



The Western Influence on Representations of the Seven Sleepers in Islamic Miniatures

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received 15 January 2024

Received in revised form 04 April 2024

Accepted 17 April 2024

Available Online 17 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Islamic miniatures
 Seven Sleepers
 Aṣḥāb al-kahf
 Islamic Art
 Christianity
 Islam

ABSTRACT

The Quranic story of Aṣḥāb al-kahf, or the ‘Companions of the Cave’, has always been illustrated by Islamic miniaturists depicting the seven sleepers as seven in number. The narration of the story in the Quran refers to Allah's divine power, which miraculously caused seven youths to fall asleep and awaken after 309 years, but without specifying their exact number. The tale contains distinct parallels to the western legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, dating from the 5th century, which recounts the story of Christian youths who were persecuted by the emperor Decius in the 3rd century. While the Quran does not stipulate the number of sleepers, the western legend specifically states that the story is about seven sleepers. In light of this background, an effort is made here to interpret the number seven in “Companions of the Cave” Islamic miniatures as evidence of a western influence on the mindsets of their creators.

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Seven Sleepers has remote origins, and variations of the story may be found in very different cultures, perhaps because, in short, it symbolically points to the human being's introspective capacity to come to know himself in order to achieve the Good, and the intelligible. At the beginning of the last century, western scholars began to turn to the legend, making efforts to collect the sources, and motifs of the narrative in Christianity and Islam. (Hannelies Koloska, 2015, 76) In these pages we seek to focus not so much on the sources, whose analysis has been undertaken by distinguished specialists, (Koch, 1883);(Guidi, 1885) but rather to offer a look, from the perspective of the arts, at the story's iconographic representations, especially in Islamic miniatures. Despite the fact that western sources concur in citing seven young people, the Quran is less precise, offering up to three possibilities, revealing little interest in the exact number, as, in it, it varies. (Quran 18: 22)

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةٌ رَأَيْتُمْ كَلْبَهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَتَأْمِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُل رَّبِّي أَعْلَمُ
بِعِدَّتِهِمْ مَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ فَلَا تُنَارُوا فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً ظَهَرَ أَوْ لَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا

Translation:

“They [i.e., people] will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog - guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], ‘My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument [785] and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone’.” (Malik, 1997)

PROBLEMATIC AND METHODOLOGY

We will analyze the representation of this theme in miniatures to understand why, despite this ambiguity in the sacred text, in its depictions in Islamic art there always appear, curiously, seven sleepers.

The main question, therefore, is whether Muslim miniaturists were faithful to the figure established in the Christian story, or they followed the three possibilities offered by the Quran. To explore this hypothesis, we employ a methodology based on the examination of Islamic miniatures featuring the iconographic theme of the Ephesian Sleepers, comparing the results with a review of the different sources.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN OF THE QURAN: SŪRAT AL KAHF

This is one of the best known and most beloved chapters in the Quran. The verses of Al Kahf are found in Chapter 18 of the Muslim divine book. It is an earlier, Meccan chapter, with the exception of some verses among its 110. The name ‘al-Kahf’ refers to ‘the Cave’ where the main events of this chapter occur, with it appearing in the ninth verse of its content, and referring to the cave where the sleepers spent their long period. (Quran 18:9). By analysing the content of this chapter in the Muslim divine book, we find that its 110 verses contain 1,577 words and 6,360 letters, including several stories and events. It could be described as a narrative and historical chapter. (Maududi, 1999); (Al-Hilali, 1994, 437-9)

The term al-kahf is used just four times in this chapter. (Quran18: 9, 10, 11, 16) By analysing the word, it is found that it specifically refers to a cave in a mountain where those young men sought refuge, as is well known. The noun itself refers to a cave resembling a hole in the mountain. (Ibn Kathīr, Stories of the Qur’ān, 2000, 75); (Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr Alqur’ān al‘azīm , 1999).

Many theories have circulated related to the cave from historical and geographical points of view. Some scholars, such as Shu‘ayb Al-Jiba‘i, gave a name to this cave, calling the one in the story ‘haizam’, while other Islamic scholars, such as Al-Nanak, contended that it was not a cave in a desert, but rather in a valley. (Ibn Kathīr, Stories of the Qur’ān, 2000, 78-81).

Muslim believers, however, have shown little interest in demonstrable knowledge regarding this cave, as nothing is mentioned in their divine resources about its name or its exact location. The solar light mentioned in the sura situates the entrance of the grotto facing north (Quran 18:17).

