

The Mantle, Mimesis, and the Muslimeen: How Poetic Narratives Transform Objects for the Islamic World

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Over time, the term “relic” has come to encompass numerous objects. From fragments of holy bodies to attractions for the faithful to vehicles of intercession, it is essential to consider the repercussions of such definitions. For instance, what does it mean when the definition of a relic includes not just foot bones but the impression of a foot that is now gone? How does this impact the dissemination of the relic as both object and idea? These considerations are crucial in examining bodiless relics. Many relics in the Islamic tradition fall under this category of relic. Of these, the Holy Mantle of Muhammad is one of the most famous. Using the Prophet’s mantle as a case study can shed light on the ways in which Islamic relic veneration encompasses a number of paradoxical relationships, namely the connection between the inaccessible and accessible. As an object at the crossroads of different disciplines and art forms, the Holy Mantle has a far-reaching impact that reveals much about the efficacy of such relics in reaching Muslims globally, especially when they have been translated across verbal channels.

The Ephemeral: The Man and the Mantle

Before analyzing the themes and narratives related to Islamic relics, the history of the Holy Mantle should be examined. It is crucial to consider the Mantle as an object by recalling its historical context. The mantle narrative began in the Arabian Peninsula during the seventh century. The mantle itself is a simple cloak that measures over a meter in length. It is woven from black wool and lined with a cream-colored woolen material on the inside.¹ The mantle belonged to Muhammad although it is unclear how he originally acquired it or whether it had a significant background as a physical object. It is likely that the cloak was merely a cloak that became special due to association with Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Later, it gained even greater renown after a noteworthy exchange, an exchange between Muhammad and a poet which marked the Mantle’s first symbolic translation from ephemeral object to enduring theme.

Poetic exchanges, which set the stage for the Holy Mantle’s story and reputation, had deep roots in Pre-Islamic Arabia. Before Muhammad, poets were celebrated, highly visible individuals. They actively participated in social commentary and current events using their craft. Poetry played an important role as the earliest form of literature in the Arabian Peninsula.² As an integral part of literature and communication, poetry was—and still is—a cornerstone in Arab culture. Arabs prided themselves on being masters of their language through poetry. The practice of poetry was widely respected and continued to be a prominent form of expression during and after Muhammad’s lifetime. Naturally, with the founding of Islam, poetry served as a channel for expressing reactions, negative and positive, to the new religion. Many dissenters of Islam used poetry as a means of attacking or satirizing the Prophet and his early followers.

¹ Hilmi Aydin, *Pavilion of the Sacred Relics: The Sacred Trusts* (Clifton: Tughra Books, 2004), 55.

² Hussam Almujaalli, “The Importance of Ka’b ibn Zuhayr’s *Burdah* to Classical and Modern Islamic Poetry” (MA diss., Brandeis University, 2014).

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Others used elaborate prose and rhyme to defend Muslims. Families with strong roots as practicing poets did not hesitate to chime in. Ka'b ibn Zuhayr was a well-known poet who belonged to one of these lyrically inclined families.³ He lived during the time of the Prophet and was one of the most vehement opponents of Muhammad and his message.

After the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims, Ka'b's brother Bujayr converted to Islam. Before long, Ka'b launched a polemic against his brother and the Prophet in the form of an orally transmitted poem. After hearing the lampoon, Muhammad used wordplay to turn the insults into words of praise toward himself and the new religion. With this, he condemned Ka'b and any other polytheistic poets continuing to attack Islam with death sentences. Meanwhile, Bujayr replied Ka'b through another oral poetic message pleading for him to repent and convert to save himself.⁴ The passionate verses exchanged between the two brothers underscores the significance of poetry as a form of communication in Arab culture and thus, among early Muslims. Because Islam was founded in the Arabian Peninsula, it is no surprise that cultural influences like strong poetic traditions have made lasting impressions on the cultures of later Muslim communities around the world.

Realizing he was at a disadvantage now that the power dynamic had shifted, Ka'b went into hiding. People mocked him as a dead man walking and refused to shelter him.⁵ Considering his desperate circumstances, Ka'b finally took his brother's words to heart and risked meeting the Prophet in person, albeit secretly.⁶ When he met the Prophet, he was not initially recognized. Seeing as he had slipped in without incident, Ka'b took the opportunity to ask whether a person who repented his mistakes and embraced the faith would be forgiven. The Prophet replied in the affirmative after which Ka'b asked, "Even Ka'b ibn Zuhayr?" The Prophet once again replied in the affirmative. Upon hearing this, Ka'b revealed his identity to Muhammad and began reciting an ode. This poem was called *Banat Suad*, or *Suad has Departed*, and it would come to be known as the *Ode of the Mantle*.⁷

