

## THE DIAGRAM AS PARADIGM

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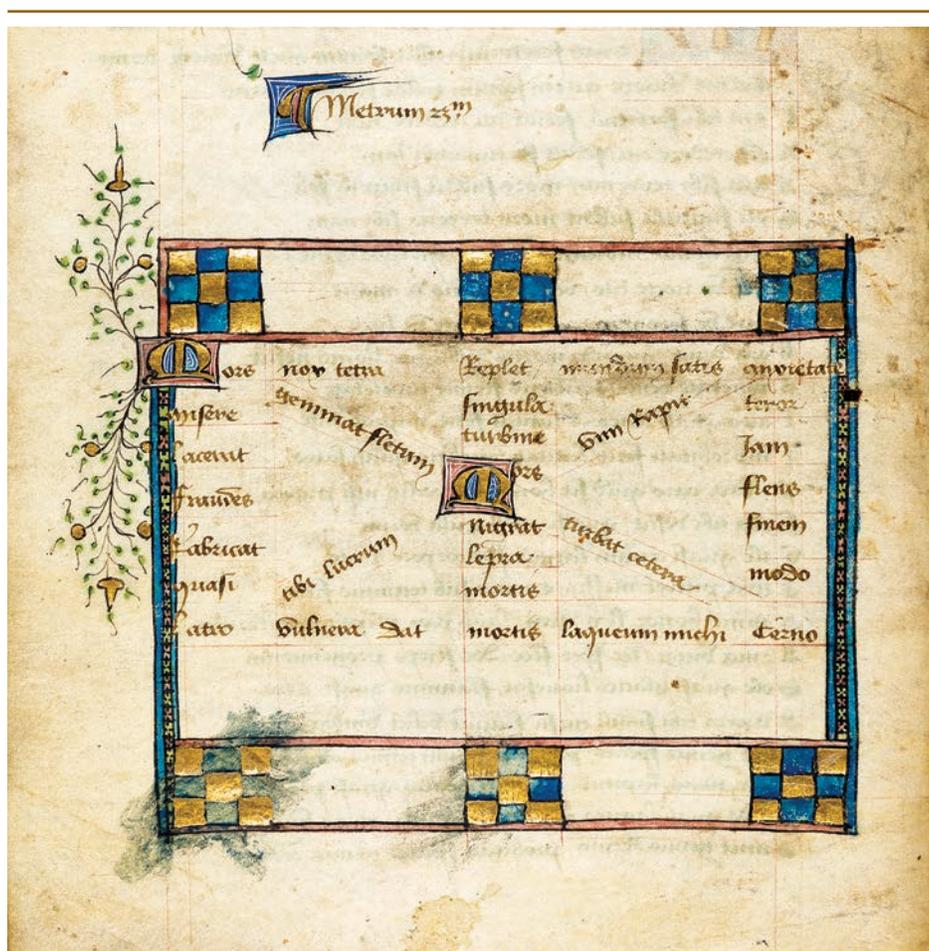
Ioli Kalavrezou

# THE DIAGRAM AS PARADIGM

## Cross-Cultural Approaches

*Edited by*

JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER, DAVID J. ROXBURGH,  
AND LINDA SAFRAN



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# THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD'S 'AYN SEAL

## A Safavid-Period Diagram as Cosmic Vision

CHRISTIANE GRUBER

**T**HE TURN OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WITNESSED A HIGH POINT FOR the “gunpowder” empires of the Islamic world, stretching from the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent to the Ottomans in Western Asia. In Iran, members of the ruling Safavid dynasty (1501–1722 CE; all subsequent dates are CE) also claimed preeminence in the area, adding a distinct Sufi and Twelver Shi‘i affiliation to their Persian-Muslim identity. The former attests to the Safavid rulers’ descent from a mystical brotherhood, while the latter represents the principal branch of Shi‘i Islam, which posits ‘Alī and his male descendants (the Imams) as the rightful heirs to Islamic religious and political power.

Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1588–1629), the most renowned among the Safavid monarchs, established a new capital in Isfahan around 1600. This thriving, cosmopolitan environment endowed the imperial city with its honorific rhyming epithet: *Isfahān niṣf-i jahān*, or “Isfahan, half the world.”<sup>1</sup> The city’s main square, known as *maydān-i shāh* (“The King’s Square”), brought together the major financial, political, and religious institutions at the same time as it provided a schematic rendering that hinted at world dominion—a status suggested by the square’s other appellation, *naqsh-i jahān*, “design,” “diagram,” or “map” of the world.<sup>2</sup>

A grand synthesis of the arts and sciences occurred at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries. For instance, Shah Sulaymān (r. 1666–1694) and several members of the Safavid ruling elite commissioned a series of illustrated multitext manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> Acting as a “state of the field” in each branch of knowledge, these portable encyclopedias include a number of diagrams.<sup>4</sup> Among them can be found a kind of cosmic compass that depicts the process of creation as emanating from the realm of the divine (*lāhūt*) all the way down to the realm of all physical manifestation, including humankind (*insān*) (Fig. 18.1). This intriguing diagram combines cosmological thought, the belief in the emanationist power of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and knowledge of the planets and nature. Taken together, these elements depict a grand vision of all creation radiating outward from the immaterial sphere of

☞ I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed and helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

1 Iskandar Beg Munshī, a historian who worked under the aegis of Shah ‘Abbās I, wrote poetic verses on the city’s global status and beauty, in which he states that “Isfahān is half the world they say, / But by so saying, they only go half-way.” Cited in R. D. McChesney, “Four Sources on Shah ‘Abbas’s Building of Isfahan,” *Muqarnas* 5 (1988): 103–34, at 110.

2 For a discussion of Isfahan’s urban layout and its palaces, see S. Babaic, *Isfahan and Its Palaces: Statecraft, Shi‘ism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran* (Edinburgh, 2008), as well as a forthcoming book by Farshid Emami.

3 These Safavid multitext manuscripts form the subject of a forthcoming volume of essays edited by Sonja Brentjes.

4 Illustrated multitext manuscripts containing scientific content and diagrams can be traced back to Iskandar Sulṭān (d. 1415), the Timurid governor of Fars in southern Iran, who commissioned portable miscellanies or “vademecum encyclopedias.” See P. Soucek, “The Manuscripts of Iskandar Sultan: Structure and Content,” in *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. L. Golombek and M. E. Subtelny (Leiden, 1992), 116–31.



still others, such as Āmulī, diagrams must display esoteric knowledge and cosmic correspondences within an overarching Twelver Shi'ī vision of the world; concurrently, they are thought to precipitate a spiritual death in the Sufi devotee who, upon reaching gnosis (*ma'rifa*), becomes overwhelmed in a visionary moment or event.<sup>8</sup>

In Islamic lands, cosmic diagrams were almost always embedded within the texts they illustrate. They were thought to function as indexical signs for a higher ontological reality, as visual aids to access the celestial world and as pictorial proxies for the transcendence of corporeal limits. Their multiple functions are matched by the panoply of terms used, which noticeably bear no equivalent to the English word “diagram” (Gk. *dia* + *gramma*), whose etymology points to the practice of marking or writing out by lines. Instead, in Arabic and other Islamicate languages, the diagram is known by other names, with *ṣūra* (form), *rasm* (drawing or picture), *shakl* (shape), *mithāl* (representation, likeness, or similitude), and *dā'ira* (circle) among the most common.<sup>9</sup> Frequently, Islamic renderings of the cosmos follow Ptolemaic celestial-sphere diagrams arranged as nested circles (*dawā'ir*).

By the 1600s, multiple strands of gnostic, cosmological, and sectarian thought coalesced into a larger “philosophical-Sufi amalgam” across the Islamic world.<sup>10</sup> In the Safavid capital, a group of theologians and their students came together to form what scholars have called the “School of Isfahan.”<sup>11</sup> Founded by the leading Persian

Twelver Shi'ī theologian and philosopher Mīr Dāmād (d. ca. 1631), this particular school of thought is characterized by its Shi'ī doctrinal orientation, its following of the Sufi metaphysical concepts as laid out by Ibn 'Arabī, and its synthesis of various sapiential sciences, chief among them the Peripatetic and Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) philosophical traditions.<sup>12</sup> This amalgam thus conjoined the philosophical principles as articulated by Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037) with the gnostic doctrines of the Persian philosopher Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and his successors.

