

THE REGION OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

This article explores the historical and intellectual significance of Nasaf (Nakhshab), a city in Central Asia (modern-day Uzbekistan), as a major center of Islamic scholarship. It provides an overview of the region's deep connection to Islamic culture since the 7th century CE and contrasts the sedentary lifestyle of its people with the nomadic cultures of neighboring regions. The main body of the text offers concise biographies of several influential scholars who emerged from Nasaf, including Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi and Umar ibn Muhammad Abu Hafs al-Nasafi. The article highlights their key contributions to Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Quranic exegesis (tafsir), and hadith, underscoring Nasaf's lasting legacy as a source of invaluable intellectual and spiritual heritage for the Muslim world.

Keywords: Nasaf (or Nakhshab), islamic Scholars, Central Asia, Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Quranic Exegesis (Tafsir), Hanafi Madhhab.

Introduction

Since its conquest by Muslims in the 7th century CE, the region of Central Asia has been closely tied to Islamic culture. The Arabs called this area «**Ma wara' al-Nahr**» (literally, «that which is beyond the river,» referring to the Amu Darya). From that period onward, numerous scholars emerged who made significant contributions to Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), mathematics, medicine, and philosophy.

The modern republics of Central Asia differ in their contributions to Islamic civilization. This is because the populations of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan settled around the Amu Darya («**Jayhun**»), adopting a sedentary lifestyle. In contrast, nomadic life was predominant among the people of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, causing many of them to be in constant migration.

The blend of nomadic and sedentary populations in the regions of Ma wara' al-Nahr and Khorasan led to the rise of major cultural and religious centers in Uzbekistan, such as **Samarkand, Bukhara, and Termez**.

Regarding the city of **Nasaf**, Yaqt al-Hamawi states in his work «*Mu'jam al-Buldan*»: “Nasaf is a large, populous city located between Jayhun and Samarkand. Many scholars from various fields have emerged from there. Nasaf itself was also called «**Nakhshab**.»¹

Al-Istakhri said: “Nasaf is a city with districts called Qinduz and Rubozi. It has four gates located on the roads to Bukhara and Balkh. Mountains are two days away from it. There is a plain between Nasaf and the Jayhun river with no mountains. A single river flows through the

¹ Yaqt al-Hamawi. *Mu'jam al-Buldan*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah. 2011. – Vol. 5. – P. 284.

middle of the city; it is the collection point for the waters of Kesh, and from there it flows toward the villages and the emir's residence. There is a place on the riverbank known as «**Ras al-Qantara**» (head of the bridge). Nasaf has many villages and regions. There are two pulpits (minbars) outside the city. The majority of its villages are located in marshes. There is no other constantly flowing river in Nasaf and its regions, and sometimes its water dries up. They have wells to irrigate their gardens and fields. The soil of Nasaf is mostly fertile. Nasaf is now located in Uzbekistan and is also called Nakhshab.

Islam peacefully entered this city, known as Nakhshab, in the year 92 AH (710 CE) under the command of Qutayba ibn Muslim. Many scholars have emerged from the city of Nasaf, and we will now provide a brief biography of some of them.

1. Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi

He is **Abdullah ibn Ahmad ibn Mahmud al-Nasafi**, also known as **Abu al-Barakat** and **Hafiz al-Din**. He was a renowned jurist (faqih), a specialist in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), a Hanafi scholar, a Quranic exegete (*mufasssir*), and a theologian (*mutakallim*). He was one of the ascetic and pious scholars of the later period. Imam al-Nasafi was born in the city of Nasaf, a large city located between Jayhun (Amu Darya) and Samarkand. His exact year of birth is unknown.

Imam al-Laknawi said about him in his book «*Al-Fawa'id al-Bahiyya*»: “He was an unparalleled and perfect imam of his time, a leader in the fields of jurisprudence and its principles, deeply knowledgeable in hadith and its meanings, one of the great scholars of the world and a notable imam. Ibn Kamal Pasha considered him to be among the *muqallidun* (imitators of a legal school) who could distinguish between sound and weak narrations. He did not include rejected sayings or weak narrations in his books. He belonged to the highest level of *mutafaqqihun* (specialized jurists) and the lowest level of *mujtahidun* (independent interpreters). Others, however, elevated him to the rank of a *mujtahid* within the legal school. He himself said that *ijtihad* within the school ended with him and that there was no *mujtahid* within the school after him. As for absolute *ijtihad*, it ended with the four imams.”²

His Teachers

Imam al-Nasafi studied under many prominent scholars of his time. Among them are:

- **Imam Hamiduddin Ali ibn Muhammad al-Zarir al-Bukhari**, who passed away in 666 AH (1267 CE). He wrote a commentary on the work «*Al-Hidayah*».³
- **Shams al-A'amma Mahmud ibn Abdusattar ibn Muhammad al-Imadi al-Kardari al-Baraniqi**, who passed away in 642 AH (1245 CE). He was a student of Burhanuddin al-Marghinani (the author of «*Al-Hidayah*»).

