

# ŞŪFĪ MAGIC - GRECO-EGYPTIAN MAGIC

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In a previous paper I tried to show the close connection between practices of bowl divination as described in the Greek magical papyri and recipes of similar contents offered by modern Arabic magical literature<sup>1</sup>. I also referred passingly to the evident Şūfi colouring in the description of the “banquet of the spirits”, the main scene in the divinatory operation which presented the familiar requisites of Şūfi feasts with processional flags and scenes of gatherings for common meals.

This time I wish to examine this Şūfi background, the relationship of Şūfis to magic in present time, their role in propagating magical practices and their general indebtedness to Greco-Egyptian magic. The special connection between Şūfis and magic in general has long been registered by such well-known sources as Pseudo-al-Mağrīṭī's *Picatrix* and Ibn Ḥaldūn's *Muqaddima*. The *Picatrix* mentions that according to Şūfi opinion the original state of things can be altered through the utterance of the “greatest names” (Ritter 1933:38, Ritter-Plessner 1962: 36). This famous work of astrological magic also refers to Ġābir ibn Ḥayyān as “The Şūfi” when it speaks about the alchemist as the most outstanding master in talismanic art (Ritter 1933:146, Ritter-Plessner 1962:153).

Ibn Ḥaldūn in his openly manifested effort to defend Şūfism against possible accusations of dealing with magic, claims that the Şūfi practice of *kaşf* (“removal of the veil of sensual perception”) which occurs after mystical exertions, retirement and *diker* exercises is “different from the similar act of sorcerers, Christians and other ascetics since the former realize this through straightforwardness” (Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Muqaddima* III, 81f). The *Muqaddima* also asserts that “Şūfis are able to exercise an influence upon worldly conditions”. In Ibn Ḥaldūn's view, however, this art cannot be considered as sorcery since it is brought about with divine support (*ibid.*, 167). At the same time Ibn Ḥaldūn acknowledges that letter magic was specifically connected to Şūfi practitioners and al-Būnī, Ibn ʿArabī and others wrote numerous works on it (*ibid.*, 171).

Modern studies on Şūfism have regularly indicated the Şūfi involvement in magic but have not paid particular attention to this accepted fact. Trimmingham, for instance, emphasizes al-Būnī's (d. 1225) role in the process of “systemizing the sciences of divination, astrology and magical invocation” (Trimingham 1971:28). Others tend to regard the increasing growth of magical practices in Şūfi circles as a typical sign of

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<sup>1</sup> See Fodor 1994:96, n. 49.

degeneration or deviation which characterizes the later developments of Sūfism. So, Winter says that by aš-Šaʿrānī's time Sūfis became the main exponents of the occult sciences, although the famous Sūfi sheikh disapproved of this practice (Winter 1982: 173-176). Arberry speaks about an "age of decline" when "charms and amulets came to acquire a special value" (Arberry 1972:120f).

Lings stresses the point that the devotion to jugglery and sorcery represented the deviation of only a few among the Sūfis<sup>2</sup>. Whatever the exact numerical proportion of those Sūfis who practice magic may be presently, we have different proofs about their constant interest in the problem. Among the sources which show the Sūfi involvement in magic mention must be made of their own publications which never miss to condemn these practices. The common view of "official" Sūfism can be summarized in the following; the use of invocations (*ruqya*) is allowed when they contain only passages from the Book of God, His Names, His attributes or anything else which is intelligible and uttered in Arabic language. Another important condition for the employment of these licit *ruqyas* is that the invoker must firmly believe that the efficacy of the incantation is due to God's will alone. Accordingly, the strange words, artificially created expressions, imaginary spells and repulsive fumigations (*kalimāt ḡarība, alfāz muṣṭanaʿa, ʿazāʾim mūhama, buḥūrāt munaffira*) are strictly forbidden. Neither is it permitted to make a living on this kind of activity<sup>3</sup>.

To demonstrate that these statements cannot be considered simply as theoretical expositions but reflect daily problems facing the Sūfi organizations, suffice it to quote some of the Laws of an Egyptian Sūfi Order, the Ḥamīdiyya Šādīliyya (Gilsenan 1973:210f):

"25. It is not permissible for anyone of our *ṭarīq* to believe in pantheism, or unity of the world with God (*ittihād*) or modality: or the Truth is the same as creation or to say what Ḥallāj said."