In Iranian lands, the occult arts were of paramount importance to Muslim elite scholarly and spiritual pursuits during the early modern period.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, members of the School of Isfahan also included within their philosophical-gnostic explorations the science of letters (*ilm al-ḥurūf*)—in which each letter of the Arabic alphabet represents God's creative breath and cosmic force—and the science of numbers, with a special emphasis on alphanumeric computation (*abjad*) and the number-based philosophy of Pythagoras, both of which were believed to disclose the divine meanings and structures of the universe.<sup>14</sup> These many methods of contemplating the world in theological, philosophical, esotericist, letrist, and numerical terms came to be known collectively as “divine

of Isfahān,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman, 2 vols. (London, 1996), 2:597–634; and L. Lewisohn, “Sufism and the School of Isfahān: *Taṣawwuf* and *ʿIrḫān* in Late Safavid Iran,” in *The Heritage of Sufism*, ed. idem, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1999), 3:63–134.

12 H. Ziai, “Illuminationism,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/illuminationism> (last updated March 27, 2012).

13 M. Melvin-Koushki, “Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism,” *Arabica* 64.3–4 (2017): 287–95, at 293 (special issue: idem and N. Gardiner, eds., “Islamicate Occultism: New Perspectives”).

14 The arithmosophy of Pythagoras is present already in the *Rasā'il* (Epistles) written in the tenth or eleventh century by an Ismaili group of authors collectively known as *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Brethren of Purity). This compendium contains over fifty treatises on mathematical, natural, psychological, rational, and theological sciences. See especially I. R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā') (London, 1982). Moreover, for a discussion of the “Neopythagorean turn” in Safavid philosophy, see M. Melvin-Koushki, “World as (Arabic) Text: Mīr Dāmād and the Neopythagoreanization of Safavid Iran,” *Studia Islamica* 115.1 (2019): 378–431.

8 H. Corbin, “La science de la balance et les correspondances entre les mondes en gnose islamique (d'après l'oeuvre de Ḥaydar Āmolī, VIII<sup>e</sup>/XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle),” in idem, *Temple et contemplation* (Paris, 1980), 72, 114, available in English translation at <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Temple-and-Contemplation-by-Henry-Corbin.pdf>.

9 Karamustafa, “Cosmographical Diagrams,” 74.

10 For the expression “philosophical-Sufi amalgam,” see S. Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, 2016), esp. 31.

11 On Mīr Dāmād and the “School of Isfahan,” see, inter alia, S. Rizvi, “Isfahan School of Philosophy,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/isfahan-school-of-philosophy> (last updated April 5, 2012); S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York, 2006), 209–22; idem, “Spiritual Movements, Philosophy and Theology in the Safavid Period,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 6, *The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. P. Jackson and L. Lockhart (Cambridge, 1986), 656–97; H. Dabashi, “Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the ‘School

wisdom” (*ḥikma ilāhiyya*), itself a theosophical form of mysticism whose ultimate goal consisted of bringing humankind closer to God.<sup>15</sup>

### The Cosmic ‘Ayn Seal of Muḥammad’s Prophecy

It is from within this Shi‘i philosophical and esoteric context of the School of Isfahan that a large-scale diagram appears to have emerged (Fig. 18.2). Although illustrated in two recent exhibition catalogues, to date this item, held by the Farjam Foundation, remains an unstudied unicum.<sup>16</sup> Its time of production was most likely after the first half of the seventeenth century because it cites the Safavid gnostic philosopher Mīr Dāmād. Additionally, it seems to be the largest extant diagram of the early modern Islamic world: measuring 50 (w) by 72 (h) centimeters, this monumental artwork extends far beyond the confines of the manuscript format, in which small-scale diagrams more typically are found (as can be seen in Fig. 18.1). Instead, its substantial size, its manufacture on a fine cotton weave, and its lack of crease marks suggest that it was intended to be shown (and to withstand) hanging, a hypothesis that is supported by two minute holes puncturing the upper horizontal frame. Its stain marks also hint at exposure to water damage and humidity—perhaps even candlelight and incense smoke—for a period of time.

This diagram’s unprecedented size is matched by the complexity of its visual and textual contents, which include a gold crescent moon and a series of variously colored concentric circles accompanied by descriptive notations, quranic excerpts, and Persian poetic verses. Most felicitously, a caption located in its lower left corner

informs the viewers: “This is the shape/diagram [*shakl*] of the seal of prophethood [*muhr-i nubuvvat*] [on] the shoulder blades [*kitf*] of the Messenger of God (peace and prayers of God upon him and his family), [which is] in the form [*sūrat*] of the written [letter] [*maktūb*] ‘ayn.” In other words, this diagram depicts the mark of Muḥammad’s prophecy, a sign impressed on his physical body that served to confirm his selection and anointment by God. Most Islamic textual sources do not describe the Prophet Muḥammad’s seal of prophecy as shaped in the form of the letter ‘ayn, however. Rather, they state that it consisted of a fleshy or hairy protuberance or else looked like a cupping glass, a pigeon’s egg, the mark left behind by a leech, or the button of a tent.<sup>17</sup>

The “seal of prophethood” formed into the Arabic letter ‘ayn is as unusual as it is innovative. In this case, the letter is composed of the radiant crescent at the top followed below by a gold-and-blue circle that presents a vision of the earthly and heavenly realms. This large-scale diagram thereby shapes the macro- and microcosmos within a particular lettrist form whose various linguistic and symbolic associations, as will be shown, carry the Sufi Shi‘i imprint typical of the School of Isfahan.

A further analysis of the diagram’s textual contents can help clarify its religious and cultural valences. Beginning in the top corners, a series of mystical verses in Persian root the object in the history of Persian Sufism as well as the esotericist milieu of Safavid Isfahan. The upper left corner includes verses drawn from the collection of poems (*divān*) penned by the Persian mystical poet Sanā‘ī (d. 1131), in which the author speaks about a famous painting competition between the Romans and the Chinese.<sup>18</sup> The verses also

15 On *ḥikma* as Shi‘i gnosis and transcendental philosophy, see Dabashi, “Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the ‘School of Isfahān,” 625; on *ḥikma* as “philosophical mysticism,” see Lewisohn, “Sufism and the School of Isfahān,” 92; and on *ḥikma ilāhiyya* as a divine philosophy that brings the individual closer to God, see S. Rizvi, “Mīr Dāmād’s (d. 1631) *al-Qabasāt*: The Problem of the Eternity of the Cosmos,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. K. El-Rouayheb and S. Schmidtke (New York, 2017), 438–64, at 442.

16 See F. Leoni, ed., *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford, 2016), 79, 88, cat. no. 62; and C. Gruber, ed., *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time* (Toronto, 2019), 158–59, no. 40.

17 For a further discussion of the “seal of prophecy,” see C. Gruber, “‘Go Wherever You Wish, for Verily You Are Well Protected’: Seal Designs in Late Ottoman Amulet Scrolls and Prayer Books,” in *Visions of Enchantment: Occultism, Magic, and Visual Culture. Select Papers from the University of Cambridge Conference*, ed. D. Zamani and J. Noble (Somerset, UK, 2019), 23–35, at 25.

18 Sanā‘ī al-Ghaznavī, *Divān-i ḥakīm Sanā‘ī*, ed. M. R. Barzgar Khāliqī, 2 vols. (Tehran, 2014), 1:339. The painting competition between the Greeks and Chinese is discussed in a number of textual sources, including Niẓāmī’s (d. 1209 CE) *Khamsa* (Quintet). For its importance in discussing representational art as a means to explain Sufi ideas through a variety of theories concerned with visual perception, see P. P. Soucek, “Niẓāmī on Painters and



**FIG. 18.2.** Cosmic 'ayn diagram of Muḥammad's prophecy, probably Isfahan, first half of the seventeenth century. Farjam Foundation, London. Photo courtesy of the Farjam Foundation, DIFC, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

record Sanā'ī praising his own poetry as a cosmic structure that encompasses the nine heavenly spheres (sing. *charkh*) and seven earthly climes (sing. *iqlim*).

The verses in the diagram's upper right corner prove of paramount importance in dating and

contextualizing this large-scale artwork because they were composed by Mīr Dāmād.<sup>19</sup> These verses open his magnum opus, entitled *Jazavāt va mavāqīt* (Flaming embers and epiphanies), by praising the letters *nūn* and *'ayn*:

Painting," in *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. R. Ettinghausen (New York, 1972), 9–21; and for its role in conceptualizing the "portrait," see M. Milwright, "Rum, Sin, and the Idea of the 'Portrait' in Medieval Arabic Literary and Visual Culture," *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 28 (2010–11): 75–102.

19 Mīr Dāmād creatively composed Persian verses in dialogue with a number of Sufī poets, including Nizāmī; such poetic license allowed him an imaginative discourse. Dabashi, "Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the 'School of Iṣfahān,'" 621.

