



BRILL



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THE EYE OF REFLECTION: AL-NABULUSI'S SPATIAL INTERPRETATION OF IBN 'ARABI'S TOMB

وَفِي هَذَا الشَّأْنِ الْعَجِيبُ، سَرُّ غَرِيبٍ، تَأْمَلْهُ بَعْنَ الْاعْتَبَارِ، إِنْ كَتَمْنَ
أَوْلَى الْأَبْصَارِ.

In this wondrous order, there is an unusual mystery;
contemplate it with the eye of reflection
if you are among the possessors of insights.

—Al-Nabulusi, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316

In a brief commentary on a prophetic tradition concerning prayer, the renowned Andalusian judge and hadith scholar Abu Bakr Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1148) refers to the Prophet Muhammad's extraordinary visual ability, offering insights into a premodern Islamic understanding of the nature of visual perception.¹ Facing a wall while leading a prayer, the Prophet was reported to have once reproached his followers, who were not praying properly behind him, saying: "Do you think my qibla is only here [before me]? By God, your bowing and prostrating are not concealed from me; I can see you even though you are behind my back."² Many Muslim scholars and hadith commentators have discussed and debated the ways in which the Prophet was able to see what was behind his back. Some went as far as to suggest he had a third eye between his shoulders; others proposed that he saw an image of his followers reflected in the wall before him that acted as a mirror; yet others were more rational, arguing for a kind of inspiration or revelation, or for a peripheral vision that involved a slight turning of the face but no bending of the neck.³ Ibn al-'Arabi dismisses these rather twisted explanations, arguing in favor of a visual ability so extraordinary that the Prophet was able to see what was behind him without turning his head, just as, on another occasion, he was able to see Paradise in the breadth of the wall before him.⁴ Ibn al-'Arabi

bases his argument on a particular understanding of the nature of visual perception. "Visual perception [*al-idrāk*]," he posits, "is a meaning [*ma'nā*] that God creates in the eye according to what the viewer intends to see of the visible things."⁵ What the viewer "intends to see" is, of course, commensurate with his or her aptitude and disposition, and, being endowed with extraordinary powers, the Prophet was thus able to see what others were incapable of seeing. In his commentary on the same hadith, the celebrated hadith scholar Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 1448) goes a step further to distinguish between *ibṣār* and *ru'yā*. In contrast to *ibṣār* (seeing), he argues, *ru'yā* (vision) does not—by necessity of reason—presuppose an instrument of seeing, an eye, for it is commonly believed among Sunni scholars that vision is possible without proximity or visual contact.⁶ Thus he reinforces Ibn al-'Arabi's view that intentionality in itself can become a visualization, or a point of view, literally, according to one's visual capacity.

INTENTIONALITY AND VISIBILITY

This understanding of visual perception poses some challenges to our modern, science-based conceptions. First, the indissoluble bond between the viewer and the visible, as well as the effective agency of the viewer in shaping the visible, challenges the nature of objectivity that gives primacy to the stable properties of an independent, self-standing reality (i.e., the world out there). The margin for malleability, which allows for changing the visible reality according to the viewer's intentionality and disposition, has been completely eradicated in post-Cartesian scientific understanding.

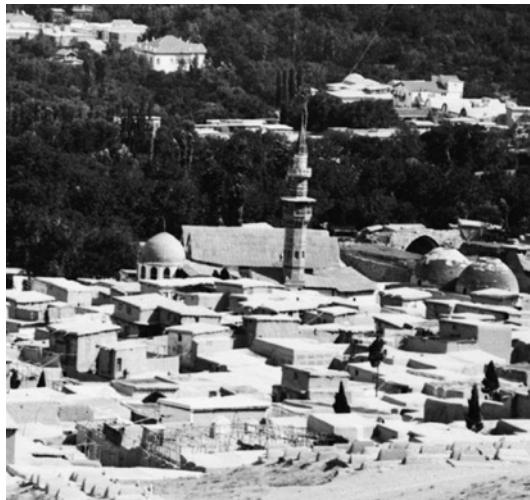
Second, the effective agency of the viewer and the malleability of visible reality provide a space for the extraordinary, the unpredictable, and the unknowable, that is, a space for mystery (*sīrr*). Al-‘Asqalani considers those who adhere to *al-‘āda* (unchangeable natural habits)—that is, the rationalists—to be *ahl al-bida’* (heretics).⁷ Thus in the premodern Islamic view, there had always been a space for the breaking of the continuity of a habitual world and the normality of things as set by the laws of nature. In this space, a suprahuman or divine power partakes in the manipulation of history, the creation of events, and the making of things with a transcendental purpose of its own. This state of being formed an object for “the eye of reflection.” And third, considering “meaning” (*ma’nā*) as something that God creates in the eye, not the mind, poses yet another challenge to the dissociation between sensing and reasoning in our current views that differentiate between the sensible and the intelligible, giving superiority to reasoning over sensing. Meanings are normally associated with thinking and reasoning, and as such they are products of the mind, not the senses. When meanings become associated with the eye, the eye assumes a cognitive ability, visual illusion takes on a new significance, and the immediacy in the act of recognition tends to eliminate representation and limit the role of interpretation.⁸ The implication of this switch can be seen in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s explanation of rear vision. In his commentary on the above hadith, he refers to the human lack of rear vision as “visual incapacity,” or “absence of power” (*ghayb al-qudra*), in compensation for which, he says, God created the mirror. Thus the existence of the mirror, in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s view, came to provide evidence of, and an extension to, the limited visual capacity of humans. As an extension to human seeing power (*qudra*), however, the mediating instrumentality of the mirror becomes an issue, because the appearance of the reflection creates a duality of the object and its image. To overcome this duality, Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that what appears in the mirror is not an “image” (*mithāl*) of a thing but the thing itself, that is, its “reality” (*haqīqatuhu*).⁹ This is so, he explains, because the mirror has no spatial depth and substance to support the embodiment of an “image” in it, even though it gives the illusion of depth and embodiment. This phenomenon

proves to him that specular presence, which is dictated by the intention of seeing, involves no otherness or representation: the meaning that God creates in the eye—not the mind—is of the thing itself.¹⁰

This understanding of the nature of visual perception, though not in agreement with the optics-based approach of Muslim scientists or the Aristotelian approach of Muslim philosophers, had currency among hadith scholars, theologians, and mystics until the eighteenth century.¹¹ Elsewhere I have discussed how it mediated ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi’s (d. 1731) reading of the history of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as well as his appreciation of its spatiality, function, and meanings.¹² Here I shall return to this renowned eighteenth-century Damascene figure to examine the way in which this understanding of the nature of visual perception mediated his reading of the spatiality, function, and meanings of—in this case—the tomb of his spiritual teacher, the celebrated Andalusian Sufi master, Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240).¹³ In a rare late seventeenth-century architectural treatise titled *Al-Sīrr al-Mukhtabī fī Darīh Ibn al-‘Arabī* (The Concealed Mystery in the Tomb of Ibn ‘Arabi),¹⁴ al-Nabulusi interpreted the spatiality of this rather humble Ottoman complex (figs. 1–4), employing visual hermeneutics that blur the borders between intentionality and visibility, meaning and mystery.¹⁵

