

# THE MI'RĀJ MINIATURES OF VENICE AHMADI İSKANDAR-NĀMA: AN ASSESMENT ACCORDING TO TIMURID TRADITION

**Venedik Ahmedî İskender-Namesi Mi'raç Minyatürleri: Timurî Geleneğine  
Göre Bir Değerlendirme**

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## ABSTRACT

The mi'rāj as an important religious event in the world of Islam has been depicted in different eras and regions according to its differing history and cultural approaches. The Timurid and Ottoman mi'rāj paintings have become a worthwhile pretty good field of comparison in terms of different viewpoints and perceptions. While an expression in which Asian influences were more vivid and vibrant was adopted in the Timurid mi'rāj paintings, an expression more closely following the rules of the Sunni understanding were preferred in the Ottoman mi'rāj paintings. However, the mi'rāj depictions of Ahmadi's Venice *İskandar-nāma* as an Ottoman work of art are the exceptions to this generalization. One of the illustrated copies of the *İskandar-nāma*, written by Ahmadi, is found in the Venice National Library. It is agreed that this work of art, dated 1440-50, was illustrated by artists of Timurid-Turkoman origin in the Ottoman Edirne Palace. In this study, two mi'rāj paintings within the Venice Ahmadi *İskandar-nāma* bearing features different from the traditional Ottoman mi'rāj painting will be analyzed. The Timurid influences and the Ottoman synthesis within the symbolic fiction of these two mi'rāj paintings will be further discussed in this article.

### Key Words

Mi'rāj, Miniature, İskandar-nāma, Timurid, Ottoman

### ÖZ

İslam dünyası içinde önemli bir yere sahip mi'raç, kültürel yaklaşımlara göre çeşitlenen hikâyesine bağlı olarak farklı dönem ve bölgelerde farklı resmedilmiştir. Farklı algılayışlar açısından Timurî ve Osmanlı mi'raç resimleri iyi bir karşılaştırma alanı olmaktadır. Timurî mi'raç resimlerinde Asya etkilerinin daha canlı olduğu bir ifade benimsenmişken Osmanlı mi'raç resimlerinde Sunni anlayışın kurallarına daha bağlı anlatımlar tercih edilmiştir. Ancak, bir Osmanlı eseri olarak Venedik Ahmadi İskendernamesi mi'raç resimleri bu genellenin dışında istisnai tasvirlerdir. Ahmadi tarafından kaleme alınan İskendername isimli el yazma eserin resimli nüshalarından biri Venedik Milli Kütüphanesi'nde bulunmaktadır. Bu eser 1440-50 arasına tarihlenmektedir ve Edirne Sarayı'nda Türkmen-Timurî kökenli sanatçılar tarafından resimlendirildiği kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışmada Osmanlı mi'raç resim geleneğinden farklı özellikler taşıyan Venedik İskendernamesi içindeki iki mi'raç resmi incelenecektir. Ayrıca bahsedilen iki mi'raç resminin sembolik kurgusu içindeki Timurî etkileri ve Osmanlı sentezleri ele alınacaktır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Mi'râç, Minyatür, İskender-nâme, Timurî, Osmanlı

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## Introduction

*İskandar-nāma* was written by Ahmedi for the Ottoman court in the middle of the 14th century. The story is an Islamic version of the life of the Macadenonian, Alexander the Great. First completed sometime before 1389, with subsequent versions composed until around 1410, Ahmedi's *İskandar-nāma* is one of the first mesnevis (verse narratives in rhymed couplets) of any kind in Ottoman literature and it is the first literary account of Iskandar's life in the Turkic tradition—virtually the only one in Anatolian Turkic—and it is the first work in Anatolian Turkic literature to focus on the life of a primarily nonreligious figure (Sawyer 1997: 17). The first illustrated sample of Ahmedi's *İskandar-nāma*, which was painted in Amasya in 1416, is in Paris (PBNF, Turc 309) (Bağcı et al. 2006: 21-22). Probably during the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, three illustrated copies of Ahmedi's *İskandar-nāma* were produced. Of these, one copy, for which the date is precisely known, is kept in Berlin, dated 1475-76 (BPSB Ms.Or.Quart 1271); whereas a second copy is undated and is kept in St. Petersburg (SPIOS C-133) (Bağcı et al. 2006: 28-29); a third copy dated between 1450-60, which has been the subject of research, is found in Venice (1450-60, VBNM, Cod.Or.XC (57) (Bağcı et al. 2006: 26-29). The Venice *İskandar-nāma* was depicted in the Ottoman Palace in Edirne; within the work are 66 illustrations. The research carried out by Serpil Bağcı (1989, 1994: 111-133) and Ernst Grube (1987: 187-202) on this manuscript hold an important place in the world of art history. The influence of artists of

Timurid-Turkoman origin on the Venice *İskandar-nāma* according to illustration style is accepted (Bağcı et al. 2006: 26-29). In this study two mi'rāj depictions of the Venice *İskandar-nāma*, on folios 12r and 193r, with a unique description and symbolism for the Ottoman painting art and culture will be dealt with from the perspective of how the Timurid influence was colated within the Ottoman synthesis.

