
Iconography of the three Icons in Shi'i Muharram Rituals; The Peacock, the Cypress & the Lion

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Abstract

In this paper I will introduce a vernacular emblem, a copper peacock with an open tail which resembles the form of hand and a tiny miniature sculpture of lion, adjacent to the peacock feet. This sacred Shi'it item consists of symbols which have always been presented during Muharram rituals, conveying a number of iconography connotations. Comparison this figure with other Islamic items such as Persian illustrated manuscripts, this paper tend to analyze symbols which play a key role in Muharram rituals and adorns standard or *A'lam*. Applying iconography approaches, I tend to elaborate this folkloric item which displays a remarkable item that can be seen during Muharram rituals. Not only during Muharram rituals but also in Persian manuscript such as *Falnama* or *Shahnama*, these emblems are recognizable. In this essay, after an introduction in order to demonstrate what the iconography is and how this methodology can be applied to analyze a form of art, I will compare different Christian and Islamic icons which demonstrate a key factor in order to answer how imaginary icons and symbols was transferred from the long established Christian Byzantine Empire to Islam? How cross-cultural tendencies of Byzantium era shaped the icons of Islamic art at the age of transition? And consequently, I try to shed light on this question how one can pursue these meaning on Shi'it *A'lam* or standard in Muharram rituals in terms of iconography?

Keywords: Iconography, Cross-cultural, Muharram Rituals, Peacock, Lion, Hand, A'lam, Persian Manuscripts, *Falnama*, *Shahnama*.

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Introduction on three stages of Iconology;

Pre-iconographical analysis, iconographical analysis, iconological analysis

In order to elucidate the role of peacock, cypress tree and lion in standard (Al'am) in Muharram rituals in terms of iconography, one may pursue the perception of German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) of systematic approaches of modern iconography in order to study ancient art and consequently the essays of Aby Warburg (1866–1929) and his student Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) “elaborated the practice of identification and classification of motifs in images to using iconography as a means to understanding meaning.”(D’Alleva; 2005: 22) Erwin Panofsky in his books, *Studies in Iconology, Humanities Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, defines Iconography as branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art. (Panofsky; 1967:3). Again in *Meaning in Visual Arts* he adds that: “in a work of art, ‘form’ cannot be divorced from ‘content’”. (Panofsky; 1970: 205) Concerning this matter, he distinguishes the form or the subject matter or meaning of the form into three strata:

First stage or Pre-iconography level, which has been applied in primary or natural subject matter dealing with pure form. Iconography literally means,” the *Study of Images*”. At its simplest level, which we call pre-iconographic level of meaning or denotative message, the practice of iconography means identifying

motifs and images in works of art. (Ibid: 20)

Secondary or conventional meaning which means iconography. In Iconography we connect artistic motifs and combinations of artistic motifs (composition) with theme or concepts. (Ibid: 6) and finally intrinsic meaning or content which can be commemorated with ‘compositional method’ and ‘iconographical significance’. (Ibid: 7)

Peacock, Cypress Tree and Lion as Tree Fundamental Emblems in Islamic Culture;

What Would They Have in Common With Other Cultures?

With this very short overview, now we are able to analysis this pieces of art in terms of iconography. For this matter, as it mentioned above, the very first stage is to simply read this item. This vernacular emblem (Picture 1) consists of a vertical peacock on a standing with a mirror at the middle of peacock’s ribcage, and at the base next to the peacock leg, a very miniature sculpture of a lion that is alert and scrutinizing, strengthening and solidarity walking around the peacock, as if the lion, like a guardian, surveils it. (Picture 2)

The descriptive of this emblem that we are able to illustrate for pre-iconography stage for this peacock would be very banal, but on the other hand will serve as an eye opener experience for retrieving the iconology of the above-mentioned peacock.

The open tail of this peacock with the delicate form of its neck is consisting of obvious five shapes, resembling the form of flower with wide open petals and also can be observed as an open hand. The circle shape of mirror at the middle of this copper sculpture, together with rhythmic forms of short rays decorates the all around circumference of the mirror, remind you of the shining sun.

