

Inscribed Amniotic Membrane as a Talismanic-Medicinal Ingredient in the Fifteenth-Century Anatolian Turkish Medical Manual *Yādigār-ı İbn Şerīf*

Helga Anetshofer

Author:

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Chicago.

anetshofer@uchicago.edu

ORCID: [0000-0003-1920-353X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1920-353X)

Keywords:

15th–16th century, medical manual, *havāṣṣ*, magic, talismanic healing and protection, caul, talismanic shirt, Galenic-Islamic humoral tradition

Cite this article:

Anetshofer, Helga. “Inscribed Amniotic Membrane as a Talismanic-Medicinal Ingredient in the Fifteenth-Century Anatolian Turkish Medical Manual *Yādigār-ı İbn Şerīf*”. *Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions* 3/3 (Summer 2025): 13–25. Available under <https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-25-03-02>.

Article DOI 10.25365/kshf-25-03-02

Published online September 28, 2025

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Context

The edited passage presented below on the talismanic-medicinal usage of human amniotic membrane is an extract from a therapeutic manual called *Yādigār* (lit., a work that evokes the memory of its author). This manual was composed by İbn Şerîf in the Turkish vernacular of Anatolia, most likely no later than the 1420s in Bursa. The manuscript copy that I consulted to prepare the transcription and translation below is dated 972/1565 (MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa). Amniotic membrane (aka amnion or caul) is the innermost layer of the membranes that form the amniotic sac, which contains the human embryo (and later fetus) cushioned by amniotic fluid during pregnancy (see figure 1).



Figure 1 — A wax model of a full-term fetus seen through the translucent amniotic membrane inside the opened uterus, ca. 1785, from the teaching collection of Florentine anatomical wax models that was on display at the medico-surgical academy Josephinum in late 18th-century Vienna. © Josephinum – Ethics, Collections and History of Medicine, MedUni Vienna, no. AT-MUW-FM-000343.

In rare events a baby is born “with the caul,” that is, with a piece of amniotic membrane stuck to his or her head. This membrane was perceived as a lucky or protective veil or helmet in premodern eastern and western societies, hence the historical names English *caul* (← Latin *galea*, helmet, or, *caput galeatum*, helmeted head), and German

Glückshaube (lucky helmet or cap) or *Glückshaut* (lucky skin or membrane). The 16th-century Ottoman manuscript copies MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa, which I used for the transcription and translation, and MS Török, which I consulted for additional context, contain the terms Arabic *niqāb al-janīn* (veil of the fetus); and Ottoman *niqāb* (← Arabic, veil), *oğlan niqābı* (child's veil), *duvak* (Turkish, veil), and *perde* (← Persian, veil, membrane). The strong symbolic association of the amniotic membrane with protection has led to various forms of talismanic usage of this human tissue in cultures around the world. Here, I will discuss two ways in which the Ottomans used the membrane and/or prescribed that it be used: a) as a medical drug (pieces of inscribed membrane would be ingested for healing purposes), and b) as fabric for a protective talismanic shirt (the membrane or possibly several entire membranes would probably have been rolled out flat and pressed to paper to dry them out so that they could be used for this purpose).¹ In both of these Ottoman applications of the membrane, the healing and/or protective power of the caul was combined with and secondary to the power of the Qur'anic verses, the prayers, the "beautiful names" of God, and the other amuletic designs that would be inscribed on it.² (See talismanic writing and design on the front and sleeve of a talismanic shirt made of linen in figures 2 and 3). Today, amniotic membrane has made a comeback in Western medicine and is considered beneficial primarily for the treatment of certain eye injuries; the tissue is procured from donors after prearranged caesarean sections, and its market value is growing.³

¹ See historical photographs of amniotic membrane dried out pressed to paper, as well as other historical illustrations of the caul in 16th-century medical and 19th-century talismanic European contexts in Surgeons' Hall Museums (Edinburgh), "The Veiled Child," The Anatomy Lab (blog), January 10, 2019, <https://surgeonshallmuseums.wordpress.com/2019/01/10/the-veiled-child/> (accessed May 6, 2025); and Imogen Crawford-Mowday, "Caul: A Sailor's Charm," (England: The Other Within: Analysing the English Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford), <https://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness-sailors-charm.html> (accessed 6 May 2025).

