Symbolism in a 19th Century Islamic Prayer Book

The Walter Havighurst Special Collections in King Library recently acquired a 19th-century Ottoman manuscript. However, apart from one paragraph of information from the artifact seller, much remains unknown about the object. This late 19th-century medallion manuscript contains extracts from the Quran and prayers in Arabic. Most notably, it also showcases iconographic elements associated with the Prophet Muhammad and the religious sites of Mecca and Medina. The mystery medallion provides insight into how Islam was practiced in Turkey and the item's possible uses.



Figure 1. "Depiction of Mecca." Ottoman medallion manuscript. Folio 2, verso. Walter Havighurst Special Collections. Miami University. Photograph taken by Emily Luyster.

From the 15th-20th century, the Ottomans dominated the region of Anatolia and southeastern Europe. The Turkish leaders pushed out Christian Byzantine influences, although the practice of other Abrahamic religions were still permitted. Several miniature devotional books such as this appeared in the 19th century after a long history of Quranic prayer books in the region (Gruber 2009, 119). This medallion book in Special Collections was called an *Anam'i Sharif*, a Sunni prayer book of the sixth surah of the Quran, also known as the *Surah al-An'am* in the artifact description by the seller. This object is similar to other late-Ottoman prayer manuals in its contents: "amulet seals, calligraphies of the names of God, the Prophet, and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, as well as the physical description of the Prophet, the Prophet's belongings, and representations of the holy sites" (Göloğlu 2018). Therefore, our object was a part of a tradition of Islamic books in various sizes that nevertheless told a similar story.

In the 19th century, Sunni influences spread and became popular among the Ottoman sultans (Gruber 2009, 118). The Islamic conquerors of these new regions adopted Hellenistic culture and made a syncretic form of Islam, which used far more images and relics than other Islamic states (Schimmel et al., 2024). The Ottoman sultans were interested in the relics of the Prophet, possibly to feel more connected to the religion while residing far from Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Indeed, it is important to remember that this manuscript was drawn, painted, and written by hand, and therefore, every choice of color was conscious and meticulous.

The object is a circular book with a diameter of 48mm, comprised of 16 joined leaves that unfold in a concertina format. Its design is striking; while many similar prayer books exist in a traditional codex format (bound with a spine), this concertina structure allows it to be extended for linear reading, akin to a scroll. Additionally, it can be opened in 8 segments, revealing each page leaf by leaf. The interplay between its form and function is significant. Although we cannot be certain, the small, round shape suggests that it may have been intended as an amulet or protective charm. It could serve as a personal protective object, worn close to the heart, or, alternatively, as a collective safeguard stored on a battle standard.

The writing inside the book is extracts from the sixth surah, prayers, and a series of *hadith* (words of the Prophet). Disks 5-7 feature a stylized description of the Prophet Muhammad. The sixth surah was revealed to the Prophet in Mecca and proclaims Allah the ultimate creator of the universe, over which He has all authority. Over time, the sixth surah of the Quran (al-An'am) gained a talismanic function of protection and its inclusion in the medallion manuscript suggests it was taken into battle. This surah was also often read during 2 out of 5 daily prayer times in the Ottoman court. Although not present in this manuscript, the prayers in *Anam'i Sharif* were often written in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish (Gruber 2009, 117). The use of

Turkish could imply that this manuscript was for personal use as opposed to ceremonial religious practices.

While most pages include words, the book mainly features images. At the time of this book's creation, it was forbidden to depict the Prophet Muhammad directly, as it is today. However, the Ottoman Empire still used images extensively, instead opting to depict iconographic elements and relics associated with the Prophet's memory. A popular example is Muhammad's footprint (see Figure 2), which was thought to have talismanic properties (Hassan 1993). Next to the gold outline of the foot is the sandal filled with water. Water was necessary for ablutions and preparing to worship. Other sacred images in the book include Moses's two-headed rod, the tuba tree that grows in Paradise, Solomon's seal (6-pointed star), *miswak* (toothbrush), a basin for ablutions, a tunic, and a standard. There are also hyper-realistic depictions of Mecca and Medina, drawn from a birds-eye view of the city center and a view of the "Rawdat al-Sharifa," or the Prophet's Mosque. The prevalence of images as opposed to text in this artifact suggests that it could be used for guided meditative prayer or group protection due to the images' sacredness.



Figure 2. "Depiction of Muhammad's footprint and sandal." Ottoman medallion manuscript. Folio 5, verso. Walter Havighurst Special Collections. Miami University. Photograph taken by Emily Luyster.

We know the medallion book was crafted specifically to be portable, lightweight, and pack as much religious value as possible into one manuscript. After the book was passed from the original owner, it was re-bound with Venetian marbled paper, likely sometime in the 20th century (Morelli, n.d.). Also, these flimsy, paper prayer books would have been kept in a protective case. The case could have been gold, glass, or steel if it were used on a battle standard.

However, it may have had a leather or metal case if it were for personal use. As for what the case would have been or why it is missing, it remains a mystery. The case was likely valuable material, which made it appealing to separate it from the document itself.

This Ottoman medallion manuscript offers a fascinating glimpse into late 19th-century Islamic devotional practices, blending text, imagery, and portability in one powerful artifact. Though much about its origins remains unknown, its form and content reveal a rich tradition of religious art and personal piety. As a historical object, it reflects broader patterns of Ottoman religiosity and craftsmanship, while raising questions about individual spiritual experience. Continued research may uncover more about its function and cultural significance, helping us better understand the lived religious practices of the Ottoman world.

Bibliography

Bain, Alexandra. *The Late Ottoman E'nam'i Serif: Sacred texts and images in an Islamic prayer book.* University of Victoria, 2017. https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/items/afb5ef17-2cea-484a-a4c6-ce81f4e248cf

Felek, Özgen. "Fears, Hopes, and Dreams: Talismanic Shirts of Murād III." *Arabica* 64, no. 3/4 (2017): 647–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26569044.

Göloğlu, Sabiha. "Depicting the Islamic Holy Sites: Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem in Late Ottoman Illustrated Prayer Books." In *15th International Congress of Turkish Art*, ed. Michele Bernardini. Ankara, 2018. https://www.academia.edu/38080467/Depicting_the_Islamic_Holy_Sites_Mecca_Medina_and_Jerusalem_in_Late_Ottoman_Illustrated_Prayer_Books

Gruber, Christiane. *The Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Collections*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. Chapter 4, "A Pious Cure-All: The Ottoman Illustrated Prayer Manual in the Lilly Library." https://www.academia.edu/456884/_A_Pious_Cure_All_the_Ottoman_Illustrated_Prayer_Manual_in_the_Lilly_Library.

Hasan, Perween. "The Footprint of the Prophet." *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 335–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/1523198.

Morelli, Laura. "Venetian Marbled Paper and Bookbinding: A Brief History." Accessed March 10, 2025, https://lauramorelli.com/venetian-paper-bookbinding-a-brief-history/

Schimmel, A., Bruijn, J.D., Shiloah, A., Landau, J.M., Allen, R.M., Grabar, O. "Islamic arts." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 13, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts.

Shaw, S.J., Yapp, M.E. "Ottoman Empire." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 11, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire.