

Chapter 5

Arabic Manuscripts on Magic at L'Orientale

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1. A small but Representative Sample of Islamicate Occult Literature

The collection L'Orientale holds only three Arabic manuscripts that can be classified to some extent as “magical”. Two of these manuscripts are part of the Sarnelli Collection (MSS ARA 139 and ARA 244), while a third manuscript is of Egyptian production and was acquired in Cairo in 1971 (MS ARA 72). Yet despite their small number, this three codices form both textually and materially (the two aspects of the manuscript that very often show close relations) a representative corpus of many of the general trends of magical—and more generally occult—literature in the Islamic world.

The first above all concerns the very problem of defining, thus classifying and cataloging, this genre of literature. Namely, can we properly speak of “magical” literature? And if so, in what sense? There is at least one key theoretical aspect underlying this question. It concerns the different ways in which Islamicate intellectual history has conceived (and continues to conceive) the idea of “magic”. Simplifying as much as possible, if the general sense usually given to the term “magic” today is “an art capable of determining the course of events by resorting to the use of unseen forces”, this definition appears too broad in Islamic terms. Or rather, according to classifications of sciences developed in the Islamic world, this broad definition encompasses disciplines and practices that are often perceived as diametrically opposed to each other. Indeed, on the one hand we find practices considered licit (*ḥalāl*) or even meritorious, essentially based on prayers, and Qurʾānic passages, classified among the “religious sciences” (*al-ʿulūm al-šarʿiyya*); a kind of Qurʾānic theurgy. On the other we find practices deemed illicit (*ḥarām*), aberrant, which were brought under the concept of *siḥr*, magic/sorcery; almost always these were classified among the “natural sciences” (*al-ʿulūm al-ṭabīʿiyya*) (Martini 2020).

This theoretical subdivision between licit and illicit practices is sometimes preserved in literature, but very often the opposite also happens, that is, a kind of coexistence, or even fusion, of different materials. This phenomenon, which is very often found in texts and material culture related to the occult sciences in the Islamic world, is also what we notice on many occasions in the magical Arabic

manuscripts of L'Orientale. What emerges in these cases, in essence, is the hybrid character of this literature, which when looked at from a certain angle turns out to be eminently magical, while from another perspective it continually trespasses into Islamic religious literature.

These two vast and important domains, religion, and magic, are then joined by yet a third. This is medicine, insofar as a large part of the recipes, formulas, talismans, contained in these texts are intended for prophylactic, protective, and healing purposes. Reason why according to a still different point of view these texts also fall under medical literature. It is no coincidence, in fact, that two of the three “magical” Arabic manuscripts held by L'Orientale are part of Sarnelli's collection. They were acquired in Yemen and were of interest to Sarnelli insofar as they were used, along with more properly medical texts, in what was then called “indigenous medicine”.

Another significant aspect of this small body of texts is that it represents quite well the spread and penetration of occult practices in all spheres of society, among the common people as well as the political and intellectual elite, which is reflected in the presence and coexistence of a literature of high origin, cultured, refined, with a, so to speak, “low”, popular one. This indeed seems to be a trend in occult literature that appears to be valid for all historical and cultural contexts. After all, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that belief in certain ideas and practices is one of the distinguishing features of the pre-modern world, and therefore it is quite natural that it united all social and intellectual strata.

2. Connecting Textual Content and Codicological Aspects: Mutual Reflections between the “Soul” and the “Body” of a Manuscript

In the case of the three manuscripts under consideration, their textual content and context of production are relatively well reflected in the codicological and material aspects. Thus, we have MS ARA 72, about whose contents we know if not quite everything, a great deal; namely, the title, the author, the date of copying and the date of composition of the original, and which stands as a homogeneous manuscript, with margins free of glosses, copied in a fair calligraphy by a single copyist, who signs himself in the colophon. It is a good example of Islamicate magical-occult literature of scholarly production. The author of the work is ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), a relatively well-known intellectual, who was born in Antioch, in Ottoman context, but lived at length in the Mamluk territories, especially Cairo. Direct contacts

with Sultan Murad II (r. 1421-1444, 1446-1451) are speculated, but beyond this he is a fairly well-known figure because of the great influence of his writings in the milieu of the Ottoman court (Gardiner 2017).