Narratives in the *Sūrat Al Kahf*

The *Sūrat al Kahf* encompasses narratives of ancient events, prophets' experiences, historical stories about erudite and righteous people, and parables to guide humanity in accordance with Muslim beliefs.

Its narrations have their own lessons and uniqueness in all the Quranic verses. It contains five vivid and dramatic stories that make it read and sound more like a dynamic storybook filled with dialogue, imagery and action than a litany of commands, injunctions and doctrines. Except for the story of *Iblis the Rebel*, (Quran, 18:50) they are distinguished by the fact that they are not repeated elsewhere in the Quran, like many other narratives are, in addition to often being represented in paintings forming part of Islam's artistic heritage.

The five stories told in the verses are the *Young Men of the Cave*, *The Master of the Garden*, *Iblis the Rebel*, *Dhū lQarnayn*, and *The Journey of Moses*. (Bajwa, 2012, 26) The stories in this chapter are well known in the Muslim community, and are painted on Islamic manuscripts; one of them, the focus of this article, is the *Companions of the Cave*, for which the chapter is named. (Hosein, 2007, 1).

Obviously, the story of the *Companions of the Cave* was a source of great interest for the producers of miniatures. Other stories, like *The Master of the Garden*, though seldom depicted in Islamic manuscripts, are often portrayed in Islamic paintings.

The story of the 'Companions of the Cave' in the Quran

The 'Companions of the Cave' story is about a group of people described in all the different versions as young, or even in their teenage years, while, in some cases other details, such as their names, and how many of them there were, are omitted. The Quran does not include many details about the story, (Hannelies Koloska, 2015, 81) and assigns different numbers to the companions – three, five and seven – while invariably including a reference to their dog, as Ibn 'Abbās noted. (Kathīr, Paraphrasing of the Qur'an, part 1 1990, 113-6) The names of the seven sleepers are mentioned in the Arabic sources, like Zuhri, and others, with Ibn 'Abbās confirming their names as: *Maqsimyānūs*, *Amlīhūs*, *Dafānūs (Diyānūs)*, *Martīmūs*, *Diyūnisīyūs*, *Antūniyūs* and *Yuḥanā*. (Kandler 1994, 54).

It is also stated that they were guided by Allah and harboured a firm belief in him. In the Quranic verses we can read what might be translated as: 'Doubtlessly, they were young men who believed in their master, and we increased them in guidance'. (Quran 18:13) Their physical strength complemented their spiritual strength, and they took a stand against the challenges of their time, fleeing from impending danger and taking refuge, with the help of Allah. (Noor and Mangrio 2018,12)

There are many theories regarding the location of the Seven Sleepers' cave, with four sites in Turkey: the Ephesian site, and the caves located in Tarsus, Afşin and Lice. (Marco 2019. 170) The Sleeper's monumental complex located in Ephesus contains a church and catacombs, in whose Chamber 10 a mural painting was discovered, thanks to the latest technical advances, depicting seven young people, with halos and looking straight at the viewer, as "active sleepers". (Zimmermann 2020, 253).

The many purported locations of the Seven Sleepers' grotto can be divided into two groups: the first consists of places that have evolved as transnational sacred and heritage tourism destinations; the second are sanctuaries attended mostly by local people, and where the Seven

Sleepers are perceived as holy persons or saints according to the faith. However, in some cases this categorization is not so rigid, and we can find both patterns in a single place. (Marco 2019, 169-190).

This story was frequently narrated for the purpose of teaching people religious morals and ethics, such as the importance of faith in Allah, who was the reason for the miracle that the sleepers experienced. The main moral in this narrative in the Quran is the faith of the people of the Cave, and how strength does not stem from numbers, or resources, but rather one's connection with Allah, who gives it to those who sincerely believe in him. (Kathīr, Paraphrasing of the Qur'an, part 1 1990, 114)

The tale of the Seven Sleepers became popular for its associations with Divine protection, sleep, and resurrection, in both Christendom as well as in the Muslim world. Hence, there are numerous paintings, charms, talismanic pendants, miniatures, amulets and objects of veneration related to these holy figures.