HISTORY AND MYSTERY: THE *SĪN* AND THE *SHĪN*

Before discussing al-Nabulusi’s hermeneutics of the spatial organization of Ibn ‘Arabi’s tomb, a brief presentation of its history is necessary, as the way in which it was founded was rather mystifying. Nearly three hundred years after the death of Ibn ‘Arabi, his complex was constructed in 1517–18 by the Ottoman sultan Selim (d. 1520), and much mystery and intrigue have shrouded its construction ever since.¹⁶ Al-Salimiyya, as it came to be known after its patron, was Sultan Selim’s first and only architectural work in Damascus, marking his triumphant ruling over this strategic Mamluk city. An enigmatic treatise attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi titled *Al-Shajara al-Nu’māniyya* (The Tree of Nu‘man) presented the following prediction:



1



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Figs. 1 and 2. Ibn 'Arabi's complex in its urban context at the foot of Mount Qasiyun, ca. 1940, showing the double-pitched roof over the prayer hall. (Photos: courtesy of Imad al-Armashi)



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Figs. 3 and 4. Ibn Arabi's complex in its current form in the suburb of Shaykh Muhyi al-Din, 2010, showing the modifications, additions, and the demolition of the double-pitched roof. (Photos: fig. 3, Samer Akkach; fig. 4, courtesy of Ola al-Zouhayli)

When *Sīn* [= S, for Selim] enters *Shīn* [= Sh, for Sham] there shall be revealed the grave of Muhyi-l-Din. The reason for this allusion is what the Real has disclosed unto me, through direct divine informing, that our death will be in the protected city of Damascus, which is called Jullaq, and that our grave will disappear for a period of time until the emergence of a leader from great Constantinople. The letter *Sīn*, from the family of 'Uthman, shall be the cause for the disclosure of our grave, and the construction of our shrine. And the rising of this leader will be by the order of God and the consent of His messenger.¹⁷

The treatise and the prophecies it contains add a layer of mystery to the history of this unpretentious building. The text was presented in the form of riddles and symbolic allusions concerning the destiny of, and major events associated with, the Ottoman dynasty.¹⁸ The text has been dismissed by contemporary scholars as a fabrication. Yet, although neither al-Nabulusi nor Muhammad Ibn Tulun al-Salihi (d. 1546), the historian and religious scholar who witnessed the construction of

Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex, mentioned this mysterious text, it had received considerable attention, with at least three commentaries by or attributed to well-known figures. The first is attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi’s contemporary Ahmad al-Buni (d. 1225), the second to his close disciple Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (d. 1273), and the third to the religious scholar Salah al-Din al-Safadi (d. 1363).¹⁹ In addition, the celebrated historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) in his *Muqaddima* (Prolegomenon) wrote about the history and wide popularity of this kind of text, called *malāhim* (sing. *malḥama*, epic) and referred to a specific one he had seen concerned with the Turks written by a Sufi called Muhammad al-Bajarbaqi (d. 1324).²⁰ This apparently popular text seems to have been written in verse and was different from that of *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya*.

While Ibn Khaldun was unambiguously dismissive of the credibility of these texts, his renowned student, Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi (d. 1442), was not. Almost a century before the Ottoman conquest of Damascus, al-Maqrizi made reference to *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya* and its authorship. In his famous book on the socio-urban history of Cairo, *Al-Khiṭāṭ* (Plans), he devoted a chapter to the destiny of his home city: what was being said about how long the city would endure, the major events which would befall it, and the predicted time of its destruction.²¹ This chapter was drawn from the prophecies presented in Ibn ‘Arabi’s epic, *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya*, and although al-Maqrizi did not mention the title of the work, we can assume it was the source, as *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya* was the only known eschatological treatise attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi that was concerned with Egypt, Ard al-Kinana. Al-Maqrizi also reported consulting an anonymous commentary on *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya*, which proved to be of little help to him in deciphering its conundrums. Continuing to be concerned with its content, he consulted with a trustworthy colleague, who had seen a greater commentary in two volumes and who provided al-Maqrizi with the details he quoted in his book.²²

We do not know, of course, what was in the texts al-Maqrizi and his colleague had seen, but assuming they were the same as the extant copies of *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya* and its commentaries, then al-Maqrizi’s reference testifies to the existence of the text long before

Sultan Selim’s takeover of Damascus. Whatever the case may be, the authenticity of *Al-Shajara al-Nu‘māniyya* is not of primary concern to us here, or whether the text was written by Ibn ‘Arabi, or indeed the accuracies of the prophecies. What concerns us here is whether the treatise had played any role in Sultan Selim’s decision to construct the complex and thereby to officially sanction Ibn ‘Arabi’s sainthood.

Arabic sources tell us that after his quick and decisive victory over the weak and disorganized Mamluk army at Marj Dabiq, Sultan Selim made peaceful entries into Syrian cities in 1516. He entered Damascus that year, and after a short stay to prepare his armies, he left for his next campaign in Egypt, where he likewise encountered little resistance. Immediately upon his return to Damascus from Egypt, Sultan Selim commissioned the building of the complex over the grave of Ibn ‘Arabi. The complex was designed and constructed with surprising haste. Sultan Selim arrived back in Damascus on Wednesday, 21 Ramadan 923 (October 7, 1517), during the Muslim month of fasting. He met with the governor and local dignitaries, and then immediately commissioned the construction of the complex. On Saturday, the site visit was conducted and an initial layout was agreed; on Sunday, an adjacent residence was purchased and a building supervisor was appointed; on Monday, the demolition of existing buildings commenced; and a few days later, on 2 Shawwal (October 18), construction of the mosque commenced. After one month, on Tuesday, 3 Dhu'l-Qa‘da (November 17), Sultan Selim ordered the construction of the domed chamber over Ibn ‘Arabi’s grave. That night the foundations were dug in the cemetery, to avoid any anger over the unavoidable disturbance of some of the graves. A month later, on 10 Dhu'l-Hijja (December 24), people celebrated the Adha feast and prayed in the mosque. To celebrate the event, Sultan Selim sent to this mosque 250 sheep and camels to be slaughtered and distributed to people, but only 30 sheep to all the other mosques in the suburb of al-Salihiyya, northwest of the old city. Forty days later, on 20 Muhamarram 924 (February 1, 1518), the pulpit was installed. Four days afterward, Sultan Selim attended the Friday prayer there and celebrated the completion of the complex. The project took less than four months

from start to finish. Three days after the celebration of its completion, Sultan Selim left the city.²³

