DOI: 10.46586/er.14.2023.10439
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Entangled Religions 14.3 (2023)
er.ceres.rub.de

The Entanglement of Philosophy, Politics and the Occult

The Hidden Secret of early Post-Avicennan Thought in the Islamic East

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ABSTRACT By the thirteenth century, philosophy, politics and occult science had become deeply entangled in the Persianate Islamic world. Two of the greatest luminaries in this intellectual milieu were Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) and Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Ibn Ḥabash Ibn Amīrak al-Suhrawardī (d.1191/2), who at one point were fellow students of philosophy under a certain Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī in Marāgha in northeastern Iran. Both subsequently sought royal patronage, the former travelling eastwards to Transoxania to secure the generosity of the Khwārazm-Shāhs, the latter travelling eastwards to the Levant to gain the intimate trust of Malik al-Ẓāhir, the son of the Ayyūbid sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn—known in the West as Saladdin. Both composed works devoted to talismanic astral ritual. And crucially, both developed philosophical soteriologies coloured by their meditations on the "craft"—soteriologies with profound implications for the nature of political authority.

KEYWORDS Rāzī, Suhrawardī, Sakkākī, Talisman, Daimon, Occult, Perfect Nature

Introduction: Philosophy and the Occult

In the eastern half of the Islamic world, the period that spanned the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was witness to a deep entanglement between learned magic and philosophy. Its context was that efflorescence of intellectual activity that variously critiqued, defended and developed the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), who became known in the West as Avicenna when his works became an object of focus for the Arabic-Latin transmission of knowledge. During this period, two of his most influential intellectual heirs were Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d.1191/2), who, at one point in their careers, were fellow students of philosophy under a certain Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī in Marāgha in northeastern Iran. Both subsequently sought patronage with the great powers that ruled in the Islamic world. Rāzī travelled eastwards to establish himself in the courts of the two rival regional powers, the Ghūrids and the Khwārazm-Shāhs. Suhrawardī travelled westwards to win the [1]

confidence of al-Malik al-Ẓāhir, the governor of Aleppo and son of the Ayyūbid sultan Salāḥ al-Dīn— known in the West as Saladdin (Griffel 2007; Street 1997; Walbridge 1999, 13–17 and 201–210). The two philosophers also shared a deep interest in the occult, on which they both wrote dedicated works.

[2] No mere compendium of talismanic operations, Rāzī's *The Hidden Secret* (*al-Sirr al-maktūm*) was a profound philosophical meditation on the efficacy of the "the craft" (*al-ṣināʿa*). An early work of Rāzī, written no later than 1179, it modified Avicennan celestial kinematics and psychology to construct a scientific account of talismanry that enabled a human agent to harness the powers of the soul to channel celestial influence into a talisman—be it a metal idol or a ring—to bring about change in the terrestrial world that breached the empirical norm, in accordance with the will. The work includes instructions for numerous such talismans. These operations, however, are merely a propaedeutic for what is in fact the real "hidden secret" of the work: an astral ritual, lasting many years, during which the aspirant, guided by his own personal celestial guardian spirit (*al-ṭibāʿ al-tāmm*) and wearing ritual clothing, observing ritual fasting and diet, performing prescribed gestures, and maintaining certain conscious attitudes, addresses orisons to the planets. From each, the aspirant gains specific knowledge and powers. On successful completion, the theoretical and practical capacities of the aspirant's soul reach perfection. Thus transformed, it ascends to the ontological rank of the celestial spirits and the heavenly spheres yield to the will. The aspirant becomes 'self-talismanised.'[1]

[3] Of central importance to Suhrawardī's occult work *Spiritual Influxes and Sanctifications* (*al-Wāridāt wa'l-taqdīsāt*)—addressed to "the human talisman" (*al-ṭilasm al-basharī*)—are orisons with which, beginning with God, the Necessarily Existent, the aspirant then sanctifies the intellects and souls of each sphere of the cosmic pleroma, descending from "Bahman" the First Intellect through the heavens and ending with the terrestrial elements (Walbridge 2011, 80–97). The terminology of Suhrawardī's philosophical "wisdom of illumination" (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) that he inaugurated suffuses the language of these orisons (2011, 85). Although they evince no explicit objective of gaining occult power, the manifestation of thaumaturgy, visions and veridical dreams nevertheless constitutes evidence, in Suhrawardī's philosophical system, that the aspirant has indeed perfected the wisdom of illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*). As a Platonising critique of Avicenna's Peripateticism, Suhrawardī's wisdom of illumination integrated the epistemology of an immediate intuitive knowledge of spiritual and intelligible realities with the direct realism of "knowledge by presence" (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*) through which both universals and particulars were cognised. It was in the performance of his orisons that his philosophy found its most lyrical expression. And it was in occult knowledge and power that his philosophy was most fully embodied.

[4] In engaging with the talismanic craft, our authors were drawing on a body of occult thought that in the Islamic world had become closely associated with the Sabians—a historical community that, well into Abbasid times, sustained the last vestige of Near Eastern astrolatry (Roberts 2017, 253–77). By the twelfth century, Islamic theologians applied the term "Sabian" to any non-Abrahamic religious culture—be it Greek, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian—that they understood as being steeped in astrolatry. For these theologians, the Ancient Mesopotamian variety of Sabianism claimed as its own the antediluvian reve-

1 For a study of the philosophical theory of *The Hidden Secret*, see Noble (2021). A full translation of the long ritual appears in Noble (2021, 269–82). For the text of *The Hidden Secret*, I am relying on the undated Cairo lithograph of Mirza Muḥammad Shīrāzī. Liana Saif identifies one source for the concept of the Perfect Nature in the Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica, in connection with Apollonius (see Saif 2021, 38).

lation of Hermes, who taught the principles of astrology and the celestial-terrestrial matrix of occult correspondences that informed the craft of the talisman master (Van Bladel 2009, 234–39). Observing spiritual austerities and astral rituals, their souls could receive from the celestial spirits (*rūḥāniyyāt*) knowledge of the heavens that lay beyond the reach of empirical inquiry; and they could perform, with their talismanic idols, prodigies that breached the empirical norm. It is the Sabianism of this twelfth-century philosophical construct—which had become synonymous with learned magic—that is the object of our present inquiry. Rejecting prophethood, the Sabians of our twelfth-century philosopher-theologians pursued an occult philosophical soteriology in which the celestial spirits played the pivotal salvific role. In *The Hidden Secret*, the masters of the talismanic science were identified as the Sabians, whose sage Dawānay was the second of the three Hermai identified by the early Islamic astrologer Abū Maʿshar al-Balkhī.[2] And it was Hermes— "the father of philosophers"—that Suhrawardī identified as the primordial source of his wisdom of illumination (Walbridge 2001, 17).

[5] If accepted as real—which our authors did—the Sabian science directly challenged Islamic theology that aspired to a sound rational basis for the declaration of faith that there is no god but God, and Muḥammad is His final messenger. For if human agency can affect the terrestrial world with talismanic technology, then the confidence that it is God's power that is the fundamental cause of all change and thus the only real cause, *sensu stricto*, in existence is shaken. This adamantine theological principle is yet further jeopardised by the recognition that such celestial principles can be persuaded, through prayer and sacrifice, to bring about events that violate the empirical norm. Moreover, if any human agent can, by mastering natural philosophy, astrology, and by taming his baser soul with spiritual austerities, establish a noetic connection with these celestial principles, and thereby attain revelation and thaumaturgical power, the institution of prophethood, and the belief that Muḥammad's represented its final and ultimate iteration in human history, was threatened.

