

# Chapter 1

## Origins, Foundations and Rivalries (850–1100)

### The Context

The place is Baghdad and the year is around 850. It is over eight hundred miles of desert from where the Prophet announced his revelation in Mecca and more than two hundred years since he died. Although the word *sufi* (“wool-wearer”) has been around for many years as a nickname or even a reproach for the hermits of the surrounding wilderness, for the first time it is being used to refer to people in the city itself. And unlike the obscure and self-effacing renouncers in the mountains and desert, these men in the city not only wrote books telling others how to behave, but also achieved enough prominence in the eyes of their contemporaries and successors to have their books discussed and preserved. In one of the familiar paradoxes of religious history, the sheer fact that we know about these men tells us that they were not reclusive or anti-social figures who kept themselves apart from the world, but public men with public lives in perhaps the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city in the world. By the mid-ninth century, eight generations of fathers and sons have lived since Muhammad established his community of Muslims and in its third capital the pious and the scholarly among the heirs of that foundational community were more conscious than ever of the responsibilities of preserving the Prophet’s message in his absence. It is a time of unprecedented productivity, legal and moral, spiritual and intellectual; from the legacy of the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims, the many meanings of Islam are being created (and debated and sometimes suppressed). Over the past generation, the learned have found a new medium to publicize and exchange their ideas, for the city’s great trade routes have brought paper from China to replace parchment and papyrus. Many books

are being written (and copied and sold); new ideas are finding supporters and detractors; and Islam itself is acquiring the meanings, variations and institutions that later generations will inherit and push back into the lifetime of the Prophet or the words of the Quran he revealed. If the paper trail left by the early Sufis does not take the historian beyond this early ninth century period, then the same can be said for the codification of such other key Islamic institutions as the Law (*shari'a*) and the Prophetic Example (*sunna*). The small group of people being called Sufis in Baghdad by around 850 were not wholly separate in their concerns from the men who thought through the implications of legal principle or sought ways of distinguishing true from false reports of the Prophet's words and deeds. While in later times and other places, to be called a Sufi might mean many different things, here where the term first caught on, it signified individuals who were especially scrupulous in their behavior and piety. Such was their devotion to God, and their distaste for the pleasures of the world, that at first literally and over time metaphorically they donned the hot, coarse and stinking garments of wool that lent them their name: the Sufis or "wool-wearers."

In view of the fact that since the middle of the nineteenth century, academics have sought "origins" of Sufism in the period prior to that outlined above, it is worth reiterating just exactly what we do (and do not) have in Baghdad by the middle of the ninth century when the earliest reliable data on the Sufis emerged. What we have is primarily a nickname or designator (*sufi*) being applied to certain people in the Baghdad region (some of whom left written records) and, as we will see below, arguably also far beyond Baghdad (who left no written records). But what we do not have yet is a Sufi movement, a characteristic set of doctrines and still less a tradition, all of which would develop only later. For this reason, it makes little sense to speak of "Sufism" as though such an entity had any meaningful existence at this time. Rather, we can say that by the mid-800s there were people being called Sufis whose teachings would gradually (and, moreover, retrospectively) be sifted and appropriated in the following generations as growing numbers of people came to call themselves Sufis and to formulate rituals, doctrines and dress to distinguish themselves from others and to construct a self-conscious historical pedigree to give weight to their truth claims. By maintaining this distinction between the label and the person, between the word and the referent, we will also be better equipped to navigate the first of the historical problems we need to address: the origins of Sufism.

## The Problem of Sufi Origins

It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that more academic ink has been spilt over the origins of the Sufis than over any other question in Sufi history.

Yet the importance of the question is relative rather than absolute, in that it depends on the model of historical process we bring to bear on our understanding of the past. The longstanding scholarly focus on “origins” developed out of a perspective in which historical process was seen as necessarily vertical, that is, as a set of “inheritances” and “influences” that acted on and were received by each passing generation so as to give cumulative shape to their thoughts, actions and creations. This model was particularly influential in the development of the fields of Religious Studies and Oriental Studies during the nineteenth century in which, under the influence of the new archaeological and textual discoveries concerning early Christian and Jewish history, the practice of the secular investigation of any religious history became an “archaeological” one of stripping away the accumulating strata of influence and inheritance to unearth, as it were, the “foundations” of any historical entity. But historical process is not merely (nor even mainly) a vertical one and with a century of sociological thinking behind us we are now more likely to think in terms of history being made within the horizontal stratum we recognize as “context” and “contemporaries” in which the past is received less as an irresistible agent than as a set of cultural resources to be continued, adapted or abandoned at will. As we will see below in our discussion of the written evidence of the early Sufis themselves, they were very deliberate in their attitudes towards the past of both their own Muslim community and the communities of non-Muslim peoples in their empire.

For this and for other reasons, the Sufis and their writings are best understood as products of their own “horizontal” time. This is not to say that the distinct practices, ideas or even terms the Sufis used did not originate before the ninth century. On the contrary, in the cosmopolitan society of Iraq and the many different contexts in which the Sufis later operated, the ability to make such selective adaptations from the past was one of the factors which lent the Sufis their attractiveness. But to adapt discrete cultural elements is not to surrender the integrity of the final production. Just as early Muslim jurists appear to have borrowed elements of Late Roman provincial law in constructing their own legal systems, and Muslim Kharijites wrote themselves into narrative paradigms of pious violence or martyrdom first embellished in the Byzantine Empire, so do certain early Sufis appear to have likewise adapted elements of Christian thought and practice for their own purposes.<sup>1</sup> But unless we are working on the theological rather than historical criterion that everything that is Islamic must come from the Quran, then such critical and selective adaptations need not render the final creations any less a product of the cosmopolitan Muslim circles of ninth century Iraq. Rather than thinking in terms of “adaptations” or “borrowings,” we may be better off seeing the parallels as part of what has been described as a “semiotic *koinê*” that was common to Muslims, Christians and Jews in the early centuries of Islamic rule.<sup>2</sup>

A good example of this shared symbolic (and indeed linguistic) vocabulary is seen in the term *sufi* itself. Despite a range of alternative purported etymologies (including the Greek *sophia*, “wisdom”), the term has now been generally accepted as a derivative of the Arabic word for wool (*suf*), so as we have seen rendering a *sufi* someone who wears a woolen garment. The most thorough investigator of the history of the term has argued that it was first used in a Christian rather than an Islamic milieu to refer to a deviating trend that emerged in the late sixth century among the Nestorian Christians of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, around twenty miles south of where Baghdad would be founded in 762.<sup>3</sup> While the official language of the Nestorian Church was Syriac, over the decades after the Arab conquests of the region in the years after the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, many Nestorians lost their ability to understand Syriac and so required Church edicts to be made in Arabic. It was this Arabic Christian vernacular that spread the terms *labis al-suf* (“clad in wool”) and in turn *sufi* to refer to a particular group of Christian ascetics in Iraq, with whom early Muslim ascetics shared both word and practice as “an identification with a humble, lowly status and a recognition of values other than material.”<sup>4</sup>

The weakness in the argument is that key parts of the evidence are either hypothetical, dependent on reconstructed theoretical word usages, or reliant on purported early usages recorded only in later source materials. But there are also larger problems with the argument as well. Firstly, there is the question of the degree of importance we are willing to lend to a name and the sub-question of whether that name and its “original” etymological meaning had a direct or arbitrary relationship to the persons, ideas or activities to which it came to refer in later Muslim contexts. In a classic study of seventy-eight early Muslim definitions of the terms *sufi* and its derivative *tasawwuf* (“to wear wool” or “to become a Sufi”), only one was found that referred to the wearing of wool and few others that referred to ascetic practices more generally, with the vast majority defining the terms by way of moral values and ethical dispositions.<sup>5</sup> This evidence appears to break the link between the Muslim and purported Christian meanings of the word *sufi* so as to suggest that in the different contexts of its usage the “things” to which the word referred were quite distinct. But the problem here too is that while these seventy-eight definitions are attributed to early ninth century figures, they only survive as quotations in much later sources. Again, we are faced with the problem that the further we go back beyond the great explosion of literary production in the ninth century, the sources either become indirect or dry up entirely: we are left with either late quotations from early figures or hypothetical reconstructions of earlier speech patterns.

Secondly, to look beyond the issue of language, there is the more substantive problem of whether there was a Muslim adaptation of Christian practices as well as words and the sub-question of whether that adaptation

shaped the actual activities of those Muslims being called *sufi* in the ninth century. Here it is worth returning to the model of a semiotic and in some cases linguistic vocabulary that Muslims and Christians shared rather than exclusively owned. It is important here that we consider the context, in that during the first couple of centuries of Islamic history, the environment in which Muslims lived in such regions as Syria, Iraq and Egypt was one in which they were outnumbered by Christians. More thoroughly Christianized than even Western Europe at this time, the Middle Eastern Fertile Crescent was a landscape of churches, monasteries and saintly shrines. These sites and their occupants were not only given legal protection by the new Muslim empires, but were also in various ways co-opted by their Muslim rulers. Tombs of Christian saints and prophets were recognized as Muslim pilgrimage centers; monasteries served Muslims as wine-serving country clubs for poets and as libraries for literati; and Christian scholars helped translate into Arabic the heritage of Graeco-Roman thought that had been selectively preserved by the Christians' forefathers.<sup>6</sup> There is therefore no question of the variety of Muslim interaction with Christians, at least for the period up to around 850.

It has long been recognized that the wearing of wool points to similarities with the ascetic activities of the Eastern Christians, particularly in Syria, where between 661 and 750 the Muslims had kept their capital at Damascus before the shift to Iraq with the ascent of the 'Abbasid dynasty. Reacting to nineteenth century fashions for seeking the origins of the Sufis in Indian thought, scholars in the 1930s uncovered detailed evidence on the similarities between Christian and Muslim "ascetics" and it was argued that this



**Figure 1.1** Ascetic Lifeways: Wooden and Coco-de-Mer Begging Bowls (*kashkul*) (Image: Nile Green)

common ascetic heritage prepared the way for the Sufis' development into fully-fledged "mystics" more concerned with experience and knowledge than with punishing the body.<sup>7</sup> This placing of the early Muslims into their pluralistic contexts has also been seen in the more recent trend towards seeing both early Christian and Muslim developments within their shared social setting. In its simplest form, the method has been to place evidence on Christian and Muslim activities side by side, to point to similarities and wherever possible evidence of direct contact between them, and to use this as evidence for the influence of the Christians on the Muslims, pointing to such similarities as prayer patterns, sayings and attitudes as well as clothing.<sup>8</sup> But here the debate on origins moves in two directions whose different implications need to be carefully separated. For scholars writing in the 1930s, in both the Muslim and Christian case the isolation and self-mortification of asceticism was a natural (indeed, universal) cradle for the development of "mysticism." The latter was regarded in turn as a universal urge aimed at "a knowledge of Ultimate reality, and finally at the establishment of a conscious relation with the Absolute, in which the soul shall attain to union with God."<sup>9</sup> In other words, this interpretation presents a developmental model of history in which asceticism is not an end in itself but must mature and blossom into mysticism, which is what the author cited the Sufis as being involved with. This collapsing of the differences (and, indeed, the potential antagonism) between the two categories of ascetic and mystic affords a somewhat conflict-free narrative. The early Muslim ascetics who had been influenced by the practices of their Christian neighbors are thus seen as feeding seamlessly into the rise of the Sufis who, in developing the more complex metaphysical models of human and divine interaction that "mysticism" required, once again needed to borrow from the Christians, who, having been around longer, were ahead of the Muslims on the same universal scale of spiritual development.

The problem is that when we look at the evidence on the Muslim side, this early progress from asceticism to mysticism does not seem so straightforward. So rather than seeing the Muslim ascetics as the natural forebears of the Sufis, we may be better off seeing them as their competitors. In recent decades, closer investigation into the discussions that surrounded early Muslim "asceticism" (*zuhd*) has cast serious doubt on this notion of a seamless flow between the *zabid* "ascetic" and the *sufi* "mystic" by showing the degree to which self-mortification, seclusion and above all celibacy were denounced as deviations from the *sunna* or Prophetic Example.<sup>10</sup> As we will see when we deal with the earliest clear evidence of the opinions of the people called Sufis, many of them were forthright in condemning ascetic practices as unnecessarily public displays of what amounted to false piety. (Given the popular acclaim that many Late Antique ascetics gained, the ironic implication was that ascetics were actually egotistic careerists.) To put the matter

more plainly, even if Muslim ascetics did copy the style of Christian ascetics, this does not necessarily point towards a Christian “origin” for the Sufis, because far from being the direct heirs of the ascetics, the Sufis may be better understood as their rivals and critics. *Zahid* “ascetics” did not maturely blossom into Sufi “mystics”: instead the voices of the *zuhhad* were muted by the more successful Sufis’ marginalization and eventual replacement of them.

