

# Political advice and ethics in an occult framework: Alai Muhibbi Şirazi's *Düstûru'l-vüzerâ* as an example of 16th century Ottoman lettrism

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The literary genre of political advice (*siyâsetnâme*) occupies a significant role within the annals of Ottoman political philosophy, representing a substantial component of the era's literary landscape. Rooted in the Persian tradition, particularly epitomized by the “mirror for princes” genre, and more recently categorized as “treatises on ethics”, these works began to emerge within Ottoman literature as early as the late fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The prominence and popularity of ethics literature were openly expressed and emphasized to their direct recipients, encompassing both rulers and other prominent figures. While previous research often approached these works with indifference, engaging with them in rather formulaic terms, closer examination has unveiled substantial differences in both content and structure.<sup>2</sup> One such

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1 For a summary of the academic discussion on terminology and categorisation of this truly rich and broad textual group see M. Sariyannis, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought Up to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Leiden 2018), 6–9.

2 For a recent assessment of this unarguably very rich literary genre see H. Yılmaz, *Caliphate*

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notable work is “The Code of the Viziers” (*Düsturü'l-Vüzerâ*, hereafter referred to as *Düstur*). This advisory and guiding political treatise delineates the virtues and codes of conduct to be adhered to, not by the sultans or the princes, but by the viziers during times of peace and war. Its author, Alayi bin Muhibbi eş-Şirazi eş-Şerif was a versatile Ottoman intellectual of the sixteenth century. Information regarding his life is scant and somewhat contradictory. He is believed to have spent his entire life in the city of Konya, a prominent center of religion, mysticism, and culture, where he likely received education in calligraphy and copying. Sources also associate him with the Mevleviyye Sufi brotherhood, within which he gained recognition as a skilled reciter of the *mesnevî* and as a gifted poet. His poetry, composed in Persian, Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, plays a significant role in his works, particularly in *Düstur*, serving as literary bridges within the text. Hailing from Shiraz, a renowned literary and intellectual hub in the Persianate world, his family background suggests a rich literary heritage.<sup>3</sup> The exact dates of his birth and death remain unknown. Drawing from the dating of his numerous works, the earliest of which date back to the 1550s, it can be inferred that he was likely born in the 1520s or late 1510s, with his life spanning the greater part of the sixteenth century. This conjecture is supported by the dating of one of his seemingly later (if not his latest) works: a concise theological text, structured in the form of questions and answers, addressing various Qur'anic concepts, presented to the former governor of Anatolia, Silahdar Cafer Paşa (d. 1587).<sup>4</sup>

According to Kâtip Çelebi, Alayi completed and presented his treatise in Konya in 1558–1559,<sup>5</sup> a period marked by turbulence in the Empire. Sultan Süleyman's two remaining sons, Bayezid and Selim, unable to solve their differences and in an effort to put an end to the struggle of succession, were getting ready for a direct clash. Despite their father's efforts to compromise them, the two finally met with their armies in the great plain of Konya, Selim's governing province. The battle, which took place on the 30th of May 1559, saw Selim as the

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*Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton 2018), 69 et seq.

3 In an Ottoman biographical dictionary, we read that his father's name was Mir Muhyi eş-Şirazi, a fact that confirms his Persian origins; see S. Solmaz, *Abdi ve Gülşen-i Şu'arâsı (İnceleme-Metin)* (Ankara 2018).

4 The text has been published recently by M. A. Alpaydın, *Sorular ve Cevaplar Işığında Ayetlerdeki İncelikler: Risâletü'l-Es'ile ve'l-Ecvice fî İlmi't-Tefsîr* (Istanbul 2020).

5 L. Forrer, *Die osmanische Chronik des Rüstem Pascha* (Leipzig 1923), 195–196.

winner while Bayezid was forced to flee the Ottoman lands, reaching until the enemy court of the Safavids.

