

## C. Research reports

# The Melting Occult Pot in Ottoman Bosnia: Between Theory and Practice

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The occult in the Balkans is a gift that keeps on giving: from historiographic, ethnographic, and sociological research to literary, cinematic, and artistic imagination, many authors have attempted to register and represent the region's diverse magic beliefs and practices that include werewolves, vampires, ghosts, apparitions, fairies, and other good and evil entities.<sup>1</sup> Neither confined to a single epoch nor a single class or religion, these beliefs and practices have existed in varied social and cultural milieux, intersecting nearly all realms of life and reflecting deep-seated anxieties about the unknown. While existential angst regarding the ultimate unknown — death — drives most of them, the unknown is also associated with religious, ethnic, gender, and ecological concerns. In a

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1 See, e.g., E. Durham, "Of Magic, Witches and Vampires in the Balkans", *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 23 (1923), 189–192; R. Levy-Zumwalt, "Let It Go to the Garlic!: Evil Eye and the Fertility of Women among the Sephardim", *Western Folklore* 55:4 (1996), 261–280; B. McClelland, *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead* (Ann Arbor 2006); É. Pócs, "Stoikheion, Stuha, Zduhač: Guardian Spirits, Weather Magicians, and Talisman Magic in the Balkans", *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 15:3 (2021), 386–410; E. Kostova, *The Historian* (New York 2009).

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region that has historically been subjected to various imperial conquests and wars, frequent internal strife, and recurrent demographic and environmental shifts, the occult has been embraced by the Balkan population to better inhabit their world replete with uncertainties, navigate through social anxieties, and provide prophylactic and curative assistance and mediation there where reason is alleged to fail.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth Bosnia) is no exception. On the contrary, the convergence of various forms of the occult, both those that developed locally as well as those introduced trans-locally, speaks to a rich and enduring tradition of occult practices that may have been pushed to the social margins with the advent of modernity but have nevertheless survived, to this day. In this paper, we focus on the practices associated with the Ottoman period in Bosnia, when the already rich local register of the occult gained new elements, expanding it both cross-confessionally and cross-regionally. In other words, with the islamisation of Bosnia and the introduction of the Ottoman systems of knowledge within which esoteric sciences played a vital role, the occult became a new bridge among religious communities as well as a trajectory for the participation of Bosnia in the transfer and exchange of knowledge across and beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire.

At the outset, there is a disconnect between the inherited occult practices encountered in everyday life and the highly sophisticated esoteric treatises deposited in literary archives. The former is conventionally labelled popular culture and ascribed to anthropological and ethnographic inquiry and oral histories.<sup>2</sup> The latter belongs to the enduring Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Ottoman studies since it requires literary proficiency in all Ottoman languages – Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, and Hebrew as well as occasional Latin and mediaeval Bosnian. For the most part, the epistemological trajectories of investigating and understanding these practices and theories have not intersected. In Religious Studies, a similar polarity exists.<sup>3</sup> Continued bifurcation of knowledge between philosophical discussion on esoteric modes of knowledge and the application of the occult in everyday life, while understandable from the perspective of disciplinary conventions and research pragmatism, have eclipsed essential connections between theory and practice, that is, between the ideas and technologies

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2 P. Moro, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion* (New York 2009); S. Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* (New York 2009).

3 R. T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common* (Berlin & Boston 2018).

of the occult.<sup>4</sup> That said, establishing such connections is daunting. It requires innovative research methods to bring forth a new and refreshing analysis of the occult through its historical dynamic and counting on the evidence that connects material and written culture. This will be significant for the current project since both types of primary sources are available. They represent a unique opportunity to understand the links between written and material culture and offer new interpretative possibilities across the disciplinary divide.

In this process, similar challenges of classification emerge. The aforementioned standard delineations between theory and practice, written and material culture, as well as distinctions related to religious origins, eclipse any significant overlaps. In Ottoman Bosnia, when it comes to esoteric knowledge and practices, all religious traditions (Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and Judaism) rely heavily on holy scriptures and sacred scripts for the “technology of magic”;<sup>5</sup> specifically through the use of talismans and amulets. These are inscribed, text reliant, and are often able to generate intertextual connections between the sacred scripture and the local systems of meaning. Their value, as both material objects and written registers, thus necessitates suspending the assumption of sharp demarcations between text and object in either theory or method. Second, much of the material evidence of the occult in Ottoman Bosnia — talismans, amulets, ritual objects, and related artifacts — may originate in different confessional communities of Bosnia but represent some of the most enduring examples of integrated esoteric practices in the region. In other words, while their origin may be unambiguously Christian, Islamic or Jewish, their circulation and use, as many sources indicate, are just as likely to be ambiguous, transferable, and combined.

