The Occult Sciences in Islamicate Cultures
(13th-17th Centuries)

Department of Near Eastern Studies
Princeton University

Jones Hall, Room 202

February 14-15, 2014

Organized by:
Matthew Melvin-Koushki (Princeton University/University of South Carolina)

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Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University
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While few scholars would dispute the fact that premodern writings on the so-called occult sciences—astrology, alchemy, lettrism/kabbalah, magic, etc.—thickly populate manuscript archives from India to England, there are sharp differences in how this occultist legacy has been received in modern scholarship. On the one side of the great (if mythical) Eurasian divide, Europeanists have in the last decades thoroughly rehabilitated the occult sciences as a fundamental component of Western intellectual history from antiquity to the present, and indeed as a primary load-bearing structure in the edifice of modernity. In the process, the thought of key medieval thinkers, such as Bacon and Lull, and many of the humanistic heroes of the Renaissance and the ‘Scientific Revolution,’ from Bruno to Pico to Newton, has been shown to be profoundly occultist in orientation and methodology—and profoundly dependent on Arabic sources in the same vein. On the other side, despite a small but potent body of scholarship on the subject, most Islamicists continue to reflexively regard the ubiquity of occultism in premodern and modern Muslim societies either as the detritus of an immature Hellenophilism or, in later periods, as proof of cultural decadence and degeneracy. The more occult strands of feted thinkers’ oeuvres are quietly ignored, and dedicated occultist thinkers simply dismissed as intellectually vacuous.

This is not to say that great postmodern strides have not been made in the direction of deconstructing ‘classical’ Islamic history and rehabilitating ‘postclassical’ Islamicate cultures as sites of new, synthetic forms of creativity and expansiveness. Yet all of these necessary deconstructions and rehabilitations notwithstanding, Islamicate occultism remains largely suspect and grossly understudied, while European occultism, its heir and twin, is increasingly embraced. Indeed, Western esoteric studies is now a field in its own right, featuring dedicated academic units in Europe; the same has yet to be dreamt of with respect to things Islamic.

That the Islamicate occult sciences are still considered suspect reflects a certain ensorcellment of Islamicists by the specter of post-Enlightenment Science. Reacting to the depredations of European colonialism, the well-intentioned scholarly compulsion has been to exorcize Islamicate history and culture of ‘superstition’ and ‘magic’ in an effort to banish orientalist stereotypes of cultural and scientific stagnation, resulting in an invasive scientific pruning of Islamicate intellectual history. We are presented with an approved canon of Muslim thinkers whose contributions to science can be universally appreciated. Such Whig histories of science are no longer defensible among Europeanists; the history of science in the premodern Islamicate world must be similarly excorized and decolonized.

The workshop here proposed on the occult sciences in Islamicate cultures is conceived of as a modest contribution toward the repair of this deep structural imbalance in scholarship on premodern Eurasian intellectual, scientific and cultural history. In bringing together senior and junior scholars committed to the study of the occult sciences in Islamicate societies and sensitive to the similarities of cultural patterning across Islamo-Christian (or Islamo-Judeo-Christian) Eurasia as a whole, the workshop aims to be a forum in which to present and discuss state-of-the-art research on the theory and practice of specific occult sciences in various medieval and early modern Islamicate societies, as well as an opportunity to evaluate the state of the field and identify concrete strategies for its development.

NB: Papers will not be read at this workshop. Rather, each panel will begin as a conversation between the panelists and/or respondents, then expand into general discussion.
WORKSHOP PROGRAM

Friday, 14 February

2:30-3:00 p.m. Opening remarks

3:00-3:45 p.m. Keynote address: Occultism and Ottoman imperial identity

- Cornell Fleischer (University of Chicago)

3:45-4:15 p.m. Tea and coffee

4:15-5:35 p.m. Panel 1: Astrology between Anatolia and India
Moderator: Noah Gardiner (University of Michigan)

- Eva Orthmann (University of Bonn):
  “Astral Magic and Divine Names: The K. al-Jawāhir al-khams of Muḥammad Ghauth Gwāliyārī”

