

A. EDITORIAL

Ottoman Esotericism in a Global Perspective

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It is with great pleasure that we present the third issue of “*Aca’ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*”, in the context of our five-year (now six-year, since ERC granted an extension to the difficulties presented by the pandemic) research project, GHOST, that is to say “Geographies and Histories of the Ottoman Supernatural Tradition: Exploring Magic, the Marvelous, and the Strange in Ottoman Mentalities”, funded by the European Research Council under the program Consolidator Grant 2017. The research team consists of Marinos Sariyannis (Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH, Rethymno, Greece), as Principal Investigator, Zeynep Aydoğan (Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH, Rethymno, Greece), N. Işık Demirakın (Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH, Rethymno, Greece), Feray Coşkun (Özyegin University, Istanbul, Turkey), Güneş Işıksel (Medeniyet University, Istanbul, Turkey), Bekir Harun Küçük (University of Pennsylvania, USA), Ethan Menchinger (Manchester University, UK), Aslı Niyazioğlu (Oxford University, UK), and Ahmet Tunç Şen (Columbia University, USA), as well as three Ph.D. candidates (Aylin Çakı, Dimitris Giagtzoğlu, Markos Litinas), some MA students and our technical staff. In the year that elapsed between this and the previous issue, we tried hard to make up for all the delays the COVID-19 brought about: for the presentations and conferences we par-

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ticipated, the reader is advised to check the “News” section of our site (<https://ghost.ims.forth.gr/news/>). On 14–17 January 2022, the eleventh “Halcyon Days in Crete” international symposium, organised by the Department of Ottoman History of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies/Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas, took place (virtually) with the topic “Enchantments and disenchantments: early modern Ottoman visions of the world”. A report on the symposium can be found in the present issue, and the proceedings will be published in due course (hopefully before the end of the project, in early 2024) in a peer-reviewed volume. We plan to organise yet another conference in the context of the GHOST project within 2023.

The first conference organised by the GHOST project, back on December 2019, had tried to tangle the Ottoman concepts of nature and the supernatural; assembling a team of scholars via an open call for contributions, it sought to map an emerging field in Ottoman studies, one that tries to trace the varying conceptions and techniques pertaining to the hidden world in an early modern Islamicate empire, following the recent boom of such studies concerning late medieval Middle Eastern cultures. The second conference enlarged its view to encompass visions of the world and of nature in the Ottoman Empire (including non-Muslim populations), with an emphasis in the well-known debates on Enlightenment(s), the Weberian disenchantment (and/or re-enchantment) of the world, and the way these notions may be applied in non-European environments. The question that this *problématique* raises is almost self-evident: how can we place Ottoman perceptions of the nature and of the ways human agency can handle its hidden powers (be them natural properties or supernatural entities) in a global context?

Very briefly, we know that Islamicate science up to the twelfth century CE (with major works such as the epistles of the Brethren of Purity/*Ikhwān al-Safā'* or the famous *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*) had formulated a theory of magic based on natural hierarchies and correspondences, where talismanic techniques could use powers inherent in nature yet hidden from the common intellect. However, a major revolution had occurred by the early thirteenth century: the astral magic of *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, combined with a strong Sufi strand of letter science (especially through Ibn 'Arabī's tremendously influential works), gave rise to what has been called lettrism, i.e. a theory of nature and magic in which Arabic letters, being essential elements of the cosmos and its divine order, dominate both the universe and the ways to exert human influence on it. The work of al-

Būnī (d. 1225?), together with a series of works attributed to the same scholar or, alternatively, to Hermes Trismegistus, established a talismanic magic based on magic squares (*wafk*), letters and numbers. This approach, which has been named “Neo-Pythagorean” due to its mathematical dimension, was popularised through a network connecting Egypt, Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia under figures such as Ibn Turka or ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 1454). As revealed by Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Noah Gardiner, it appears that throughout the fourteenth century CE several scholars, including Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and of course Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) fought bitterly against this trend,¹ only to be defeated in favor of an increasingly “occultist” trend that tended to include more and more powers, which older scholars (e.g. Ibn Sīnā or the Brethren of Purity) considered natural, into a supernatural sphere of angels, demons and jinn. In a series of articles, Matthew Melvin-Koushki has recently postulated that this Neo-Pythagorean, mathematicised perception of the hidden actually catalysed an occultist turn, which functioned in tandem with the formation of the major Islamicate empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Timurid, Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal) to form an “occult-scientific imperialism”.²

