

# An Ottoman Pasha's Encounter with a Dagestani Scapulimancy Practitioner in Iran

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## Context

The following excerpt is drawn from the chief physician Gevrekzâde Hâfız Hasan Efendi's (d. 1801) treatise on physiognomy. Two extant copies of this treatise are housed in the Istanbul University Library.<sup>1</sup> Physiognomy, the practice of interpreting a person's character or fate through their outer appearance, is the primary focus of the treatise. However, Gevrekzâde expands the discussion to encompass various disciplines of *'ilm-i firâset*,<sup>2</sup> including scapulimancy (*'ilm-i ketf*). He provides a brief account of scapulimancy, describing its practice.

According to Gevrekzâde, scapulimancy involves interpreting markings on the scapula of a sheep. He notes that practitioners of this art, who often exhibit an unusual appearance—possibly hinting at shamanistic traditions<sup>3</sup>—use the scapula to predict future events. The process begins with specific rituals: the sheep must be slaughtered with intention, in a clean environment, while the moon is visible, and near a garden or water source. The right scapula is then cleaned and held with its thin, flat side facing upward, oriented toward the sun and eastward. Gevrekzâde admits, however, that there is no codified method for interpreting the markings; practitioners rely on inspiration, and their interpretations are products of imaginative insight rather than a systematic study.<sup>4</sup>

Gevrekzâde also recounts the following fascinating anecdote involving Râğıb Paşa (d. 1763), during his tenure as a financial administrator in Tebrîz. Râğıb Paşa, a known enthusiast of divination, stayed at the residence of Mehdî Hân who is likely Mîrzâ

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<sup>1</sup> Gevrekzâde Hâfız Hasan. *Dürrü'l-Manşûr / Mürşidü'l-Etibbâ fi Tercemeti Ispagorya*. Istanbul University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library T. 7085; Gevrekzâde Hâfız Hasan. *Qiyâfetnâme*. Istanbul University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library T. 02695.

<sup>2</sup> Liana Saif. "Physiognomy: Science of intuition." In S. Brentjes (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook on the Sciences in Islamicate Societies: Practices from the 2nd/8th to the 13th/19th Centuries* (pp. 180-193). Routledge (2022).

<sup>3</sup> "bu fennde mâhir olanlaruñ dahı erbâb-ı ma'ârif kıyâsıyla şekl ve şemâ'illeri nazar-ı ğarîbdür ki aşlâ ma'ârif zann olınacağ şüretde olmayub" Gevrekzâde Hasan, *Dürrü'l-Manşûr / Mürşidü'l-Etibbâ*, 133a.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 132b-134b.

Mehdī Astarābādī (d. circa 1760).<sup>5</sup> Mehdī Hān introduced the paşa to a scapulimancy practitioner from Tāgīstān who is reputed for his remarkable skill in this science. In the following excerpt, at a feast arranged at Rāgīb Paşa's request, the scapulimancy practitioner demonstrates his abilities.

## Transcription

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*Hattā bunuñ misillü*

*zıkr olınan fenn-i ketf Rāgīb Paşa merhūmdan naql-i şahih olarak  
aşhāb-ı şikadan ve kendi lisānından böyle naql iderler ki devlet-i  
'aliyyenüñ taraf-ı Īrānla muhārebesi esnāsında Tebrīzde defterdār  
bulnub sākin olduğımız konağūñ şahib-i evveli Mehdī hān  
didikleri zāt-ı 'ālī-kađr ki cemī'-i 'ulūm-ı şettāda kāmīl ve fāzılinden  
bir recul-ı fā'ik olub huşūşiyle fenn-i nücūmda Ebū Ma 'şer-i sānī  
idi bir gün fakīrūñ hānesini teşrif idüb ve kemāl-i inbisātla  
didi-ki behey sulṭānum bizler nücūm nücūm diyüb deryā gibi bir fennüñ  
ardına düşmişüz anuñ ise ne ka 'rı ma 'lūm ve ne kenārı mer 'ī  
böyle bir fenn ki şavābından haṭası ekşer dünki gün Tāgīstāndan  
fakīre misāfireten henüz dađı tāze bir zāt geldi elinde koyunuñ  
ketfi ya 'nī küregi var her ne niyyet iderseñ aña baқub cevāb  
viriyor eger cüz 'ī ve eger küllī ve aşlā taḥallūf dađı itmek imkānı  
yoқ bir ğarīb keyfiyyet ne ḥesāb ve ne irtifā 'ı ve zāyiçe yollu*

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Tucker. "Mahdī Khān Astarābādī." In Fleet, Kate; Krämer, Gudrun; Matringe, Denis; Nawas, John; Rowson, Everett (eds.). *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (3rd ed.). Brill Online (2020).

