

THE ASCENSION OF THE PROPHET AND THE STATIONS OF HIS JOURNEY

1

THE Mİ'RÂJ AND THE THREE SACRED CITIES OF ISLAM
IN LITERATURE, MUSIC, AND ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS
IN THE OTTOMAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

editors

Ayşe Taşkent

Nicole Kançal-Ferrari



DERGÂH

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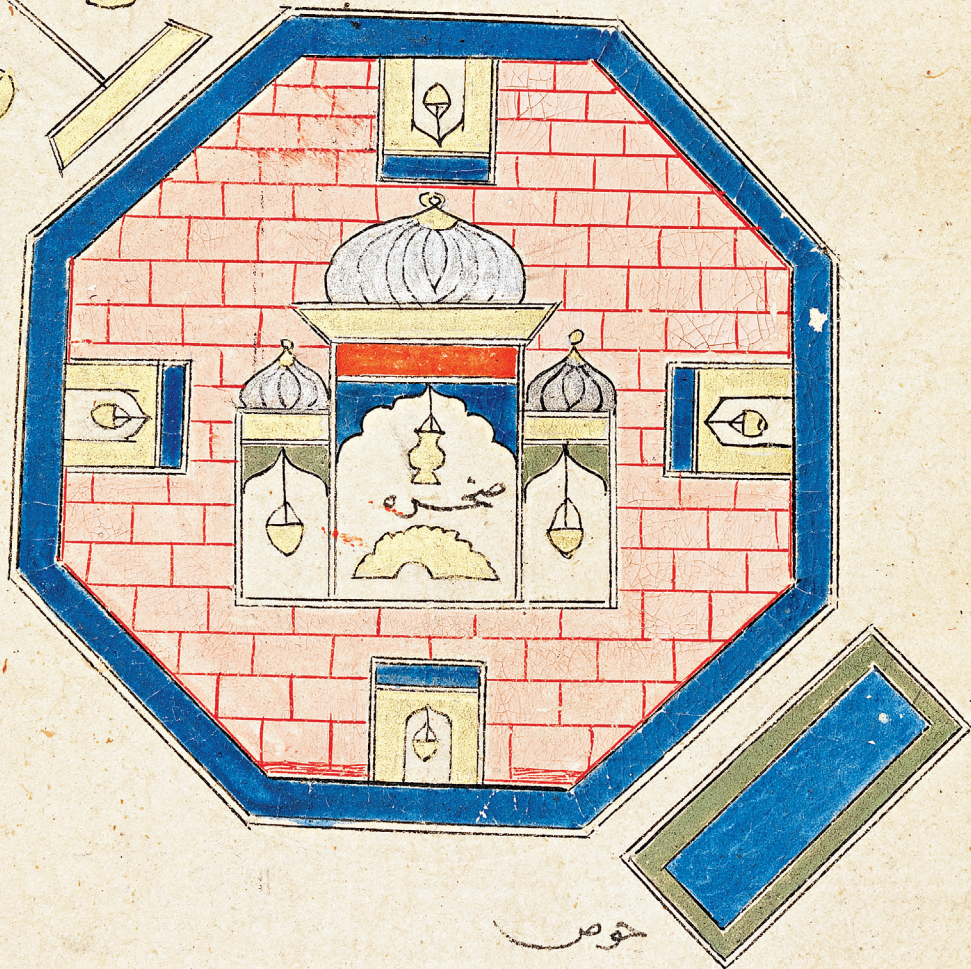
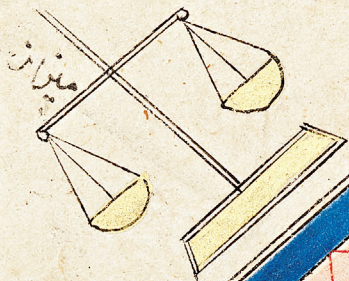
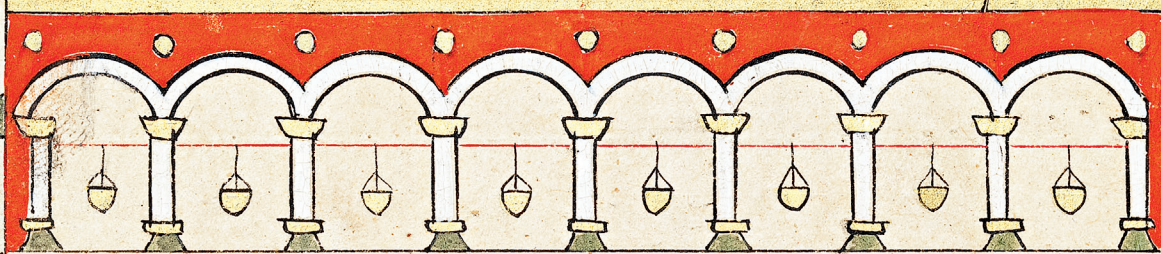
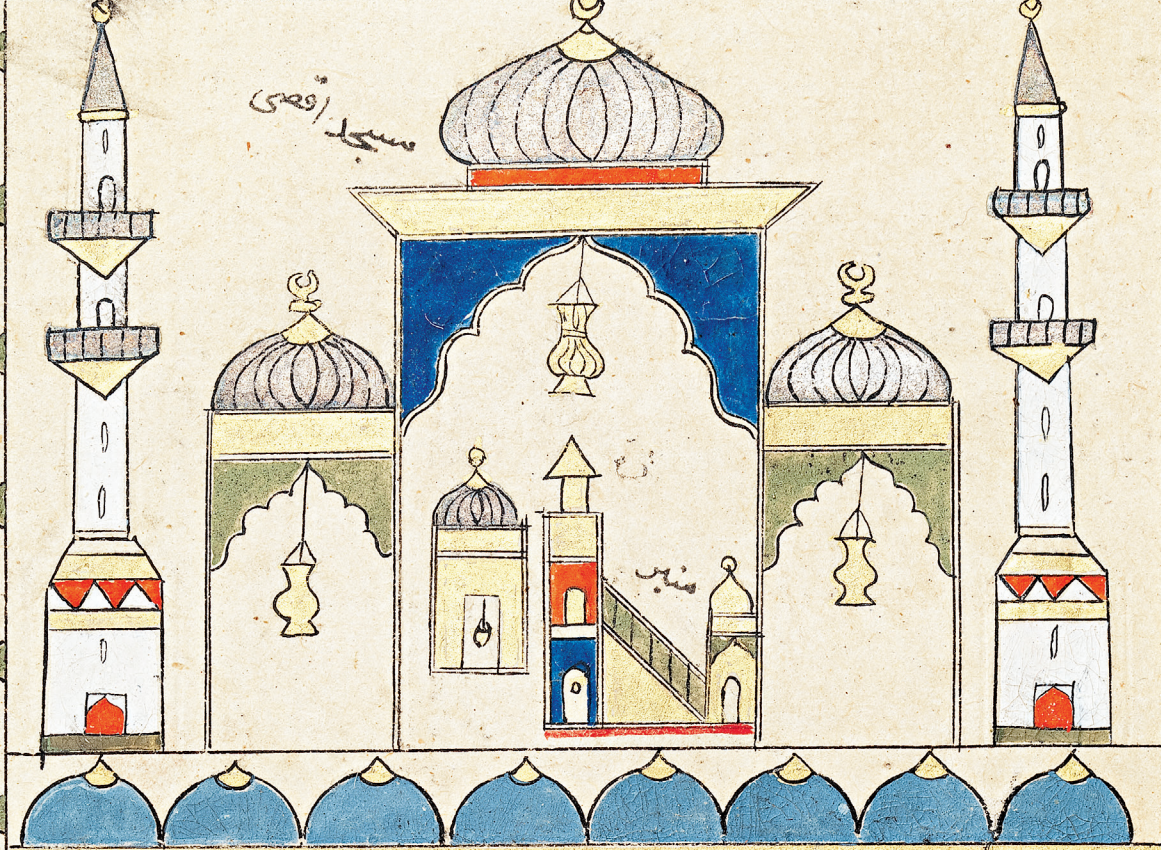
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شیخ برین از ملک بر
بمکن جان ملک و



Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing.

(Al-Isrā'/The Night Journey, 17:1)

1. By the star when it sets
2. indeed your companion is not astray
3. nor does he speak vainly.
4. It is nothing less than a revelation revealed
5. taught to him by a being of intense power
6. possessing strength. He straightened up
7. while he was on the highest horizon,
8. then he drew close and descended
9. and he was a distance of two bows or closer.
10. He revealed to his servant what he revealed.
11. The heart did not lie in what it saw.
12. Will you then argue with him about what he saw?
13. He saw him another time
14. at the Lote Tree of the Boundary
15. next to the Garden of the Refuge
16. when the Lote Tree was covered by what covered.
17. His vision did not stray, nor was it excessive.
18. He saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.

(Al-Najm/The Star, 53:1-17)

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Volume 1

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The text contains references to both the
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Ascension scene showing the constellations, signs of the zodiac, and the seven heavens
Nizāmī, *Makhzan al-asrār* (Treasury of secrets), Isfahan, 1665. British Library, Add.
6613, fol. 3r (BL3492771). © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman
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Journey to Inspiration: *Mi'rāj* Texts and Images

The Formation of the *Mi'rāj* Story

One of the most wondrous moments in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have occurred on the night of the 27th of Rajab. On this night, he was awoken by the Angel Gabriel who, having arrived in Mecca, informed Muḥammad that the time had arrived for him to embark on a night journey (*isrāʾ*) to Jerusalem and to go on an ascension (*mi'rāj*) through the skies so that he could meet prophets and angels, converse with God, and visit heaven and hell (fig. 10.1; cat. no. 39). As a tale indicative of Muḥammad's superior status among all Jewish and Christian prophets, his ability to receive revelations from God, and his witnessing of events in the Hereafter, the combined *isrāʾ*-*mi'rāj* story has held a steady place in religious and biographical literature from the beginnings of Islam to the present day. Many tales in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages—not to exclude those in Latin, Castilian, and Old French¹—about the ascension indeed flourished over the centuries and, as a result, provide powerful testaments to the story's high esteem, its widespread popularity, and its relevance to religious and political claims.