[6] Avicennism provided the initial theoretical lens through which both Rāzī and Suhrawardī viewed the talismanic craft. Both saw in the craft a certain value in formulating an intellectually elitist soteriology that could also serve as state ideology. In this article, we shall explore the Avicennan framework by consulting his two most influential works *Philosophical Pointers and Reminders* (*al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbīhāt*) and *The Healing* (*al-Shifāʾ*). This will lay the necessary conceptual foundation to understand Rāzī's scientific account of talismanry, and how it subsequently influenced the political theory and elite soteriology that he developed in his final theological summa *The Sublime Theses of Divine Science* (*al-Māṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*). We shall then touch briefly on the career of Razī's contemporary Suhrawardī and the parallel occult themes of his political theory. We shall conclude by observing an important textual entanglement between *The Hidden Secret* and the occult works of their junior contemporary Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī—the personal magician of both the last Khwārazm-Shāh and Chagadai, the son of Chinggis Khān. Such an overview will bring into focus the nexus between philosophy, politics and the occult that marked the beginning of the Mongol period in the Islamic east.

2 The second Hermes is known as Hermes of Babylon, where he lived when it was the home of the sages. He was skilled in medicine, philosophy, and mathematics. He revived the sciences that had been lost in the Flood and was the Hermes who had been the teacher of Pythagoras. This Hermes represented both the Babylonian and Zoroastrian traditions of wisdom. A reference to this second Hermes, who is said to have been called "Dawanay" in Chaldaean, is found in the introduction to an astrological manuscript attributed to Hermes entitled *Risala fi Dala'il al-Iqtiranat* [Essay on the significance of conjunctions] (see Walbridge 2001, 21).

The Avicennan Lens

As one of the chief contenders in the field of theological and philosophical debate, the Neoplatonising Peripatetic philosophy of Avicenna advanced such a systematic and comprehensive scientific worldview that it demanded deep engagement from the thinkers of the period. During the period in question, the Avicennan cosmological framework of our authors' theorising on the occult accounted for how the multiplicity of contingent reality ultimately derives from the eternal simplex that is God—the Necessarily Existent—by adopting a Neoplatonic model of emanation (*fayḍ*). [7]

In reasoning about the divine principle, Avicenna maintained that just as Its unqualified necessity implies Its unqualified simplicity, so does the latter imply the former. And just as necessity implies that It cannot be subject to any external cause, so Its simplicity implies that It cannot have any internal intention—namely to create. Thus, no multiplicity can issue directly from It. Applying the *ex uno* metaphysical principle that "from one only one proceeds" (*lā yaṣdur ʿan al-wāḥid illā al-wāḥid*), Avicenna asserted the atemporal emergence of the immaterial First Intellect as consequent to the beginningless and eternal act of divine self-contemplation (Amin 2020, 125–26). A second immaterial intellect followed from the First's contemplation of the Necessarily Existent; the cosmically englobing outermost sphere was the result of the First Intellect's contemplation of its relationship of contingency on the Necessarily Existent; and the outermost sphere's animating soul was the result of the First Intellect's self-contemplation as a being necessarily existent by virtue of its own necessary cause (Davidson 1992, 75). The objects of contemplation of this second intellect, again, are three: the Necessarily Existent; its own self as necessarily existent by virtue of its own cause; and itself as a possible existent. From such contemplation issue three entities: a third immaterial intellect; the sphere of the fixed stars; and the soul that moves this sphere. It was the continuation of this process, and the emanation of the immaterial supracelestial intellects, the celestial souls and spheres, from Saturn down to the Moon, and finally the sublunary sphere of this world, that generated the Ptolemaic cosmos that Avicenna inherited. [8]

Associated with the lunar sphere, the Active Intellect—the last of the immaterial supracelestial intellects of this emanative cosmogony—was the metaphysical cause of prime matter and of the myriad forms that made up earthly natural kinds. Celestial motion was the auxiliary cause that turned the cycle of generation and corruption and primed the receptivity of terrestrial matter for the instantiation of these forms. Terrestrial change, however, was not the primary motivation of this celestial motion. For, whilst they were cognisant of their effects, the celestial souls were primarily driven by their desire to imitate, and thus to realise, the motionless perfection of their metaphysical causes—those supracelestial intellects that transcended space and time; those immaterial products of the initial act of divine self-contemplation. [9]

The Avicennan cosmogony conceived of humanity as a unity in species, and of the Active Intellect as its metaphysical cause and origin. Since the Active Intellect was the cause of the human rational soul's process of perfection, it played a central role in Avicenna's epistemology and prophetology (Davidson 1992, 76). In its theoretical aspect, the immaterial human intellect was oriented towards its metaphysical origin, from which it received the primary and secondary intelligibilia that constituted philosophical knowledge. In its practical aspect, it was oriented to towards the human soul's internal senses—seated in the physical substrate of the brain—that delivered to it the particulars of sense perception. The intellect's abstrac- [10]

tion of, and cogitation on, such particulars prepared it for receptivity to the disclosure of universals by the Active intellect.

[11] It was the principles of sound syllogism construction that safeguarded against the errors of reason that thwarted the construction of sound demonstrations establishing philosophical truth. The crucial middle terms of such syllogisms were acquired either through the labour of cogitation that is trained in the science of Aristotelian logic; or more rarely through spontaneous intuition (*ḥads*). The prodigious capacity for such rare philosophical intuition in the acquisition of universals was one of the three Avicennan categories of prophethood (Gutas 2014, 179–203; al-Akiti 2004, 189–212).

[12] Mirroring this cogitation-intuition binary, the acquisition of particulars proceeded either by means of the senses; or by means of dreams and visions through the human soul's noetic connection to the celestial realm. Both empirical observation and sound reason confirmed for Avicenna the human soul's ability to acquire knowledge of the unseen world—knowledge that comprised data relating to future events and other matters hidden to external sense perception. Indeed, Avicenna was so convinced of the empirical evidence for this that he averred: "except for him whose temperament is corrupted, and whose powers of imagination and recollection are torpid, there is no-one whose own soul has not had such experiences so as to inspire in him assent to this." Reason made an even bigger assertion: the possibility that such knowledge data can also be encoded in waking visions. It was the extreme of such ability that constituted imaginational prophethood (Avicenna 2002, 374–75).

[13] The third category—thaumaturgical prophethood—was the means by which the soul can bring about extraordinary change in the material world. Avicenna reasoned that, just as the soul's emotive states could affect the subject's own body, so the subject's soul had the potential to affect external bodies—even at a distance. Indeed, Avicenna reasoned that some souls could be so powerful as to cause geological and climactic effects. The furthermost extremity of this power constituted thaumaturgical prophethood.

[14] Philosophical and imaginational prophethood represented the perfection of human theoretical capacity (*al-quwwa al-naẓariyya*); thaumaturgical prophethood represented the perfection of human practical capacity (*al-quwwa al-ʿamaliyya*). Since, as we discussed earlier, humanity constituted a single species, no one member thereof was distinguishable by any essential difference. So, the capacity for all three categories of prophethood lay in potential, both jointly and severally, in every human soul.

