ASCENDING TO HEAVEN
FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATIONS
OF THE PROPHET’S MFRÂĞ

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Scenes illustrating the mi'rağ, the Prophet’s ascension to heaven, are some of the most glorious in Persian painting. Single scenes illustrating the subject are found in various types of literature, ranging from such Persian classics as Nizâmi’s Hamsa to popular devotional works about the Prophet’s life such as the Qisas al-anbiyâ’ (Tales of the Prophet) and biographies of his life such as the Siyar an-nabî. In all these cases, the ascension is merely one of many illustrations, but in addition there were at least two illustrated manuscripts devoted entirely to the subject of the Prophet’s ascension. Called Mi’râğnâma or Book of Ascension, these works have multiple paintings illustrating several incidents of the journey. The more famous of the two manuscripts, transcribed in Uighur script, was made in the Timurid period1. The other illustrated manuscript was made a century earlier under the Ilhanids, Mongol rulers of Iran from 1256 to 1353. This essay surveys the illustrations from the Ilhanid copy and shows how the topic of the Prophet’s ascension to Heaven developed in the fourteenth century from a single incident in the Prophet’s life to an independent hagiography with multiple, large illustrations that served as models for the next several centuries.

Individual scenes depicting the Prophet enthroned are already included in some of the first illustrated manuscripts known from the Ilhanid period, and the story of the Prophet’s life was incorporated into several illustrated histories2. The earliest was the Gâmi' at-tawârihib, the world history made for the Ilhanid vizier Raśîd ad-Dîn. This magnum opus was divided into several volumes: the first covered the history of the Mongols, the second treated the non-Mongol peoples of Eurasia, and the third was a geographical treatise that has not survived3. The Prophet’s life was part of the second part of the second volume. The text survives in one of the earliest manuscripts of the world history, an Arabic copy made under the auspices of the vizier himself in 714/1314-15 and now divided between Edinburgh University Library and

1 The manuscript was published by Marie-Rose Séguy (1977).
3 See Raśîd ad-Dîn, Gâmi' vii-ix for a convenient overview of the organization of this complex work.

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the Khalili collection in London. The story of the Prophet’s life originally comprised some 30 folios, with 15 illustrations. The section on the Prophet’s ascension occupies just over two pages, including one illustration (fig. 1). It is the earliest known illustration of the subject to survive.

Like many illustrations in this section of the manuscript, the painting is a narrow strip (11 x 25 cms), which occupies the top third of the large page, the equivalent of 12 of the 35 lines of the text block that measures 37 by 25 cms. The paragraph of text on the page before the illustration summarizes the story of the Prophet’s ascension. It ends by mentioning the angel who asks the Prophet to choose among three gold cups containing milk, water, and wine. The copyist, perhaps with the concordance of the author and patron who supervised transcription of this manuscript, clearly wanted this particular incident to be illustrated, for when transcribing the preceding text, he narrowed the number of words per line, tapering the text into a V-shape that ends with the very words describing the three cups. The painting then falls at the top of the facing page, with the line of text just below the painting describing how the Prophet eschews the last two choices, opting for milk.

The painter’s simple composition adheres literally to the text. On the right an angel stands on a rainbow while emerging through a pair of doors representing the gates of Paradise. In the centre a second angel offers a gold bowl, evidently the one filled with milk. To the left is the Prophet, astride his miraculous steed Burāq. While the tripartite composition is relatively standard, the iconography is not. Burāq is here depicted with a spotted body, human arms, a human (and crowned) head holding a book, presumably the Qur’an, and a human-headed tail holding a shield and sword. The angels, who resemble those in another scene depicting the Birth of Muhammad (Edinburgh 29), wear strapless gowns that drape from a tied bodice and sprout wings that, unusually, grow along the whole length of their arms.

The unusual iconography suggests that the painter borrowed these figures, without complete understanding, from other painterly traditions, both eastern and western. The unusual gowns, for example, may be derived from Bodhisattvas and other figures in the Buddhist tradition, though the immediate source of the imagery is not known. Contemporary Christian manuscripts offer another rich source of imagery, and many other compositions in Rasid ad-Din’s world history that illustrate Muhammad’s life were adapted from Christian iconography. Sir Thomas Arnold showed that the depiction of Muhammad’s birth was adapted from a Nativity, with the three magi transposed into three waiting women and Joseph transformed in the Prophet’s uncle ‘Abd al-Muttalib (Arnold 1928:99 and pl. XXIII).

