

Pictorial Narration of the Battle of *Karbala* in Qajar Iran: A Combined Art Historical and Anthropological Approach

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The Battle of Karbalā¹ (61AH/680AD) has long been regarded as a pivotal event in the formation of the Twelver Shi‘ah tradition. The tragedy of the battle is fundamental, even today, to the Twelver Shi‘ah identity. A number of commemoration rituals are associated with Karbalā’ and many involve the narration of stories associated with the battle. In Figure 1 (p.2), a *pardah* (curtain/screen) is used by a *pardahdār* (*pardah*-bearer), in the second half of the 20th century, as an aid in narration of the stories. A *pardahdār* would hang up his curtain, often with a sheet pinned over

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¹Arabic and Persian terms and names will be transliterated according to the systems used by the International Journal for Middle Eastern

Studies. However, commonly used terms will be rendered as they are listed in the Oxford English Dictionary.

it, which he would then remove by increments, illustrating various stages of the story. The *pardah* would help the audience to visualise and relive the story in their mind's eye. Lashkari and Kalantari refer to the curtains as “articulate expressions of those woeful happenings”² but calling them pictorial expressions might be more accurate, as the *pardah* is first and foremost a pictorial tool in the narration of the story. The mournful tones of the *pardahdār*, in combination with the scene depicted on his curtain, would move the audience to grieve for those killed at battle. The iconography of the *pardah* was able to work in

this way as it was instantly recognisable to the audience, being the product of the long development of the depiction of the Karbalā' cycle which had begun in the

Safavid period and crystallised under Qajar patronage. The imagery which resulted from the developments of the Qajar period (1794-1925) uses a distinct vocabulary of markers. An audience would be able to recognise specific stories from set layouts and individuals from set attributes, allowing quick access to the essence of the story and a connection with the protagonists. The central scene of the *pardah* in Figure 1 depicts the half-brother of Imam Ḥusayn (d.680) 'Abbās b. 'Alī (d.680) (commonly known as Abū 'l-Faḥl) splitting an Umayyad enemy in two with his sword. To understand such iconography, still in use today, it is necessary to understand the Qajar roots of this art, as demonstrated by the oil-on-canvas painting by 'Abbās al-Musavī in Figure 2. More specifically, it is important to explore how Qajar patronage of Shi'ism and its folk expressions,³ combined with patronage of the arts in general, gave depictions of the Karbalā' cycle their fully-fledged form, in the arts of both the higher and lower social strata.

The Battle of Karbalā' and Iranian Shi'ism

The battle on 10th *Muḥarram* 61AH (10th October 680 AD) on the plain at Karbalā' was fought between Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī and Fāṭimah and therefore grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, supported by his seventy-two men, many of whom were also descendants of the Prophet, and the forces of the Umayyad governor of Kūfah 'Ubayd-Allāh b. Ziyād. The account given here follows the interpretation of the Twelver Shi'ah tradition largely formulated under Safavid patronage, as recounted in texts such as *Rawḏat al-Shuhadā'* (*The Garden of the Martyrs*), composed by Vā'iz Kāshifī in 1502.

²Amir Lashkari and Mojde Kalantari, “Pardeh Khani: a dramatic form of storytelling in Iran”, *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2015), 247.

³Throughout, terms such as ‘folk’, ‘from below’ and ‘popular’ will be used. These terms indicate that these art forms originated among the general populace, not at court.



Figure 1 (*Pardahdār with pardah*)



Figure 2 (*The Battle at Karbalā', 'Abbās al-Mūsavi*)

The people of Kūfah requested aid from Ḥusayn in their struggles against the tyranny of the Umayyad governor, in opposition to the Caliph, Yazīd, but Ḥusayn did not reach Kūfah, as he and his seventy-two men were killed at Karbalā'. The women and children accompanying them were taken captive by the Umayyad troops. 10th

Muḥarram is now remembered as the Day of ‘*Āshūrā*’ and has been commemorated by supporters of ‘Alī and his descendants, now called the Shi‘ah, almost since the event itself took place. In the centuries following the battle, it developed into the pivotal moment in Shi‘i historical consciousness. The commemoration of the slaughter of so many pious innocents and the unjust victory of the oppressor has become essential to the Shi‘ah in forming personal religious belief and communal ritual practice.

Shi‘ism became the official religion of what is roughly modern day Iran under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1760), through the agency of Shāh Ismā‘īl (r.1501-24). By the reign of Shāh ‘Abbās (r.1587-1629) the majority of the population had converted to Shi‘ism. This support of Shi‘ism was eventually inherited by the Qajars. By the time the Qajars came to power, the ‘*ulamā*’ (clerics) were a wealthy and influential group. Unlike the Safavids, the new Qajar rulers did not claim descent from Muḥammad and so they needed to legitimise their rule in other religious terms. To this end, they co-opted many popular religious practices to enable public displays of piety. Just one facet of this undertaking was the commemoration of ‘*Āshūrā*’, which received immense royal patronage from the Qajar dynasty, particularly by Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh (r.1848-96).

