

Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus

'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, 1641-1731

Elizabeth Sirriyeh



SUFI VISIONARY OF OTTOMAN DAMASCUS

ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731) was the most distinguished Sufi visionary and scholar of Ottoman Syria. Many contemporaries and later Sufis gained their knowledge of Sufism from his writings. Many studied the works of the Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabī, the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ and other masters through his mystical interpretations. Yet, despite Nābulusī’s importance for understanding Arab Sufism in the Ottoman age, very little has been published on this significant Sufi author. This pioneering book seeks to introduce the reader to Nābulusī’s Sufi experience and work, set against the background of Islamic life and thought in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Syria and Palestine.

The book opens with an exploration of Nābulusī’s early life as scholar and Sufi saint in the making, earning enemies by his support for Ibn ʿArabī and more controversial medieval mystics. His debt to Ibn ʿArabī is examined further in a study of one of Nābulusī’s books on Sufi doctrine, written at the age of 33 years. In his forties Nābulusī underwent a time of intense visions, especially during a seven-year period of retreat. This time also saw the production of Nābulusī’s popular book of dream interpretation. Following discussion of his personal visionary experience and writing on dreams, further chapters deal with the journeys of his later middle age in Syria, Palestine, Egypt and the Ḥijāz. These chapters emphasise the mystical content of his travel writings, including his interest in the significance of ecstatics’ visions and visits to holy tombs.

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PREFACE

Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī was arguably the most distinguished Arab Sufi of Ottoman Syria. His close associates and many later Sufis regarded him as an extraordinary visionary, one of the greatest of the gnostic saints, who had been guided through divine unveiling to walk on the ‘path of God’ and be brought near to the Divine Presence. Admiring contemporaries spoke of him as the *qutb*, the spiritual ‘pole’ or ‘axis’ of his time at the head of the saintly hierarchy, upon which the order of the universe depended. His name was linked with that most famous of Arab Andalusian mystics, Muḥyī ’l-dīn b. al-ʿArabī, widely known simply as Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), the Great Master (*al-shaykh al-akbar*). In some circles he was even thought to be a reincarnation of Ibn ʿArabī, as the view spread that the Great Master had himself predicted that he would reappear in Damascus and be named ʿAbd al-Ghanī. Although Nābulusī may have stopped short of such a direct identification, he did come to look upon Ibn ʿArabī as his spiritual father and accepted that he had inherited from him a very high and distinctive status; according to Nābulusī’s grandson and biographer, he affirmed that the Great Master had been the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood in his own age, but that there were seals later in time, of which he was one.¹ What did Nābulusī intend if he did indeed speak of himself as the Muhammadan Seal?

The idea of a seal of the saints is known from an early Sufi treatise by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. c. 910), whose theorising was studied by Ibn ʿArabī when he came to develop his own view on the subject.² According to Tirmidhī, Prophet Muḥammad was the seal of the prophets because prophethood was perfected in him, not because he was the last in the line of prophets. Similarly, he described the seal of the saints as being so-called ‘because he has perfected his “friendship with God”, that is, he has “sealed” it’.³ Tirmidhī apparently

laid claim to the title long before Ibn ‘Arabī’s more famous, and seemingly more extensive, claims for himself in the role. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the Muhammadan Seal is ‘the special Seal of the sainthood of the community which is visibly that of Muḥammad’⁴ and is the ultimate source of all sainthood, including that of the prophets in their capacity as God’s saints. Ibn ‘Arabī’s bold statements about himself as seal are sometimes ambiguous and were to lead to much controversy because the Great Master appeared to critics to be exalting himself to a rank above that of the prophets. The first to denounce Ibn ‘Arabī, and especially the promotion of the seal of sainthood, was the Syrian Shāfi‘ī jurist Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī (d. 1262), who notes that Tirmidhī was followed by Ibn ‘Arabī ‘and several misguided [Sufi] masters in Damascus’, and he declares:

Each of them asserted that, in certain respects, he was superior to the Prophet. ... All these claims sprang from the desire for the leadership (*riyāsa*), which they thought belongs to the Seal of the Prophets. However, they made a grievous mistake, for the Seal of the Prophets is far superior to any of them, and there is ample evidence to prove this.⁵

Had Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām lived in the later seventeenth rather than the thirteenth century, he would surely have condemned Nābulusī along with other ‘misguided masters in Damascus’. He would not have been alone in his opinion. While Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghanī, or at least some among his followers, may well have believed that he was the highest perfected saint of his time, not everyone in Syria agreed with this assessment. In a climate of tension between Sufis and their opponents, Nābulusī felt compelled to defend himself and champion Ibn ‘Arabī and other fellow Sufis, both of the past and of his own day. Throughout his long life he was to inspire extreme veneration and intense hostility. To anti-Sufis he was one of those responsible for introducing corruption into the faith. They were to see him as the staunch supporter of much that they attacked as false innovations; these ranged from the lofty speculations of Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmic vision to popular practices at the graves of saints.

However, Nābulusī was not only a ‘true saint’ in the eyes of admirers or a ‘corrupt heretic’ as far as his detractors were concerned. He was a talented poet and man of letters, a scholarly traditionalist and jurist as well as a commentator on Sufi texts and exponent of Sufi doctrine. He also became well known for his mystical travel writings, recording his physical and spiritual journeys

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among the living and dead saints of his native Syria, Egypt and the Hijāz. He wrote for both a scholarly and Sufi élite, but also for a wider general public, among whom his book of symbolic dream interpretation would be extensively consulted and retain its popularity to the present. By his early fifties, he had already written 140 books and short tracts and by the time of his death at the age of 90 years, he may have composed as many as 250 works. Nevertheless, despite his scholarly and spiritual distinction, many of these are extant only in manuscript, while others have been lost. The formidable task of making Nābulusī's surviving writings available in critical editions has proceeded slowly over the last 50 years, and it is likely to be many more years before a full corpus of his extant work becomes available in Arabic. At present, very little has been translated into English and European languages.

In view of the inaccessibility of much of his work, 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī has attracted limited attention in academic studies, in spite of his importance for the understanding of Arab Sufi thought and religious life in the Ottoman period. Bearing in mind the lack of English publications on Nābulusī, this book seeks to introduce the reader to his Sufi life experience and a small selection of his writings. Nābulusī's life is reviewed against the backcloth of Ottoman Syria and Palestine in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, but remembering that for Nābulusī the inner life of the visionary is as real as the events of his outer life and frequently more significant. Chapters discussing the various phases of his life alternate with chapters dedicated to particular aspects of his work, reflecting his concerns in that period. Thus a chapter on his early life and Sufi development is followed by a chapter discussing an early work of Sufi doctrine; a chapter on his middle years of intense visionary experience is followed by a chapter regarding his interpretation of dreams; and a chapter on his later middle age, which was marked by a series of travels to visit the righteous living and dead, is followed by a chapter on mystical elements of his *riḥlas*. A breakdown of the chapters is given below.

Chapter 1, 'The making of a scholarly saint', considers Nābulusī's life and work to the age of 33 years. It pays attention to intellectual and spiritual influences on Nābulusī from his family background and teachers and from his studies of the medieval Sufi tradition, especially Ibn 'Arabī, but also the philosophical mystic Ibn Sab'īn (d. c. 1269–71) and Sufi poet 'Afif al-dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291). After a brief examination of his poem in praise of the Prophet and commentary on it, composed in 1664 in a state of mystical

inspiration at the age of 23 years, it discusses his initiation into the Qādiriyya.

Chapter 2, ‘The spiritual son of Ibn ‘Arabī’, studies Nābulusī’s book on Sufi doctrine, *al-Faṭḥ al-rabbānī wa ’l-fayḍ al-raḥmānī*, written in 1674 when Nābulusī was 33 years old and reflecting the strong influence of Ibn ‘Arabī. It observes how Nābulusī at times gave his own development to the Great Shaykh’s ideas in ways that could antagonise critics of some Sufi thought or of Sufism as a whole.