[15] The explanatory power of Avicenna's philosophical account of prophethood derived from its innovative development of the Aristotelian imagination (*phantasia*) to assert a complex of five distinct internal senses. To argue for this multiplication of internal senses, he applied the principle that to be perceived, different kinds of percept required distinct faculties. Now, in addition to the standard Aristotelian forms of sensibilia (*ṣuwar al-maḥsūsāt*), Avicenna asserted a further category of percept: intentions (*maʿānī*). Intentions were essentially non-material properties that could inhere in sensible forms. His favourite illustrations for intention include the wolf's predatory intention towards a sheep or the ram's concupiscent intention towards a ewe. Therefore, to perceive intentions, animals—both rational and non-rational—required a faculty of perception distinct from that which perceived sensibilia (Avicenna 2002, 240).

[16] A hylomorphic intromission model of perception determined that the forms of sensibilia such as shape, colour, position, sound, magnitude and motion were conveyed to the external senses; the latter then transmitted their cognitive data to the common sense (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*) that integrated them to produce a unified experience of extra-mental sensible re-

ality. Intentions, however, being percepts that were fundamentally different from sensibilia, were cognised by a separate internal sense—the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). And just as Avicenna's principle of faculty differentiation demanded separate faculties to facilitate the cognition of different categories of percept, so did he posit different faculties of memory for their retention: "form memory" (*al-khayāl*, or alternatively *al-muṣawwira*) and "intention memory" (*al-dhākira*). A fifth internal sense—described as "operative" (*mutaṣarrifa*)—facilitated the soul's ability to perform cognitive operations on the contents of the two respective memory stores. Such operations were either cogitative—in which case this operative faculty was referred to as the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*); or imaginative—in which case it was referred to as the imaginative faculty (*al-mutakhayyila*). It is ceaseless in its activity (Avicenna 2002, 239–41).[3]

[17] Unlike the immaterial human intellect, the five internal senses functioned through the pneuma. This was contained in the three cerebral cavities that were arranged along the length of the brain. Since it received data from the external senses, the common sense was located in the front portion of the anterior cavity, its memory store in the rear portion. The intention memory was located in the posterior cavity. The two distinct memory stores were thus separated by the middle cavity. Occupying it were the estimative and the operative faculties. From this commanding position, the estimative faculty—as the governing faculty of the animal soul—could direct the operative faculty *qua* imagination to act on stored forms and intentions to combine them and generate cognitive objects that had no direct correspondence with the extra-mental reality that the soul perceived by means of the external senses (Avicenna 2002, 239–41).

[18] The estimative faculty presided over the synergy of the internal senses that facilitated the human soul's ability to know the unseen. Change in the sublunary world was determined by heavenly motion; the celestial souls were cognisant of the terrestrial effects of their configurations; such cognisance was disclosed in their intentions, which could be received by the human soul's estimative faculty. This faculty could then direct the imagination to exercise its combinatorial power to draw on the two memory stores and imprint on the common sense what the human soul experienced as a vision or a veridical dream. To varying degrees of accuracy, this experience corresponded to the original celestial intention that had been received (Avicenna 2002, 375–76).[4]

[19] Throughout his hylomorphic account of perception, Avicenna described receptive faculties as undergoing a process of "imprinting" (*inṭibāʿ*), "inscription" (*irtisām*) or "engraving" (*intiqāsh*) by the forms of perceptual objects. The soul experienced sensory "witnessing" (*mushāhada*) when the tablet (*lawḥ*) of the common sense was inscribed by forms. We have already discussed how witnessing took place during the waking state, when forms from the extra-mental world were conveyed to the common sense by the external senses. But even during the waking state, there were mundane—even quotidian—occasions when what comes to be witnessed in the common sense routinely had only indirect and proximal correspondence with extra-mental reality. The two examples on which Avicenna relied to illustrate this were the raindrop that is perceived as a straight line, and the dot painted on a spinning disc that is perceived as a circle. When the raindrop, for instance, is seen at point$_1$, a form is inscribed in the common sense; but before this form vanishes from the common sense, the raindrop

3 Note that in this passage, Avicenna identifies the Aristotelian *phantasia* (transmitted into the Arabic philosophical tradition as *banṭāsiyā*) with the common sense.

4 In my reading, it is the estimative faculty—not the imagination or the practical intellect—that receives the celestial intention. See my discussion in Noble (2021, 186n38).

reaches $point_2$, and a second form is inscribed in the common sense; the common sense integrates these forms into the perception of a line—which has no direct correspondence with the external world (Avicenna 2002, 377–78).

[20] Be that as it may, even when observing the descent of a raindrop, the common sense in a healthy soul is nevertheless inscribed with forms from the external world, as conveyed by the external senses. In contrast, those suffering from fevers and bilious imbalances can have sensory experiences which have absolutely no correspondence with the extra-mental world: their cause is internal. Such hallucinations occur when the soul's powers are diverted in the fight against illness, leaving the imagination—incessant in its activity—unchecked. It then proceeds to draw on percepts stored in the two memory stores and constructs sensory experiences that it then imprints on the common sense. Similarly, during sleep, with the external senses inactive and with the soul's powers diverted to digestion, the imagination is unfettered to imprint on the common sense what is experienced as a dream (Avicenna 2002, 378–81).

[21] In contrast to such autogenetic experiences, the veridical dream has its cause in the celestial realm. During sleep, the estimative faculty can receive from the celestial souls an intention that carries knowledge data about the unseen world. The estimative faculty then commands the imagination to draw on the two memory stores to construct and then imprint on the dormant common sense what is experienced as a dream that corresponds to the intention received from the celestial realm. This can also occur during certain kinds of illness, or as a result of vigorous physical activity. In both cases, the pneuma through which the imagination operates undergoes dissolution (*taḥallul*) and the faculty becomes inert, relieving the soul from directing power to hold it in check and allowing the estimative faculty to connect with the celestial realm. Once the pneuma of the imagination has recovered, it is able to resume its combinatorial activity and imprint the common sense with simulacra that resemble the data received by the estimative faculty. The furthest extreme of this ability allows the prophetic soul to connect with the celestial realm even during the waking state, the resulting imaginal simulacra being so powerful as to dominate the common sense and override sensory input conveyed by the external senses (Avicenna 2002, 379–82).

[22] Avicenna maintained that in lesser souls, noetic connection with the celestial realm can be achieved by physical procedures. Thus, when a Turkic tribe needed to divine the future, they consulted the shaman (*kāhin*) on their matter of concern. Having been thus apprised, he launched into an intense sprint. Hyperventilating, he almost lost consciousness and uttered what his imagination disclosed to him. Listening attentively, the tribe decided on a course of action accordingly. Similarly, a scryer's focus on a transparent or glittering object bewildered the common sense, allowing the soul to connect with the celestial realm (Avicenna 2002, 384–85).

[23] Whatever the means by which a celestial intention was received, the extent to which its initial effect on the human soul could remain therein undistorted depended on the degree to which the imagination could subsequently be brought under control. As previously mentioned, the imagination was ceaseless in its activity. Unchecked, it would habitually respond to any stimulus—whether its origin was extra-mental or internal, arising from a humoral imbalance—by producing a series of inexact simulacra thereof. Avicenna called this imaginative association (*muḥākaya*). From the original cognitive object, it mimetically produced a second, then a third, then a fourth, and so on, for however long the process would last. The relation of each object to its predecessor was one of similarity or antithesis. It was the pneumatic substrate

of the imagination, affected as it was by the body's temperamental balance, that would determine the direction in which the process of imaginative association proceeded. Sometimes, the original object could be so powerful as to arrest the imagination. At other times, the imagination would set to work on it to such an extent as to make the original object irrecoverable. At yet other times, it was possible to reconstruct the original cognitive object through careful hermeneutical analysis (*al-taḥallul waʾl-taʾwīl*) (Avicenna 2002, 382–84).