"27. It is not permissible for anyone to use magic or anything similar to it for this cuts the relation with God."

"36. Every *khalīfa* or higher than he who teaches his students names which are not Arabic or makes them enter the *khalwa* or orders them to pray the unlawful *awrād* or orders them to make *dhikr* with 10,000 names in every day and night; or orders them to make devotions which stop the eating of all things which were alive; or to make a fast for many months; or to use the *djinn* or anything like

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<sup>2</sup> Lings 1969:268. For the connection between Sūfism and magic, see also MacDonald 1934:445; Doutté 1908:52-56; Shah 1982:335-344.

<sup>3</sup> aš-Šādīli, 1987:54. Lawful incantations are legalized by claiming that they heal the soul (*ibid.*, 56). For similar views, see *Abḡadiyya*, 67ff. The custom of eating glass or snakes is rejected together with other arts of jugglery on the basis that neither did the Prophet practice them, nor are they useful: aš-Šādīli, 1987: 58f. The popularity of magic among Iraqi Sūfis and its severe criticism are well demonstrated by al-Kasanānī (*Taṣawwuf* 290-298) who gives detailed descriptions of the magical operations in use.

that; he is responsible for what he does and the consequence is on him; for the *tariq* is free from that.”

In the light of these regulations it will be of special interest to examine several passages chosen from modern Arabic magical books compiled by ‘Abdalfattāḥ aṭ-Ṭūḥī, a prolific writer and a practising Şūfi, a member of the Naqşabandī *tariqa*<sup>4</sup>. The texts actually present the vices which have prompted their condemnation in the Laws of the Order. The passage in question reads as follows (aṭ-Ṭūḥī, *as-Siḥr al-‘ağīb* II, 77):

تبتدئ بالرياضة حسب الوقت المناسب، بأن تقدم صلاة الله بنية بدء الرياضة، وبعد الصلاة تصرف العمار بقراءة الزلزلة ثلاث مرات، وتكرر (أشتاتا) ثلاث مرات في كل مرة، وتوكل بصرف عمار المكان حتى يتم عملك، ثم تتلو الأسماء ١١١ مرة، والدعوة ٢١ مرة، والبخور مطلوب وهكذا يكون بعد كل صلاة، وفي جوف الليل تتلو الأسماء ١١١١ والدعوة ٧٠ مرة، وذلك مدة الرياضة الأولى، وبهذا يمكن استخدام الملك طهشير في قضاء الحوائج بدون رؤيته، أو التكلم معه مشافهة، (أي سماع كلام) اللهم إلا أن في بعض الليالي تراه كعمود من نور، وتسمع أحيانا بعض ألفاظ قليلة خاطفة كالهمس، ويكون الإلهام عندك أشد من الجميع - أما المنام فترى كل شيء فيه، سترى وترى العجائب لو صبرت وداومت، وقبلت الشروط، فكل آت قريب ثم تداوم على الورد الخاص يوميا صباحا ومساء، قراءة الأسماء ١١ مرة، والدعوة ٣ مرات.

أما إذا أردت السماع والرؤية، فادخل الخلوة المدة المناسبة، بالشروط السابقة في الرياضة، ليكن الطعام خفيفا دون الشبع، البعد الكامل عن الروح أو ما خرج منها، البعد عن كل نجس ثوبا وبدنا ومكانا، البعد عن الناس إلا للضرورة، التدقيق في صحة العدد حال التلاوة، فلا تزيد ولا تنقص، وإلا وقع الخلل، وبطل العمل.

