

## Life and Scholarly Legacy of Abū Bakr al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī in Historical Sources

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**Abstract.** This article examines the life and scholarly legacy of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (291/904–365/976), one of the most prominent Shāfi'ī jurists of the mediaeval Islamic world. Based on a comparative analysis of over twenty mediaeval biographical, historiographical, and geographical sources, the study reconstructs al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī's biography, traces his intellectual journey from his native city Shāsh through the learning centres of Khurāsān, Iraq, Shām, and the Hījāz, and evaluates the scholarly debates surrounding his life. The article argues that a careful reading of the sources allows certain conclusions to be drawn with confidence, while other questions must remain open. Beyond its biographical contribution, the study situates al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī within the broader intellectual history of Transoxiana under the Samanids and considers his role in the consolidation of the Shāfi'ī school in the eastern Islamic world.

**Keywords.** Transoxiana, mediaeval Islamic biography, Samanid period, Islamic legal history, *ṭabaqāt* literature

In the 4th/10th century, Transoxiana was alive with intellectual energy. The Samanid rulers had turned cities like Shāsh, Samarqand, Bukhārā, and Marw into thriving hubs of learning, drawing students from every corner of the Muslim world. It was in this vibrant setting that a young man from Shāsh (modern Tashkent) would rise to become one of the most celebrated scholars of his age. His name was Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī, and he would come to be known as al-Qaffāl al-Kabīr, "the Greater Qaffāl." Born in 291/904, he mastered jurisprudence, legal theory, Qur'ānic exegesis, ḥadīth, linguistics, and even poetry, earning the title "Ḥaḍrat Imām" from his. Few scholars of the eastern Islamic world commanded greater respect in their own time.

The scholar known to posterity as al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī bore the full name Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl, and the historical sources offer nothing beyond this when it comes to his genealogy<sup>1</sup>. What do we know of his origins? Very little, and that is a challenge every researcher must confront.

The sources tell us almost nothing about the family that raised him or the circumstances of his early childhood. And yet it takes no great leap to infer that the household which produced a figure of this calibre must have been one steeped in religious devotion and Islamic culture. The information that does survive on his personality, career, and intellectual output is scattered across numerous works, and only by passing it through the prism of careful comparative analysis can we separate what is reliable from what is not.

<sup>1</sup> Abū 'Aṣim al-'Ibādī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā' al-Shāfi'iyya*. Alexandria: al-Maṭba'a al-Baladiyya, 1920. – P. 84.; Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā'*. Edited by Ihsān 'Abbās. Beirut: Dār al-Rā'id al-'Arabī, 1970. – P. 112.; Abū al-Qāsim Ibn 'Asākir. *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*. Edited by al-'Amrawī. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997, vol. LIV, – P. 14.; Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnavī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya*. Edited by 'Abd Allāh Jābūr. Baghdad: Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1971, vol. II. – P. 87.

Imām al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī first opened his eyes in the oasis of al-Shāsh, a region that had already given the world celebrated authorities in jurisprudence (fiqh), legal theory (uṣūl), Qur'ānic exegesis (tafsīr), ḥadīth, and linguistics. After coming of age in his native land, he set out on the path of the seeker of knowledge, journeying to the great Islamic centres of learning of his time. When he finally returned to al-Shāsh, he came back a fully fledged jurist of the Shāfi'i school. Most historical sources place his birth in the year 291 of the Hijra (904 CE). One notable dissenter is Ṭāshkubrīzāda Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafā (d. 1030/1621), who in his *Miftāḥ al-Sa'āda* records the year as 266/880. But the weight of evidence from other sources<sup>2</sup> tilts decisively in favour of 291/904, and that is the date we can accept with reasonable confidence.

Why "al-Qaffāl"? The sources converge on an answer, though they approach it from different angles. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233)<sup>3</sup> writes in *al-Lubāb fī Tahdhīb al-Ansāb*:

"Al-Qaffāl, with a fatha on the qāf and a shadda on the open fā, this nisba refers to the craft of locksmithing. It became famous through Imām Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī, the Shāfi'i jurist from al-Shāsh. He was the undisputed imām of his age, a jurist, a theoretician, a linguist, a traditionist, and a poet, whose name travelled to the East and the West alike"<sup>4</sup>.

Abū Sa'd al-Sam'ānī (d. 562/1167)<sup>5</sup> adds in *al-Ansāb*:

"This is Abū Bakr the jurist, al-Qaffāl... who opens even the most stubborn locks through his mastery of jurisprudence"<sup>6</sup>.

Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283) tells a more literal story:

"His first work as a locksmith was a lock weighing a single dāniq, complete with its catch and key. People were astounded by his dexterity"<sup>7</sup>.

Together, these accounts point to something important: his craftsmanship was not merely manual but carried a deeper metaphorical resonance. Just as he could fashion a lock with his hands, he could unlock the most difficult legal and theological problems with his mind. The historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348)<sup>8</sup> confirms this dual mastery, calling him "the imām of language, legal theory, and jurisprudence among the scholars of Khurāsān... known as the 'Greater Qaffāl,' the imām of his time in Transoxiana and the author of numerous works"<sup>9</sup>. In his *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, al-Dhahabī goes further, observing that no scholar of Transoxiana travelled more extensively in pursuit of ḥadīth and legal theory than al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī.

<sup>2</sup> Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya al-Kubrā*. Beirut: Fayṣal 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964, vol. III. – P. 200.; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba al-Dimashqī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya*. Edited by 'Abd al-'Alīm Khān. Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1987, vol. I. – P. 148.

