

# Al-Qurṭubī's *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* and the Ontology of Astral Talismanry

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In the early stages of Sufism's development, magical and occult practices, following the Greek tradition, were closely linked to the natural world. As Sufi philosophy entered a period of intensified intellectual synthesis (circa the twelfth century), these practices became the exclusive domain of the Sufi elite, serving as a means of transcendence for the soul and acting as a spiritual catalyst in the relationship between the mystic and God (Fahd 1966; Hamès 2007; Lory 2004). Given the specificity and interconnectedness of these two phases, the question of cryptographic semantics, or theurgic *instrumentarium*, becomes particularly relevant in Sufism. Although talismanic practices have been known since Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt and beyond, the philosophical concept of the talisman has not yet received sufficient academic attention.

This article will focus on al-Qurṭubī's (*Maslama al-Qurṭubī*, 906–964) encyclopedia of astral / talismanic magic, *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* ("The Goal of the Sage"), better known worldwide by its Latin title, *Picatrix*. It is assumed that al-Qurṭubī, in his detailed practical and theoretical descriptions of astral / talismanic magic, is one of the first to articulate – implicitly but systematically – the philosophical conditions under which the sage himself functions as a talismanic mediator, rather than merely as a maker of talismans. In the 12th and 13th centuries, this concept was further developed by prominent Islamicate thinkers – Suhrawardī (*Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥabash al-Suhrawardī*, 1154–1191), al-Būnī (*Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Būnī*, d. ca. 1225/1233), Ibn 'Arabi (*Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ibn 'Arabī*, 1165–1240) and others, so this is the first attempt to trace the roots of the philosophical concept of "human talisman" historically and conceptually.

**Keywords:** occult sciences, astral magic, talismanry, philosophy, theurgy, al-Qurṭubī.

## Celestial Order and Human Perfection in al-Qurṭubī's Talismanic Theory

The Islamic conceptualization of talismanry emerges at the intersection of *'ilm*, *siḥr*, and *falsafa* – epistemic fields never strictly demarcated in Islamic thought. Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, later Latinized as *Picatrix*, exemplifies this synthesis: the talisman is not a superstitious artifact but a

philosophical instrument of celestial causality, embedded in a rigorous cosmological framework. Hellmut Ritter has drawn attention to the very etymology of the Arabic word *ṭillasm* (*ṭilasm*, *ṭlsm*)<sup>1</sup>, noting that when

<sup>1</sup> The variant forms reflect a difference in the treatment of the consonantal cluster: م ت ل ط (*ṭilasm*), without gemination, and م ت س ل ط (*ṭillasm*), with *shadda* (gemination) on the *lām*. Both forms occur in manuscript traditions and dictionaries. The plural

read in reverse it corresponds to *musallat* (*mšlṭ*), meaning “that to which power over something is conferred.”<sup>2</sup> Such power is attained by embedding “celestial secrets” within a material object – essentially by possessing sufficient astrological knowledge and the ability to channel the forces of the planets and stars into that object. This observation underscores how the concept of the talisman was linguistically framed as an instrument of authority and influence, aligning closely with its theorized function of harnessing astral forces through learned practice.<sup>3</sup>

The treatise stands in continuity with late antique talismanic traditions in which consecrated images (*telesmata*) served as vehicles for cosmic influence. In the Islamic context, these practices are grounded in Aristotelian cosmology and the Neoplatonic principle of astral harmony. *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* did not merely inherit the theurgical logic of its predecessors but integrated it into a fully articulated philosophical system, providing a bridge between Hellenistic theurgy and the epistemology of Islamic talismanry. Its topic is magic, “a divine power advanced by causes,” the latter being explicitly knowable.<sup>4</sup> The celestial

bodies mediate between divine causes and things sublunar, including (but by no means limited to) human affairs. By creating talismans, we harness and direct celestial powers to earthly effects.<sup>5</sup> Grounded in natural philosophy, the *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* embodies what Liana Saif describes as an epistemological stance that seeks to understand causes and employ them in order to produce desired outcomes – an approach in which knowledge of the terrestrial and celestial realms is achieved through observation, reasoning, and the deduction of causal relations.<sup>6</sup>

Of particular significance for the subsequent intellectual history of talismanry is the fact that *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* was translated into Latin during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the title *Picatrix*. Within this Latin context, the talisman was referred to simply as an *imago* – an image – and its study framed as the *scientia imaginum*, or “science of images.”<sup>7</sup> Far from being a marginal curiosity, this discipline developed as a recognized field across the three dominant languages of scholarship: Greek, Arabic, and Latin. Its translation into *Picatrix* thus enabled sustained cross-cultural

is given as *ṭāsmāt* (ṭāsmāt), and *ṭāsmāt* (ṭāsmāt), and *ṭāsmāt* (ṭāsmāt), the last being by far the most common and widely attested form in both classical and later sources. For the sake of consistency, the forms *ṭilasm* and *ṭilasmāt* are used throughout this work, as they align with the most established scholarly usage in contemporary academic literature.