In a parallel course, in Western Europe, the translation of classical Arabic works such as al-Kindī’s *De radiis* or *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (famously known as *Picatrix*) into Latin led to the rise of a scholarly tradition of natural or astral magic, connected with the ideas of Hermeticism; this tradition coexisted with another, namely ritual or demonic (Solomonic) magic, based not on powers and properties of nature but on handling and manipulating demonic forces.³ From the late

1 M. Melvin-Koushki, “In Defense of Geomancy: Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī Rebuts Ibn Khaldūn’s Critique of the Occult Sciences”, in M. Melvin-Koushki – N. Gardiner (eds), *Islamicate Occultism: New Perspectives, special double issue of Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 346–403; N. Gardiner, *Ibn Khaldūn versus the Occultists at Barqūq’s Court: The Critique of Lettrism in al-Muqaddimah* (Berlin 2020).

2 M. Melvin-Koushki, “Astrology, Lettrism, Geomancy: The Occult-Scientific Methods of Post-Mongol Islamicate Imperialism”, *Medieval History Journal*, 19/1 (2016), 142–501; idem, “Toward a Neopythagorean Historiography: Kemālpaṣazāde’s (d. 1534) Lettrist Call for the Conquest of Cairo and the Development of Ottoman Occult-Scientific Imperialism”, in L. Saif, F. Leoni, M. Melvin-Koushki and F. Yahya (eds), *Islamic Occultism in Theory and Practice* (Leiden 2020), 380–419.

3 On the history of magic and astrology in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see J.-P. Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance. Astrologie, divination et magie dans l’Occident médiéval (XIIIe–XVe siècle)* (Paris 2006); R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge

fifteenth century onward, Renaissance scholars often turned to natural magic, combining it with Neoplatonism, Hermeticism and Kabbala: in the work of scholars such as Marcilio Ficino (d. 1499) or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494) the world is a continuum, in which human soul is capable of influencing its environment, since macrocosm and microcosm correspond to one another. These ideas culminate during the sixteenth century, with Pietro Pomponazzi (d. 1525), Agrippa of Nettesheim (d. 1535) and of course Paracelsus (d. 1541). The Renaissance ideas about the human Magus and his powers over the natural world have been held responsible for the Scientific Revolution, a theory enhanced by the occultist occupations of major scientists such as Johannes Kepler (d. 1630) or Isaac Newton (d. 1726); yet, these views are now considered outdated, although the history of science now places more attention on the development of occult sciences and their role. The definitive (or not-so-definitive) marginalisation of magic began with Descartes' (d. 1650) rationalism and the Enlightenment philosophers throughout the eighteenth century.

No doubt, the Ottomans were influenced by and participated in the global occult turn during the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century. From Akşemseddin (d. 1459) to the şeyhülislam Kemâlpaşazâde (d. 1534), major figures of Ottoman intellectual life wrote lettrist treatises and prophesied universal dominion; palace circles were heavily influenced by occultists such as the geomancer Haydar, who apparently managed to convince young Süleyman I that he was destined to perform a Messianic mission in spreading Islam worldwide.⁴ At the turn of the sixteenth century, Murad III was captivated by astrological predictions and firmly believed that he was the Chosen of God, constantly receiving messages from the Hereafter.

Yet, even if we accept that in other Islamicate empires the occult turn maintained its momentum throughout the seventeenth century, Ibn Khaldūn seems to have exacted a belated revenge on his occultist opponents: starting with

1989); B. P. Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge 2015).

4 Melvin-Koushki, "Toward a Neopythagorean Historiography". Cf. C. H. Fleischer, "Seer to the Sultan: Haydar-i Remmal and Sultan Süleyman", in J. L. Warner (ed.), *Cultural Horizons: A Festschrift in Honor of Talat S. Halman*, 2 vols (Syracuse 2001), 1:290–299; idem, "Shadow of Shadows: Prophecy in Politics in 1530s Istanbul", in B. Tezcan – K. Barbir (eds), *Identity and Identity Formation in the Ottoman World: A Volume of Essays in Honor of Norman Itzkowitz* (Madison 2007), 51–62.

Kâtib Çelebi's (d. 1657) historical works, Khaldunist historical sociology permeated the understanding of history of the Ottoman elite and drove away messianic considerations of occult power. The seventeenth century was one of disenchantment, as the *Ḳāḏizādeli* movement sought to banish the supernatural from everyday life and pietist brotherhoods such as the *Naḳṣibendīs* (*Naqsh-bendīs*) arose among both the elite and common folk. In this regard, one could argue that the Ottomans also followed a global trend: this time, comparisons can be made with European puritanism and the debates between Protestant and Jesuit scholars about miracles and miracle-working.