For the iconography analysis of this creative and folkloric piece, we start from decoding the peacock. The Stunning tail of peacock is a courtship display that is also heavy and conspicuous, making the peacock vulnerable to predators, and also to moralizers who perceive an example of pride and fall. (Ronnberg; 2010: 260) This is one of the reasons that Eve always depicted on a peacock back when they are condemned because of eating the forbidden fruit and God command them to expel from paradise and dwell on earth. The magnificently done manuscripts of dispersed *Falnama* (The Book of Omens)(Picture 3) which was lavishly illustrated in Safavid period, during Shah Tahmasb reign (1524-76) depicted the so-called story of Expelling Adam and Eve. Moreover, this has been numerous illustrated in different copies of the illustrated manuscripts of *Qisas al-Anbiya* (Stories of Prophet).

“Peacocks as a decorative motif may have originated in the west, despite their eastern provenance. There was an ancient belief

that the flesh and feathers of peacock do not decay. This led to the peacock becoming a Christian symbol for Christ’s Resurrection; in Islam too, as we have just seen, the peacock is closely associated with Paradise. As such, the bird features in scenes of nativity and Annunciation in Christian art. The Hellenistic association with Dionysos, typos for Christ, may have added depth to the identification with eternal life. This may in part explain the frequent appearance of peacock at Byzantine church of St. Polyeuktos dedicated by the princess Anicia Juliana in sixth-century. (Alud, “Birds and Blessing: A Kohl-Pot from Jerusalem”: 8-9)

In antiquity the peacock signified rebirth and early Christian art adopted the image of peacock as a symbol of resurrection. The peacock molts in the fall, and unadorned for many months acquires brilliant plumage in the spring, symbolizing the reincarnation and rebirth(Ronnberg; 2010: 260).

As such, early Christian paintings and mosaics use peacock imagery, and peacock feathers can be used during the Easter season as church decorations. This symbol of immortality is also directly linked to Christ.(Picture 4)This Mosaic, in the middle displays the cross, symbol of Christ, and two peacock that, with a constant vigilance, they both protect the Christ’s cross. On the other hand, they symbolize the renaissance of Christ. Surprisingly, this icon can also be hunt down in numerous Islamic symbols

along with rituals function and concept, as it can be seen in decorative motives in color printed textiles, or mural motives in *Hamam Khan* in Sanandaj, Kordestan City, in west of Iran. (Picture 5)

In this motif, exactly as it was seen in the previous image, showing the two peacock guard the sterilized from of a cypress tree. Here, this question will be aroused, from iconography point of view, if the cross is the symbol of Christ, what does signify this Cypress tree in this mural painting?

“In Mediterranean, cypress has been utilized for funeral and mourning ceremonies, since for its ever green nature, implies eternity and rebirth, as it is believed the same for peacock.” Also, “his multiple ‘eyes’ suggesting their surpassing vision, and all-seeing eternal.” (Ronnberg; 2010: 260)

Animals have a significant role in order to find out how Jewish, Christianity and Islam are inter connected and shares many emblems, indicating the how Byzantium era shaped the icons during Islamic period.

A large mosaic found at the Tunisian town of Hammam Lif is so closely aligned with regional conventions that its structure was first identified as a Byzantine church. The presence of a Latin dedicatory inscription identifying the site as “Sancta Sinagoga” (Holy Synagogue), flanked by two Menorahs, revealed that it was a synagogue. The floor consisted of

four mosaic carpets, integrating distinctly Jewish symbolism with popular motifs of the period, including a lion. (Picture 6) (http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b60853040-AE7E-4162-8FA7-525505D6B633%7d&oid=479521&pkgids=186&pg=5&rpp=20&pos=87&ft=*)

The lion from the southeastern portion of the floor resembles those found in Jewish art as well as in Christian mosaics and domestic settings of the period. It demonstrates how images took on various meanings in different religious and cultural contexts in the Byzantine world.

Jean Chevalier survey in *Dictionnaire des Symbols*, has mentioned that Lion as the symbol of natural power, royalty, and also the symbol of shining sun. Lion is also a symbol of eternal wisdom. Moreover, according to Shi'it, Imam Ali the son in law of Prophet Mohammad, was epithet as the lion of God (Assadol-Allah). In Popular and naive images, a lion has always been imagined next to Imam Ali. (Picture 7)