[24] The estimative faculty was as crucial to Avicenna's account of thaumaturgy and magic as it was for his explanation of divination and imaginal prophethood. When unfettered by the intellect, the estimative faculty could exert a powerful effect on the body. Thus, when someone walks along a plank of wood suspended over a great height, the vertiginous feeling that the estimative faculty produces can send the body plummeting to its destruction. And since, in reaction to intentional stimuli, it could affect the subject's body, Avicenna reasoned that the estimative faculty could also affect bodies at a distance. In this way, individuals could heal the sick, summon rains, avert plagues, and cause earthquakes. The estimative faculty also lay behind the power of the envious evil eye to cause harm. This was an entirely naturalistic account of thaumaturgy. The only distinction between the saint and the sorcerer was moral. Moreover, it made no accommodation for the efficacy of magic ritual itself except insofar as it could focus the power of the practitioner's estimative faculty (Avicenna 2002, 387–90).

[25] In the same way that there was a spectrum of human psychic receptivity to celestial knowledge of the unseen, so too was humanity characterised by such a diversity of thaumaturgical power as to include the possibility of a soul so powerful that it could affect other souls—and even act "as a soul for the world." Such power could arise in a soul either by virtue of its innate temperament or through its purification (Avicenna 2002, 388).

[26] Human perfection was realised in the complete actualisation of all three prophetic categories. Legitimate political authority only truly resided in the one who had attained such perfection—who, in doing so, "becomes almost a human god." Indeed, Avicenna maintained, "worship of him, after the worship of God, exalted be He, becomes almost allowed. He is indeed the world's earthly king and God's deputy in it" (Avicenna 2005, 378).[5]

[27] Avicenna's general scientific theory of prophethood, divination, thaumaturgy and magic was the denouement of his metaphysics, which began with his analysis of the unchanging divine simplex that exerted no direct influence in the sublunary world. His account simultaneously explained how the prophet, saint, sorcerer—even the common man—might receive knowledge of the unseen by connecting with the celestial realm through the estimative faculty; and how the same faculty could enable them to intervene in the terrestrial world in ways that contravened the empirical norm. Moreover, his theory of veridical dreams and visions explained the subjective nature of the form in which they were internally experienced and the objective origin of their extra-mental, celestial efficient cause. The potential of the prophet, saint, sorcerer, and common man to perform thaumaturgy and to experience visions, however, existed on a continuum undifferentiated by any essential difference. For a thinker like Rāzī, this constituted a challenge to the unique nature of prophethood. It provided, however, the ideal conceptual foundation to explain the efficacy of the Sabian craft.

5 On Aleister Crowley's somewhat similar idea that the magician functions as the "co-heir of gods, a Lord of Light," see Henrik Bogdan's chapter in this volume (2023).

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *The Hidden Secret*

During the historical period under discussion, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was the pre-eminent exponent of "*kalam*"—an Islamic theological methodology that applied reason to scripture to defend the fundamental verities of the faith. So intellectually seductive was the appeal of Avicennism that it demanded from *kalām* a robust response. It was in defending the edifice erected by his theological school from the Avicennan threat that Rāzī devoted much of his career. Ultimately, his strategy was to attempt a systematic harmonisation of the two approaches.[6] [28]

Born in the Persian city of Rayy in 544/1149, Rāzī received his formative instruction in *kalām* from his father. But it was in Marāgha, under Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī—whose students, as we have mentioned, included a young Suhrawardī—that he dedicated his attention to Avicennan philosophy. Subsequently, his need to establish his name in the world of philosophical debate and to secure stable patronage took him east, to Khurāsān and Transoxania. The fierce reputation that he won as a debater eventually secured for him the generous favour of the two rival regional powers, the Ghūrids and the Khwārazm-Shāhs (Shihadeh 2017, 297). [29]

Considering his life-long engagement with his philosophy, it should come as no surprise that Rāzī availed himself of Avicenna's prophetology to construct the theory behind Sabian talismanry that he recorded in *The Hidden Secret*. It extolled knowledge of the Sabian craft as the acme of human intellectual endeavour—a craft that promised to disclose to its student the mysteries of causality in the cosmos, command of which empowered the individual to act in the sublunary world in ways that circumvented the seeming habitual pattern of cause and effect. For Rāzī the theologian, such patterns were merely the divinely mandated norms by which events unfolded—there were no real causes as such that operated independently of the divine fiat. The theological error of the Sabians is only given cursory treatment—a brief but necessary excursus. The agenda of *The Hidden Secret* is neither polemical nor heresiological. [30]

The absence of any such destructive agenda evidently baffled subsequent readers who failed to agree on the work's authorial intent. Some were persuaded that Rāzī was a crypto-astrolater who defended Sabian magical practice. Others, perplexed, denied that a theologian of Rāzī's stature would have written it. Yet others, who celebrated the occult sciences and viewed Rāzī as a disputatious theological pedant, simply denied his authorship of the work, so penetrating were its insights into the world of spiritual beings. However, situating the work within the broader context of Rāzī's philosophical-theological grand project would have allowed *The Hidden Secret*'s confounded readers to distinguish appropriately between the its subject matter and its author's purpose, preventing such overhasty judgments (Noble 2021, 18 and 33–34). [31]

Two issues must be clearly distinguished here: the reality of the Sabian craft as a technology that could produce real effects in the world and the compatibility of the Sabian craft with Islamic sacred law. Addressing the first, Rāzī's view was that Sabian talismanry was indeed a real technology with a sound empirical basis. Why he believed this can only be a matter of speculation. Holding such a view, it was imperative for Rāzī, whose ambition it was to construct a philosophical theology as systematic as its Avicennan predecessor, to provide a scientific account of the technology that could harmonise with his overarching metaphysics. The second issue divides into two further subsidiary issues—the compatibility with Islamic sacred law of certain ritual acts described in *The Hidden Secret*; and addressing the planets. [32]

6 Strictly, *kalām* is a methodology rather than a domain of inquiry. Both *kalām* and philosophy applied their own respective methodologies to the same domains of inquiry, such as metaphysics, physics, and ethics (Treiger 2017, 5–6).

In his introduction to the work, Rāzī was careful to repudiate "all that is opposed to the religion (*al-dīn*) and the peace of certainty" (Al-Rāzī n.d., 2). Obvious examples of acts opposed to the sacred law are the Venusian orgy and the Martian cannibalism that feature in the aforementioned long planetary ritual. There is no evidence in his oeuvre that Rāzī, as a jurist, ever argued that the sacred law provided dispensations for such activities. As for addressing the planets, Rāzī describes in his early encyclopaedic work—*The Compendium of the Sciences* (*Jāmiʿ al-ʿulūm*)—an ancient Persian royal ritual that addressed the sun for the fulfilment of a certain need. This he described as forbidden in the sacred law (*ḥarām*), an act which would render the performer an infidel—even if through it a worldly objective might be attained (Noble 2021, 255). Why the sacred law would deem permissible the act of petitioning a king for patronage whilst proscribing the same act when performed to the sun is left unexplained. One possible solution is that one of the key objectives of the sacred law was to preclude the seduction of astrolatry through its allure of worldly gain. The development of Islamic legal positions on the occult sciences remains an unexplored field and lies beyond the scope of this article. [33]

