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## Understanding of Aniconism in Islamic art through some miniatures of Imam 'Alī

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### Abstract

In this paper, a completely different depiction for Imam 'Alī is presented in Islamic miniatures could be understood and interpreted as a perspective of Aniconism in Islamic Art which depends on veiling all his body, not only facial features, by fire circle as a new style of his illuminations. Usually, he is represented with a halo of light around his face, or sometimes by only veiling his face, and in other illustrations he appears normally with all facial features. Aniconism, as a term, was previously used in related studies to Islamic Art. The article aims to apply and understand the term of Aniconism in Islamic art through some illustrations and depictions of Imam 'Alī where he was avoided to be represented as a clear interpretation and indication to Aniconism. Methodologically, it will be through exploring those depictions of Imam 'Alī comparing with others, moreover investigating the usage of the term linguistically and artistically.

### 1. Introduction

Imam 'Alī, also known as ibn Abī Ṭālib, was the cousin of Prophet Mohammad and also his son-in-law. Born in 601 A.D. in Mecca, he was the first person to believe in Islam. He became a prominent figure to both Islamic sects, Shiites and Sunnites. For Sunnites, 'Alī was the fourth caliph in the History of Islam, while the Shiites consider him as the first of the twelve Imams. He participated in all the wars that Prophet Mohammad won in his life, hence Shiites value him as a war champion. This is why so many legends appeared concerning Imam 'Alī<sup>1</sup>.

The *Haydar Nameh* manuscript that dates back to the XVII Century is located in The Egyptian National Library of Cairo at the moment. It discusses the heroic war acts of the Imam representing the principal issue of all the miniatures that appear in this paper that studies Aniconism. The mind of the miniaturist in question represents Imam 'Alī as a sacred figure, thus he replaced him with a divine symbol, as we are going to explain later.

<sup>1</sup> Al-'Asqalānī, I., *Al-Iṣābah fī Tamayiz al-Ṣahābah*, Beirut, 2012, p. 1063-1065.

In the present paper we introduce a different depiction of Imam 'Alī in Islamic Miniature. The way the face of the Imam 'Alī is covered in the miniatures object of study is worth attention, given that it takes place in a very unusual form to the four traditional (conventional) methods used by Muslim miniaturists to veil the features of important religious characters, including the prophets. The first one uses a halo of light without covering the face, the second veils the face without the halo of light, the third covers the face and adds a halo of light and the fourth shows the whole face without the halo. Only one appears in the miniatures, veiling the facial features with a halo of light without covering it with a *niqab* or veil that takes the shape of the face or appears independently<sup>2</sup>.

This study certainly introduces a new technic used for covering the bodies of religious figures in Islamic Art, which consists in covering the whole body with a flame of light; in this case the body of Imam 'Alī appears completely veiled by a flame of fire, whether he is riding or walking, without a horse, talking in a council, or in any other theme tackled in the miniatures of the above-mentioned manuscript where the main subject is related to the imaginary wars against the Kings of Orient. Moreover, this flame that substitutes the body of Imam 'Alī, does not appear in any other miniatures of the medieval Islamic codices, which can be considered as a different interpretation from the traditional Aniconism in Islamic Art that consists in veiling in different ways and in different extents the religious figures, instead of not representing them, as usual in the application of Aniconism<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Aniconism in Islamic Art

In general, it seems that using the idea of Aniconism in the history of Islamic Art was not usual. Nevertheless, it has been used more often in the studies concerning the history of Christian Art. Actually, it seems interesting how researchers have analyzed the influence of Aniconism in the representations and miniatures without considering those partial effects as a form of Aniconism. We can clearly confirm that there has not been a complete study about Aniconism in Islamic Art that had offered an interpretation and an explanation of the motives and the religious influence that affect the Muslim painter in charge of the figurative representations of the sacred characters and prophets. The word "aniconic" was first used in 1973 by Oleg Grabar in reference to some figurative representations. In 1986, two Turkish historians of Islamic Art<sup>4</sup>, Cagman and Tanindi, started to study those religious influences in Muslim painters<sup>5</sup>. In 1965 too, Thomas Arnold presented an analysis referring to the difficulties in the study of aniconism in this art<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Elassal, I., "The Veiled faces of prophets in the Islamic miniatures - application on illustrated manuscripts of XVI century in Konya Mawlānā Museum", *International Journal of Arab Archeologists Union*, 2016, p. 119-122.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about paintings of Imam Ali see: Shaker L., *Tasweer el imam 'Alī*, Beirut, 2011, p.16-26.

<sup>4</sup> GRABAR, O., *The Formation of Islamic Art*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> CAGMAN, F. & TANINDI, Z., *The Topkapi Saray Museum: The Albums and Illustrated Manuscripts*, (Trans. J. M. Rogers), New York, 1986, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> ARNOLD, T. W., *Painting in Islam: a Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*, New York, 1965, p. 120-132.

On the other hand, there are works that offer a general idea about the rejection of images through the objects in Islamic Art, not precisely miniatures, for example the study of the Turkish researcher Sogancio, clearly using the term "aniconism", although his investigations belong to another area than Islamic manuscripts<sup>7</sup>.

Aniconism is an essential concept in Islamic Art, but it appears in a totally different way to the common interpretation of Aniconism in Christian Art. This can be explained by the existence of representations of divine characters in Islamic Art with clear effects of veiling facial features as an influence of the prohibition of images in Islamic belief.