A notable exception to the most representation of the Miraj (the prophet Mohammad Miraculous Night Journey) can be seen in the one of the illustrations of the dispersed copies of the *Falnama* manuscripts, Safavid period, in which showing a crouching, growling lion in the upper left corner to which the Prophet Mohammad extends a ring to a lion. (Picture 8) Traditionally, the feline

figure has been identified as Imam Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son in law and the first Shi'i Imam, who is referred to as the "lion" (Asad, Haydar, Shir) and the "lion of God" (Asad-allah). Ali's role as Muhammad's rightful heir is corroborated in the accompanying text: "Everything that happened that night, blow by blow, Murteza Mujtaba [i.e., Ali] recounted to him next day (Farhad: 2009: 118). Artists have tried their hand to depict the Story of Miraculous Journey of Prophet Mohammad during the history of Persian book making and paintings. But what makes this beautiful miniature as an exception is the role of lion in this image which has not been previously illustrated.² In terms of Iconography, the icons which has been seen in Jewish and Christianity during the sixth or seventh century, also has demonstrated a key role in Persian Islamic manuscripts. But how these icons have been transmitted to Islam will relieve the evidence of socio-political connected of these cultures.

As the seventh century began, vast territories extending from Syria to Egypt and across North Africa were ruled by the Byzantine Empire from its capital, Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Critical to the wealth and power of the empire, these southern provinces, long influenced by Greco-Roman traditions, were home to Orthodox, Coptic, and Syriac Christians, Jewish communities, and others. Great pilgrimage centers attracted the faithful from as far away as Yemen in the east and Scandinavia in the west. Major trade

routes reached eastward down the Red Sea past Jordan to India in the south, bringing silks and ivories to the imperial territories. Major cities made wealthy by commerce extended along inland trade routes north to Constantinople and along the Mediterranean coastline. Commerce carried images and ideas freely throughout the region.

In the same century, the newly established faith of Islam emerged from Mecca and Medina along the Red Sea trade route and reached westward into the empire's southern provinces. Political and religious authority was transferred from the long established Christian Byzantine Empire to the newly established Umayyad and later Abbasid Muslim dynasties. The new powers took advantage of existing traditions of the region in developing their compelling secular and religious visual identities. (<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam>)

What dose signify A'lam, Standards or Banners during Muharram Rituals?

The role of Banners in Miniatures of Persian Manuscripts.

By comparison of the picture of cypress tree and the function of Standard (A'lam) (Picture 9) in Shi'ism ritual, one is able to find the same traces of common beliefs concerning the iconography of peacock and the role of cypress tree in so-called cultures, as it mentioned above, for Christianity and Islam. In Ashura rituals, which is one the most popular feast among Shi'its, on the day of 10th

and 11th of Muharram where Imam Hossein and his followers were brutally killed, people gather in streets as a respect to Imam Hossein, all in black, beating on their head and chest as they mourn and grieve for him. One of the most non-dispatching parts of this big feast is A'lam (Standard). Among Shi'i communities, standard, (A'lam) are believed to represent replicas of those carried by Imam Hossein during the fateful battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. By the latter part of sixteen century, they were used during military camping and religious ceremonies and sacred spaces, as depicted in several Falnama illustrations, such as the story of miraculous journey of Prophet Mohammad (Picture 10). In this illustration, Gabriel in front of Burraq, holds a green banner leading the way. Here green, in terms of iconography, refers to the dynasty of Mohammad prophet, and interestingly, at the top of this banner one able to find the same form of A'lam. This form of A'lam has been repeatedly depicted in the manuscripts of Safavid courts especially during Shah Tahmasb reign especially in the splendid miniatures of Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb (Picture 11).

“Symbols like A'lams in Tahmasp's miniatures must have conveyed a specific message. In fact, A'lams, had long been highly symbolic in Iran. Alongside their military function as guiding devices and rallying point during battles, they had long been important requisites in Shi'i rituals. Within the Safavid context, with Shi'ism, as state religion, standards (A'lam) with Shi'i-Islamic quotations invoking divinely induced victory were not only used in religion ceremonies, but

also identifies forces and indeed the Shah himself.”(Al-Khamis, “Khusrau Parviz as Champion of Shi'ism? A Closer Look at an Early Safavid Miniature in the Royal Museum of Edinburgh”: 204-205)

As it cited above, A'lams, indicates the eternal and everlasting in Shi'its faith. Ali Bolukbashi, argues that the symbol of A'lams can be traced back to the time of pre-Islamic and antiquity. (Bolukbashi; 1380:13)