- 2 al-Qurṭubī, Maslama b. Qāsim, *Picatrix: Das Ziel des Weisen*, ed. Ritter, H., Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1933, p. 85.
- 3 Saif, L. From *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma'ārif*: Ways of knowing and paths of power in medieval Islam, in *Arabica* 64(3–4), 2017, p. 300.
- 4 Anderson, B. The science of talismans today, in *History Compass*, 21(3–4), 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12761>

- 5 Saif. From *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma'ārif*: Ways of knowing and paths of power in medieval Islam, p. 299–300.

- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 309.

- 7 Burnett, Ch. Talismans: Magic as science? Necromancy among the seven liberal arts. *Magic and divination in the middle ages (Study 1)*. Variorum, 1996; Weill-Parot, N. Causalité astrale et “science des images” au Moyen Âge: Éléments de réflexion. *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences*, 52(2), 207–240. <https://doi.org/10.3406/rhs.1999.1351>, 1999; Weill-Parot, N. *Les “images astrologiques” au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance: Spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques (XIIe-XVe siècle)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002.

engagement on the metaphysical role and efficacy of images, establishing a shared intellectual vocabulary that shaped both Islamic and European discourses on talismanry.

Charles Burnett observes that al-Qurṭubī distinctly categorizes magic into three parts: *nīranjāt* (ritual acts performed through incantation – spirit upon spirit), *ṭilasmāt* (talismanic magic – spirit upon body), and *al-kīmīyā*’ (body-on-body transformation – body upon body). He explains: “*Nīranj* is the Arabic transcription of the Middle Persian word “*nerang*”, used to denote incantation or ritual formula; *ṭilasm* (talisman) clearly derives from the word *telesma*, which literally means “completion” or “performance [of the ritual]”; alchemy, according to one theory, originates from the Egyptian word [*kēme*], meaning the black soil of the fertile Nile delta. Al-Qurṭubī categorizes magic based on the categories of spirit (*rūh*) and body (*jasad*): *nīranjāt* involve the operation of spirit on spirit, talismans, of spirit on body, and alchemy, of body on body.”<sup>8</sup> However, in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, only two types of magic are described: ritual / incantational and talismanic magic, while alchemy, as al-Qurṭubī himself notes, is discussed in a previous work “The Rank of the Wise” (*Rutbat al-Ḥakīm*). Ch. Burnett further emphasizes that in both *nīranjāt* and *ṭilasmāt*, efficacy arises not from symbolic resemblance alone but through a ritual mechanism that “acti-

vates” the object by drawing planetary spirit into it at the astrologically precise moment. In this sense, the talisman functions as a spiritually-charged instrument, rendered efficacious by the convergence of material form, celestial timing, and operator intent. Ch. Burnett traces the ontological logic of such operations back to the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Hermetica*, where *nīranjāt* are described as compound ritual actions: carefully measured ingredients – animal, mineral, and vegetal – are combined and activated through recitation and combustion. The object becomes effective not by its form alone, but by the release of subtle spiritual vapors (*arwāḥ rūḥāniyya*) that interact with astral forces. In this sense, a *nīranj*<sup>9</sup> is both a material object and a

