



علم الحروف

³ilm al- Ḥurūf

The Science of Letters

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*Numbers are to letters
what intellects are to spirits,
and letters are to beings
what spirits are to bodies.*

- Ahmad ibn ³ali al-Būnī

Talismanic Magic in the Islamic World

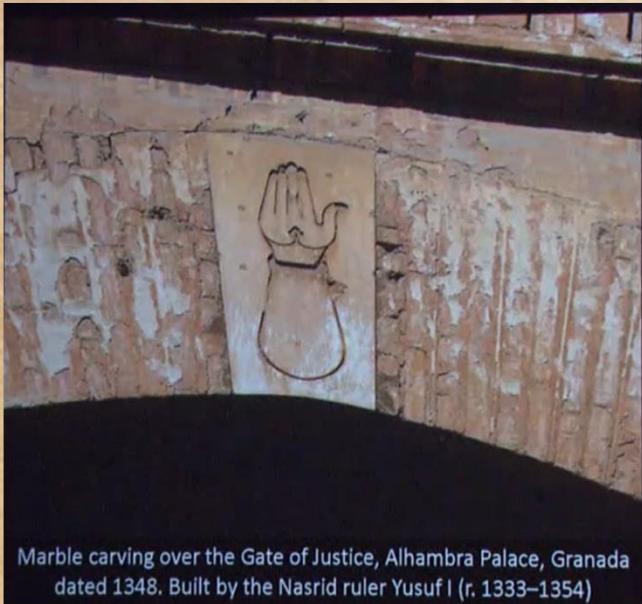
- Contrary to popular belief, Islamic material culture is rich with amulets, talismans, and other instruments used for protection, astrology, and divination.
- While the official acceptability of such practices varied through history, the abundance of artifacts of this nature from every period is proof of the commonality of these rich traditions. What is certain is that there was a widespread belief in the supernatural, and the ability of humans to influence these forces.
- Most of these practices are enshrouded by Qur'anic principles, thus avoiding legal prohibitions but more importantly, legitimizing the power of these objects through the invocation of the divine.
- Very common popular amulets include:
 - The famous hand of Fatimah, named after Muhammad's daughter
 - The *tamīma*, a speckled black and white stone worn around the neck by children in the pre-Islamic era to repel the evil eye . This eventually evolved into small pouches and sometimes elaborate lockets called *ta'wiz*, in which rolled up verses of the Qur'an are kept.
- One common divinatory science was the reading of omens in sand, termed geomancy. There were even mechanical devices created to aid in the interpretation of patterns in sand.



Hand of Fatima amulet from, 18th c.
Hyderabad, Nasser D. Khalili Collection



Geomantic Tablet by Muhammad al-Muhtasib al-Najjari, 13th c. CE Damascus, British Museum



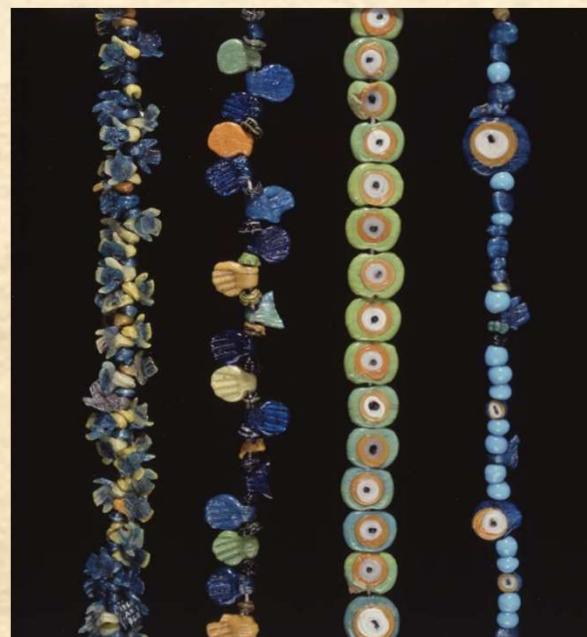
Marble carving over the Gate of Justice, Alhambra Palace, Granada
dated 1348. Built by the Nasrid ruler Yusuf I (r. 1333–1354)



Alhambra vase and detail, Spain, 14th
century, h.117 cm, St Petersburg



Incantation Bowl with inscribed spell, 8th c.
Iraq



Glass beads in form of eyes and hands of
Fatima, Palestine, unknown date

Block-Printed Talismans

- Block-printing is the earliest form of printing. It originated in China around about 700CE, and had made it to the Islamic World by 900CE.
- The main form of Islamic block-printing that survives to this day are block-printed talismans, examples of which are found in at least 14 museums and libraries in The US and Europe, and many more in the Middle East. Notwithstanding, they remained relatively unknown in the west until an extensive catalogue of them was published in 2006 by Karl R. Schaefer, a Professor of Librarianship at Drake University, and the only expert in Islamic Talismanic block prints in the West.
- These talismans originated with the Sufis, who possessed the required esoteric knowledge, and importantly in the early period, the rare ability to write. The first examples are hand-written, but eventually their popularity led to innovation in the form of block-printing for ease of mass-production.
- Quoting Schaefer:
 - *“For those who believed in their efficacy, amulets served as sources and reminders of protective or helpful powers harnessed for a specific personal purpose. They were worn on one’s person so that the protective powers, the lines of cosmic sympathy, would always be woven about their object. Depending upon the desired outcome, the amulet was meant to protect the wearer from specific threats or dangers, or to assure the successful achievement of a specified goal. Put differently, the wearing of an amulet drew a veil of focused energy or power about the wearer; indeed, the Arabic term for amulets, *hijāb*, indicates just such a function.”*
- While these printed talismans were initially composed of Qur’anic verses, they eventually became more complex, esoteric, and at times personalized. This was especially the case after the spread of the works of al-Būnī made the esoteric knowledge of the ³ilm al-Ḥurūf more widespread.

Block-Printed Talismans

Date Unknown



11th c.



