

ULRICH MARZOLPH

## The Niebuhr Scroll

Visiting Karbala and the shrine of Husayn during his travels in the Middle East in December 1765, Carsten Niebuhr acquired a scroll with images of the Shi'i sanctuaries. Today, the scroll is preserved in the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Originally prepared as a scroll of 22 cm height and 192 cm width, the paper item is now glued onto cardboard and has been cut into three pieces of varying width (approximately 57.7 + 56.7 + 77.5 cm). Niebuhr himself regarded the document with a certain contempt, as to his eyes the images were "badly executed." The only items depicted on the scroll that he thought worthy of reproduction in his *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und anderen umliegenden Ländern* (1778) are the Prophet's seal and 'Ali's sword. Today the Niebuhr scroll is an invaluable mid-eighteenth-century manuscript specimen of a certain type of illustrated pilgrimage documents that existed both previously and later.

The Niebuhr scroll is a commodified souvenir documenting the owner's visit to Mecca and Medina, to the sacred Shi'i shrines in Iraq, and to the sanctuary of Emam Reza in the Iranian city of Mashhad. The scroll's initial stations in Mecca and Medina relate to the *hajj* or pilgrimage that is obligatory for every Muslim. Since many centuries, official documents acknowledging the performance of the *hajj* had sometimes been adorned with visual representations of the places the pilgrim visited, but the vast majority of the currently known documents relates to the Sunni denomination of Islam. The Niebuhr scroll is an early document that unambiguously testifies to the Shi'i dimension of the pilgrimage.

The schism between the Sunni and the Shi'i branches of Islam relates to the question of succession to the prophet Muhammad. Shi'i Islam held the prophet's family to be the rightful successors to Muhammad. Hence, Shi'i venerate Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali, the sons Hasan and Husayn born from Muhammad's daughter Fatima, and their offspring as the rightful leaders (*imams*) of the Muslim community. Collectively, this Muslim "holy family" is known in Persian as *panj tan* (the five persons).

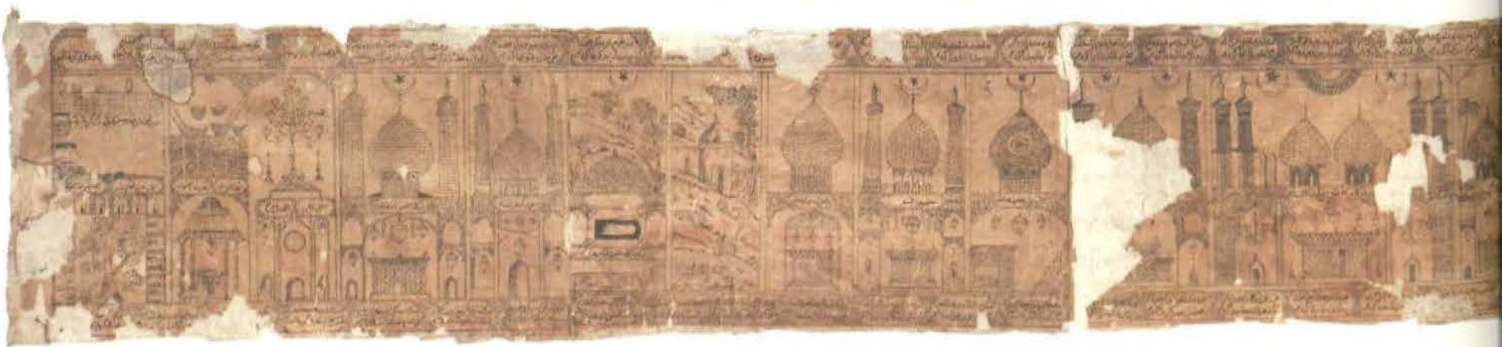
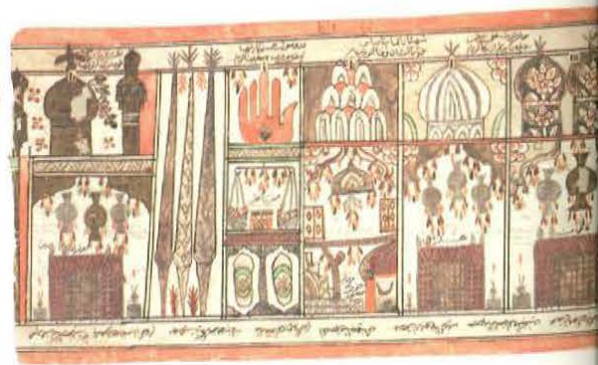
The scroll consists of two areas of a different nature. The scroll's middle area has images, while the borders contain poetry. The verses constitute a specimen of the poetry known as *chavushi-khvāni*, i.e. the verses pronounced by the pilgrimage guide known as *chavush* or



