

FABRICS FIT FOR ANGELS

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Within Islamic painting the depiction of angels generally occurs in the context of temporal power and authority, of religious narrative and of the garden, both heavenly and terrestrial. It is their wings which identify their inclusion within the pictorial composition rather than any distinguishing attire but, that said, it appears that while the Islamic artists employed the visual metaphor of luxurious contemporary court fabrics to evoke the image of heavenly splendour and magnificence, they were less inclined to dress these heavenly beneficent beings in types of garments too closely associated with the styling of court robes.

As is well recognised the Islamic painter was rarely overwhelmingly concerned with recording accurately, naturalistically and minutely every detail in his pictorial composition. Few depictions display such clarity of garment structure as certain early Qāğār paintings, such as those formerly in the Amery collection (Falk 1972), which reveal the use of bias cutting, types of fastenings and braiding, seaming details as well as clearly portraying textile patterning and texture. Furthermore it is apparent that few Islamic artists perceived that it was a requirement in such depictions to reflect the accepted literary notions regarding angels. Arabic writers, such as aṭ-Tabarī (d. 923 AD) and al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283 AD), described their immense size and stature with numerous wings, anything from four as possessed by Isrāfīl who will sound the trumpet on the Day of Reckoning to four thousand as with Izrā'il, the angel of death. One such wing could easily, we are told, cover a quarter of the earth's surface when unfurled. Little concerted effort is made by the artist to represent the scale of these enormous wings nor of the angelic body covered with saffron hairs, nor the multiple faces of these divine beings positioned at various places on their body to watch humanity¹. However, as always, there are a few exceptions, one of the most important being the first-half of the 15th century Uighur manuscript of the *Mī'rāğ-nāmāh* (Bibliothèque Nationale (BN), Paris, Suppl. turc 190). In this work the angels are frequently depicted on a larger scale than the Prophet Muḥammad and there appears to be a deliberate wish to convey a feeling of a distinct celestial world, peopled by such super-normal divine creatures, different from ordinary terrestrial beings.

¹ MacDonald 1960; *ERE* IV, 615ff, which notes that Ğibrīl (Angel of the Revelation) possessed six huge wings each formed of 100 smaller ones, or elsewhere as 1600 wings covered with saffron hair; the wings of Mikā'il were described as being made of green emerald, while Izrā'il had four faces, on his head, chest, back and at his feet.

There is also a matter of gender: the stories explaining the fall of the angels Hārūt and Mārūt suggest that these beings possessed some masculine sexual feelings; indeed it was yielding to such emotions that resulted in their fall from heavenly Grace. But although theologians and philosophers agreed that angels could weep, feel annoyance and required nourishment (albeit with spiritual food and drink), the matter of their gender does not appear to have been much discussed, let alone decided. Such ambiguity regarding gender is reflected in a number of Islamic manuscript depictions. However, it must be said that our knowledge of the differences in male and female dress, especially of the early and medieval periods, in the Islamic Middle East is imprecise², and identification of gender tends to be based on jewellery, hair-styling rather than specific costume details such as neckline, robe closures etc.. Those images showing angels confirming divine affirmation of temporal power, holding the royal baldachin or canopy over the head of the ruler, as in the frontispiece of *Kitāb al-Agānī*, Mosul c. 1218-9 (Millett Kütüphanesi, Istanbul, F. Efendi 1566 fol.1r.), appear to depict female angels judging by the ear ornaments, hair-styling and garment neckline. Such figures are derived from winged Victories from the Classical Mediterranean world and Sāsānid Iran, as at Taq-i Bustan where the female gender of the Victory angels is unambiguous. In the early 14th century *Ġāmī at-tawārīh* (Edinburgh University Library, and the Nasser D. Khalili Collection, London), the angel dressed in a shoulder-less tunic, closely attending the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad, should presumably be read as female (befitting in the role of mid-wife). There are later similarly attired representations in certain Persian manuscripts, with their hair arranged in a top-knot loop; they are shown alongside other winged figures wearing sleeved robes, rather than the shoulder-less tunic, and crowns. Comparable dress differences are seen in, for instance, the 1539-43 *Hamsa* of Nizāmī (British Museum Or.2265) and the *Haft Awrang* of Ġāmī, 1556-65 (Freer Gallery of Art (FGA), inv. 46.12, fol.275a) and it is logical to suppose that the artist wished to show that the heavens were peopled by both male and female divine messengers. This inclusion of both 'angelic' genders is clearly suggested in a mid-16th century Persian album drawing 'Garden of Heavenly Creatures' (FGA, inv. 50.2).

