

## IBN SABĪL: Crossing Boundaries in the Biography of Asad ibn al-Furāt

While attending a class of the eminent Ḥanafī scholar, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805)<sup>1</sup> one day, Asad ibn al-Furāt heard a voice outside calling out and offering water to travellers. Asad jumped up immediately, went out and accepted the water. When he returned to the class, his teacher asked him in surprise: “O, Maghribī [Arab from North Africa], have you drunk the water for travellers?” Asad answered emphatically: “May God keep you! I am indeed a son of the road (*ibn al-sabīl*).”

Later that evening, Asad was visited by a servant of Muḥammad who conveyed his master’s greetings and handed him a small basket. He said: “My lord only learned today that you are a son of the road. Take this stipend and use it for whatever you need.” Asad recounts that he accepted the purse happily thinking that it was full of [silver] dirhams. When he went back into the house he opened the basket and was delighted to find eighty [gold] dinars.<sup>2</sup>

The appellation of *ibn sabīl* (son of the road) conjures a wide range of images and meanings in Arabic. E.W. Lane writes:

...the son of the road; he whom the road has brought forth; the wayfarer, or traveller: or he who travels much or often: or the traveller who is far from the place of his abode... or the person to whom the way has become short [so that he is unable to continue his journey]; ... who desires the return to his country, or town and finds not what will suffice him; or the traveller who is cut off from his property: or the person who desires a country or town, other than his own, for a necessary affair; or according to Ibn ‘Arafēh, the guest who has become disabled from proceeding in his journey, his means having failed him...<sup>3</sup>

SCRIPTA MEDITERRANEA, Vols XIX-XX 1998-1999, 259

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<sup>1</sup>Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥanafī, disciple of Abū Ḥanīfa, and along with Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798), is considered among the founders of the Hanafī school of Islamic law. He is best known for his book, *al-Siyar al-Kabīr*, a pioneering work on “international” law. See M. Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani’s Siyar*, (Baltimore, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Abū Bakr ‘Abd-Allāh al-Mālīkī, *Riyāḍ al-Nufūs*, Ḥ. Mu’nis, ed. (Cairo, 1951), vol. 1, 175-6. It is al-Mālīkī’s biography that forms the basis of this study.

<sup>3</sup>E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, (Beirut, 1980), vol. 4, 1302.

In the Qur'ān, the wayfarer enjoys the status of someone deserving special consideration in receiving charity:

They ask you of what they should give in charity. Tell them: "What you can spare of your wealth as should benefit the parents, the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarers, for God is not unaware of the good deeds that you do."<sup>4</sup>

The image of a struggling scholar, exhausting all his money and worldly possessions on the road in search of all that there is to learn, appears frequently in the biography of Asad ibn al-Furāt, and is one that serves as a central metaphor of his illustrious life, his career, and his legacy in Islamic history.

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Abū 'Abd-Allāh Asad ibn al-Furāt (son of the Euphrates) ibn Sinān was born in the Mesopotamian town of Ḥarrān in 142/759. He came to the city of Qayrawan (Ifriqiyya: modern Tunisia) when he was two years old with his father, Sinān, who was a soldier (*mujāhid fī Sabīl Allāh*) in the Muslim forces conquering and settling North Africa. His earliest biographers report that the family originated in the city of Nishapur in the province of Khurasan (northeast Iran).<sup>5</sup>

Being the son of a professional soldier, Asad learned early on the hardships and rewards of being on the road in pursuit of a higher cause. His particular mark of distinction, however, would not be made in military service, but rather in scholarship. But fate would have it that Asad ibn al-Furāt was to be best remembered in Islamic history as the commander of the Islamic forces that invaded, conquered, and settled the island of Sicily, bringing it into the fold of the Islamic empire for two centuries.<sup>6</sup>

When Asad was eighteen years old, he decided on a career in scholarship, and in true Muslim fashion he set out on a journey (*riḥla*), which was, along with the pilgrimage to Mecca and commerce, an important venue for the exchange of ideas and goods throughout the vast

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<sup>4</sup>Qur'ān 2: 215.