As Ka'b neared the end of the poem, the Prophet is said to have removed his mantle and put it around Ka'b's shoulders, bestowing upon him an incredible gift—an item attributed to the Prophet. Nevertheless, the transfer of the Mantle from the Prophet to Ka'b represented more than just the gifting of an object attributed to the Prophet. If one looks more closely at the structure and composition of Ka'b's poem, it follows a unique poetic tradition. This tradition involves a poet engaging a patron through elaborate praise. The resulting ode is known as a *qasida*. To be considered a *qasida*, a poem must adhere to very specific guidelines and principles. The term *qasida* comes from the Arabic word *qasada* which means "to aim at" or "to intend." This relates to the purpose of the *qasida* which is a panegyric ode in which a poet praises another individual, referred to as the patron. The *qasida* is a sophisticated art form that is generally comprised of three parts: *nasib*, *rabih*, and *madih*. *Nasib* refers to the opening of the

³ Ibid. From a young age, Ka'b ibn Zuhayr's father instilled a deep awareness of the significance of poetry in him. He went as far as initially forbidding Ka'b from reciting poetry for fear that a lack of proficiency might tarnish the family's reputation. With time, Ka'b became a wordsmith of great renown along with his younger brother, Bujayr.

⁴ Paul Smith, trans., *Qasidah Burdah: Three Poems of the Prophet's Mantle* (Victoria: New Humanity Books, 2012).

⁵ Smith, *Qasidah Burdah*.

⁶ Michael A. Sells and M.J. Sells, "Banat Su'ad: Translation and Introduction," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990): 141.

⁷ Aydin, *Sacred Trusts*, 59.

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poem using amatory verses. *Rahil* describes the next portion of the poem that focuses on a journey or a lengthy, rich description of the poet's camel. The final part, *madib*, is the panegyric which is directed at an individual of higher rank.⁸

By presenting a patron with such a poem, the poet initiates a type of mutually understood agreement in which the expectation is that the patron will reward the poet as part of the exchange.⁹ In the case of Ka'b and the Prophet there were at least two levels of exchange. On the one hand, the Mantle itself was a worldly reward conferred upon the poet. However, the greater prize was to be found in what it symbolized for Ka'b: a gesture of acceptance, approval, and a chance at life anew as a believer alongside the Prophet. From this point on, new beginnings came to be an important theme related to the mantle as a motif.

This episode is the first instance in which the Mantle plays a dual role as both accessible and inaccessible relic. In relation to Ka'b, the Mantle was an accessible object because it was a physical, tangible item given to him directly by the Prophet. Simultaneously, the Mantle represented something inaccessible: The Prophet's approval, an affirmation that was not a tangible object. Nevertheless, the Prophet's choice to accept "even Ka'b ibn Zuhayr" (as the poet stated himself) demonstrates the accessibility of the Islamic faith and community to not only outsiders but even former enemies. The Mantle itself, without context, cannot convey these sentiments because it is a singular object. Anyone can access the religion, but not everyone could own the Prophet's Mantle, or at least not in its physical form.

Later, the idea of accessibility came to result in a reversal of roles for the Mantle. In fact, the absence of the Mantle anecdote in a few authoritative biographies of the Prophet has led some to speculate that it was in fact the poem that generated the mantle story of Ka'b which in turn generated an actual relic.¹⁰ This is similar to many cases of medieval Christian relic authentication in which the narrative of an object played a significant role in validating it as relic.

The Eternal: The Muslim and the Mystical

A reincarnation of the Holy Mantle came with another great poet, Imam al-Busiri, whose ode marked a pivotal transformation of the mantle motif. At some point in his life, the thirteenth century wordsmith was stricken with an illness that left him semi-paralyzed and confounded his doctors. With all apparent means exhausted, al-Busiri turned in despair to write a poem in which he made supplications and sang praises to the Prophet. Later, in a dream, he encountered the Prophet. In this dream, al-Busiri recited the poem he composed. Once the poet reached the end, the Prophet removed the mantle he was wearing and bestowed it upon al-Busiri. This moment of mimesis comes incredibly close to the original Mantle narrative in which Ka'b ibn Zuhayr was given the cloak. Both men turned to the Prophet in a time of desperation when they found themselves with no other worldly options. In this case, however, the gifting of the mantle resulted in al-Busiri awakening to find that he was miraculously cured of his ailment.

⁸ Renate Jacobi, "The Origins of the Qasida Form," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia & Africa*, eds. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (New York: Brill, 1996), 21.

⁹ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's 'Qasidat al-Burdah' (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37 (2006): 155-56.

¹⁰ Stetkevych, "Text to Talisman," 161.

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The poem, originally titled *Celestial Lights in Praise of the Best of Creation*, came to be known as the *Burdah*, after the mantle that was awarded because of it.

