

The **A₁** **B₃** **C₃** of Abū Bakr al-Shanawānī (d. 1610)

Arabic letter semiotics on the threshold of modern times

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Arabic scholarship in early Ottoman Egypt

“However, he who is unable to differentiate alif, bā’, tā’, ṭā’ accurately, proves to be too young to be equal to (these) studies. [...] He who can answer them is one of the (learned) men. But if not, he has no advantage over the children.”

Suyūṭī, *Al-Taḥadduth bi-ni‘mati llāh*

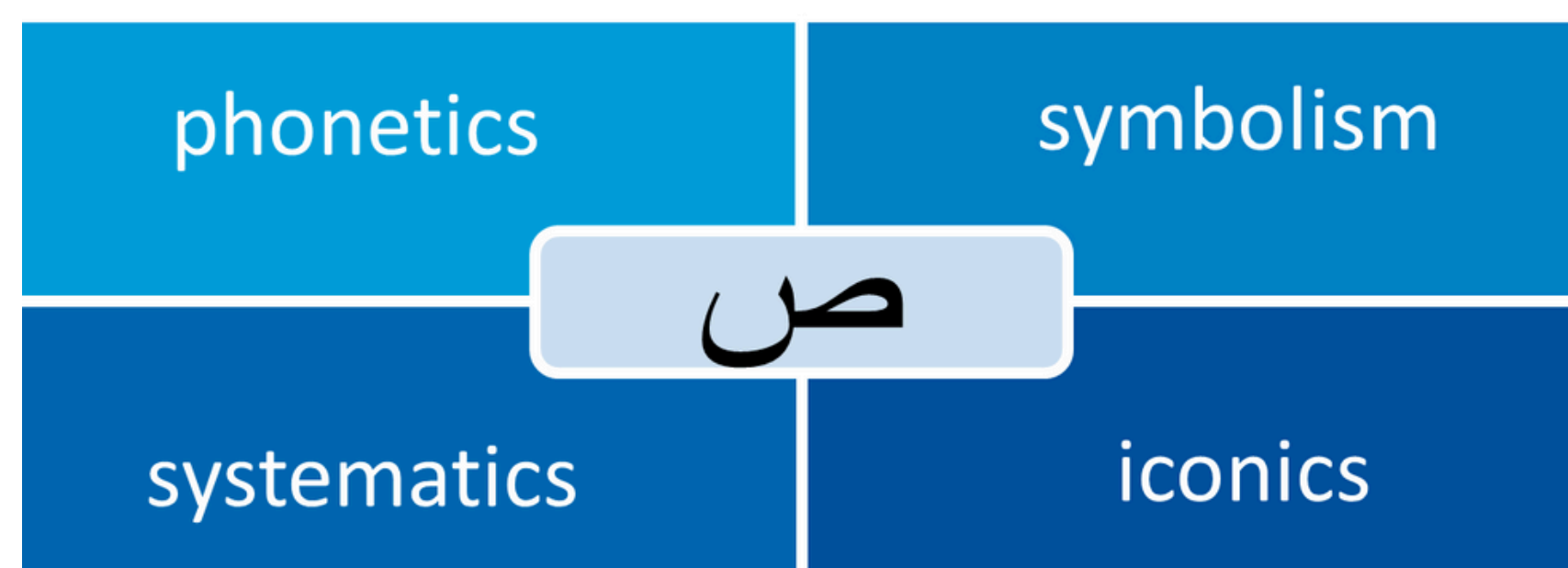
The Mamluk polymath Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) recognized that precise knowledge of the nature of letters and their use could be a good touchstone for true scholarship and, against this background, formulated seven questions about letters in his autobiography.

It was not until half a century after his death that a Cairinian scholar named Abū Bakr al-Shanawānī (d. 1610) finally answered these questions in a detailed and still unedited work. With his *Ḥilyat ahl al-kamāl bi-ajwibat as‘ilat al-Jalāl*, he created an original work that is unique in its transdisciplinary conception in the Arabic literary tradition and thus offers a good basis for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies.

At the same time, Shanawānī's work takes up the challenge posed by Suyūṭī and thus continues a tradition of Arabic scholarship in early 16th-century Ottoman Egypt that was long thought to be in cultural decline.

Arabic letter semiotics

As elements entangled between language and text, writing and image, letters challenge (linguistic) philosophical considerations, which are studied in modern letter semiotic fields of research such as grammar and notational iconicity. All these aspects also raise questions about the nature of the letters as a whole, which becomes particularly clear in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison, such as this case with respect to Arabic. The diagram depicted below was developed in order to systematize these different approaches and to make them productive for the semiotics of Arabic letters. Moreover, the diagram is also intended to illustrate the meaning of the term “letter semiotics”, which is frequently used in this study, as the scientific analysis of the symbolic nature of the individual letter at various levels of meaning.