MS ARA 72 is a manuscript that fits into a story and tells a story; that is situated in an intellectual discourse that can be well located and contextualized. The work it contains is a commentary by al-Biṣṭāmī on a work by perhaps the best-known author of Islamic occult literature, Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225). The original work of al-Būnī is titled *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya fī al-awrād al-rabbāniyya* (The Luminous Ray Regarding the Dominical Litanies); al-Biṣṭāmī's commentary, according to the title given in the present witness, is named *Kaṣf al-asrār al-rabbāniyya fī šarḥ al-lumʿa al-nūrāniyya* (The Unveiling of Dominical Secrets through the Commentary of The Luminous Ray). From other sources we know that while in Cairo al-Biṣṭāmī studied al-Būnī's *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya* with a specific person: an intellectual belonging to a distinguished scholarly household whose name was ʿIzz al-Dīn b. Ġamāʿa (d. 819/1416–1417) (Gardiner 2012, 115–116; Gardiner 2017, 22). Moreover, by matching the records in the colophon of MS ARA 72 with those of another manuscript witness of the same work, we learn information of primary importance about it, namely the place and date of composition: al-Biṣṭāmī completed his commentary in Green Island (*Ġazīrat al-Ḥaḍrāʾ*), a locality near Alexandria, on 17 Ṣafar 822, that is, 15 March 1419 (for more details see the entry on MS ARA 72 below in this catalogue). Having this information in mind, it is remarkable to note that also the present manuscript is Egyptian, copied in 1028/1619.

This relative wealth of information allows us to appreciate the historical and cultural witnessing function that the object in our hands unfolds by connecting people, places, and times far apart, illustrating the complexity and breadth of boundaries of the intellectual history of the Islamic world. There is a dialectic, an ongoing dialogue, back and forth in time, between our seventeenth-century copy and the fifteenth-century archetype of al-Biṣṭāmī's commentary; just as there is between al-Biṣṭāmī's fifteenth-century commentary and al-Būnī's thirteenth-century work. It is precisely in such a dialectic that our witness, MS ARA 72, contributes information about the genesis of the archetype (place and date of composition) while simultaneously the story of the archetype's genesis confers meaning on our later copy. Also, we have al-Būnī, a North African author from the early thirteenth century, who writes a work. We have al-Biṣṭāmī, an Anatolian, from the first half of the fifteenth

century, who two hundred years later decided to study this work in Cairo with an intellectual, ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn Ġamā’a, who boasted of his own unbroken oral transmission of that very work, passed down through generations, from al-Būnī himself. Al-Biṣṭāmī, after studying al-Būnī’s work with Ibn Ġamā’a, decided to write a commentary on it, no longer in Cairo, but still in Egypt, near Alexandria. Finally, we have a reader and copyist, also an Egyptian, who in the early seventeenth century—another two hundred years have passed—copied that commentary. These individuals are the protagonists in a narrative of the continuity of interest in the same work—and in the topics treated in it, of course—over a space-time span of five centuries ranging from the Maghreb to Anatolia and which, in this specific case, has Mamluk Cairo and Egypt as its pivot, both from the point of view of intellectual history and in terms of chronological and geographical coordinates.

Compared to MS ARA 72, the two manuscripts obtained by Sarnelli in Yemen, MS ARA 139 and MS ARA 244, turn out to be very different both codicologically and in terms of content. They appear as miscellanies, multi-text composite manuscripts, in which most of the works contained are fragmentary, many acephalous, others incomplete, almost all untitled, whose authors are unknown or pseudepigraphs. They have no noble authorship, so to speak; and they have uncertain origin. Copied by different hands, very often written in haste, with careless handwriting, as if they were personal notes, sort of notebooks. The margins are often thickly filled with glosses, comments. They convey the impression of being an extemporaneous production, texts assembled in the course of time, to meet the needs of the moment. But at the same time, unlike the Egyptian manuscript of al-Biṣṭāmī’s commentary, they bear on themselves tangible traces of protracted use over time, the signs of having been consulted and used on several occasions, of having “served” someone and something, until the fateful moment when they came into the possession of Tommaso Sarnelli.

