

### The Sufi Saint of Jam

The Sunni saint cult and shrine of Ahmad-i Jam has endured for 900 years. The shrine and its Sufi shaykhs secured patronage from Mongols, Kartids, Tamerlane, and Timurids. The cult and shrine complex started sliding into decline when Iran's shahs took the Shi'i path in 1501, but are today enjoying a renaissance under the (Shi'i) Islamic Republic of Iran. The shrine's eclectic architectural ensemble has been renovated with private and public funds, and expertise from Iran's Cultural Heritage Organization. Two seminaries (*madrasa*) that teach Sunni curricula to males and females were added. Sunni and Shi'i pilgrims visit to venerate *their* saint. Jami mystics still practice *'irfan* (gnosticism).

Analyzed are Ahmad-i Jam's biography and hagiography; marketing to sultans of Ahmad as the "Guardian of Kings"; history and politics of the shrine's catchment area; acquisition of patronage by shrine and shaykhs; and Sufi doctrines and practices of Jami mystics, including its Timurid-era Naqshbandi Sufis.

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## The Sufi Saint of Jam

*History, Religion, and Politics of a Sunni Shrine  
in Shi'ī Iran*

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*University of St Andrews*



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*To my Mum,  
Maureen Clare,  
with love*

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## Preface

The genesis for this book lies with a doctoral thesis written at Cambridge. The idea for shaping the book into a history of an Islamic institution over its entire life, 900 years – a daunting project – was inspired, however, by the observation of Dr. Tony Street of the University’s Divinity Faculty, who commented about “the extraordinary spectacle of an institution dealing with pressures arising from changing dynasties and sectarian division, adopting strategies that allowed it to flourish through nine centuries.” There is a need for histories of religious institutions, especially of Sufi shrines that continue to thrive and to fill spiritual voids. There is a need, relatedly, to understand the yearnings of Muslims who seek nearness to God through His “Friends” (saints), and the orthopraxes of Muslims who make pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to sacred spaces (*haram, hima*).

Shrines, saints, and relic/tomb veneration are beliefs and rituals common to the Abrahamic faiths; a cursory review of the sundry pilgrimage guides to Jerusalem suffice to illustrate the point. Shrines and saints have been important not just to global Muslims, but to Iranians. Sunni and Shi’a often share shrines in Iran. Since Iran began its journey from majority Sunni to majority Shi’a in 1501, several shrines have acquired distinctively Shi’i hues; but those sites are neither closed to, nor shunned by, Sunnis; for instance, the magnificent Gawhar-Shad Mosque inside the shrine complex of Imam Riza. The saint cult of Ahmad-i Jam, still distinctively Sunni in a predominantly Sunni region, has a Shi’i following, including among Afghan Hazaras. A Shi’i following is fascinating considering that the saint was a bigoted Sunni who fulminated against the Shi’a, especially the Isma‘ilis – the “Assassins” of lore.

xiv Preface

The Shi‘i Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, allegedly “fundamentalist” and “sectarian,” provides material financial and technical support to the administrators of the Sunni shrine. The saint cult and complex have been revitalized, but not entirely due to Tehran’s efforts. A nebulous regional “Sunni revival” is ongoing.

In presenting this study, which spans historical periods and academic fields, I have tried to balance the needs of specialists from Islamic studies, Sufi studies, Iranian studies, Afghanistan studies, and Mongol studies, with the needs of nonspecialists who may find the subject matter to be of interest, possibly even of value, to their own work. It is unlikely that I will meet this balance to the satisfaction of everyone. I have dispensed with macrons and diacritics in transliterations: the Arabist or Persianist will know the correct word, but nonspecialists will be irritated by the dots and dashes.

The sources for a study spanning 900 years are unevenly distributed: sources are abundant for the centuries when Ahmad-i Jam’s shrine and saint cult were in political, social, and economic bloom; but with the Shi‘i ascendancy (1501), the indubitably Sunni shrine and saint cult withered in Iran. The cult even lost its Indian foothold when the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great – a descendant of Ahmad-i Jam – became a devotee of a Chishtiyya saint. Consequently, primary sources dwindled. But with the renaissance of Ahmad-i Jam’s shrine and cult under the Islamic Republic of Iran, old and new sources are surfacing – a trend that includes this book.

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<sup>†</sup> Died August 6, 2018.    <sup>†</sup> Died October 23, 2019.

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I appreciate the courtesies extended by the entities and individuals holding copyright to the photographs reproduced herein. I have to single out Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin with effusive praise and thanks for allowing me to use, without fuss or cost, a folio from *Jahangir Album* (Libr. Pict. A117). I was unable to include an image from *Akbarnama* (IS.2:77–1896), which is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum. The V&A refused to issue a perpetual license: a non-expiring license is indispensable in a technological age where books are available in e-book formats, “print on demand,” and thus never out of print. Unless indicated, copyright to maps and photographs belongs to me. If I have failed to acknowledge someone, please forgive the oversight. It is unintentional.

## Notes on the Text

### QUR'AN AND HADITH

Quotes from the Qur'an are from 'Abdallah Yusuf 'Ali's translation. Qur'an citations are given in the form "Q12:15," that is, chapter (*sura*) 12, verse (*aya*) 15. Hadith refer to the six authentic (*sahih*) collections available online at <https://sunnah.com> (in Arabic and English). They are given here in the form "*Sahih al-Bukhari* # 1198."

### TRANSLITERATION

The *IJMES* systems for Arabic and Persian are followed but without the macrons ( $\bar{a}/\bar{i}/\bar{u}$ ) and diacritics ( $\underline{d}/\underline{h}/\underline{s}/\underline{t}/\underline{z}/\underline{z}$ ). 'Ayn (') and *hamza* (') represent letters of the alphabet and are retained. The letter *waw* is rendered *w* throughout; diphthongs are *aw* and *ay*; doubled final form of the vowel  $\bar{i}$  is *-iyy*.

Spelling follows options in dictionaries by Hans Wehr and Francis Steingass. Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Mongol words accepted into English and included in *Webster's* or the *OED* are not transliterated; hence, *ulama*, *darwish*, *waqf*, and so on.



## Abbreviations

BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
CAJ	<i>Central Asiatic Journal</i>
CHI	<i>Cambridge History of Iran</i>
EI <sup>2</sup>	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i> (2nd ed.)
EI <sup>3</sup>	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i> (3rd ed.)
EIr	<i>Encyclopædia Iranica</i>
EQ	<i>Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an</i>
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
IJMES	<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of Asian History</i>
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
JOAS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
PIHC	<i>Proceedings of the Indian History Congress</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>