



ME'RĀJ II. ILLUSTRATIONS

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From the turn of the 14th century onward, depictions of the Prophet Moḥammad's night journey (*esrā'*) and heavenly ascent (*me'rāj*) were integrated into illustrated world histories and biographies, and also began to appear in animal fables like *Kalila wa Demna*, compendia of poetical extracts, Persian romances, heroic tales, and divination books. Fully independent and lavishly illustrated *Me'rāj-nāmas* (Books of Ascension) were produced from the time of Il-khanid rule (ca. 1260-1335) until the Qajar period (1794-1925) as well. As growing evidence indicates, it seems that these latter kinds of works were utilized for Sunni or Shi'ite missionary activities (see Gruber, 2005, 2008, 2009).

The earliest surviving image of the Prophet's ascension appears in a section on the *me'rāj* as included in an illustrated manuscript of Rašid-al-Din's *Jāme' al-tawāriḵ* (Compendium of Chronicles), begun in Tabriz in 706/1306-7 under the patronage of *Soltān Ġāzān* (r. 1295-1304) and completed under his successor Öljeitü (Uljāyту, r. 1304-16). In this painting, the Prophet strides his human-headed flying steed al-Borāq, who holds a closed book in its hands while its tail appears to transform into an angel wielding a shield and a sword. On the right, two angels, one of whom holds a gold cup on a platter, approach the Prophet from a set of doors that seem affixed to sky. Judging from the elements in the painting and their relationship to Rašid-al-Din's text, this image presents a



moment in which the Prophet must chose between evil (the angel of death or a demon) and good (the Qur'ān), which sets him on an initiatory, correct path (*al-feṭra*) from the earth into the heavens. His proper course is echoed by his selection of the cup of milk and his rejection of other cups containing water, honey, and wine (EUL Or. Ms. 20, folio 55r; Talbot Rice, 1976, p. 110, fig. 36; Gruber, 2005, pp. 84-99, fig. 2.4).

Although this painting belongs to a larger cycle of images dedicated to the Prophet's life, the me'rāj as a subject unto itself took off very soon thereafter with the first illustrated *Me'rāj-nāma* attributed to the commission of the last Il-khanid ruler [Abu Sa'id Bahādor Khan](#) (r. 1316-35). Today, only a series of nine paintings on eight folios are preserved in a Safavid album of paintings and calligraphies (TSK H. 2154, folios 31v, 42r-v, 61r-v, 62r, 107r, and 121r; Ettinghausen, 1957; Çağman and Tanındı, pp. 67-70; Gruber, 2005, pp. 108-180; idem, 2009). Unfortunately the original *Me'rāj-nāma* text—said to have been calligraphed by the hand of the Il-khanid scribe 'Abd-Allāh Şayrafī (d. after 746/1345-46) to accompany these paintings (Thackston, 2001, pp. 12-13)—is now lost due to the paintings' cropping and remounting. Later Safavid inscriptions attribute the compositions to the master painter [Aḥmad Musā](#), who is described as having “lifted the veil off the face of depiction” and having thus initiated a novel genre of painting in Persian lands (Thackston, 2001, p. 12; Roxburgh, 2001, p. 160). The major narrative moments represented in the surviving Il-khanid paintings include the Prophet seated in Jerusalem undergoing the testing of the cups (folio 62r), his witnessing of the rooster angel in the first heaven (folio 61v, *baḳṣī* milieu).

Textual and pictorial details in the Timurid *Me'rāj-nāma* suggest that the manuscript was utilized at court by Şāhroḳ to promote Sunni Islam among the Timurid ruling elite and possibly to Ming ambassadors present in Herat as well. The manuscript's religious functions are further supported by the fact that its text is based on Maḥmud b. 'Ali al-Sarā'i's (fl. ca. 1325-60) *Nahj al-farādis* (Pathway to Heavens), a work in the Forty Hadith genre that appears to have been transcribed and illustrated—in a manner highly reminiscent of the Timurid *Me'rāj-nāma*—during the rule of Şāhroḳ's successor, Solṭān Abu Sa'id Gurgān (r. 1451-69). Although this manuscript is held in a private collection, a preliminary study (Gruber, 2008, Ch. 5) suggests strongly that it constitutes an independent me'rāj-Hadith, therefore allowing for further discussions about the religious character of images (a specific category of Islamic painting as noted most recently in Grabar and Sims).



