FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE? NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION, TRANSMISSION, AND RECEPTION OF THE MAJOR WORKS OF AḤMAD AL-BŪNĪ

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ABSTRACT

This article is a preliminary presentation of findings from an extensive survey of the large manuscript corpus of works attributed to the 7th/13th century Sufi and putative ‘magician’ Aḥmad al-Būnī. In addition to addressing the texts themselves, the survey has included attention to patterns over time in the reproduction of works, and to paratexts such as transmission certificates and ownership notices. Through detailed presentation of the latter, the article serves in part as a methodological demonstration. It presents: 1) new information on al-Būnī’s life; 2) a brief overview of the major works of the medieval Būnian corpus, with a proposal that five of these works can be attributed most securely to al-Būnī; 3) a discussion of the spread of Būnian works between the 8th/14th and 10th/16th centuries; and 4) evidence that the work through which al-Būnī is best known, Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā, is in significant ways a product of the early 11th/17th century, and that at least two lines of teachers claimed for al-Būnī in this work were plagiarized from the works of ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Bistāmī. It is argued that the tenor of al-Būnī’s teachings and the history of their reception have been broadly misunderstood due to reliance on printed editions and a modern scholarly disinclination to regard the occult sciences as a serious topic of inquiry. It ends with a call for more complete integration of manuscript studies into the broader field of Islamic historical studies.

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