Priscilla Soucek went one step further, showing how both the composition and iconography of two other scenes from the Prophet’s life – his encounter with the monk Bahira (Edinburgh 30) and his conquest of the Banū n-Nadīr (Khalili Collection) – were adapted from two scenes – The Baptism of Christ and the Entry into Jerusalem – in a manuscript of the Gospels made in 1294 and now in the Matenadaran Library in Erevan. Copied by Yakob and illustrated by Khach’er at the Argelmonastery in Berkri for a couple, Khelok and Pokhan, and their two sons Prosh and T’uma, this manuscript is the earliest of a group produced in the Vaspurakan region of Greater Armenia (Soucek 1998). Unusual features of Burāq and the angels may also have been borrowed from Armenian Christian manuscripts locally available in Tabriz in the early fourteenth century, as religious difference was clearly no bar to iconographic pilfering. The unusual, and probably borrowed, iconography suggests furthermore that the ascension of Muhammad in the 714/1314-15 copy of Raṣīd ad-Dīn’s Gāmiʿ at-tawāriḥ is not only the first version of the scene to survive, but one of the earliest made.

By the next generation, ilḫanid painters were called upon to illustrate many scenes of the Prophet’s ascension within a whole manuscript devoted to the subject. Unfortunately this manuscript has been dismembered and the text lost, but some of the illustrations were mounted in an album (Istanbul, Topkapı Library H2154) that was put together in 951/1544 by the Safawid chronicler and librarian Dust Muhammad for Bahram Mirza, brother of the Safawid sâli Tahmasp. Dust Muhammad included eleven illustrations (or parts of them), pasted on eight of the 149 folios in the album (31b, 42a-b, 61a-b, 62a, 107a, and 121a).

In addition to the full-page paintings, three pages contain scenes pasted together. For example, the upper parts of folios 61a and 121a depict scenes of Muhammad ascending on the back of an angel, while the bottom parts can be reassembled to illustrate the scene of the Muhammad at the tree of paradise. Likewise the top part of folio 121a can be joined to a strip of waves taken from another folio, 62a, and reversed. Clearly Dust Muhammad was not above cutting up images to make them fill the pages of his album.

In four cases (fols. 31b, 42a, 61b, and 121a) Dust Muhammad added labels to the illustrations, identifying them as the work of Ahmad-i Müsä. The Safawid chronicler told us more about this artist in the preface written to accompany the illustrations in the album5. Although some authors have viewed this historical preface as apocry-

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5 Ettinghausen (1957) identified the eleven scenes: fol. 31b: Muhammad and Gabriel before a big angel; fol. 42a: Gabriel carrying Muhammad; fol. 42b: Flight over the mountains; fol. 61a (top): Muhammad at the Gates of Paradise and (bottom): Tree of Paradise; fol. 61b: cock; fol. 62a (top) waves and (bottom): bowls offered to Muhammad; fol. 107a: Conquest of a city; fol. 121a (top): Flight over waves and (bottom): Tree of Paradise.

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4 See Blair (1995) for a reconstruction of the original manuscript. The Edinburgh section has also been published by David Talbot Rice (1976), and the illustrations from the Khalili portion, once in the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society, have been published by Gray (1978).

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ness" (Roxburgh 1996). Preface and illustrations were meant to be examined together,
and the preface helps to explain the pictures.