- Tunç Şen (University of Chicago):
  “Astrology in Ottoman Court Culture: Royal Patronage for Astrologers during the Reign of Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512)”

5:45-6:45 p.m. Panel 2: Ottoman physiognomy and political theory
Moderator: Nicholas Harris (University of Pennsylvania/Chemical Heritage Foundation)

- Özgen Felek (City University of New York):
  “Reading Bodies Holy and Royal: The Ottoman Physiognomy Tradition as Enacted in Seyyid Loḳmān’s Kıyäfetü ’l-İnsāniye”

- Emin Lelić (University of Chicago):
  “İlm-i firaset and Fürstenspiegel Literature: The Prince as the Mirror Image of the Body Social”
Saturday, 15 February

9:00-10:20 a.m.  Panel 3: The talismanic shirt as text and artifact

Moderator: Eva Orthmann (University of Bonn)
Respondent: Tunç Şen (University of Chicago)

- Rose Muravchick (University of Pennsylvania):
  “The Void in the Vitrine: The Exhibition History of Islamic Talismanic Shirts”

- Özgen Felek (City University of New York):
  “Fears, Hopes, and Dreams: The Talismanic Shirts of Sultan Murād III”

10:20-10:50 a.m.  Tea and coffee

10:50 a.m.-12:10 p.m.  Panel 4: Theory and politics in Būnian magic

Moderator: Emin Lelić (University of Chicago)

- Noah Gardiner (University of Michigan):
  “Al-Būnī’s Lettrist Cosmology: Writing and Diagramming the Invisible Worlds”

- Jean-Charles Coulon (University of Paris - Sorbonne):
  “Magic and Politics: Historical Events and Political Thought in the Šams al-maʿārif Attributed to al-Būnī (d. 622/1225)”

12:10-2:00 p.m.  Lunch on own

2:00-3:20 p.m.  Panel 5: Shirazi occultists in Iran and India

Moderator: Rose Muravchick (University of Pennsylvania)

- Daniel Sheffield (Princeton University):
  “The Lord of the Planetary Court: Cosmic Aspects of Millennial Sovereignty in the Thought of Āẕar Kayvān and His Followers”

- Matthew Melvin-Koushki (Princeton University/University of South Carolina):

3:20-3:50 p.m.  Tea and coffee
3:50-5:10 p.m.   Panel 6: *The nature of Islamicate alchemy*

Moderator: Matthew Melvin-Koushki (Princeton University/University of South Carolina)
Respondent: Tuna Artun (Rutgers)
Respondent: Michael Gordin (Princeton University)
Respondent: Jennifer Rampling (Princeton University)

- Nicholas Harris (University of Pennsylvania/Chemical Heritage Foundation):
  “A Prolegomenon to the Study of Islamicate Alchemy”

- Sonja Brentjes (Max Planck Institute)
  “Reflections on a History of the Occult Sciences in Islamicate Societies from the Perspective of History of Science”

5:20-6:40 p.m.  Roundtable: *Whither the study of Islamicate occultism?*

6:40-6:50 p.m. Closing remarks
Astral Magic and Divine Names: The *K. al-Jawāhir al-khams* of Muḥammad Ghauth Gwāliyārī

Eva Orthmann  
*University of Bonn*

The early Mughal Empire in India was deeply influenced by magical practices and concepts. Such practices figured in the daily court life as well as in festivals and acts of war. One of the most famous magical texts from that period is the *K. al-Jawāhir al-khams* by Muḥammad Ghauth Gwāliyārī (d. 1562). Muḥammad Ghauth was a Sufi shaikh of the Shaṭṭārī order and at the same time a close advisor of the second Mughal emperor Humāyūn. His book is often described as an important treatise on astral magic. This is however only half the truth: most of his book is dedicated to invocations of the divine names.