According to epic of Shahnama Ferdowsi, Siyavash, the son of Key Kavous, is the symbol of innocent, truth, wisdom and also rebirth. When Siyavash's stepmother, blames him of her rape, Key Kavūs orders a trial by fire. Mounted on his horse, Siyavash rides into bonfire. Onlookers wail and worry, but the prince emerges unscathed. This act has always been as sign of rebirth and purity. Also when Siyavash were beheaded by Turaninan, they save his blood in a bowl to be poured on the barren land after his death. Consequently the plant Sūvoūshon has been raised from the soil, as a symbol of Siyavash immortality. In the miniatures of Shah Tahmasb's Shahanma, this scene dramatically has been shown in pale purple with leafless branches though, simultaneity, in Baysunghory's Shahnama (picture 12) this scene has been shown with plant Sūvoūshon and also the leafless branches which is one the most creative attitude of Persian painters in Baysunghor court atelier who simultaneity painted two occasions in one single illustration. Now, we are able

to affirm that not only in Hamman Khan in Sanandaj, but also in Muharram rituals, the defied form of cypress tree has been borrowed from Sūvoūshon, which refers to Siyavash immortality, as a symbol of forever lasting of Shi'it beliefs in terms of iconology.

We are able to analysis of two elements of Shi'it principles; peacock and cypress tree which has been repeatedly is present in standards.

Back to the first figure of combined, the mirror Peacock and Lion, now we are able to analyze this folkloric item from iconographical point of view.

This Item which refers to A'lam of Imam Hossein ritual represents a peacock, the symbol of immortality and a lion which can be referred to First Shi'i Imam, Ali and also signifies as a guardian of Shi'it beliefs. Also the form of this peacock recalls the Sūvoūshon plants and consequently will recognized the symbolic cypress tree which has been always been presented in A'lam of Ashura. Furthermore, it evokes the form of a hand.

Hand also has been presented as shi'it icon which can be both seen in Muharram rituals and Islamic manuscripts.

(Picture 13) This is one of the other illustrations of *Falnama*. At first glance, this composition recalls images of the "hand of Fatima", the Prophet Mohammad Daughter and Imam Ali's wife. A popular and ubiquitous symbol through the Islamic world, it long has been associated with

talismanic and healing properties.

Flanked by two tall cypress trees, the monumental hand is outlined in gold, and its blue ground is covered with small schematized flowers, it floats against an abstracted, cream colored hillside strewn with orange, blue, and purple rocks and large flowering plants. In the center, the final letter of Ali's name, which repeated four times, forms a diamond and enclosed the name of Ahl-i Bayt (family of the Prophet), Fatima, Ali and their sons Hassan and Hossein are written in somewhat awkward angular Kufic script, as if carved into a seal. The names of the Prophet and Ali, written in a more cursive script, are repeated four times to form a circle around the diamond, while Hassan, Hossein, Jafar, Musa and again Hassan appear on the five fingers. Together, they represent the appellations of twelve Imams. (Farhad: 2009: 118)

Here, all vestiges of narrative have been distilled to create a simple yet powerful symbol for prognostication in the shape of a palm which recalls this peacock. Whether coincidental or not, the illustration and the written augury are also most overtly Shi'i in tone and content stressing the importance of the twelve Imam and, in particular, Ali. The introductory verses claim that Ali's palm "has the form of the world Allah. This became in truth assign of God's hand," thus equating the Imam with God.

Furthermore, as it has mentioned

above, the eye is related to wisdom and knowledge. Although the hand icon itself can perform as the hand of God, it is used in folk culture to dispel the Evil Eye with the eye embedded in the palm of the hand. Surprisingly, all the mentioned figures, symbols and icons, along with their ritual functions, have been utilized for preparing the Islamic talismanic shirt in Ottoman period. The Magen David, the crescent moon, the eye and the cypress trees are so common in Talismanic shirt with an intricate pattern of script from holy Quran and Islamic sermons that it served as a spiritual protection for the wearer. (Picture 14)

Conclusion:

The Transition of knowledge at the seventh century, was a key fact to have many shared icons in both Jewish, Christianity and Islam.

