

Denise AIGLE

Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs: Pouvoir, société et lieux de sacralité (X^e-XV^e s.)

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Iran's history is shaped by the diversity of its topography, languages, and lifeways. This complexity often means that major events were experienced and recorded differently by chroniclers writing in provincial capitals. Research into local histories, histories of sub-cultures, and micro-histories are some of the ways historians have come to terms with the many "Irans" that persist to this day. Denise Aigle has been one of the most successful modern exponents of Iran's local history, particularly of Fārs, the object of her most recent monograph, *Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs: Pouvoir, société et lieux de sacralité (X^e-XV^e s.)*, which uses Sufism as a lens to explore the social history of southern Iran from the Islamic conquest (633-651) until the imposition of Safavid rule (1501-1736). This book appeared a few months ahead of the translation of her earlier monograph, *Le Fārs sous la domination mongole (XIII-XIV^e s.)*, and is the logical next step in her research on medieval Fārs.⁽¹⁾ Indeed, *Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs* not only provides a detailed profile of the leading Sufi currents in Fārs prior to the Safavid conquest, it also challenges a number of misconceptions about the historical interplay between religious, political, and economic communities in one of Iran's most dynamic and famous regions.

The assertion that holiness and sainthood are socially constructed is at the heart of Aigle's work. She explains that saints are elected by their communities, who use hagiographical literature to express shared notions of holiness (p. 9). Based on this premise, Aigle analyses the theme of holiness in the biographies of saints (*ṭabaqāt/manāqib*) to

reconstruct their religious communities in medieval Fārs (p. 82). Aigle begins this study of holy men and their communities with an introduction to the political, social, and spiritual history of Fārs from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries (p. 87-238). This timeline challenges rigid adherence to dynastic chronologies in favour of a new periodisation that explains how notions of holiness and sacred space were formed in southern Iran. The tenth century was when Islam began to make significant inroads into the predominantly Zoroastrian population of Fārs to create a new syncretic Islamic culture. Aigle shows how the Būyid court (945-1055) exemplified this mix of Persian and Islamic tradition by sanctifying old symbols of Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian authority with a new Islamic mythology. Old imperial centres like Persepolis became the abode of Quranic prophets, like King Solomon, and new genealogies were "found" to link past Iranian rulers with the house of the Prophet Muhammad (p. 73). The major administrative and economic centres of Fārs also began to associate themselves with Islamic patron saints, who provided prestige, protection, and prosperity to their newly converted communities. Just as the Būyid court reconciled the political heritage of Fārs and the Islamic world, so too these new saintly communities shrouded their daily lives with the sanctity provided by religious patrons. Aigle spends the rest of the book identifying what made these saintly men holy, what role they played in society, and how much legitimacy they lent to those in power. She does this in two separate sections devoted to the shaykhs of Shīrāz-Kāzarūn [Shaykh Kabīr (d. 981), Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209), Amīn al-Dīn Balyānī (d. 1345), 'Umar Murshidī (d. 1423)] (p. 281-659) and the shaykhs of Lāristān [Rukn al-Dīn Dānyāl (d. after 1266), Muḥammad b. Abī Najm (d. 1384), Shāh Sayf Allāh Qattālī (d. 1275-6), Quṭb-i Muḥyi (d. approx. 1496)] (p. 663-863). Her analysis leads Aigle to conclude that Fārs became an important centre of Sufism by the thirteenth century, with at least two *ṭarīqas* (orders) giving rise to cadet branches in Fārs and the wider Islamic ecumene.

The range of teachings and rituals attributed to these Fārsī saints is remarkably diverse, yet Aigle identifies a basic typology in the hagiographies produced in the region. She shows that by the thirteenth century Fārs, and Shīrāz in particular, was home to a number of well-established scholarly families, whose early connections to intellectual networks in Baghdād, especially the Suhrawardiyya Sufi order, imposed a conservative Sunni atmosphere on the province (p. 326). The 'ulamā's commitment to religious orthodoxy, reinforced by the political

(1) In English, Denise Aigle, *Iran under the Mongols: Ilkhanid Administrators and Persian Notables in Fars*. London, I.B. Tauris, 2024.

leaders in Shīrāz, ensured that the Sufi leaders of Fārs emphasised the importance of observing the *sharī'a*, studying jurisprudence, and adhering to the *sunna* (p. 348). Aigle also notes that their biographies drew heavily upon the *sīrat* (biographical) literature of the Prophet and the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (lives of the prophets), ensuring that their special spiritual authority was founded on precedent (p. 408). This intellectual conservatism maintained the saints' credibility in the communities that they represented, while also burnishing their reputation for mystical knowledge and miraculous power. It was often hard to balance these claims to exceptional spiritual authority with adherence to tradition, even among the Sufi orders themselves, as illustrated by the tension between the Suhrawardiyya and Rūzbihān Baqlī over the latter's advocacy for mystical intoxication, reported in his biography, *Rūḥ al-jinān* (p. 520). Yet the saints' liminal position on the boundary of religious and social propriety made them good intermediaries between their community, God, and their rulers, who Aigle argues became more distant after the demise of the Būyids in the eleventh century.

