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Amulets and Talismans in the Earliest Works of the *Corpus Bunianum*

Jean-Charles Coulon

The thirteenth-century Sufi *shaykh* al-Būnī is the putative author of an important corpus dealing with occult sciences in the Islamicate world, known in Western scholarship as the *corpus bunianum*.^{*} The best-known of these magical texts attributed to him is *The Great Sun of Knowledge* (*Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā*), and another of the more famous works in this corpus is the *Source of the Foundations of Wisdom* (*Manba'usūl al-ḥikma*), a compilation of four epistles. It has now become clear, however, that the works that al-Būnī actually authored have more to do in nature with Sufi theory and practice rather than strictly magical purposes. His limited corpus nevertheless became the basis of an important magical tradition especially through the extensive commentaries by later esoterists. While al-Būnī's earliest books were seminal in feeding the later magical tradition, the information they contain about amulets and talismans per se, is in fact limited. In this paper, I will analyse the vocabulary, processes and figures related to amulets and talismans in the ancient core of the *corpus bunianum*.

1 Al-Būnī, the Putative Key-Author for the Analysis of Islamic Amulets and Talismans

Al-Būnī (d. 622/1225 or 630/1232) holds a special place in the understanding of magical practices in the Islamicate world, both medieval and contemporary. During the colonial period, Orientalist scholars and colonial authorities (administrative and military) produced numerous discussions of amulets and talismans that they encountered in local museum collections or acquired during their missions. In the context of colonialist and Orientalist works, the first studies dealing with al-Būnī did not demonstrate any historical perspective.

* I am very grateful to Korshi Dosoo and the editors of the volume for their comments and remarks to improve this paper. All errors are my own.

To the contrary, al-Būnī was considered as the actual author of the *Shams al-ma'ārif*, in accordance with the Islamic tradition, and the starting point of Islamic talismanic tradition. The colonial administrator Edmond Doutté,¹ for example, connected Islamic talismans and magical practices to the *Shams al-ma'ārif*, Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Tilimsānī's (d. 930/1524) *Shumūs al-anwār*, and al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) *Kitāb al-Raḥma fī al-ṭibb wa-l-ḥikma*.² Thus, he introduced these texts to European Orientalist scholarship, with lasting consequences. Later, particular attention was brought to the problem of magic squares, especially in relation to apocryphal texts circulating under al-Būnī's name.³

The works of Tawfik Canaan also drew attention to al-Būnī. Canaan was a Palestinian physician in the Ottoman army, and a skilled Orientalist involved in Orientalist and local interests in preserving "traditional" aspects of Palestinian culture.⁴ Hence, he wanted to preserve Palestinian traditions and popular culture. He wrote a number of papers dealing with such traditions. At the same time, he gathered a collection of artefacts, among which were several talismanic bowls. He analysed these "fear cups" in two papers, and went on to produce an influential study entitled "The decipherment of Arabic talismans".⁵ In this article, he supported his decipherment with the *Shams al-ma'ārif* and the *Manba' uṣūl al-ḥikma*, two works falsely attributed to al-Būnī also by Canaan.

Curiosity about al-Būnī has generally been driven by the desire to understand the Islamic talismanic tradition as a way to decipher talismans,⁶ as well

1 For whom see Alain Messaoudi, "Carra de Vaux," in *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, ed. François Pouillon (Paris: IISMM and Kharthala, 2008), 310–312.

2 Edmond Doutté, *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord* (Alger: Typographie Adolphe Jourdan, 1909).

3 Wilhelm Ahrens, "Studien über die "magischen Quadrate" der Araber," *Der Islam* 7 (1917): 186–250; and Wilhelm Ahrens, "Die "magischen Quadrate" al-Būnīs," *Der Islam* 12 (1922): 157–177; Bernard Carra de Vaux, "Une solution arabe au problème des carrés magiques," *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 1 (1948): 206–212.

4 Marcela Probert, "Exploring the Life of Amulets in Palestine. From Healing and Protective Remedies to the the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2021).

5 For the bowls, see Tawfik Canaan, "Ṭāsīt er-radḡfeh (fear cup)," *Journal of Palestine Oriental Studies* 3 (1923): 122–131; Tawfik Canaan, "Arabic Magic Bowls," *Journal of Palestine Oriental Studies* 16 (1936): 79–127. For talismans, see Tawfik Canaan, "The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans," *Berytus* 4 (1937): 69–110 and 5 (1938): 141–151. Reprinted in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate and Variorum, 2004), 125–177.

6 Georges Chehata Anawati, "Trois talismans musulmans en arabe provenant du Mali (marché de Mopti)," *Annales islamologiques* 11 (1972): 287–339; Constant Hamès, "Le Coran talismanique, De l'Arabie des origines à l'Afrique occidentale contemporaine, Délimitation et inventaire des textes et des procédés linguistiques utilisés," in *Religion et pratiques de puis-*

as what was considered as the “margins” of Muslim religious practices, especially “practical” *Ṣūfism*.⁷

However, all these works are based upon the *corpus bunianum*,⁸ a theme-based collection supposedly produced by one author, in this case al-Būnī. In fact, recent research has pointed out that both *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* and *Manba' uṣūl al-ḥikma* are later works falsely attributed to al-Būnī.⁹ Even the “short version” of the *Shams al-ma'ārif* is an apocryphal compilation.

