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The Aesthetics of Allegory I: Rhetoric versus Demonstration in the Hermeneutics of Images in Classical Islam

Abstract: This article explores the Aesthetics of Allegory in classical Islamic thought, focusing on the hermeneutics of images as articulated by Averroes. It examines the distinction between rhetorical and demonstrative interpretations of sacred texts and images, highlighting the role of intellectual hierarchies and cosmological theories in shaping these interpretations. The study also analyses the allegorical interpretation of the Miʿrāǧ narrative by Avicenna and its connection to Islamic metaphysics. Finally, it discusses the Marīnid Sultanate's promotion of geometric art in madrasas as a reflection of these allegorical principles, arguing that such art served as a visual representation of Islamic cosmology accessible only to the intellectual elite.

Key Words: Allegory, Hermeneutics, Marīnid Sultanate, Averroes, Avicenna, Geometry, Miʿrāǧ.

Alegorinin Estetiği I: Klasik İslam'da Tasvirlerin/İmgelerin Hermenötiğinde Retorik vs. Kanıtlama

Öz: Bu makale, klasik İslâm düşüncesinde alegorinin estetiğini inceler ve özellikle İbn Rüşd'ün ortaya koyduğu şekliyle imgelerin/tasvirlerin hermenötiğine odaklanır. Kutsal metinlerin ve imgelerin retorik ile demonstratif (kanıtlayıcı/gösterimsel) yorumları arasındaki ayrımı ele alarak, bu yorumları şekillendiren entelektüel hiyerarşilerin ve kozmolojik teorilerin rolünü vurgular. Çalışma ayrıca, İbn Sînâ'nın miraç anlatısının alegorik yorumunu ve bunun İslâm metafiziğiyle bağlantısını analiz eder. Son olarak, Merînî Sultanlığı'nın medreselerde geometrik sanatı bu alegorik ilkelerin bir yansıması olarak teşvik etmesini ele alır ve bu sanatın, İslam kozmolojisinin yalnızca entelektüel elit kesimin erişebileceği görsel bir temsili olduğunu savunur.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Alegori, Hermenötik, Merinî Sultanlığı, İbn Rüşd, İbn Sina, Geometri, Miraç.

The Holy Spirit is like the point, prophethood is like the line, and apostleship is like the surface (Avicenna, 1992: 120).

Introduction

This research develops the theory of the aesthetics of allegory, grounded in the hermeneutics of classical Arab philosophers with particular emphasis on the methodological framework established by Averroes. The present article constitutes the first part of a two-part study. While this instalment focuses squarely on the aesthetics of allegory, the subsequent publication will advance towards an aesthetics of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*. Both aesthetic theories serve as analytical tools for the symbolic interpretation of Marīnid *zillīǧ* geometrical patterns in the madrasas of Fes, Morocco, specifically the Madrasa al-ʿAṭṭārīn and Madrasa Bū ʿInānīya.

Building upon Dorothy Washburn's precise theoretical work on symmetric geometry—which posits that geometric ornamentation carries symbolic meaning decipherable only by a limited group within the originating culture (D. K. Washburn 2003; 1999; 1998; D. Washburn and Humphrey 2001)—this study demonstrates that while Washburn and other scholars[1] have proven this theory's applicability across cultures, the Islamic context offers primary sources that substantiate its relevance for Marīnid *zillīǧ*, as well as for Nasrid tilework (*alicatado*) and muqarnas.[2]

[1] Washburn has recently published an annotated bibliography. See: (D. K. Washburn 2024)

[2] These two dynasties - the Marīnids and the Naṣrids - were not only geographically proximate but also contemporaneous, sharing a history of fluctuating alliances and rivalries. The constant intellectual exchange between them, driven by diplomatic missions, personal ambitions, and even political exile, might suggest shared symbolic and metaphorical motifs in their geometric art. However, as will be argued infra (particularly in confronting Leaman's position), a proper contextual examination of their distinct political and religious histories reveals that each sultanate faced unique exigencies, resulting in fundamentally different motivations for artistic patronage. Moreover, while Marīnid *zillīǧ* and Naṣrid tilework (*alicatado*) may appear stylistically similar at first glance, closer analysis demonstrates significant divergences in most cases. Thus, beyond understanding their historical contexts and politico-religious imperatives, which shaped their respective ornamental patterns, one must engage with the foundational principles of geometric grammar. This necessitates abandoning superficial, Orientalist readings of Islamic geometric patterns in favour of rigorous

Proposing an aesthetic theory for Islamic geometric art entails addressing fundamental methodological challenges, as both fields—aesthetic philosophy and the study of geometric patterns—have remained largely neglected domains of scholarly inquiry.[3] As Oliver Leaman observes, the study of Islamic art and philosophy has often been overshadowed by a disproportionate emphasis on historical context at the expense of aesthetic and theoretical engagement. "Many modern writers on Islamic art are interested in history rather than theory and aesthetics. The same is true of writers on Islamic philosophy." (Leaman, 2004: 179) Although Leaman published these observations in 2004, a brief examination of the conference programmes of the Ernst Herzfeld-Gesellschaft annual colloquia[4] reveals that the situation has not changed significantly over the past twenty years, at least in Western Europe.[5] This tendency stems, argues Leman, from the scholarly demands of the field—linguistic, exegetical, and theological—which inevitably shift focus away from the artworks' intrinsic aesthetic value. In the specific case of geometrical art, there is a lack of competence in fundamental geometrical

Euclidean analysis using compass and straightedge constructions. That said, as will be demonstrated in the final section of this study, limited instances of Marīnid artistic influence upon Naṣrid craftsmanship can nevertheless be identified. Specifically, through analysis of octagonal geometric patterns, I examined one particular case of direct replication by Naṣrid artisans in (Emparán Fernández, 2025)

[3](However, there are some examples, such as those pertaining to Ashʿarite atomism in Seljuk geometric patterns, see: Neçipoğlu 1995; Tabbaa 2001; Also referenced is the aesthetics of water, light and time in the Alhambra in: Puerta Vilchez 2011a; 2004; Additionally, a broader interpretation of non-figurative representation as opposed to aniconism can be found in: Elias 2012)

[4] Leaman addresses the historical focus in art studies, yet, in my interpretation, his critique specifically targets historicism and the history of objects approach, rather than treating artworks as cultural artefacts that encapsulate their historical, political, psychological, religious and aesthetic conditions of production. This distinction becomes evident when examining the 2025 Ernst Herzfeld-Gesellschaft colloquium description: *Historicisms in Islamic Art: Narratives, Materials and Perspectives* (Cairo, July 2025). Upon reviewing the introductions of the first ten proceedings, *Beiträge zur Islamischen Kunst und Archäologie*, it becomes evident that a historicist and descriptive approach predominate, focused on chronologies and material analysis, while a notable absence of aesthetic or theoretical reflections on Islamic art persists. Available in: https://reichert-verlag.de/buchreihen/archaeologie_reihen/archaeologie_beitraege_zur_islamischen_kunst_und_archaeologie

[5] It should, nevertheless, observe an opposing approach in the school of the United States, particularly in Boston, under the programmes sponsored by the Aga Khan.

knowledge and in the basic principles of Euclidean geometry.[6] Yet this methodological preference has led to a troubling assumption: that Islamic art and philosophy are primarily of historical, rather than philosophical or aesthetic, significance. Leaman critiques this perspective, observing that "Islamic philosophy is often seen as being of mainly historical and not philosophical interest. Exactly the same point is often made about Islamic art, that it is of cultural rather than aesthetic interest." (Leaman, 2004: 180)

This perspective fundamentally misunderstands the nature of cultural artifacts. To argue that Islamic art can be appreciated without its historical context is to repeat the Orientalist mistakes of the colonial era, which sought to detach artworks from their cultural meanings. Such an approach not only distorts our understanding but actively participates in the epistemic violence that has characterised Western engagement with Islamic artistic traditions since the 19th century (see: Emparán Fernández 2024).

The ontological reality of art objects as cultural products demands contextual analysis. Without this, we lose both scientific objectivity and the artwork's agency within its social framework. This decontextualisation mirrors the problematic universalism promoted by institutions like London's School of Traditional Arts, whose perennialist approach imposes an ahistorical framework on Islamic artistic production (see: Critchlow 1999).

While personal aesthetic experience remains valid, we must distinguish between subjective appreciation and scholarly analysis. The former cannot replace

[6] To corroborate this point, one needs only examine Dorothy Washburn's most recent article and its section on Islamic geometry. This annotated bibliography mentions just two historians of Islamic geometric art, including Carol Bier (D. K. Washburn 2024, 255–57). As Washburn's article demonstrates, the field remains overwhelmingly dominated by enthusiasts—whether mathematically trained or not—alongside designers and artists. This dominance exacerbates the persistent misinterpretation of these artistic forms, a problem rooted in Orientalist and colonialist frameworks, that, since Keith Critchlow's works (Critchlow, 1999), impose symbolic readings informed by perennialism and traditionalism. I address these issues in two articles: (Emparán Fernández 2024; Forthcoming c).

the latter without committing what Donna Haraway would call the 'god trick' of false objectivity (Haraway 1988). Furthermore, this approach effectively destroys what Walter Benjamin termed the 'aura' of the artwork (Benjamin 2013).

Ultimately, this is not merely an academic debate about methodology, but a question of intellectual integrity in decolonial scholarship.[7] True understanding of Islamic art requires us to engage with both its formal qualities and its historical situatedness.

This article is divided into three principal sections. The first examines the epistemic hierarchy within Islamic hermeneutics, focusing primarily on Averroes' psychological theory of the three intellectual classes and their distinct capacities for interpreting sacred texts.

The second section deepens our exploration of allegory through an analysis of the Miʿrāǧ narrative attributed to Avicenna. Here, we contrast two interpretative modes: the literal visual representations of the Prophet's ascension (as seen in popular manuscripts like the *Miʿrāj Nāme*) with Avicenna's philosophical allegorisation of the same event. This juxtaposition reveals how the same text could yield radically different meanings – cosmological and noetic for elite philosophers versus corporeal and miraculous for the general populace. Crucially, we demonstrate how Avicenna's allegorical reading transforms celestial spheres into intellectual realms and angelic encounters into metaphors for epistemic progression.

The final section applies the aesthetics of allegory through a geometric-hermeneutic analysis of a pattern from the Madrasa al-ʿAṭṭārīn, reconstructing the intellectual-aesthetic experience of its original intended audience. While a full iconographic decoding falls beyond this article's scope, we elucidate key aspects of

[7] Although late in relation to the Latin American decolonialist project, which has been part of academia in its universities for over five decades. See: (Ardiles et al. 1973; Mignolo and Escobar 2013; Bauer 2022).

the pattern's construction to reconstruct the intended aesthetic experience of its original audience: Marīnid scholars and advanced students. This analysis serves as a methodological demonstration, proving that: 1) Islamic geometric art demands contextualisation within its historical and intellectual milieu, 2) Basic Euclidean geometric literacy is indispensable for its study, and 3) A multidisciplinary approach (philosophical, historical, and mathematical) is essential for rigorous interpretation.