- **Badrudin Khawarizmi.**

² Abdul Hayy al-Laknawi. *Al-Fawa'id al-Bahiyya*. – Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, 1998. – P. 101-102.

³ Haji Khalifah. *Kashf al-Zunun 'an Asami al-Kutub wa-al-Funun*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2017. – Vol. 1. – P. 112.

⁴ Ibn Abi al-Wafa. *Al-Jawahir al-Mudhiyyah fi Tabaqat al-Hanafiyyah*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2005. – Vol. 4. – P. 230.

His students

His students include the following scholars:

- **Husayn ibn Ali al-Sughnaqi**, who passed away in 714 AH (1314 CE). He wrote a commentary on «*Usul al-Bazdawi*» and is the author of «*An-Nihaya 'ala al-Hidayah*.»⁵
- **Imam Muzaffaruddin Ahmad ibn Ali ibn Taghlab al-Baghdadi**, famously known as «**Ibn al-Sa'ati**,» who passed away in 694 AH (1295 CE).⁶

His Works

- «**Al-Manar fi Usul al-fiqh**» (The Lighthouse in the Principles of Jurisprudence).
- «**Kashf al-Asrar**» (The Unveiling of Secrets). In this work, he wrote a commentary on his own book on *usul al-fiqh*, titled «*Al-Manar*.»
- «**Al-Manar fi Usul ad-Din**» (The Lighthouse in the Principles of Religion).
- «**Umdat al-Aqa'id fi Usul ad-Din**» (The Mainstay of Creeds in the Principles of Religion).
- «**Madarik al-Tanzil wa Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil**» (The Realities of Revelation and the Truths of Interpretation). This is his famous work of Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*).
- «**Al-Kafi fi Sharh al-Wafi**» (The Sufficient Commentary on «*Al-Wafi*»). Both are his works on Hanafi jurisprudence.
- «**Al-Mustasfa fi Sharh Manzumat Abi Hafs al-Nasafi**» (The Selected Commentary on the Poem of Abu Hafs al-Nasafi). In this book, he discusses the differences of opinion among the jurists.
- «**Kanz al-Daqa'iq**» (The Treasure of Subtleties). This is a well-known text in Hanafi jurisprudence.
- He also wrote a commentary on «**Al-Ihsikati**» on the principles of jurisprudence. Some say he wrote two commentaries on «*Al-Ihsikati*.»
- «**Al-Atf min al-Kashf**» (The Compassion from «*Al-Kashf*»). This is another commentary on «*Al-Manar*,» shorter than «*Kashf*.»
- «**Fada'il al-A'mal**» (The Virtues of Deeds).
- «**Al-La'ali al-Fakhirah fi Ulum al-Akhirah**» (The Exquisite Pearls in the Sciences of the Hereafter).

Regarding His Similarity with the Author of Another Tafsir

In the introduction to the book «*Fath al-Ghaffar*,» Ibn Nujaym stated: «The author of '*Al-Manar*,' al-Nasafi, is not the same as al-Nasafi, the author of the famous *tafsir*. The latter is Najm al-Din Abu Hafs Umar ibn Muhammad, who passed away in 537 AH (1142 CE).»

However, this opinion of Ibn Nujaym is mistaken, as Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi is indeed the author of the *tafsir* book titled «**Madarik al-Tanzil wa Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil**.» Furthermore,

⁵ Taqiyyuddin al-Ghazzi. *Al-Tabaqat al-Saniyyah fi Tarajim al-Hanafiyah*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2005. – Vol. 1. – P. 432.

⁶ Ibn Abi al-Wafa. *Al-Jawahir al-Mudiyyah fi Tabaqat al-Hanafiyah*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2005. – Vol. 1. – P. 80.

Najm al-Din Abu Hafs Umar ibn Muhammad has his own books, «Al-Taysir» and «Al-Akmal al-Atwal.»