On the other hand, we must add that astral and natural magic works of the ninth-tenth centuries were not taken in account for the decipherment of Islamic amulets and talismans. Indeed, the most famous book in this tradition, Maslama al-Qurṭubī's (d. 353/964) *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*,¹⁰ contains a lot of instructions for the making of talismans or magical objects (*ṭilasm*, *nīranj*, *nushra*, etc.), and introduces itself as a book on magic (*siḥr*). However, despite its firmly established reputation, it was not considered as a valuable source to analyse Islamic amulets and talismans. The obvious reason is that the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* does not contain a lot of instructions based upon the Arabic alphabet, the divine names, the Qur'anic verses or the magic squares.

sance, ed. Alain de Surgy (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 129–160; Constant Hamès, “Taktub ou la magie de l'écriture islamique. Textes soninké à usage magique,” *Arabica* 34, no. 3 (1987): 305–325; Constant Hamès, “Entre recette magique et prière islamique,” *Fétiches II. Puissance des objets, charme des mots, Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire* 12 (1993): 187–223; Constant Hamès, “L'usage talismanique du Coran,” *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 218, no. 1 (2001): 83–95; Constant Hamès, “Problématiques de la magie-sorcellerie en islam et perspectives africaines,” *Cahiers d'études africaines* 189–190 (2008): 81–99; Karl R. Schaefer, *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets in American and European Libraries and Museums* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 19.

7 Pierre Lory, “Magie et religion dans l'oeuvre de Muhiy al-Dīn al-Būnī,” *Horizons maghrébains* 7–8 (1986): 4–15; Pierre Lory, “La magie des lettres dans le *Ṣams al-ma'ārif* d'al-Būnī,” *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 39–40 (1987–1988): 97–111.

8 On this concept, see Jan Just Witkam, “Gazing at the Sun: Remarks on the Egyptian Magician al-Būnī and His Work,” in *O Ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture in Honour of Remke Kruk*, eds. Jan P. Hogendijk and Arnoud Vrolijk (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183–199.

9 See Jean-Charles Coulon, “La magie islamique et le *corpus bunianum* au Moyen Âge” (PhD diss. Université de Paris IV Sorbonne, 2013): vol. 1, 479–499, 544–552 and 552–564; Jean-Charles Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam au Moyen Âge* (Paris: CTHS, 2017), 219–229; Noah Gardiner, “Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission, and Reception of the Major Works of Aḥmad al-Būnī,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 12 (2012): 81–143.

10 On the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, see, among many others, Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 143–169; and Liana Saif, “From *Gāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Ṣams al-ma'ārif*: Ways of Knowing and Paths of Power in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica* 64, no. 3–4 (2017): 297–345.

To the contrary, in the *corpus bunianum*, we can find that the earliest works by al-Būnī seem to ignore the magical objects terminology that can be found in the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, although later works in the same corpus in the 16th century seem to rehabilitate these words. Hence, we might ask which elements of the Islamic talismanic tradition can be truly related to al-Būnī. Do al-Būnī's own genuine works deal with amulets and talismans, or is this topic a later development in the apocryphal *corpus bunianum* works?

2 A Brief History of the *Corpus Bunianum*

First of all, we need to introduce the outlines of the constitution of the *corpus bunianum*.¹¹ Who was al-Būnī? Al-Būnī was a ṣūfī master. During the Mamluk and Ottoman era, hagiographical notices described him as “the source (*zamzam*) of secrets, the mine of lights, the master of miracles, glorious stations,” and he is known as one whose prayers are granted (*mujāb al-da'awāt*).¹² He was probably born in Annaba (Būna in the Middle Ages, hence his *nisba* al-Būnī, it is located in Algeria). He was instructed in the Qur'anic recitation, Mālikī fiqh and other sciences in Tūnis where his ṣūfī master 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Mahdawī (d. 621/1224) lived. He then went on to al-Andalus where he met scholars such as the theologian and *adīb* Abū al-Qāsim al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185), the historian and traditionalist Abū al-Qāsim b. Bashkuwāl (d. 578/1183) and the ṣūfī master Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Ja'far al-Khazrajī al-Sabtī (d. 601/1205).

11 For this presentation of al-Būnī, I have summarized the conclusions of the work of Noah Gardiner and myself: Noah Gardiner, “Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission, and Reception of the Major Works of Aḥmad al-Būnī,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 12 (2012): 81–143 and Noah Gardiner, “Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī's Works,” *Arabica* 64, no. 3–4 (2017): 405–441; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 205–232; Coulon, “La magie islamique,” 1, 447–565. In those publications, extensive references can be found for the biographical information provided here.

12 The quotation is from 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621; *al-Kawākib al-durrīyya fī tarājim al-sāda al-ṣūfīyya* [= *Ṭabaqāt al-Munāwī al-kubrā*], ed. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṣāliḥ Ḥamdān [Le Caire: al-Maktaba al-azhariyya li-l-turāth, 1994], vol. 2, 35–38). The first hagiographical notice known about al-Būnī is from the Ottoman scholar 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), a prolific commentator of al-Būnī's work and a major actor in the spread of al-Būnī's works in the Ottoman high society and sultanian court: see his *Shams al-āfāq* (MS Paris, BnF, ARABE 2689), fol. 24^b–26^a. See also Jean-Charles Coulon, “Building al-Būnī's Legend: The Figure of al-Būnī through 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī's *Shams al-āfāq*,” *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 5 (2016) 1–26; Noah Gardiner, “The Occultist Encyclopedism of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 20 (2017): 3–38.

Afterwards he travelled to Alexandria, where he met Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Salafī (d. 576/1180) and the jurist Abū al-Ṭāhir Ismāʿīl b. ʿAwf al-Zuhrī al-Mālikī (d. 581/1185).

He settled in Cairo in the time of the last Fatimid caliph, al-ʿĀḍid li-Dīn Allāh (r. 555/1160–567/1171), performed the hajj, and then travelled through Jerusalem, Damascus, where he met Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 571/1176), Wāsiṭ, and Baghdad, where he interacted with Abū al-Faraj b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200). He returned to Cairo, and from there perhaps went to Tūnis, where he lived until his death. The end of his life remains unclear. We have traces of his presence in Cairo until 622/1225. Ḥājjī Khalīfa indicates that he died in 622/1225 or 630/1232, but does not give the place where he died.