11th c.



12th c.

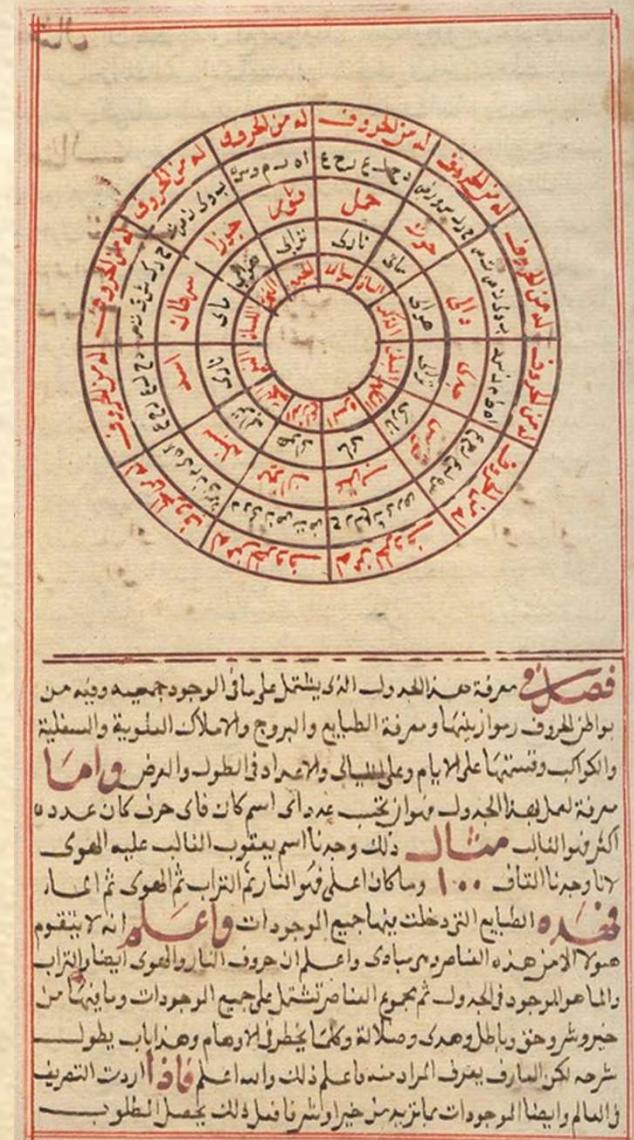


Simiyya' and Sihr

- Sihr (سحر) is the practice of deriving power by supernatural means from Jinn (جِن) and demons (شياطين). It's is universally condemned and can be equated to the Western concept of "black magic". Its study for the purposes of understanding how to protect from it, however, is allowed in Islam.
- Simiyya' (سيمياء) is the practice of deriving power and protection by celestial means by the ritual use of the Qur'an and the Divine Names. This is somewhat equivalent to the Western concept of "white magic", but might more accurately be named "theurgy" in the Hermetic sense. This type of "magic" was commonplace and at best frowned upon in Medieval Islam.
- One of the most common forms that Simiyya' takes is that of ³ilm al-Ḥurūf (علم الحروف), which can be translated as "The Science of Letters". This practice derives from the idea that the letters of the Arabic abjad are holy and have mystical properties and significance. Each of the 28 letters is associated with astral, numerical, and elemental properties.
- When combined with an understanding of the Divine Names, letters can then be used to derive protection and attract certain desired divine properties.

Ahmad al-Būnī and the Shams al-Ma³ārif

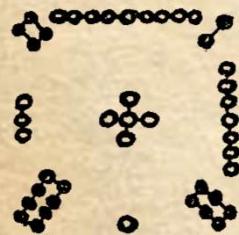
- Ahmad ibn ³ali al-Būnī (أحمد بن علي البواني) was an Almohadi philosopher and Sufi writer born in Annaba (present day Algeria) in 621AH (1225 CE)
- He is best known for writing the *Shams al-Ma³ārif wa Laṭā'if al-³awārif* (شمس المعارف ولطائف العوارف), the *Book of the Sun of Gnosis and the Subtleties of Elevated Things*, a treatise which acts as a guide to the power of names and letters, and which is largely based on the Divine Names and the ḥurūf muqaṭṭa'āt (حروف مقطعات), and thus is a form of *Simiyya'* and not the forbidden *Sihr*.
- While al-Būnī is the most prolific writer on the subject and his full works were often referred to by Western philosophers and occultists as the *Corpus Bunianum*. He was not, however, the originator of these ideas, as he himself traces his knowledge teacher to student back to the 1st c. AH ascetic theologian Hasan al-Baṣrī (حسن البصري). Whether this is true is impossible to confirm.



Mathematics in Talismanic Magic

- The first thing that al-Būnī explains in the Shams al-Ma³ārif is the construction of talismans based on letters, divine names, and magic squares
 - In Islam, there are 99 names for Allah, each one of which is associated in esoteric Islamic mysticism with certain powers and properties
 - Magic squares are diagrams with an equal number of rows and columns which are filled with numbers such that the sum over every row, column, and diagonal is equal to the same number
- Mathematical constructions such as magic squares were considered to have mystical properties, which can be understood since they seem to have magical patterns emerge from them spontaneously
 - In present day we know these mathematical properties to be naturally part of the workings of mathematical equations, and while this was also known in period, there was a definite understanding of these properties as arising from the supernatural perfection of the creation of Allah
- **Magic squares** were known throughout the ancient world and were used by the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Indians, Arabs, Hebrews, Chinese etc.
 - The first known historical mention of magic squares is the 3x3 square mentioned in the *I Ching* (易經), dating from at least the 2nd c BCE.