One part of these divine names corresponds to the *asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*, the 99 beautiful names of God. They are used for all kinds of *dhikr*, some of them rather strange. For magical purposes, however, Muḥammad Ghauth uses the *asmāʾ al-ʿiẓām*, the greatest names. These are 39 (or 40) names composed of several nouns and adjectives. The invocation of these greatest names follows strict rules which apply both to the exterior circumstances of prayer as well as to interior conditions, *sharāʾiṭ*. Muḥammad Ghawth does never really explain what is meant with these conditions. They determine however the outcome and effect of the prayers, which serve at controlling spiritual beings, and sometimes provide the praying person with quite sensational powers. In between these effects, we find the subjugation of the planets, an effect usually attained by direct invocations of the stars.

The lecture will examine the practices described in the *K. al-Jawāhir al-khams* and will compare them with magical operations described in other texts. It will ask for possible sources of this very specific use of the divine names and their combination with astral magic, and will finally address the merging of Sufi *dhikr* and magical invocations as perceived in Muḥammad Ghauth’s book.

**Eva Orthmann** is Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn. She was previously a Visiting Research Fellow at Yale University and Assistant Professor at the University of Zurich. Her main fields of interest are Iranian studies, Indo-Persian studies, and history of science, especially astrology and the occult sciences.
While it is well-known that Bayezid II generously supported artists, poets and scholars and that he commissioned the writing of the first dynastic histories of the Ottoman house as part of his broader ideological agendas vis-à-vis the political and dynastic challenges he confronted, his equally active patronization of “the science of the stars” has yet to be acknowledged. This is not surprising, considering how marginalized the study of astrology has been in Islamic studies in general and Ottoman studies in particular. Nevertheless, the study of astrologers and their writings promises to open up new vistas onto the political, cultural, and intellectual history of the period. Throughout the late medieval and early modern Islamicate world astrologers offered rulers their expertise in interpreting heavenly configurations and predicting future events; here the Ottoman polity is no exception. Indeed, in the case of Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), the sheer number of astrologers employed and astrological texts commissed by the Sultan himself makes it possible to argue that there was a conscious and sustained attempt to cultivate the science of the stars, one that would result in the institutionalization of the office of müneccimbaşı (court astrologer-astronomer).

The primary focus of this paper is to foreground the astrologer-astronomers active at the court of Bayezid II. Based mainly upon the gift and pay registers from the middle to the end of Bayezid II’s reign, this study aims to identify these specialists and understand the nature of their relationship with the court. To these registers may be added the almanacs (sg. taqvim) that were written by these astrologers and submitted to the Palace by the vernal equinox of each year. Taqvims are invaluable historiographical sources in that it is possible, based on the annual astrological predictions and prognostications expressed therein, to track the psychology of politics and diplomacy around the Ottoman court in a given period, among other questions. These texts are equally important for revealing the models to which they are indebted as sources of scientific knowledge. Inasmuch as taqvims are predicated on current astronomical tables (sg. zii) and their compilers usually cite specific schools and/or authorities in justification of their predictions, a thorough study of these taqvims enables us to chart the scientific horizons of Ottoman court astrologers.

Ahmet Tunç Şen is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He is currently working on his dissertation, entitled “Astrology and the Islamic Millennium: Knowledge, Prophecy, and Politics at the Ottoman Court, 1450s-1550s.”
Reading Bodies Holy and Royal: The Ottoman Physiognomy Tradition as Enacted in Seyyid Lokmân’s Ḍiyāfetū ‘l-Insānîye

Özgen Felek
City University of New York

Despite the obvious significance of the human body and the existence of a large corpus of texts on physiognomy in the Islamic world, the field of Islamic Studies has only recently begun showing interest in the body as a theoretical category. This paper examines the construction of the concept of the male body through physiognomy manuals (sg. Ḍiyāfet-nāme, firāset-nāme) from the Ottoman context. After examining how popular physiognomy books create the image of the ideal body, this paper turns to a close analysis of a royal physiognomy book entitled Ḍiyāfetū ‘l-Insānîye fi Şemā’i ‘l-ʿOsmānîye (‘Human Physiognomy: On the Characteristics of the Ottomans’) presented to the Ottoman sultan Murād III (r. 1574-1595).