Early Arabic literary descriptions of the dress, the colouring, their styling worn by angels are even less precise. The Qur'an (76:22) notes that the attendants in the gardens of Paradise will be attired in green *sundus*, a patterned-weave silk³. Mention

² To draw a contemporary parallel: a casual observer unused to Western mores would probably fail to note, unless shown, that gender was signified in the manner and direction of closure in Western men's and women's fashion since the late 19th century, as in trousers, shirts etc., as well as in small differences in the tailoring cut and styling.

³ *Sundus* is generally taken to be a form of *samit*, that is a draw-loom compound woven silk (generally twill weave). Presumably the colour green alludes to costly luxury, as it seems there was only one known single-bath vegetable dye giving a stable green colour, available in Iran and rarely found; see

has already been made of the early 13th century frontispiece of the *Kitāb al-aḡānī* manuscript in Istanbul with the two female winged victory angels wearing a style of clothing similar to those worn by the centrally-placed ruler and his attendants surrounding him. The depiction of the two recording angels in the 1280 *‘Aḡā‘ib al-mablūqāt* of al-Qazwīnī (Bayerische Staatsliche Bibliothek, Munich, Arab 464 fol. 36r.) also suggests a heavy reliance on courtly garments with both Munkat and Nakat wearing turbans with, among the folds, a small calligraphic ornamental square and dressed in voluminous robes with *tirāz* bands on the dropped shoulder line, in the fashion of the then-defunct ‘Abbāsīd court bureaucrat or member of the prosperous bourgeoisie⁴. The honorific connotations of the *tirāz* band are well-known and need no further clarification in this argument⁵. But the depiction of the garment folds has suggested to some that the artist was thinking particularly of a moiré silk; this effect of a ‘watered’ textile was produced not by a specialist weave but by passing the finished cloth through heated corrugated rollers, so causing expansion and contraction of the yarn or filament. Such mechanism was described in connection with goat-hair mohair processing in Ankara (Angora) by both the mid-16th century Habsburg ambassador, Busbecq, and his travelling companion, Dernschwam⁶, and similar equipment is still employed in at least one silk-workshop operating in Margilan, Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan) as seen by this writer. One royal Ottoman garment, said to have been the property of Selim I (d. 1520), has survived⁷ and it is known that such mohair-silk mixture cloth was greatly admired and exported to Northern Europe, eventually giving its European name ‘grosgrain’ to the English navy’s daily ration of rum (Andersen 1989:164). With this particular image, however, I agree with those scholars who argue that the artist drew his inspiration from established conventions of drapery representation as employed in contemporary Byzantine

Whitworth 1976:55. The most usual way of obtaining a green colour, before the introduction of synthetic dyes in the second half of the 19th century from Europe into the Middle East, was to double-dye the selected fabric, firstly in blue, usually indigo, and then in yellow. This meant production costs in terms of time, labour and ingredient were doubled and thus reflected in the final wholesale price.

⁴ Certainly their apparel shows no similarity to Mongol court dress as depicted in some manuscripts, metalwork and ceramics, and yet this manuscript was produced over twenty years after the Mongol capture of the Abbasid capital, Baghdad. The angels’ dress is not modelled on that of an Abbasid theologian, but the closest parallel may be found in the apparel of male listeners to a theological oration as depicted in the 1237ms. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, Iraq (BN, Arabe 5847, fol.58v).

