



## **Talismanic Shirt**

North India or the Deccan, Late 15th to early 16th century

Ink on cotton

65cm high, 94cm wide

Stock no.: A5825a

Provenance: UK private collection since the 1960s

Talismanic shirts are cotton garments decorated with qur'anic inscriptions and worn for their apotropaic effect. They were most commonly used on the battlefield under armour, but sometimes worn by the sick to aid with recovery. In 1539, Hürrem Sultan, the first wife of Süleyman the Magnificent, sent him a shirt made in Mecca because "it had sacred names woven in it and would turn aside bullets".<sup>1</sup>

The present example is one of a series of almost identical talismanic shirts originating from the late 15th or early 16th century from North India or the Deccan. Made from a densely woven cotton, closer in texture to parchment than cloth, all 114 Suras of the Qur'an are inscribed on the shirt. Though the size of the garments may vary, the cut is always the same: a simple form consisting of a large rectangle, flanked by two smaller rectangles for the sleeves, and a simple circle for the head. The precision of the ornamentation implies that measuring equipment, such as rules and compasses, was used. The pectoral roundels in striking red and blue, the epaulettes, and fringe-like lower border emulate traditional armour.<sup>2</sup> Discolouration around the underarms from the sweat of the wearer confirms that this shirt was used.

Each square panel contains a single verse, with Sura headings in red, written in the micro calligraphic *ghubari* script, a script whose name means dust-like for its minute size.<sup>3</sup> The back panels tend to be inscribed with the Qur'anic verse 12:64 (Sura Yusuf), which states that "God is the Best Guardian and the Most Merciful of the Merciful Ones".<sup>4</sup> The *shahada* is inscribed in two large medallions on the chest in a style known as *tughra*. The only colours used are black, red, blue and gold.

The borders are decorated with red dots, in which are enumerated the 99 names of God in a script known as *Bihari*. A variant of *naskh* used prior to the establishment of the Mughal Dynasty, the use of *Bihari* may help to date these garments to before 1526 CE.<sup>5</sup>

A talismanic shirt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [1998.199](#)) with almost identical ornamentation, is dated to the 15th - early 16th century, and attributed to Northern India or the Deccan. Another very similar talismanic shirt, also dated to late 15th/early 16th century India, is housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (accession no. [T.59-1935](#)). Other examples are in the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore (accession no. [2017-00015](#)), dated to the 16th century, and the Musée Guimet, Paris ([MA 5680](#)), dated to 15th century North India. A third example, identical but for the lobed edges to the bottom band, is held in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, USA (accession no. [T.59-1935](#)) and is dated to the first half of the 15th century, North Indian or Deccan.

[1] Rogers, J.M., and Ward, R.M. *Süleyman the Magnificent*. London: British Museum, 1988, p. 175 in Von Folsach, Kjeld, Meyer, Joachim, and Wandel, Peter. *Fighting, Hunting, Impressing*. Copenhagen: The David Collection, 2021. p. 159.

[2] Brac de la Perrière, Eloïse. 'Les chemises talismaniques indiennes d'époques pré-moghole et moghole', *Journal Asiatique* 297.1 (2009). pp. 57-81 ; p. 59.

[3] Islam, Shumaila. 'Calligraphy as a Spiritual Experience beyond the Script', *Al-Qamar* 5.1 (2022). pp. 126-152; p. 131.

[4] Gruber, Christiane. 'The Arts of Protection and Healing in Islam', *Ajam Media Collective*, retrieved online via <https://ajammc.com/2021/04/30/premodern-ppe-talismanic-shirts/> on 15/04/24.

[5] Brac de la Perrière, Eloïse. 'Manuscripts in Bihari Calligraphy: Preliminary Remarks on a Little-Known Corpus', *Muqamas* 33 (2016). pp. 63-90; p. 64.