After revealing that symbolically the geometric pattern employed as an example of hermeneutic isomorphism represents a diagram of the Islamic cosmos in the last section of this article, two new problems emerge regarding this type of art that limit its understanding and generate resistance. The first of these has to do with the study of diagrams, while the second with the assumption that there was no specialised work and that the *zillīǧ* craftsman was the same person as the creator of the geometric design.[8] With regard to the first follow up, Roxburgh notes, the study of Islamic diagrams has been hindered by art history's preference for figurative painting and its neglect of interdisciplinary collaboration. This oversight mirrors the broader marginalisation of geometric art's epistemic dimensions—a gap this article seeks to address.

> There are several reasons why historians of Islamic art have only recently begun to study diagrams in their diverse manifestations and contexts of production and use. The first has been a basic preference for studying figural paintings, often fully polychrome images, most commonly narrative in nature, that accompany extant Arabic and Persian manuscripts from the early eleventh century onward. Like some other fields of art-historical study, Islamic art has been slower to broaden its purview and embrace a gamut of images that extends beyond figurative painting and literary texts and, in terms of production, to challenge the privileged focus and assumed role of specialist, skilled, professional producers (artists, calligraphers) in the face of evidence of other kinds of image-makers and scribes (intellectuals, scholars), who were often also the primary users and audiences of manuscripts (Roxburgh, 2022: 42).

1. Theoretical Framework: Averroes and the Allegory

> Islamic allegory represents a vast body of literature. It encompasses diverse genres-romance, "visionary recital," exegesis, debate (munâẓara), and fable. And its encoded "messages" stem from such varied disciplines as philosophy, mysticism,

[8] I address this issue in (Emparán Fernández Forthcoming c; Forthcoming a)

> theology, political theory, and social and political satire. Despite this diversity in form and content, Islamic allegory is the product of a cohesive literary tradition (Heath, 1992: 3).

This section examines Averroes' hermeneutic epistemology, in which he developed a methodology to theologically justify philosophical hermeneutics and the practice of philosophy. Through an argument grounded in verses from the Qur'ān, Averroes not only defended the practice of philosophy but also established it as an obligatory pursuit for philosophers. He argues:

> That religious Law calls to an intellectual inquiry on the existing beings and requires one (to attain) knowledge on them, it is clear from several verses of the Blessed and Exalted God's Book, among which, for instance, the following: "Reflect, O you who have eyes to see!" (Q. 59:2). This verse certifies the necessity of using intellectual reasoning, or rather, simultaneously, of intellectual reasoning and juridical-legal reasoning. The Most High also says: "Haven't they studied the realms of the heavens and earth and all the things created by God?" (Q. 7:185). This verse clearly induces speculation on existing beings as a whole. God the Most High has taught that among those who have been granted the honour of possessing science there is Abraham, in particular,—be unto him peace!—and indeed God said: "And so we showed Abraham the realms of the heavens and the earth, so that he be among those who are firmly convinced" (Q. 6:75). The Most High also stated: "Don't men then look at the camel, how it was created, and the sky, how it was lifted?" (Q. 88:17–18); and again: "Who… meditate upon the creation of the heavens and the earth" (Q. 3:191). And there exist innumerable other verses similar to these (Ibn Rushd, 2017: 71).

This restrictive practice was based on his epistemic psychology, which categorised individuals into one of three groups according to their intellectual capacity.

Building upon Averroes' hierarchical methodology and theory, it becomes possible to establish a criterion for an aesthetic theory that considers hierarchical social relations within the Marīnid dynasty, as well as the social and architectural context of the works to be analysed later. However, the second instalment of this research will explore the Marīni reception of Averroes, as well as that of al-Ġazālī. This means that the present volume will focus solely on Averroes' methodological theory regarding the hermeneutics of sacred texts, which will then be extrapolated into the theory of the Aesthetics of Allegory.

As summarised by Mohamed Abdel Yabri, Averroes' work is dedicated to establishing a methodological paradigm, with the exception of his commentaries on

Aristotle's works. Averroes' methodological discourse sought to answer three fundamental questions: 1) the manner in which sacred texts are to be read and interpreted; 2) the manner in which Aristotle's philosophy is to be read, insofar as it provides the foundations of the falsafa; 3) the manner in which the relationship between religion and philosophy is to be defined, so as to safeguard the independence of each and at the same time ensure the integrity of both (Yabri, 2006: 300).

To answer that questions, Averroes distinguishes between three groups of people based on their intellectual capacity: the masses, the dialecticians, and the philosophers. For the masses, the literal meaning of sacred texts is sufficient, while the philosophers require demonstrative proofs.

In *Faṣl al-Maqāl* (*The Decisive Treatise*), Averroes establishes the fundamental distinction between these three levels of interpretation: rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative, respectively (Ibn Rushd, 2017). This creates a hierarchy that reflects a theory of knowledge and a sociological vision of society, wherein an individual's intellectual capacity determines access to truth (Ibn Rushd, 2017: 43–47). For Averroes, allegorical interpretation is a privilege reserved for the philosophical elite, while the masses must adhere to the literal meaning of texts to avoid confusion and heresy (Ibn Rushd, 2017). He argues that the purpose of allegory is to convey truths to those capable of understanding them, while maintaining the stability of religious belief among the general population (Averroes, 2001a: 65–71; Ibn Rushd, 2017: 110). This caution reflects his broader concern for social stability and the preservation of faith among the general populace. The masses, in his view, are not equipped to handle the abstract and often counterintuitive conclusions of philosophical reasoning. Thus, the dissemination of allegorical interpretations to the uninitiated risks undermining their adherence to the literal truths of religion, which are essential for maintaining social order and moral conduct (Taylor, 2012: 295–96). This tripartite division underscores his

belief that religious texts contain multiple layers of meaning, each suited to a different audience (Taylor, 2012: 288).

> Indeed, men's personalities differ qualitatively as far as this consent is concerned, being there those giving it to rational demonstration, those giving it to dialectic disputes with the same intensity of those believing in demonstrations—and this because their nature does not allow them otherwise—, and those giving it to rhetorical discourse, also with the same intensity as those believing in demonstrations. (Ibn Rushd, 2017: 78)

The rhetorical level, aimed at the general public, employs a persuasive language to inspire faith and moral conduct. The dialectical level, intended for theologians, engages in reasoned debate to explore theological complexities. Finally, the demonstrative level, accessible only to philosophers, reveals the deepest truths through logical and metaphysical reasoning (Leaman 1988: 149–50). In detail, the masses, who constitute the majority, can only comprehend the literal meaning of sacred texts and respond best to rhetorical arguments. The dialecticians, including theologians and jurists, are capable of engaging with more complex interpretations but lack the ability to grasp philosophical demonstrations. Finally, the philosophers, trained in logic and metaphysics, can access demonstrative interpretations, which reveal the most profound truths of religion (Averroes, 2001b: 26). Moreover, for Averroes, this means that only philosophers are able to detect the elements within the Qurʾān that have a literal meaning (Wohlman, 2010: 2; Leaman, 1988: 152).

As mentioned, for Averroes, allegory is not merely a hermeneutical tool but also a social mechanism that ensures religious stability. In his *Kitāb al-Kašf ʿan Manāhij al-Adilla* (*Exposition of the Methods of Proof*), he argues that allegorical interpretations should be confined to books written in a demonstrative style, intended exclusively for philosophers. To disseminate these interpretations among the masses, who lack the capacity to understand them, would be an act of irresponsibility, as it could undermine their faith in the literal meaning of the sacred text. Averroes' emphasis on the careful management of knowledge highlights his view of religion as a unifying force that must be protected from the destabilising effects of misinterpretation (Leaman, 2002: 211). By restricting access to allegorical

interpretations, he seeks to preserve the integrity of both philosophical inquiry and religious practice, ensuring that each serves its intended purpose without encroaching on the other.

> […] the public believes that what exists is either the imaginable or sensible, and that what is neither imaginable nor sensible is non-existent. Thus, if they are told that there is an existing being which is not a body, their imagination would fail them and they would consider it not-existent, especially if they are told that he is neither outside the world nor inside it, neither above it nor below it (Averroes, 2001a: 58).
>
> Thus, one must not divulge to the general public what leads them to repudiate such [explicit statements] because their impact on the souls of the general public lies in clinging to their apparent meaning. However, if they are interpreted, one of two things would happen: either that interpretation would be applied to these and all similar statements in Scripture, in which case religion in its entirety would be torn apart and the wisdom intended by it would be lost; or they would all be accepted as part of what is ambiguous."[9] [All this would amount to the repudiation of religion and its eradication from the souls of people, without the advocate of such a view becoming aware of the catastrophic damage that he wreaks on religion.] (Averroes, 2001a: 59)

Concrete elements of this vision include his critique of the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) for their indiscriminate use of allegory, which, in his view, confuses the masses and generates unnecessary disputes. In his *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), he argues that theologians, by attempting to rationalise religion without a solid philosophical foundation, fall into errors that could be avoided if they adhered to the demonstrative methods of philosophy. (Leaman, 1988: 187) For Averroes, philosophical truth and religious truth are not contradictory but represent different levels of understanding the same reality. Richard C. Taylor calls this argument the Unity of Truth (Taylor, 2000: 6; see also: 2005: 185) on the basis of the following passage, with emphasis on the last sentence:

> Since this Law is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognizance of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection does not lead to differing with what is set down in the Law. For truth does not oppose truth; rather, it agrees with and bears witness to it (Averroes 2001b: 8–9).

However, this concord can only be appreciated by those trained in the art of demonstration. If deviations do occur in the study of philosophy, this is not a fault of

[9] Reference to Q. 3:6.

the discipline, but is due to a lack of the necessary qualities to carry out the studies (Leaman, 1988: 148). Theologians, in their attempts to reconcile reason and revelation, often resort to speculative arguments that lack the rigour of philosophical reasoning. This, according to Averroes, not only leads to intellectual confusion but also risks alienating the masses from the simple and accessible truths of religion (Leaman, 2002: 211). By contrast, philosophers, through their rigorous methods, can uncover the deeper meanings of religious texts without undermining their literal significance for the general populace (Taylor, 2012: 291–300).