⁵ The most informative study on *tirāz* is Golombek & Gervers 1977. A number of calligraphic ornamental squares, generally embroidered with gold thread or painted, presumed to have once been part of turban cloths are within the Textile Museum collection, Washington DC. (inv. 73.389, 73.52; 73.612); see Kuhnel 1952:L1.

⁶ French 1972:242-243; see also Babinger 1923:196-197.

⁷ It is held in the Costume Section of the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, inv. no.13/39.

enamelled metalwork and paintings, rather than choosing to depict an actual contemporary fabric.

Contemporary Christian religious painting in the region or in neighbouring Byzantium may have influenced the Islamic artist in the projection of angelic wings and certain body postures but it appears that generally speaking the iconography employed especially in the Tīmūrid, Safawid and Ottoman manuscripts from the second quarter of the 15th century had its antecedents in the east rather than the west. If one looks at the positioning and posture of the angels in such works as the 1556-65 *Haft Awrang* of Ġāmī (FGA, inv. 66.12 fol.147a) (Fig. A⁸) and late 16th century Ottoman court manuscripts, angels descend from the heavens in the manner of Buddhist *apsaras* as represented in the numerous cave paintings of the Dunhuang complex (Fig. B) and other Buddhist cave shrines in today's Xinjiang province, China⁹. The swirling, flying ribbons of these *apsara* figures, themselves often shown half-naked and ambiguous in gender, are often echoed in the Islamic depictions, where they have been translated into long, floating, undulating sashes around the lower waist or falling from full arm-bows (e.g. Fig. C, G). As with the hair loop top-knot, these dress elements owe nothing to the Western world.

In the case of the 15th century Uighur *Mīrāg-nāmah* mentioned above, it takes no great leap of faith to accept that certain artistic conventions travelled from the eastern side of the Tarim Basin westwards into Central Asia and thence into the eastern provinces of Iran before and during the 15th century. However, the argument appears less tenable in case of 16th century Ottoman court painting, because of the vast geographical distances involved. Until that is, one considers the famous three albums (H. 2153, 2154, 2160) now in the Topkapi Saray Museum collection, Istanbul (hereinafter TSM)¹⁰. Elsewhere in this volume, Professor Sheila Blair discusses the influence of certain paintings within these albums on later work and I would argue that other images incorporated within the same bindings had similar impact on the work of court artists who adapted the 'foreign' imagery to demonstrate the 'other-world' of the Qur'anic heavens.

Among the pages of these albums there are several works derived from Chinese sources. It is unclear whether all or some are the work of Ottoman (or indeed Iranian) copyists or by Chinese hands although modern scholars are agreed these are

⁸ This and the other drawings accompanying this paper are the work of Andrew Smith, London. My grateful thanks to him.

⁹ These caves like those of Bezeklik and Khocho in the Tarim Basin region were frequented by the merchants and travellers undertaking the dangerous and lengthy trade routes (the so-called Silk Road) from the Chinese Empire into Central Asia or India and further west, from pre-Islamic times onwards.

¹⁰ These album paintings were the subject of intensive study by a number of scholars and their findings published in Grube & Sims 1985. Some articles from this colloquy were also printed in *Islamic Art*, I (1981).

not the products of the Imperial Yuan court ateliers¹¹. It is certain that one album (H.2154) was collated, presumably in court circles, for the enjoyment of Bahrām Mīrza (1517-49), youngest son of the Safawid shah, Ismā'īl (r. 1501-24) but it is very probable that a number of the pictures in this and especially in the other albums, H. 2153 and 2160, were produced many decades before and had exchanged hands through military conquest. It is argued that perhaps they were part of the spoils seized by the Safawid armies from the Qara Qoyunlu royal library, whose military forces had in turn looted the Tīmūrid palace library in Herāt, Afghanistan, in 1458, but their turbulent history did not end there. The albums, however and whenever collated, were then entered into the Ottoman royal inventories during the reign of Sultan Selim I (r.1512-1520), perhaps as an indirect consequence of the victorious Battle of Chaldiran, Eastern Anatolia, in 1514¹², with the exception of the Bahrām Mīrza album (H.2154) which came into Ottoman hands later in that century, probably as a diplomatic gift. So a possible line of transmission and dissemination from the eastern provinces of Iran to the Ottoman capital of Istanbul may be argued.