*chāvosh* during the return of the pilgrims to their homes. The verses present a crudely rhymed and somewhat stylized narrative of the pilgrims' visit to different locations, including their experiences on the way and the presents they brought back home.

In its middle area, the scroll presents a visual journey that takes the viewer from Mecca to Mashhad, on the way visiting sites and buildings that bear particular relevance for Shi'i Muslim pilgrims. Read from the bottom right side to the top left and identified by captions written in Persian inside the images, the journey begins in Mecca. The first image depicts the ritual sites in the vicinity of Mecca such as Mina and Mount 'Arafat in the top section, and the trotting space between Marwa and Safa in the middle; the bottom section of the image renders a depiction of the Zamzam well that is placed inside the sanctuary (*ḥaram*) in Mecca. The *ḥaram* in Mecca in the following image is shown as a square of equally long sides with the Ka'ba in its center. The building rests on an outwardly protruding platform and the black stone on the building's eastern corner, here on the left side, is indicated by a curving white line against the building's black draping, the *kiswa*. Next is the prophet's mosque in Medina and the shrine housing the tomb of the second Shi'i imam, 'Ali's son Hasan, and three other Shi'i imams at the cemetery of Baqi, followed by the depiction of some smaller shrines at Baqi and an image of the oasis Fadak. The cemetery at Baqi, whose shrines were destroyed by Wahhabi iconoclasts early in the twentieth century, houses the graves of Muhammad's wives and his daughter Fatima, and also of a number of the Shi'i imams. The oasis Fadak, historically renowned for its rich date palms, originally belonged to Muhammad;

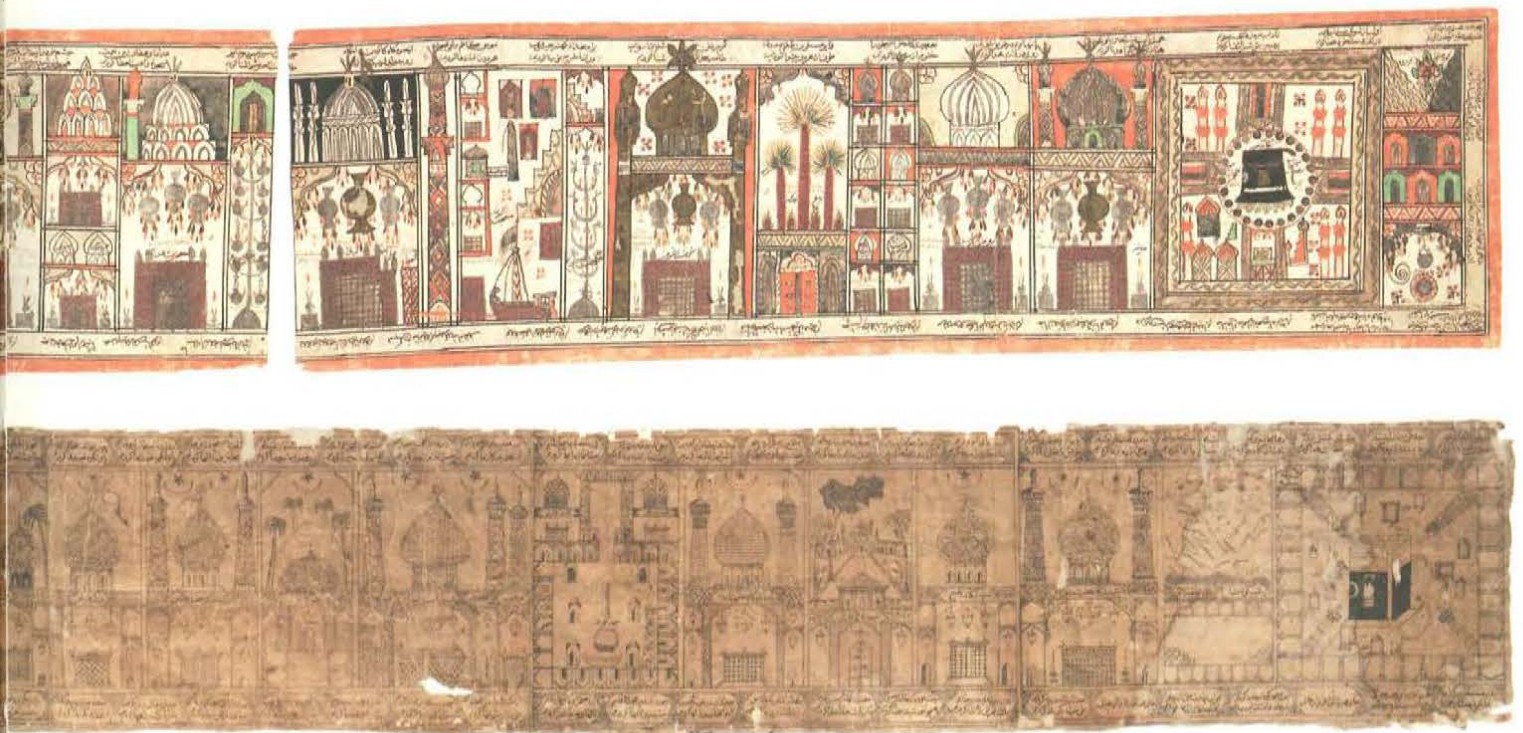
Top: Ethnographic Collection, The National Museum of Denmark. Acquired by Carsten Niebuhr.  
Below: private collection.