9 As Ch. Burnett explains, the *nīranj* is the operation of mixing and burning a carefully chosen and precisely measured range of ingredients. It is both a ritual action (*‘aml*) and the result of the action: something digestible as a food or a drink. It is listed beside another action – *‘ilāj*: ‘curing (with medicines)’, and another result of an action: ‘poisons’ (*sumūm*). The primacy of ‘action’ (making the food or drink) resulted in the word usually being replaced in Arabic by *ṣana* ‘a (‘the making’) and *khalṭ* (‘the mixing’), and by the corresponding verbs describing the process: *ṣana* ‘a, *khalāṭa* and *ikhtalāṭa*. Action is reflected in the usual Latin word for *nīranj*: *opus* or *confectio*. These replace a transliteration of the Arabic word or a specific term in Latin. The ingredients are all natural things, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, each with their own powers. Thus, a Latin addition to one text comments: ‘*Tanta enim est phisica virtus in eis*’ (‘For such is the natural power in these <confections>’). Thus, too, Avicenna in his *Division of the Intellectual Sciences* describes the *nīranj* as ‘mixing the powers which are found in the substances of the earthly world in order that from these a power may be produced from which a strange action emanates’ (in distinction to talismans which combine heavenly powers with those of terrestrial bodies). Great care

8 Burnett, Ch. *Hermetic Tradition in Arabic Culture* (forthcoming); Burnett, Ch. The Three Divisions of Arabic Magic, in L. Saif, F. Leoni, M. Melvin-Koushki & F. Yahya (eds.), *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, p. 43.

performative ritual – its function hinges on correct planetary timing and the operator’s metaphysical preparation.<sup>10</sup>

While alchemy is reserved for discussion in *Rutbat al-Ḥakīm*, the focus in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* on ritual and talismanic magic reflects al-Qurṭubī’s broader theoretical commitment to an Aristotelian cosmology, wherein the operations of magic are undergirded by the interaction and transformation of the four elemental substances. Al-Qurṭubī adopts an Aristotelian cosmological framework, in which the four elements – fire, water, air, and earth – constitute the entirety of the material cosmos. Further pairs of opposing qualities (heat and cold, moisture and dryness) determine that these elements interact in various combinations according to Empedoclean notions of Love (attraction) and Strife (repulsion). The worldview of *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* is that of a universe composed of concentric spheres made of a certain ethereal substance. The material world, located at the center of the cosmos, is constant, but its structure is continuously changing. The four elements naturally arrange themselves according to their density. The heavy elements (water and earth) naturally fall towards the center, while the lighter ones (fire and air) rise to the heavens: “Truly, the universe consists

of concentric orders (*marātib muḥīṭa*), each encompassing the other; the heavier descend toward the center (*al-athqal ... al-markaz*), while the lighter rise toward the sphere (*al-akhaf ... al-falak*). Through this ordering the structure on which the cosmos subsists is established (*al-tartīb; qiwām al-kawn*).<sup>11</sup> When the mystic rises beyond the sphere of the four elements, he leaves the microcosmic world and enters the macrocosm.

The first planetary sphere, the Moon’s sphere, serves as a gateway leading from the sublunary world (the world of matter and corruption) to the supralunary world (the world of spirit and the source of generation). Beyond this point, the cosmos is no longer composed of elementary matter – the planets are formed from immaterial spiritual substance, which radiates force downwards. Above the Moon, the planets are arranged as follows: Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and finally, Saturn. Beyond the planetary spheres is the eighth sphere, the Zodiac, through which the planets seem to make all their wanderings. Beyond this eighth sphere lies the ninth, *Primum Mobile*, or the veil covering the Empyrean – the uppermost heaven, the abode of God, which causes the daily rotation of the celestial sphere and acts as a veil (*ḥijāb*) shielding from the light of the One. God resides in infinite space beyond these cosmological spheres. This specific cosmology, rooted in centuries-old Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Arabic, and Indian

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has to be devoted to the ingredients of the mixture, in terms both of their nature and their quantity. Burnett, *Hermetic Tradition in Arabic Culture* (forthcoming); see also Burnett, Ch., Niranj: A Category of Magic (Almost) Forgotten in the Latin West, in *Natura, scienze e società medievali. Studi in onore di Agostino Paravicini Bagliani*, Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2008, p. 37–66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī], *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥaq al-natījatayn bil-taqdim*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, Maṭba‘at Augustin: Glückstadt and Hamburg, I. 3, 1927, p. 11–12.

natural philosophy, underpins the internal consistency of *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*'s theoretical foundations of magic.<sup>12</sup>

