



## NAKL

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**NAKL**, one of the principal objects related to the mourning rituals commemorating the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn b. ‘Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Moḥammad. It is described as a wooden structure resembling a bridal pavilion and decorated with colorful silk shawls, precious fabric, mirrors, lanterns, etc.; flowers and green branches are also added for ornamentation (FIGURE 1). It is further described as a large, tall bier to which daggers, swords, luxurious fabric, and mirrors are attached. Sometimes such a coffin is also fashioned for a young man who has met an untimely death (Dehḵodā, s.v. *naḵl*; Mo‘in, *Farhang-e fārsi* IV, Tehran, 1968, p. 4691). The *naḵl* (or *naḵl-e tābut*) is so called because of its resemblance to the date palm tree (*naḵl*), which has a tall, slender, straight trunk.

*Naḵl-gardāni* is the ritual ceremony of carrying the *naḵl*, as a symbolic representation of the Imam’s coffin, in the procession of the ‘Āšurā’ (i.e., 10 Moḥarram, the date of the martyrdom). On the day of ‘Āšurā’, the *naḵl* is carried to a place where *rawża-ḵvāni* (mourning sessions commemorating the tragedy at Karbalā’) or passion play (*ta’zia*) is being performed. Sometimes, the *naḵl* is so colossal and heavy that it requires several hundred men to lift it up and carry it (FIGURE 2; FIGURE 3).

As ritual objects for the ‘Āšurā’, *naḵls* are built from wood in various sizes, from simple constructions that can be carried by two persons to colossal structures about three stories high that have to be supported by hundreds of men. In Yazd and the surrounding towns and villages, a *naḵl* is often referred to as a *naql* “conveying, carrying, transferring.” This large wooden structure is



carried on the day of ‘Āšurā’ from one place to another. According to some, the edifice is called *naḳl* during the entire year except on ‘Āšurā’, when it is referred to as *naql* (since on that day it is moved in procession), but this opinion is not universal. It is interesting to note that on the dedication plaque attached to the biggest and most famous *naḳl*, which stands in front of Takia Amir Čaqmāq in the square of the same name in Yazd (FIGURE 4; FIGURE 5), the word *naql* is used. It bears the date 20 Rajab 1229/9 February 1882 and measures 8.50 m in each of its three dimensions (Afšār, II, pp. 709, 1194-96, pl. 167).

A *naḳl* has four wooden legs that support a rectangular base made of intersecting tree trunks that stick out laterally in four directions. Men use the trunk poles to carry the structure on their shoulders and in their arms. These poles metaphorically represent the lances that pierced the body of Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā’. According to ‘Abd-al-‘Azim Puyā, the legs are made from wood from the plane tree; the shoulder and hand poles from aspen; and mulberry wood is used for the lattice that rests on the grids formed by the poles. The lattice is held together by nails and metal braces and decorative objects are attached to it with nails and ropes. Although it is called *naḳl* (date palm), the shape of the lattice more closely resembles the cypress tree. In Persian literature, the cypress is a metaphor for beauty, in particular for a beautiful and handsome figure. In the dedication plaque to the Amir Čaqmāq *naḳl*, the structure itself is likened to the beautiful corpse of the “Sultan of Karbalā’,” that is, Imam Ḥosayn.

The *naḳl* and *naql* ritual are primarily to be found in the towns and villages on the edge of the great central desert from Semnān to Dām’gān via Qom, Kāšān, Ḳor, Biābānak, Zavāra, Ardestān, and Nāyin. The largest *naḳls*, however, are seen in the Yazd district, which is also the region with the greatest number of them. In this area, there is not a single village that does not have its own *naḳl*. In addition to its ritual and religious manifestations, the *naḳl* is also a symbol of social unity for a town, village, or district. *Naḳls* are found standing in central communal and public spaces such as town squares or in and around *takias*. It is a common belief that the body of Imam Ḥosayn was moved to the shade of a palm tree after his heroic death, and thus the designation of the bier as *naḳl*. A more plausible belief is that the makeshift bier, which carried the Imam from the battlefield to his resting place, was made from the branches of the palm tree, which is all that was available in the Karbalā’ desert. With the passage of time, a simple stretcher became an elaborate structure with lavish

decorations. For big *naqls* in the Yazd region, fifty trees were sometimes required. Very often those trees were carried on the shoulders of people for long distances to the place of construction, which would then become the *naql's* resting place (Moḥammad Abu-Fazli, pp. 87-106).

