

SYMMETRY IN THE SERVICE OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM: A CENTRAL CALLIGRAPHIC LEVHA

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Abstract: *Calligraphy has generally served as a breaker of symmetry in geometrically rich Islamic art. In this paper I focus on a late Ottoman-levha, a framed inscription, whose calligraphy is bilaterally symmetrical. I show how the symmetry relates the levha to other Islamic art, integrates ritual objects of the Bektashi mystic Order with calligraphy in the design, and serves to obscure a potentially heretical and traitorous message in the Sunni Ottoman context. Further, I show how consideration of the symmetry supports a particular reading of the levha, not as a list of Arabic names as earlier proposed, but as a sentence in Turkish that expresses a central tenet of mystic Islam.*

In an Islamic worldview, the first sacred art is nature (Lings, 1976). There is a well-known *hadith-i qudsi* or “divine saying” in which God expresses His relation to creation: “I was a Hidden Treasure and longed to be known; I created creation that I be known.” For Muslim mystics, this saying reflects the yearning in their relationship with

God, as well as the omnipresence of the Creator. A challenge in Islamic mystic art has been to represent omnipresence without suggesting multiplicity. In this paper I will show how bilateral symmetry is used to meet this challenge.

The above saying also implies the unity of creation through the Oneness of its Creator. Indeed Islam is centrally monotheistic; its *shahadah* or creed of witness begins: "There is no God but God . . .". In Islamic art from India to Spain, a common feature is geometric patterns of complex star polygons, linear repeat patterns, and arabesques, often arranged in tessellations or patterns of shapes that fit together like a puzzle, and which are framed in such a way as to suggest continuity of the pattern beyond the immediate surface. Such "unfinished" and complexly regular patterns are often interpreted as symbolic of the infinity of the universe, and at the same time of its order, traced back to the Oneness of the Creator.

But besides the star polygons, linear repeat patterns, and arabesques that provide multiple types of symmetry and afford the observer multiple viewing points, Islamic art is also characterized by the presence of Arabic calligraphy. Sometimes, especially with the angular Kufic style, the calligraphy is arranged symmetrically. But most often the Arabic calligraphy breaks the symmetry of the geometric forms that surround it, minimally by its unidirectionality. Thus the *Ya Sin sura*, the chapter of the Qur'an recited in memory of the dead, is inscribed around the arches of doors of the Taj Mahal in India. And throughout the Al-Hambra in Spain is the phrase: *wa la ghaliba illa Allah*, "and there is no victor but God". However in the Islamic art that is the focus of this paper, the cursive calligraphy itself is symmetrical.

In this paper I present a remarkable calligraphic *levha*, a framed inscription or plaque, from Istanbul of the late Ottoman Empire. It is clearly from the Bektashi Order that along with the better-known Mevlevi or "whirling dervishes" formed the two main mystic orders of the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately much Bektashi artwork, especially that in cities, was presumably destroyed when the Order was declared illegal in 1826. (The Dutch scholar, Frederick DeJong, has worked notably to preserve forms of Bektashi art.) What remains is mostly from outlying regions and often a form of folk art. Yet the particular Bektashi *levha* of this paper combines classic Islamic artistic tenets to present a theologically minority message in visual form in the center of the late Ottoman Empire.

Further, a careful reading of its symmetry serves to counter other scholars' interpretation of it as merely representing a "Bektashi trinity" (Birge, 1931, p. 232), that is, a listing in Arabic letters of the names "Ali", "Muhammad" and a mystic term for God. Rather I will show how the symmetry of the *levha* supports interpretation of its words not as a list of names but rather as a sentence in Ottoman Turkish - that there is syntax bubbling beneath the symmetry.



Figure 1: Bektashi *Levha*, Istanbul 1908 (Birge, p 236)

1. A BALANCE OF WORDS AND OBJECTS

Represented within the oval of the rectangular *levha* (see figure 1) are three distinct objects (a headpiece, a ritual pendant, two axes) and three distinct words in Arabic letters (ali, muhammad, hak). Each word is written in “mirror writing” or bilateral symmetry, with the last word written twice in such form.