Noah Gardiner and I have analysed a large number of manuscripts in our doctoral theses, and have pointed out several stages in the composition of the *corpus bunianum*. A number of works can be attributed with certainty to the authorship of al-Būnī, according to a cluster of indications. These form the historical core of the *corpus*. They are: a cosmological work and esoteric commentary of the Arabic alphabet entitled *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt fī al-ḥurūf al-ʿuluwiyyāt* (*The Subtleties of the Signs: On the Celestial Letters*);¹³ an esoteric commentary of the divine names entitled *ʿAlam al-hudā wa-asrār al-ihtidāʾ fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (*The Banner of Guidance and the Secrets of the Right Path: Commentary on the Beautiful Names of God*); and two manuals of ṣūfī spiritual development and exercises entitled *Mawāqif al-ghāyāt fī asrār al-riyādāt* (*The Stations of the Goals: On the Secrets of the Exercises*) and *Hidāyat al-qāsidīn wa-nihāyat al-wāsilīn* (*The Guidance of the Candidates and the End of the Arrivals*). None of those texts can be considered to have a magical content, except a few passages of *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* dealing with the ways to use the occult properties of Arabic letters.

I also include in the historical core another famous treatise entitled *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya fī al-awrād al-rabbāniyya* (*The Luminous Light: The Orisons of the Lord*).¹⁴ Noah Gardiner considers this work to fall outside this core, but he admits that it is an ancient work in the *corpus* and suggests that it could be the work of one of al-Būnī's disciples, or even might be by al-Būnī himself.¹⁵

13 al-Būnī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, MS Paris, BnF, ARABE 2637 (compared to MS Paris, BnF, ARABE 2658).

14 al-Būnī, *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya fī al-awrād al-rabbāniyya*, Damascus, BnA, 3679 and 18554; Paris, BnF, ARABE 1225 and ARABE 1226; Princeton, Princeton University Library, 1895, fol. 1^b–48^b; Dublin, Chester Beatty, 4284; Istanbul, Aya Sofya, 1870, fol. 43^a–84^a and Sehīd Ali Pasa, 2764.

15 Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge?" 96. In this page, Noah Gardiner considered that three major Būnian works fall outside the core: *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya fī al-awrād al-rabbāniyya*; *Tartīb al-daʿawāt fī taḥṣīṣ al-awqāt ʿalā ḥtilāf al-irādāt*, and *Qabs al-iqtidāʾ ilā wafq al-saʿāda*

On the other hand, al-Būnī often cites his own works in the four texts mentioned above, but in *al-Lum'a al-nūrāniyya* there is no mention of al-Būnī's other works. This casts doubt upon the authenticity of this work, but it is in my opinion not sufficient at this stage to prove that it was not written by al-Būnī. Whatever its authorship, *al-Lum'a al-nūrāniyya* is certainly among the oldest works of the *corpus bunianum*.

The second work whose relationship to the historical core is unclear is *Shams al-ma'ārif wa-laṭā'if al-'awārif*. Indeed, in my doctoral thesis, I demonstrated that the text usually known under its shorter title, *Shams al-ma'ārif*, and often considered as authentically composed by al-Būnī does in fact not belong to the historical core. The text contains many anachronisms.¹⁶ However, the four above mentioned works do quote a book entitled *Shams al-ma'ārif*, which makes it likely that al-Būnī did indeed write a text with that title. The solution to this apparent contradiction came with the discovery of a unique manuscript in the National Library of Damascus whose title is *Shams al-ma'ārif*.¹⁷ The content of this work is totally different from that which was previously identified by that title. The Damascus manuscript is a cosmological Ṣūfī work and all quotations of the *Shams al-ma'ārif* in the four works authored by al-Būnī previously mentioned perfectly match the content of this text. Another point that supports al-Būnī as the author of this text is that he calls 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Mahdawī his master—indeed al-Mahdawī was al-Būnī's teacher.¹⁸ Finally, the content and style of the text perfectly match the themes and style of the historical core of al-Būnī's oeuvre. It was therefore possible to finally reject the attribution to al-Būnī of the magical *Shams al-ma'ārif*, and affirm that the Ṣūfī cosmological text of the same name may be the one authored by al-Būnī.

The next major step in the composition of the *corpus bunianum* and the development of al-Būnī's reputation was due to an Ottoman scholar and *adīb* named 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454). This author bears primary responsibility for al-Būnī's fame in the Ottoman era. He wrote commentaries

wa-najm al-ihtidā'. I defended the same idea concerning *Tartīb al-da'awāt fi taḥṣīṣ al-awqāt 'alā ihtilāf al-irādāt* and *Qabs al-iqtidā' ilā waḥq al-sa'āda wa-najm al-ihtidā'* based upon philological arguments and a comparison with the other Būnian works, however, although we cannot definitely prove that *al-Lum'a al-nūrāniyya* is a genuine work by al-Būnī, I also think that there is not enough convincing evidence at this stage to consider this work out of the core. See Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 451–461; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 221.

16 About these anachronisms, see Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 482–483; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 227–229; Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge?" 102–103.

17 About this manuscript and hypothetically authentic version, see Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 484–491; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 227–229.

18 Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 488; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam*, 227–228.

on the works of al-Būnī, adding much information on talismanic uses and recipes to al-Būnī's original treatises in the process. For instance, his *Rashḥ adhwāq al-ḥikma al-rabbaniyya* written in 815/1413 is an extensive commentary on *al-Lum'a al-nūrāniyya*, in which he included instructions for the creation of amulets in the addenda.

Finally, the last major step in the development of the *corpus bunianum* is the composition of the *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* (*The Great Sun of Knowledge*). Indeed, this apocryphal huge compilation, based upon some authentic works by al-Būnī, some apocryphal works attributed to him—particularly the *Shams al-ma'ārif*—and some of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Biṣṭāmī's works, has been wide spread in the Ottoman high society. Lithographical reproductions also contributed to its success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* is a magical encyclopaedia, containing a few hundred recipes and formulas. Although this work contains a lot of anachronisms with regard to al-Būnī's days, it has been considered as al-Būnī's major work.