“You should start with the religious exercise (*riyāda*) according to the appropriate time on the condition that you introduce the prayer to God by [expressing] the intention (*niyya*) of starting the *riyāda*. After the prayer you should dismiss the spirits (*ummār*, literally “the inhabitants”) by reciting the Sūra of the Earthquake [Q 99] three times. You should repeat “scatterings” (*aštātān*, Q 99,6) three times on each occasion. You should take charge of dismissing the spirits of the place until your work (*‘amal*, i.e. “the magical operation”) is finished, then you should recite the names 111 times and the invocation 21 times. [In the meantime] the incense should be fumigated. It should be in this way after each prayer. In the middle of the night you should recite the names 1111 times and the invocation 70 times. This should [happen] during the period of the first *riyāda*. By this it is possible to use King ṬHŞYR in settling the affairs without seeing him or speaking to him orally (that is hearing the speech). Except that, oh my God, in one of the nights you will see him as a pillar of light and you will hear sometimes a number of a few brief words like whispering. Inspiration with you will be stronger than with all. As for the dream, you will see everything in it. You will see and see the wonders if you will be patient and if you will continue and if you will accept the conditions. So, everything will happen soon. Then you should continue with the special office (*wird*) every day, in the morning and in the evening. The recitation of the names should be 11 times and the invocation 70 times.

As for [the situation] when you wish to hear and see, then enter the seclusion (*ḥalwa*) for the appropriate period on the conditions [mentioned] formerly in [connection with] the *riyāda*. Let the food be light without [causing] saturation. [There should be] complete abstinence from the animated things [i.e. meat] and what came out of it [i.e. meat products]. [There should be] abstinence from every impure, [let

<sup>4</sup> See aṭ-Ṭūḥī, *Wilāya* 54ff where he speaks about dream visions in which Naqşabandī sheikhs appeared to him. See also Fodor 1994:76.

it be] the clothing, the body and the place. [There should be] abstinence from the people unless it is necessary. [There should be] accuracy in the soundness of the number during the recitation. Do not add and do not reduce, otherwise a disorder will take place and the operation will be futile.”

Summarizing the basic elements of the magical praxis preceding or accompanying the invocation proper, the following points emerge as essential:

1. The main preparatory action is the so called *riyāda*, a kind of devotional exercise, well-known from Šūfī practice. There it has a double meaning in the sense that, on the one hand it aimed at the physical preparation of the soul by such mortificatory acts as the forbearance of hardships, vigilance, hunger etc. On the other hand it helped to realize the spiritual preparedness of the soul by training it morally<sup>5</sup>. The two aspects of the term complement each other since both of them are supposed to bring the soul into a state which enables it to receive revelation through a divine (or demonic) encounter, or to be ready to embark upon a magical operation. It is also worth to be noted that the recipe insists on the existence of the “intent” (*niyya*) on the part of the practitioner before starting the operation. With the introduction of this idea another bridge came to be built to the Šūfī world<sup>6</sup>.

The period of the *riyāda* and its starting day this time are determined by calculations using the numerical value of the letters in the practitioner’s name and of the Sūra of The Djinn but usually the period is prescribed in advance<sup>7</sup>.

2. The fasting makes up an integral part of the *riyāda* but it is treated separately, especially in connection with the practitioner’s seclusion from the outer world. Recipes always advise him to eat only bread prepared with barley and crushed in good olive oil. At the same time a complete abstinence is required from “animated things” (meat) or what came out of an animated thing (meat products)<sup>8</sup>.

3. The seclusion (*ḥalwa*) refers to the procedure itself and to its place. Seemingly a clearly defined territory is meant by it, completely separated from the rest of the world. Among the main requirements for the *ḥalwa* as a place of retreat, its purity, remoteness from noise, the orientation of its entrance towards the *qibla* and the total exclusion of other people are frequently enumerated (*ibid.*, II, 14, 16).

Apart from the ordinary daily prayers, the oral part of the operation comprises the invocation (*da‘wa*), the main instrument in the conjuration of the spirits. As the following passage reveals, certain unintelligible groups of letters called *damā‘ir* and belonging to the invocation must have a special importance in establishing the contact with the spirits (*ibid.*, II, 25).

<sup>5</sup> For the *riyāda*, see e.g. aš-Šarqāwī, *Mu‘jam* 163f. See also Doutté 1908:96ff.

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of *niyya*, see e.g. Massignon 1954:186.

<sup>7</sup> For a *riyāda* of 21 days, see e.g. aṭ-Ṭūhī, *Siḥr al-kubhān* 24.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. aṭ-Ṭūhī, *as-Siḥr al-‘aḡīb* II, 16.

