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NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN AHMED YASAWI’S HIKMET: A CONTENT-ANALYTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT Number symbolism is a recurrent element of oral and written tradition, appearing across myth, epic, religious culture, and poetry. This study examines the use of number symbolism in the *Divan-i Hikmet*, the collected aphorisms of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (d. 1166), founder of the first Sufi order established among the Turks and a central figure in the Islamization of Anatolia. The text was screened in full for numerical references; ninety distinct numbers were identified, ranging from one to 120,000. Twelve numbers of particular cultural salience in Turkic and Islamic tradition — 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 40, 63, 360, 444, 18,000 and 100,000 — were selected for frequency counting and contextual analysis, and the results were compared against the broader literature on cross-cultural number symbolism. The findings indicate that Yasawi draws on both universal symbolic associations (unity, duality, the cardinal directions, the seven heavens) and distinctly Turkic-Islamic elaborations (the *Kırklar* assembly associated with the number forty, the Prophet’s age of sixty-three, and the body-cosmos correspondence encoded in 360 and 444). The article concludes that number symbolism in the *Hikmet* functioned both as a devotional-pedagogical device and as a channel through which pre-Islamic Turkic and Islamic mystical traditions were fused, with demonstrable influence on later Alevi-Bektashi symbolic vocabulary.

Keywords: number symbolism, Ahmed Yasawi, *Divan-i Hikmet*, Turkic-Islamic literature, content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Symbolic expression is attested from the earliest stages of human culture and became, with the development of oral and later written tradition, an inseparable feature of myth, epic, religious practice, and poetry. Among the resources of symbolic language, number occupies a distinctive place: numerical symbolism can be traced to Sumerian and Babylonian antiquity, developed through successive cultural contact, and came in due course to shape Turkic and Islamic literary and religious expression.

Certain numbers recur with markedly higher frequency than others across cultures. In Turkic folk culture, three, four, five, seven, nine and forty are consistently treated as

auspicious or sacred, a pattern visible in folktale, epic, idiom, proverb, and popular belief. Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (11th–12th century), regarded as the founder of the earliest Sufi order among the Turks and as a formative spiritual influence on the spread of Islam in Anatolia, is the author of the *Divani Hikmet*, a didactic collection composed in a register accessible to a broad audience. A preliminary reading of the *Divan* indicates extensive and deliberate use of number symbolism throughout, with the numbers one, five, seven, eight and forty — numbers already prominent in Turkic tradition — recurring with particular frequency.

The aim of the present study is to identify the numbers to which Yasawi assigns symbolic weight in the *Hikmet*, to establish how frequently and in what contexts each number occurs, and to determine the meanings he attaches to them relative to the wider historical and cross-cultural literature on number symbolism. The study addresses three questions: (i) which numbers recur most prominently in the *Divani Hikmet*; (ii) in what textual and thematic contexts does each number appear; and (iii) to what extent do Yasawi’s usages reproduce pre-existing (pre-Islamic Turkic, Judeo-Christian, Hellenic, Islamic) symbolic conventions as opposed to introducing original elaborations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary source is the *Divani Hikmet* in the edition prepared by Hayati Bice (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2010), used as the standard reference edition for *Hikmet* numbering throughout. Comparative and interpretive material was drawn from the established literature on number symbolism, including Schimmel’s *The Mystery of Numbers*, Atabek’s general survey of number symbolism, Ifrah’s history of numerical notation, and specialist studies of Turkic and Alevi-Bektashi symbolic vocabulary (Kılıç 2016; Coşar 2011; Bozkurt and Bozkurt 2012), together with relevant entries from the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi.