Aigle's profile of Sufism in Medieval Fārs is particularly novel for her exposition of the local networks that governed Fārs. In the eleventh century, Fārs transitioned from the centre of an empire to a province of the Seljuk (1055-1194), Mongol (1258-1335), and Timūrid (1370-1468) empires. Aigle argues that the estrangement of the imperial centre enhanced the importance of spiritual leaders, particularly Sufi shaykhs, in governing Fārs (p. 867). Relations between the saints and the imperial authorities were often tense and the hagiographies report numerous instances when the Sufis either shunned or protested against rulers who were perceived to be working against their community's interest. Yet winning favour with the saints had the potential to reinforce control over an important constituency in Fārs. These connections are evidenced through the minting of Shīrāzi coins in the name of their patron saint Shaykh Kabīr in 1336-1338 and the marching of Sufi orders, complete with banners and drums, in a parade held at Takht-i Jamshīd by the Akkoyunlu (1378-1507) governor Khalīl Sulṭān in 1476 (p. 391, 450). The intermediary role of the saints can also be seen in the diverse functions of their shrines and tombs, which provided charity to the destitute, a place of congregation for scientific meetings, scriptoria, and even places of convivial gatherings between friends and acquaintances (p. 258, 333, 628). The centrality of the Sufi lodges (*khānaqāhs*) and tombs to life in medieval Fārs made them a common meeting ground for merchants, urban leaders (*kulūs*),

nomadic Shūls, Kurds, Turks, Mongols, and chivalric orders (*futuwwa*). *Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs* portrays medieval government in Fārs as a collaboration between these local networks and the political rulers, best exemplified by the ties between the Sufi *khānaqāh* and the communities they served.

Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs also provides a valuable catalogue of the most important yet under-studied Sufi orders of Fārs, using saints' biographies (*manāqib*) to identify the beliefs and praxis of each respective *ṭarīqa*. Drawing on manuscripts held in private collections and unpublished texts, the book profiles little-known figures like 'Umar Murshīdī, who rose to prominence during the reign of Shāhrukh (r. 1409-1447) and was credited with mediating disputes between the Timūrid sovereign and his son Ibrāhīm Sulṭān in Fārs (p. 162). Aigle's work on the tombs and religious orders of Lāristān is also largely unstudied outside of Iran, making it an important reference work for specialists on Sufism and the religious history of southern Iran. Her reconstructions of these orders, their leaders, and their teachings is thoroughly engaging and the author's use of a range of sources from poetry to travelogues provides remarkable depth. Quotes from Ḥāfiẓ satirising the zealous Muẓaffarid ruler, Mubāriz al-Dīn (r. 1353-1358), as the "chief of the morality police" and the hypocritical holy men peddling their piety as "*zuhd furūsh*" (lit. sellers of piety) gives a sense of how some of these communities were viewed in wider society (p. 138, 360). Meanwhile, the Safavid secretary Būdāq Munshī Qazwīnī's description of the illiterate women of Shīrāz, who spent their time copying texts, whilst their husbands painted the accompanying miniatures, gives a vivid sense of the market for manuscripts and the atmosphere in which hagiographical literature was transmitted (p. 224). The use of these secondary sources not only allows Aigle to contextualise the often esoteric hagiographical stories that she recounts, it also provides the reader with a more comprehensive appraisal of how the saintly communities fit into medieval Fārsī society.

The scope of this work naturally means that there are several questions that are left unanswered, although whether they can be interrogated further may depend on the discovery of new source material. Aigle points out that the hagiographical literature of Fārs often focuses squarely on the saint and his descendants at the expense of their disciples and even their female relatives (p. 632). The author made several attempts to address the role of women in the biographies of Fārsī saints, making a convincing argument that several Sufi orders admitted female members, most notably the Rūzbihāniyya (p. 496).

Others, like the Kāzarūniyya appear to have catered more exclusively to men. In either case, women only appear in the biographies of these saints to replicate the role of the Prophet's household in the *sīrat* literature, reinforcing the ties between the saint and the Prophet Muḥammad (p. 366). The absence of further information makes it difficult to study these women as autonomous actors. Similar limitations appear to circumscribe what we can learn about the membership of the hereditary Sufi orders in Fārs. The objective of the hagiographies was to edify the saints and their descendants, rather than provide a history of the order itself, which prevents further study into the makeup or rituals of the order (p. 632). Aigle has done a sterling job of using secondary sources, such as endowment deeds and local histories to identify possible adherents. The semi-legendary accounts of the *manāqib* also allow her to build a profile of each order's praxis and key teachings. Yet the idiosyncratic nature of the biographies means that it is particularly hard to know the fate of the order after the founder's death (p. 882). This problem is especially evident for the orders of Lāristān, where it is difficult to know anything about how or when they might have declined in popularity. One recurring trend seems to be that there was a direct correlation between the lifespan of a *ṭarīqa* and its access to reliable income, whether from pilgrims, endowments, patronage, or land ownership. In several cases, Aigle shows that this type of wealth allowed shrines and tomb complexes

to survive the Safavid persecution of Sufi orders that proved so devastating in other parts of the empire. Her research even hints that they remained important partners for the Safavid governors of Fārs in southern Iran, belying the commonly held view that Safavid rule spelled the end of Sufi orders across Iran (p. 724).

Saints hommes de Chiraz et du Fārs is a uniquely impressive piece of scholarship, which provides readers with the most comprehensive introduction to Sufism in Fārs to date. Not only does it include a detailed catalogue of the significant figures, initiation rites, and teachings pertaining to these orders, it uses contemporary poetry, local histories, epigraphic inscriptions, and travelogues to situate the Sufi orders in the broader social and political landscape of medieval Fārs, providing a natural and necessary expansion of Aigle's earlier work on southern Iran under Mongol rule. *Saints hommes* argues compellingly that the people of Fārs were not passive hosts to the armies and rulers that occupied their territory from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. Rather, they actively engaged these rulers in the administration of the province and played a critical role in the success or failure of their political ambitions. This conclusion challenges traditional characterisations of the Middle Ages as a period of disruption in the natural trajectory of Iranian history, and shows it to be a period of tremendous vitality and development in which Fārs transformed itself into an important centre of spiritual devotion and scholarship.

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