In the premodern belief system, God’s boundless powers could never be humanly owned. Still, they could be partially bounded and directed to the desired end above and beyond mainstream practices and rituals. Bosnians of all walks of life took advantage of the religiously plural environment whose sages and reli-

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4 E. Savage-Smith (ed.), *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* (Farnham 2004); C. Burnett, *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds* (Aldershot 1996); E. Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008); D. Pingree, “The Diffusion of Arabic Magical Texts”, in *La diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel Medio Evo europeo* (Rome 1987), 57–102.

5 M. W. Dols, “The Theory of Magic in Healing”, in Savage-Smith (ed.), *Magic and Divination*, 87–102.

gious authorities harnessed natural and divine powers to help their supplicants in wellness, health, and protection. The inherited healing traditions, coupled with the knowledge from Ottoman and European medical lineage, provided Bosnians with diverse resources and locations from which to draw support and help. Medical manuals were readily available. At the same time, the formation of these very intimate links with objects like talismans and amulets is also an affirmation of spiritual trust and a significant manifestation of cross-influence in a religiously plural society like Ottoman Bosnia, where religious authority was institutionally regulated but where many realms of culture, including the esoteric tradition, found a way of enhancing its content and influence due to a willingness to cross the official boundaries. The powers inhered in occult objects were primarily knowledge-specific and only secondarily identity-specific. In many ways, these objects acted as a form of premodern interreligious dialogue, grounded in the recognition that the symbols and supplications different from one's own could equally efficaciously bridge the communication with the unknown.

Thus, one anonymous Ottoman miscellany dated to 993/1585 that records everyday life in the Balkans, including Bosnia, speaks clearly about such prophylactic double-dipping: a Muslim man who died on his return from the Hajj pilgrimage was found to be wearing two amulets around his neck — one Muslim and the other Christian — to aid him in health and other challenges of life. His mother confirmed that this was her choice since the village priest was well known to cure childhood illnesses, while the Muslim cleric covered other issues.<sup>6</sup> This syncretic practice of mixing and matching, even switching religious symbols and cultural relics, has been repeatedly recorded in Bosnian history. Third, since the objects of magic intended to address, as one Franciscan monk observed in the mid-19th century, “all aspects of life which Bosnians could possibly find themselves in,” their utility was flexible and widespread. As a result, the author continues, “[Orthodox] Christians collect amulets from their own priests, Catholic friars, and Muslim imams (*od svojih popova, kaludjera i turskih hodža*)”, while his own Catholic flock “rushes to get an amulet even for minor headache”.<sup>7</sup> The monk's antipathy was notably directed less towards the cross-confessional impulse but rather towards the amulet itself. Before him, his fellow friars at the Fojnica monastery in central Bosnia also recorded repeated

6 Manuscript #4811/II of the Oriental Institute, Sarajevo, folio 18/18a.

7 I. F. Jukić, *Putopisi i istorijsko-etnografski radovi* (Sarajevo 1953), 346.

requests for charms by Muslim patients.<sup>8</sup> These practices cross the religious divide and blur social status, gender, age, profession, and other forms of collective identification. As a result, magic objects are often customised in content and form to accommodate such varied settings, circumstances, and needs. Consequently, it becomes difficult to classify them by type or provenance. Finally, the fact that many inscribed talismans are eventually buried, submerged in water, orally consumed, shredded, suffumigated, or burned points to their expansive ritual utility through a close connection with the four elements (air, earth, water, and fire), alchemy, and astral correspondences, all of which activate magic efficacy but affect their constancy as either text or object.