According to Muslim theory, the sleepers were living in a community of infidels, so they made a decision to flee, for the sake of Allah, who rewarded them with mercy in the cave and protection from the sun. They later woke up and found the entire village believers. (Tabarī 1978, 126)

The story of these young men in the cave is the most important narrative found in the *Sūrat al-Khaf* among the four it contains. Also known as the Sleepers of Ephesus, the tale is an ancient pre-Christian legend, according to some scholars, its action taking place under the reign of Emperor Decius. Many of these exegetes rely on Christian and Jewish sources in their interpretation of the story. (Gibbon 1911-1920, 220)

It is considered the main story in the *Sūrat*, in the minds and hearts of Muslims, many of whom used to read it every Friday and listen to its narrative – and they still do. Thus, Islamic miniaturists were influenced by this fact, and took particular interest in the episodes it described.

After a debate arose between researchers and investigators about the sleepers being seven in number or not, the artists of Islamic miniatures responded by assigning a specific number of men inside the cave by borrowing from the western account of the Seven Sleepers. Not even the prophet Mohamed offered any clarification of their number when he delivered the verse. (Kandler 1994, 47)

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, according to Christianity. A comparison.

As we pointed out, the 18th *Sūrat* of the Quran, called of The Cave, or The Cavern, features several accounts, including that of Aṣḥāb al-kaḥf, (Quran 18:8-30) whose name proceeds from the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (Psalm 32 (33) 19 (NRSV), which narrates how in 250 the Roman Emperor Decius (249-251) ordered the persecution of Christians who refused to make sacrifices to venerate him. Thus, seven young people from Ephesus decided to hide in a cave to avoid having to worship him, and be martyred accordingly. Divine intervention, however, plunged them into a deep sleep, and took away their souls. They would later awaken (resurrect) in the same cave several centuries later; according to the Quran, ‘three hundred years and nine more’, without being aware of the passage of time, because, upon awakening, the young people believed they had been asleep ‘a day or part of a day’, but they

had really awoken in an era during which the Syrian Orthodox Church was flourishing, as Christianity had prevailed. When one of the sleepers, Malchus, goes to the city to buy food, he is puzzled by the sight of crosses there. This was under the reign — according to prevailing opinion — of Theodosius II (408-450) and, again, the nature of Christ was being debated. The Council held in Ephesus on the occasion of these disputes recognized the humanity of Jesus and the leading role of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God (*theotokos*). According to Martínez Carrasco, (Carrasco 2018, 87) the story was written in the sixth century, a tumultuous time for Orthodox Syrians, as a faction of the Church, again, denied the Resurrection, while the Sleepers were upheld by those who called for faith in this phenomenon. For the Muslims, on the other hand, the story of the sleepers was a manifestation of the power of Allah, according to sources for the interpretation of the Quran, and their faith was considered an exemplary model.

Not all the sources concur as regards when the miracle occurred; the patriarch Eutychius of Alexandria claimed that it was under Theodosius I (379-395), (Carrasco 2018) and, while today the prevailing opinion is that it was under Theodosius II, there is no universal consensus, (Grysa 2015, 50) in this regard. As for the Quran, the main Arab source, it contains no allusions to the time frame of this event. It would be later, when the recorders of the tradition — such as al-Tabari or al-Talabi — refer to this legend as having occurred during the *jāhiliyyah*, when the ‘petty kings’ ruled; that is, during the time between Mohammed and Jesus (Carrasco 2018, 84). The Quranic version of the cave's young people does not contain the same order of events as in the original story, omits certain details, and, ultimately, resembles more of a commentary rather than the narration of a legend, *per se*. (Corradini 2004, 61) This can be explained by the fact that the Quran focuses on the essence of the story, without paying special attention to its details, including its particular location, era, or characters.

The *Sūrat*, suggesting three possibilities with respect to the number of men, always adds a dog, which boasts the gift of prophecy, and is one of the ten animals admitted into paradise. The figure of the dog appears only in the Muslim versions, (Guidi 1885, 56) and it is interesting to note that it does *not* usually appear in western miniatures. Its function, remaining next to the entrance of the sleepers' cave, has been interpreted by some as to watch over their sleep (Carrasco 2018, 89), according to the most widespread version of the story in Arabic — that by Muhammad b. Ishaq. which reaches us today through Talabi — the dog belonged to one of the young men, and followed them when they went to the cave, while according to Ibn ‘Abbās the animal belonged to a shepherd. According to Ka'b, meanwhile, they came across the dog several times, and it barked at them. In one of the versions, he even spoke to them to reassure them that he loved God's friends and would watch over them as they slept. (Guidi 1885, 56).

According to Guidi's translation of Ishaq's text, (Guidi 1885, 56-60) the story continues with the emperor's order to wall up the entrance to the cave where the young men were, so that they would die of hunger and thirst, and it would become their tomb. However, God plunged them into sleep, preserving their spirits, while the dog kept watch over them, lying by the entrance with its legs outstretched.