In his authentic works, al-Būnī himself never used terms such as *ṭilasm*,¹⁹ *nushra*, *tamīma*,²⁰ *ḥijāb*,²¹ or other words with similar meanings. However, he did describe practices that could subsequently be used in the confection of amulets and talismans. This is what I would like to introduce now.

3 Amulets and Talismans in *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*

Laṭā'if al-ishārāt is a ṣūfī cosmological work. Indeed, the first part of this treatise deals with cosmology and God's creation of the world. The second part is an esoteric commentary on the Arabic letters. In light of this text, it is not surprising that later scholars considered al-Būnī as the master of the science of letters and magic squares (*ilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-awfāq*). The author of the magical *Shams al-ma'ārif* indeed copied a number of sections from the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*.

19 The word *ṭilasm*, from the Greek *telesma*, was used in the ninth and tenth centuries mainly for talismans referring to Greek authorities. A lot of monumental buildings of the Antiquity were depicted as ancient talismans settled to protect countries and cities. However, the term is used in the *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* for any kind of written talisman. See for example Coulon, *La Magie*, 92–98.

20 *Nushra* and *tamīma* are two words often used for anteislamic amulets. We can find these terms in later Arabic literature for protective objects. See for example Coulon, *La Magie*, 48–51.

21 This latter word appears in al-Būnī's works, but exclusively in a ṣūfī meaning, i.e. a veil that the ṣūfī path enables to raise to see the world as it is. To the contrary, the term *ḥijāb* is used in the *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* as a synonym of protective talisman. Some later talismans called *ḥijāb* refer to al-Būnī although his authentic works do not use the word in this meaning.



FIGURE 9.1 The hierarchy of the spheres. MS Paris, BULAC, ARA.572, fol. 37^b
© BULAC

In the *Latā'if*, al-Būnī sketched out creation in a cosmological perspective, and for this reason it contains many schematic drawings, but these must not be confused with magical drawings *per se*. Indeed, some of these drawings can be both considered as a representation of a kind of knowledge and magical item as well, but a lot of them are only added for a mnemonic purpose or to

help the reader to figure organized data.²² For example, the following diagram represents the hierarchy of the spheres and introduces the creation.

This image is, however, taken from a late and anonymous manuscript on occult sciences partly based upon some chapters of the *Shams al-ma'arif* and now kept in the collections of the BULAC (Bibliothèque des Langues et Civilisations).²³ This diagram representing the cosmos which originally appeared in al-Būnī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, became so popular that it was subsequently taken up by the compiler of *Shams al-ma'arif* and many other writers.

In fact, the greater part of the *Laṭā'if* deals with ṣūfī cosmological theory. Before we get into the text itself, it should be reiterated that we do not find references to words describing amulets or talismans such as *nushra*, *tamūma*, *ṭilasm*, *ḥirz*, *ḥijāb*, etc. in the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*. Nevertheless, the use of such objects can well be deduced from the text, but al-Būnī did not use these words himself.

There are, however, some instructions for certain praxes, as well as allusions and references to the utilisation of written elements, especially Arabic letters and magic squares, and, although al-Būnī was celebrated at his time as a ṣūfī master, these occult elements were the basis of commentaries and magic oriented additions and development, which finally made al-Būnī more famous as a “theurgist” than a ṣūfī master. Indeed, al-Būnī describes the esoteric properties (*khawāṣṣ*) of the letters. The instructions to use the properties for a material gain usually indicate that the letter has to be written on a specific material (parchment, paper, etc.), sometimes with a specific ink (rosewater, orange blossom water, etc.), in specific conditions to produce a specific effect (*taṭhīr*). Al-Būnī developed the idea that each letter has a shape (*shakl*, pl. *ashkāl*) which synthesises its occult properties and esoteric meaning. These *ashkāl* are mainly magic squares and circles.

For example, in the section on the letter *ḥā'*, we can read:

And for this reason, he who writes this letter on a seal eight times with the four names mentioned above is preserved by God's praise against all diseases. If he puts it in water and gives it to sick people to drink, they

22 We developed this aspect in Jean-Charles Coulon, “Écrire et figurer le cosmos: l'emploi des figures dans les manuscrits de sciences occultes islamiques attribués à al-Būnī (m. 1225),” in *La plume et le calame entre Orient et Occident, les métiers de l'écrit à la marge*, eds. Isabelle Bretthauer, Anna Caiozzo, and François Rivière (Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2020): 399–421.

23 This diagram can be found in a lot of manuscripts. We chose this one particularly because the BULAC freely and kindly allows the use of its manuscripts for scholarly publication purposes.

will experience relief. If they continue to drink this water and to refresh themselves with it, it will cure all sickness. It is also beneficial for wrathful men among those who suffer from yellow bile. He who wears this seal, if he lives a long life, he will not be often confused. Among its properties (are that) it removes the inclination for sexual intercourse. If one is a young man, it is better to hide this seal and not to wear it on Saturday nor on Monday, but one may wear it on any other day. [This seal] ensures that the one who holds it will not experience thirst and be able to drink water copiously. If it is suspended in a garden, it makes the fruit grow and flourish, if God—exalted be He!—so wishes.²⁴

For this letter, an offensive utilisation exists, but it is not possible to mention it here. We have introduced the religious benefits leading to God—exalted be He!—by the secret of the Oneness. He who writes it on a parchment, when the moon is in the rays [of the sun] in the hour of Mercury, and who is summoned by a sultan or a tyrant, God makes their inner thoughts removed from mentioning him and He distracts them from him with another. He [must] wear it directly on his bare head and cover his head over this [object], and leave it until he is no longer afraid. This frees prisoners.

He who writes it with *sūrat al-Mulk* in a cup and drinks [water poured in it] after an eight days' fasting, God improves his memory and his ability to concentrate to complete matters. He preserves him from anything that harms him—I mean the complete figure that will follow—if God—exalted be He!—wants.