So far we have questioned the significance of the similarities in designations and practices between the Christian ascetics and the Muslim Sufis. The main problem with such searches for traces has been that while there exists plenty of evidence for similarities and even contacts between Muslims and Christians, there exists hardly any direct evidence for the actual “borrowing” that is meant to have underlain the similarities. One could argue that this is not surprising, since being well aware of the richer development of Christian thought and practice in the early centuries of Islam, Muslims were hardly likely to have publicized their need to adapt ideas and techniques from a religion which their own had supposedly superseded. The same might be said for evidence for the flow of the more subtle traffic of metaphysical doctrines and biographical narratives. It is in this most nebulous of areas that an alternative method was proposed for assessing potential Christian influence, which was not to seek the recurrence of the isolated motif or word-borrowing but the more complex – and thereby less likely to be random – reproduction of a “pattern, configuration or structure.”<sup>11</sup> Through a form of historical structuralism, it has been argued that the Sufi debt to Nestorian Christianity could thereby be traced through the repetition of doctrinal or biographical patterns found first in Christian works and later in Sufi writings.<sup>12</sup> One example is the writings of the seventh century Iraqi Christian, Isaac of Nineveh, whose threefold model of the soul’s ascent through a series of triad clusters of activities and virtues has been interpreted as reappearing in later Sufi elaborations of their own path.<sup>13</sup> As an attempt to bridge the impasse between merely documenting similarities and deciding between which were coincidental and which were evidence of direct adaptation, this method of historical structuralism claims to identify the recurrence of complex patterns too intricate to recur without direct transmission. The fullest exercise in this vein has been carried out on the biographical accounts of Rabi‘a (d.801), the celebrated female Muslim ascetic of Basra in southern Iraq whom the Sufis would claim as one of their forerunners, and here the method has shown with some success how the Muslim legends of Rabi‘a drew on older Christian narratives of penitent prostitutes.<sup>14</sup> But even if we accept that certain configurations of ideas were transmitted, ultimately we are left with no clearer understanding of how this happened and for historians this need for a clear explanation of how something happened is as important as the evidence that it did. As in the older type of intellectual history that once dominated the study of Sufism, without an understanding of

process we are presented with texts which are supposedly connected, but with no sense of the readers who are meant to have connected them. Even if such direct structural parallels can be detected, again this can be just as efficiently explained as being the result of a shared horizontal symbolic imaginary – a “semiotic *koinê*” – than as being the result of the one-way traffic of Muslims “borrowing” from Christians.

If modern scholarship seems to offer no clear picture of Sufi origins, the question arises as to whether the Sufis’ own account is any better? Over time the Sufis certainly became very interested in their own past and in their construction of a tradition furnished all manner of biographical stories about their forebears, stretching right back to connect their teachings with the Prophet. As we will see in more detail below, the problem is that the chief sources on these forebears date from much later (in many cases, several centuries later) than their own lifetimes. As in the case of Rabi’a, the biographies of such other purported Sufi forerunners as the Central Asians Ibrahim ibn Adham (d.777), Fudayl ibn ‘Iyad (d.803) and Bishr ibn al-Harith (d.841) and the Egyptian Dhu’l-Nun (d.861) became enmeshed with tropes and motifs that drew on folklore as much as fact.<sup>15</sup> As we will see in Chapter 2 when we come to discuss the biographical collections in which the supposed careers of those forerunners were recorded, the retrospective claiming of such a neat chain of forerunners tells us more about the textual consolidation of tradition in the eleventh century than it does about the lives and circumstances of the earliest Sufis three hundred years beforehand. As we have already seen, in the middle 800s there was as yet no Sufi tradition, nor even a coherent movement, merely a group of often quite distinct individuals being nicknamed Sufis. The point is therefore not so much whether men such as Ibrahim ibn Adham existed, nor even whether they were part of an earlier trend towards asceticism. It is rather a question of, first, whether they can be seen as having constituted in any way a coherent group over such vast distances and, second, whether they can be seen as having constituted a trend or trajectory that the Sufis inherited rather than suppressed.

In historicist terms, these problems concerning the origins of the Sufis are therefore magnified by an emphasis on the vertical transmission of cause and influence, which stresses the inheritance of ideas over their rejection and the transformation of movements over their suppression. The fact of the matter is that, as in the early history of Christianity, the first centuries of Islam were a period of intense competition between producers of often radically contrasting versions of the faith in which patterns of political allegiance, economic activity, everyday etiquette and legal restraint were subjects of intensive and at times violent debate. Rather than search for a neat and multi-generational transformation from asceticism to mysticism that has long characterized the study of early Sufi history, by looking at each stratum of time in its own right



we can see the discontinuities and differences that allow us to assess whether the ideas and actions of the previous generation were perpetuated or rejected.

Let us take the ascetic *zuhhad* as a case in point. Following the later biographies written by the Sufis themselves, historians have traditionally taken the *zuhhad* to have been “Sufis-in-waiting.” But by putting the ascetics into the circumstances of their own time, we can see how they served very different purposes and sought very different goals from the Sufis who emerged in later centuries. The eighth century heyday of the *zuhhad* was a period in which Muslims were still a minority group in their own imperial domains and in which the consolidation of their conquests left frontier regions under the perpetual threat of re-conquest.<sup>16</sup> It was in these border regions that many *zuhhad* ascetics such as Ibrahim ibn Adham flourished, serving in frontier wars in which their religious devotion and robust asceticism brought them not only success in battle but the renown that would pass on their names to future generations. Seen in the harsh realities of their time, such ascetics were less timeless seekers of God than Muslim equivalents to the hardy Byzantine devotees of the Christian warrior saints whose shrines protected the other side of the same imperial frontiers.<sup>17</sup> Operating as they did in these contested cultural borderlands, in terms of their narratives no less than their actions, the militant Muslim ascetics were shaped by a trans-religious value system that they shared with the Christian militant ascetics of the period.<sup>18</sup> Once again, we may be dealing less with a question of Muslim “borrowings” from Christians than with a shared cultural arena and geographical area in which Muslims and Christians competed with one another within a set of overlapping frameworks, whether narrative, moral or metaphysical.

Of course, not all of the early Muslim *zuhhad* ascetics were frontier warriors and many of them probably did spend more time conversing with than fighting with Christians. But what becomes clear by looking at these figures in their own troubled times is that the Muslim ascetics of the eighth century were not only more complicated figures than the teleological role of the “proto-mystic” would make them: they were also plainly distinct figures with quite different social roles and moral agendas from the people who from the mid-ninth century would be called Sufis in the more peaceable cities of Iraq rather than the frontiers in Syria or Central Asia. As the subsequent historical writings of the Sufis themselves show, in which the Sufis sought to present the earlier ascetics as their own forebears, the search for antecedents often tells us more about the quest for legitimacy than the processes by which ideas and movements take shape.<sup>19</sup> Rather than attempt to trace the developments of one period in the quite distinct circumstances of its predecessors, let us instead remain in the “horizontal” period and circumstances in which a small number of Muslims acquired the nickname Sufi and see if we can do better explaining their origin in their own stratum of time rather than in those that preceded them.

### The Sufis of Iraq (800–900)

By the early ninth century, asceticism was falling into widespread dispute among the urban scholars who were becoming an increasingly important voice in Muslim society. This was a period in which the early Islamic model of a community led by a single figure belonging to the family of Muhammad (alternatively a caliph or an imam) was being replaced by new notions of authority whose different formulations lent varying weight to reason and piety, mastery of the scriptures and charismatic closeness to God. Taking their lead from their readings of Graeco-Roman philosophy in the championing of reason, the Muslim philosophers called *falasifa* in imitation of the Greek and the rationalist theologians called Mu'tazilites were particularly influential in Baghdad in the ninth century.<sup>20</sup> In the early decades of the century, the rationalist party was sufficiently influential in its championing of reason over revelation to persuade the leader of the Muslim empire, the Caliph al-Ma'mun (r.813–833), to initiate an "inquisition" or *mihna* which for eighteen years sought to enforce the doctrine that the Quran was not a pre-eternal text but was created in the contextual time of history.<sup>21</sup> On the other side of the debate were various scholars who sought to uphold the authority of revelation, not least because it seemed to offer firmer (as it were constitutional) grounds for law-making, which struck many as less amenable than reason to manipulation by the ruling class. They objected in particular to the Caliph al-Ma'mun's claims to authoritative insight into the meaning of scripture. In addition to defending the status of the Quran, these scholars were also concerned with upholding – indeed, with raising in prominence – the thousands of reports of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad known as the Hadith. It was amidst these debates, naturally converging in Baghdad as the capital of empire of the 'Abbasid caliphs, that there began to emerge what we now know of as Sunni Islam. Based on the premise that Muslims constitute a moral rather than a political community united by their commitment to the message of the Quran and the Example or *summa* of the Prophet as recorded in the Hadith, this "constitutional bloc" nonetheless maintained a special place for the '*ulama* ("men of learning") who had the textual expertise to decide on what the message of the Quran and Hadith actually was.<sup>22</sup> On the other side were those who remained loyal to the older Muslim notion of authority and religious knowledge being vested in a single person and, though their ideas too took many decades to develop, they kept their old nickname of the "partisans" or Shi'a of their first leader, the Prophet's son-in-law, 'Ali. Two centuries after the Prophet left the community of Muslims he had founded, these debates were attempts to work with the resources he bequeathed to that community, by way of his revelation through the Quran, his example through the Hadith, and his family through the descendents of 'Ali.

This context of contentious debates and cultural resources is important because it prevents us from falling prey to the notion that as “mystics” the Sufis were primarily people who sought a direct relationship with God and thereby had little need for the guidance of scripture and Prophetic Example. It will also prevent us from assuming that the Sufis were from their inception in a position of rivalry with the scholars or *‘ulama*.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, from the earliest records we have of them, the Sufis appear as deeply involved with the scriptural and exemplary legacy of the Prophet and it is this very “bookishness” that allows us to write their history. Given that in this period much of these figures’ dealings with the Quran and Hadith were through oral memorization rather than regular resort to written codices, the term “discursiveness” would be more accurate than “bookishness,” but the overall point remains that the Sufis and *‘ulama* were likewise invested in the discourses of oral and written texts, with the Sufis debating the degree to which experience shed light on the true meanings of these texts.<sup>24</sup> There were probably many people in this period who had direct encounters with God that had nothing to do with scripture and there were certainly those among the early Sufis who claimed that their experiential pursuit of *tahqiq* (“realization, verification”) rendered their knowledge claims superior to those relying solely on scripture. But with one major exception whom we will meet in the next section, for the most part we know very little about such people because they were either not members of the text-producing class or were unable to win the support of those who were.

In situating the earliest Sufis in their own “horizontal” time, then, we need to recognize their emergence as belonging to the development of a wider scholar class that was not only equipped with knowledge of Quran, Hadith and the specialist skills of interpreting them, but was also gaining increasing social authority by dint of both possessing such textual or discursive knowledge and putting its righteous example into practice. Living in the major towns, these were not the reclusive ascetics of the mountains or frontiers. Nor did they occupy ivory towers in the city itself, because the knowledge of right and wrong and the ability to persuade others to agree through either personal moral authority or legal decree had deeply practical implications. While there would be exceptions, the general rule would remain through future centuries that whether as lawyers, poets, metaphysicians or moralists, successful Sufis were rarely far from pen and paper or from the Hadith and Quran that laid the foundations of Muslim learning. And yet the early Sufis were not only men of the pen and their claims to experiential knowledge should be seen as placing them not wholly distinctly from the emergent scholarly class but as a special sub- or even splinter group with much in common with the scholars but with an additional claim to the authority of direct contact with the divine realms.

If the Quran and the Hadith were resources for the people being called Sufis, then how did they make use of these resources in the creation of their

own doctrines and practices and in making sense of their experiences? In brief, they internalized and externalized them: they internalized the Quran by committing its every verse to their memory and they externalized the Hadith by enacting its moral examples in their behavior.<sup>25</sup> Crucially, they also adopted the Quran's vocabulary to create a scripturally-sanctioned terminology for the spiritual exercises and forms of experience that they added to the religious repertoire of other members of the scholarly class. This was therefore not a passive form of knowledge and if we have emphasized the Sufis' relationship with books, then we must be clear about their way of using them: books were tools for contemplation on the one hand and for action on the other.<sup>26</sup> While we have noted that, with the arrival of paper, far more books were being produced in Baghdad than had ever been the case in the western hemisphere, they were still handwritten and valuable objects. These material factors fed into the culture of reading that developed around them, albeit with the proviso that religious texts took longer to be committed to paper than such secular texts as poems, scientific works and cookbooks. As in other manuscript societies in which book-use existed within a larger framework of oral forms of learning, books were read deeply and repeatedly, a process sometimes compounded by the requirement of either writing out one's own copy of a text or wholeheartedly memorizing it in order to acquire it. While scholars were literate themselves, some of their followers were not and so books were listened to as often as they were read. Rather than marking a page with a highlighter, such auditory readers were in the habit of storing and absorbing their contents mentally. As we will see later, this culture of reading books aloud even affected the shape of their contents, so that a few centuries later most Sufi books contained the kind of anecdotal stories or key points in rhyme that could easily be remembered by their listeners. But before the Sufis took to writing their own books, they were reading the Quran and Hadith in this active and internalizing mode, like other learned men of their period.

This sense of reading as an active engagement with the scripture enables us to tackle another of the key debates around the origins of Sufism. Often seen as the "internalist" counterpart to the "externalist" accounts of Sufi origins in Christian or other non-Muslim influences, the idea that Sufism originated in the Quran has found its greatest proponents among Francophone and more recently American scholars.<sup>27</sup> Tracing the origins of the technical vocabulary or Sufi lexicon that the first generations of Sufis developed in their writings has demonstrated that this was overwhelmingly a vocabulary of Quranic origin. This has in turn been used to argue that Sufism was a consistent and coherent "internal" product of Islam rather than the result of outside influence.<sup>28</sup> Of course, the argument has some basic flaws that relate to the distinction made earlier between words and things: just because Sufis chose to label their practices or doctrines with Quranic terms does not necessarily imply that the actual practices or doctrines themselves came from

the Quran. Critics of the theory have used what they see as the dry, sectarian or narrative tone of the Quran to argue that even on its own evidence, the Quran cannot have been the source for the doctrines of the Sufis: “the [Quranic] text is noteworthy for its rigour and severity, and the mystics of Islam have had to work hard to produce inner meanings which reflect personal communion with God.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet the answer to the problem may lie in the very words of its critique: the Sufis did indeed have to work hard on the text, for this contemplative and active engagement with its meaning was precisely how they treated scripture. Rather than phrase the debate around what we as later readers may see in the Quran (“rigour and severity”), and demand that the text itself in some way possess agency to create doctrines and movements in the outside world, we are better off shifting our perspective towards asking what the early Sufis themselves saw in the Quran and to ask how their active modes reading produced meanings through the creative interaction between their own life circumstances and the text. So the question becomes not whether Sufism “originated” in the Quran in the passive sense of the verb, but whether the Sufis of the ninth century used the Quran as a resource to understand the world around them and to create ways of morally, intellectually and practically interacting with it.<sup>30</sup> There is nothing wrong with asking whether the Sufis made their ideas originate from the holy book, since this is precisely



**Figure 1.2** Contemplating the Quran: Folio of Sura 2.119 from Ninth Century Iraq (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchas, F194217, F1937.6.7b)

how scriptures are read. The Hadith was used in similar ways, with different groups using the many thousands of often contradictory reports of the Prophet's words or deeds to defend or criticize their own and others' actions. Like the Quran, the Hadith was not an "agent" or necessarily even a "source" of religious movements in its own right, but rather a resource which like their other contemporaries the Sufis deployed in the elaboration and defense of their teachings. Finally, the Quran also found use among the Sufis as a source of the chanted phrases that made up the Sufi practice of chanted "remembrance of God" or *dhikr* (a term itself taken from the Quran). In such contexts, its words functioned not so much as purveyors of linguistic meaning than as sonic provokers of altered states.