Although the exact details of the *mi'rāj* tale fluctuated from one text to the next and from one



10.1

10.1 (cat. no. 39): Ascension scene. Jāmi, *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā* (Joseph and Potiphar's wife). Shiraz, 1568. Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul, TSMK H.812, fol. 10v. Courtesy of the Topkapı Palace Museum.

¹ See Gisèle Besson and Michèle Brossard-Dandré, trans., *Liber Scale Machometi, Le Livre de l'Échelle de Mahomet* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1991); and Reginald Hyatte, trans., *The Book of Muhammad's Ladder of 1264* (Leiden, New York City, and Cologne: Brill, 1997). Some scholars, such as Miguel Asín Palacios, have argued that European translations of the Islamic ascension tale had a direct influence on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. For this, see Palacios's *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, trans. Harold Sunderland (Lahore: Qausain, 1977). This hypothesis remains debated in scholarship today.

oral tale to another, its general narrative arc was more or less codified by the tenth century. Early biographers such as Ibn Ishāq (d. 768), Hadith transmitters like al-Bukhārī (d. 870), historians such as Ibn Saʿd (d. 845), and exegete-historians like al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) all attempted to clarify and elaborate upon the remarkably vague verses in the Qurʾan which appear to describe the Prophet's ascension, even though these verses altogether omit any mention of the term *miʾrāj*.

The Qurʾanic verses at the source of the ascension tale include most prominently the first verse of chapter 17 (al-Isrāʾ), which states, "Glory to Him who made his servant travel by night from the sacred mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) to the furthest place of worship (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*) whose precincts we have blessed, in order that we may show him some of our signs." Most writers interpreted this *aya* as an indication of Muḥammad's journey from Mecca to a far-away place, itself understood to represent Jerusalem as Muḥammad's necessary stopover en route to the heavens. Already at this time, the expression *al-masjid al-aqṣā* became synonymous with the "noble enclosure" (*al-ḥaram al-sharīf*) in Jerusalem, where at the turn of the eighth century Umayyad rulers constructed a mosque bearing the same name.² As a result of these historical factors, Qurʾan 17:1 is often explained as the lateral and earthly portion of Muḥammad's nocturnal voyage, which took him from Mecca to Jerusalem before his vertical and heavenly ascension to the heavens.³

Another series of consecutive verses in the Qurʾan—namely, verses 4–18 from the 53rd sura, entitled "the Star" (al-Najm)—complete the narrative by describing the Prophet's arrival at a very high horizon marked by a tree (*sidrat al-muntahā*) believed to demarcate the upper limit of both space and time. Once he arrives

very close to God—in fact, so close that only the space of two arcs (*qāba qawsayn*) remains—God bestows revelations upon the Prophet who, in turn, observes the greatest signs of the Lord. The rather elusive features of these verses allowed for creative liberties in storytelling but oftentimes led to heated disputes over the nature of Muḥammad's vision of God. Most frequently, writers tended to concur that Muḥammad's vision (*ru'yā*) of the divine presence was one that occurred solely in his heart (*fī qalbiḥī*) rather than constituting an ocular vision (*fī al-baṣar*) per se.⁴

The conjoining of Qurʾan 17:1 and 53:4–18, as well as the incorporation of a number short Qurʾanic verses and biographical details from non-Qurʾanic sources, thus engendered the primary elements of the story of the Prophet's *miʾrāj*.

Miʾrāj* Texts: From *Miʾrājnāma* to *Miʾrājīyya

Probably prompted by storytellers and oral traditions, writers attempted to write down more definitive versions of the Prophet's *miʾrāj* by collating a number of details to these otherwise fragmented verses. Such attempts at codifying the ascension narrative may have been due, in part, to varying oral traditions. Although there are numerous reports about the Prophet's ascension in Hadith manuals, biographies, *tafāsīr*, and histories, the first truly independent and complete work dedicated to the theme of the ascension was the "Book of Ascension" (*Kitāb al-Miʾrāj*) attributed to the Prophet's cousin, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 688).⁵

Ibn ʿAbbās's *Kitāb al-Miʾrāj* set the standard for most subsequent autonomous "Books of Ascension" in Arabic, also known in Persian and Turkic spheres as *Miʾrājnāmas*. In these

² For a further discussion of the term and its various interpretations, see Heribert Busse, "Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 1–40; and Alfred Guillaume, "Where was al-Masjid al-Aqsa?," *al-Andalus* 18, no. 2 (1953): 323–36.

³ Problematic or important terms cannot be discussed within the scope of this study. However, for a history of the interpretations of Qurʾan 17:1, see Claude Gilliot, "Coran 17, Isrāʾ, 1 dans la recherche occidentale: De la critique des traditions au Coran comme texte," in *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, ed. M. A. Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Peeters, 1996), 1–26.