If *The Hidden Secret* is considered in the context of his grand intellectual project, we need not resort to a Straussian argument that Rāzī publicly declared his commitment to Islamic law whilst privately advocating the Sabian craft. For Rāzī, the error of Sabian metaphysics did not imply that Sabian technology produced no real effects in the world. And since Rāzī was indeed convinced that the technology was real, any sound metaphysics would have to account for its efficacy. This was the challenge—albeit implicit—that he laid out in *The Hidden Secret*. We should be mindful that a Persian philosopher's deep intellectual engagement with learned magic no more implies his practice of it than a modern-day physicist's interest in uranium implies his intent to make a nuclear bomb. [34]

The Hidden Secret begins with an encomium to occult knowledge and presents the talismanic science as the culmination of practical philosophy, in pursuit of which man finds liberation from the mortality of his terrestrial existence, experiences an angelomorphic transformation, and is admitted to the rank of the celestial spirits, who become his hierophantic guides to the arcana of the spiritual and corporeal worlds. The first treatise (*maqāla*) prefaces the subsequent numerous descriptions of talismanic operations with a theoretical discussion of "talisman" as a process: "[…] the blending (*tamzīj*) of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered (*li-ajl al-tamakkun min*) to make manifest that which runs contrary to the norm (*al-ʿāda*) or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it" (Al-Rāzī n.d., 7; as translated in Noble 2021, 1). Such was the primary sense in which Rāzī understood the concept of "talisman." [35]

To command this process as a practical technology, the practitioner must engage in rigorous ascesis to sever the "corporeal bonds" (*ʿalāʾiq jismāniyya*) that fetter the soul to the terrestrial plane, to connect with the "active heavenly forces" of the celestial spirits and to "blend" them into a talismanic idol (*ṣanam*)—the secondary sense of "talisman." Thus blended, they are then directed, in accordance with the practitioner's intention, to cause an effect that contravenes the empirical norm. The nature of the magical objective determined the selection of the planet used. The operation was a two-stage process. At the prescribed katarchic moment, the appropriate planetary metal is poured into a mould to cast the talismanic idol. Ritualised gesture, mimetic of the magical goal, hones the meditative focus of the practitioner who directs the celestial forces that had been blended into the idol to bring about his intended effect. [36]

[37] Of course, astrological competency was a prerequisite for identifying the correct katarchic moment for casting the talismanic idol. But it was the matrix of occult celestial-terrestrial correspondences that determined the appropriate mental world of ritual preparation and act, which included specific diet, suffumigations, sacrifices, clothing, incantations, and visualization. The stronger the talisman master's command of occult celestial-terrestrial correspondences, the more effective was ritual in establishing human connection with the supernal realm. A complete cognitive internalization of this matrix ensured that the sensory input of ritual would guide the practitioner's imagination to align with the operative talismanic planet and establish therewith a noetic connection.[7] The talismanic process involved the entirety of the soul's cognitive apparatus. In Avicennan terms, the practitioner's theoretical intellect acquired the necessary command of astrology; the practical intellect ensured the care and attention to ritual performance; the common sense received the sensory data arising from ritual; and the mimetic association of an astrologically primed imagination facilitated the estimative faculty in connecting with the supernal realm.

[38] Rāzī's philosophical account of Sabian talismanry coordinated the two theoretical levels of the human and the celestial. As for the human, Rāzī assigned the estimative faculty—the governing faculty of both imaginational and thaumaturgical prophethood—the crucial role in the talismanic process. The one who did not possess an innately powerful estimative faculty could train it through ascesis and meditative training. He reasoned that if, in the Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood, the estimative faculty's connection with the celestial realm could facilitate the transmission of knowledge, then so too could it direct celestial forces to affect terrestrial reality in accordance with the will. The same psychological principles that allowed the Turkic shaman, or the scryer, to use a physical procedure to induce a human-celestial noetic connection also allowed the talisman master to employ spiritual discipline and astral ritual to achieve the same end. The practitioner's bonds to corporeal reality were severed by traumatising the body, through extreme daily fasting, until the point of sustenance on the barest minimum of food required to draw breath. During this period, any consequent humoral imbalances could be addressed by the use of fragrances, music and visuals.

[39] As for the celestial level, Rāzī adapted Avicennan proofs to substantiate the Sabian belief in the ensoulment of the celestial realm; celestial knowledge of the terrestrial effects of heavenly motion; and celestial receptivity to human communication through the media of orisons and sacrifice. But, in accounting for the Sabian belief system, he departed from Avicennan cosmology in one crucial aspect: He identified the metaphysical cause of terrestrial natural kinds as the spirit that governs the outermost sphere—not the Avicennan Active Intellect that was co-ordinate with the lunar sphere. This removal of the Active Intellect allowed to Rāzī to replace it with a quintessentially Sabian doctrine: the Perfect Nature.

[40] According to Sabian anthropology, humanity was not a unity in species, originating in the single metaphysical source that was the Avicennan Active intellect—rather it was an aggregate of essentially different soul groups. Each derived from a distinct astral spirit which was the "heavenly father" of each individual group member. This, as reported by Rāzī, was known to the Sabians as the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibāʿ al-tāmm*). Functionally, it was the Arabic counterpart of the Greek Neoplatonic personal daimon. In the Avicennan system, it was the Active Intellect that was the efficient cause of the human soul's perfection. In the system of Razī's Sabians, however, it was an individual's perfect nature that, through dreams and

7 For a somewhat similar practice of connecting with planetary spirits, see Otto's chapter on Frater Acher's "Arbatel experiences" in this volume (2023).

hypnagogic epiphanies, inspired the individual with occult knowledge and guided the soul to its theoretical and practical perfection. Moreover, once stabilised, this connection allowed the perfect nature to act as a personal guide and hierophant in the long ritual of planetary ascent, upon completion of which the aspirant becomes 'self-talismanised' with power over the sublunary realm—the Sabian equivalent of the Avicennan perfected man.[8] It seems that for Rāzī, this doctrine was the key wisdom of the Sabian occult philosophy. So important was it that in the parting counsel that he offered the anonymous king, whom he addressed when concluding *The Hidden Secret*, he advised: "As for him who seeks knowledge and the perfect philosophy, he should invoke his perfect nature" (Al-Rāzī n.d., 164; as translated in Noble 2021, 27).[9]

Rāzī composed *The Hidden Secret* at the beginning of his writing career, no later than [41]
1179. Thereafter, he remained largely silent about the Sabian occult philosophy until he neared his final year, when he completed the last volume of his (unfinished) philosophical-theological summa *The Sublime Theses*, in 1209. Entitled *On Prophethood and related matters* (*Fī al-nubuwwāt wa-mā yataʿallaq bihā*), the last volume concludes with a detailed presentation—albeit in a far more systematised form—of the material he presented in *The Hidden Secret*. His deep engagement with the occult science of the Sabians and his conviction in the efficacy of their talismanic technology provided him with powerful arguments with which to challenge Avicennism. Moreover, he fully embraced the Perfect Nature doctrine, adopting it as the cornerstone of his alternative philosophical soteriology.