I scrutinize the Ḍiyāfetū ‘l-Insānîye to demonstrate how its author, Seyyid Lokmân, employs this genre to “scientifically” prove the Ottoman sultans to be holy and royal figures. While physiognomy books for commoners primarily treat of individual body parts, Seyyid Lokmân’s text includes sacred and royal lineage, heroism, piety, good morals, and wealth as significant elements in portraying the sultans’ bodies to show the exceptional nobility and holiness of the office of the sultan and his flourishing family. The study also demonstrates the challenges and contradictions that Seyyid Lokmân encounters as an author and the solutions he adopts, as well as his efforts to ensure that the sultans’ bodies are not compared to the bodies of their subjects.

Özgen Felek (Ph.D. Michigan) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Graduate School, CUNY. She was previously a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University. Felek specializes in religion, gender, and visual representations of the Ottoman Empire.
This paper will address the confluence of ilm-i firaset (physiognomy) and Fürstenspiegel literature in order to access the well-known and yet mysterious Islamic binary of micro- and macrocosm. The occult sciences teach that man is the microcosm and the universe the macrocosm; the two are perfect reflections of each other. Classical Islamic social organization, too, was conceived as a reflection of this same micro- and macrocosm binary. The throne of God was at the center of creation, which was ordered in a strict hierarchy. The ruler in society and spirit in man, respectively, symbolized God and his heavenly court.

Self-knowledge, according to the Prophet Muhammad, leads to knowledge of God; according to Bayhaqi it makes for a wise ruler. The foundation for wise rule was justice, which in classical Islamic political theory meant keeping everyone in their proper social place. In other words, the classical Islamic polity was a deeply hierarchical society, which reflected the great angelic hierarchy in the heavenly courts; or, in the language of the philosophers, the descending emanation of being from the Godhead.

A key to the knowledge of human beings, including oneself, was ilm-i firaset. Thus, it is no surprise that it is part of Fürstenspiegel literature, as a science to be mastered by rulers so that they may better discern their subjects' true nature and assign to each their proper place in society. The image of the human (king's) body as a symbol of society—e.g. the king as the heart, the vizier as the mind, the soldiers as the arms, etc.—allows us to speak of the king's two bodies. It is the coincidence of the individual and the institutional body. Knowledge of one body leads to knowledge of the other; the king's knowledge of his subjects, through ilm-i firaset, leads to knowledge of himself and vice versa.

Emin Lelić completed his B.A. in History at Carleton College and M.A. in Ottoman History at the University of Chicago. He is currently working on his PhD dissertation, titled “İlm-i Firâset and the Ottoman Weltanschauung: A Window into the Soul of an Empire,” at the University of Chicago's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He has received an IIE Fulbright Fellowship (2010-11), a Woodrow Wilson Travel and Research Grant (2013) and currently holds a Research Fellowship at Koç University's Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations in Istanbul.
The Void in the Vitrine: The Exhibition History of Islamic Talismanic Shirts

Rose Muravchick
University of Pennsylvania

A recent show at the Freer/Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian, *Falnama: The Book of Omens*, presented viewers with magnificent *Falnama* manuscripts from Iran and Turkey. In order to “contextualize” these works, the show was filled with a variety of objects that included military standards, porcelain bowls, amulets, and an Ottoman talismanic shirt. This Ottoman talismanic shirt (TSM 13/1184) was displayed in one of the first rooms of the show, and immediately presented the audience with an object that is, in fact, less well understood than those from within *Falnama* genre itself. Talismans and amulets from the Islamicate world are often exhibited alongside other “occult” objects such as divinatory bowls, manuscripts with magic squares, and copies of magical texts like those attributed to al-Buni. Presenting these objects as part of one visual corpus offers today’s museum-goer the same titillation that an 18th-century European gentleman might have had when visiting a colleague’s *Wunderkammer*, but it does not do much to help said viewer understand either the notion of “magic” in the Islamicate world or each discrete object’s lived context. In focusing on the *Falnama* exhibition, a pointed question becomes immediately apparent: How, precisely, does the inclusion of these objects contextualize the practice of divinatory book arts within 16th-17th century Iran and Turkey? Or is it, rather, that these objects are considered part of the same world by dint of their “magical” qualities? This paper will argue that the exhibition history of Islamic talismanic shirts, alongside other “magical” objects from the Islamicate world, continues to heavily rely on the notion of a universal Islamic belief in magical efficacy to such an extent that the very context which these objects are purported to bring to their exhibitions is, in effect, effaced.