> It belongs to philosophy to try to comprehend the whole of scientific research, that relevant to plants and animals, as well as to physical science, what concerns the levels below the moon as well as those above it, and in this way attain an exemplary knowledge of the Artisan. This is the knowledge suggested by the verses of the Qur'an which Averroës cites, delineating the fit between heaven and earth, water and vegetation, which conditions the existence of camels. "Have they not scrutinized the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all the things God has created" (7:185)? "Then will they not look well at the camel and the form with which it was created; at the heaven and how it was set on high" (88:17-18)? (Wohlman, 2010: 54)

For Averroes, this type of syllogism, the demonstrative, is superior to all, which contrasts with al-Ġazālī's appreciation of the practice of the empirical sciences which he regards as at best well-founded suppositions (Wohlman, 2010: 27).[10] Thus, what Averroes is in this way undertaking is tracing a philosophical tradition that goes back through Avicenna and al-Farabi to Aristotle (Taylor, 2000: 3–4).

By segmenting philosophy into groups based on intellectual capacities, Averroes argues for the theological obligatory nature of the practice, as it constitutes a teleological analysis of the world. In this way, Averroes establishes that philosophy is not only recommended, but obligatory for philosophers. In the introduction of the *Decisive Treatise*, he says:

> Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is

[10] Cf. article Nr. II

> permitted, prohibited, or commanded – and this as a recommendation or as an obligation – by the Law. (Averroes, 2001b: 1)

This obligatory nature, which Averroes argues by quoting certain Qur'ānic passages, is limited only to those who have the necessary skills and training in reasoning and are prepared to perform demonstrative reasoning, which differs from dialectal, rhetorical and fallacious reasoning (Leaman, 1988: 144–47).

> The meaning of 'allegorical interpretation' is: extension of the significance of an expression from real to metaphorical significance, without forsaking therein the standard metaphorical practices of Arabic, such as calling a thing by the name of something resembling it or a cause or consequence or accompaniment of it, or other things such as are enumerated in accounts of the kinds of metaphorical speech (Averroes, 1961: 50).
>
> He says: "['The knowledge thereof is with my Lord] in a Book. My Lord neither errs nor forgets.'"[11] Understanding the meaning of the negation of these imperfections is very close to necessary knowledge. For what part of [these imperfections] is close to necessary knowledge is what has been expressly denied of God Almighty by Scripture, whereas what was far from necessary primary cognitions, Scripture has indicated by stating that it is part of the knowledge of the fewest people, as the Almighty says in more than one verse of the Book: "But most people do not know," [which is part of] His saying: "Surely, the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of mankind, but most people do not know,"[12] and His saying: "It is the original nature according to which Allah fashioned mankind. There is no altering Allah's creation. That is the true religion; but most people do not know."[13] If it is asked: "what is the proof (that is, the religious proof) for denying these imperfections of [God]?" we would answer that the proof is the fact that existing beings continue to be preserved without disruption or corruption. Now were the Creator liable to be overtaken by inattentiveness, error, forgetfulness or distraction, then existing beings would be disrupted. God Almighty has indicated this notion in more than one verse of His Book saying: "Allah holds the heavens and the earth firmly, lest they become displaced [were they displaced, none will hold them together after Him]. He is indeed Clement, All-Forgiving."[14] He also says: "[His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth,] and their preservation does not burden Him. He is the Exalted, the Great."[15] (Averroes, 2001a: 56)
>
> Being it so, if demonstrative speculation leads to the knowledge of any real being, the prerequisite is inescapable that that real being is either mentioned or omitted in the Scriptures. If it is omitted, there is no contradiction (between religion and philosophy), because that case would be identical to the jurist who, not finding some legal principle in the Scriptures, must deduce it by analogy. If, on the contrary, religious texts mention them, one of the two occurs: either the apparent sense of the philosophical conclusion agrees with or it contrasts with those texts. If it agrees,

[11] Q. 20:52
[12] Q. 40:57
[13] Q. 30:30
[14] Q. 35:41
[15] Q. 2:255

> there is no problem. Yet if it contrasts, the necessity of an allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures arises. Allegorical interpretation means to transport the argumentation from a real to a metaphorical level-without, by this, derogating from Arabic linguistic standards in the use of metaphors-, so as to define something either with a synonym or referring to its cause or its effect or to something else that might be comparable thereto, or finally to all those peculiarities that can be found in the diverse kinds of metaphorical discourse (Averroes, 2017: 79–81).

As a summary of his hermeneutic methodology and sociological hierarchisation, let us turn our attention to his treatise *Kitāb al-Kašf*, in which Averroes articulates his tripartite epistemology with Qurʾānic exegesis, which will be presented. The text draws a clear distinction between methods suitable for the masses and those reserved for the intellectual elite, grounding this division in the very nature of revealed language. As he explicitly notes:

> All religions, as we have said, agree on the fact that souls experience states of happiness or misery after death, but they disagree in the manner of symbolizing these states and explaining their existence to men.[16] And it seems that the [kind of] symbolization which is found in this religion of ours is the most perfect means of explanation to the majority of men, and provides the greatest stimulus to their souls to [pursue the goals of] the life beyond; and the primary concern of religions is with the majority. Spiritual symbolization, on the other hand, seems to provide less stimulus to the souls of the masses towards [the goals of] the life beyond, and the masses have less desire and fear of it than they do of corporeal symbolization. Therefore it seems that corporeal symbolization provides a stronger stimulus to [the goals of] the life beyond than spiritual; the spiritual [kind] is more acceptable to the class of debating theologians, but they are the minority (Averroes, 1961: 76).

This statement reveals a keen understanding of collective psychology, where sensible representations—such as descriptions of Paradise in the Qurʾān—are pedagogically more effective than metaphysical abstractions. The methodological core of the text lies in his taxonomy of religious statements, which systematises criteria for allegorical interpretation. Averroes identifies five categories of texts, the most relevant being those requiring symbolisation: 1) those requiring complex demonstration (accessible only to philosophers); 2) those with obvious symbolism (mandatory interpretation); 3) those with recognisable symbol but obscure meaning (requiring pedagogical adaptation); and 4) those with clear meaning but

[16] On this subject - preparation for the *Barzaḫ*, and the afterlife - its treatment and representation by the Marīnid dynasty in the madrasas of al-ʿAṭṭārīn and Bū ʿInānīya, see (Emparán Fernández 2025)

inadvertent symbolism (where allegorisation is to be avoided). As he emphasises: "Allegorical interpretation is the special task of 'those who are well grounded in science'" (Averroes, 1961: 79), thus establishing a direct correspondence between cognitive ability and exegetical authority (See also: Yabri 2006: 308–9).

Regarding the danger of disseminating the insights gained by philosophers through their hermeneutical engagement with sacred texts, as well as the potential misuse of this methodology by theologians who may lack the intellectual capacity to employ such sophisticated modes of literary interpretation, in the concluding section of *Kitāb al-Kašf*, Averroes delivers a pointed critique of al-Ġazālī's approach to allegorical interpretation, particularly targeting what he views as the latter's indiscriminate application of symbolic exegesis. While acknowledging al-Ġazālī's distinction between five modes of existence (essential, sensible, imaginary, intellectual, and metaphorical), Averroes contends that his predecessor failed to properly restrict allegorical reading to appropriate contexts: "Abū Ḥāmid did not make such a distinction... therefore in such a case that suspicion ought to be discredited" (Averroes, 1961: 80). This censure reflects Averroes' broader epistemological concern—that uncontrolled allegorisation by theologians like the Aš'arītes and Mu'tazilites risks destabilizing the careful hierarchy of interpretive authority essential for maintaining both philosophical rigor and social order. His objection centres on al-Ġazālī's willingness to extend symbolic interpretation to texts where the literal meaning should remain operative, a methodological laxity that Averroes sees as characteristic of *kalām* theology's undisciplined approach to scripture. This critique reinforces the Cordoban philosopher's consistent position that demonstrative certainty must govern all higher interpretation, while rhetorical and dialectical approaches remain suitable for less advanced intellects.

> From our account you have now become aware of the amount of error that occurs as a result of allegorical interpretation. It is our desire to have the chance to fulfil this aim with regard to all the statements of Scripture: i.e. to discuss which of them have to be interpreted allegorically and which not, and, when they have to be interpreted, to whom the interpretations should be given; I mean, [to deal thus] with every difficult passage in the Qur'an and the Traditions, and show the place of all the

> statements in these four classes. But the aim which we have pursued in this book is now accomplished; and we have given it precedence only because we have held it to be the most important of aims connected with Scripture. It is God who helps us to follow the right course and guarantees our reward, through His favour and mercy (Averroes, 1961: 81).

In his critique of al-Ġazālī's theological positions, Averroes employs geometry as an epistemological paradigm to delineate the boundaries of legitimate philosophical discourse.[17] The passage

> The kinds of statement, however, are many, some demonstrative, others not, and since non-demonstrative statements can be adduced without knowledge of the art, it was thought that this might be also the case with demonstrative statements; but this is a great error. And therefore in the spheres of the demonstrative arts, no other statement is possible but a technical statement which only the student of this art can bring, just as is the case with the art of geometry (Averroes, 1987: 257).

reveals his fundamental conviction that demonstrative knowledge operates analogously to geometric proof: both require specialised training and remain inaccessible to those lacking systematic instruction. This comparison is not merely rhetorical but reflects the Aristotelian hierarchy of knowledge that Averroes adapts to Islamic thought, wherein the masses comprehend through dialectic, while philosophers alone engage in demonstration.

The geometrical analogy serves a dual function in Averroes' argumentation. Firstly, it establishes that metaphysical truths about divine knowledge—like geometric theorems—cannot be judged by sensory perception or common opinion. Just as the untrained observer cannot grasp why the sun's true size contradicts its apparent magnitude, the theologian misunderstands the philosophers' conception of God's knowledge as self-referential yet causally comprehensive. Secondly, the comparison underscores Averroes' epistemological elitism: geometric education mirrors philosophical training, creating an intellectual elite capable of distinguishing between literal and demonstrative truths. This division aligns with

[17] On the tradition of geometry in the classical Islamic world and its role within the practice and education of the philosophical sciences, as well as its reception and significance within the Marinid dynasty, according to Ibn Ḫaldūn, see: (Emparán Fernández Forthcoming).

his tripartite theory of discourse in *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, where the Qur'ān's multivalent meanings cater to different cognitive capacities.

Crucially, this analogy carries theological-political implications. By equating philosophical understanding with geometric expertise, Averroes implicitly critiques al-Ġazālī's attempt to subject metaphysical questions to dialectical theology. The geometric model demonstrates why such debates inevitably fail: just as geometric ignorance renders lay judgments irrelevant, metaphysical ignorance invalidates theological speculations. Consequently, Averroes reserves demonstrative knowledge for philosophers while permitting allegorical interpretation for the learned and literal readings for the masses —a stratification mirroring geometry's exclusionary rigour. The comparison thus ultimately defends philosophy's autonomy while justifying its restriction to intellectual elites capable of geometric-like precision.