Within these albums the three-quarter profile of the so-called 'moon'face, so fashionable in Tang art circles, appears again and again but of course this concept of facial beauty had already proved irresistible to Islamic artists for many centuries. Of more importance for this brief study, once again among these pages one sees the floating ribbons, the hair loop, and the multi-layered garment structure with various sleeve-lengths consisting of a light-weight loose tunic top caught at the waist and falling in a multiplicity of loose folds to the lower hips, and a fullish skirt. Both the tunic and skirt folds, and the long floating ribbons tied in large bows give an impression of graceful movement (Fig. D). In the depiction of angels in the Islamic Middle East this imagery proved to be remarkably influential, as seen in the frontispiece of 1437 *Hamsa* of Hāgu Kirmānī, Sīrāz (Arthur S Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C., Vever ms 586.0034), a early 16th century drawing 'Angel with a lute' attributed to Bihzād (TSM H. 2162, fol.7v), the 1534 *Hamsa* of Nizāmī, fol. 301b (H. 760), and the 1594-5 Ottoman manuscript *Siyar-i Nabī* (Fig. C).

That said, there was also a tendency among some Islamic court artists to associate their angelic depictions with contemporary court fashion, incorporating for instance the so-called Chinese 'cloud collar' and 'mandarin-square' as worn by the angels kneeling in adoration before Adam (Fig. E) in the 1417 Herāt manuscript *Mağma' at-*

¹¹ Watson 1985; Shatzman-Steinhardt (1985) argues that although there are strong elements of Tang dress, it is known that such imagery still had currency in late 13th/early 14th century China under Mongol/Yuan authority.

¹² Cagman 1981. Bahrām Mīrza was appointed governor of Hurāsān and Herāt 1530-3, and thereafter was governor of the Western Caspian region, and of Hamadān; Soucek 1988.

tawārīḥ (TSM B. 282), and by Ġibrīl in the 1594-5 Ottoman manuscript, *Siyar-i Nabī* (TSM H. 1223, fol. 296a). Such dress decorations were introduced into the Islamic lands with the early 13th century Mongol conquering armies; one of the earliest textual references occurs in the dynastic history of the Chin Tatars (1115-1260) in a sumptuary edict restricting the use of the 'cloud collar' to members of the Imperial household in China¹³. Both collar and square were features of Īlhānid and Tīmūrid court dress in the Eastern Islamic regions, and a number of early 15th century *naqqās* designs have survived (Berlin Staatsbibliothek, Diez album)¹⁴ as well as one applique collar (Kremlin Treasury, Moscow, inv.TK-3117) (Fig. F).

This important item has been published a number of times, but unfortunately with very little information, other than the dimensions, the green silk ground material¹⁵, embroidered in gold thread and coloured silks. And the published illustrations yield little more. No details are given as to the embroidery stitch/es employed; it is probable but not certain that the metal thread is held in place by couching, as may be seen in certain 16th century Ottoman royal 'honorific' kaftans (TSM 13/738, 13/739) where the 'basket-weave' technique gives the decoration a very textural appearance (Tezcan & Delibas 1986: pl. 87 and 86). It has not been possible to obtain details regarding the nature of the gold thread on the Kremlin piece: whether it is of actual gold or silver-gilt; foil-strip; or wrapped on a silk core, on animal substrate or on bark. As scholastic opinion is still divided as to whether this item is Tīmūrid produced in Central Asia or Safawid emanating from Iran, such information could be vitally important in discussion. We know it was usual in the Islamic world to wrap metallic threads round silk core whereas in medieval Central Asia and China gold on animal substrate or mulberry bark was generally employed (Wardell 1987), and albeit a century or more later in date, the 1710 Safawid court manual *Tadkirat al-Mulūk* (Minorsky 1943:59) for instance carefully recorded the percentage of gold on silver (thread) permitted for honorific garments, according to various courtly ranks. It is probable that such cloud collars and indeed the 'squares' were not always embroidered separately from the garment construction, as with the Ottoman kaftan mentioned above and the Kremlin piece. Some manuscripts depictions, such as an illustration dated c. 1300 (TSM, album H.2152, fol.60b) of a Mongol