Looking first at the words, the largest one is the name “Ali”, written in the lower region of the *levha*, first from right to left in Arabic fashion, and then from left to right in reflection. The first letter on the right side of the mirror - pair looks like a “c”, its second letter is the tall vertical, and its third letter forms a sort of tail that entwines with the same letter from the left side of the pair. These letters refer to Ali who was a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law - he married Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. As the Prophet himself had no surviving sons, the sons of Ali and Fatima and their progeny are seen as continuing the family of the Prophet. Shi’a Muslims and many of the mystic orders believe that the rightful successors to the Prophet should be of his family through Ali, whereas the more numerous Sunni Muslims do not hold with this. Indeed, this is the main theological difference and rift in Islam. Along with his importance in succession to leadership, Ali is also understood by the Bektashi and most other mystic orders as the one who brought mystic understanding of the Qur’an to Islam. Certainly the relative size of Ali in the *levha* suggests his importance.

The second word is found in the center of the *levha*. It is the name “Muhammad”, again written in bilateral symmetry. Muhammad lived from 580 to 632 A.D. in Arabia, and received the Word of God which became the Qur’an. According to Islam, Muhammad is the “seal of the prophets”, the last one of a prophetic line that includes Noah, Ibrahim, Jacob, Moses, Job, Jesus, Zacharias, and John; Muhammad is also a focus of most Sunni Muslims. On the *levha*, this is the smallest of the words.

The third word, of medium size, is written sideways, twice in bilateral symmetry on both sides of the *levha*. That is, while it is legible from straight on, it is written in a way that loosens the orientation of a viewer literate in Arabic. The word is made up of two letters, *ha* and *qaf*, that is *haqq* in Arabic, or *hak* in Turkish. This word can refer to “truth” in general or “the Truth”, a mystic term for God. Despite the sideways orientation of the letters, the diacritic of two dots that is a necessary part of the last letter, has been shifted from what would have been a series of four dots in a vertical line for the mirror pair, to a diamond - like arrangement with rotational symmetry.

Turning to the objects, near the top of the *levha* is a headpiece known as *taç* or “crown” in Turkish. This is the particular headpiece worn by Bektashi babas who are the clerical leaders of the Order, and is thus a clear symbol of the Bektashi Order. In the six to seven hundred year history of the Order, the headpiece has always had a central knob on top symbolizing the Divine Reality, and a wrapping of green cloth around the bottom. But there have been distinctions in the number of pleats of heavy felt that lead

up to the knob. The headpiece in the *levha* is a Huseyni taç whose twelve pleats represent the twelve Imams. These are descendants of the Prophet through and including Ali, and are regarded by many mystic Orders as well as Shi'a Muslims as the rightful successors to the Prophet.

Immediately below the headpiece is another distinctly Bektashi object, a twelve-pointed pendant, that is worn around the neck. This is the *teslimi tash* or "stone of submission", often made from alabaster. The word for submission (*teslim*) is built on the Arabic root "s-l-m" that underlies of the word "islam" referring to submission to God. Bektashis build their mystic meaning by referring to beliefs or practices in Sunni Islam, and then going beyond them. Thus Bektashis submit to God, but also to their mystic master and to the mystic injunction of "death before dying", that is, dying of the ego in order to better approach the Truth. The twelve points of the "stone of submission" stand for the twelve abnegations or abstinences, many of which serve to reign in the ego.

The third distinct object is the axe-head or *teber*, found on each side of composition. This too is a Bektashi symbol that perhaps harkens back to the earlier days of the Order when the Bektashis served as chaplains to the Ottoman Janisseries, or it was used in ritual practice. In the twentieth century it does not have a ritual function, but still holds Bektashi associations.

Overall there is a harmony and balance in the words and objects and their repetitions in the medallion-like composition. The headpiece and the pendant have prominence - they break the symmetry of the other features and give the *levha* a clear up/down orientation, like that of a Bektashi leader in his headpiece, with a pendant on his chest.

2. THE *LEVHA* IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

Calligraphy is known in Arabic as *handasat al-khatt*, or the "geometry of the line", with "line" referring to letters or writing. In Islamic societies the art of calligraphy has long been a prominent art form and a unifying cultural symbol. Both the sacredness of the Qur'an, understood as the Word of God, and the prohibition against idol worship, often interpreted as prohibition of pictorial or representative art, contributed to the elevation of the art of beautiful writing of Muslim scripture. In the tenth century a great calligrapher in Baghdad set a geometric method of relating cursive Arabic letters to each other in terms of a circle whose diameter is the first letter, the *alif*. The different cursive styles are then described in terms of the relation of the thickness of the line drawn by the pen to the *alif*. The calligraphy of the Bektashi *levha* is in *thuluth* style where the *alif* is traditionally seven times the thickness of the pen.