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added details about the artist Ahmad-i Mūsā that help to localize the paintings
and their manuscripts. Ahmad, according to Dust Muhammad, learned the art of
painting from his father Mūsā and worked during the reign of the Īlkhānid ruler Abū
Saʿīd (r. 1317-35), illustrating four manuscripts that passed to the royal Timūrid
library owned by Sultan Husayn Mīrzā, ruler of Herāt from 1469 to 1506. The
manuscripts must then have passed to the royal Safavid library where they were
available for Dust Muhammad to peruse and even extract for his album. One of
the four manuscripts was a Mīrāғnāmā copied by Mawlānā ‘Abdallāh Sāyrafī. One of
the two most famous followers in the second generation after Yāqūt al-Musta’simī,
this calligrapher worked in Baghdad and Tabriz from 1310 to 1344 (Blair). Dust
Muhammad’s preface thus allows us to identify these paintings as coming from a
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Dust Muhammad also praised the painter Ahmad-i Mūsā as a master who “lifted
the veil from the face of depiction, and invented the [style of] depiction that is now
current,” that is, current in the early sixteenth century. Stylistic analysis confirms
Dust Muhammad’s identification of Ahmad-i Mūsā’s seminal role. Like the paintings
in the Arabic copy of Rašīd ad-Dīn’s Ġāmī at-tawārīḥ, the paintings in the
Mīrāғnāmā are very wide (they all measure some 23-24 cms wide, on the same order
as those in the Ġāmī at-tawārīḥ). In contrast to the earlier paintings, however, they
are very much taller, virtually the same size as the entire text block in the earlier
history. They may well have been full-page images. The enlarged space provided
for much larger figures, with a far greater emotional impact. It also allowed Ahmad-
Mūsā to create far more exciting compositions. They move beyond the simple tri-
partite arrangements typical of the Ġāmī at-tawārīḥ and develop three-dimensional
landscape space using foreshortening and repoussé figures.

We can see these innovations in the painting from fol. 62a of Bahrām Mīrzā’s
album (fig. 2). Pasted upside down at the top is the strip with waves that formed part
of another painting with Muhammad’s flight. The rest of the page, measuring 30 by
25 cms, shows Muhammad sitting in a richly decorated building with a mibrāb
behind him. Just behind him to the right in the painting is another figure almost as
large as the Prophet and dressed in green and orange. To the left, a pair of kneeling
angels offer the Prophet golden cups. Below, Burāq – the only time he is shown in
these album paintings – is depicted with pink face and gold crown, gray elephant
ears, and a reddish body outfitted with a gold saddle. Ettinghausen identified the
scene as depicting the account of the seventh heaven in which angels offer

Muhammad three cups. It is thus virtually the same scene shown in the Ġāmī at-
tawārīḥ.

The biggest difference between the two illustrations of the same subject is the
setting and the sense of space. Ahmad-i Mūsā set the scene in a building supported
on four columns of gray marble. The receding lines of the arches supporting the
dome suggest that the building was octagonal, and it may well have been intended
to represent the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Muhammad is said to have ascended
from Bayt al-Maqdis, and this city was often epitomized by the Dome of the Rock,
as in a contemporary painting from a manuscript of al-Bīrūnī’s Āṯār al-baqiya
transcribed in 707/1307.

Ahmad-i Mūsā also elaborated the action in the foreground, setting the audience
in a circle seen from the back. This convention brings the viewer into the painting,
which becomes a window into space. Typical of Italian painting of the Quattrocento,
it occurs already in Persian paintings made at the beginning of the fourteenth
century. Indeed, it is quite possible that Ahmad-i Mūsā had in front of him in the
royal Īlkhānid library the Arabic copy of Rašīd ad-Dīn’s Ġāmī at-tawārīḥ, for the