As Islam expanded, the new powers took advantage of existing traditions of the region in developing their compelling secular and religious visual identities. the artistic traditions of the southern provinces of the Byzantine Empire from the seventh century to the ninth, as they were transformed from being central to the Byzantine tradition to being a critical part of the Islamic world. Although many icons have been transmitted from Byzantium to Islam during seventh to ninth century, many of them have been applied during the vibrant period of

Timurid and Safavid period. Although some of them has a Byzantium inclination in terms of iconography, it was in fifth and sixth century that they took they regional meaning and became of the constant icons of Persian Art as new power tried to reinforce their authority by making a unique and reputable style, especially by establishing Shia as the state religion, they took all the advantages of existing power. (Picture 15)

As a conclusion, regarding the iconography of this figure, we are able to comprehensively analysis this from. Peacock, Lion, Cypress, mirror which indicates the God itself and even the God's hand are the consisting part of this element which indicates the eternity, resurrection and immortality of Shi'i. The most important question that I put forward is that although these icons have been represented in many highly acknowledged manifestations of artistic creation; such as illustration of *Shahnama* and *Falnama*, but they have their own ritualistic power and manifestations in religious and other folkloric rituals. Their importance is multi-faceted and continuous through the ages and something which will not diminish by course of changes in taste and time. These simple icons convey numerous information, narrative and insights by their sincere and deep routed energy.



Picture 1- Peacock, late Qajar era?,
copper and mirror, 32×28 c.m. Private
Collection,



Picture 2- A lion on the
base of the Peacock (De-
tail).



Picture 3- Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise. *The Book of Omen (Falnama)*, Qazvin, Safavid Period, mid-1550-early 1560s. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C.



Picture 4- The tombs Santa Cecilia, Mosaic, 5th century A.D. Rome.

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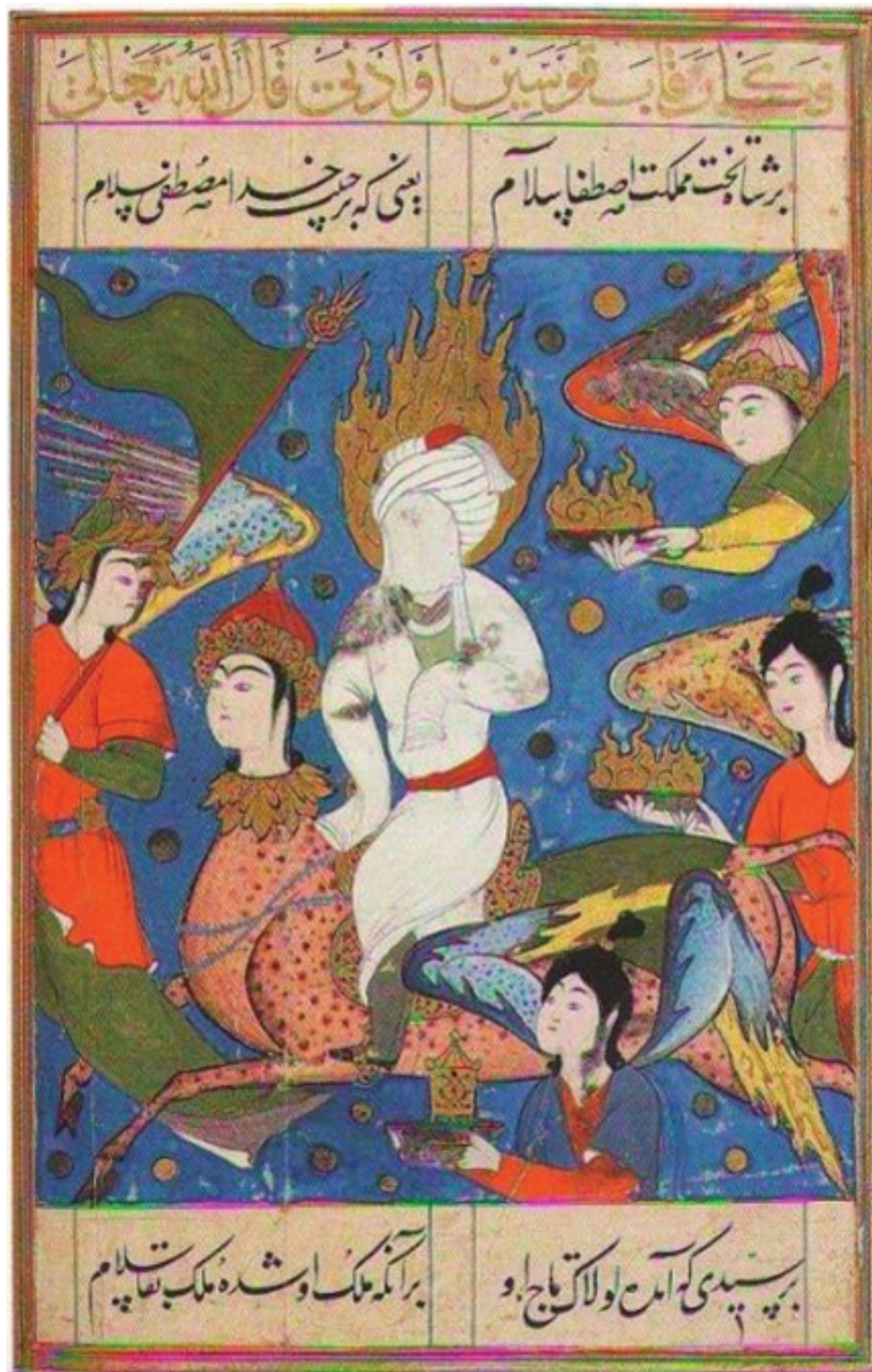
Picture 5- Hammam Khan, Sanandaj, Kordestan, Iran, late Qajar Period.