In this way, we can see how the early Sufis used the distinct discursive resources of the past (scripture and the Prophetic Example) to create their own "way" and to root it in the legitimate sources of authority which were recognized by their contemporaries. Words have histories and so change meaning over time, and in the different times and places in which they are read, the preserved words of scripture are used to point to different referents in the world than those to which they pointed in the time and place in which the scripture was written. So in the Baghdad of the middle 800s, the Quran was used as a lexical source for a terminology which had different meanings and referred to different activities, virtues and emotions than it did for the Muslim readers of earlier generations. Since the Iraq of this period was a far more complex and cosmopolitan society than the Arabia in which the Quran had taken shape, the actions and ideas to which its vocabulary was attached at that later time were necessarily different. Given the day-to-day cultural exchanges that went on in ninth century Iraq, it would be surprising if some of the actions or ideas to which the Quran's words were attached were not adapted from the many non-Muslims of the region. This is the way scripture operates. When a modern American Christian responds to the Biblical recommendation of charity by writing a check, she is not being any less Christian because such banking procedures were invented in the Dutch Republic rather than Roman Palestine. Ultimately, then, the problem of whether Sufism originated in the Quran or in Christian borrowings is a false one that simplifies the way in which scripture was read and religious ideas and actions were produced.

Among the circles of specialist interpreters of the Quran and Hadith, the early Sufis were closer to the trend defending revelation and tradition over reason. Far from being rule-breaking libertines or spirit-filled radicals, we should probably picture them as a broadly conservative crowd. Instead of fleeing from society like the earlier ascetics, they were often fierce upholders of the emerging moral and legal order. Like the nascent Sunni movement in which they participated, they followed the Quranic injunction to "command the good and forbid the wrong" (*al-amr bi-al-ma'ruf wa-al-nahy 'an al-*

*munkar*), even if this upset those who didn't wish to be tirelessly moral.<sup>31</sup> Like many of the other major Muslim thinkers of the period, the early Sufis were as much concerned with humanity's proper actions and attitudes in the social world than with humanity's knowledge of and interaction with what lay beyond it.

Perhaps the most important – certainly the best known – among these figures who rejected the showiness (*riya*) of the ascetics in favor of the mastery of the moral rather than the physical self was Muhasibi of Baghdad (d.857).<sup>32</sup> A case has been made that Muhasibi could not have been a Sufi because he was a moralizing theologian rather than a mystic, and indeed in his extant writings he never referred to himself as a Sufi.<sup>33</sup> However, this is to overlook both the context of strong concerns for visible (if not ostentatious) righteousness in which the Sufis emerged and from which they drew sustenance. Muhasibi was also important in terms of providing intellectual resources for the construction of Sufi tradition, for the Sufis of subsequent generations would claim Muhasibi as one of their own. This was a crucially important part of the process we are tracing of the development of a Sufi “tradition” that was at times a retrospective act of claiming prestigious persons and respectable or otherwise useful ideas. For these purposes, Muhasibi was important for developing the key idea and practice that would gradually set the Sufis apart from the other pietists among whom we have positioned them. This practice – which lent him his name as the “self reckoner” (*muhasibi*) – was the scrupulous inspection of the lower, carnal self that the Quran referred to as the *nafs* (note the resort to Quranic vocabulary).<sup>34</sup> Here in discursive as well as practical terms was the “inward turn” that set Sufis apart from their more externally demonstrative rivals, whether the ascetic *zuhhad* or the moralizing People of the Hadith. As we will now see as we turn towards the teachings of the early Sufis proper, it was this creation of a convincing framework for understanding the self and of effective methods for exploring it that brought the Sufis the fame and following that over the following generations was to spread their new method far and wide. Since the doctrines of the Baghdad Sufis of the ninth and tenth century would form the foundations of subsequent Sufi tradition, the following pages trace these doctrines in some detail, since the key concepts and the Arabic vocabulary to which they were attached would later be transmitted to Sufis as far away as the oases of the Sahara and the spice islands of the Indian Ocean.

### **Kharraz of Baghdad (d.899)**

By the middle of the ninth century, in Baghdad as well as in Basra to the south, there were a good many people being called Sufis. But in terms of both

contemporary fame and posthumous emulation, one of the most important was Abu Sa'īd, known as al-Kharraz ("the cobbler").<sup>35</sup> We know very little with certainty about the life of Kharraz, except that he travelled widely, visiting not only the holy cities of Jerusalem and Mecca (where he remained for eleven years), but also Egypt and the city of Kairouan in what is now Tunisia. His name tells us that at least at some point in his life he worked as a cobbler, pointing towards the urban artisanal milieu that we will see recurring among other early Sufis. But for the most part, we have very little biographical data to work with and so the only kind of contextualization possible with Kharraz and similar figures of the period is a discursive one, placing his ideas and writings among the wider patterns of debate and book production we have seen going on in Baghdad at this time, albeit bearing in mind that we are still in a period when such "books" consisted of something more like manuscript notes than formally arranged codices. Kharraz's main work was the *Kitab al-Sidq* (Book of Truthfulness), which seems to have been composed for a broader scholarly than a narrowly sectarian readership, though he also penned a number of shorter treatises or *risalas* devoted to more specific and complex questions and probably intended for a smaller and more like-minded readership.

Given the tendency of many accounts of Sufi thought to strip away the cultural shell in search of the mystical kernel, it is worth first pointing out the distinctively Islamic character of Kharraz's writings. As in countless other Sufi works of future generations, Kharraz proved his points by presenting supporting quotations from earlier Muslim authorities, whether from the Quran and Hadith or from the scholars and ascetics of the previous two centuries, so using the past that we have already described as a resource for such writers to draw on. Although there was not yet a distinctly Sufi tradition to draw on – the writings of Kharraz's generation would themselves serve as the earliest resources for such a distinct tradition to be created over the next few generations – there was already an abundant Islamic tradition to draw on in support of one's ideas. Recognizing this Islamic, discursive context is important because it prevents us from falling too easily into line with older tendencies in understanding the early Sufis as mystics in search of raw experience. On the one hand, keeping in mind the Islamic content of Kharraz's writings prevents us from too easily stripping away what were to Kharraz and his readers the Islamic foundations of his teachings to present his work as a naked structure of ideas in order to make possible the claim that "his work reads very much like the [Christian] treatises of Isaac of Nineveh."<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, recognizing the intertextual process by which Kharraz and other Sufis constructed their own texts by drawing on (and in some cases, as we will see later, by baldly plagiarizing) authoritative earlier texts, we can avoid the assumption that as "mystics" the Sufis constructed their writings primarily from the raw material of their own



transcendental experiences. For, experience was interpreted and gained its meanings through resort to the vocabulary and concepts developed through the Sufis' active reading of Quran and Hadith, such that experience and text formed part of a creative continuum.

Yet the concern for defending the authority of collective Islamic tradition over individual experiential charisma is seen in many of Kharraz's works, which far from overriding the basic requirements of Muslim ritual included an earlier book devoted to the proper performance of formal worship. By the same token, Kharraz defended the authority of the Prophets (who were dead) over that of the self-proclaimed *awliya allah* or "Friends of God" (many of whom were living). We will speak more of these mysterious but key figures later, but for now the point is to recognize Kharraz's traditionism and conformism. While drawing on and positioning himself within this normative background, Kharraz did make important contributions to the development of what would soon become the distinct proprietary method of the Sufis. In the *Kitab al-Sidq*, he outlined a series of moral attributes that the sincere Muslim must acquire if (in the words of the Quran as cited by Kharraz) he "hopes to meet his Lord."<sup>37</sup> Kharraz's concern with "truthfulness" (*sidq*) was an echo of the critique of ostentatious asceticism we have already seen emerging and as he recorded it himself his aim was to show truthfulness as at once a "theoretical knowledge" (*ilm*) and a "practical science" (*fiqh*), both of these designations conceived within the framework of Islamic categories that were emerging at this time among Muslim scholars of all persuasions, including the law-makers.<sup>38</sup>

Although we are now more used to speaking in terms of "spiritual development," we are perhaps better off thinking of the principles Kharraz outlined as moral conditions, in that to speak of "spiritual" development in the absence of action in the world would be to misconstrue the whole tenor of his message in which spiritual development was meaningless if not accompanied by good action. Outward action and inward intention must be harmonized with one another and scrupulous truthfulness helps ensure that this is the case. But this was only the beginning of the matter and the *Kitab al-Sidq* was dedicated to expounding the subtle implications and nuances of the pursuit and mastery of this guiding principle. In doing so, Kharraz used what would become the central metaphor of Sufi doctrine: that the Sufi method can be understood as a "Path" (*tariqa*) that guides one safely on the journey towards the state of harmony with God that is Islam. Like any other long journey, along the way the traveler passes through a variety of "places" (*maqamat*, sometimes translated as "stations"). And so in order to become truthful – in intention as well as action – one must travel through many such metaphorical "places" in which the different aspects of truthfulness may be acquired: repentance, self-knowledge and self-control; knowledge of the wiles of Satan; knowledge of what is lawful and forbidden; abstinence; trust in God; godfearingness; shame; gratitude towards the creator; boundless love

of one's lord; fatalism; longing for God; and finally the place of intimacy with God.

The metaphor of the path was important because, as on any journey, no place can be reached without first passing through the previous places along the road. This method of delineating such "places" on the path towards intimacy with God would become one of the classic characteristics of Sufi writing and, we must presume, proof of possessing the kind of special familiarity with that journey that brought disciples to writers' doors. Nonetheless, we must assume that these teachings were not merely theoretical, as they appear in summaries such as this, but were also practical and effective. Like medicine, they were not only a formal branch of knowledge but also a method that brought about a cure. The Sufis not only showed people how to do good, but also how to feel good by way of the contentment brought by complete reliance on God (*tawakkul*).

If the path and the places along it were one foundational element of the Sufi method to which Kharraz contributed, another was the joint concept of "passing away" (*fana*) and "surviving" (*baqa*). As with any other Sufi doctrine, support for the idea of the death of the ego before the body was found in the Hadith of Muhammad, who was claimed to have advised his followers to "Die before you die." If walking the path was the method, then the procedure itself was the wiping out of the base and lowly instincts of the lower soul (*nafs*) so that at the journey's end nothing remained but the higher spirit (*ruh*) in a state of loving intimacy with its divine creator.

Kharraz discussed the characteristics of that state of intimacy, and the type of people who reached it, in his more specialist *risala* treatises. The language of these works was more dense and obscure, suggesting the emergence of the kind of specialist jargon that not only characterizes closed communities of readers but also requires the oral commentary of a teacher to clarify their meaning. In the circle of Kharraz at least, we should not then imagine the early Sufis as populists: like the occultist Neo-Platonic *Ikhwan al-Safa* ("Brothers of Purity") who emerged in Basra half-a-century later, the early Sufis had a penchant for the arcane and even pedantic. Their critique of the *zubbah* ascetics whose showy and at times gruesome austerities certainly did win popular support suggests that if anything the likes of Kharraz and Muhasibi beforehand represented a distinctly anti-popularist circle of urbane litterati who sought dignity in mastering their books rather than their bodies.

In Kharraz's treatises, the urge towards classification that we have already seen in the *Kitab al-Sidq* thus found expression in an account of the seven "classes" (*tabaqat*) among the spiritual elite whom he designated as the "people of bafflement and bewilderment." Each of these classes sought God in a different way, from the pondering of abstruse allusions (*isharat*) of those of the lowest class to those higher souls who have been brought into such proximity (*qurb*) to the divine essence as to have entirely lost all of their own

attributes in those of God.<sup>39</sup> For all his attempts to avoid controversy through upholding the importance of outwardly observing Muslim social norms, Kharraz was unable to avoid controversy in this dilution of the distinction between God and mankind, even if it was a tiny elite among them. Despite arguing for the existence of seven elite classes of humankind, in other respects Kharraz sought to reduce the status of persons whose proximity and absorption in God led them to be considered his special “Friends” (*awliya*).<sup>40</sup> While like other Muslims of his day, Kharraz certainly accepted the existence of such saintly figures, he was adamant that their status did not exceed that of the Prophets (*anbiya*). The implication was that whatever God revealed to his Friends was lower in authority and status to what he revealed to his Prophets: even a Friend of God could not command one to break the laws or deny the revelations brought by the Prophets. While expanding the ways and numbers of people who might have direct contact with God, Kharraz was therefore at the same time restricting the authority that such contact granted over other members of society.