In Ottoman Turkish, calligraphy is referred to as *husnihatt* or “beautiful writing”. And while proportions and geometric distinctions were set earlier by Arab calligraphers, and beautiful work was done by Iranian and Indian calligraphers, it was Ottoman calligraphers who from 1500 on came to set the standards of beauty and establish Istanbul as the center of Islamic calligraphy. Even during the twentieth century with the adoption of a Roman alphabet in Turkey, magnificent work, like that of Necmettin Okyay (1886-1977) (see figure 2) has continued to be done in Istanbul. The calligraphy in the Bektashi *levha* is also of high quality.

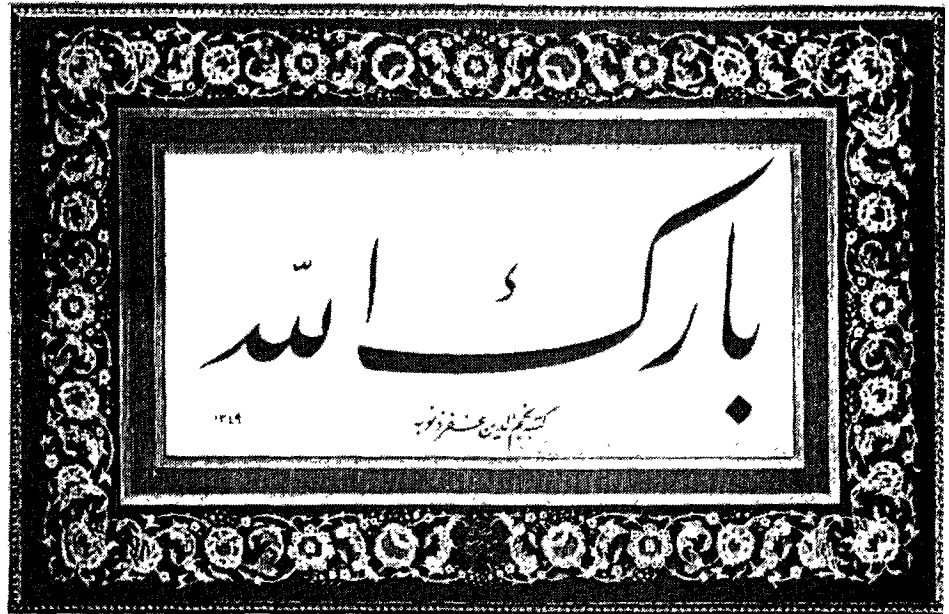


Figure 2: *Barak Allah*, Necmettin Okyaya, 1930 (collection of author)

In terms of composition however, the Bektashi *levha* (figure 1) and the calligraphy of Necmettin (figure 2) appear more different than alike. While both are framed with borders of translational symmetry - floral bands around the rectangular space of

Necmettin's calligraphy, tiny leaf patterns of the oval of the Bektashi *levha* - the symmetry and centeredness of the Bektashi *levha* contrast markedly with the flow of Necmettin's calligraphy. Further there is the inclusion of representational objects in the Bektashi *levha*.

As mentioned, Islam stands squarely against idol worship, a prohibition that was sometimes interpreted as a prohibition of representational art. Yet there has always been some form of representational art in Islamic art, particularly leaves, flowers, and fruit, but also humans in the famous Persian, Indian, and Ottoman miniatures. What there is not is portraits of individuals. That is, the representational art tends to be generic. This is true of the objects in the Bektashi *levha*. However what is unusual in the *levha* is that the objects and the words are roughly of the same scale.

Intermediate between calligraphy and compositions of objects and words is something referred to as calligrams (Schimmel, 1992, 246) wherein the calligraphy does not follow a straight line, but rather itself forms an object. The most famous of these is Mustapha Rakim's stork (figure 3) formed by the invocation to the chapters of the Qur'an, the *bismillah*, in *thuluth* style.



Figure 3: Stork, Mustapha Rakim (Aksel, p 77)

Another example of this, where the calligraphy itself suggests an object, is one where the writing forms the Bektashi headpiece or *taç* (figure 4).