⁴ For a review of the debates over Muḥammad's vision of God, see Josef Van Ess, "Le *miʾrāj* et la vision de Dieu dans les premières spéculations théologiques en Islam," in *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, ed. M. A. Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Peeters, 1996), 27–56.

⁵ Frederick Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn ʿAbbās Ascension Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008). Colby notes that there are several versions of the "Book of Ascension" attributed to the figure of Ibn ʿAbbās; these did not crystallize into a fixed narrative until the ninth century. The Arabic text of Ibn ʿAbbās's *Kitāb al-Miʾrāj* is available in Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Ṭuʾmī, ed., *Taṭrīz al-Dībāj bi-Haqāʾiq al-Isrāʾ wa-l-Miʾrāj* (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1994), 9–33.

accounts, Muḥammad's journey to Jerusalem and the heavens and back to Mecca is related in a seamless fashion and with astounding attention to detail. These books underwent elaboration and embellishment, while their major narrative clusters became solidified over the centuries.

The Prophet most often is described as mounting a winged, human-headed steed named al-Burāq, responsible for his journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and onward to the seventh heaven.⁶ Sometimes the Prophet stops on the way to Jerusalem, where he then meets a number of prophets and serves as their prayer leader (*imām*). From Jerusalem, he rises through the seven heavens—at times, each heaven bears a particular name and is created from a specific substance—where he encounters further prophets and many angels, some of which are shaped like a rooster. Having arrived at the utmost limit, he then has a vision of, and communicates with, the Lord about his own merits and his community's obligations, which include the five daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Moving onward, he then visits heaven and its inhabitants, and observes hell and the various punishments reserved for sinners, such as those who steal the wealth of orphans. Upon his return to Mecca, Muḥammad is questioned about his miraculous ascent to the heavens by the members of the Quraysh tribe and most especially by their leader Abū Jahl, who claims that the Prophet is guilty of either lying or sorcery. However, upon correctly describing Jerusalem or determining a caravan's entry into Mecca, the Prophet confirms his assertions and thousands of Quraysh members embrace Islam as a result.

Mī'rājnāma texts were popular because of two principal and complementary factors. First, because of their ability to inspire awe and fear in their readers or listeners, they provided effective

pedagogical tools to teach a portion of the Prophet's biography and to warn their audiences of what awaits those who do not follow doctrinal regulations and the "right path" (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). Second, because of the narrative's conclusion, the *mī'rāj* could be used within societies either in the process of converting to Islam or within intra-religious debates. Muslim groups also attempted to advance their own sectarian claims—be these Sunni, Shi'i, Ismā'īlī, Sufi, or other—by modifying particular details in the books of ascension they produced. For instance, a Sunni *mī'rājnāma* may describe angels praying on behalf of the Sunni community (*ahl al-sunna*), while a Shi'i *mī'rājnāma* may recount the Prophet Muḥammad encountering Imam 'Alī, in the shape of an angelic lion, beyond the seventh heaven.⁷

The most well-known ascension texts composed in Arabic bearing Sufi overtones include al-Sulamī's (d. 1021) "Subtleties of the Ascension" (*Laṭā'if al-Mī'rāj*), a work that uses the motif of the ascension to explain mystical concepts through a number of theme-specific sayings.⁸ Like al-Sulamī, al-Qushayrī (d. 1073) was a mystical writer who, though best known for his treatise (*risāla*) on the principles of Sufism, also composed a *Kitāb al-Mī'rāj*.⁹ Sufi shaykhs like him saw in the Prophet's ascension the pattern of a spiritual voyage toward witnessing God (*mashāhid al-ḥaqq*).¹⁰ Even more famously, the Sufi writers Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 878) and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) believed that individual aspirants could freely employ the Prophet's corporeal *mī'rāj* as a template for their own spiritual ascensions toward divine enlightenment and unity.¹¹ Early Sufi exegetes like Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) and al-Tustarī (d. 896) equally interpreted Qur'anic verses on the Prophet's ascension as an intimate communion between a lover (*ḥabīb*) and the beloved

⁶ On al-Burāq, see also Ayşe Taşkent, "Written and Visual Depictions of Burāq in Islamic Culture," in this volume.

⁷ On Qajar ascension images displaying Shi'i messages, see Ali Boozari, "Persian Illustrated Lithographed Books on the *Mī'rāj*: Improving Children's Shi'i Beliefs in the Qajar Period," in *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mī'rāj Tales*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Frederick Colby (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 252–68.

⁸ Al-Sulamī, *The Subtleties of the Ascension: Early Mystical Sayings on Muhammad's Heavenly Journey*, trans. Frederick Colby (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006); and Frederick Colby, "The Subtleties of the Ascension: Al-Sulamī on the *Mī'rāj* of the Prophet Muhammad," *Studia Islamica* 94 (2002): 167–83.

⁹ Al-Qushayrī, *Kitāb al-Mī'rāj*, ed. 'Alī Ḥasan 'Abd al-Qādir (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Hadītha, 1384/1964); and al-Ṭu'mī, *Taṭrīz al-Dībāj bi-Haqqā'iq al-Isrā' wa-l-Mī'rāj*, 115–88.