### **Tustari of Basra (d.896)**

By the second half of the ninth century, the question of the relationship between Prophets and Friends (and thence of the ordinary Muslims in fealty to them) was already a pressing one. Around three hundred and fifty miles to the south of Baghdad in the city of Basra, the question was also being addressed by Kharraz’s contemporary, Sahl ibn ‘Abdullah Tustari (d.896). Like Kharraz and many other Muslim scholars of the period, Tustari traveled widely in his lifetime and, though he grew up in the Iranian town of Tustar that gave him his name, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca, resided in several towns in Iraq and possibly traveled through Egypt as well.<sup>41</sup> While as evidence historians have the texts that such men as Tustari left behind, it is much harder to assess the impact on their thought of the conversations and meetings that must have taken place during their travels. Later claims that Tustari learned from the semi-legendary Egyptian master, Dhu’l Nun (“He of the Fish,” d.861), are not intrinsically unlikely, but simply hard to verify. We do know rather more about the development of ideas in Basra over the decades prior to Tustari’s arrival there in 877, when he was already an old man approaching sixty, even if it seems likely that his ideas were already mature by this stage.<sup>42</sup> While we can point to his connection to discussions and modes of writing in the generation or two before him, and while it seems likely that he was influenced by an earlier Quran commentary by the Shi‘i *imam* Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d.765) that is no longer extant, we are probably better off seeing him as a creative figure in his own right than seeking sources for his ideas among Gnostics and Neo-Platonists.<sup>43</sup>

What is most fascinating about the source of Tustari's creativity is its appearance in the fertile interpretive ground between the Quran and his own experiences. It is important that we do not lose sight of either side of this balance of input, for Tustari was neither solely a freethinking mystic drawing on his own sublime thoughts nor a derivative exegete dealing in simple paraphrases of scripture. Instead, he was a Muslim for whom the Quranic words of God provided an inexhaustible source of knowledge for the contemplative reader in active engagement with his scripture. With the Quran as his guide, Tustari explored the meaning of his own experiences that came from years spent in the intense chanting of incantatory formulas such as those he learned during his youth from an uncle, a well-known scholar of Hadith. While parallels and sources for this practice of chanting have been sought in the lengthy Jesus prayers of the Nestorian Christians, for Muslims such as Tustari and his uncle, the source was wholly Islamic. Not only did the formulas themselves often consist of words from the Quran, the generic term for such exercises – *dhikr* or “remembrance” – was itself taken from the several Quranic recommendations to remember God. Tustari was the first person we know of who connected this practice of chanting *dhikr* with the notion of the heart as the organ of knowledge, the purification of which allowed it to become host to God's primordial light.

Although Tustari's *tafsir* or Quran commentary was more a rambling collection of notes than a step-by-step exegesis, it does provide both an overview of his teachings and a sense of the role of the scripture within them. Between text and contemplation, Tustari developed the Quranic idea that there existed a pre-eternal covenant (*mithaq*) between God and his creatures in which the souls of every human who would ever be created were summoned before God and then accepted him as their master.<sup>44</sup> However, Tustari's version of the Covenant stretched back even further into the dawn of creation, teaching that before God created humankind, he had first created Muhammad.<sup>45</sup> This was not quite the Muhammad of history but a cosmic Muhammad created from pure light brought out of the primordial light of God himself. From this Muhammadan Light (*nur muhammadi*) God then brought out the rest of creation in ranked order: the Prophets, the Friends and then the more ordinary souls of the rest of humanity. Not all of the humans God created were equal; no less important, the Friends were not close to God by merit of their special efforts but because of their preordained status at the moment of creation. While ordinary Muslims could certainly be brought closer to God by using such techniques as chanting *dhikr* to purify themselves of the distractions of the lower soul, there was no chance for them to be promoted in this celestial hierarchy of Friendship (*wilaya*). Indeed, Tustari presented this hierarchy of God's Friends as a closed club dominated by a fixed number of truthful ones (*siddiqun*), substitutes (*abdal*) and cosmic tent-pegs (*awtad*). As we will see in Chapter 2, in social and spatial terms this



Figure 1.3 Sharing Sacred Geographies: Medieval Shrine of Shaykh Yusuf Abu al-Hajjaj in Luxor Temple, Egypt (Image: Nile Green)

theology of Friendship would over time feed a vibrant cult of Sufi saints whose shrines, such as that built for Shaykh Yusuf Abu al-Hajjaj in the former pharaonic temple of Luxor in Egypt, would gradually transform the Middle Eastern landscape into a sacred Islamic geography.

Although Tustari openly taught that there were four levels to the meanings of the Quran (literal, symbolic, ethical and eschatological), it was only the Friends who could truly understand it. While we see again the concern for ranking and enumeration that also characterized the writings of Kharraz, there is no doubt that the Friends loomed far larger in the cosmos of Tustari. At the same time that many Muslim scholars were forming an egalitarian (or at least a meritocratic) Islam in which knowledge and authority were acquired through mastery of scripture and concordance with the Prophetic Example, in the circle of Tustari we see the re-emergence of an older hierarchical Islam in which knowledge and authority were vested by divine election in a small number of people. Because this was not an elite defined by bloodline, as it was in the Shi'i formulation of authority lying solely in the family descendants of Muhammad, it was a more protean and thereby a more manipulable model that was likely to attract more supporters as a result. Since only the Friends themselves knew they were Friends, there was in principle no method of verifying whether a self-proclaimed Friend was really such a one or not. Unsurprisingly, Tustari claimed to be himself the *qutb* or

“axis” of the universe who stood at the center of this cosmic hierarchy of Friends whom God had selected in pre-eternity.

Although Tustari’s commentary of the Quran abounds in extraordinary visions and insights, his teachings also therefore provided an ideological resource for the highly authoritarian trends which we will see flowering as the Sufis sought greater influence in centuries to come. In his own lifetime, Tustari’s claims to Friendship won him as much approbation as support and he seems to have been forced to flee at least one city as a consequence. While he was able to gain a considerable following in Basra, after his death his followers moved in different directions, some founding what became seen as a distinct theological rather than Sufi school called the Salimiyya and others moving to Baghdad to join the circle gathering around the next Sufi we must examine, Junayd the “sober.” What we are seeing is therefore not quite yet a coherent Sufi movement, but rather a series of distinct but intersecting circles gathered around individual masters. As we see with the followers of Tustari and Junayd, in Iraq at least these circles had a fair degree of social interaction with one another and it was this interaction which in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries would gradually create a more coherent Sufi movement sharing common ideas and practices.

By around 900, we have certainly moved beyond a position where Sufi was merely a nickname for an assorted medley of seekers, and many of the foundational ideas, terms and practices that would constitute a proprietary Sufi method were being formulated. But, as we will see with the next few figures we examine, the debates and disagreements were such that we are still short of a coherent movement, still less a tradition.

### **Junayd of Baghdad (d.910)**

Unlike Kharraz and Tustari, who traveled widely despite spending the most active parts of their careers in Iraq, Junayd was very much a long-term citizen of the imperial capital at Baghdad.<sup>46</sup> Junayd’s nickname of al-Khazzaz tells us that he earned his living as a silk merchant, pointing again to an urban occupational background. Even more than the other figures we have discussed, his early training in the emerging discipline of Islamic jurisprudence placed him squarely in the intellectual mainstream of the Baghdad of his day. These scholarly credentials are clear from both the number of treatises he wrote – over thirty according to one account – and the familiarity with wider discussions they reveal. Like Kharraz and Tustari, Junayd sought to ground his teaching in (indeed, to draw it from) the very same sources being used to create the legal restraints of Shari’a, namely the Quran and Hadith.<sup>47</sup> Just as scores of later Sufis writing in his wake would emphasize the harmony between the internal/esoteric (*batini*) and external/exoteric (*zahiri*)

dimensions of existence, so Junayd's teachings on the nature of the soul were a counterpart rather than an alternative to the rules of Shari'a. For Junayd, the "Path" or method was no more and no less than the full realization of the basic principle of Islam as announced in the call to prayer: "there is no god other than God." Known as the doctrine of *tawhid* – the "oneness" or unity of God as opposed to the "threeness" or trinity of the Christians – for Junayd this most fundamental of Muslim principles laid the basis for all Sufi endeavor. It was not sufficient to merely attest to God's unity with the tongue, or accept it with the intellect, but to live or experience it as a reality.<sup>48</sup> Drawing on the same Quranic notion of a covenant being discussed by Tustari in Basra at the same time, Junayd claimed that human souls longed for this original state of being in which their souls were in a state of pre-individual existence in God.<sup>49</sup> Like Tustari again, he taught that the way to recover this original state was through a process of dying to oneself through the *fana* or destruction of the lower individual soul. Speaking of his own experience of such self-destruction, Junayd described how "an overpowering vision and a refulgent brilliance took possession of me and induced in me a state of *fana*, creating me anew in the same way He had created me when I had no existence."<sup>50</sup>

Developing another key concept which would later be harmonized with the model we have already seen of the way being marked by a series of "places" along the Path towards *fana*, Junayd explained that the seeker would pass through a transient but progressive series of "states" (*ahwal*, sing. *hal*). But in the doctrine that would mark Junayd out for future generations of Sufis, he also taught that while states of ecstasy and bewilderment were part of the Path, the seeker who experienced "surviving" (*baqa*) after having destroyed himself in God did not remain in that transient state of excitement but passed beyond it into a higher and abiding condition of "sobriety" (*sahw*).<sup>51</sup> The highest state of communion with God was therefore accompanied by conformist outward behavior that ordinary Muslims could clearly distinguish from the raving ecstasies or austerities of those less close to the Almighty.

Like other Sufis of his day, Junayd was formulating his teachings in a context of heated debates over proper belief and conduct. At one extreme of the debate was the Baghdad-based preacher Ahmad Ghulam Khalil (d.888), who in 877 is reported to have brought formal charges of heresy (*zandaqa*) against over seventy followers of the Sufis such as Junayd, so providing major disincentives against teachings that appeared to contradict the words of the Quran or particularly the Hadith.<sup>52</sup> The prominence in Junayd's teaching of the doctrine of sobriety – of lawfulness, self-control and restraint – was at least partly also a response to popular stories about and sayings of ecstatic seekers of God that were reaching Baghdad from the provinces of the empire. Many of these rumors of mysterious and charismatic spiritual giants concerned a certain Abu Yazid (d.875) from Bistam, in the distant Iranian

countryside far to the east of Baghdad. We know relatively little about Abu Yazid (also known as Bayezid), though many of the “ecstatic utterances” (*shath*) he purportedly exclaimed while in rapturous intimacy with God were collected by his followers, passed on to travelers on the trade route through Bistam, and eventually discussed in the refined religious circles of Baghdad. In a geographical no less than spiritual sense, to the urbane intellectuals of the capital Abu Yazid had the attraction of a frontiersman, unrestrained by the conventions of the city and unafraid to voice the excitement of his discoveries. The kinds of statement he was said to have made – “Praise Me! [as though I were God]” and “I shed my self as a snake sheds its skin and then saw that I was He!” – formed pithy summaries of what the more prolix and cautious Sufis of Baghdad were almost saying in their theory of destruction and remaining in God, but were avoiding saying so bluntly.

The story that Abu Yazid was taught by a man called al-Sindi (“from Sind,” in North India) would lead one modern scholar to argue not only that Abu Yazid’s teachings was “monism” derived from Indian sources – a “Vedanta in Muslim dress” – but also that this Indian influence permanently changed the direction of Sufi thought.<sup>53</sup> In all likelihood, the Baghdad Sufis were very much men of their own minds and (in the case of Junayd especially) realized that the wild man of Bistam was hardly going to help them in their cause among the urban intelligentsia. If the idea popularized by later Sufis that Abu Yazid and Junayd founded two distinct schools of “drunkenness” and “sobriety” was certainly an over-statement, then we can at least see differences emerging by way of doctrinal trends and modes of behavior.<sup>54</sup>

Here again we are reminded that the Sufis were not merely mystics basing their teachings on sublime experience, but also public intellectuals participating in the leading debates of the day. The written records the early Sufis bequeathed us were discursive productions shaped by their participation in spoken debates and their borrowings from written authorities. But they were also the result of attempts to map the words and ideas of that discourse onto individual experiences in a way that made sense of that experience but (for conformists like Junayd at least) refused to allow private experience to shake the legal and political foundations of collective social life. In line with this sensible middle ground, Junayd was cautious in his discussion of God’s Friends. As with Tustari, for Junayd such an elite did exist and occupied a position of authority with regard to the ordinary mass of Muslims. But for Junayd the very sobriety of the state of “remaining” in God rendered the accomplished Sufi externally identical to the teacher of Shari‘a:

He is one of the experts in religious law, and in what is permitted and what is forbidden and one of the best informed in all matters pertaining to Islam. He walks in the footsteps of the prophets and follows the way of life of the saints and righteous, he does not stray after those innovations (which, though



contrary to tradition, have gained a measure of currency in Islam), nor does he refrain from accepting the agreed tradition of Islam. . . He holds the view that authority must be obeyed, nor will he separate himself from his community. He holds that rebellion against authority is an action of the ignorant. . .<sup>55</sup>

This conformist stance is not to say that Junayd's career was without its controversies. But rather than seeing the early Sufis' development of their method as intrinsically in opposition to the proponents of law and "orthodoxy," we should recognize that few positions on anything were beyond debate (even the methods by which Shari'a was being constituted were highly variant). In a context in which proponents of the idea of the Muslim community being held together by allegiance to the Prophetic Example or *sunna* had developed the notion of the collective consensus (*ijma'*) of the learned as a mode of semi-egalitarian authority, Junayd tried to bring the notion of authority deriving from a special relationship with God held by an elite of Friends into harmony with an emergent Sunni mainstream. By behaving exactly like any other member of the scholarly '*ulama* class, and keeping consensus with their opinions, the Friend of God would only advise people to reaffirm and deepen their ordinary social and legal commitments. Far from being introspective and self-absorbed mystics, Sufis like Junayd were active participants in the creation of a Muslim society and as such participated in vigorous public debates on the nexus between authority and responsibility, behavior and fulfillment. But as we will see as we turn to some of Junayd's less sober contemporaries, the experience of feeling intimate with God and the sense of election it imbued was not in all cases so easily socialized.