Sultan Selim's keen interest in Ibn 'Arabi is intriguing, to say the least. Despite being fully preoccupied with his military campaigns, Sultan Selim devoted much attention to this project, spending lavishly and donating generously in celebration of its completion. He also set up generous endowments that supported the employment of thirty Koran reciters, four announcers of prayer, and a number of teachers, religious leaders, and administrators. Despite Ibn 'Arabi's wide reputation and local popularity, his grave site had remained deserted for almost three hundred years. Thus Sultan Selim's decisive commemoration seems to have elevated Ibn 'Arabi overnight to the status of official saint. We do not know for sure the motives behind Sultan Selim's action, or whether the curious prophecy attributed to Ibn 'Arabi had anything to do with it. What we know, however, is that the mysterious treatise, which was in wide circulation, declared the rise of the Ottomans to be "by the order of God and with the consent of His messenger"²⁴ and portrayed this major event as an auspicious sign for the prosperity of Islam in Arab lands. The perceived religious character of the Turks among the Arabs was also propitious. Al-Maqrizi reports that the famous Fatimid caliph and founder of Cairo, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (d. 975), was once asked about the Turks: who were they? He replied: "Muslim people who enjoin right and forbid evil; they establish the law and duties, and fight, for the sake of God, his enemies."²⁵

Whether this real or fabricated treatise was used to sanction—through the mediation of Ibn 'Arabi's prophecies—the Ottomans' invasion of Damascus and their rule over the rest of the Arabic-speaking Muslim world is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that the transformation of Ibn 'Arabi's forgotten and neglected grave into a significant shrine, signaling the Ottoman endorsement of his sainthood, played a noticeable role in the development of the city's socioreligious life. Against the wishes of almost all hadith scholars, who, according to Ibn Tulun, were opposed to Ibn 'Arabi's teachings, Ibn 'Arabi became the new patron saint of the city. Not only that, but the city's most celebrated hadith scholar, Ibn Tulun himself, ironically became the first imam in the mosque of a Sufi saint whose sainthood he did not

acknowledge. This rather awkward appointment might have eventually contributed to the religious controversy surrounding Ibn 'Arabi's ideas being extended to the architecture of his tomb, prompting al-Nabulusi to write his treatise on the spatial hermeneutics of the building.

CONTROVERSY AND ARCHITECTURE

Ibn 'Arabi was a highly controversial figure, and his mystical hermeneutics caused a deep rift among contemporaneous and later Muslim scholars.²⁶ Through his influential teachings, he maintained a strong presence in Damascus, yet so did his main foe, the renowned Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). For more than two and a half centuries after his death, Ibn 'Arabi's grave site lay deserted and forgotten in the cemetery of Ibn Zaki, indicating that his opponents, the jurists (*fuqahā'*), had the upper hand in the city. According to 'Ali b. Maymun al-Fasi (d. 1511), who visited the grave site in 1499, people in Damascus were afraid of mentioning Ibn 'Arabi's name and reluctant to direct visitors to the location of his tomb. He wrote: "When I arrived at Damascus I found none to direct me, for all were frightened of the tyranny of the wretched clergy.... I finally arrived at the bath-house and requested of the keeper to open the door for me so that I could enter the shrine to see the tomb. Using a subterfuge, he scaled the wall and opened the door for me. I found the shrine to be devoid of any trace of visitors. The grass had withered, thus proving that none had frequented the place."²⁷ Thus the official celebration of Ibn 'Arabi's sainthood by the new rising power, the Ottomans, marked a significant swing to the side of his supporters. This intervention might have enhanced Ibn 'Arabi's presence and popularized his image locally and regionally. Certainly, with the Ottomans' sanction of Ibn 'Arabi's sainthood, al-Salimiyya began to attract an increasing number of pilgrims and visitors. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding his personality and teachings only grew sharper and deeper in the ensuing centuries.²⁸

At the time of al-Nabulusi, nearly two centuries after the construction of al-Salimiyya, Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and teachings were under strong attack, as were also the whole path of Sufism, and especially the notion of

sainthood (*wilāya*) and the rituals associated with it, such as saint veneration through grave construction and visitation.²⁹ Under the influence of the puritanical ideas of the Kadizade movement, anti-Sufi sentiment grew.³⁰ Al-Nabulusi wrote extensively in defense of Sufism in general, and of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings in particular, and commented profusely on the rational and spiritual approaches in Islam, which were reflected in the crystallizing polarity of the law and the truth (*al-shari‘a* and *al-haqīqa*). He therefore was not looking for an occasion to extend his views onto Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex, but criticism and denigration of Ibn ‘Arabi must have reached an intolerable level and been extended to his sacred shrine, prompting al-Nabulusi to write his short rebuttal in the early months of 1089 (1678), at the age of thirty-nine.³¹ With *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī* the polemics over Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings took on a spatial dimension. By revealing a mystery concealed in the spatiality of the complex, al-Nabulusi endeavored to provide a new way of visualizing its spatial organization and appreciating the inner significance of its architecture, thereby offering rare insights into an Islamic architectural theory.

Al-Salimiyya was constructed on a steep slope at the foot of Mount Qasiyun in al-Salihiyya. Ibn Tulun described the original structure in detail.³² His descriptions are consistent with the current shape and layout of the building, taking into account the additions and modifications that took place over the past five centuries (see figs. 3 and 4).

The current form of the building shows one big flat-roofed, cubical block with two small attachments to the eastern side, one of which is the original domed tomb chamber, the other a new addition. In the original design, however, the complex was terraced and consisted of three levels: an upper level of the mosque that had a courtyard with arched porticoes on three sides and a prayer hall on the fourth (southern side), with windows overlooking a garden located at the southern end; a middle level of the domed tomb chamber and rooms for seclusion with windows overlooking the garden; and a lower level of the garden on the edge of Yazid River at the southern end of the building. The complex also had a minaret and other ancillary facilities, including a freestanding domed

building for charity-related activities (*takiyya*) located opposite the main entry on the upper northern side of the building (figs. 5 and 6). The main building had two entries: one from the upper level (north) into the courtyard and the main prayer hall, which was covered by a double-pitched roof; and one from the lower level of the garden through the tomb chamber. The upper entry was and still is the main entry. We do not know anything about the size or design of the garden; however, the building was set back from the river, and a freestanding tower with a mechanical device raised water from the river to the mosque, channeling it to the upper level through an aqueduct, the remnants of which are still visible (figs. 7 and 8).³³

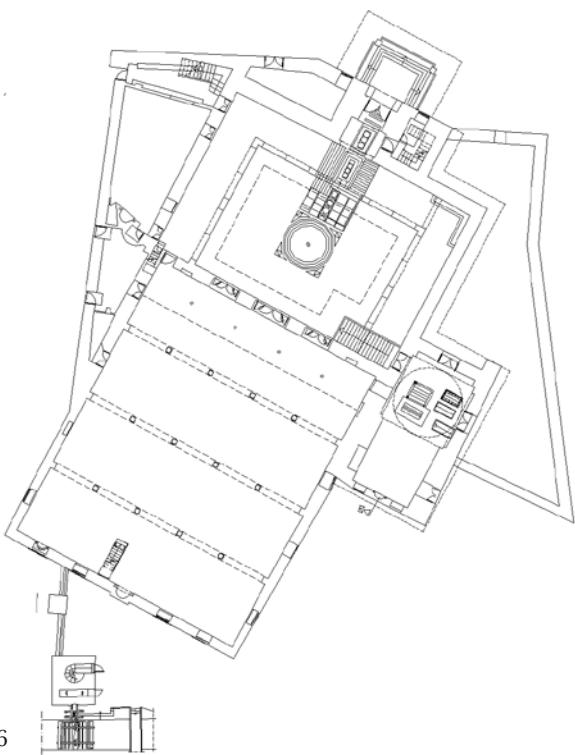
Among the many religious complexes in Damascus that house tombs of religious and spiritual figures, al-Salimiyya’s multilevel spatial arrangement was unique. Al-Nabulusi’s treatise suggests that the position of Ibn ‘Arabi’s grave in the spatial arrangement of the complex had become a point of attack, as his critics seemed to have used the lower position of the tomb chamber to point out his inferior status in comparison with the higher position of the mosque. And it is possible, given the intensity of the debates his ideas had provoked, that the rational jurists might have prohibited people from descending to the lower chamber, which in their view would represent descending to polytheism and unbelief (figs. 9 and 10).

