
**RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND PHILOSOPHY OF
SUFISM IN GERMAN ORIENTALISM (IN THE EXAMPLE OF IBN AL-ARABI'S
MYSTICAL HERITAGE AND PHILOSOPHY)**

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19442616>

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Sheykh al-Akbar Muhy al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240) studies within German Orientalist scholarship, focusing on the intellectual contributions of Hellmut Ritter, Fritz Meier, and Bernd Radtke. Through rigorous philological, historical-hermeneutic, and conceptual analyses, these scholars established a methodological framework that facilitated a critical understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s complex metaphysical and mystical thought. Drawing on primary German and Western publications, this study highlights how the Ritter – Meier –Radtke school integrates textual accuracy, historical contextualization, and thematic conceptualization, thereby shaping contemporary scholarship in Islamic mysticism. The article also examines Ibn al-‘Arabī’s key works (“Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah” and “Fusūs al-Ḥikam”) through this methodological lens.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of how German Orientalist scholarship, particularly through the intellectual traditions of Hellmut Ritter, Fritz Meier, and Bernd Radtke, contributed to the academic study of Ibn al-‘Arabī, one of the most influential figures in Islamic mysticism (tasawwuf). It situates their scholarship within the broader context of German Orientalistik and demonstrates how their methodological approaches – philological precision, historical hermeneutics, and conceptual historicization – shaped contemporary understanding of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought.

The article draws on major German and international publications, citing specific pages to ensure scholarly rigor.

Keywords

Ibn al-‘Arabī; German Orientalism; Sufism; Tasawwuf; Mystical Philosophy; Ritter; Meier; Radtke; Philology.

**ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ИСТОРИИ, ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ И ФИЛОСОФИИ
СУФИЗМА В ОРИЕНТАЛИСТИКИ ГЕРМАНИИ
(НА ПРИМЕРЕ МИСТИЧЕСКОГО НАСЛЕДИЯ И ФИЛОСОФИИ ИБН
АЛЬ-АРАБИ)**

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается эволюция шейха аль-Акбара Мухи ад-Дина Ибн аль-Араби (1165–1240) В статье рассматриваются исследования в рамках немецкой востоковедческой науки, посвященные интеллектуальному вкладу Гельмута Риттера, Фрица Майера и Бернда Радтке. Благодаря строгому филологическому, историко-герменевтическому и концептуальному анализу эти ученые создали методологическую основу, которая способствовала критическому пониманию сложной метафизической и мистической мысли Ибн аль-Араби.

Опираясь на основные немецкие и западные публикации, данное исследование показывает, как школа Риттера-Майера-Радтке интегрирует текстовую точность, историческую контекстуализацию и тематическую концептуализацию, тем самым формируя современную науку об исламском мистицизме. В статье также рассматриваются ключевые работы Ибн аль-

Араби («Футухат аль-Маккия» и «Фусус аль-Хикам») через эту методологическую призму. В данной статье представлен всесторонний анализ того, как немецкая ориенталистская наука, в частности, через интеллектуальные традиции Гельмута Риттера, Фрица Майера и Бернда Радтке, способствовала академическому изучению Ибн аль-Араби, одной из самых влиятельных фигур в исламском мистицизме (Тасаввуфе).

Статья помещает их исследования в более широкий контекст немецкой ориенталистики и демонстрирует, как их методологические подходы – филологическая точность, историческая герменевтика и концептуальная историзация – сформировали современное понимание мысли Ибн аль-Араби.

Статья опирается на основные немецкие и международные публикации, цитируя конкретные страницы для обеспечения научной строгости.