<sup>5</sup>*Riyāḍ* „, 172.

<sup>6</sup>Muslim rule over Sicily lasted from the conquest of 217/827 until its downfall in 445/1053.

Arabo-Islamic culture survived throughout Norman rule, and the last colonies of Muslims in Sicily survived well into the reign of Frederick II (1220-50). For two historical studies on Asad ibn al-Furāt, see M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani de Sicilia*, C. A. Nallino, ed. (Catania, 1933), 382-417; and U. Rizzitano, "Asad Ibn al-Furāt giureconsulto dell'Ifriqiya" in *Storia e cultura nella Sicilia saracena*, (Palermo: 1975), 3-17.

Islamic empire. The importance of *riḥla* lasted throughout the entire period of classical Islam and is underscored by the fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, who in his *Muqaddimah*, stresses the necessity of making personal contact with as many acknowledged authorities in one's field as possible.<sup>7</sup> Thus his great quest was to seek out the most prestigious scholars in the great academic centres of the medieval Islamic empire. Having grown up in Qayrawan and Tunis, where the legal writings of Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 179/795) were having a great impact on Islamic religious education, Asad travelled to Medina to study directly under the grand master himself. His unquenchable thirst for knowledge and his persistence in exceeding its boundaries and venturing into the unknown tested the patience of his revered professor, Mālik, who suggested that he go to Iraq if he preferred the methodologies of reasoning and speculation to those of traditional learning.<sup>8</sup>

Following the advice of the master, Asad set out on the road once again. Although he would remain loyal to the teachings of Mālik, and would forever be counted among the great jurisconsults of the Maliki school of Islamic law, Asad made considerable forays into the intricate world of "opinion" scholarship (*al-ra'y*) where individual reasoning (*ijtihād*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) accented the writings of the disciples of Abū Ḥanīfa in Kufa and Baghdad. Thus it was more than geographical boundaries that Asad crossed in his pursuit of learning all that there was to learn: he crossed the boundaries of the politics and institutions of learning, and he bridged the worlds of the strict traditionalism of the Medinese (Malikis) and the intellectual adventurism of the Iraqis (Hanafis).

There is an anecdote in the biography of Asad ibn al-Furāt related by a certain Ibn al-Haddād<sup>9</sup> about a young man who used to come and study with Asad. During a session one day, Asad asked the student about his profession. After the student responded, Asad told him to get up [and leave]. The student was shocked and told his professor that he would give up his job if he disapproved of it. Asad responded that it was not the work he objected to, but the student's absence from it. He went on to explain to the student that the "shop" which he owned was the means of his livelihood and the source for subsidising his education. He told him that as a businessman he had certain obligations to his clients, and if he was not there to serve them, they would take

<sup>7</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1967), vol. 3, 307-8.

<sup>8</sup>"In aḥbabta al-ra'ya fa'alayka bi-'l-irāq." *Riyād*", 174.

<sup>9</sup>For an account of the story and genealogy of Ibn al-Ḥaddād, see *Riyād*, 185 and n. 1.

their business elsewhere. He then recommended that the student spend one or two days per week in lessons and the rest tending to his business, and that he should inform his clients when he would be absent.

This story not only underlines the practical side of Asad but also his ability to cross the line, wherever necessary. It also reflects his profound appreciation not only for the suffering one must bear and the sacrifices one must make in the pursuit of knowledge, but the benefits and rewards that it may yield as well. This appreciation led Asad to cross the boundaries and straddle the worlds of scholarship and politics.

