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I Am a Shirt

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I Am a Shirt

Abstract
In order to understand the technological developments and achievements of the Islamic world, it is important to highlight the different processes, practices, and techniques used in creating objects, whether artistic or otherwise. This paper follows a plausible journey for a single shirt, from its initial creation as a piece of cloth to the epigraphic designs that gave it its deeply religious and mystical power to whoever wore it in Mughal India.

Keywords
Islamic Technology, Islamic Art, Islamic History

Disciplines
History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Islamic World and Near East History

Comments
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I Am a Shirt:
The Technology behind a Talismanic Shirt from Mughal India

Fig. 1 Talismanic Shirt, from Walker, “Recent Acquisitions,” 12

I am, simply put, a shirt. But I am also much more. I do not simply rest on the
backs of men. I was made to be worn by a great warrior, an amir in the empire’s army,
underneath his armor during the heat of battle.¹ I am not just a plain smock as I appear. I
was woven from stiffened cotton in the markets of Calikut, the center of the cotton trade
for all of the Mughal Empire.² And as you can plainly see, I am not blank and lacking of
design. My front and back is covered by the work of a talented calligrapher, who placed
upon me the entire text of the Qur’an and the ninety nine names of God and holy sayings

² Ibid.
Lined by wafq and the basmala, I do not simply serve to clothe the warrior, but to protect him from evil with the Divine Message. I keep him healthy and strong and lead him to victory when he is at war.

So you see I am a shirt, a simple shirt like any other. But I have been made into a much greater thing, a powerful weapon that is truly pleasing to God. I am a product of a loom, made with the same materials as other shirts, but I am also a work of art, and a talisman. But before I can explain why I am so beautiful, and why I am so powerful, I must first explain how I came to be what I once was: a simple shirt.

Before cotton reached the lands of my owner’s ancestors, it was grown here, in India. During my creation the textile industries were booming, with trade connections reaching far and wide. One such textile center was Calikut, where I became a fabric. But before I could be created, the material of my very being had to be grown, picked, and spun into fibers. The cotton used for my creation was picked from fields not far from Calikut by the hands of a woman named Manmati, who also separated the boll from the hard capsule. But Manmati did not gin her own cotton like some of the other peasants, the ginning was done by a traveling specialist named Raja, who bowed and packed the cotton. Bowing required the use of a wooden bow and a wooden mallet, which Raja used to loosen the fibers and then pack into large balls. Raja was good at his work and eventually the cotton balls that he had made in his shop reached the trade center of Calikut, to be spun into thread and woven into cotton fabric on a loom.

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Internet, Accessed 10 April, 2008.
5 Ibid, 20.
6 Ibid, 21.
Calikut was one of the largest centers for the production and export of cotton fabric, and it was where the material of my body would be made. After the cotton balls had been spun into thread by a wheel, the thread was strengthened and prepared by a man named Todar to be put on one of the looms in his workshop. The fabric that I would one day be made from was not dyed like some of the other textiles in the workshop. My fabric would be simple and plain in color, but strong and well woven on the loom. The beginning of my life began on Todar’s heddle-loom. The cotton fabric was put on the starting band attached to the rectangular frame. The warps hung down from the starting band and were kept taught by two rows of stones weighing them down. Because of my simple nature and Todar’s skill I became a single piece of plain cotton fabric in very little time.

I was a fabric, a textile. Far from the elaborate piece of art I would eventually become, I was still a part of the world around me and an important part of society. The empire is known for its textiles and the sultans will wear only the finest wool, Kashmir, and velvet items. Of course textiles are essential to everyone’s lives, but those in the

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7 Schimmel, Annemarie. *The Empire of the Great Mughals*. 102; The trade and economy of the Mughal Empire at its peak was phenomenal. Travelers and merchants were astounded by the enormous cities, comparable in size to those found in Europe at the same time. Three major trade centers were the likely locations of where such stiffened cotton would originate. Gujarat, besides being one of the main trade centers under Mughal rule, was renowned for its exquisite fabrics although Lahore became increasingly competitive and was known, mostly by Armenian merchants, for its textile production. However, cotton in the Mughal Empire mostly came from Calikut. The export of cotton from Calikut to the Portuguese and British became one of the main sources of revenue for the empire. Considering its importance to the overall cotton industry, it is likely that the cotton used to make the shirt originated in Calikut.