## Ahmedi and his *İskandar-nāma*

*İskandar-nāma* has an important place in Ottoman history in terms of its topic, how it is dealt with, the language used and the illustrations seen in the works. The influence of Ahmedi, the author of this work, should also be taken into consideration. There is varying information from different sources regarding the life of this poet, who used the pseudonym, Ahmedi in his work. The name commonly held to belong to him is one of the controversial names known as "Tâcüd-din İbrahim bin Hızır" (Köprülü 1965: 216). Considering the fact that Ahmedi, whose date of death is known to be 1412, was stated to have died in his eighties, it is assumed that his birth date was 1334-1335 (Mengi 1994: 83). Notwithstanding the fact that it is unknown where and how he received his education, it is considered that Ahmedi went to Egypt to enhance his knowledge and experience and to complete his education, and then he returned to Anatolia (Temizel 2004: 90). Although the date when he returned to Anatolia is somewhat uncertain, it is agreed that he had first been to the palace of the Germiyans and Aydinid Seignories after which he was committed

to the eldest son of Sultan Bayazid I, Amir Suleiman Chalabi (1377-1410) (Akdoğan 1979: 6). After which Ahmadi presented his work called *Jamshid u Khurshid* to Sultan Mehmed I and he included a section dedicated to written for Sultan Mehmed I to improve his relations with him and through these efforts Ahmadi managed to strengthen his bonds with the Ottoman Palace (Ünver 1983: 4).

Basically, in the literature, the first poet to mention Alexander the Great in the East was Ferdowsî (died 1020) in his work *Shāhnāme*; the subject, later on, became a single Mathnawi written by Nizami Ganjavi (died 1209) (Avcı 2012: 131). *Iskandar-nāma*, the most well-known work of Ahmadi, was the first work written in Anatolia in response to Nizami's *Iskandar-nāma* (Bardağcı 2013: 910). He included new themes in the work, he eliminated some events in it while adding new ones and also included instructive parables while exhibiting broad Islamic culture (Mengi 1994: 85). Besides a great deal of encyclopedic information absorbed within the construct of the story in these chapters, such as religion, sufism, morality, philosophy, geography, astronomy, metallurgy, medicine and politics, all the sovereigns up to "The Ottomans" along with the history of humanity were narrated in a panoramic way in this work of art (Türkdoğan 2009: 761; Bağcı 170-171). In fact *Iskandar-nāma* has a brief praise of God's unity at this point in the narrative with the Prophet coming to the fore in the long "Mevlid" at the appropriate stage of the Universal History's chronology which is interrupting the chronological account with

over 600 bayts, mostly devoted to the mi'rāj (Sawyer 2003: 240)

Despite the fact that there are various views regarding who the *Iskandar-nāma* was presented to, it would be reasonable to agree on İsmail Ünver's notion that it was presented to the son of Sultan Bayazid I (1360-1403), Amir Suleiman Chalabi, after the necessary additions had been made (Ünver 1983: 15-16). In fact, what is important is the period in which this work was presented rather than to whom it had been submitted. Sawyer describes Ahmadi's attitude in his period like this:

"Viewed in context of the political upheavals of the late 14th century in Anatolia, Ahmadi's choice of the remote Alexander as an ideal ruler may attest to his own despair of finding a ruler to extol—and find patronage with—in his own time. Both Bayazid and Timur, are reported to have admired Alexander, but it would have been an impossible task truly to please either possible patron. The two sought to destroy each other, and Bayezid ultimately succumbed. Under these circumstances, Ahmadi failed to find a patron who would marvel at holding up the "mirror" of this narrative of an ideal ruler and seeing his own face. Yet in his *Iskandar-nāma* he succeeds in disseminating the tradition of courtly culture he discovered in Cairo, demonstrating that, while cities and regimes may fall, the literary work may triumph by reaching out to new audiences." (Sawyer 1997: 110)

It should be kept in mind that Ahmadi was an intellectual who lived in a period called "The Ottoman Interregnum" when the impacts of 1402

and the Ankara Battle, which eventuated in Amir Timur's victory against Ottoman, were intensively felt in the wake of Bayezid I's reign and when there were chaotic incidents taking place throughout this crucial 14 years in Ottoman history. Ahmadi created the *Iskandar-nāma* as an expression of the ideals of leadership and patronage that he found lacking amidst the political turbulence of his age (Sawyer 1997: 2). The psychological repercussions of the ongoing critical period Ahmadi lived in must have unavoidably influenced the cultural and artistic environments of that time, as well.

