

Saadi Shirazi

Muslih-ud-Din Mushrif ibn-Abdullah Shirazi



Born 1184 CE

Died 1283/1291 CE (aged 99/107)

School [Persian poetry](#), [Persian literature](#)

Main interests [Poetry](#), [Mysticism](#), [Logic](#), [Ethics](#), [Sufism](#)

Abū-Muhammad Muslih al-Dīn bin Abdallāh Shīrāzī, **Saadi Shirazi**^[1] ([Persian](#): ابومحمد مصلح الدين بن عبدالله شیرازی) better known by his pen-name as **Sall dī** ([Persian](#): سعدی) or, simply, **Saadi**, was one of the major [Persian poets](#) of the medieval period. He is not only famous in [Persian-speaking](#) countries, but he has also been quoted in western sources. He is recognized for the quality of his writings, and for the depth of his [social](#) and [moral](#) thoughts.

Biography

A native of [Shiraz](#), his father died when he was an infant. Saadi experienced a youth of poverty and hardship, and left his native town at a young age for [Baghdad](#) to pursue a better education. As a young man he was inducted to study at the famous [[Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad [an-Nizamiyya] center of knowledge (1195–1226), where he excelled in [Islamic Sciences](#), [law](#), [governance](#), history, [Arabic literature](#) and theology.

The unsettled conditions following the [Mongol](#) invasion of [Khwarezm](#) and Iran led him to wander for 30 years abroad through [Anatolia](#) (he visited the Port of [Adana](#), and near [Konya](#) he met proud [Ghazi](#) landlords), [Syria](#) (he mentions the famine in [Damascus](#)), [Egypt](#) (of its music and [Bazaars](#) its clerics and elite class), and [Iraq](#) (the port of [Basra](#) and the [Tigris](#) river). He also refers in his work about his travels in [Sindh](#) (Pakistan across the [Indus](#) and [Thar](#) with a Turkic Amir named Tughral), India (especially [Somnath](#) where he encountered [Brahmans](#)) and [Central Asia](#) (where he meets the survivors of the Mongol invasion in Khwarezm).

He also performed the pilgrimage to [Mecca](#) and [Medina](#) and also visited [Jerusalem](#).^[2] Saadi traveled through war wrecked regions from 1271 to 1294. Due to Mongol invasions he lived in desolate areas and met caravans fearing for their lives on once lively silk trade routes. Saadi lived in isolated refugee camps where he met bandits, Imams, men who formerly owned great wealth or commanded armies, intellectuals, and ordinary people. While Mongol and European sources (such as [Marco Polo](#)) gravitated to the potentates and courtly life of [Ilkhanate](#) rule, Saadi mingled with the ordinary survivors of the war-torn region. He sat in remote teahouses late into the night and exchanged views with merchants, farmers, preachers, wayfarers, thieves, and [Sufi](#) mendicants. For twenty years or more, he continued the same schedule of preaching, advising, and learning, honing his sermons to reflect the wisdom and foibles of his people. Saadi's works reflect upon the lives of ordinary Iranians suffering displacement, plight, agony and conflict, during the turbulent times of Mongol invasion.

Saadi was also among those who witnessed first-hand accounts of [Baghdad](#)'s destruction by Mongol Ilkhanate invaders led by [Hulagu](#) during the year 1258. Saadi was captured by [Crusaders](#) at [Acre](#) where he spent 7 years as a slave digging trenches outside its fortress. He was later released after the [Mamluks](#) paid ransom for Muslim prisoners being held in Crusader dungeons.

When he reappeared in his native Shiraz he was an elderly man. Shiraz, under [Atabak Abubakr Sa'd ibn Zangy](#) (1231–60) was enjoying an era of relative tranquility. Saadi was not only welcomed to the city but was respected highly by the ruler and enumerated among the greats of the province. In response, Saadi took his [nom de plume](#) from the name of the local prince, Sa'd ibn Zangi. Some of Saadi's most famous panegyrics were composed an initial gesture of gratitude in praise of the ruling house, and placed at the beginning of his *Bustan*. The remainder of Saadi's life seems to have been spent in Shiraz.

The Journey of Saadi Shirazi



Saadi Shirazi is welcomed by a youth from [Kashgar](#) during a forum in [Bukhara](#).

Due to the [Mongol Empire](#) invasion of the [Muslim World](#), especially [Khwarizm](#) and [Iran](#), Saadi like many other Muslims was displaced by the ensuing conflict thus beginning a 30 year journey. He first took refuge at [Damascus](#) and witnessed the [famine](#) in one of the most efficient cities of the world. After the frightful [Sack of Baghdad](#) in 1258 by [Hulegu](#) and the [Ilkhanate](#) Horde, Saadi visited [Jerusalem](#) and then set out on a pilgrimage to [Mecca](#) and [Medina](#). It is also believed that Saadi may have also visited [Oman](#) an other lands south of the [Arabian Peninsula](#).