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6



四	九	二
三	五	七
八	一	六

3x3 magic square from the *I Ching*

四	九	三	八
二	七	六	一
八	三	九	四
七	六	五	十
五	十	四	九

4x4 magic square from 10th c. India



5x5 “SATOR” magic square from 8th c. Italy

The Abjad - الأجد

- The Arabic alphabet is what is called an **abjad**
 - A system of writing which only uses consonants
 - Long vowels w, y, and ā are considered consonants
 - Short vowels are implied by context, or in some rare cases, as diacritic marks
- Arabic is a cursive writing system, written right to left
- Letters have different forms when used word initial, medial, final, or isolated
 - Example, the letter *bā'* has the following forms:

Final	Medial	Initial	Isolated
ب	ب	ب	ب

- Some letters can only connect from the right, example the letters '*alif* and *rā'*:

Final/Medial	Initial/Isolated
ل	ل

Final/Medial	Initial/Isolated
ج	ج

The Abjad - الأَبْجَد

ا	ب	ج	د	ه	و	ز
'alif	bā'	jīm	dāl	hā'	wāw	zayn
a in car	b in bat	j in jam	d in dad	h in hat	w in wet, oo in pool	z in zebra
ح	ط	ي	ك	ل	م	ن
hā'	ṭā'	yā'	kāf	lām	mīm	nūn
no equivalent	no equivalent	y in yet, ee in feet	c in cat	l in lost	m in mom	n in nun
س	ع	ف	ص	ق	ر	ش
sīn	3ayn	fā'	ṣād	qāf	rā'	shīn
s in sad	no equivalent	f in far	no equivalent	no equivalent	r in rat, but rolled	sh in shoot
ت	ث	خ	ذ	ض	ظ	غ
tā'	thā'	khā'	dhāl	ḍād	ẓā'	ghayn
t in test	th in thumb	ch in l'chaim	th in that	no equivalent	no equivalent	no equivalent

Additional Letterforms

ء	أ	إ	ء	ي	إ
<i>hamzah</i>	<i>'alif hamzah</i>	<i>'alif hamzah</i>	<i>wāw hamzah</i>	<i>yā' hamzah</i>	<i>'alif maddah</i>
glottal stop, not considered a letter	glottal stop before short a	glottal stop before short i	glottal stop before long u	glottal stop before long i	glottal stop before long a
ء		ي		إ	
<i>tā' marbūtah</i>		<i>'alif maqsoura</i>		<i>lām alif</i>	
either <i>t</i> or <i>h</i> sound, only found at end of words, used to mark feminine gender of nouns and adjectives		long <i>a</i> sound, only found at end of words, used in some verb tenses and masculine names		compulsory ligature, used to prevent ambiguity with ل, which would otherwise be either ل+ل or ل+إ	

The Numerical Value of Letters

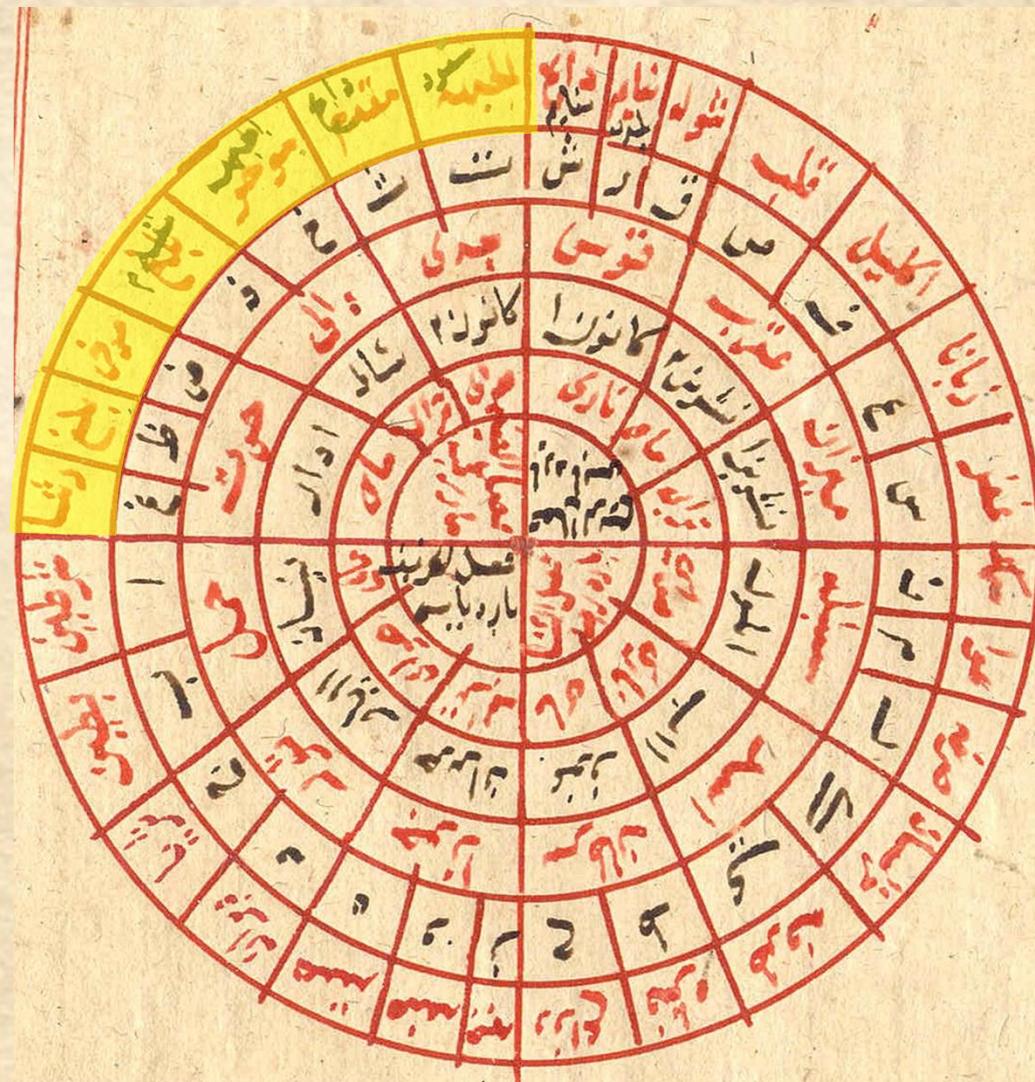
ا	ب	ج	د	ه	و	ز
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ح	ط	ي	ك	ل	م	ن
8	9	10	20	30	40	50
س	ع	ف	ص	ق	ر	ش
60	70	80	90	100	200	300
ت	ث	خ	ذ	ض	ظ	غ
400	500	600	700	800	900	1000