Returning to the distinction between theoretical and practical magic, a bifurcation already presented by al-Qurtubi (d.964) in his foundational occult work *Ghayat al-Hakim*,<sup>9</sup> the grimoires which proliferated in both Islamicate and premodern European societies offer an exciting bridge between theory and practice. Ottoman Bosnian libraries also reflect this proliferation — practically any library that includes Ottoman sources contains miscellanies of this hybrid genre — allowing us to form critical insights into the usage of such manuals for protective, curative, and other purposes. Creating magic effects by imbuing everyday objects with special powers, as laid out in these manuals, furnishes them with new religious function and metaphysical meaning and allows us to trace better ritual transformations of texts and objects through interpretative practices of both the makers and consumers of magic. Finally, given at once the all-encompassing approach of such manuals yet their application to specific areas of everyday life, these manuals are helpful registers for social historians to assess social, health, and wellness standards and understand how desires, anxieties, ambitions, illness, and other challenges of life were managed through a ritual activation of magic.

The Ottoman grimoires in Bosnia surveyed in this study are deposited in three main libraries in Sarajevo: Gazi Husrev Bey's Library, The Bosniak Institute, and the Historical Institute. Tragically, during their 1992–1995 siege of Sarajevo, the Serbian forces deliberately destroyed the Oriental Institute, which contained a valuable collection of rare manuscripts on astral and esoteric sciences, creating a significant fracture in cultural heritage and leaving us in the dark

8 V. Bazala, "Svećenici kao liječnici", *Liječnički Vijesnik* (1938): 534–565.

9 D. Porecca – D. Attrell (trans. & ed.), *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic* (University Park 2019).

regarding the true extent of the occult manuscript culture. As regards the extant sources, several fundamental characteristics emerge: first, the manuscripts are multilingual. Written in the Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and, to a lesser extent, Persian languages, they speak to the commonalities and differences in occult semantics across the linguistic cultures represented in the libraries. Furthermore, Slavic languages are not represented, although some Aljamiado interventions of the Bosnian language in Arabic script can be found on the margins of the grimoires, primarily when the issue of medicinal substitution is necessitated for the botanical ingredients that are not locally available. Many manuals are polyglot, using two or more languages at once. Many are composite texts (including *mecmua* miscellanies) containing multiple authorship, fragments from well-known grimoires, and scribal additions and glossaries. Third, the treatises demonstrate relatively uniform but also uneven representations of the spiritual and natural forces at play in the occult. Various spiritual entities, commonly classified as *ruhaniyat*, of the lower and higher realms, do not have fixed names or places in the cosmological order. A significant analytical challenge in the case of Ottoman Bosnia and the Balkans is how best to develop a typology of such entities, especially since many have changed names or roles in their encounter with the local supernatural forces and beings. Thus, the terms *dîv*, *câdû/câzû*, *melek*, *cinn*, *perî*, *khudam*, and alike appear at times in synch and at other times at odds with each other. And fourth, these manuals effectively represent a bridge between theory and practice. Functionally organised, they put to use what is laid out as theoretical frameworks of astral and occult sciences by well-known authors represented in the libraries, such as, in Arabic, the works of al-Qasrani (d. 200/815), Abu Ma'shar (d.272/885), al-Qayrawani (d.432/1040), al-Farisi (d.677/1278); Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240); in Ottoman Turkish by authors like Ibrahim Cevri (d.1065/1654), Mehmed Qasımpaşalı (d.1102/1691), Mehmed Çelebi (d.1040/1630); in Persian by Fakhr al-Din Razi (d.606/1209) and al-Buhari (d.695/1296); the translated texts of al-Buni (d.622/1225), and many others. The highly sophisticated cosmology of such works indicates a widespread interest in hidden sciences (*al-'ulum al-sirriya*) and the intellectual underpinning of the practice of astrology and different forms of divination and prognostication, like hydromancy, lettrism, geomancy, alchemy, dream interpretation, magic squares (*vefk*), and others, which the manuals put to the test.

As a case study of such theories in action, I will focus briefly on one manual found at the library of the Bosniak Institute in Sarajevo, provisionally entitled

“A Miscellany in Occult Sciences” and catalogued as Ms. 876.<sup>10</sup> Nearly 300 folios in length, the *mecmua* includes alchemist, pharmaceutical, numerological, talismanic, astrological, and lettrist instructions and recipes intended to be used for a broad spectrum of medical, religious, psychological, relational/social, marital, economic, erotic, and other experiences and challenges in life. The book was brought in from a private collection of an imam serving the community in a northeastern Bosnian town. Bound with thick leather, the book is bilingual, in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, which are switched back and forth without compositional or formal predictability.