In fact, an opening poem in *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī* suggests that going downstairs to the tomb might be likened to descending to hell. Al-Nabulusi wrote:

The tomb of Muhyiddin is among the most splendid,
a fire for the ignorant, but light in itself.
Whosoever approaches it in the mode of Moses,
shall converse with Truth with sorts of presence.
Do not say fire, for fire is none other than you,
and go beyond interpreting the outward.
A mosque up high and a garden down below,
with a river that is among the most beautiful.
He is in a presence in between the two,
below, yet above in the loftiest palaces.
The way to him is through poverty and humility,
and around these all shall revolve.
So reflect on what we have granted you,
of sciences belonging to this and the other world.³⁴

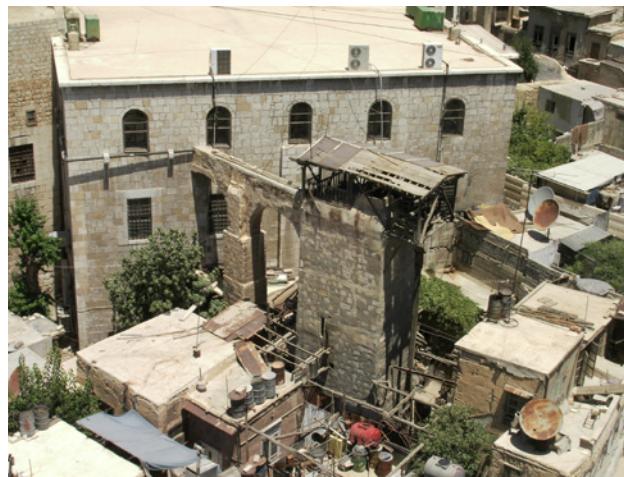


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Figs. 5 and 6. Plans of Ibn 'Arabi's complex in its current form together with its adjacent buildings. To the west (left) is the Ayyubid Bimaristan al-Qaymari, and to the north (above) is the *takiya* (part of the complex of al-Salimiyya). The original plan of the prayer hall contained only one row of columns and two bays covered by a double-pitched roof. (Plans: courtesy of Ola al-Zouhayli)



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Figs. 7 and 8. The water tower of Ibn 'Arabi's complex, 2010, originally positioned on the Yazid River to raise water to the level of the mosque and to the courtyard. (Photos: fig. 7, courtesy of Ola al-Zouhayli; fig. 8, Samer Akkach)

THE SIRR: THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

Referring to the spatial arrangement of al-Salimiyya, al-Nabulusi wrote: "In this wondrous order, there is an unusual mystery [*sirr*]; contemplate it with the eye of reflection if you are among the possessors of insights."³⁵ Thus al-Nabulusi hinges his spatial interpretation on the notion of *sirr* (mystery, secret), indicating that he wrote *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī* to reveal an unrecognized objective concealed in the design of the building. Yet he does not explain what he means by *sirr* or how it should be



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Figs. 9 and 10. The stairs leading down to Ibn ‘Arabi’s tomb chamber from the level of the courtyard and mosque, located at the southeastern corner of the courtyard, through which one enters the mosque, which lies at the same level, 2012. The opening to the right under the arch leads to the stairs. (Photos: courtesy of Kinda Tabbaa)

understood. The notion of *sirr* is complex and can be understood in general and mystical ways, so in what sense did al-Nabulusi use it? Considering that the selection of titles was often dictated by rhyming as much as by meaning, one can argue that the term *sirr* was selected for its general usage. From this perspective, the *sirr* would simply point to an unrecognized idea and can thus be explained as an alternative, or not-so-obvious, interpretation of the multilevel building, one that pays respect and reverence to the great master it houses. From the mystical perspective, however, we must take into consideration the Sufi articulation of the notion of *sirr* as well as Ibn ‘Arabi’s reflections on it.

Al-Nabulusi was not an ordinary writer; he was a celebrated Sufi master of the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders, one who was well versed in Sufi teachings and hermeneutics and in full command of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, which he regularly taught throughout his life. Accordingly, it would be unreasonable to ignore the mystical understanding of the concept of *sirr* and to overlook its agency in al-Nabulusi’s theorization. In fact, it is safe to assume that al-Nabulusi’s focus on the *sirr* reflects a deliberate choice driven by his mystical preoccupations.

To understand the mystical meaning of *sirr* in the context of al-Nabulusi’s usage with reference to architecture, a distinction must be established between

sirr and *ma’nā*. The Arabic term *sirr* (mystery, secret) differs from *ma’nā* (meaning), though both overlap in certain respects. *Ma’nā*, from ‘*anā* (to care, to be concerned with, to intend), is attached to human thinking, intention, and self-conscious deliberations, whereas *sirr*, from *sarara* (to keep inside, to hide), is a form of concealment that is independent of human intentionality and self-conscious reasoning. Access to *sirr* can be achieved through mental occurrences or events called in Arabic *khawāṭir* (sing. *khāṭir*, quick passing thoughts), which refer to flashes of *in-sight* that involuntarily roam one’s heart, appearing and disappearing quickly without an identifiable cause and source.³⁶ The *khawāṭir* are considered to be a source of inspiration and revelation. In the opening of his treatise, al-Nabulusi explains the source of his ideas: “This is a breeze from the gardens of the unseen [*al-ghayb*] and a fragrance that removes from the noses of intending visitors the cold of uncertainty [*al-rayb*], in which I have explained aspects of what God-most-high has disclosed unto me in a state of inspiration, where there is neither sign nor speech.”³⁷

Thus understood, the *sirr*, as a form of concealment, is concomitant to every revealed reality as a hidden core that is there by virtue of the reality’s disclosure, just as the shadow is inherent in the nature of light. And just as the visibility of light is realized through contrast with

shadow, revealment is likewise affirmed through contrast with concealment. The *sirr*, in this sense, is seen as a medium of visualization, of which the verb *asarra* means at once “to conceal” and “to reveal,” and *surūr* means both “pleasure” and “happiness.”³⁸ From a Sufi perspective, the *sirr* is conceived as a state of truth concealed in between existence and nonexistence, neither known nor unknown. In humans, the *sirr* is defined as “a subtlety placed in the heart as the spirit placed in the body. It is the locus of visualization [*mushāhadā*], just as the spirit is the locus of love, and as the heart is the locus of knowledge.”³⁹ Sufis differentiate the *sirr*'s function in three contexts, knowledge (*ilm*), situation (*hāl*), and truth (*haqīqa*), considering the *sirr* as an “eye” that enables certain visualization according to the condition of each context.⁴⁰