In the same way, he who engraves in a circle (*mustadīr*) [made] of silver eight [times the letter] *ḥā'* and the four names and suspends it upon his heart and firmly believes in God cools his heart for worldly desire or what is hidden in his will, and [if he does] this in the hour of the moon while the moon is in an auspicious conjunction (*fī al-su'ūd*), or in the hour of Venus while the moon is in an auspicious conjunction (*mas'ūd*), and suspends it while he is pure, fasting and remembering God—exalted be He!—and does not approach it when he is [already] close: if he does [all of] this, God removes the fear and the terror from his heart of hearts. This may also be a protection (litt. "cause") against the loss of understanding from his heart and the tyranny of forgetting; consider it carefully. This is its drawn and marked figure:²⁵

24 This entire paragraph was reproduced by al-Nuwayrī in his *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Cairo: Maṭba'at dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1937, (vol. 12, 226).

25 Coulon, "La magie islamique," vol. 4, 123–124; fol. 39^b–40^a.

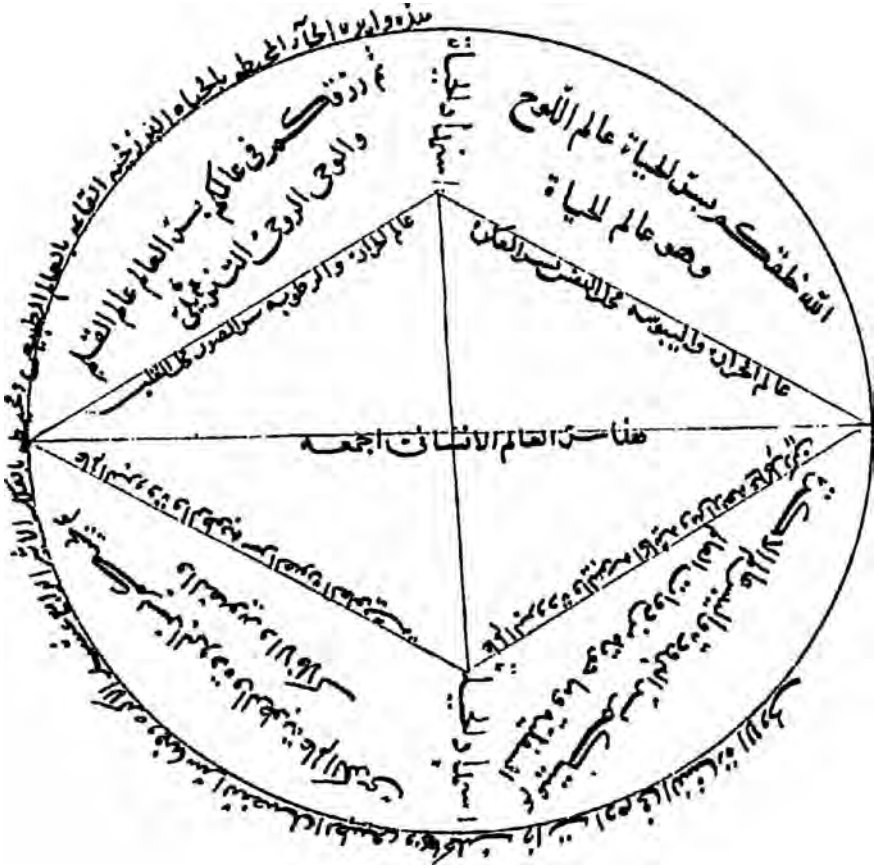


FIGURE 9.2 The circle of the letter *hāʾ*. Adapted from MS Paris, BnF, Arabe 2637, fol. 40^a

The figure consists of a lozenge in a circle accompanied by writing. This figure is not only a cosmological drawing but a talismanic figure that can be used in the creation of talismans. The cosmological meaning of the figure is evident in the writing: the sentence surrounding the circle states that “this is the circle (*dāʾira*) of the *hāʾ* which surrounds the isthmus of life (*al-ḥayāt al-barzakhiyya*) which binds the natural world and which surrounds the fourth sphere of the ether from the [celestial] Globe. In [this circle] is the secret of the natural dissecting (*al-taḥṣīl al-ṭabīʿī*). The essence of Ādam was completed by [this circle] in the first growth.” This sentence expresses the esoteric meanings of the letter *hāʾ*, which is supposed to refer to life (*ḥayāt*) since it is the first letter of this word in Arabic. The circle is then divided in four parts by the diagonals of the lozenge. The four parts of the circle contain four sentences dealing with the successive steps of the Creation, and the four parts of the lozenge contain four

sentences, each associated with the Aristotelian natural properties. Thus, the four sentences of the circle explain that “God created you by the secret of life in the world of the Tablet, which is the world of life,” that “He then placed you in your world through the descent of the secret of science and spiritual inspiration into the World of the Pen (*‘ālam al-qalam wa-l-wahy al-rūḥī*),” that “He then makes you live by the secret of the cold and the moist in the World of the Throne (*‘ālam al-kursī*), the Representation (*al-taṣwīr*) and the Spheres (*al-aflāk*),” and finally that “He then makes you die by the secret of the cold and the dry in the world of the lower globe and the essences of the world which surround it.” The four sentences of the lozenge explain that they represent “the world of the hot and the dry, which is the place of the soul (*maḥall al-naḥs*) by the secret of the thought (*sirr al-fikra*),” “the world of the hot and the moist, secret of the representations (*sirr al-ṣuwar*), place of the heart (*maḥall al-qalb*),” “the world of the cold and the moist, secret of the celestial representation (*al-ṣūra al-‘uluwiyya*),” and “the world of the cold and the dry of the *ḥā’*, which are four for each essence (*rukʿn*).” The sentences in the diagonals are “This is the secret of the whole human world” and “asking help for life (*istimdād al-ḥayāt*).” Therefore, each quarter of the figure corresponds both to a stage of the Creation and a humour. It should be noted that the numerical equivalent of the letter *ḥā’* is eight, and the lozenge divides the circle in eight parts.