**Figure 4: Bektashi Headpiece
in Calligraphy** (Aksel, p 59)

A variation of this, and one that is even closer to representations of objects, is compositions where the outlines of an object are given and then filled with calligraphy. For example, the outline of the Bektashi *taç* is given, but the lower part is filled with calligraphy (figure 5).



**Figure 5: Bektashi Headpiece
with Calligraphy** (Aksel, p 77)

Finally there are compositions made up of combinations where calligraphy both forms the outline of the object and is framed by outlines of objects. One such combination *levha* (figure 6) is similar to the Bektashi *levha* of this paper. Both include the Bektashi headpiece and pendant, and both have “Ali” in mirror symmetry below the pendant and *taç*. But this combination *levha* also includes calligraphy inside baubles and faces

inside letters, as well as calligraphy in more traditional straight line position at the bottom of the composition, guarded by two lions, the traditional symbol of Ali. The overall appearance is less professional, more like folk art. And while it is centered and bilaterally symmetrical on a vertical axis, its objects are more numerous and less integrated than the Bektashi *levha* from Istanbul that is the focus of study.

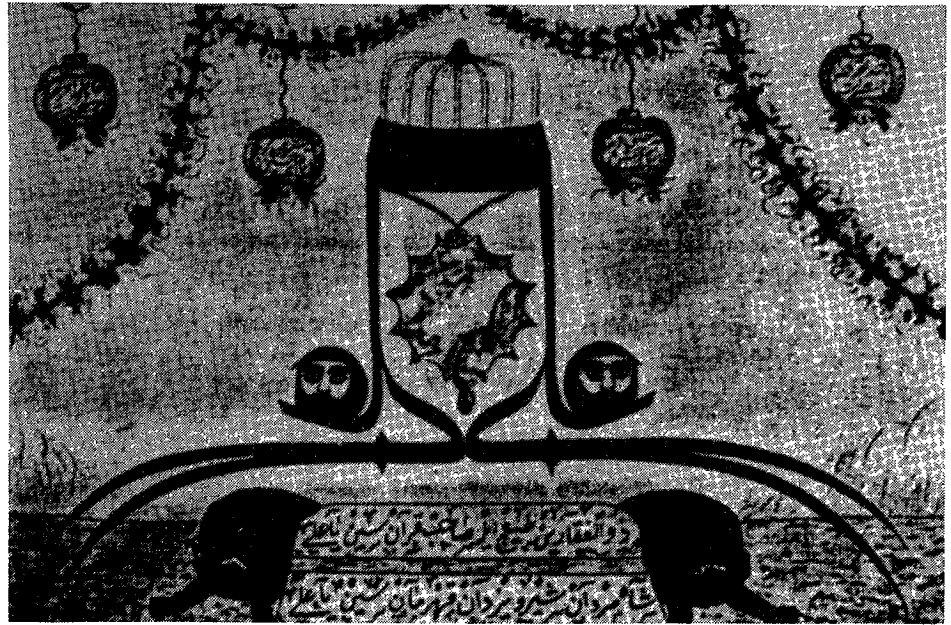


Figure 6: Combination of Calligraphy and Objects (Birge, p 236)

All these variations of objects defined by writing, objects filled with writing, and objects along with writing constitute the category of “script-pictures”, that is, “pictures made of writing”, or *yazi-resim* (Aksel, 1967) as it is called in Turkish. Thus the Bektashi *levha* under study can be classified as a form of *yazi-resim*, but one with unusual elegance, an elegance I relate to its greater compositional symmetry.

3. CONSTRAINTS OF MINORITY THEOLOGY AND MYSTIC CONCEALMENT

So far I have described the features of the Bektashi *levha* and have situated it broadly in traditions of Islamic calligraphy. But the political and theological contexts are also meaningful and impose constraints that affect the composition of the *levha* and its interpretation.



Figure 7: *Hilye*, Hacı Ahmed Ardik, 1937 (Derman, # 49)

As mentioned, the Bektashis are a mystic order who profoundly revere Ali as the source of mystic interpretation of the Qur'an and a deeper understanding of Islam. Along with Shi'a Muslims, they also hold that Ali and his line (the twelve Imams) are the rightful successors to the Prophet. This contrasts with Sunni Islam in which Ali is seen as a supporter of the Prophet, and the last of the first four caliphs, but is not elevated beyond that.

