

## Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (714/17-801)

- She is the most famous female saint in Islam. For a long time in fact the only female saint who was really well known and featured in the standard accounts of Sufism. We now know that there were a lot of other powerful and spiritually inclined women with public profiles in the early period of Islam, as we shall see in a moment, but still, Rabi'a stands out.
- She lived in the very early days of the Islamic religion – born within 80 years of death of the Prophet. There are few records of any sort from this period, as it was only in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century that the religion and culture of Islam began to be put down in written form. The first life of the prophet, for instance, by Ibn Ishāq, did not appear until mid-8<sup>th</sup> century (767). Up until this point, knowledge had been transmitted through an oral tradition.
- There is therefore no written material at all and virtually no contemporary sources for Rabi'a. She is one of a number of early Sufi figures, including Dhul Nūn the Egyptian (d. about 810) and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d.874), that we know largely through the writers of the later tradition. In the case of Rabi'a, she has been best known through the writings of 'Attar, who was 13<sup>th</sup> century (d. about 1220), in his *Tadhkirāt al-Awliyā'* (Memoirs of the Saints). You may or may not know that there is a whole genre of writing within the Sufi tradition which consists of collections of stories and saying of the great saints of previous generations, and these have been a major factor in the formation of the identity of Sufism as a distinct tradition, and even today provide us with the bulk of our knowledge about many important figures.

Margaret Smith, who is still probably the most important biographer of Rabi'a, although her book was written in 1928, has said:

One cannot go so far as to throw doubt upon her actual historical existence, but the traditions about her life and teachings include a very large proportion of legend which today can hardly be distinguished from authentic information.<sup>1</sup>

A new book in French by Jean Annetay<sup>2</sup> tries to go back to the very earliest existing sources, and one has to say that they are pretty scant. Nowadays we have discovered material that is much earlier than 'Attar, for example al-Sulamī's *Dhikr al-niswa* which was written at the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> century, which has much less of a 'reworked' feeling to it, but it is still relatively remote – 200 years – from her actual life.<sup>3</sup>

- All this raises the question of how much it matters about historical verification in the case of any great spiritual figure. The importance of Rabi'a is that from the very earliest days of Sufism she has been a representative of a sort of spirituality; she is famous for her love for God, and her fierce refusal to admit anything except the love of God into her heart; her intense concentration and devotion to the spiritual life and her refusal to engage with worldly things.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Smith *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya-Kaysiyya*, Encyclopaedia of Islam 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Annetay, *Une femme soufie en Islam*, Entrelacs, Paris, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> al-Sulamī *Early Sufi Women* Trans. Rkia Cornell, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1999.

As of the poems we are going to read; many of them are very well known, but they have come to us through a complex tradition, initially as I said an oral one. One of the traditions concerning her was that she was a musician – a flute player – so the assumption has to be that they have been passed down through the centuries, perhaps as songs, until the point at which they were recorded. The corpus has tended to grow over the years, as is the tendency of oral traditions; the more remote from the actual historical time, the more elaborate the exposition. Recent scholarship has shown, for instance, that her most famous poem, “I have loved with two loves” only appears in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in Aflāki’s *Feats of the Knowers of God*, and is also found attributed to other sources. Similarly, some of the stories in the hagiography are also found as attributed to other people.

But, as I said, the importance of Rabi‘a is as a kind of archetypal figure who has a central place in the Sufi tradition – a very definite existence in consciousness – and she is often referred to by later writers, Ibn ‘Arabī for instance, as an exemplar of spiritual devotion. Michael Sells says about all this:

To exclude Rabi‘a and the fascinating issues her sayings raise concerning mysticism and gender on the basis of the criterion of composition of the written texts would be to reinforce the written over the oral in a way that does not reflect the way the Islamic tradition works.<sup>4</sup>

### **Life and Times**

- We do have a basic account of her life. This tells us that she was born and lived all her life in Basra, in Iraq, a city at the head of the Persian Gulf, in what was ancient Mesopotamia. So she was of Iraqi descent, not Arab. The tradition is that she was the 4<sup>th</sup> daughter of what is described as a ‘poor family’. It seems her father’s occupation was ferrying people across the Tigris. Jean Annetay feels that this emphasis upon the ‘poverty’ of her family was basically a code indicating that she came from some sort of spiritual line, which would of course be pre-Islamic, non-Arab line.