In his critique of Avicennan emanationism, al-Ġazzālī (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*) dismisses the philosophers' conception of the First Principle's knowledge as philosophically incoherent and theologically untenable. His objection hinges on the claim that a God who knows only Himself—while being the cause of all existents—must logically be inferior to the intellects that emanate from Him, which know both themselves and their effects (Averroes, 1987: 123–24). Yet Averroes, in his rebuttal, argues that al-Ġazālī's rejection stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the emanationist framework, one rooted in the limitations of untrained reasoning when confronted with metaphysical abstractions.

To illustrate this epistemological divide, Averroes employs a striking analogy from geometry:

> If, for example, the common man, and even he who has reached a somewhat higher degree of culture, is told that the sun, which appears to the eye as being the size of a foot, is about a hundred and seventy times bigger than the earth, he will say that it is absurd, and will regard him who believes it as a dreamer; and it is difficult for us to convince him through propositions which he can easily understand and acknowledge in a short time. The only way, indeed, to attain such knowledge is through deductive proof-that is, for the man who is amenable to proof. If it is the

> case even with geometrical questions and mathematical problems in general, that, when a solution is explained to the common man, it will appear to him fallacious and open to criticism at first sight and to have the character of a dream, how much more this will be the case in the metaphysical sciences, since for this kind of knowledge there are no plausible premisses which satisfy the superficial understanding, by which I mean the understanding of the masses (Averroes, 1987: 125).

This analogy serves a dual purpose. First, it underscores the disparity between perceptual immediacy and demonstrative knowledge. Just as the layman rejects the sun's true scale because it contradicts sensory experience, al-Ġazālī rejects emanationism because its premises—such as the identity of the First's self-knowledge with the intelligible order of the cosmos—transcend the "superficial understanding" of the masses. Second, it highlights the necessity of systematic training: geometric truths, though empirically counterintuitive, become irrefutable when grasped through deductive proof; likewise, metaphysical truths (e.g., the First's knowledge encompassing all existents via their causal dependence on Him) require rigorous philosophical initiation.

Averroes extends this logic to the emanationist model itself. The hierarchical procession of intellects and celestial spheres—from the First Principle through the Active Intellect—mirrors the axiomatic structure of geometry. Each intellect's cognitive act (its "thinking" of the First) generates the next ontological tier, just as geometric theorems unfold from postulates. To the untrained observer, this chain appears arbitrary or absurd, much like the sun's true dimensions, but to the philosopher, it constitutes a coherent system where causal necessity replaces anthropomorphic volition.

Crucially, Averroes' analogy also tacitly rebukes al-Ġazālī's conflation of divine knowledge with human cognition. The First's self-knowledge is not a "ignorance" of particulars (as al-Ġazālī charges), but a sui generis mode of comprehension wherein the intelligible forms of all existents are contained eminently. This mirrors how a geometric proof's conclusion is implicitly present in its axioms—a unity invisible to those untutored in the Posterior Analytics.

Thus, the geometrical analogy does more than defend emanationism; it frames al-Ġazālī's critique as a failure to ascend from dialectical to demonstrative reasoning. The "dreamlike" quality he attributes to metaphysical truths is, for Averroes, merely the shadow cast by unilluminated intellects—a point that resonates with his broader insistence that theology must defer to philosophy in matters of *ta'wīl* (allegorical interpretation).

Where al-Ġazālī dismisses as absurd the philosophers' claim that heavenly intellects comprehend all consequences of their a movements comparing it to a man knowing every physical effect of his footsteps (Averroes, 1987: 410–12) Averroes counters by invoking the geometric model once more. Just as geometric truths — though counterintuitive to the untrained— become necessary through demonstration, the philosophers' position on celestial intellects derives from systematic proofs rather than common-sense analogies. Al-Ġazālī's error, according to Averroes, lies in judging metaphysical propositions through empirical criteria, much like rejecting geometric proofs because they contradict sensory perception. The celestial intellect's unified knowledge of particulars and universals (Averroes, 1987: 413) operates beyond anthropomorphic constraints, just as geometric axioms transcend physical observation. This parallel reinforces Averroes' core argument: metaphysical truths, like geometric ones, require technical training to comprehend, and their validity cannot be assessed through dialectical objections grounded in everyday experience.

Averroes' hermeneutical theory has significant implications for what might be termed the "aesthetics of allegory." By establishing a hierarchy of interpretation based on intellectual capacity, Averroes not only defines how sacred texts should be read but also how metaphysical truths should be represented through images and symbols. In this sense, the Marīnid *zillīǧ*, with their intricate geometric patterns, can be understood as a visual expression of this allegorical aesthetics, wherein abstract forms convey philosophical truths to a select audience. Averroes' work thus

illuminates the relationship between philosophy and religion while providing a theoretical framework for understanding the role of geometrical patterns in the transmission and reflection of knowledge. The *zillīğ*, as both artistic and intellectual artefacts, exemplify the interplay between form and meaning, serving as a bridge between the material and the metaphysical. Through their complexity and beauty, they invite contemplation and reflection, embodying the principles of Averroes' hermeneutical theory in the hermeneutic isomorphism.

2. Case Study: The Miʿrāğ and Its Allegorical Interpretations

The Miʿrāğ, or Ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad, serves as a key example of allegorical interpretation in classical Islam. Avicenna interprets the Miʿrāğ as a metaphor for the process of intellectual realisation, with each stage of the journey representing the soul's ascent towards the emanation seeking divine knowledge. The angels encountered in each celestial sphere symbolise the intelligences reflecting their cosmological principles that aid in the noetic process. Avicenna's interpretation reflects the broader metaphysical and noetic theories of classical Islamic philosophy, which were criticised by al-Ġazālī and later defended by Averroes, as we have already explained in the previous section.

The account of the Miʿrāğ appears briefly in the Qurʾān (17:1): "Glory (be) to the One who journeyed with His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Distant Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might show him some of Our signs. Surely He – He is the Hearing, the Seeing." (Droge 2013: 175). But it is in the ḥadīth that it is primarily and more thoroughly explained. However, depending on the chain of transmission, there are different versions that evolved over time, incorporating elements of greater or lesser fantastical character. The version used by Avicenna corresponds to the tradition of Ibn ʿAbbās (see the text in: Avicenna 1992: 211–13). By contrast, the versions found in most authoritative ḥadīth collections present the Prophet Muḥammad meeting various prophets who inhabit those respective heavens, rather than encountering angels with fantastical

characteristics as in Avicenna's account. Thus, for example, in the sixth heaven dwells Moses, who plays a key role in the main outcome of the Prophet's nocturnal journey to the heavens.

We have discussed and noted the characteristics of how sacred texts are interpreted by the general population versus philosophers. While the former accepts literal interpretations of texts, philosophers engage in allegorical interpretations, which will be exemplified in relation to the Miʿrāǧ through Avicenna's reading. However, it is important to consider the theologians' interpretation to consider the differences between these three modes. The Miʿrāǧ was interpreted to demonstrate Muḥammad's superiority over previous prophets from earlier traditions (Al-Tabarī 1988, VI:78–80; Ibn Isḥāq 1980, 181–87; Imām Muslim 1996, I:113–22)—that is, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others. The Miʿrāǧ culminates with the establishment of the five daily prayers. For this, the Prophet Muḥammad meets with God and has a conversation in which fifty daily prayers are initially decreed. Advised by Moses during his return to the earthly realm, Muḥammad goes back to negotiate the number of prayers with God and succeeds in reducing them to ten. However, as he descended, Moses recommended he reduce them further; Muḥammad ascended again and secured their reduction to five daily prayers, with each prayer counting as ten.

Having stood before God demonstrates the Prophet's superiority and, by extension, the superiority of the revelation he transmitted, which constitutes Islam. Another much-debated element was whether the journey was spiritual or physical in nature. This question carries other implications regarding Muḥammad's status as well as theological issues that gave rise to interpretations and discussions among early theologians (Schrieke et al., n.d.; Schrieke 1915; Andrae 1918, 39–49; Horovitz 1919; Vuckovic 2005; Colby 2008). As an example, let us consider what Ibn Kaṯīr (1301 – 1373) (Mirza, n.d.)mentions on this matter:

> This is what is authentic in the exegesis, as is affirmed by the words of the eminent Companions mentioned heretofore, God be pleased with them all. As for Shurayk's

comment about Anas concerning the tradition relating to the night journey, "and then al-Jabbār, the Omnipotent, the Lord of Glory drew close and descended, becoming as close as a bow's length or two," this might be the understanding of the reciter, and so he inserted it into the ḥadith. But God knows best.

Even if this interpretation is correctly preserved, it is no interpretation of the holy verse, but relates to something quite different from that at issue. But God knows best.

It was on that night that God Almighty and Glorious enjoined the daily prayers upon His servant Muḥammad (God's peace and blessings be upon him and upon his nation); these were to number fifty prayers each day and night. Thereafter he repeatedly went between Moses and his Lord, Almighty and Glorious is He, until finally the Lord, All Resplendent is He, and to Him is all credit due, decreed that they be five. He stated, "They are five and (yet) they are fifty, credit being ten times the number."

That evening speech came to him directly from the Lord, Almighty and Glorious is He. The Imāms of the orthodox faith are unanimous regarding this. They differ regarding his seeing Him. Some consider that he saw God twice, in his heart. Ibn ʿAbbās and his adherents maintain this. Ibn ʿAbbās generalized (in discussion) about the vision, but others have offered a narrower interpretation.

Those who spoke in general terms about the vision include Abū Hurayra and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, God be pleased with them.

Some authorities, however, state their conviction that the vision was by means of his eyes.

Ibn Jarīr preferred this and insisted upon it, being followed in this by others of the more recent authorities.

Among those considering that the sight occurred through the naked eyes included Sheikh Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, as reported by al-Suhaylī and it is the preferred view of Sheikh Abū Zakariyyāʾ al-Nawawī in his fatawā, his legal decisions.

One faction maintains that the vision never occurred, because of the ḥadith in the ṣaḥīḥ collection of Muslim, from Abū Dharr. It states, "I said, 'O Messenger of God, did you see your Lord?' He replied, 'A light! How could I have seen it!' In another account the words are, 'I saw a light'."

These scholars say that the sight of the Everlasting could never be through eyes that are ephemeral (Ibn Kathīr 1998: II:67).

