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▶ **To cite this version:**

Pierre Marie Jacques Lory. Kashifi's Asrâr-i Qâsimî and Timurid Magic. Iranian Studies, 2003, 4 (36), pp.531-541. halshs-00322913

HAL Id: halshs-00322913
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00322913

Submitted on 19 Sep 2008

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KÂSHIFÎ'S *ASRÂR-I QÂSIMÎ* AND TIMURID MAGIC

Pierre Lory

The work of the scholar, moralist and exegete, Husayn Kâshifi, is fairly well-known, and becomes even more so with the appearance of this special issue of *Iranian Studies*. On the other hand, the esoteric dimension of Kashifi's work has received far less attention. It represents, however, an integral part of the author's world vision. The goal of the present article is to cast light on the principal ideas and character of Kâshifi's work on magic, entitled *Asrâr-i Qâsimî*.[1] This medium-sized book opens like any other, as if it were dealing with a subject as incontestable as pharmacology or astronomy. Its goal, however, is to outline the procedures that enable one to participate in the hidden laws that connect all living things. Kâshifi's stated purpose is to make the contents of the voluminous general surveys of the Ancients on esotericism accessible to a wider Persian-speaking audience. He hints that the work was done at the request of a certain Amir Sayyid Qâsim, to whom it is dedicated, and as the title itself indicates.[2] The work begins with the traditional eulogy of the Prophet, at the same time referring to several hadiths praising scientific research: "Let me see things as they are!" and "Lord, augment my knowledge!" and citing Arabic and Persian verses in a similar vein. The use of hadiths serves to situate Kâshifi's disussion within the official and legitimate scope of Islamic learning. Moreover, the citations of poetic verses introduce it as part of a culture that is both literary and religious, that is, of a select and cultivated readership. In short, the introduction reinforces the idea that the occult sciences are an integral part of

[1] *Asrar-i Qasimi*, lithog. ed. Muhammad Hasan 'Alamî Press, no date or place of publication. Hereafter cited as AQ . I would like to thank Ziva Vesel for drawing my attention to this work and for securing the lithograph edition. I am grateful to her for her advice and encouragement.

[2] AQ, 4-5.

the knowledge accessible to the contemporary cultural elite. His goal, however, is essentially practical, as he does not strive to do the work of a theoretician here.

After these introductive eulogies, Kâshifi provides an outline of the work by stating that he will focus on the sciences of *kîmiyâ*, *lîmiyâ*, *hîmiyâ*, *sîmiyâ* and *rîmiyâ*. This list of strange terms is drawn from an anagram, which was well-known in esoteric circles, whereby the first letters of the five terms formed the word KLHSR, which could also be read as "*kullu-hu sirr*^{un}" ("All of it is mystery"), an Arabic formula that Kâshifi attributes, somewhat surprisingly, to the ancient Greek sages (*hukamâ-yi Yûnân*,).[3] Let us note, right from the outset, this reference to Greek wisdom, which is reaffirmed a little later by the claim that the books on these five sciences were translated from Greek into Arabic by Shihab al-Diin Yahya Suhrawardî (d. 1191), who also supposedly reproduced talismanic figures.[4] This declaration is perhaps derived from the link that was explicitly made by the great Persian theosophist between hermetic Greek wisdom and his philosophy of Illumination (*hikmat al-ishrâq*). However, this statement is clearly at variance with chronology and history.

Each of these terms is based on the scheme, *kîmiyâ*, which denotes the science of alchemy. As Fuat Sezgin showed, the term had a fairly pejorative connotation during the first centuries A.H., and it came into legitimate use only with time. The ancient alchemists preferred to speak of "the science of the art" (*'ilm al-san'a*), but by the ninth /fifteenth century, its use had evidently been accepted.[5] The term *sîmiyâ* was also used in medieval Arabic, but its meaning was less clear. It could designate natural magic in its entirety--this is the meaning adopted by Kâshifi--or more precisely, the mystic science of letters.[6] The three other terms covered disciplines that were well-known, although under different designations,

[3] AQ, 3.

[4] AQ, 4.

[5] Sezgin, F., *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3-7.

[6] See D. B. MacDonald and T. Fahd, "Sîmiyâ," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 9: 1998.

which Kâshifi goes on to define for his readers. He does not approach the subjects represented by the five terms in their anagrammatical order, but rather proceeds from the general to the more specific, in the following order: *sîmiyâ*, *rîmiyâ*, *lîmiyâ*, *hîmiyâ*, *kîmiyâ*. Each of the chapters devoted to these subjects is divided into sections (*fasl*) and juxtaposed sub-sections.