One of the pivotal figures in this consequential victory, solidifying Selim's position as the sole heir to the throne, was his tutor (*lâlâ*) and personal advisor, Mustafa Paşa, a Bosnian convert. It is to this individual that Alayi dedicated his treatise. Initially, the rationale behind this dedication appears evident: Mustafa Paşa's pivotal role in the victory elevated him to the position of Selim's second-in-command. Despite attempts by the Great Vizier Rustem Paşa to diminish his influence, Mustafa Paşa's authority persisted, evidenced by Selim's intervention to rescind his appointments in Pozega and Timisoara. Alayi, cognizant of these political dynamics, appears to have hastened to garner the favor of the Paşa. In his preface, he makes his sole reference to both Mustafa Paşa and Selim, whom he reverentially addresses as *Sultân*.<sup>6</sup>

While the aforementioned explanation appears reasonable, further textual evidence from the period suggests that the dedication of Alayi's treatise to Mustafa Paşa transcended conventional literary patronage. Mustafa Paşa indeed enjoyed a reputation as a notable patron of intellectuals and artists, with Gelibolu Mustafa Ali counting among his most renowned proteges. However, his affiliations extended beyond mere patronage; he held a significant connection to Alayi's mystical brotherhood, the Mevleviyye, and exhibited a strong interest in occultism.<sup>7</sup> A notable piece of evidence supporting this assertion is found in the famous miniature from Mustafa Ali's *Nusretname*, depicting Mustafa Paşa awaiting an oracle in the shrine of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi in Konya. This miniature serves as compelling evidence of the importance attributed to the esoteric sciences in the conduct of both war and politics.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, this image provides a strong indication of the heavily occult character of Alayi's text, a characteristic that warrants the further examination provided below.

There exist just two known manuscripts of *Düstur*, both preserved with-

6 *Düstûru'l-Vüzerâ*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa, fol. 92/a.

7 Mustafa Paşa's Mevleviyye affiliation is corroborated through his generous donations and gifts and from his actions for the building of their convent right after the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus; N. Yıldız, "The Vakf Institution in Ottoman Cyprus" in M. N. Michael, M. Kappler and E. Gavriel (eds), *Ottoman Cyprus: A Collection of Studies on History and Culture* (Wiesbaden 2009), 134–136.

8 R. Grierson, "Cover Illustration: Lala Mustafa Paşa Visits the Shrine of Jalal al-Din Rumi Nusretname, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, H. 1365 Istanbul, 1584, Fol. 36a." *Mawlana Rumi Review*, 8 (2017), 7–12.

in the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library as components of multi-themed collections. Given that the manuscript of Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa precedes that of Bağışlar by a few years, our study was primarily grounded in the former.<sup>9</sup> It is pertinent to acknowledge that the work has already undergone comprehensive examination and transliteration in its entirety by Emrah Dokuzlu, utilizing the same manuscript as our primary source.<sup>10</sup>

## Structure and content of the work

The treatise spans a total of twenty-three folios and consists of an introductory section, three primary chapters (*bâb*), and an epilogue.<sup>11</sup> The introductory portion delves into an analysis of the term itself before delving into a discussion on the administrative and bureaucratic significance of the vizier throughout the Islamicate period.

The second chapter offers insights into the history and virtues of select viziers, primarily from the early centuries of Islam, encompassing the era of the Prophet Muhammad and the first caliphs. These virtues pertain to various facets of the vizier's professional and domestic life, including their interactions with the ruler and his subordinates within the state apparatus, as well as their efforts to maintain order within their households.

Until this juncture, the text presents no notable deviation in content or structure. Such descriptions and arguments, both in terms of individuals and sources, are prevalent in numerous Ottoman mirrors for princes. However, the subsequent and final chapter exhibits a marked shift in content. This concluding segment, which we will predominantly examine, surpasses the preceding one in length. Its introductory section reads as follows:

Third chapter: Some of the prayers in this chapter come from the Messenger of Allah. They are recited by the Prophet, his Companions and by other righteous predecessors. And since the aforementioned prayers and the knowledge, that benefits from letters, words and prayers, are not exclusive to the war and the military

9 *Düstur* covers folios 90b–123a. The texts preceding and following it in the miscellany are Imam Gazali's *Netîcetü's-Sülûk fî Nasîhati'l-Mülûk* and Hüseyin Herzafen's *Telbîsu'l-Beyân fî Tablîsi'l-Büldân* respectively.