Regarding the motives for the prohibition of figurative representations in Islamic Art in Quran and in the Hadith of the prophet Mohammad, most studies introduce those texts with different representations in their investigations to explain the direct effect of the absence of individualization of sacred characters in Islamic paintings during the first eight centuries of Islamic History.

Archeologists, who work along with orientalists on the sites of Pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, analyzed the question of paintwork in Islam and they were obviously forced to discuss the subject of figurative representations. We may think, for instance, of the Umayyad castles in the desert or Abbasid palaces where we can find a fantastic repertory of human and animal figures.

Most probably, the most important issues that should be considered when we discuss those analyses are: first of all, the influence of Hadith (sayings of the prophet Mohammad) related to paintwork and image representation. Secondly, the large number of miniatures of Islamic codices in museums and international libraries, in addition to the important testimonies of wall-paintings recently found, confirm that Muslims were acquainted with pictorial art during all the periods of Islamic Art. Thirdly, archeologists and orientalists studied the Islamic paintings in order to understand what happened in the modern period, the moment when the manuscript that we study was carried out<sup>8</sup>. For all those reasons, researchers in Islamic paintings have to consider the Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad as a main source for their studies.

The prohibition in Islam of the use of images in painting appeared during the second half of the second century of the Hijra when interpreters explained the sayings of prophet Muahmmad as a prohibition of figurative painting, but this only represented the common opinion of those who studied religion in that period, when all the sayings of the prophet were collected in one book<sup>9</sup>.

In the Noble Quran there are no clear references to painting, although some people think that there are two occasions in the sacred book where such references appear.

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<sup>7</sup> SOGANCIO, I. O., "Islamic Aniconism: Making Sense of A Messy Literature", *Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education*, Iss. 1, University of Iowa, 2004, p. 6-10.

<sup>8</sup> ELPACHA, H., *Fonoun Al-taswīr Al-islāmī fī Misr*, op. cit., p.10.

<sup>9</sup> HASSAN, Z., *Al-taswīr Al-islāmī and Al-fors*, Cairo, 1936, p. 16-19; Adly, H., "Al-tamaseel fī al fan al-Islāmī", Cairo, Egypt, 2008.

On their part, researchers in Muslim Painting and Islamic jurists, such as Okasha in his book about Religious Painting and Abdo in *Introduction to Aesthetics*, discuss the permissibility of Painting in Quran. They both highlight three aesthetic rules: the first one is that everything is permitted unless there were texts that forbid it, which is the case of painting. The second one is that the only texts that have the power to prohibit anything are the Quran and the Sayings of the Prophet, something that does not apply to painting. The third rule is that the opinions of researchers in Islamic Jurisprudence do not totally permit or prohibit it<sup>10</sup>.

The sayings of Prophet Mohammad concerning this issue can be divided into three parts: the first one, more extreme, is the total prohibition of images and the malediction of artists for the principal motive of avoiding idolatry because people were used to worshipping images. The second group includes the sayings of the Prophet that permit images with no shadows, like those depicted on mural paintings, paper, curtains or clothes<sup>11</sup>. They even allege that the Prophet appeared once wearing a garment with paintings of men with black hair and he was seen praying in similar garments. The third group includes some that allow the use of children's toys, etc., used sometimes to "stimulate maternal instinct" for young ladies<sup>12</sup>.

All of those sayings affected Islamic thinking in general and Muslim scholars in particular throughout the history reflected in Islamic art in general and Painting in particular.

Iconoclasm, the religious Christian movement that started in Eastern Christian world in 726 d. C. by order of the Byzantine emperor Leo III, the Isaurian, rejected adoring images and destroyed them, which was the reason for the destruction of a huge number of Christian icons, no doubt, was affected by the prohibition of painting in Islam and the opinions of Muslim jurists during this period. This was the motive of the existence and the permanence of the trend that prohibits images since the III century of Hijra<sup>13</sup>.

Other investigators point that the prohibition of Painting in Islam is due to Jewish influence and that the major part of the sayings of the Prophet is written by Jews who converted to Islam and who turned later into teachers of Muslim jurists in theology in Mecca and Medina<sup>14</sup>.

Shiites were interested in this subject in their manuscripts, although with peculiar characters, like hiding faces or whole bodies as we see in the miniatures where Imam 'Alī appears and which presents the subject of this study. Those manuscripts managed to break the taboo of depicting religious characters in a symbolic way that was born in Shiite art centers<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> OKAHS, T., *Al-taswīr Al-islāmī Al-dīnī*, Beirut, 1989, p. 17; MUSTAFA, A., *Mādkhal ila Falsafat Al-jamāl*, Cairo, 1994, p. 98-99.

<sup>11</sup> ELPACHA, H., *Fonoun*, p. 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> OKAHS, T., *Al-taswīr*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> LEROUX, E., *Lee mosquées du Caire*, Paris, 1932, p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> ALNĀIMI, N. A., *Maqāmāt Al-hārīrī Al-mosawāra*, Bagdad, 1979, p. 113; MEHREZ, G., *Māwāqif Al-yāhudīa min Al-taswīr wa laqātoho bel īslām*, *Journal of faculty of Arts of Cairo university*, vol. 1, 1947, p. 83-87.

<sup>15</sup> AIZAH, F., *Al-gasād wal sowār wal-muqaddas fil īslām*, Beirut, 1999, p. 50.