Two *nūns*, two *nūns*, which the pen does not  
write  
In every *nūn* there are two *nūns* from these  
two.  
Two *‘ayns*, two *‘ayns*, their numbers  
unconfined  
In every *‘ayn* there are two *‘ayns* from these  
two.<sup>20</sup>

Anchored in centuries-old Islamic traditions of uncovering the mystical meanings of Arabic letters and their cosmic implications, Mīr Dāmād’s lettrist verses focus on the *nūn* and *‘ayn* in particular.<sup>21</sup> They form a poetic prologue to his larger oeuvre, in which he further elaborates upon the mystical meanings of all letters in the Arabic alphabet. With regard to the letter *nūn*, he states in the twentieth chapter of his *Jazāvāt va mavāqīt* that it is the quintessential “letter of possibility” (*ḥarf-i imkān*): to wit, it is the “circle of the world of possibilities” (*dā’irat-i ‘ālam-i imkān*), the “arc of the world of divine command” (*qaws-i ‘ālam-i amr*), and the “arc of the created world” (*qaws-i ‘ālam-i khalq*). In addition, he calls the *nūn* the “world of intellect” (*‘ālam-i ‘aql*) and the “first intellect” (*‘aql-i avval*),<sup>22</sup> the latter a lettrist take on the Neoplatonic notion that the first or active intellect (*al-‘aql al-fā’āl*) set the entire cosmos into creation.<sup>23</sup>

Within Islamic tradition, the *nūn*’s importance can be traced back to the Quran, in particular verse 68:1, which mentions the “[letter] *n* and the pen” (*nūn wa-l-qalam*). Moreover, the letter



FIG. 18.3. The Arabic letter *nūn*. Photo in public domain

is associated with the terminal *n* of both words in the quranic expression *kun fa-yakūn* (Be, and it is), God’s existential fiat in which the *nūn* acts as the letterform equivalent to the verb “to be.”<sup>24</sup> Put more simply, in Islamic religious thought the letter *n* is above all the *n* of creation.

Over the centuries, Sufis and those interested in the occult and lettrist sciences were drawn to the letter *nūn*’s powerful symbolism, not only because of its linguistic association to these creative idioms found in the Quran but also because of the letter’s written form, which comprises a half-circle and central dot (Fig. 18.3). Among such mystics, Ibn ‘Arabī waxes poetic on the visual appearance of the letter *nūn*. In his *Futūḥāt makkīyya* (Meccan revelations), for example, he states that the letter is a whale and the cosmos; its diameter is the earth while its central dot is the primordial rock and a sacred pivot.<sup>25</sup> He illustrates this point with a drawing that, like other cosmograms included in his writings, seeks to geometrize cosmic structures (Fig. 18.4). Ibn ‘Arabī further elaborates this point in another treatise he dedicated to the letters *mīm* (*m*), *wāw* (*w*), and *nūn* (*n*). He explicates that the written letter *nūn* displays a half-circle (*niṣf dā’ira*) or half-globe (*niṣf al-kurra*), with the sphere of the sensible or earthly realities (*ḥiss/maḥsūsāt*) and hidden or spiritual realities (*ghayb/rūḥāniyyāt*) divided into two halves.<sup>26</sup>

20 Mīr Dāmād, *Jazāvāt va mavāqīt*, ed. ‘A. Awjabī (Tehran, 2001), 1.

21 Lettrism, or letter-based (*ḥurūfī*) Sufism, was founded during the fourteenth century by the mystic Faḥr al-Dīn ‘Aḥmad Rāzī (d. 1394). His most influential book was the *Jāvidānmāna* (Book of eternity), in which he explains the numerological significance of the letters of the Perso-Arabic alphabet along with their respective manifestations of the divine essence; H. Algar, “Astarābādī, Faḥr al-Dīn,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/astarabadi-fazlallah-sehab-al-din-b> (last updated August 17, 2011).

22 Mīr Dāmād, *Jazāvāt va mavāqīt*, chap. 20 (on the letter *nūn*), 227–29.

23 In Islamic philosophy, the first intellect (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) is indebted to the Aristotelian notion of the prime mover (*primum movens*), that is, an “unmoved mover” or “first cause.” As a supra-physical entity, it is also equated to the active intellect. I. Bodnar, “Aristotle’s Natural Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 edition), ed. E. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/aristotle-natphil/>.

24 The expression *kun fa-yakūn* is used at least eight times in the Quran; among others, see 2:117.

25 S. Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany, NY, 2005), 136–37 and fig. 3.9.

26 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Le livre du mīm, du wāw et du nūn*, ed. and trans. C.-A. Gilis (Beirut, 2002), 74–75.

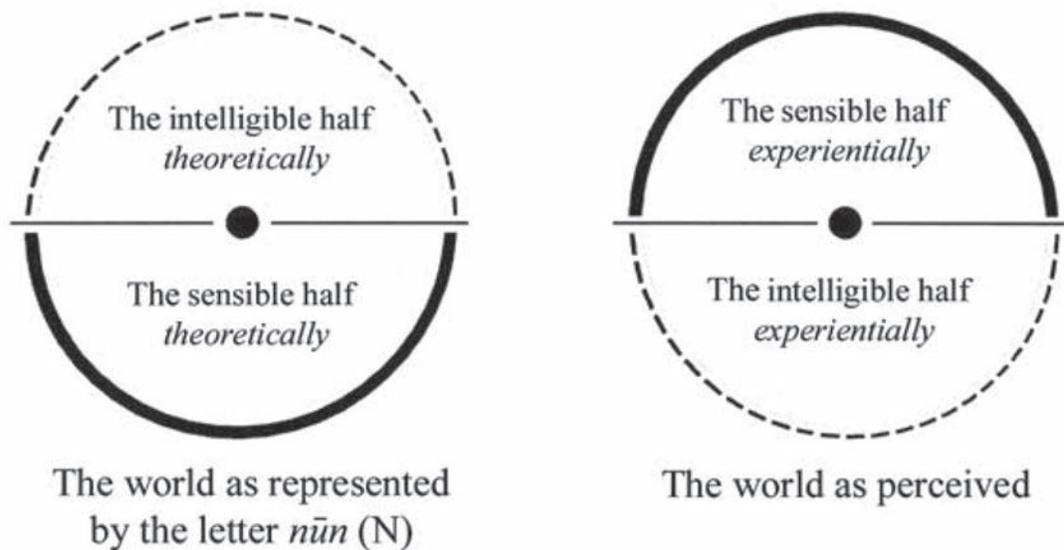


FIG. 18.4. Diagram of the Arabic letter *nūn* in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt makkīyya* (Meccan revelations). Photo from S. Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany, NY, 2005), 136, fig. 3.9

Mīr Dāmād’s mention of two *nūns* in his verses likely refers to the visible and invisible parts of the world—that is, the sensible and intelligible divide that demarcates the earthly and the angelic realms. The structural aspects of the letter’s form, made of a canoe-like curvature and a central point, are thus folded into an overarching cosmic imagination that relies heavily on diagrammatic thought. Such visual correlations and convergences carry significant epistemological power, a phenomenon typical of global practices involving pictorial schemata.<sup>27</sup>

As it relates to the Safavid diagram, however, the letter *‘ayn* takes precedence since its form determines the overall shape of this particular cosmic-letterist scheme. Just like the *nūn*, the *‘ayn* forms the subject of an entire chapter (no. 25) in Mīr Dāmād’s *Jazāvat va mavāqīt*, in which the philosopher states that the letter displays important alphanumerical symbolism and bears a range of spiritual qualities. For example, he states that in *abjad* computation, the letter is a representation of the number 70, which is equivalent to the expression “Alive among all the living” (*ḥayy al-aḥyā’*), a descriptor of the everlasting

Lord. Moreover, in degrees (*darajāt*),<sup>28</sup> the letter is equivalent to 130, a numerical value synonymous with “perfection” or “completeness” (*mukammil*).

Mīr Dāmād goes on to state that the *‘ayn* symbolizes “a spiritual ascension” (*mi-rāj-i rūḥānī*) since it initiates the word for “ascent” (*‘urūj*). This rising upwards, he further stresses, takes the spiritual journeyman from the “level of the soul” (*martaba-yi naḥsiyya*) to that of the intellect (*martaba-yi ‘aqliyya*) and from the “fragmentary or particular degree” (*daraja-yi juz’iyya*) to the universal degree (*daraja-yi kullīyya*).<sup>29</sup> Based on Mīr Dāmād’s metaphysical musings about the letter *‘ayn*, this particular diagram could have acted as a prophetic sign representing or catalyzing a spiritual voyage to the celestial realms. Hence, it could have provided a visual tool to help pious viewers reach and perhaps gaze upon God.

28 When Mīr Dāmād states that *‘ayn* is 130 in degrees, he is referring to the fact that the numerical value of the letter *‘ayn* when spelled out in full is equivalent to 130 (*‘ayn* = 70, *yā’* = 10, *nūn* = 50). Al-Būnī calls this the value of a letter as computed by its constituent elements (*bi-l-tafṣīl*). I wish to thank Noah Gardiner for explaining Mīr Dāmād’s uncommon use of the term *darajāt*, as well as the anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the alphanumerical computation here only works if the two Arabic words *ḥayy* and *mukammil* are read without consonantal gemination (*tashdīd*), i.e., as *ḥay* and *mikmal*.