10 E. Dokuzlu, "Alâî b. Muhibbî eş-Şirâzî'nin *Düstûru'l-Vüzerâ* isimli siyasetnâmesinin metin ve tahlili", unpublished M. A. thesis, Istanbul Üniversitesi, 2012.

11 For a summary description of the treatise's content see Dokuzlu, "Alâî b. Muhibbî", 35 et seq.

and all wishes and intentions are general and comprehensive, for this reason they are separately mentioned in this chapter.

As elucidated by Alayi, the knowledge conveyed in this section transcends the domains covered in preceding chapters. Whereas the advice and exemplary actions cited in the first and second chapters predominantly pertained to politics, ethics, warfare, and military strategy, here the author indicates his intention to impart knowledge on the talismanic utilization of sacred scripts and the letters of the alphabet. In a subsequent sentence, the writer explicitly asserts that this form of talismanic knowledge “is an indispensable weapon in the hands of sultans, viziers and statesmen” against their adversaries (*Şah vezîr ve hâkim ve emîre lâzım ve vâcibdür*). With this statement, Alayi appears to address any potential concerns regarding the apparent departure from the ethos and objectives outlined in his introduction. It is as if he interjects to assert that talismanic lettrism and prayers are equally vital for members of the ruling class, should they seek protection against the adversities inherent in wielding great power and navigating internal conflicts.

In terms of narrative and structural composition, the talismanic section maintains continuity with the preceding chapters, with Alayi drawing upon the wisdom gleaned from the words and deeds of esteemed figures in Islam. However, a notable shift occurs politics yields precedence to Sufism. While the earlier chapters shed light on the exemplary conduct of early caliphs and Ottoman sultans in matters of statecraft, diplomacy, and warfare, the talismanic section draws inspiration focal points, the quintessential luminaries of Islamic esotericism and various Sufi brotherhoods. Unsurprising, the foremost among these figures is Ali bin Abu Talib, the Prophet’s son-in-law, renowned as the primary recipient of esoteric knowledge and subsequently the transmitter of this wisdom to eminent sheikhs. The pervasive influence of Ali’s persona on Alayi’s work is palpable throughout, with Ali depicted as the epitome of an ideal ruler, embodying virtues encompassing both exoteric and esoteric understandings of the world. Within this chapter, particular emphasis is placed on the latter aspect, portraying Ali as a Sufi ruler adept in practice of talismanic lettrism:

On the day of Badr, his excellency the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, recited this prayer: “O Allah, Who sent down the Book, O Allah, Who makes the clouds move and defeats the armies, O Allah, defeat them and make us victorious.” And He used to recite this prayer as well: “O Allah, we ask You to stand

against them by Your might and we seek refuge in You from their evil, Hâ Mîm the unhelpful all faces bow down before that Life and Trust.” The word of his excellency Ali: “I met with Hızır.” I told him: “Teach me something with which I will find victory against my enemy.” He taught me this prayer, which goes like this: “Oh Allah elif lâm mîm and elif lâm mîm and elif lâm mîm sâd and elif lâm ra and elif lâm ra and elif lâm ra and elif lâm mim ra and elif lâm ra and elif lâm ra and kef ha ya ‘ayn sâd and tâ ha and tâ sîn mîm and tâ sîn and tâ sîn mîm and elif lâm mîm and elif lâm mîm and elif lâm mîm and elif lâm mîm yâ sîn and sâd and hâ mîm and hâ mîm and hâ mîm ‘ayn sîn kaf hâ mîm hâ mîm hâ mîm hâ mîm and kâf and nûn and yâ Hû yâ help me and protect me for the sake of those who have no gods but Him.” His excellency Ali says that “I said it and with the blessings of this prayer, I made many expeditions even on the day of Badr.”<sup>12</sup>

The chapter commences with the presentation of two examples of talismanic prayers, both intertwined with one of the Prophet Muhammad’s most pivotal victories over the Quraysh in the town of Badr.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the narrative shifts its focus to Ali, a central figure and hero of the Battle of Badr.