Chapter 3, ‘The Naqshabandī recluse’, discusses Nābulusī’s life and work from about 1676 to 1687, focusing on his connections with the Naqshabandiyya and a seven-year period of retreat, a time of dreams and ecstatic states and of prolific writing.

Chapter 4, ‘Interpreter of true dreams’, explores Nābulusī’s views on dreaming, and interpretation of his own and others’ dream experiences. It looks in some detail at his famous guide to symbolic dreams, *Ta’fīr al-anām fī ta’bīr al-manām*, composed during the long retreat.

Chapter 5, ‘Solitude in a crowd’, deals with the period of return to public life from 1687 to 1700, when Nābulusī set out to fulfil the eighth Naqshabandi principle, mindful of his inward spiritual journey with God, even when outwardly in the world. It discusses his physical journeys to Lebanon, Jerusalem and Palestine, as well as his long journey of 388 days through his homeland to Egypt and on to the Ḥijāz for the *ḥajj*. It also surveys writings from that time, including his major work on Sufi doctrine, *al-Wujūd al-ḥaqq*, completed in 1693.

Chapter 6, ‘A new kind of mystical travel-literature’, examines Nābulusī’s *riḥlas* resulting from his extensive travels. It emphasises their mystical content by concentrating on Nābulusī’s accounts of his encounters with Sufis, especially ecstasies (*majādhīb*), and his visits to Sufi tombs. Attention is also paid to the significance of dreams in the Sufi *riḥla*.

Chapter 7, ‘Last years in Ṣālihiyya, 1707–1731’, offers a short review of the end of Nābulusī’s life and final contributions to Sufi scholarship.

Foreign language words, mainly Arabic, are italicised. In the case of some more common words, the English form of the plural is used in preference to the Arabic, for example *ṭarīqas* rather than *ṭuruq*. The system of transliteration is generally standardised except for quotations and some well-known place names.

THE MAKING OF A SCHOLARLY SAINT

The birth of a saint

ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī was marked out for sainthood even before his birth. His mother, Zaynab, a lady of some social standing as the daughter of a leading merchant, played a crucial role in connecting her son to the saintly tradition of Damascus. She was also to be a key figure in his spiritual upbringing. During the late stages of her pregnancy, her husband, Ismāʿīl al-Nābulūsī, was away in Egypt studying with some of its most prominent Sufis. These included Ḥasan al-Shurunbulālī (d. 1658), who is noted as holding in high esteem the ecstatic mystics (*majādhīb*), who were constantly overwhelmed by the divine presence in their lives.¹ Ismāʿīl and his wife appear to have shared this view, as Zaynab went during her pregnancy to consult the custodian at the shrine of one of the most popularly venerated Damascene saints, Yūsuf al-Qamīnī (d. 1259).²

Qamīnī is variously described as an ecstatic (*majdhūb*), seized with apparent madness by the force of sudden illumination, and enraptured by God (*muwallah*), someone who through extreme love of God experienced a permanent state of unveiling (*kashf*) so as to have direct experiential knowledge of God. Through his mystical insights he was also said to be aware of the innermost thoughts of his fellow human beings.³ He was noted as an antinomian Sufi for whom it was no longer relevant to follow the dictates of the *Sharīʿa* because he had gone beyond all need for it. Therefore, he did not observe the rules of ritual purity, but wore filthy clothing, rarely washed and urinated in his long, sweeping robes. Qamīnī was known to frequent the stoke-hole of the baths at the Nūr al-dīn Hospital in Sūq al-Qamḥ and, otherwise, spent his time among the dung heaps. Nevertheless, it was popularly believed that his outwardly polluted state was of no consequence in the true saint,

whose inner state was pure. He was credited with many miracles, especially with the healing of the sick. After his death, crowds of working-class Damascenes attended his funeral and erected 'a decorated tomb with a carved headstone, and a group of them remained by the tomb reciting the Qur'ān, thereby casting him in death in the role of the founders of the great tomb-foundations'.⁴ However, veneration of such a 'people's saint' did not apparently remain confined to the lower strata of society, since Ismā'īl and Zaynab al-Nābulusī were from the Arab élite of seventeenth-century Damascus. The shrine was actually maintained by the Nābulusī family until the mid-twentieth century, when an apartment building was constructed over it.⁵