To recapitulate the Avicennan perspective, the Active Intellect—the last of supracelestial [42]
intellects that was coordinate with the lunar sphere—played a central cosmological role: It was the metaphysical cause of natural kinds in the sublunary world, including the individual souls that comprised the single human species; and it was the efficient cause of the individual human soul's actualisation and perfection. Rāzī not only launched a sustained offensive against the doctrine of the Active Intellect, but also drew out the implications of the internal sense psychology that accounted for how an individual's theoretical and practical capacities might be perfected. He argued that Avicenna relativised prophethood and failed to demonstrate how the effects of prophetic thaumaturgy might be distinguished from the results of employing talismanic technology—which Rāzī maintained was real science. Instead, he argued that the "greatest spirit" (*al-rūḥ al-aʿẓam*) that governs the outermost sphere was the metaphysical cause of sublunary natural kinds; and that humanity was a genus comprising numerous species, the metaphysical cause of each being a distinct astral spirit—the perfect nature. It was the perfect nature that inspired the individual with philosophical insights, veridical dreams, waking visions, ethical guidance, and spiritual tutelage. He rescued prophethood from the equalising impact of Avicennism by asserting that the prophet, deriving from the greatest spirit, was essentially different from the rest of humanity, his revelations unique. Nevertheless, the philosophical-spiritual elite of the rest of humanity might themselves establish connection with their own astral perfect natures to embark on the spiritual ascent to perfection (Noble 2021, 229–49).

As the earthly counterpart of the greatest spirit, the perfected man stood at the apex of a [43]
hierarchy of souls that he brought to perfection; he implemented the sacred law; and his prac-

8 For similar ideas surrounding the acquisition of the 'Holy guardian angel' in Aleister Crowley's work, see Bogdan's chapter in this volume (2023).

9 For an overview in the Chaldean, Zoroastrian and Hellenistic historical contexts of rituals to connect with the personal daimon, as well as insights into this praxis from a contemporary practitioner, see Frater Acher (2018).

tical power extended throughout the corporeal world. Developing the idea of humanity as a genus comprising different species, he advanced an ethnology that claimed that the inhabitants of the Irānshahr region—the Persianate world, which at that time included the Central Asian region—were the closest to perfection. And of humanity, the greatest in perfection was counted amongst their number. What Rāzī had identified as a quintessentially Sabian doctrine had now been pressed into the service of an Iranocentric political ideology. The theory had profound political implications which surely would not have been overlooked by his royal Persianate benefactors (Noble 2021, 262–64).

Suhrawardi

[44] It would seem not unreasonable to infer that, in advising the royal addressee, at the end of *The Hidden Secret*, to invoke his perfect nature to attain the "perfect philosophy," thereby bringing into full realization of his theoretical and practical capacities, Rāzī was harbouring the ambition to establish himself as a philosopher-vizier in the old Iranian tradition. Nor does it seem unreasonable to infer that, given his biography, Rāzī's one-time fellow student of philosophy Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī also nurtured the same ambition.

[45] Born in 1154, Suhrawardī did not remain long in his native village of Suhraward in northwest Iran before his pursuit of philosophy took him to Marāgha to study with Rāzī under Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī (Pourjavady and Pourjavady 2002, iii). His subsequent travels in pursuit of knowledge took him to Isfahan, Anatolia and Syria. He also spent considerable time with Sufis, gaining a strong reputation for spiritual austerity, voluntary poverty, miracles—and even magic (Walbridge 1999, 14–15).

[46] A fortuitous display of his spiritual attainment soon won him access to the governor of Aleppo, al-Malik al-Ẓāhir (r. 1186–1216), the son of the Ayyūbid sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. When, in 1183, a few years after Rāzī had written *The Hidden Secret*, Suhrawardī arrived in the city, he took up residence in the Ḥallāwiyya, one of the leading schools of Islamic jurisprudence at the time. Impressed by his fierce acumen in legal debate, which belied his shabby appearance, the rector of the establishment sent his son to deliver a more suitable set of clothes. In the spirit of voluntary poverty, he declined the offer and instead gave the messenger a valuable gem to auction in the bazaar. When the boy reported that the gem had attracted a bid of thirty thousand dirhams from no less a figure than the governor of Aleppo, Suhrawardī, in a dramatic display of his asceticism, smashed the stone. No action could have proved more effective in winning the ear of the young local ruler. The close confidence he gained, however, was to end in tragedy. The suspicion and jealousy of the religious scholars whom he routinely defeated in debate prevailed over Salāḥ al-Dīn to command his son to execute the hapless philosopher (Walbridge 1999, 201–2).

[47] The historical sources are vague on the charge that was brought against him. He was accused of undermining the sacred law, a necessary concomitant of which was to question the legitimacy of the state. His infamy was exacerbated by his reputation for wielding "magical powers," which he discussed in context of his theories on royal authority (Ziai 1992, 339). His association with the occult would have been strengthened by his composition of *Spiritual Influxes and Sanctifications* (*al-Wāridāt wa-l-taqdīsāt*). Conspicuous amongst the orisons he composed to the heavenly bodies was the prayer to the Sun (*Hūrakhsh*), which was the celestial counterpart of the earthly king (Ziai 1992, 320; Walbridge 2011, 80–97; Piątak 2018,

401–3). Similarly worthy of note, in light of our discussion of Rāzī's occult oeuvre, is another prayer evoking the epiphany of the Perfect Nature (Walbridge 2011, 88).

[48] In his pioneering study of *Spiritual Influxes and Sanctifications*, Łukasz Piątak notes that, in his philosophical magnum opus *The Wisdom of Illumination* (*Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*), Suhrawardī makes but one mention of the necessity of venerating the planets. This exhortation is in connection with *Hūrakhsh*, the "talisman" of Shahrīr—"the archetype of kingship" that rules over the other planets. Piątak notes that elsewhere, in *Spiritual Influxes*, the "Greatest Luminary" is singled out from all the heavenly bodies for sanctification alongside God, since it is the "visible image of God's majesty" and "the role that sun performs in the planetary system is the counterpart to the role that Light of Lights plays in entire universe" (Piątak 2018, 402).

[49] Piątak presents *Spiritual Influxes* as a vindication of the primordial astral cult—as transmitted by all true prophets and sages—that integrates the veneration of the seven heavenly bodies. Its central litany to the plenitude of metacosmic intellects and encosmic souls that constitute the hierarchy of being has a strophic structure, suggestive of group worship—presumably the community of Illuminationist philosophers for whom such liturgical veneration represented the culmination of the spiritual austerities and the philosophical practice enjoined by Suhrawardī. Beginning with God—the Light of Lights—the Illuminationist litany descends the ontological hierarchy, addressing with adoration each level of the pleroma, including the planets, the elements, the rational souls of the prophets and sages, and finally the souls of those aspiring to illumination. Each object of adoration confers blessings on the one who declares its sanctification. On the sublunary level, observes Piątak, the litany's purpose "is the purification (*taqdīs* or *taṭhīr*) of all living creatures including mankind, as well as four elements and all the bodies that are amalgamates of those elements." As "an obligation imposed by God on the virtuous nations," the overarching purpose of the practice for the Illuminationist is in Piątak's evaluation to "stimulate his growth in virtues (*al-faḍā'il*) and flashes of light (*al-lawāmiʿ*) and lead him to happiness on the day of bodily departure (*yawm al-khurūj*)." Without a doubt, this was an occult soteriology—but more than that, was it a soteriology with political ramifications? (Piątak 2018, 58–62).

[50] Considering the reasons for his execution, Hossein Ziai persuasively argues that Suhrawardī was believed to be involved "in a political conspiracy aimed at establishing the young Ayyūbid prince as ruler of the age, divinely aided and guided by the divine philosopher—namely, al-Suhrawardī—who possessed manifest signs of divine inspiration" (Ziai 1992, 343). His political thought on the perfected man drew on precisely the same Avicennan discourse that influenced Rāzī's formulation of the perfected man (1992, 317–18). Ziai observes that Suhrawardī conflated the miraculous prophetic powers as discussed in the Avicennan theory with the Iranian tradition of "royal light" (*kharra-yi kīyānī*)[10] that is bestowed on just kings who have reached philosophical perfection, thus developing occult power.