Shiite miniatures had great influence over artistic works that belong to the Turkish Sunnite School, through the teachings of Persian artists that spread all over other Islamic art centers. And that is the reason why we can notice in the Turkish Sunnite School that, when representing religious figures, the miniaturist was free from the conditions that imposed the physical characters and they were substituted with a symbolic painting<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, in periods of decadence there were trends that supported the prohibition and the miniaturist had to hide the body of the character, and this indicates a clear reference to Aniconism in Islamic art.

The art of Islamic miniature started to flourish during the XIV century, developed in the XV and reached its peak in the XVI century, when the paintings of Prophets and religious figures spread. This helped the developing of the concept of Aniconism in Islamic art in general and miniatures in particular and made the degrees of prohibition vary affecting the beliefs of Muslim miniaturists. At a certain moment, miniatures were affected by the complete prohibition of representing religious figures, whether veiling the facial features only or the whole body, like the miniature of Imam ‘Alī that we study in this paper.

Intellectual opinions in Islam concerning Painting had a great impact on the representation of images throughout the history of Islamic Art. First of all, especially in manuscripts, the artist followed some aesthetic values, like avoiding anthropomorphism and nature representations, not drawing shadows and ignoring the rules of perspective or the third dimension, and also paying less attention to anatomic proportions of human and animal figures. On the other hand, these artistic values of Islamic Painting are considered as defects if measured by the aesthetic criteria of contemporary art. But at the same time, these characters changed Islamic Painting into a cornerstone of art history<sup>17</sup>.

Though restricted by Aniconism, images of prophets and imams were represented in miniatures, and this restriction was the reason for choosing historic themes where those characters were seen as heroes. A very obvious example is *The Book of Alexander*, which can be found in the National Library of Egypt in Cairo. Besides, Shiites were interested in highlighting physical features of religious characters.

### 3. Aniconism as a specialized term in language

According to the *Collins Dictionary*<sup>18</sup>, the word "aniconism" can be dissected into three parts :

1. the prefix an- is frequently used to introduce the meaning of "not", "without" or "lacking "
2. the stem of the word "icon", a loanword from Greek which means "image "
3. and the suffix –ism used in the formation of "nouns denoting action or practice, state or condition, principals, doctrines, a usage or characters, devotion or adherence, etc."

<sup>16</sup> KUNL, E., *Al-fan Al-islāmī*, Cairo, 1966, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> HASSAN, Z. M., *Al-tāswīr*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/aniconism> , Last Seen 27/10/2022, 19:30

Aniconism, is a specialized term, and hence it is not recognized as a part of the lexicon of Spanish language. It does not appear in the Dictionary of the Real Academia Española (el DRAE, main linguistic authority commissioned by the constant revision and correction of Spanish language).

Nevertheless, it can be found in Art dictionaries, like the illustrated dictionary of art history, *Diccion Art*, and is defined as: "quality of not having figurative decoration, generally for theological or ideological reasons. It is a feature, for example, of Islamic art and the Byzantine iconoclastic period, but also of later movements such as minimalism"<sup>19</sup>.

Another definition for this concept appears in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "in religion, opposition to the use of icons or visual images to depict living creatures or religious figures. Such opposition is particularly relevant to the Jewish, Islamic and Byzantine artistic traditions"<sup>20</sup>. As we can see, both definitions highlight the idea of opposition and prohibition of the representation of living creatures in general, and religious characters in particular, which applies mainly to Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and the Arts*, "aniconism" is "the prohibition of images in a religious cult and its practices. The way in which such prohibition or restriction is interpreted, however, depends on the number of historical, social, religious, political and cultural contexts. In some contexts, Aniconism is understood to include a restriction in any and all images, in material, literary, or any other possible form or medium. In other contexts, the restrictive scope of Aniconism is more limited, such as prohibiting, in all contexts, all anthropomorphic (human) or theriomorphic (animal)..."<sup>21</sup>. This definition distinguishes two different levels of restriction for the prohibition of figurative representations according to contexts. The general level includes all forms or mediums of representation, and the limited level which only concerns human and animal images.

#### 4. Miniatures of Imam ‘Alī

Islamic miniatures are full of stories about characters that were considered sacred in Islam, and so the themes addressed in this paper mainly concerns production in religious painting, the most significant of all is Prophet Mohammad. With the expansion of Shiite beliefs and its parallel influence in Islamic art, the figure of Imam ‘Alī became of great interest for the imagination of Muslim miniaturists. The manuscript that presents this different form of representing the Imam ‘Alī, known as *Haydar Nameh (The Book of Haydar)* or *Alexander Nameh (The Book of Alexander)* is conserved in The National Library of Egypt in Cairo and the title reveals the main topic, heroic acts of Imam ‘Alī, also called *Haydar* in many Shiite Persian texts. The book is registered with number 80 in the Persian History Section. It has

<sup>19</sup><http://diccionarioarteconpedro.blogspot.com/2015/02/aniconismo.html?m=1> Last Seen 1/11/2022, 11:20

<sup>20</sup><https://www.britannica.com/topic/aniconism> Last Seen 22/10/2022, 20:00

<sup>21</sup><https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=Aniconism&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true> Last Seen 27/10/2022, 19:40



been studied from a linguistic point of view by El Sayed<sup>22</sup>, at *Ain shams* University in Cairo, but the major part of its illustrations has not been published.