These theological points have political ramifications because the Ottoman government centered in Istanbul was Sunni, whereas its archenemy in the Islamic world, Safavid Iran, was Shi'i. Thus the beliefs of the Bektashi Order could be considered by the government as both heretical and, by association, traitorous. And while Islam in Ottoman times never engaged in anything resembling the Christian Inquisition, the Bektashis' belief in Ali and the twelve Imams cannot have endeared them to the Ottoman regime. Thus a constraint on some Bektashi art is how to express minority beliefs and not incur the wrath of the regime.

A second constraint is the powerful directive in the mystic orders, and in Bektashism in particular, not to reveal the secrets of the Order. The ritual practices are confined to the initiates. Often times on the walls of mystic centers there are verses from the Qur'an relating to Joseph. These are understood as a warning, for Joseph's problems began when he told his dreams to those who shouldn't have heard them.

Both these constraints encourage a tradition of obscured or even hidden meaning in Bektashi poetry, sayings, stories, and in some of its visual art. The broader theological precedent for this is the pragmatic tradition in minority Islam, *taqiya*, which holds to the propriety and sometimes necessity of concealing one's beliefs to avoid persecution by the majority. The Bektashi practice of private rituals and the experience of persecution in the early 19th century reinforce this.

One common strategy in visual art of revering Ali while not exciting the animosity of Sunni Muslims is to use a particularly Sunni format, surrounded by inscriptions familiar and acceptable to Sunnis, but then write only of Ali. A prime example of this (figure 7) is the *hilye* or "verbal description of a person" written in *muhakkak* or majestic *thuluth* style in which the top and bottom lines of calligraphy are familiar Qur'anic ones, the four circles in the inside corners each contain a name of one of the four caliphs, as is frequently found in the four corners of the main prayer room of Sunni mosques, but the central circle contains a description not of the Prophet, which is most common, but of Ali, as described by the Prophet. The focus is Ali, but the framing is all safely Sunni forms.

Another visual way of revering Ali while not exciting animosity from Sunni Muslims is the more secretive form in what appears a totally representational composition (figure 8). It is the picture of a room with two Bektashi Babas, recognizable by their headpieces, seated on the floor on one side, faced by another man whose arms are

crossed in the Bektashi position of humility and respect assumed by initiated members in the private ritual room of Bektashi centers. None of this would be particularly offensive or even noticeable to Sunni authorities. On the wall is an assemblage of weapons and small banners. The two banners on either side of the wall show adherence to the Family of the Prophet, with the hand on the right symbolizing the five members of that family (Muhammad, Ali and Fatima, and their two sons: Hassan and Husein), while the banner on the left represents the splayed sword of Zulfikar, given to Ali by Muhammad. Between these banners, and hidden by the very number of weapons yet still represented through their shapes and arrangement is a rough calligraphic message, *Aman ya Ali*, that is, "Alas O Ali!" (Aksel, p. 95).