[51] In his Persian work *The Book of Radiance* (*Partow-Nameh*), Suhrawardī avers:

> [52] Whoever knows philosophy, and perseveres in thanking and sanctifying the Light of Lights, will be endowed with royal *Kharreh* and with luminous *Farreh,*[11] and—as we have said elsewhere—divine light will further bestow upon him the cloak of royal power and value. Such a person shall then become the natural Ruler of the Universe. He shall be given aid from the Highest Heavens, and whatever

10 In contemporary western scholarship, the Persian word *kharra* can also be transliterated as *kharrah* and *kharreh*.

11 The Persian *farreh* can also be transliterated as *farra* and *farrah*.

> he commands shall be obeyed; and his dreams and inspirations will reach their uppermost, perfect pinnacle. (Suhrawārdī 1998, 84—85)

[53] For a philosopher like Suhrawardī who was attempting to revive ancient Persian wisdom, the terms *kharreh* and *farreh* had particular resonance. Whilst, with the two terms, Suhrawardī appears to be accenting distinct aspects of the philosopher king's divinely mandated power, they are in fact different forms of the same word.

[54] Diachronically reconstructing its occurrence in the Iranian languages, Gherardo Gnoli explains that the most likely etymology and semantic function of the term *kharreh/farreh* encapsulated the concept "glory." He cites 'traditional interpretations' that considered its primary range of meaning to include "glory," "splendour," "luminosity" and "shine" specifically associated with fire and the sun. In the *Avesta*, he observes, *kharreh/farreh* represented a luminous 'magic force'—a power that drove every being toward the completion of its duty. In Sogdian Buddhist texts, the term was deployed to signify the "position of a Buddha." In the period of New Persian—the native tongue of Suhrawardī— *farr*was a "royal and divine attribute" (Gnoli 1999).

[55] That similar power, in Suhrawardī's theory, was conferred on wise philosopher viziers could only have stoked the suspicion caused by his closeness with Salāḥ al-Dīn's son (Ziai 1992, 307–8). For Suhrawardī, truly legitimate sovereignty belongs to the man who is "divinised" (*muta'allih*) (Walbridge 1999, 209). Walbridge writes of the deep suspicion that the Sunnī Salāḥ al-Dīn harboured of such divinised philosopher kings. He had once been the loyal servant of al-ʿAḍīd li-Dīn Allāh—a divinised philosopher-king that ruled the Shīʿī Fātimid state in Egypt. The Shīʿī "Old Man of the Mountain"—the leader of the Shīʿī "Assassins," who had been a constant thorn in his side—was also an advocate of the suspect political doctrine (Walbridge 1999, 207–8). Suhrawardī could hardly have selected an environment more hostile to his occult political doctrine. His execution, dated sometime between 1191 and 1192, seemed inevitable.[12]

[56] It would appear that Rāzī was far more prudent in his choice of patron when he expounded on his own theory of the perfected man in *The Sublime Theses*. The Khwārazm-Shāh ʿAlā' al-Dīn Tekish seems the most likely candidate to have been the unnamed "king" to whom he addressed his parting counsel in *The Hidden Secret* (Noble 2021, 29–30). For the Khwārazm-Shāhs, the talismanic science was no mere object of intellectual curiosity: They aggressively employed it for political ends, as can been seen from the career of Rāzī's contemporary, Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī.

Sakkākī

[57] Sirāj al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn Abī Bakr al-Sakkākī (1160—1229) is more well-known for his study on the philosophy, grammar and rhetoric of the Arabic language *Keys to the Sciences* (*Miftāḥ al-ʿUlūm*), which, through an abridgement by a subsequent grammarian Khaṭīb Dimashq al-Qazwīnī, achieved status as the standard text for instruction in Islamic seminaries throughout the east (Smyth 1993, 100).[13] Born in Khwārazm, he initially trained as a metal-worker. His initial attempt to secure patronage was to make an exquisite inkwell which he hoped would curry the favour of the Khwārazm-Shāh. When it was received with indifference, he

12 For this death date, see Walbridge (1999, 14).
13 For alternative birth and death dates for al-Sakkākī, see Maṭlūb (1964, 46 and 52).

observed the contrasting generosity with which scholars were welcomed in the royal court and so resolved to train as an Arabic grammarian (Maṭlūb 1964, 46). His efforts finally bore fruit when he secured the favour of the last two Khwārazm-Shāhs ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 1200—1220) and Jalāl al-Dīn Mingbarnī (r. 1220—1231). They seemed, however, more interested in his expertise as a magician whose skill in metal work qualified him amply for the casting of talismanic idols (Miller 2001, 249–56).

[58] Threatened by newly reassertive ʿAbbāsid caliphal power, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad availed himself of Sakkākī's occult knowledge and skill at metal work to cast a talismanic idol. With the purpose of bringing the Caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 1180–1225) misfortune and curtailing his ambitions, it was interred in Baghdad. But by the time ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad was succeeded by his son Jalāl al-Dīn, Sakkākī had become convinced that the talismanic influence had become reversed against the Khwārazm-Shāh. When a trusted servant was sent to retrieve the object, the burial site of the idol could no longer be reached (Miller 2001, 249).

[59] Sakkākī's suspicion concerning the talisman's malfunction was not unfounded. Soon afterwards, the Khwārazm-Shāh dynasty was smashed by the Mongol onslaught. But this seems to have occasioned Sakkākī's career no harm. His reputation as a consummate occultist reached the ear of Chagadai, the son of Chinggis Khan, whose close confidence he swiftly gained (Al-Laknawī 1906, 232). As was the case with Suhrawardī, Sakkākī inevitably attracted the envy of dangerous court rivals. And he could find no rival more dangerous an enemy than Chagadai's vizier, Ḥabash ʿAmīd, who orchestrated against him a campaign of personal slander. The biographer ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī reports that Sakkākī learnt of the vizier's plotting by performing a ritual to Mars, in the process causing a fire in Chagadai's camp. With such a display of occult power, ʿĀmīd saw his opportunity to sow mistrust and suspicion in Chagadai's mind: "So he [i.e., Ḥabash] said to Chagadai: 'If Sakkākī is capable of such feats, be not surprised if he tries to wrest from you your throne.' Thus was [suspicion] seeded in Chagadai's imagination, so he threw Sakkākī into prison where he languished for three years before he died" (Al-Laknawī 1906, 232).[14]

[60] The anecdotal evidence of biographers is not the only evidence we have of the Arabic grammarian's involvement in the occult sciences. He left to posterity a large compendium in Arabic of occult ritual, entitled *The Complete Compendium on the Principles of Spirit Subjugation and Astral Magic (Kitāb al-shāmil wa-baḥr al-kāmil fī uṣūl al-taʿzīm wa'l-qawāʿid al-tanjīm*).[15] Further tribute to his accomplishment as a practitioner is the Persian *Compendium of Texts of Sakkākī on the Science of Astral Invocation* (*Majmūʿa-yi nuskha-yi Sakkākī dar ʿilm-i daʿvat*).[16] The section entitled "On the Subjugation of the Planets" (*dar ʿilm-i daʿvat*) contains a full Persian version of the long ritual of planetary ascent that was the central operation of Rāzī's *The Hidden Secret*. Whilst it is possible that Sakkākī may have consulted a common source attributed to Abu Maʿshar, to which Rāzī had access, it is indeed equally possible that he had consulted Rāzī's own work.