The original manuscript does not mention neither the date when it was written nor the name of the author, although in the catalogue of the National Library of Egypt in Cairo it is registered as *Alexander Nameh* or *The Book of Alexander*, while in Al-Torazi<sup>23</sup> the name figures as *Haydar Nameh*<sup>24</sup>.

The manuscript contains 352 folios written in verse in Persian language. Every folio contains 19 lines, except folios number 7, 11 and 14, and there are 95 colored miniatures.

The verse of the first folio and the rest of the second are mostly written in gold, while the remaining folios only have golden margins. The text appears in black, subtitles in red<sup>25</sup>, vegetal decoration and the calligraphy is in Persian *Ta'liq*<sup>26</sup>. Page numbers can be found on the upper left angle and only in the verse of the folios.

In the introduction to the poem in the present manuscript, the author/ authors who participated in the composition of this poem, and whose identity is still unknown, starts talking to the prophet Muhammad and the 12 Shiite Imams<sup>27</sup>, then he/they praise the Prophet Adam, and start again talking about prophet Mohammad and his voyage to heaven or *Mi'raj*; later he/they mention the reason why this manuscript was written and organized this way,

<sup>22</sup>The approach of the researcher Sherin El-Sayed, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt, studies this manuscript through the point of view of Persian Linguistics. The present paper examines the manuscript through the point of view of the History of Art. Besides, the work of El-Sayed only discusses 34 miniatures, the major part of which are not related to Imam 'Alī.

<sup>23</sup> El TORAZI NASARALLAH is the author of the oldest catalog of codices with miniatures preserved at the National Library of Egypt in Cairo, dated 1976.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning the name of the manuscript, there are two very well-known names: the first is *Haydar Nameh*, which resonates with the content of the texts and the images because *Haydar* is one of the famous names Imam 'Alī received when he was born. In general, it is an Arabic word referring to his continuous victory in the battle represented in the miniatures. The second name, or *Alejandro Nameh*, is the name by which this manuscript is mentioned in the official catalog of the library, although the character of Alexander is not mentioned or referred to in the content. Nevertheless, in Islamic reproach to historical characters the character known as Du l-Qarnayn, mentioned in Quraan and popular for his positive values among Muslims, is usually related to Alexander the Great. It is very interesting that Du l-Qarnayn appears in the text and the miniatures of the manuscript, especially the miniature of fol. 74 v., where Imam 'Alī appears with Gog and Magog. Moreover, Shiite beliefs are inspired in historic characters whose positive tributes are related usually to Imam 'Alī.

<sup>25</sup> The catalog of El Torazi Nasrallah mentions that the color of the text is blue, but we found out that it is not.

<sup>26</sup> El Ta'liq is a type of Persian handwriting distinguished by its concave letters, written in a vertical way and then starting from above again.

<sup>27</sup> The twelve Shiite imams are descendants of 'Alī and Fatima the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. They inherited the knowledge and the wisdom and their opinion is considered as important as the sentences or the sayings of the prophet concerning the interpretation of the Quran. The imams are: Aly, the first Imam, Hasan, the second imam, Hussain Ibn Aly, the third imam, Aly Ibn al-Hussain, Zainul Abedeen, the fourth imam, Muhammed Ibn Aly al-Baqir, the fifth imam, Ibn Ja'far Mohamad Assādiq, the sixth imam, Ibn Musa al-Kasim Ja'far, the seventh imam, Aly Musa Ibn al-Reza, the eighth imam, Mohamad Ibn Aly Al-Taqi al-Jawad, the ninth imam, Aly Ibn Muhammed (Al-Naqi, Al-Hadi), the tenth imam, Hasan Ibn Aly (Al Askari), the eleventh imam, y Mohamad Ibn al-Hasan (Al-Mahdi-Sahibuz Zaman), the twelfth imam. For the Sunnites, the venerated characters are the califas selected by Muslims after the death of Prophet Muhammad. It is worth mentioning that one of the characteristics of Old Persian poetry, especially during the Safavid era, was the praising of those twelve imams. V. Persian reference: DABIHULLAH, S., *Mujtasir Dor Tarij Tahuol Nazzm Wanathar Barsi*, Teherán, 1333, H. SH, p. 70-78.

imitating the *Shâhnameh*, also known as *The Book of the Kings*, to immortalize his name in History. The text then starts narrating the beginning of the wars of Orient and their motives, and it also mentions the names of the leaders of the Muslim army, Imam Ali, Saad Ibn Abi Waqqas, *Abū Mihjan* and Malek Al Ashtar; it also tells the story of the war against Gog and Magog and other imaginary creatures.

The style of miniatures in *The Book of Haydar* was classified as part of the Indian school, characteristic of the XVII and XVIII centuries. The main theme of the miniatures is the wars of Imam Ali and his companions, *Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ* and *Abū Mihjan*. After examining the manuscript many times with the technical specialists in the NLEC, we conclude that every two opposite pages have the same size of a folio. The material in which it is elaborated is paper, the measure of the sheet is 389 x 48 cm, and the line spacing is 2.5 cm, and in this way most of the miniatures have the dimensions of 25 x 17 cm, and they live together with the text. The manuscript is a one-sided notebook, we can only write on one side of the page, like the codices found in northwest India. Some sheets have calligraphy in two directions<sup>28</sup> with strokes going up and down in the sheet to form decorative geometric figures similar to a rhombus. There are also some floral motives gold-plated between the columns, forming a frame for the text.

