

Research Notes

Uncovering 'Islamic Art': al-Birūnī and the Ilkhanid Miniatures

İslam Sanatını Ortaya Çıkarma: El-Bîrûnî ve İlhanlı Dönemi Minyatürü

İslam Issa*

Birmingham City University

Abstract

This essay provides a detailed study of an Ilkhanid miniature of Adam and Eve from 1307/08. The story of Adam and Eve has captured the imaginations of countless artists over centuries. Islamic tradition does not have the religious, figural art culture of its Christian counterpart, and images of Adam and Eve present further issues due to their nudity. The miniature in question is an isolated example which has been presented under the banner of 'Islamic art' in David Talbot Rice's landmark study *Islamic Art* (1965). In the picture, Adam and Eve are both naked, though Eve covers her private area with one hand. This essay proves that this image, based on al-Birūnī's *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (c. 1000) is not a straightforward exemplification of Islamic art for several reasons, including details of its materiality, the timing of its composition, and the various influences on its style and content.

Keywords: Ilkhanid, Adam, Eve, Islamic Art, al-Biruni

The story of Adam and Eve has captured the imaginations of countless artists over centuries. In particular, the moment immediately preceding their 'fall' in Eden has received much attention. That event is probably the most painted from the Old Testament, and as far as biblical stories are concerned, it is surpassed only by images of Christ's passion. However, as a key incident in all Abrahamic faiths, Adam and Eve's first sin has an augmented importance. In the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, Adam appears as an Islamic prophet and the incident in question is narrated on three separate occasions.¹

As is commonly known, Islamic and Jewish traditions generally lack the religious, figural art culture of their Christian counterpart. Notwithstanding, as I have summarized elsewhere, 'fourteenth-century Persian art depicted Muhammad as an ordinary looking man, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ottoman artists would surround or cover his face, and often his hands, with flaming nimbi as signs of respect' (Issa, 2016, p. 207). Images of Adam and Eve provoke further care due to another factor: their possible nakedness in Eden. Certainly, prominent renditions of the unclothed couple – based on Old Testament readings in which 'they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed' (King James Version 2.25) – include the early renaissance paintings of Masolino and Masaccio, who depicted the fall (1427) and the expulsion (1425) respectively. They were possible sources of inspiration for Michelangelo's famed fresco adorning the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, of the naked couple's temptation and expulsion (1508-12).

As Thomas Arnold notes, 'scriptural warrant' has enabled painters within Christian traditions to 'breach ... the conventional demands of modesty' to produce such nude illustrations. But inasmuch as the 'respect for a Prophet of Allah would stand in the way of

¹ See the *Qur'an* 2.34-39; 7.11-27; 20.115-23.

*Professor of Literature and History, School of English, Birmingham City University

ORCID# 0000-0002-4022-7635; islam.issa@bcu.ac.uk; doi: 10.47777/cankujhss.1413123

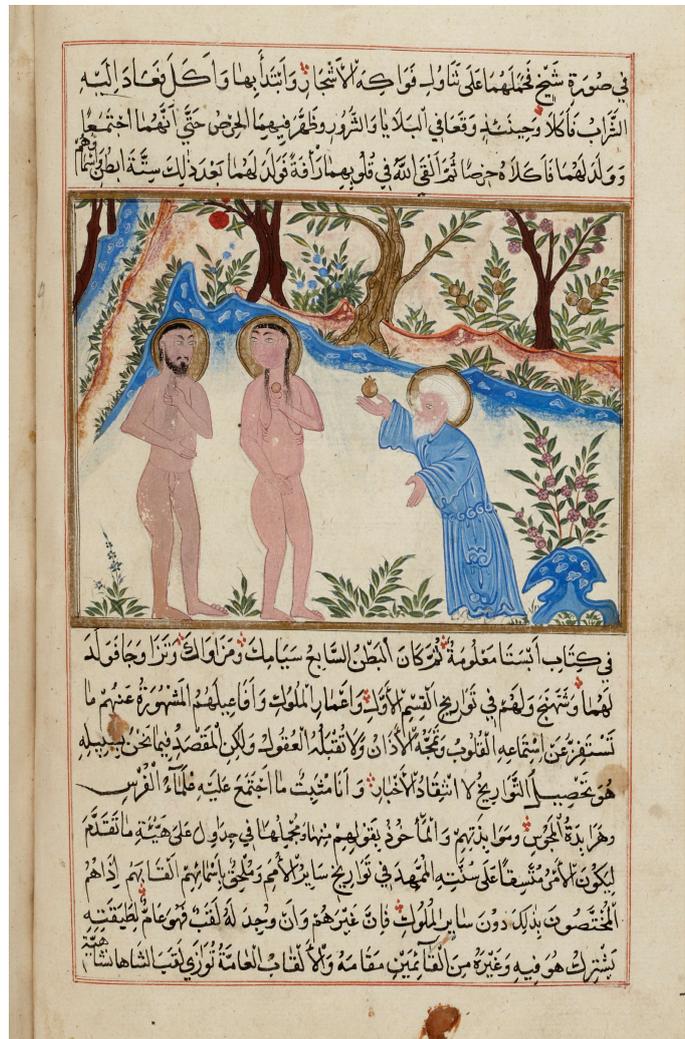
CUJHSS (ISSN 1309-6761) June 2024, 18/1: pp. 157-162. Received Feb 7, 2024; Accepted March 5, 2024