When she was a young woman, possibly very young, she was stolen from her family and sold as a slave. Some commentators say that she was a prostitute, but there does not really seem much evidence for that. But she eventually obtained release; I will read you Attar’s account in Arberry’s translation.

By day she continually fasted and served God, and by night she worshipped standing until day. One night her master awoke from sleep and, looking through the window of his apartment, saw Rabi‘a bowing prostrate and praying:

“ Oh God, You know that the desire of my heart is in conformity to Your command, and that the light of my eye is in serving Your court. If the affair lay with me, I would not rest one hour from serving You. But You Yourself have set me under the hand of a creature.”

Such was her litany. Her master perceived a lantern suspended without any chain above her head, the light of which filled the whole house. Seeing this, he was afraid. Rising up, he returned to his bedroom and sat pondering until dawn. When day broke, he summoned Rabi‘a, was gentle with her and set her free.

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<sup>4</sup> Sells *Early Islamic Mysticism*, Paulist Press 1996, p. 26.

“Give me permission to depart”, Rabi‘a said.

He gave her leave, and she left the house and went into the desert.<sup>5</sup>

After her release, she settled in the desert, in the caves at the edge of the town where many other ascetics had set up residence, or in a house at the edge of the town until her death, and she is buried just outside Basra. There is a much visited tomb in Jerusalem as well, but the existence of this just seems to reinforce the sense of legend and mystery surrounding her physical existence.

- The stories that appear in the hagiographies are very much about her great love and devotion to God and her extreme ascetism. She never married, and it seems that her status as freed slave gave her a certain amount of freedom and exempted her from many of the social pressures exerted upon women of the time. The accounts are characterised by an extraordinary sense of intimacy with God; conversations between her and her Lord are often described. She is also depicted as being knowledgeable, and of having interaction with some of the most important figures of her day. In ‘Attar, the conversations are often with another very famous early figure, Ḥasan of Basra, but as it now seems that Hasan was only 11 when she died, we have to understand that these are archetypal stories. It is interesting that she appears here as his teacher;

Once Rabi‘a sent Hasan three things – a piece of wax, a needle and a hair.

“Be like wax” she said, ‘Illuminate the world and yourself burn. Be like a needle, always working naked. When you have done these things, a thousand years will be for you as a hair.’”

“Do desire us to get married?”, Hasan asked Rabi‘a.

“The tie of marriage belongs to those who have being”, Rabi‘a replied. “Here being has disappeared, for I have become naughted to self and exist only through Him. I belong solely to Him. I live in the shadow of His control. You must ask my hand of Him, not me.”

“How did you find this secret, Rabi‘a?” Hasan asked.

“I lost all ‘found’ things in Him.” Rabi‘a replied.

“How do you know Him?” Hasan enquired.

“You know the ‘how’; I know the ‘howless’”, Rabi‘a said.<sup>6</sup>

In al-Sulamī, her main companion is a man called Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 777-8) who was one of the earliest traditionalist – an collector of *ḥadīth*, or traditions of the Prophet. And this is probably a more accurate historical depiction. Al-Sulamī’s text, which was only discovered in 1991, rather revises our notions about women in early Islam; he lists 82 female saints with stories about them, and Rkia Cornell,

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<sup>5</sup> Farid al-Din al-Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, transl. A J Arberry, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 46

who has translated the book into English as *Early Sufi Women*<sup>7</sup> concludes that there were probably communities of women living an ascetic life in both Iraq, around Basra, and in Iran. It is interesting that the other early Sufis such as Dhul Nun and al-Bisṭāmī are also depicted by him as having women teachers; the latter had a woman called Fāṭīma al-Nishapurī who was famous for her Qur'ān recitation. All this reinforces the sense of Rabi'a as an archetype; a representative of this very early spiritual emergence in the first years of Islam.