² See Helga Anetshofer, "The Hero Dons a Talismanic Shirt for Battle: Magic Objects Aiding the Warrior in a Turkish Epic Romance," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 77, no. 2 (2018), 189: "... for the majority of the shirts, made from fabric [as opposed to amniotic membrane], the magical protection results from the inscribed verses, prayers, and formulas, which are based on a combination of religious, mathematical, and astral sciences. The shirt is only a means by which to cover the body with the inscriptions."

³ P. B. Veldman, et al., "Efficacy of Amniotic Membrane Grafting for the Treatment of Chemical and Thermal Ocular Surface Injuries: A Report by the American Academy of Ophthalmology,"



Figures 2 and 3 — Talismanic Shirt, Ottoman, 18th century, Linen, front and right sleeve, 145 × 85 cm. (See also Anetshofer, “The Hero Dons a Talismanic Shirt for Battle”). Neukloster, Wiener Neustadt, Austria (IMG_9207 and IMG_9197). © Neukloster. Courtesy of P. Prior Michael Weiss OCist.

The passage below from İbn Şerîf’s *Yâdigâr* is interesting specifically for two reasons. First, that the passage’s description of the preserving and marketing of amniotic membrane after childbirth is referring to an actual practice can be corroborated by the fact that a talismanic shirt that is explicitly made from amniotic membrane is listed in the inventory of Bâyezîd’s II palace library (see below for details). Second, as the amniotic membrane is a byproduct of childbirth, the passage points to a glimmer of female agency demonstrated by women who “save” their baby’s caul and are either willing or unwilling to sell it.

Ophthalmology (Rochester, Minn.), vol. 132(2) (2025), 154–163. “Amniotic Membrane Transplant,” American Academy of Ophthalmology, EyeWiki, https://eyewiki.org/Amniotic_Membrane_Transplant#cite_note-34 (accessed July 11, 2025). Globenewswire (2024), “Amniotic Membrane Market Expected to Reach \$12.68 Billion by 2032, with a CAGR of 14% | Introspective Market Research,” <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2024/11/12/2979375/0/en/Amniotic-Membrane-Market-Expected-to-Reach-12-68-Billion-by-2032-with-a-CAGR-of-14-Introspective-Market-Research.html> (accessed July 11, 2025).

İbn Şerîf's *Yâdigâr* is a well-known but understudied work. No source is available on the *Yâdigâr*'s author, İbn Şerîf, except for the *Yâdigâr* itself, which is undated. In the *Yâdigâr*, the author says that he is known by the name İbn Şerîf; that he has devoted his whole life to the study of medicine (*'ilm-i tıbbâ meşğûl oldum*); and that he has personally tried and confirmed the efficacy of many of the recorded remedies on patients (e.g., ... *mücerreb 'ilâc kim kerrâtile tecrîbe itdük şahîhdür büyük kişilere ve oğlancuqlara tecrîbe olunmuşdur* "... it is a tried and tested medicine; it is effective; we have tried and tested it many times; it has been tried and tested on adults and children").⁴ İbn Şerîf apparently lived and practiced medicine in Bursa for some time, as numerous references to Bursa are found in the *Yâdigâr* (e.g., comments regarding the bad air quality of Bursa or mentions of local names of remedies used in Bursa).⁵ The *Yâdigâr* is a popular early medical work in the Turkish vernacular and survives in around 60 manuscripts, dating from the 16th through to the 18th centuries. A good edition of the Old Anatolian Turkish text with a modern Turkish rendering is available (based on MS İstanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi, Revan Köşkü Kitaplığı no. 1684, which is complete but undated, prob. late 16th or 17th century),⁶ but no translation in a western language exists. The *Yâdigâr* is largely based on earlier sources. Its theoretical foundation is the Galenic-Islamic humoral tradition which İbn Şerîf studied by "reading some early and later books in Arabic and Persian from experienced masters (*mücerreb üstâdlar*)."⁷ Herbal medicines and food-

⁴ See Orhan Sakin, et al. (eds.), *Yâdigâr: 15. Yüzyıl Türkçe Tıp Kitabı*, (2. baskı), İstanbul: Merkezefendi Geleneksel Tıp Derneği: Zeytinburnu Belediyesi, 2017, 28–29, 399, 515).