Therefore, the *tafsir* of al-Nasafi, the author of «Al-Manar,» is more famous than the *tafsir* of Abu Hafs. When «Tafsir al-Nasafi» is mentioned, it refers to Abu al-Barakat, who passed away in 710 AH. Similarly, when some scholars of *usul* refer to al-Nasafi's *tafsir*, they mean the author of «Al-Manar.»⁷

His Date of Death

There is disagreement regarding the date of his death: 701, 710, or 711 AH. It is said that he passed away on the night of the first Friday of Rabi' al-Awwal in the year 701 AH and was buried in the city of Iyzaj. Iyzaj is a city and province located between Khuzistan and Isfahan, considered one of the best cities in that province. Iyzaj is also one of the villages of Samarkand. In the book «*Taj al-Tarajim*,» his death is stated to be in 710 AH. In the writings of some people, it is recorded that he passed away on the tenth of Rabi' al-Awwal in 710 AH. This date is the most famous among Hanafi scholars and those who have written his biography.⁸

2. Umar ibn Muhammad Abu Hafs al-Nasafi

He is the jurist and exegete **Umar ibn Muhammad ibn Isma'il ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Luqman**, known as **Abu Hafs**, who was given the title **Najm al-Din** (Star of the Religion). He was born in Nasaf in 461 AH (1069 CE). He wrote a poetic work (*manzumah*) titled «*Al-Khilafiyat*», which he completed in 504 AH. He passed away in Samarkand in 537 AH (1142 CE).⁹

3. Abu Muhammad 'Abdul'aziz ibn Muhammad al-Nakhshabi

He is the Shaykh, Imam, Hadith memorizer (*hafiz*), traveler, and scholar **'Abdul'aziz ibn Muhammad ibn 'Asim al-Nasafi**.¹⁰ He narrated hadith from Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Mustaghfiri, and Sahl ibn Bishr al-Isfara'ini narrated from him.

Al-Hafiz Ibn Mandah said about him: «He was unique in his time in memorization and skill. We have not seen anyone like him in our era in terms of memorization. He had a fine handwriting, wrote quickly, had a good recitation, and a beautiful character.» When I asked al-Saji about him, he said: «He was one of the *hafizes* like Abu Bakr al-Khatib and Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Suri. They praised him and approved of his understanding; his eyesight was sharp, and his chains of narration (*isnad*) were sound.» Abu Sa'd al-Sam'ani said: «I asked Isma'il ibn Muhammad about him. He said with great respect: 'He is that al-Nakhshabi, he was a great *hafiz*.'» According to Ibn Mandah, he passed away in 457 AH.¹¹

⁷ Muhammad Abdul Azim al-Zarqani. *Manahil al-'Irfaq fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*. – Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2021. – Vol. 2. – P. 48.

⁸ 'Abdul Hayy al-Laknawi. *Al-Fawa'id al-Bahiyyah*. – Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, 1998. – P. 101-102.

⁹ Haji Khalifah. *Kashf al-Zunun 'an Asami al-Kutub wa-al-Funun*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2017. – Vol. 2. – P. 1862.

¹⁰ Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi. *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2012. – Vol. 3. – P. 1018.

¹¹ Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi. *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala'*. – Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah Publishers, 2021. – Vol. 18. – P. 297.

[1] [2] [3] [4]

4. Abu al-'Abbas Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Mustaghfiri

He is **Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn al-Mu'tazz ibn Muhammad ibn al-Mustaghfir ibn al-Fath Abu al-'Abbas al-Mustaghfiri al-Nasafi**. He was born in 350 AH. He was a jurist, a virtuous scholar, a hadith scholar, and a truthful person. He wrote numerous academic collections and works. In his time, there was no one like him in Transoxiana in terms of authorship and understanding of hadith. He studied under scholars such as Judge Abu 'Ali al-Husayn al-Nasafi, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Fadl, and 'Abdullah al-Sabdamuni. He passed away in Nasaf in 432 AH.¹²

5. Ibrahim ibn Ma'qal ibn al-Hajjaj al-Nasafi

He is the Imam, *hafiz*, jurist, and judge **Abu Ishaq al-Nasafi**, the judge of the city of Nasaf, which is also known as Nakhshab. He heard hadith from Qutayba ibn Sa'id, Jubarah ibn al-Mughallis, Hisham ibn 'Ammar, Abu Kurayb, Ahmad ibn Mani', and others who lived in their time. He traveled extensively. Scholars such as 'Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Tamma'i, Khalaf ibn Muhammad al-Khayyam, 'Abdul Mu'min ibn Khalaf, Muhammad ibn Zakariyya, and his son Sa'id ibn Ibrahim narrated hadith from him.