The *Divan* was read in its entirety and every numerical reference was extracted and logged with its *Hikmet* and line location. This full-text screening yielded ninety distinct numbers, ranging from one to 120,000. From this inventory, twelve numbers were selected for close analysis on the basis of (a) documented salience in pre-Islamic Turkic tradition, (b) documented salience in Islamic religious sources, or (c) unusually high frequency within the corpus itself. For each selected number the following were recorded: (i) raw frequency of occurrence across the *Divan*; (ii) the lexical collocations in which the number appears (e.g., “seven heavens,” “eight paradises”); (iii) the thematic or doctrinal context of each occurrence; and (iv) correspondence with, or divergence from, the symbolic associations reported in the comparative literature. Frequencies were tallied manually from the Bice edition and cross-checked against the *hikmet*/line citations given in the original study; the counts reported below reproduce those citations for verification.

RESULTS

Across the corpus, ninety distinct numbers occur, spanning three orders of magnitude from unity to 120,000. Frequency is markedly uneven: a small set of numbers — one, two, four, five, seven, eight, forty, sixty-three, 360, 444, 18,000 and 100,000 — account for the

majority of symbolically weighted usages, while the remainder appear singly or in isolated hyperbolic constructions. Table 1 summarizes the frequency and dominant semantic field of each of the twelve numbers selected for detailed analysis.

Number	Frequency (n)	Primary semantic field in the Hikmet
1 (bir)	41	Divine oneness (Allah); literal unit
2 (iki)	46	Duality / opposition (dünya-âhiret); paired organs
4 (dört)	25	Cardinal directions; four Caliphs; four Sufi “gates”
5 (beş)	12	Five daily prayers; “five letters” of the Sufi path
7 (yedi)	29	Seven heavens/earths/hells; seven steps after burial
8 (sekiz)	7	Eight gates/levels of Paradise
40 (kırk)	17	The Kırklar (Forty Saints) assembly
63 (altmış üç)	33	Age of the Prophet’s death; Yasawi’s retreat
360 / 444	8 / 4	Bodily veins / bones; microcosm–macrocosm (insân-ı kâmil)
18,000 (on sekiz bin)	6	Totality of created realms (âlem)
100,000 (yüz bin)	69	Rhetorical hyperbole: abundance of suffering, mercy, devotion

Table 1. Frequency and principal symbolic associations of the twelve numbers analyzed in the Divan-ı Hikmet.

Small numbers (1, 2, 4, 5)

The number one occurs 41 times; in 25 of these instances it functions as a designation of the Creator, expressed through formulas such as “One and Existent” (Bir ve Var) and “the One God” (bir Allah), while the remaining occurrences are non-symbolic numerical uses (“one hour,” “one breath”). The number two occurs 46 times: eight instances denote paired bodily organs (eyes, arms, feet), and twenty instances form the compound “two worlds”/“two realms” (iki âlem / iki cihan / iki dünya), designating the opposition between this world and the hereafter; six further instances form the expression “second register” (defter-i sâni), which Köprülü reads as a self-reference to the Hikmet collection itself. The number four occurs 25 times, most saliently in the phrase “four directions” (dört yan), an expression Durbilmez associates with pre-Islamic Turkic conceptions of statehood, and in the idiom “four dövmek” (roughly, “to turn frantically in four directions”), which recurs across seven separate Hikmets as devotional counsel. The number five occurs 12 times, concentrated in two collocations: “five daily prayers” (three occurrences) and “five letters” (five occurrences), the latter referring to the five-letter spelling of each of the four Sufi “gates” (şariat, tarikat, hakikat, marifet).

Mid-range numbers (7, 8, 40, 63)

Seven occurs 29 times, principally in the collocations “seven heavens,” “seven earths,” “seven hells,” and “seven climes,” and in the recurring phrase “seven steps,” used exclusively

in passages describing the interrogation of the deceased by the angels Munkar and Nakir. Eight occurs 7 times, four of which specify “eight paradises,” consistent with the hadith tradition cited in the comparative literature. Forty occurs 17 times; eight of these instances refer to the Kırklar (“Forty [Saints]”), a body of unseen holy figures central to Alevi-Bektashi cosmology and traced, in that tradition, to narratives surrounding the Prophet’s ascension (mi’raj). Sixty-three occurs 33 times, 31 of which refer specifically to the age at which Yasawi is reported to have withdrawn underground into ascetic retreat — an act the Divan itself frames as emulating the age at which the Prophet Muhammad died, and which the surrounding oral tradition glosses as “not exceeding the limit” (haddi aşmamak).