the Shi'i community holds that Caliph Abu Bakr deprived the prophet's daughter Fatima of her legal inheritance, thus initiating a long series of oppressive acts against the Shi'i community. At this point, the visit to sites related to the *hajj* in the stricter sense is finished. Sunni Muslims would be likely to continue their journey by visiting Jerusalem, from where Muhammad according to legend set out on his nocturnal journey to the heavens. Shi'i travelers, however, would aim to visit the shrines of the Shi'i imams in Iraq.

The scroll's visual journey thus continues to Najaf, Kufa and Karbala, followed by Kazimayn, Samarra, and Nishapur. Najaf houses the shrine of 'Ali (died 661), the fourth successor to Muhammad and the first Shi'i imam. In the mosque at Kufa, from where according to Muslim popular belief the deluge arose, we see a replica of Noah's Ark in the foreground. In the following image of the sanctuary of the martyrs of Karbala we find explicit mention of 'Ali-Asghar, Husayn's youngest son. During the battle of Karbala in 680 C. E., when Husayn and his followers fought the caliph's troops in order to regain his rightful position, the infant 'Ali-Asghar was pierced by the enemy's arrows. The first shrine on the scroll's second section is that of Abu 'l-Fadl 'Abbas, Husayn's half-brother, who was cruelly mutilated by the enemy forces in Karbala when attempting to fetch water from the river for his thirsty companions. The following shrine is that of the two adolescent sons of Husayn's faithful follower Muslim ibn 'Aqil, who were murdered by the caliph's agents in Kufa. The shrine in Kazimayn holds the tombs of the seventh imam Musa al-Kazim (died 799) and of the ninth imam Muhammad al-Taqi (died 835), and the shrine in 'Askariyayn that of the tenth imam 'Ali al-Naqi (died 868) and of the eleventh imam





Hasan al-‘Askari (died 873/74). The following image depicts the shrine of the cellar water basin in Samarra that in popular Shi‘i belief is connected to the occultation of the twelfth imam Muhammad al-Mahdi. Before reaching the final destination at the tomb of imam Rida in Mashhad, there is an image of imam Rida’s footprints preserved in a sanctuary in Nishapur; the “scales of justice” will weigh each person’s good and bad deeds at the day of judgment; and the fingers of the large hand symbolize the five members of the prophet’s family—i.e. Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband ‘Ali and their sons Hasan and Husayn. The shrine of the eighth imam, al-Rida (died 818) is the only shrine of a Shi‘i imam on Persian soil and the only one besides that of ‘Ali in Najaf whose dome used to be covered in gold.

Most of the shrines are depicted in a similarly stereotype manner. The domed shrines are usually depicted from the exterior above, and in cross-section below. In the lower part, the viewer can gaze directly into the interior of the tomb chamber, containing the grave surrounded by a screen. Many of the captions have been translated into German, but the ink in which these words have been added is so faded that they are hardly legible.