Kâshifi begins with a presention on *sîmiyâ*, a general form of magic. The other name he gives it, *'ilm-i khayâlât*, or the "science of imaginary appearances," is not to be understood simply as "illusionism." Its goal is to harness subtle, hidden forces, and to put them at one's service; this is the implementation of forces which truly exist for the author as well as for his readers.[7] Practically speaking, this is the subjugation of genies, or the spirits (*rûhâniyyât*) of deceased individuals.[8] The suggested procedures for doing so are based on the knowledge of bones, ashes, and inks. They consist of fumigations and various rituals, often chosen in connection with astral positions. As such, they include invocations (*da'awât*) addressed to the stars.[9] Magic formulas are provided in unknown languages, to be recited or writren down, as are talismanic figures, most notably "eyeglass symbols" (*filiqtîr*).[10] The effects were supposedly very powerful, and could be used to further various goals. One could affect meteorology, for example, make the sun disappear in the daytime and reappear at night, or provoke storms, cause lightning and rain; one could also affect plant growth in order to obtain harvests out of season, for example. The science of *sîmiyâ* can also cause changes in the appearance of people or animals, make them disappear, or walk on water. As for his sources on *sîmiyâ*, Kâshifî mentions principally Plato's *Laws*, i.e., the pseudo-epigraphical work entitled *Nawâmis Iflâtûn*, which dates from perhaps the fourth century A.H. Galen had intended to summarize it, but, faced with the density of its contents, he ended up producing

[7] AQ, 4.

[8] AQ, 42, 57-58.

[9] AQ, 47ff.

[10] AQ, 13ff.

a commentary on it. Widely known, judging from the large number of manuscripts, it was translated into Latin, Hebrew and Persian. It deals with a great number of subjects, from communicating with the dead, to moving across water and through the air, to the reproduction of animals. Kâshifi states that he also drew on the commentary attributed to Galen (*Mukhtasar Jâlinus*). He mentions Plato's *Ten Words* (*'Ashr maqâlât*) as well, which corresponds to the treatise entitled *Book of foundations and rules* (*Kitâb al-usûl wa-al-dawâbit*), which, like the former, proposes to expose the interactions between macrocosm and microcosms, and he cites its translator into Arabic, Hunayn ibn Ishâq.[11] Throughout the work there are also references to authors of the Muslim period, such as Muhammad ibn Zakariyâ Râzî--whose influence in several domains of the occult sciences is well-known--regarding a method of walking on water.[12] Suhrawardî is also cited, for an operation of the simple alimentary order.

The science of *rîmiyâ* consists in putting to work the natural powers that intrinsically link things together. These are natural and earthly force, not subtle or spiritual ones, as in the case of *sîmiyâ*. We find ourselves in a field that, in the occult sciences, is often called *'ilm al-khawâss*. The chapter is principally devoted to ways of exercising influence over the mental state of other humans: how to elicit the love of a desired being, or to gain the protection of a powerful individual. *Rîmiyâ* enables its practitioners to make people happy, sick, or insane,[13] to make women dance, etc.[14] This can be done through fumigation, the use of perfumes, dances, writing, or through the use of planetary forces.[15] Husayn Kâshifi considers *rîmiyâ* a

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[11] AQ, 17. The text mentions "Husayn ibn Ishâq," which is obviously a mistake. See also Manfred Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 364-65.

[12] *Ibid.*, 383.

[13] AQ, 62ff.

[14] AQ, 67-68.

[15] AQ, 82.

form or "charlatanism" (*'ilm-i sha'badhât*) and refers to it as the utilization of ruses (*hiyal wa-dukûk*). Here too, it is important to look closely at the proposed descriptions. The definition of *dakk* and *hila* is given as a series of "items" which are based primarily on astrological considerations.[16] It does not constitute merely trickery and illusion, but rather, the use of invisible laws for harmless purposes and amusement, by accessible mean, in contrast to the workings of *sîmiyâ*. Sometimes, the goal seems to be simply amusement (*la'b*) by artificially eliciting movement, silence, laughter, tears etc., or bizarre "natural" phenomena.[17]