There were then two Christians — Tandrus and Rubas — who, hiding their faith, were lodged in the house of the emperor and, aware of the terrible order to seal the cave, decided to bear witness to what happened by engraving it on two lead tablets, which they placed in a small bronze box bearing a silver seal, and covered it in the cave itself, in the hope that someone would find it, read it, and come to know what had transpired. Time passed and Theodosius rose to the throne, with the division between those who believed in the Resurrection and those who

denied it re-emerging. It was then that God inspired a man who lived on the mountain, named Aulkiah (Adolis in the Christian version) to hire two men to break down the wall that sealed the grotto in order to take advantage of the materials to build a fold for his flock. After knocking it down, the bravest of them entered and found the dog ‘under them, towards the door to the cave’. The seven young men had awakened and were sitting there praying, as if time had not passed, which in this account was three hundred years. (Guidi 1885, 59)

In the Quran, when the young people awaken, they decide that one of them should go to the city to buy food. He is cautioned to avoid being noticed, due to the danger of being recognized and them forced them to worship their gods. Despite taking precautions, they were discovered, and a building was then built above the cave to commemorate them.

Such is the story according to the Quran, but if we compare it with Christian sources, we find in them an abundance of details that enrich the narrative. For example, the people identify the young man by the coins with which he pays, dating from Decius's time. (Guidi 1885) Accused of hiding a treasure, he is accompanied to the cave, where the rest of his companions are discovered. They then tell the bishop and the proconsul what happened, and they, in turn, tell Emperor Theodosius, who travels there to visit them in the cave, where he has the opportunity to embrace them and to hear Maximian's testimony of faith in the Resurrection. They then fall asleep again, and immediately pass away. Theodosius, astounded by the miracle of their resurrection, ordered that a lavish sanctuary be built there, but the sleepers appeared to him and asked him to bury their bodies right in the cave, which was located on Mount Celion, according to Latin sources, (Vorágine 1982) on which a sanctuary was erected.

In another anecdote added to this story, when they hid in the cave, and the emperor's soldiers discovered that they were there, Decius ordered that the entrance be sealed. A Christian later engraved both their names and the reason why they had been persecuted; this is another question on which there is no agreement, since, in the different versions of the story the names do not entirely coincide, though often referring to Maximian, Malchus, Martian, Dionysius, John, Serapion and Constantine. (Guidi 1885, 49); (Vorágine 1982).

Strikingly, in contrast to the precision of the number of sleepers in the Western tradition, in the Quran this number is *not* definitively clarified. In fact, Verse 22 is totally imprecise, citing several figures, and this is precisely the question we explore in these pages: why is it that Islamic miniatures depict seven sleepers when their sacred book does not specify this number? We can state that the cause is that the miniaturists were influenced by western iconographic models, which invariably represented seven young people, with this phenomenon highlighting the importance of the transmission of these models from the West to the East.

As we pointed out, the aforementioned Quranic verse offers up to three different figures: ‘There were three and, with the dog, four’, ‘five and, the sixth, the dog’ and ‘seven and, their dog, the eighth’, before concluding by advising the reader to, in view of this variety of possibilities, say: ‘My Lord knows their number better, which only a few know’. It is worth mentioning that the numbers are always odd (3, 5 and 7), with the narrator situating the receiver of the text before a sort of riddle, not in order for him to guess the number — ‘making conjectures about the unknown’ (Quran, 18:22) — but rather for the purpose of underscoring, through this example, and some others throughout the story, like how long they had been asleep, or how much time elapsed between when they entered the cave and when they woke up, that what is really important in the believer is his faith in divine omniscience.

Islamic miniaturists were strongly influenced by Quranic stories and narratives about the prophets. This is clear throughout the abundance of religious miniatures, despite Islam's calls to prohibit these types of works. (Okahsa 1989, 17); (Wiet 1932, 1:182)

Such appeals gradually disappeared as Shia schools of art flourished, which allowed these themes to be depicted and encouraged artists to document their religious history, with these artists affecting all the subsequent schools of art during the medieval era and successive centuries.