The main calligraphy of the text is Persian *Ta'liq*, as we mentioned before, which is written in italics, and the letters –from the right to the left- are traced from the top to the bottom of the page. The introduction of the manuscript appears in sheet 1v. This sheet consists of two opposite pages adorned with gold and lapis lazuli, shown together as a single sheet. The miniaturist used black ink to write over a white background some verses inside a floral frame, filling its tiny spaces with triple and quadruple rosettes in white, red and rose over a blue background, with an obvious tendency to *horror vacui*. Unlike the normal Islamic codices, at the end of this exemplar we do not find any kind of decoration other than the Persian sentence "*tamat tamam shad*", which means "end of the manuscript" or the colophon; indicating the finalization of the manuscript. After a long period of searching, and with the help of all the references cited in this investigation, including the research of El Sayed, who studied the manuscript from a linguistic point of view, we did not find any information concerning the date of finalization of the manuscript or any reference to the copyist or the miniaturist<sup>29</sup>.

Regarding the cover and the back cover of the manuscript, made of cardboard, most probably they do not belong to the same period of the elaboration of the manuscript, because some of the folios, precisely 95, 96, 133, 134, 220, 237, 238 and 288, were lost. There is also an error in the order of the folios. Number 55 is found before 51, for example. This indicates that the original cover and back cover of the manuscript were lost, and those that we find now are not the original.

<sup>28</sup> See: MOHAMAD, A., S., *Fann Sīnā'at Al-makhtōtāt Al-fāresīa*, Cairo, 2002, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> EISAYED, S., *Derajat Majtōt Haydar Nameh*, PHD Theses, Ain Shams University, Cairo, 2009 , p.15-24



Every miniature of Imam ‘Alī in this manuscript covers the whole area of the folio, and that is why it is different from other codices. In Persian manuscripts, the writer saves space in the text for the paintings. The illuminated folios are divided into three parts: first, intermediate and superior or background plan. One common feature in all miniatures is that the inferior zone always invades the central area and, in some occasions, also the superior, which is a result of the influence of Chinese art in Islamic art. The manuscript mentions the reason why this poem was written, imitating the *Shahnameh*. On the other hand, it is well known that the *Haydar Nameh* poem was elaborated by many poets<sup>30</sup>. Evidently the miniaturist of this manuscript had read the "*Mesnavi*"<sup>31</sup> poem, the main content of the Shiite poem "*Mesnavi*" in this manuscript of 22.500 verses, and that is why the miniatures are clearly affected by Shiite beliefs through the appearance of holiness attributed to ‘Alī, mythologizing his figure and representing him always triumphant even over fantastic and imaginary creatures. The text is completely Shiite, mainly talking about Imam ‘Alī, emblematic figure undoubtedly for the Shiites, in addition to the 12 imams. The linguistic studies of the text confirm that it consists of descriptions of the illustrations<sup>32</sup>.

*Mesnavi* poem narrates the victory of Imam ‘Alī and his companions over their imaginary enemies<sup>33</sup>. The main character is very similar to that of the manuscript called *Joran Nameh*<sup>34</sup>, from the XV century, which relates analogous events to those of Imam ‘Alī and his companions<sup>35</sup>, fighting against imaginary figures, as dragons and mythological animals, where Imam ‘Alī is always crowned as victorious.

The Iranians were always keen on registering the heroic acts of Imam ‘Alī due to his great spiritual influence on Shiite beliefs, mainly using the poetic Persian genre the *Mesnavi*, also called *masnawi* or *mathnavi*, based on stanzas of two verses with equal rhymes and narration. The word "*masnevi*" was translated into Arabic as "*muzdauaj*" ("double" in English).

Specialists in religion refuse these legends about Imam ‘Alī, due to the lack of evidence of their veracity and because it does not apply to the principal rules of Islam<sup>36</sup>. On the contrary, Shiites promote these legends as a means of acquiring new adepts.

## 5. Description of the miniatures and Iconography

<sup>30</sup> ELSAYED, S., *Haydr Nameh*, p. 3-6.

<sup>31</sup> The Masnavi poem is a legend that relates the battles of Imam ‘Alī and his companions against their imaginary enemies. The Mesnavi genre sufi poems, among which ten were copied in many codices around the world, like the one written by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, the great Sufi poet, conserved in the Egyptian national Library which includes some miniatures where Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī is with his teacher Shams of Tabriz. For further information see: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/30/rumi-masnavi-muslim-poetry> (Accessed 6/1/2023)

<sup>32</sup> ELSAYED, S., *Haydr Nameh*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> ABDELHADI, Q., E., *Fonoun Al-shīar el Fārisī*, Cairo, 1981, p. 119-121.

<sup>34</sup> There are copies in many libraries all over the world, at the British Museum for example, with registration number Add. 19/766. It contains 156 miniatures. There are two copies in India and the oldest copy can be found in the Art Museum of Teheran in Iran, with 155 miniatures. There are 40 other miniatures all over the museums of the world. V.: RIEU, C., *Catalogue of the Persian manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. 2, London, 1988, p. 128-137.

<sup>35</sup> ETHE, H., *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the Indian Office*, Oxford, 1903, p. 220-221.

<sup>36</sup> ELSAYED, S., *Haydar Nameh*, p. 4.