There is also another aspect that distinguishes Sarnelli’s two Yemenite manuscripts from the Egyptian MS ARA 72, that is, their dating. MS ARA 244 unfortunately bears no dates and remains of uncertain dating, although all the heterogeneous sections of which it is composed appear late anyway. On the other hand, MS ARA 139, despite the many incomplete works it hands down, bears three dates. Two colophons are dated 1343/1925 (f. 95r) and 1344/1925–1926 (f. 107v), respectively. There is also a donation note, in which Sarnelli recalls that the codex was presented to him in 1931 (MS ARA 139, f. 1r). In short, these

Yemenite codices—no doubt at least MS ARA 139—bring us into the twentieth century, into modernity. They mend time, stitching together the cuts made by the surgeons of history: medieval, pre-modern, modern; they ferry into the near past ideas, practices, formulas, and symbols formed and rooted in the remote, sometimes very remote past. They bear direct witness to the beliefs and practices of Yemen in the first half of the twentieth century, while foreshadowing a possibility that is as realistic as it is, in some ways, disorienting: the survival of those very beliefs and practices in the contemporary.

They also tell us something, implicitly, about the formation of the Sarnelli Collection. The donation note in the exergue to MS ARA 139 confirms relevant information about the eminent position Sarnelli held during his Yemeni sojourns. Indeed, the text, written in pencil in Italian, states that it is a “Gift of Seif el Islam Ali, son of the Imam, Sanaa, 14/9/1931-9” (ARA 139, f. 1r).

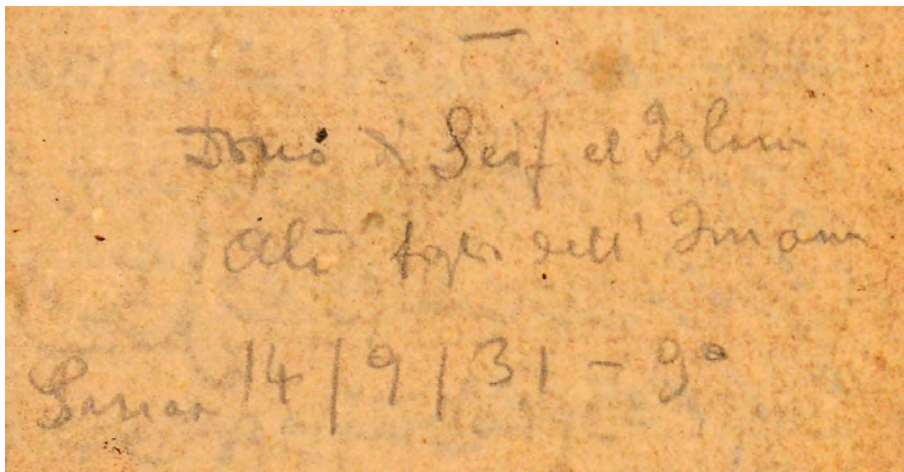


Fig. 1. MS ARA 139, f. 1r. Donation note (detail)

It seems in all evidence a reference to ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā, a lesser-known son among the very many of the renowned Imam (and ruler) of Yemen Yaḥyā Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn (reg. 1918–48). A princely present that matches with other valuable manuscripts, either for provenance or for rarity, that are part of the corpus formed by the Italian physician, and that contribute historical and cultural value to the Sarnelli Collection (see Chapter 2, especially sections 3 and 5; for more details see also Chapter 3 in this volume.

3. A Short Survey of Distinctive Content Elements of Islamicate Occult Literature Featured in the Arabic Manuscripts on Magic at L'Orientale

In the last part of this brief introduction, I considered that it would be useful to present a brief survey of the elements that recur most often in these manuscripts, believing that this would be a simple and straightforward way to make them better understood and to make them somewhat more accessible and less alienating than they would be without clarifying the main particularities of their contents. As mentioned at the beginning, these elements are part of that repertoire which, declined in ever new and different ways, is attested in almost all magical literature and, more generally, in all objects and material culture traceable to the sphere of occult sciences, such as amulets, talismans, and others, in the Islamic context. As an example, if we want to make a reference to one of the most valuable collections at L'Orientale (which, due to its own characteristics, naturally dialogues with the medico-magical manuscripts) we will say that much of this repertoire is also found engraved on the magic bowls of the Aron Collection (on which see Giunta 2018; and Bernardini and Giunta 2025).

3.1. *Qur'ān and Divine Names*

The first of these elements, which is ubiquitous and has been discussed in numerous venues, including by the present author, and on which I will not dwell here, is the use of Qur'ānic texts, including divine names (Donaldson 1937; Hamès 2007; Martin III 2011; Al-Saleh 2014; Martini 2020; and the bibliography cited therein). As an example of the pervasive presence of this truly constitutive element of occult practices in the Islamic context (both those considered licit or illicit, both those considered part of the religion or harmful magic) the contents of many of the figures illustrated below will hopefully suffice.