The influence of the *Sūrat al Kahf* is remarkable, as it has played a special role in Islamic belief, generally; a majority of Muslims across history used to read this *Sūrat* every Friday. According to a famous hadith of the prophet Muhammad: 'Whoever reads al Kahf on the night of Jumu'ah, will have a light that will stretch between him and the Ancient House (Ka'ba)' (Mundhirī 1982). This hadith reveals the power of the *Sūrat* when recited on Friday night. Reading this chapter is beneficial for Muslims, according to the counsel of the prophet Mohamed, who expresses this in the hadiths, in which he states that whoever reads it every Friday will benefit from it all week, and his works will be facilitated, so they took care to read it. This belief greatly helped to propagate its stories, and for them to become part of the customs and traditions of Islamic culture, as reading it every week led to its memorization, and allowed its stories to permeate Islamic society, including its art.

SOURCES

As we stated, for the study of historical sources there are, among many others, three essential works: *Die Siebenschläferlegende, ihr Ursprung und ihre Verbreitung*, by John Koch; and that by Ignazio Guidi, *Testi orientali inediti sopra i Sette Dormienti di Efeso*, Roma, 1885. (Guidi 1885); (Koch 1883)

The leitmotif of a long dream has its origins in Antiquity, and appeared extensively in different cultures. (Witakowski 2011) Aristotle, in his *Physics*, refers to those in Sardinia who, according to a legend, upon awakening from a long dream, found themselves alongside the heroes, and stated, about time: 'And when we did not distinguish any change, as the soul remains in a single, undifferentiated moment, we did not think that time had elapsed [...]'. (Echandía 1995 4: 11, 218b, 28-9.)

For the purpose of this work, it behoves us to focus on the transmission of the theme of the seven friends, or sleepers, from the western, Christian tradition to Islam, and the reflection of this in Islamic miniatures; and, especially, the criterion that guided Muslim artists when it came to representing them, since there is no consensus in the Quran as to the exact number of young people who made up this group. As we have stated, sometimes there is talk of three, other times of five, or of seven, and even eight men. (Tondello 2019, 44) In Grysa's view, (Grysa 2015, 45) it seems unlikely that the Jewish tradition, according to which there were only three sleepers, influenced the origin of the Islamic version of the legend.

However, it is evident that its general message was shared by Christians and Muslims, despite the numerous differences in their stories. There are approximately 200 manuscripts that tell the story of the sleepers, and most were written between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, although those in Syriac are the oldest. (Tondello 2019, 31) In this regard, mention should be made of S. Griffith, who concludes that the first Islamic commentators on the Quran were clearly inspired by Syriac sources when introducing some elements of the story of the sleepers, as is

manifested in one of the oldest works: *Kitab al-mubtada* by Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (767). (Griffith 2008, 130); (Koloska 2017, 363)

The origin of the legend is not known exactly, with specialists considering three hypotheses. (Grysa 2015. 46)

(1) It was written in Latin, then translated into Greek, and later into Syrian, from which St. Gregory of Tours translated it into Latin in *De Gloria Martyrum*, and then Jacobus de Voragine incorporated it into *The Golden Legend*, (Voragine 1982, 410-4) with it is going on to be widely disseminated in the known world.

(2) It was first in Greek. According to Honigmann, the source as of 448 was Stephen, Bishop of Ephesus, who wrote a work a Greek version of which was produced a year later. (Honigmann 1953)

(3) The story was originally written in Syrian, in the Syrian Orthodox Church. (Carrasco 2018, 83-5)

According to Guidi, (Guidi 1885, 50-1) who studied the eastern texts containing the account of the sleepers, the Arab/Christian version was of greater importance than the Christian/Muslim one, forming the basis for the Ethiopian one, which circulated widely in the East. According to him, the Quran omitted numerous details found in the original version, but there are other texts that more faithfully followed the Christian tradition, and practically limited themselves to disguising or adapting the version for Muslims. As the main source he points to the text by Muhammad b Ishaq, transmitted by Talabi and Damiri, with these two versions being very similar to each other, and concludes that the Arabic account provided by Ishaq comes almost directly from the Syrian text.

Like other stories, this one of the sleepers was adopted by different faiths harbouring eschatological theologies and the hope of a promised paradise, precisely because of the exemplary attitude of the seven men, who refused to recognize a series of idols, and who bore witness to the Resurrection, as Gregory of Tours' version states. (Tours 1885, 386)

Grabar relates the main idea of the Resurrection found in the history of the sleepers to the descent of Christ into limbo, and recalls that the Byzantine patriarch Photius, in his *Library*, or *Myriobiblion*, described this story (Chapter 253, Martyrdom of the Seven Sleepers), being the first Greek translation of his *Vie*. (Grabar 1998, 242)

About the number of companions

As indicated, the Quran offers three different figures in Sūrat 18 in relation to the number of young protagonists of the story of the cave. As we stated, it speaks of three, five and seven companions, plus the dog, which is included in all three cases. According to Koloska ('Ephesos', 367-8), the different opinions on the number of sleepers in the Quranic text are due to the fact that this text traces its own theological horizon and, therefore, comments on this Christian legend without assigning much importance to details, such as the number of young people. Rather, it emphasizes the power of God to intervene miraculously, and highlights the idea of salvation for those who have faith, without the need to be martyrs, as was the case in the Christian tradition.