Picture 6- Mosaic of Lion, 6th century, Made in Tunisia, excavated Hammam Lif Synagogue
Medium: Stone tesserae, Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Collection Fund (05.18)



Picture 7-(Standard)’Alam late 17th–early
18th century, Brass, metropolitan Museum of
Art Accession Number: 2013.37



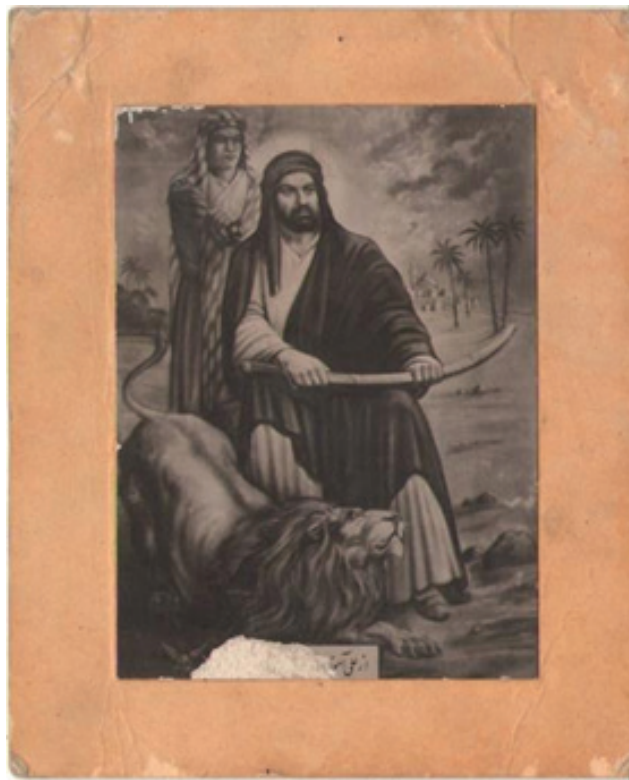
Picture 8- The Prophet Mohammad 's Night Journey (Miraj), *Falnama*, Probably Iran, 1570s.



Picture 9- Surkha, Capture By Faramarz, Is Condemn by Rostam (Detail), *Shahnama Shah Tahmasb*, Safavid period, Tabriz, (r. 1524–76).



Picture 10- The Death of Siyavash, *Baysonghuri Shahnama*, Iran, Herat, 1430 A.D., Golestan Palace Library, Tehran.



Picture 11- Imaginative Depiction of Imam Ali Portrait by an unknown contemporary Artist.



Picture 12- The Prophet Mohammad 's Night Journey (Miraj), *The Book of Omen (Falnama)*, Qazvin, Safavid Period, mid-1550-early 1560s. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C.



Picture 13- Khaybar: The Conquering Palm of Ali, From the H.1703 *Falnama*, Iran, Safavid Period, or Turkey, Ottoman period, ca. 1580s; Topkapi Palace Library, Istanbul.



Picture 14- An Ottoman Talismanic Shirt (JAMA) With Extracts From The Qur'an and Prayers, Turkey, 16th Century, 89 × 81 cm. Sotheby's Auction.



Picture 15-Flag of Safavid Dynasty of Persia, 1501–1736.

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(<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam>)