29 Mīr Dāmād, *Jazāvat va mavāqīt*, 246–47.

27 J. Bender and M. Marrinan, *The Culture of Diagram* (Stanford, 2010), 13, 17.

At the same time this Safavid diagram may also have served as a synoptic blueprint for Mīr Dāmād's *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*. Composed in Persian at the command of Shah 'Abbās I, this treatise puts on display the mastery and range of this Shi'i theologian's metaphysics, which is primarily concerned with the nature of existence beginning from divine effusion, descent, or theophany (*tajallī*) to man's eventual ascent (*'urūj*) and return to a cosmic source or origin.<sup>30</sup> Essentially a work of lettrist occultism, *Jazavāt va mavāqīt* engages with the philosophical writings of Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā, the Illuminationist theories of Suhrawardī, and the mystical symbolism of letters and their relations to the planets as found in the Sufi writings of Ibn 'Arabī. Throughout his text Mīr Dāmād systematically develops a number of key themes, chief among them man's capacity to "break out of [his] body" (*inqiṭā' az badan*) and experience a "suspension of the soul" (*ta'alluq-i nafs*) in order to reach a total "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) in God's presence.<sup>31</sup>

Most germane to the present discussion, the text of the *Jazavāt va mavāqīt* includes a number of elements that pervade the diagram as well. For instance, the diagram's top section identifies the edge of the known world, where "the fabulous griffin" (*al-'anqā' al-mughrib*)<sup>32</sup> and the mythological Mount Qāf (*al-jabal qāf*) are located and beyond which lies the divine realm (Fig. 18.5). There, the diagram's viewers are informed, the first manifestation of God's essence (*dhāt*) is "the name One" (*ism al-aḥad*), whose pure being is

30 On the *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*, see S. H. Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. M. A. Razavi (Richmond, UK, 1996), 250–54; idem, "The School of Ispahan," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy: With Short Accounts of Other Disciplines and the Modern Renaissance in Muslim Lands*, ed. M. M. Sharif, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1963–66), 2:917–22, also at <http://muslimphilosophy.com/hmp/XLVII-Forty-seven.pdf>; and Dabashi, "Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the 'School of Iṣfahān,'" 614.

31 On the "breaking out of the body" and the "suspension of the soul," see Mīr Dāmād, *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*, 75–82; and on the "unity of being," 43–50.

32 This term appears to have been borrowed from Ibn 'Arabī's early text entitled *Kitāb 'Anqā' mughrib* (The book of the fabulous griffin), his first major work on Sufi sainthood (*walāya*) and his own role as the "seal of [God's] friends/saints" (*khatam al-awliyā'*); on this text, see G. T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-'Arabī's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden, 1999).

located in the cosmos prior to its earthly manifestation. As the inscription inside the gold crescent further notes, God's theophany can be ascertained through several modalities and practices, including the cultivation of knowledge (*'ilm*), the presence of existence or being (*wujūd*), the engaging in spiritual contemplation or witnessing (*shuhūd*), and the exuding and perception of light (*nūr*).

Below the gold crescent the inscribed text goes on to explain that the first theophany (*tajallī*) is the "crescent of appearance" (*bilāl al-zuhūr*), which is referred to by a variety of names, among which are the "name of God" (*ism Allāh*), the "Muḥammadan light" (*al-nūr al-muḥammadī*), the "light of lights" (*nūr al-anwār*), the "absolute vicegerency" (*al-walāya al-muṭlaqa*), the letter *n* in Q 68:1: *nūn wa-l-qalam*, and the "Muḥammadan reality" (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*). In this section of the diagram it is clear that this Safavid cosmic scheme provides a lunar metaphor overlaid with lettrist thought and Illuminationist allegory to promote the concept of vicegerency (*walāya*), itself an inheritance of prophetic authority to which both Shi'i imams and Sufi saints have traditionally laid claim. In addition, it harmonizes well with Mīr Dāmād's emanationist ontology, which posits that God is a "light of lights" that engenders effusion or theophany, from which springs forth the universal intellect (*'aql-i kull*), from which a progression of other emanations occur until the material world emerges.<sup>33</sup>

These elements not only typify the thought of the School of Isfahan but are also hallmarks of Mīr Dāmād's *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*, which is dedicated to explaining the cycle of emanation of divine presence to the physical world and its final return to it. For its part, humankind stands at the center of this chain of being, capable of both descent from God and ascent back to him. In order to return to God's realm, Mīr Dāmād continues, man must learn the beautiful names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), engage the imaginative

33 I. Netton, "Suhrawardī's Heir? The Ishrāqī Philosophy of Mīr Dāmād," in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 3, *Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501–1750): The Safavid and Mughal Period*, ed. L. Lewisohn and D. Morgan, online ed. (Oxford, 2007), 225–46, at 238; Dabashi, "Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the 'School of Iṣfahān,'" 614; and Nasr, "School of Ispahan," 918.



FIG. 18.5. Detail of Fig. 18.2, showing “the fabulous griffin” (*al-‘anqā’ al-mughrib*) and the mythological Mount Qāf (*al-jabal qāf*). Photo by Christiane Gruber

and intellectual senses, and understand the esoteric meanings of the Quran by mastering the symbolism of the letters it contains. The latter practice is especially crucial since the Quran is considered the archetype of all manifestation or, in Mīr Dāmād’s own words, the ultimate “Muḥammadan reality.”<sup>34</sup>

Its various elements taken together, the diagram therefore appears to represent the totality of

existence as embodied by the ‘*ayn*’-shaped seal of Muḥammad’s prophecy. It also stands as a letterist indexical sign for the Quran, which is suggested by the diagram’s inclusion of an inscription identifying God’s Logos by the command “Say, ‘he’” (*qul huwa*), which is calligraphically molded into the shape of the letter ‘*ayn*’ on the work’s right vertical border. The expression *qul huwa* initiates one of the last, shortest, and most apotropaic chapters of the holy book (112), which invites believers to declare, “Say, ‘he is God, One, God the Eternal, he does not beget nor is he begotten, nor is there to him any equivalent’” (*qul huwa Allāhu aḥad / Allāhu al-ṣamad / lam yalid wa-lam yūlad / wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwwan*

34 On man’s four degrees of perception—that is, sensation (*ihsās*), imagination (*takhayyul*), apprehension (*tawahhum*), and intellection (*ta’qqul*)—see Nasr, “School of Ispahan,” 921; on the Quran as the ultimate “Muḥammadan reality,” 922; and on the “Muḥammadan reality” as God’s eternal, preexisting Logos and light, see Corbin, “La science de la balance,” 90.

*ahād*). As a result, the *‘ayn* diagram must have gained greater potency as a large-scale, mystico-cosmological quranic amulet.

### Lettering Shi‘ism: An ‘Alid ‘Ayn?

Beyond providing a schematic résumé of Mīr Dāmād’s magnum opus and an “ideovision” of the nature of existence,<sup>35</sup> the diagram also reasserts a Shi‘i view of the cosmos, the latter already detectable in the gold crescent in which the “absolute vicegerency” may refer to Imam ‘Alī and his descendants. For example, in the upper right corner of the lower cosmic circle, letters cascade down alongside the celestial spheres and planets from a half-circle inscribed with the names of Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn (Fig. 18.6). These five members of the Prophet Muḥammad’s household (*abl al-bayt*) represent the “Holy Family” or “Holy Pentad” central to Shi‘i thought and practice.<sup>36</sup> In this diagram they are aligned to the soul (*naḥs*), heat (*ḥarārat*), coolness (*barūdat*), the body (*jasad*), moisture/humidity (*ruṭūbat*), and contraction/dryness (*yubūsat*).<sup>37</sup> While the Prophet Muḥammad stands for the soul, the other four members of his family personify the four natures. This quadrature provides an underlying cosmic order, much like the four elements of fire, water, air, and earth in Islamic philosophical and mystical writings.<sup>38</sup> However, in this case a quadrature is expanded into the Shi‘i pentad—with the Prophet Muḥammad acting as the circle’s innermost point and soul.