The custodian of the tomb, whom Zaynab visited to enquire about her unborn child, was also an ecstatic, known simply as Shaykh Maḥmūd. He had a reputation for holiness and miracles, and he allegedly knew before the birth that Zaynab would bear a son and told her that she should call him 'Abd al-Ghanī.⁶ He predicted a glorious future for the boy and is said to have given her a silver coin and a lump of earth, which she was to feed to the baby after his birth.⁷ It is not clear whether the gifts show the state of Maḥmūd as a *majdhūb*, crazed to the eyes of the world, or whether they have some other significance. 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī was born on 18 March 1641. He recalls that his birth took place on the second day after Maḥmūd's death and that the saintly custodian 'had entreated our mother before he died to bring us to his grave and to rub us with the soil of his grave before it was built over'.⁸ This custom of laying the new-born child on the earth is extremely ancient and known in a wide variety of cultures.⁹ It is probable that the gift of earth as food is connected in some way with this request. Here the aim is seemingly to effect a two-way transmission of spiritual forces. In a sense the newly born and the newly dead share a common situation: the one is at the beginning of earthly life, the other is on the threshold of the afterlife and being born to the new, real life with God. By placing the infant 'Abd al-Ghanī on the soil of the grave and feeding him with earth from the holy man, his mother would ensure that he derived blessing (*baraka*) from the dead shaykh; at the same time she would enable her baby son to transmit his own *baraka* as a future saint to assist Shaykh Maḥmūd in his life after death. This story, which Nābulusī promotes, serves to confirm that he was recognised and destined from a foetus to become more than a competent scholar. It witnesses his own conviction about his superior spiritual status.

A family of lawyers

The young ʿAbd al-Ghanī might have had the markings of a saint in the making, but he was also a member of a scholarly family of some distinction. He traced his ancestry back through fourteen generations of notable jurists and men of learning to the twelfth century. He was to point out himself that the Nābulusīs were descended from the Banū Jamāʿa, who had provided Shāfiʿī chief judges in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria.¹⁰

The family, originally from Ḥamā in central Syria, had settled in Jerusalem during the thirteenth century. The Banū Jamāʿa then split into two main branches. One line remained in Jerusalem and supplied the preachers at the Aqṣā Mosque; the other moved to Cairo when Badr al-dīn Muḥammad b. Jamāʿa (d. 1333) was summoned there in 1291 by the new Mamlūk sultan, al-Ashraf Khalil. He was to be appointed to two of the most senior posts in the religious hierarchy: chief judge (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*) and head of the Sufi brotherhoods (*shaykh al-shuyūkh*). A man like Ibn Jamāʿa was obviously far removed from the popular tradition of the outwardly polluted, ‘enraptured’ men of God. He believed in the intimate association between learning and purity, and cautioned against the dangers of any contact with pollutants: ‘The learned man should keep away from the basest professions, because they are despicable according to both revelation and custom, such as the art of cupping, dyeing, money changing and gold-smithing.’¹¹ The list suggests the dangers of both physical and moral pollution and the link between the two. When at a later stage in his life Nābulusī faced allegations of not observing strict ritual purity himself, he called attention to his impeccable learned and pure ancestry, the great and good of the Banū Jamāʿa.¹²

However, although Nābulusī might have been proud of his descent and used it in his defence, he held very different views from Badr al-dīn b. Jamāʿa on matters of doctrine. Ibn Jamāʿa was one of those jurists who issued a number of *fatwās* in condemnation of Ibn ʿArabī’s theosophy.¹³ Nābulusī, on the other hand, was to be a major exponent and supporter of that theosophy.