It is within this meticulously ordered cosmological framework, stretching from the corruptible sublunary sphere to the luminous heights of the Primum Mobile, that *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* situates the possibility of magical action, proposing that only one who comprehends and harmonizes with this celestial hierarchy can ascend toward true wisdom and command the occult forces emanating from the heavens. What, according to *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, makes a person wise? Who can learn to draw down the forces of the heavens to earth and communicate with astral beings? According to Hermes Trismegistus, science and philosophy share one common element – perfect nature (*aṭ-ṭabī' a at-tamma*).<sup>13</sup> The Hermetic concept of perfect nature is developed throughout *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* and is explained as a state of mystical fulfillment that a magician achieves by aligning himself with the planets governing his birth and strictly adhering to ritual principles so that an intermediary spirit or guardian angel eventually forms. Before undertaking any ritual, the mage-sage must be adept at understanding the complex interrelationships existing among various elements of the chain of being. With sufficient knowledge, the mage perceives hidden or occult correspondences (also known as “sympathies,”

*tašābuh / munāsabāt*) between plants, animals, and minerals of the lower world and the spiritual forces of celestial bodies in the higher realm. In the terminology of the *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, *tašābuh* refers to analogical resemblances by which the properties of earthly things reflect celestial realities, while *munāsabāt* denotes the harmonious proportions and relational ties that bind the lower and higher realms. These are not arbitrary associations but ontological linkages inscribed in the very order of creation, such that each form in nature is seen as a reflection of a higher archetype. Recognizing these correspondences, the mage can gather all necessary sympathetic materials and use them to invoke astral spirits related to the nature of his goal – through sympathetic resonance between the collected items and the corresponding celestial bodies, the sage becomes empowered to harness their power. It is precisely this fusion of inner conviction and ritual mastery that renders the talisman effective, for in al-Qurṭubī's framework, the talisman is not a mere artifact but a crystallization of the sage's faith, will, and alignment with celestial order. Al-Qurṭubī asserts that the sage's body is a magical vessel, receiving and synthesizing various spiritual powers and physical materials. The complexity of each ritual reflects the intensity of the practitioner's intentions, but the primary condition for every sage is unconditional faith. Astral spirits are accessible only to the sage who truly believes in them; they remain hidden from the profane or the impostor. In *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, al-Qurṭubī explains that everything in the world has a cause (*sabab*) and a correspondence (*munāsaba*)

12 Saif, L. *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*, Basingstoke / New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 38–45.

13 al-Qurṭubī Maslama b. Qāsim, *Picatrix*, English translation and introduction by Attrell D., Porreca, D., Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2019, p. 21.

with what is above it among the stars (*al-kawākib*) and spirits (*al-arwāḥ*). Whoever understands these correspondences (*al-munāsabāt*) and combines them (*jamaʿa baynahā*) with a sincere intention (*niyya ṣādiqa*), finds that the powers will be present to him (*ḥudūr al-quwā*) and the spirits will respond (*istijābat al-arwāḥ*).<sup>14</sup> Such unwavering belief not only grants the sage access to astral intelligences but also underpins the very principles through which talismans operate, as al-Qurṭubī conceptualizes them not as inert instruments, but as loci where spiritual intent, material composition, and celestial order intersect.

Rather than treating talismans as mechanistic tools for manipulation, al-Qurṭubī presents them as composite objects made to receive and transmit celestial influences. One term glossed for them is talisman, from *ṭilasm*, “that to which power over something is conferred.” By the nature of their constituent parts, talismans draw down spiritus from the upper world by a cascade of rays (al-Kindī’s theory). Their efficacy depends on alignment of matter, time, and rite: “The talisman is built out of appropriate substances and at appropriate times, and it is consecrated with the appropriate ritual actions. Then, it is strengthened by the appropriate suffumigations and sacrifices that will attract the spirits to the image.”<sup>15</sup> This sits within the treatise’s larger claim that things in the lesser (sublunary) world reflect those in

the greater (celestial) world, and it aligns with the Neoplatonic model of procession/emanation adopted in the work’s cosmology and hierarchies.<sup>16</sup>

For al-Qurṭubī, the talisman functions as a transductive object – capable of receiving, concentrating, and projecting astral influences into the sublunary realm. Its efficacy depends not on superstition, but on the magus’s knowledge of celestial harmonics and philosophical cosmology. According to al-Qurṭubī’s reasoning, the successful talisman-maker (or talisman-maker of “self”) must first possess true wisdom, acquired through mastery of the natural and celestial sciences, ethical refinement, and unwavering faith. The talisman, then, is not merely an instrument of power, but a manifestation of philosophical knowledge. It reveals cosmic order through precise forms and inscriptions. For example, in *Picatrix* II.9.2, a talisman for repelling mice must be engraved on a red bronze with the first face of Leo ascending.<sup>17</sup> Such procedures might appear mundane, yet they are underpinned by profound theoretical foundations: the mage acts as a philosopher-priest aligning terrestrial substances with celestial powers.