3.2. *Magic Squares*

Another remarkably popular component are the so-called Magic squares and Latin squares, which in Arabic are termed *awfāq* (sing. *wafq* or *wifq*) (Sesiano 1996; Sesiano 2002; Savage-Smith 2023). Of very ancient origin, they are found used in various contexts long before the advent of Islam. Among the oldest documented attestations are those in Chinese culture. The simplest and most widespread of all is a 3×3 square. It, in the Islamic context, eventually reaches a proper name, *Budūḥ*, which gives us the measure of the importance and effectiveness ascribed to

it (Macdonald 2004). This name is derived from the four letters in the corners of the square in its alphabetical version, in which the numbers are replaced with the corresponding Arabic letters.

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

ب	ط	هـ
ز	هـ	ج
و	أ	ح

Fig. 2. 3×3 magic square named Budūḥ in its numerical (left) and alphabetical (right) versions

٤	٩	٢
٣	٥	٧
٨	١	٦

ب	ط	هـ
ز	هـ	ج
و	أ	ح

Fig. 3. MS ARA 72, ff. 26r and 32v (details): 3×3 magic square named Budūḥ in its numerical (left) and alphabetical (right) versions

٤	٩	٢
٣	٥	٧
٨	١	٦

٤	٩	٢
٣	٥	٧
٨	١	٦

Fig. 4. MS ARA 139, ff. 4v (left) and 326r (right): two examples of 3×3 magic square named Budūḥ in its numerical version

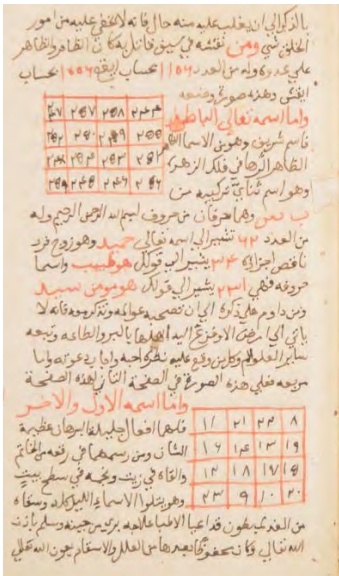


Fig. 5. MS ARA 72, ff. 86v-87r: general view of two pages containing five *aufaq*, four numerical and one alphanumeric, elaborated from the numerical values of the letters of some divine names

3.3. The Seven Signs

Another major element of the Islamic occult repertoire is a sequence of seven symbols that some authors believe indicates the “supreme name of God” (Doutt 1909, 155–157; Winkler 1930, 55–119). Numerous variants are attested in the primary literature in the form of the individual signs composing the sequence and, in some cases, in the order of their arrangement (Winkler 1930, 114–116), and the instability of this combination of symbols also surfaces from the many variants recorded in MSS ARA 139 and 244. No matter what their meaning is, it is important to point out that, in the same way as magic squares, these seven signs are pervasive in Islamic occult imagery, just as they are also widely attested in the magical manuscripts of the Sarnelli Collection.



Fig. 6. One of the main versions of the Seven Signs (Winkler 1930, 115)

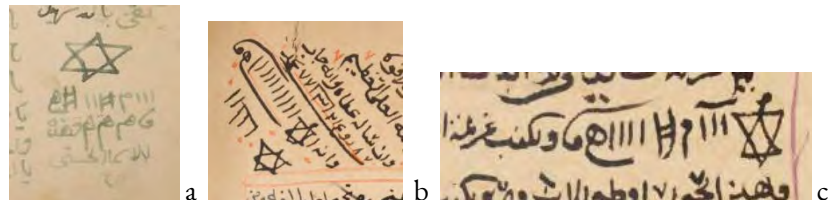


Fig. 7. a-c MS ARA 139, ff. 19v, 23v, and 30r (from left to right): samples of the Seven Signs in the margins and in the body of the text

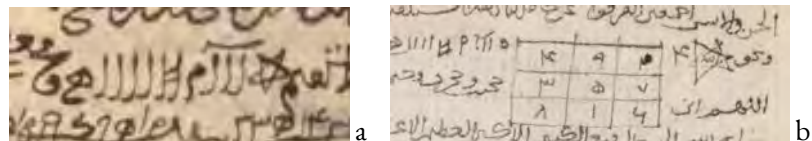


Fig. 8. a-c MS ARA 244, ff. 4v, 21r, and 45v (from left to right): samples of the Seven Signs in the body of the text