The manuscript contains an illustration of the *Mi'rāj*, where the influence of Aniconism is mostly appreciated. The representation of the religious or sacred figure was avoided, as in the verse of folio number seven of the manuscript where Prophet Mohammad is not illustrated. This characteristic is fundamental in Aniconism and in art in general, avoiding the representation of religious characters<sup>37</sup>. The image of Imam 'Alī in the verse of miniature number 39, representing the battle loot, can be considered as evidence, clearly noticed in this scene, of refusing the use of the image by covering only the face with a luminous halo to veil his features.

Although the Aniconism in this case is also related to the figure of Imam 'Alī, as we can see in the other 48 miniatures where the body appears completely covered, it can be noticed here that only the facial features of the Imam were veiled. This treatment can be explained by two hypotheses. The first one postulate that another miniaturist had to finish this miniature, and that might be the reason why the sacred character of Imam 'Alī was not treated with the same degree of relevance that the religious figure occupied in the work of the original miniaturist of the present manuscript, who veiled the body of the Imam completely.

It might be possible also that it was the same artist, but he might have changed his opinion at a certain moment due to the fear of the consequences of representing completely this sacred religious figure, so he decided to cover the whole body in the following miniatures of the manuscript. The last explanation, obviously, is more probable, because of the similarity between all the miniatures of the manuscript concerning style.

We can clearly affirm that the veiling of the whole body with a flame of light is the predominant type of Aniconism in the present manuscript. And that is the way the figure of Imam 'Alī appears here, whether he is riding his horse or walking on foot, giving advice, or in any other form concerning the themes of the miniatures in this manuscript, whose main subject is related to the imaginary battles with the kings of Orient. The front page of folio number 36 (Plate 1) shows Imam 'Alī on the right upper part riding his white horse, completely covered with a halo of light hiding his whole body, like the rest of miniatures of the manuscript. We can see the Imam wielding his two-pronged sword (called *Dū-l-Faqār*)<sup>38</sup> at Juar Shah, with clear Mongolian-Hindu features who is riding his brown horse in the upper left part of the scene. Shiites have strong beliefs related to the sword of the Imam 'Alī<sup>39</sup>. The absence of Imam 'Alī's body is obviously clear indicating to Aniconism, on the opposite of other miniatures for him with just veiling his face like a miniature from *Hadiqat al-Su`ada* manuscript at the Egyptian national library (plate 2).

<sup>37</sup> GRABAR, O., *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> ALTOWSI, M., *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 42, Cairo, 2008, p.58

<sup>39</sup> It looks like any other sword, but its blade is cut in the form of "V", and so it has two tips. The sword *Dū-l-Faqār* can be found today in the Topkapi Palace, Topkapi Sarayi in Turkish, in Istanbul It was plundered from the mosque Athar Alnabi in Cairo, when the Ottoman Sultan Selim I defeated the Mamluk sultan al Ghouri and killed him in the battle of *Marj Dabeq*, and the Ottomans entered Cairo, capturing al-Mutawakkil III, Selim I sent the sword to Istanbul as a belong to the prophet. For further information see: DAVID, G. A., "Dhu'l-faqar and the Legacy of the Prophet", *Gladius*, 19, 1999, pp. 58-187.

Aniconism is clearly applied on the miniatures of *Hayder nameh* with the fully disappearance of the divine body of Imam ‘Alī which is repeated more than one time in the manuscript like verse 115 (Plate 3), he appears with his sword with extraordinary power capable of splitting a body into two halves and cut off the heads from the bodies in one fell swoop, which appears in many miniatures of Imam ‘Alī in the battles. As above mentioned, the artist reiterated applying Aniconism in his miniatures of Imam Ali in this manuscript when he represented him without any details of his body which is totally disappeared while he gave an interest to other details like of this sword dedicating a large space and distinguishing the size of this sword compared to the rest of the swords in every miniature, as we can see in the miniature that appears in the verse of folio number 167 (Plate 4), where the weapon looks larger than usual like the miniature of Imam ‘Alī in *Rawdat aš-šafā* manuscript from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at the Freer Gallery Museum in Washington, where the Imam ‘Alī appears carrying his sword nevertheless its size is similar to all the other swords in the scene (Plate 5)<sup>40</sup> where Imam Ali is represented with his facial features normally with halo of light around his face not like the Aniconism which applies by disappearing his whole body.

Another fact that affects the aniconic issue is that the miniaturist does not draw the footwear of Imam ‘Alī, which appears all the time hidden by a halo of light or a flame of fire, as we mentioned before, although their representation was possible for two reasons: the first is that they are the same through all the miniatures, so it would have been more feasible to represent them without the halo of light. The second one is that the miniaturist already drew the quiver, the arrows and the sword of the Imam. In our opinion, most probably the miniaturist did draw the weapons but refused intentionally to show the specific physical parts of the body of the Imam. This reflects the fear of the miniaturists to commit a violation of the religious code while representing religious figures, which might be the case of the author in the present manuscript.

The military helmet was also represented frequently in the manuscript, precisely for its warlike character; nevertheless, the miniaturist did not show the army soldiers wearing this defensive element, and only used it for two members of both armies (126 front page). It is probable that the usage of the helmet might have been limited to the leaders that appeared in the lines of each army. The chains also appear represented in a similar way, as we can observe in the miniature of folio number 169 (Plate 6), where the flexible movements of the hands and feet of the captives are shown in a great realistic way.