### **Mi'rāj Miniatures and Timurid Conception**

In order to understand the Timurid influence in the mi'rāj depictions of the Venice *Iskandar-nāma*, it is necessary to comment on the historical background of the depictions and mi'rāj scenes of the Prophet Muhammad. Actually, the history of depicting the Prophet dates back to before the mi'rāj paintings. The first depiction of the Prophet Muhammad is seen in the *Varqa and Gulshāh* (TSK H.481, fol.70r.) manuscript, made in Konya in the period of the Anatolian Seljuks and dated 1200-1250 (Gruber 2009: 235). The depiction of the Prophet was continued in the work of Sadettin Varavini, the *Marzubānnāma*, which was made in Baghdad and dated 1299 (Gruber 2009: 236). In the copy of Biruni's historical artefacts called, Chronology of Ancient Nations, dated 1307-1308 (Edinburgh University Library, Ms. Arab 161) depictions of the Prophet Muhammad are seen (Hillenbrad 2000: 129-146).

In the copy dated 1306-1307 of

the *Jāmi al-Tavārīkh* manuscript (Edinburgh University Library, Nr.30, fol.55r) there exists a depiction of the Prophet on Buraq<sup>1</sup> (Ettinghausen 1957: 366-367). Even though it is not an ascension scene, symbolization of the mi'rāj with sky travel including angels in the pattern and being carried on Buraq will be a tradition in Islamic book painting (Tanındı 1984: 10).

The first *Mi'rājnama* were illustrated during the reign of the Ilkhanate Sultan, Abu Said, between 1317-1335 in Tabriz (TSK H.2154 fol.42v) (Gruber 2110a: 40). In the *Mi'rājnamas* the moment of ascension in the journey of the Prophet was not only illustrated, but the whole of the mi'rāj story with its various stages and details is depicted (Seguy 1977; Gruber 2010b). The 1436 *Mi'rājnama* is clearly one version of many mi'rāj legends which developed and overlapped in the Islamic world from Maghreb to Khorasan in Arabic, in Persian and in Turkish (Bertham 1988: 25) The mi'rāj was a scene much loved later by the Timurids (1370-1506) and Safavids (1501-1722) and works regarding the mi'rāj were produced (Gruber 2009: 229). From detailed depictions such as those found in *Mi'rājnamas* to single scenes illustrating the journey of the Prophet through the sky, the mi'rāj theme continued to be highly popular from the 14th to 16th centuries (Gruber 2009: 229). It is observed that the moment of ascension is mostly illustrated in manuscripts not only addressing religious but also literary and historical issues in the period of the Timurids (Tekin 2001: 538-539).

Probably the most impressive feature of such mi'rāj scenes are the

depictions of the Prophet's face. It is therefore necessary to deal with the subject of Ottoman-Timurid interaction in the mi'rāj miniatures included in the Ahmadi *Iskandar-nāma* in this context. Different explanations can be put forward for such a detailed depiction of the Prophet's face. The prohibition regarding depiction of the Prophet in the Islamic world exceeds the scope of this study since it is a highly complex and different research area. However, when depictions of the Prophet Muhammad are considered, it is worth noting that such a tradition developed in the Asiatic cultures of the Islamic world. Actually, depiction has always existed in the world of Islam. The sculptures and frescoes in the palaces of Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates which have survived to the present day are works of conspicuous depiction. However depiction in that period was something which could be enjoyed consumed by a specific social and cultural class within the palace.

In the Islamic world, the period of the Seljuk and Ilkhanate dynasties as an Asian-rooted civilization, marked a turning point. The depictions enjoyed by limited and specific individuals in Islamic culture suddenly became open to the outside world. Numerous examples can be found of this new artistic attitude on the facades of every kind of structure as well as increasing numbers of depictions on all kinds of handcrafts. The early Asian-rooted traditions of pre-Islamic religions such as Shamanism, Manichaeism and Buddhism regarding depiction were adapted to Islam. Many examples of such adaptation can be found. There are many depictions regarding the

Buddha's life in a copy dated 1314 of the *Jāmi al-Tawārīkh* manuscript and the Buddha was illustrated as a prophet adapting to Islamic understanding and Mara as a devil (Canby 1993: 301). The Mi'rājnāma written in the 13th century by Haqim Suleiman Ata, the student of Khawaja Ahmad Yasavi, reflects an adaptation of Muslim elements to nomadic tastes and Buddhist concepts (Scherberger 2010: 79). Both the influence of Asian-rooted Shamanist, Buddhist and Manichaeist pre-Islamic religions and the adaptation of such traditions to Islam by the Seljuks and the Ilkhanates occurred before the Timurid period and should be resulted in the Timurids freely and continuously making depictions of the Prophet Muhammad.