9 Korngold, Cecile. “The Significance of the Textile Industry in Medieval Islamic Society.” Introduction. “In addition to clothing and other accessories, almost all interior furnishings of houses and tents were textile products—curtains, carpets, tapestries, cushions, mattresses, sofas, bedclothes, to name the most commonly used items. Textiles were an asset; as such their value was an index of wealth and status.” With multiple materials and many stages of labor, the textile industry in Medieval Islam provided numerous jobs as well as influencing all levels of society. As stated above, textiles were physically everywhere and played a role in every aspect of life.
Mughal court control the textile economy and desire the most luxurious wardrobes. To those in power, shawls, hats, and elaborate robes are of the utmost importance and are naturally representative of prestige. The ruler’s carpets, often made from pashmina, are forbidden to be walked on while wearing shoes. And the great emperor, Jalal Ud-Din Akbar, feels so strongly about clothing that he believes that giving it to a person of low status will immediately put you at that low status as well.\(^\text{10}\)

But I would not be just a textile for long. I was bought up and made my way along the Ganges River until I finally arrived in Delhi. There I was taken into another workshop, this time owned by a 1,000-zat mansabdar. The amir’s name was Azim. He owned shops in the city as a merchant in order to pay his soldiers. He had recently commissioned a dismissed artist from the emperor’s court to come and illuminate a shirt for him. This is where I came in. I was cut into a tunic measuring thirty-eight inches from sleeve to sleeve and twenty five inches from the top to the bottom. I was about to begin a process that would transform me into something more than just a cotton shirt.

The commissioned artist was a skilled miniature painter and calligrapher. Artists like him are commissioned all the time by the ruling elite to create beautiful pieces of art. Calligraphy and painting is loved throughout the empire, especially by sultans and princes.\(^\text{11}\) Such skilled work, however, takes time. And so for the next four years, I

\(^{10}\) Schimmel, Annemarie. *The Empire of the Great Mughals*. 167-173; The Mughal court’s emphasis on fine clothing set the trend for the rest of the empire, creating the need for a large textile economy with the focus on very fine products. Overall textiles were probably the single most important aspect of daily life in the Mughal Empire.

\(^{11}\) Schimmel, Annemarie. *The Empire of the Great Mughals*. 267; Paintings and calligraphy, like fine textiles, were representations of a ruler’s wealth and power. But they were also the paramount examples of a genuine interest and passion for the arts that is seen throughout the reign of the Mughals and across the Islamic world.
would be written and painted on by the artist in the Amir’s workshop.\textsuperscript{12} The artist used the Bihari style of calligraphy (Fig. 1) to write out every verse of the Qur’an, as well as the ninety names of God and holy sayings in the borders.\textsuperscript{13}

![Bihari Style Calligraphy](image)

**Fig. 2 Bihari Style Calligraphy, from Schøyen, “The Schoyen Collection”**

It was long work and I had to lie very still as he worked upon me. By the time of completion however, everything seemed to have been worth it. The artist embellished me with shoulder cartouches, roundels with checkered patterning or the name of god, the \textit{basmala}, and the verses of victory. My sides features blue and brown bordering and my

\textsuperscript{12} Levenson, Jay A. \textit{Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration}. Washington, D.C: Yale University Press, 1991. 203. A talismanic shirt from Persia is believed to have taken from 1476 to 1480 to complete, indicating the amount of effort that went into creating such a work of art.

\textsuperscript{13} Schimmel, Annemarie. \textit{Calligraphy and Islamic Culture}. New York and London: New York University Press, 1984. Islamic calligraphy is very diverse in its styles. Because of competition between calligraphers, new styles and arrangements and ways to write things were continually being created. It is likely, considering the time and area the shirt was worn, that the Qur’anic verses and \textit{basmala} were written in a specific form of \textit{nasta-liq}. \textit{Nasta-liq} was often used to write verses of the Qur’an and became popular in Iran. There it was developed into a hanging style that was eventually brought to India during the heyday of the Mughal Empire. However, a style that originated in turkey called \textit{ta-liq}, caught on in India and a style called Indian \textit{ta-liq} could have been the style used on the Talismanic shirt. Despite all the indications that would suggest that the calligraphy style was \textit{ta-liq} or \textit{nasta-liq}, due to the “slowly thickening lower endings” it is very likely that the style of calligraphy written on the shirt is the Bihari style. The Bihari style, probably named after the center of Bihar which was responsible for the production of aloe wood and paper, was used in India during the 15\textsuperscript{th} century and was often done color. These characteristics of the Bihari style would suggest that it was the calligraphy style on this Talismanic shirt.
front has two blue breast roundels. The whole Qur’an is written inside \textit{wafq} along the front and back and inside triangular shapes bordering the bottom. After four years I went from being a shirt to essentially an illuminated Qur’an. Having such words written on my body makes me part of a deeply meaningful tradition and revered artistic style. I am covered all over by a truly noble craft.