¹⁰ Al-Qushayrī, *Kitāb al-Mī'rāj*, 107.

¹¹ There exist many studies on al-Bisṭāmī's and Ibn 'Arabī's ascension texts. Among them, see Reynold Nicholson, "An Early Arabic Version of the *Mī'rāj* of Abu Yazid al-Bisṭami," *Islamica* 2, no. 3 (1926): 402–15; and James Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the *Mī'rāj*, Parts I and II," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 629–52 and 108 (1993): 63–77.

(*maḥbūb*),¹² terms tinted with unmistakable Sufi overtones.

Works on the *mi'rāj* in Persian abound as well. Some of them are allegorical, others Sunni or Shi'i in character, and still others Sufi and highly poetic. Ibn Sīnā's (d. 1037) *Mi'rāj-nāma* stands out as the earliest of its type in Persian prose, but his text deploys the pattern of the Prophet's ascension to explain his particular philosophical system.¹³ One anonymous Ilkhanid *Mi'rāj-nāma* manuscript bearing the date 1286 and written in Persian makes much more explicit claims about the rightful rulership of the Sunni community at a time of tremendous religious fluctuation in Iran.¹⁴

Although such narrative texts on the ascension existed in Persian lands, the preferred form was the *mi'rāj* poetic preface (*dībāja*) typically included after prayers addressed to God and the Prophet. These ascension poems were included most especially in epic stories and romances composed by Persian poets such as Sanā'ī (d. 1141), Nizāmī (d. 1218), 'Aṭṭār (d. 1230), Rūmī (d. 1273), Sa'dī (d. 1292), Amīr Khusraw Dihlawī (d. 1325), Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1389–90), and Jāmī (d. 1492).¹⁵ These poems, typically bearing the title of *na't*, *madḥ*, *du'ā*, *munājāt*, or *sitāyish*, are couched in highly metaphoric terms and thus lay the groundwork for interpreting the narratives they accompany in allegorical terms.

In Turkic traditions, the ascension also constituted a popular subject in biographical, theological, and poetic works. *Mi'rāj* tales and poems are found in old Anatolian and Ottoman Turkish prose and verse works composed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These include most prominently 'Āşık Paşa's (d. 1333) *Garibnāme*, Aḥmedi's (d. 1412) *Iskendernāme*, Süleymān Çelebi's (d. 1422) *Mevlid*, Meḥmed Yazıcıoğlu's (d. 1451) *Muḥammediye*, and Ḍarār's (fl. ca. 1350–1400) *Siyer-i Nebī*, a copy of which was lavishly illustrated for Sultan Murād III in 1595–96 (cat. no. 16, cat. no. 72).¹⁶ Independent *mi'rāj-nāmes* also developed in Khwarezmian and Chaghatay milieus. For example, al-Sarā'ī (fl. ca. 1325–50) dedicated two chapters to the ascension story in his Khwarezmian text entitled *Nehcū'l-Ferādis*,¹⁷ itself at the foundation of the later Chaghatay *Mi'rāj-nāma* attributed to Mīr Ḥaydar Tilbe (fl. ca. 1400–30), the court panegyrist of the Timurid governor Iskandar Sultan (r. 1409–14).¹⁸

Independent ascension poems (*mi'rāciyye*) in Ottoman Turkish became quite prevalent especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although many authors composed such works, one of the most widespread and beloved Ottoman *mi'rāciyye* poems was composed in *meşnevī* form by İsmā'il Ḥakkı (d. 1724), a member of the 'ulemā

¹² Gerhard Böwering, "From the Word of God to the Vision of God: Muhammad's Heavenly Journey in Classical Sufi Qur'an Commentary," in *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, ed. Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Peeters, 1996), 205–21; Nazeer el-Azma, "Some Notes on the Impact of the Story of the *Mi'rāj* on Sufi Literature," *The Moslem World* 63, no. 2 (April 1973): 93–104; Nazeer el-Azma, *al-Mi'rāj wa-l-Ramz al-Ṣūfī* (Beirut: Dar al-Bāḥith, 1982); and Qassim al-Samarrai, *The Theme of the Ascension in Mystical Writings: A Study of the Theme in Islamic and Non-Islamic Mystical Writings* (Baghdad: National Printing and Publishing Co., 1968).

¹³ Ibn Sina, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), with a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven*, trans. Peter Heath (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Ibn Sīnā, *Mi'rāj-nāma*, ed. Shams al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Abarqūhī (Mashhad: Astān-i Quds-i Rezavī, 1366/1987); and Tobias Nünlist, *Himmelfahrt und Heiligkeit im Islam: eine Studie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Ibn Sīnā's Mi'rāj-nāma* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002). [See also Ayşe Taşkent, "Did Avicenna Write a *Mi'rāj-nāma*? A Structural and Content Analysis of the *Mi'rāj-nāma* in the Context of Avicenna's Theory of Soul (*Nafs*) and Prophecy (*Nubuwwa*)," in this volume. (e.n.)]