#### **The Ottoman Adaptation of the Timurid Mi'rāj Conception**

The Ottomans were not a civilization which was formed depending on links with Asia. When compared with other Turkish-Islamic civilizations, Ottomans adapted an Islamic view adhering strictly to the rules (Necipoglu 1992: 195-196). The Timurid influence on the Ahmadi *Iskandar-nāma* is most obvious in the use of depiction. Unlike the Timurids, in the Ottoman painting tradition the Prophet was depicted with a veil covering his face. Following this Ottoman approach, Zubdat al-tawārīkh, the work of Sayyid Loqman Ashuri, is an important religious work visualizing the story of the forty-two prophets (Mahir 2005: 155)<sup>2</sup>. The work was written and illustrated in 1583 and three copies of the same work have survived until the present day (Renda 1991: 485-506). In the mi'rāj miniature, the Prophet Muhammad

was illustrated in his daily life, with the celestial environment to which he will ascend to during the mi'rāj but not illustrated ascending towards the sky accompanied by the angels on Buraq (Renda 1977: 58-67). Rather than just being a variation of the mi'rāj composition, the important point herein is the fact that the features of the Prophet's face are not illustrated and are covered by a veil. In the six-volume work, *Siyar-i Nabī*, illustrated in 1595 by Mustafa Darir, in which the life of Prophet Muhammad is told, the Prophet is illustrated in a green gown, with a white turban wrapped around his head and a white veil on his face. In the works, *Sevākīb-ı Menākīb*, written in 1599 with illustrations prepared by *Fālnāma* in 1614-16, the depictions of the Prophet Muhammad had not changed and the Prophet's face was depicted with a veil.

The Venice *Iskandar-nāma* as an Ottoman manuscript has two distinctive mi'rāj depictions. One is on fol.12r and the Prophet Muhammad is shown as moving in the sky on Buraq (Fig.1). The second is on fol.193r the Prophet Muhammad is shown in the sky (Fig.2). Serpil Bağcı states that four artists took charge of the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* manuscript three of whom mainly worked together and that the styles of two of them were quite similar to each other (Bağcı 1989: 51). Distinguishing these artists as A,B,C and D, the researcher defines the styles of the artists, A and B, as being close to each other in terms of similarity. Moreover Serpil Bağcı associates artist A's composition organizations and basic painting style of clean and clear depiction in scenes

with fewer figures, with the 15th century Timurid Herat School in particular (Bağcı 1989: 51). The artists who had worked on this work of art were the educated and trained masters who had recognition and knowledge of the 15th century Timurid and Turkoman painting art school (Bağcı et al. 2006: 26-29).<sup>3</sup>

When the selected descriptive language and the stylistic characteristics are analyzed, these two mi'rāj paintings are seen to bear features that differ from the descriptive patterns of the Ottoman mi'rāj that will be established later on. It would not be wrong to regard the source of this different depiction as the Timurid culture according to the stylistic characteristics. Two Timurid mi'rāj paintings belonging to the period before 1440-1450, when the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* was produced, have appeared as an illustration of interaction.

Although there are a number of mi'rāj depictions in the world of the Timurids the effect of the Timurid mi'rāj concept will be discussed from two important Herat samples. One of them is the Timurid Mi'rājnāma dated 1436/7, and illustrated probably in Herat (Paris Nationale Bibliotheque Supp.Turc.190, fol.5a) (Fig.3,4). The mi'rāj miniature in the Nizami *Khamse*, dated 1494-1495 and illustrated in Herat (London British Museum Or. 6810 fol 5v) has almost the same characteristics as those in the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* as an Timurid production (Fig.5).

In the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* the primary influence is in relation to portraying the Prophet Muhammad's face. Exposing the facial details of the



prophet in the Ottoman mi'rāj paintings would not be a permanent pattern. Unavoidably, in defiance of the Ottoman attitude, the question as to why Muhammad's portrait was depicted in such a particular and privileged work as the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* springs to mind. The answer to this question is hidden in the art taste of the patron who wanted the work to be illustrated. It is agreed that this work of art was the product of the workshops in Edirne.