The role of the Qajars

Among the practices associated with the commemoration of the Battle of Karbalā’ which came under the patronage of the Qajar dynasty, two are useful for our purposes. The first is the support of *ta‘ziyah* (passion plays commemorating the Battle of Karbalā’) and other associated events) accompanied by the construction of *takiyahs* (theatres for the performance of *ta‘ziyah*). Built in Tehran in 1868 by Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, the *takiyah dawlat* was the most famous of the theatres for the performance of *ta‘ziyah*. Although *ta‘ziyah* would have been watched by members of the Safavid court, staged in the *maydān-i naqsh-i jahān* in Isfahan, the *takiyah dawlat* is evidence of the considerable Qajar patronage of *ta‘ziyah*, originally a folk performance form. Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh took his inspiration for the building from the Royal Albert Hall in London, demonstrating that his aims were not only to patronise art forms coming “from below” to ingratiate himself with his people, but simultaneously to modernise his country by borrowing Western architectural forms.⁴

⁴J. Calmard, “Le Patronage des Ta‘ziyeh: Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press and Soroush, 1979), 125.
Ritual and Drama in Iran, ed. Peter J.



Figure 3 (*Takiyah Dawlat, Kamāl al-Mulk*)

The second aspect of Qajar patronage which is pertinent to the discussion here is the Qajar support of painting. The Qajar court had its own atelier, led by a succession of chief painters, one of whom was Kamāl al-Mulk (d.1940) the painter of Figure 3. The Dār al-Funūn, established in 1851 by Amīr Kabīr (d.1852), Prime Minister to Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, also developed an atelier.⁵ Kamāl al-Mulk also established the School of Fine Arts and Painting in 1912. The iconic oil-on-canvas portraits of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh (1772-1834), such as that by Mirzā Bābā (d. c.1830), painted in a fusion of the Persian and European modes, as seen in Figure 4, are closely associated with our image of him as a ruler. His innovative use of imagery was part of a promotion of the arts which constituted an effort in building a dynastic identity through the depiction of power. The images of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh and his descendants are highly

⁵Willem Floor, “Art (*naqqashi*) and Artists 16 (1999), 125-54. (*naqqashan*) in Qajar Persia”, *Muqarnas*, vol.



Figure 4 (*Fath 'Alī Shāh, Mirzā Bābā*)

idealised representations of the ruler. The European mode of the paintings allowed them to have power among both Persians and foreign visitors to the Qajar court. A similar style of painting is also found on objects produced for the upper-echelons of Qajar society in other media, such as lacquer and enamel. Another example of the Qajar state sponsorship of painting, in this case wall-painting, is the monumental depiction of the Battles of Chaldiran and Karnal in the *Chihil-Sutūn*, Isfahan. Even though some of this imagery drew on depictions from the Safavid era, the Qajar dynasty's use of painting, particularly oil-on-canvas, for the building of identity and memory, as well as the promotion of painting in general, was innovative.

Methodology

Against this background, this essay will provide an overview of the pictorial narrations of the Battle of Karbalā' produced in Qajar Iran on various media. This overview will also make reference to *ta' ziyah*. As will be shown below, *ta' ziyah* evolved out of earlier

rituals commemorating 'Ashūrā' during the Qajar period and seemingly provided the inspiration for the nature of many of the pictorial narrations which followed. Due to this close connection between the performance and pictorial modes, scholarship on pictorial narrations of Karbalā' is often found tacked on to works on *ta'ziyah*.⁶ The aim of this essay, however, is to focus on the depictions themselves. In addition to analysis of the images, literary sources which describe *ta'ziyah* and pictorial depictions, particularly the *pardah*, will be taken into account. These will be taken from the Qajar and Safavid periods, in order to build up a picture of how the iconography of the Battle of Karbalā' developed in early modern Iran. However, I will not attempt to provide a definitive model for the chronological development of Karbalā' imagery as the sources available do not allow for such concrete conclusions.

Following an investigation of the sources, there will be an examination of how the depictions not only have aesthetic qualities, but also evocative and inspirational powers as crucial components of religious belief and practice. In this section of the essay, I will look at how they fit into Shi'i doctrine and have been received by Shi'i 'ulamā', particularly during the Qajar period. The religious life of the pictorial narrations will also be considered within an anthropological framework. The anthropological aspect of the investigation will demonstrate how such imagery can play a key role as an identity marker and in the promotion of social bonds. This will help us understand why the Qajars were successful in their promotion of such practices. Such an unusual combined approach of literary, art historical, doctrinal and anthropological analysis will shed new light on the subject of depictions of the Battle of Karbalā', while also providing a new methodological framework which could be applied to other cases of religious art.