This excerpt provides insight into a lineage of mystics endowed with profound knowledge of the mystical properties of letters and words. Preceding Ali in this chain of spiritual guidance is none other than Hızır. Much has been speculated and written about this enigmatic figure who transcends the confines of space and time. Often referred to as “the Green One,” Hızır is depicted as immortal sage who appears in moments of spiritual intensity or crisis to offer resolution. In Ottoman literary tradition, his most renowned intervention of this nature took place during the siege of Istanbul, where he miraculously appeared to Sultan Fatih Sultan Mehmed’s tutor, Akşemseddin.<sup>14</sup>

Ali’s encounter with Hızır provides insight into practices often utilized as additional instruments in times of war. Beyond military preparations and strategic planning preceding battles, rulers were compelled to undertake further actions to ensure decisive victory over their adversaries. The extensive letterist talismanic prayer depicted in the text offers a vivid depiction of how warfare and

12 *Düstur*, 113a–113b.

13 This battle, which took place in March 624, constituted one of Muhammad’s great military triumphs against his local political and economic antagonists. See *TDVİA*, s.v. “Bedir Gazvesi” (M. Fayda).

14 The incident is described in Akşemseddin’s biography; See M. Çelik (ed.), *Akşemseddin Hazretleri ve Yakın Çevresi: Menakıb-i Akşemseddin*, (Istanbul 2016), 64–65.

politics intersected with talismanic, divinatory knowledge, and occultism in general. Concerning the Ottomans, similar depictions are dispersed throughout various texts, primarily chronicles and other narrative sources recounting their significant triumphs against both Christian and Muslims adversaries.<sup>15</sup>

These abovementioned observations concerning the miraculous interventions of Hızır in times of peril are further substantiated through his second and final appearance in *Düstur*. This occurrence follows immediately after the talismanic section of the chapter, and notably, it is not Ali who engages with him on this occasion. Instead, it is Necmeddin Kübra, a revered sheikh and prominent figure in Islamic mysticism, who interacts with Hızır. Necmeddin Kübra, was an illuminationist renowned for his expertise in interpreting visions and dreams. He was also the founder of the Kübreviyye Sufi brotherhood and operated primarily in what is now Uzbekistan.<sup>16</sup> His life was cut short during the Mongol capture of his hometown.<sup>17</sup> Similar to Ali and Akşemseddin, Kübra possessed knowledge of lettrist divination, which he harnessed to prophesy the outcomes of war.<sup>18</sup>

When Şeyh Necmeddin Kübra met Hızır and asked for a blessing, Hızır sent this couplet as a blessing to those who belong to him. Every person who has a strong desire and eagerness for the expedition and recite this couplet about him he will, with the help of Allah, reach to his goal and return to his place with health and peace. This is the couplet: “Wherever you are directed, your helper is peace, and the Most Merciful watches over you from everywhere.”<sup>19</sup>

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15 The most famous and probably most powerfully symbolic among these cases of military occult lettrism is not of talismanic but of divinatory nature and happened during sultan Selim I's military expedition against the Mamluks. See M. Melvin-Koushki, “Toward a Neopythagorean Historiography: Kemâlpaşazâde'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 2019), 380–419.

16 Information regarding his life is drawn mainly from a famous biographical dictionary by Molla Jami in the second half of the fifteenth century

17 *TDVİA*, s.v. “Necmeddin-i Kübrâ” (H. Algar).

18 This information is found in a lettrist treatise by the great Persian philosopher Celaleddin ed-Devvani, cited by M. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest for a Universal Science: The Occult Philosophy of Şâ'in al-Dîn Turka İsfahânî (1369–1432) and Intellectual Millenarianism in Early Timurid Iran”, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 2012, 255.

19 *Düstur*, 117b.