Fig. 9. MS ARA 139, f. 38r:
repeated use of the Seven
Signs on a single page

3.4. The Seal of Solomon

Another element that is rarely missing in this kind of literature is the so-called Solomon's seal, which in this context may take the form of a five- or six-pointed star (pentagram or hexagram) (Doutté 1909, 156–158; Winkler 1930, 119–133). It will have been noted that the star/Solomon's seal in fact also constitutes one of the Seven Signs (esp. Winkler 1930, 133–137). Moreover, as will be seen even better in the pages to follow, such a geometric figure very often represents the main form of which a talismanic figure is formed in the Islamic occult literature.



Fig. 11. MS ARA 72, f. 53r: two “calligraphic” Solomonic seals in red ink in the shape of a six-pointed star (hexagram) whose constituent segments are produced by the stretching of the word *Huwa* (هو), “He”, referring to God, repeated six times. The name *Allāh* is inscribed in black ink in the six inner acute angles of each star

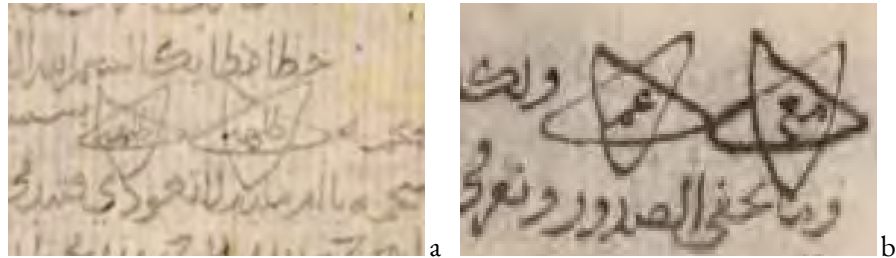
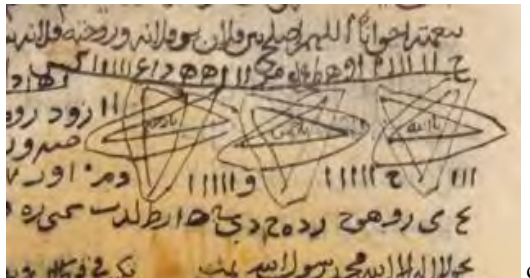
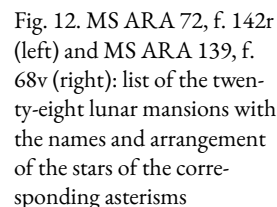


Fig. 10. a-c MS ARA 244, ff. 7v, 22r, and 42r (from left to right; details): samples of Solomon's Seal in the form of a five-pointed star (pentagram) inscribed with Arabic words and letters

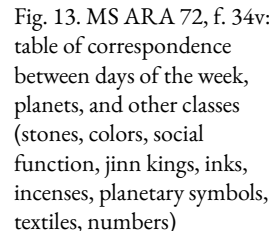


3.5. Astrological Elements

Universally attested in magical literature in general, including in the Islamic context, are astrological elements of various kinds. For example, in two of the three Arabic magical manuscripts of L'Orientale (MSS ARA 72 and 139) we find sketched lists of the twenty-eight lunar mansions (*manāzil al-qamar*) and the corresponding constellations and asterisms. Other astrological elements very much present are references to the seven planets.



Charts, lists, tables of correspondence, rectangular in shape, such as the one on the side, but often circular as well, are indeed another of the most prominent visual elements in magical literature and occult literature in general. Their function is essential, because they are connected to the very theoretical principles on which all magical art is based according to premodern thought, particularly the principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which there exist correspondences and links that are as invisible as they are real and binding between what is above and what is below, that is, between all classes of existents. Knowing these correspondences and knowing how to act on them encapsulate in synthesis all magical



science. The tables of correspondences that almost obsessively punctuate this literature, therefore, prove to be key elements: synthetic representations of the warp and weft that weave existence, making it a unified whole, a continuum, and at the same time maps that enable the wise to move and act in the cosmos with insight.