*Rose Muravchick* is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She is currently finishing her dissertation: “God is the Best Guardian: Islamic Talismanic Shirts from the Gunpowder Empires.” Her research interests include the material culture of the medieval Mediterranean and material religion.
Despite the existence of a rich collection of artifacts related to talismans and magic in the Ottoman tradition, this collection has not yet been studied in depth. A few recent studies on the topic present basic information about material artifacts, seals with the names of preeminent Sufis such as ʿAbdü ʿl-Ḳādir Geylānī and Aḥmed el-Rifāʿī, talismanic caps, shirts, skullcaps, and healing rods, without providing deep analysis of the use of the talisman and magic among Ottoman Sufis or the relationships of these practices to wider trends in Ottoman culture.

The present study examines the talismanic shirts prepared for the Ottoman sultans, in particular the shirts of Murād III (r. 1574-1595), who was a devoted disciple of the Ḫalvetī master Şeyh Şücāʿ Dede. After a brief introduction to the talismanic shirts prepared for the Ottoman sultans, the motifs, symbols, and divine words used in the talismanic shirts produced for Murād III are analyzed. What kind of results would we find if we read his shirts in conversation with the texts he commissioned, as well as with his dream accounts that he sent to his spiritual master in letter form? Were his shirts mainly meant to function as a protective or good luck charm, or were they loaded with a deeper meaning reflecting the expectations and hopes of the Sultan and his subjects?

This study discusses the heavily loaded symbols on Sultan Murād's shirts and his response to the expectations carried by these symbols. Since Murād was a devout Ḫalvetī disciple, a close reading of his talismanic shirts and their symbolism will also assist us in better understanding the relationship between Sufism and occult sciences in Ottoman culture.

Özgen Felek (Ph.D. Michigan) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Graduate School, CUNY. She was previously a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University. Felek specializes in religion, gender, and visual representations of the Ottoman Empire.
Al-Būnī’s Lettrist Cosmology: Writing and Diagramming the Invisible Worlds

Noah Gardiner

University of Michigan

Although the North African cum Egyptian Sufi Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. ca. 622/1225) has long been thought of primarily as a writer on the talismanic arts, his works also contain cosmological materials of considerable breadth and complexity which arguably hold a place of equal or greater importance in his written project. This cosmology is decidedly lettrist, which is to say that the letters of the Arabic alphabet play central roles in his quasi-Neoplatonic vision of the creation and workings of the invisible and visible worlds that make up the Creation, and is foundational to the variety of operative lettrist practices (including talismanic arts) that al-Būnī prescribes throughout his works. In this paper I sketch an outline of al-Būnī’s lettrist cosmology, with attention to certain elements that mark al-Būnī’s place in a current of cosmologically-oriented lettrist thought that originated with ‘extremist’ and Ismā‘īlī Shi‘ite thinkers and came to be a defining aspect of the distinct strain of Sufism that developed in the Islamicate West. I argue that these cosmologies were a way of staking claims to extraordinary spiritual authority with significant political overtones, and that attention to these dynamics is vital to understanding the reception of al-Būnī’s works—both positive and negative—in the centuries after his death. As in all my research on al-Būnī, I am particularly interested in questions of the roles of books in the transmission of esoteric knowledge. I thus focus in some detail on al-Būnī’s use in his cosmological writings of quasi-talismanic diagrams that are intended, if utilized properly, to give the reader visionary access to the invisible worlds, and on ways in which they render the book not only a receptacle for discursive content, but an instrument of initiation.