In particular, the fact that the artist B had worked on *Qulliyat e Khātubī*, definitely known to have been illustrated in Edirne, and that the activities of Istanbul nakkashane had mainly focused on the production of the works of western origin during this period are evidence that this work of art was produced in the Edirne Palace (Bağcı 1989: 60). However, there is no accurate data as to whether or not it was produced during the time of Sultan Murad II or Sultan Mehmed II. Considering the date of its production and Sultan Mehmed II's fondness of *Iskandar-nāmas*, it can be assumed that this invaluable manufactured work was prepared during Sultan Mehmed II's reign (Bağcı 1989: 60). It is a known fact that Sultan Mehmed II was fond of portraits.<sup>4</sup> If Sultan Mehmed II was the patron of this manuscript his fondness of portraits must have had an impact on the depictions of Prophet Muhammad's portraits found within the Venice *Iskandar-nāma*. It is unlikely that a sultan, who knew that an artist like Gentile Bellini who would paint his own portrait was living in Venice, could be unaware of the fact that art-

ists who exposed the physical features of Muhammad came from the Timurid school. Ultimately, the portrait of the Prophet Muhammad was used as a template in Timurid Art. Employing artists from the Timurid school in the Edirne Palace ought to have enabled the paintings to be produced without trouble in terms of not only the stylistic characteristics but also the portrait template.

The mi'rāj depiction in the fol.12r of the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* is observed to have continued the Timurid school in terms of not only the portrait features of the Prophet Muhammad but with all the composition and angelic figures as well. In this illustration, it is seen that the miraculous night journey, in association with the first phase of the journey, was illustrated with the periphery of the Ka'bah below. The Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night journey on the steed Buraq over the Ka'bah and the accompaniment of the angels would be a composition being depicted during the Timurid period for the first time.<sup>5</sup> As a favoured descriptive genre, it will appear first mostly in the Timurid school and then in the Turkoman school.

As was pointed out by Christiane Gruber, gestures in the mi'rāj paintings are an important part of its symbolism. In the Ahmadi *Iskandar-nāma* fol.12r, the chosen gestures were the Archangel Gabriel's finger pointing at Muhammad and Muhammad's making a fist with one of his hands to touch his chest, while holding the reins of the steed Buraq with the other hand, as depicted in the Timurid mi'rāj paintings. The mi'rāj scene in the Timurid *Mi'rāj-nāma*, where the

Prophet meets the angel whose appearance is of half-fire and half-snow (BNF Sup Turc 190, 11v), the Archangel Gabriel is pointing at Prophet Muhammad while the Prophet is holding the reins of the steed Buraq with one hand and making a fist with the other one on his chest. In the Timurid *Mi'rājnāma*, the Prophet's fist, however, is placed upon his heart in response to his witnessing the otherworldly peoples and creatures, thereby suggesting that his dominion is all inclusive and also deeply affective and this particular gesture therefore conveys both his prophetic authority and his profound emotion on the night of his ascension (Gruber 2008: 302). The index finger can be called the shaadet finger which means promise in Arabic. This finger is the symbol of being a true follower of Islam. It is also possible that the pointing of Prophet Muhammad's index finger indicates that there is only one God and is associated with the principal monotheistic tenet of Islam that there is no god but God (Gruber 2008: 302-303).

Among the Ottoman *mi'rāj* paintings, the depiction in fol. 193r is a unique production of the Ottoman synthesized artistic manner (Fig. 2). The most striking expression of Timurid influence, as is also discussed above in detail, is the fact that Prophet Muhammad's face is shown through his portrait features. Yet, above all, the Prophet Muhammed, for the first time, was illustrated as standing quite above the level where all the angels, the steed, Buraq, and the Archangel Gabriel stood. The fact that he was depicted standing on foot is not a different attitude at this point. Within the

Timurid *Mi'rājnāma* are also scenes showing him standing together with the Archangel Gabriel. What is most impressive is the fact that he was depicted a little above all the other beings. On the upper left corner of the painting, he is standing with his hands placed and clasped in front of his chest in a posture called "the Qiyyam position" during prayer. He is totally surrounded by a blazing halo made of Divine Light. On the upper right corner, on the other hand, there is the depiction of a hand within the blazing nimbus around which there is also another blazing halo of Divine Light.

Grube pointed out that the hand icon within the halo at the top of the page indicates the influence of the Byzantine painting tradition (Grube 1987: 191). Indeed, within the text of the Ahmadi *Iskandar-nāma* are verses regarding the merging and communication of Muhammad with Allah (Bağcı 1989:129). Nonetheless, in the Islamic painting art tradition, there are no depictions relative to the hand of God; yet, there are descriptions about the hand of Allah in the 10th verse of Surat Al-Fath<sup>6</sup> and in the 29th verse of the Surat Al-Hadid<sup>7</sup> in the Quran.

