

= Al @-@ Maʿarri =

Abul ʿAla Al @-@ Maʿarri (Arabic ??? ?????? ?????? Abʿ al @-@ ʿAlīʿ al @-@ Maʿarrʿ , full name ??? ?????? ????? ?? ??? ????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? Abʿ al @-@ ʿAlīʿ Aʿmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sulaymān al @-@ Tanʿ al @-@ Maʿarrʿ ; 973 ? 1057) was a blind Arab philosopher , poet , and writer . Born in modern @-@ day Maarrat al @-@ Nuʿman , Syria , he studied at Aleppo , Tripoli and Antioch . Producing popular poems in Baghdad , he nevertheless refused to sell his texts . In 1010 , he returned to Syria after his mother began declining in health , and continued writing which gained him local respect .

Described as a " pessimistic freethinker " , Al @-@ Maʿarri was a controversial rationalist of his time , citing reason as the chief source of truth . He was pessimistic about life describing himself as " a double prisoner " of blindness and isolation . He attacked the dogmas of religion and rejected Islam . He was equally sarcastic towards the religions of Jews , Christians and Zoroastrians . He advocated social justice , and lived a secluded , ascetic lifestyle . He was a strict vegetarian , writing " do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals . " Al @-@ Maʿarri held an anti @-@ natalist view , in line with his general pessimism , suggesting that children should not be born to spare them of the pains of life .

Al @-@ Maʿarri wrote three main works that were popular in his time . Among his works are " The Tinder Spark " , " Unnecessary Necessity " , and " The Epistle of Forgiveness " which may be considered a precursor to Dante 's Divine Comedy . Al @-@ Maʿarri never married and died at the age of 83 in the city where he was born , Maarrat al @-@ Nuʿman . In 2013 , a statue of Al @-@ Maʿarri located in Syria was beheaded by jihadists from the Al Nusra Front . Despite controversy about his unorthodox views , Al @-@ Maʿarri is regarded as one of the greatest classical Arabic poets .

= = Life = =

Abul Ala was born in Maʿarra , modern Maarrat al @-@ Nuʿman , Syria , near the city of Aleppo , in December 973 . At his time , the city was part of the Abbasid Caliphate , the third Islamic caliphate , and was during the Golden Age of Islam . He was a member of the Banu Sulayman , a notable family of Maʿarra , belonging to the larger Tanukh tribe . One of his ancestors was probably the first qadi of Maʿarra . The Tanukh tribe had formed part of the aristocracy in Syria for hundreds of years and some members of the Banu Sulayman had also been noted as good poets .

He lost his eyesight at the age of four due to smallpox . His later pessimism may be explained by his virtual blindness . Later in his life , he regarded himself as " a double prisoner " which referred to both this blindness and the general isolation that he felt during his life .

He started his career as a poet at an early age , at about 11 or 12 years old . He was educated at first in Maʿarra and Aleppo , later also in Antioch and other Syrian cities . Among his teachers in Aleppo were companions from the circle of Ibn Khalawayh . This grammarian and Islamic scholar had died in 980 CE when al @-@ Maʿarri was still a child . Al @-@ Maʿarri nevertheless laments the loss of Ibn Khalawayh in strong terms in a poem of his Risʿlat al @-@ ghufrʿn . Al @-@ Qifti reports that when on his way to Tripoli , Al @-@ Maʿarri visited a Christian monastery near Latakia where he listened to debates about Hellenistic philosophy , which planted in him the seeds of his later skepticism and irreligiosity ; but other historians such as Ibn al @-@ Adim deny that he had been exposed to any theology other than Islamic doctrine .

In 1004 @-@ 5 Al @-@ Maʿarri learned that his father had died and , in reaction , wrote an elegy where he praised his father . Years later he would travel to Baghdad where he became well received in the literary salons of the time , though he was a controversial figure . After the eighteen months in Baghdad , al @-@ Maʿarri returned home for unknown reasons . He may have returned because his mother was ill , or he may have run out of money in Baghdad , as he refused to sell his works . He returned to his native town of Maʿarra in about 1010 and learned that his mother had died before his arrival .

He remained in Maʿarra for the rest of his life , where he opted for an ascetic lifestyle , refusing to

sell his poems , living in seclusion and observing a strict vegetarian diet . His personal confinement to his house was only broken one time when violence had struck his town . Though he was confined , he lived out his later years continuing his work and collaborating with others . He enjoyed great respect and attracted many students locally , as well as actively holding correspondence with scholars abroad . Despite his intentions of living a secluded lifestyle , in his seventies , he became rich and was the most revered person in his area . Al @-@ Ma?arri never married and died in May 1057 in his hometown .

= = Philosophy = =

= = = Irreligion = = =

Al @-@ Ma?arri was skeptic in his beliefs who denounced superstition and dogmatism in religion . This , along with his general negative view on life , has made him described as a pessimistic freethinker . One of the recurring themes of his philosophy was the right of reason against the claims of custom , tradition , and authority . Al @-@ Ma?arri taught that religion was a " fable invented by the ancients " , worthless except for those who exploit the credulous masses .

Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true ; they are all fabrications . Men lived comfortably till they came and spoiled life . The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce .

Al @-@ Ma?arri criticized many of the dogmas of Islam , such as the Hajj , which he called " a pagan?s journey . " He rejected claims of any divine revelation and his creed was that of a philosopher and ascetic , for whom reason provides a moral guide , and virtue is its own reward .