Noah Gardiner is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan. He works on late-medieval Arab-Islamic cultural and intellectual history, the occult sciences, and manuscript studies.
Magic and Politics: Historical Events and Political Thought in the Šams al-maʿārif Attributed to al-Būnī (d. 622/1225)

Jean-Charles Coulon
University of Paris - Sorbonne

During the late medieval period, the circles of power were very much invested in the occult sciences. Whether we study Christendom or Islamic civilization, rulers, their advisers or their agents promoted astrology, alchemy, magic, etc. As an outstanding example, we find manuscripts of the seminal magical manual Šams al-maʿārif wa laṭāʾif al-ʿawārif dedicated to prominent individuals. The origins of this treatise remain quite obscure, hence the paucity of research into its historical context. Attributed to Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Būnī, a Maghribi Sufi master supposed to have died in 622/1225, it may rather have been written at the end of the 7th/13th century or in the middle of the 8th/14th, under Mamluk rule. And just as al-Būnī’s tomb was visited as a Sufi shrine, the Šams al-maʿārif is supposed to contain the secrets of this shaykh, famed as “one whose prayers are granted” (muḡāb al-daʿāyāt). Our purpose here is to analyse those elements of the Šams al-maʿārif which contain a historical or political dimension in order to draw out some political perspectives and the influence of political thought on this work. Such elements, in turn, may inform us about the historical background of the writing of this book.

Jean-Charles Coulon holds a PhD in medieval history and Arabic studies from the Sorbonne University (Paris). He is currently the Arabic librarian at the BULAC (University Library of Languages and Civilisations) and copyeditor for Arabica.
This paper examines notions of millennialism and sovereignty in the writings of the followers of Āẕar Kayvān (d. 1618 CE), an eclectic religious thinker who moved with his followers from Shīrāz in Safavid Iran to Patna in Mughal India during the late sixteenth century. Kayvān and his followers held that with the coming of the lunar millennium, the period of the Arabo-Islamic rule was at its end and a new millennium of Persian-Zoroastrian dispensation was beginning. Declaring himself to be the 'Perfect Man' (insān-i kāmil) and rejecting formal adherence to Islam, Kayvān promulgated an idiosyncratic Zoroastrian identity which he referred to as the kīsh-i ābādī. Kayvān and his followers adopted archaic Persian names and constructed genealogies for themselves stretching into Iran’s pre-Islamic past, while simultaneously distancing themselves from normative Zoroastrian communities in Iran and India, who, according to Kayvān, did not appreciate the true esoteric meaning of the teachings of Zarathustra. In this paper, I examine aspects of Kayvān’s political theology, specifically astrological aspects of Kayvān’s conception of sovereignty. Kayvān held that the royal court should be a microcosmic reflection of the celestial court, in which the king and his astrologer-viziers act as intercessors on behalf of the divine decrees of the planets. Further, I argue that though Kayvān’s model of kingship was ultimately rejected by Shāh ʻAbbās for whom it was most likely intended, it does provide us with a rare glimpse into the diversity of extremist (ghuluvvī) religious thought during the early reign of ʿAbbās and its afterlife in Mughal India.

Daniel Sheffield is a historian of the religious traditions of Iran and South Asia whose research focuses on the medieval and early modern engagement of Zoroastrian theologians with Persianate and Sanskritic cosmopolitan thought. He is currently a Link-Cotsen Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts and a Lecturer in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University.
Occultist thought in Safavid-era Iran is, quite simply, *terra incognita*. While the period has seen a welcome uptick in interest, scholarship to date has largely elided that mode of theory and praxis that throughout the early modern Islamo-Christian world mediated between the categories of messianism and imperialism, heterodoxy and orthodoxy, religion and science: occultism. In the case of Iran, the waters are further muddied by the deliciously messy and messianic heterodoxy of movements like the Ḥurūfiyya and the Nuqṭaviyya; these groups’ enthusiastic invocation of the occult science of letters (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*) in particular has distracted researchers from the more sedate claims of the vigorous, mainstream tradition of high lettrism, and by extension high occultism, that is a defining feature of the intellectual history of the 15th-16th-century Persianate world, with impressive cognates in Europe put forward by thinkers like Pico, Bruno, Agrippa and Dee.