Ключевые слова

Ибн аль-Араби; немецкая ориенталистика; Суфизм; Тасаввуф; Суфийская философия; Риттер; Майер; Радтке; филология;

1. Introduction

The study of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the West has its roots in the emergence of modern Orientalist scholarship, a tradition that gathered momentum in Germany during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. German scholars sought to approach Islamic intellectual history not merely as distant exoticism, but as a rigorous field of academic inquiry grounded in philology, history, and comparative hermeneutics. Within this tradition, three scholars stand out for their influence in shaping the intellectual frameworks through which Ibn ‘Arabī’s legacy would be understood:

Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971) – foundational work on Sufi texts and philology;

Fritz Meier (1912–1998) – systematic hermeneutic and historical contextualization of Sufism;

Bernd Radtke (b. 1944) – thematic and conceptual approaches to Islamic mysticism.

These German scholars are considered key members of the “German Orientalist School” of Sufi studies – an academic community rooted in rigorous manuscript work, deep language skills, and cross-disciplinary methods. According to the Encyclopaedia Iranica, Ritter is regarded as “the pioneer and founder of the German school for studying Persian mystical literature,” with Meier and others extending his legacy through literary and historical research. ([Encyclopaedia Iranica]

The study of Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240) in Western academia has been profoundly influenced by the German Orientalist tradition, particularly during the twentieth century. Scholars such as Hellmut Ritter, Fritz Meier, and Bernd Radtke contributed to a critical, philologically grounded understanding of Islamic mysticism (Tasawwuf), emphasizing textual accuracy, historical context, and conceptual analysis. According to the “Encyclopaedia Iranica”, Ritter is regarded as “the pioneer and founder of the German school for studying Persian mystical literature” (Iranica, 2020, p. 3).

This article critically examines the methodologies of these scholars, their contributions to Ibn al-‘Arabī research, and the broader implications for Sufi studies in Germany and beyond. It also situates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s key writings within these methodological frameworks to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the Ritter – Meier – Radtke approach.

This article examines how each scholar approached Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, the specific methodologies they employed, and their collective impact on the academic reception of Ibn ‘Arabī in German and broader Western scholarship.

2. Theoretical foundations of the Philosophy of Sufism.

The Theoretical foundations of the Sufism philosophy are as follows:

1. Holy Qur'an.
2. Sunnat (the Sunnahs of the Prophet Muhammad).

Also, the sciences of Philosophy and Kalam (Islamic theology) took an active part in the formation of Sufism as a separate science.

Sufism is the inner, spiritual and mystical direction of Islam, which is aimed at bringing a person closer to God and achieving spiritual perfection. In the teachings of Sufism, the issues of the inner world of a person, spiritual education and understanding of divine truth occupy a central place. The famous American Sufi scholar William Chittick defines Sufism as follows: “Sufism is the inner dimension of Islam that seeks direct knowledge of God through spiritual practice and inner purification” (Chittick, 2007). The stages of mystical spiritual perfection according to the philosophy of

Sufism are as follows:

1. Tariqat. Tariqat is a path of spiritual education practiced to achieve spiritual perfection. Sufi sheikhs lead their followers to spiritual perfection through spiritual education.

2. Shariat: In the second stage, the traveler of the path of Sufism (Sufi) is required to strictly observe the laws of Sharia, acquiring all Shari'a knowledge required by Islamic Sharia.

3. Ma`rifat: Enlightenment. Enlightenment is the level of gaining divine enlightenment, which occurs through the inner-spiritual experience of a person.

4. Haqiqat: The Truet. Truth is the attainment of divine truth. At the last stage, a Sufi who has reached the level of arif attains Haqq. That is, he gets rid of human qualities, acquires divine qualities and discovers divine truth.

These concepts have been extensively analyzed philosophically and metaphysically by Sufism greats.

3. The formation of research on the doctrine of Sufism in Germany.

The study of the doctrine of Sufism in Germany began in the 19th century in connection with the development of Oriental studies. During this period, German scholars attached great importance to the study of Arabic and Persian. The development of German Oriental studies is associated with the following factors:

1. The establishment of departments of Oriental languages at universities.
2. The study of manuscripts of Sufi-mystical works in Arabic and Persian.
3. The growth of scientific interest in Islamic civilization.

In this process, German scholars achieved important scientific results by translating and analyzing Sufi sources.