## The talismans in the text

One of the distinctive features of *Düstur* is the inclusion of four illustrations of talismans. These drawings represent a unique aspect of the text, as they are not present in any other extant *siyasetnames* from the Ottoman period. Found in both surviving copies of *Düstur*, these illustrations remain consistent without variation. They are seamlessly integrated within the chapters alongside other prayers, lacking any separate introduction. Among these drawings, the first depicts one of the most renowned Islamic talismans:

The Seal of Süleyman: whoever has this seal engraved on gold, and wears it on the sundial, he will restrain all his enemies and whoever sees him will be afraid. Its phlegm is also beneficial for the sick and protects its owner from sludge. This is the seal and it is permissible to be in this form.<sup>20</sup>

Süleyman's seal is arguably one of the most intercultural occult talismanic symbols. This star typically manifests with six edges and was employed as a signet ring, embroidered into garments, or inscribed as a talismanic script on paper. In pre-Ottoman Anatolia, it was recognized as the emblem of the Karamanids, while in the sixteenth century, it adorned the battle standard of the Ottoman Grand Admiral, Barbaros Hayerddin Paşa.

The remaining talismans exhibit greater complexity both in their visual form and interpretive significance. They materialize as visual representations of Qur'anic verses imbued with talismanic qualities. Consider the description of the second talisman:

Benefit: For every difficult work to be easy and for good and blessing to be abundant, it is necessary to recite this verse: "God will bring ease after hardship".<sup>21</sup> And if they write it on the skin of a gazelle with musk, saffron and rosewater those whose name is pronounced and whose talisman is made will be able to fulfil many desires immediately while every action will be easy. With the help and grace of God this is his picture.<sup>22</sup>

20 *Düstur*, 115b ; Dokuzlu, "Alâî", 139. Unfortunately, I was denied permission to reproduce any illustration from the manuscript. Moreover, the relevant pages are no longer available online..

21 Surah *At-Talaq* verse 7.

22 *Düstur*, 116a ; Dokuzlu, "Alâî", 140.



The extracted circle is this Qur'anic verse: Let the man of wealth provide according to his means. As for the one with limited resources, let him provide according to whatever Allah has given him. Allah does not require of any soul beyond what He has given it. After hardship, Allah will bring about ease. Gold Almighty said: Muhammad is no more than a messenger; other messengers have gone before him. If he were to die or to be killed, would you regress into disbelief? Those who do so will not harm Allah whatsoever. And Allah will reward those who are grateful.<sup>23</sup>

In examining the second talisman, Alai begins by elucidating its qualities before presenting delving into its presentation and analysis. Unlike Süleyman seal, this talisman remains unnamed, suggesting perhaps a lesser degree of familiarity. The verses and letters adorning it are encrypted, requiring considerable effort from the reader to decipher what initially appears as disordered words, lines and symbols. This talisman is purportedly designed to ward off various adversities in an individual's life.

The third talisman shares similar characteristics with the second. It also utilizes, as its medium, a body part of a creature—the wings of a bird—demanding specialized scribal and calligraphic expertise:

Whoever repeats this Qur'anic verse will be safe from the evil of all the jinn and will his words will be accepted and he will be protected in the sight of the sultans. And if they paint this verse on a bird's wing, then Muhammad's holy name should be written in Kufic script and the names of the four angels, namely Jabrail, Mikail, Israfil and Azrail should be engraved around "Muhammad" like this.

According to the transliterator of the texts, the Qur'anic verse inscribed on the talisman corresponds to the verse 144 of Surah Al-Imran.<sup>24</sup> An observation worth noting is the inclusion of another name alongside that of the Prophet, rendered in Kufic script. This name is none other than that of Ali, reintroducing itself within the context of the talisman and potentially carrying significant symbolism. In a related text, Gelibolu Mustafa Ali's *Menâkıb-ı Hünerverân*, written just a few decades prior, Ali is depicted as a master of the Kufic script. Moreover, in the same text, Kufic script stands out as one of the most esteemed scripts in the annals of Islamic calligraphy.<sup>25</sup> From these insights, one might

23 *Düstur*, 116b ; Dokuzlu, "Alâî", 141.

