



## Review Article



### Feryal Salem

*The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunnī Scholasticism. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunnī Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts 125, Leiden: Brill, 2016): Pp. VI + 165. ISBN: 978-90-04-31029-2.

In 1996 a groundbreaking study by Michael Bonner<sup>1</sup> drew scholarly attention to the Arab-Byzantine frontier and its religious and intellectual milieu. In the early Abbasid period this area (known as the *tuḡūr*, roughly corresponding to an arc running along the line of the Taurus mountains) stood out for the appearance of a movement of scholars and ascetics combining “participation in warfare and activity in transmission of hadith to a partial rejection of the caliphal authority in the conduct of jihad”.<sup>2</sup> The fourth chapter of Bonner’s book was devoted to three distinct typologies of such “scholars and saints of the frontier”. So, along with al-Fazārī and Ibrāhīm b. Adham al-Balḥī, ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak al-Marwazī (d. 181/797) came into full view for the first time.<sup>3</sup> According to Bonner, Ibn al-Mubārak represented a model of “this worldly asceticism, which does not turn inward and away, but which rather builds and maintains the community, through the concepts of companionship and reward”.<sup>4</sup> He thus established an approach to the subject that would be followed, with some variants, in the years to come.<sup>5</sup>

1 Bonner, Michael, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War. Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier*. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1996).

2 Bonner, *Aristocratic violence*: p. 108.

3 Cf. Bonner, *Aristocratic violence*: pp. 119-125.

4 Bonner, *Aristocratic violence*: p. 125.

5 For further works along these lines, see Denaro, Roberta, *Dal martire allo šahīd. Fonti, problemi e confronti per una martirografia islamica* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006): esp. pp. 105-116; Cook, David, *Martyrdom in Islam*, (Cambridge: New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007): pp. 36-38 and *passim*; Afsaruddin, Asma, *Striving in the Path of God. Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2013):

Exactly 20 years after *Aristocratic Violence*, a work by Feryal Salem finally devotes a self-standing monograph to Ibn al-Mubārak. In a brief detailed study (*The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunnī Scholasticism. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunnī Identity in the Second Islamic Century*, Brill, Leiden 2016. Pp. VI + 165) Salem offers a well-rounded portrait of Ibn al-Mubārak, examining his biography (chap. I), his role in ḥadīṭ transmission, that is to say his teachers and students, his works (chap. II), and his characterization as a *mujāhid* and as a *zāhid* (chap. III and IV).

Studying Ibn al-Mubārak's biography poses some basic problems. Pretty little can be inferred from early biographical sources on this Khorasanian merchant, except that he was born in 119/737 in Marw, was trained as *muḥaddīṭ*, spent his life travelling in search of knowledge and alternating pilgrimage to jihād along the Arab-Byzantine frontier, where he died in 181/797.

However, starting as early as the beginning of the 11th century, this enigmatic traditionist stands out as a sort of “founding father” of *Ahl al-Sunna* and is also credited with a proto-Sufi attitude (see his biography in Abū Nu‘aym). In later sources, in fact, Ibn al-Mubārak, in the same way as other personalities and ascetic movements of the 8th century, is given a “certificat de Sunnisme avant la lettre” – to quote Jacqueline Chabbi's words in her study on ascetic and mystic movements in Khorasan (illuminating and usually ignored by American scholars).<sup>6</sup>

From this viewpoint, in Salem's book there are a few unanswered questions, starting from the explanation of the huge gap between the few lines on Ibn al-Mubārak we can read in Ibn Sa‘d (d. 230/845) and the many pages, rich in anecdotes and fully detailed narrations, we find in authors writing five or six centuries later.

In fact, as it is often the case with biographies and events related to the first two centuries of Islam, under the label of “classical sources” we find texts dating from 9th to 15th century, composed in very different historical conditions and resulting from diverse political-religious milieus. As it often happens, also in the case of Ibn al-Mubārak the biographic information and the hagiographic material exponentially increase with the chronologic distance from the object of the biography. As a consequence the bulk of the details of his life is provided not so much by the few lines of the *Ṭabaqāt* as by the many biographical pages in Abū Nu‘aym (d. 430/1038), al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī (d. 463/1071), or al-Dahabī

pp. 149-157 shifts the emphasis toward an interpretation of Ibn al-Mubārak's work less centered on military jihād.

6 Chabbi, Jacqueline, “Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurasan”, *StIs*, XLVI (1977): pp. 5-72.

(d. 748/1348). This does not mean denying *a priori* the authenticity of the biographical materials included in late collections. These trope-filled biographical accounts, however, should be critically examined, taking into account their inherent complexity and lack of homogeneity in order to better understand the reasons of the *appeal* that Ibn al-Mubārak had in many Sunni milieus.

*How, when and why* Ibn al-Mubārak becomes a “quintessential model” in the fields of *ḥadīth*, *zuhd*, and *jihād*<sup>7</sup> remain issues left on the sidelines of Salem’s study. The author considers such role more as a matter of fact than as a research topic and leans forward an interpretation of the sources considered as a whole, as expression of a community attitude in general, treating the diachronically uneven evidence as if it were part of an undifferentiated continuum.