Other complete illustrated *Me'rāj-nāmas* have also survived. One of them is very small, in a vertical layout, and contains seven paintings that are clearly within the Qajar painterly style of ca. 1850-1900 (Beinecke Pers. 8). The text is patently Shi'ite: dialogues between Moḥammad and the angels take the shape of the Shi'ite *šahada* (“There is no God but God, Muhammad is His Prophet, and ‘Ali is His Vice-gerent”); angels are described as bearing Shi'ite inscriptions on their wings and foreheads; and Moḥammad encounters ‘Ali beyond the seventh heaven, where ‘Ali enumerates all of his, the imams’, and the *Ahl-e Bayt*’s virtues. Other Qajar illustrated manuscripts in print form (Boozari) indicate that such works were used as pedagogical tools to teach a moment in the Prophet’s life and to reinforce Shi'ite beliefs. By collating evidence drawn from Il-khanid, Timurid, and Qajar illustrated *Me'rāj-nāmas*, it becomes clear that these kinds of illustrated bio-apocalyptic manuscripts could be used to promote either Sunni or Shi'ite Islam from ca. 1300 to 1900.

By the turn of the 16th century, the Timurid (and possibly the fragmentary Il-khanid) *Me'rāj-nāma* arrived in Istanbul. It was kept in the Topkapı Palace Library until 1672 at the latest, at which time the Frenchman Antoine Galland purchased the volume in the book market for a paltry 25 piasters (Galland, p. 29). Between ca. 1500-1650, this “Book of Ascension”—possibly along with the Il-khanid *Me'rāj-nāma*— appears to have provided inspiration for a series of paintings included in the multi-volume illustrated manuscript of al-Ḍarir’s *Siyar-e Nabi* (Life of the Prophet) produced in 1595-96 for the Ottoman sultan Morād III (Garrett Fisher, 1984, 1981; Tanındı; Gruber). Although the section on the Prophet’s ascension is quite long, only five paintings survive. These illustrate Gabriel’s arrival in Mecca (NYPL ms. 157, folio 3r), Moḥammad’s journey to Jerusalem (NYPL ms. 157, folio 5r), his leading of prayer in Jerusalem (NYPL ms. 157, folio 6v), Moses’ intervention in helping Moḥammad reduce daily prayers from 50 to five (MIK I.26/78, Eskandar Solṭān, produced in Shiraz in 813-14/1410-11 (BL Add. 27261, folio 6r; Gruber, 2005, fig. 5.3) and in the illustrated *Kamsa* of 900/1494-95 made for the Timurid emir Mirzā ‘Ali Fārsi Barlas, which bears a posteriori attributions to various artists active in Timurid Herat, including the master painter [Kamāl-al-Din Behzād](#) (BL Or. 6810; Gruber, 2005, fig. 5.5; Lukens-Swietochowski, p. 208).

It is precisely within ascension paintings included in poetic prefaces and not until the time of the first Safavid ruler Shah Esmā'il I (r. 1501-24) that the facial veil emerges and becomes a standard feature of prophetic-religious iconography (on Safavid religious painting, see Rogers). The earliest original



facial veil is utilized in an ascension painting included in Neẓāmi's *Maḳzan al-asrār*, produced in 915/1509-10 (CBL Pers. 182, folio 5r). Within this context, the Prophet's facial veil appears to have arisen due to propagandistic, rather than prohibitory, impulses. Shah Esmā'il I claimed divinity for himself, and thus the use of a facial veil may have fulfilled an effective pictorial *double entendre* for this particular ruler who sought to fuse his identity with that of the Prophet (Gruber, 2009a, fig. 3). Subsequent Safavid me'rāj paintings retain the facial veil, as in the superb composition of the Prophet's ascension included in Neẓāmi's *Haft peykar* (The Seven Portraits) produced in 1539-43 for Shah Ṭahmāsp I (BL Or. 2265, folio 195r; Sims, p. 152, fig. 67). It is also during and after Shah Ṭahmāsp's reign that a lion figure—the celestial stand-in for Imam 'Ali—begins to appear in Safavid single-page ascension paintings (FIGURE 4) – which had matured within previous ascension images. As these many pictorial materials demonstrate, the theme of the Prophet's me'rāj has held a prominent place and has fulfilled a variety of purposes in Islamic visual culture over the course of seven centuries.

Institutional Abbreviations:

Beinecke: Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

BL: British Library, London

BnF: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

CB: Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

EUL: Edinburgh University Library, Edinburgh

MIK: Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin

NYPL: New York Public Library, New York

SK: Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Istanbul

TSK: Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi, Istanbul



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