Saadi then visits [Mamluk Egypt](#), of Sultan [Baibars](#). He mentions the [Qadis](#), [Muftis](#) of [Al-Azhar](#), the grand [Bazaar](#), music and art. At [Halab](#) Saadi joins a group of [Sufis](#) who had fought arduous battles against the [Crusaders](#). Further Saadi travels to [Turkey](#) first, mentions the port city of [Adana](#) and the wealthy [Ghazi](#) landowners in [Anatolia](#).

Saadi mentions Honey-gatherers in [Azerbaijan](#), fearful of Mongol plunder. Saadi finally returns to Iran where he meets his childhood companions in [Isfahan](#) and other cities. At [Khorasan](#) Saadi befriends a [Turkic Emir](#) named Tughral. Saadi joins him and his men on their journey to [Sindh](#) where he met Pir Puttur, a follower of the [Persian Sufi](#) grand master Shaikh Usman Marvandvi (1117–1274),^[3] Saadi then traveled across the [Indus River](#) and when they reach the [Thar Desert](#), Tughral hires [Hindu](#) sentinels. Tughral later enters service of the wealthy [Delhi Sultanate](#) and Saadi is invited to [Delhi](#) and later visits the [Vizier](#) of Gujarat. During his stay in [Gujarat](#) Saadi learns more of the [Hindus](#) and visits the large temple of [Somnath](#); Saadi flees the temple due to an unpleasant encounter with the [Brahmans](#).

Soon after Saadi returns to his native [Shiraz](#) and earns the patronage of its leaders.

His works



 The first page of [Bostan](#), from an Indian manuscript.

His best known works are [Bostan](#) (The Orchard) completed in 1257 and [Gulistan](#) (The Rose Garden) in 1258. *Bostan* is entirely in verse (epic metre) and consists of stories aptly illustrating the standard virtues recommended to Muslims (justice, liberality, modesty, contentment) as well as of reflections on the behaviour of dervishes and their ecstatic practices. *Gulistan* is mainly in prose and contains stories and personal anecdotes. The text is interspersed with a variety of short poems, containing aphorisms, advice, and humorous reflections. Saadi demonstrates a profound awareness of the absurdity of human existence. The fate of those who depend on the changeable moods of kings is contrasted with the freedom of the dervishes.

Saadi is also remembered as a [panegyrist](#) and lyricist, the author of a number of odes portraying human experience, and also of particular odes such as the lament on the fall of [Baghdad](#) after the Mongol invasion in 1258. His lyrics are found in *Ghazaliyat* (Lyrics) and his odes in *Qasa'id* (Odes). He is also known for a number of works in Arabic.

Of the Mongols he writes:

In Isfahan I had a friend who was warlike, spirited, and shrewd. His hands and dagger were forever stained with blood. The hearts of his enemies were consumed by fear of him; even the tigers stood in awe of him. In battle he was like a sparrow among locusts; but in combat,

"after long I met him: O tiger-seizer!" I exclaimed, "what has made thee decrepit like an old fox?"

He laughed and said: "Since the days of war against the [Mongols](#), I have expelled the thoughts of fighting from my head. Then did I see the earth arrayed with spears like a forest of reeds. I raised like smoke the dust of conflict; but when Fortune does not favour, of what avail is fury? I am one who, in

combat, could take with a spear a ring from the palm of the hand; but, as my star did not befriend me, they encircled me as with a ring. I seized the opportunity of flight, for only a fool strives with Fate. How could my helmet and cuirass aid me when my bright star favoured me not? When the key of victory is not in the hand, no one can break open the door of conquest with his arms.^[4]

"The enemy were a pack of leopards, and as strong as elephants. The heads of the heroes were encased in iron, as were also the hoofs of the horses. We urged on our Arab steeds like a cloud, and when the two armies encountered each other thou wouldst have said they had struck the sky down to the earth. From the raining of arrows, that descended like hail, the storm of death arose in every corner. Not one of our troops came out of the battle but his cuirass was soaked with blood. Not that our swords were blunt—it was the vengeance of stars of ill fortune. Overpowered, we surrendered, like a fish which, though protected by scales, is caught by the hook in the bait. Since Fortune averted her face, useless was our shield against the arrows of Fate."^[4]

[Alexander Pushkin](#), one of Russia's most celebrated poets, quotes Saadi in his masterpiece [Eugene Onegin](#).^[5]

as Saadi sang in earlier ages,
"some are far distant, some are dead".

Saadi distinguished between the spiritual and the practical or mundane aspects of life. In his *Bostan*, for example, spiritual Saadi uses the mundane world as a spring board to propel himself beyond the earthly realms. The images in *Bostan* are delicate in nature and soothing. In the *Gulistan*, on the other hand, mundane Saadi lowers the spiritual to touch the heart of his fellow wayfarers. Here the images are graphic and, thanks to Saadi's dexterity, remain concrete in the reader's mind. Realistically, too, there is a ring of truth in the division. The Sheikh preaching in the [Khanqah](#) experiences a totally different world than the merchant passing through a town. The unique thing about Saadi is that he embodies both the Sufi Sheikh and the travelling merchant. They are, as he himself puts it, two almond kernels in the same shell.