In these miniatures the characters were absolutely portrayed with great perfection. The miniaturist was very careful drawing the proportions of the bodies, distinguishing the facial features according to ethnicity. That way the Arabs were represented with large eyes, bushy eyebrows, moustaches and beards, while the Chinese, opponents in many battles, were presented with beardless faces, slanted eyes and very thin eyebrows and moustaches<sup>41</sup>. Animals, mainly horses here, also have a significant role in these miniatures, as they are

<sup>40</sup> <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1986.238/> Last seen 12 /8/2022, 20:30

<sup>41</sup> STIERLIN, H., *Islamic Art and Architecture: From Isfahan to the Taj Mahal*. New York, Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2002. p.128

important protagonists in battles and wars, and in other occasions we can also see realistic representations of camels and elephants.

The fire flame used by the miniaturist to cover the figure of Imam 'Alī does not appear in any other miniature of the Islamic medieval codices. Its main characters can be resumed as follow:

-It was represented in the shape of the palm of a hand, although it is not really like that, for it has sometimes 6, 7 or 8 fingers even, and in some occasions it is a hand with 10 fingers. If we had encountered a fixed patron concerning the number of fingers, we might have been able to discuss its possible symbolic interpretation, but the random number of the fingers of the flame is clear evidence that the most important thing for the miniaturist was covering completely the body of the Imam 'Alī in the scenes, and the fear of representing him physically, which is a factor that has to be taken into consideration in the evolution of the aniconic treatment in this manuscript in comparison to other codices.

-The size of this flame varies from one miniature to another, and the miniaturist did not take into consideration the proportional ratio between its size and that of other represented elements. For instance, there seems to be a lack of coherence between the size of the flame and the cushion upon which the Imam Ali is seated usually when he is gathered with his council.

-Almost in all the miniatures of the manuscript the flame of fire –that covers Imam 'Alī - is usually accompanied by some concrete objects which help identify easily and undoubtedly the Imam 'Alī, like his famous sword, "" *Dū-l-Faqār* ", that appears in some battle scenes, and his quiver of arrows that always goes with the flame especially in war figurations.

-When the fire flame covers all the facial expressions of Imam 'Alī, the artist tends to represent more secondary details, like the sword "" *Dū-l-Faqār* ", in order to show his power and his capability of beating fantastic animals or winning a battle.

As we explained before, the author of the present manuscript is anonymous; there isn't any reference to the miniaturist in the introduction, in the conclusion, nor the signatures inside the pages of the manuscript. Moreover, it is very hard to identify him, due to the new style that he applied, especially referring to the complete veiling of the body of the Imam. And what is even more distinguished is that this style is never repeated in any other miniature neither in this school nor in another.

There is no doubt that the decision of the miniaturist to choose the type or level of occultation in his work was mainly related to the relevance of the character according to the religious point of view. This is the reason we consider that the author did not dare to represent Prophet Muhammad; nevertheless, he used the flame of fire to veil Imam 'Alī. This difference can be clearly noticed almost in all the miniatures where Imam 'Alī and the Prophet Muhammad appear together, either in Shiite or Sunnite codices. For example, in one of the miniatures of the Shiite manuscript "The Garden of the Blissful", preserved in the National Library of Cairo in Egypt, we can see Prophet Muhammad with Imam 'Alī in the

day of Ghadir Jum<sup>42</sup>. In this scene, the Prophet appears with a veil covering his face and surrounded by a halo of light, while the Imam's facial features can be seen, although his head is also surrounded by a halo of light.

However, in another miniature we were able to prove that Imam 'Alī had been represented without any features of Aniconism, mainly when he was with his wife, Lady Fatima, and his father-in-law, Prophet Muhammad. This Turkish Sunnite miniature is located in the Chester Beatty Library. Both Lady Fatima and Prophet Muhammad have their faces veiled and their heads surrounded by a halo of light, while Imam 'Alī appears unveiled.

These two examples discuss different interpretations of Aniconism in Arts, according to Sunnite and Shiite beliefs, and to what extent this effect is applied by the artist depending on the relevance of the character, as in the case of Imam 'Alī and the flame of fire used to veil his figure / face in the above-mentioned miniatures and in some others in the same manuscript.

## Conclusion

In our opinion, this article can be considered as an introduction to future investigations about Islamic Art, after proving the possibility of using the term Aniconism in the Islamic Culture from the historic and linguistic points of view. *Haydar Nameh* manuscript studied in this article presents a distinguished model of the representations of Imam 'Alī veiling all of his body with a flame of fire. The presence of a characteristic flame to cover sacred figures can only be observed in the iconography of the XVII century, when this effect of the Aniconism appears, and not before, during the medieval epoch.

The Shiite effect played a fundamental role in the diffusion of the representations of sacred characters in Islamic manuscripts, due to the position of leadership acquired by Imam 'Alī within this Islamic discipline. For the Shiites, 'Alī occupies the first position in the hierarchical scale after, of course, the Prophet Mohammad.

The miniatures that we commented in this study offer a new form of Aniconism in Islamic Art. The technic of covering the whole body of Imam 'Alī as a religious figure using a halo of light is not usual. The most common applications of Aniconism remove the whole figure from the paintings to avoid any possible contradictions with religious values.