But the writing and illumination that covers me is about more than just the work of the amir’s artist. Because I am more than just a cotton shirt covered by ink. The ink has power, and the shapes have power, and I have power. I am a talisman. My owner did not simply commission my creation for the beautiful artwork that covers my cotton form. The \textit{wafq}, the strings of letters, the verses of victory, the \textit{basmala}, and most importantly the Qur’an, all work to make me a talisman. He wanted to be protected by

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14 "Talismanic shirt [India (north India or the Deccan)] (1998.199)".
Magic Squares are essential to the artistic look of the shirt. They are “lined with religious phrases or names of God and are represented numerically in the abjad system, an alphanumeric system based on the old order of the Semitic alphabet, within the square”.
“Muslims, like Jews, regard the universe as having been created by God through the power of letters of the alphabet. Words, therefore, or rather the letters from which they are formed, are regarded as the basic substructure of the universe and consequently form much of the subject matter of Islamic art. The Koran as given to the Prophet in the Arabic language is described as part of the infinite word of God taken from a tablet guarded or preserved in heaven.” In this sense the writing of the entire Qur’ran on the shirt is a representation of everything that God has given and therefore is of ultimate significance. In other words there could be no greater expression of religious faith by an article of clothing than the full text inscribed upon it.
17 Khaldun, Ibn. \textit{The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History}. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958. Ibn Khaldun defined calligraphy as: “the outlining and shaping of letters to indicate audible words which, in turn, indicate what is in the soul…it is a noble craft…it enables people to become acquainted with science, learning, with the books of the ancients, and with the sciences and information written down by them”.
18 Venetia, Porter. "Talismans and Talismanic Objects." The writing found on the most powerful Talismans are the verses of the Qur’an. Strings of individual letters, \textit{wafq}, or magic squares, names of God, and versus of victory or healing are all commonly found on Talismans and are found on the Mughal shirt. The fact that the shirt contains the entirety of the Qur’an indicates its purpose as a Talisman that could protect the wearer through its praising and devotion to God. The verses of victory (61:13) from the Qur’an are commonly used on Talismans with relation to war and warfare. This shirt, worn underneath the chain mail to defend its owner in battle, most likely would have had these verses inscribed.
the Divine Message in battle. He wanted to be safe from illness, safe from bullets, and of course, to be victorious.\textsuperscript{19}

Talismanic shirts such as me are very rare.\textsuperscript{20} But the function that I serve has lasted for a very long time. As a talisman, my basic functions are to keep my owner safe, fight the power of the evil eye, and support my owner’s well-being.\textsuperscript{21} Some talismans come in the form of bowls, or amulets. But few talismans are as beautiful as me. The science and religion behind my function go far back into time and have much to do with mysticism, sorcery, and metaphysics.\textsuperscript{22} Unfortunately, I was never worn under my amir’s chain mail suit into battle. I was never even used at all. Azim died several years after my creation during a time of peace. Once he was dead I was put away and have been left untouched for thousands of years. My lack of use accounts for my excellent state of preservation to this day. But now that I have been found again, God Willing, I will be used for my true purpose. I long to go into battle and help lead my wearer to victory. I am made of thick but comfortable cotton. I am a work of tedious and intricate art. I am a

\textsuperscript{19} (a) "Talismanic shirt [India (north India or the Deccan)] (1998.199)". (b) Venetia, Porter. "Talismans and Talismanic Objects."
\textsuperscript{21} Venetia, Porter. "Talismans and Talismanic Objects."
\textsuperscript{22} Khaldun, Ibn. The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History. 395. The evil eye is, as Ibn Khaldun called it, “an influence exercised by the soul of the person who has the evil eye. A thing or situation appears pleasing to the eye of a person, and he likes it very much. This circumstance creates in him envy and the desire to take it away from its owner.” To him, the evil eye was a result of sorcery, although one could not avoid their actions when under the control of it and therefore could not be held accountable. During his time the religious laws put sorcery, talismans, and prestidigitation in the same category and forbade them as harmful. Al-Ghazali had similar perspectives on talismans. He said in his Ihya’ Ulum al-Din that the “blameworthy sciences are magic, talismanic science, juggling, trickery and the like” (10). These sciences were essentially blameworthy as harmful because their “harmfulness exceeds their utility” (23). While talismans continued to represent a kind of magic into the time of the Mughals, the talismanic shirt acted as protection against the harmful magic of the evil eye as well as being mostly a representation of Islam with the Qur’an and other religious features. Hardly seen as a harmful magic, the shirt was desired by the mansabdars of the Mughal Empire to provide protection and victory in battle and was therefore no longer viewed in a negative light. While talismans represented harm during Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun’s lives, in India during the 15th or 16th century talismans were clearly being used by the Muslim elites of the Mughal Empire.
powerful talisman that can keep the one who wears me safe and show his devotion to God simultaneously. I am certainly not just a shirt.
References


