

Traces of Touch

Object Animacy and Miniature Qur'ans During the First World War

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Histories of the Indian Army in the early twentieth century give a great deal of attention to the arrangements made by British officials to accommodate differences in spiritual worldviews and their corresponding practices.¹ However, the plural and disruptive materialities of these accommodations require more sustained examination. This article considers the use of sacred texts, specifically the miniaturized Qur'ans gifted to Indian Army soldiers in the First World War. Building on scholarship that discusses the divinely endowed agencies of these objects, this article uses traces of tactile engagement observed through object-led research to argue that their auspicious and protective powers might be understood as activated by and serving the soldiers' bodies.²

Letters from Indian Army soldiers and committee papers from the charitable funds set up to support them illustrate both the demand for sacred texts, and the logistical and theological problems faced in providing and keeping them: the need for careful packing, means of successful distribution, and protocols to prevent sacred texts from being damaged or abandoned in the field.³ Miniaturized versions that could be kept on one's person, even on the battlefield, offered one solution. Letters from Indian Army soldiers included requests for "a Holy Qur'an—a very small one... which is kept in a locket," "a small Qur'an which will go into the pocket," and "a little Koran... which can go inside a little box, the sort of thing that I can keep in my pocket."⁴ Yet the request and production of miniature Qur'ans from national and international suppliers not only provided a solution to distribution and storage issues but also participated in a long lineage of Islamic objects bestowed with divine agency.⁵ This history challenges the general archival positioning of these objects as decorative or passive vessels of scripture.⁶

Islamic art historian Nancy Um, working on seventeenth and eighteenth-century gifts grouped under the misnomer "Mughal glass," argues that their identity might be recast "from isolated items of decorative interest to parts of assemblages" through research methods that highlight the objects' "practical and experiential dimensions."⁷ This article adds to a rich body of existing scholarship, by applying its insights collectively to the miniaturized Qur'ans. I explore how historians' understanding of these objects might change when existing scholarship, like Kristina Myrvold and Andreas Johansson's research into their divine powers, is placed in dialogue with the activation of divine agency in Islamic material culture and material encounters with these Qur'ans in the archive. I argue that material traces of the body—and its absence—on these objects indicates that the agencies of these Qur'ans were realised through their close contact with the soldier's body.

- 1 Miniature Qur'an in Metal Case with Tassels (purple), 1915, views of front and script in closed metal case. Metal, fabric, paper, whole: $2 \times \frac{3}{8} \times \frac{1}{16}$ in.; chord extended: $13 \frac{3}{16} \times 1 \frac{1}{16}$ in. Imperial War Museum © Imperial War Museum EPH (5829)





- 2 Miniature Qur'an (printed by David Bryce & Son) with red and gold decoration on cover, ca. 1915. Metal, fabric, paper, Qur'an: $1\frac{1}{16} \times 1\frac{3}{16} \times \frac{7}{16}$ in.; measurement when case is closed): $1\frac{7}{16} \times 1\frac{5}{16} \times \frac{9}{16}$ in. Emery Walker Trust, Item No. 01470 © Emery Walker Trust

Consider two typical designs of miniaturized Qur'ans. The first is a single sheet of tissue thin paper inscribed with Qur'anic scripture, folded repeatedly such that it could be held in a tiny metal case (fig. 1). The case is bookended with tassels, one straight and the other a closed loop; I suggest this allowed the case to be tied to the body. The metal side, which protects the case's opening, is fixed; it is not hinged and seems to have been bent with the intention of keeping the text permanently inside. This aligns with the style of other objects in Islamic material culture that could bring good fortune on or protect the user, because the Qur'anic extracts were not intended for reading, but rather were to be worn *with* the body. Examples include fabric shirts, inscribed with the full content of the Qur'an, and seal designs on rings or stamps that incorporate scriptural quotes.⁸ A small cylindrical metal container held by London's Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM) was worn on a chain by a Turkish soldier, and is catalogued as having held similar Qur'anic texts.⁹ This echoes Myrvold and Johansson's account that Turkish soldiers were gifted copies of the Qur'an by the Ottoman sultan following the losses at Gallipoli, which were similarly hung "around body parts that were hurt and in pain."¹⁰ As with the miniature Qur'ans considered here, the intention was not to remove and read the texts; rather, they were material forms of divine presence with all associated powers.