Abu Ya'la al-Khalili said about him: «He was a trustworthy and a *hafiz*.» He passed away in Dhu al-Hijjah of the year 295 AH. I say that he had works such as «*Al-Musnad al-Kabir*» and «*Al-Tafsir*». He narrated the book «*Sahih al-Bukhari*». He was a jurist and a *mujtahid*. He passed away in 294 AH.¹³

6. Abu 'Amr Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Ja'far al-Nasafi

He is the Shaykh, a great scholar, and the muezzin **Abu 'Amr Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Rahib al-Nasafi**. He narrated «*Sahih al-Bukhari*» from Hammud ibn Shakir and also narrated from Mahmud ibn 'Umar. Ja'far al-Mustaghfiri narrated from him, saying: «He was a person who recited the Quran frequently and had a strong aversion to the people of innovation (*bid'ah*).» He transmitted hadith to us from Ibn Shakir through the book «*Al-Jami'*.» He passed away in 380 AH.¹⁴

7. Imam, Hafiz, Muhaddith, Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibn 'Abdulmalik ibn 'Ali ibn Musa ibn Isra'il al-Nasafi

He is the Mufti and Judge of Nasaf, **Abu al-Fawaris**. He was born in 404 AH. He heard many hadith from the *hafiz* Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Mustaghfiri and remained in his company. He also narrated from Abu Nu'aym Husayn ibn Muhammad, the companion of Khalaf al-Khayyam, Mu'tamad ibn Muhammad al-Makhuli, and many other scholars. He narrated extensively in

¹² 'Abdul Hayy al-Laknawi. *Al-Fawa'id al-Bahiyah*. – Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, 1998. – P. 57.

¹³ Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi. *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2012. – Vol. 2. – P. 686.

¹⁴ Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi. *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala'*. – Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah Publishers, 2021. – Vol. 16. – P. 396. [2] Ibid. – Vol. 19. – P. 143.

Bukhara and Samarkand. Scholars such as the *muhaddith* 'Uthman ibn 'Ali al-Baykandi, Abu Thabit al-Husayn ibn 'Ali al-Bazdawi, and Abu al-Ma'ali Muhammad ibn Nasr narrated from him. Al-Sam'ani and his son 'Abdulrahim were among his friends. He passed away in Nasaf on the twenty-second of Jumada al-Akhira, 487 AH. [2]

8. Hammad ibn Shakir ibn Suwayya al-Nasafi

He is the Imam, *muhaddith*, and truthful **Abu Muhammad al-Nasafi**. He heard hadith from 'Isa ibn Ahmad al-Asqalani, **Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari**, Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, and many other scholars. He is one of the narrators who transmitted «*Sahih al-Bukhari*» directly from al-Bukhari. Several people narrated from him. Al-Hafiz Ja'far al-Mustaghfiri said about him: «He was a trustworthy and reliable person who traveled to Syria. He narrated to me *Sahih al-Bukhari* through Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Jami'. The judge of Bukhara, Abu Ahmad, also narrated hadith to me about him.»

Ibn Makula stated that he passed away in 311 AH.¹⁵

9. Mak'hul ibn al-Fadl, Abu Muti' al-Nasafi

He is the author of the book «*Al-Mu'alliyat*» on asceticism and etiquette. He narrated from Dawud al-Zahiri, Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, 'Abdullah ibn Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Muhammad ibn Ayyub ibn al-Durays, and many others. Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Isma'il, who was the shaykh of Ja'far al-Mustaghfiri, narrated from him. Al-Mustaghfiri mentioned him in his book «*Tarikh al-Nasaf*» and said that his name was Muhammad ibn al-Fadl and his nickname was Mak'hul. He passed away in Safar of the year 308 AH.¹⁶

Conclusion

The scholars who emerged from the land of Nasaf made an invaluable contribution to the development of Islamic sciences. This region held an important place not only in Transoxiana but also in the entire Islamic world for the advancement of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*), hadith, theology (*kalam*), and other religious and academic fields. The intellectual legacy of the Nasafi scholars had a profound impact on religious and educational aspects, as well as on social and cultural life.

Scholars like **Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi**, **Abu Hafs al-Nasafi**, **Abu Muhammad 'Abdul'aziz al-Nakhshabi**, and **Abu al-'Abbas al-Mustaghfiri** established academic schools. They contributed to the development of Hanafi jurisprudence, perfected Quranic exegesis, systematized hadith science, and formulated coherent views on theological matters. Their works were widely used in various regions of the Muslim East, and they nurtured many students.

Furthermore, the scholarly work of the Nasaf scholars is of particular importance for enriching the academic heritage, systematizing various sciences, and leaving behind reliable sources for future generations. Today, their works—especially their jurisprudential and exegetical legacy—

¹⁵ Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi. *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala'*. – Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah Publishers, 2021. – Vol. 15. – P. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid. – Vol. 15. – P. 33.

are not only of historical value but also serve as a valuable resource for contemporary academic research.

Thus, the land of Nasaf remains a region that provided the Muslim world not only with an academic center but also with a rich intellectual and spiritual legacy for centuries to come. For this reason, studying the activities and works of the Nasaf scholars is a relevant and promising direction for modern academic research.

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