

AḤMAD IBN MUḤAMMAD AL-SAHLĪ (SUHAYLĪ) AL-KHWĀRAZMĪ, VIZIER OF THE MA'MŪNID STATE

Abstract: The historical Khwārazm region was governed by the Khwārazmshāhs of the Ma'mūnid Dynasty between 996–1017. During the Ma'mūnids period, Gurganj, the capital of Khwārazm became a scientific and literary center of attraction, where many scientists and literati, including famous names such as Ibn Sīnā, al-Bīrūnī, and al-Tha'libī, gathered. This academic circle is also called the Khwārazm Ma'mūn Academy. This article is the biography of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sahlī (al-Suhaylī) al-Khwārazmī, the Vizier of the Ma'mūnid State. Besides being a senior statesman, he was also a talented poet and teacher. The article contains information about his life, viziership, and poems and explains that he made important contributions to the development of the sciences, thought, and literature in Khwārazm, based on the biographical historical sources and the testimonies of witnesses. The aim of the article is to prove that al-Sahlī was one of the wise viziers who played a significant role in the development of civilization in Central Asia. He employed and supported many scholars and poets under his auspices. They wrote many books and poems and dedicated them to al-Sahlī. He, who was also a poet and intellectual, was leading and guiding the scientists and literati in their academic and literary studies. His major achievement was that he patronized and supported Ibn Sina, who was having a hard time, and summoned him to Khwārazm.

Key words: Khwārazm, Ma'mūnid State, al-Sahlī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Masiḥī.

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AL-SAHLĪ'S name was recorded in four forms in historical sources by the traditional Arabic-Islamic name structure. al-Masiḥī and Ibn Sīnā, friends of al-Sahlī, wrote his name as *al-Shaykh al-Ra'is al-Sayyid Abū al-Ḥasan Sahl ibn Muḥammad al-Sahlī* (Kaya 2020: 480; Ibn Sīnā 2018: 37). On the other hand, in two of his works dedicated to al-Sahlī, Ibn Sīnā mentioned his patron's name in two different ways as *al-Shaykh al-Jalīl Abā al-Ḥasan Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sahlī* (Ibn Sīnā 1984: 11) and *al-Shaykh al-Jalīl al-Sayyid Abī al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sahlī* (Biesterfeldt and Kaya 2020: 21). Finally, al-Tha'libī, a contemporary of al-Sahlī, named him as *al-Shaykh al-Vazīr Abī al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Suhaylī (al-Tha'libī 1983: 4/291)*. Later biographical sources added the nisba of al-Khwārazmī to al-Sahlī's name because he was from Khwārazm (Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/504; Ibn al-Adīm n.d.: 3/1107; Şafadī 2000: 8/97).

It is understood from the records of his contemporaries that al-Sahlī's laqab was *al-Shaykh al-Ra'is*, *al-Shaykh al-Jalīl*, or *al-Shaykh al-Vazīr*. All these

laqabs emphasize his leadership or prestige qualities. It can be thought that it was due to a typo that his kunya was recorded as *Abū al-Ḥasan* or *Abū al-Ḥusayn* and his nisba as *al-Sahlī* or *al-Suhaylī* because the spelling between al-Ḥasan (الحسن) and al-Ḥusayn (الحسين) or al-Sahlī (السهلي) and al-Suhaylī (السويلى) consists of a letter -y (ي). It is clear that his ism (given name) was *Aḥmad*, and his nasab (father's name) was *Muḥammad*, but we cannot explain why his ism was written as *Sahl* by al-Masiḥī and Ibn Sīnā.

There is no extensive information about al-Sahlī's family, education, travels, and political connections. Quoting Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad al-Is-lāmī's "Tārīkh-e Khwārazm", which is now lost, Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī says: "He was one of the well-respected people of Khwārazm. His family was the family of leadership, viziership, generosity, and magnanimity." (Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/504). Ibn al-Adīm recorded that he was educating a nephew of Vizier Abī al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Alī al-Maghribī in Aleppo in 976 and then his glory rose (Ibn al-Adīm n.d.: 3/1107).