As mentioned above, previous scholarship on the topic has largely stemmed from analysis of *ta'ziyah*. Such work on the religious drama mode provides vital background to the development of pictorial depictions of Karbalā'. A limited number of scholars, most notably Chelkowski and Massoud-Ansari, have studied depictions of Karbalā' and provided an invaluable basis for the material covered in this essay.⁷ Others, such as Aghaie, have, more recently, discussed the role of symbols and rituals in modern Iran, drawing on historical precedents.⁸ On the topic

⁶See P. Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and drama in Iran*; see also M. And, *Rituelden, Drama: Kerbela–Muharrem–Ta'ziye* (Istanbul, 2002); Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (London, 2003).

⁷Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and drama in Iran*; F. Massoud-Ansari, *Die Malerei zur Zeit der Qadjaren-Dynastie (1796-1925) im Iran* (Paris, 1986).

⁸Scot K. Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbalā': Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

of the anthropology of such rituals, Flakerud has produced an immensely useful book concerning the visualisation of belief in Iranian Shi‘ism.⁹ This essay hopes to build on these works by covering a unique combination of the facets of the visual aspect of ritual mourning in the Qajar period.

Textual sources for depictions of the Battle of *Karbalā*

There are a number of reports of the commemoration of the Battle of Karbalā’ on the Day of ‘*Āshūrā*’ dating from the early Islamic periods. However, sources from the early Modern period onwards are most pertinent for the question at hand. Michel Membré, the Venetian envoy to the Safavid court from 1539 to 1542 provides a number of notable accounts, among them, he writes:

In their squares there are many Persian mountebanks sitting on carpets on the ground; and they have certain long cards with figures; and the said mountebanks hold a little stick and point to one figure after another, and preach and tell stories over each figure.¹⁰

Most modern scholars have concluded that *ta‘ziyah* developed from mourning processions and commemorative texts, which subsequently gave rise to depictions such as those found on the *pardah*, and other media. Membré’s evidence, however, in which he describes ‘the mountebank’ telling stories using figures, could suggest an alternative genesis of the *pardah* and storytelling with pictorial narration. In a similar vein, in 1895 De Vilmorin wrote:

We were also offered ancient pictures on cardboard which represented religious subjects, such as the mosque of Karbalā’... my attention was in particular drawn by the fact that the main persons wore a white face veil.¹¹

Another description is given in 1737 by two Dutchmen, Salmons and Van Goch. They tell the story of a mourning procession with fascinating, if not gory, details. The processions included ‘big theatrically arranged wagons showing scenes of his [Husayn’s] life, his deeds, his battles and his death.’¹² They describe one wagon as having a cover sprinkled with sand and blood, or red paint, with holes cut into it, under which people would lie and stick their heads or limbs through the holes to

⁹Ingvid Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shi‘ism* (London, 2010).

¹⁰Floor, *Wall Paintings in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2005), 136.

¹¹Floor, *Wall Paintings*, 132.

¹²Chelkowski, “Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Iran”, *Muqarnas*, vol. 6 (1989), 99.

give the impression of dismembered bodies. They also comment on the spectators' reactions as the wagon passes by:

The people set up such wailing to show their grief in so many ways and with such conviction, imitation and naturalistic representations that one wonders at their capacity to give vent to such appropriate signs of suffering so realistically.¹³

Here they echo my own feelings at first seeing hundreds of weeping women during Karbalā' commemorations held in Tehran, wondering whether the tears were genuine, or also part of the performance. This is a question to which I will return, when considering the social and anthropological aspects of 'Āshūrā'. Salmons and Van Goch also recount recreations of battles. Such reports suggest that dramatic re-enactments, now known as *ta'ziyah*, had begun to take shape as early as the mid-18th century. The fights may have been *ad hoc* and without plot, but it seems that they were part of a dramatic commemoration of 'Āshūrā'.