Concerning this *rîmiyâ,* which deals with conjuration and charlatanism without being identified as such, Kashifi cites several authors, the most respected of which seems to be "the sage Abu al-Qâsim Ahmad al-Simâwi," also known as "al-'Irâqi." This author, who is known for an important work on alchemy, *Kitâb al-'ilm al-muktasab fi zirâ'at al dhahab*, also wrote a complete treatise on magic, *Kitâb 'uyun al-haqâ'iq wa-îdâh al-tarâ'iq*, which Kâshifi cites directly.[18] He also cites the work, *Hiyal wa-dukûk*, which cannot be identified,[19] as well as the treatise by the little-known author, Abu 'Abd Allâh Maghribî, *Sihr al-'uyûn*, better known under the title *Kitâb ibn-i Hallâj*, which also treats *sîmiyâ* and *rîmiyâ*.[20] Incidentally, Kashifi cites his own father as source for a practice destined to combat scorpions.[21]

Lîmiyâ is presented by Kâshifi as the science of talismans (*'ilm-i tilismât*). This consists of linking an active superior force—for example, that of the seven planets—to an inferior (earthly) passive force by means of an earthly support, that is, a talisman. In this way, it is possible for the practitioner to influence people's spirits to his advantage, notably those

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[16] AQ, 82.

[17] AQ, 86ff.

[18] See Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften* , 391-92.

[19] AQ, 4.

[20] AQ, 4.

[21] AQ, 78.

of kings or highly-placed people—but also to obtain love, to reduce someone to silence, etc. The chapter contains several drawings and plans, in which astrological influences could be bound by figures of humans and animals, or by geometric designs. A sizeable passage is consecrated to the powers of different letters of the Arabic and Indian alphabets.[22] This chapter does not always permit a clear understanding of the role of *rîmiyâ*, for while in general it concerns earthly interactions, it also involves recourse to astrological forces.

A large part of this chapter is devoted to the use of magic by kings. The principal source in this domain are the teachings of a certain Hakîm Tumtum, the Indian. To this author, whose identity is quite likely completely imaginary, was attributed a series of opuscules on magic and alchemy.[23] Kâshifi makes much of him, and affirms that it is thanks to his teachings that the masters of this science have been able to render distinguished services to their kings. By way of example he cites the case of Mawlana 'Abd al-Latif Gilani who used invisible influences to enable Murshid Quli-Khan to rule over all the Qizilbash chiefs.[24] Combining the talismanic figures for Venus and Mars, Mawlana Diya' al-Din Kashani helped the vizir Agha Ja'far to exert influence over the king and his court.[25] Elsewhere, Kashifi relates that Mawlana 'Abd al-Karim Daylami magically protected Nizam al-Mulk from the aggressions of Hasan-i Sabbah.[26] In another passage, Kashifi describes how Mawlana 'Abd al-Samad Ardabili ensured victory for Shah Isma'il by providing him with a talismanic device which harnessed the power of the sun and included the greatest name of God, as this was

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[22] AQ, 129-49.

[23] See Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 4: 119; Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, 381, 298-99.

[24] AQ, 96.

[25] AQ, 110.

[26] AQ, 115.

transmitted by 'Ali b. Abi Talib.[27] But the person most frequently cited in this chapter is without a doubt Mawlânâ Bahâ' al-Dîn Muhammad (d. 791/1389), the eponymous founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order.[28] Thanks to his knowledge of Tumtum's book, he was able to create talismans for a variety of princes, and most notably, to give them victory over their enemies. In this connection, Kashifi proffers an original explanation of the sobriquet, "*naqsh-band*" which was attributed to Baha' al-Din: one who draws talismanic figures, or better, one who binds others by means of these figures. These stories provide an interesting perspective on the close relationship between Naqshbandi Sufi masters and contemporary rulers: these masters gave their sovereigns the support of their *baraka*, but in a very concrete way, by means of effective magical actions. Kâshifî seems to invite his readers to look at the history of medieval Islamic rulers from a new perspective. Incidentally, he notes that the Sufi masters mentioned were only repeating what Plato (sic) had done for Alexander the Great.[29]

Lîmiyâ draws on the authority of ancient Hellenic texts or those alien to Islam. We have already noted the importance of the Indian sage, Tumtum. Kâshifî also cites the *Mushaf Hirmis al-Harâmisa*. It is known that Hermes Trismegistus, often identified with Enoch and with the Koranic figure, Idrîs, plays an extremely important role in the literature on magic in Arabic.[30] This said, it is difficult to know precisely which of the works attributed to him corresponds to this *mushaf*. The same problem arises with the *Dawâlîs-i Iskandarânî*.[31] As for Abu Bakr ibn Washiyya's *Tamâthîl*, one might suppose that this refers to the famous

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[27] AQ, 120-21.

[28] AQ, 103, 108-110, 112-14, 116, 123-24, 126.

[29] AQ, 123.

[30] Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften* , 368-78.

[31] AQ, 3.