We would like to underscore how, despite the three variants found in the sacred text, the miniatures that represent the scene of the Seven Sleepers, whether Christian or Islamic, *invariably depict seven, and no other number*, which we interpret as revealing an attitude of

openness on the part of Muslim miniaturists to the influence of Christian art. As a curiosity, only in the Islamic representations does the dog appear. Let us look at both aspects below.

With regard to the number of sleepers, in Guiri's opinion it is possible that western artistic representations, already widely present in the churches of the Christian East by the eighth century, could have influenced the Muslims' vivid imaginations. (Guidi 1885, 64.n.2) Thus, the statement that three of the young people were to the right of the emperor, and three to his left, is attributed to Ali, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, (Tha'labī 2002, 694) which Guidi relates to the frequent representation of Christ flanked by a greater or lesser number of apostles. It should be added that, according to Ali (Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law), the young people were later made ministers, and the emperor decided nothing without them, (Tha'labī 2002, 694) with this relationship of trust reminding one of that between Jesus and the apostles.

Having said this, in our view the Muslim miniaturists agreed to represent specifically seven sleepers, and no other number found in the Quranic Sūrat, because of the significance of the number. First, there is its symbolism. This is something that was already recognized by Christianity, as is well known, and it is an issue that we cannot address here due to the limited extent of this work. Massignon indicates that when the number seven was accepted by the commentators of the Quran, they associated it with several factors, such as the seven heavens, the number of stars in the constellation of Ursa Major, the number of imams in Ishmaelite Shiism, and that of the major prophets: Adam, Idris (Enoch), Nuh (Noah), Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus), and Mohammed. (Massignon 2009)

Secondly, as opposed to three or five young people, seven of them represented more clearly, as they were a larger group, the strength of a group having faith in divine designs and, in this case, the Resurrection. They were considered an example; hence the believers held them in high esteem, assigning the young people a protective, talisman-like nature. In fact, it was even said that whoever recited the first or any verse of Sūrat 18 was protected against the Deceiver (Dajjal). (Jourdan 2001, 96)

We find, therefore, in the above reasons the answer to the question of why Muslim artists always represented the young sleepers as being seven in number, despite the Quran's ambiguity in this regard.

Another question arises: why did Muslim miniaturists invariably include the dog in their representations of the scene? Guidi proposes another explanation of the appearance of the dog in the Quranic Sura in addition to that of it as a guardian, as indicated above. According to the author, its origin could be tied to the well-known Christian representation of the apocalyptic lamb on the book of the seven seals, an iconographic element that could have been confused or assimilated with the tables engraved by the emperor's confidants bearing the names of the young men at the entrance of the cave, since, according to him, the lamb's posture is similar to that described by Mohammed for the dog. This would explain why the dog was given the name "Raquim," an Arabic word meaning "inscription" or "writing", in reference to the two tables engraved with the names and story of the sleepers and deposited in a chest at the entrance to the cave. (Tha'labī 2002, 691) Guidi himself, however, notes that the dog already appeared in Theodosius, *De situ terrae sanctae* (520-530 e. volg.), although, according to him, here the dog seems to embody what was a popular tradition. (Guidi 1885, 64 n.2)

All this gives us an idea of the various adaptations and interpretations that this time-honoured story has had, and continues to have, which leads us to refer again to Koch and his study of the different texts that there were about the sleepers, (Koch 1883, 137-8) some of which even

offered a remarkable variant, such as that by Kazwini (d. 1283), who came to mix in his *Cosmography* two different stories, citing the mountain where the cave was located as ‘al-Raquim’, while the dog was called ‘Qitmir’. The word ‘al-Raquim’ has been assigned different meanings, from the name of the dog that appears next to the sleepers, to that of the mountain where the cave was located, as according to Ibn ‘Abbās who used the term to refer to a valley existing between Ghatafan and Aylah (Eilat), near Palestine (Tha‘labī 2002, 690). Another interpretation is that offered by Griffith, ‘Christian Lore’, 125-7. There are also many who have referred to the colour of the dog, and its name; according to Ali's version, it was the dog of the shepherd that the seven young men met when they fled to the mountain (Tha‘labī 2002, 696). ‘Qitmir’ is the name given to the dog in later versions of the story of the companions.