وتكتب ضمائر الدعوة الآتي [sic!] في إناء عند الشروق بمسك وعنبر وزعفران وتحوها بماء الورد. فإذا أردت الشرب تشرب من هذا الماء مدة النهار - وتكتب ضمائر الدعوة أيضا مرة أخرى عند الغروب وتشرب منها مدة الليل وهكذا تكون الكتابة في الشروق لشرب النهار - وفي الغروب لشرب الليل مدة جميع أيام الخدمة. رياضة وخلوة. وهذه ضمائر الدعوة المطلوبة: أبريج وريج ومستدرج هيج هيج طهريج نجز هجز لجز. وتتلو الدعوة عقب كل صلاة ٢١ مرة. والبخور شغال. وهو العجم، وأصول اليبروج<sup>9</sup>، وبذر الخشخاش، وبذر الخس، والميعة، والكندر، والمستكى التركي.  
 "And you should write the following *damā'ir* of the invocation in a bowl with musk, amber, saffron at sunrise and you should wipe it off with rose water. If you wish to drink, you should drink from this water during daytime. You should also write the *damā'ir* of the invocation once more at [sun]set and you should drink from it during the night. [The practice is supposed to be continued] during each day of the service [let it be] the *riyāda* [or] the *halwa*. The necessary *damā'ir* of the invocation are as follows: ABRŪĠ, RYĠ, MSTDRĠ, HYĠYĠ, HYĠ, ṬHRYĠ, NĠZ, HĠZ, LĠZ. You should recite the invocation after each prayer 21 times, while incense is fumigated. This should be [mixed] from black raisin, root of the mandrake, poppy-seed, lettuce-seed, styrax, [Lebanese] frankincense, and Turkish mastic."

These *damā'ir* (sing. *damīr*) which here appear as magical names representing the substance of spirits to be adjured can obviously be identified as the familiar technical term for "pronoun" used in linguistics but taken over by the Şūfis in the sense of "le moi conscient de l'homme" (Massignon 1954:40). The recitation of the magical names represents a constant part of the conjurations and some recipes call this *wird* in imitation of the Şūfī practice of reciting daily offices (aṭ-Ṭūhī, *as-Sihr al-ʿaġīb* II, 42).

According to our prescription a direct encounter can take place between the practitioner and the spirits at the peak of the continuous invocations during the *halwa*. Other recipes describe the scene in a detailed way, emphasizing the occurrence of the following elements<sup>10</sup>: The appearance of the light frequently indicates the arrival of the spirit or spirits who exchange greetings with the magician, ask about his wish to be fulfilled, and conclude a pact (*ʿabd*) with him. This pact which may oblige the practitioner to accept several conditions (like the promise not to use the spirits in actions of disobedience towards God), resembles very much the traditional pact concluded between the Şūfī sheikh (*muršid*) and his disciple (*murīd*) as an important rite in the latter's initiation ceremony<sup>11</sup>.

This repertory of Şūfī technical terms combined with an evident effort to adhere to the regulations of official religion tries to disguise an essentially magical operation, the main components of which present a striking parallel to the descriptions of similar procedures from Greco-Roman Egypt.

The eagerness to encounter a deity or a spirit alone, face to face, characterized people's attitude in their quest for a personal religious experience, as a first century A.D. document, the letter of the physician Thessalus attests to it (Festugière 1939:57-

<sup>9</sup> In the original text: أصول البروج which has no sense here.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. aṭ-Ṭūhī, *as-Sihr al-ʿaġīb* II, 17f.

<sup>11</sup> For this, see e.g. Gilsenan 1973:239f.

64). Thessalus in his letter relates that he failed when he wanted to use the recipes of the famous magician, Nechepso. In his search to discover the cause of his failure, he went to Thebes to speak to the priests. One of them was ready to help Thessalus in arranging an encounter with a god. Upon the priest's order the physician fasted for three days then went to the priest at the dawn of the third day. The priest prepared a chamber for him which was to serve as the place for consulting the deity. He seated Thessalus in front of a throne then, in compliance with Thessalus' wish invoked Asclepius with the help of mysterious names and finally left Thessalus alone. After this preparation Asclepius really appeared in a beautiful form, greeted Thessalus, inquired about his wish and upon his request revealed the cause of the failure with the magical recipes. At the end Asclepius promised Thessalus that soon people would greet him also as a god.