Asad's return to Qayrawan at the end of the second Islamic century was received with great enthusiasm, especially in academic circles. He brought with him his famous work, *al-Asadiyya*, a compendium of Islamic law that included notations on questions and answers he pursued in Cairo with the eminent Egyptian scholar, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Qāsim. This work gained immediate and widespread popularity in all the centres of learning throughout much of North Africa. Although the *al-Asadiyya* would eventually be eclipsed by *al-Mudawwana*, a more comprehensive work by his rival and medieval North Africa's premier scholar of Maliki law, Saḥnūn Ibn Sā'id (d. 240/854), Asad's reputation was nonetheless firmly established. He was celebrated for the breadth and depth of his knowledge, his extensive travels, the impressive list of his famous teachers, and the unusual distinction of being a scholar in the traditions of both Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa. No sooner had he returned to Qayrawan than the list of his students, coming from every direction to study under his tutelage, grew to impressive numbers. Those familiar with his biography are immediately reminded of a story he told, and reported at the beginning of his biography, about a dream his mother had when he was a boy. In the dream she sees animals grazing on grass that has grown on Asad's back. The following day she consults a man who interprets dreams and he tells her that her son will have extensive know-ledge that people will seek.<sup>10</sup>

Even though Asad suffered something of a defeat in his rivalry with Saḥnūn, he emerged as a powerful figure within the ruling circles. The *amir* of Qayrawan, Zitādatallah (201-23/816-38), aware of his academic credentials and intellectual abilities, appointed Asad as the second chief-judge of Qayrawan—an unusual appointment, according to the historians—not long after his return. Asad quickly asserted himself in his new position, assuming the role of the outsider fighting against the mainstream, and a staunch defender of his beliefs and principles. At a time when the free-thinking, rationalist sect of

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 172.

Mu‘tazilism was in vogue, both in the intellectual circles of Baghdad and by extension, those of Qayrawan, Asad aggressively attacked the sect’s essential positions and labelled its adherents as heretics, arguing against their speculative views of the created Qur’ān and upholding the traditionalist position on divine attributes, which they disavowed.<sup>11</sup> One story has it that a certain Sulaymān al-Qurrā’, of Iraqi origin, was sitting at the back of the mosque one day during one of Asad’s lectures and challenged the teacher openly when he quoted a prophetic tradition that spoke of seeing God in the hereafter. Obviously moved by anger, Asad approached the man, seized him by his collar, pulled on his beard, and hit him with his shoe, causing the man to bleed.<sup>12</sup> Not wanting to miss an opportunity to show off the firmness of his convictions, however unpopular they were among many of the cultural elite, Asad seized the moment to express solidarity with the profound conservatism of the masses and their supporters among the jurists.

One of Asad’s first assignments as chief-judge was to put an end to a wide-scale rebellion that had erupted in the military ranks and succeeded in laying a twelve-year blockade around the city of Qayrawan, holding the Aghlabid princes as virtual prisoners at the royal palace. Accompanied by his co-chief-judge, Abū Muḥriz, Asad ventured outside the gates of the city to confront Maṣṣūr al-Tunbudhī, the leader of the rebellious forces. The rebel leader received the chief judges and invited them to break rank with the government and join forces with the rebellion, pointing out the list of injustices committed by the court. When he called the Aghlabid ruler the scourge of all Muslims, a very frightened Abū Muḥriz quickly added that he was the scourge of Jews and Christians as well.

By contrast, Asad confronted al-Tunbudhī and reminded him that he had once been close to the palace. He suggested that he was equally responsible for many of the injustices, and pronounced that he would not renounce the Aghlabid court without renouncing him.<sup>13</sup> Although a rebel soldier started to attack Asad, the two judges managed to escape safely. In the end, Asad emerged as a hero from this very difficult situation.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 181-2.

<sup>12</sup>The story is first told to Abū ‘Arab, who gives the man’s name as Sulaymān al-Qurrā’, *Tabaqāt*, 82, and later embellished by al-Maliki, who calls him Sulaymān the Iraqi (*Riyāḍ*, 182).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 186.