Further evidence from foreign travellers can be found in reports of painting. In 1817, Kotzebue, of the Russian embassy to Iran, wrote that the royal tent had an entrance curtain embellished with a painting of a dragon.¹⁴ Similarly, James Alexander, travelling in Iran in 1825, recorded that the entrance to the royal enclosure was covered with a curtain decorated with the scene of Rustam killing the White Div.¹⁵ More pertinently, when considered in relation to the *pardah* tradition, O'Donovan wrote during his time in Iran between 1879 and 1881 that:

On dead walls not far off some traders in religion had fixed up large canvas paintings, fifteen feet square, representing various scenes in the massacre of Hasan and Hussein, and some combats of Rustam and the White Demon.¹⁶

All three reports are of interest as they are evidence for depictions on cloth. However, this last passage is particularly noteworthy as it links the depictions of the Karbalā' cycle and the Rustam cycle, both, apparently, being narrated by a man using the *pardah*. This connection highlights both the popular roots of depictions of the battle and its place in forming not only a Shi'i identity, but an Iranian one, too. It could also suggest that the Battle of Karbalā' was seen as one of several popular heroic epics, besides bearing religious connotations. The narrative is, after all, a rousing story of battle, heroism, tragedy and redemption.

¹³Chelkowski, 99.

¹⁵Floor, 4.

¹⁴Floor, W., *Wall Paintings in Qajar Iran*, 3.

¹⁶Floor, 137.

Pictorial narrations of the Battle of Karbalā'

Now that a selection of the literary sources has been considered, this next section of the essay will cover the material sources. It is likely that some of the earliest depictions of the battle were as illustrations in manuscripts. Figure 5 shows an illustration from a 16th century Ottoman manuscript of the text *Maqatal-i Āl-i Rasūl* (*The Killing of the Family of the Prophet*). Similar illustrations are also found in illustrated copies of *Ḥadīqat al-Su'adā'* (*The Garden of the Happy*) and *Rawzat al-Shuhadā'*. Such illustrations demonstrate that the practice of depicting the Battle of Karbalā' was not a new phenomenon in the Qajar period.

It is likely that depictions of the Battle of Karbalā' on *pardahs* also started at an early date, as suggested by some of the textual sources cited above, making mention of the use of depictions to accompany narrations of the story. However, due to the folk

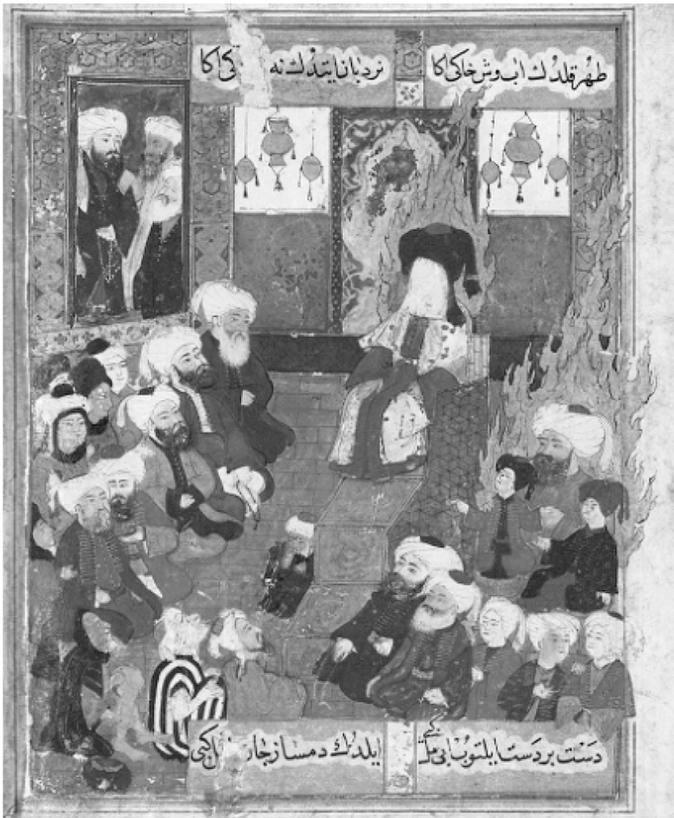


Figure 5 (Depiction of the family of the Prophet from *Maqatal-i Āl-i Rasūl*)

nature of the art form, it is impossible to state definitively when it began. It is an art form which still continues today, albeit with much diminished significance compared with the early 20th century. Most performances which happen now are staged and lack the original spontaneity of the performances of wandering *pardahdārs*. As the basics of the tradition were described in the introduction to the essay, in this paragraph I will examine the style and composition of the *pardah*. As is evident in Figure 1 the depictions on the *pardah* are, most importantly, narrative, but also non-linear. A hierarchy of events and individuals is formed through the relative size of the characters. Such a layout is reminiscent of the chronology of *ta'ziyah* performances, which often jumps around in time and space. As Wirth wrote of *ta'ziyah*, there is no need for the *pardah* to convey the plot, as the audience already knows it.¹⁷ No known examples of Qajar *pardahs* remain today and early photographs are scarce, but contemporary *pardahs* are brightly coloured, as their predecessors surely were, attracting the attention of passers-by. Iconography is often enforced through the use of colour – green for Ḥusayn and his supporters, red for Shimr and the Umayyads – with the same colours used in the costumes of *ta'ziyah* performers. Likewise, the style of the painting is highly stylised and formulaic, allowing an audience to immediately grasp the story and empathise with the protagonists.