During this period, intellectual elites followed a course reminiscent of contemporary European developments. Under the heavy influence of al-Suhrawardī's Illuminationism, itself very akin to Neoplatonism, scholars such as Taṣḳöprüzāde (d. 1561) or Kâtib Çelebi developed a theory of natural magic that strongly resembles Renaissance authors such as Ficino or della Mirandola, as it is based on secret hierarchies and correspondences of the microcosm and the macrocosm. Yet they never seem to have really engaged in such magic, neither in theory nor in practice. This "natural turn" may therefore be entirely unrelated to the parallel developments in European esotericism and could perhaps more fruitfully be regarded as an antiquarianist interest in pre-lettrist Islamic astral magic. Indeed, the few Greek-speaking Ottoman specimens of occultist treatises do display affinities with Renaissance Neoplatonic musings.⁵ However, most Ottoman treatises on occult topics are either collections of lettrist talismans and prayers (a rare systematic exposition of lettrist theory and method is Saruhani's mid-sixteenth century *Ḳavā'id-i teshīrāt*)⁶ or essays on ritual magic, closer to the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* tradition (such as Uzun Firdevsī's early sixteenth-century *Da'vetnāme*). Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century magic, preserved mostly in vernacular manuscripts, consists mainly of alphanumeric calculations and lettrist talismans; and an Egyptian sorcerer, tried in Malta in 1605, seems to have used mostly al-Būnī's techniques and magic squares,

5 See the work in progress by Mr. Markos Litinas, PhD candidate and cf. his M. Litinas, "The Views of Gerasimos Vlachos on Astral Influences: Aristotelic, Hermetic, and Astrological Approaches to the Heavenly Bodies", *Aca'ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural*, 2 (2021), 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.26225/2mpd-7x13>

6 E. Kaçar, "İbn-i İsa'nın *Ḳavā'id-i teshīrāt* isimli eseri: inceleme ve metin", unpublished M.A. thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2019.

although he claimed to be practicing more “Renaissance-like” occult methods such as astrology and geomancy.⁷

Thus, Ottoman esotericism and occultism seems to have proceeded in tandem with the general developments in other Islamicate empires, rather than in the European cultural environment, as far as its contents and methods are concerned. However, it departs from these developments (or at least it seems so; the history of Iranian or Mughal occultism in the early modern period has barely been studied)⁸ insofar occultist preoccupations lose their grip on power games and imperial policy after the late sixteenth century, making the occult/lettrist turn more of a moment in this case. On the other hand, if Taşköprüzade’s or Kâtib Çelebi’s occultism may be considered antiquarian, there is a parallel with Safavid trends. What seems to bear some similarities with the European experience is the manner in which Ottoman society (or, to be more precise, part of it) arguably underwent a disenchantment of sorts after the seventeenth century. This also dealt a strong blow to the prestige of occult sciences, including the highly respected ones such as astrology. “Practical naturalism” and technology transfer in the artisanal strata of the big cities throughout the eighteenth century, although one will meet major difficulties trying to compare this development with Enlightenment or the Scientific Revolution.⁹

A more thorough analysis of these global dimensions would surely exceed the limits of a simple editorial. More secure and detailed conclusions will hopefully be reached at the end of the GHOST project. For the moment, we hope that the reader will find the material collected in the present issue satisfying and that we will be able to produce an equally interesting fourth and (perhaps) last issue, scheduled for Fall 2023.

7 See A. Mallett – C. Rider – D. A. Agius (eds), *Magic in Malta: Sellem Bin al-Sheikh Mansur and the Roman Inquisition*, 1605 (Leiden 2022), especially the chapter by L. Saif, “Magic and Divination Lost in Translation: A Cairene in a Maltese Inquisition”, 419–451.

8 For the Moroccan case, see now J. K. Stearns, *Revealed Sciences. The Natural Sciences in Islam in Seventeenth-Century Morocco* (Cambridge 2021).

9 See H. Küçük, *Science without Leisure: Practical Naturalism in Istanbul, 1660–1732* (Pittsburgh 2019) and cf. the interesting discussion that ensued: N. Shafir, “The Almighty Akçe: The Economics of Scholarship and Science in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 58 (2021), 251–280 and H. Küçük, “Response to Nir Shafir”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 59 (2022), 261–272.

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