Targets and work program

- editing and translating the *Ḥilyat ahl al-kamāl bi-ajwibat as‘ilat al-Jalāl* by Abū Bakr al-Shanawānī
- analysis of the letter concept presented in the work in the light of contemporary letter semiotic research
- classification of the work in the historical development of pre-modern Arabic scholarship, with the aid of intra-textual, paratextual, and extra-textual information

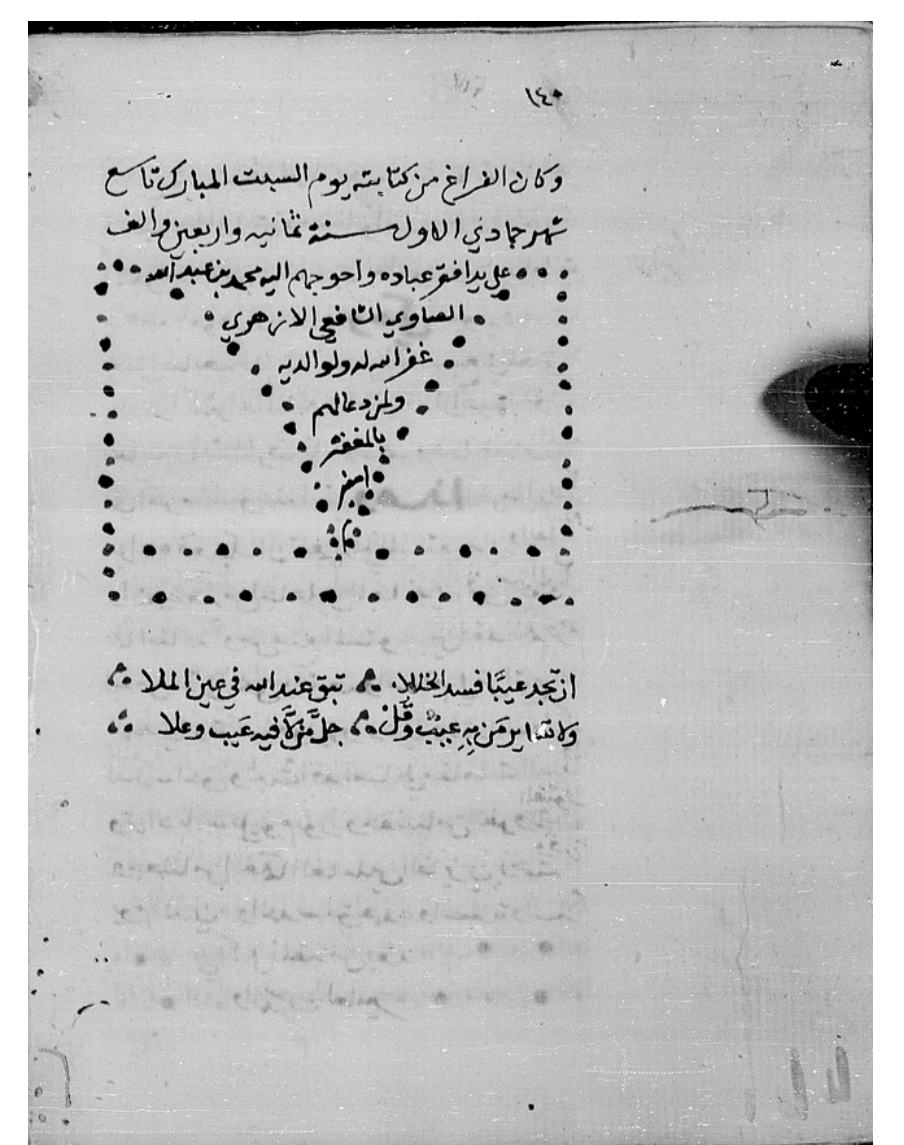
Text exploration
critical edition based on eight manuscripts



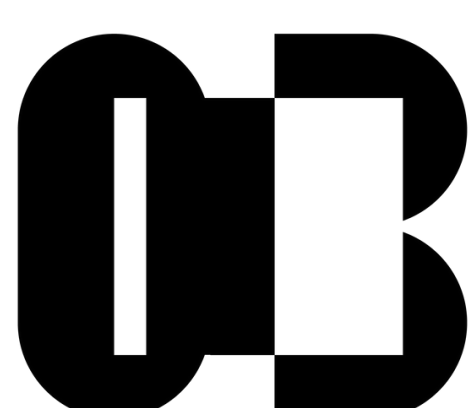
Cairo, 1626



Vienna, before 1834



Cairo, 1638



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