In this way, al-Qurṭubī bridges cosmology and anthropology: the talisman reflects not only the structure of the cosmos but also the idea of the *perfect(ed) human* – a being whose spiritual refinement allows the harmonization of inner and outer worlds.

14 Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī]. *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥaḳ al-natījatayn bi-l-taqdīm*, I. 3, p. 11–13, III. 1–2, p. 149–160.

15 *Picatrix*. English translation and introduction by Attrell, Porreca, p. 15.

16 Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī]. *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥaḳ al-natījatayn bi-l-taqdīm*, I. 3, p. 11–13; III.1–2, p. 149–160, IV. 1, p. 286–295.

17 *Picatrix*. English translation and introduction by Attrell, Porreca, p. 101.

The talisman is no longer simply an image (*šūra*), but a metaphysical schema – a conduit of divine order mediated through the philosophical sage. This metaphysical humility is not a rhetorical flourish – it grounds the entire talismanic system in *tawhīd*, redefining “magic” as an act of symbolic submission. In this framework, talismanic causality never competes with divine agency but operates as a secondary, participated causality (*sabab mushtarak*), fully subordinated to divine will (*mashī’a*).

### Bāṭin, ḥawāṣṣ, and the Symbolic Use of Nature

The talisman in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* operates not only through celestial causality but also through the activation of hidden correspondences within nature, what Islamic philosophers termed *khawāṣṣ al-ashyā’*, the “occult properties of things”. This doctrine holds that natural entities – plants, minerals, animals – possess inherent symbolic forces that can be awakened and directed through ritual inscription, astrological alignment, and the practitioner’s intention.

In this model, *bāṭin* is not confined to scriptural exegesis but extends to nature itself. Every created thing presents an outer aspect (*ẓāhir*) and an inner, efficacious property (*bāṭin*) – a hidden quality (*khāṣṣiyya*) deposited in its substance (*jawhar*) that is not grasped by the senses but is apprehended by reason and wisdom (*‘aql; ḥikma*) and acts according to the celestial order (*qānūn al-samā’*). On this basis, *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* frames natural philosophy as the key to reading the world’s

signs: sublunary particulars mirror the higher forms, and efficacies arise when materials and timings accord with that order. This is the conceptual ground on which the treatise later develops its operative arts, but the point here is ontological rather than magical: nature itself is layered with inner properties that participate in the macrocosm–microcosm relation.<sup>18</sup> Thus, *bāṭin* should not be understood as a hidden ‘content’ behind appearances, but as an ontological depth through which symbolic forms actively participate in higher levels of being.

The notion of *khawāṣṣ* goes back to Hellenistic doctrines of sympathy (*sympathēia*) and antipathy (*antipatheia*), where each part of the cosmos is bound by invisible affinities. This conceptual heritage found explicit articulation in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, where, as L. Saif shows, al-Qurṭubī describes every entity as inherently astral, their occult properties (*khawāṣṣ*) determined by celestial forms. These properties, he [al-Qurṭubī] explains, may act either naturally or through talismanic mediation: “*Ḥawāṣṣ* can do wondrous things on their own, such as the ruby’s action as a repellent of plagues and others. And this can be done by a talisman [...] through that which is deposited [in it as a result] of celestial proportions.”<sup>19</sup> In Qur’anic cosmology, such ideas were refracted into the conviction that each created thing is an *āyah* – a sign of divine wisdom. The material world

18 Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī]. *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥṡāq al-natījatayn bi-l-taqdīm*, III. 1, p. 149–156 (see also I, p. 3–51.)

19 Saif. From *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma’ārif*: Ways of knowing and paths of power in medieval Islam, p. 300.

is thus not inert matter but a symbolic field of astral and divine correspondences awaiting interpretation and activation. Al-Qurṭubī's talismanic system is therefore deeply semiotic: the cosmos is a text to be read, and its letters – metals, herbs, stones – carry layered meanings. The talisman, as a physical artifact, is a syntactic construction: its parts do not act mechanically but symbolically, anticipating the epistemology of *‘ilm al-ḥurūf* (science of letters).

