

TALISMANIC SHIRTS OF CENTRAL ASIA

Shirt and robes, which are equal in its function, are one of the most ancient type of shoulder clothing of the population of Eurasia, and similar to many archaic phenomena of traditional culture they become attributes of various magic and ritual activities, which are then called according to the corresponding event: birth, baptismal, wedding, death, etc.

Shirts and robes have a special place in the culture of Islam; they belong to a category of protective talismanic objects [1]. Talismanic shirts are easily recognizable due to certain Qur'ānic inscriptions and individual signs and numbers displayed on their surface; they fully correspond to the tradition of manufacturing protective objects. The practice was widely disseminated in the culture of Islam, in the centre of which was “the Word of God” — the Qur'ān and calligraphy — its earthly incarnation. Since the times of the Prophets it is preached about the supernatural power of the Qur'ānic *āyāt*, a series of legends about the words and actions of the Prophets (*ahādīth*), “the names of Allāh”, the names of His Prophet, the names of his daughter and grandchildren, and the sum total of some other texts, these are the main means of magic protection for any Muslim. Let us also add that throughout the centuries of the profession of Islam each *sūra* and *āya* of the Qur'ān have been given their special magic meaning [2].

The earliest talismanic shirts known to us date to the late 15th century. However, the majority of them dates to the 16th—17th centuries and are of Turkish origin and rarer of Iranian and Indian origin [3]. Talismanic shirts and robes have a special name that goes back to the Qur'ān (7:26), *libās al-taqwā* (“the garment of the fear of God”), and thus a special use, too. Namely, it was put on top of chain armour, as a means of magic protection from diseases and battle wounds [4]. Along with it, the information about the use of such artefacts are not registered, hence assumptions of their alterative use should not be rejected.

In spite of the rarity of the type, a rather large number of shirts with inscriptions has been published. Each *libās al-taqwā*, however, is unique. It is not just about the rarity, beauty and early enough dating of these articles; the prominent historical and cultural value, which by no means is of any smaller, if not even greater, significance. It is defined by the singularity of steady and yet

individual décor, made within the framework of certain cultural space, but in each case it is made for a particular person. Six garments, different in form and décor, made for Murad III, Selim II and Jem Sultan and kept in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul, may serve as striking examples [5]. Other patterns were published by D. Alexander [6] and others. The goal of the given article is to describe the talismanic robe from the collection of Nasser Khalili [7] (*plate 2*) and to define the time and place of its making and its use.

Let us now examine the materials used, the cut and décor and of the robe. Maximum width of the articles is 177.0 cm; its length is 122.0 cm; they are made of is white cotton *mata*, with linen texture and the cloth of 33.0 cm wide. The threads are spun in Z shape; the texture density is 13×15 thread/cm. The robe is of tunic-shaped style: the body consists of four cloths of various widths flung over shoulder. Long narrow gussets are sewn to the flaps in the front. Two more gussets — a short and a long one — are inserted between the main cloths of the hem: the first is in the front on the right, and the second is in the back on the right, which corresponds to the principle of rotational symmetry, so typical for Central Asian style. The sleeves are made of two cloths sewn together diametrically, with gussets of irregular shape. The shawl-like collar has a triangular end on the chest. All mentioned cut elements, including the shape of the collar, are typical for official full robes of Bukhārā nobility of the 18th—19th centuries and outer shoulder garments of male population of Central Asia in general.

The décor of the robe is made in different techniques: tracery, hand-drawn inscriptions and edging, hand-made printing. Compositionally the ornament and inscriptions are organized into fringed selvages, vertical stripes filling the decorated field, horizontal lines and circles. The selvages are adorned with wide patterned stripes from close stepped rhombuses drawn by means of stamps. The same type of stripe follows along the waistline, separating the hem of the robe from its upper part. The hem itself, white in colour, has a rather modest décor, made up of eleven stripes of the same pattern. Motif has several names in Central Asia: among Turkmens it is *hamtoz* (“stepped”) and *tekbend* (“a woman's girdle”); among Arabs it is referred to by an Arabic-Persian term *naqsh-i khisht* (“a pattern made of bricks”) [8].