A *naql* structure is usually left in the same location uncovered and exposed to the elements throughout the year. As a result, the wood begins to deteriorate. The *naql* of 'Aqdā, however, is kept in a covered location called *kāna-ye naql* (Afšār, I, p. 454). The famous *naql* of the Amir Čaqmāq Square of Yazd was endowed in 1882 and is still standing there, but as the structure has decayed and is no longer safe to carry, it is not used in the annual procession. (see Afšār, II, pl. 167). Allegedly, as a sacred object, the *naql* may not be destroyed and must be left to decay naturally. The same situation is also now occurring in Taft, where the old *naql* has been left to live out its days (Afšār, I, p. 410), with the new one standing close by (FIGURE 6). Since there is a popular belief that the *naql* holds miraculous properties, the abandoned *naql* is still venerated. People come and light candles in front of it as they make solemn vows or offer up supplications; the Amir Čaqmāq *naql* once caught fire from the votive candles that were placed near it. The larger *naqls* usually have storage places nearby for the various items that are reused every year for decoration. In some cases, the necessary ornamental paraphernalia is stored in a *takia*.

Sometimes the front and back log-poles of the lattice are laid across the side poles, and sometimes the side poles are laid on top of the front and back ones. The logs thus form a grid pattern. The men carrying the *naql* at the front and rear have it on their shoulders, while those on the sides carry it resting on the biceps of their bent arms. The distance between the poles on each side is less than one meter. The *naql* of Mehriz requires 156 men to carry it; there are thirty-nine places on each side of the structure for them to stand (Ṭorayyā).

Several days before the 'Āšurā', the wooden structure of the *naql* is dressed from top to bottom. The predominant colors of the fabric covering the skeleton are black, symbolizing mourning, and green, representing the family of the Prophet. The ceremony decorating the *naql* is referred to as *naql-bandi*. Everyone is welcome to help in this process: some contribute their efforts as the result of private vows; others do it as an expression of their love for Imam Ḥosayn (FIGURE 7). During this process, one can hear constantly invocations for God's blessing such as *Allāh-omma šalla 'alā Moḥammad wa Āl Moḥammad* "O God, praise Moḥammad and his descendents."



Once the wooden structure of the *naql* is covered with cloth, symbolic objects are attached to the structure. Mirrors are the main items of ornamentation (FIGURE 8). Some of the mirrors are donated by members of the local community as votive pledges; some are bought and given as offerings; and some are lent for the occasion. Young women offer mirrors with the intention that their wishes for a good husband will be granted. Many believe that such an offering will in return result in the answer of their prayers through the intercession of Imam Ḥosayn. Symbolically the mirrors represent the shining aura of the corpse of the Imam. The mirrors reflect light, thereby turning the bier into a glittering object. Moreover, the participants in the processions, seeing their reflections in the mirrors attached to the bier, feel that their wish to identify with Imam Ḥosayn's suffering is fulfilled.

These days it is less common to see the great number of daggers, swords, and shields that were attached to the *naql* in the past. Symbolically these arms represent the weapons used by the enemy to wound and kill the Imam. The mirrors appear on the front of the *naql*, sometimes covering it completely and sometimes placed in an arch around a cypress tree fabricated of narrow wooden strips and painted green. Standing out from the black background surface, the cypress tree, representing the Imam's body, has arrows affixed to it, which illustrates those that entered the imam's body. The overall shape of the lattice also recalls the cypress (Tabibi, pp. 175-78).