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bir harf yazısı var fi-mā ba ‘d fakīriñüz kütüb-i nücümüyyeyi iħrāk bi’n-nār  
 idüb andan telemmüz itmek murād eyledüm didikde baña daħı istiğrāb  
 elvirüb bu mişillü erbāb-ı kemālden olan zāt böyle i ‘tikād  
 eyledikde bu şahş ne mertebede ehl-i ma ‘ārifden olmağ gerekdür diyüb  
 şahş-ı mezbūrı görmek murād eylemekle Mehdī Hāna ‘acabā ol-zātı  
 bu mevķi ‘e da ‘vet eylesek icābet iderler mi didikde Hān  
 vallāhi sulṭānum dünki gün gelüb misāfirimiz oldu henüz meşrebi  
 ma ‘lūmum degüldür icābet eylemez ise soñra ṭarafına hacālet elvirir  
 lākin fakīr-ḥānede bir ziyāfet tertīb idelüm de teşriḫ  
 idüñ hem görüñlür ve hem keyfiyyet ma ‘lūm-ı şerīfüñüz olur  
 diyüb bu kavlı ile yevm-i mev ‘ūdda Hānuñ konağına varılıb  
 bir miḫdār şöhet ve istirāhatden soñra Hān zikr olınan  
 zātı oldığımız mevķi ‘e getürüb efendüm cenābuñuza evşāfını  
 itdigim zāt bunlardur diyüb ta ‘rif eylediklerinde gördüm taḥmīnen  
 yigirmi beş otuz yaşında var kösec ve başında ḳalpaḳ  
 bir zāt birbirimizle āşināyiden soñra bir miḫdār şöhet-i  
 istīnās olıduḳda Hāna işāret idüb ‘azīze keyfiyyātı  
 tefhīm itdigimi dīde evet, eger bir niyyetüñüz var ise ṭutuñuz” diyüb  
 imā eyledikde fakīr daħı nefsinde vardıḳda niyyet eylemiş idüm  
 Hān daħı ‘azīze haber virdikde ḳoynundan bir ḳoyun küregi  
 çıkarub ve bir miḫdār te ‘emmül-i nazar eyleyüb başını ḳaldırub  
 sizüñ niyyetüñüz cenābuñuzdan rütbede büyük bir zātda alacaḳ ḫaḳḳuñuz  
 vardur andan içün niyyet eylemişsiñüz didikde Hān varabildiñüz mi

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diyü işāret eyledikde didim belī vardılar ve yine ‘azīz hattā maṭlabuñuz  
on üç kīsedür didikde belī öyledür didüm tekrār yine kürege  
nazar idüb efendi ḥaṭā itmişüm zīmmet on beş kīsedür  
didikde ammā benüm fi’l-aşl ma ‘lūmum olmağla ḥayır on üç kīsedür  
diyü mu ‘āraza idüb lākin ‘azīz kelāmından nükül itmeyüb elbette  
on beş kīsedür didikde faḳīre daḥı ḥayret gelüb ma ‘a-hāzā  
‘azlūmi getürdüb ve birkaç gün zarfında ‘āzim-i rāh olmaḳ  
içün cümle eşyāmı yirleşdirmiş idüm lākin ‘azīzūñ işrārından  
baña daḥı ta ‘accüb ve ḥayret gelüb konağa geldikde yükleri açub  
ve defterleri çıkarub yeñiden ḥesāb eyledim nefsu’l-emrde ‘azīzūñ  
didigi gibi tamām on beş kīse aḳcedür yekūn iderken faḳīr  
ḥaṭā itmişüm buña vāḳıf oldukda ḥayret üzre ḥayret  
gelüb ve derūnuma bir i ‘tikād-ı küllī ḥāşıl oldı ve ‘azīz ile  
ülfet itmekle Ḥān ile ‘azīzi berāber da ‘vet idüb ve gendüsine  
‘azīm i ‘zāz ve ikrāmdan şoñra dünki söyledigi kelāmı taşdıḳ  
idüb nefsu’l-emrde kelām buyurdığıñuz gibi olub yekūnda  
ben ḥaṭā itmişüm didikde belī öyledir benüm ḳatumda ḳaṭ ‘ā ḥaṭā  
oldığı yoḳdur didikde didim işbu aḳceyi ‘acabā alabilür miyüm  
didüm ḥayır almanıñ imkānı yoḳdur didi çünki bundan aḳdem  
Köprilizāde ‘Abdullāh Paşa ser ‘asker iken faḳīr nüzl emīni  
eylemişler idi ol sebebden zīmmetlerinde ḳalmışdı vefāt  
eyledikde mālını mīrīden aḥz idüb ol-ḳadar aḳce ḳaldı gitdi  
alamadıḳ imdi bu keyfiyyete vāḳıf oldukda öyle şeylere