3.7. *Brillenbuchstaben* (Spectacle letters)

Another recurring element in both literature and material culture related to magic in the Islamic context are the so-called *Brillenbuchstaben* (Spectacle letters; caractères à lunettes), which are also well known in other contexts, such as but not limited to Jewish magic (Doutté 1909, 158; Winkler 1930, 150–167; Canaan 2004, 167–69). “Spectacle letters” is not a term attested in the primary sources but rather coined in modern studies. These are signs that have eyelets at the ends of the figure from which they derive the name by which they are designated. Their meaning appears highly enigmatic, to the point that some argue that they are completely meaningless. In some modern studies the term *Brillenbuchstaben* appears to be used just as a synonym for “seals” and “charaktères”. I am not personally convinced of these terminological overlaps, but one must admit that as with many of the other fundamental elements of the occult sciences there is a lack of systematic studies on these mysterious characters that would shed more light on their genesis, use and meaning. The impression is that under the generic definition of “Spectacle letters” are grouped various categories of signs and characters believed to possess magical function. Of particular note are numerous “magical alphabets” handed down in Islamic occult literature consisting in whole or in part of signs that visually and formally fall precisely within the modern definition of *Brillenbuchstaben*. Again, regardless of the definition and possible meanings of the *Brillenbuchstaben* it should be noted that while the work of al-Biṣṭāmī in MS ARA 72 never uses these signs they are instead extremely recurrent in the two magical manuscripts from Yemen belonging to the Sarnelli Collection.

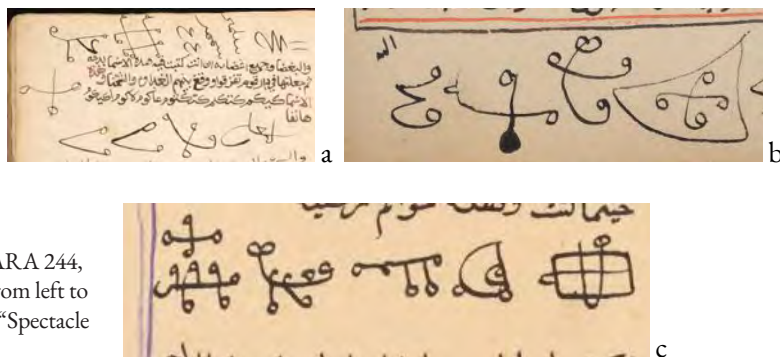


Fig. 14. a-c. MS ARA 244, ff. 8v, 41v, 55v (from left to right: samples of “Spectacle letters”

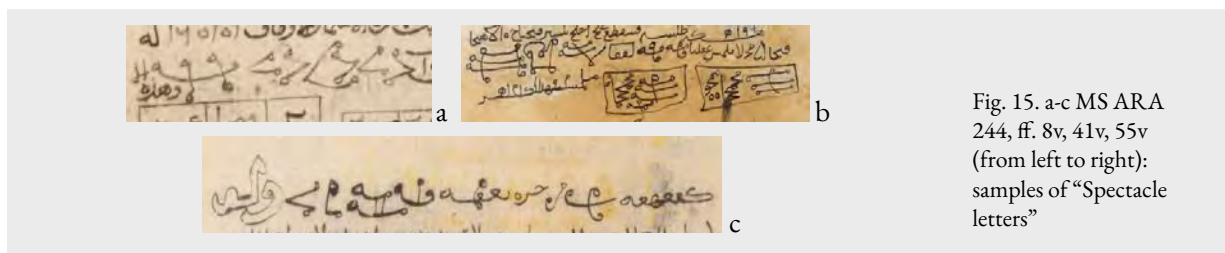


Fig. 15. a-c MS ARA 244, ff. 8v, 41v, 55v (from left to right): samples of “Spectacle letters”

3.8. Occult Alphabets

Discussing “Spectacle Letters”, magical alphabets have been mentioned. This, too, is a modern definition, alternating with others, such as “occult alphabets”. Occult alphabets appear to be yet another application of the principles of universal analogy and sympathy that structure the scaffolding of pre-modern cosmology, because each of these alphabets presents forms that would in some way recall this or that planet, this or that thing, therefore triggering, aiding, and guiding occult operations. They are attributed by the esoteric Islamic tradition to eminent figures in the history of pre-Islamic or early Islamic philosophy, spirituality, and occultism, on the boundary between history and legend, such as ancient Greek philosophers, or Hermes Trismegistus; others are traced back to peoples and civilizations of the past, others are related to the planets and therefore referred to in scholarship, sometimes, as “planetary alphabets” (Hammer 1806; al-Bisṭāmī 2686, ff. 187v–185r). Because of their characteristics, I would be inclined to describe them as symbolic alphabets, in the sense of consisting of symbolic figures, close to the idea of an ideogram. Occult alphabets are not properly cipher languages, although the boundary between these two types of writing does not always appear clear, and although in magical texts and objects there are forms of writing that it seems more correct to define as cases of cryptography or, even, “pseudoscriptures” (al-Yaman 1984; Bosworth 1997).