What is symbolized here is the power of Allah rather than the physical attributes (Valiuddin 1977: 70). With reference to the explanations about the hand of God, there is also a hand symbolism ingrained in the written denotation of the Sufi world (Herlihy 2009: 237). In relation to the hand symbolism, Serpil Bağcı states that this may benefit from other written references conveying the *mi'rāj* event. From this perspective, she also points out that in the 16th century Turk-



ish version of the work referred to as Madaraj un Nubuwwat, written by the author called Mu'in of Herat who lived in the 15th century, it is written that an angel, in front of sidrat al-muntaha<sup>8</sup>, reaches out an angel's hand through a covering and takes the Prophet inside after having informed the Archangel Gabriel that he is not allowed to pass beyond one more step (Bağcı 1989: 130). As a matter of fact, in Ahmadi's Mi'rājnāma text communicated by Yaşar Akdoğan, there is a description that an angel held Prophet Muhammad, by the hand and took him away, covered in veils (Akdoğan 1989: 284/183). Among the other *Mi'rājnāmas*, there are sometimes a few descriptions concerning the hand symbol appearing in front of sidrat al-muntaha though not many (Akar 1987: 354-355). The representation of the descriptive images regarding the Divine Power during mi'rāj was visualized by means of the hand symbolism. Besides being the possible consequence of a cultural interaction, such a depiction of the hand can be the symbolic illustrative imagery associated with the Divine Power deep-rooted in the Islamic tradition.

In the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* fol. 193r, the depiction of His Holiness Muhammad in a standing posture in the upper left corner of the page appears to be the result of a certain preference. First of all, showing him elevated above the level of all the other created beings, as was often repeated in Ahmadi's *Iskandar-nāma*, is associated with the Prophet Muhammad's privileged status among all creation within the Islamic view (Akdoğan 1989: 147,157)<sup>9</sup> There are also other

descriptions regarding the fact that the Archangel Gabriel told Muhammad during mi'rāj that Angel Gabriel was not allowed to pass through and beyond the level of sidrat al-muntaha, imagined to be far more advanced than the sevenfold heavens, and that he would be burned if he took even a tiny step forward, and that it was only Muhammad who was allowed to pass beyond this point (Akar 1987:257). The emphasis on this understanding and this moment is represented by the illustration of Muhammad standing at the upper left corner and the depiction of the Archangel Gabriel behind the Prophet. As it was also expressed by Christiane Gruber, in both the Ilkhanid and the Timurid Mi'rājnāmā the posture of Muhammad in fol. 193r makes sense when the notion of the symbolic description of gestures in the ascension depictions are taken into consideration.

Performing a prayer in the course of mi'rāj is considered as a religious duty (Akar 1987: 18, 21, 293), Ahmadi conveys this in the *Iskandar-nāma* in the same way. In this respect, it may not be regarded as a coincidence to see Muhammad, in the illustration, standing in "the Qiyyam position", which is the first moment of prayer on foot, and placing and clasping his hands in front of himself.

Also in the descriptions of Ahmadi's Venice *Iskandar-nāma*, the influence of the viewpoints of the Timurids undertaken within the mi'rāj paintings is also perceived. The most lavish artistic attempt to convey the mi'rāj story in its entirety occurred at the time the Timurid ruler Shahrukh (r. 1401-1447) commissioned an illustrat-

ed *Mi'rājnama* "Book of Ascension" in Chaghatai Turkish using the Uighur script which is an important example of the Timurid tradition (Paris Nationale Bibliotheque Supp.Turc.190, fol.5a).

The Ilkhanate *Mi'rājnama*, a significant illustration in terms of mi'rāj paintings in the history of art, has been a prototype in a sense with regards to the notion of dealing with the Shah Rukh's *Mi'rājnama* and the mi'rāj paintings through political, social and religious motives mi'rāj depictions were first used by Abu Said in Ilkhanate's *Mi'rājnama* as a pragmatic symbol in order to establish the Sunni manner. Christiane Gruber states her views on this subject in the following way:

"By collating the contents of the Ilkhanid *Mi'rājnama* text with this painting, it is clear that both the textual and pictorial modes could be marshalled in an effective combination to explain and to endorse the superior status of Sunni Islam"(Gruber 2010a:29).

Shah Rukh's identity as the protector and disseminator of Islam in Central Asia, influenced him in providing all his support for this illustrated Chaghatai *Mi'rājnama* (1436-37, Paris Nationale Bibliotheque Supp. Turc.190). Shah-Rukh probably continued to promote the Ilkhanate mi'rāj tradition. In this respect, he used a new title, pādshāh-i Islam, and founded a madrasah as the mujaddid of Islam in Herat in accordance with the Hanafi doctrine (Subtenly and Khali-doc 1995: 211-218; Subtenly 2007: 25).