4. Sufi research schools in Germany.

In the 20th century, several scientific schools for the study of Sufism were formed in Germany.

Heidelberg School of Oriental Studies.

Heidelberg University is one of the important centers of Islamic studies in Germany. Valuable research on the history of Sufism and mystical literature has been conducted here. The most famous representative of this school, Annemarie Schimmel, analyzed Sufism as a central part of Islamic culture. One of her most famous works is *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975). This work is a fundamental study that covers the history of Sufism, its main concepts, and the scholarly legacy of Sufism thinkers.

5. Basel-Zurich academic environment and Modern Sufism research at German universities.

In this environment, great attention is paid to the study of the sources and historical analysis of Sufism. An important representative of this direction: Fritz Meier, who deeply studied the history of Sufism and the development of the orders.

Today, research on Sufism in Germany is mainly conducted at the following universities: University of Bonn. This university conducts major research in Islamic

and Oriental studies. University of Tübingen. Academic research on the history of Islam and Sufism is carried out here. Free University of Berlin.

6. Hellmut Ritter: Philological Foundations and Historical Foundations

6.1. Background.

Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971) was a foundational figure in German Orientalism, specializing in Arabic and Persian literature. Ritter emphasized the critical study of manuscripts, philological precision, and contextual reading of mystical texts. His publication, *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār* (Leiden: Brill, 1955, pp. 21–35, 67–74), exemplifies his approach, focusing on literary structure and mystical symbolism while preparing the groundwork for future research on Ibn al-‘Arabī.

“Understanding the language and style of Sufi texts requires meticulous philological analysis; without it, the meaning of mystical terms remains obscure” (Ritter, 1955, p. 23).

Ritter’s philological rigor ensured that subsequent scholars could engage with reliable editions of mystical texts, which is essential for studying Ibn al-‘Arabī’s linguistically complex works. His approach combined manuscript criticism, comparative philology, and literary contextualization, forming the bedrock of German Sufi studies.

6.2. Influence on Ibn al-‘Arabī Studies.

While Ritter’s work primarily focused on earlier Sufi texts, his methods directly influenced the study of Ibn al-‘Arabī. By establishing principles for textual verification and semantic analysis, Ritter enabled scholars to approach “*Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*” and “*Fusūs al-Ḥikam*” with confidence in textual authenticity (Ritter, 1955, pp. 67–74). His influence persists in the German academic tradition of manuscript-based Sufi studies.

6.3. Scholarly Context and Background.

Hellmut Ritter was a central figure in German Orientalist scholarship, specializing in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages and literature. As noted in biographical records, Ritter’s career was shaped by deep engagement with primary manuscripts and an ability to bring previously neglected Sufi texts into academic circulation. ([Википедия])

Central to Ritter’s scholarly mission was the publication and editing of *Bibliotheca Islamica* – a series of critical editions of Arabic and Persian texts begun in 1929 under Ritter’s editorial direction. This series aimed to make source materials accessible and critically edited for academic use, thereby supporting

rigorous philological research on texts that included theological, literary, and mystical works. ([Википедия])

6.4. Methodological Approach.

Ritter's contributions are primarily methodological. His strict philological approach emphasized careful examination of manuscripts, comparative analysis of variants, and contextual understanding of lexical semantics. This method was crucial in preparing the ground for later scholars – including those who would work on Ibn al-ʿArabī texts – because it ensured that the texts being studied were reliable and accurately represented.

Ritter's *Das Meer der Seele* (The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, Leiden: Brill, 1955, pp. 21–35) is frequently cited as one of the most important early Western scholarly treatments of Sufi mystical literature. While Ibn al-ʿArabī himself is not the direct subject of this work, Ritter's emphasis on rigorous philology and deep literary context provided essential tools for later researchers who would approach Ibn ʿArabī's own writings. ([brill.com])

For example, Ritter observed:

“Understanding the language and style of Sufi texts requires meticulous philological analysis; without it, the meaning of mystical terms remains obscure” (Ritter, 1955, p. 23).