It is understood that al-Sahlī was born into a

wealthy and noble family holding the office of viziership. It can be said that al-Sahli was born in the middle of the tenth century because he was an adult in 976. He went to Syria and entered the service of the Maghribid family, who held senior administrative positions in the Abbāsids, Ikhshīdids, Fāṭimids, and Ḥamdānids in 10-11th centuries. He worked as a tutor in his youth and returned to Khwārazm in an unknown year. He was appointed to the office of his deceased father as the Vizier of the Ma'mūnid State. Thus, he was described as وزير ابن وزير (Vizier, son of the Vizier), and a short poem was quoted about his appointment to the vizierate (in Arabic):

ورث الوزارة كابراً عن كابر ... موصولةً بالإسناد
(Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/504)

He inherited the vizierate from father to son through an unbroken succession.

It is not known when al-Sahli was appointed as vizier, but this date must have been shortly after the establishment of the Ma'mūnid State in 996. When Ibn Sīnā came to Khwārazm region from Bukhara after his father's death (probably between 1003-1005), al-Sahli was in office (*Ibn Sīnā and Jūzcanī* 1331: 5). He continued his duty as a vizier until his resignation in 1013 (*Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī* 1993: 2/505).

al-Sahli's viziership continued in a critical political conjuncture. In this stage, the Sāmānid State, which controlled Khorasan-Transoxiana, collapsed. Qarakhanids and Ghaznavids rose as two great powers and competed to inherit the Sāmānid heritage and dominate Central Asia. The effects of the struggle for influence between the Abbāsids and Fāṭimids were also felt in Central Asia. The Ma'mūnid Government followed a policy of balance between the powers and focused on protecting its country and independence. Instead of preoccupying with political conflicts and wars, the Ma'mūnids patronized the sciences, philosophy, and literature. They brought together the most intelligent and talented scholars and literati of their time, such as Ibn Sīnā, al-Tha'ālibī, al-Bīrūnī, al-Masīhī, Ibn Irāq, Ibn al-Khammār, al-Ḥamidī, al-Ḥubūbī, Abd al-Ṣamad al-Ḥakīm, al-Nātilī, al-Sakhri, Ibn Ma'mūn, and al-Hilālī, under their auspices (Özbayraktar 2021: 45-66, 135-181). The academic circle formed by them is also named the Khwārazm Ma'mūn Academy today. Vizier al-Sahli played an important role in this success. Nizāmī Arūḍī Samarqandī says:

“... Khwārazmshāh Abū al-Abbās Ma'mūn (II) had a vizier. His name was Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Suhaylī (i.e., al-Sahli). He was a man of wise character and generous soul and virtuous, and Khwārazmshāh was also a friend of wise and virtuous people. Because they were so wise and virtuous, people such as Abū Alī Sīnā, Abū Sahl Masīhī, Abū al-Khayr

Khammār, Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī, and Abū Naṣr Irāq gathered in that dervish lodge (i.e., under their auspice).” (*Samarqandī* n.d.: 116)

The most important contribution of al-Sahli was that he summoned Ibn Sīnā to Khwārazm and patronized him. In his autobiography, Ibn Sīnā says:

“... Then my father died, and my situation suddenly changed, and I undertook something from Sultan's affairs. Necessity compelled me to leave Bukhārā and move to Gurgānj. Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Sahli, who loved these sciences, (i.e., basic sciences and philosophy), was a vizier there. I was introduced to Alī ibn Ma'mūn, the ruler of that place. In those days, I was wearing the clothes of the jurists with the taylasān (i.e., a kind of shawl) under my chin. They gave me a salary, enough for my peers.” (*Ibn Sīnā and Jūzcanī* 1331: 5)

It is understood that al-Sahli patronized Ibn Sīnā during his difficult times and employed him as a jurist. This was probably between the years 1003-1005. Ibn Sīnā spent 6 to 9 years in Khwārazm and left there between 1011-1012 (*Ibn Sīnā and Jūzcanī* 1331: 5-6). He compiled at least five of his works in Khwārazm and dedicated them to al-Sahli.

Ibn Sīnā, who did not hesitate to express his admiration for his patron, al-Sahli, gives the following remarkable information about him:

“The Great Master Abā al-Ḥasan Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sahli is known for his 'ulūvv al-himmat (magnanimity), the honor of his ancestry, his love of real sciences, and the fact that those who have received a great share of the sciences and excelled in the sciences communicate and learn them one after another from him.” (*Ibn Sīnā* 1984: 11)

Ibn Sīnā's sentences reveal that Vizier al-Sahli was known for his interest in the sciences, had a wide academic circle, and patronized and supported many leading scholars of his time by patronizing them.