It is possible to follow the effects of the appreciation of Chaghatai Turk-

ish in the Timurid cultural world from the works written in the 14th and 15th centuries in a geography extending to Anatolia through the Aqqoyunlu route. In a period when Chaghatai works were highly appreciated, there may have been the influence of the Chaghatai Timurid *Mi'rājnama* dated 1436 on including a Turkish Mawlid section in the *Iskandar-nāma*, which describes the Prophet's mi'rāj extensively. At least, the existence of Anatolian poets and masters who were aware of this descriptive tradition of mi'rāj should be taken into consideration. In the event that the mi'rāj was used by the Ilkhante Abu Said and later on, by Shah Rukh as the symbol of a Sunnite approach in a political and cultural way within the Turkish-Islamic world, it would not be wrong to assume that the Ottomans did not want to fall behind in this respect. Within the attention drawn to the history of the world, the sovereignties, empires and emperors, the legendary hero, Alexander the Great has been perceived as the representative of not only the struggle for power and rulership but also for justice, equity and unity since he was associated with the parable of Zulkarnain in the Quran (Türkdoğan 2009: 761) The desire to reinforce Mawlid Sunni ideology and the exquisite respect towards the Prophet within the work, in which Alexander the Great is dealt with as an Islamic character by being associated with Zulkarnain, seems to make sense.

According to Ahmadi, the first condition of equity is faith and belief in the afterlife, and an emperor or a ruler has to regard his reign and throne in the world as a holy task commended

to him as a duty (Türkdoğan 2010: 429). This reveals a symbolic description which somewhat propagandizes a political, social and cultural understanding of the Prophet Muhammad and mi'rāj. In his work, Ahmadi (1330?-1412/13) wrote the *Iskandar-nāma* as a result of the widespread use of Anatolia Turkish in this period, the tendencies to translate epic-type literature and the dominant veteran-hero "gazi" ideology (Bağcı 1989: 171).

In the Venice *Iskandar-nāma* mi'rāj depictions, a symbolic approach was preferred through which formulations were made with Timurid mi'rāj paintings. The fact that the artists from the Timurid school ecole took charge in the Edirne Palace must have enabled the Timurid Mi'rāj symbolism to become an Ottoman synthesis. These preferences actually comply with Ahmadi's written description in the Islamic Centre.

### RESULT

The Ahmadi *Iskandar-nāma* is a unique manuscript in which the Alexander the Great, was matched with Zulkarnain within Islam, with consideration of the masters, authors, network of artists, geography, interactive geography, social and cultural environments. Ahmadi's description of Muhammad's mi'rāj does present an interesting comparison with Alexander's ventures to the end of the world; it is easy to imagine Alexander's journey as a horizontal, less successful, and far more arduous, version of Muhammad's vertical ascent to the Seventh Heaven in a single instant (Sawyer 1997:203).

Mi'rāj miniatures in the Venice *Iskandar-nama* serve as an example of

this unique interaction in Ottoman art. In later Ottoman mi'rāj miniatures the Prophet's face is depicted with a veil unlike the Timurid mi'rāj as above. Using gestures as symbols, the organization of the composition and depicting the mi'rāj as a Sunnite identity were derived from the Timurid artistic concept. The Ahmadi Venice *Iskandar-nama* mi'rāj miniatures as unique depictions should be accepted as an application of Timurid interaction with an Ottoman synthesis.

### NOTES

- 1 Al-Burāq is, according to Islamic tradition, the flying steed of the prophets, upon which the prophet Muhammad rode on his night time journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (Gruber 2012:40)
- 2 For detailed information (Renda 1966).
- 3 Infact in 1526, the style of artisans and architects employed in the Ottoman court were still dominated by Timurid Turcoman aesthetic principles (Necipoğlu 1992: 197).
- 4 "What follows from the documents in the Venetian Archives is that the Sultan Mehmed II had demanded a painter and a sculptor who worked with bronze, and finally Gentile Bellini and the sculptor, Bartolommeo Bellano, were selected. They came to Istanbul together with their two assistants, however, since the art of Bellano did not meet the expectations of the Sultan Mehmed II, the Sultan criticized him politely in a letter he wrote to Duke of Venice on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1480, and he requested another bronze founder "as good as the previous one, even better than him" (Raby 2000: 68). Gentile Bellini painted the portrait of the Sultan in the European painting art style and also worked on some wall paintings (Renda 1985: 9). On the other hand, though it is unknown whether the Sultan Mehmed II selected Costanza de Ferrara by name or whether or not he let Ferrante II of Napoli make the selection, Costanza's visit was hosted by Sultan the Conqueror, and the relations between Sultan the Conqueror and Ferrara suggest that the artist's visit to Istanbul took place in the mid-1460s or 1470s, and it is possible that Costanza stayed in Istanbul for years afterwards (Raby 2000: 67).
- 5 The mi'rāj concept has had an effect on the emergence of this pattern. In Islamic culture, the first stage of the miraculous night