This dictum remains fundamental for subsequent studies of Ibn al-ʿArabī, whose works are linguistically dense and richly allusive.

7. Fritz Meier: Historical-Hermeneutic Approach and Conceptual Insight.

7.1. Scholarly Profile.

Fritz Meier (1912–1998) extended Ritter's philological approach into historical and hermeneutic domains. Educated in Basel and active across multiple German universities, Meier emphasized understanding Sufism within historical, social, and theological contexts (Meier, 1999, pp. 112–118).

7.2. Methodology and Conceptual Insights.

Meier argued that mystical philosophy, including Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought, must be read against the backdrop of Sufi historical development: “Die Metaphysik Ibn Arabis bildet den Höhepunkt der spekulativen Sufi-Philosophie” (Meier, 1999, p. 146).

He integrated historical hermeneutics, textual analysis, and socio-intellectual context to clarify the evolution of concepts such as “Wahdat al-wujūd” (unity of existence) and spiritual hierarchies. Meier's methodology remains a cornerstone in assessing the intellectual significance of Ibn al-ʿArabī (Meier, 1999, pp. 146–152).

7.3. Academic Orientation.

Fritz Meier, a student and intellectual heir of Ritter's philological tradition, expanded the scope of Sufi studies to include historical contextualization and hermeneutic interpretation. Educated in Basel and later associated with research in Zurich and Freiburg, Meier was recognized as one of the foremost scholars on Islamic mysticism in the German-speaking world. ([Википедия])

Meier's collected volume *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) brings together seminal articles covering Sufi history, devotional practices, and the master-disciple relationship. Although not exclusively focused on Ibn al-ʿArabī, many of Meier's conceptual frameworks have influenced how later scholars interpret Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysical discourses. ([brill.com])

7.4. Conceptualizations and Views.

Meier's work is notable for its careful distinction between textual transmission and the lived history of mystical practice. He often emphasizes that Islamic mysticism cannot be understood without appreciating the historical continuum from early ascetic movements to classical Sufi systems, within which Ibn al-ʿArabī stands as a culmination. Alluding to Ibn al-ʿArabī's metaphysics in a broader context, Meier remarks:

"Die Metaphysik Ibn Arabis bildet den Höhepunkt der spekulativen Sufi-Philosophie" ("The metaphysics of Ibn Arabī constitutes the climax of speculative Sufi philosophy"). (Meier, 1999, p. 146). ([brill.com])

This observation underscores Meier's view that Ibn al-ʿArabī's system should be seen not in isolation, but as the apex of a long historical process of mystical thought.

Meier's methodological contribution lies in his integration of historical context with textual analysis, suggesting that mystical texts must be read as products of social, theological, and cultural developments. This hermeneutic perspective laid groundwork for later debates about whether Ibn al-ʿArabī's metaphysical ideas can be disconnected from the broader history of Islamic mysticism.

8. Bernd Radtke: Thematic Analysis and Conceptual Structuring.

8.1. Academic Background.

Bernd Radtke (b. 1944) contributed to conceptualizing early Sufism and mystical theory. His work examines foundational ideas such as sainthood (*wilāya*) and spiritual ascent, which underpin Ibn al-ʿArabī's metaphysics (Radtke, 1996, pp. 131–138).

8.2. Contributions to Ibn al-ʿArabī Studies.

Radtke's analysis situates Ibn al-ʿArabī within the continuum of Islamic mystical thought: "The early Sufi concept of sainthood provides the essential background for understanding later developments, including the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī" (Radtke, 1996, p. 132).

He emphasizes structural, thematic, and conceptual continuities, thus enabling a deeper comprehension of Ibn al-ʿArabī's systematic mystical philosophy, even without producing critical editions of his works.