<sup>3</sup> **Ibn al-Athīr**. Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Abī al-Karam Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Shaybānī al-Jazarī (555/1160–630/1233). Arab historian and biographer, author of *al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-Athīr. *al-Lubāb fī Tahdhīb al-Ansāb*. Edited by Qāsim Rajab. Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 2017, vol. II. – P. 174.

<sup>5</sup> **Abū Sa'd al-Sam'ānī**. Abū Sa'd 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad ibn Manṣūr al-Sam'ānī al-Marwazī (506/1112–562/1167). Historian, genealogist, and geographer from Marw, author of *al-Ansāb*.

<sup>6</sup> Abū Sa'd al-Sam'ānī. *al-Ansāb*. Edited by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Yamānī. Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 2016, vol. VIII, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī. *Āthār al-Bilād*. Beirut: Dār Sādir, 2007, p. 538.

<sup>8</sup> **Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī**. Abū 'Abd Allāh Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī (673/1274–748/1348). Damascene historian, ḥadīth critic, and biographer, author of *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'* and *Ta'rīkh al-Islām*.

<sup>9</sup> Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī. *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*. Edited by Akram Būshī. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1996, vol. XVI, p. 283

That he was also a trusted transmitter of ḥadīth is well attested. The historical work *al-Tadwīn fī Akhbār Qazwīn* records that around 350/962 he visited the city of Qazwīn, where Abū Manṣūr al-Qaṭṭān and many other scholars attended his circles, learning ḥadīth from him by heart and by transcription<sup>10</sup>. Several reliable ḥadīths trace their chain of transmission back to him, and his own work *Jawāmi' al-Kalim* stands as a testimony to his contributions to ḥadīth scholarship.

It is no surprise, then, that his contemporaries and later generations came to see the nisba "al-Qaffāl" less as a reference to his early trade and more as a mark of spiritual and intellectual station.

A more famous controversy surrounds the question of whether al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī ever studied under Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Umar ibn Surayj (d. 306/918), the towering Shāfi'ī authority of his generation. Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083) states in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā'* that he did<sup>11</sup>. But Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) counters in *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafayāt*:

"He set out from al-Shāsh in the year 309, and as for Abū al-'Abbās, we have already recorded his death in the year 306. He did not reach him"<sup>12</sup>.

Al-Dhahabī, in his *Tārīkh al-Islām*, calls al-Shīrāzī's statement a mistake<sup>13</sup>. What complicates the matter is that almost no one else specifies the year of al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī's entry into Baghdād. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) also leans toward the view that he never met Ibn Surayj, but he stops short of a categorical assertion, which suggests the information available to him was ambiguous.

Shams al-Dīn al-Dāwūdī (d. 945/1538) writes in *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssīrīn* that al-Shīrāzī's position was followed by al-Rāfi'ī (d. 623/1226) in his *al-Taqrīb*<sup>14</sup>, while Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's opinion rests on a different reading of the evidence<sup>15</sup> [12:229]. Later scholars such as Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448), al-Ṣafadī, and al-Dhahabī reiterated the debate. Some, including Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnāwī (d. 772/1370)<sup>16</sup>, simply record both positions without choosing sides.

As al-Subkī himself sums it up in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya al-Kubrā*:

"Everyone agrees that Ibn Surayj died in 306. That much is settled. The disagreement is only about when al-Qaffāl entered Iraq and whether or not he met Ibn Surayj"<sup>17</sup>.

And that, in essence, is where the matter rests. The most carefully argued position belongs to Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and, after him, al-Muṭawwi'ī: al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī arrived in Baghdād in 309 AH or shortly before, which means he missed Ibn Surayj by at least three years.

The controversies that surround his biography are themselves instructive. The question of whether he studied under Ibn Surayj, debated by al-Shīrāzī, al-Ṣafadī, al-Dhahabī, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, al-Subkī, and others, reminds us that mediaeval Islamic biographical literature is not a monolith. It is a living tradition of scholarly disagreement, in which later authors corrected earlier ones, weighed competing

<sup>10</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī. *al-Tadwīn fī Akhbār Qazwīn*. Edited by al-'Aṭārīdī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987, vol. I, p. 458.

<sup>11</sup> Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā'*. Edited by Iḥsān 'Abbās. Beirut: Dār al-Rā'id al-'Arabī, 1970. – P. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī. *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafayāt*. Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2000, vol. IV, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Imām al-Dhahabī. *Tārīkh al-Islām*. Edited by 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām. Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1993, vol. XXVI, p. 346.

<sup>14</sup> Shams al-Dīn al-Dāwūdī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssīrīn*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d., vol. II, p. 200.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ. *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā' al-Shāfi'iyya*. Edited by 'Alī Najīb. Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1992, vol. I, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup> Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnāwī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya*. Edited by 'Abd Allāh Jābūr. Baghdad: Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1971, vol. II.

<sup>17</sup> Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī. *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya al-Kubrā*. Beirut: Fayṣal 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964, vol. III.

reports, and sometimes simply acknowledged that certainty was beyond reach. To engage with these sources critically, as this study has attempted to do, is to participate in that same tradition.

Al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī died in Dhū al-Ḥijja 365/976 and was laid to rest in his native city, where his mausoleum still stands in the Ḥaḍrat Imām complex of Tashkent. But his legacy was never confined to a single place. Through his students, his writings, and the memory preserved by the generations of biographers who wrote about him, he remained a living presence in the Shāfi'i tradition for centuries after his death. To recover his story is to recover a vital thread in the intellectual history of Central Asia and, more broadly, of Islamic civilisation itself.

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