Badr al-dīn’s own direct descendants from the line of great judges of Cairo and Damascus appear to have died out by the fifteenth century. ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī was actually himself descended from Badr al-dīn’s younger brother ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who remained in Jerusalem. However, not long after the Ottoman occupation of Syria in 1516, one of the family members moved from Jerusalem to the Palestinian town of Nāblus and then up to Damascus, a city that

attracted a number of Palestinians to settle there in the sixteenth century. This branch of the Banū Jamā^ʿa was to become known as Nābulusī after the family's short stay in Nāblus. But it was ʿAbd al-Ghanī's great-grandfather, Ismāʿīl al-Nābulusī (d. 1585), who was to establish the Nābulusī family's fortunes. True to the traditions of the old Banū Jamā^ʿa, he was distinguished as a Shāfiʿī jurist, became Shāfiʿī *muftī* of the city and taught *fiqh*, both at the Umayyad Mosque and at four different *madrasas*. These included the Darwishiyya Madrasa, specially endowed by Darwish Pasha, governor of Damascus in the 1570s, for Ismāʿīl and his descendants to teach Shāfiʿī *fiqh*.¹⁴ He taught an international body of students, Turks and Persians as well as Arabs, all of whose languages he spoke. Ismāʿīl succeeded also in becoming a wealthy man, the leaseholder of various villages and farms, and had connections at the highest level with the religious dignitaries of Istanbul. Nābulusī was obviously very proud of his great-grandfather, writing in laudatory tones about him when recalling a visit to the mausoleum built for him by Darwish Pasha in the Damascus cemetery of Bāb al-Ṣaghīr.¹⁵

By contrast, ʿAbd al-Ghanī's grandfather, also named ʿAbd al-Ghanī, seems to have been lacking in intellectual abilities and his grandson dwells on his noble character rather than his scholarship:

He was a man of fine character and gracious qualities, showing fully his magnanimity and noble descent. He had a considerable income at that time. If anyone asked him for a robe, he would take off his own robe and give it to him as alms. In the district of Ṣālihiyya, Damascus, he had endowments (*awqāf*) left to him by his late mother, Ḥanīfa bint al-Shihābī Aḥmad, daughter of the judge (*qāḍī*) Muḥibb al-dīn b. Mun^ʿa. These *awqāf* consisted of shops and rented properties. When he went with the brethren to collect the rent of the shops and other properties, he would sometimes return home the same day empty-handed.¹⁶

The younger ʿAbd al-Ghanī manages to present his grandfather in the best possible light, as a model of unstinting charity rather than an inefficient and extravagant administrator of his inheritance from his mother. The generous grandfather is shown as a particular kind of saintly personage, whose charitable works are viewed as 'social miracles' interrupting the normal course of life. In a study of pious members of the Ḥanbali Maqdisī family in twelfth- to fourteenth-century Damascus, Stefan Leder has remarked that they effectively

specialised in either learning or practical piety, often expressed in heroic deeds of charity, although dedication to one did not entirely exclude the other.¹⁷ The situation in the Nābulusī family seems a similar one: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī and his great-grandfather and father represent the pious scholars, while his grandfather represents the practical man of piety.

Nābulusī presents his father, Ismā‘īl, as a scholarly jurist within the family tradition; but he also shows him as breaking with that tradition by leaving the Shāfi‘ī school (*madhhab*) to become a Ḥanafī. The change of *madhhab* was not perhaps surprising, since Ḥanafīs occupied the top religio-legal posts in the Ottoman state and this led to a growing interest in the study and teaching of Ḥanafī *fiqh*. Yet Nābulusī is naturally anxious not to suggest any opportunism in his father’s move and instead claims that he was intellectually convinced to make the change after serious study with Ḥanafī jurists.¹⁸ Ismā‘īl wrote on legal topics, taught at the Umayyad Mosque and at *madrasas* in Damascus, and served for some time as a judge in Sidon. He also, as noted, appears to have had some interest in Sufism. He oversaw his son’s early education, but sadly Ismā‘īl al-Nābulusī died at the age of 45 years when his young son ‘Abd al-Ghanī was only 12 years old.