The condition of the book betrays its frequent usage. Some previously torn folios are fortified with glue and paper cuttings. Many pages have fallen out, then stitched back in and renumbered, in some cases over the original numbers and in others next to them, and contain numerous *hâshiyas*, supplementary and explanatory notes on the margins. The opening page, for example, does not include the usual introductory supplications but starts tightly at the top of the page with “the first spell” (*azâ'im evvel*). Spells are sequenced and commonly introduced with *bunun dermâni budur ki*, a formulaic expression that suggests that the original text is likely relatively old. However, the last pages are missing, so we have neither a date nor the scribe's name. Based on some linguistic pointers, such as orthography and terms of animals, the manuscript seems rather old, its origins are unclear but this copy was made by a Bosnian scribe. Being a miscellany, the text does not follow a narrative or thematic sequence. However, themes are often clustered together, offering magic formulae, advice, and recipes in different versions of the same subject. Despite the seeming disorder of the content, every entry is detailed and thorough. Magic formulae, diagrams, and magic squares accompany the majority of entries, interchangeably referred to as *wafq/vefk*, *sûrat*; *shakl/şekil*; *hurûf*; *ta'wîdh*; *heykel*; and *nuska/nüşa*.

The spectrum of magic mediations and influences in the *mecmua* is vast. It includes physical deformities, ailments, illnesses, afflictions (both of humans and domestic animals), mental issues, psychological disorders, sexual performance, erotic desires, social angsts surrounding work and neighborly relations, and others. Veterinary problems are also dealt with in detail, with much attention given to the health of beehives and farm animals. Agricultural produce, from

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10 I thank the staff of the Bosniak Institute for access to the material and Mr. N. Filipović for assistance.

vegetable gardens and fruit trees to crops and farmland, is protected against various infestations, poor management, and weather risks. The spells are used for curative, restorative, palliative, and dietary care. Many are also preventative and apotropaic, projecting anxieties about the weather, wealth, travel, trade and commerce, livestock, and evil forces of the visible and invisible worlds. It is important to emphasise that the causes behind various afflictions and anxieties are commonly perceived as having physiological and/or occult geneses, as advanced by premodern Islamic and European understanding of health and healing. The close connection between health, religion, and magic reveals that ill fortune and illness are often ascribed to supernatural and superhuman forces thanks to a close relationship between the inner and outer worlds with a person's psychological and physical well-being.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, most scholars argue that occult practices found in the Islamic lands, expressed in different forms of divination and astrology, have endured despite the discomfort and occasional rejection by jurists and theologians because there had hardly ever been any serious doubt about the existence of magic powers.<sup>12</sup> However, it is their manipulation that emerged as an issue of contention, both among the jurists and the general population. Magic and divination, in that sense, are not to be regarded as antonyms of mainstream medicine. It is their misuse, malicious or irresponsible use, that is scorned. And, as the many manuals and treatises on the subject indicate, the need to educate potential practitioners is key to their better social standing and reputation.<sup>13</sup> The *mecmua* in question reflects this observation well: all recipes and formulae are explained in detail, so little is left to chance, both in terms of applicability and rationale. Only a serious and thoughtful practitioner could

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11 L. Saif, "Between Medicine and Magic: Spiritual Aetiology and Therapeutics in Medieval Islam", in S. Bhayro – C. Rider (eds), *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (Leiden 2017); T. Fahd, *La divination arabe* (Brill 1996); Idem, "Sciences naturelles et magie dans *Gayat al-hakim* du Pseudo-Mayriti", in G. Sanchez (ed.), *Ciencias de la naturaleza en al-Andalus: Textos y estudios* (Granada 1990), 11–21; E. Francis, "Islamic Symbols and Sufi Rituals for Protection and Healing: Religion and Magic in the Writings of Ahmad ibn Ali al-Buni (d. 622 / 1225)", unpublished PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2005; Idem, "Magic and Divination in the Medieval Islamic Middle East", *History Compass* 9:8 (2011), 622–633.

12 D. M. Varisco, "The Magical Significance of the Lunar Stations in the 13th Century Yemeni *Kitab al-tabsira fi 'ilm al-nujum* of al-Malik al-Ashraf", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 13 (1995), 19–40.