This kind of circle-shaped figure is common in the *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*. However, the second important kind of talismanic figure in this treatise is the magical square (*wafq*, pl. *awfāq*).

Here is an example of the four-based magic square, as introduced by al-Būnī:

He who makes a table of four by four squares and puts in it numerical relation (*nisba ‘adadiyya*), must do it on a Monday, which is the birthday of the Prophet, the day of his mission and the day of his death. Know that the letters are efficient by their own properties: no particular moment is required, it is a choice to be made by the one who desires it. The numbers are efficient by nature: they depend on the auspicious celestial moments by God’s wisdom, the One who does what He wants. Do it when the Moon is in exaltation, without any evil influence, during the hour of the Moon. Write it after achieving ritual purity through ablutions using the Throne Verse (Q: 2:255), and [the verse] “Say: He is God, the One” (Q112:1) a hundred times on a blank/pure parchment. God will allow its wearer memory, understanding and access to wisdom, He will increase his power over the lower world in its entirety, he will free the prisoners, defeat the enemy in any controversy, and so many things that it is not possible to describe them. Here is the figure:

1	8	11	14
12	13	2	7
6	3	16	9
15	10	5	4

As for the secret of this letter-square, it too is wonderful. Put the letters instead of the numbers and perform this operation after two weeks of fasting. During this period of fasting, you must eat only bread, stay pure and invoke God. You should take a moon-plate (i.e. a plate made of silver) and engrave on it the above-mentioned numbers (*sic*) and face the *qibla*. Do this on Thursday during the hour of Jupiter. The moon must be in conjunction with the Sun, and Jupiter and the Gemini should be in the ascendant. You must burn mastic and white aloe each Thursday. God will make the one who wears the seal love what concerns religion, God will make easy for him acts of obedience [to God], and He will give him the power over “the causes” (*fī al-asbāb*).²⁶ God will bless anything he attempts. He who writes it on a blank paper at the same time and wears it in the seam of his coat will be safe, with God’s power, against thieves and all appalling things. Take care not to put it in any impurity or to put it in a dirty place. Here it is. Consider it carefully. This is the first product of the secrets of the even numbers:²⁷

A	Ḥ	Y.Ā	Y.D
Y.B	Y.J	B	Ḍ
W	J	Y.W	Ṭ
Y.H	Y	H	D

²⁶ That is, the principles of causation which will enable him to achieve his desired results.

²⁷ Coulon, “La magie islamique,” 1, 962–964; 4, 81–82; *Latā’if al-ishārāt*, fol. 14^a–15^a.

The compiler of the *Shams al-ma'ārif* borrowed this introduction to the four by four magic square, which led to its spread in magical treatises.²⁸ We also find in the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*:

- two 3×3 magic squares (Coulon, “La magie islamique,” 4, 85; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 17^a; and Coulon, 4, 174; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 62^a),
- another 4×4 square (Coulon, 4, 149; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 53^{a-b}),
- a 5×5 square (Coulon, 4, 119–120; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 37^a–38^a),
- two 6×6 squares (Coulon, 4, 155–156; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 55^a; and Coulon, 4, 172; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 61^a–61^b),
- a 7×7 square (Coulon, 4, 170; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 60^a–60^b),
- two 8×8 squares (Coulon, 4, 83–85; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 15^b–16^b; and Coulon, 4, 112–113; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 32^b–33^b),
- a 9×9 square (Coulon, 4, 144; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 50^b–51^a),
- a 10×10 square (Coulon, 4, 133–134; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 44^b–45^a),
- an 11×11 square (Coulon, 4, 175–176; *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, fol. 63^a).

This list clearly shows that magic squares are not peripheral in al-Būnī's work. But they are not the primary subject itself, rather they are used as a seal, i.e. as a way to represent the esoteric meaning and properties of a letter (or number) although it also makes it inunderstandable for a non-initiated individual.

What was the place of the magic square during al-Būnī's era? The most famous magic square was obviously the three by three magic square. This probably originated from China, where it was known as the *Lo-Shu*.²⁹ The first mention of this magic square in an Arabic text is in 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's (fl. 9th century) *Firdaws al-ḥikma*. This physician prescribed a recipe based upon the properties of the three by three magic square to help women in labour. A similar use with slightly different recipes can be found in (pseudo-)Jābir b. Ḥayyān's *Kitāb al-Mawāzīn al-ṣaghīr* (probably dating to the fourth/tenth century), in the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (fl. 4th/10th century) and in Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. Mathematicians also wrote treatises exclusively devoted to the mathematical aspects of magic squares; these include Abū al-Wafā' al-Buzjānī (d. 997–998), 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Anṭākī (d. 987) and Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan b. al-Haytham (d. 1041).³⁰ However, there is another scholar who might have

28 Coulon, “La magie islamique,” 2, 180–187.

29 Schuyler Cammann, “The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion,” *History of Religions* 1 (1961): 37–80; Schuyler Cammann, “Old Chinese Magic Squares,” *Sinologica* 7 (1962): 14–53; Schuyler Cammann, “Islamic and Indian Magic Squares,” *History of Religions* 8, no. 3–4 (1969): 180–209, 271–299.

30 All of these authors are introduced in Jacques Sesiano, *Les carrés magiques dans les pays islamiques* (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2004), 10–12.

had some influence in the development of the esoteric properties of the magic squares, namely Abū Ishāq al-Zarqālī (d. 493/1100). In his treatise, he associated a planet with each magic square.³¹ Al-Zarqālī's treatise was well-known in al-Andalus, and so one might postulate that al-Būnī could have known this text and used it.³²

4 Amulets and Talismans in *al-Lum'ā al-Nūrāniyya*

Al-Lum'ā al-nūrāniyya was one of al-Būnī's most widely-known works. Many commentaries and addenda were written on it during the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period, and these added many additional magical elements. However, originally the work was a kind of book of prayers with a section entitled *al-Anmāṭ*, the purpose of which was to facilitate the learning of the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God. These *Anmāṭ* were so famous that Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb (d. 776-1375) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 809/1406) considered them as a separate treaty.³³ After the *Anmāṭ*, the next section concerned the invocations of the different thirds of the nights, and the next the prayers that one could perform during the Night of Destiny (*laylat al-qadr*) or the Day of *ʿArafā*.³⁴ The last part discussed the composition of magic squares.