¹⁴ See Christiane Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension: A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

¹⁵ These are compiled in Ahmad Ranjbar, *Chand Mi'rāj-nāma* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1372/1952). Also see Najib Mayel-Heravi, "Quelques *me'rājiyye* en persan," in *Le Voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, ed. Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Peeters, 1996), 199–203; Ghulam Rasheed, "The Development of *Na'tia* Poetry in Persian Literature," *Islamic Culture* 39, no. 1 (January 1965): 53–69; and Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, "The Story of the Ascension (*Mi'rāj*) in Nizami's Work," in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Kamran Talatoff and Jerome Clinton (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 179–88.

¹⁶ There exist numerous Turkish editions and studies of these works. For a broad review of the subject, see Metin Akar, *Türk Edebiyatında Manzum Mi'râc-Nâmeler* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1987).

¹⁷ János Eckmann, ed. and trans., *Nehcū'l-Feradis* (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 1995). I am not including here a discussion of the *Mi'rāj-nāma* attributed to the twelfth-century Yasavī writer Ḥakīm Atā, as Max Scherberger will demonstrate in a forthcoming study that this text is in fact a fifteenth-century composition. See Kemal Eraslan, "Ḥakīm Ata ve Mi'râc-nâmesi," *Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Araştırma Dergisi* 10 (1979): 243–304; and Akar, *Türk Edebiyatında Manzum Mi'râc-Nâmeler*, 96–99.

¹⁸ The text is available in Latin transliteration and English translation in Wheeler Thackston, "The Paris *Mi'rācnāma*," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 18 (1994): 263–99; in Arabic transcription and French translation in Abel Pavet De Courteille, *Mirād-j-Nāmeḥ, récit de l'ascension de Mahomet au ciel composé A.H. 840/1436–1437* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1975); and in Latin transliteration and German translation in Max Scherberger, *Das Mi'rāgnāma: Die Himmel- und Höllenfahrt des Propheten Muhammad in der osttürkischen Überlieferung, Arbeitsmaterialien zum Orient* 14 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003).



originally from Bursa.¹⁹ His Sufi poem was first composed in 1709 and transcribed many times thereafter (fig. 10.2). Finally, Ottoman ascension recitations were a staple of *miraç kandili*, the yearly festivities held on the night of 27 Rajab to commemorate the Prophet's ascension. The most celebrated of these compositions was the *Mi'râc-ı Nebî* penned by 'Oṣmân Dede (d. 1729), the chief flutist (*neyzenbaşı*) at the Mevlevî lodge in Galata. His *Mi'râc-ı Nebî* was not only read aloud but composed in musical form as well.²⁰

As confirmed by the wide range of languages and texts—exegetical, biographical, historical, poetic, and even musical—the story of the Prophet's *mi'rāj* permeated all aspects of Islamic culture. It served as a way to teach a momentous occurrence in Muḥammad's life, explicate doctrinal points, forward specific religious ideas, and describe the afterlife. It also provided the quintessential narrative conduit for the celebration of divine love as well as the expression of religious and spiritual devotion.

¹⁹ Akar, *Türk Edebiyatında Manzum Mi'râc-Nâmeler*, 171–72. [See also Mustafa İsmet Uzun, "The Poetry of 'Rising to the Level of God' in Turkish-Islamic Literature: *Mi'râciyyes* and *Mi'râc-nâmes*," and Mehmet Arslan, "Verse *Mi'râciyyes* and *Mi'râc-nâmes*," in this volume. (e.n.)]

²⁰ Orhan Nasuhioğlu, "Dini Musikimizin bir Şaheseri: Mi'râciye," *Musiki Mecmuası* 26 (1974): 4–6; and Mustafa Uzun, "Edebiyatımızda ve Musikimizde Miracıyeler," in *Mi'râc Sempozyumu: Sempozyum Bildirleri*, 17 Aralık 1995-Eskişehir (İstanbul: Seha Neşriyat, 1999), 97–111. [See also Süleyman Erguner, "The Ascension of Our Music: The *Mi'râciyye* and Kuṭb-ı Nâyî 'Oṣmân Dede," in this volume. (e.n.)]

10.3: The Prophet begins his ascension with ladders of gold and silver. Anonymous, *Mi'rājnāma*. Iran, ca. 1850–1900. Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Persian ms. 8, fol. 17r.

Seven Centuries of *Mi'rāj* Images

Because of the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 and the obliteration of the famous Abbasid library, it is hard to surmise the status and scope of illustrated books before the advent of Ilkhanid rule in Persia (1256–1353). Although a small corpus of illustrated manuscripts made before 1300 do survive,²¹ it is really at the turn of the fourteenth century that the history of Islamic painting begins in earnest. From this time forward, depictions of the Prophet's ascension not only were integrated in illustrated world histories and biographies—as would seem most logical—but also began to appear in animal fables like *Kalila va Dimna*, miscellanies of poetical texts, Persian romances and heroic tales, and divination books. Last but certainly not least, fully independent and illustrated *mi'rājnāmas* were produced as well. As growing evidence indicates, it seems that these kinds of works were utilized for missionary activities or indoctrination into a specific branch of Islam.²²

The earliest surviving image of the Prophet's ascension complements a section on the *mi'rāj* as included in the “Compendium of Chronicles” (*Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*), written by the Ilkhanid vizier Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318) and made as an illustrated manuscript in Tabriz in 1307–14. In this stand-alone painting, the Prophet strides al-Burāq, which holds a closed book in its hands while its tail appears to transform into an angel wielding a shield and a sword.²³ In the painting, one angel holds a gold cup on a platter while another approaches the Prophet from a set of doors that seem affixed to the sky. Judging from the elements in the painting and their relationship to Rashīd al-Dīn's text, this image presents a moment in which the Prophet must select the cup of milk and thus embark on the correct path to heaven.