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. 2024 © The Author(s)

a Muslim painter in a similar manner outraging orthodox sentiment', a stronger sense of modesty pervades Islamic visual representations of all scriptural figures (Arnold, 1928, pp. 103-04). Thus, the few illustrations of Adam and Eve that have appeared from the Muslim world, predominantly during the sixteenth century, regularly present the figures in splendid clothing (Issa, 2016, pp. 207-11). Before that, the late thirteenth century *Manāfi' al-Ḥayawān* [*Usefulness of Animals*] included images of Adam and Eve partially clothed.

There is, however, one isolated example: a miniature from 1307 or 1308, when a treatise by the early tenth-century Persian scholar Abū al-Rayḥān al-Birūnī was transcribed by a scribe named ibn al-Kutbī – possibly the court calligrapher ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (1283-1363) – that has been presented under the banner of 'Islamic art' in David Talbot Rice's landmark study *Islamic Art* and discussed in brief by Priscilla Soucek (Talbot Rice, 1965, p. 116; Soucek, 1975, pp. 111-14). In the picture, Adam and Eve are both naked, though Eve covers her private area with one hand. I shall argue, however, that this image might not be treated as a straightforward exemplification of Islamic art for several reasons, including details of its materiality: its original physical position, the timing of its composition, and the various historical circumstances and related conventions that affected its style and content.

In fact, the initial religious context surrounding this image would verify that the nudity of Adam and Eve is not traditionally regarded as part of the Islamic story – at least until the couple's fatal error. The Qur'an notes: 'So when they had both tasted, their secret parts became exposed to them. So, [instantly], they both took to heaping together upon themselves leaves of the garden' (*Qur'an* 7.22).² While the verse may suggest that they were naked but did not know shame, the next verses add: 'Let not Satan seduce you, as he expelled your parents from the garden, stripping them of their clothing, that he might show them their secret parts' (*Qur'an* 7.27). Predominant Islamic scholarship – for instance, the fourteenth-century history of ibn Kathīr – has therefore presented the fuller Qur'anic context of the story as evidence that Adam and Eve were not physically naked before they erred (Issa, 2016, p. 206).



Abū al-Rayḥān al-Birūnī, *Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah*. Manuscript Arabe 1489, f. 32v; courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.

² Also, *Qur'an* 20.121: 'So both [Adam and Eve] ate of it. Thus their secret parts became exposed to them. So, [instantly], they both took to heaping together upon themselves leaves of the garden'.

First of all, the image appears in a text that does not attempt or claim to offer the Islamic version of the temptation story. Like most miniatures of its time, this painting was a book illustration, so there is reason to interpret the image in its initial context. It belongs inside a tenth-century calendrical treatise, *Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah*, which translates as *The Remaining Traces of the Past Centuries*, and is better known as the *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (c. 1000). The common archetypal manuscript of the *Chronology*, which includes twenty-six illustrations and is now at the University of Edinburgh Library in Scotland, was copied in the early fourteenth century. Further likely direct copies include an undated seventeenth- or perhaps sixteenth-century Ottoman version at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. The *Chronology of Ancient Nations* text was authored by the Persian polymath Abū al-Rayḥān al-Birūnī (973-1048), a historian who also wrote on mathematics and astrology. His *Chronology* does not attempt or claim to offer the Islamic version of the temptation story. The entire work is an intentionally comparative account of world history according to different civilizations.

