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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to the mullah Mohammed Ali, guardian of the three Tombs [1] in Com

Why do you live amongst the tombs, divine mullah ? You were made rather to dwell amongst the stars. You no doubt hide yourself lest you dim the light of the sun : you have no spots, unlike that star [2] ; but like it you cover yourself with clouds.

Your science is an abyss deeper than the ocean [3] ; your spirit is more piercing than Zufagar, Ali's two-pointed sword [4] ; you know what takes place in the nine choirs of the celestial powers ; you read the Qur'an on the breast of our divine Prophet, and when you find some passage obscure, an angel at his command unfolds its swift wings and descends from the throne to reveal to you its secret.

I could by means of you have an intimate correspondence with the seraphim : for are you not, thirteenth Imam, [5] the center where heaven and earth end, and the point of communication twixt the abyss and the empyrean ? [6]

I am in the midst of a profane people ; allow me to purify myself with you : suffer me to turn my face toward the sacred places where you live ; distinguish me from evildoers, as we distinguish between the white and black threads at sunrise. [7] Assist me with your counsel ; watch over my soul : exalt it with the spirit of the prophets ; nourish it with the science of paradise, and allow me to place its wounds at your feet. Address your sacred letters to Erzerum, where I shall be staying for several months.

Erzerum this 11th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1711

[1] Those of Fatmé and of the kings Sefi I (who died in 1642) and Abbas II (1632-1666). Usbek has performed his devotions in the famous mosque of Com (letter 1), which contains the three tombs.

[2] It was Galileo who described sunspots ; see letter 126.

[3] "For her thoughts are more vast than the sea, and her counsels more deep than the great ocean" (Ecclesiasticus 24:39).

[4] The sword named Zufagar had been given by the archangel Gabriel to Ali, son-in-law and successor to Muhammad (Chardin, III, 64).

[5] A forceful compliment to the addressee, who is not one of the twelve successor imams directly descended from Ali. The word *imam* had the general meaning of guide or spiritual head.

[6] The abyss designates hell and the deepest seas ; the empyrean the highest realm of heaven, where the saints enjoy the beatific vision.

[7] The expression comes from the Qur'an (2:187) : "[...] eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night]".