The second surviving design was manufactured by Glasgow-based printer, David Bryce & Son. Bryce drew on an existing blueprint for the firm's miniaturized Bibles to produce Qur'ans as tiny, bound books that were then enclosed in metal cases (fig. 2).¹¹ The case features a circular magnifying glass, embedded into its front, and a crescent-shaped lug at the top with which to attach it to the body. Those editions I handled personally included a bound text in mint condition, even when the case is aged; the binding is uncreased, the gilt cover is immaculate. Compared to the firm's miniaturized Bibles, which often have cracked spines, damaged pages, and well-worn covers, the condition of the Bryce-printed Qur'ans suggests that they were not read as texts.

I propose that what draws these designs together are the bodily practices with which the auspicious and protective potential of the objects was realized. The handling of miniaturized Qur'ans by soldiers in the First World War is best understood by turning to studies of similar objects and their activation in Islamic material culture. For example, in her work on the agency of late Ottoman seals, Cristiane Gruber argues that intensely personal

practices that involved the user's body, often on the guidance of accompanying manuals, activated the objects' powers. One such manual, dated 1877, notes "whoever rubs the seal on his face morning and night will be absolved from eighty years of sins, and whoever looks at the seal at the beginning of the month will be safe from all misfortune."¹² These instructions are echoed in a letter from Alfred Ezra, who procured at least 3,000 David Bryce miniature Qur'ans for hospitalized Indian Army soldiers. He writes that the Qur'ans were "a huge success.... On receiving one, the man will stand up, put the book over his head and touch each eye with it, and then kiss the book with reverence. They nearly all wear them round their necks, and say that this protects them from all harm."¹³ Myrvold and Johansson discuss this letter as evidence of the miniature Qur'ans' divine power.¹⁴

I contend that Indian soldiers during the First World War also relied on forms of bodily intimacy and connection in their engagement with the miniature Qur'ans they received. Surviving fragments of letters sent by soldiers speak to the comfort in faith sought by combatants and their families; it offered them a means of escaping the war's horrors and finding a higher purpose in its violence. One unnamed Punjabi Muslim cavalryman writes, for example, "God be merciful, God have pity, God deliver his people," while others believe the war to be the divine wrath of God.¹⁵ Dafadar Himayat Ullah was "by the help of God" able "even in the trenches ... to keep the fast and say my prayers," while Shulaman Khan observes that "God has been very gracious to us and we have won reputation." Like Ullah, he attributes his resilience to God: "I get through each day by taking the name of God. I have made over my [Ramadan] and [Eid] to God's care."¹⁶ In addition to words of prayer and thanks, soldiers deployed objects with protective powers to reassure and safeguard friends; Dafadar Shah Jahan Khan, for example, sent a ta'wiz (amulet) to a friend, entreating them to "keep it about you" and "keep a stout heart."¹⁷ The comfort sought in one's faith and associated objects adds weight to how historians might understand the relationship between soldiers' bodies and the miniaturized Qur'ans.

What emerges by adopting a perspective that draws context from Gruber's work on object agency in the history of Islamic material culture and from Myrvold and Johansson's work on the beliefs that these miniature Qur'ans were believed to possess divine powers, is an entanglement of object, the body and the divine at the moment of activating the Qur'an's agency. This happens in an intensely personal and tactile way, beyond merely wearing the object. Tarnishing patterns on the cases that held otherwise intact Qur'anic scripts offer crucial material signs of such devotional touch across examples of the David Bryce designs. Editions at the IWM (see fig. 2) and the Horniman Museum collection in London both exhibit tarnishing patterns on the front of the case that exclude the bezel around the embedded magnifying glass.¹⁸ Although the pristine condition of the miniature Qur'ans suggest they were predominantly kept inside their cases, these tarnishing patterns show that the cases were then thumbed or touched around the magnifying glass to activate their divine properties.

There is a lineage of object animacy in Islam, and this article has drawn together Islamic studies, design histories and object-led research to position the miniaturized Qur'ans provided to Indian Army soldiers within this agential material culture landscape. Such historical artifacts can subsequently be understood as part of complex networks that go beyond the human.