2.1. Avicenna

Before proceeding with Avicenna's interpretation of the Miʿrāǧ, it is necessary to clarify the status of prophethood according to his system. Within the Avicennian noetic process, prophethood holds a distinct status that operates differently from that of other individuals. Understanding the process of revelation—that is, the noetic process of prophethood—lays the foundation for recognising that Avicenna was offering an allegorical interpretation of the Miʿrāǧ rather than an

allegorisation. Thus, it is essential not only to explain the noetic process of prophethood but also to consider it for the present analysis. Concerning prophethood, Avicenna states:

> Revelation is the emanation and the angel is the received emanating power that descends on the prophets as if it were an emanation continuous with the universal intellect. It is rendered particular, not essentially, but accidentally, by reason of the particularity of the recipient. […] The message, therefore, is that part of the emanation termed "revelation" which has been received and couched in whatever mode of expression is deemed best for furthering man's good in both the eternal and the corruptible worlds as regards knowledge and political governance, respectively.
>
> […] This, then, is the summary of the discourse concerning the affirmation of prophecy, the showing of its essence, and the statements made about revelation, the angel, and the thing revealed. As for the validity of the prophethood of our prophet, of Muhammad (may God's prayers and peace be on him), it becomes evident to the reasonable man once he compares him with the other prophets, peace be on them. We shall refrain from elaboration here. […] This, then, is the summary of the discourse concerning the affirmation of prophecy, the showing of its essence, and the statements made about revelation, the angel, and the thing revealed. As for the validity of the prophethood of our prophet, of Muhammad (may God's prayers and peace be on him), it becomes evident to the reasonable man once he compares him with the other prophets, peace be on them. We shall refrain from elaboration here (Avicenna, 1963: 115–16).
>
> As for that which the Prophet [Muhammad] (may God's prayers and peace be upon him) conveyed from his Lord (may He be honored and glorified), saying: and upon that day eight shall carry above them the throne of thy Lord [lxix, 17], I say: religious Laws generally state that God is on the throne. Among other things this expression means that the throne is the last of the created corporeal existents. The anthropomorphists among the adherents of religious Laws claim that God, the Exalted, is on the throne, though not in the sense of His indwelling there. The philosophers in their language, however, regard the ninth sphere, which is the sphere of all the spheres, the last of the corporeal existents (Avicenna, 1963: 118).

Avicenna distinguishes between two types of philosophy: theoretical and practical. The general aim of this discipline is to ascertain the truth of all things. Nevertheless, it is through theoretical philosophy that happiness is attained. Yet, according to Avicenna, in this pursuit, one has no agency.

> The goal in philosophy is to become acquainted with the realities of all things so far as it is possible for man to do so. Existent things are either those whose existence is not through our choice and agency, or those whose existence is through our choice and agency. Knowledge of objects from the first division is called theoretical philosophy, while knowledge of objects from the second division is called practical philosophy. The goal in theoretical philosophy is perfecting the soul only through its knowing, while the goal in practical philosophy is perfecting the soul, not only through its knowing but through knowing what to do and then doing it. So the goal of the theoretical is conviction in a belief that is not through doing, while the goal of

> the practical is knowledge of an opinion that is in the doing. So the theoretical is primary in that it has a relationship to belief (Avicenna, 2019: 9–10)
>
> And the goal of theoretical philosophy is knowledge of the truth,[18] while the goal in practical philosophy is knowledge of the good (Avicenna, 2019: 14)

In his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics, Avicenna already draws a distinction between poetics and logic. He notes that human beings have a more positive inclination towards imaginative representations than towards demonstrable truths, which, in turn, produce aversion and dissociation. He says:

> It is the [proper] concern of the logician to examine poetry with regard to its being imaginative. The imaginative is the speech to which the soul yields, accepting and rejecting matters without pondering, reasoning or choice. In brief, it responds psychologically rather than ratiocinatively, whether the utterance is demonstrative or not. The demonstrative is different from the imaginative, for an utterance may serve to prove the truth (of something) without exciting emotion. Yet if said again, in a different way, it may often affect emotion without conviction occurring as well, and [in this case] the soul responds in keeping with imaginative assent rather than with conviction. It may happen that an imaginative lie is all that a convinced person has (Avicenna, 1974: 61–62).

Similarly to how Averroes, as well as other great Muslim philosophers of the classical period,[19] approach the matter, for Avicenna truth is expressed hierarchically in levels according to the intellectual capacity of the recipients (Heath, 1989: 191). Avicenna's doctrine of allegorical interpretation was summarised by Peter Heath as follows: Human intellectual aptitude varies according to the dominant psychological faculties—intellect, cogitation (a blend of intellect, estimation, and imagination), or lower faculties such as imagination, irascibility, and concupiscence. Legislators—whether political leaders, philosophers, or prophets—must tailor their discourse to the cognitive capacities of their audience. The most effective method employs a multi-layered argumentation (demonstrative, dialectical, rhetorical, or poetic) that allows different minds to grasp truth at their

[18] Avicenna notes, within the same context, that the three theoretical sciences are: the natural sciences, the mathematical sciences, and the divine sciences (Avicenna, 2019: 14). Regarding the classification of geometry and its characteristics as a theoretical science, see: (Emparán Fernández Forthcoming c)

[19] The article originally included a review of various thinkers along with their conceptualisation of allegory, its use and interpretation. However, due to space constraints, these respective sections had to be removed. Nevertheless, one may consult: (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ 2021, 97–99; Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ 2015, 129–33; The Brethren of Purity 2009; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2005, I:123–24; Bīrūnī 1964, 111–23)

level. Since most individuals are governed by passions and representational faculties rather than pure intellect, symbolic language and allegory become essential, conveying superficial meaning to the masses while revealing deeper truths to the elite. Direct communication of philosophical truths to unprepared minds is counterproductive and dangerous, risking social discord rather than enlightenment. Historical precedent shows that such recklessness endangers both the messenger and societal stability. Yet, some tangible formulation of truth remains necessary to maintain social cohesion, which is why Avicenna considers prophecy indispensable—only revelatory legislation can harmonise diverse human temperaments. For those of sufficient intellectual aptitude, direct philosophical instruction is both appropriate and necessary, as they advance knowledge and decipher the symbolic truths embedded in prophetic teachings. Additionally, allegories serve a pedagogical function, stimulating philosophical inquiry in gifted beginners (Heath, 1992: 152).

It is due to the danger of the philosophers' interpretations reaching the ears of inexperienced individuals unprepared to receive such knowledge that Avicenna reveals in the introduction to his *Miʿrāǧ Nāma* his initial hesitation to undertake this task after a friend requested it. In this introduction and explanation of the risks, he begins by outlining the existence of differing intellectual capacities. He states:

> A friend of ours has continually inquired about the meaning [maʿnā] of the Ascension, desiring it explained in a rational way [bar tarîq-i maʿqûl]. I was constrained (from doing this) because of the danger involved until now, when I have entered the service of the Exalted Court of 'Alâ' [ad-Daula]. I submitted this matter [maʿnā] to his opinion. He consented and gave me permission to delve into it and of his own will assisted, so that the bond of indolence was opened, and my diligence and effort in this (topic) could become apparent. For although many subtle truths and symbols [maʿānî-yi latîf va-rumûz] come to mind, when there is no virtuous recipient or perfect intellectual [ʿâqil] (to receive them), they cannot be made manifest. It is a fault to divulge secrets to a stranger; the teller then becomes culpable. As they have said: "Secrets, protect them from others!" But when you speak to someone capable and worthy, it is appropriate to convey the truth to one who is deserving (Avicenna, 1992: 111).

Thus, it is established that there are diverse types of intellectual capacities, and knowledge must be imparted to each individual in the appropriate manner.

Similarly, as Averroes would later assert, it is erroneous to communicate philosophical truths to the common people. Consequently, revelation must be explained in two distinct ways, given its dual nature:

> Faith consists of two parts: real [ḥaqîqî] and metaphorical [majâzî], the husk and the core. Prophets have real faith, the core, for they bear the core and the truth [maʿnâ]. Ordinary people [ʿavâmm] bear the husk, the form [ṣûrat]. Their faith is sensible, not intelligible. With the aid of the (intellectual) faculty, (the prophet) draws down the Holy Spirit (Avicenna 1992, 119).

According to Avicenna, the Miʿrāğ has a symbolic character, i.e. the ascent is not of a material character, nor is it of a spiritual character, but it is of an intellectual character. Therefore, the Miʿrāğ is an allegory of the process of prophetic intellection, in which the modes, or mechanisms, of another sort of intellection aided by the various intelligences, or angels, corresponding to levels higher than that of the Agent Intellect, are also explained. The interpretation of the characteristics of the angels that the prophet encounters in each heaven is astrological in nature; in other words, the psychological qualities and characteristics that Avicenna gives to each of these intellects is completely related to the astrological influence that they exert. Thus, for Avicenna, the Miʿrāğ is not an account of a historical event of either a physical or a dream/spiritual character, as it is usually interpreted and depicted (see image 1), but is rather the description of the epistemological systematic process of a perfected character reaching the prophetic level.

Image 1: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Supplément Persan 1030, Folio 35v.[20]

In order to facilitate access to Avicenna's interpretation of the Miʿrāǧ, some of the referenced elements will be reviewed which have been visually represented by means of what we have called the Aesthetics of Allegory, in order to access the interpretation of those elements by means of philosophical hermeneutics. For this,

[20] The illustration depicts Muḥammad's journey through the seven celestial spheres. Surrounded by divine light, he is guided by Gabriel through each heaven, encountering different prophets residing in them. The first heaven shows Muḥammad with Gabriel and the Burāq, facing Prophet Adam. Below this celestial scene appears the ladder used for the heavenly ascent, with an earthly mosque positioned beneath it (*Taswir. Islamische Bildwelten und Moderne* 2009, 191).

we will quote the version of the Miʿrāğ that Avicenna employs and then paraphrase his interpretation.

> I was afraid and leapt up from my place because of that fear. He said to me, "Be still, for I am your brother Gabriel." I said, "O Brother, an enemy has taken control of me (before)." He said, "I will not hand you over to the enemy." I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "Arise! Be observant and take heart." I was amazed, and I followed Gabriel. Behind Gabriel, Burâq caught my eye. It was larger than an ass and smaller than a horse. Its face was like a human face. It is long of arm and long of leg. I wanted to sit on it, (but) it shied away. Gabriel helped me until it was tamed (Heath, 1992: 211).

Gabriel is an allegory of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as Avicenna explains, forms part of the emanation and plays a fundamental role in the noetic process of prophethood.