Moreover, around the name “Muḥammad” is inscribed the Shi‘i hadith in which the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have proclaimed: “I am the city of knowledge, mercy, paradise, and wisdom, and ‘Alī is its gate.” Here, Imam ‘Alī’s

vicegerency and supremacy are supported textually and visually, especially by his name’s inscription above—and not below—Muḥammad’s name, itself executed in a black ink that does not exude a golden aura like the names of the other four members of the *abl al-bayt*, which are executed in radiant gold pigment. This strategic use of chrysography echoes a number of Shi‘i texts that stipulate that the names of the *abl al-bayt* are inscribed on the four legs of God’s throne and that the imams were preexistent in the celestial spheres as “silhouettes of light” (*ashbāḥ-i nūr*) well before their eventual physical manifestation on earth.<sup>39</sup> Bracketed by an astrological and letterist framework, this Shi‘i quadrature here serves as the “prime vector” of *walāya*.<sup>40</sup>

The supreme position of ‘Alī’s name invites us to return to this cosmic diagram to explore the letter *‘ayn*’s potential sectarian implications. After all, the letter *‘ayn* forms the incipit letter of his given name, ‘Alī. Ergo, the large *‘ayn* diagram might function as a cosmic letterist grapheme for the Imam as well as for the embodiment of the notion of *walāya* as articulated within a Safavid Twelver Shi‘i worldview. For this reason, the diagram may be read as both the singular *‘ayn* of ‘Alī and the collective *‘ayn* of the ‘Alids.

This emphasis on ‘Alī also appears in Mīr Dāmād’s *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*, which opens with the verses, “O herald of the nation [*alam-i millat*] and soul of the Prophet [*naḥs-i rasūl*], the ring of your knowledge surrounds the ears of intelligences [. . .]. O glorified treasure of the descent of revelation [*tanzīl-i waḥy*], you are the holy interpreter of revelation [*ta’wīl-i waḥy*].”<sup>41</sup> In these verses, ‘Alī is praised as the life-force of the Prophet Muḥammad, as the human gem

35 The term “ideovision” is borrowed from L. Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. T. J. Trenn and R. K. Merton, trans. F. Bradley and T. J. Trenn (Chicago, 1979), 125–45.

36 On the “Holy Pentad,” see F. Suleman and S. Jiwa, “Shi‘i Art and Ritual: Contexts, Definitions, and Expressions,” in *People of the Prophet’s House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi‘i Islam*, ed. F. Suleman (London, 2015), 13–29, at 16.

37 Here, for reasons that will require further exploration, both coolness and the body are associated with Fāṭima.

38 Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*, 121, 123.

39 M. A. Amir-Moezzi, “The Pre-Existence of the Imam,” in idem, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. D. Streight (Albany, NY, 1994), 140–41; idem, “The Imam in Heaven,” in idem, *The Spirituality of Shi‘i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London, 2011), 169–92, at 180; and M. Asatryan, “An Early Shi‘i Cosmology: *Kitāb al-ashbāḥ wa-l-aẓilla* and Its Milieu,” *Studia Islamica* 110 (2015): 1–80, at 6–8.

40 M. Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition,” *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* 5.1 (2017): 127–99, at 189.

41 Nasr, “Spiritual Movements, Philosophy, and Theology in the Safavid Period,” 671 (with slight alterations to the English translation); and Mīr Dāmād, *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*, 2–3.



**FIG. 18.6.**  
Detail of Fig. 18.2,  
showing a half-circle  
inscribed with the  
names of the Prophet  
Muḥammad, 'Alī,  
Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and  
al-Ḥusayn. Photo by  
Christiane Gruber

of sacred revelation, and as the personification of quranic exegesis, itself a scriptural practice believed to catalyze a spiritual ascension back into the realm of God. In its 'Alid articulation, this Safavid diagram's epistemic parameters expand to act as a "Shi'ified" cipher of the process of cosmic descent and ascent.

From the sixteenth century onward, a number of other *'ayn* seals and *'ayn*-based calligraphic diagrams were made. For example, Safavid prayer scrolls at times include seals with 'Alī's name written four times, with a central *'ayn* acting as a centrifugal quatrefoil. These *'ayn*-cum-'Alī graphic constructs may be preceded or followed by the Shi'i petitionary invocation to 'Alī (*nād-i 'Alī*) as the dispenser of miracles and succor in trying times.<sup>42</sup> At other times, 'Alī is acclaimed

via the popular Shi'i laudatory formula "Alī is the vicegerent of God" (*'Alī walī Allāh*). Also known as the *walāya*, the expression *'Alī walī Allāh* makes a strong claim for Shi'i authority and legitimacy, particularly as it refers to the Prophet Muḥammad appointing his son-in-law as his rightful successor (*walī*) immediately prior to his death in a sermon at Ghadir Khumm.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to being uttered aloud and inscribed through script, it also was formed into calligrams, as can be seen in an Ottoman Bektashi Shi'i calligraphic panel made in the

Persia," in *Persian Art: Image-Making in Eurasia*, ed. Y. Kadoi (Edinburgh, 2018), 78–101, at 91, fig. 5.7.

<sup>43</sup> Safavid texts record the Prophet Muḥammad's appointment of 'Alī as his *walī* during his farewell pilgrimage. For example, in his *Kitāb al-Irshād* (Book of guidance), the Safavid Shaykh al-Mufid records Muḥammad as having stated, "Whomever I am the master (*mawlā*) of, this man, 'Alī, is his master." Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitāb al-Irshād / The Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imams*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (Elmhurst, NY, 1981), 12.4.

<sup>42</sup> For a fourfold calligram of 'Alī's name accompanied by the *nād-i 'Alī* included in a Safavid prayer scroll, see T. Nünlist, "Devotion and Protection: Four Amuletic Scrolls from Safavid



**FIG. 18.7.** Bektashi Shi'i calligraphic panel inscribed with the expression *‘Alī walī Allāh* written in mirror script, Ottoman lands, ca. 1720–30. Library of Congress, African and Middle Eastern Division, 1-86-154.130. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC

1720s (Fig. 18.7). In this example, the expression *‘Alī walī Allāh* is written twice, in mirror script, with the two *‘ayns* of *‘Alī* facing each other, resembling two eyeballs. This redoubling calligraphic technique endows the composition with a certain degree of iconicity despite its skirting the figural, anthropomorphic mode.<sup>44</sup> The same holds true for our Safavid *‘ayn* diagram, which resembles a crescent-shaped head looking upward and surmounting a circular body with four limbs, suggestive of two arms and two legs stretched out in a position of embrace or exaltation.

Although it is unique in its monumental size and cosmological content, the Safavid Shi'i *‘ayn* diagram, quite possibly produced during the second half of the seventeenth century, foreshadows Ottoman seal designs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A number of Ottoman prayer books produced at this time include a drawing (*resim*) or the shape (*shakl*) of the letter *‘ayn*. In these illustrated prayer miscellanies, *‘ayn* seals are either identified as the drawing of the “eye upon God” (*‘ayn ‘alā Allāh*) or the

44 İ. C. Schick, “The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53–54 (2008): 211–24; and on mirror script more generally, see E. Akin-Kıvanç, *Muthanna: Mirror Writing in Islamic Calligraphy* (Bloomington, 2020).

“eye of *‘Alī*” (*‘ayn-i ‘Alī*) (Figs. 18.8–9). With a visual emphasis given to two swooping *‘ayns* that act as carriers of the name of God, these sphragistic compositions suggest two eyes incubating a vision of the divine within a letterist vessel, the latter filled with repeated invocations to God (*yā Allāh, yā Allāh*, etc.) and the declaration of the devotee’s placing his or her trust in God (*tawakkaltu ‘alā Allāh*). Often such seals also include the quranic promise that “God will safeguard you from them. He is all-hearing and all-knowing” (2:137: *fa-sayakfikaḥum Allāh waḥuwa al-samī‘ al-‘alīm*), as well as the pious affirmation that “God suffices me and he is the best guardian” (*ḥasbiya Allāh wa-ni‘ma al-wakīl*). Whether the *‘ayn* is associated with God or *‘Alī*, the iconotextual makeup of the manuscripts’ illustrations renders it clear that this type of amuletic design serves to reaffirm the ability of God, and God alone, to guide and guard those within the faith community.