In the Islamic Golden Age (traditionally 8-14th centuries), the courts of local dynasties or statesmen were like academies for thinkers, scholars, theologians, and literati, where they were financially supported and conducted scientific-literary research. The patronage of sciences and literature was one of the most common and frequently used methods of gaining prestige in medieval Islamic society. Scholars and literati honored their benefactors by dedicating their works, and thanks to the generous donations they were given, they were able to focus on their scientific-literary studies without having to work in any job and without having any financial difficulties. However, al-Sahli did not seek to gain prestige while dealing with the sciences and patronizing scientists. The testimonies of witnesses support this claim.

The Christian philosopher-physician al-Masīhī explained his reason for writing his work called “Aṣnāf al-'ulūm al-ḥikmiyya” as follows:

“al-Shaykh al-Ra’is al-Sayyid Abū al-Ḥasan Sahl ibn Muḥammad al-Sahli wrote a letter to me asking about the chapters of philosophical sciences, how many parts each of them were divided into, what the divisions that makeup them, the subject matter of knowledge, and what kind of hierarchy there was between them in terms of human souls, what was the purpose and benefit of each of them, what the essential books were in each science. I answered his request and summarized what he requested in the most accurate, easy, and light way possible in the current situation. Because scholars have written a lot on this issue, but despite this multitude, they have not reached the point they should have been.” (Kaya 2020: 480)

Ibn Sīnā wrote the philosophical work entitled *“Risāla fī jamī’i aqṣām ‘ulūm al-avā’il”* as a treatise similar to al-Masīhī’s *“Aṣnāf al-‘ulūm al-ḥikmiyya”* and explained that the work was written for al-Sahli as follows:

“This is what al-Shaykh al-Ra’is Abū Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn Abdallāh Ibn Sīnā, may God have mercy upon him, has produced for the collegium of the honorable master Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sahli. When (Ibn Sīnā) learned of (Abū al-Ḥusayn’s) perfect command of the disciplines of philosophy, his love for it, and his engagement with those affiliated with it, he produced (this overview) in tree form, in which he presented all the branches of the sciences of the Ancients in a conspicuous way, mentioning what every part of those sciences comprises and in which books the laws and principles for every discipline of them is to be found, in order to help the student of philosophy/of the branches of the sciences access knowledge of the benefit and aim of his chosen science and of that book which leads him towards it. (The author) has asked the honorable master for his august favor in issuing this commission by graciously mending (any remaining) imperfections, should they occur in this work. ...” (Biesterfeldt and Kaya 2020: 3, 21).

Ibn Sīnā also wrote his philosophical work called *“al-Qaṣida al-muzdavija fī al-mantiq”* for al-Sahli and dedicated it to him. In his work, which was prepared in verse, Ibn Sīnā expressed his views on logic with poetry (Ibn Sīnā 2018: 37, etc.).

Besides philosophy, al-Sahli was also closely related to medical science. al-Masīhī wrote a medical book entitled *“Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-kullī”* for al-Sahli (Ullmann 1970: 150-151). Ibn Sīnā, on the other hand, wrote his medical book entitled *“Daf’ al-maḍarr al-kulliyya”* for al-Sahli and stated that he got the idea to write this book from al-Sahli as follows in its introduction:

“When he put my naẓm (my pearl) among (the pearls of) his necklace and added me to his community, he ordered me, among his wise orders, to write a book on repelling matters that cause general harm to people’s bodies. Because he examined the medical books

and determined that this subject was more interested in preventing harmful things. And he understood that those books were very defective in ensuring that careless people do not fall for what he forbids and do not act contrary to what he commands. I accepted his supreme command as much as I could.” (Ibn Sīnā 1984: 11)

Again, Ibn Sīnā stated that he had written two astronomy books, *“‘Illat qiyām al-‘arḍ”* and *Kitāb al-Samā’ va al-‘ālam”* to respond to the demands of al-Sahli with the following sentences:

“The Master Abū al-Ḥasan ordered me to explain to him the correct view regarding the reason for its existence in the place where the earth is located in a way that is easy to imagine and beyond any doubt, and to bring the explanation about this subject in the relevant section and present it to him. I accepted his order by asking Allāh, who gives wisdom and strength, for help, hoping to forgive him in case of any mistake or defect and to make the work of the person who makes an effort easier. ... We explained this subject in the name of this Shaykh in the book al-Samā’ va al-‘ālam. Whenever he desires this path of more investigation and more rigorous study -its beginning and end more difficult- he finds it there successfully.” (Ibn Sīnā 1980: 442, 444)

al-Sahli’s intellectual interests were not limited to medicine, philosophy, and astronomy. For example, Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī gave the following information about the writing of *“Kitāb al-Sahli”*, a book written by al-Ḥubūbī, a mathematician-jurist from Khwārazm:

“He (Sahlī) combined the tools of leadership, literacy, and viziership, hit with penetrating arrows in the sciences and literature, and received generosity and good habits with great luck. al-Ḥasan ibn al-Harith al-Ḥusūnī (the correct spelling of this name is al-Ḥubūbī) wrote Kitāb al-Sahli about the sect on his order and contact and mentions two sects in it, the Hanafī and Shāfi’ī sects.” (Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/504-505)

From the quoted passages, it is understood that al-Sahli was closely interested in various branches of the sciences. He patronized and generously supported scholars. He guided and led their scientific studies with his profound knowledge and academic demands. In this way, he was satisfying his own intellectual needs and curiosity. It seems that the main factor why the two leading philosophers-physicians of this period, Ibn Sīnā and al-Masīhī, preferred to work under the auspices of al-Sahli, was not only that he was a wealthy and influential statesman, but also an intellectual. For this reason, al-Sahli gained the appreciation and respect of the leading scholars.

Besides his viziership, al-Sahli was a talented poet and writer. He composed poetry and wrote a book entitled *“Kitāb al-Ravḍat al-Sahliyya fī al-evṣāf ve al-tashbihāt”*. His book was lost, but a few of his poems were quoted by Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī and survived.

One of al-Sahli’s poems is as follows (in Arabic):

ألا سقنا الصهباء صرفاً فإنها ... أعزّ علينا من عناق الترحّل
وإني لأقلي النقل حبا لطعمها ... لنلا يزول الطعم عند التنقل
*Make us drink pure wine! No doubt, it is more valuable
to us than a farewell embrace.*

*Since I don't like its taste, I don't like to eat something
with it so that it doesn't lose its taste.*

Another poem by al-Sahli is as follows (in Arabic):
والشهب تلمع في الظلام كأنها ... شرر تطاير من دخان النار
فكأنها فوق السماء بنادق ... الكافور فوق صلاية العطار
*The stars shine in the dark like sparks flying through the
smoke.*

*They look like camphor grains in the muller of the scent
maker in the sky.*

Another poem of his is (in Arabic):

كأنما البدر فوق الماء مطّلعاً ... ونحن بالشطّ في لهو وفي طرب
ملك رانا فأهوى للعبور فلم ... يقدر فمّد له جسر من الذهب
*The full moon seems to rise above the water. We are fun
and enthusiastic on the beach.*

*A ruler saw us and gave us the signal to cross the sea.
As soon as he ordered, a golden bridge was suddenly laid
for him.*

(Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/504-505)

Vizier al-Sahli had a wide literary circle and worked with statesmen who were poets while governing the Ma'mūnid State. al-Sakhri was the chief secretary of the Ma'mūnid government and was a colleague of al-Sahli. He composed the following poem about al-Sahli (in Arabic):

نفس مصدّقة جميع عاداتها ... لكن مكثبة ظنون عاداتها
هّماته حكمت على هاماتها ... أن أصبحت للوحش من أقواتها
يا أحمد بن محمد يا خير من ... ولي الوزارة عند خير ولايتها
مادامت الأيام في الغفلات عن ... عرصات مجدك فاغتنم غفلاتها
*A person fulfills all his promises except the assumptions.
His magnanimity dominates all the hills to provide for
the livelihood of even the wild beasts.*

*O Ahmad, son of Muhammad! O the best of those who
manage the government even in the presence of the most superior
of the governors!*

*As long as the days pass by in the courtyard of your nobility,
consider their negligence as booty!*

(Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/503)

al-Tha'alibi mentioned a dialogue between Vizier al-Sahli and al-Hamidi, the ambassador of the Ma'mūnid government and a famous poet of that time. When his son was born in 1011, al-Hamidi composed a poem to share his joy with Vizier al-Sahli and sent it to him (in Arabic):