1 Colour reproduction in Gray 1961:27.
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Earlier Persian manuscripts were not the only sources of inspiration for Ahmad-i Musa. He, like the painters of the Gâmi‘ at-tawarih, also looked to Christian manuscripts, finding in their illustrations models, for example, for his depiction of the angels. The angels in the Mi’rajnama, unlike those in Rasid ad-Din’s Compendium of Chronicles, wear long-sleeved robes and have large wings striped in red and blue (fig. 3). They are much closer to the angels in contemporary Armenian manuscripts, such as a scene of the Annunciation (fig. 4) from a relatively unknown copy of the Gospels dated 1330 and now in Isfahan (DerNersessian & Mekhitarian 1986: 196 and fig. 51). Copied by Kirakos, vardapet of Erzincan, at the monastery of Djhavâna, it was illustrated by one Kirakos of Tabriz, who signed his name under the feet of the Virgin. The dedication mentions the merchant prince Vegen, who became religious and built, along with his brother Prince Pitchar, churches devoted to the Virgin and the convent of Deghdanavan. It is not necessary that this small (23 x 16 cm.) manuscript be the exact model that Ahmad-i Musa used; rather the 1330 Gospel now in Isfahan is typical of the school of Gladzor in the province of Siunik in Greater Armenia, best known from the splendid copy of the Gospels made there in the opening decade of the early fourteenth century and now in Los Angeles.
(Mathews & Wieck 1994: no. 36; Mathews & Taylor 2001). The gilt ground and type of flying winged figures used by Ahmad-i Mūsā also occur in pages from another large Gospel book made by T’oros the Deacon at Tabriz in 1311 (Mathews & Taylor 2001: no. 31). This Gospel book remained intact in the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Tabriz until 1906. Many Armenian manuscripts were therefore available in Tabriz, and Muslim painters like Ahmad-i Mūsā must have consulted them, continuing to find inspiration for their scenes of Muhammad’s life from contemporary Christian gospels.

In addition to style, one needs to consider the function of the Ilhanid manuscript of the Mi’rāğnāma. What sort of text did these paintings illustrate? We are certainly dealing not with illustrations to a history, as was the case with the ascension scene in Raśid ad-Dīn’s Compendium of Chronicles, but with a full devotional text. Ettinghausen, who studied the album paintings closely, showed that they did not fit either the Arabic version of the Mi’rāğnāma, now lost but known from early Western translations, or the Eastern Turkish text used in fifteenth century. This is clear, for example, from the scene of the celestial cock (fig. 5). It depicts Muhammad, under the guidance of a crowned angel, probably the Archangel Gabriel, observing an angelic choir gigantic white cock standing on a golden dais. This angel was in charge of counting the hours of the day and night in order to announce the hours of prayer and pronounce the tasbih, which was then repeated by roosters around the world. None of the written versions mentions a choir. Furthermore, the cock was usually positioned between the earth and the throne of God, but here apparently stands on a polygonal dias.

The scenario becomes more mysterious when we consider the final image from this manuscript that was included in the album H2154 (fig. 6). To judge from style, iconography, and composition, such as the winged angel and the audience in the foreground seen from the back, it belongs to the same manuscript of the Mi’rāğnāma, but what scene it illustrates is unclear. It shows an angel presenting a city to a figure seated on a rug, surely to be identified the Prophet Muhammad as he is surrounded by a mandorla. But who are the two figures to his left, whom he is gesturing? And who are the two further figures standing at the lower right? The composition and figures recall the scene of Muhammad appointing ʿAli his successor at Gadir Humm, shown in the manuscript of al-Birūnī’s ʿAtār al-bāqiya made in 1307, probably at Tabriz14. This would suggest that the two seated figures represent ʿAli and Husayn. It might further imply that the mysterious figure wearing a green robe and sitting next to Muhammad when he is offered the bowls (fig. 2) is also ʿAli, who is sometimes said to have accompanied Muhammad on his nocturnal journey9.

And what city is being depicted? It is polygonal, walled, bisected by three rivers, and dotted with three large buildings with minarets. Ettinghausen argued that the presence of a river excluded Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, the three cities most often associated with the Prophet. The riparian view, by contrast, makes possible an identification of Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and Constantinople, and on the basis of the curved course of the river and the shape of the minarets, Ettinghausen, following a suggestion put forward by Helmut Ritter, opted for the Constantinople, arguing that the scene represented an apocalyptic vision of the forthcoming conquest of the mighty city long-coveted by Muslims.

This argument is not convincing. The conquest of Constantinople did not loom large in the Ilhanid mentality. To the contrary, the Ilhanids had diplomatic relations with the Byzantines, and the Ilhanid ruler Abaq (r. 1265-80) even married an illegitimate Paleologue princes, Maria Despina. Abaq’s grandson, who reigned as Sultan Ulqaytu, was baptized Nicholas and raised a Christian before he converted to various sects of Islam.