3.4 Composite and large numbers (360/444, 18,000, 100,000)

360 and 444 occur together within a single verse pairing “three hundred and sixty veins” with “four hundred and forty-four bones” (360 occurring 8 times; 444, 4 times), an image consistent with an Alevi-Bektashi body-cosmos correspondence in which the body’s vessels and bones are mapped onto the structure of the created universe, expressing the doctrine of the insân-ı kâmil (the “perfect human”) as microcosm. 18,000 occurs 6 times, invariably in the collocation “eighteen thousand realms” (on sekiz bin âlem), a formula of Sufi rather than Qur’anic or hadith origin used to express the immeasurable scope of creation. 100,000 is by far the most frequent of the numbers surveyed, with 69 occurrences; unlike the numbers above, it carries no fixed doctrinal referent and instead functions rhetorically, as an intensifier attached to a wide range of nouns denoting affliction (“a hundred thousand troubles,” “a hundred thousand torments”), piety (“a hundred thousand prayers,” “a hundred thousand devotees”), and eschatological reward or punishment.

DISCUSSION

Two distinct patterns emerge from the results. The first is convergence with symbolic associations already documented across Sumerian, Hellenic, Judeo-Christian and Islamic sources: the treatment of one as a sign of divine unity, of two as a marker of opposition, of four as an index of spatial totality, and of seven and eight as structuring numbers of cosmology (heavens, hells, paradises) all replicate conventions attested well beyond the Turkic-Islamic sphere. This convergence is unsurprising given that Yasawi’s Sufi formation drew directly on an Islamic intellectual tradition that had itself absorbed Hellenic (Pythagorean, Neoplatonic) and biblical numerical symbolism.

The second pattern is elaboration specific to the Turkic-Islamic and, in particular, the later Alevi-Bektashi context. The frequency and doctrinal weight given to sixty-three, to the Kırklar association of forty, and to the paired 360/444 image are not paralleled with comparable prominence in the general comparative literature on number symbolism, and their combination in the Hikmet appears distinctive to Yasawi and to the devotional tradition that followed him. The “five letters” formula for the four Sufi gates, in particular, appears to anticipate later Bektashi numerological wordplay on the term bektaş, suggesting a direct line of textual influence from the Divan into subsequent Alevi-Bektashi symbolic vocabulary, as

argued by Köprülü with respect to Yasawi’s broader influence across Kipchak, Azeri, Turkmen and Anatolian-Rumelian literary spheres.

The high frequency but low doctrinal specificity of 100,000 is worth noting separately: its function is closer to rhetorical amplification than to fixed symbolic reference, and this distinguishes it functionally from the other eleven numbers examined, which each anchor a stable cluster of associated concepts.

CONCLUSION

The Divan-ı Hikmet deploys ninety distinct numbers across its text, ranging from one to 120,000. Among these, twelve numbers carry sustained symbolic weight. Five of them — one (the Creator), two (opposition), four (direction), seven (cosmological structure) and eight (paradise) — reproduce symbolic associations attested widely across pre-Islamic and Islamic sources and are not specific to Yasawi. A second group — four as the number of the Caliphs, five as the number of daily prayers and of the Sufi “gates,” seven as the number of steps in the grave interrogation, sixty-three as the Prophet’s age at death, and forty as the number of the Kırklar — draws on distinctly Islamic and Turkic-Islamic reference points. A third group — 18,000 and 100,000 — functions to express, respectively, the totality of creation and rhetorical abundance. The study’s principal limitation is its restriction to a single primary source and to twelve of the ninety numbers identified; a systematic account of the remaining numbers, and of the Divan’s downstream influence on specific later authors, would require separate, more extensive corpus work.

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