Although this painting belongs to a larger cycle of images dedicated to Muḥammad's life, it

bears didactic overtones. The *mi'rāj* as a subject unto itself and as a teaching tool took off very soon thereafter, with the earliest surviving illustrated *Mi'rājnāma* believed to have been made for the last Ilkhanid ruler, Abū Sa'īd (r. 1317–35). Only a series of nine paintings on eight folios are preserved today, and none of them include the original ascension text.²⁴ A theory for this *Mi'rājnāma*'s purpose been put forward by comparing it to an otherwise unstudied Ilkhanid *Mi'rājnāma* manuscript dated 1286. This Persian text helps identify and order the paintings, and suggests very strongly that the story of the ascension at this time could help promote the superior status of the Sunni community (*ahl al-sunna*). This is perhaps not surprising given Abū Sa'īd's overt embracing of Sunni Islam after his father Oljeitu's conversion to Shi'i Islam. In other words, the oldest illustrated *Mi'rājnāma* that has come down to us seems to have functioned as a Sunni illustrated devotional manual tailored to a Persian-speaking audience probably within the ruler's immediate entourage.

This illustrated *Mi'rājnāma* probably engendered a number of others, in particular the famous Timurid *Mi'rājnāma* most likely produced in 1436–37 for the Timurid ruler Shahrūkh (r. 1405–47), himself a staunch “reviver” (*mūceddid*) of Sunni Islam. This manuscript stands out for being written in Chaghatay Turkish and transcribed in Uyghur script, as well as containing over fifty stunning paintings.²⁵ The images reveal strong Buddhist elements, which appear to have been borrowed freely from materials witnessed by Malik Bakhshi, the manuscript's scribe, while he was on the Timurid mission of 1419–22 that traveled through Central Asia to the Ming capital of Khan Baliq (Beijing).

It remains unclear whether the Timurid *Mi'rājnāma* was utilized internally by Shahrūkh, possibly as a tool to promote Sunni Islam among

²¹ Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1977), 1–142.

²² For a brief overview of ascension images, see Christiane Gruber, “L'Ascension (*Mi'rāj*) du Prophète Mohammad dans la peinture et la littérature islamiques,” *Luqman: Annales des Presses Universitaires d'Iran* 39, no. 1 (Fall & Winter 2003–4): 55–79.

²³ See David Talbot Rice, *The Illustrations to the “World History” of Rashid al-Din*, ed. Basil Gray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976); Christiane Gruber, “Al-Burāq,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd edition (2012), 40–46.

²⁴ For a discussion of the Ilkhanid *mi'rājnāma* paintings, see Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*; and Richard Ettinghausen, “Persian Ascension Miniatures of the Fourteenth Century,” *Convegno di Scienze Morali Storiche e Filologiche, Symposium on Orient and Occident during the Middle Ages, May 27– June 1, 1956* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1957), 360–83. This article was republished in his *Islamic Art and Archaeology: Collected Papers*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Berlin: G. Mann Verlag, 1984), 244–68.

²⁵ Marie-Rose Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet: Miraj Nameh*, BN, Paris Sup Turc 190, trans. Richard Pevear (New York: Braziller, 1977); and Christiane Gruber, *The Book of Muhammad's Ascension (Mi'rajnama): A Study in Text and Image* (Valencia, Spain: Patrimonio Ediciones, 2008).

the ruling elite, or whether the manuscript may have been intended as a gift to the Ming emperor. What is clear, however, is that the manuscript never went eastward; quite the contrary, it went westward and arrived in Istanbul, where 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 only 25 piasters.²⁶ Between ca. 1500 and 1650, therefore, it is quite likely that both the Ilkhanid and Timurid *Mīrājnāmas* provided inspiration for the series of five ascension paintings included in the *Siyer-i Nebī* manuscript produced in 1595–96 for Murād III.²⁷

Other complete illustrated *mīrājnāmas* survive as well. One of them is very small, in a vertical layout, and contains seven paintings which fall clearly within the Qajar painterly style of ca. 1850–1900 (fig. 10.3).²⁸ The text itself is patently Shi'i: dialogues between Muḥammad and the angels take the shape of the Shi'i *shahada* ("There is no God but God, Muḥammad is His Prophet, and 'Alī is His Viceregent [*walī*]"); angels are described as bearing Shi'i inscriptions on their wings and foreheads; and Muḥammad encounters 'Alī beyond the seventh heaven, at which time 'Alī enumerates all of his, the imams', and the *ahl al-bayt*'s virtues. By collating evidence drawn from Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Qajar illustrated *mīrājnāmas*, therefore, it becomes clear that these kinds of illustrated manuscripts and the story of the Prophet's ascension could serve as a means for promoting obeisance, and perhaps even conversion, to Sunni or Shi'i Islam.

