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A Multiple-text Collection by Ẓahīr al-Dīn Mirzā Muḥammad Ibrāhīm

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Cover

Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, MS 1984.463. fol. 61r: This folio shows in the middle at the right the riddle text in large letters in *thulūth* calligraphy. Between the five lines of this riddle is a part of an Arabic philosophical work in *naskhī* comprising three lines in each piece. In red, numbers and words are placed mostly below individual words of the riddle referring to letter magic. Around this centre piece, two brief Persian texts in *nasta‘līq*, an Arabic table, and a triangular diagram between lines of an Arabic explanation can be found. Both Arabic pieces are written in *naskhī*. The Persian text above the table introduces the lunar mansions, which the table enumerates. The Persian text in the left margin, entitled „A gem on theoretical philosophy about true speech“, deals with themes from *kalām*. The triangular diagram with its surrounding Arabic text treats the cosmological division of the universe in Muslim terms, beginning with God’s throne and descending through the Ptolemaic planetary sphere to the four Aristotelian spheres of the sublunar world to the underworld.

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Fig. 1: Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Sackler MS 1984.463.132: illuminated front cover of the manuscript.

Introduction

A Multiple-text Collection by Ṣahīr al-Dīn Mīrzā Muḥammad Ibrāhīm

Sonja Brentjes | Berlin

Ṣahīr al-Dīn Mīrzā Muḥammad Ibrāhīm (d. 1102 H/1691 CE), the Safavid governor of Azerbaijan from 1077 H/1666 CE until 1095 H/1683 CE and ‘minister of finance’ under Shāh Sulaymān (r. 1077–1105 H/1666–1694 CE) thereafter, was an influential, wealthy and well-educated member of the Safavid courtly elite in the late eleventh H/seventeenth CE century. He administered and donated religious and educational institutions in north-west Iran and designed one of the first documented educational curricula known in Iran. Apart from his patronage of a pedagogical centre, he also wrote texts and compiled books (*majmū‘a*) in his spare time. One of his multiple-text collections, the *Nihāyat al-aqdām fī ṭawr al-kalām* (*The Final Steps in Transcending Speech* [or: *Theology*]), is at the centre of this volume of essays. The work currently exists in five illuminated and several unilluminated manuscript copies of varying length and completeness. The five known illuminated manuscripts are surveyed in the first paper by Reza Pourjavady and Ahmadreza Rahimi-Riseh, who particularly focus on their codicological properties, the main contents of the collection as a whole and the relationship each manuscript has to the other four manuscripts.

One of the five illuminated manuscripts, MS Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1984.463 (Fig. 1)¹, is at the heart of an art historical exploration by Christiane Gruber and three technical studies (on paper, sewing, pigments and binding) by Penley Knipe, Katherine Beatty, Katherine Eremin, Georgina Rayner and Mary McWilliams. The four other copies were not available for such in-depth investigations. All four papers have helped to unveil some exceptional aspects of this particular manuscript, which was produced in Isfahan for Shāh Sulaymān’s library. These exceptional features

include the extraordinary variety and quantity of coloured passages of text, the costly illumination of titles, headlines, diagrams, tables and decorative elements, the use of at least one imported pigment (Indian yellow) and the challenging complexity of the content, display forms and production methods. Moreover, the unusual number of movements and gestures required to follow the many texts placed in the middle of the page, between the lines and in the margins plus the accompanying diagrams and tables they contain suggest that the manuscript was meant to be read dynamically and its visual conundrums were supposed to be deciphered by its curious users.

Uncovering the meaning of some of the complex enigmas about the content, layout and usage of the works in the collection is the goal of the four other papers here by Amir-Hosein Pourjavady, Chad Kia, Sonja Brentjes, Razieh S. Mousavi and Hamid Bohloul. The essays of the first three authors explore a text on music, poems and some of the mathematical texts, diagrams and tables. Mousavi’s and Bohloul’s contribution investigates the relations between (magic) letters, numbers and God, the One. These four essays complement each other to a certain degree while also highlighting different layers of the original compilation along with its relationship to later copies that have survived. Mousavi and Bohloul have deciphered the lettrist practices found in the collection/s, which serve to convey the main ideological message spread across the individual works, namely the unity of knowledge. For his part, Kia has analysed a single folio in several different copies, discovering through this process a change in content, order and relationship that he suggests reflects a shifting politico-religious context. Additionally, Pourjavady and Brentjes describe texts, tables and diagrams belonging to the fields of their academic

¹ For a digitized version of the manuscript see online at the Harvard Art Museums website: <<https://hvr.art/o/215600>>.

specialisations and try to identify the relations of those parts of the mathematical sciences to the central texts in the collection, which are the carriers of the primary purpose of the compilation, namely *to solve the riddles it contains*.

In conjunction with Gruber's art historical contribution and Pourjavady's and Rahimi-Riseh's codicological study, these four papers document the fact that the collection with its various copies was not a straightforward effort to entertain educated guests at a friendly social event. In fact, it reveals a multi-layered interaction of riddles, which are difficult to understand today due to the cultural rules of the time being lost. These interactions were shaped by the selection of textual pieces and graphic clues the works contain. Modifications were introduced by later collectors who commissioned new copies; the later changes even concerned the complex practices of the calligrapher, who wrote all five of the known illuminated manuscripts, and the illuminator(s) whose names we do not know. These various additions to the multiple-text collection that Ṣahīr al-Dīn compiled in 1070 H/1660 CE increase the fluidity of the collection's meaning and probably created a sense of instability for those participating at the *majālis* – a word which is usually translated as a *learned gathering*, but refers here probably more to an evening with entertainment or a banquet, as the guests attempted to grasp the meaning of the riddles and find answers to them.

In order to avoid any further confusion, I should point out that the numbering of the folios in the five manuscripts covered in this volume follows the numbering of the Safavid calligrapher Muḥammad Shafī' Tabrīzī (d. after 1098 H/1686–87 CE) in three cases: MSS Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Ayasofya 4785; London, British Library, Or. 12974;

and Harvard Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1984.463. This numbering can be found in the left-hand margin of the left halves of the folios in each manuscript. The unnumbered folios at the beginning of the Sackler manuscript should be counted backwards, as it were, that is, 0a,b, -1a,b, -2a,b and -3a,b. In the case of the two other manuscripts, which the calligrapher did not number, we have followed current rules on foliation.

The papers brought together in this volume do not solve all the riddles in Ṣahīr al-Dīn's compilation. Rather, they extend an invitation to colleagues to engage with the Safavid art of elite, educated entertainment and its material products – and hopefully solve some of the remaining riddles. They precede though any publication on these codices that appeared since 2022. Due to several postponements, this special issue is published only now.

I cordially thank all the contributors to this volume for their great effort to make sense of parts of this important manuscript corpus. My special thanks go to Michael Friedrich and Irina Wandrey at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, who made the workshop and this subsequent publication possible. I also thank the Iran Heritage Foundation, London, the Persian Heritage Foundation, Fresno, CA., the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Department III 'Artefacts, Actions, Knowledge', Berlin and Maribel Fierro, CSIC, Madrid and recipient of the Anneliese Maier award of the Humboldt Foundation, Bonn in 2014 for their supplementary financial support of the workshop.

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