The memory of a similar experience is preserved in an inscription of the temple of Mandulis in Nubia (modern Kalabsha) which received many visitors especially in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. The text (not later than the second half of the 3rd century A.D.) relates that the anonymous visitor who wanted to know whether Mandulis was identical with the Sun, practiced chastity for a long time, offered fumigations with incense, then had a vision in which Mandulis manifested himself to him in the temple and gave him the affirmative answer (Festugière 1950:49f).

In my former article I had already tried to show the existence of parallel elements in the Greek magical papyri and the Arabic magical literature from Egypt. This time the terminological coincidences will be set in the focus from the Šūfi point of view.

In a spell for acquiring an assistant demon the practitioner is instructed in the following way<sup>12</sup>: "After the preliminary purifications, (abstain from animal food) and from all uncleanness and, on whatever (night) you want to, go (up) onto a lofty roof after you have clothed yourself in a pure garment ... (and say) the first spell of encounter as the sun's orb is disappearing..." The word for practicing purification is derived from the term ἀγνεία referring to the state of ritual purity<sup>13</sup> which may also imply the soul and the heart (Williger 1922:63).

Instructions for fasting and particularly the requirement of abstinence from "animated things" (ἐμψύχος) were especially basic for achieving purity. In many respects, the role of this purification rite can be compared to the function of the Arabic *riyāda*. We can also find the reference to barley meal for breaking the fast<sup>14</sup>.

It is another common feature that the place where the practitioner should perform in complete solitude, either in the case of Thessalus (chamber, οἶκος), or in the vision of Mandulis (temple), or in the magical papyri [the roof of the house, a clean, dark

<sup>12</sup> *PGM* I, 54-58; Betz 1992:4. See also *PGM* IV, 52; Betz 1992:38, 52, 175; *PGM* IV, 734, XIII, 114.

<sup>13</sup> For this idea, see Arbesmann 1929:8f, 20; Williger 1922:49, 53; Hopfner 1974:843-861.

<sup>14</sup> *PGM* III, 411f; Betz 1992:29. For the importance of barley, see *RE* 7, 1281-1284.

room, without light (*PDM* XIV, 150; Betz 1992:204), the Eastern section of the village, the city or the house (*PGM* IV, 58f; Betz 1992:38), or even a tent (*PGM* XIII, 99f; Betz 1992:175)] is always a separate place like the *halwa* with occasional indications to its orientation [to the South (*PDM* XIV, 119; Betz 1992:202), to the West (*PGM* XIII, 8; Betz 1992:172) or to the East (*PGM* XII, 212, Betz 1992:161)].

As for the magical formulae in the Greek magical papyri by which the deity or the spirit are invoked, a basic component reveals that the magician using the secret, mysterious names, actually claims to be identified with the conjured god or demon. After uttering the names of Hermes in a love spell, the magician invokes the god with these words:

“I know you Hermes, and you know me. I am you, and you are I. And so, do everything for me...”<sup>15</sup>. In a love spell the magician identifies himself with the figures of different deities like the Sun or Horus (*PDM* XIV, 435-440; Betz 1992:220). In another spell to grant memory the deity is called to enter the magician’s mind ( $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ ) (*PGM* III, 412; Betz 1992:29).

As we have seen, the Arabic magical prescriptions are usually content with speaking about the encounter with the spirits and seem not to go as far as alluding to the realization of a union between the practitioner and the invoked spirit. This cautious attitude is quite understandable since any attempt to hint at such a possibility would probably expose him to charges even more serious than those of illicit magic. Among the many accusations levelled against Şūfīs, the practice of union with God (*ittihād*) has proved to be the most dangerous, which the partisans of Şūfism have always tried to repel by every possible means<sup>16</sup>.

In spite of all this precaution and readiness of the magicians to censor themselves, we can still find recipes with prescriptions implying the union between the conjurer and the conjured. In a spell the “servants” of certain letters are invoked to go to a person in the magician’s “image” (*miṭāl*) and “capacity” (*ṣifa*) (aṭ-Ṭūhī, *Sihr al-kuhḥān* 8). The spirit may also be called to enter the magician’s “shape” (*ḥay’a*) (*ibid.*, 29) or “figure” (*ṣūra*) (*ibid.*, 23).

