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Visualizing Sufism

Islamicate Intellectual History

STUDIES AND TEXTS IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL
AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS

Studies on Graphic Representations in Sufi Literature
(13th to 16th Century)

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CHAPTER I

Diagrams and Visionary Experience in al-Būnî's (d. 622/1225) *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt fi al-ḥurūf* *al-'ulwiyyāt*

Noah Gardiner

Around the turn of the seventh/thirteenth century, a discipline known as "the science of letters and names" (*ilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-asmā'*), which had been cultivated for some time in the Islamicate west, was introduced to the central Arab-Islamic lands by Sufi émigrés such as the Andalusian Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and the Ifrīqiyan Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225 or 630/1232–1233). The science, often referred to as "lettrism" in recent scholarship, is a discourse on the relationship between divine speech and manifest existence that assigns central cosmogonical roles to the divine names and the letters of the Arabic alphabet. It has occult-practical components as well, including specially crafted invocatory prayers (*ad'iyā*, *awrād*, etc.), talismans bearing matrices of letters and numbers (*awfāq*, s. *wafq*), and various letter-based divination techniques. Originally confined to esotericist Sufi circles, the science was widely popularized among Muslim intellectuals and elites of the eighth/fourteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries, exercising significant influence on Islamic thought and culture for centuries after.¹

Al-Būnī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt fi al-ḥurūf al-'ulwiyyāt* (The Subtleties of the Allusions regarding the Superior Letters), completed in Cairo in 622/1225, is his

¹ On the history of lettrism up to and including to al-Būnī, see Denis Gril, "The Science of Letters," in *The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (New York: Pir Press, 2004), 103–219; Pierre Lory's various essays on the topic collected in the volume *La science des lettres en islam* (Paris: Editions Dervy, 2004); Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in Al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-'Arabī and Ismā'īlī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Jean-Charles Coulon, "La magie islamique et le «corpus bunianum» au Moyen Âge" (PhD diss., Paris IV—Sorbonne, 2013), and various works by the present author. On the spread and development of lettrism in the centuries after al-Būnī, see Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light," *al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 (2016): 42–113; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire: New Forms of Religiopolitical Legitimacy," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of Islam*, ed. Armando Salvatore and Babak Rahimi (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 353–375; İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).