Saadi's prose style, described as "simple but impossible to imitate" flows quite naturally and effortlessly. Its simplicity, however, is grounded in a semantic web consisting of [synonymy](#), [homophony](#), and [oxymoron](#) buttressed by internal [rhythm](#) and external [rhyme](#) something that Dr. Iraj Bashiri quite skillfully captures in his translation of the [Prologue](#) of the work:

*"In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Laudation is due the most High, the most Glorious, Whose worship bridges the Gap and Whose
recognition breeds beneficence. Each breath inhaled sustains life, exhaled imparts rejuvenation.
Two blessings in every breath, each due a separate salutation.
Whose hand properly offers and whose tongue,
The salutation due Him, and not be wrong?
Says He: "Ingratiate yourself, O family of David,
Unlike the unthankful, that I thee bid!"
Subjects proper, best admit to all transgression,
At His threshold, with contrite expression;
How otherwise could mortal creatures ever,
Make themselves worthy of His discretion?"*

Regarding the importance of [professions](#) Saadi writes:

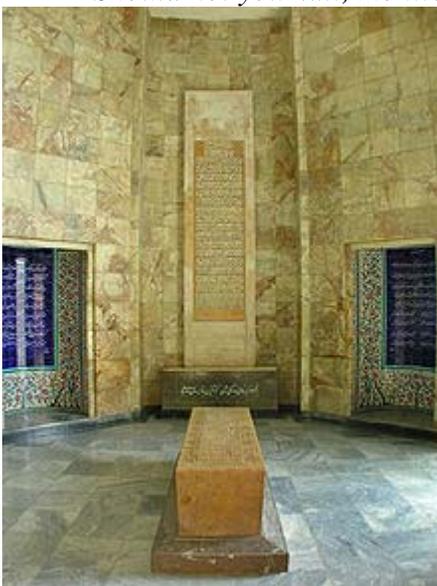
Oh darlings of your fathers, learn the trade because property and riches of the world are not to be relied upon; also silver and gold are an occasion of danger because either a thief may steal them at once or the owner spend them gradually; but a profession is a living fountain and permanent wealth; and although a professional man may loose riches, it does not matter because a profession is itself wealth and wherever you go you will enjoy respect and sit on high places, whereas those who have no trade will glean crumbs and see hardships.



Saadi's mausoleum in [Shiraz, Iran](#).

Saadi is also known to have taken a keen interest in natural phenomenon:

He has ordered the zephyr to cover, with the emerald carpet of spring, the earth; and He has instructed the maternal vernal clouds to nourish the seeds of autumn to birth. In foliage green, He has clothed the trees, and through beautiful blossoms of many hues, has perfumed the breeze. He has allowed the life-imparting sap to percolate and its delicious honey to circulate. His power is hidden in the tiny seed that sires the lofty palm. The clouds, the wind, the moon, and the sun, For your comfort, and at your behest, run; They toil continuously for your satisfaction, Should not you halt, monitor your action?"



Tomb of Saadi in his mausoleum

Chief among these works is [Goethe's](#) *West-Oestlicher Divan*. [Andre du Ryer](#) was the first European to present Saadi to the West, by means of a partial [French](#) translation of *Gulistan* in 1634. [Adam Olearius](#) followed soon with a complete translation of the *Bustan* and the *Gulistan* into [German](#) in 1654.

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) was also an avid fan of Sadi's writings, contributing to some translated editions himself. Emerson, who read Saadi only in translation, compared his writing to the [Bible](#) in terms of its wisdom and the beauty of its narrative.^[6]

Saadi is well known for his aphorisms, the most famous of which, *Bani Adam*, calls for breaking all barriers:^[7]

بنی آدم اعضای یک پیکرند^[8]
گوهرند که در آفرینش ز یک
چو عضوی به درد آورد روزگار
دگر عضوها را نماند قرار
تو کز محنت دیگران بی غمی
آدمی نشاید که نامت نهند

The poem is translated by M. Aryanpoor as:

*Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you've no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain!*

by H. Vahid Dastjerdi as:^[9]

*Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;
For they're created of the same clay.
Should one organ be troubled by pain,
Others would suffer severe strain.
Thou, careless of people's suffering,
Deserve not the name, "human being".*

and the last translation by Dr. Iraj Bashiri:

*Of One Essence is the Human Race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base.
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace.
The Unconcern'd with Others' Plight,
Are but Brutes with Human Face.*

The translations above are attempts to preserve the rhyme scheme of the original while translating into English, but may distort the meaning. What follows is an attempt at a more literal translation of the original Persian:

"Humans (children of Adam) are inherent parts (or more literally, limbs) of one body, and are from the same essence in their creation.

When the conditions of the time hurts one of these parts, other parts will be disturbed.

If you are indifferent about the misery of others, it may not be appropriate to call you a human being."