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Reports on Research Findings

The Keir *Mi^craj*: Islamic Storytelling and the Picturing of Tales

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In the Fall of 2002, I began my dissertation research on "The Prophet Muhammad's Ascension [*Mi^craj*] in Islamic Art and Literature, 14th-17th Centuries" in museums and libraries in the United States, Europe, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. I am interested in the various junctures between texts and images related to the Prophet's biography and, in particular, his miraculous ascension to the Heavens on the back of Buraq, his winged, human-headed horse, guided by the Angel Gabriel. My research addresses issues of iconography, the development of fully illustrated narratives of the ascension (so-called *Mi^crajnamas* [Books of Ascension]),² the use of the ascension as a

spiritual catalyst in illustrated Sufi poetry (al-^cAzma 1973: 93-104, 1982), and the impact of literary tropes on visual language and vice versa. As a result of materials that I have discovered over the past two years, new points of interest have emerged.

Two concerns that have come to light revolve around orality and storytelling, the supple and unwritten documents of collective memory and resilient forces behind various arenas of cultural and visual production. Many of the paintings and texts of the Prophet's *mi^craj* vary to such an extent that, despite many efforts by Muslim thinkers and writers to codify the story and delineate its exact narrative elements, a great variety of ascension narratives nonetheless thrived within the spheres of Islamic storytelling, preaching, and the visual arts. Although oral stories and their variations from the premodern period rarely survive today, it appears that a fruitful way to begin discussing and reconstructing lost tales lies in examining the evidence provided by paintings and other visual materials.

¹ The author wishes to thank Edmund and Richard de Unger for permission to study and reproduce the Keir *Mi^craj*, and Jamilya Ukudeeva and Virginia Martin at CESR for their helpful editorial suggestions. This article is based on a paper presented at the CESS Conference (Harvard, Oct. 3, 2003).

² For illustrated *Mi^crajnamas*, see Ettinghausen 1957: 360-83; and Séguy 1977; for *Mi^crajnama* texts, see Pavet de Courteille 1975; and Thackston 1994: 263-99.

Reconstructing oral narratives via pictorial evidence remains impeded by several methodological problems. Since we have no written records to corroborate lost oral stories, these always remain within the realm of the speculative. Hypotheses can be offered, suggestions put forth, but firm conclusions cannot be reached. Furthermore, pictures may represent not one particular tale, but a conflation of stories, not easily disentangled and reconstructed as separate and autonomous entities. Finally, paintings may serve various purposes depending on the occasion and the setting of the particular storytelling session, and, as a consequence, it is very difficult to suggest an accurate social context. Despite such obstacles, paintings can provide a link between oral customs and literary culture, as will be shown here.

A rare painting in the Keir Collection in London, England (Robinson 1976: III.103), represents the Prophet Muhammad on Buraq and accompanied by Gabriel as they fly above a monarch and his attendants (Figure 1³). The painting's double composition of the Prophet's ascension and a monarch in a frontal pose, its large-scale format (40 x 30 cm), and its red and orange hues on a pale gray background painted on vellum have no known parallels in the Islamic arts of the book. Not a single extant mi^craj painting incorporates the depiction of an earthly ruler, nor does any ascension text seamlessly join — at both the literary and structural levels — a verbal encomium to the Prophet with a tribute to a living king. Moreover, although other oversize paintings survive in international collections (Atasoy 1972; Mahir 1999: 443-455), these tend to depict well-known Persian epic stories or enthroned Ottoman kings, and not an episode from the Prophet's biography. It seems that such oversize paintings must have served as tools in the practice of picture-recitation, i.e., the telling of stories with the help of images (Mair 1988).

The Keir Mi^craj appears to issue from the artistic production of the Aqqyunlu [White Sheep] Turkmen, whose rule extended from their capital in Tabriz, in the province of Azerbaijan, from 1387 to 1502. The painting probably dates from the first half

of the 15th century based on stylistic considerations, a dating that has found further support in a more recent analysis of the painting's pigments.⁴ For these reasons, it is assumed that this painting emerges from the Perso-Turkic world of northwestern Iran, influenced by the oral practices and visual arts that flourished before and during the Timurid period.

Except for the gold flaming halos around the Prophet Muhammad's turban and Gabriel's crown, the pigments are not as deep and textured as those utilized in manuscript illustrations. The large swirls and swaths of oranges and reds hint that the painting was not meant for close inspection, but rather necessitated a certain optical distance from the canvas. The coarseness of the hues suggests that the image did not enjoy aristocratic patronage and in all likelihood represents a second-class product. Other 15th- and 16th-century paintings of a similar size and roughness of execution prove that they were not made for a ruler either, but were intended as visual props shown to audiences during the performance of numerous stories drawn from the *Shahnama* (Atasoy 1972: 271).

Because no remaining text corresponds to the Keir Mi^craj, it seems probable that the painting depicts a now-lost medieval oral narrative that fuses visually a panegyric to the Lord of This World (the earthly monarch) and to the Lord of the Next (the Prophet Muhammad). Like this painting, most written Islamic narratives — including biographies of the Prophet Muhammad [*sirat al-nabi*], stories of other prophets [*qisas al-anbiya*], and histories of kings [*tarikhi al-muluk*] — existed rather freely within the realms of popular oral and visual culture before finding a crystallization in the literary world. With that in mind, it is not so surprising to find the biographical and the historical appear as an agglutinate in the Keir Mi^craj, rather than dichotomized according to categories we have come to expect.