On the title page, al-Birūnī is described as a 'champion of the religion' and praised as a 'wonder of the world' (al-Birūnī 1307-08, f. 1a; al-Birūnī 1501-1600, f. 1a).³ Although his underlying aim appears to be built around strongly held convictions about his own Islamic faith, al-Birūnī was to an extent a pioneer of comparative religion and by the standards of his time, we could even describe him as an interfaith activist (de Blois, 1990; Jeffery, 1951). As well as possessing knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, and the Indian religions, he was very well informed on Zoroastrianism. It is within a description of that particular faith group's beliefs that this picture belongs, specifically to explain a Zoroastrian account of the temptation story. In the narration, the evil spirit Ahriman tempts the first humans – not the Islamic Ādam and Ḥawwā', but Mashya and Mashyana – in order to transform himself from an old to a young man. This detail is clear in the illustration, in which Ahriman's white hair and small size contrast him with the darker hair and stature of the younger couple. By looking closely at the Ottoman reproduction, it becomes clearer that Ahriman is depicted as a spirit since he is floating, without feet. This could be because copies often resulted in simpler versions of the original art, especially if space was lacking, but it may also be an intentional alteration when the earlier manuscript was copied. Ahriman's form is certainly different from the Old Testament's serpent and the Qur'an's Iblīs, who is made of fire.

The next factor in need of consideration is that the miniature in question was completed three whole centuries after al-Birūnī's text was written. This painting is not, as such, part of the primary source to which it is assigned. Despite the fact that al-Birūnī also wrote astronomical, scientific, and talismanic texts that he conceived as being illustrated, he was on this occasion compiling the beliefs of different civilisations in order to advocate his own Muslim beliefs. Thus, it is unlikely that he participated actively in the creation of an illustrated text and he would probably not have wished for this story to be illustrated – certainly not with a nude Prophet.

The fact that this story did get illustrated, and the timing of the illustration, leads to further considerations about influence. This image shows clear influence from the Mongols, whose powerful rule extended to large parts of the Middle East. The Ilkhanid dynasty controlled the southwestern Mongol Empire from circa 1256 to 1335. The Mongols tried, in general, to incorporate the art of the countries they invaded. As a result, artists in the Ilkhanid capital Tabriz (now in Iranian Azerbaijan) began to blend several styles of what was then regarded as contemporary painting. The period also saw a marked interest in different faiths, and artists looking to illustrate religious scenes for which there were no known

³ Arabic transliteration: 'naṣīru-l-dīn ... u'jūbatu-l-'ālam'.

prototypes reached out to other traditions. This picture was completed during this specific period, at the start of the fourteenth century, which explains, for instance, the shape of the landscape and the East Asian facial features of the figures, given the influence of Chinese and Central Asian art on the Mongols. After the death of the Mongol emperor Hulagu Khan – grandson of Genghis Khan – in the thirteenth century, the Ilkhanid division of the Mongol Empire became increasingly influenced by Islam, to the extent that some of its ruling classes and military leaders converted to the religion. The conversion of the Ilkhanid dynasty's ruler Maḥmūd Ghāzān Khan (1271-1304; also known as Casanus) in 1295, just as he was taking power, led to the implementation of Islam as the state religion. Ghazan's Vizier, similar to Prime Minister, was Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī (1247-1318), who had converted from Judaism to Islam around a decade and a half earlier. Both men would certainly have been interested in other religions. What is more, Rashīd al-Dīn was also very keen on art, and even established an art district in Tabriz. Soon after this, commissioned by Ghazan, Rashīd al-Dīn started to write the illustrated *Jāmi' Al-Tawārikh*, literally 'the collector of histories' but known as the *Chronicle of the World* or *Compendium of Chronicles*.

That work is a global history 'intended to further the new Mongolian-Iranian upper class' historical awareness' (Hagedorn, 2009, p. 17), and remains one of the most significant historical documents from the Mongol Empire. The project itself and the notion of coupling it with elucidatory artworks were both so important to the author that this huge work was likely illustrated by none other than artists that he chose to commission from the Tabriz district. These handpicked artists do not include signatures on any of their illustrations, so we cannot be sure of their identities or personal details, including their faiths. What is more, there are eight illustrations depicting the Prophet Muhammad in Rashīd al-Dīn's work, which are in fact thought to be 'the earliest' surviving examples of Islam's most eminent Prophet in artistic depiction (Arnold, 1928, p. 93).⁴ Given this Vizier's intentions and interests, as well as the highly relevant content and coverage of al-Birūnī's preceding *Chronology*, it is no surprise that the earlier work was republished at that very same time. Like Rashīd al-Dīn's chronicle, it would also be an illustrated manuscript serving very similar objectives. The addition of illustrations to the works was an active choice that confirms the Ilkhanid interest in a range of non-Muslim religious faiths (Hillenbrand, 2001), and no doubt, their interest in transcultural art, too.