In *Gāyat al-Ḥakīm*, detailed practical instructions, lists of herbs, stones, and their astrological properties reflect this logic. For instance, certain stones are linked to specific planets and thus carry their *ḥukm* (ruling power); others are only efficacious when engraved under precise lunar phases. These are not arbitrary associations, but grounded in a comprehensive metaphysical worldview: “Engrave the figures of the Sun written below upon a stone of hematite when the Sun is standing in the first face of Leo ascending. Whoever carries this image will be safe from all lunar illnesses that come from the combustion of the Moon.” (II.10.54)<sup>20</sup> Such natural objects become repositories of divine force, but only when awakened through ritual knowledge. This correlates with the idea of *tawḥīd*: the unity of all creation under divine authorship means that symbolic operations on nature are not *shirk*, but acts of alignment with the inner logic of creation.

The practitioner's role is not to dominate nature, but to enter into a theurgical dialogue with it. This idea recurs throughout

*Gāyat al-Ḥakīm*, especially in its emphasis on ritual purity, prayer, and ascetic discipline. The talisman-maker must prepare himself – physically, mentally, spiritually – before even touching the materials he works with. Thus, nature is not a passive object but an active interlocutor, whose *bāṭin* content reveals itself only to the purified sage.

The symbolic use of nature also operates visually and geometrically. *Picatrix* preserves a tradition in which each planet is associated with its own figure, inherited from earlier esoteric sources: “These are the figures of the seven planets <...> as we found them translated in the Lapidary of Mercurius, the Book of Apollonius, and in the Book of Spirits and Images, which the wise *Picatrix* translated.” (III.1.9–10)<sup>21</sup>

*These are the figures of the seven planets:*  
*Saturn Jupiter Mars Sun Venus Mercury Moon*



These planetary figures are not arbitrary designs but encode cosmological geometries, serving simultaneously as aesthetic and ontological signifiers aligned with the harmonic structure of creation. Just like the letters and substances they accompany; these forms participate in a symbolic logic

<sup>21</sup> *Picatrix*. English translation and introduction by Attrell, Porreca, p. 104. In H. Ritter's Arabic edition III.1, p. 149–156 accordingly. Al-Qurṭubī's planetary figures (*ashkāl al-kawākib*) in the Arabic text differ from those reproduced by D. Attrell and D. Porreca because their edition follows the Latin *Picatrix*, in which medieval translators and scribes regularized the original geometric and descriptive forms into standardized sigils familiar to the Latin Hermetic-astrological tradition.

<sup>20</sup> *Picatrix*. English translation and introduction by Attrell, Porreca, p. 110.

whose referent is divine unity rather than mere material efficacy. Within this vision, the *bāṭin* and *khawāṣṣ* dimensions of al-Qurṭubī's talismanic theory articulate a profound symbolic ontology: nature is not inert but animated by hidden meanings, and the talisman-maker, acting as philosopher and theurgist, must decipher and engage its sacred grammar through disciplined ritual, moral refinement, and contemplative insight.

### Alchemy and Ritual Action in Talismanic Construction

The final dimension of al-Qurṭubī's talismanic system lies in the domain of ritual performance and material transformation. If talismanic causality is rooted in astral philosophy and its medium encoded in symbolic nature, then its realization demands a precise ritual grammar – an embodied and alchemical engagement with both substance and spirit. In *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, this logic is articulated through an elaborate program of sacrifice, purification, invocation, and material preparation – each act not merely instrumental but ontological.

*Al-kīmiyā*<sup>22</sup> appears in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* not as a separate science but as a cosmic mirror of talismanic action. Both rely on

the principle that all matter is in flux, and that transformation – of metals, herbs, consciousness – is governed by celestial and spiritual laws. The operative practitioner, the *ḥakīm*, is a co-actor with nature: he guides substances toward their perfection, reflecting the Neoplatonic idea that matter longs for form, and form for unity with the divine. Al-Qurṭubī emphasizes that ritual practice divorced from knowledge is not only ineffective but potentially harmful. Echoing both Hermetic and Qur'anic concerns about purity of intention, he stresses that talismanic operations require the practitioner to be spiritually prepared and intellectually equipped: no one benefits from these sciences whose soul is impure or whose intention is insincere; in the *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* effective operations presuppose ritual **purity** (*ṭahāra*), **sincere intention** (*niyya ṣādiqa*), and knowledge of the **natures and conditions** (*ṭabā'i; shurūṭ*) of the spirits, for only then do they respond to the practitioner. The descent of spiritual forces, he argues, responds only to those who understand their natures, proper conditions, and divine order, but not to those acting with ignorance or impure motives. This notion, reminiscent of the Sufi doctrine that *niyya* shapes spiritual outcome, places ritual action within the framework of ethical purification. It is not merely what one does, but who one becomes while doing it. Ritual efficacy, therefore, presupposes an ontological transformation of the practitioner himself, making ritual failure a function not of technical error but of metaphysical misalignment. The talisman thus embodies the inner state of the operator, made visible in copper, ink, blood, or gold.