Due to the similarities with *ta'ziyah* and the theatrical style of the recitation given by the *pardahdār*, it can be argued that the *pardah* tradition arose out of *ta'ziyah*. However, bearing in mind some of the early accounts of storytellers using images and the informal nature of the performance, it is not unlikely that the origin of the form pre-dates *ta'ziyah*. Either way, the *pardah*, and its folk roots, clearly demonstrate the way in which imagery associated with Karbalā' acted as a prop for public piety. Audiences would gather around the *pardahdār* and lament the plight of the martyrs of Karbalā', both the teller of the stories and the listeners involved in the gaining of salvation, reinforcement of a social bond, entertaining and being entertained.

Qajar depictions of the battle, similar to those found on *pardahs*, can be seen as more permanent fixtures on the walls of various types of buildings across Iran. As the dating of the genesis of depictions of the battle as wall paintings or tile panels has not been fixed, it is hard to definitively state how such depictions took their final form. They may have developed out of *pardah* imagery, as the style and iconography found in many of the wall depictions resemble depictions found on *pardahs*. Diba has argued that *ta'ziyah* performances were translated into oil paintings, which then became *pardahs*, which

¹⁷Andrej Wirth, “Semiological Aspects of Chelkowski, ed., 33. Ta'ziyeh” in *Taziye: Ritual Drama in Iran*, P.

took their final form in being painted directly on to walls.¹⁸ All three media display depictions with very similar styles and compositions and, therefore, it is difficult to say which came first. The main purpose of this essay is not to debate the evolution of imagery, *per se*, but the development of the depictions may not be as linear as it has been thought. As is common with folk art forms, the development of the various media carrying Karbalā' imagery may have grown in informal, unpredictable ways.

The spaces most commonly bearing wall depictions of Karbalā' are *imāmzādahs* (shrines to descendants of the Prophet), *ḥusayniyāhs/takiyāhs* (spaces dedicated to mourning rituals and the performance of *ta'ziyah*), *buq'āhs* (small shrines) and *saqqākhānahs* (public water fountains). Here, examples of imagery from three sites will be discussed.



Figure 6 (Wall painting at *Imāmzādah Zayd*)

Chronologically, the first is the *Imāmzādah Zayd* in Isfahan, though its date has been disputed. According to Peterson, the building is from the mid-19th century, a dating based on the iconography of the depictions.¹⁹ Peterson's dating is based on evidence linking the representation to *ta'ziyah*, which flourished in the mid-19th century onwards. He notes

¹⁸Layla S. Diba, ed. *Royal Persian Painting: The Qajar Epoch (1785-1925)* (London: I.B. Taurins, 1999), 94.

¹⁹S. Peterson, "Painted Tiles at the Takieh

Mu'āvin al-Mulk (Kermanshah)" in *Akten des VII. Internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archäologie : München, 7.-10. September 1976*, 619.

that women with veiled faces are depicted, a phenomenon which came about under the influence of the practice of veiling female protagonists in *ta'ziyah* performances, to hide the fact that they were played by men. Therefore, he argues, the depiction of veiled women indicates that the tile-work is post the development of *ta'ziyah*. Rogers, on the other hand, had claimed that the paintings date from 1685-86, on the basis of a restoration inscription, even though he himself mused about why Chardin had not recorded them.²⁰ Meanwhile, Chelkowski noted that the foreigners depicted in the paintings are dressed appropriately for the late 18th or early 19th century.²¹ Even though I would support Peterson in his 19th century date for the paintings, his reckoning is not entirely sound as pre-19th century depictions of fully-veiled women can be found.

Having shown Rogers's dating as incorrect, Peterson goes on to emphasise the striking realism of the paintings.²² He attributed such a style to the effect of *ta'ziyah*, but also to the style of secular portraits favoured by the royal court and the burgeoning interest in photography. The depictions, painted in vivid colour, certainly have an immediacy to them. It is not hard to imagine how they would have aided a visitor to the shrine in mourning for the descendant of the Prophet to whom the shrine has been dedicated, and for Ḥusayn.

Another genre of wall-paintings prevalent in the late Qajar period came to be known as coffeehouse paintings (*naqqāshī qahvah-khānah*), named after the location of the depictions. The most popular subject matters were stories from the *Shāhnāmah* and the Karbalā' cycle.²³ They would have been used by storytellers (*naqqalān*) to illustrate the stories told to entertain the customers. The scene in the foreground of the painting in Figure 7, by the renowned coffeehouse painter, Muḥammad Mudabbir (d.1967), bears a striking resemblance to the depictions seen in Figures 1 and 2.