⁵ Sakin, *Yâdigâr*, 26, 403 (*havânuñ yigregi oldur ki ... Bursa şehri soğakları gibi koğar olmaya* "the best air is that which ... does not stink like the streets of the city of Bursa"), 557 (*Hızır-İlyâs diyü ad virdük Bursa şehrinde Cân-kurtaran dirler* "we called [the medicine] Hızır-İlyâs, in the city of Bursa they call it Cân-kurtaran (Life saver)," 592–593 et al. Additionally, MS Atatürk Kitaplığı, the earliest dated manuscript copy (İstanbul: IBB Atatürk Kitaplığı, Muallim Cevdet Yazmaları, MC_Yz_K.000300, 911/1505–6) includes a rather randomly inserted dedication to Umur b. Timurtaş (d. 1461), a patron of architecture and literature in the service of Murâd II; Umur Beg was connected to Germiyan and had a residence in Bursa (for Umur Beg see Tim Stanley, "The Books of Umur Bey," *Muqarnas* 21 (2004), 323–331).

⁶ Sakin, *Yâdigâr*.

⁷ MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa, 1b (*Yâdigâr-ı İbn Şerîf*, Ankara: Milli Kütüphane, Afyon Gedik Ahmet Paşa İl Halk Kütüphanesi, 03 Gedik 5146, 972/1565, TÜYEK, <https://portal.yek.gov.tr/works/detail/620789>).

stuffs are the primary means of treatment. Other therapeutic procedures include blood-letting or phlebotomy (*faşd, kan aldırma*) and wet cupping (*ḥacāmat*); pastes or patches applied to the skin (*yağı*); and suffumigation (*buḥūr, tütüzdürmek*).

The popular appeal of the *Yâdigâr* probably lay in the work's explicit character as a concise practical guide for people to use when they had no access to a physician,⁸ as well as in the work's inclusion of numerous faith-based remedies that involved *ḥavāṣṣ* (hidden properties) of Qur'anic verses, prayers, or symbols, imbued with apotropaic and medicinal qualities. These special verses etc. were written on a piece of paper or other objects such as peeled eggs or the amniotic membrane. These inscribed paper talismans (*nusha*, prescription, recipe > today *muska*, amulet)⁹ would either be attached to ailing body parts with a string or ingested by eating or drinking (by dissolving the ink of the written verses in water and then drinking the water).¹⁰ In the preface (and other places), İbn Şerîf makes reference to the intersection or rivalry between religion (including practices often called "magic") and medicine. He cites two stories of Islamic medical lore in order to illustrate that—instead of resorting to passive trust in God (*tevekkül*)—one should benefit from the properties of medicinal herbs which were purposefully created by God. He states that all prophets practiced medicine and that medicine is a divinely

⁸ MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa, 1b–2a: "This book can conveniently be carried around and kept close, both when traveling or at home (*seferde ve hâzerde*). ... When this book is in the hand of a competent person there will be no need for a doctor (*ṭabīb*) to preserve one's health and drive away illness (*sağlığı sağlamakta ve şayrılığı def' itmeklikde*)."

⁹ Cf. Pe. *nuskhat, nuskha*, Exemplar, prototype, archetype, a copy or model whence anything is taken; a manuscript-copy; a physician's recipe; a prescription of ingredients for any composition; an inventory; an amulet (Francis Joseph Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, London: Allen, 1892, 1400).

¹⁰ See e.g. Sakin, *Yâdigâr*, 584: "They should cure those who are spellbound (*bağlu*) (by evil women) by writing and then making them eat and drink certain *ḥavāṣṣ*." For the tradition of ingesting the Qur'an as a normative and divinely sanctioned healing practice since the emergence of Islam see Travis Zadeh, "An Ingestible Scripture: Qur'anic Erasure and the Limits of 'Popular' Religion," in *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, ed. by B. Fleming and R. Mann, New York and London: Routledge, 2014, 97–119.

sanctioned science (*‘ilm-i tıbbıla ‘amel itmek hikmet-i Bārīye ve şerī‘at-ı Muḥammediyye-ye muvāfıkdur* “practicing the science of medicine is in accordance with God’s wisdom and the [sacred] law of Muhammad”).¹¹