24 Bozoklu, "Alâî b. Muhibbî", 70 n219.

25 Gelibolu Mustafa Ali, *Mustafa 'Âli's Epic Deeds of Artists*, ed. E. Akın-Kıvanç (Boston 2011),

speculate that the utilization of this specific script on this or any other talisman could bestow additional protective attributes upon it. The presence of the names of the four angels surrounding that of Muhammed is also noteworthy, as their misalignment could potentially impact the efficacy of the talisman. Lastly, regarding the talisman's intended purpose, while a talisman designed to ward off evil spirits may not appear particularly novel, one tailored to safeguard a statesman or prominent figure such as Lala Mustafa Paşa, against the malevolent intentions of rulers might have held immense popularity within the highest echelons of society were not immune to wrath of the sultan, such as protective talisman would likely have been in high demand.

The fourth and final talisman exhibits analogous attributes to its predecessors, as it also provides protection against malevolent jinn. Additionally, it purportedly guarantees victory in battle and safeguards against various forms of misfortune, whether encountered on land or at sea:

Whoever takes this form will be victorious over enemies in battle and will be protected and hidden from the harm of all jinn and disasters. All the people will be obedient and there's no doubt about it: "It is He Who causes the dawn to split forth, and has ordained the night for repose, and the sun and the moon for reckoning time. All this is determined by Allah the Almighty, the All-Knowing."<sup>26</sup> Whoever draws this verse of the Qur'an in this way and places it at the head of the ship or draws it on the ship's board, the ship will be protected from the disasters of the sea, and if they draw it and tie it to the knot of the person tied to it, it will be done immediately by the permission of Allah.<sup>27</sup>

While talismans offering protection in maritime environments, such as that depicted above may seem like a rarity, they are documented in historical sources. An Indian tradition recounts that the renowned mystic Maruf-i Kerhi once provided a merchant sailor with a paper with a prayer inscribed on paper, offering safeguard against storms.<sup>28</sup>

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179–181. The special talismanic qualities of Kufic have also been observed by Guy Burak, "Alphabets and "Calligraphy" in the Section on Prayers, Special Characteristics of the Quran and Magic Squares in the Inventory of Sultan Bayezid II's Palace Library", *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, 2 (2021), 32–54.

26 Surah Al-An'am verse 96.

27 *Düstur*, 117a ; Dokuzlu, "Alâi", 142–143.

28 This story is related only once in an Indian Sufi treatise, cited by A. Gallop, "The Amuletic

## Conclusion

Although relatively concise, Alayi's counsel treatise encompasses a breadth of subject matter. In this study, our focus has been confined to a specific section of only one of its three chapters. The talismanic and lettrist wisdom imparted by this sixteenth-century Sufi polymath to an emerging notable offers a representative glimpse into the intellectual currents prevalent in the Ottoman Empire, dating back to the era of Mehmet II and his father, Sultan Murad, in the mid-fifteenth century. The significant military conflicts, personal, political and apocalyptic concerns characteristic of this earlier period persisted throughout the Selimian and Suleymanic eras, fostering the production of semi-political/semi-occult literature. Such literature enjoyed widespread popularity among the major political figures of the time.

When considering the written form of such works, one could contend that talismanic and amuletic knowledge constituted the most obvious manifestations of occultism within the Ottoman realm. Regrettably, critical editions for the majority of these often extensive texts, exclusively dedicated to this undoubtedly intricate and occasionally technical field of knowledge, remain absent.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, tangible objects such as talismanic shirts, jewelry, and magical squares inscribed on parchment circulated within the confines of vizierial residences, behind the formidable walls of the sultan's palace, and within the esteemed confines of prominent Sufi shrines. As scholarly inquiry progresses, it is hoped that we will continue to gain a deeper understanding and a clearer depiction of the various forms and expressions, as well as the underlying motivations driving the production of these captivating texts.

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Cult of Ma'rif al-Karkhi in the Malay World", in R. M. Kerr and T. Milo (eds), *Writings and Writing from Another World and Another Era. Investigations in Islamic Text and Script in Honour of Dr Januarius Justus Witkam, Professor of Codicology and Palaeography of the Islamic World at Leyden University* (Cambridge 2010), 167–196.

29 An example of such an Ottoman text belongs to Abdurrahman el-Bistami and bears the title *Şemsü'l-âfâk fi 'ilmi'l-ḥurûf ve'l-evfâk*. It is a multipage lettrist and talismanic treatise which survives in many manuscript collections.

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