At the apex of the *naql*, front and back, is a *šadda*, a vertical pole surmounted by metal rings. This name might be used with its meaning "fringe," which the attachments to the ring form around the pole, or with analogy to the open, ring-like shape of the Arabic diacritic sign *šadda*. Hanging from these rings are colorful fabrics donated by local people, and each one is large enough from which to make a dress. According to tradition, after Imam Ḥosayn and his seventy-two companions were killed on the plain of Karbalā', the enemy plundered their tents and looted whatever they could carry away before setting fire to the encampment. These fabrics symbolically represent the cloth from which the women of Karbalā' could fashion their garments. In the middle of the roof of the *naql*, between the two *šaddas*, stands the ensign of the Imam, called *'alam* (see 'ALAM WA 'ALĀMAT). The *'alam* is a huge, sometimes three-meters high metal blade attached to a wooden shaft. *'Alams* come in three sections. The wooden shaft has a horizontal metal crossbar; on this crossbar are several small metal blades. Various metal animals are attached to the crossbar, including lions, peacocks, and doves, and precious shawls also are

suspended from it. *ʿAlams* are usually carried separately in the procession.

When the entire back panel in the rear of the Amir Čaqmāq *naql* is dressed, it represents the Imam’s tomb shrine at Karbalā’. The characteristic and easily recognizable architectural features of his mausoleum are woven with golden thread into the black canvas (FIGURE 9). In this fashion, the *naql* symbolically represents not only Imam Ḥosayn’s stature and his coffin, but his tomb as well. The Amir Čaqmāq *naql*, though no longer in use, is decorated for the ‘Āšurā’ day with this canvas (Chelkowski).

Many rituals are performed in large communities of central Persia, where the big *naqls* are employed on the day of ‘Āšurā’. Once these rituals are finished, all attention turns to the *naql*. Barefoot men dressed in black shirts and pants take up their positions around the poles protruding from underneath the *naql*’s lattice. Four guides stand on each side facing the *naql*, holding green shawls. On the top of the *naql*, next to the *šaddas*, are men with cymbals. Dirges are sung while bags of sugarplums are tossed to the cymbal players, who in turn shower the heads of the crowd below with the sweets. Even those bags of sugarplums that are not caught by the cymbal players but nevertheless have touched the *naql*, are believed to bring good luck (*tabarrok*). People collect rocks and pebbles along the path of the *naql* so that the *naql* carriers won’t hurt their bare feet. Finally, it is the decisive moment to lift the *naql* (FIGURE 2; FIGURE 3). The man in charge, called *bābā*, invokes the Imam by crying “Yā Ḥosayn,” and, with a clash of the cymbals, the *naql* is raised. This action is called *naql-bardāri* (FIGURE 10).

The procession of the *naql*, called *naql-gardāni*, follows (FIGURE 11). The *naql*, guided by four men (sometimes, in the case of a very big *naql*, additional guides stand on the protruding poles), moves majestically on a circular path in an anti-clockwise direction. It is surrounded by a crowd of softly treading men clad in black who parade their ritualized grief and sense of mourning (*mātam*) by striking their heads with their hands. Soon the *naql* comes to a stop so that the *naql*-carriers can rest. During the pause, dirges are sung and a chest-beating *mātam* is performed. In a town square location like that of the Amir Čaqmāq, the *naql* can be carried around the square as many as seven times (Chelkowski).

In other places, such as Qamšar of Kāšān, the *naql-gardāni* has a linear structure. The *naqls* of several districts file one after the other as they traverse the town. In Qamšar, the *naqls* are preceded by *ʿalams* and followed by chain-



beaters. Women line the entire path of the *naql-gardāni* on sidewalks and on the flat roofs of houses. Even the bystanders are drawn into this ritual by joining in various *mātams* (Chelkowski).

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