My reading below is based on MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa of İbn Şerīf’s *Yâdigâr*, dated 972/1565. The passage is part of a list of treatments for leprosy (*cüzām*) at the very end of the section on dermatological conditions (*Dördünci bahş şişlerde ve yaralarda ve cirâhatlerde ve sivilcülerdedür*, Fourth Section on lumps or swellings, ulcers, skin inflammation, and pustules). The adjectives *ğarīb* and *‘acīb* “rare, wondrous,” used in the passage to describe birth with a caul (and/or its medicinal efficacy), generally relate to phenomena of God’s creation that defy rational explanations.¹² Nonetheless, the fact that the amniotic membrane in the recipe below can be substituted by olive leaves suggests that the actual cure was thought to come from the power of the Qur’anic verse inscribed on the membrane rather than from the membrane itself. The caul as the means to ingest the verses adds an additional potent layer to the healing process.

In an earlier project, I had come across another reference to amniotic membrane (Arabic *niqāb al-janīn*) in the section on prayers, hidden properties of the Qur’an, and magic squares (*tafşil kutub al-ad’iya wa-kutub ḥawāşş al-qur’ān wa-kutub ‘ilm al-wafq*) in the inventory of Bāyezīd’s II palace library (*Kitāb al-Kutub* or *Daftar al-Kutub*, Register of Books), dated 909/1502–3. The section includes five talismanic shirts *qamīş* (aka *cāme-i fetḥ*, victory shirt, or *zırh qamīş*, armor shirt) whose primary function was to protect and aid the wearer in battle.¹³ One of the shirts is said to be made from amniotic membrane: *qamīşun min niqābi l-janīni fihi awfāqun wa-ad’iyatun*, “a shirt (made) from

¹¹ MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa, 1b; Sakin, *Yâdigâr*, 41, 399–400. The preface of the MS Atatürk Kitaplığı does not include this passage but instead has the dedication to Umur b. Timurtaş. MS İstanbul which is the basis of the Sakin, *Yâdigâr* edition has c. 50 fol. more text at the end than both MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa and MS Atatürk Kitaplığı; MS Atatürk Kitaplığı in particular has numerous misbound and/or missing folios.

¹² In Sakin’s *Yâdigâr* edition *ğarīb* “odd, rare” often appears together with *mücerreb* “experienced, proven, tried-and-true (remedy),” as in the passage of the caul edited here: *bir ğarībce mücerreb nesne* “a quite rare or odd (but) proven thing” (Sakin, *Yâdigâr*, 624).

¹³ Anetshofer, “The Hero Dons a Talismanic Shirt for Battle,” 175, 185–188.

the veil of a fetus (*niqāb al-janīn*), with magic squares (*wafq*) and prayers (*du‘ā‘*) on it.”¹⁴ Reading the therapeutic manual *Yādigār-ı İbn Şerīf* and the inventory of Bāyezīd’s II palace library together makes it possible to demonstrate that the collection and talismanic-medicinal application of amniotic membrane was an actual practice in 15th-16th-century Ottoman Anatolia.

Transcription¹⁵

Ve bir ğarīb ‘acīb nesne kim taḥkīk // gerçektür şol niqāb kim oğlanıla bile doğar ba ‘z-ı ḥātūn kişi oğlan doğırıcak niqāblu doğurur ol niqābdan alalar, yidi ‘aded veyā üc ‘aded [111a] ele girdüğine göre ‘avratlar şaklarlar, degmede ele girmez meger cüzām olan kişi mün ‘im ola akçeye kıya ve yā-ḥud big kişi ola ol niqābı peydā ide ol niqābuñ üzerine // yazalar bu āyeti فَاحْزَرَقْتُ فِيهِ نَارٌ فَاحْزَرَقْتُ الْرَحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ فَاصَابَهَا إِغْصَارٌ فِيهِ نَارٌ فَاحْزَرَقْتُ iki keret yaza فَاحْزَرَقْتُ yazdukdan şoñra bir dutulmaduk çölmege koyu, ağızın // muḥkem bir nesne ile berkide furunda yağa andan çıkara kırk bahş ide, kırk şabāḥ balıla karışdurub cüzām olan kişiye yidüre Allāh faẓlıyla ol ‘illetden // ḥalāş ola, inşā ‘allāhu ve eger oğlan niqābı ele girmese kırk ‘aded zeytūn yaprağına bu āyeti¹⁶ her yaprağa bir āyet yazalar çölmek içinde didigimiz // gibi yağalar andan ğubār saḥk idüp kırk bahş ideler, kırk şabāḥ balıla karışdurub yiyeler. Şifā bula inşā ‘allāhu ta ‘ālā [MS تع] ve bu oğlan yüzünde bile doğan // niqāba ‘avratlar duvaḥk dirler, perde daḥi dirler