Unlike Ottoman seals, the Safavid diagram functions as a Shi'i letterist cosmograph that provides viewers with an epiphanic vision of all existence, from beginning to end, as carefully laid out in Mīr Dāmād's *Jazavāt va mavāqīt*. Despite their divergences, Safavid and Ottoman diagrammatic traditions similarly engage with the semiotic potential of the *‘ayn*, a letter of the alphabet whose name, as a noun, also means “spring,” “eye,” and “sameness.” The word's semiotic capaciousness catalyzed a number of religious and philosophical concepts in various Islamic contexts. For example, al-Būnī states that the *‘ayn* is the first of the luciform secrets and carries the forces of God's throne; accordingly, the celestial spheres are encompassed by the thronal *‘ayn* as “the egg encompasses the yolk.”<sup>45</sup> Beyond a numinous and embryonic interpretation of the letter, the *‘ayn* likewise can carry sectarian implications since it serves as the first letter of *‘Alī*'s name. Indeed, in Shi'i Ismaili Islam, two sects known as the *‘ayniyya* (followers of the letter *‘ayn*) and the *mīmiyya* (followers of the letter *mīm*) stress the superhumanity of *‘Alī* and the Prophet Muḥammad, respectively. A twelfth-century text summarizes this divide in core belief in the following words: “Some believe in the divinity of

45 Gardiner, “Diagrams and Visionary Experience,” fig. 7.



FIG. 18.8. The drawing (*resim*) of the “eye upon God” (*ʿayn ʿalā Allāh*), illustrated prayer book, Ottoman lands, 1194*b* (1780). The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.950, fol. 8r*v*. Photo courtesy of the Morgan Library and Museum, New York City

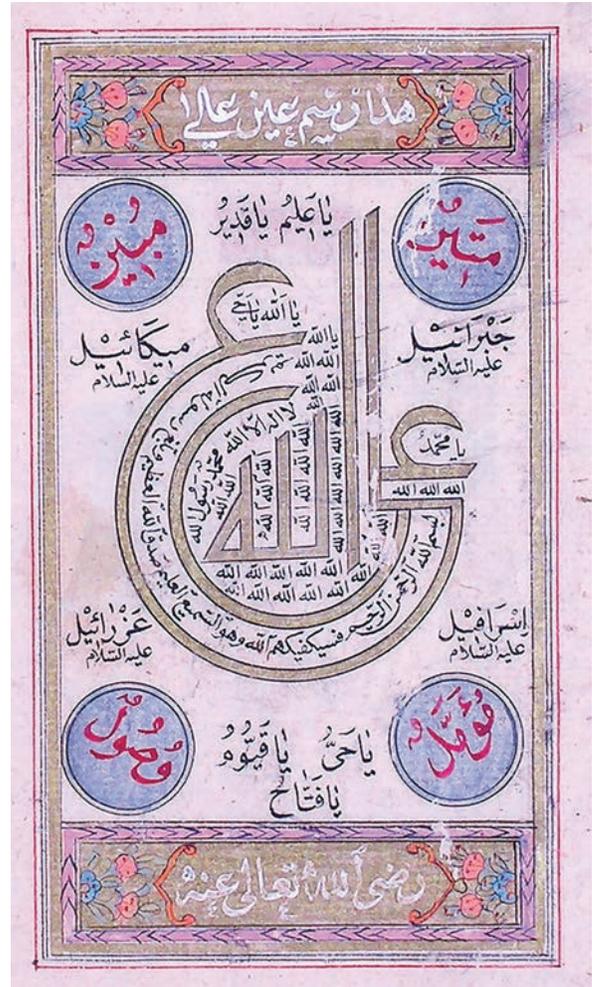


FIG. 18.9. The drawing (*resim*) of the “eye of ‘Alī” (*ʿayn-i ʿAlī*), illustrated prayer book, Ottoman lands, 1226*b* (1811/2). Sadberk Hanım Museum, ms. Küt. 558, fol. 46*v*. Photo courtesy of the Sadberk Hanım Museum, Istanbul

both ‘Alī and Muḥammad, but still think ‘Alī superior; these are called the ‘Ayniyya.”<sup>46</sup> Based on this lettrist principle, it could be argued that, although acting as a letter-mark for the Prophet Muḥammad’s seal of prophecy, the Safavid *ʿayn* diagram embodies above all ‘Alī, thereby reaffirming the latter’s supreme rank.

The religio-cultural milieu of the diagram’s manufacture was, however, Twelver—and not Ismaili—Shi’ism, and, more precisely, it is clearly connected to the ambit of Mīr Dāmād. For this

philosopher of the School of Isfahan, the *ʿayn* helps to explicate a number of precepts, above all those concerned with experiential knowledge and the establishment of reality. Touching upon both themes, his *Kitāb al-Qabasāt* (The book of blazing brands) includes a number of references to the name of the letter *ʿayn* as a word. In the book’s introduction, he states that the clarity of “objective certainty” (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) can be achieved by means of demonstration. According to the Quran and the religious sciences, such certitude is reached via reasoning or cognitive certainty (*ʿilm al-yaqīn*) as well as by means of optical perception or “visual certainty”

46 M. Brett, “The Mīm, the ‘Ayn, and the Making of Ismā‘īlism,” *BSOAS* 57.1 (1994): 25–39, at 25.

(*‘ayn al-yaqīn*).<sup>47</sup> A visual-sensorial experience—that is, the use of the eyeball—is thus thought to undergird an epistemological knowledge of the world.

In following Ibn ‘Arabī’s stipulation that a sign must correlate to its referent, Mīr Dāmād goes on to posit the following semiotic principle: the relationship between existence and being, between the divine and the real (*‘aynī*), must be predicated on the criterion of sameness (*‘ayniyya*).<sup>48</sup> Existential forms occur in time, and temporal existents or “real similitudes” (*muthul ‘ayniyya*) aid in the intelligible appreciation of the cosmic system. Such signifier-forms provide a summative consideration of the universe.<sup>49</sup> In a very profound sense, then, these “real similitudes” function in a manner similar to the Safavid *‘ayn* diagram, whose overall lettrist shape and textual content make it an epistemic image par excellence. As an image that translates “abstract epistemological priorities into concrete pictures,”<sup>50</sup> the cosmic *‘ayn* diagram hints, through the principle of lettrist similitude (*‘ayniyya*) and the power of visual perception and optical certitude (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), at ‘Alī’s standing as the ultimate existence and presence of God in the observable, material world.

### Pendant Interworlds: Mīr Dāmād’s Ecstatic Visions

Here, a vision of an ‘Alid cosmos is not confined to the limitations of a pocket-size prayer book; rather, it is produced as a large-scale image meant to be hung on a wall. The practice of suspension hints at other possibilities in interpreting the *‘ayn* diagram, especially since Mīr Dāmād himself speaks at length about an intermediary world known as the “world of similitudes” (*‘ālam*

*al-mithāl*).<sup>51</sup> This mesocosmos located between the realms of the intelligible and the perceptible is believed to include “suspended images” (*muthul mu‘allaqa*),<sup>52</sup> whose bodies are imaginal and whose matter is spiritual.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Mīr Dāmād elaborates upon the notion of the circle (*dā‘ira*) and the simile (*tashbīh*), both of which are effective to describe and reify God’s divine order.<sup>54</sup> His analogical thought suggests that the Safavid diagram could be interpreted as a circular “suspended image” that metaphorically represents a mystical interworld, an “imaginary-real” place in which “images descend and souls ascend to meet spiritually.”<sup>55</sup> Both the mesocosmos, as a realm of similitudes, and the diagram, as a graphically rendered epiphany, therefore can be understood as a locus in which man’s spiritual journey and rapprochement to an ontological source can be hastened.<sup>56</sup>

While the diagram may serve as a visualized “CliffsNotes” of sorts to Mīr Dāmād’s work or a schematized ‘Alid image of cosmic in-betweenness, it also may have been used to prompt a cathartic form of ecstasy in its devout viewers. This third hypothesis is supported by another short text composed by Mīr Dāmād, entitled *al-Risāla al-khal‘iyya* (Treatise of disassociation), in which he describes two ecstatic visions that he experienced in the years 1602–3 and 1614.<sup>57</sup> Both of these visions found the Safavid theologian entering a state of trans-consciousness,

47 Mīr Dāmād, *Kitāb al-Qabasāt: The Book of Blazing Brands*, trans. K. A. Brown (New York, 2009), 1, n. 2; and idem, “Time, Perpetuity, and Eternity: Mīr Dāmād’s Theory of Perpetual Creation and the Trifold Division of Existence. An Analysis of *Kitāb al-Qabasāt: The Book of Blazing Brands*” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 28, n. 42.

48 Brown, “Time, Perpetuity, and Eternity,” 119, 209.

49 Ibid., 497, 512.

50 L. Daston, “Epistemic Images,” in *Vision and Its Instruments: Art, Science, and Technology in Early Modern Europe*, ed. A. Payne (University Park, PA, 2015), 13–35, at 18.

51 Mīr Dāmād, *Jazāvāt va mavāqīt*, 62–67 on *‘ālam al-muthul* according to the Peripatetics and Illuminationists, and 167–70 on *‘ālam al-mithāl*.

52 S. J. Ashtiyāni and H. Corbin, *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens: Depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu’à nos jours* (Tehran, 1971), 1:27; and H. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste de l’Iran mazdéen à l’Iran shī‘ite* (Paris, 1979), 155.

53 On the “imaginal body” (*jism mithālī*), see Ashtiyāni and Corbin, *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens*, 1:26; and, on “spiritual matter” (*māddat rūhāniyya*), *ibid.*, 1:28–29.

54 Mīr Dāmād, *Jazāvāt va mavāqīt*, 14–16 on *dā‘ira*; and 21–25 on *tashbīh*.

55 F. Rahman, “Dream, Imagination, and *‘Ālam al-Mithāl*,” in *The Dream and Human Societies*, ed. G. von Grunebaum and R. Caillois (Berkeley, 1966), 414, 417.