### **Hallaj of Baghdad (d.922)**

The most famous demonstration of this emerging tension between personally-inspired and collectively-consulted authority is seen in the life of Husayn ibn Mansur, known as al-Hallaj ("the wool sifter").<sup>56</sup> Born in southern Iran in around 857, Hallaj became a follower of Tustari and then of another Sufi, 'Amr ibn Uthman al-Makki, in Basra, before entering Junayd's circle in Baghdad. He seems to have been unable to commit to the discipleship of any one master, perhaps through ambitions to attract a following in his own right. Even by the standards of his most mobile contemporaries, Hallaj traveled extremely widely, wandering not only through Iran but also venturing into the far reaches of Muslim expansion in Central Asia and India. On these journeys he disappears from the limited historical horizons of documentation and he is chiefly known to us through his presence in the literary and intellectual capital of the Islamic world at this time, where he openly courted controversy for his opinions in Baghdad and was finally executed

there in 922. Like other victims of untimely deaths, his execution was the crowning of a career, for it ensured his immortalization by scores of Sufi biographers and poets in later centuries for whom he would be remembered as the great martyr for speaking the truth of divine love.

In prosaic fact, the picture was certainly more complicated and probably less attractive. While ecstatic love of God was part of Hallaj's teachings and is evidenced in the moving poetry which he wrote, his short surviving prose writings suggest a more intellectual aptitude for the ideas being developed by his erstwhile teacher, Tustari. As we have seen, in the Sufi circles of Baghdad and Basra that he frequented, the idea of being destroyed in God enjoyed wide circulation, as did the notion that God had a special relationship with an elite known as the Friends or *awliya*. We have already seen how the doctrine of Friendship created a special model of authority by portraying the Friend as being in such close proximity to God as to have knowledge that no amount of memorizing of the Quran or Hadith could bring. But in terms of the social exploitation of the doctrine, thus far self-proclaimed Friends like Tustari had only used their elect status to gather around themselves small circles of like-minded seekers. With Hallaj, we start to see the playing out of the full social potential of the doctrine through the amplification of the claim to Friendship by its outward demonstration through the performance of miracles (*karamat*). When it came to winning larger number of disciples, such performative proofs of special status had great potential and Hallaj's public performance of such miracles achieved precisely that. Hallaj was not the first Muslim believed to have the ability to work miracles and there already existed compilations of the tales of the wonders worked by earlier Friends and Prophets. But Hallaj was the earliest major Sufi to bring this skill into his repertoire and, like a Marxist moving from the seminar room to the rally platform, in gathering so many followers in the process he radically shifted what was at stake in the Sufis' teachings.

Unsurprisingly, the crowds of followers whom Hallaj attracted brought him to the attention of the state authorities in Baghdad, whose own by now rather tired claims to legitimacy were being whittled away with each generation of new ideas. While the reasons for Hallaj's arrest and eventual execution involved an explosive blend of court politics and intelligentsia rivalry, the gravity of the situation was worsened by his own outrageous statements, some of which survive in his own writings and others in quotations in the works of others. Here, Hallaj went beyond the earlier discussion of the ego as being destroyed in God to claim that, since there was now nothing left of Mansur al-Hallaj, it was God who spoke through his lips. The ego of Hallaj had passed away to leave only the spirit of God inhabiting his body as it walked among the streets and peoples of Baghdad. In his most infamous claim – more important through the later belief that he did say it than through any absolute evidence that he did – Hallaj used one of the

ninety-nine names of Allah to declare “I am the Real (*ana al-haqq*),” in effect declaring himself identical with God. Even more extraordinarily, he expressed sympathy for the plight of Satan, whose refusal to bow down before Adam in Islamic legend Hallaj saw as an act of heroic loyalty to God by Adam’s refusal to swerve from his absorption in worshipping the divine unity.<sup>57</sup> Even so, the official reason for Hallaj’s execution lay in his purported teaching that the pilgrimage to Mecca that was incumbent on all Muslims able to perform it could just as well be performed symbolically around a table at home. By implication, Hallaj was arguing that the symbolic or esoteric dimension of religious duties was more important than their actual or exoteric performance. It was a principle which if generalized threatened the entire fabric of obligations and duties on which Islamic society had been developing over three previous centuries. With increasing numbers of followers, there was indeed now much at stake in the opinions of the Sufis.

### Iraqi Sufism by the Late Tenth Century

As the tenth century wore on, more and more teachers called Sufis were attracting followers in Iraq and writing works in which they elaborated on the terms and concepts we have seen developing in the writings of Kharraz and others. As with the teachers we have already examined, in showing how the seeker could come close to God, partake in his knowledge and in some cases in his power, these were doctrines with immense socio-political potential, even if this potential had as yet been scarcely realized except in the negative sense with the execution of Hallaj. A case in point is a biographically obscure Iraqi called Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbar, known as al-Niffari (“from Nippur”) who died after 977.

Building on the Sufi tendency we have already seen emerging to elaborate the many “places” (*maqamat*) or “states” (*ahwal*) on the Path, in his *Kitab al-Mawaqif* (“Book of Staying Places”). Niffari developed the idea that the Path also contained “staying places” (*mawaqif*, sing. *waqfa*), as it were, stopover points, which though they might be bypassed by some travelers were actually places in which God revealed different aspects of himself to the patiently thoroughgoing seeker. Implying that other seekers had missed these “staying places,” Niffari went on to describe in astonishing detail the revelations which God gave to him at each of no fewer than seventy-seven places, beginning his discussion of each of these *waqfas* with the frank claim that “God stayed me and said to me. . . .”<sup>58</sup> For Niffari, the visionary experience acquired in these staying places was not only superior to book learning, but also to the more hastily acquired direct knowledge that other Sufis claimed to have of God. In these increasingly elaborate expositions of the nature and scale of the journey towards God, it would not be too wide of the mark to

see a kind of spiritual one-upmanship at work. And for Niffari, the mastery of the staying places on that journey held great reward, since at them the seeker could even acquire God's creative power to bring things into existence. Even in this early period, the power of miracles – the power to accomplish things that even the mightiest of men could not – was never far away from the Sufis' concerns.

Before we move on to explore the other main geographical region in which Sufism developed, it is worth ourselves staying a moment to look over the developments that had taken place in Iraq by the end of the tenth century. Firstly, we have seen a development from a period in which *sufi* or "wool-wearer" was merely a nickname for a vague assortment of seekers to a period in which the term was used to denote a distinct method of acquiring knowledge which was now termed *tasawwuf*, which we can fairly translate as Sufism. In other words, the terms have acquired a more substantive and specific meaning: where there were previously only people called Sufis, now there is a practical and theoretical method being called Sufism. The factors enabling this development were several, some of them visible at the distance of centuries, others more obscure. The most visible factor was the production of texts in which the Sufis developed a conceptual vocabulary that not only explained their ideas and made sense of their own and their disciples' experiences, but also rooted them in the legitimate sources of knowledge by way of the Quran and Hadith. By around the year 1000, the types of Sufi texts being produced ranged from commentaries on the Quran to treatises on individual topics, emotive poetry, admonishing letters, suggestive aphorisms and accounts of visionary experiences. Often extremely complex and allusive, these were in many cases the creations of an intelligentsia writing for its own members. In a period in which legal and moral authority over the Muslim community was being acquired by precisely those men who called themselves the '*ulama* or "learned," this social location of the new Sufi method was extremely convenient.

This is not to say that every early follower of the Sufis was a member of this urban intelligentsia, for many of the verses, aphorisms and stories which appeared in writing easily circulated among the illiterate through memory and speech. But it is to say that without the support of this increasingly influential intelligentsia, the survival of Sufism beyond this period and its expansion beyond Iraq would have been far more difficult. The writings which the Iraqi literati produced were themselves agents in the process by which Sufism expanded and survived, not only transmitting ideas through time (where with each passing generation they grew in stature as the products of a spiritually gilded age), but also transmitting them through space (where they publicized the fashionable new method of Baghdad in the provinces of its empire). As much as Sufism can be seen as a form of "mysticism" in which experience was always paramount, in terms of

accounting for its success we must therefore recognize that it was also very much a matter of writing. And for the historian at least, the latter is the more important, because when transient experience passes away, writing survives: *littera scripta manet*.

While we should not ignore the importance of individual spiritual experiences and acts of creative interpretation, the “discursive” processes of writing were extremely important, because in basing Sufi doctrine on terminology and texts that were recognizable to other Muslims of the period, the early Sufis ensured that their teachings were both respectable enough and intelligible enough to survive in future generations and to be related to wider branches of recognized knowledge. When experience entered the equation, it was not allowed to remain pure and ineffable, but had to be interpreted and understood through the special vocabulary that the early Sufis created in their writings from the resource of the Quran as a revelation in words.<sup>59</sup> The sheer importance of this early development of a powerful because legitimate vocabulary for doctrine and practice would later be seen in the repeated “diglossic” process by which this original Arabic vocabulary was borrowed and maintained in the many other languages in which later generations of Sufis would speak and write. Whether taken as entire books or as their constitutive elements by way of a legitimate and wide-ranging terminology, the textual output of the early Sufis of Baghdad created one of the crucial resources with which later generations of Sufis would construct a “tradition,” which is to say a body of beliefs and practices that draws legitimacy and prestige from its relationship to a venerated past. If texts were one resource, then the personae of their producers were another, and as we will see later, in their own writings later generations of Sufis would use the lives of the early Sufis of Iraq to create genealogical biography chains by which any Sufi of later generations could claim to be the heir to one or more of the masters of Baghdad and Basra. The Sufis of ninth century Iraq were therefore not only important for what they did in their own times, but also as resources for the creation of a tradition, and so for what they bequeathed to future times by way of a corpus of texts and a corporation of ancestors.

By looking in the opposite temporal direction and placing the Sufis of this period in relation to the ascetic movement of the previous century, we can also recognize what was along with their search for a legitimate mode of expression perhaps their most important other achievement: the socialization of asceticism. By presenting a convincing alternative path to God from the punishment of the flesh and the renunciation of social life, marriage and ownership of property preached by the ascetic *zuhhad*, the Sufis created a religious product with a far greater chance of replication and survival. This was not only the case because of the general truisms that any society can only support a limited number of economically unproductive renunciants and

that the ascetic life will only ever have a limited social appeal. It was also the case for the more culturally specific reason that in a period and place in which the Prophetic Example or *sunna* of Muhammad was becoming the touchstone of social and moral theory, the life of the solitary ascetic began to look less and less legitimately Islamic. Muhammad had been a family man, a leader of his community and a successful merchant, and none of this had prevented him from being chosen as the Prophet of God. In the course of future centuries, the legacy of this early Sufi socialization process – lending Sufis the ability to echo the Prophet by claiming “Friendship” with God while maintaining the opportunities lent by property-owning, social networking and the production of family heirs – was to prove crucial in their ability to embed themselves in almost every corner of the social, economic and political life of their communities.

As yet, we know little of the organizational format of the Sufis of the early period, who seem to have gathered in small circles around their masters in a manner that reflected the gatherings of other Muslim scholars of the time.<sup>60</sup> It is only when we turn towards developments further east that we see evidence for the shift from a Sufi “movement” of like-minded masters and disciples that had developed by 1000 in Iraq to a Sufi “organization” that possessed distinct corporate rules and architectural structures of its own.

### **Eastern alternatives? Competition and Incorporation in Khurasan**

The Sufis were by no means the only Muslims formulating esoteric and mystical models of knowledge in Iraq. But what we have seen is the beginning of their gradual and calculated ascendancy there as they replaced a fringe ascetic movement (of authority via bodily mastery) and aligned themselves with a mainstream scholarly movement (of authority via textual mastery). When we turn to the eastern region of the ‘Abbasid Empire known as Khurasan (“the land where the sun rises”), we see what were at first a set of parallel and quite discrete religious developments gradually coming into contact with the Sufi movement emanating from the imperial center in Iraq and eventually being absorbed by it. It is important that we make a distinction between these different movements and recognize the processes of competition and collusion by which they interacted, since otherwise we will fall into the trap which led many earlier accounts to portray Sufism as appearing at more or less the same time in a wide range of geographically disparate places. In line with other recent accounts of early Sufism, what is painted here is broadly speaking a picture of the diffusion – or better, the circulation – of religious ideas, practices and (it is here that Khurasan made its own contribution) institutions.

Encompassing regions which we would now consider as eastern Iran, Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, Khurasan had fallen into Muslim hands during the early decades of conquest that followed the death of Muhammad in 632. Unlike many of the western regions of the Islamic 'Abbasid Empire, which had previously been under Byzantine Christian rule, Khurasan had been subject to Persian Zoroastrian rule and also contained pockets of Buddhist and Christian presence. As in the west, the process of conversion and resettlement was lengthy, and despite the arrival of a new ruling elite of Muslims, in the countryside many of the old Persian-speaking landowners still maintained their influence. With the crumbling of Baghdad's centralizing power in the tenth century, this culturally Persian influence was felt in some of the cities as well.<sup>61</sup> This did not prevent the development in Khurasan's rich mercantile and agricultural oasis towns of properly Islamic modes of social and intellectual life and the survival of any kind of unadulterated pure Persian culture belongs to the imaginary of modern nationalism. But if the towns and country of Khurasan were far from the imperial hothouse of religious production and disputation in Baghdad, then with the sowing of Islamic ideas in their distinctive cultural soil they were nonetheless capable of producing their own new kinds of Muslim movements. The question is: what relationship did these Khurasani movements have with the Sufi movement that was emerging in Iraq and how did they interact with it?