22 Here, "alchemy" is not meant in the strict sense of *al-kīmiyā* as an independent science, which al-Qurṭubī reserves for *Rutbat al-Ḥakīm*, but in a metaphorical and philosophical sense. In *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, alchemical language functions as an analogy for talismanic operation and ritual transformation, not as a separate discipline. On the distinction between the two works, see de Callatay, G., Moureau, S., "Towards the Critical Edition of the *Rutbat al-ḥakīm*: A Few Preliminary Observations," *Arabica* 62, 2015, p. 385–394.

Typical talismanic operations described in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* include the careful selection of appropriate materials (such as sulfur, hematite, or bronze), the engraving of figures and letters often associated with *‘ilm al-ḥurūf*, the recitation of planetary invocations, the offering of sacrificial elements (such as doves, cocks, or incense), and the precise orientation of the body and instruments according to celestial positions. One detailed instruction, for example, prescribes how to contact the spirit of the Moon when she is in Aries:

“If one wishes to employ the power of the Moon (*quwwat al-qamar*) when she is full and ascending in Aries, he should adorn himself and go to a green place (*mawḍi‘ akḥḍar*) near a river or flowing water (*mā‘ jār*). He takes with him a cock whose crest has been cut off and slaughters it with a bone, not with iron (*‘azm, lā bi-ḥadīd*). Then he turns his face toward the Moon, lights two censers with burning coals, and places frankincense (*lubān*) upon them until smoke rises. Standing between them, he raises his gaze to the Moon and prays: “O Moon (*yā qamar*), O luminous one (*yā munīr*), O radiant one (*yā bahiyy*), I ask of you such-and-such.”<sup>23</sup>

At first glance, this resembles shamanic magic. But its logic is not irrational – it is cosmically rigorous. The practitioner acts not arbitrarily, but at the threshold where form, intention, and timing converge, echoing Aristotelian teleology and Neoplatonic descent. As Henry Corbin explains, in Islamic esotericism action is not conceived

as mechanical causality but as symbolic participation: an imaginal alignment of will, word, and world.<sup>24</sup> In this light, talismanic practice belongs not to irrational superstition but to the realm of the *mundus imaginalis* – “an intermediate universe “where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual,” a world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtle and immaterial.”<sup>25</sup> Talismanic action, thus, is not fabrication but disclosure.

The alchemical analogy is unavoidable. Like the Philosopher’s Stone, the talisman transmutes not just material, but the soul of its maker. The burning of substances corresponds to the purification of the lower self (*nafs*), while the engraving of signs parallels the inscribing of divine names upon the heart. In this sense, ritual action is initiation: not a step in magic, but a threshold to wisdom. It may best be described as a semiotic praxis – a disciplined operation in which outer forms disclose inner truth. The talisman becomes a coagulated prayer, a crystallized moment of alignment between *qudra* (divine power), *niyya*, and *ṭabī‘a* (nature).

Yet this symbolic operation does not take place in abstraction. Its forms are inseparable from their material vehicles, which themselves carry cosmological significance. As al-Qurṭubī describes, metals and herbs are not passive substrates but living participants, chosen for their astrologi-

23 Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī]. *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥaq al-natījatayn bi-l-taqdīm*, IV. 2, p. 296.

24 Corbin, H. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. p. 179.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

cal resonance and elemental disposition. In the terminology of *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm*, each planet is linked to a particular *ma'din* (metal or mineral) and *nabāt* (plant), whose properties reflect its celestial nature and serve as conduits of astral power. Thus, for example, Venus works are undertaken in copper and timed to her figure and hour, while Saturn's are undertaken in lead with rites suitable to his temperament. In general, when *ṭilasm* is fashioned according to these correspondences (*munāsabāt*) – with the appropriate matter, configuration, and *waqt* – it produces its intended effect, by God's permission (*bi-idhni Allāh*).<sup>26</sup> These associations are not superstition but expressions of an Islamic cosmology in which the material and the spiritual are bound in symbolic equivalence. This is why al-Qurṭubī insists on ethical constraints: the talisman, improperly made, may fail or backfire – not because it is “black magic,” but because it violates the structure of divine law. The *ḥakīm* (sage) does not seek power, but harmony; he does not impose, but listens. The operative mage in *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* is closer to a mystic than a magician.