A scholar in training

Throughout his life Nābulusī would experience tensions between his role as a religious scholar and his life as an illuminated mystic and people’s saint. From his earliest years his father set him to work learning and reciting the Qur’ān and, when he had mastered the whole of it by heart and so become a *ḥāfiẓ* at the age of five years, he could be noted either as endowed with the brilliant mind of a future scholar or as given the blessing of the sacred text as a future saint or, indeed, as combining brilliance and blessing.

His father’s death might, in other circumstances, have severely disrupted his course of learning and damaged a promising career, but in this case it did not. There was sufficient wealth from both sides of the family to support him in his studies and his mother, as he informs us, was ‘devoted and sympathetic’ towards him.¹⁹ He appears to have been deeply attached to his mother and appreciated the loving support that she provided. His fatherless state might even be seen to have marked him out as special, given that the Prophet Muḥammad had been an orphan. In middle age, when Nābulusī came to write a book of dream interpretation, he noted that, if a

small boy sees the Prophet Jesus in a dream, 'he will live as an orphan and be brought up in his mother's home and will become a righteous and learned man'.²⁰ The destiny of the child dreamer appears to mirror his own exactly. Tantalisingly, we are not told whether he ever had such a dream himself, but the association with prophetic models is certainly an interesting one in developing his self-perception.

Between the ages of 12 and 20 years, Nābulusī continued with his studies, fatherless, but not totally without a fatherly figure in his life. He was fortunate in receiving the kind attention of a senior Ḥanbalī scholar, ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1660), who is said to have acted like a foster-father to him.²¹ The Ḥanbalīs of Damascus were esteemed for their attention to scholarship on *Ḥadīth* and ʿAbd al-Bāqī was instrumental in supervising the young ʿAbd al-Ghanī's studies in the field, in which he was joined in classes by a number of Ḥanbalī students. He was to excel in the subject and become a respected traditionist (*muḥaddith*), his major extant work being an index to the *Ḥadīth* transmitters whose names appear in the six Sunni canonical collections with their rankings within the seven classes of reliability.²² The close early association with the Ḥanbalī community was one which would endure throughout Nābulusī's long life and many young Ḥanbalīs would be sent by their parents to study *Ḥadīth* with him.²³ This friendship between the Damascene Ḥanbalīs and the most renowned Arab Sufi of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been remarked upon as one indication that Syrian Ḥanbalism of this period was not characterised by the stern hostility towards Sufism evident among the Wahhābī Ḥanbalīs of Arabia in the eighteenth century. Some Ḥanbalīs are also known initiates of *ṭarīqas* in Damascus. In this period relations between Ḥanbalīs and members of other *madhhabs*, mostly Ḥanafīs and Shāfī'īs, also seem to have been cordial and not damaged by the kind of juristic disputes recorded in medieval Syria.²⁴ The Ḥanafī Nābulusī's study of *Ḥadīth* with a Ḥanbalī master was not exceptional, as other prominent Ḥanafīs did the same.

His study of *fiqh*, however, had naturally to be conducted under Ḥanafī instruction, his first significant master being Shaykh Aḥmad al-Qala'ī al-Ḥanafī (d. 1658). It would be an important area for him, in keeping with the family tradition. He could not easily expect to achieve the senior Ḥanafī judgeship as *qāḍī al-quḍāt* of Damascus, since this was a post normally reserved for Turks. Nevertheless, the *muftīs* of the city were mainly from the Arab or Arabised population, so to attain the rank of *muftī* would not have been an

unreasonable aspiration, sadly not to be realised until he was very old. Yet, even though his official practice of the law would be limited, he was to be thoroughly prepared as a youth and young man for future distinction as the author of numerous legal treatises. These included theoretical discussions of legal principles as well as contributions to debates on issues of the day, such as the permissibility of smoking. Tobacco had been introduced into the Middle East early in the seventeenth century, and its use became a subject of controversy among the *'ulamā'*. Campaigners against it succeeded in persuading the Ottoman authorities to ban it. The 1630s bore witness to numerous executions for the offence of smoking tobacco. Sufis were by no means the only offenders, but they were generally perceived as over-tolerant towards tobacco, as well as towards wine, cannabis and opium. After a period of less severe repression in the time of Nābulusī's youth, the prohibitionists gained strength once again from the 1660s. Nābulusī does not seem to have risked smoking himself as a young man, although he did so in later life. He was to write boldly in defence of the habit as legally permissible and also to compose poetry in favour of smoking.²⁵