In *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations), Ibn 'Arabi distinguishes three types of human desire (*raghaba*): one is motivated by the soul (natural desire), the second by the heart (spiritual desire), and the third by the *sirr* (divine desire).⁴¹ These are related to the tripartite constitution of humans: natural, spiritual, and divine. Constituting the divine component of humanity, the *sirr* is directly connected to the Real or Truth (*haqq*). This connection explains the meaning of the common phrase often used by Sufis after one's name: *qaddasa Allāhu sirrah* (may God sanctify his secret) or *quddisa sirrah* (may his secret be sanctified).

In residing at the heart of revealed things, the *sirr* becomes the other side of intentionality; it is the inner core acquired by beings in the process of manifestation. Thus the *sirr*, in essence, undermines the very certainty of human intentionality by denying individual ownership of ideas in the creative process of making. Whenever something comes into existence, there is always a *sirr* folded within that gives this something more than its manifested form, apparent purpose, and the maker's reasoned intention. In this sense, the *sirr* can never be intended, but only discovered. It cannot be reduced to a meaning or a set of meanings, nor can it be exhausted by being discovered and disclosed. The *sirr*, by virtue of its very concealment, is a constant source of ideas and inspiration. Whenever a *sirr* is revealed, another is simultaneously concealed, and it is in this sense that the

sirr is seen as at once a visualizing medium and an expression of divine wisdom.

With the *sirr* as his starting point, al-Nabulusi makes a clear distinction between human intentionality and the determinations of being. The game of being, so to speak, is sustained by divine wisdom and has its own consciousness, which is independent of beings and the deliberations of human reasoning. “It was the divine wisdom and holy secrets,” al-Nabulusi writes, referring to Ibn 'Arabi, “that he was buried in the foot of the Salihiyya mountain [i.e., Qasiyun].”⁴² Although things appear to be directed by human concerns and under human control, in reality being has its own dictates whereby humans are engaged to act. Humans are not passive agents in this game, however, but rather active players whose actions coincide with the unfolding of the being's dictates. In this understanding, reality always has two sides to it: visible and invisible, recognizable and mysterious. Thus in the spatial arrangements of al-Salimiyya, what was revealed and became recognizably visible, through the patronage of Sultan Selim and his design and construction team, was only a certain side of what was hidden therein. This is where the significance of the Sufi concept of the *sirr* lies. As a state of truth, the *sirr* directs attention to what is being concealed in the process of revealing: it is the presence of absence.

THE EYE OF REFLECTION

Al-Nabulusi wrote *Al-Sirr al-Muktabī* to counter the criticism being leveled at the tomb of his revered master. He wanted people to *see* what is not outwardly visible and to share a mode of vision similar to that through which the Prophet Muhammad *visualized* the invisible. This invisible reality reveals itself through visible traces: the unique spatiality of the building that acts as a medium for “the eye of reflection” to discern what is being concealed. Here the concealed mystery is not the architect's ideas or original design intentions or the patron's purpose behind the building, none of which is in fact important or even necessary for understanding the meaning of a work of architecture. The true meaning resides in the *sirr*, the mystery that lies beyond the



Fig. 11. Digital model of what Ibn 'Arabi's tomb might have looked like in al-Nabulusi's time. Details are based on early twentieth-century photographs; model prepared in 2013. (Model: courtesy of Hala Qasqas)

architect's and the patron's desires, intentionality, and self-conscious reasoning.⁴³

While presenting a theoretical reading of architecture, the spatial visualization was presented from a mystical perspective, using architecture as a vehicle to illustrate the spiritual meanings of form. In this respect, *Al-Sirr al-Muktabī* is a valuable early modern source offering a rare theoretical interpretation of Islamic architecture from a nonarchitectural perspective. In his attempt to unravel the secrets of al-Salimiyya, al-Nabulusi focused his visual hermeneutics on three aspects: first, the *siting* of the complex and its relationship to geography and natural setting; second, the *approach* to the complex from outside; and third, the *experiencing* of the building from the inside (fig. 11).

Siting

Al-Salimiyya was built on a steep mountainside where Ibn 'Arabi's grave was originally located. In this siting arrangement, al-Nabulusi saw a significant relationship between the mountain and the cave, the outer body and the inner heart, and considered the grave, by its very location, to be the heart of Qasiyun. "It was divine wisdom and holy secrets that led to his burial at the foot of the Salihiyah mountain," al-Nabulusi wrote. "He is buried in a cemetery at a somewhat steep slope of Mount

Qasiyun, because it is in the heart of the blessed mountain, and knowledge is in the hearts not the minds."⁴⁴ The mountain and cave symbolism of the manifest reality and hidden secret is widely known in many traditions, yet here al-Nabulusi uses it to point to the religious difference between the theologians who depend in their knowledge on reason (*nazar*) and mystics who depend on divine disclosure (*kashf*).⁴⁵ Both terms involve visual metaphors. *Nazar* (literally, vision) has been associated with reason and rationality (*ahl al-nazar* are the philosophers), whereas *kashf* (unveiling) has been associated with intuition and the suprarational (*ahl al-kashf* are the mystics). In the siting analogy, al-Nabulusi associates the mountain with reason and sight, and the cave with the heart and insight. True knowledge, he asserts, lies in the heart, not in the thoughts (*al-ma'rifa fi'l-qulūb lā fi'l-afkār*).

In mystical thought, the heart (*qalb*) is associated with centrality and truth.⁴⁶ In the mountain and cave metaphor, this is what Ibn 'Arabi stands for as he rests at the heart of Mount Qasiyun. A prophetic tradition often quoted by Sufis reports a divine saying: Neither can my earth nor my heaven embrace me, but the heart of my faithful servant can. Conceived as the seat of divinity, the "heart" is defined by the Sufis as an "abstract luminous substance that mediates between the spirit



Fig. 12. Digital model of Ibn 'Arabi's tomb, viewed from the level of the garden. (Model: courtesy of Hala Qasqas, 2013)

and the soul," and as "an eternal light and transcendental secret [*sirr*], revealed at the center of beings, whereby God gazes at humans."⁴⁷ Thus viewed, it is the center whereby humanity is realized. With reference to the Koranic verse, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of his light is as a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp is in glass, the glass is as it were a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west" (Koran 24:35), the niche is taken to represent the body, the tree the soul, the lamp the spirit, and the glass and brilliant star the heart.⁴⁸ Thus the heart is the invisible shield through which shines the light of truth, and this is what Ibn 'Arabi's tomb is seen to represent (fig. 12).