Thus, talismanic construction operates as a form of spiritual alchemy, wherein ritual action effects not only the alignment of terrestrial matter with celestial influence but also the transmutation of the practitioner himself. As in alchemical praxis, precision, ethical disposition, and cosmological knowledge are requisite; the talisman is not a passive conduit but a site of metaphysical convergence. Al-Qurṭubī

thus reconceptualizes magic as a theurgical act – an epistemic and ontological labor through which the sage participates in, rather than disrupts, the divine order.

### Conclusions

The article has examined Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* as a foundational text in the philosophical articulation of Islamic astral talismanry, arguing that it establishes not merely a technical system of magical operations but a coherent ontology of mediation grounded in cosmology, anthropology, and theurgy. Rather than treating talismans as superstitious artifacts or marginal occult tools, al-Qurṭubī conceptualizes them as philosophically constructed instruments through which celestial causality, material form, and human intentionality converge within a divinely ordered cosmos.

At the heart of *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* lies a rigorously structured cosmology in which all levels of being – from elemental matter to planetary intelligences – are linked through analogical correspondences (*munāsabāt*) and sympathetic relations (*tašābuh*). Talismanic efficacy emerges not from arbitrary symbolism, but from precise alignment with this ontological hierarchy, mediated by correct timing, material selection, and ritual discipline. In this sense, al-Qurṭubī's talismanry remains firmly embedded in natural philosophy and Aristotelian–Neoplatonic causality, while simultaneously incorporating Hermetic and theurgical elements.

Most significantly, this study has shown that *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* anticipates a decisive

<sup>26</sup> Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī [Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī], *Kitāb Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa-aḥaq al-natījatayn bi-l-taqdīm*, III. 1, p. 149–156.

conceptual shift: the gradual reorientation of talismanic efficacy from the object itself to the metaphysical condition of the practitioner. Although al-Qurṭubī primarily describes external talismans, his insistence on perfect nature (*aṭ-ṭabī‘a at-tāmma*), sincere intention (*niyya ṣādiqa*), ethical purification, and intellectual mastery implicitly redefines the sage as the primary locus of talismanic mediation. The human being, when properly prepared, becomes a living interface between celestial and terrestrial realms.

This implicit anthropology constitutes the historical and philosophical root of the later Islamic concept of the “human talisman”, explicitly developed by thinkers such as Suhrawardī, al-Būnī, and Ibn ‘Arabī. In their systems, talismanry is progressively internalized: illumination replaces inscription, divine names replace engraved figures, and the perfected human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) emerges as the supreme talismanic form. Al-Qurṭubī’s work thus occupies a pivotal position at the threshold between operative astral magic and philosophical theurgy.

Furthermore, the analysis of *bāṭin*, *khawāṣṣ*, and ritual action demonstrates that *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* articulates a symbolic ontology in which nature itself is semiotically charged and spiritually animated. Materials, images, and rites function not as mechanical causes but as symbolic conden-

sations of higher realities. Talismanic practice, accordingly, appears as a disciplined engagement with the imaginal structure of the cosmos – what later Islamic philosophy would conceptualize as the *‘ālam al-mithāl*.

By situating talismanry within *tawḥīd* rather than outside it, al-Qurṭubī reframes magic as an act of alignment rather than domination. The talisman does not impose power upon nature but discloses the hidden harmonies already inscribed within creation. This redefinition resolves the apparent tension between occult practice and Islamic monotheism by subordinating all efficacy to divine permission (*bi-idhni Allāh*).

In conclusion, al-Qurṭubī’s *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* should be read not simply as a manual of astral magic, but as a philosophically sophisticated meditation on mediation itself – between God and cosmos, form and matter, knowledge and action. Its legacy lies not only in its influence on Latin *Picatrix* traditions, but in its role as the conceptual ground from which later Islamic thinkers articulated a fully philosophical doctrine of talismanry centered on human transformation. Recognizing this allows talismanry to be restored to its proper place within the history of Islamic philosophy: not as a marginal curiosity, but as a central mode of metaphysical reasoning and spiritual anthropology.

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