His religious skepticism and positively anti @-@ religious views extended beyond Islam and also toward Judaism and Christianity . Al @-@ Ma?arri remarked that monks in their cloisters or devotees in their mosques were blindly following the beliefs of their locality : if they were born among Magians or Sabians they would have become Magians or Sabians . Encapsulating his view on organized religion , he once stated , " The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts : those with brains , but no religion , and those with religion , but no brains . "

= = = Asceticism = = =

Al @-@ Ma?arri was an ascetic , renouncing worldly desires and living secluded from others while producing his works . He opposed all forms of violence . In Baghdad , while being well received , he decided not to sell his texts , which made it difficult for him to live . This ascetic lifestyle has been compared to similar thought in India during his time .

In Al @-@ Ma?arri 's later years , he became a strict vegan , neither consuming meat , nor any other animal products . He wrote :

And do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals ,
Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught
for their young , not noble ladies . [...]
I washed my hands of all this ; and wish that I
Perceived my way before my hair went gray !

= = = Anti @-@ natalism = = =

Al @-@ Maarri?s fundamental pessimism is expressed in his anti @-@ natalist recommendation that no children should be begotten , so as to spare them the pains of life . In an elegy composed by him over the loss of a relative , he combines his grief with observations on the ephemerality of this life :

Soften your tread . Methinks the earth 's surface is but bodies of the dead ,
Walk slowly in the air , so you do not trample on the remains of God 's servants .

Even on Al @-@ Maʿarri 's epitaph , he wanted it written that his life was a wrong done by his father and not one that was done by himself .

= = Modern views = =

Al @-@ Maʿarri is controversial even today as he was skeptical of Islam , the dominant religion of the Arab World . In 2013 , almost a thousand years after his death , the al @-@ Nusra Front , a branch of al @-@ Qaeda , beheaded a statue of Al @-@ Maʿarri during the civil war in Syria . The statue had been crafted by the sculptor Fathi Muhammad . The motive behind the beheading is disputed ; theories range from the fact that he was a heretic to the fact that he is believed by some to be related to the Assad family .

Still , Al @-@ Maʿarri is sometimes referred to as one of the greatest classical Arab poets . Some have drawn connections between him and the Roman poet Titus Lucretius Carus , citing how progressive their views were compared to the time in which they lived .

= = Works = =

An early collection of his poems appeared as " The Tinder Spark " (Saqʿ al @-@ zand ; ??? ?????) . The collection of poems included praise of notable people of Aleppo and the Hamdanid King Saʿd al @-@ Dawla . It gained great popularity and established his reputation as a poet . A few poems in the collection were about armor .

A second , more original collection appeared under the title " Unnecessary Necessity " (Luzʿm mʿ lam yalzam ????? ?? ?? ????? ?? ?????????) , which is how Al @-@ Maʿarri saw the business of living ; also Luzʿmʿyʿt " Necessities " , alluding to the unnecessary complexity of the rhyme scheme used .

His third famous work is a work of prose known as " The Epistle of Forgiveness " (Risʿlat al @-@ ghufrʿn ????? ?????) . The work was written as a direct response to the Arabic poet Ibn al @-@ Qarih , whom Al @-@ Maʿarri mocks for his religious views . In this work , the poet visits paradise and meets the Arab poets of the pagan period , contrary to Muslim doctrine which holds that only those who believe in God can find salvation (Quran 4 : 48) . Because of the aspect of conversing with the deceased in paradise , the Resalat Al @-@ Ghufuran has been compared to the Divine Comedy of Dante which came hundreds of years after . The work has also been noted to be similar to Ibn Shuhayd 's Risala al @-@ tawabi ' wa al @-@ zawabi though there is no evidence that Al @-@ Maʿarri was inspired by Ibn Shuhayd nor is there any evidence that Dante was inspired by Al @-@ Maʿarri . Algeria reportedly banned " The Epistle " from the International Book Fair held in Algiers in 2007 .

" Paragraphs and Periods " (Al @-@ Fuʿʿl wa al @-@ ghʿyʿt) is a collection of homilies . The work has also been called a parody of the Quran .

= = Extracts = =

O fools , awake ! The rites ye sacred hold
Are but a cheat contrived by men of old ,
Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust
And died in baseness - and their law is dust .

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???????? ??? ??? ??????? ????????? * ????????? ?????? ??? ?????????
(Luzum 249)

Religion and infidelity , and stories that are related , and a Revelation that is cited as authority , and a Pentateuch and a Gospel .

Lies are believed amongst every race ; and was any race ever the sole possessor of Truth ?
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?? ?? ??? ??????? ????? ??? * ??? ????? ?????? ?????? ???

(Luzum 252)

They have not based their religion on any logical ground , whereby they might decide between Shi
? ites and Sunnis , In the opinion of some whom I do not mention , the Black Stone is only a
remnant of Idols and sacrificial altar stones .

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(Luzum 260)

Had they been left alone with Reason , they would not have accepted a spoken lie ; but the whips
were raised . Traditions were brought to them , and they were bidden say , ? We have been told the
truth ? ; and if they refused , the sword was drenched (in their blood) .

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(Luzum 262)

Fortune is (so strangely) allotted , that rocks are visited (by pilgrims) and touched with hands and
lips , Like the Holy Rock (at Jerusalem) or the two Angels of Quraysh , howbeit all of them are
stones that once were kicked .

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????? ??? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? * ??????????? ?????? ??????

(Luzum 301)

= = Editions = =

G. Brackenbury (trans .) , Risalat ul Ghufran , a Divine Comedy , 1943 .