31 Sesiano, *Les carrés magique*, 14; Marcè and Rosa Comes, "Los cuadrados mágicos matemáticos en al-Andalus: El tratado de Azarquiel," *Al-Qanṭara* 30, no. 1 (2009): 137-169.

32 Since the writing of this paper, a major contribution on the history of magic squares has been published and must be pointed out here, as it renewed our knowledge of the magic squares in the first centuries of Islam: Bink Hallum, "New Light on Early Arabic Awfāq Literature," in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, eds Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, and Farouk Yahya (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020): 57-161.

33 Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Ḥaṭīb, *Rawḍat al-ta'rīf bi-l-ḥubb al-sharīf*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad 'Aṭā' (Cairo: Dār al-fikr al-'arabī, n.d.): 330-331; Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifā' al-sā'il li-tahdhīb al-masā'il*, ed. Muḥammad b. Tāwīt al-Ṭanjī (Istanbul: Osman Yalçın matbaası, 1957): 67-68; *La voie et la loi*, French transl. René Pérez (Paris: Actes Sud, 2010): 190-191; and Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Ḥaldūn*, ed. Étienne Marc Quatremère (Paris: B. Duprat, 1858): 3, 142; *Les prolégomènes*, French transl. William Mac Guckin De Slane (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1863-1868): 3, 194; *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, English transl. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958): 3, 177.

34 *Laylat al-qadr* is the 27th night of the month of Ramaḍān. In the Qur'an, *laylat al-qadr* is depicted as the moment the Qur'an was sent down and as "better than a thousand months" (Q: 97, 1-3). As *yawm ʿArafā*, it is the ninth day of Dhū l-ḥijja and the second day of the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). It commemorates Muhammad's last sermon.

This treatise deals particularly with invocations, prayers (*du'ā'*) and *dhikr*. But the book also reveals some talismanic uses of the Beautiful Names, and some of their uses in a written or engraved form to produce various effects upon the world. We may note a few examples here.

In the section for the prayer of the first hour of Sunday (*yawm al-aḥad*), the related names of God are listed as follows:

Among the Beautiful Names [related to this prayer] there are the King, the Light (*al-Malik al-Nūr*). He who recites this Qur'anic verse the aforementioned number of times in a dark house with closed eyes, he will see wonderful lights filling up his heart. If he continues to do so, [the lights] take shape in the sensory world, and this *dhikr* is beneficial for the masters of concentration (*arbāb al-himam*) and the masters of ascetic retreats (*arbāb al-khalawāt*). He who writes and wears it will see for himself increases in the forces of his soul, contrition for his enemy and opponent as he could never have seen before. And it is possible to cure with it diseases of the head, especially the cold. This effect (*ta'thīr*) exists in its moment.³⁵

This extract is very typical of the other sections about the prayers. It begins with an oral use of the names by means of prayers and invocations (*du'ā'* and *dhikr*). Then, the written use is introduced. There is no precise word used to refer to this kind of amulet: they are introduced as undefined written objects. Moreover, the recipe is not necessarily as precise as in the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*. Indeed, in the current case, we have only the indication of what should be written, and that it must be worn. There are no indications for a specific moment or astral compilation at which the writing should take place, for a suitable writing material, for a peculiar ink or colour, etc.

In the paragraph of the invocation for the second hour of Sunday, we can find a reference to another practice:

He who "breaks" His name the Generous (*al-Bāsiṭ wa-l-Jawwād*) and wears His names himself, no-one will see him without loving him and opening his heart to him, thanks to the property of this prayer, the name and the Qur'anic verse. This *dhikr* is good for the masters of contrition among the masters of the ascetic retreats.³⁶

35 Coulon, "La magie islamique," 3, 7–8.

36 Coulon, 3, 11.

TABLE 9.1 Tafṣīl—taksīr-bast

		Alif																																					
tafṣīl	Ā (alif)						L (lām)						F (fā')																										
taksīr	Ā	L			F			L			Ā	M			F	Ā																							
	1 (aḥad)	30 (thalāthūn)			80 (thamānūn)			30 (thalāthūn)			1 (aḥad)	40 (arbaʿūn)			80 (thamānūn)		1 (aḥad)																						
bast	Ā	Ḥ	D	Th	L	Ā	Th	W	N	Th	M	Ā	N	W	N	Th	L	Ā	Th	W	N	Ā	Ḥ	D	Ā	R	B	ʿ	W	N	Th	M	Ā	N	W	N	Ā	Ḥ	Ds

The verb “to break” (*kassara*) appears in other passages. For example, about the invocation for the third hour:

He who breaks His name the Fast (*al-Sarīʿ*), the Heart Turner (*al-Muqallib* = *muqallib al-qulūb*) and maintains it, God will make anything he wants happen quickly and he will know what is far from him.³⁷

“To break” (*kassara*) refers here to the *taksīr* operation. The *tafṣīl*, the *taksīr* and the *bast* are the names of three operations within the “science of the letters and the magic squares” (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-awfāq*) aiming to deconstruct letters in order to increase their esoteric properties. The *tafṣīl* is the operation which consists in writing a letter with the name of the letters of its own name. Thus, *alif* would be written Ā-L-F. In a sense, the *taksīr* is the *tafṣīl* of the result of the *tafṣīl*. Thus, the *taksīr* of *alif* is Ā-L-F (*alif*) L-Ā-M (*lām*) F-Ā (*fāʿ*). Finally, the *bast* consists in converting the *taksīr* in the numeric equivalent, and then, in doing the *tafṣīl* of the name of each number. Table 9.1. sums up the three operations for the letter *alif*. Concerning a divine name, we may take the example of al-Ḥayy, and the *taksīr* would be Ā L F M Ḥ Y, as shown in table 9.2.

