

“LADDERS OF LIFE”, A MUSLIM DIVINATION TABLE FROM THE MAE RAS COLLECTION *

There is an interesting collection of six articles in the MAE stocks. These articles are identified as “posters of religious content”, that in fact are *shamā’ils*:

- (i) *Shamā’il* with the Qur’ān, 24:35, the names of archangels, members of the Prophet's family, etc. including place of production (*fig. 1*);
- (ii) *Shamā’il* with the Qur’ān, 2:256 and its qualities, names of the four righteous *khalīfs*, *shāhada*, *basmala*, etc. including the customer's name, place of its storage (certain *kharābāt*) and the imprimatur of the 13.03.1900 (*fig. 2*);
- (iii) *Shamā’il* with the image of the mosque of Madīna, the names of Allāh and the Prophet, etc. and the imprimatur of the 23.10.1899 (*fig. 3*);
- (iv) *Shamā’il* with the genealogic tree of Muḥammad starting from Ādam accompanied by texts in Arabic and Turkic with the imprimatur of the 27.11.1900 (*fig. 4*);
- (v) Calligraphic inscription: “*Basmala* is a key to a wise saying” (*fig. 5*);
- (vi) The divination table (*fig. 6*).

Unfortunately, neither its collector nor the date of its arrival is known. It was registered by E. Nikolaicheva in April of 1952 with a note that read “from old admissions to the Museum”. Each of the six articles deserves an examination of its own. A special interest, however, is drawn by one of them, namely a table for divination, No. 6018-6 (*fig. 1*). A brief description of its appearance, made by the registrar, is given below:

A table for divination. Paper of beige colour, mounted with a narrow strip of paper of light violet colour; ruled with ink in 90 small squares. Each of the squares contains a prophecy inscription. The squares are irregularly cut by

straight ladder lines and bundles of thin lines intertwined with one another. Its size is 34.5×28 cm.

This description needs considerable improvement. The fact of the matter is that the table is made up of one hundred cells. Each of the cells contains an index number and one or two words in Persian, defining its meaning. Some cells are linked with one another. There are two main types of the connecting lines used: “snakes” (12) and “ladders” (15). “Bundles of thin lines intertwined with one another” represent a conventional image of a snake with an open mouth and its forked tongue out. When the “ladders” are scrutinized more thoroughly, they are divided into three groups: (i) those that are made up of two parallel lines (2), (ii) those that are made up of two parallel lines, connected with short pieces perpendicular to them (proper “ladders”) (10), and those (iii) “ladders”, within which there are circles (3) (*Table 1*). Presently, it is not clear whether these distinctions have any significance and/or meaning. The table, as a whole, has been preserved quite well. The fact that it was kept in folded form for a long time, however, makes it much harder to read the text where the paper was folded.

The table is preceded by a poetic text which contains instructions describing the way it is supposed to be used. According to the text we are dealing with, the purity of one's faith could be tested with the help of the table. For that to happen, dice needed to be thrown in a particular manner, so that the particular number attained would be compared with the corresponding cell. If the cell has a “ladder” in it, it needs to be used to go up. Thus, for instance, “the fear of God” leads to “faith” (*imān*), and “Evanescence of oneself in God” (*fanā*) — straight to “the Most High Throne”. If, on the other hand, instead of a “ladder”, a person falls into a cell with a snake, then “having fallen out of its mouth” as it says in the foreword, he is obliged to go down (from “vanity” to “sea of

* I have already addressed this theme in the article “Musul'manskaia gadatel'naia tablica iz kollekcii MAĖ RAN” (“The Muslim Divination Table from the Collection of the MAE RAS”), *Radlovskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg, 2007), pp. 146—49, where the described table was briefly introduced. When this present text was already in press, I discovered one page on the Internet, which presented a detailed description of the similar table: http://www.untiredwithloving.org/snakes_ladders.html.