The scroll ends in a set of figures relating to either Muhammad or ‘Ali. Read from right to left, there is the Buraq, i.e. the fabulous steed that served Muhammad on his nocturnal journey from Jerusalem; a camel bearing a litter that would contain the large textile covering the Ka‘ba that was exchanged for a new one every year; a lion symbolizing ‘Ali; the seal of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e. a birth mark that is usually seen as certifying his claim to prophethood; ‘Ali’s horse Duldul; his famous sword Dhu ‘l-fiqar; and his slave Ghanbar (or Qanbar).

Contrary to all previous items of a similar nature, the images on the Niebuhr scroll have been arranged horizontally. All older scrolls known so far, whether of a predominantly Sunni or a Shi‘i type, are organized vertically, and their images are read from top to bottom. If we consider the fact that pilgrimage scrolls were intended for (public or private) display, the new arrangement indicates the commodification of these objects, since the horizontal arrangement allowed the document to be displayed in the modest atmosphere of a private home.

The Niebuhr scroll is a typical eighteenth-century tourist object, designed to be purchased by pilgrims as proof that they had been to the shrine. As the earliest known object of this type, the scroll finds an interesting successor in a lithographed item from the Qajar period, now in a private collection in Kailua, Hawai‘i. Still in the twentieth century, similar documents were printed as posters.

The Niebuhr scroll is part of a specifically Shi‘i visual tradition that extends historically at least to the final years of the Safavid period. Besides its value as a historical document, the prime importance of

the Niebuhr scroll lies in adding a Shi'i dimension to the study of *hajj* certificates. This Shi'i dimension is, first of all, evident in the physical aspect of the pilgrimage as it is presented in both the verse and the visual narrative. Visually, this emphasis already applies to the sites visited in Saudi Arabia, such as the cemetery of Baqi' and the oasis of Fadak, each of which plays a major role for Shi'i pilgrims. Shi'i preferences then become dominant for the sites visited in Iraq, most of which are linked to the traumatic experience of the battle at Karbala. When finally turning to Iran, the pilgrims reach their final destination at the shrine of imam Rida in Mashhad. The Shi'i document shares with the regular Sunni *hajj* certificates the perspective that the *hajj* to Mecca is the fulfillment of the supreme religious duty of all Muslims. Meanwhile, in the Niebuhr scroll, the *hajj* acquires the character of a mere starting point, almost a pre-text to the pilgrim's subsequent journey. This journey is much more than a supplement to the *hajj* proper, and much more than a return to the pilgrim's place of origin, since the scroll's visual course eventually succeeds in displacing Mecca. The Shi'i pilgrim's additional, and equally important goal is his visit to the holy sites in Iraq and Iran. The tomb of Husayn in Karbala remains, as it has always been, the most important Shi'i sacred site. But the final and, in fact, the ultimate destination of the scroll is the sanctuary of imam Rida in Mashhad. By relying on the *hajj* paradigm, and by combining its traditional visual code with the specifically Iranian element of *chavusbi-khani* traditions, the scroll succeeds in Iranicizing the pilgrimage and in embedding the sacred Iranian territory in a Shi'i world-view.

In this manner, the Niebuhr scroll provides a fascinating extension to the "regular" *hajj* certificates that are dominated by a Sunni perspective. Whether this and similar pilgrimage documents acted as records of pilgrimages by proxy or whether they were acquired and kept by the pilgrims themselves as personal mementos or tokens replacing the urge to carry home one's experience of the place, they obviously served an important function. From today's analytical perspective, they attest to the transformation of geographical places into visually constructed sacred spaces, and of terrestrial geography into religious topography, hereby authenticating the related set of religious practices and beliefs. These mechanisms are ruled by a specific interpretation of history that on the one hand historicizes Shi'ism while on the other presenting the historical events from a decidedly Iranian Shi'i perspective.

Further reading: James W. Allan, *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Subcontinent*, London 2012; Ulrich Marzolph, 'From Mecca to Mashhad: The Narrative of an Illustrated Shi'i Pilgrimage Scroll from the Qajar Period', in: *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 207–242.



# ARRIVALS

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*Edited by Anne Haslund Hansen*

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