We can confirm, hence, that this study introduces a new way of covering the bodies of religious characters in Islamic Art, using a halo of light. Moreover, this halo that substitutes the figure of Imam 'Alī does not appear in any of the miniatures of medieval Islamic codices.

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<sup>42</sup> The incident of Ghadir Jum has a great relevance in Shiite Muslim beliefs and it is considered as an important day similar to the celebrations of Al Fitr (Minor Eid) and Al adha (Grand Eid), because the Shiites consider that on this day the prophet gave the right to Imam 'Alī Ibn Abi Taib to be el Muslim Califa. This day was the 18th of the Muslim month Dhi Al Hijjah, just after the return from the farewell pilgrimage. For more details, See: AL-SUYUTI, J., *Addurr Al-Manthūr Fittafsīr Bil-Ma'thūr*, Vol. II, Beirut, 2010, p. 293; AL-HAYTHAMI, N., *Majmū' azzawā'id wa Manba' al-Fawā'id*, vol. IX, Beirut, 1994, p. 129; AL-Dhahabī, S., *Siyar a'lām annubalā'*, vol. XIV, Beirut, 1996, p. 277.



Regarding the form in which the flame of fire appears in these miniatures we have to draw the attention to the fact that it is represented in the form of the palm of a hand without having a specific number of fingers. As shown above, this may have a particular significance related to its possible symbolic interpretation, but the random number of fingers of this flame is clear evidence that the most important thing for the miniaturist was covering the body of Imam 'Alī completely in the scenes and the fear of representing him physically, and this is a factor that has to be taken in consideration in the evolution, or simply the aniconic treatment, of this manuscript in comparison to others.

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**Plate 1:**



Plate 1: Imam 'Alī is fully disappeared behind the File halo in the battle, *Manuscript of Hayder Nameh*, 36 recto, Egyptian National Library, 80- Persian history, XVIII century, 24.6 x 14,2, Hindu-Mongolian School of art.

By the researcher after permission of National Library of Egypt in Cairo.

## **Plate 2**



Plate 2: *Ghadīr Khumm* scene, Imam 'Alī is appeared with a veiled face only while rest of the body appears, *Manuscript of Hadiqat al-Su'ada*, Egyptian National Library, 80- Turkish history *Talaat*, XVI century.

By the researcher after permission of National Library of Egypt in Cairo.

## **Plate 3:**





Plate 3: Imam 'Alī is fully disappeared cutting his enemy's head by his sword, *Manuscript of Hayder Nameh*, 115 verso, Egyptian National Library, 80- Persian history, XVIII century, 24.6 x 14,2 cm, Hindu-Mongolian School of art.

By the researcher after permission of National Library of Egypt in Cairo.

**Plate 4:**



Plate 4: Imam 'Alī is fully disappeared with his sword *Dū-l-Faqār*, *Manuscript of Hayder Nameh*, 167 verso, Egyptian National Library, 80- Persian history, XVIII century, 24 x 14,6 cm, Hindu-Mongol School of art.

By the researcher after permission of National Library of Egypt in Cairo.

**Plate 5:**



Plate 5: Imam 'Alī is fighting in a battle, Manuscript of *Rawdat aṣ-ṣafā*, Museum of Freer Gallery, Washington, Preservation no. S 1986.238, 24 verso, 1571-1572, Safavid school of art.

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**Plate 6:**



Plate 6: The torture of captives by the armies of Imam 'Alī's enemies, Manuscript of Hayder Nameh, 169 recto, Egyptian National Library, 80- Persian history, XVIII century, 24 x 14,2 cm, Hindu-Mongolian School of art.

By the researcher after permission of National Library of Egypt in Cairo.



## فهم مصطلح الأنبيكونيزم في الفن الإسلامي من خلال بعض منمنمات الإمام علي

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### الملخص

### معلومات المقالة

يمكن تقديم مصطلح الأنبيكونيزم في الفن الإسلامي من خلال تصاوير للإمام علي لم يظهر فيها، حيث تم استبدال هيئته التصويرية بتغطية كاملة لجسده مما يعكس تجنب الفنان المسلم لتصوير الشخصيات الهامة عقائدياً، وهو أصل المفهوم الاصطلاحي واللغوي لتعبير الأنبيكونيزم على حد سواء. ورغم ظهور الشخصيات الدينية بهيئتها محجوبة الوجه فقط في أمثلة أخرى عديدة في تصاوير المخطوطات الإسلامية إلا أن بعض الهيئات المصورة للإمام علي قد اشتملت على تجنب كامل من الفنان المسلم لتصويره وهو ما يتوافق مع معنى الأنبيكونيزم وفق استخدام المصطلح في الدراسات السابقة في الفن الإسلامي، ويهدف الطرح إلى تقديم رؤية جديدة له عبر المنمنمات الإسلامية ومنها على سبيل المثال ما يتعلق بالإمام علي، وهو ما يمكن تناوله من خلال التحليل اللغوي والاصطلاحي للأنبيكونيزم وتحقيق مفهومه في الفن الإسلامي وتقديم هذه الهيئة الفريدة للإمام علي في التصوير الإسلامي والتي تظهر في أمثلة بعض المنمنمات من خلال حجب كامل لهيئته الجسدية واستبدالها بهالة على كامل الجسد بدلاً من الوجه فقط كما هو معتاد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**  
الإمام علي؛ المنمنمات الإسلامية؛ الفن الإسلامي؛ الأنبيكونيزم.

**(JAAUTH)**

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