As a first step toward repairing this lacuna, this paper takes as a convenient test case Maḥmūd Dihdār Shīrāzī, *takhallūs* ʿIyānī (fl. 1569), the most productive Persian author on applied lettrism of the 16th century. Maḥmūd Dihdār was deeply implicated in the intellectual scene of Shiraz, including its extension to India through the efforts of his renowned associate and fellow occultist Mīr Fatḥ Allāh Shīrāzī (d. 1589) and better-known son Muḥammad Dihdār Fānī (d. 1607). Most notably, Dihdār *père* is acclaimed in the sources as Shaykh Bahāʾī’s (d. 1621) teacher in the occult sciences, an index of his contemporary standing; his seminal manual of applied lettrism, the *Mafātīḥ al-Maghālīq*, continues to be in demand in Iran today.

An analysis of his oeuvre and context indicates that our Shirazi occultist, who styles himself heir to the great Syrian Kurdish occultist of the late 14th century, Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (d. 1397), must be accounted an outstanding exponent of the high lettrist tradition of Fars initiated by Akhlāṭī’s *khalīfa*, Ibn Turka (d. 1432), and of enduring interest to other Shirazi thinkers like Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 1502) and Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631). And while the anarchic antics of the Nuqtavis may indeed have provided a convenient pretext for the Safavid state to persecute or marginalize intellectuals like Maḥmūd Dihdār, his example shows that the reflexive assumption that Iranian lettrists are Nuqtavi until proven innocent may now be put to rest.

Matthew Melvin-Koushki (Ph.D. Yale) is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University and Assistant Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. He specializes in early modern Islamicate intellectual and cultural history, with a focus on the theory and practice of the occult sciences in Iran and the Persianate world.
A Prolegomenon to the Study of Islamicate Alchemy

Nicholas Harris
University of Pennsylvania/Chemical Heritage Foundation

Long since relegated to the dustbin of history, we pay alchemy little attention in partitioning the world into constituent, studyable elements. But premodern alchemists did not respect our modern taxonomic decisions very much. Their investigations pranced blithely between religion, science, and economics. One effect of trying to understand medieval alchemists on their own terms is the potential unraveling of our familiar categories. Alchemy has become a bastard child, and disinherited as such. As a kind of occult practice, it was bad religion; alchemy came to be seen as one of the first pseudo-sciences, against which science could take shape. Alchemy was also, for the merchant and artisan of nascent capitalism, the archetypical cheat, a get-rich-quick scheme that promised an enormous production of wealth without regard to labor.

This short paper aims to sketch a program for the study, understanding, and analysis of Islamicate alchemy. This project will help to further the larger initiative of integrating the many elements of pre-modern Islamicate intellectual history in a variety of academic disciplines and fields, not only Islamic studies narrowly understood. Previous generations of scholars have investigated the earliest figures in the tradition to some extent, although always hoping to find the Nachleben of classical Greece and the protean glimmers of what would become “modern” Western science.

A reappraisal of Islamicate alchemy, certainly overdue and with recourse to the large corpus of Arabic alchemical manuscripts, will raise a bevy of issues to explore: the role of the author in alchemical texts; questions about genre; the relationship between text and practice; the specter of natural philosophy and proto-science; and perhaps most importantly the epistemological underpinning of the Islamicate alchemical tradition.

Nicholas Harris is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania in the Department of Religious Studies. His dissertation, “Better Religion through Chemistry: Aydemir al-Jildakī and Alchemy under the Mamluks,” aims to “resurrect” (in a scholarly sense only) the 14th-century Egyptian alchemist Aydemir al-Jildaki. Nick received his B.A. and his M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He is currently the Price Fellow at the Beckman Center of the Chemical Heritage Foundation.