

THE ASCETIC MOVEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE 8TH-9TH CENTURIES: RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

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Abstract

In Central Asia, asceticism emerged in the 8th–9th centuries as an independent ideological-social movement, occupying a significant place in the region's religious, scholarly, and social life. In this article highlights of the ascetic movement in central Asia during the 8th-9th centuries: religious and social processes.

Keywords: Central Asia, asceticism, movement, religious, social process, movement, culture.

Introduction

Developing in major cultural centers such as Marv, Bukhara, Qashqadaryo, and Samarkand, this movement not only laid the early foundations of Islamic Sufism but also distinguished itself from other ascetic schools with its unique characteristics. Through the activities of ascetics like Abdullah ibn Mubarak, Abu Turab Nakhshabi, Muaz ibn Ya'qub an-Nasafi, and others, Central Asian asceticism manifested as a distinct direction characterized by social engagement, scholarly-theoretical foundations, and inner asceticism. This article is dedicated to exploring the formation, spread, and regional characteristics of the Central Asian ascetic school.

Main part

The environment of Marv played a pivotal role in the formation and dissemination of asceticism as a fully-fledged ideological-social movement in Central Asia. Sources identify Abu Abdurrahman Abdullah ibn Mubarak ibn Wazih Hanzali Turki Marwazi (736–797) as one of the earliest ascetics from Central Asia. According to Sam'ani, he was a distinguished jurist and encyclopedic scholar, renowned for the ascetic qualities of piety (*wara'*) and generosity (*sakha*). Notably, as one of the founders of the Central Asian ascetic movement and a figure who shaped its subsequent development, Abdullah ibn Mubarak differed from representatives of other ascetic schools by advocating an asceticism rooted in an active social lifestyle rather than complete renunciation of the world. A. Knysh describes him as an example of relatively moderate asceticism. Abdullah ibn Mubarak is also considered one of the founders of scholarly-theoretical Sufism, contributing to the development of ascetic practices through his authorship of one of the earliest works on the subject. In his collection of hadiths, *Kitab az-Zuhd* (*The Book on Asceticism*), he successfully compiled examples of asceticism from the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions.

The ascetic teachings that emerged in Marv began to spread to other major cultural, scholarly, and religious centers of Central Asia. By the 9th century, the widespread presence of asceticism in Bukhara became evident. During this period, Bukhara's asceticism was influenced not only by the Marv environment but also by the ascetic and Sufi schools of Iraq and Sham. Notable representatives of the 9th-century Bukhara ascetic movement include Abu Muhammad Isa ibn Musa Gunjar (d. 801), Abu Umar Hafs ibn Mansur Paykandi Farishti (2nd/9th century), and Abu Ishaq Ahmad ibn Ishaq Surmari Zohid (d. 856).

Sufi sources pay significant attention to another prominent ascetic from Central Asia, Abu Turab Nakhshabi (d. 834), who hailed from the city of Nakhshab in the Qashqadaryo oasis. Sulami and subsequent Sufi authors place Abu Turab Nakhshabi in the first tier of their classification system, which initially divided Sufis into five and later six tiers based on their era and role in Sufi history, identifying him among the earliest Sufis who laid the foundations of Sufism. According to Sulami and Sam'ani, Abu Turab Nakhshabi, who studied Sufi teachings in Balkh (Khurasan) and Basra (Iraq), promoted the ideals of chivalry (futuwat), reliance on God (tawakkul), asceticism (zuhd), and piety (wara') in his ascetic practices.

It can be hypothesized that Abu Turab Nakhshabi laid the foundation for another branch of the Central Asian ascetic school—the Qashqadaryo branch—as the ascetic movement became notably widespread in this region following his activities. One of the prominent figures of this era from Qashqadaryo was Abu Abdurrahman Muaz ibn Ya'qub an-Nasafi Kasani (9th century), who not only exemplified asceticism and piety in his personal life but also contributed to the construction of mosques, ribats, and other facilities for ascetics. Sam'ani notes that in 834, he built a congregational mosque and, in an area called "Sikkat uz-Zuhhad" (*The Street of Ascetics*), constructed a mosque, ribat, well, and ablution facilities. This street later became known as "Abu Abdurrahman az-Zohid Street."

Following Marv and Bukhara, the Central Asian ascetic movement also spread widely in Samarkand during the 9th century, concurrently with the Qashqadaryo oasis. According to Sam'ani, Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Muhammad Waraghsari (d. 846) was one of the earliest prominent ascetics of Samarkand. As the overseer of the Waraghsar ribat, located five farsakhs from Samarkand, he engaged in worship at the local khanaqah. Sam'ani also lists the renowned Samarkand hadith scholar Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Abdurrahman Samarqandi Darimi (798–870) among the devout and ascetics. An example confirming Darimi's asceticism is his refusal to accept the position of judge (qadi) of the region when offered by the governor of Samarkand.

Another key feature distinguishing the Central Asian ascetic school from others, such as the Khurasan and Basra schools, is that the majority of its ascetics were from socially active segments of society, including Islamic scholars—imams, hadith scholars, and jurists of high standing. Consequently, inner asceticism (zuhd of the heart), which involves leading a socially active life among people while maintaining spiritual asceticism, was more prevalent than external asceticism (physical zuhd), which entails complete withdrawal from society and extreme renunciation. Another factor that not only set Central Asian asceticism apart from

other regions but also contributed to its relative superiority was its scholarly-theoretical nature: representatives of this movement produced some of the earliest works dedicated to Sufism.

It can be argued that in the 8th–9th centuries, Central Asia developed and operated an independent ascetic school distinct from other schools, particularly the Khurasan ascetic school. The ascetic era in Central Asia during this period played a significant role in the subsequent development of Sufism in the region. The teachings and ideas of the major figures of the Central Asian ascetic school are also evident in the activities of Central Asian Sufis who emerged in the 10th century.

Based on the provided information, ascetic processes in Islam acquired characteristics specific to the regions where they spread. These characteristics were shaped by religious, social, political, geographical, and cultural factors, including the mentality of the local peoples. These regional traits manifested in ascetic perspectives, practices, rituals, appearances, specialized worship structures, and the lifestyles of ascetic figures.

Conclusion

The ascetic movement that emerged in Central Asia during the 8th–9th centuries played a crucial role in the region's religious, scholarly, and social life as an independent ideological-social direction. Developing in cultural centers such as Marv, Bukhara, Qashqadaryo, and Samarkand, this movement laid the early foundations of Islamic Sufism and distinguished itself with unique characteristics rooted in social engagement, scholarly-theoretical foundations, and inner asceticism. Through the activities of ascetics like Abdullah ibn Mubarak, Abu Turab Nakhshabi, and Muaz ibn Ya'qub an-Nasafi, the Central Asian ascetic school emerged as a direction harmonized with socially active life and grounded in scholarly works, rather than extreme renunciation. Originating in Marv, this teaching spread to Bukhara, Qashqadaryo, and Samarkand, embodying local characteristics. The majority of ascetics were scholars, hadith experts, and jurists who promoted inner asceticism and a scholarly-theoretical approach. The Central Asian ascetic school not only stood out for its regional distinctiveness but also laid a significant foundation for the further development of Sufism. Shaped by religious, social, political, and geographical factors, the ideas of this movement continued to influence the Central Asian Sufi school in the 10th century.

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