Access

As already described, al-Salimiyya had two entries, one at the upper level (north), the other at the lower (south). Al-Nabulusi compares this dual accessibility to two approaches to religious knowledge: the outward and the inward. The mosque, which occupies the higher level, is taken to represent the outward divine law, which is accessible by the public, whereas the tomb that occupies the lower level is taken to represent the inward truth, which is accessible only by the elite. The fact that there are two entrances to the tomb itself, one direct from

below, the other via the upper mosque, is taken to represent the ways in which one can approach the religious truth of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and teachings. Al-Nabulusi describes a side walkway on the right-hand side of the building that leads pedestrians from the upper street down to the lower garden, which provides a setting to the complex on the edge of Yazid River. The complex itself was elevated from the garden level, so whoever approaches the building from the garden had to climb up a stair to the level of Ibn 'Arabi's tomb. Viewing the tomb from the garden reveals it in a lofty place, al-Nabulusi writes, while viewing it from the mosque reveals it in a low place. He says:

If you descend along the sidewalk outside the mosque that is adjacent to it on the right-hand side, you will arrive at a lush garden [*rawda khadrā'*] with fresh running water.⁴⁹ When you enter this garden you will find the tomb of the shaykh ... elevated to the highest point, in contrast to your situation when you are in the protected mosque. In this wondrous order there is an unusual mystery; contemplate it with the eye of reflection if you are among the possessors of insights. And that concealed mystery is nothing other than the presence of absolute beauty, whereby the negligent [*ghāfilūn*] are perplexed while the knowers [*'ārifūn*] are guided.⁵⁰

Here al-Nabulusi uses the spatiality of the complex to again engage the dichotomy between *nazar* and *kashf*



Figs. 13 and 14. Digital model of Ibn 'Arabi's tomb, viewed from the level of the garden. (Model: courtesy of Hala Qasqas)

(reason and revelation), rationality and spirituality, the law and the truth (*al-shari'a wa-l-haqīqa*). He takes the garden to represent revelation, spirituality, and truth, with its lower location being seen as a constant reminder of one's humility and selflessness, the main characteristics of the people of the truth. The garden stands for truth by virtue of its natural and unmediated existence, its primordiality and unconstructedness. By contrast, the mosque stands for the religious law by virtue of its designed, determined, and constructed reality. As truth is superior to law, in al-Nabulusi's view, the lower open space of the garden is likewise viewed to be superior to

the upper enclosed mosque.⁵¹ In this spatial visualization, al-Nabulusi seems to be setting up landscape against architecture, garden against building, nature against culture (as constructed beliefs and habits) (figs. 13 and 14).

In a polarized community sharply divided between supporters and detractors of Ibn 'Arabi, entry to the building seems to have become an issue. It was possible to imagine entry into the complex to have become a declaration of identity and a statement of position. Those who enter from above became identified with the people of the law, that is, the jurists and their allies,

whereas those who enter from below became identified with the truth, that is, the Sufis and their followers. In representing initiation into religious learning, the order of access in these two entries assumes new significance. "He who enters the mosque of the law [*masjid al-shari'a*] before entering the garden of truth [*rawdat al-haqīqa*]," al-Nabulusi asserts, "will lose considerably, as he will find the tomb of the great shaykh, may God be pleased with him, in a very low place, so he would oppose, reject, criticize, and despise, yet this would only be his own status being reflected in the mirror of the shaykh."⁵²

Thus viewed, the ways in which people engage with the spatiality of the mosque reflect their personal attitudes and "visual (in)capacity," to use Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphor. As antimystical sentiment was well entrenched in Damascus during al-Nabulusi's time, he asked those who reject Ibn 'Arabi's teachings to reflect on their method of learning: "What virtue can you claim for yourself if you are following others in praise and dispraise? The donkey carries loads but cannot distinguish them; it could be carrying rubbish or precious stones."⁵³

In his spatial hermeneutics, al-Nabulusi sees a connection between the spatial order of the complex and people's attitude, and he uses al-Salimiyya's spatial arrangement to guide people toward good moral conduct. Viewing the tomb as a Ka'ba located in the vicinity of Mount Tur, where Moses conversed with his Lord, al-Nabulusi writes:

Humble yourself before this transcendent status and take the right-hand sidewalk of the Syrian corner, and enter from the auspicious side of Mount Tur into the sacred spot near Moses's tree. And take what has been revealed to you and be thankful of the shaykh's truthful presence. And drink from that river's sweet water and do not preoccupy yourself with knowing anything other than the Lord.⁵⁴

In al-Nabulusi's visual interpretation, the garden, the water, and the waterwheel (i.e., the water tower) become important elements, assuming special significance. Water is seen as the principle of life, the source of knowledge, and the medium of purification. Its integral relationship to the garden makes it an indispensable element for the experience of the mosque. The people of the mosque have no source of water other than the river below, and they are therefore obliged to drink the water of the garden raised by the waterwheel.

So they are dependent on the water of the garden. As for the people of the garden, however, they do not need the water of the mosque and the mihrab. In this sense, water becomes associated with belief in Ibn 'Arabi's sainthood and spirituality, and while all people, believers and critics, enter the mosque, only the believer enters the garden. Yet all share in their dependency on the garden's water, and especially the detractor, who despite his rejection "will still be in need of the water of life, extracted by the wheel of thought from that garden, in order for him to achieve a complete presence and perfect state of tranquillity and submission."⁵⁵ "So breathe in, in that garden, the breezes of acceptance," al-Nabulusi calls, "and do not fear the criticism of the self-deluded and the jealous, for light cannot be seen by the blind."⁵⁶

As to the proper order in the relationship between the truth and the law, al-Nabulusi explains that "he who enters the garden of truth [first] will perfect his condition by upholding the requirements of the law and possessing the happiness of the two abodes. He will find the tomb of the shaykh in the highest place, expose himself to the river of eternal life, and witness the fruits of eternal happiness."⁵⁷ Thus it is only through accessing the complex through the garden first that one will discern the standing of the shaykh as being the highest and his status as being the most proud.

Experience

Divine secrets and lordly wisdoms, al-Nabulusi discerned, necessitated that the grave should be located at the heart of the complex, just as the grave site was positioned at the heart of the mountain. Experientially, after entering the mosque from the higher entrance, one descends to the tomb's chamber by seventeen steps. This spatial arrangement was unusual, as graves in other buildings were normally located at the same level of the main entry. Al-Nabulusi sees psychological dimensions corresponding to the ways in which the complex is spatially experienced. At the upper level of the mosque, one has a sense of authority and arrogance, so one feels empowered to criticize the great master. By descending to the tomb via seventeen steps, however, one humbles oneself and begins to realize the greatness of the master. "Whoever enters the mosque aiming for the mihrab,"⁵⁸ al-Nabulusi warns, "will not recognize this mystery,

which is concealed from him by his own intention. So he will be imprisoned behind the door.”⁵⁹