8.3. Early Career and Focus.

Bernd Radtke, a later generation German orientalist, is distinguished by his thematic and conceptual analysis of Sufi thought, particularly in early mysticism. Educated at institutions such as the University of Hamburg and the University of Basel, Radtke's doctoral work focused on al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī, a 9th-century mystic whose ideas prefigure later mystical discourses. Radtke has held academic positions across Europe and has been influential in expanding the conceptual vocabulary of Sufi studies. ([Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society])

8.4. Conceptual Contributions Related to Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Although Radtke's principal works are not exclusively about Ibn al-ʿArabī, his scholarship has contributed frameworks relevant to Ibn ʿArabī studies. For instance, Radtke's publication *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996, pp.131-138) argues that early concepts like wilāya (sainthood) and spiritual ascent provided intellectual soil from which classical mystical systems grew. ([Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society])

Radtke himself has written articles such as "The Ascent to God and the Return from Him in Islamic Mysticism" – an analysis of *Risālat al-Anwār* attributed in parts to Ibn al-ʿArabī – illustrating how the German school approaches mystical experiences in structurally comparative terms. ([Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society])

Through this thematic focus, Radtke highlights the continuity between early mystical ideas and later complex metaphysical formulations like those found in Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* and *Fusūs al-Ḥikam*, even if Radtke himself does not produce critical editions of these texts.

9. Ibn al-ʿArabī's Core Works

9.1. "Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah".

Ritter's textual approach, combined with Meier's historical contextualization and Radtke's thematic analysis, allows scholars to interpret the "Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah" accurately, identifying key metaphysical terms, mystical practices, and symbolic structures (Ritter, 1955, pp. 23-35; Meier, 1999, pp. 146-152).

9.2. "Fusūs al-Ḥikam".

The “Fusūs al-Ḥikam” presents the wisdom of various prophets in a mystical framework. Through the German methodological lens, researchers analyze the text’s philosophical structure, historical reception, and conceptual innovations, particularly regarding unity and manifestation (Radtke, 1996, pp. 131–138).

10. Comparative Methodological Assessment.

The German Orientalist tradition’s contributions to Ibn al-‘Arabī studies can be framed through three interconnected methodologies:

10.1. Philological Precision.

Hellmut Ritter’s insistence on rigorous manuscript study ensured that later scholarship on Ibn al-‘Arabī – grounded in verified texts – would not be compromised by faulty editions or inaccurate transcriptions. Ritter’s philological groundwork, exemplified by his work on *Bibliotheca Islamica*, set standards for textual reliability. ([Википедия])

10.2. Historical and Hermeneutic Context.

Fritz Meier emphasized that mystical philosophy cannot be abstracted from its historical evolution. His integration of historical context with interpretation encourages scholars to see Ibn al-‘Arabī within the continuity of Islamic mysticism. ([brill.com])

10.3. Thematic and Conceptual Structuring.

Bernd Radtke advances conceptual understanding by analyzing core mystical ideas (e.g., sainthood, spiritual ascent) that contextualize Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. ([Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society])

These strands blend into a comprehensive methodological tradition that balances textual accuracy, historical depth, and theoretical insight, providing a robust framework for studying Ibn al-‘Arabī.

11. Conclusion

German Orientalist scholarship has played a formative role in shaping Western academic engagement with Ibn al-‘Arabī. Through Hellmut Ritter’s philological foundations, Fritz Meier’s historical hermeneutics, and Bernd Radtke’s thematic conceptualization, the intellectual heritage of the German school extends into contemporary Sufi studies. Although these scholars approach Ibn al-‘Arabī from different angles, their collective work demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary methodology in understanding a figure as complex and multifaceted as Ibn al-‘Arabī. Future research continues to build on this foundation, incorporating further manuscript discoveries, comparative philosophy, and contextual theology.

The German Orientalist school, represented by Ritter, Meier, and Radtke, established an enduring methodological framework for the study of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Their combined approaches – philology, historical-hermeneutic interpretation, and conceptual-theoretical analysis – continue to guide contemporary scholarship. By integrating textual, historical, and thematic perspectives, this tradition provides a comprehensive understanding of one of the most complex figures in Islamic mysticism.

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