The *Husayniyah Mushūr* in Shiraz was destroyed by fire in 1988, but the tilework in the courtyard is thought to have dated from the period of 1873-76. Above one of the doors leading off the interior courtyard of the complex was the panel which can be seen in Figure 8. The iconography is certainly comparable to that seen on the *pardah*, with, for example, the use of size to determine the importance of individuals. The protagonists bear attributes, such as feathers in their helmets, also similar to those seen on the *pardah*.

²⁰J.M. Rogers, "The Genesis of Safawid Religious Painting", *Iran*, vol. 8 (1970), 125-27.

²¹Chelkowski, "Narrative Painting", 104.

²²Peterson, "Painted Tiles at the Takieh Mu'āvin

al-Mulk (Kermanshah)", 627.

²³See Floor, W., 'Art (*naqqashi*) and Artists (*naqqashan*) in Qajar Persia', Muqarnas, vol. 16 (1999), 139.



Figure 7 (Depiction of *Karbalā'* by Muḥammad Mudabbir)

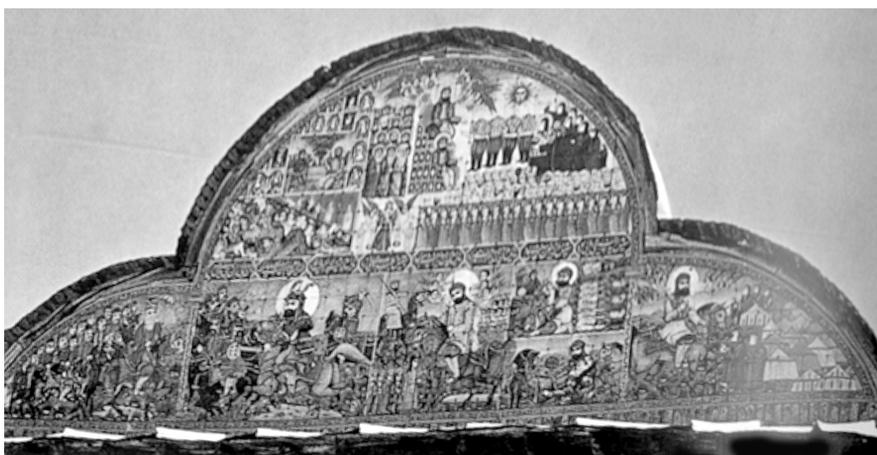


Figure 8 (tile-panel at *Husayniyah Mushir*)

The *Mu'āvin al-Mulk* in Kirmānshāh, a complex consisting of a *husayniyah*, *zaynabiyah* and *'abbāsiyah*,²⁴ along with other buildings, shops and a *saqqakhānah*, was built in the late 19th century and restored in 1917-1920 (Figure 9). The tile decoration was added during the restoration, and possibly up to as late as 1925, making it a very late example of Qajar depictions of Karbalā'. Nine of the panels

²⁴Spaces designed for the mourning rituals associated with Ḥusayn, Zaynab (Ḥusayn's sister) and 'Abbās (Ḥusayn's half-brother) respectively.

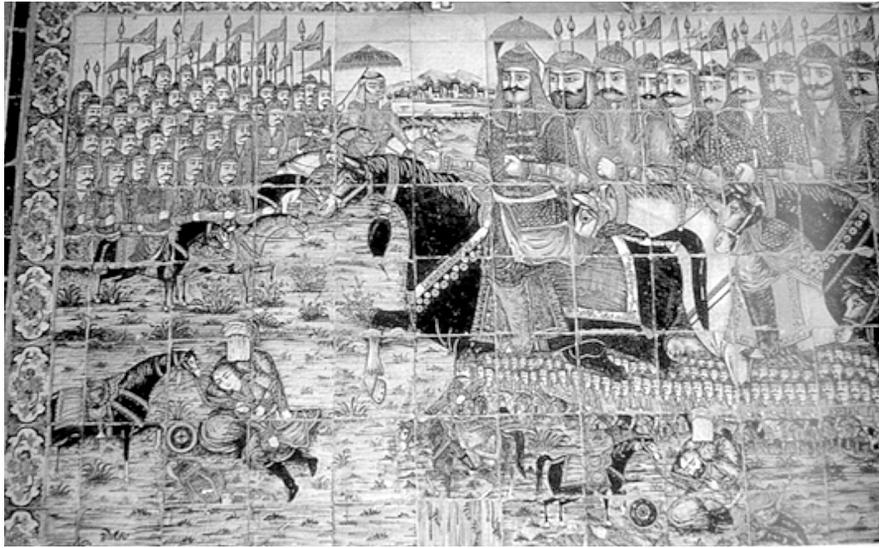


Figure 9 (tile-panel at *Mu'āvin al-Mulk*)