¹³ Cammann 1963:165-166; see also Wittfogel 1949:236, and Bretschneider 1910: II, 195.

¹⁴ Pages from the Diez album are illustrated in Lentz & Lowry 1989 (catalogue entries 90, 95-97) where they are assigned a dating from 1400-1450; Ipsiroglu (1964: pl XXX-XXXV) dated these drawings to the 14th century.

¹⁵ The detail that the ground fabric is green in colour is given in Pope 1938-39: pl.1017. The catalogue entry (no. 116) in Lentz & Lowry 1989 is even less informative.

/Ilhānid ruler holding audience¹⁶, suggest that the panels were embroidered onto the fabric before tailoring, or perhaps the ornament was woven in at the time of actual fabric production; examples of both processes are known in the Imperial Chinese context (Vollmer 1981).

In both 16th century Safawid and Ottoman depictions, the court artist employed another convention in dress detail to demonstrate the status of the heavenly messengers and attendants, that is by dressing the angels in the manner of high-ranking court officials with numerous horizontal rows of braiding down the front two garment panels (Fig. G). Such *çaprast*, made by tablet weaving, would have been immediately recognised by any court observer as an indication of rank and social status¹⁷.

Similarly the gold and silver decoration as featured sometimes on angelic dress, such as the robe of Ġibrīl bringing a sheep to save the sacrifice of Ismā'īl by Ibrāhīm in the 1583 *Zubdat at-tawārīḥ* (Turk ve Islam Museum, Istanbul, ms.1973), was probably inspired by contemporary Ottoman court robes. At least one royal robe, late 16th century, decorated with stamped silver dots survives (TSM 13/198¹⁸) but of course the artist could have been thinking of embroidered motifs. Perhaps the clearest evidence of a close relationship with contemporary court fabrics is found in an album painting dateable to the last quarter of the 16th century, presently in the Souvarar collection. The angel holding a rose (Fig. H) is depicted wearing a figured outer robe, perhaps of silk brocade or cut velvet pile, of similar patterning (but not tailoring) to the outer garment worn by Sir Robert Sherley in the 1622 Van Dyck portrait (Petworth House, UK), and an early 17th century fragment in the David Collection, Copenhagen (inv.13/1991) (Folsach & Keblow Bernsted 1993:115). The artist has given his angel undertrousers of diagonal-striped fabric but again the exact textile material and process are ambiguous. It is possible that the artist was depicting hand-blocked printed cotton, as briefly described by 17th century European travellers¹⁹, for the fabric ground is shown as (bleached) white. However, fragments of Safawid silk brocade are known with similar broad diagonal stripes featuring floral motifs²⁰ as are, of course, numerous examples of Qağar trouser ends of cotton

¹⁶ The robe of the attendant, bottom left with his back to the viewer, appears to have a central seam going through the decorated 'square'; see Ipsiroglu 1971: pl. 23.

¹⁷ As in the 1610 *Fal-nāmah* (TSM, H.1703, fol.7r); see also the 1594-5 *Siyar-i Nabī* (TSM, H.1223, fol.98b) depicting 'Alī.

¹⁸ The garment is associated with Sultan Murad III, but the cut of the neckline strongly suggests it was a woman's robe.

¹⁹ For example, Tavernier 1682: I, 567, Chardin 1711: IV, 263-264.