56 On the transcendence of estrangement, see Rahman, “Dream, Imagination, and *‘Ālam al-Mithāl*,” 418.

57 For an analysis of the treatise as well as its transcription in Arabic and translation in French, see H. Corbin, “Confessions extatiques de Mīr Dāmād, maître de théologie à Ispahan (ob. 1041/1631–1632),” in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, 3 vols. (Damascus, 1956–57), 1:331–78.

in which he left behind his body and found himself, if only briefly, in an atemporal world of cosmic unity and harmony.

Mīr Dāmād's first vision occurred in a mosque in Qom. It came to him upon entering into a state of sleep, at which time he became enraptured and witnessed a radiant light (*nūr sha' sha'nī*).<sup>58</sup> The author tells us that he was surrounded by the Prophet Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn, while the angels also gathered around him and God contained him. Upon waking he bemoaned the loss of his ecstasy, wishing to retain it until the Day of Resurrection.<sup>59</sup> As Henri Corbin has noted, Mīr Dāmād's first vision describes a cosmic integration within a Twelver Shi'i typology, the whole of which appears rather mandala-like in its overall scheme.<sup>60</sup> While the mandala metaphor is intriguing, the newly discovered Safavid diagram suggests another, more intriguing possibility: that is, Mīr Dāmād's vision may have been rendered visually permanent through our large 'ayn diagram, radiating the light of a crescent moon and inscribed with the names of the *abl al-bayt*.

Mīr Dāmād's second vision occurred when he was secluded in one of his personal retreats (sing. *khalwa*). Upon reciting God's ninety-nine beautiful names, he entered a cosmic realm that forced him into *ekstasis*—that is, into a mystical state of being rapt outside of oneself. He then became absorbed and annihilated in God's light and felt a divine ecstasy (*khātifa-yi qudsiyya*) that ripped him from his body (*al-wakar al-judānī*).<sup>61</sup> Mīr Dāmād goes on to tell us that he broke the "link of the chain of sensible perception" and unbound the "knot of the net of physical nature," a movement that allowed him to fly into the angelic world, where he fully divested himself of his physical body (*khal'atu badanī*). Finally, he arrived in the world of "meta-time" (*dahr*)<sup>62</sup>—that is, the

locus of all existences, be they past and future, divine and natural, celestial and material, fleeting and eternal. Unfortunately, however, an intense occult clamor woke him up from his ecstasy, bringing him back to this world and leaving him with nothing but feelings of nostalgia, desire, and sadness. Perhaps then, the Safavid diagram served to reify Mīr Dāmād's second vision in a schematic manner so as to explain his experience of cosmic disembodiment to his students, followers, and his royal companions 'Abbās I and Ṣāfi.

Returning to the diagram, one last element may point to its possible context and use. Within the cosmic circle, a distended, star-like shape executed in blue ink includes the names of the seven days of the week in each of its points (Fig. 18.10). From one day to the next, a corresponding Sufi practice is listed: for example, from Sunday to Monday, the mystic should invoke God through remembrance (*dhikr*), and then, for each night of the week, he must engage in fasting, silence, vigil, seclusion, intellection, and repentance, respectively.<sup>63</sup> This graphic rendition of weekly Sufi praxis suggests a fourth possibility, namely, that the diagram may have hung on a wall, where it was used for contemplation by the followers or pupils of Mīr Dāmād, whom the Safavid Sufi theologian addresses, in another treatise, as his "brothers of self-purification" and "brothers of retreat and solitude."<sup>64</sup>

While the practice of suspending or drawing diagrams on walls is rare in the Islamic world,<sup>65</sup> in this instance it is suggested by the item's large size, cotton fabric, and two piercings. Hanging

58 Ibid., 356.

59 Ibid., 357.

60 Ibid., 358–59.

61 Ibid., 367–71.

62 *Dahr* is a philosophical concept that pervades Mīr Dāmād's writings. It is understood as "meta-time," an "eternal coming-into-being," the "metaphysical dimension of all non-material things," "a kind of eternity intermediary between the dimension of absolute timelessness and the dimension of time," and/or "pure time in which existence and nonexistence

are simultaneous and co-present." See Netton, "Suhrawardī's Heir?," 236–37, 243; and F. Rahman, "Mīr Dāmād's Concept of *Hudūth Dahrī*: A Contribution to the Study of God-World Relationship Theories in Safavid Iran," *JNES* 39.2 (1980): 139–51, at 142. It is also described as a kind of circular time that is "not unidirectional but composed of cycles of ontological processes." S. H. Rizvi, "Between Time and Eternity: Mīr Dāmād on God's Creative Agency," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17.2 (2006): 158–76, at 159.

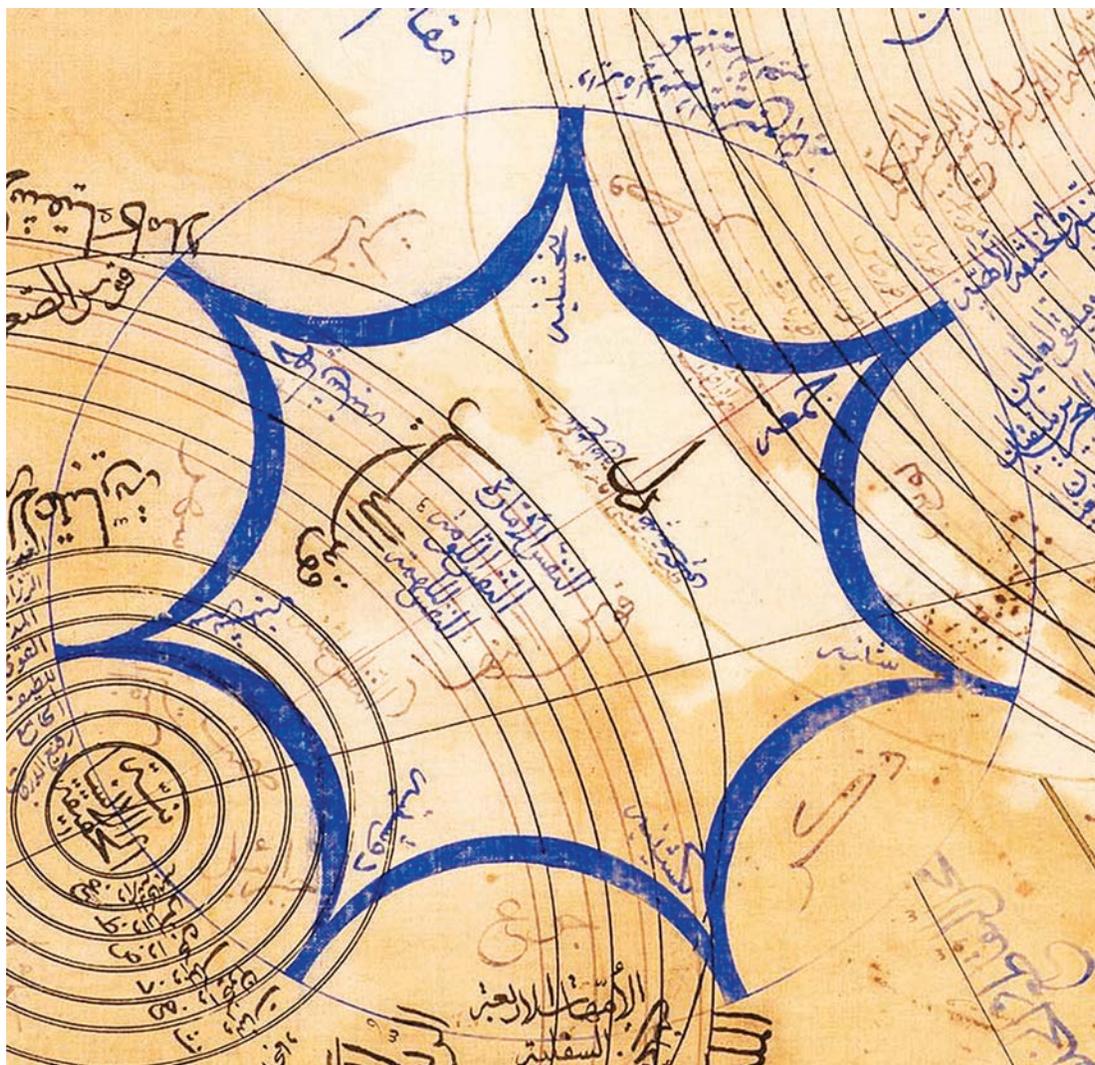
63 On the symbolism of the number seven and septads (e.g., seven prophets, planets, climes, and hells), see Corbin, "La science de la balance," 82.