In this premodern world of narratives and images drifting between the written and the oral spheres, the Keir Mi^craj must have served as a multipurpose tool to narrate pictorially any number

³ The Prophet Muhammad's Mi^craj over a Monarch and Attendants, Keir Collection, London, England. Author's photograph. Richard de Unger at the Keir Collection has authorized the publication and reproduction of the Mi^craj. Further publication of the Mi^craj is prohibited. See a color reproduction of Figure 1 in the on-line version of this issue of CESR (4/1, Winter 2005).

⁴ The pigments of the Keir Mi^craj were analyzed by Dr. Wernher at the British Museum. B. Robinson (1976: 155-156) states that they are "definitely ancient." In a personal communication in March 2003, Dr. Edmund de Unger noted that the scientific examination of the pigments places the painting at ca. 1400 CE.



Figure 1. The Keir Mi'raj (Copyright © by the Keir Collection. Reproduced by permission.)

of accounts, such as the miraculous tale of a king's conversion to Islam, a royal decision based on the approval of the Prophet as seen in a visionary dream, the relating of the Prophet's ascension as sponsored by a ruling body, and so forth. The use of the painting could be tailored to need as well: for example, it could illustrate a tale of admonishment or a story proving both the Prophet's and the monarch's ability to link Heaven with the earth, all the while providing entertainment by means of an engaging, graphic, and theologically-approved "show" [*tasannuf*] (Ibn al-Jawzi 1986: 221). In essence, the Keir Mi'raj uses the Prophet's ascension as the acceptable means of entertainment, under whose auspices any number of stories linked to sovereignty could be extracted and depicted.

In the painting, Muhammad and the royal figure are linked intimately not only by the composition but also, more specifically, through the figures' gestures: Muhammad's right hand forms a fist as he holds Buraq's reins and his left index finger points straight down to the crown of the monarch below, who stands holding his girdle with both fists. Although there has been no study of gestures and their meanings in the visual arts of Islam akin to M. Baxandall's study of Renaissance religious and profane gestures and body positions (Baxandall 1972), certain motions and finger formations often were associated with corresponding emotions or values. For instance, the pointing of the index finger indicates a witnessing of faith [*angushti shihadat*] (Steingass 2000: 114) in the Persian tradition, while in Turkic folktales it denotes the *tahlil*, that is, the proclamation that there is only one God (Eberhard and Boratav 1953: 350-1). The making of a fist symbolizes the round world and thus serves as the symbol of the *mundus imaginalis* or, alternatively, as a sign denoting worldly concerns.⁵ In the Keir Mi'raj, we can hypothesize that the Prophet's hands indicate that his dominion (the fist) is harnessed by the witnessing and worshiping of a single God (the index finger) through his earthly representative (pointing down), the monarch, to whom the Prophet hands over the reign of power by visual contraposition. It is he, the consummate ruler standing in the center and staring straight out of the canvas, whom the viewer must confront, while the Prophet Muhammad points

straight to him, further encouraging our own visual intuitions. The crisscrossing of the painting by vectors of symbolic movements connects the figures to one another.

This pictorial dynamism draws in the viewer, while the storyteller also uses precise and calculated gesticulation to cause a heightened sense of emotion in the audience members (Chelkowski 1989: 102). As a result, the Keir Mi'raj constitutes one of the earliest examples of a *parda* [painting] used for transportable picture recitation, which continued into the Safavid period⁶ and found its efflorescence during the Qajar period. It displays how the Prophet Muhammad's heavenly ascension was assimilated to more pressing political issues connected to rulership during the Aqqyunlu period. The Prophet's ascension materializes the themes in order to endow the otherwise "unorthodox" practice of picture recitation with religious legitimacy as invested through its earthly representative. The narrating of the Prophet's ascension and its fusion with a eulogy of a monarch provides a mechanism through which an otherwise questionable practice could thrive.

The Keir Mi'raj provides the rare visual proof that some narratives of the Prophet's ascension existed within the same milieu as narratives concerned with royal figures, easily blending the *sirat al-nabi* genre with the *tarik* al-muluk genre. Although the exact character of such interactions remains difficult to determine and analyze today, it appears that oral traditions at times displaced literary ones in the field of the visual arts. For that reason alone, paintings used for storytelling such as the Keir Mi'raj offer evidence for the creative role of oral stories, and force the scholar to think beyond text-image or religious-profane dichotomies. This vacillation of oral tales provides a more nuanced way to approach cultural, literary, and art history, allowing for a multiplicity of interpretations. Such subtle, interlocking meanings — rather than the strict process of identification and reconstruction — have begun to shape my dissertation project on the Prophet Muhammad's ascension and to inform my research more generally. The remaining questions that need to be pursued include the identification of recorded oral tales in the Persian and Turkic traditions, the comparison between storytelling and

⁵ Eberhard and Boratav (1953) further specify that the pointing of two fingers is a gesture reserved for the Prophet Muhammad and a Padishah, proving that strict limitations on "manual" expression existed in Turkic cultures.

⁶ Olearius, in his diary of his travels in Persia, states that Shah 'Abbas I went to coffeehouses with his guests to listen to tales narrated by storytellers that "gesticulate with a little stick like tricksters" (quoted in K. Yamamoto 2003: 21-2).

picture-making, and their common link to power, authority, and cultural practices.

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Central Asian Encounters of the Middle East: Nationalism, Islam, and Post-Coloniality in al-Azhar

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A dramatic resurgence in religious identification in Central Asia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been termed "Islamic renaissance"

in regional scholarship. However, in the study of this "renaissance," much attention has been paid to the "political Islam" of radical Islamic movements,