin
of righteousness, piety and self-denial:
the only currency in that street
is beggary."

He was then given a Sufi robe (*khirqā*), married Bahā’ al-Dīn's daughter by whom he had a son, and stayed for at least 25 years with the shaykh, who eventually made him his *khalīfa* (deputy). When the shaykh died, ‘Irāqī composed a famous elegy for him and then due to jealousy from other disciples who considered him beyond the pale, left with a group for Mecca.

³ Adapted from *Divine Flashes*, trans. Chittick and Lamborn-Wilson (intro), pp. 39.

After visiting Mecca and Medina, most of the group went north to Damascus. With two companions, 'Irāqī went on to Anatolia, travelling until he came to Konya where Ibn 'Arabī's stepson and heir Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) was teaching: he stayed and attended classes on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Every day, after listening to the *Fuṣūṣ* teaching, 'Irāqī would compose his own *Lama'āt (Divine Flashes)*, in prose and verse. The style was based upon Aḥmad al-Ghazzālī, who is considered to have established the Sufi metaphysics of Love, seeing the divine as Love. When the work was completed in 28 chapters, he presented it to al-Qūnawī, who approved it.

He was evidently very popular and had many followers, "while he himself was the disciple of the whole world". One who believed in him was the ruler of Anatolia, Mu'īn al-Dīn Parwāna (d. 675/1276), who was also friends with Rūmī: the Parwāna wanted to build him a permanent centre, but 'Irāqī refused, although eventually he agreed to have a *khānaqah* in Tokat. There are various stories of 'Irāqī holding sessions of *samā'* and composing poems there, playing with children, walking half-naked on the mountain slopes, reciting poems. When Rūmī died in 672/1273, he is reported to have remarked: "Nobody understood him as one should: he came into the world as a stranger and left it as a stranger".

When his friend and protector the Parwāna was executed by the Mongols in 676/1277, 'Irāqī made his way to Cairo to convey the Parwāna's wealth (a bag of jewels) to his son, who had been imprisoned in Egypt by the sultan. Unable to obtain the release in the normal way, 'Irāqī went directly to the sultan himself and laid the jewels before him. The sultan was so impressed by his honesty and integrity that he immediately released the young man and allowed the poet access to the court at any time he wished.

Eventually 'Irāqī went to Damascus, where he fell ill and died on 8 Dhū al-Ḥijja 688/23 November 1289. He was buried in the Ṣāliḥiyya cemetery next to Ibn 'Arabī, although no trace of his tomb appears to have survived after the 16th century. He is best remembered as one who combined the Arabic Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī, expressed in profound metaphysics, with the Persian Sufism of Khurasān, expressed in poetry and metaphor.

As a note on the connection between our poets, there is a certificate given on a manuscript of Ibn al-Fārīd's poems by a certain 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Maḥfūz al-'Alawī for his son, dated 691/1292, giving authority for the text to be transmitted "by virtue of my transmission from the great *shaykh* and *ḥāfiẓ* (one who knows the Quran by heart) Fakhr al-Dīn al-'Irāqī, may God have mercy upon him."⁴

⁴ Chester Beatty Arabic MS 752, fol. 1a.

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