The examination of the composing elements in the descriptions of the previously treated magical practices – Greco-Egyptian and Arabic alike – allows us to try to form an idea about the spiritual background which seem to be firmly rooted in Late Antiquity, first of all in late Neoplatonism.

Through the activities of Proclus and Iamblychus ideas of popular religion, especially those connected to magical practices gained acceptance among philosophers (Praechter 1927:209; Wallis 1972:105; Segal 1981:364). This magical material practically came to be reinterpreted and was put to the service of the main goal of achieving

<sup>15</sup> *PGM* VIII, 49f; Betz 1992:146. See also *PGM* XIII, 795; Betz 1992:191.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. aṣ-Şarqāwī, *Muṣṣam* 25f, 59, 227.

union with God with the help of theurgy (Dodds 1951:287, 291f; Eitrem 1942:50). In the case of Neoplatonists this meant that popular magical practices coexisted with high philosophical ideas (Dodds 1951:282; Wallis 1972:2f). The connecting link between the two was the jointly shared fiction of the law of sympathy governing the whole universe (*ibid.*, 70, 107).

Some of the philosophers also advised fasting and abstinence from "animated" things to reach the state of purity as a preparation for the union with God (Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia* 44,2, 49,2, 34,3). Some of them were reluctant to turn to theurgic practices to realise their sublime goal, but others were willing to profit from the magical techniques (Luck 1989:204). So, Proclus was also well-known as a magician, who practiced divination, could bring about rain or avert earthquakes.

This duality in the character of Neoplatonism (Segal 1981:373), the simultaneous existence of vulgar magic and philosophical religion within a common framework is equally manifested in the Greek magical papyri and Sūfism. Explanation may be sought in the necessity felt by people to differentiate between their local, personal problems to be solved by the intervention of familiar spirits and demons and between affairs and goals belonging to the sphere of high religious ideas (*ibid.*, 371f).

In other words, this is to say that the position of magic in Sūfism reflects a situation rooted in Greco-Egyptian spiritual life. Research has accepted Sūfism as the result of an inner development within Islam and has admitted the influx of outer influences, like that of Neoplatonism as secondary only and rather late<sup>17</sup>.

The first problem with this attitude is that it has looked upon Neoplatonism as a pure philosophy neglecting magic as an organic part of the system, equal to philosophy in rank. The second problem arises from the fact that usually Mesopotamia<sup>18</sup>, notably the Šābians have been taken into consideration as a possible channel for transmitting Neoplatonic ideas. As a matter of fact, the *Picatrix*, the main expositor of the Šābian tradition, both in its general world view, completely subordinated to astrological considerations, and in its magical recipes seems to differ in several aspects from the Greco-Egyptian tradition represented by the Greek magical papyri.

For research, the role of Egypt in this respect has remained in the background, in spite of the fact that its magical tradition might have been continuous. The best proof for this can be offered by the person of Dū-n-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 859), the great mystic from Akhmim who must have been a real Neoplatonic figure, who like Proclus was equally interested in magic and philosophy, so might have played a decisive role in the preservation and transmission of local tradition. He spent a lot of time searching the ancient Egyptian temples to gain knowledge in alchemy and other

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Lings 1969:*passim*; Trimmingham 1971:2; *Abğadiyya*, 19ff; Stoddart 1976:43. But cf. also Abdel-Kader 1976:115 for the early influence of Neoplatonism.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Massignon 1954:73-81.

occult sciences. He also produced miracles (*karāmāt*)<sup>19</sup>. In fact, his different preoccupations were in perfect harmony with the idea dominating the first centuries A.D. which looked upon magic, philosophy and wonder working as essentially similar<sup>20</sup>. In conclusion we may emphasize again that the spiritual background behind this idea has manifested itself in Şūfī magic and its practitioners. The dimensions of the influence of Greco-Egyptian magic are well illustrated by the fact that Jewish mystical and magical literature of the period reflects the same characteristics as we have seen both in the Greek magical papyri and in the Arabic magical literature<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> On *Ḍū-n-Nūn*, see Ibn al-Qiftī, *Tārīḥ* 185; Nicholson 1906:322ff.

<sup>20</sup> For this, see Segal 1981:362.

<sup>21</sup> For this Jewish connection, see Lesses 1996:60.

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