²⁰ E.g. Victoria & Albert Museum, T.963-1889.

completely covered in small slanted stitch embroidery in similar pattern compositions²¹.

If the Safawid artist depicted such heavenly beings in the styling and fabrics of a contemporary courtier, his Qāḡār counterpart preferred to show angels more in the role of court servant, dressed accordingly literally with their sleeves rolled up ready to attend and wait upon the important characters in the pictorial composition. Only their wings identify them as heavenly beings, and their gender is no longer in question; male angels are attired in the manner of male servants, the female beings as female.

In more recent decades, the artist in the Islamic Republic of Iran has turned to Western art for an appropriate model. The works of early Renaissance and also Baroque artists have been avidly studied especially by those commissioned to execute public art and graphics, both in terms of composition and figural treatment. At the same time, the official endorsement of the religious paintings of Mahmoud Farshchian, who is clearly strongly influenced by certain 19th century European works, which display an emphasis on drapery and romanticist detail, while retaining the 'classic' Persian painting conventions regarding composition, is encouraging other younger artists to explore these ideas. It does indeed appear that instead of looking east for a way of signifying a sense of the heavenly splendour of an ex-terrestrial world, which had been the established courtly convention for centuries, today's Iranian artists' feels of this heavenly beneficence can be best conveyed by employing occidental iconography.

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²¹ E.g. Victoria & Albert Museum, T.509-1889.

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Fig. A. after detail from 'The Gnostic has a vision of angels...' *Haft Awrang* of Ğāmī, Iran 1556-65, FGA, inv. 66.12, fol. 147a; M. Shreve Simpson, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's *Haft Awrang*., FGA 1997, p.148.



Fig. B. after detail from Cave 321, early Tang period, Dunhuang;
R. Whitfield & S. Otsuka, *Dunhuang, caves of the singing sands*, London 1995, pl.92



Fig. C. after detail from 'Muhammad & Ğibril' *Siyar-i Nabî*, Ottoman 1594-5, TSM, Istanbul, H.1223, fol. 296a; Zeren Tanındı, *Siyer-i Nebî*, Istanbul 1984



Fig. D. after TSM, Istanbul, H.2153 fol.170r; *Islamic Art* 1 (1981)

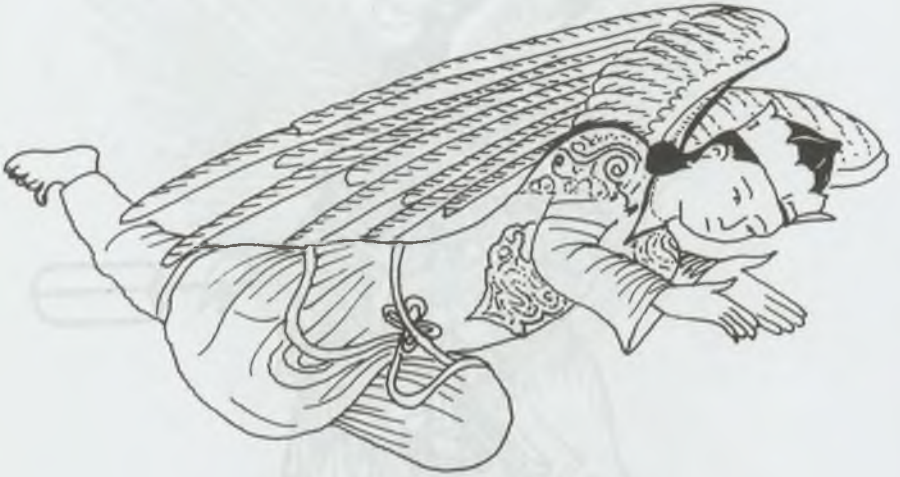


Fig. E. after detail from *Hafiz-i Abnu Magma' al-Tawārih*, Herāt c. 1417, TSM B.282 fol.16a