[61] One manuscript witness of *The Hidden Secret*, Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library Carullah MS 1482, at f. 164a, contains an intriguing marginal gloss to the colophon. The scribe notes that in reproducing the text of the work, he relied not only on a holograph manuscript witness, but also a copy penned "in the hand of Sirāj[?]al-Khwārazmī, known as al-Ṣakkākī (*min khaṭṭ*

14 As quoted in Maṭlūb (1964, 51–52), as translated in Noble (2021, 33). See also Zadeh (2014, 133–34).
15 London, British Library, Delhi Arabic MS 1915(b) and London, School of Oriental and African Studies, MS 46347.
16 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Walker, MS 91.

sirāj [?] *al-khwārazmī al-maʿrūf bi'l-ṣakkākī*)" (Noble 2021, 31).[17] Though far from certain, it is at least not unlikely that this is the same Sakkākī who served as the magician of the two last Khwārazm-Shāhs and the son of Chinggis Khan.

Like Rāzī and Suhrawardī, Sakkākī was another intellectual operating in the Islamicate east who pressed the exoteric sciences into the service of the esoteric. Unlike them, however, Sakkākī placed his practical knowledge of the occult sciences into the hands of the political powers he served. Considering his work on the philosophy of language in light of his occult works, Emily Selove argues that "his theory of simile and metaphor take on a more occult appearance, and we see how he charts the currents of power and influence that lie hidden between things" (Selove 2020, 44). She moreover infers an implicit suggestion by Sakkākī "that masters of language are able to perceive the unknown, the hidden connections between things, and the hidden order of the macrocosm reflected in the microcosm of man" (Selove 2020, 44). Elsewhere, Emily Selove and Mohammed Sanad persuasively argue that Sakkākī's work on the philosophy of language is "redolent with magic" and that, in the politically volatile world in which he lived, he projected his authority as a consummate scholar of the Arabic language, and in doing so, claimed elite access to the word of God and perilous knowledge of the occult sciences (Selove and Sanad, Forthcoming 2023).[18] [62]

Conclusion

Towards the end of his reign in 1213, al-Malik al-Ẓāhir, Suhrawardī's erstwhile patron, completed the erection of the new entrance complex to the Aleppo citadel. Its first entrance—known as the Gate of the Serpents—is "surmounted by a relief of two knotted serpent dragons with forked tongues." This relief, Persis Berlekamp contends, was carved as a talisman depicting apotropaic eclipse dragons. If we accept Ziai's reading of why he was executed, then it is worthy of note that it was Suhrawardī's philosophical-political project that provoked the suspicion of the religious scholars—not his engagement in astral magic *per se*. The intellectual culture in the Aleppo of his time did not appear to foster an environment hostile to the use of astral talismanic technology—its attitude towards an unauthorised soterio-political philosophy was perhaps another matter (Berlekamp 2016, 72). [63]

As she observes in her survey of architectural talismanic iconography of the early thirteenth century in the heartlands of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, Berlekamp points out that in Anatolia, Syria and Iraq, walls and gates provided cities protection not only as physical barriers but also as talismans imbued with apotropaic power by virtue of their specific iconography. The Aleppo citadel was just one case in point. Another, even more striking example was the Talisman Gate in Baghdad. Completed in 1221, and commissioned by the Caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, its arch was "framed by two enormous soaring dragons flanking a much smaller but central princely figure." The latter was depicted as having subjugated the dragons, his hands grasping their tongues—a powerful symbol of royal charisma. Providing an overview of the modern scholarship on the gate's iconography, Berlekamp observes that early scholars advanced the view, which still holds currency, that the central figure represented the Caliph al-Nāṣir, the two dragons his political enemies: one, the leader of the Assassins; the other, the Khwārazm-Shāh ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad—a patron of both Rāzī and Sakkākī. It would [64]

17 His name is usually spelt with a *sīn*, not a *ṣād*.

18 I am grateful to both Emily Selove and Mohammed Sanad for providing me with a draft copy of the latter article.

seem that political powers in the Islamicate world were less interested in suppressing magic than controlling its use. This was, as we have seen, even more the case with the non-Muslim Chagadai, whose fear that he would be unable to control Sakkākī's magic precipitated the latter's execution (Berlekamp 2016, 59, 77–78).

[65] As a consummate theoretician on the occult sciences, Rāzī exerted a profound influence on their reception and development in the post-Mongol Islamic world. Soon after Rāzī's death in 1210, Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, the sultan of Delhi (r. 1211–1236), commissioned a Persian translation of his Arabic *The Hidden Secret*. It was the only eastern Islamic occult text of which the famous anti-occultist Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406)—who was based in the Islamic west—was aware. Just as significant, Rāzī's hugely influential Persian encyclopedia, *The Compendium of the Sciences* (*Jāmiʿ al-ʿulūm*) reclassified the occult sciences as mathematical—initiating, as Melvin-Koushki argues, the "neopythagorean turn," launching them in their "ascent to philosophically mainstream status," and laying the foundation for "the massive increase in patronage of professional occultists at the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman courts in the run up to the Islamic millennium" in 1592. Melvin-Koushki further argues that the "neopythagorean-mathematical turn was intimately connected with, even partially driven by, the occultist renaissance of the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries." In this latter period, the occultist, mathematician and chronicler of the Timurids, Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī (d. 1454), presented the eponymous founder of the dynasty as "Lord of Conjunction," invoking Zoroastrian astrological notions regarding the sun and moon—notions which, as Azfar Moin observes, "had entered Islam in various philosophical and occult forms, most importantly via the Illuminationist (*Ishrāqī*) metaphysics of the famous twelfth-century thinker Suhrawardī […] who had even composed prayers in Arabic to ask the sun for knowledge and salvation" (Noble 2021, 30; Melvin-Koushki 2017, 127; Moin 2012, 35–36).

[66] The foregoing sketch of Islamic intellectual history illustrates just how entangled the domains of philosophy, politics and the occult were in the twilight of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. Learned magic attracted learned minds, and the ruling elites sought to wield it—or, at least, try and monopolise its use in the political domain. Given its deep concern with the nature of prophethood, Islamicate intellectual culture provided particularly fertile soil for theorising on its efficacy. Though Avicenna's theory of occult power was entirely psychologising, it provided the conceptual tools for those convinced of the efficacy of learned magic to construct a scientific account that could explain its practices, such as the notion of a celestial ascent; and the metaphysical assumptions of its doctrines, such as the Perfect Nature. For both Rāzī and Suhrawardī, who predeceased the Mongol conquest, learned magic was synonymous with the highest philosophy. But whilst they both gained access to power by presenting themselves as philosopher-viziers, their younger contemporary Sakkākī achieved the same goal through his actual practice of learned magic. In doing so, Sakkākī managed to flourish in spite of the tribulations of the Mongol invasion which, as Melvin-Kouhski observes, "wrought a rupture of pandoric consequence for Islamicate religiopolitical culture." The old ʿAbbāsid order was smashed, creating a vacuum of political legitimacy over which the claims of new ruling elites competed (Melvin-Koushki 2018, 353–54). Mastery of occult science was one means by which such new claims were advanced by early modern Islamicate powers. For their ability to do this, they owed a not insignificant debt to our three main protagonists.

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