



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Farid al-Din ‘Attar”

Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia

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A celebrated Persian poet and Sufi hagiographer, ‘Attar lived during the second half of the twelfth century CE and the first two or three decades of the thirteenth century in or near Nishapur. According to the most commonly received scholarly opinion, he died during the Mongol sack of Nishapur in April 1221 CE, but 1230 CE also remains a possibility. Reliable biographical information about him is scarce, and many supposed autobiographical indications derive from works that have turned out to be spurious. It is nevertheless clear that he was known as an expert pharmacist. He appears to have had close ties with the well-known Sufi of Khwarazm, Majd al-Din Baghdadi (d. 1209 CE or later) or with one of his disciples, Ahmad Khwari, in Nishapur.

However, ‘Attar generally had very little to say about the Sufis of his own time, and he never mentioned anyone as his own Sufi master, whereas he obviously admired the great Sufi saints (*awliya*) of the past. Unlike his famous counterpart among the Sufi poets, Mawlana Rumi (d. 1273 CE), he does not seem to have played any active role in organised Sufism. The oft-repeated story of ‘Attar meeting young Rumi in Nishapur belongs to the realm of succession myths (F.D. Lewis, 2000). The literary historian, Muhammad ‘Awfi, who visited Nishapur around 1200 CE, describes ‘Attar as a pious, withdrawn Sufi and a fine mystical poet. ‘Awfi cites examples from ‘Attar’s lyrical poetry but does not comment on his *mathnawis* (narrative poems). Another early account comes from the Shi‘i scholar and philosopher Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201-1274 CE), who visited ‘Attar personally when he was a student in Nishapur. Tusi was impressed with the old poet’s “eloquence” and his way of interpreting the “discourse of the [Sufi] masters, the knowers [of God] and the spiritual guides,” as he later put it to his student Ibn al-Fuwati (d. 1323 CE). The latter, in his report, adds a reference to ‘Attar’s complete collection of lyrical poetry (his “great *Diwan*”) and to one of his *mathnawis*, the “Mantiq al-Tayr.”

A number of works attributed to ‘Attar were in fact written by a later poet using the same pen name or have otherwise turned out to be falsely attributed to the famous ‘Attar. This applies not only to those works portraying him as a fervent Shi‘i but also to the so-called *Khusraw-Nama* (also known as *Gul-u-Hurmuz*), a romance that was regarded as authentic until recently, and the spuriousness of which has been convincingly demonstrated by contemporary Iranian scholarship (M.R. Shafi‘i-Kadkani, 1996 and 1999). ‘Attar’s authentic works include, in addition to the *Diwan* and a selection of quatrains titled *Mukhtar-Nama*, four great *mathnawis* that are mentioned in the introduction to the latter work in the following order: “Ilahi-Nama” (properly called *The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.*



“Khusraw-Nama”), “Asrar-Nama,” “Mantiq al-Tayr” (or “Maqamat al-Tuyur”), and “Musibat-Nama.” It is not clear whether this sequence also reflects their relative chronological order; references to the poet’s advanced age in the first two would rather speak against such an assumption. ‘Attar’s prose work about the saints, *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*’, is nowhere mentioned by the poet himself, but there is no good reason to question the authenticity of its first part (i.e., the part ending with the entry about al-Hallaj).

The most famous among the *mathnawis* is the “Mantiq al-Tayr.” This is the tale of the mystical journey of the birds through seven valleys in search of their mythical king, Simurgh, a cosmic bird of ancient Iranian lore, who turns out to be their real Self. The theme of the journey of the birds had been used long before ‘Attar as a symbol for the soul’s attempt to approach God in philosophical (Ibn Sina) and Sufi (Ghazali) literature; however, ‘Attar’s adaptation is by far the most poetic and mystical. The main theme of the “Musibat-Nama” is also a mystical journey, but this time the wayfarer is thought itself (*fikrat*), guided by a master who is not of this world, although he must be found in this world. This journey leads the wayfarer through forty encounters with fantastic angelic, human, and purely physical beings to the recognition that he has to submerge himself in the Ocean of the Soul: only then can the “journey *in* God” begin. In the “Ilahi-Nama”, a king/caliph teaches his six sons how to transform their worldly desires into related spiritual aims. The “Asrar-Nama” is, despite its *mathnawi* form, not really a tale but rather a meditation on the themes of death and resurrection.

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