### Cultural Context

- It is of significance that Rabi'a lived in Basra, as in this very early period this was one of the most important centres of the new Islamic world, and perhaps the most important in terms of the development of a specifically Islamic culture. As we talked a bit about the pre-Islamic culture of the Arabs, it is perhaps relevant to talk a bit about what happened in the first period after the revelation when Rabi'a lived.

The Arabs, on fire with the passion of the new religion, burst out of the desert in the last years of the Prophet's life and in the thirty or forty years following to conquer huge swathes of territory from both the Byzantine and Persian empires. From being essentially nomadic tribesmen (although they were not quite as uncultivated as some people have depicted) they found themselves rulers of an empire, occupying the great centres of civilisations such as Jerusalem and Damascus – the latter was the capital of the Umayyad dynasty. Many of the companions of the Prophet and early followers therefore settled in this new territory, and Basra was one of the most important places where a community grew up.

- This period was also one in which the shape of the new religion and associated culture began to be determined. Basra was a centre for the gathering of *hadith* – the traditions and saying of the Prophet – which became the basis for Islamic law. It was also a centre for the first intellectual movement of Islam, *kalām*, which is often described as 'Theology' but it does not really compare with Christian theology. *Kalām* was more a way of developing debate about religious matters, of which the most important in this early period was the free-will and the nature of the Qur'ān. And it was also a centre for the development of the mystical aspect which became known as Sufism, with figures such as Rabi'a and Hasan al-Basrī. Margaret Smith says for instance:

Rabi'a differs from those of the early Sufis who were simply ascetics and quietists, in that she was true mystic, inspired by ardent love and conscious of having entered into the unitive life with God. She was one of the first Sufis to teach the doctrine of pure Love, the disinterested love of God for his sake alone, and one of the first to combine with her teaching on love the doctrine of *kashf* the unveiling, to the lover of the Beatific Vision.<sup>8</sup>

- Within academic circles, there is debate as to whether Arabic culture developed in a way which was:

#### 1) Exogenous

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<sup>7</sup> al-Sulami *Early Sufi Women*

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Smith *Rabi'a al-Adawiyya-Kaysiyya*, Encyclopaedia of Islam 2.

ie Growing by additions on the outside

## 2) Endogenous

Growing by additions from inside

Given the history, the first would seem to be the common-sense view. At the time of the conquest, Arab culture was very much an oral tradition of poetry and folklore, the only written text being the Qur'ān. 200 years later we find fully developed disciplines of history, ḥadīth scholarship, Qur'ānic commentary, grammar, law, with philosophy and science about to take off. They had also developed a mystical tradition, and distinctive artistic and architecturally cultures.

In the case of science and philosophy, one can trace influences from other cultures, and it is tempting to assume that the Islamic sciences – history, law, grammar, etc. – and also perhaps mystical thought (for which the obvious source would be the 'holy man' culture of late antiquity) were also derived, even though we do not know exactly from what.

However, attempts to demonstrate this have failed, and the endogenous view has largely come to prevail in scholarly circles. A good example is architecture; although the early Muslims took the basic form of the mosque from the prevalent culture, from the very earliest examples that we have the mosques have a very distinctive Islamic character which cannot be put down to mere imitation and derivation.

It seems to me that the same is true of the mystical tradition which sprang up in the first centuries from really two main centres; Basra and then later Baghdad, and the far north-east of Iran, the area known as Khorasān, where people like Bistāmī and Hallāj came from. Although one can see influence from the Christian tradition in the central regions, and from Buddhism and Hinduism in the east, what emerges has a distinctive Islamic 'voice' from the very beginning. It really is a new form of expression. And the main reason for this, I would suggest, is the very central place that the Qur'ān played in the mystical tradition; Qur'ān recitation was one of the central pillars of spiritual practice at this time, and the language and imagery of the text – which is very different from that of the Bible – imprinted themselves upon the consciousness of these early mystics and therefore their expression.

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