There is no discussion of the issue whether his figure may (also) be seen as the result of the different overlapping biographical traditions which, without being necessarily false, surely reflect later needs for legitimization.

At the basis of this approach is an idea of source criticism as a “double-edged sword that reveals the biases of the present even as it attempts to expose the biases of the past”.<sup>8</sup> Although this is undeniably an ever-present risk, it is not less risky choosing to demonstrate “how the classical sources portray aspects of the life of Ibn al-Mubārak, without either rejecting information that cannot be factually disproven or unequivocally accepting the veracity of all that is reported about this early figure”.<sup>9</sup>

We have, therefore, the impression of a predominantly descriptive approach elaborating a large amount of biographical data, somewhat flattening them, in order to produce the most detailed and accurate biographical profile. It is a choice based on the firm belief that, anyway, “consistent praise of a figure in historical texts would indicate that he must have been regarded as a praiseworthy individual by the community in a general sense”,<sup>10</sup> and Salem sticks to this statement throughout her study, thus losing the opportunity to identify the specific groups constituting this large and generic “community” that in particular considered Ibn al-Mubārak as “a praiseworthy individual” or as a “figure of piety”.<sup>11</sup>

The same methodological choice is reflected in the reconstruction of Ibn al-Mubarak’s works, that the author divides into lost texts which are nonetheless mentioned in other works, known and published works, and texts in a

7 Salem, *The Emergence*: p. 2.

8 Salem, *The Emergence*: p. 8.

9 Ibid.

10 Salem, *The Emergence*: p. 69.

11 Salem, *The Emergence*: p. 89.

manuscript form awaiting publication. The fact that the *Kitāb al-jihād* is not mentioned in the *Fihrist*,<sup>12</sup> which attributes to Ibn al-Mubārak only the *Kitāb al-zuhd*, the *Kitāb al-birr wa 'l-ṣila*, a *tafsīr*, a collection of ḥadīṭ and a work on history, would have been required proper reflection and through discussion even by those believing in this attribution. Although the attribution of *Kitāb al-jihād* has not been debated so far (so did Bonner, followed by Cook, Afsaruddin and the author),<sup>3</sup> maybe the time has come to attentively consider several valid doubts Melchert raised in a recent article that<sup>13</sup> might reopen the debate on the *Kitāb al-jihād* and on Bonner's paradigm.

The same can be said on the *Kitāb al-arba'īna* included by Salem among the missing works by Ibn al-Mubārak, relying on the mention by Hajjī Ḥalīfa (d. 1068/1657) and al-Babānī (d. 1338/1920), an attribution she accepts without further explanation. Yet the fact that once more relatively late sources attribute him a founding role sounds interesting: his *Kitāb al-jihād* would be not only the first (extant) book devoted to the subject, but Ibn al-Mubārak would also be the first to write a “forty hadith” book. If this was true, we would probably have an important element to better understand an under-studied genre whose “invention” should be consequently backdated by half century at least, compared to the evidence provided by previous sources.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, Salem undoubtedly provides scholars of proto-Sufism and proto-Sunnism, as well as of the Late-Ancient world, with a useful instrument, rich in information. Deserving our gratitude, this study updates the bibliography on the subject, also including some studies by so far neglected Arab scholars, integrates the biographical sources making them available in English, and most importantly considers this central-Asian scholar from a wider perspective compared to previous literature on the subject. Scholarly production on Ibn al-Mubārak is not particularly rich. It is particularly regrettable, therefore, that Feryal Salem's book makes no reference to a study I published some years

12 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Raḥmāniyya, s.d.): I, p. 319.

13 Melchert, Christopher, “Ibn al-Mubārak's *Kitāb al-Jihād* and early renunciant literature”, in Gleave, Kristó-Nagy (eds.), *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'an to the Mongols*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015): pp. 49-69.

14 On the genre of forty ḥadīṭ see Davidson, Garrett, *Carrying on the Tradition: an Intellectual and Social History of Post-Canonical Hadīth Transmission*, (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, June 2014), pp. 234-54 and Mourad, Suleiman A. and Lindsay, James E., *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period. Ibn 'Asākir of Damascus (1105-1176) and His Age, with an Edition and Translation of Ibn 'Asākir's The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad*. (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2013): pp. 54-55.

ago, focused exactly on this same biographical tradition, examining it through very much same texts (although from a different perspective).<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, we can only be glad about the renewed attention scholars are paying to one of the most interesting figures of the VIII century, and grateful to Feryal Salem for providing a study that, at least in my opinion, while answering many questions, also leaves many other ones open to future studies.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Denaro, Roberta, "From Marw to the *tujūr*: Ibn al-Mubārak and the shaping of a biographical tradition", *Eurasian Studies*, VII/1-2 (2009): pp. 125-44.