64 Rizvi, "Mīr Dāmād's (d. 1631) *al-Qabasāt*," 443.

65 For a discussion of Sufis contemplating pictograms executed on walls, see E. Kropf, "'Sensible Images': Pictograms in the Manuscript Transmission of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī's (d. 973/1565) *al-Mizān al-kubrā*," in *Visualizing Sufism*, ed. G. M. Martini (Leiden, forthcoming).

FIG. 18.10.

Detail of Fig. 18.2, showing a distended, starlike shape with the seven days of the week and their associated Sufi practices of remembrance, fasting, silence, vigil, seclusion, intellection, and repentance. Photo by Christiane Gruber



on a wall, the diagram could have acted as an interworldly pendant image that invited Shi'i-inclined Sufis to engage in liturgical acts and behaviors—among them visual contemplation—in order to jettison their physical bodies, levitate with their souls, and achieve a complete “unity of being” in God and the cosmos. In such a case, this early modern Perso-Islamic attempt to transcend the flesh and secure a vision of theosis (*ta'allub*)<sup>66</sup> displays similarities to other diagram-centric contemplation practices that took place in Christian monastic settings as well.<sup>67</sup>

66 On Mīr Dāmād's concept of deiformity (*ta'allub*), see Lewisohn, “Sufism and the School of Iṣfahān,” 93; and Corbin, “Confessions extatiques de Mīr Dāmād,” 340.

67 See J. F. Hamburger, “Drawing Conclusions,” and A. S. Cohen, “Zwiefalten's Diagrammatic Scriptorium,” in this volume;

### A Cathartic “Big Picture”

The Safavid cosmic *'ayn* diagram brings us back full circle—both literally and metaphorically—to explore one final possible interpretation of its symbolic uses and meanings, namely, that it graphically eternalizes Mīr Dāmād's ecstatic vision (or visions), from which he was so saddened to be awakened, and that it concurrently illustrates for his brethren in the faith how to achieve an ecstatic dissociation (*khal'*) and cosmic catharsis (*tajrid*) within the overarching

and A. S. Cohen, “Diagramming the Diagrammatic: Twelfth-Century Europe,” in *The Visualization of Knowledge in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*, ed. M. Kupfer, A. S. Cohen, and J. H. Chajes (Turnhout, 2020), 383–404.

Shi'i-Sufi philosophical framework embraced by members of the School of Iṣfahān. For its viewers, it could have carried the potential to transform from an epistemic picture to an epiphanic one. Its primary virtue therefore lies not in the representation of objective reality or divine knowledge but as a graphic inducement to spiritual *ekstasis*.

The dual processes of transcending form and begetting “conceptual cognitions”<sup>68</sup> are at the very core of diagrammatic thought and practice, which, as John Bender and Michael Marrinan remind us, depend on a series of correlations and convergences in order to “overstep the limits of ordinary vision and move outside the parameters of normal sight.”<sup>69</sup> The Safavid *‘ayn* diagram, most likely made sometime during the seventeenth century, must have visually guided its beholders toward such a transcendental experience—whether this experience was a transcendence of the body, unity of spiritual being, or cathartic vision of the cosmos.

68 On “conceptual cognitions,” see Dabashi, “Mīr Dāmād and the Founding of the ‘School of Iṣfahān,” 627.

69 Bender and Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram*, 60.

Above all, this extraordinary diagram begins to answer some lingering questions about how Persian mystics belonging to the School of Isfahan practiced their faith. As Matthew Melvin-Koushki notes, “the history of the *practice* of Safavid philosophy has yet to be written; quite simply, we have little idea how its exponents lived their systems, how they constructed this new society.”<sup>70</sup> The cosmic *‘ayn* diagram strongly suggests that early modern Persian Sufis turned to visualized schemes in order to construct, contemplate, and live their philosophical systems. Thus, while Safavid artists, architects, and urban planners were hard at work outlining “half the world” in the main square of the imperial capital, the Sufi-Shi'i brethren of the School of Isfahan labored to trespass the bounds of optical vision—indeed, to forgo the body itself—in order to conjure up a “big picture” of the cosmos and their soaring place within it.

70 M. Melvin-Koushki, “Pseudo-Shaykh Bahā'i on the Supreme Name, a Safavid-Qajar Lettrist Classic,” in *Light upon Light: Essays in Islamic Thought and History in Honor of Gerhard Bowering*, ed. J. J. Elias and B. Orfali (Leiden, 2020), 256–90, at 259 (italics in original).



## ABBREVIATIONS

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<i>AFP</i>	<i>Archivum fratrum praedicatorum</i>	CCC	Corpus Christi College, Oxford
<i>AH</i>	<i>Art History</i>	CCCM	Corpus christianorum, Continuatio mediaevale
<i>AHMA</i>	<i>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Âge</i>	CCSG	Corpus christianorum, Series graeca
<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>	CCSL	Corpus christianorum, Series latina
<i>AI</i>	<i>Ars islamica</i>	<i>ChHist</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>AIHS</i>	<i>Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences</i>	<i>ClMed</i>	<i>Classica et mediaevalia</i>
<i>AnnHistCon</i>	<i>Annuario historiae conciliorum</i>	<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>ArtB</i>	<i>Art Bulletin</i>	<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>BacBelg</i>	<i>Bulletin de la Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques, Académie royale de Belgique</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>Classical Review</i>
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City	<i>CRAI</i>	<i>Comptes rendus des séances de l'année de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres</i>
<i>BEC</i>	<i>Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes</i>	CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
BL	British Library, London	<i>Δελτ. Χριστ.</i>	<i>Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς</i>
<i>BMA</i>	<i>Bulletin of The Metropolitan Museum of Art</i>	<i>Ἀρχ. Ἐτ.</i>	<i>ἀρχαιολογικῆς ἐταιρείας</i>
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris	<i>DMA</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Middle Ages</i> (New York, 1982–89)
Bononiensis	Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna	DOML	Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
BSB	Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich	<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>	<i>DTC</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de théologie catholique</i>
<i>BullBedé</i>	<i>Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé</i>	<i>EI2</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1960–2004)
<i>ByzF</i>	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i>	<i>EtCl</i>	<i>Études classiques</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>Frühmittelalterliche Studien</i>
<i>CabCM</i>	<i>Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, Xe–XIIe siècles</i>	<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>CCAG</i>	<i>Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum</i> (Brussels, 1898–1953)	<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historisches Jahrbuch</i>
		<i>HSCPh</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
		<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
		<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>

<i>JECbrSt</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>	<i>OHBS</i>	<i>The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies</i> , ed. E. Jeffreys, J. Haldon, and R. Cormack (New York, 2008)
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>	<i>ÖNB</i>	Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>	<i>PAPS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society</i>
<i>JÖB</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik</i>	<i>PBR</i>	<i>Patristic and Byzantine Review</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>	<i>PG</i>	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–66)
<i>JWalt</i>	<i>Journal of the Walters Art Museum</i> [note: before 2000, <i>Journal of the Walters Art Gallery</i> ]	<i>PL</i>	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844–80)
<i>JWarb</i>	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>	<i>PTS</i>	Patristische Texte und Studien
Laur.	Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence	<i>RA</i>	<i>Revue archéologique</i>
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon: A Supplement</i> , ed. E. A. Barber et al. (Oxford, 1968)	<i>RBén</i>	<i>Revue bénédictine</i>
MAPS	Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society	<i>RBK</i>	<i>Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst</i> , ed. K. Wessel (Stuttgart, 1963–)
<i>MarbJb</i>	<i>Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft</i>	<i>RE</i>	<i>Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , new rev. ed. by G. Wissowa and W. Kroll (Stuttgart, 1894–1978)
Marc.	Biblioteca nazionale Marciana, Venice	<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des études byzantines</i>
<i>MedHum</i>	<i>Medievalia et humanistica</i>	<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
<i>MedSt</i>	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i> , Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies	<i>RendPontAcc</i>	<i>Atti della Pontificia accademia romana di archeologia, Rendiconti</i>
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae historica	<i>RN</i>	<i>Revue numismatique</i>
<i>MMAB</i>	<i>Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin</i> (New York, 1942–)	<i>RPh</i>	<i>Revue de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes</i>
<i>NPNF2</i>	P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , 2nd ser., 14 vols. (1890–1900, repr. Peabody, MA, 1994)	<i>RQ</i>	<i>Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>ODB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> , ed. A. Kazhdan et al. (New York, 1991)	<i>RSBN</i>	<i>Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici</i>

SC	Sources chrétiennes	Wellcome	Wellcome Library, London
ST	Studi e testi	<i>WJKg</i>	<i>Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte</i>
<i>StMed</i>	<i>Studi medievali</i>	<i>WSt</i>	<i>Wiener Studien</i>
<i>StP</i>	<i>Studia patristica</i>	ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
TAPS	<i>Transactions of the American Philosophical Society</i>	ZKunstg	<i>Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte</i>
<i>VChr</i>	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>		