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*aşlâ i 'tibârum yoğiken hevesüm düşüb fenn-i mezbûrı ta 'allüm eylemek  
 için ol günlerde naqd olarak otuz kîse aqcem var idi anları  
 çıkarub 'azîz-i merķûma "işbu aqcenüñ cümlesi saña helâl olsun  
 eger dağı olsa dirîğ eylemez idüm didikde koynından bir şahîfe kadar  
 kâğıd çıkarub didi işbu fennüñ cümle şerh ve tafşîli budur  
 şüreti bir sâ 'atde taħrîr olunub ve ta 'lîmi iki sâ 'atde olur  
 ve ta 'lîmi için ħudâ bilür bir aqçe ve bir ħabbe talebinde degülüm lâkin  
 küregi elime alub nazâr eyledikde derûnuma bir miqdâr keyfiyyet tulû '  
 ider ki anları taħrîr idüb ta 'lîme kudretüm yoqdur bunlar bizüm öteden  
 berü ħânedânumuza ırsla vedî 'a olunmuş bir ħâletdür yoqsa 'alimallâh  
 cenâbuñuzdan bir şey dirîğ degüldür diyü cevâb virdikde bundan  
 ma 'lûmum oldı-ki nefş'ül-emrde bu keyfiyyet tulû 'ât-ı ilâhiyyeden  
 bir ħâlet olub ta 'lîm ve te 'allüm ile fehm olınacaq fennden olmayub  
 bu fennüñ aşĥâbınuñ tîli 'lerinde sehm'ül-gayb ta 'bîr olınan ħâlâtdan  
 bir şey olub yâĥûd taħrîr eylediği gibi ħânedânlarında cifr 'ilmi  
 keyfiyyâtı mişillü bir esrâr-ı ilâhiyyedür eger böyle olmasaydı faķîr âdem  
 olkadar aqçeyi aĥz idüb ta 'lîm iderdi diyü naql eylediği zât  
 bu faķîre bu şüret üzre ħikâyet eylediği li-münâsebetihi baş u taħrîre  
 bādî oldı ħarrarehu li-nâķilihi*

## Translation

In relation to the aforementioned science of scapulimancy, they recount from the late Ragıb Pasha through reliable sources and directly in his own words as follows:

During the time of the Sublime State's war with Iran, I was residing in Tabriz as the financial administrator. The former owner of the house we lived in was a certain distinguished person named Mehdi Khan. He was a man of high standing, well-versed in all branches of knowledge, particularly excelling in the science of the stars, being the second Abu Ma'shar<sup>6</sup> of his time. One day, he visited this humble one's residence and, in a state of great openness, remarked: "My lord, we have pursued the science of astrology which is like a vast ocean, with neither its shores clearly visible nor its depths comprehensible. It is a discipline where truth is often overshadowed by error. Recently, however, a man from Dagestan has arrived as a guest at this one's home. He possesses a sheep's scapula and whatever intention you held in your mind, whether general or specific, he would look at the bone and provide an answer. His skill is such that his interpretations never fail, a peculiar ability that requires neither calculation nor celestial elevation, nor the drawing of any charts or figures. Observing this, I felt inclined to abandon my astrological studies entirely and instead devote myself to this knowledge."