Asad's bravery, as opposed to Abū Muḥriz's weakness, would remain a dominant feature in his biography. After the al-Tunbudhī incident, which ended in the defeat of the rebel forces, Asad ibn al-Furāt became the nemesis, the binary opposite of Abū Muḥriz.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Abū Muḥriz was to be cast as the insider, the strictly conservative, mainstream traditional *faqīh*, operating by the book, cautious and wavering, Asad was portrayed as the outsider, the crosser of boundaries, the adventurer and risk taker who relished in going against the mainstream, but one who was astute in sniffing out the potential for personal gain in every situation. An anecdote from the biography of Abū Muḥriz, transmitted by a certain Muhammad ibn Zarzar, recounts the following:

One day the *amir* Ziyā datāllah asked his two chief-judges their opinion on his bringing of slave girls to the baths. Asad quickly responded that since they were his concubines he had the legal right to look at them, even their private parts. Whereupon, Abū Muḥriz predictably took the opposing view, arguing that even if he had the right to see them as such, they themselves did not have the right to see the nakedness of others.<sup>15</sup>

Once again Asad rose to the occasion and told the *amir* what he wanted to hear. At the same time that he was evolving into a statesman, a politician who could please the palace and the crowds as well.

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In the early months of 212/817, a renegade Byzantine general from Sicily, Euphemius, sent word to the Aghlabid court offering vital military information in exchange for overthrowing his enemies in Sicily. The information was extremely valuable to Ziyādat-Allāh, considering his domestic problems with a restless army, an aggrieved population, and a critical religious leadership. However, the matter was not simple since Ziyādat-Allāh was bound to a peace treaty with Byzantine Sicily that had been concluded by his successor and was still in effect. In a quandary, Ziyādat-Allāh summoned his court advisors and chief judges and sought their opinions. Even though the court had been told that Muslim soldiers were held prisoners in Sicily—a violation of the terms of the peace treaty—Abū Muḥriz counselled caution and pleaded for a wait-and-see strategy. His position was overwhelmingly supported by the religious leaders. Asad took the opposite position, and

<sup>14</sup>Asad ibn al-Furāt is mentioned frequently in Abū Muḥriz's own biography which follows that of Asad. See *ibid.*, 189-96.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 190. My paraphrasing is a polite version of the original!

citing a verse from the Qur'ān: "So do not become weak-kneed and sue for peace, for you will have the upper hand; as God is with you, and he will not overlook your deeds,"<sup>16</sup> he recommended that Ziyādat-Allāh launch an attack.

Perhaps sensing that such an attack on Sicily would clearly satisfy a restless army, and secure riches in the way of booty, ransom taxes, and slaves that would find their way back to the Ifriqiyan economy,<sup>17</sup> or simply seeing it as another venture, another journey in pursuit of a higher goal, Asad once again chose to go his own route, being the lone voice in support of the attack against the opposition of the palace advisors. Moreover, his appointment as commander of the army that would invade Sicily, while maintaining his title as chief-judge, was yet another crossing of boundaries, from the judicial to the military.

The appointment of commander of the invading forces of Sicily undoubtedly had several meanings for Asad. First of all, it reconnected him to his own heritage as son and grandson of holy warriors (*mujāhidīn*) who participated in the Islamic wars of conquest, thus allowing him to follow in a sacred family tradition. Secondly, this appointment would be the supreme fulfilment of a wish that his revered professor, Mālik ibn Anas, extended to him on his departure from Medina approximately thirty-five years ago. Asad tells the story that he and two colleagues went to pay a visit to Mālik to bid him farewell. The two colleagues ask the grand master for his words of advice to which he kindly obliged. Then he turned to Asad and topped the advice he gave to the two colleagues by telling him to fear God, [live by] the Qur'ān, and be an earnest and faithful servant to the Islamic community (*umma*). His teacher in Egypt, Ibn al-Qāsim, would later give Asad his own version of Mālik's advice by telling him to fear God, [live by] the Qur'ān, and spread [the wealth of] his knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, and most significantly, this appointment would grant to Asad the opportunity to embark upon his greatest journey, i.e., that of holy war (*jihād*) in the pursuit of the highest cause, which is the spread of Islam, in the service of God (*fī sabīl Allāh*). The manner in which Asad chose to execute his duties as commander of the holy war-