Kitâb shawq al-mustahâm, which contains magical alphabets and figures.[32] The *Hall al-mushkilât* is also mentioned, and could correspond to *Hall mushkilât shudhûr al-dhahab*, a commentary that Ibn Arfa' Ra's included in his own esoteric poem, *The Golden Glitter*; the latter, however, is devoted to alchemy and not to the science of talismans. Kashifi suggests that hese titles do not constitute his only sources,[33] and in fact he later cites Bûnî in his chapter on *lîmiyâ*, with reference to a practice aimed at "reducing (people) to silence" (*'aqd al-lisân*).[34]

Hîmiyâ is presented as the science of making use of the seven planets (*'ilm-i taskhîrât*) and astrological principles in order to assure the success of an enterprise in this world. By this means, one can subjugate genies, the *rûhâniyyât*, i.e., spirits of the dead, but undoubtedly also angelic or astral entities.[35] According to Kâshifi, it is possible to put planetary influences to work by following certain procedures, most notably those connected with the science of letters. Here, the discussion reverts to what was stated earlier about *lîmiyâ* with its use of graphic figures, especially seals (*khawâtim*). Since it also refers to invocations (*da'awât*) and fumigations, the specificity of *hîmiyâ* as an occult science is difficult to determine. On the subject of *hîmiyâ* there are references to judiciary astrology, most notably Fakhr al-dîn Râzî's famous *Sirr al-maktûm*.[36]

Kîmiyâ, which is directly concerned with alchemy, appears last in the *Asrâr-i Qâsimî*. The account begins with some clear definitions of the goal of this discipline, which is to transform base minerals until they reach the degree of silver and gold. The essential

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[32] It was translated by Joseph Hammer in 1804. See Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 4: 281-83; Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, 2-3 and 441.

[33] AQ, 3.

[34] AQ, 107.

[35] AQ, 149.

[36] Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften* , 388-90.

knowledge here is that of the spirits, mercury and sulphur, which give life to metallic bodies. Kashifi also describes the different phases of colors that occur throughout the work; however in doing so he uses a graphic code, a sort of secret alphabet, which reners the text opaque. Kâshifi's alchemy is a divine science, and there is no question of gaining access to it without an inspired guide.[37] However, for those who seek it through piety and continual prayer, guidance may manifest itself in an unforseen manner through visions or voices of supernatural origin. The alchemist is an individual apart, whose peculiar characteristic is to depend on no one, and to need nothing.[38] This chapter, which is very short compared with the others, seems to place alchemy at the summit of all the sciences by virtue of the spiritual dimension attached to it, a dimension which is not mentioned in connection with the others.

Alchemy is represented by a fairly large body of literary sources. In his introduction, Kâshifî states his having consulted excerpts from the works of Jâbir ibn Hayyan, and he cites first his *Book of Seventy-Seven*, probably a copyist's error, which conflated the title *Seventy* with the name of one of its chapters, *Book of Seven*.[39] His other sources are *Shudhûr al-dhahab* by Ibn Arfa' Ra's,[40] *'Ilm al-muktasab* by the abovementioned Sîmâwî / Irâqî, the work by Jalkadî (no title mentioned), the poems of Khâlid ibn Yazîd,[41] the work by Majrîtî (no title mentioned, but probably his *Rutbat al-hakîm*),[42] and the work of Tughrâ'î, the influence of whose *Mafâtîh al-rahma* is well- known.

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[37] AQ, 160.

[38] AQ, 162-63.

[39] Jâbir ibn Hayyân, *Dix traités d'alchimie*, trans. P. Lory (Paris: Sindbad, 1996), 62ff. and 227ff.

[40] Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften* , 231.

[41] See Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schriftums*, 4: 125-26; Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften* , 193-94.

[42] John Holmyard, "Maslama al-Majriti and the Rutbatu'l-hakîm," *Isis* 6 (1924).

Somewhat more surprising is the mention of the names of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) and his son, Sultan Valad.[43] Allusions to alchemy are present in many passages in Rumi's work, but it is a question of mystical alchemy, the elaboration of the Man of Truth. The mere mention of the names of these great mystics in connection with *kîmiyâ* underscores the eminently spiritual dimension that was conferred on it at the time of Kashifi's writing.

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Drawing some conclusions from the foregoing observations, we can state right away that Kâshifi principally does not speak as a practitioner of the different sciences he describes; rather his work is that of an editor who cites his sources. Nevertheless, he takes the doctrines represented by these sciences seriously. It is in this spirit that he announces from the outset that it is impossible to achieve success merely by reading works about these five sciences, and that it is imperative to have the help of an experienced master.

