

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM

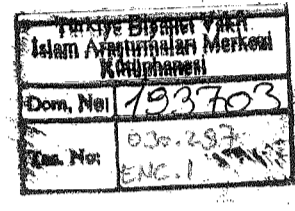
THREE

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Arslān al-Dimashqī, Shaykh

Shaykh Arslān b. Ya'qūb, al-Ja'barī **al-Dimashqī** (d. between 555/1160 and 560/1164) was a Syrian Šūfi and the "patron saint" of Damascus. Born in Qal'at Ja'bar, in northeastern Syria, between 470/1077 and 475/1082, he settled in Damascus probably at a fairly early date and earned his living as a carpenter for about twenty years. He initially resided in the Christian quarter of Bāb Tūmā, where he applied himself to his devotional practices in a mosque not far from his workshop. It is said that he dug a well whose water was reputed to cure stomach-aches; the miracle is still mentioned in Ottoman sources. Later Arslān abandoned his profession in order to devote himself to a life of contemplation, placing himself under the guidance of Abū 'Amir al-Mu'addib. The chain of initiation (*silsila*) of this *shaykh* goes back to Sarī Saqātī (d. 251/865), one of the eminent personalities of the Šūfi school of Baghdad. The link between Arslān and Iraqi Šūfism appears in various anecdotes concerning his life and work. He began to attract disciples quickly, so that the small mosque with which he was associated was soon no longer large enough. Then, for a time, he shared a mosque situated near Bāb Sharqī with his friend, the Šūfi Abū l-Bayān, also known as Ibn al-Hawrānī (d. 556/1160). However, his growing reputation as a saint soon eclipsed that of his companion. Arslān essentially owed his byname, *hāmī al-barr wa-l-shām* ("protector

of Damascus and of its region"), to the fact that he and his disciples settled permanently outside the city walls, taking up residence in a monastery (*ribāt*) adjoining the chapel of Khalid b. al-Walīd (d. 21/642), the Muslim general who conquered Damascus in 14/635. His relocation to this famous historical site took on a symbolic significance expressing the *shaykh's* dedication to the two aspects of *jihād*, the military and the spiritual. Shaykh Arslān indicated thereby his intention to participate actively in the defence of Damascus, which was besieged by Crusaders in 543/1148. He also placed himself in the political lineage of Nūr al-Dīn (d. 570/1174), a prince of the Turkmen dynasty of the Zangids, which dominated the Muslim East from 521/1127 to 619/1222, and was the first herald of the *jihād* against the Crusaders. Nūr al-Dīn venerated the *shaykh* and had himself buried with a piece of a saw that had belonged to Arslān.

When Arslān died, he was buried in his own *ribāt*, which became a much frequented sanctuary and continues to be to this day. Over the centuries, numerous *ulamā'* and Šūfis expressed the wish to be buried next to him.

According to the sources, Shaykh Arslān's impact was profound and enduring. He is one of the few Syrian Šūfis mentioned in *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* ("The great generations of saints") of al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565), who claims that Arslān assumed the responsibility for the spiritual guidance of all "aspirants" (*murīdīn*) from Syria. Arslān did not establish an initiation path (*ṭarīqa*) in the true sense of the term, but should rather be regarded as the initiator of a school of Syrian spirituality, which was transmitted through the *khūrqa* (mantle) and which focused on the Šūfi approach to the concept of *tauhīd* ("divine oneness"). He

is in fact the author of a *Risāla fi l-tauhīd* ("Epistle on oneness"), written in a highly elliptical and ambiguous style and containing a series of variations on the Šūfi topic of the extinction of human individuality in God (*fanā'*). This incisive text elicited no fewer than twelve commentaries.

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ERIC GEOFFROY

Ashīr

Ashīr, the fourth/tenth-century capital of the Berber Zirid dynasty, is strategically located high in the Ṭīṭerī (Titteri) mountains 100 kilometres south of Algiers, where it commanded the route across the Maghrib from Ifrīqiyya (the eastern Maghrib) to Morocco and Spain, as well as the way to the sea down the valley of the Chélif (Shalaf) River. It consisted of two palatial citadels on the separate sites called Yashīr and Bēnia (Banya). The first was founded in 324/936 by Zīrī b. Manād, the Talkāta ally of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Qa'im (r. 322-34/934-45), to secure the central Maghrib against the Zanāta allies of Córdoba; a substantial

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