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A detailed examination of the “Unwan” page of Book 1 (*One hundred saying of Ali*) of the manuscript MUL17 at the University of Melbourne

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines in detail one page of a manuscript in the Middle Eastern Collection of the University of Melbourne, the illumination page of the first, ‘Unwan’, page of book 1 of MUL17.

The Collection comprises around 200 manuscripts written in various languages. They cover various subject matters including the Qur’an, commentaries, dictionaries, grammar, poetry, love stories, medicine and history. Since 1993, the Grimwade Centre has been investigating the collection and its conservation and preservation issues. Outcomes have included a symposium and an investigation into the materials (mainly pigments) of a selected number of manuscripts. However, there continues to be gaps in our knowledge about the collection. These include: inaccuracies in the catalogue entry, a lack of provenance and little textual knowledge. Currently a number of PhD research projects at the centre are focussing on different aspects of the collection and engaging experts in other fields of study. One of these PhD projects is focussing on studying a particular manuscript (MUL17) in detail. The book contains two texts,

Book One: Şadkalamah Shāh Vilāyat (One hundred sayings by Ali), Late 17 – early 18th century, Language: Arabic and Persian, Scribe: Shāh Maḥmūd Nayshābūrī and.

Book Two: Manzūmeh Hajj (Futūḥ al-Ḥaramayn (Unveiling heart and soul-Description of holy cities)), Author: Muḥyī al-Dīn Lārī (15th -16th century), Language: Persian and Arabic (only the prayers) depicts the pilgrimage to Meccain blue, green, yellow, red, black, white and gold pigments.

The aim of this project is to study the manuscript from a variety of disciplinary angles, including: the values and information embedded in the materiality, art and text of the manuscript, which are then placed in its historical context and linked to written sources and other copies of the manuscript. This paper demonstrates how this broad codicological examination is specifically supported by conservation.

The focus of this paper is an investigation of the ‘Unwan’ page utilising the identification of materials and techniques using scientific methods and exploring artistic aspects such as motifs and their

symbolism. Studying these aspects together, aids extraction of valuable information, thus preserving both the tangible and intangible aspects of this text. Focusing in detail on one page demonstrates the value of an in-depth study in adding substantially to the knowledge of a significant cultural material.

BIOGRAPHIES

Leila Alhagh is a PhD candidate with her research based on the artistic and literary aspects of 'Sad kalamih Shah Vilayat (One hundred sayings by Ali): an analytical study of MUL17 (a manuscript from the University of Melbourne Middle East manuscript collection) with a research focus on codicology, artistic and cultural interpretation of manuscripts.

Dr Petronella Nel is a Lecturer at the Grimwade Centre at the University of Melbourne. She is currently leading a collaborative ARC Linkage Project 'A National Framework for managing malignant plastics in Museum Collections'. She is interested in developing analytical techniques for characterising polymers, dyes and pigments in order to inform their preservation.

Professor Robyn Sloggett is Director of the Grimwade Centre, which delivers industry-focused conservation teaching, research and consultancy programs. Her research incorporates scientific and cultural analysis of Australian art, attribution, conservation in Southeast Asia, and the preservation of cultural material and archives held in remote and regional communities.

Professor Amir Zekrgoo has been writing and lecturing on subjects related to art, symbolism and mysticism in Asian religious traditions (Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu) for over 25 years. He has authored 12 books and over a hundred articles. He is an artist and his work has been exhibited in over 50 exhibitions in Asia, America and Europe since 1977.