Kâshifi's account is, at least externally, fairly systematic, but its overall plan is somewhat artificial. Astrological information, for example, is found throughout the entire work,[44] to the point where the legitimacy of devoting a separate chapter to *hîmiyâ* becomes questionable. The link established with genies is shared by both *sîmiyâ* and *rîmiyâ*. The use of graphic figures, so central to *lîmiyâ*, is also included in *rîmiyâ*. This did not go unnoticed by the author himself, who admits that the sources he drew from often contained diverse disciplines: Abu 'Abd Allâh Maghribî's *Sihr al-'uyun*, which is cited on *rîmiyâ*, also contains information about *sîmiyâ*.[45] Râzî's *Sirr al-maktum* also deals with *lîmiyâ*; so does Jaldakî's work. In fact, it is the subject itself of the *Asrâr-i Qâsimî* that creates such instances of overlap. The differences between the different branches of magic are not very clearly defined

[43] AQ, 3.

[44] For example, the astral invocation in *sîmiyâ*--AQ, 47.

[45] AQ, 4.

in themselves. Basically, these are simply different aspects of a group of similar practices, each calling for a homogenous vision of the world. Astrology, as we have noted, plays a pivotal role. Since actions in the inferior worlds are ruled by the influx from the superior spheres, the essential task of magic is to manipulate them by means of various practices.

Kâshifi explains in his introduction that he wants above all to present a clear survey of magic, in which the different parts complement and relate to each other. Each chapter constitutes, in his words, "a garden filled with fresh flowers," and is divided into fundamentals (*asl*) in which the diverse 'technical' aspects are detailed in sections (*fasl*) themselves sometimes composed of several notes (*wasl*). These different parts are interconnected, at least according to the work's introduction;[46] that is to say, it is easy to identify and place them in relationship to each other. The subject that Kâshifi proposes to elucidate is itself so dense and complex that, in comparison with other writings on magic (for example, Bûnî's *Shams al-ma'ârif*), the *Asrâr-i Qâsimî* may be considered a masterpiece of clarity.

What is the meaning of this work in the context of Kâshifi's religious thought? Let us first note that his *Asrâr-i Qâsimî* is not an isolated composition in his oeuvre; he also wrote other treatises on letter symbolism, astrology and alchemy.[47] The general tone of the work indicates that, for Kâshifi, all of these disciplines actually constitute sciences, which are founded on stable laws, and which demand rigorous execution. He seems to authorize the recourse to spirits. This was by no means accepted within Islamic judicial and theological thought, and the debate on the subject was at times virulent. It may be recalled that Fakhr al-dîn Râzî in particular contributed a great deal to extend the debate. But alongside the "official" academic debate, there has always been an effective practice, especially at the royal

[46] AQ, 5.

[47] Gholam Hosein Yousofi, "Kashifi," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 4: 733.

courts and with the complicity of educated men, where the "occult" sciences were not only authorized, but openly practiced.[48] This is not brought into question by Kâshifi, who goes so far as to describe the rituals addressed to the heavenly bodies as complex, but real operations.[49] The principal difficulty, according to Kashifi, seems to be a "technical" one--that the practice of these different sciences is in vain without recourse to an experienced and recognized master.[50] In addition, he warns that certain operations, if taken lightly, may prove to be dangerous for those who attempt to put them into action, since anyone may draw down considerable powers without having mastered the laws that regulate them.

The point to bear in mind with regard to Kâshifi's discussion and the sources he used, is the problem of a specifically "Islamic" magic. The occult sciences derived primarily from a pre-Islamic, pagan substratum, as evidenced by the pseudegraphical literature attributed to Hermes, Plato etc., or the works of a pseudo-Majritî or an Ibn Wahshiyya. Throughout the centuries, certain practitioners took great pains to progressively Islamize these concepts and practices. For example, Bûnî sought in every way possible to produce magical practices that were grounded in the Koran, the Divine Names, the letters making up this or that Koranic verse, etc. This is not, however, the concern of Kâshifi. The references to ancient writings do not seem to represent a problem for him. In fact, he avoids implicating the Koran, the Divine Names or other specifically Islamic elements, as if he were seeking consciously not to mix religious or mystical thought with the magical practices he describes, which are for the most part profane. More fundamentally, the reader feels that for him, the practice of magic puts into action those natural laws which do not imply religious thought any more than does medicine or pharmacology. The magic is basically utilitarian, and if it leads to or depends

[48] A useful assessment is found in G. Saliba, "The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society," *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 44 (1993).

[49] AQ, 47.

[50] AQ, 4.

upon wisdom, it does so in the same way as other activities which have a role in the great cosmos created by God.