Although later biographical texts from the twelfth century onwards absorbed many early Khurasani masters into the Sufi tradition that they were attempting to construct for their region, modern research has shown that in the tenth century hardly anyone was being called a "Sufi" in Khurasan itself and the few who were had either migrated from or traveled through Iraq.<sup>62</sup> If the early Khurasani renunciants of the ninth century did not call themselves Sufis, then given their distance from the westerly places in which this nickname circulated it is not at all surprising, particularly if we accept the proposition that the term *sufi* was originally used as part of the vocabulary of Iraqi Christians.<sup>63</sup> In their anti-social tendencies, the two most important of the early Khurasani movements resembled (though were not connected to) the ascetic *zuhhad* of Syria and Iraq. Called Karramiyya after the name of their founder Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Karram (d.874), the members of the first movement were often taunted on account of their rigorous asceticism by their contemporaries with the nickname "mortifiers" (*mutaqashshifa*).<sup>64</sup> Their doctrines combined a literalistic reading of scripture with the claim that work and material gain were obstacles on the path to God. The resulting blend of an appealingly anthropomorphic picture of God and a leadership as materially poor as the most wretched of their peasant followers won them a large popular support base throughout Khurasan. Although like the scholars of Iraq, the leaders of the Karramiyya possessed sufficient scriptural learning to root

their doctrines in the Quran and in some cases engage with theological discussions emanating from Baghdad, the Karramiyya was ultimately a movement of the lower classes, who included Muslim converts from the local population whose entry to the Islamic community or *umma* was beginning to challenge the earlier social structure of Islam in Khurasan as the religion of an immigrant imperial elite.<sup>65</sup> From the ninth century through the twelfth century, the Karramiyya remained an important force in the social and religious life of Khurasan. This longevity and influence was enabled by their development of large monastic communities funded by land grants whose residents were thereby able to follow Ibn Karram's command to avoid work and devote oneself exclusively to asceticism and prayer. With residents sometimes numbering as many as four thousand, these monasteries were clearly impressive sites. Although by the twelfth century the days of the Karramiyya would finally be eclipsed with the rising star of the Sufis in Khurasan, the model and even the names of the institutional innovations they interchangeably called *khanaqahs* (from the Persian) and *madrasas* (from the Arabic) would prove to be extremely influential in the Sufis' own development of institutions.<sup>66</sup>

The second rival movement we must reckon with in Khurasan was that of the Malamatiyya or "Blame Seekers" which developed around the city of Nishapur in the circle of Hamdun al-Qassar (d.885).<sup>67</sup> As well as being opposed to the Sufis emanating from Baghdad, the Malamatiyya were on more local ground primarily opposed to the Karramiyya whom (as with the Sufis' opinion of the *zuhhad* in Iraq) they regarded as showy ascetic publicists whose popular acclaim was an obstacle to true piety. By contrast, the Malamatiyya sought to bring themselves closer to God by destroying their egos through the avoidance of any public display of piety likely to attract pride-inducing praise and by the subjecting of their egos to self-humiliating recollections of their own "blameworthiness." Where the Karramiyya seem to have appealed to the lowest sections of society, the Malamatiyya seem to have been popular among the urban artisanal classes, for whom the ability to live piously without giving up either work or social life provided an attractive prospect.<sup>68</sup> The Malamatiyya certainly shared many terms and ideas with the Sufis of Baghdad of the same period, such as avoiding "showiness" (*riya*) and controlling the lower self (*nafs*), but even amid these similarities there were differences. Unlike the Sufis, the Malamatis held that the *nafs* could not be destroyed and claimed that any public expression of spiritual achievement immediately nullified it. If as a result they were skeptical about the claims of Sufis destroying their lower selves and then declaring themselves intimate Friends of God, the Malamatis' avoidance of public piety also left them unwilling to participate in the public moralizing and "commanding the good" that connected the Sufis to the emerging Sunni mainstream.



The third of the Khurasani movements to distinguish from the early Iraqi Sufis was that of the Hakims or “Wise Men” of the oasis towns around Balkh and Tirmiz around what are now the northern borders of Afghanistan. Given the success with which the Sufis subsequently incorporated the leading Hakims, the claims that the Hakims were straightforwardly Sufis rather than a distinct local movement have usually been taken at face value by modern scholars. But there is reason to classify the group of men known by the title Hakim as a separate movement in its own right, albeit one with less impact and reach than those of the Karramis and Malamatis.<sup>69</sup> While broadly speaking the former were peasant and artisanal movements, from what little we know the Hakims seem to have been of a more “aristocratic” character, their leaders being not only hereditary landholders but self-declared Friends of God as well. Indeed, only the leaders were considered Hakims, which was clearly a title of authority rather than fellowship. For our purposes, the most interesting figure among them was Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad, known as al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (“the Wise Man of Tirmiz”), who died sometime between 905 and 910.<sup>70</sup> One of the reasons Tirmidhi looms so large in later memory was for the sheer fact that he was able to stamp his own personality on history through writing an autobiography, something not only considered poor form among premodern Muslims but also in striking contrast to the self-abasing strictures of his Malamati and Karrami contemporaries.<sup>71</sup> Like the leading Sufis of Baghdad, Tirmidhi had memorized the Quran early in life, mastered the study of Islamic jurisprudence and Hadith, and also visited Basra and Mecca. Like the *Kitab al-Mawaqif* of Niffari in Iraq a generation later, Tirmidhi’s Arabic autobiography depicts his personal visionary experiences in fascinating detail, beginning with a dream of the Prophet Muhammad leading him through his home city.<sup>72</sup>

What is most interesting about the autobiography is the way it describes dreams in which Tirmidhi’s wife and friends were shown the lofty spiritual rank he himself had attained, such that the dreams of others were presented as a form of third-party evidence for Tirmidhi’s status as a Friend, a device which may have been a response to the many detractors we know he had in his home town. Indeed, in providing foundational resources for the subsequent development of Sufi tradition, Tirmidhi was most important for his elaboration of the formal theory of *wilaya* or “Friendship with God,” that is, the Muslim doctrine of sainthood.

Displaying the same taxonomic logic as that seen in the Baghdad Sufis’ treatment of the places and states on the Path, in his *Kitab Sirat al-Awliya* (“Biography of the Friends”) Tirmidhi set out to classify and rank the different classes and kinds of God’s Friends. He introduced the idea that just as there was a Seal of the Prophets (*khatm al-anbiya*, a rank occupied by Muhammad), so was there a Seal of the Friends (*khatm al-awliya*, a rank

apparently occupied by Tirmidhi himself). While he conceded that the Prophets were still superior to the Friends, in practice the Friends not only possessed most of the Prophets' supernatural attributes but, since prophecy had ended with Muhammad as the Seal of the Prophets, humankind had now in any case to be guided by the living Friends. Yet the Friends were not only on earth to help their fellow men, they were also there to discipline and punish them: the Friend "is the place of God's indulgent glance, as well as God's scourge, amongst His creatures."<sup>73</sup> In the writings of Tirmidhi, we see how claims of visionary experience were not simply testaments of personal salvation but evidence on which to build a starkly hierarchical model of humanity and its rightful leaders.

The Karrami, Malamati and Hakim movements developed sufficiently far away from Iraq as to survive on their own terms well into the eleventh century before being incorporated and effectively suppressed as the Sufi movement spread eastward through its establishment of outposts and proselytizers in Khurasan. To examine how this process of competition and incorporation occurred, we must turn to another key time and place in Sufi history: the city of Nishapur between the tenth and twelfth centuries.<sup>74</sup> Nishapur was a major trade and oasis city in what is now the northeastern corner of Iran and, with the impoverishment of Baghdad after its fall to the Shi'i Buyyid dynasty in 945, became increasingly important as a center of moral and religious production. Like the imperial capital in its heyday, the great desert emporium was a marketplace in which the producers and pliers of different models of Islam found themselves in keen competition with one another.

One broad process we can arguably see at work here is the replacement of what we might term frontier expansion movements by interior consolidation movements. As we have seen, one of the most important features of the Karramiyya was its role in the conversion of non-Muslim subject peoples known as *dhimmis*. Growing historical understanding of the eastern marches of Khurasan in the ninth and tenth centuries has also pointed to the role of frontier warrior-teachers who combined war (*jihad*) and preaching (*da'wa*) to expand Islamic rule across the Central Asian steppe lands then being occupied by nomadic Turks.<sup>75</sup> In some ways, this picture of the eastern frontier reflects what we have already seen in the west, where at least some of the ascetic *zuhhad* settled in the troubled frontiers with Byzantine territory. As the external frontier moved further east and the internal social frontier evaporated at the tipping point of conversion and acculturation to Islam, space was opened in the social fabric for new consolidation movements concerned with the deeper Islamization of society through a "permanent settlement" emphasizing law, economic production and maintainable social life for which the renunciant Karramis and the holy warriors of the frontier were no longer appropriate. While the precise contours of these larger rural

processes remain unclear, the fuller character of the urban sources means that we have a clearer picture of developments taking place in cities like Nishapur. Here we are looking at two separate but interwoven processes, one discursive and one institutional. Since we have already discussed the ways in which texts and debates helped the Sufis rise to prominence in Iraq, we will turn first to the discursive question of how their books and discussions helped them similarly expand in Khurasan.

As we have seen, many of the texts, terminology and even techniques being used by the “indigenous” movements in Khurasan had much in common with those being employed by the Sufis of Iraq. The Quran and the Hadith were common resources; the language of “Friends” and the “Path” was in widespread use; and formal prayer, the chanted “remembrance of God” (*dhikr*) and for some “listening to music” (*samaʿ*) were shared practices. The point is not that all of the indigenous Khurasani seekers shared all of these commonalities, nor even that when they did that they agreed on the precise meaning of a common term or the proper performance of a common technique. What was important was rather the mutual intelligibility of the various methods on offer, an intelligibility that enabled productive discussions and interactions between members – and perhaps more importantly between the “swing voters” of potential members – of the different movements. At a more basic level, this intelligibility was enabled by the existence of shared communication tools, including the medium of Arabic as a *lingua franca* of learned exchange and the availability of paper to reproduce books and even write letters. Despite the vast distance between Iraq and many of the cities of Khurasan (the distance from Baghdad to Nishapur is almost as far as from London to Warsaw), these communication tools enabled the learned from these very different regions to share ideas vicariously through writing. As with the role of Latin in medieval Christendom, we must be careful not to take these common communicative tools for granted: when the Sufis later sought to expand in other geographical and social contexts, they would need to acquire other cultural tools such as vernacular languages and popular songs. But in the present context of interaction between the townsmen of Khurasan and Iraq, we are looking at a process by which Iraqi Sufis traveled or dispatched writings east and Khurasani “swing voters” traveled west (typically *en route* to Mecca) and returned home, in both cases carrying what we might now term portable communication devices in their baggage by way of the books they bought (or more likely copied) on their travels.<sup>76</sup>

If this helps us answer the question of how the proprietary Sufi method interacted with its indigenous alternatives in Khurasan, the question of why it was ultimately preferred over them is more difficult to answer. This is not least the case because we are ultimately dealing with many individual acts of choice which, though contributing to an overall pattern of preference, are in their specific rationales long lost in time. Since individual motivations are

notoriously difficult for the historian to assess, the evidence presented for the incorporation and replacement of the Malamatis and Karramis is one of more general antagonisms and alliances. In perhaps the most convincing overall theory, the Sufis in Nishapur and its surrounding cities are seen as having attached themselves to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law, which lent them "an institutional framework in which mysticism could be taught and practiced."<sup>77</sup> But before moving on to the "hard" dimensions of this institutionalization, let us first address its "softer" or discursive dimensions.

As we have seen, from the period of their earliest emergence in Baghdad, the Sufis were very much part of the circles of Quranic, Hadith and even legal expertise. For this reason, we must be wary of older interpretations which saw the developments we are now examining as a process which saw the Sufis finally entering the "mainstream," since this interpretation depends on the double fallacy that the Sufis were outside the "mainstream" to begin with and that there even was any such single "mainstream" that flowed evenly through different places during the preceding centuries.<sup>78</sup> If neither Shafi'i law in particular nor Islamic law in general presented a long-term "mainstream" into which the Sufis were baptized for the first time in Nishapur, what legal learning did represent was a more efficient method of acquiring and making practical use of the textual knowledge with which Sufi and non-Sufi specialists had long been concerned, an efficiency which caused Sufis as well as Malamatis to adhere themselves to its practices. The nature of this efficiency lay in the way in which Shafi'i legal scholarship offered scholars a "diploma" or *ijaza* system in which their authority was socially testified by written certification from their teachers and a clear legal methodology to employ in place of memorizing vast numbers of Hadith and constructing idiosyncratic personal methods for making sense of them.<sup>79</sup> This new efficiency, which not only made the practice of law easier but also ensured that the rulings of legal decision-makers were taken seriously, was the product of system-wide prestige rather than personal reputation and drew various individuals and parties to adopt the Shafi'i method, with the result that both Sufis and Malamatis converged in adhering to the Shafi'i law school and the social settings of its schools and study circles.

Having attracted these parties, Shafi'ism provided them with further discursive tools. One of these was the model of knowledge transmission through master-to-disciple lineages that the Sufis called the *silsila* ("chain"), which we will discuss further below. This in turn, encouraged disciples to model their behavior on that of their masters in a way that echoed the notion of the Prophetic Example or *sunna*.<sup>80</sup> The mastery of Hadith also became increasingly important as Shafi'i Sufis of the period such as Sulami (d.1021) wielded this expert knowledge to create compilations and interpretations of Prophetic traditions in support of the Sufi rather than the Karrami method.<sup>81</sup> This is by no means to say that all Sufis in either Khurasan or elsewhere from

this point became followers of the Shafi'i law school. But in and around Nishapur through the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Sufi infiltration of an ascendant local establishment of Shafi'i law-makers helped them gain an important foothold in the region of Khurasan previously dominated by Karramis and Malamatis.