depict Karbalā', while others depict scenes from the Qur'an and ancient Iranian story cycles. In the depictions of Karbalā', the influence of *ta'ziyah* is again evident. However, I would argue that Peterson is again misleading in his analysis, as he claims the representation of Ḥusayn's head with a candle stems from the use of candles to signify the coffin of a dead character in *ta'ziyah* performances.²⁵ It is just as likely that such an attribute stems from the depiction of holy personages in book illustrations, where their heads are often backed with a blazing halo of gold flames.

Qajar depictions of the events at Karbalā' were also produced in the form of lithographic prints, as seen in Figure 10, the earliest known example being produced in 1857.²⁶ These images were produced to illustrate texts describing the events at Karbalā' and sometimes accompanied *ta'ziyah* scripts. They display features unmistakably resembling the depictions we have seen on other media, such as the large size of the main characters and their dress.

The last of the media depicting imagery from the Battle of Karbalā' to be discussed here are oil-on-canvas paintings. The painting shown in Figure 2, *Battle at Karbalā'* painted by 'Abbās al-Mūsavī (d.1931) in the late 19th or early 20th century is one of the finest remaining examples of such works. It is in the 'coffeehouse style' as discussed

²⁵Peterson, "Painted Tiles", 620.

Persian Lithographed Books (Leiden: Brill,

²⁶Ulrich Marzolph, *Narrative Illustration in* 2001), 25.

above in relation to wall-painting. These depictions are some of the most dramatic representations of Karbalā', alive with action and movement. The organisation of the events is again non-linear but does have some development to it, with hell, for example, depicted in the lower right-hand corner of the example shown in Figure 2. Most likely to have been produced for the private houses of wealthy clients, the oil-on-canvas renditions of the Karbalā' cycle show clear similarities with the Qajar tradition of secular painting. The dress of the main protagonists, who are depicted in three-quarter view, is in the Qajar fashion, with curving arches for eyebrows and the horses leaping in an improbable motion. Similarities to battle scenes on lacquer painted objects, especially in the pose of the horse, can also be found. What is most striking, however, is the very close resemblance of the depiction on the *pardah* in Figure 1 to the depiction in the oil painting.



Therefore, as something of a conclusion to the material presented above, the painting in Figure 2 demonstrates the way in which the upper and ruling classes of Qajar society were able to take an artistic practice from below, refashion it and then, in turn, have their styles and modes of depiction amalgamated into folk art forms. These borrowings demonstrate that the patronage of the arts by the Qajar dynasty did indeed lead to a flourishing in the arts at every level. As shown above, a number of works propose that such imagery took most inspiration from *ta'ziyah*. While this is still not an unfounded claim, the similarity of the depictions in other media to the oil painting is undeniable and the oil painting has its own connection with other Qajar secular art forms, such as royal portraiture, lacquer painting and

wall-paintings. However, the borrowings from *ta'ziyah* are also significant in our conclusions. Just as Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh's building of *takiyahs* as both a display of piety and a movement towards modernisation led to a flourishing in *ta'ziyah* at a lower level, so the depiction of the Battle of Karbalā' in oil-on-canvas (a Western mode) had its own effect.

The Shi'i mourning tradition

There are numerous widely accepted sources within the Shi'i tradition which recommend mourning. It is reported that Imam al-Riḍā (d.818) said:

Verily the day of al-Ḥusayn has lacerated our eyes and made our tears flow. It has made our beloved one (Imam al-Ḥusayn) become forlorn in the land of affliction and grief. Al-Ḥusayn has left grief for us to inherit and sorrow to accompany us until the Day of Resurrection.²⁷

Imam al-Ṣādiq (d.765) is said to have permitted crying for Ḥusayn saying:

Every kind of despondency and crying is disapproved, except for grieving and crying for Imam al-Husayn.²⁸

The evidence presented above, both textual and material, demonstrates that love for Ḥusayn and his family and mourning for them was common practice under Qajar rule. There is also evidence from within the Shi'i tradition during the period. The cleric Mirzā Abū al-Qāsim Ibn-i Ḥasan Gīlānī (1739-1817) emphasised the benefits of crying, or causing crying, for Ḥusayn.²⁹ Mullā Darbandī (d.1869-70), now seen as a controversial figure, but very popular during his lifetime, in his work *Asrār al-Shahādāt*, emotionally exhorted his followers to mourn Ḥusayn and even flagellate themselves in the process.