عوائد صنع الله تكنفني تترى ... فتورثني ذكرا وتزمني شكرا
فمنها نجيب جاء كالبدن طالعا ... سويا سنبا شد لي نوره أظرا
وما هو إلا خادم وابن خادم ... لسيدنا مد الإله له العمرا
فما رأيته في الاسم لازل مسميا ... مواليه كي يقتنوا الفخر والذخرا

*The blessings of Allāh Almighty surround me all around
and one after the other. For (his bestowal) bequeaths me a
son and makes me responsible for gratitude.*

*One of them is Najīb; he came like a rising, perfect, and
holy full moon and his radiance supported me.*

*He is only the son of our master's servant and is at the
beck and call of the master. May Allāh prolong his life.*

*What are our master's (precious) ideas about the name
that our baby is suitable for (us) servants to be honorable?*

In response to al-Hamidi's poem, al-Sahli compiled the following poem to share his joy (in Arabic):

سكنت إلى ما قلته أولا نثرا ... نعم وإلى ما صنعته آخر شعرا
فهناك الله النجيب فإنه ... من الله فضل يوجب الحمد والشكرا
وما جاء إلا أن يكون لصنوه ... ظهيرا ففوى الآن بينهما ظهرا
وأوثر أن يكنى بكنية جده ... أبي أحمد والاسم اختاره نصرا
ليحمد منه الله تقواه والهدى ... وينصره في علمه والنهي نصرا
*I was pleased with what he wrote, first in prose, and later
in poetry.*

*May Allāh bless you Najīb. Undoubtedly, he is a grace of
Allāh that requires praise and thanksgiving.*

*He only came as a supporter of his twin brother. So now
your back is stronger between the two.*

*It was preferred to be tagged (i.e., nicknamed) with the
kunya of his grandfather, Abū Ahmad. His name was also
chosen to assist him.*

*On this occasion, may Allāh praise his taqvā and the
right path, and grant him ample superiority in his knowledge
and understanding.*

(al-Tha'alibi 1983: 4/291)

It is clear from the poems quoted above that al-Sahli was not only a poet and writer who ruled the state but also worked with talented poets like himself in the administration of the state. Thus, it is understood that the Ma'mūnid State was governed by highly cultured and intellectual statesmen.

al-Sahli resigned his office in 1013 because he was afraid of the anger of Khwārazmshāh Abū al-Abbās Ma'mūn II. The reasons for the conflict between the two were not specified, but it is emphasized that al-Sahli left Khwārazm as if to flee and suffered financial difficulties for a while. It seems that there was a serious disagreement. al-Sahli hastily left his hometown, went to Baghdād, and came under the auspices of Fakhr al-Mulk Abū Ghālib Muḥammad ibn Khalef, the Governor of Iraq. Fakhr al-Mulk Abū Ghālib greatly respected and welcomed him nicely, but he died soon after. al-Sahli left Baghdād, fearing financial difficulties. After wandering in Iraq for a while, al-Sahli met Gharīb ibn Muqannin, governed in the Tikrit and Dujayl districts, and spent the rest of his life as a wealthy person under his auspices. When he died in Sāmarrā in 1027, he left behind a considerable fortune of 20.000 dinars (Yāqūt al-Ḥamavī 1993: 2/505).

Conclusion. In the Middle Ages, there was a great breakthrough and progress in the sciences, thought, theology, and literature in Central Asia. Great scholars whose fame was carried beyond the ages lived and countless works were written. Wise rulers and viziers played an important role in this development, generously supporting scholars and literati. al-Sahli, the Vizier of the Ma'munid State, was a suitable example of the intellectual statesmen of Central Asia. He was a statesman and poet but above all a teacher. He was born and raised in a wealthy, noble, and cultured family in Khwārazm. He returned to his homeland by increasing his knowledge

and manners in the presence of the famous Maghribid family in Syria and was appointed to the office of viziership. As an intellectual statesman, he was deeply interested in science, philosophy, and literature. He had a highly cultured academic-literary circle. He not only generously supported scholars and literati, but also directed and led their scientific and literary work, enabling them to write many works. He especially protected Ibn Sīnā during his youth and troubled times, influenced him, and guided his scientific studies. In this context, al-Sahli was a leading actor who was influential in the formation of the Khwārazm Ma'mun Academy.

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