The names of eighteen of his teachers were recorded by his grandson, Kamāl al-dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1699), including his childhood master Najm al-dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), author of a major biographical dictionary of notables of the tenth Islamic century (late fifteenth to late sixteenth centuries CE).²⁶ Kamāl al-dīn remarks with admiration that his grandfather 'surpassed all his peers in speech and comprehension before he reached the age of twenty'.²⁷

Encounters with Sufi books

Although Nābulusī gained his scholarly knowledge and skills from his teachers, he was not convinced that living human masters were necessarily the most important and true guides to real knowledge. Books, he believed, taught him more and it was his encounters with the writings of the medieval Sufi tradition that began to open the way for him to mystical illumination. Essentially, his most esteemed teachers were the dead Sufi masters from the world of spirits, and one means by which he sought to receive their guidance and the power of their *baraka* was through reading their books.

Biographers mention the names of three principal authors in whose writings Nābulusī became particularly absorbed: Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), Ibn Sab'īn (d. c. 1269–71) and 'Afīf al-dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291).²⁸ Of the three, the Great Master Ibn 'Arabī is the least

surprising and, as noted in the Preface, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī considered himself to have a special relationship to him.²⁹ In the sixteenth century Ibn ‘Arabī had effectively been adopted by the Ottomans as an establishment saint and it had become relatively respectable to study his work. Following his conquest of Syria, Sultan Selim I ordered the construction in 1517–18 of the celebrated mausoleum over the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī; the Great Shaykh became valued as the protecting saint of the Ottoman dynasty.³⁰ Selim’s son, Süleymān the Lawgiver (known to Europeans as ‘the Magnificent’), prevented any efforts to disparage Ibn ‘Arabī as a heretic or unbeliever. However, throughout much of the next century, the Great Master and his followers received no official state protection and were exposed once again to the verbal, and sometimes physical, assaults of their opponents. Most prominent among the adversaries of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school were the radical preachers, jurists and students of the Kāḏizādeli movement.³¹ The Kāḏizādelis developed their virulently anti-Sufi campaigns in Istanbul and Anatolia under the leadership of Kāḏizāde Meḥmed (d. 1635). Between about 1621 and 1685, they enjoyed a period of fluctuating popularity in their efforts to counter what they perceived as unacceptable and heretical Sufi excesses, and at times were highly effective in influencing Ottoman sultans to act against Sufis and more widely on a range of moral issues. They were vocal spokesmen in the above-mentioned drive to eliminate tobacco, alcohol and drug use. Temporarily weakened during the Grand Vizierate of Meḥmed Köprülü from 1656 to 1661, they were experiencing a revival and were active in Damascus just as Nābulusī was embarking on a teaching career at the Umayyad Mosque.

As a young man in his twenties, he started giving classes there on *Ḥadīth* and also began teaching texts of Ibn ‘Arabī in public and private study groups, defying the Kāḏizādeli lawyers and students who denounced the Great Shaykh in Turkish as *Şeyh-i Ekfer*, ‘the Worst Shaykh’.³² The young scholar began to be specially noted for his interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most famous book, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*), *faṣṣ* (pl. *fuṣūṣ*) being the ‘bezel’ or ‘setting’ on a ring holding a precious stone. The bezels, in this case, are the line of twenty-seven prophets from Adam to Muḥammad; each of them holds a gem, a particular aspect of the Divine Wisdom. In the twenty-seven chapters of his book, each dedicated to a particular prophet, Ibn ‘Arabī presents a synthesis of the main themes to be found in his lifetime’s work, including the ‘oneness of being’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), the ‘perfect human being’ (*al-insān al-kāmil*),