I too became astonished and thought to myself: when such a distinguished and accomplished person holds such beliefs, what level of learning and refinement must this remarkable man possess? Filled with curiosity, I desired to meet this extraordinary man in person. Turning to Mehdi Khan, I asked, "I wonder, if we were to invite this individual to our gathering here, would he accept the invitation?" Khan replied, "My Sultan, though he visited us yesterday, I am unsure of his temperament and cannot guarantee he will accept an invitation. It may lead to embarrassment should he decline. However, I propose we arrange a feast at my house, allowing you to meet him informally and observe his abilities."

On the appointed day, we arrived at Mehdi Khan's residence, and after some conversation and repose, the Khan took the man to where we were standing, saying: "This is the person I spoke of." He appeared to be about twenty-five or thirty years old,

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<sup>6</sup> Ebû Ma'ser Ca'fer b. Muhammed b. Ömer el-Belhî (d. 272/886) was a highly influential Persian scholar of astrology and astronomy.

beardless, and wearing a fur cap. After being acquainted, we engaged in a close conversation. The Khan signaled to me, “If you have an intention in mind, please proceed.” I already had an intention. The Khan informed the esteemed man, who then took a sheep’s scapula from his bosom, examined it intently for a moment, and raised his head, saying: “Your intention pertains to a prominent individual of high rank from whom you are owed something. This is the reason behind your intent.”

When the Khan asked if I had been able to collect the debt, I replied, “yes, the debt had been paid.” The man continued, “the amount in question is thirteen purses.” I replied, “yes, that is correct.” However, upon further inspection of the scapula, saying, “I was mistaken—it is fifteen purses.” However, being certain of the matter, I objected, saying, “No, it is thirteen purses.” However, the person did not waver from his statement, insisting, “It is certainly fifteen purses.” I was overtaken by astonishment and, consequently, prepared for my dismissal. Over the course of a few days, I gathered all my belongings, intending to set on a journey. However, due to the insistence of the esteemed person, I was again struck by amazement and wonder. When I arrived at the house, I opened the luggage, took out the account books, and conducted a thorough review. In fact, the actual total corresponded precisely to what the esteemed person had stated: fifteen purses of aspers. Realizing my own mistake, I was overwhelmed by astonishment upon astonishment, and a profound conviction formed within me regarding the truth of his words.

Ultimately, I became closely acquainted with the esteemed person, and accompanied by the Khan, invited him to a gathering. After showing him great respect and honor, I confirmed the truth of his earlier words, acknowledging that they were entirely accurate. I admitted my error, saying, “Indeed, I was mistaken.” To this, he replied, “Yes, that is correct. There is absolutely no error on my part.” Then I asked, “Would it be possible for me to collect this money?” He answered, “No, it is impossible for you to obtain it.” Then, I understood that, “Previously, when Köprülüzade Abdullah Pasha was the commander-in-chief, he had appointed me in charge of the army’s provisions. For this reason, the debt remained outstanding in his records. Upon his