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Notes

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- 1 For example, Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017), 28–31, 70–72; Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front 1914–15* (Cheltenham, U.K.: History Press, 2015), 175; and George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire At War: From Jihad to Victory. The Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 2018), 37.
- 2 For an example of scholarship on these objects' agency, see Kristina Myrvold and Andreas Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War: Religious Comforts for Indian Muslim Soldiers," in *Miniature Books: The Format and Function of Tiny Religious Texts*, ed. Myrvold and Dorina Miller Parmenter (Bristol: Equinox Publishing, 2019), 132–57.
- 3 Meeting of the General Committee of the Indian Soldiers' Fund, August 8, 1915, Proceedings of the General Committee, book 2, Indian Soldiers' Fund (1915–16), Mss Eur F120/2, British Library.
- 4 Shah Nawaz Khan to Doctor Sahib Khan, October 22, 1915, Firoz Khan to Jemadar Said Muhammed Khan, October 13, 1915, and Said Ali to Faqir Khan, October 5, 1915, quoted in Myrvold and Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War," 139.
- 5 For details of the suppliers, see Shrabani Basu, *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914–18* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 43; and Myrvold and Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War," 140, 143, 146, 148.
- 6 The Imperial War Museum descriptions of the objects shown as Figures 1 and 2 refers to the "decorative impressed rectangular border" and "decorative silver-coloured metal case." "Koran, miniature, in case," EPH 5829, Imperial War Museum, accessed June 4, 2024, iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30085759; and "Koran, miniature," EPH 7784, Imperial War Museum, accessed June 4, 2024, iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30087635.
- 7 Nancy Um, "Nested Containers for Maritime Journeys: Tools of Aromatic Diplomacy around the Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Indian Ocean," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 25, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2018): 199–223, quote at 203.
- 8 Examples include "Talismanic Shirt," Northern India, fifteenth–early sixteenth century, 1998.199, Friends of Islamic Art Gifts, 1998, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed June 4, 2024, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453498; and "Seal Ring with Inscription," Iran or Central Asia, fifteenth–early sixteenth century, 12.224.6, Rogers Fund, 1912, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed June 4, 2024, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/446273.
- 9 Open-Ended Cylindrical Metal Container for Keeping Extracts of the Qur'an, Carried by Turkish Soldiers, EPH 4906, Imperial War Museum, iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30084828.
- 10 Myrvold and Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War," 149.
- 11 I discuss the connection between the Bryce Qur'ans and Bibles in Katie Irani, "'Discontinuous Interruptions': Bodiliness and Pluralities in Histories of the Indian Army, 1914–1918" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art/Victoria & Albert Museum, 2023).
- 12 Christiane Gruber, "'Go Wherever You Wish, for Verily You Are Well Protected': Seal Designs in Late Ottoman Amulet Scrolls and Prayer Books," in *Visions of Enchantment: Occultism, Magic and Visual Culture*, ed. Daniel Zamani, Judith Noble, and Merlin Cox (Somerset, U.K.: Fulgur Press, 2019), 2–15, 28.
- 13 Myrvold and Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War," 148, 149.
- 14 S.M. Zwemer, "Notes on Current Topics: The Koran at the Front for Moslem Troops," *Moslem World* 6, no. 1 (January 1916): 204–5, as quoted in Myrvold and Johansson, "Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War," 148–49.
- 15 See an undated letter from an unnamed Punjabi Muslim cavalryman, in Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, vol. 1, December 1914–April 1915, British Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1 (hereafter IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1); and letters from soldiers in the 129th Baluchis (March 25, 1915) and the 2/8th Gurkha Rifles (March 24, 1915), both in vol. 1, March 1915–April 1915, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/2.
- 16 Letters from Dafadar Himayat Ullah, July 21, 1916, and Shulaman Khan, August 5, 1916, vol. 1, March 1915–April 1915, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/2.
- 17 Letter from Dafadar Shah Jahan Khan, September 12, 1915, vol. 1, September 1915–October 1915, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/6.
- 18 For the Horniman Museum and Gardens example, see David Bryce & Son, "Miniature Qur'an Made of Paper and Printed with Ink within a Metal Miniature Qur'an Case, with a Patterned Surface and a Glass Magnifying Section at the Front," 1900, 12.2.65/1, accessed June 4, 2024, Horniman Museum and Gardens, horniman.ac.uk/object/12.2.65/1.