> That which is united to the intellect from the Holy Spirit is prophethood [nubuwat]. […] When it is united with a human, and the Holy Spirit opens his or her way to itself and becomes governor of that disposition, it makes (that person) lofty in aspiration […]. Whatever this person does is through that Holy Power. Just as is (found) in the (prophetic) tradition. […] Thus the Holy Spirit is the noblest of all souls, for all (other) souls are subordinate to the Universal Intelligence. The Holy Spirit, however, is that which is the intermediary between the Necessary Existent and the First Intelligence. (Avicenna, 1992: 118–19)

Gabriel appears at the moment when Muḥammad was in an intermediate state between asleep and awake, representing the suppression of the sensory and an active state of the rational soul. The rational soul presents itself and promises to be a guide. Muḥammad turned away from the sensible world and with the help of the intellectual instinct followed the Holy Emanation.[21]

Here the Buraq appears on the scene, which is an allegory of the Agent Intellect (see image 2). This is an aid in the process of intellection in the same way that a mount is an aid in the accomplishment of a journey. It is larger than the Rational Soul, but smaller than the First Intelligence. It is inclined to help humans and can reach all sections of the emanation. However, because Muḥammad was still

[21] For a diagram of this version of the Miʿrāğ alongside Avicenna's interpretation, as well as diagrams of other versions of the Miʿrāğ and emanation systems, see: (Emparán Fernández Forthcoming a, chaps 5 & 6)

in the physical world, he needed the assistance of the Rational Soul in order to receive the help of the Agent Intellect.

> When I reached the second heaven, I entered. I saw an angel nearer than the former, with perfect beauty. He had a wondrous form, half of his body was of snow, half of fire. Neither mixed with the other, nor were they antagonistic toward one another. He greeted me and said, "Good tidings to you to whom goodness and fortune belong" (Heath, 1992: 212).

The second heaven is the sphere of Mercury, and the Angel is the body of Mercury. Each planet has a specific influence; however, Mercury is neutral, and its influence depends on its conjunction. That is, depending on the planets or stars with which it is associated, its influence will be auspicious or sinister (Avicenna, 1992: 131). Furthermore, it is explained that each of these intelligences serves as a guide for humanity in the same manner as the Active Intellect. However, this guidance is not universal but selective. Consequently, the type of guidance received determines the development of distinct personality traits. In the introduction to the *Miʿrāǧ Nāma* concerning the guidance of the various intelligences—following the order of emanation—the First Intelligence corresponds to the seventh heaven (that of Saturn), while the Seventh Intelligence corresponds to the first heaven (that of the Moon) (Avicenna, 1992: 117).

> When I reached the fourth heaven, I saw an angel, complete in statesmanship, seated on a throne of light. I greeted (him), he responded properly but with complete arrogance. Due to pride and haughtiness, he (usually) spoke to no one. (But) he smiled when he answered (my) greeting and said, "O Muhammad, I see complete goodness and felicity in your royal splendor. Good tidings to you!" (Heath, 1992: 212)

The Throne is the fourth celestial sphere, and the Angel is the Sun. Since astrologically the Sun is benefic, its smile is the benevolent influence it exerts when ascending. The good tidings are the blessings it bestows with generosity (Avicenna, 1992: 131).

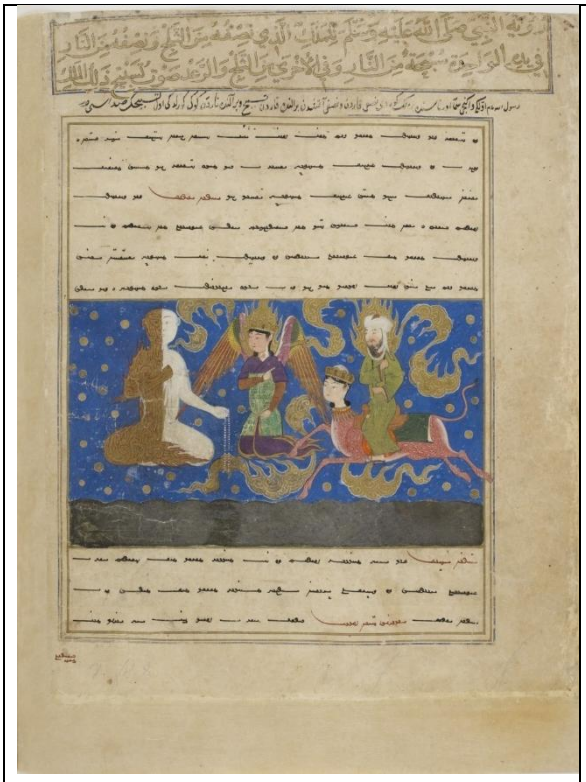


Image 2: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Supplément turc 190, fol. 11v.[22]

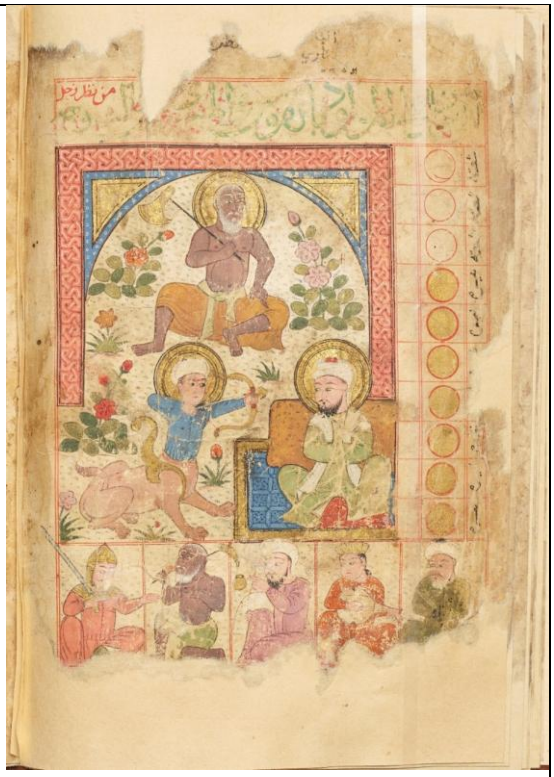


Image 3: The Keir Collection of Islamic Art on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art; K.1.2014.369, fol. 11v.[23]

> When I reached the seventh heaven, I saw an angel sitting on a chair of red ruby. Not everyone finds a way to him, but when someone does reach him, he is cherished. I greeted him. He responded and blessed me (Heath, 1992: 212).

This is the seventh celestial sphere, and the Angel is Saturn. The influence of this planet is the most sinister, and it is red in colour—though in classical astrological iconography, Mars is associated with the colour red, while Saturn is

[22] This miniature is part of the *Miʿrāj Nāmeh* of Paris. In this account—which, like the version used by Avicenna, belongs to the so-called Ibn ʿAbbās ascension narratives (Colby 2008, 3)—the angel half-snow, half-fire appears in the first heaven (Séguy, 1977: 51). This angel, in other sources, is called by the names "Spirit" (*rūḥ*) and "Beloved" (*Ḥabīb*) (Colby ,2008, 247). He holds in his left hand a rosary of snow and in his right hand a rosary of fire. Additionally, the image shows Gabriel in the centre guiding the Prophet Muḥammad, mounted on Burāq, to the right.

[23] This is a representation of the third decan of Sagittarius, which Saturn rules. At the centre, beneath the arch, is Saturn, while Sagittarius appears to the left and Jupiter, its ruling planet, to the right. Beneath these are the vignettes with the Planetary Terms: Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Saturn, and Mars (Carboni 1987, 166–67). As both ruler of the third decan and the fourth term, Saturn is depicted in the traditional manner—that is, bare-chested, with dark skin, and wielding an axe (Carboni, 1997: 6; Caiozzo, 2003).

depicted with dark skin (see Image 3). Avicenna explains that everything it does, it does perfectly, surpassing all others, whether something is auspicious or sinister. Since it is very difficult to find it in a positive position, when it is, its influence is so favourable that it exceeds that of any other (Avicenna 1992, 132).

> I saw many angels busy praising God and affirming His unity, all immersed in grace (Heath 1992, 213).

In the interpretation of this phrase, Avicenna expounds his eschatological thought regarding the destiny of souls. These angels are truly those souls that have achieved nobility according to the level of their knowledge and, by distancing themselves from sensual concerns and learning about the unseen, have attained happiness (Avicenna 1992, 133).

3. The Marīnid Sultanate and the Role of Geometry

The Marīnid Sultanate (13th–15th centuries) played a crucial role in promoting the study of geometry and its application in art and architecture. The *zillīǧ* mosaics in Marīnid madrasas, such as those in Fez, are characterised by complex geometric patterns that reflect the cosmological principles of Islamic metaphysics (Emparán Fernández Forthcoming a).

Due to their political and religious circumstances—which will be addressed in the second instalment of this research—the Marīnids promoted a theoretical Sufism, practised in urban centres by members of the intellectual elite, namely teachers and students of madrasas, *fuqahāʾ*, and the sultan himself. Similarly, as a political strategy to legitimise their rule, the Marīnids fostered the sciences through the recruitment of teachers and the construction of madrasas and libraries.

During the period of greatest splendour, corresponding to the sultanates of Abū Saʿīd (r. 1310 – 1331), his son Abū al-Ḥasan (r. 1331 – 1348), and the latter's son, Abū ʿInān (r. 1348 – 1358), the vast majority of madrasas were built. After Abū ʿInān's death, no further madrasas were constructed, marking the beginning of the dynasty's decline. The most beautiful of all is considered to be al-ʿAṭṭārīn (1325),

built by Abū Saʿīd, while the largest—and thus the most spectacular in its dimensions and ornamentation—is the one commissioned by his grandson, Abū ʿInān: the Madrasa Bū ʿInānīya (1355). These two madrasas share not only their intricate ornamentation, featuring both geometric *zillīğ* and biomorphic stuccowork, but also their dedication to the teaching of the rational sciences, as indicated by their inaugural inscriptions and other epigraphic records (Emparán Fernández 2025, see:; Forthcoming c; Forthcoming b).

For the purposes of this article, we will analyse one of the geometric patterns in the *zillīğ* of the al-ʿAṭṭārīn Madrasa through the lens of allegorical aesthetics. The second instalment of this research will examine the symbolic aspects of this same geometric pattern in depth, addressing the aesthetics of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*—the focus of that subsequent study—which will delve further into the history of the Marīnid dynasty and its rational Sufism. Here, however, we will explore certain iconographic aspects of the geometric pattern to elucidate the aesthetics of expressed allegory.

Both the al-ʿAṭṭārīn and al-Bū ʿInānīya madrasas feature Qurʾānic inscriptions, including a distinctive phrase not found in any other Marīnid madrasa:

إِنَّ فِى خَلْقِ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱخْتِلَـٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ لَـَٔايَـٰتٍ لِّأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَـٰبِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ ٱللَّهَ قِيَـٰمًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِى خَلْقِ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَـٰذَا بَـٰطِلًا سُبْحَـٰنَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ.[24]

> Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and (in) the alteration of the night and the day, (there are) signs indeed for those with understanding, who remember God, whether standing or sitting or (lying) on their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth: 'Our Lord, You have not created this in vain. Glory to You! Guard us against the punishment of the Fire (Droge, 2013: 46).