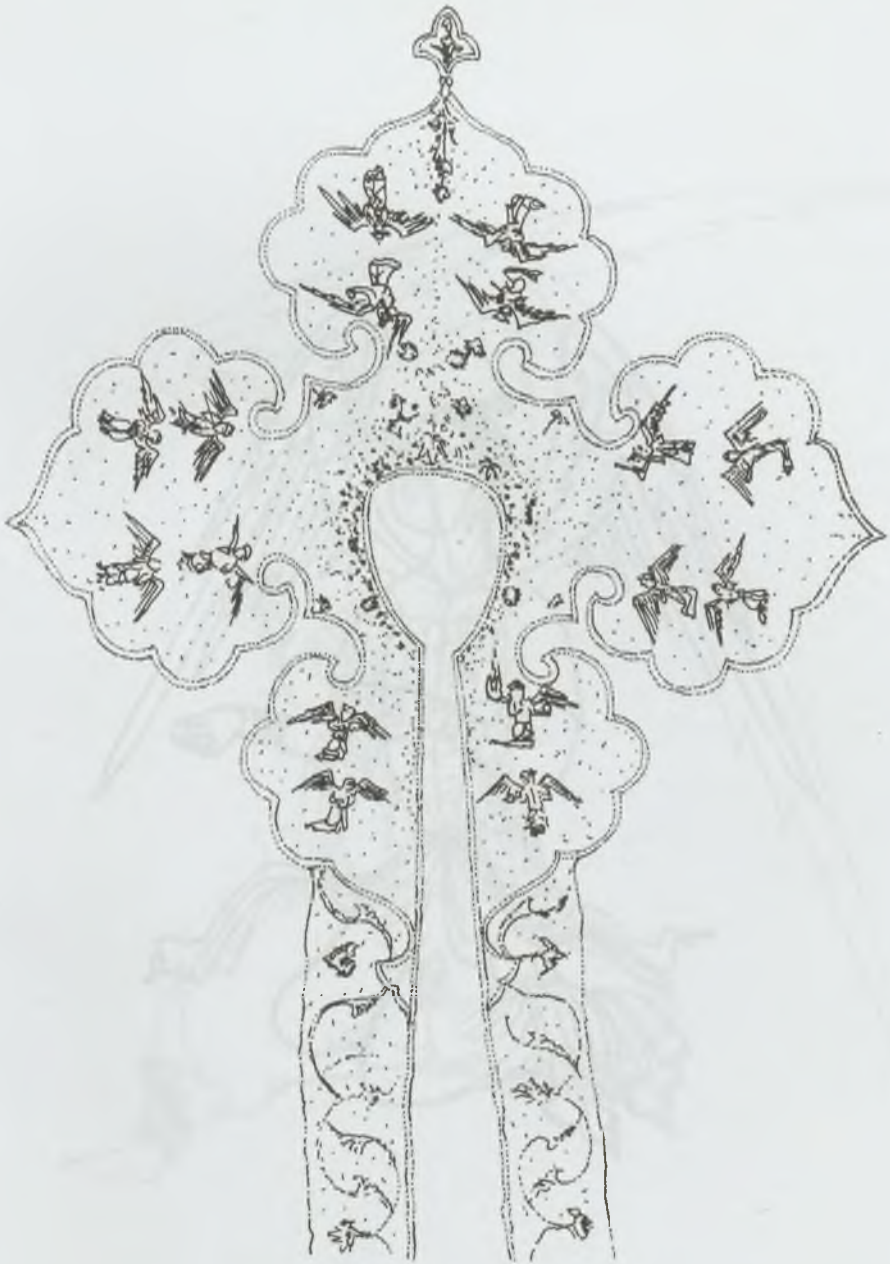


Fig. F. after Pope 1981, XI, pl.1017



Fig. G. after detail from ms. *Haft Awrang* of Ğamī, Iran 1556-65,
FGA 46.12 fol.188a; M Shreve Simpson *op.cit.*



Fig. H. after A. Souvadar *Art of the Persian Courts*, New York, 1992, item 101.