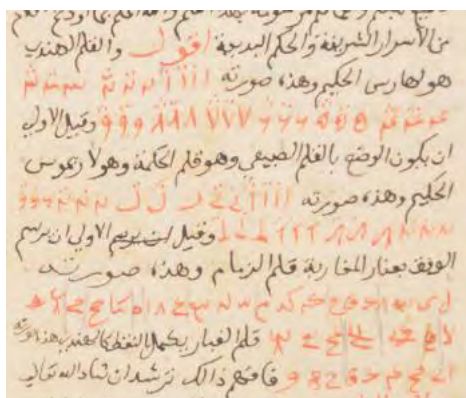


Fig. 16. MS ARA 72, f. 135v: list of three occult alphabets

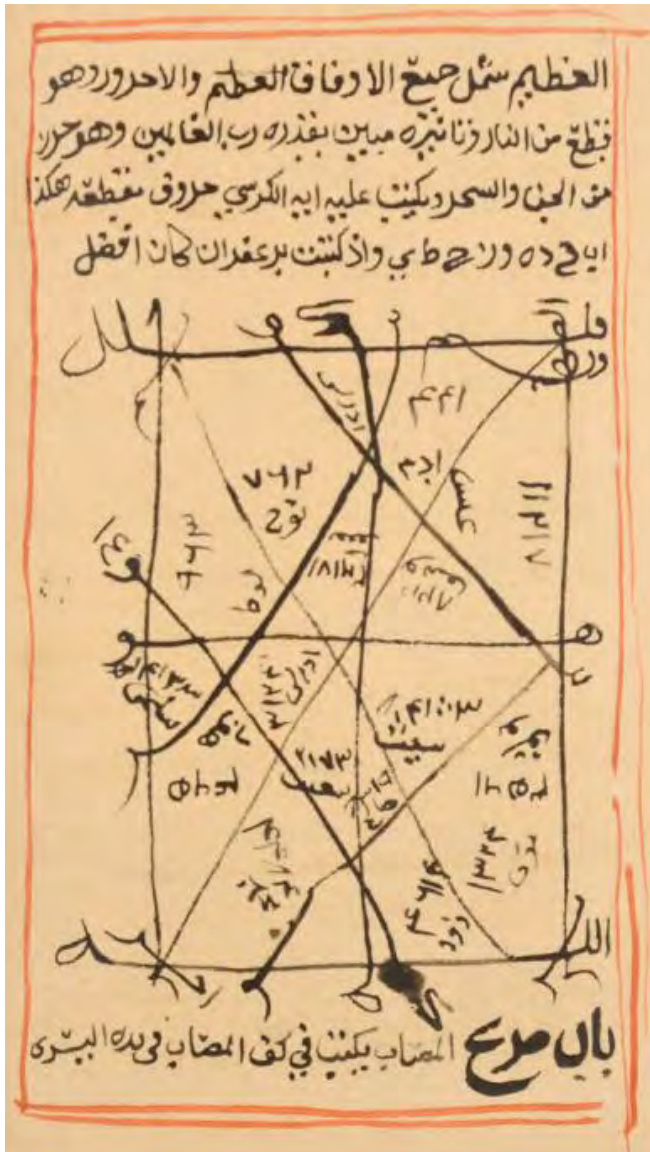


Fig. 17. MS ARA 139, f. 321v: Talismanic figure to be placed in an amulet for protection against jinn and black magic (*sihr*)

3.9. The Talisman:

A Synthesis of Occult Symbology

I conclude this survey by pointing out another of the most important and representative elements contained in treatises on magic, which is naturally reflected in magical objects, of which it often represents the very constituent element. These are innumerable talismanic figures, with different shapes, often geometric, sometimes anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, with the most disparate properties, and the recipes related to their composition and activation (Ruska et al. 2000; Canaan 2004; Hamès 2007; Porter, Saif and Savage-Smith 2017; Garcia Probert and Sijpesteijn 2022). Indeed in most cases all the elements mentioned so far—Qurʾānic passages, magic squares, the Seven signs, Solomonian seals, astrological symbols, spectacle letters, occult alphabets and whatnot—converge and are found, all or in part, within a talisman, that is, an image-object that is believed to be in some way “animated” and to exert a certain force and function, of which the elements described so far turn out to be ultimately the constituent elements. The three magical manuscripts of L’Orientale are replete with this type of figure, some significant examples of which are shown below.

Fig. 20. MS ARA 139, f. 51v:
 “Double” talismanic figure
 consisting of an unidentified
 zoomorphic element (left) and a
 geometric element (right) referred
 to in the text as “Seal of Solomon”,
 (*hātām Sulaymān*) containing the
 statement that “God benefits the
 one who bears it on himself and
 the one who writes it”.

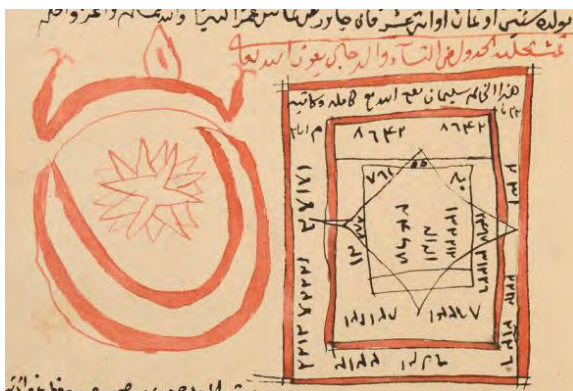


Fig. 21. MS ARA 72, f. 78r.
 Talisman of the letter *ʿAyn*, to
 which numerous prodigious
 properties are attributed. Its
 basic shape consists of the letter
ʿAyn (ع), the name Allāh (الله)
 and the name ʿAlī (علي)



4. Magic Book and Magical Object

In this survey of content elements representative, or rather constitutive, of the Islamic magical imagery, I have so far insisted on the correspondences and similarities between the contents of magic books and magical objects. Having ascertained this closeness, however, I would like to conclude this introduction by highlighting, in part perhaps simplifying, in part provoking, what appears to be instead an essential difference between the “magic book” and the “magical object”, which plays in our favor to bring the book—namely the manuscript book, being the subject of this catalog—back into focus. It is the fact that the magic book stands to the magical object as power stands to the act. That is, that all the symbols, signs, figures, seals, talismans, contained in the book are inactive, “in theory”, where in the talismanic object they are active, “in act”. This situation gives special status to each of these two elements: the book and the object. But remaining with the book, and its physical form, that is, the codex, which is what interests us most in this venue, it should be noted that its being “in potency”, “in theory”, gives it an indefinitely broader character of possibility than the object. The magic book, the recipe book, the grimoire, is indeed like a vast sea of possibilities from which the sage can draw from time to time the information suitable for the casting of innumerable spells and the crafting of innumerable talismans. It is everything and nothing, paradoxically. It is all the spells, formulas, seals and talismans it contains, together and simultaneously, and it is none of them. The magical object, on the other hand, operates, is in act, but for that very reason it is given, it is determined, defined, functioning in the same way and to the same end forever. This essential difference between the magic book and the magical object is reflected in the identification of the ideal recipient of each: the grimoire is the tool of the magician, necessarily knowing and necessarily acting; the object is intended for the client-patient. This parallelism is certainly not peculiar to the magical realm. It is true of all texts that are technical works relating to some “science” requiring specific expertise. This includes, of course, medicine, to reconnect with the other main topic of the manuscripts presented in this catalog. Precisely as the book of magic is intended for the magician and the magical object for those who request it, so the book of medicine is, at least in theory, intended for the physician, where the remedy that the physician deduces from the book is intended instead for the sick person.

The manuscript codices collecting texts on medicine and magic, the subject of the present catalog, do not tell stories and do not edify, do not entertain, and were not addressed to a general reader. Rather, they are “books of science”, both theory

and application, sapiential works addressed to the wise, often composed and copied personally by men of science, or intended for them in the first or last instance. This simple observation is met punctually in the story of the medico-magical codices of the collection surveyed in these pages, which were purchased, received as a gift, collected, by a man of science, Tommaso Sarnelli, and which in an institution of science have then arrived as the last act of their journey. Among the many possible destinations, the University L'Orientale indeed appears particularly well suited to house these special objects, as it is composed by individuals—teachers, librarians, students—who embody, or at least aspire to embody, the spirit of the scholar: one who is called by vocation to engage with these works, and for whom they were originally intended.

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