Two matters are fairly clear, whatever the extent to which they can be directly related to the expansion of the Shafi'i school in Khurasan: the Sufis of the region were overwhelmingly members of the Shafi'i school and among these Sufis there emerged a similarly efficient model of transmitting and authorizing knowledge. Ultimately it was the consequences rather than the causes of this development that were more important. For what we see emerging in and around Nishapur, and spreading from there not only around Khurasan but also westwards into Iraq and as far as Islamic Spain, was a new master–disciple relationship that would permanently transform the nature of the Sufi method and tie it to a powerful set of new social relationships. This “Nishapur model” has been described as one in which “the shaykh, by means of a pact, binds the novice to practice unquestioning obedience, to carry out every order and to reveal all his secret thoughts and inner states without exception while. . . [t]he shaykh is not to pass over any mistake on the part of the novice and can assign him whatever punishments he wishes.”<sup>82</sup> It seems historically crass to follow an older moralizing interpretation which contrasted a “healthy” early period in which the followers of the Sufis of Baghdad were like students attending the lectures of their professors with a “corrupt” later period of slavish adherence to superstition and master-worship. Any sharp dichotomy between a “teaching master” (*shaykh al-ta'lim*) and a “directing master” (*shaykh al-tarbiya*) is probably a simplification, though there is little doubt as to the increasing intensification of the master/disciple relationship.<sup>83</sup> This binding of the disciple to the master was now accompanied by a solemn vow, designated as a *bay'a* (“oath”) after the formal pledges of allegiance made to Muhammad by the first Muslims. And as we will see below when we turn to the more concrete forms of this institutionalization, for many disciples the new “apprenticeship” model involved giving up their family lives for a period of the master's choosing to live in a Sufi hospice, as well as cutting their hair and donning special robes that distinguished them as Sufis.<sup>84</sup> In short, we are entering a period in which it becomes much more feasible to present the Sufis as a distinct corporate movement within society, who marked themselves apart from others and together among themselves by rituals of initiation, pledges of allegiance, modifications of their outward appearance and the use of an arcane idiolect. In social no less than psychological terms, by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to become a Sufi was becoming a much more totalizing experience.

As Sufism came to mean things that it had not meant before its transformation in Khurasan, the increasingly formal requirements of both

participation in a method and membership in a movement found expression in two new types of book that emerged chiefly in Khurasan during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These were the handbook and the biographical compendium, genres which in practice overlapped a good deal. The most famous early examples of the handbook are the *Kitab al-Luma' fi'l-Tasawwuf* (“Book of Flashing Lights concerning Sufism”) of Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d.988) and the *Ta'aruf li-Madhab Abl al-Tasawwuf* (“Introduction to the School of the People of Sufism”) of Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (d.990 or 995). Further examples produced in the following century included the *Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'Ilm al-Tasawwuf* (“Qushayri’s Treatise on the Science of Sufism”) of Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d.1074) and the *Kashf al-Mahjub* (“Revelation of the Hidden”) of 'Ali ibn 'Uthman al-Hujwiri (d. circa 1075).<sup>85</sup>

All of these handbooks were produced by writers either in or from Khurasan. Since one of the clearest common characteristics of the handbooks was the legitimacy of the Sufis emphasized through stressing the conformity of their doctrines and practices to the Quran and the Sunna, it was once commonplace to describe them as “defensive” works whose great achievement was to convince the guardians of Islamic legal orthodoxy that the Sufis were not heretics. This apologia was seen as having been all the more pressing after the execution of Hallaj in 922. However, this perspective is probably a false one, since the Sufis were themselves often the very same people as the scholars of Hadith and exponents of law. But even so, these new books and their distinctive purposes do need explaining. It is here that our contextual picture of competing movements and abundant religious productivity proves its worth, especially when combined with what was in the tenth century at least the newness and unfamiliarity of the Sufis in Khurasan compared to the more familiar and better-established Karramis and Malamatis. For with their self-justifying rhetoric, abundant explanations of doctrine and detailed expositions of practice, the handbooks are probably best seen as advertisements and manifestos intended for Muslim scholars throughout Khurasan who were unfamiliar with and even wary of the Sufi newcomers.

This proselytizing intention probably also spurred another important development in the transmission of Sufism which is seen in the last of the handbooks we have listed: the use of Persian rather than Arabic by Hujwiri in his *Kashf al-Mahjub*. We might also see the Sufis’ relationship to the obscure urban artisanal movement known as *futuwwa* (“youthful chivalry”) as a related strategy for the cooption of regional rivals in which textual production played a similar “rebranding” role, as seen in the case of the *Kitab al-Futuwwa* (“Book of Youthful Chivalry”) written by the Nishapuri Sufi, Sulami.<sup>86</sup> As with the move to socialize the frontier warrior-ascetics and the world-renouncing Karramis, in the Sufis’ attempt to redirect the lower class violence of the *futuwwa* and related ‘*ayyar* gangs of the Khurasani towns and countryside, we can see a reflection of the moralizing middle ground sought

by the Baghdad Sufis that fits well with the fact that many of Khurasan's chief Sufis were members of the urban legal and property-owning establishment.<sup>87</sup>

The other important new type of book which emerged in this period was the biographical compendium or "book of generations" (*kitab al-tabaqat*).<sup>88</sup> Whether as a separate book or a section within a larger book, it was in this genre of text that we can finally see the emergence of a fully-fledged Sufi "tradition" defined by the historical self-consciousness of its members. For the "book of generations" served as a textual means by which present forms of Sufi knowledge and their practitioners gained legitimacy and prestige through being presented as heirs to a lineal tradition that reached in an unbroken "chain" through every generation to the person of Muhammad. In textual terms, what this involved was the collection (and in some cases we must assume the creation) of biographical notices on the linking figures of every "generation" or *tabaqa*. Here was a process of the invention of tradition which required that the semi-legendary ascetics and pietists of the seventh and eighth centuries be presented as Sufis and that Sufi teachings themselves be seen as the original doctrine of Muhammad as transmitted through the ages.

Unsurprisingly, the writers of these biographical compendia tended to end the chain of reception at their own masters and thence themselves, a process which, once the genre was invented, would be repeated whenever new versions of such texts were written. This repeatable procedure allowed tradition to serve as a form of transferable symbolic capital that could link the Prophet and the early Sufis of Baghdad to eleventh century Khurasan as easily as to nineteenth century India or to whichever time and place in which the biographical handler of tradition happened to be writing. But back in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when, at the hands of Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami in Khurasan and Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d.1038) in central Iran, the earliest extant Sufi biographical compendia were written, the "book of generations" performed two main operations. First, in a consequence of the Sufis' familiarity with the techniques of scriptural learning, it borrowed from Hadith scholarship the method (or rhetoric) by which authentic knowledge of Muhammad's words was verified by means of a chain (*sanad*) of transmitters linked back to the Prophet himself. This was a chain which the Sufis replicated in the chains of transmission they used to authenticate the words of their predecessors and in their concept of the chain of initiatic descent (*silsila*). Second, the "book of generations" genre performed a back-projection into the venerable past of the more recent development of master-disciple bonds of allegiance and initiation. Through creating biographical chains which connected the Sufis of later times and distant places with men considered as their pious ancestors, the biographical compendium afforded the Sufis the comfort that their beliefs and practices were those recommended by none other than the Prophet himself. And between Muhammad in Mecca

and men like Sulami in Nishapur, there stood the likes of Junayd in Baghdad a few generations earlier, whose remembered lives and books of advice now served as resources in the construction of a Sufi tradition.<sup>89</sup>

In this way too, writing in a Khurasan in which the Malamatis were still much respected, even fond local memories of the Malamati “blame seekers” could be incorporated into this remembered past in which competition between distinct movements was glossed over. As a result, Malamati masters were inserted into the lineages of the Sufis and their distinct history was elided as the Malamatis became textually remembered as only a sub-group of the Sufis.<sup>90</sup> Even when the biographical texts were not wholly read, Sufis committed to heart the bare structure of their chains of knowledge and verification that in turn became seen as charismatic wires in which not only conscious knowledge was transmitted but also the mysterious blessing power of *baraka* seen as literally handed down from the Prophet through each generation’s initiatic handshake in a Sufi form of apostolic succession. Through these discursive means, the backward creation of an at least partially imagined tradition allowed for the forward creation of much more tangible forms of tradition by way of the lineage-creation that we will see coming into full fruition in Chapter 2 in our discussion of the Sufi brotherhoods. Associating with an ascendant legal school, teaching in novel ways, advertising ideas through new types of book and tying living proponents to a venerable past: these were some of the “soft” or discursive methods by which the Sufis won a following in Khurasan. They were helped in this process of expansion and incorporation by the fact that there was now a more tangible Sufi social “body” into which new followers might be incorporated by way of the *madrassa* and *khanaqah*. It is to this “hard” aspect of the Sufis’ institutionalization that we must now turn.

What is interesting here is that the acquisition and development of these distinct concrete spaces for Sufi activity not only occurred in Khurasan, and not only occurred through the adaptation of institutions invented by their rival Karramis, but, in then spreading westwards, acted as an institutional counterbalance to the eastward movement of doctrines and persons a generation or two earlier. In other words, we can see a pattern of circulation at work: the Sufism that began in Iraq became something else after moving to Khurasan before then returning to its western homeland in permanently altered form. The first of these new institutions is often not considered to be a Sufi institution at all. But if the *madrassa* (“place of study”) was never a uniquely Sufi institution, it was one in which Sufis have operated from its earliest appearance in the eleventh century to the present day. While the earliest *madrassas* appear to have been associated with the Karramiyya, as colleges for the study of the “Islamic sciences,” *madrassas* effectively owed their expansion to the collusion of the Muslim scholarly class with the nomadic Saljuq Turks who in the middle of the eleventh century steadily



conquered the cities of Khurasan before finally subduing Baghdad in 1055.<sup>91</sup> Needing not only a literate and legally-informed bureaucracy to manage their vast conquests, but also the sanction of legitimacy that came through the public support of Muslim social norms, the Great Saljuq dynasty (1037–1157) channeled part of their material resources into constructing a large network of such colleges right across their domains, so aligning themselves to a trans-regional religious establishment that they themselves substantially (or at least institutionally) created.<sup>92</sup> Although *madrasas* are usually thought of as places for the study of the Quran and Shari‘a, as we have already seen in most cases the leading Sufis were themselves recognized experts in these disciplines. Once again, the designation “mystic” robs the Sufis of the multiplicity of skills that helped them succeed.

With the books and treatises it comprised by the eleventh century, “the science of Sufism” or *‘ilm al-tasawwuf* could now itself be conceived as one of the religious sciences alongside the mastery of Arabic grammar, the interpretation of scripture and the techniques of jurisprudence. As such, it was able to find a place in the readings of those associated with the new *madrasa* colleges, if probably not being formally taught within them. Of course, this professorial version was very much a bookish brand of Sufism. But in being connected to a salaried official class of bureaucrats and lawyers, this respectable Sufi method of knowledge (respectable by now through its prestige as a “tradition”) received the impetus that would finally enable it to incorporate or suppress its competitors.<sup>93</sup> The leading light of this “college Sufism” was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), a public intellectual whose mastery of academic politics and intellectual trends saw him elevated to the position of rector of the great Nizamiyya *madrasa* founded in 1065 in Baghdad.<sup>94</sup> If it is no longer necessary to see Ghazali as the man who finally brought Sufism into the “mainstream” – as if it was ever anywhere else – he does exemplify the power that came with connecting the Sufis to new government-sponsored institutions of learning. While not the most original Sufi book, his massive *Ihya ‘Ulum al-Din* (“Revivification of the Religious Sciences”) did perform the important function of systematizing many of the ideas developed by earlier Sufis into coherent and intelligible form. As a result, it was read for centuries after his death down to the present day. Among his many other works (which included a short influential commentary placing the Quranic Verse of Lights into line with Sufi ideas of the cosmic Light of Muhammad), the most effective in the propagation of Sufism was a shrewd Arabic autobiography in which this most famous scholar of his day described his own journey towards truth as one in which he pursued every branch of philosophy and book-learning before finally realizing that it was the Sufis who held the true keys to wisdom.<sup>95</sup>

While the *madrasa* was certainly an important area for Sufi influence, the most characteristically Sufi institution which would develop in Khurasan

during this period was that of the *khanaqah* or residential Sufi lodge, which in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries the Saljuqs also came to patronize. Although on both the eastern and western limits of Islamic rule, frontier ascetics had previously dwelt in fortified compounds known as *ribats* (a term which in some areas would also later be adopted for Sufi lodges), for the most part the early Sufis of Iraq and Khurasan had met either in the homes of their masters or in public mosques.<sup>96</sup> Their gatherings, like those of the scholarly *‘ulama* from whom they were not clearly distinguished, were typically conceptualized through the notion of the *halqa* or “circle” that gathered around a particular master. As we have seen, most of the early Sufis seem to have had day jobs, whether as artisans or practicing lawyers, and although some early figures (such as the *bakim* Tirmidhi) were independently wealthy, they were not wealthy because of their teachings or claims to metaphysical status. In the course of the centuries between approximately 1000 and 1300, this picture would change radically and the first step in this direction was the creation of propertied institutions specifically earmarked for Sufi activity. While we will see the fuller ramifications of these developments in Chapter 2, its foundations were already being laid well before 1100.