The Elemental Association of Letters

ذ	ف	م	ط	ه	ا	Hot	Fire
ض	ص	ن	ي	و	ب	Dry	Air
ظ	ق	س	ك	ز	ج	Cold	Water
غ	د	ع	ل	ح	د	Moist	Earth

The Astrological Association of Letters

- This is one of the most comprehensive and important diagrams in the *Shams al-Ma³ārif*
- It lists the association of all 28 letters with various astrological concepts
- Each letter is associated with a season, month, zodiac sign, and lunar mansion
- al-Būnī follows an odd convention in that one section of the lunar mansions has its order scrambled
 - This is possibly done to prevent misuse by the inexpert reader, as the invocation of the planets was anathema in Islam, and this prohibition could easily be accidentally trod upon by the novice
 - The expert reader would know the list of the mansions by heart and would know to de-scramble them as needed



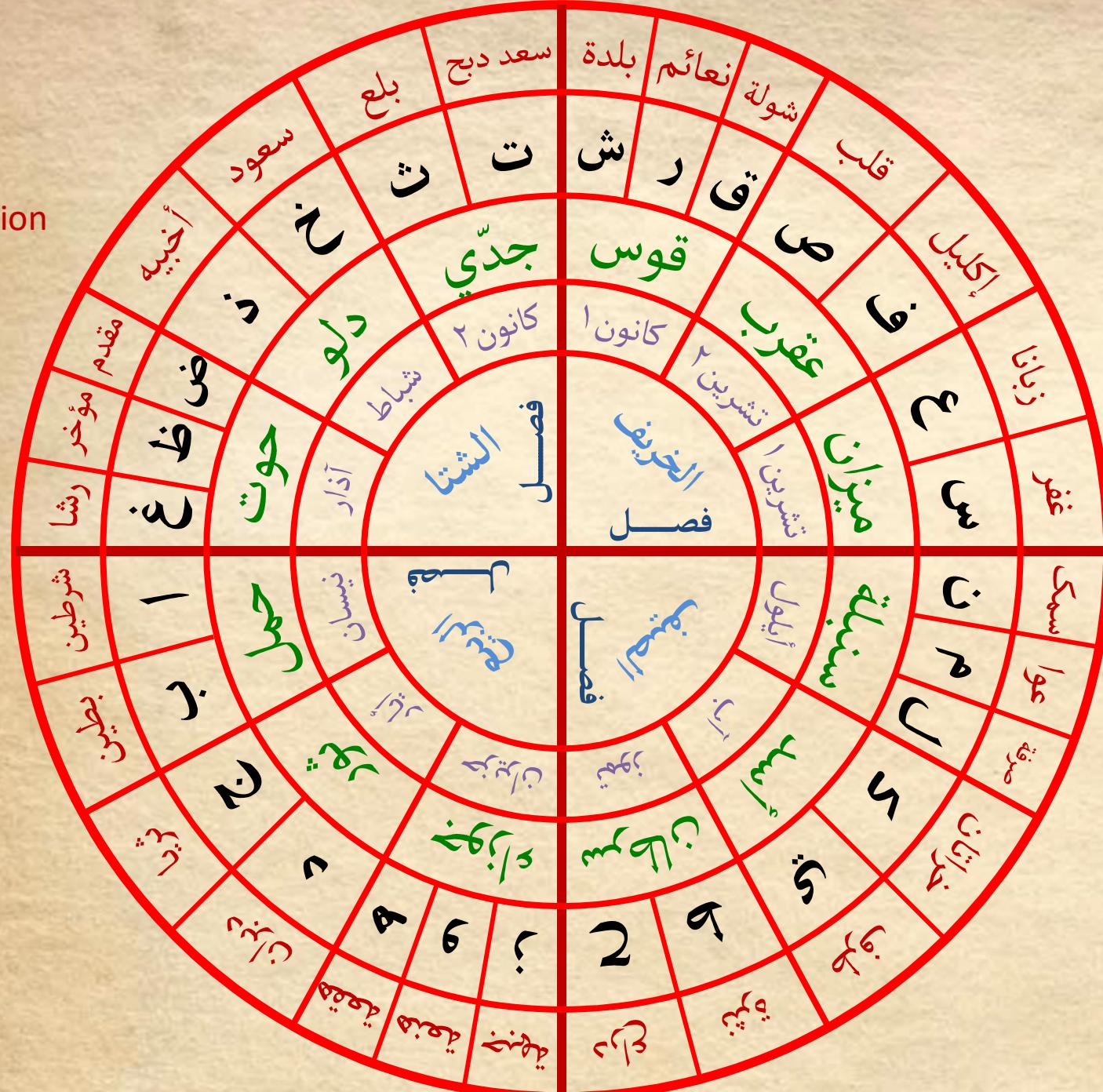
Seasons

Months

Zodiac Sign

Letter

Lunar Mansion



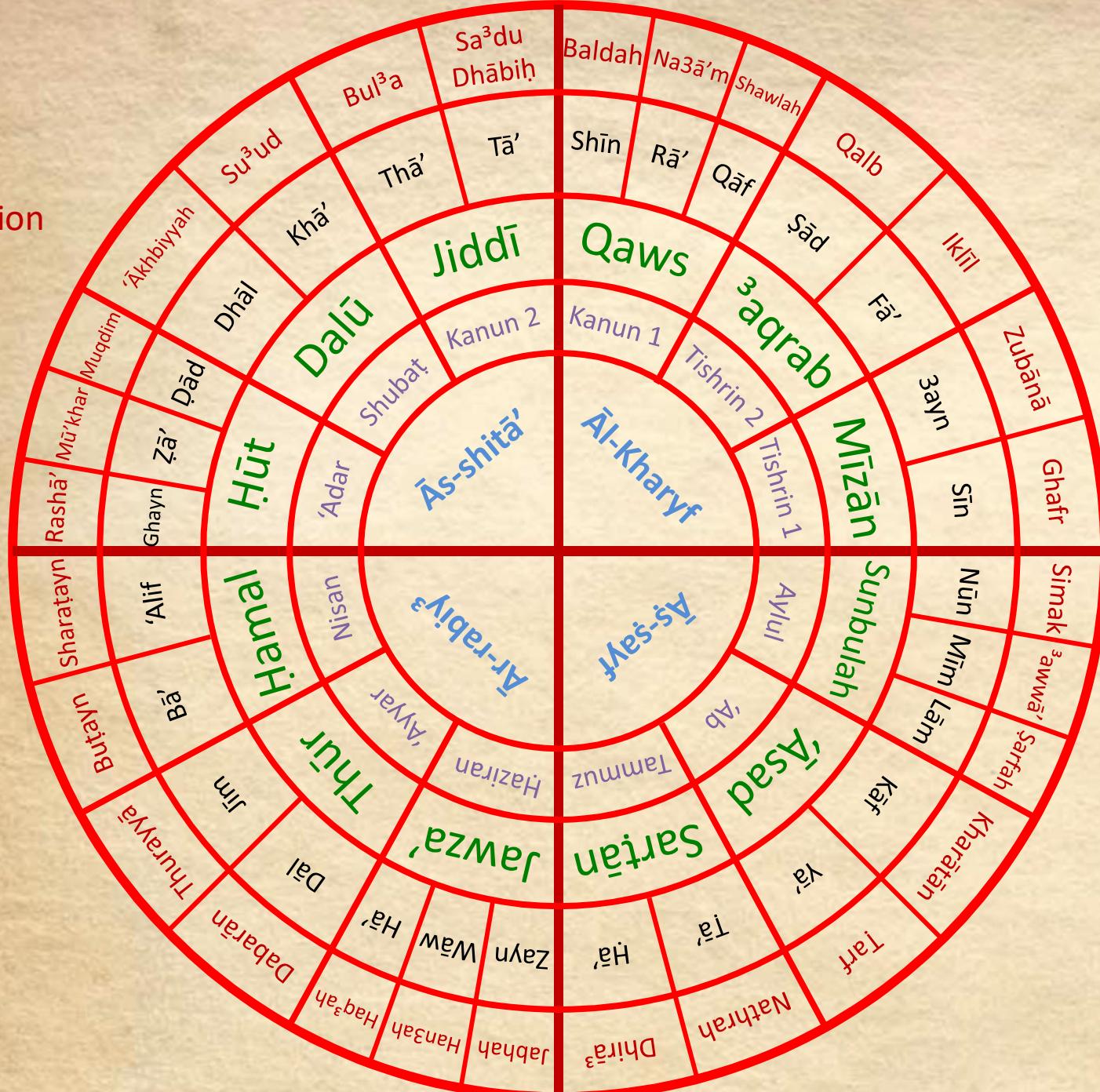
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Months