Here al-Nabulusi uses intentionality (*qaṣd*) as both mental and visual orientation. For those who restrict their mind and eyes to the upper level, the level of the mihrab, the level of reason, will not be in a position to see the concealed mystery in the spatiality of the complex. Their position amounts to imprisonment behind the door of intentionality, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense, as those who confine themselves to the prayer hall are both visually and mentally isolated by the doors of the hall. Seeing the shaykh’s tomb beneath their feet, in a lowly status, can only be a reflection of their own low status “revealed through the dazzling light” of Ibn ‘Arabi’s presence. That is why such a person “would not understand anything of the truthful speech in the presence of truthfulness, mistakenly believing that the darkness of thoughts and souls is in fact the lights of the bride’s presence. He is thus expelled from the house because he does not belong there, and everything returns to its origin.”⁶⁰

Al-Nabulusi relates intentionality to what he visualizes as the “door of worship and prayer,” which is the real access to the complex. “Whosoever enters from the door of worship and prayer by his own self, because of his negligence in witnessing his Lord in the traces of his reason and senses, he would be a polytheist without him noticing,” al-Nabulusi writes, wondering “how would he expect to reach the highest palaces while his knowledge of the folks of God is inadequate?” By comparison, “he who enters the door of worship and prayer from the right-hand sidewalk, he would humble himself before his Lord by descending along that clear pathway” to the garden of truth. “So understand, O jurist, what the intelligent is alluding to,” al-Nabulusi calls, “and search within yourself, by which you are acting, and you will find the mosque and the mihrab being removed from before your eyes, and you will see the tomb of the shaykh ... in the high and near status, not in the status of lowness and concealment.”⁶¹

CONCLUSION

By searching for a concealed mystery (*sirr*) in the siting, access, and spatial arrangement of Ibn ‘Arabi’s tomb,

al-Nabulusi presents a theorization of architecture that is based on visual hermeneutics laced with mystical ideas. From an architectural perspective, al-Nabulusi’s conceptualization can be seen as an attempt to read nonintended design ideas into al-Salimiyya. He sees the building as a signifying instrument, pointing to a hidden truth lying beyond its formal confines. For him, the significance of the form lies in revealing the fundamental difference between two competing approaches to religious certainty, and through this difference he is able to show—in visual and spatial terms—the truth of what Ibn ‘Arabi has stood for over the centuries. In this respect al-Nabulusi’s text is unique, as known architectural treatises of that period were mainly narrative based and descriptive. Contrasting his spatial interpretations with the spatial descriptions of Ibn Tulun, for example, we can see the merit of al-Nabulusi’s theorization.

In *Al-Qalā’id al-Jawhariyya* (The Pearly Necklaces), Ibn Tulun gave an eyewitness account of the actual making of Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex. He provided a detailed description of the building—its context, form, spaces, size, material, color, and texture—in addition to a detailed chronicle of its construction. Elsewhere in the same book, he also gave an account of the controversy over Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings among both the elite and the public. Yet he did not discern any overlap between the two domains of architectural forms and religious debates. In his historical documentations, architecture appeared, on one side, purely material and technical, while religion appeared, on the other side, purely conceptual and polemical. Such a separation was typical in premodern Islamic literature, which explains the limited scope of architectural theory in premodern Arab-Islamic literature. Bridging this divide and visualizing crossings and overlaps between the two domains of architecture and religion offer new epistemological possibilities, and new horizons of theoretical understanding. It is in these epistemological possibilities and horizons of understanding that architecture assumes new socio-religious and intellectual functions, and through them it becomes invested with new meanings. This was the crux of al-Nabulusi’s treatise, in which he replaced Ibn Tulun’s “technical eye” with his own “eye of reflection.” Through visual hermeneutics of concealment and

disclosure, al-Nabulusi endeavored to take the mind on a reflective journey beyond the confines of materiality into the wondrous realms of mystery and spirituality:

Surely Muhyiddin is the magnanimous imam,
and among the fingers he is the thumb.⁶²
A finger of Truth among many extended
to the creatures, yet in this a conclusion was reached.
Puzzling is everything that belongs to him, sciences and
self,
and a tomb by which the minds were perplexed.
As is the Real in whom some have strayed,
while others were guided and became steadfast.
And so are all of the messengers, they are light
for some, and darkness for others.
So reflect O brother of enlightenment and be fair,
and contemplate when delusion spreads.
His tomb is the very dust of yours,
and in you, howsoever you are, he has a station.
He has your soul, to which you have become
a shroud, and the preservatives are those words.
When insights are healthy, they become
like mirrors, in which one's intention looms.
But when they darken, every form of life
becomes death among mankind, and that will be the
end.⁶³

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NOTES

1. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Qabas fī Sharḥ Muwaṭṭa' Mālik ibn Anas* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1992), 1:360–61.
2. Quoted in *ibid.*, 1:360.
3. These ideas were referred to by Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī in *Fath al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), 1:514–15.
4. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Qabas*, 1:360.
5. *Ibid.*: الإدراك معنى يخلقه الله في العين على قدر ما يريد أن يصر الرائي من المرئيات. The Arabic word *idrāk*, from *daraka*, “to reach,” also means “conceiving” and “cognition”; hence it applies to both sensory and mental activities.
6. Al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, 1:514: لأن الحق عند أهل السنة أن الرؤية لا يشترط لها عقلًا عضو مخصوص ولا مقابلة ولا قرب.
7. Al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, 1:514: خلاً لأهل البدع لوقوفهم مع العادة.
8. From a certain Sufi perspective, the senses do not err because their mode of knowing is direct, involving no mediation.
9. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Qabas*, 1:361.
10. *Ibid.*: وليس الذي تراه في المرأة مثلاً بل هو نفس المرئي بعينه: والدليل القاطع على ذلك أن المرأة تكون في غلظ قشرة الپیضة ثم تقابل بها وجهك فتدنو من المرأة قری الدنو فيها، وتبعد عنها ذارعاً وذراعين قری البعد فيها، وحال أن يكون ذلك الدنو والبعد الكبير في غلظ قشر الپیضة، فدل على أن الذي تدرك إنما هو حقيقة المرئي.
11. For the optics-based approach, see Ibn al-Haytham, *Kitāb al-Manāzir*, ed. Abdelhamid Sabra (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, 1983). For the rational approach of philosophy, see Ibn Sina, *Al-Shifā': Al-Tabi'iyyāt*, ed. Ibrahim Madkour (Cairo: Organisation Générale Egyptienne, 1970); Ibn Rushd, *Talkhiṣ Kitāb al-Hiss wa'l-Mahsūs*, ed. Henricus Blumberg (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1972).
12. Samer Akkach, “The Poetics of Concealment: Al-Nabulusi’s Encounter with the Dome of the Rock,” *Muqarnas* 22 (November 2005): 110–27.
13. 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731) was a Damascene Sufi who took it upon himself to achieve spiritual enlightenment. He kept up an intimate spiritual relationship with Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), although they were separated by five hundred years. Many considered him as the reincarnation of the great master. Al-Nabulusi conducted teaching sessions on Ibn 'Arabi's works throughout his life, was a regular visitor to his tomb, and in his later years moved to al-Salihiyya to live in proximity to his complex. The house he constructed for himself, still extant today and functioning as a religious center, was only a short walk from al-Salimiyya. About the same time, al-Nabulusi was given a teaching post at al-Salimiyya, where he taught Koranic interpretation and other spiritual sciences. There, in an unprecedented practice, he conducted a series of public readings of Ibn 'Arabi's major work, *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations), causing much controversy and religious unrest in Damascus. See Samer Akkach, *'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 123–28.
14. I am using two manuscript copies of this text from the Princeton University Library (Ms. 4617 and Ms. 295). The first is older and was copied shortly after the death of the author in 1151 (1738); however, the second is more legible. References to folio numbers are based on the second (Ms. 295).
15. The treatise has been published in Arabic and translated into English: Ahmad al-Mizyadi, *Al-Nūr al-Abhar fī'l-Dīfā' 'an al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (Cairo: Dār al-Dhikr, 2007), 397–404; Paul Fenton, “The Hidden Secret Concerning the Tomb of Ibn 'Arabī: A Treatise by 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī,”

- Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 22 (1997): 25–40. On the treatise, see also Elizabeth Sirrieh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus: 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, 1641–1731* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 126–28.
16. Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) is widely recognized as one of the greatest mystics and most influential figures in the history of Islam. Born in Murcia, Spain, he spent most of his life traveling and finally chose to settle in Damascus, where he died at the age of seventy-eight. Ibn 'Arabi was a prolific and controversial figure, with between four hundred and five hundred works attributed to him. His influential ideas swept over the entire Islamic world, forcing almost every religious authority of note over many generations to take a position on his works.
 17. Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Shajara al-Nū'māniyya al-Kubrā fī'l-Dawla al-'Uthmāniyya wa mā Yata'allaq bihā min al-Ḥawādith al-Kawniyya*, Al-Zāhiriyah Library, Damascus, Ms. 8376, fol. 4.
 18. The treatise and its relation to the tomb construction have been discussed in Ryad Atlagh, "Paradox of a Mausoleum," trans. Cecilia Twinch, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 22 (1997): 1–24.
 19. Copies of these manuscripts are kept in the National Library of Damascus: Əhməd al-Bünī, Zāhiriyah Ms. 7352; Ədr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, Zāhiriyah Ms. 6870; Ələh al-Dīn al-Safadī, Zāhiriyah Ms. 4398.
 20. See Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 341.
 21. See Əhməd ibn 'Ali al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa'l-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khitāṭ wa'l-Āthār* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, n.d.), 1:196–97.
 22. Ibid., 1:196.
 23. These details are from Ibn Tūlūn, *Al-Qalā'id al-Jawhariyya fī Tārikh al-Sālihiyya*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 1:114–18.
 24. See n. 17 above.
 25. Quoted in al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz*, 1:196–97.
 26. Ibn Tulun gave a detailed picture of this polarization during his time. He reported that Ibn 'Arabi was revered by most of the Persians, all of the Turks, and some groups in Damascus; however, he was opposed by "the majority of the Arab jurists [fuqahā'] and all of the hadith scholars." Two centuries after the construction of the complex, Damascus remained deeply polarized. An antimystical sentiment ran high, and the official establishment dominated by the jurists was against Sufi teachings and practices. Ibn Tūlūn, *Al-Qalā'id al-Jawhariyya*, 2:538.
 27. Quoted in Fenton, "Hidden Secret," 27–28.
 28. See Alexander Knyshev, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999).
 29. I have discussed this in a recent publication, Samer Akkach, *Intimate Invocations: Al-Ghazzī's Biography of 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 5–14. Influenced by the ideas of the Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, the Wahhabis were among the most zealous advocates against these practices.
 30. On the Kadizade movement, see Madeline Zilfi, "The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45, 4 (1986): 251–69.
 31. This was a prolific year for al-Nabulusi, during which he wrote a wide range of works.
 32. Ibn Tūlūn, *Al-Qalā'id al-Jawhariyya*, 1:114–18.
 33. This mechanical device is currently in a state of disrepair. It has been documented in Ahmad Yusuf al-Hasan, *Taqī al-Dīn wa'l-Handasa al-Mikāniyya al-'Arabiyya* (Aleppo: Ma'had al-Turāth al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī, 1976), 51–70.
 34. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316. This opening poem summarizes al-Nabulusi's interpretive approach, showing that the debate around the spatial arrangements of al-Salimiyyah was in essence a debate about two religious approaches to divine certainty: the path of the truth and the path of the law.
 35. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316.
 36. The concept of *khawāṭir* formed an integral part of pre-modern Islamic mystical psychology. See Samer Akkach, *Letters of a Sufi Scholar: 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 99–104.
 37. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316.
 38. See Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab al-Muhibb* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2003), s.vv. "asarrā" and "surur." **وَأَسْرَ الشَّيْءِ: كُمَهٌ وَأَظْهَرٌ، وَهُوَ مِنَ الْأَضْدَادِ... سَرَّتْهُ: كُمَتْهُ، وَسَرَّتْهُ: أَعْلَمَتْهُ.**
 39. Al-Jurjānī, cited in Anwar Abi Khuzam, *Mu'jam al-Muṣṭalaḥāt al-Šūfiyya* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1993), 98.
 40. See Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 2:468–69.
 41. Ibid., 2:521–22.
 42. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316.
 43. Akkach, "Poetics of Concealment," 110–27.
 44. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316.
 45. On the symbolism of the mountain and the cave in the Hindu tradition, see René Guénon, "The Mountain and the Cave," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 5, 2 (Spring 1971): 74–76.
 46. On the symbolism of the heart and the cave, see René Guénon, "The Heart and the Cave," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 5, 1 (Winter 1971): 24–26.
 47. Abi Khuzam, *Mu'jam*, 144.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Here he is referring to the Koranic verse:
"وَأَوْيَنَا هَمًا إِلَى رَبْوَةٍ ذَاتٍ قَرَارٍ وَمَعِينٍ." (50:23) ذَاتٌ قَرَارٌ: أَرْضٌ مَبْسَطَةٌ.
وَمَعِينٌ: الْمَاءُ الظَّاهِرُ الْجَارِيُّ.
 50. The verse describes a flat land with visible running water. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 316.
 51. Ibn 'Arabī's preference for the empty *hijr* over the building of the Ka'ba points to a similar analogy. See Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam:*

- An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 188–93.
52. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fols. 318–19.
53. Ibid., fol. 317.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., fol. 319.
56. Ibid., fol. 317.
57. Ibid., fol. 319.
58. On the function and meaning of *mihrab*, see Nuha N. N. Khoury, "The Mihrab: From Text to Form," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, 1 (1998): 1–27; Nuha N. N. Khoury, "The Mihrab Image: Commemorative Themes in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Muqarnas* 9 (1992): 11–28.
59. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 317.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. In Arabic, *ibhām* means both "thumb" and "ambiguity," which in this context refers to Ibn 'Arabi's being a unique figure, just like the thumb, who had been ambiguous and enigmatic to many.
63. Al-Nābulusī, *Al-Sirr al-Mukhtabī*, fol. 319.