In addition to the Chinese and Central Asian influence on the form, one should also consider the Christian, likely Byzantine, influence on the substance. Soucek speculates that the painter may have utilised 'a composition found in Byzantine manuscript cycles' but stops there (Soucek 1975, p. 113). The fact that there are few if any surviving images of Muhammad from the six or so centuries immediately ensuing his death, which was in 632, confirms that the very inclusion of illustrations of the key Islamic Prophet in Rashīd al-Dīn's *Chronicle* was itself reminiscent of some Christian practice.⁵ The actual iconographic content of the pictures confirms this further. For instance, unlike the birth of Jesus in both the Bible and Qur'an, the birth of Muhammad is not detailed in the Qur'an and is by no means the most momentous or celebrated occasion in Islamic tradition or the *sīrah al-nabawiyyah* [Prophetic biography] literature. Not only is the occasion illustrated in this volume, but it is also done in a manner highly analogous with common perceptions and renditions of Christ's nativity. The female visitors or midwives around his mother, Āminah bint Wahb, are reminiscent of the Biblical Magi in the opening of the second chapter of

⁴ There are thirteen illustrations in the section on the life of Muhammad.

⁵ The earliest surviving representation is thought to be in a mid-thirteenth-century Seljuk manuscript, the *Varqa and Gulsha*.

Matthew's Gospel. There are also angels present at the scene, a common feature in portrayals of Christ's birth. Both details are non-existent in Islamic accounts of Muhammad's birth. One detail that could fit with the Hadith accounts is the presence of Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib: while he did not attend the birth, he was called immediately by Āminah in order to see his grandson (Mubarakpuri 2000, p. 96). However, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's position on the right-hand side of the image appears similar to where Joseph might be seated in renditions of Christ's birth. In fact, in medieval consciousness, it was assumed that Joseph was an aged man when Jesus was born. Put simply, then, it is viable to determine that the images accompanying al-Birūnī's *Chronology* would also have been affected by aspects of Christian culture.

The Ottoman manuscript was likely reproduced to further preserve al-Birūnī's important text. The work is hugely fascinating because of the illustrations that accompany it, as well as the fact that it displays a mix of both tolerant open-mindedness and stark conviction. Al-Birūnī is not a syncretic writer; as noted in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, '[h]e is as unequivocal in rejecting beliefs unacceptable to Muslims' (de Blois 1990, p. 284), and his work remains an observation of other beliefs from what he considers to be a superior platform. But his text is nevertheless a noteworthy comparative study, not least because his interest in detailing the religious identities of his contemporaries in a matter relative to his time could be a lesson for scholars today. Indeed, over half a century on from Rice's important work and given the developments and anxieties of today's interconnected world in which context and nuance are only increasing in importance, there is much need to consider carefully whether we may still be generalizing and clustering 'art' into nebulous groups or categories.

References

- al-Birūnī, Abū al-Rayḥān. (1307-08). *Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah*. Manuscripts of the Islamicate World and South Asia, Ms 161, at the University of Edinburgh Library.
- al-Birūnī, Abū al-Rayḥān. (1501-1600). Manuscrit Arabe 1489, at Bibliothèque nationale de France.
- Arnold, Thomas. (1928). *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*. Clarendon.
- De Blois, François. (1990). Bīrūnī, Abū Rayḥān. *Encyclopædia Iranica* IV, no. 3: 283-85.
- Hagedorn, Annette. (2009). *Islamic Art*. Taschen.
- Hillenbrand, Robert. (2001). Images of Muhammad in al-Biruni's Chronology of Ancient Nations. In Robert Hillenbrand (Ed.) *Persian Painting: from the Mongols to the Qajars*. Tauris, 129-46.
- ibn Kathir. (2004). *Al-Bidāyah wa-l-Nihāyah*, vol.1, ed. Ahmed Gad. Dār al-Hadīth.
- Issa, Islam. (2016). *Milton in the Arab-Muslim World*. Routledge.
- Jeffery, A. (1951). al-Bīrūnī's Contribution to Comparative Religion. In *Al-Bīrūnī: Commemoration Volume*. Iran Society, 125-60.
- Mubarakpuri, Safiur Rahman. (2000). *Ar-Rahīq Al-Makhtūm*. Dār al-Salām.
- Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*. (1314). Manuscript Arab 20 at Edinburgh University Library.
- Soucek, Priscilla. (1975). An Illustrated Manuscript of al-Bīrūnī's Chronology of Ancient Nations. In Peter Chelkowski (ed.) *The Scholar and the Saint*. New York University Press, 103-68.

Rice, David. (1965). *Islamic Art*. Thames and Hudson.

The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha. (2008). Eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Pricket. Oxford University Press.

The Gracious Quran. (2008). Trans. Ahmed Zaki Hammad. Lucent.