13 Dols, "The Theory of Magic in Healing".



be careful and thorough in explaining the ingredients, prayers, procedures, and effects with so much attention.

Like the wide range of afflictions, the ingredients and materials used to activate magic are impressively inclusive. Stones, both semi-precious and precious, minerals, gems, plants and herbs, trees and their bark, animals and animal parts are all used for ritual treatments. Their specifics are not random since each material and substance has a hidden meaning whose function is activated through magic combination and exposition. As Porter, Saif and Savage-Smith explain in relation to *Ghayat al-hakim*,

the magic is based on the knowledge of correspondences – that is, the rules of sympathy or antipathy among animals, plants, minerals, even colors and scripts, on the one hand, and celestial/spiritual entities on the other. The magic of this text can be considered astral, natural, and spiritual. The operator in this case needs to have a vast knowledge of planets, signs, and lunar mansions in addition to information on all kinds of animals, plants, and minerals that correspond to the powers of the celestial bodies.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the *mecmua* explicitly lists different effects and therefore formulates substitutable spells based on the colour of animals (e.g., black or white sheep; white, black or piebald chicken; brown or black ox), their external characteristics (long tail, large ears, etc.), and their age. Although the animals or their parts may be used for one purpose, the details reveal different combinations and applications, most of which include sacrificing the animal, using its blood to write a talisman, and distributing the meat to the community. In fact, the key to a successful outcome seems to be found in the arrangement of specific Qur’anic passages, religious invocations, and magic formulae in conjunction with cultivating good neighborly relations. The divine word is transferred and is not just used to enhance the talisman; instead, it animates its magic property and leads to success or, if incorrectly deployed, to failure, in specific and general social terms. Every entry thus has its corresponding incantation, to be recited and/or written, then ritually placed in order to complete the magic procedure.

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14 V. Porter, L. Saif, E. Savage-Smith, “Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic”, in F. B. Flood – G. Necipoglu (eds), *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (New York 2017), 521–557 at 523.

The procedures are all elucidated in detail, and the instructions tend to be spelled out step by step, advising no deviations. After all, God is the mover of all correspondences, so the chain of action between Him and the talisman user must not be jeopardised at any stage. As mentioned earlier, extending the act of healing toward the community is not unusual: “twelve pieces of bread must be distributed as a charity (*sadaqa*), then a ram is sacrificed, and its meat distributed after its flesh is punctured with a needle.” Or, “sacrifice a young goat, distribute its meat after puncturing its skin with a needle and, combining the blood with saffron, write the sura Yasin three times on the Byzantine paper (*rûmî kâğıt*), recite the sura, then soak the paper in the water and give to the patient to drink for three days.” Or, “let the patient eat the meat of the white chicken while writing a Quranic verse on its skin, then dab the chicken skin on the patient, then feed the livestock.” (folios 5–17, recto verso) Although the effects of such action may be only symbolic, the interdependence of inner and outer well-being is translated into the interdependence of the individual and the community. Healing is dramatised, to borrow Catherine Bell’s terms, as “cultural performance,”<sup>15</sup> becoming both a strategy of asserting the healer’s authority over those who are otherwise sideliners and a way of normalizing the occult as a more visible and tangible aspect of everyday life.

The talismans on which the divine and magic words are written are disposed of in various ways. They are to be buried in the ground, in the ruins of a building, an old church, the crossroads, a mosque, an abandoned mill by running water, or an old well. Sometimes, they ought to face the qibla. They are also to be burned over a candle fire or in a hearth. Some are to be sunk into the water and left there for as long as the water is given to the patient to drink. Sometimes they are folded and hung around the neck or put away on a shelf or under a pillow. Once this is performed, the spell is complete, and God will enable the healing (*Allah şifâ bula*).