There exist countless single-page paintings of the ascension included in the beginnings of Persian romances and epic stories produced from ca. 1500 to the Qajar period. These compositions most often function as pictured praises to the Prophet Muḥammad, since they depict angels offering platters containing jewels, incense burners, a crown, and flames (cat. no. 47).²⁹ All of these visual elements are related to the texts of Nizāmī, Jāmī, and others, who describe in detail the Prophet's gem-like qualities, his sweet aroma,



²⁶ Antoine Galland, *Voyage à Constantinople (1672–1673)*, ed. Charles Schefer (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002), 29.

²⁷ Zeren Tanındı, *Siyer-i Nebī: İslâm Tasvir Sanatında Hz. Muhammed'in Hayatı* (Istanbul: Hürriyet Vakfı Yayınları, 1984).

²⁸ Maryam Ekhtiar, "Infused with Shi'ism: Representations of the Prophet in Qajar Iran," in *The Prophet between Ideal and Ideology: A Scholarly Investigation*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Avinoam Shalem (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 102–4, plates 20–24.

²⁹ This painting is a remarkably close copy of the famous ascension painting included in Nizāmī's *Khamsa* made for Shah Tahmāsb in 1539–43. See Eleanor Sims, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 152, fig. 67.

10.4 (cat. no. 13): Ascension scene showing the constellations, signs of the zodiac, and the seven heavens (detail). Niẓāmī, *Makhzan al-asrār* (Treasury of secrets). Isfahan, 1665. British Library, Add. 6613, fol. 3r (BL3492771). © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman Images.

10.5: Erol Akyavaş, *Miraçname VIII*. Paris, 1984–87. Plate in author's collection.



10.4

his divinely decreed rulership, and his pre-existing light (*nūr Muḥammad*).³⁰

It is within ascension paintings included in poetic prefaces and not until the time of the first Safavid ruler, Shah Ismāʿīl I (r. 1501–24), that the facial veil emerges and becomes a standard feature of prophetic iconography.³¹ As a result, we must now approach this particular motif with much greater care and nuance. Indeed, the Prophet's facial veil appears to be due to

poetic, rather than prohibitory, impulses, and its initial emergence with Shah Ismāʿīl, a ruler claiming divinity for himself, suggests that it was linked to the very unusual mix of Shiʿi, Sufi, and Kızılbaş beliefs embraced by the Safavid monarch. It is also at this period that a lion figure—the angelic stand-in for Imam ʿAlī—begins to appear in some single-page ascension paintings, thereby giving them a clear Shiʿi tinge (cat. no. 61).³²

³⁰ See also Nina Macaraig, "The Fragrant Journey Heavenwards: Incense Burners in *Miʿrāj* Depictions," and Nicole Kançal-Ferrari, "The Prophet's Turban and Celestial Crowns: Headgear in Ascension Scenes," in this volume.

³¹ On the question of the facial veil in Safavid ascension paintings, see Christiane Gruber, "When *Nubuvvat* Encounters *Valayat*: Safavid Paintings of the Prophet Muhammad's *Miʿrāj*, ca. 1500–1550," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shiʿism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shiʿi Islam*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 46–73.

³² See also Ertuğrul Ertekin, "The Legend of ʿAlī Appearing in the Form of a Lion during the *Miʿrāj* and Its Reflection in Visual



Many other kinds of single-page *mi'rāj* paintings were produced from about 1500 onward. Some represent the Prophet's ascension over the Ka'ba in Mecca, thereby functioning as a virtual and visual pilgrimage to the holy land (cat. no. 12). Others depict the *mi'rāj* over the concentric heavenly spheres (*aflāk*), the signs of the zodiac, and the constellations, in order to show the Prophet's voyage across the entirety of the cosmos (fig. 10.4; cat. no. 13). In the latter case, the story of Muḥammad's ascension clearly intersects with the fields of astrology and cosmology.

The ascension narrative, its potential for spiritual abstraction, and its many fantastic features have provided a rich and constant source of inspiration to artists. Indeed, Erol Akyavaş (d. 1999), one of Turkey's most prominent modern painters, was inspired by the tale when he produced his series of mixed-media lithographs named *Miraçname* (fig. 10.5). His compositions explore the realms of the unconscious and the metaphysical by borrowing choice motifs—such as the rooster angel, the stepped ladder, and the celestial spheres (*aflāk*)—which had matured within ascension images over seven centuries.³³

Culture: A Reading from the *Mi'rāçlama of Khaṭāyī*, in this volume. (e.n.)

³³ Ömer Şerifoğlu and Zeynep Şanlıer, eds., *Erol Akyavaş ve Miraçnamesi* (Istanbul: grataNoNgrata, 2004).