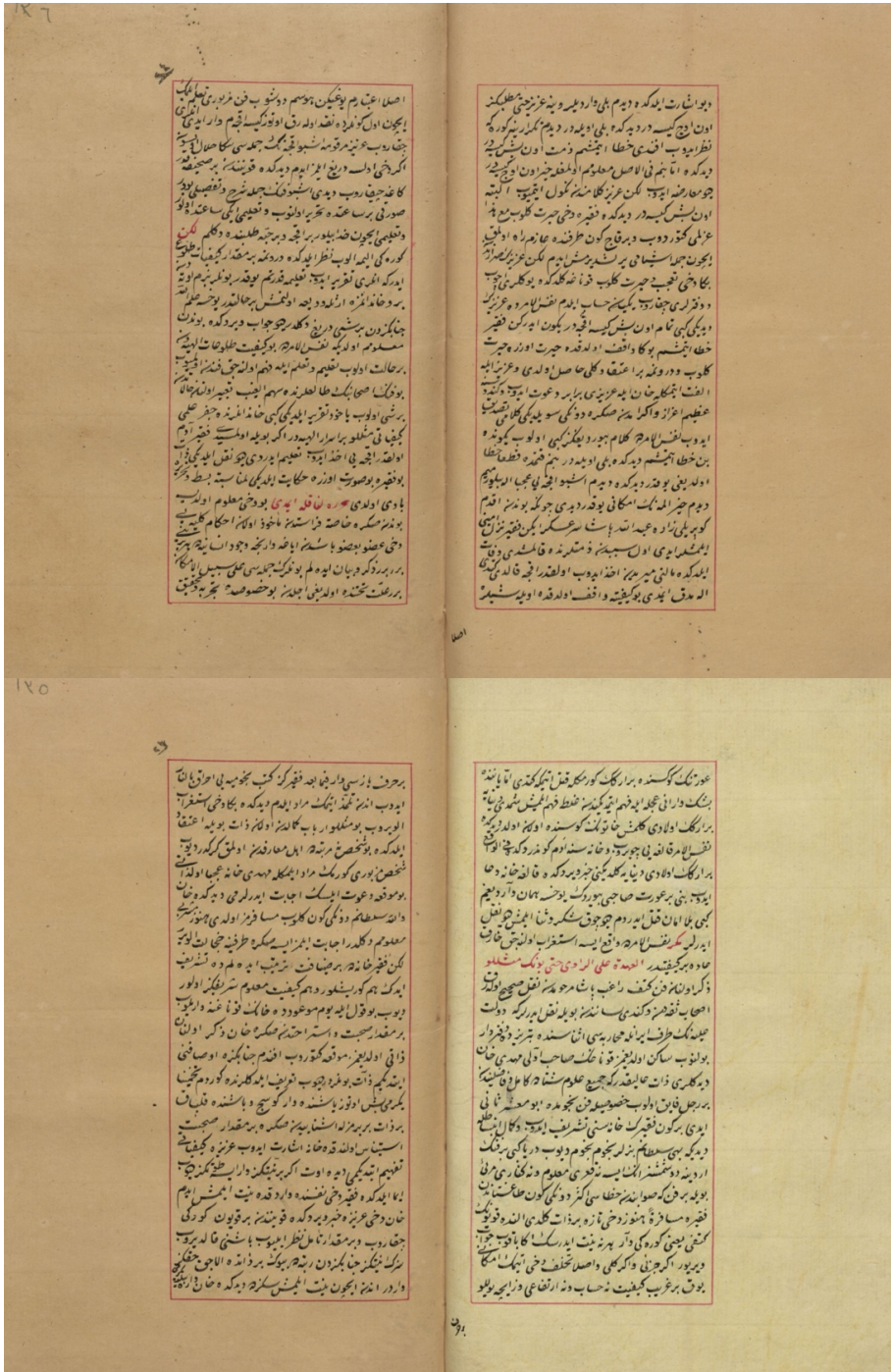
passing, his wealth was taken by the state treasury, and the amount I seek was included in that, leaving it unrecoverable.”

When I became aware of this situation, although I usually had no interest in such matters, I developed a sudden fascination with learning this science. At the time, I had thirty purses of aspers in hand. I brought them out and said to the esteemed person, “Let all this money belong to you, and if I had more, I would not hesitate to give it as well.” Then, he drew out a sheet of paper from his bosom and said, “This contains the complete explanation and details of this art. Its copy can be written in an hour, and its instruction takes two hours. I seek neither a single coin nor a grain for teaching it, as God is my witness. However, when I hold the scapula in my hand and examine it, certain states reveal themselves into my mind. I lack the ability to articulate or teach them. These are states entrusted to our lineage as a sacred inheritance from generations past. Otherwise, God knows, I would not withhold anything from you.” He thus responded.

From what I understood, this state is one of the divine illuminations and not a science that can be comprehended through teaching and learning. It appears to be a state referred to as one’s destined share (*‘sehmü’l-ğayb’*) in the astrological charts of those versed in this field, or, as he explained, an esoteric divine secret akin to the qualities of the cifr science preserved within their lineage. If it were not so, that person would surely have accepted such a substantial amount of money and taught this knowledge.

This account was narrated to me in this manner, and I have recorded it here due to its relevance and significance.

Facsimile



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