¹⁴ MS Török, [page] 47 [lines] {18–19} (see *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library* (1502/3-1503/4), ed. Gülru Necipoğlu, Cemal Kafadar, and Cornell H. Fleischer (Brill, 2019), *Muqarnas Supplements* 14, vol. 2, p. 37 (transliteration); manuscript page 47 (facsimile). Anetshofer, “The Hero Dons a Talismanic Shirt for Battle,” 189 (here erroneously labeled as no. 93 instead of correct no. 94). In the edition of the inventory, Guy Burak left *niqāb al-janīn* (lit. the veil of the fetus) untranslated with a question mark: “[no.] 94. “*Qamışun min niqābi al-janīni fihi awfāqun wa-ad‘iyatun*” (A Shirt Made of ...? Inscribed with Magic Squares and Prayers), [manuscript page] 47 [lines] {18–19}” (Guy Burak, “The Section on Prayers, Invocations, Unique Qualities of the Qur’an, and Magic Squares in the Palace Library Inventory,” in *Treasures of Knowledge ...*, vol. 1, 359).

¹⁵ MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa, 110b²²⁻²³ – 111a¹⁻⁶ (*Yādigār-ı İbn Şerīf*).

¹⁶ MS *bir āyet* – emended according to Sakin, *Yādigār*, 625.

Translation

A rare and wondrous thing that is certainly true is the veil (*niḳāb*) a child is born with. Some women give birth to children that are veiled. One should acquire from that veil seven pieces, or three pieces— [۱۱۱ا] —as much as one can get. (Yet) the women save it; it is not easily obtainable. But if a person who has leprosy (*cūzām*) is generous and does not mind spending a lot of money, or if it is a nobleman, he should acquire that veil.

On the veil one should write the verse “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace: It was smitten by a fiery whirlwind and it burnt up.”¹⁷ One should write “*fa-ḥtaraqat* (and it burnt up)” twice. After writing (this),¹⁸ one should put it (the caul with the talismanic writing on it) in a not-yet-used earthenware pot, seal it firmly with something, and burn it in the oven. Then one should take it out, divide it into 40 portions, on 40 mornings mix (one portion each) with honey, and feed it to the leprosy patient. By the grace of God (the patient) will recover from the disease, inshallah.

And if one cannot obtain a child’s veil (*oĝlan niḳābı*), one may write this verse on 40 pieces of olive leaves, once on each leaf. One should burn them in an earthenware pot just as we described. Then one should pulverize it and divide it into 40 portions, on 40 mornings mix (one portion each) with honey, and eat it. (Then) he or she will be cured, inshallahu taala. The women call this veil that covers the child’s face when it is born *ḍuvaḳ* (veil) and also *perde* (veil).

¹⁷ *Bismillāhirraḥmānirraḥīm fa-aṣābahā i ‘ṣārūn fīhi nārūn fa-ḥtaraqat* (Qur’an 2:266).

¹⁸ The syntax of this phrase is not entirely clear. Cf. Sakin, *Yâdigâr*, 625: *Niḳābuñ üzerine bu âyeti yazalar ... فَأَحْتَرَقْتُ فَأَحْتَرَقْتُ iki kerre yazalar فَأَحْتَرَقْتُ kelimesin yazdıktan sonra* “On the veil one should write the verse: “... *fa-ḥtaraqat* (and it burnt up),” one should write *fa-ḥtaraqat* twice. After writing *fa-ḥtaraqat* ...”.