This repeated passage, drawn from Qurʾān 3:190–191, carries particular theological and epistemological weight, as it was notably cited by Averroes in his *Faṣl al-Maqāl* to argue for the necessity of philosophical hermeneutics.[25] Within his hierarchical epistemology, this verse served as a key scriptural justification for the

[24] Q. 3:190:191. Transcription from (Aouni 1991)
[25] Cf. Supra.

intellectual pursuit of demonstrative knowledge, reinforcing the obligation of the learned to engage in rational interpretation.

The deliberate inclusion of this verse in these madrasas—dedicated to the study of philosophical and rational sciences—stands in contrast to Marīnid madrasas focused solely on traditional religious instruction. This distinction underscores the institutional alignment with Averroes' intellectual legacy, suggesting a conscious emphasis on the interplay between revelation and reason. Furthermore, the recurrence of the phrase supports the hypothesis that the geometric ornamentation in these buildings encodes a symbolic system, legible only to the scholarly elite—those granted access to the *zillīǧ* and the intellectual traditions it embodies.

The term *liʾūlī l-albābi*, literally "possessors of the kernels" (or "cores"), employs the metaphor of a nut to denote those who penetrate beyond superficial appearances to grasp inner truths (Nasr 2015, 2:179). It is for this reason that Drogue translates *liʾūlī l-albābi* as "for those with understanding"—that is, individuals capable of transcending the surface to reach the hidden core of knowledge. This concept aligns with the intellectual mission of the al-ʿAṭṭārīn Madrasa, which was dedicated to students expected to pursue such depth in their studies. The Qurʾānic phrase's placement at the madrasa's entrance served as both an admonition and an ideal: a reminder of the intellectual rigour required within its walls. This inscription is prominently displayed in three plaster cabochons framing the vestibule's entrance. It also appears along the gallery walls, interposed between the *zillīǧ* and stucco motifs. Its strategic placement reinforces its doctrinal and pedagogical significance, marking these spaces as sites where philosophical and exegetical disciplines converged under Marīnid patronage.

The verse's reference to those who reflect upon creation "whether standing or sitting" provided a scriptural basis for the Sufi practice of *ḏikr* —continuous remembrance of God in all states of being (Nasr, 2015, 3:191). Meanwhile, its

emphasis on the "in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and (in) the alteration of the night and the day, (there are) signs indeed" takes on added significance given that the first teacher at al-ʿAṭṭārīn was Ibn Bannāʾ al-Marrākushī (1256–1321), a polymath renowned in astrology, astronomy, geometry, and the occult sciences (Vernet Ginés, 1998; Renaud 1938; 1937; Samsó, 2007). Ibn Bannāʾ's intellectual journey itself reflects the interplay between divine inspiration and rational inquiry: though he initially pursued fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), a revelatory dream—in which the structure of the cosmos was unveiled to him—led him to devote himself to the mathematical and celestial sciences. Similarly, one of his students Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ al-Lijāʾī al-Fāsī (m. 1372) dreamed of gathering stars while studying law; his father interpreted this as a sign to redirect him to Ibn Bannāʾ's tutelage (Vernet Ginés, 1998: 51).

The selection of this Qurʾānic verse was far from incidental. Its themes resonate with the Marīnid promotion of an intellectualised Sufism, practised not only by scholars like Ibn Bannāʾ and his disciples (including al-Ābilī and Ibn Ḫaldūn[26]) but also by madrasa teachers, jurists, and the sultanate's inner circle of elites—such as Ibn Marzūq, vizier to Abū al-Ḥasan and chronicler of his reign, who attested to Ibn Bannāʾ's esteemed position in the court of Abū Saʿīd. The Sufi dimensions of this verse, particularly its implications for contemplative practice, will be explored further in the second instalment of this research, which will examine the Marīnids' patronage of urban, philosophically inclined Sufism—a tradition embraced by both scholarly and political elites.

The aesthetic experience differs fundamentally between these two modes of artistic representation. In literal visual depictions of the Miʿrāǧ as derived from ḥadīth narratives, the aesthetic engagement relies primarily on the viewer's recognition of textual imagery translated into visual form. The artist's skill manifests

[26] Ibn Bannāʾ al-Marrākushī was the teacher of al-ʿAbīlī, who in turn was the renowned master of Ibn Ḫaldūn. See (Ibn Khaldūn and Jarmouni Jarmouni 2015, 97; Ibn Khaldûn 1984, 48–49; Renaud 1937)

in their ability to render the supralunar realm and angelic beings, yet the work remains essentially a direct visualisation of the literary account.

Conversely, the geometric patterns of *zillīǧ* tilework demand a qualitatively different engagement. These creations address a specialised audience—specifically, the instructors and advanced students of madrasas who possessed sophisticated geometric literacy. The aesthetic experience here transcends surface observation; what matters is not the visible pattern alone, but rather the mathematical complexities and spatial relationships concealed within the chiselled ceramic components. This form thus constitutes a visual epistemology accessible only to the geometrically initiated.

The geometric *zillīǧ* placed in the eastern and western walls of the madrasa al-ʿAṭṭārīn's courtyard (image 4) exemplifies an *aesthetics of allegory*, wherein form functions as a hermeneutic isomorphism rather than mere decoration. Although the aim of this article is to present the theory of the aesthetics of allegory and not to carry out an iconographic analysis, it is necessary to present some elements concerning iconological interpretation in order to exemplify the implementation of the aesthetics of allegory. Considering this, we will not dwell on the symbolic elements and how they operate but simply mention them using an artefact of 'similar characteristics' that has already been decoded previously.

Darío Cabanelas demonstrated in his study of the Comares Hall ceiling, such geometrical configurations represent the Islamic cosmos, with their seven layers mirroring the celestial heavens (Cabanelas, 1988). This discovery helps us to understand what can be considered the prototypical version of the ceiling of the Salon de Comares. The structural configuration (bent pyramid) and its geometrical composition are similar to the ceiling of the prayer hall of al-ʿAṭṭārīn, which also has the seven layers (image 5). If we consider that the ornamentation of the ceiling of the Hall of Comares was made by Muḥammad V (r. 1354–1359; 1362–1391) in his second period, i.e. after he had spent a period in exile in Fez, it is more than certain

that the inspiration for the construction of the ceiling of the Hall of Comares came from al-ʿAṭṭārīn. The latter, having been built more than 44 years before the coffered ceiling of the Hall of Comares,[27] i.e. three sultanates before his stay in Fez, consolidates its status as a prototype.

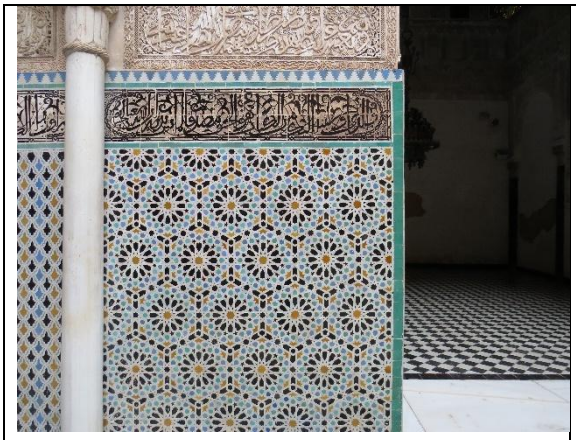


Image 4: West wall of the courtyard of the Madrasa al-ʿAṭṭārīn. Photo by the author.

Image 5: The angled pyramid-shaped ceiling of the al-ʿAṭṭārīn prayer hall. Photo by the author.

Through understanding the geometric representation and structure under which the Islamic heaven, with its seven layers, is represented on the ceiling, the geometric structure used in the geometric pattern of the *zillīǧ* can be grasped. As shown in images 8 and 9, each of the polygons was projected in 3D using a polyhedron that shares major elements of symmetry with the original polygon. By making a hemispherical spatial projection, it is understood that each hexagonal round of polyhedra actually represents one of the heavens. The geometric pattern, when reconstructed three-dimensionally, reveals a stereographic projection akin to

[27] The Comares Hall was completed in 1369 according to epigraphic evidence. Although the exact construction date of each element remains uncertain, it is highly probable that the ceiling of the Throne Hall—used by Muḥammad V—was finished not long before this date (Puerta Vilchez 2011b; Dodds 1992).

astrolabe construction (Image 7[28]), transforming polygonal units into a nested spatial metaphor.

Image 6: Chester Beatty; Object no: T 414, folio 16v

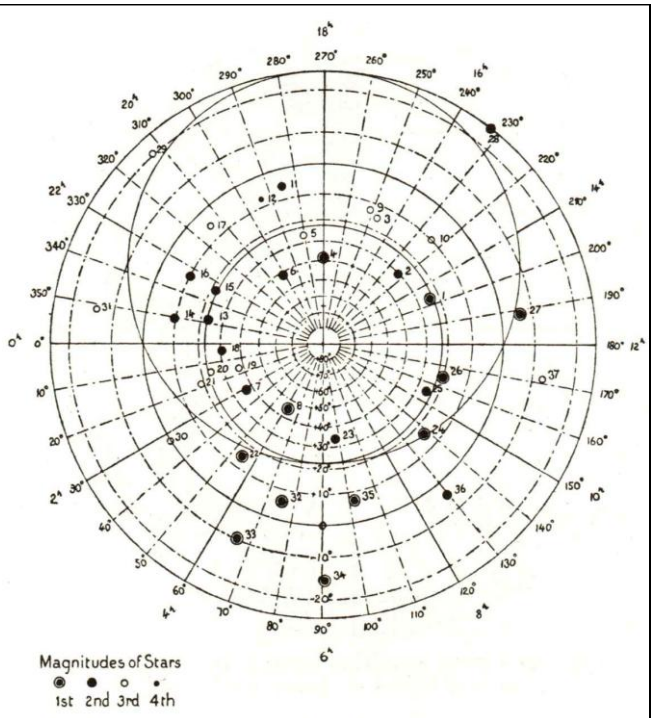


Image 7: Willy Hartner (1968), p. 301

The allegorical operation hinges on a deliberate *inversion of expectations*: the twelve-pointed star at the composition's centre does not signify the cosmic centre but the outermost sphere of the fixed stars, while the hexagonal perimeter demarcates the Lunar Sphere. Namely, this is the representation of the classical, or basic, homocentric model of the Islamic cosmos (Image 6).[29] This spatial paradox

