

Ebü'l-Vefa el-Bağdadî (051326)

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The Iraq Connection: Abu'l-Wafa' Taj al-°Arifin and the Wafa'i Tradition

'Oh shaykh, (tell us) what is Islam?' [said the questioner].
'Whose Islam are you asking about? My Islam or your Islam?'
said the shaykh [Abu'l-Wafa'].
'Is your Islam different from my Islam?' said the questioner.
'Yes' said the sayyid [Abu'l-Wafa'].

– Shihab al-Din al-Wasiti, *Menākīb-ı Seyyid Ebü'l-Vefa'*¹

In the mid-eleventh century, a rumour circulated in Baghdad about a Sufi of °Alid descent living in a nearby province. The progeny of the fourth Shi'i imam, Zayn al-°Abidin, this shaykh had thousands of followers and, according to the rumour, harboured ambitions for the caliphate. Abbasid caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amrillah (r. 1031–1075) summoned the shaykh, Abu'l-Wafa' (Ot. Ebü'l-Vefa'), to Baghdad for interrogation by forty leading religious scholars who examined him on the meaning of Islam. During the interrogation, the opening of which is partially reproduced in the epigraph above, Abu'l-Wafa' appeared confident as he proceeded to respond to the questions in his accented Arabic. Sitting on a burning hot, iron platform, the shaykh delivered a long and spirited speech contrasting his own esoteric understanding of religion with that of the exoteric jurists who, he contended, were incapable of penetrating the surface of Islam to reach its actual essence. His answers were so elegant that he put to shame the ulema in attendance, who had been quick to dismiss him as ignorant because, having grown up among the Kurds, he spoke broken Arabic. At the end of this trial and several others, all of which he passed with equal success, the caliph was finally convinced of Abu'l-Wafa's true sanctity and detachment from worldly ambitions, and granted him the income of villages in the vicinity of his dervish convent (Ar. *zāwiya*; Ot. *zāviye*), located in the Qusan district of central Iraq, an offer that Abu'l-Wafa' would, however, decline.²

To those members of the present-day Alevi community in Turkey who have some basic acquaintance with Alevi oral traditions, this story of a falsely charged °Alid *sayyid* from the provinces would sound strikingly familiar despite its temporal and spatial distance. Generations of Alevi in Anatolia have recounted similar stories in which cultic figures of the Alevi pantheon endure a series of trials and physical ordeals through which they prove their superior spirituality and deeper understanding of religion to a suspicious ruler, a probing religious rival or a potential convert. Although present-day Alevi lack a direct memory of the protagonist of the above story, one may presume a historical connectedness between the story of Abu'l-Wafa' and its Alevi counterparts, given the many Alevi documents in which Abu'l-Wafa' Taj al-°Arifin is frequently named as a familial and/or spiritual progenitor. These Alevi documents – mainly Sufi diplomas (Ar. *ijāzas*; Ot. *icāzetnāmes*) and genealogies (Ar. *shajaras*; Ot. *şeceres*) – contain little information about Abu'l-Wafa' (d. 1107), the eponym of the Iraqi-born Wafa'i Sufi tradition and the related Wafa'i *sayyids*, beyond his spiritual pedigree and his descent from the family of the Prophet Muhammad.³ Alevi oral tradition, likewise, seems to have preserved only faint traces of Abu'l-Wafa's memory, such as the consistently highlighted descent of certain Alevi *mürşid ocaks* from Imam Zayn al-°Abidin, from whom Abu'l-Wafa' allegedly also descended. A brief explanatory note in Turkish that was added in 984/1576 to the end of an older Arabic *ijāza* that was found among the Alevi documents suggests that already in this period the memory of the saint had begun to sink into oblivion among the Wafa'i-cum-Kizilbash *ocaks*. This passage, most likely derived from oral reports, provides an anachronistic account of Abu'l-Wafa's life, presenting him as a contemporary of the Umayyads whose oppressive policies towards the descendants of the Prophet forced him to leave his native home and take refuge among the Kurds.⁴ A version of the story without the Umayyad connection is told in Abu'l-Wafa's hagiographic vita about his father. Alevi *dedes* traditionally cite the same storyline, stripped of its specific Wafa'i connection, when recounting the initial settlement in Anatolia of °Alid *sayyids* who are believed to have founded the various Kizilbash/Alevi *ocaks*.

With rare exceptions, one hardly finds any information on Abu'l-Wafa' and his Sufi tradition in the modern histories of Islamic mysticism.⁵ The little-known story of the Wafa'iyya begins in eleventh-century Iraq with its eponym, Abu'l-Wafa', who grew up among tribal Kurds in central Iraq where he commanded an ethnically and socially diverse following. His spiritual lineage reaches back to one of the earliest Sufi circles based in Basra and represented an alternative strain within Sufism distinct from that