journey of Prophet Muhammad, is referred to as Isra, which means the night walk or the night journey, which also defines the Prophet's journey from Al-Masjid Al-Haram to Masjid Al-Aqsa (Schrieke 1968: 1226). Mi'râj, on the other hand, was derived from the word "uruch" which means ascending higher and represents the stairs (Pilavoğlu 1961: 29). Mi'râj, which defines the second stage, became, later on, a term comprising the whole event. In the Timurid mi'râj paintings depicting the Ka'bah, the section on the night journey was also included in the work and thus, a conceptual unity was transferred to the illustrative description.

- 6 Indeed, those who pledge allegiance to you, [O Muhammad] – they are actually pledging allegiance to Allah. The hand of Allah is over their hands. So he who breaks his word only breaks it to the detriment of himself. And he who fulfils that which he has promised Allah – He will give him a great reward.(48:10)
- 7 [This is] so that the People of the Scripture may know that they are not able [to obtain] anything from the bounty of Allah and that [all] bounty is in the hand of Allah; He gives it to whom He wills. And Allah is the possessor of great bounty (57:29).
- 8 Known in Islamic mythology as the final resting place in the secluded place of Allah; the final border beings can reach in approaching Allah in the 7th layer of the heavens.
- 9 All the purpose in the creation of kingdoms and beings is for the worth-praising and the most praised Mohammad, His Holiness (6010) (Akdoğan 1989:147). All the purpose of creation is due to the worth-praising and the most praised Mohammad, His Holiness. The first spirit of the created is His; He is both the essence and the Divine Light of the body and the soul (6061, 6062 ) (Akdoğan 1989: 157).

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## FIGURES

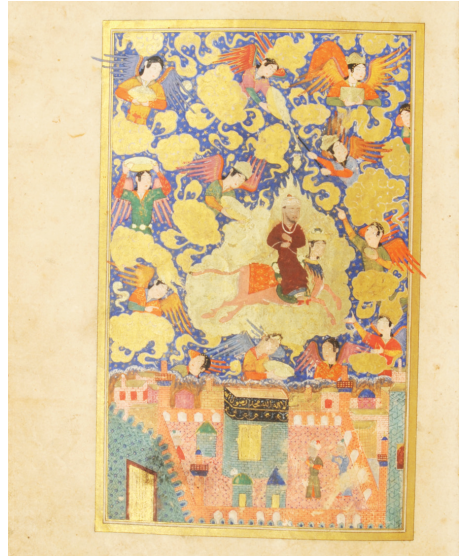


Figure 1: Ahmadi, Iskandar-nāma, Mi'rāj I, fol.12r, Edirne? 1450-1460 A.D. (Venice National Library Marciana Cod.Or. XC (=57). (Photo: courtesy of the Marciana National Library Venice)





Figure 2: Ahmadi, Iskandar-nāma, Mi'raj II, fol.193r., Edirne? 1450-1460 A.D., (Venice National Library Cod.Or. XC (=57). (Photo: courtesy of the Marciana National Library Venice)

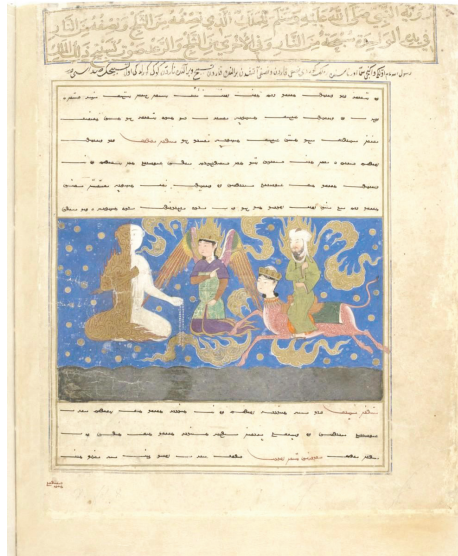


Figure 4: Mi'rājnāma, The prophet meets Half Snow- Half Fire Angel, Herat, 1436-1437. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Suppl.Turc 190, folio 5r) (Photo: courtesy of the BPNF)



Figure 3: Mi'rājnāma, The prophet rides Buraq, Herat, 1436-1437. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Suppl.Turc 190, folio 5r) (Photo: courtesy of the BPNF)



Figure 5: Nizami, Khamsah, Mi'raj, fol. 5v Herat, 1494-1495 (London British Museum Add Or. 6810) ©The British Library Board