This second apparition of the mantle marks a significant change in its accessibility to the broader Muslim community. The shift is exemplified by another encounter al-Busiri had immediately after the miraculous dream. Al-Busiri awoke and walked out of his house. At this point, he had told no one about what happened yet he was approached by a Sufi who asked al-Busiri to give him the poem which he used to praise the Prophet. Al-Busiri asked which poem he was referring to, to which the Sufi replied, “The one you composed during your sickness.” To clarify further, the man recited the first few lines of the poem and swore that he heard the poem being recited in a dream in the presence of the Prophet. The Sufi then related that in the dream, he saw that the Prophet was pleased with the poem. Then, the Prophet bestowed his mantle upon the person who sang it. After hearing this, al-Busiri gave the poem to the Sufi man who memorized it and went on to share it and his vision with others which is how it was first popularized.¹¹

It is the component of sharing and shared experience that sets this mantle apart from the original. The mantle of al-Busiri’s dream was not tangible like the physical Mantle of Ka’b but it was arguably just as powerful. On the one hand, it represented the Prophet’s intangible approval of al-Busiri’s poem just like the original had signified the Prophet’s approval of Ka’b. On the other, it provided an observable cure to an actual illness that the poet was suffering. Additionally, the poetic exchange between al-Busiri and the Prophet again demonstrates a ritual contract between the two. Like Ka’b, al-Busiri presents the Prophet, his patron, with a song of elaborate praise after finding himself in a desperate position. The Prophet, in exchange for the supplications, gives al-Busiri the mantle.

This mantle lends itself to a greater range of access because it has transcended the physical plane. And so, al-Busiri’s interaction with the Sufi indicates that even outsiders other than the poet himself could access these miraculous, intimate meetings between poet and patron. It is as if al-Busiri’s *Burdah* was a formula of sorts. The *qasida* is something anyone can learn, share, and use to experience holy or miraculous interactions. As such, the *Burdah* is an easily accessible tool to bridge the gap to the inaccessible. In this case, the inaccessible was the Prophet who was physically gone as he had been deceased for centuries at this point. The inaccessible also includes the physical Mantle of the Prophet of which there is only one. While only one person at a time could possess the original Mantle in its entirety, anyone could potentially interact with the Prophet and his Mantle or experience the miraculous through a sincere recitation of the *Burdah*.

Al-Busiri’s *Burdah* is perhaps the most widely recognized of a few Mantle Odes today. All over the world, Muslims continue to recite his poem. It seems likely that al-Busiri’s ode and narrative promoted a translation in significance from the relic object to the action that resulted in it. The poem opened new channels of access to the relic that perhaps were not thought of before. The significance of verbal communication continues to impact the presentation of the physical Mantle today through another oral tradition. Currently, the actual Mantle is kept at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. It is stored in a reliquary box wrapped in several pieces of decorated cloth

¹¹ Paul Smith, *Qasidah Burdah*.

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which is kept in a golden chest.¹² In the chambers where the Mantle is kept, a living link to the Prophet remains: an individual perpetually stationed in the chamber to recite Quran.¹³

The continual recitation of Quran in the Apartments of the Holy Mantle is the ultimate demonstration of the role the Mantle has in bridging the accessible and inaccessible. It goes even further in this context by connecting the past to the present and future, or the ephemeral to the eternal. The Mantle itself represents the Prophet, a fleeting figure who passed away without leaving behind significant bodily relics (apart from hair, nail, and tooth fragments). He is the ephemeral and the inaccessible for Muslims today. The Quranic recitation symbolizes the Prophet's legacy, something that is still very much alive. The fact that the Quran continues to be read by followers around the world in its original language in the same way as it was recited by the Prophet is the eternal and the accessible. The Quranic text, and even the Mantle Odes, have fared the tests of time far better than the actual Mantle which is missing fragments in some areas and falling apart in others.

Conclusion

The Mantle, as a temporal object of humble beginnings, merits a closer examination as to why it has become such a powerful motif. For instance, a manuscript belonging to the Ottomans records their use of the Mantle, illustrated in its reliquary box, as an auspicious aid in a battle (Fig. 1). In this case, the Mantle itself is not actually depicted. The custom reliquary leaves only the suggestion of the Mantle's presence in the battle scene. It seems the relic is meant merely as an instrument to inspire deeper thought, connections, and community. The few who have had the privilege of interacting with the more restricted relic object have still managed to bring a sense of access and universality to others. They have accomplished this not only through ritual but also by documenting their experiences via the arts.



Fig. 1 – Close-up image of a battle scene from an Ottoman manuscript. The man brandishes the Holy Mantle in its reliquary perhaps to channel divine intervention, but more importantly to connect the Ottomans to the Prophet Muhammad. (Source: Hilmi Aydin, *Pavilion of the Sacred Relics: The Sacred Trusts*)

¹² Aydin, *Sacred Trusts*, 36.

¹³ Aydin, *Sacred Trusts*, 41.

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Where does the “power” of Islamic relics lie? What is the Mantle but a humble cloak locked away in a bejeweled case far from the hands or eyes of the faithful? Perhaps it is not in the relics themselves that their resonance resides, but in the rituals, traditions, and ties they inspire. Perhaps it is the fact that any person, no matter where they were or when they lived, could sing the Ode of the Mantle and find themselves engaged in a timeless bond between themselves and their Prophet.

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