

Mysterious Symbols in Islamic Philosophy



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Suhrawardi's philosophical text *al-Mashari'* contains three mysterious symbols that the author himself claims to be the key to his own system of thought. After centuries of doubt, digital tools may be able to help understand their hidden meaning

Copies of Islamic philosophical manuscript consist of seemingly endless pages of walls of text. Readers of Islamic philosophy were not interested in embellishments or illustrations. Neither were the writers; only very seldom did they make use of graphics or symbols to get their points across. All the more exciting than that Suhrawardi (d. 1191) made use of symbolism in order to express the essence of his philosophy. In this article I will examine Suhrawardi's use of these symbols, discuss the struggle later transcribers experienced with them, and propose an improved interpretation of this symbolism using digital tools.

The Suhrawardi I am speaking of is also known as *al-maqtul*, 'the executed one,' to distinguish him from his namesakes. He was executed on the order of no one other than Saladin, the great warrior fighting the Crusaders, for his heterodox beliefs and his penchant for non-reticence.

He only lived to be 36 years old, but produced an extraordinary philosophical body of works in which he advanced a great number of innovations. He himself describes these innovations in terms of an entirely new system of thought, which he dressed up with a vocabulary around terms such as luminosity and light. Accordingly, his magnum opus is called *Hikmat al-ishraq*, 'The philosophy of illumination.' In a text he wrote later, *al-Mashari' wa-l-Mutarahat*, 'The paths and havens,' the previously-mentioned symbols appear in the introduction. The passage can be translated as follows:

When the student has fully grasped this way of thinking, then let him commence with scintillating practices according to the judgment of the Custodian of Illumination, until he himself may see some of the principles of illumination so that the foundations of the matters become resolved for him. As for the three before-mentioned forms

in 'The philosophy of illumination,' they are X Y Z. Understanding them is only granted after illumination.

I used X, Y, and Z, as placeholders for these symbols. The text in which they appear, *al-Mashari'*, has been edited by Henry Corbin, and in Figure 1 you can see how Corbin rendered the symbols in his edition. The whole passage finds an equivalent in *Hikmat al-ishraq*, which I will cite here too, to make the passage more understandable:

I exhort you to preserve this book, to keep it safe and guard it from those unworthy of it. [...] Give it only to whoever has fully grasped the method of the Peripatetics, a lover of the light of God. After commencing, let him practice for forty days, abstaining from meat, taking little food, concentrating upon the contemplation of the light of God, most mighty and glorious, and according to what the Custodian of the Book commands him.

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Manuscript of Suhrawardi's al-Mashari' wa-l-mutarahat, dated 1460.

These passages describe certain instructions for Suhrawardi's students about the circulation of his book *Hikmat al-ishraq*. This book is not to be handed out until a person is already an advanced student of philosophy, with knowledge of books by for example Aristotle and Ibn Sina. Suhrawardi sets up a difference between the philosophy of everybody else and his own. The former is considered Peripatetic and discursive, his own is illuminative and intuitive. For Suhrawardi they are not in fact competing but different stages; one first needs to master peripatetic philosophy before illuminative philosophy can be practiced. Then a forty day trial period begins of asceticism and meditation. The final decision whether to admit a candidate to the next round is ultimately in the hands of a 'custodian' (*qayyim*); a term seemingly implying Suhrawardi nominated an heir to lead a group of initiated followers. In this context, Suhrawardi disseminates three symbols which are supposed to convey a key message about *Hikmat al-ishraq*, and knowledge of the symbols is only granted to the initiated.

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dence in manuscripts, we can learn that these symbols were cause of confusion among those copying the text. In all the three manuscripts that I consulted, the symbols do not appear in the body of the text. In a manuscript from the Topkapi palace in Istanbul, dated 1460, the symbols are added (presumably later) in the margin. In a manuscript held in Leiden and finished in 1307, the symbols are also in the margin, this time sideways and as part of a larger segment. A manuscript held in the Iranian National Library, finally, is the best evidence for the controversial relationship of the symbols with the

text: where the symbols are supposed to be we only see a space left empty.

The controversy deepens when we look at the symbols themselves. I recreated these shapes on the computer so that we may take a closer look at them (figure 1). Note that Arabic is read from right to left and hence the symbols represented by X, Y, and Z are arranged in reverse order. What is instantly clear is that the shape of the symbols is not uniformly agreed upon. This is of course a big problem because now we are faced with a double-layered puzzle. We need to find out the original shape of the symbols, and we want to figure out what those shapes could mean. Further, by comparing Corbin's version with the two manuscript versions we can recognize what Corbin did when he prepared his edition. The symbols in Corbin's edition are probably not faithful reproductions of what he found in the manuscript but idealized versions. Corbin apparently saw them as geometric shapes and therefore emphasized this in his rendering, only making use of straight lines, squares and circles.



FIGURE 1
The graphic representation of the three symbols in three different edition of Suhrawardi's work.