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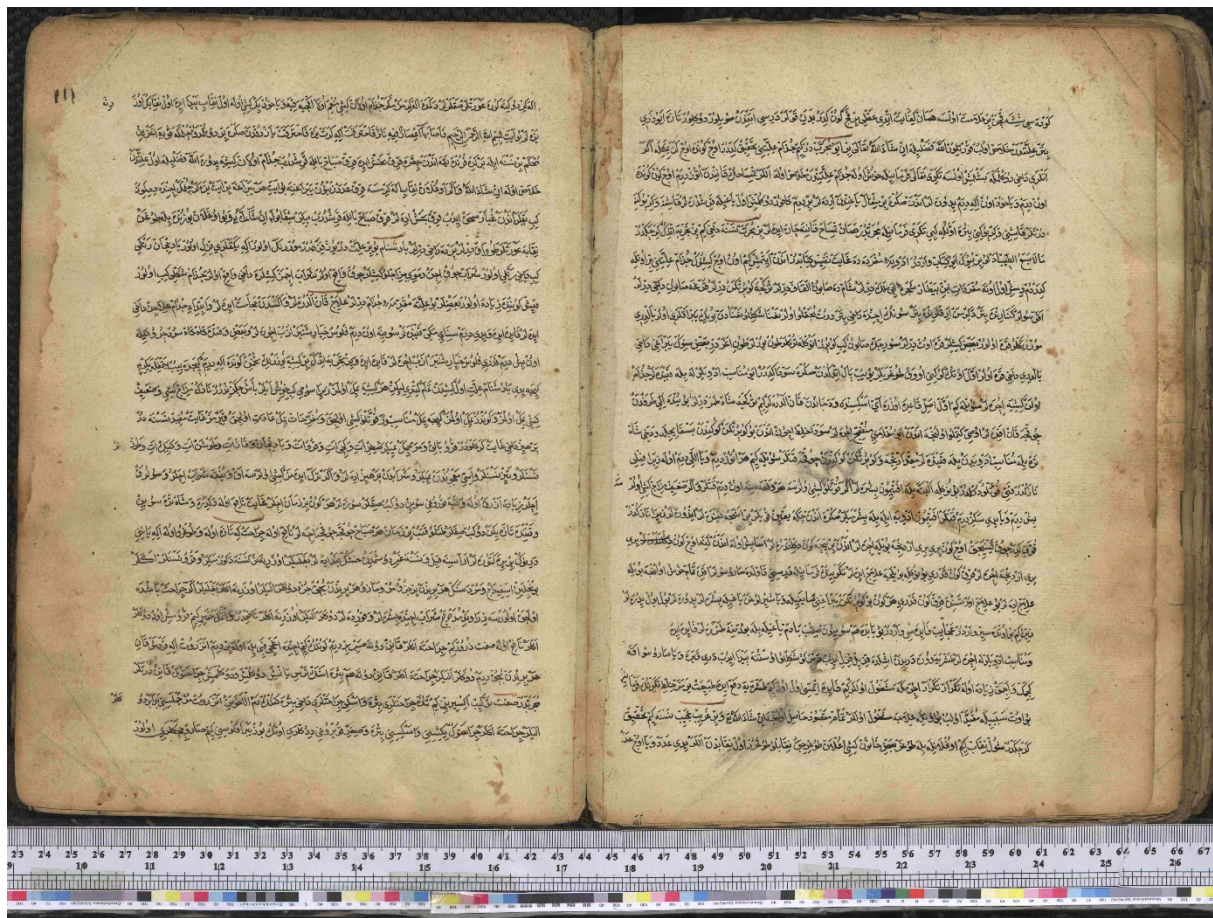
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Facsimile¹⁹

¹⁹ MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa: *Yâdigâr-ı İbn Şerîf*, Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, Milli Kütüphane, Afyon Gedik Ahmet Paşa İl Halk Kütüphanesi, 03 Gedik 5146, 110b-111a.

Detail

بَوَاوْتُ سَبِيحَكَ مُعَيَّدًا أَوْلَبَ بَوَاوْتُكَ عَلَا حَبْدَ مَسْغُولٍ أَوَّلَكَ عَامَ مَعْصُودٍ حَاصِلٍ أَوَّلَ بَدَائِنِ شَاءَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى وَبِرَّ عَرَبٍ حَبِيبٍ شَسَنَهُ كَيْفَ حَقِيقٍ
كَجَكَدَرٍ سَوَّلَ نِقَابَ كَيْفَ أَوْعَلَا نِلَاهُ بِهِ طَوْعًا بَعْضُ خَاوُنٍ كَيْسِي أَعْلَانِ طَوْعًا عِجْجِي نِقَابًا لَوْ طَوْعًا أَوَّلَ نِقَابِدَنَ اللَّذِي يَدِي عَدَدًا وَيَا وَجْهَ عَدَدٍ

[illegible]