

## Ibn Arabī: Life and Intellectual Legacy

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the life of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), one of the most influential figures in Islamic mysticism and philosophy. Known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (“the Greatest Master”), Ibn ‘Arabī’s works shaped the trajectory of Sufism and Islamic thought for centuries. The study provides a biographical overview, explores his intellectual development, and situates his writings within the broader historical and cultural context of the medieval Islamic world.

**Keywords:** Ibn ‘Arabī, Sufism, Islamic philosophy, mysticism, Andalusia, Akbarian thought.



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### Introduction

Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240 CE) stands as a towering figure in the history of Islamic mysticism. Revered by many as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, his writings explore profound metaphysical questions about existence, divine reality, and the nature of knowledge. His life, spanning the intellectual centers of Muslim Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, reflects both a personal spiritual quest and a broader cultural exchange during a period of political fragmentation yet intense scholarly activity.

**Early Life in Andalusia.** Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-‘Arabī was born in Murcia, al-Andalus, in 1165 CE, during the height of Almohad power in the Iberian Peninsula. His family was well-connected and of Arab descent, which provided him with access to scholarly and spiritual circles. Educated in Seville, young Ibn ‘Arabī encountered prominent scholars, theologians, and mystics.

A formative spiritual experience reportedly occurred during his adolescence, when he underwent visions that set him on a mystical path. From this point forward, Ibn ‘Arabī’s life became characterized by travel, study, and devotion to the pursuit of divine knowledge.

**Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys.** Ibn ‘Arabī’s intellectual journey took him across the Islamic world. He traveled extensively through North Africa, visiting Tunis and Fez, where he engaged with both jurists and Sufi masters. His encounters with leading scholars deepened his understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and metaphysics.

In 1201, Ibn ‘Arabī left al-Andalus for the East, never to return. His journeys through Egypt, Mecca, Anatolia, and eventually Damascus exposed him to diverse intellectual traditions. In

Mecca, he experienced significant spiritual illumination, which inspired his monumental work *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (“The Meccan Openings”).

**Major Works and Contributions.** Ibn ‘Arabī’s prolific output, estimated at over 350 works, includes treatises on metaphysics, mysticism, poetry, and commentary. Among his most celebrated works are:

1. **al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya:** An encyclopedic text covering theology, cosmology, and spiritual practice.
2. **Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam** (“The Bezels of Wisdom”): A concise yet dense work that presents the wisdom of prophets, often considered the pinnacle of his thought.
3. **Tarjumān al-Ashwāq:** A collection of mystical poetry blending love imagery with spiritual symbolism.

Central to his philosophy is the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (“unity of being”), which emphasizes that all existence is a manifestation of the One Divine Reality. While controversial among some jurists, this doctrine became a cornerstone of later Sufi metaphysics.

**Later Life in Damascus.** Ibn ‘Arabī eventually settled in Damascus, where he spent the last two decades of his life. There he attracted disciples, transmitted his writings, and became a respected—though sometimes contested—figure among scholars. His tomb, located in Damascus, remains a site of pilgrimage to this day.

**Legacy.** The influence of Ibn ‘Arabī transcends time and geography. His thought inspired generations of mystics, poets, and philosophers, from Rūmī in Persia to later Ottoman, Mughal, and North African scholars. While his teachings were occasionally criticized for perceived heterodoxy, his intellectual depth ensured his central place in Islamic spirituality. Modern scholarship continues to engage with his writings, highlighting their philosophical sophistication and global relevance.

**Conclusion.** Ibn ‘Arabī’s life and works exemplify the rich intellectual and spiritual culture of the medieval Islamic world. His synthesis of mystical insight, philosophical reasoning, and poetic expression has secured his position as one of the most profound thinkers in Islamic history. By bridging the gap between metaphysics and spirituality, Ibn ‘Arabī left an enduring legacy that continues to shape contemporary discussions on religion and philosophy.

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