Furthermore, the action of offering the city does not necessarily imply conquest, but rather presentation, and an alternative explanation for the scene is the presentation of Sultaniyya, the new capital founded by Sultan Ulqaytu. The Ilhanids, like the Yuan dynasty in China, founded their own imperial cities: the one established by Ulqaytu in the 1315s has mostly disappeared, but its layout can be reconstructed from texts: the inner city there was polygonal, walled, bisected by a river, and had at least three major building complexes (Blair 1986), as shown in the view by the sixteenth-century Ottoman chronicler Matrakëi Nasüh11. This illustration too uses an architectural shorthand in which conventional features are repeated and stylized, but many of the topographical elements are the same in both images. Incorporating a depiction of the newly-founded capital as a gift presented to Muhammad would symbolize the Ilhanids’ submission to Islam. Though Gāzān had officially declared his allegiance in 1295, the Mongol court was slower to do so and many amirs did not convert until the time of Ulqaytu’s son Abu Saʿīd, the first of the Ilhanids to be raised a Muslim.

Contemporary Christian art, both from Byzantium and Armenia, can once again offer sources and parallels for the subject of a donor presenting a model of his foundation. Founders of churches and monasteries are often shown offering a model

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9 Ettinhausen suggested the figure was Moses, whom the Prophet had met just before he was offered the cups in the European version of the story, but this suggestion does not seem likely to me.

10 I made this suggestion in Blair 1987:89.

11 Colour reproduction in Blair & Bloom 1994:fig. 3.
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And what city is being depicted? It is polygonal, walled, bisected by three rivers, and dotted with three large buildings with minarets. Ettinghausen argued that the presence of a river excluded Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, the three cities most often associated with the Prophet. The riparian view, by contrast, makes possible an identification of Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and Constantinople, and on the basis of the curved course of the river and the shape of the minarets, Ettinghausen, following a suggestion put forward by Helmut Ritter, opted for the Constantinople, arguing that the scene represented an apocalyptic vision of the forthcoming conquest of the mighty city long-coveted by Muslims.

This argument is not convincing. The conquest of Constantinople did not loom large in the Ilhanid mentality. To the contrary, the Ilhanids had diplomatic relations with the Byzantines, and the Ilhanid ruler Abâqa (r. 1265-80) even married an illegitimate Paleologue princes, Maria Despina. Abâqa’s grandson, who reigned as Sultan Ulâyatu, was baptized Nicholas and raised a Christian before he converted to various sects of Islam.

Furthermore, the action of offering the city does not necessarily imply conquest, but rather presentation, and an alternative explanation for the scene is the presentation of Sultânîyya, the new capital founded by Sultan Ulâyatu¹⁰. The Ilhanids, like the Yuan dynasty in China, founded their own imperial cities: the one established by Ulâyatu in the 1315s has mostly disappeared, but its layout can be reconstructed from texts: the inner city there was polygonal, walled, bisected by a river, and had at least three major building complexes (Blair 1986), as shown in the view by the sixteenth-century Ottoman chronicler Maturkâ-i Nasuhi¹¹. This illustration too uses an architectural shorthand in which conventional features are repeated and stylized, but many of the topographical elements are the same in both images. Incorporating a depiction of the newly-founded capital as a gift presented to Muhammad would symbolize the Ilhanids’ submission to Islam. Though Gâzîn had officially declared his allegiance in 1295, the Mongol court was slower to do so and many amirs did not convert until the time of UlÊaytu’s son Abu Sâ‘îd, the first of the Ilhanids to be raised a Muslim.

Contemporary Christian art, both from Byzantium and Armenia, can once again offer sources and parallels for the subject of a donor presenting a model of his foundation. Founders of churches and monasteries are often shown offering a model

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⁹ Ettinghausen suggested the figure was Moses, whom the Prophet had met just before he was offered the cups in the European version of the story, but this suggestion does not seem likely to me.

¹⁰ I made this suggestion in Blair 1987:89.

¹¹ Colour reproduction in Blair & Bloom 1994:fig. 3.
of their work to an enthroned Christ or the Virgin and Child. Theodore Metochites, leading statesman at the Paleologue court who rebuilt the church of the Monastery of the Chora between 1315 and 1320, for example, depicted this way in the mosaic set over the door leading from the inner narthex to the nave (fig. 7) (Underwood 1966: II, 26). Armenian churches often had the donor(s) sculpted in relief on the façade, and the Virgin and child are often depicted seated on a fringed rug, as the Prophet is shown here (Manuelian 1996). In the Iľhànid interpretation of the scene, the single building has been transposed into a city, and the Virgin and child transposed into Muhammad and his family.