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Letter

Lunar Mansion



Seasons

Months

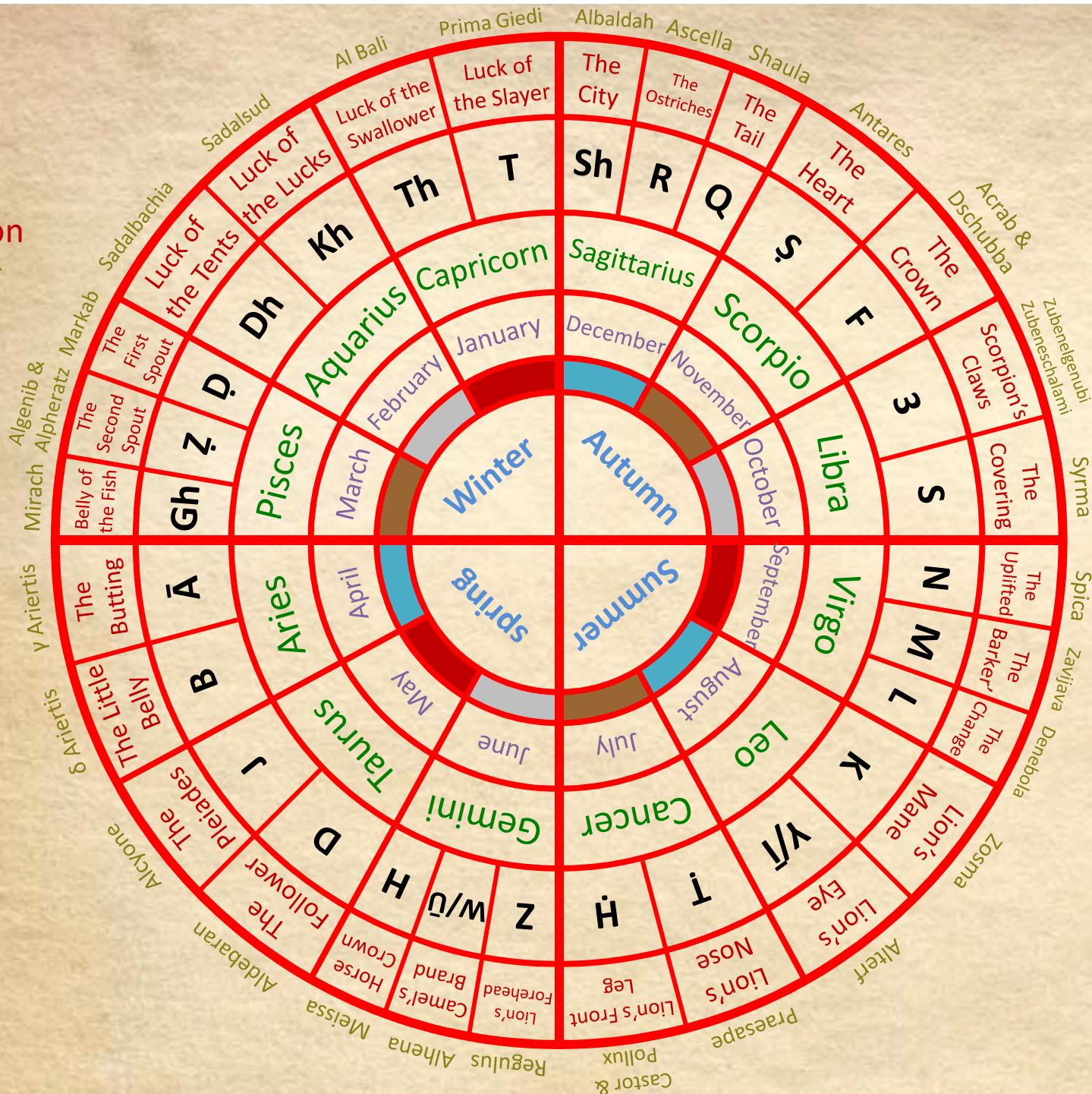
Zodiac Sign

Letter

Lunar Mansion

Indicator Star

WATER	EARTH
FIRE	AIR





Astrolabe for the latitudes of Cairo and Alexandria, c. 13th C., British Museum



Islamic, Astrolabe of 'Umar ibn Yusuf ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn Rasul al-Muzaffari, 1291, Metropolitan Museum of Art

3 x 3
Magic Square
Types

	Fire	
Water		Air
	Earth	

Fire

6	1	8
7	5	3
2	9	4

Air

2	7	6
9	5	1
4	3	8

Earth

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

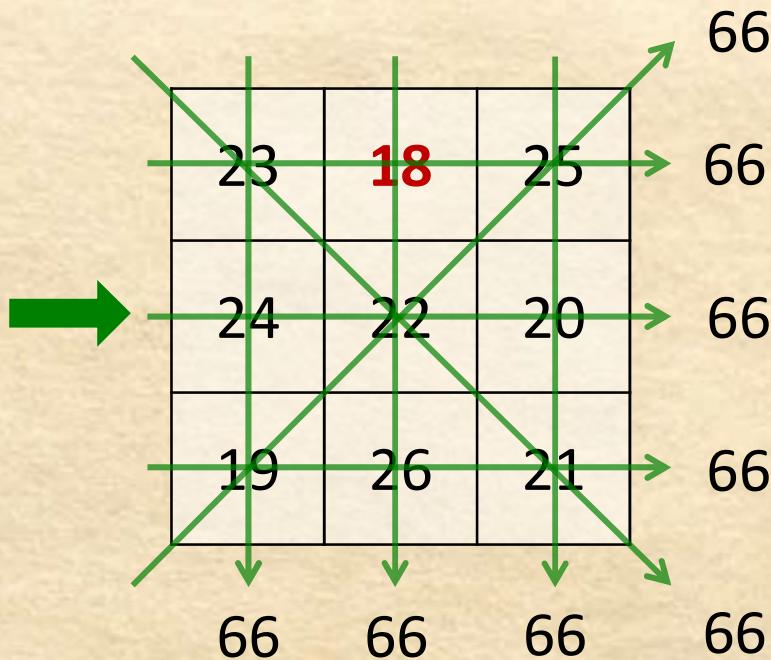
Water

6	7	2
1	5	9
8	3	4

3 x 3 Fire Magic Square Based on the Divine Name ﷺ

1. Break down the name into its constituent letters: ﷺ = 5 + 30 + 30 + 1 = 66
2. Subtract 12: 66 - 12 = 54
3. Divide by 3: 54/3 = 18
4. Starting with the result of the last step, fill in the square in the order of the basic magic square
5. If there is a remainder of 1, add 1 starting with the 7 cell, if there is a remainder of 2, add 1 starting with the 4 cell (note that one of the diagonals will not work)

6	1	8
7	5	3
2	9	4



Distribution of Elements in a 4x4 Magic Square

E	W	A	F
F	A	W	E
W	E	F	A
A	F	E	W

- The elemental type of a square is dictated by the element of the cell with the smallest number.
- This is a *Latin Square*, meaning that each row and each column contains all 4 elements only once. In addition, no two adjacent cells have the same element, making it a perfectly balanced Latin Square.
- Also note that each corner represents one of the elements without repetition

4 x 4 Water Magic Square for Āyub whose mother is Ḥādya

Rules:

- The magic sum must be 34 or greater (if the sum from the person's name is not sufficient, add the mother's name)
- Remainders: If R1 then +1 starting at the 13th cell, if R2 then +1 starting on the 9th cell, if R, then +1 starting on the 5th cell
- Rotate as necessary to match the desired element
- Always consult an expert! You don't want to accidentally summon a malicious Jinn