Meanwhile, Ali's account is rich in details; such as, for example, when he narrates how the sleepers feared that the dog belonging to the shepherd whom they met on their flight, and to whom they told their story, would give them away by barking, so they tried to drive it away by throwing stones at it, until the animal spoke to them to offer them, in the name of Allah, his protection. (Tha‘labī 2002, 697). While Griffith points to a possible influence of the Syriac tradition, in which God is the shepherd that sends a guardian to the youths to protect them (Griffith 2008, 127-8)

For many Shiite commentators the dog is a symbol of the first imam, Ali, Mohammed's nephew and son-in-law. However, for the Sunnis it is a watchful guardian, it even being said that God spoke through it. (Krokus 2017, 51) In Archer's view, (Archer 2016) the dog was simultaneously a Cerberus-like guardian of the underworld, protecting the dead, and a being that reminds mortals that they should not worship other humans, which would accord with the Islamic profession of faith, the Shahada, which only recognizes one God. (Griffith 2008, 117-118) These interpretations lead us to appreciate the importance of the dog in the iconography of the sleepers for Islam, and to understand why the miniaturists always included it in the scene, since the [Quran](#) was clear about this: despite varying numbers of sleepers cited (three, five, seven, eight), there was always a dog. (Quran 18:22)

Finally, following Krokus (Krokus 2017, 51-2) and as is generally known, signs are of great importance in the [Quran](#), as well as in the Bible, such that these companions stand, precisely, as a sign of Divine providence, proof of His existence and an illustration of their collective faith in God, the Judgment, and Resurrection. The [Quran](#), in the same *Sūrat*, emphasizes that they were believers in Allah and, therefore, an example to follow for the Muslims. (Quran 18:13)

MINIATURES OF THE COMPANIONS OF THE CAVE OR ‘AŞĤĀB AL-KAĤF’

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is the clear absence of clarifications of the sleepers’ number in the Quran. To explain, there are some narratives that appear in more than one religion, in both the eastern and western worlds. When this happened, the artists and miniaturists relied on the western narration in cases of some common stories, the ‘Companions of the Cave’ in the *Sūrat al-Khaf* being a clear reflection of this.

Islamic miniaturists took an interest in various collections of stories adapted from the Quran and other Islamic literature. Usually, these narrations were related to events common to Christianity and Judaism. Thus, the prophets recognized by the three Abrahamic religions were predominant in paintings and illustrations in Islamic illuminated manuscripts. Similarities between the main events in the narrations are usually accompanied by differences in their

details. There are common prophets who span the three religions, about whom stories are shared, but with differences in their details, with artists being flexible in their depictions of some aspects.

The narrative of the Seven Sleepers is one of those models of application. The story, as mentioned before, was commonly found in the western and eastern worlds, sharing the same main elements, but differing in details, like the number of sleepers, which is the main focus of our study. It is no coincidence that the number of companions of the cave in all the Islamic miniatures and illuminated manuscripts is seven, even though in Verse 22 of the *Sūrat al-Kahf* there are three, or five, or seven, as the Quran contrasted with the Christian accounts, which did clarify their number. (Kandler 1994, 46) In Islamic illuminated manuscripts there are always seven, which, again, may be interpreted as evidence of the strength of the influence of western literature on the Seven Sleepers story. Christian renderings and different Syriac versions of the legend, like that by Jacob of Serugh (c. 452-c. 521), and John of Ephesus (†585) in his *Ecclesiastical History*; or Dionigi of Tel Maré († 845), cite 8 or 7, while Coptic literature and the *Chronicle of Pseudo Zachariah Rhetor* (sixth century) confirmed seven being the number in both Islamic miniatures and western resources. (Griffith 2008, 129)

Western influence is a well-known characteristic of Islamic paintings and illustrations, affecting their artistic features, content, and the details of their subjects. This point about the details is re explained above. Though the same narratives existed in all the religions, certain details varied; an example would be the number of the sleepers, as in the case in question.

The story of the Seven Sleepers was of obvious interest to Muslim miniaturists, being the most depicted episode of the *Sūrat Al-Khaf's* four common stories. Several paintings are found belonging to different schools of art and extracted from different manuscripts on history, literature, and religion.