We do not have to imagine that Ahmad-i Mūṣa had been to Constantinople or Armenia to see such buildings. Portable objects provided better means for the transferal of iconography. These included not only books, but liturgical objects and even portable architecture. Maria Despina’s dowry, for example, included a tent even portable architecture. Maria Despina’s dowry, for example, included a tent intended for use as a church. In 1301, during the reign of Uğaytu, a church was dedicated to St. John the Baptist in Marağa. We have no idea what sort of decoration it had, but we can imagine that, even if executed by Iľhànid craftsmen in the vernacular materials of brick and stucco, it must have had painted decoration derived from Christian iconography.

In sum, then, the scenes of Muhammad’s ascension from a copy of a Mīrāğnāma incorporated into Album H2154 in İstanbul open a window into the fascinating pot-pourri of religious life in Iľhànid times. The paintings attest to the increasingly fervent veneration of Muhammad, and possibly his family, in the early fourteenth century. They also show the importance of Christian sources when Muslim artists were called upon to develop a new iconography to illustrate scenes that had apparently not been illustrated before in the Muslim tradition. As Ettinghausen pointed out, “Thus, just as Dante’s Divina Commedia initiates modern Italian and even all Western literature, so do this Persian manuscript and the other work of the master called Ahmad-i Mūṣa stand at the beginning of matured Persian painting and through it also of Turkish and Mughal miniatures. The historical parallel goes even further, because just as Dante was quite possibly influenced by Muslim ideas, so was Ahmad-i Mūṣa in turn stimulated by foreign concepts, Chinese and Western ones”12. Similarly, in the fifteenth century when artists at the court of Timūrid court of Šâh Ruh wanted to illustrate another copy of the Mīrāğnāma, they turned to outside sources, stimulated this time by models from Central Asia and beyond.

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12 Ettinghausen 1957:378. The role of Chinese elements is a separate subject that needs to be pursued.

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Râşîd ad-Dîn, Ğâmi’ = Rashituddin Fazlullah’s famî’n’t-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles. English transl. & annot. by W. M. Thackston. Pts. 1-3, A History of the Mongols (= Sources of Oriental Languages & Literatures, 45; Central Asian
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Sources, 4.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1998.


Fig. 1. "The Prophet's Ascension" from a copy of Rashid ad-Din's Ğami' at-tawārīh, made in 714/1314-15 probably at Tabriz. Edinburgh University Library, Arab ms. 20, no. 36
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Fig. 2. "The bowls offered to Muhammad in heaven" from a copy of the Mi‘râğnâma copied by ‘Abdallâh Sayrafi, probably at Tabriz ca. 1330, and later mounted in an album compiled by the Šâhuwîd librarion Dunk Muhammâd in 951/1544. Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 62a.

Fig. 3. "Flight over the Mountains" from the same ms as Fig. 2, Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 42b.
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Fig. 4. "Annunciation" from an Armenian copy of the Gospels dated 1330. Isfahan, Holy Saviour's Cathedral, New Julfa, ms 47(43)

Fig. 5. "The Celestial Cock" from the same ms as Fig. 2, Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 61b
Fig. 4. "Annunciation" from an Armenian copy of the Gospels dated 1330. Isfahan, Holy Saviour's Cathedral, New Julfa, ms 47(43)

Fig. 5. "The Celestial Cock" from the same ms as Fig. 2, Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 61b
Fig. 6. "Presentation of a city" from the same ms as Fig. 2, Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 107a

Fig. 7. Theodore Metochites presenting his church to the Virgin, mosaic set over the door in the church of the Monastery of the Chora, Istanbul
Fig. 6. "Presentation of a city" from the same ms as Fig. 2, Istanbul, Topkapi Library H2154, fol. 107a

Fig. 7. Theodore Metochites presenting his church to the Virgin, mosaic set over the door in the church of the Monastery of the Chora, Istanbul