<sup>16</sup>Qur'ān 47:35. The translations of all Quranic passages are from Ahmed Ali (Princeton, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>Muḥammad Talbi discusses these economic benefits: "The invasion of Sicily brought in booty and enriched the public treasury as well as private coffers; it stimulated the slave trade, and for a variety of reasons stimulated the flow of money..." (Translation is mine). See M. Talbi, *L'emirate Aghlabide 800-909*, (Paris, 1966), 213-4.

<sup>18</sup>Riyāḍ, 174.

riors tells us as much about the nature and vision of a classical medieval Muslim scholar as it does about the essence of *jihād* in its most complete sense.

According to his biographers, Asad ibn al-Furāt, Qayrawan's chief-judge and commander-general, appeared in public on a June day in 212/817 with a cavalry of ten thousand soldiers. In a dazzling procession, crowds of Ifriqiyya's most eminent scholars and dignitaries, along with all of the palace advisors and government officials, escorted the holy army to the coastal town of Sūsa (Sousse) from where the campaign would be launched. With masses of people surrounding him in every direction, and in the midst of the neighing of horses, the rolling of drums, and the waving of banners, Asad addressed the crowd:

There is no god but God himself. He has no partners. I swear to you by God, O people, that neither a father nor grandfather created a state for me nor chose me to rule. No one before me has even seen such a sight, and I have only read about what you now see. Exert your minds and labour your bodies in the search and pursuit of knowledge; increase it and be patient with its intensity, for you will gain with it this world and the next.<sup>19</sup>

Asad's short speech speaks volumes. In sum, it tells us how a Muslim of any origin could achieve greatness through the pursuit of higher goals. It tells us much about his own life, about his own pursuits, and the extensive efforts he exerted in learning all that there was to know. His speech evinces the values of hard work and an aesthetic of self-sacrifice that were at the heart of a Muslim intellectual. He exerted his mind and his body; he endured much, with patience and persistence, in order to rise to the highest ranks of society. It tells us of his vision and the broad horizons he struggled to expand to the greatest extent possible.

Asad's speech also tells us of his profound understanding of the true meaning(s) of the Islamic *jihād* and his quest to cross the boundaries of its spiritual and physical sense. Since *jihād* means firstly the exertion of great effort, of suffering or sacrificing oneself (or one's wealth) in the pursuit of a higher cause, or in the service of God and the spread of His truth, Asad spent his life in a constant state of such an exertion. *Jihād's* second, or evolved meaning, i.e., the physical *jihād*, implying the defence of Islam and the spread of its message, was not lost on him when he accepted to cross his last boundary, from the abode of Islam (*dār al-Islām*) to the abode of the non-Muslim world (*dār al-ḥarb*). Central to

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 187-8.



Asad's execution of his duty of *jihād* was his ability, as his speech shows, to fuse its spiritual and physical dimensions to embark upon a journey that had, as I have argued elsewhere, tremendous political and historical implications.<sup>20</sup>

Although Asad ibn al-Furāt died a martyr in the first year of his *jihād* in Sicily, he succeeded, in the short term, in restoring a great deal of political legitimacy and prestige to the faltering Aghlabid rulership in Ifriqiyya. In the long term, he succeeded in securing for himself a special place in Islamic history for his last great crossing, one which began a long and rich chapter that would come to an end at the court of Frederick II four centuries later.

*Harvard University*

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<sup>20</sup>W. Granara, "Political Legitimacy and Jihad in Muslim Sicily," (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1986).