A frequent differentiation between male and female versions of magic operations is notable in the entries. Gendered magic formulae are arranged with different ingredients, textual and material, based on whether the consumer is male or female. While modern medicine only relatively recently began to consider gender in developing, classifying, and dispensing medication, the pre-modern practice seems more ready to emphasise that the efficacy of a magic

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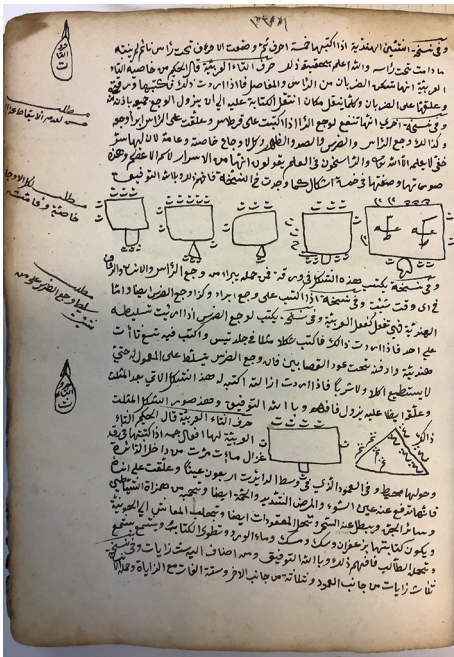
15 C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford & New York 2009), 37–8.

concoction or talisman depends on its gendered application. Moreover, just as the experience or affliction is processed differently between genders, so is the treatment. Headaches, stomach aches, and mental disorders seem conducive to such differentiations. Of course, these distinctions are most evident with regard to marital, sexual, and erotic challenges, desires, and relations. Here, from broken hearts to love connections, same-sex desires, obsessive emotional or sexual behavior, failed or undesired relationships, infertility, inability to carry a male fetus, infidelity (talismans to be worn on genitals, male and female, to ascertain monogamy), great care is paid to assisting all who need help, but always with the emphasis on gender specifications.

Last but not least, an aspect of the *mecmua* that deserves consideration is the taxonomy of black magic, where talismans and prayers against evil acts and witches/vampires (*sibir ve câzular mekri bâtil olmak için*) feature as the primary subject matter. The section is geared towards individuals either under the spell of black magic or anxious about falling prey to it. On several pages (folios 130–137, recto verso), the author details the locations where *sibir* could be cast. They include wild animals, listed by type (bear, lion, wolf, rabbit, weasel, marten, etc.) and anatomical parts (skin, brain, flesh, bones, tail, fur); plants and trees, also listed by name, part, and use; birds, listed by name and part; humankind, listed by gender, age, anatomical detail, ethnicity and religion (fair, dark, blond Turks; Anatolians; Byzantines; Jews; and others from the ‘seventy-two nations,’ aka, the proverbial 72 peoples of the world found in Biblical narratives, Prophetic sayings, and other near-eastern traditions). Wherever placed, however, *sibir* can be defeated with the power of divine words. The supplication prayers are long and specific, charged to defeat evil in every way and under every condition. The prayers’ shortened versions are also offered in connection with auspicious letters used to compose the talismans, and they all join forces in repelling and repealing evil. After each detailed entry, the author concludes with, “with this, I annul the *sibir* that is here, and that was to be here” (*olmuşdur veya olacakdır bâtil eyledim*). Interestingly, the jinn do not feature prominently in this section; instead, the jinn are involved in obstructing health and interpersonal affairs and are mentioned in relation to illnesses, anxieties, and social concerns, none of which is explicitly classified as the work of vampires or black magic.

In addition to all of the above, the *mecmua* contains lengthy sections on astral correspondences, astrology, interpretation of dreams, geomancy, auspicious days, hidden powers of the Divine Names, alchemical substances, and many

other fascinating topics in esoteric worldviews and ritual praxis. Suffice it to say, its scope and detail offer a broad, cross-cultural window into the past about everyday anxieties, challenges and aspirations to take at least partial control over the conditions that surround us. The power of the occult ritual, its enactment, and its promise to advantageously manipulate the invisible or immaterial agencies, despite its ambiguous social status, is neither delirious nor sinful. Instead, it is the product of cumulative knowledge about the workings of the universe in its physical and metaphysical dimensions. This knowledge and these ritual endeavours were not oppositional or antagonistic but complementary. The manuals like the one presented here are, therefore, two-faced. They mediate between practical, hands-on efforts to improve lives, here and now, and the insatiable intellectual curiosity of the sages from from various places and times to connect the invisible dots that constitute this vast universe.



A folio from Ms. 876, copyright The Bosniak Institute, Sarajevo.

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