These operations are not explained by al-Būnī in *al-Lumʿa al-nūrāniyya*, and so we may infer that these techniques were already known to its readership. Although the process seems simple, the text presupposes specific skills and knowledge by the practitioner.

37 Coulon, 3, 13–14.

TABLE 9.2 Example for a letter

al-Ḥayy									
Ā			L			Ḥ		Y	
<i>Alif</i>			<i>Lām</i>			<i>Ḥā'</i>		<i>Yā'</i>	
Ā	L	F	L	Ā	M	Ḥ	Ā	Y	Ā
Ā	L	F			M	Ḥ		Y	

The section *Anmāt* is devoted to the Beautiful Names of God. As in the previous section on invocations, similar instructions are given. Here is the second *namaṭ*:

Second *namaṭ* among the names.

Al-Wāḥid al-Aḥad al-Ṣamad al-Fa‘āl al-Baṣīr al-Samī‘ al-Qādir al-Muqtadir al-Qawī al-Qā‘im. Those ten names are one path in the approach to the *dhikrs* (invocations). In this section are the *dhikrs* of those who walk upon the path, depending (litt. “hanging”) upon the secrets of Oneness. And their *dhikr* is al-Aḥad al-Wāḥid.

As for al-Ṣamad, this is a good *dhikr*, especially for starving people. The one who does *dhikr* with this name do not feel any pain of starvation unless he introduces another *dhikr*. You must understand!

Al-Fa‘āl is a name for those who are dominated by thoughts, evil whispers, an overabundance of ideas and affliction in the heart because of these. The one of this description who practices *dhikr* will have his thoughts turned to what is for him joy and happiness.

As for al-Baṣīr and al-Samī‘, it is a good *dhikr* especially for those who are persistent in praying (*du‘ā’*). This may make an answer come more quickly to them.

As for al-Qādir al-Muqtadir al-Qawī al-Qā‘im, it is a *dhikr* good for those with burdens and the heavy letter. If one who suffers from a burden knows its secret and perseveres, he will not feel the burden or the exhaustion in anything he does. If someone engraves it on a seal and wears it on his finger, it will work in a moment. And if one who is weak for some reason wears it (“hangs it upon himself”) and does *dhikr* with it, he will strengthen himself at once.³⁸

This second *namaṭ* is also very typical of the structure of this section. The Beautiful Names of God are used as *dhikr*, a well-known ṣūfī practice. We know that al-Būnī was a ṣūfī master, had a group of disciples, and may have conducted *dhikr* sessions when he was still living in al-Qarāfa area in Cairo.³⁹ However, another practice appears here: the making of rings. Indeed, he prescribes the engraving of the divine name on a seal. In this second example, the instructions are also very brief: no mention of a proper moment when the writing of the seal should take place or of astral influence on the action, of the need to use a peculiar material, etc. This seal aims to help the ṣūfī disciple to practise *dhikr*, as it is indicated.

Lastly, we must add that a final section is entirely devoted to the construction of magic squares. This final section may be a kind of appendix, or even an interpolation. Indeed, a sentence explains that this passage was added in order to explain the method of constructing magic squares.⁴⁰ This method was distributed as a booklet entitled *Sharḥ al-ism al-aʿẓam* (*The Commentary of the Greatest Name*), later analysed by Bernard Carra de Vaux.⁴¹ This method of construction is based upon the game of chess and is especially simple, appropriate for readers who might not be mathematicians. Although *al-Lumʿa al-nūrānīyya* does not explain in detail the magical uses of the squares, the presence of this section suggests that this work was intended for readers who might want to make amulets.

5 Conclusion

Although al-Būnī's works are in general Sufi cosmological treatises, the descriptions of the occult properties of the letters, the Beautiful Names of God, and the Qur'anic verses take a very important place in his works. Can we speak about amulets and talismans in the *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* and *al-Lumʿa al-nūrānīyya*? Al-Būnī only wrote about the "properties of letters" (*khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*), which included their use in a written form and how these could be used to protect the bearer of the written form or the one orally expressing the names or phrases. Al-Būnī never calls these practices in his work by the regularly used words for talisman or amulet. It is these elements in his work, however, that turned

38 Coulon, "La magie islamique," 3, 72–73.

39 Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 408–413; Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'islam au Moyen Âge*, 207–209; Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge?" 90–92.

40 Coulon, "La magie islamique," 1, 459.

41 For whom see Messaoudi, "Carra de Vaux," 181–182.

al-Būnī into the expert on amulets and talismans. Indeed, al-Būnī's descriptions of the esoteric properties was easily applied in the creation of protective objects, and he gave instruction to make objects we can depict as amulets and talismans, but he carefully avoided to use the words that can relate those effective objects to amulets and talismans. It is these properties which explain why al-Būnī has long been considered as the author of a huge corpus of texts about magic, and why he remains up to today the main reference in the analysis of Islamic amulets and talismans. Indeed, building on al-Būnī's supposed expertise and reputation in this domain, subsequent authors embellished and expanded on the descriptions by adding more instructions on making amulets and even ascribed to him entire treatises on amulets and talismans that he did not write. Thus, *ṭilasm*, *ḥijāb* or other words are clearly used in the late *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* for any recipe designed to produce protective objects. The different attitude towards this vocabulary choice can be explained by a slow evolution in the field of occult sciences. Indeed, words such as *ṭilasm*, *nīranj* or *nushra* are mainly used for objects based upon the natural occult properties known since Antiquity. However, they are common words in treatises such as Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* which clearly assumes to deal with magic (*siḥr*) as the ultimate knowledge or nature. Of course, al-Būnī had to clearly differentiate his speech about the occult properties of Arabic letters and divine names from the natural properties. However, as the later commentators of al-Būnī's works added a lot of astrological and natural data for the fabrication of protective objects, they appropriate the rich vocabulary of amulets and talismans.

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