Image by L. W. C. (Eric) van Lit.

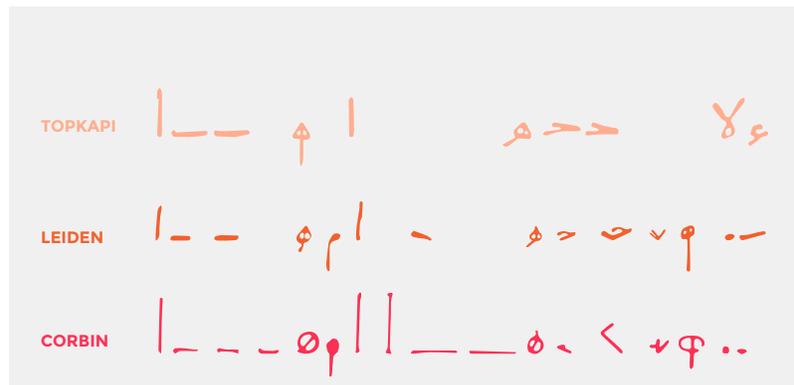


FIGURE 2
Break down of the symbol's constituents.

Image by L. W. C. (Eric) van Lit.

Now that we have the symbols in digital format we can manipulate them more easily to decipher what they may mean. The first step is to break them down into their constituents. We can arrive at figure 2, from which we see that even at the level of smallest parts there is fluctuation among the different versions, with some parts of one version missing in the others. Breaking them down as such also reveals that *Topkapi X* and *Corbin X* are closely related. In fact, upon noticing this I used *Topkapi X* to breakdown *Corbin X*, as *Corbin X* was on its own containing indistinguishable small blobs everywhere. With help of *Topkapi X* it can be seen that even the smallest features of *Corbin X* likely rely on

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manuscript evidence, which proves that Corbin was looking at something that looked like *Topkapi X*. Readers with knowledge of Arabic will by now have noticed the most important aspect which this breakdown easily demonstrates: the symbols are probably not meant to be seen as geometrical shapes, but instead they are constructed out of letters of the Arabic alphabet.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وعليه توكلون واستعين
 هذا الكتاب يشتمل على العلوم الثلاثة قررة بحكم اقتراحكم يا اخواني واوردت
 لا توجد في غيره من الكتب نافع جداً حتى تشبهه من تصرفاتي ولم اختر
 كثيراً وان كنت قد اودعته نكناً ولطائف تومي الى قواعد شريفة زائدة
 وجده بعد ما تل كتب القوم وايقا بالام ايضاً غيره به ومن لم يتهتم في العلوم البحر
 الموسوم بحكمة الاشراف وهذا الكتاب ينبغي ان يقرأ قبله وبعد تحقيق المحنة
 فاما لاراعى الترتيب ههنا ولا يغيرم في بعض المواضع بموضوع علم بل عز
 الى قواعد من علوم متفرقة فاذا استحكم الباحث هذا النمط فلنشر
 بحكم القيمة على الاشراف حتى يعاين بعض مباني الاشراف ثم يتم له الامر
 في حكمه الاشراف وهي علومها لا تعطى الا بعد الاشراف
 الانسلاخ عن الدنيا واوسط مشاهدة الانوار الالهية واخره لانها تارة له
 والمطارات العلم الاول فيه مشاريع المستوع الاول في يساغوه
 ان لا المطلوب للتصوري وتصديقي وان الموصل اليها القول السامح
 النظر في الموصلين والمفردات التي تبركبان منه والهيبة التاليفية و
 وفي صورها الصحيح والفاسد الشبيه به والتاقتص واعلم ان قول
 انه حصول صور الاشياء التي يدل عليها بالالفاظ المفردة في الذهن خط
 المفرد لم يعلم بعد ومنها ان ما يفهم من قول القائل فعل كذا التصور مع
 ومعرفة التصديق بانه الحكم على احد الشئين بانه هو الآخر وليس هو اليه
 بالتصديق الواقع في الجهلات غير منضم للتصديق الواقع في الشريطا
 في شتره ما ذكرناه في التوضيحات على ان السامح في مثل هذا الموضوع جار
 بجميع العلوم وجزئى للعلم المطلق والعلوم التي هي غير المنطق واخذ
 مطلق فان العلم المطلق لا تقوم بجزائه واعتبار علم المنطق واء
 واذا كان بحث ما في لفظ مشترك كمن بحث ان العقل هل هو جوهر او ليس



Particular of a copy of Suhawardi's text.

Using this interpretative angle, I propose that a combination of *Leiden X*, *Leiden Y*, and *Topkapi Z* leads to an improved version of these symbols, illustrated in figure 3. The entire sequence of these symbols then would consist of *lam*, *alif*, *hamza*, *ha* (ﺍ), *ḥa*(ﺡ), *ḥa*, *alif*, *ha*, *mim*, *ba*, *ba*, and *alif*. The two *ḥas* are ambiguous, as these shapes are also used to write the letters *kha*, and *jim*. The two *bas* are even more ambiguous as the way they are drawn here is not their exact form so perhaps this is not what is meant. Further, even if the form of *ba* was meant it could also be *ta* or *tha* as these letters have the same shape.