More through the serendipities of preservation and archaeological research than through any innate chronological primacy, probably the earliest surviving version of one of these Sufi lodges is found in the far west of the medieval Islamic world in Spain. This is the tenth century *ribat* that was excavated in the late 1980s from the coastal sand dunes at Guardamar in the modern Spanish province of Valencia, what was at the time of the *ribat*’s



**Figure 1.4** The First Sufi Institutions: The Ribat at Guardamar, Spain (Image: Nile Green)

construction part of the Muslim caliphate of Cordoba.<sup>97</sup> Established in 944 according to the Arabic inscription on its foundation stone, the *ribat* at Guardamar comprised a communal mosque, a large reception area, lodging rooms for pilgrims, and thirteen cells for the residential hermits.<sup>98</sup> In a pointer to the religious exercises that were practiced there, each of the cells contained its own prayer niche, while Arabic graffiti survive from the late eleventh/early twelfth century in which pilgrims ask for prayers to be said on their behalf.<sup>99</sup> There is considerable debate over the extent to which such *ribats* spread across Islamic Spain and the regions of North and Saharan Africa to which Spain was connected.<sup>100</sup> However, Arabic sources from Muslim Spain do point to the existence of an extensive network by the eleventh century, ranging from Denia and Almeria on the eastern coast to Toledo and Badajoz in the interior and to Silves on the western fringes of the Iberian peninsula.<sup>101</sup> An eleventh century *ribat* has even been located in the Balearic Islands now better known for sunbathing saturnalia than ascetic retirement, as well as in Sicily.<sup>102</sup>

According to some scholars, the *ribats* were linked to a militaristic spirituality that was distinctive to Islamic Spain, though we have already noted the presence of such warrior ascetics on the eastern Byzantine Christian and Buddhist Central Asian frontiers of Islam.<sup>103</sup> It remains unclear how this frontier jihad of the *ribats* was linked to other religious currents in Islamic Spain, including Sufism. However, Arabic biographical dictionaries from Islamic Spain do frequently refer to *ribats* as places of ascetic and other pious practices and these clearly formed the day-to-day life of their residents even if they were at times involved in holy war.<sup>104</sup> As in the emergent *khanaqahs* of Khurasan religious literature was also being created in the *ribats*, as in the case of the renunciant poetry of Ibn Tahir al-Zahid (“the ascetic,” d.988).<sup>105</sup> In another echo of what we will shortly see of the commercial links of the Sufi lodges emerging in Iran around the same time, it has also been argued that the coastal *ribats* of Spain and Morocco were multi-purpose institutions that served maritime traders as well as ascetics.<sup>106</sup> In all likelihood, what we see in the *ribats* of Islamic Spain is a regional religious formation, which though echoing the pious warriors of the eastern Byzantine frontier, was particular to the Islamic west and developed its own religious sub-culture there. This would reflect the fact that Sufism followed a different pattern in Spain (or al-Andalus) more generally, where its theorists were often attacked for straying too far from the legal literalism of the Maliki school. However, even if we cannot be sure how closely the “militaristic spirituality” of the early *ribats* was connected with the many Sufis of al-Andalus, the archaeological excavations of the *ribat* at Guardamar do allow us to examine in detail at an architectural level what an early Muslim ascetic (and perhaps by inference a Sufi) lodge looked like. For as time passed, the *ribats* did lose their early militaristic dimensions and became predominantly places of Sufi

retreat. Even if we cannot easily identify the early generations of *ribat* dwellers with the Sufis of Spain, the excavations at Guardamar remain tremendously valuable in presenting us with the earliest physical remains of a Sufi or Sufi-like collective dwelling available anywhere in the world in a period in which such purpose-built lodges were first appearing in various Muslim settings.

Turning back to the Middle East, the earliest significant individual figure whom we can connect to the development of the new expressly Sufi “lodges” lived in southern Iran, which with its closer proximity to Baghdad in the course of the tenth century had developed a brand of Sufism with much in common with the sober moralizing of Junayd.<sup>107</sup> This figure was Abu Ishaq al-Kazaruni (d.1035), named after the southern Iranian city of Kazarun in which he lived and whose deeds were recorded in a Persian biography composed by the son of his successor.<sup>108</sup> While, like other early Sufis in Iran, his teachings do seem to have laid somewhat more stress on the theme of love between humans and God, Kazaruni was also very much a moralist. For present purposes, though, he is important for having established a network of no fewer than sixty-five lodges across southern Iran. While a small residential cadre of his disciples seems to have dwelt permanently in these lodges, the buildings were primarily intended as charitable shelters for travelers and the poor. In this sense, they should be seen as a somewhat distinct development from the model of the *ribat* developing earlier in the Islamic west and of the *khanaqah* developing in Khurasan around the same time, since the latter were primarily intended as training houses for Sufis themselves in which the residents were sworn to abide by increasingly elaborate sets of house rules. Kazaruni left no such system of rules, but even so, his network of lodges does point towards an important development in the Sufis’ relationship with wider society in which we see one of the first of the many reciprocal exchanges by which Sufis negotiated to mutual benefit with different social groups. Since Kazaruni’s lodges lay on some of the most important trading routes of the Middle East, many of his traveling guests were merchants (here echoing Spain), who in return for his hospitality made the donations that rendered further expansion of the network possible. Within in a short time, Kazaruni lodges reached all the way from central Iran to the port cities of eastern China. With Kazaruni, the Sufis were for the first time attracting significant capital investment to themselves as Sufis, investment which in turn funded further publicity for their movement. Given Kazaruni’s characteristic moralism, and his upbringing among Muslim preachers to local Zoroastrians, it seems fair to consider his network as a form of social outreach in which supper came at the price of repeating a few prayers. As the cultural frontier receded, here was another interior consolidation movement deepened the Muslim commitments of the rural inhabitants and passing traders in the deserts and mountains of Iran.

A no less interesting figure who contributed to these “hard” institutional developments was Abu Sa‘id ibn Abi’l-Khayr (d.1049), a Khurasani master who resided for some time in Nishapur but spent most of his life in the semi-rural setting of Mayhana in present-day Turkmenistan.<sup>109</sup> There he established a *khanaqah* which unlike those of Kazaruni held the spiritual training of its inmates as its central purpose. To this end, Abu Sa‘id compiled a list of ten rules which his resident disciples were expected to obey. In themselves, the rules were not at all novel – to remain ritually clean, to follow all the formal prayers and perform additional orisons at night, to recite the Quran and perform *dhikr* daily, for example – but placed together they signaled a shift to the more formalized institution of Sufi “training” that we have already seen developing. The shift was all the more significant because with Abu Sa‘id, these training rules were also attached to a residential institution. Even at this time, Abu Sa‘id’s was not a unique case in Khurasan. Further south in the city of Herat in what is now Afghanistan, his contemporary ‘Abdullah Ansari (d.1089) issued a similar set of rules in local Persian dialect which seem to have been intended for easy memorization by his followers.<sup>110</sup> However, Abu Sa‘id is a more interesting figure than either Ansari or Kazaruni, since he was not only a wealthy man (which against the Khurasani background of figures like Tirmidhi was not in itself unique) but one who saw no contradiction in flaunting that wealth while remaining a Sufi. For Abu Sa‘id, the poverty (*faqr*) that previous Sufis had made much of was an inward and symbolic state and so the possession and even enjoyment of material assets was no obstacle to spiritual progress. In this, he illustrates the moral contradictions and social confrontations that still very much characterized Islam in Khurasan in this period.

While Abu Sa‘id was happy to borrow the institution of the *khanaqah* from the Karramiyya, his enjoyment of the good life stood in direct opposition to their vehement stress on poverty. And while in compiling a set of pious rules for the *khanaqah*’s residents, he reflected the outward Sunni conformism we have seen among the Sufis of Nishapur no less than of Baghdad, his emphasis on musical performances and sumptuous dinner parties placed him into disrepute with many of his contemporaries. Although some of the libertine poems on wine, pretty boys and sing-songs may be spurious attributions, there is no doubt that Abu Sa‘id laid great emphasis on the practice of “listening” (*sama‘*), which in this context involved love songs set to drums and lutes which sent audiences into ecstasies expressed through wild dancing. In such practices we can see an important fusion taking place between words and referents in which, with the shift of words to new social locations, the semantic range of the respectable early technical vocabulary developed in Iraq was stretched to refer to and thereby lend respectability to practices which the words’ original users probably never had in mind. For example, while the word and concept of *sama‘* was discussed much earlier in Baghdad,

the actual practices we see developing around the likes of Abu Sa‘id in eleventh century Khurasan were in all likelihood not borrowed from Iraqi Sufis at all but from the secular hobbies of the rural Khurasani aristocracy who in lifestyle and status Abu Sa‘id so closely resembled.<sup>111</sup> This process of the grafting of a linguistic and conceptual superstructure onto the deeper social structures of life in different environments helped Sufism to embed itself into the new communities to which it expanded from the tenth century, first in Khurasan and later in India, Anatolia and elsewhere.

Dwelling in the lodge of which he was master; surrounded by a band of men who had sworn to obey his every command; protecting the poor who sought the safety of his shadow; receiving grandees and princes as though he were one of their rank; enjoying the courtly pleasures of music and verse: all of these activities are found in abundance in the two biographies of Abu Sa‘id written in the century after his death.<sup>112</sup> On the one hand, in the biographies’ many stories of miraculous aid to the poor, we see a new appeal of Sufism – or at least of powerful Sufis – to peasant social groups. On the other hand, we see the Sufi as founder of a lodge which would be inherited by his successors (often his own family) and survive into future generations as the living Sufi became the dead saint. We have already seen the concept of the “Friends of God” or *awliya allah* developing. In this period, the concept was acquiring the institutional capital that would transform it from a discursive to a social category: into the living Friend as spiritual aristocrat and the dead Friend as venerated saint.

Once again, essential to this development was the interaction of texts with the concrete resources of their contexts. In biographies written by those who inherited the capital and status of the founders of lodges, Sufis like Abu Sa‘id and Kazaruni were venerated in the language of Friendship with God, and their spiritual rank and miraculous power were presented in turn as no less inheritable than their property. If these developments had not yet come to fruition in the eleventh century itself, when we are after all only seeing lodges being founded for the first time, it is important that we register from this early stage the implicit and causal connections between lodge-founding and shrine-founding. Teaching lodges did not become saintly shrines by a process of long decay and “spiritual malaise” as an earlier generation of historians once had it, but were from their beginning interdependent aspects of the same institutions.<sup>113</sup> Men like Abu Sa‘id, Kazaruni and Ansari were buried in the lodges they founded and even in their own lifetimes in the eleventh century their contemporary Hujwiri could describe his pilgrimages to the tombs of the earlier Sufis in his cautiously conformist handbook on Sufi practice.<sup>114</sup> What we see in the creation of the lodges, then, was the heady fusion of the symbolic capital of Friendship with the material capital of real estate. In the following chapters we will trace the vast repercussions of this development as these shrine-lodges spread from Khurasan to every corner of the Islamic world.

## Summary

What we are left with from the earliest centuries of Sufi history is almost exclusively textual evidence, much of it highly arcane and containing little reference to the specific contexts in which it was written. In finding ways in which we can connect this written evidence to the world from which it emerged, our task has partly been one of trying to understand the appeal of writings that allowed Sufism to develop and spread beyond its early core of supporters. In order to do so, over the previous pages we have traced the series of developments which between around 850 and 1100 ensured that the term *sufi* referred to a much larger range of persons, ideas, activities and institutions by the beginning of the twelfth century than it had when it was first used by Muslims three centuries earlier.

The first major development we have seen is what we can call a discursive one, by which the early Sufis used scriptural resources to develop a respectable Sufi lexicon with which to label the ideas and activities they promoted. Whether referring to specific persons as “Friends of God” (*awliya allah*), specific activities as “Remembrance” (*dhikr*) or specific social attitudes as “Reliance on God” (*tawakkul*), this Sufi lexicon connected the Sufis from the outset to wider developments in the mainstream of Islamic thought. As well as being respectable, we must also conclude that the followers who increasingly gathered around the Sufi teachers found this lexicon to be intelligible and useful, allowing them to make sense of their own experiences during their meditations and prayers and so to deepen their commitment to the larger psychological and social visions that Muslims were developing in these centuries. As we have seen, this lexicon and the different types of text that used it to elaborate doctrines on the Path and the Friends were intelligible in Khurasan no less than Iraq, helping what was originally an Iraqi movement to gain followers in eastern regions that had previously developed their own religious movements. It was in these eastern regions that we have the fullest textual evidence for the consolidation of Sufism from a teaching into a tradition, a process in which we have seen a central role played in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries by biographical works that used a genealogical framework to present Sufi doctrine as having been passed down the “generations” (*tabaqat*) from the time of Muhammad to the time of the author in question. In this, we see a process by which the writings and remembered lives of the early Sufis of Iraq (as well as the semi-historical ascetics of an earlier period) served as the “usable past,” as history that could be strategically employed to create a prestigious and legitimizing tradition.

Not only did this prestige and legitimacy help Sufis win further supporters and shield them from the potential criticism of having committed deviating “innovation” (*bida'*). It also placed their methods squarely into a dominant

epistemological framework in which tradition and revelation were considered as superior to invention and reason.<sup>115</sup> The Sufis' repeated attempts to link themselves with the authoritative past – whether articulated through their use of Quran and Hadith or through their own lineages of masters – points again to the danger of the notion of the Sufis as “mystics” engaged primarily in the pursuit of experience. While the pursuit of experience – what by the end of this period many Sufis were referring to as “tasting” or *dhawq* – was an important feature of Sufi activity, we must remember that the Sufis were engaged in a perpetual struggle to connect these experiences with the authorized concepts of tradition denoted in the early lexicon. This is not to say that the Sufis somehow “got stuck” in this lexicon and tradition, for in the following chapters we will see that while the early lexicon remained, what it meant and referred to was expanded considerably by later writers. Tradition is, after all, an adaptable resource.

In the process of competition and incorporation through which they expanded from their early arena in Iraq, the Sufis would also be helped by their integration into the institutional frameworks of wider Sunni scholarship (such as the Shafi'i law school and the *madrassa* college) and by their development of institutional mechanisms of their own (such as the authoritarian master–disciple relationship and the *khanaqah* lodges). Compared to the rigorous demands of ascetics such as the *zuhhad* and Karamiyya, the appeal of the Sufi message was probably also helped by its stress on social conformism and moderation. For though there were certainly ecstatic Sufis who won fame in this period, among both scholarly *'ulama* and ordinary people, it was the Sufis' harmonization of their metaphysical teachings with the mundane structures of social, economic and family life that won them the support needed to outlive and outreach the other ascetic and esoteric movements that rose and fell beside them.

By the end of the period between 850 and 1100, we are also seeing the notion of the Sufi as a Friend of God with special access to God's power enabling Sufis to gain a larger following among the ordinary people for whom miraculous intercessions in their ordinary lives was of more pressing importance than a direct vision of God. Seen in the careers of such men as Abu Sa'īd of Mayhana, this tentative expansion of the franchise beyond the scholarly and urban to the illiterate and rural should not be seen as a process of “decline.” Rather, it saw the playing out of the social ramifications of the notions of Friendship explored by some of the very earliest Sufi theorists. As we will see in Chapter 2, when given full vent, this expansion of the franchise was arguably the most important development in Sufi history. While we have therefore by no means reached the end of the story, for present at least we can say that overall the period between around 850 and 1100 saw Sufism develop from being merely a locally-used word designating “wool wearers” to a method of knowledge elaborated in increasing numbers of texts and finally to



a tradition enabled by institutional mechanisms of collective affiliation and reproduction.

## Notes

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