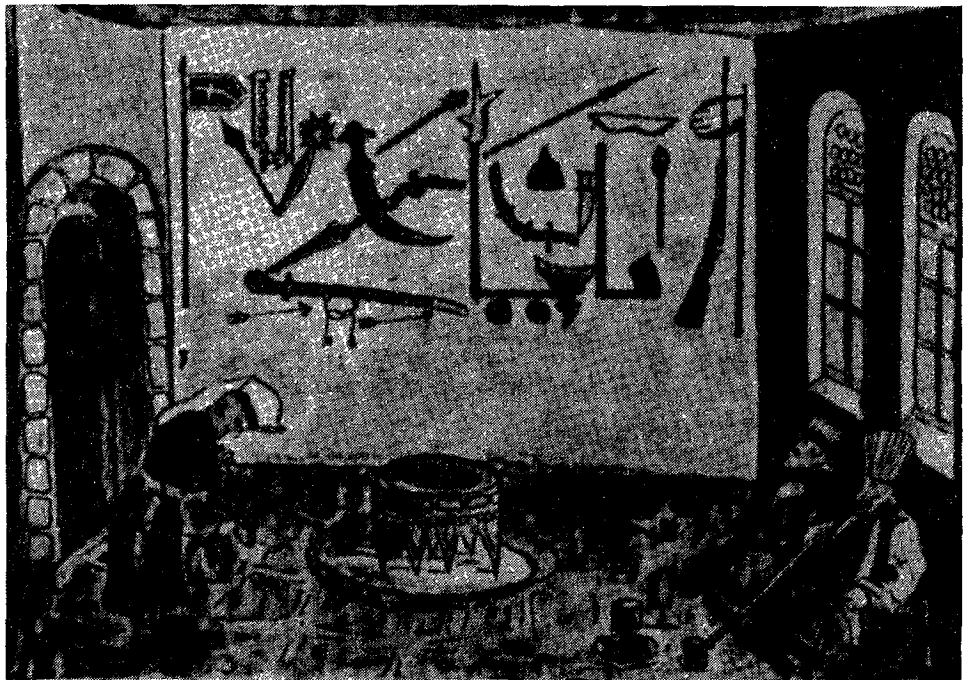


Figure 8: Bektashi Scene with Weapons (Aksel, p. 95)

Returning to the Bektashi *levha* that is the focus of study, in like manner I see a classic Islamic aesthetic expressed through the integration of objects and words and their symmetries as serving to conceal or at least mediate the *levha*'s "Ali'd" message.

4. INTERPRETING THE BEKTASHI *LEVHA*: HIDDEN SYNTAX

To interpret the Bektashi *levha* in Bektashi terms, both the mirror symmetry and the relative size of the words should be considered. Looking first at the mirror symmetry, one common interpretation by scholars is that the mirror symmetry in mystic Islamic art symbolizes the understanding that appearances in the material world have other meanings in the spiritual realm. In Arabic terms, to the *zahir*, the “apparent” or exoteric, there always corresponds a *batin*, an “inner”, or esoteric side. In general terms this is useful. The interpretation of the *levha* would then be that to Muhammad, Ali, and *Hak* or “the Truth”, there is an outer and inner meaning, and that this relates to Bektashi beliefs. Of these, Ali is the most important. There are problems here however with there being outer and inner meanings to “the Truth”, and with Ali being more important than “the Truth”. (I see these contradictions as vitiating the idea that the *levha* is a sort of “trinity” as claimed by several scholars.) Another common interpretation of such mirror symmetry is that it is like the symmetry in the human body - the word “ali” is written in the face with the “c” like letter in each eye. A human being is a microcosm for understanding the universe. Often allied with this is gematria, the assigning of numerical values to letters and computing sums of words to “prove” a sort of symbolic equation.

But yet another interpretation was given me by Baba Rexheb, a preeminent Bektashi Baba of Albanian background (see Trix, 1993). Baba Rexheb interpreted the large mirror writing of Ali to indicate, “Wherever you look, there you see Ali”. That is, you see the mystical understanding of God as brought to Islam by Ali. But then I asked if the mirror writing of Muhammad could signify that wherever you looked there you also saw Muhammad. Baba Rexheb protested. And further, I asked could *Hak* as the mystic term for God be symbolized as smaller than Ali, and didn’t its being written twice potentially signify multiplicity.

Baba Rexheb paused. Then he said in Turkish, “*Cumle olmalı. Muhammad-Ali hak(tir)*”. That is, “It must be a sentence, ‘Muhammad-Ali is the truth.’” Baba then further explained, “It means, the prophethood (of Muhammad) and the sainthood (of Ali) is the truth”. Note that in Turkish the copula “is” need not be written.

In this interpretation, instead of a list of names there are no single names. Rather “Muhammad-Ali” is understood as the unity of the prophethood and the sainthood, implying the necessity of a mystic understanding of Islam. As for the third word, in this interpretation it does not refer to God but to “truth” as a concept. Its dual echo in bilateral symmetry is therefore not blasphemous.

Supporting this interpretation that the message is indeed a syntactic unit and not separate names is the whole tradition of calligraphy where the preponderance of inscriptions are verses or at the very least phrases from the Qur’an. The only single word compositions I know of are “names of God”, that is, descriptors by which God is

referred to in the Qur'an. In the Bektashi tradition, note that in even the simple picture with the weapons on the wall, the message was syntactically linked as a crying out with a vocative to Ali. In a broader perspective, the evidence of the Creator in the universe can be related to Foucault's description of pre-seventeenth century Europe where people saw "signatures" or "signs" of God throughout their surroundings. Only in the Islamic view, these "signs" are more directly interactive or at least elaborated to the point of simple syntax.