The use of letters to construct a symbol may be significant for an anagram or a sign of the use of numerology. If it were an anagram, I can only read *Ikhuat bab al-Hama* in it, 'The brothers of the gate of Hama.' But this would suppose one more letter, the *waw*. Hama is a city in Syria, about 120 km south of Aleppo and about 45 km north of Homs. I do not know what its significance might be, other than a name for the initiated group of followers which Suhrawardi alludes to in his *al-Mashari'* and *Hikmat al-ishraq*. If the significance lies in numerology, then we can compile figure 4. *X* amounts to 101, *Y* to 22, and *Z* to 50, combining for a total of 173. I do not see significance in this. When we start to explore all the sequences that arise when we disambiguate systematically the ambiguous letters, we get, predictably, results that could be

meaningful. If we read one of the *bas* as a *tha*, and read one of the *ḥas* as a *jim*, we get a total of 666, the importance of which is obvious. If we change both *bas* for *tas*, and both *ḥas* for *jims*, we get a total of 959, which is the same number as *al-Shahrazuri huwa al-qayyim abadan*, which means "Shahrazuri is the custodian forever," which would be a reference to the passage in *Hikmat al-ishraq*. Suhrawardi is the name of Suhrawardi's most important commentator and perhaps this is a message about the appointment of Suhrawardi's heir, as leader of the group.

Of course, numbers are notoriously easy to manipulate to get seemingly meaningful results. To know exactly what Suhrawardi wished to convey with these symbols remains a mystery.

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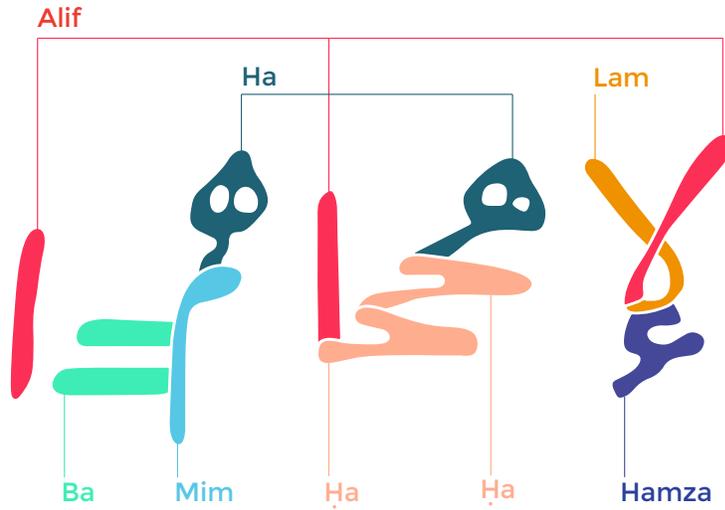


FIGURE 3
The symbols as clusters of letters.
Image by L. W. C. (Eric) van Lit.

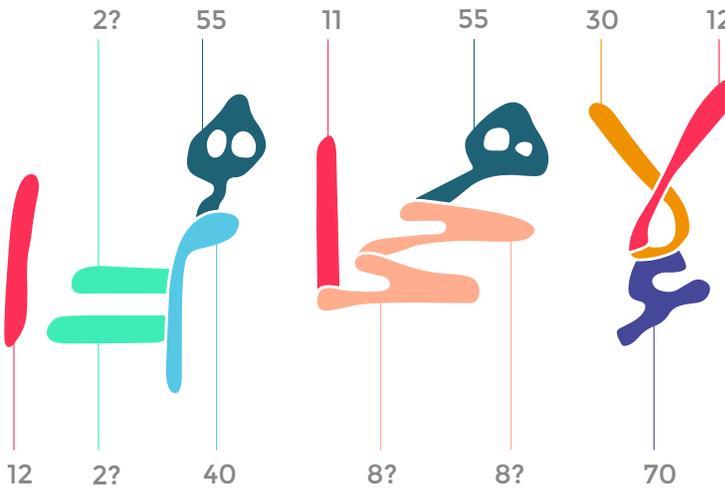


FIGURE 4
The numeric values of the letters
contained in the symbols.
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سوا يطل لا يوجد في غيره من الك
ن باخذ المشايخ كثير او ان كنت
بيدة على ما يوردونها ومن ان
ومن لم يتمهر في العلوم البحثية به
عني ان يقرأ قبله وبعد تحقيق المحن
نرم في بعض المواضع بموضوع ه
ذا استحكم البياحت هذا النمط
تي تعابن بعض مساوي الاث
بحكمة الاشراق وبسي هذه علوم
من الدنيا ووسطه مشاهدة ال
لمشاريع والمطارات ال

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