n+1

18	4	5	15
7	13	12	10
11	9	8	14
6	16	17	3

n+3

أَيُوب
ا ي و ب
حَادِي
ح ا د ي

$$2+6+10+1=19$$

+

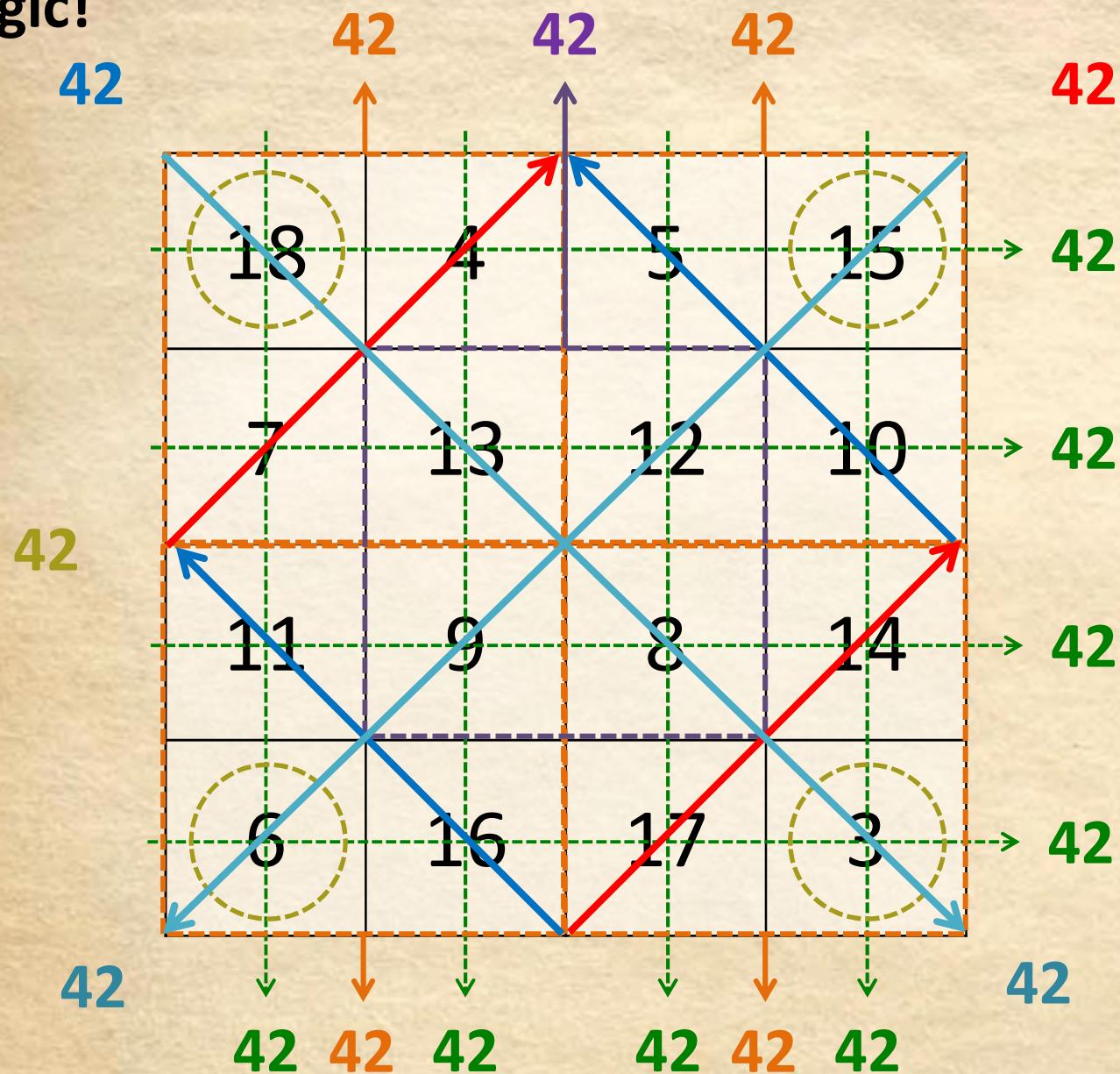
$$10+4+1+8=23$$

$$19+23=42$$

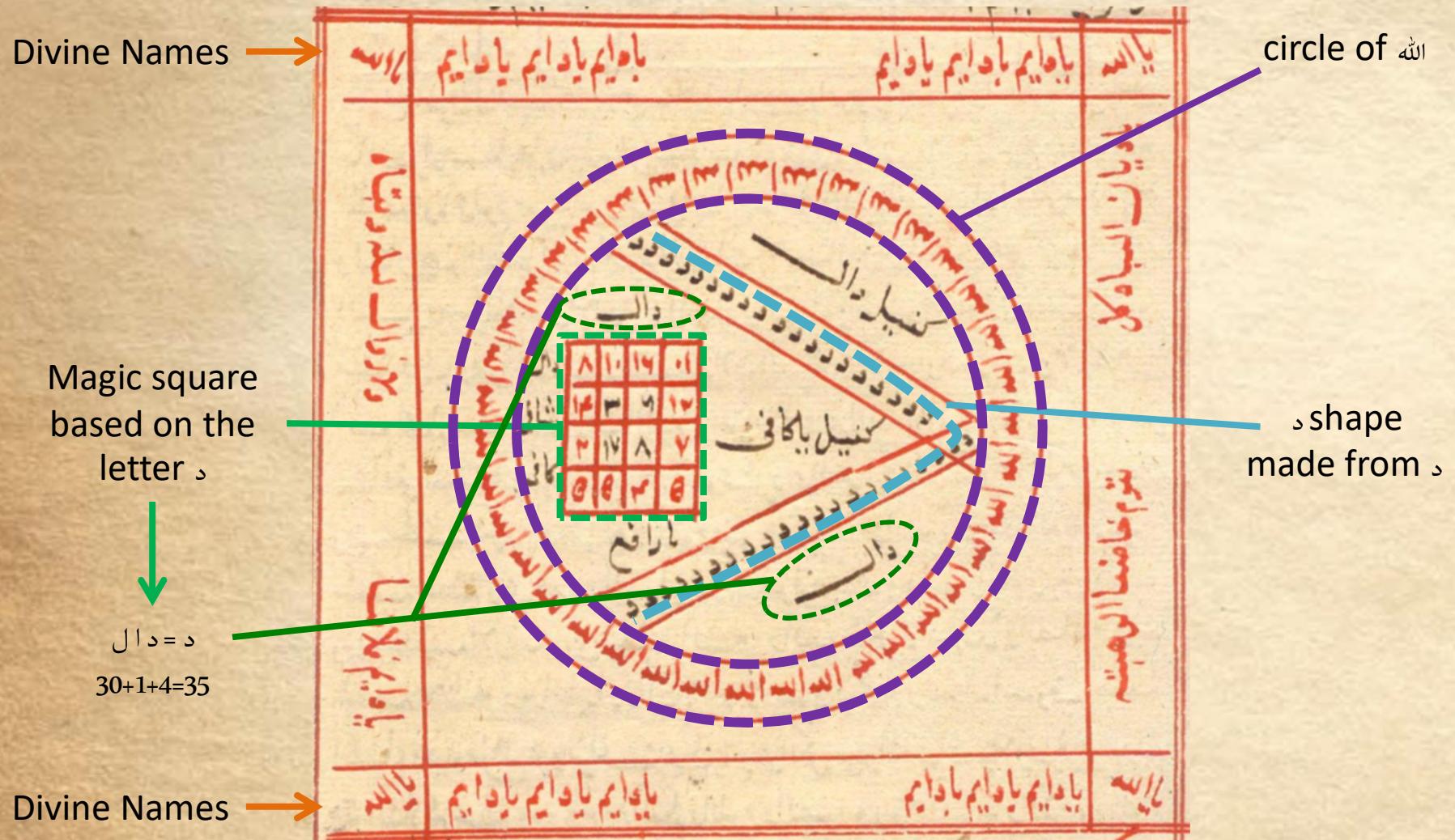
$$(42-30)/4 = 3$$

3 is the quotient
“n”

Let's analyze
the magic!

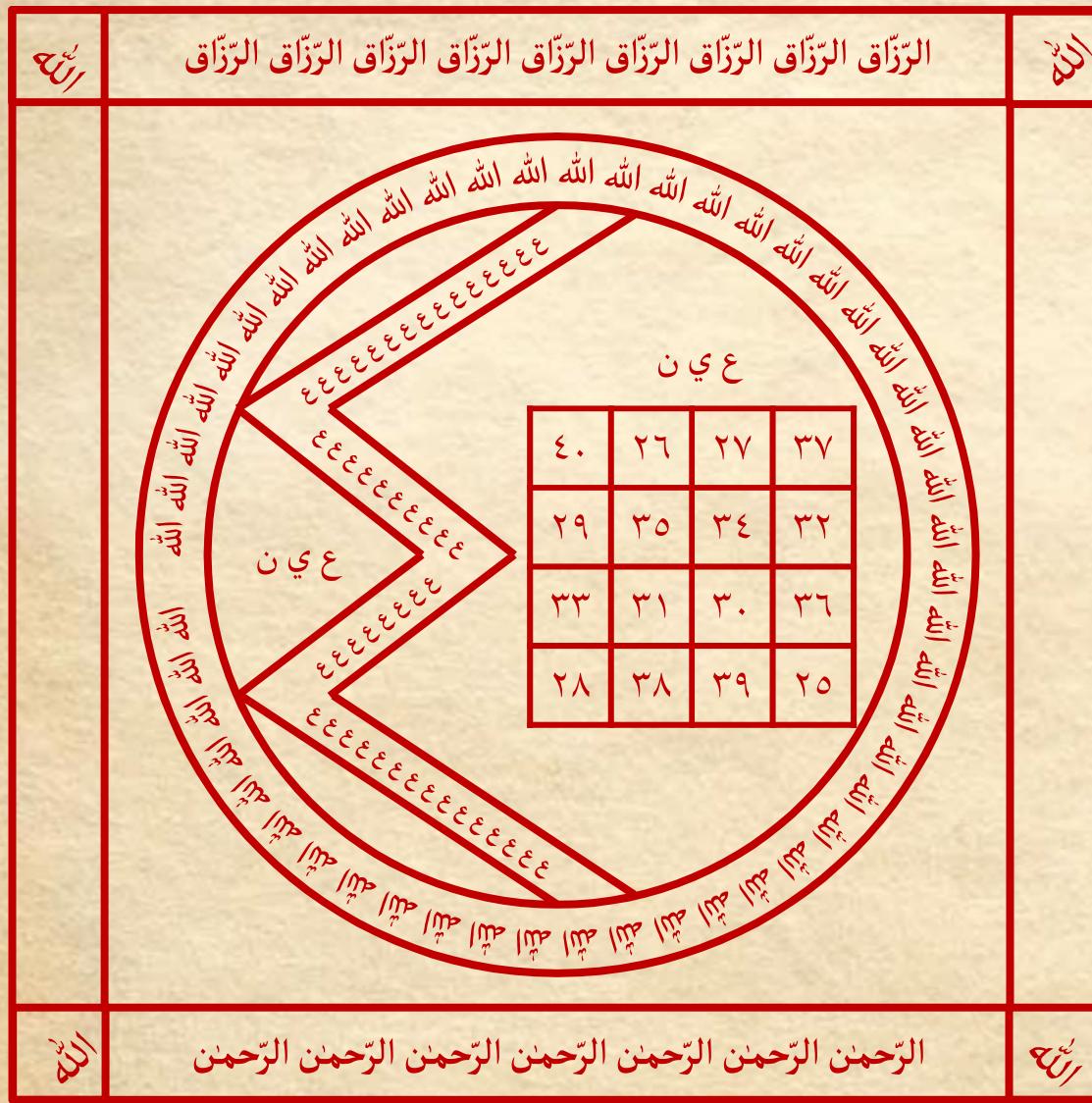


Anatomy of a Talisman



How to Construct a Talisman (based on the letter ع)

40	26	27	37
29	35	34	32
33	31	30	36
28	38	39	25



Note: This is for illustrative purposes only, following the instruction of al-Būnī. Please **do not** use a talisman using the Divine Names unless you are a Muslim, or it is created for you by a Muslim. I suggest you instead use the names from the Birhatīya Conjunction Oath, also by al-Būnī, but not sacred in the Islamic faith.

Questions

$$S = \alpha n + \beta \frac{n}{2} (n^2 - 1)$$

References

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