Also supporting the interpretation that the words are meant to be understood as a sentence is the secondary symmetry of the *levha* itself. In particular, the primary symmetry of the composition is bilateral symmetry on a vertical axis through the headpiece, the pendant, the two *muhammad*'s and the two *ali*'s (figure 9).

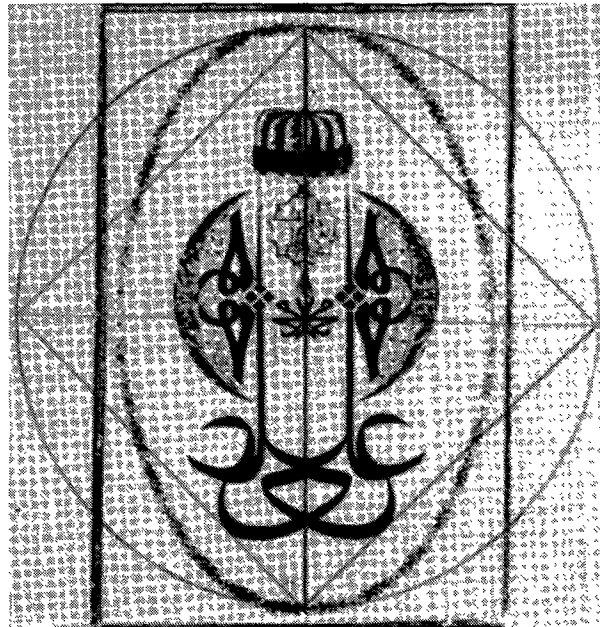


Figure 9: *Levha* and Bilateral Symmetry (vertical)

But there is also another axis of bilateral symmetry horizontally through the two *hak*'s, their diacritics, and the axe-heads (figure 10). Notice however that this splits the design so that the *muhammad*'s and the *ali*'s are together in the same lower hemisphere, while the Bektashi pendant and headpiece are in the upper hemisphere. I see this as reinforcing the reading of *muhammad* and *ali* as a sort of unit, to be read as "Muhammad-Ali hak(tir)", "the Prophethood-Sainthood is the truth". In line with this, I would also like to propose the interpretation of the upper objects as the sentence "Teslim-i murshide

hak(tir)". That is, "submission (from the 'stone of submission') to the spiritual master (as symbolized by the clerical headpiece) is the truth". Submission by the seeker to the mystic master has long been a central tenet of Bektashism (Birge, 1993). Thus the first sentence sets the scene theologically while the second sentence guides the believer practically. Confirmation of this second sentence by Baba Rexheb is unfortunately not possible as he passed from this world in the summer of 1995.

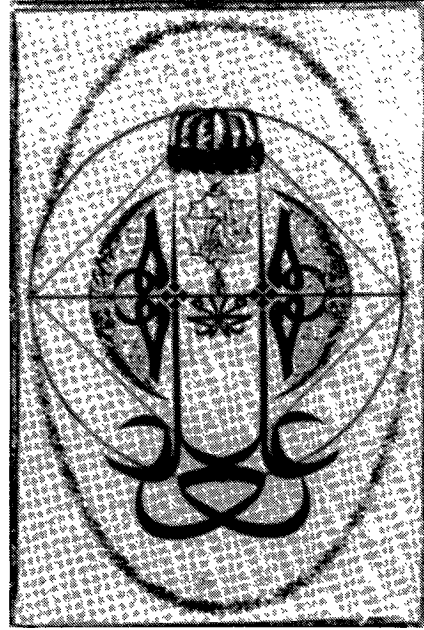


Figure 10: *Levha* and
Bilateral Symmetry
(horizontal)

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the symmetry in the Bektashi *levha* from the late Ottoman Empire relates it to classical Islamic aesthetics, supports an urban provenance, helps integrate calligraphic words with representations of ritual objects, and serves to obscure the heretical message of the importance of Ali. Its symmetry further underscores an interpretation of the words not as a list of Arabic names, but as a sentence in Turkish proclaiming that the prophethood alone is not sufficient, that only the prophethood together with the sainthood is the truth that leads to the "Majesty of Truth". Finally, the *levha* as a whole, with symmetry a crucial design element, projects a serenity that holds the viewer whether literate in Arabic and Islamic mysticism or not.

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