Within the practice of Shi'ism, both past and present, mourning is one of the main channels for public piety, something which was very much on the Qajar agenda. As inheritors of the Safavid legacy of an official Shi'i state religion, they realised promotion of Shi'i ideals and practices was incumbent upon their dynasty. Unlike the Safavids, however, the Qajars did not claim to be descendants of the Prophet. It was therefore necessary for them to display their piety in other ways. The ruling powers also had to contend with other aspects of their religion – the '*ulamā*'. During

²⁷Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 44 (Tehran, 1957-85), 284.

²⁹Aghaie, ed., "*Women of Karbalā*" (Austin: University of Texas, 2005), 31.

²⁸al-Majlisī, 289.

the period of Safavid patronage of the religion, the *'ulamā'* had grown considerable in both influence and wealth. Under the Afsharid and Zand dynasties, a lessening of royal patronage caused clerics to seek influence at a lower social level. The Qajars, although now characterised as pious, had a stormy relationship with the clerics. Therefore, they sought to demonstrate their piety amongst their people. The co-opting of folk forms of religious practice aided them in this endeavour, the patronage of *ta'ziyah* being the most significant factor. Such patronage led, in turn, to an increase in popular practices among the people.

The anthropology of mourning

In his DPhil on mourning traditions among the Lebanese Shi'ī community, El-Karanshawy draws on the work of a number of anthropologists to demonstrate the effects mourning rituals have on individuals and societies.³⁰ Writing that tragedy allows us to build and strengthen social bonds, he shows how the mourning of Karbalā' is a key memorialisation activity within the Twelver Shi'ah community. The success of mourning traditions associated with Ḥusayn is that, as a human, he provides a figure with whom individuals can relate and empathise. Empathy as a facet of commemoration helps groups to form and enhance community.

The role of the images of the Battle of Karbalā' is key to the mourning rituals. Anthropologists, such as Morgan and Flakerud, have shown the role that images such as these have in religious practice. As displayed above through Shi'ī sources, the aim of the mourner should be to remember and relive the Battle of Karbalā'. There are number of ways this is done. The performance of, and watching of, *ta'ziyah* performances, hearing the stories told by the *rawzah-khān* (a reciter of stories associated with Karbalā'), and looking at depictions of the battle all stimulate a host of emotions associated with the tragedy. As Flakerud has emphasised, the response is usually multi-layered, being both communal and personal.³¹ Whichever form the memorial takes, it aims to illicit the same response in the viewer or listener. The experience which the mourners access through these media, allows them to relive the tragedy, thereby drawing closer to salvation. Images are powerful vehicles for emotion, focusing the mind on the subject and helping the viewer to visualise the event. It is also important to remember that images such as the ones examined

³⁰Samer El-Karanshawy, *The Day the Imam* Oxford, 2013).

was Killed: Mourning Sermons, Politics, History and the Struggle for Lebanese Shī'ism (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of

³¹Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shi'ism*, 76.

here are a tangible part of the anatomy of Shi'ism, a medium through which religion can take place. In this way, these images fill a similar role to that of Christian icons, allowing the believer to experience the hereafter vicariously. They fulfil a number of the facets of religious imagery given by Morgan: imagining community; communicating with the divine or transcendent; embodying forms of communion with the divine; and influencing thought and behaviour by persuasion or magic.³²

The power of communal mourning rituals and the images used as tools during those rituals is evidence as to why the Qajar rulers would seek to co-opt art forms associated with such activity. To an individual outside the Shi'i community, the fundamental nature of the images we have seen may not seem particularly evocative. However, these images, when combined with the retelling of the story they are narrating, have the power to move the viewer in remarkable ways.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has shown, through an original approach combining traditional art historical and literary methods with anthropological theory, that depictions associated with the Battle of Karbalā' crystallised in the Qajar period. Qajar patronage of the arts, with the aim of constructing dynastic and cultural identity, led to a flourishing of the production of imagery, both at court and among lower social strata, especially from the mid 19th century onwards. The style patronised by the court, inspired by European art and influenced by the spread of photography and the printing press, became widespread in all genres. The new power of meaning afforded to imagery was particularly well-suited to religious iconography. In addition, certain folk religious practices, such as *ta'zīyah*, were also patronised by the Qajar dynasty, to support their position as pious rulers, which led to an increase in popular commemoration rituals at all levels. Combined, these two aspects of Qajar patronage interplayed with art 'from below' to produce the art discussed in this essay. Images of Karbalā' from this period may have told long-established stories, drawing on long-established rituals, but it was in the Qajar era that they came to be depicted in new modes and styles, which persist to the present day.

³² David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 55.