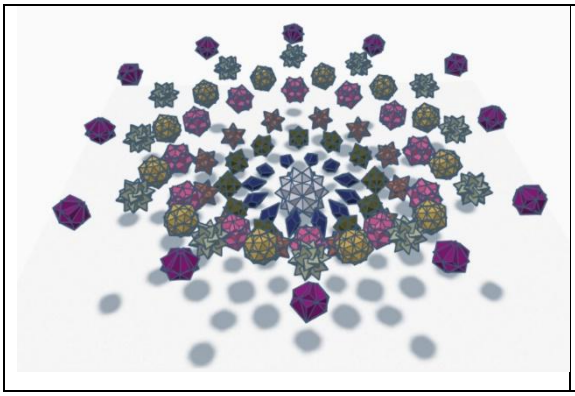
[28] David King explains the stereographic projection of the astrolabe as follows: "The device results from a stereographic projection of the celestial sphere onto the plane of the celestial equator from the south celestial pole. This projection has the property that circles on the sphere project into circles on the plane and that angles between great circles are preserved." (King 2005: 2:33) "The astrolabe is thus a two-dimensional model of the three-dimensional celestial sphere, reduced to a plane by a mathematical projection known as stereographic." (King 2005: 2:348)

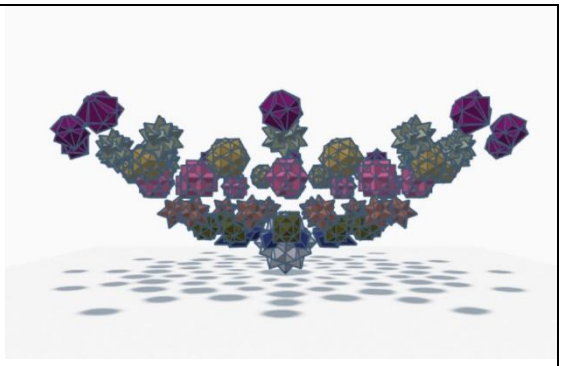
[29] On the homocentric model of the Islamic cosmos and its diagrammatic representation, as well as on its variants and innovations, see (Brentjes, 2022)

underscores a core tenet of the *aesthetics of allegory*: meaning emerges not from iconic representation but from *structural isomorphism*—a correspondence between geometric logic and cosmological doctrine. The geometrical pattern thus operates as a *hermeneutic interface*, demanding that the viewer decode its planar geometry as a distorted map of tridimensional order (Image 10).

Image 8: Detail of the hexagonal motif of the zillīǧ on the east and west walls of al-ʿAṭṭārīn. Photo by the author.

Image 9: Projection of polygons to 3D printed polyhedra. Model made by the author.





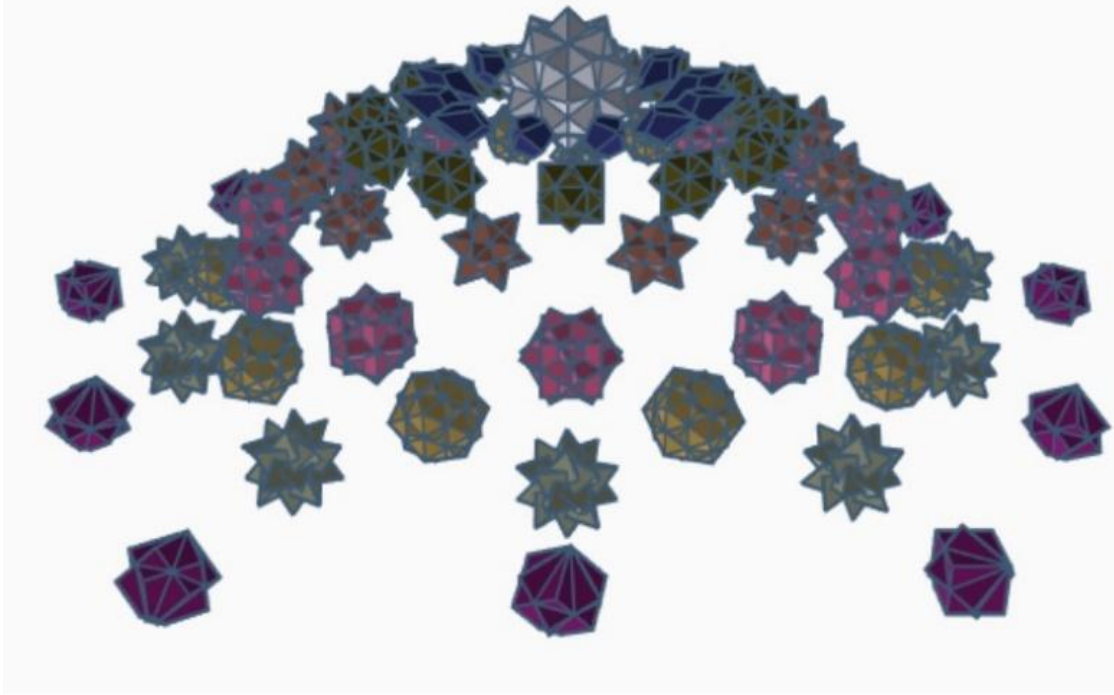


Image 10: 3D spatial projection of the polyhedra based on the hexagonal zillīǧ in layered hemispherical form through a stereographic perspective. Model made by the author.

In a noteworthy study on Avicenna's critique of Platonic mathematics, Mohammad Saleh Zarepour reveals that Avicenna not only does not criticise Plato but actually agrees with the ontology of mathematical objects.[30] However, the Plato with whom Avicenna concurs is not the genuine Plato, but rather the former's understanding of the latter. In an article that first examines the ontology of mathematical objects according to Plato, then addresses Aristotle's critique of them, Zarepour ultimately analyses Avicenna's views on these matters and his own perspective concerning the nature of mathematical objects (Zarepour: 2019).

With the stated purpose in mind, Zarepour analyses three theses: first in Plato's own work, then in Aristotle's version of the theory of intermediates

[30] Specifically, regarding the ontology of mathematical objects according to Avicenna, see: (Zarepour 2016)

attributed to Plato, and finally in Avicenna's version of the theory of intermediates attributed to Plato. The three theses are:

> **Separateness of Forms (SF):** Forms (*ṣuwar*) are independent immaterial substances, fully separate (*mufāriq*) from matter and material objects.
>
> **Separateness of Mathematical Objects (SM)**: Mathematical objects are independent immaterial substances, fully separate from matter and material objects.
>
> **Principalness of Mathematical Objects (PM):** Mathematical objects are the principles (*mabādi'*) of natural things. Mathematical objects have some sort of primacy over natural forms which makes the latter dependent on (or grounded in or caused by) the former (Zarepour, 2019: 198).

The conclusion is that Avicenna's Plato only believes in (SF) and does not support (SM) or (PM). Therefore, Avicenna's critique of the ontology of mathematical objects—insofar as they are separate, immaterial forms and the origin of things—is not a critique of Plato's actual view; Avicenna agrees with his own version of Plato. For Avicenna, both mathematics and mathematical objects occupy an intermediate position. While mathematics lies between the natural sciences and metaphysics, the ontology of mathematical objects is dual: they exist both in sensible mathematical objects and as separate mathematical objects. Thus, the objects must be studied by mathematics—that is, by mathematical objects (Zarepour, 2019).

Similarly, as occurs with revelation—which, summarised by Peter Heath, "has two basic levels, intelligible truth and sensible symbol or metaphor. Due to the weakness of their intellects, ordinary people are unable to apprehend intellectual truths; they only understand the metaphoric or symbolic dimension of revelation" (Heath, 1989: 192)—it would be plausible to analyse the geometric patterns of Marīnid *zillīǧ* in the same manner. This is to say that while ordinary people, ignorant of the geometric principles necessary for the construction of these patterns, are incapable of grasping their intellectual truth and remain at the level of the sensible, the students and teachers of the madrasa—that is, those expert in geometry—thereby accessed the intellectual level of truth.

From this it further follows that the geometric patterns in Marīnid madrasas had two interpretative levels, or rather, as I have termed them, two types of aesthetic experience: that of *ẓāhir* and that of *bāṭin*. With the former, one observes only the evident—that is, the geometric patterns drawn by the chiselled, enamel-coloured ceramic tiles—whereas the original spectators of these patterns (the madrasa's teachers and students) perceived a deeper level hidden from the geometrically untrained. This refers to all the layers of geometric construction that remain latent and are only observable mentally. The second instalment of this research is dedicated to what I have termed the aesthetics of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*.

The second issue of this article will address these topics, as well as explore in greater depth the religio-political needs of the Marīnid dynasty that fostered an intellectual environment in which the coexistence of Sufism and jurisprudence—incorporating elements drawn from both al-Ġazālī and Averroes—not only flourished but was vigorously encouraged.

Conclusion

The Marīnid Sultanate possessed a distinctive intellectual mindset that equipped them to receive and interpret the sophisticated geometrical patterns in their madrasas. These geometric patterns were not intended for a general audience but were specifically directed at the intellectual elite of the Marīnid society—scholars, Sufis, and philosophers—who were uniquely prepared to engage with their symbolic and mathematical intricacies. As demonstrated in this article, the aesthetics of allegory reveals that Dorothy Washburn's broader theory on geometric symmetry finds resonance in the Marīnid *zillīǧ*. Crucially, however, the decoding of these patterns' metaphorical language was accessible only to a select few, those versed in geometry, philosophy, and Sufi thought.

Through the hermeneutical methodologies of Averroes and the hierarchical epistemic psychology shared by Avicenna, and the Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ, we have shown how allegorical interpretation operated within Islamic intellectual traditions. These

thinkers articulated a stratified approach to knowledge, where geometric art functioned as a visual hermeneutic isomorphism—conveying cosmological and metaphysical truths to those capable of demonstrative reasoning while remaining opaque to the uninitiated. The Marīnid elite, trained in these disciplines, were thus uniquely positioned to discern the layered meanings embedded in the *zillīǧ*.

This Marīnid mindset, which facilitated a particular understanding and abstract representation of the cosmos through geometric symbolism, will be explored further in the second instalment of this research. There, we will examine the dynasty's reception of both Averroes and al-Ġazālī, as well as the political and religious imperatives that fostered an intellectualised Sufism. This context gave rise to the aesthetics of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*—a duality of interpretation that mirrored the Marīnid' synthesis of rational and mystical thought, and which will form the focus of our subsequent analysis.

In sum, the Marīnid *zillīǧ* were not merely decorative but epistemic artefacts, their meanings reserved for those whose intellectual preparation aligned with the allegorical principles that governed their design. This study has laid the groundwork for understanding how such geometric art functioned within its historical and philosophical milieu, while the forthcoming exploration will deepen our insight into the Marīnids' distinctive cosmological vision and its artistic geometrical expressions.

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