A folio dating back to the 16th century from a manuscript copy of the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* [Prophets' Stories], preserved at the Topkapı Sarayı Library in Istanbul, shows the seven companions of the cave or *Aṣḥāb al-kahf* (Plate 1).

They appear while still asleep, with Turkish facial features, following the Ottoman school of art, and in its typical garments and head coverings. The western influence appears not only in the number seven, but also in the sleepers' ages: they are older, when in the Quranic text they are described as young people, teenagers. (Quran 18:10)

The Persian copy of the manuscript of *Qisa al-Anbiyā'*, preserved at the National Library in Paris and dating back to 1581, shows the seven companions sleeping in the cave as teenagers (Plate 2), in accordance with the description found in the Quranic text. This illustration reflects the Safavid School of art, with its vibrant and characteristic designs, head covers, colour distribution and brightness. The scene is divided into two main parts, with the upper one reflecting daily life outside the cave, captured in a dialogue between two horsemen and two other people. In the figure there are two men on horseback talking to other people, in a descriptive part of the scene. The other, at the bottom, represents the cave itself and the illuminated youth inside the cave, in a figurative representation. (Berlekamp 2011, pl. XX) The Quran emphasizes divine activity, which finds its special expression in protection through the cave, and through sleep, which, in contrast, is not portrayed in detail in the Christian legend. It was only through its iconographic representation that it took on significance; since the oldest

preserved iconographic depiction of the sleeping in the cave dates back to the 10th century, it cannot be proven that the Quranic description alludes to such an icon. (Koloska 2017, 82)

The miniatures of the narrations appeared widely in copies of *Qisas 'al-Anbiyā'* in libraries all over the world. The copy at the National Library in Berlin, which dates back to the 15th century and reflects the Turkish Ottoman school of art in its artistic features, shows the seven sleepers with the dog; two of them are painted with their head covers having fallen off, and they appear at different ages (Plate 3). At the top of the miniature is a Quranic verse in red ink describing the content of the inscription, written inside the scene itself.

The illustrations of the *Qisas 'al-Anbiyā'* manuscript normally depicts episodes from the lives of Biblical figures and Islamic prophets, These tales are widely covered in non-Islamic divine books, while they are narrated only briefly in the Quran, which spurred Islamic historians, storytellers, painters and miniaturists to feel free to rely on these non-Islamic sources to illustrate the tales, like those traditions available during medieval Islamic civilization, in Asia, Africa, China, and Europe.

When the authors and miniaturists wanted to follow a chronological order and structure in those tales, they were rendered similar to the Jewish and Christian versions of the Bible in both the eastern and western worlds. The illustrations in this manuscript usually begin with the Creation of the world and its various creatures, including angels, culminating with Adam. Following the tales of the prophets, and Quranic stories like that of the Seven Sleepers, Muslim authors, writers and painters incorporated related narrations and oral traditions to create narrative content that echoed medieval Christian and Jewish stories, with several magnificently illuminated versions being created by Persian and Ottoman miniaturists revealing the clear influence of their Christian neighbours in the West. (Lohlker 2011, 19)

Actually, the depictions of the story appeared in various manuscripts, not only those abovementioned *Qisas 'al-Anbiyā'*. A folio from the *Falnameh* manuscript, (Okahsa 1989, 154) held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and dating back to the 16th century, depicts, once again, seven companions in the cave in the *Aṣḥāb al-kahf* (Plate 4). And it belongs to a different school of art, the Mongol/Indian one, with the artists concentrating on their various positions in the cave, with brilliant colours and facial features matching their characteristics. (Welch 1985, fig 23) It shows the sleepers safe in the dark cavern against a background that seems to echo an inky black sky. This verse allows the sleepers to wait for centuries while a 'pagan king' blocks the entranceway to the cave. The companions' peaceful slumber contrasts with a commotion outdoors, with men there holding swords and shields. At the top of the image, a figure shown to be leading the Roman Emperor was probably meant to depict the devil.

This was not the only one in that manuscript; there is a folio from another copy of the same manuscript of *Falnameh* that is housed the Topkapı Sarayı Museum in Istanbul and dates back to 1570. (Cagman 1979, Pl.81) It relates the same details of the story, without any differences, especially as regards their number, which is always seven. (Titley 1983, 280)

Generally, the 16th century is remarkable for the richness of its religious miniatures, which portrayed stories of the prophets, and from the Quran, including the story in question. Other manuscripts showed the Seven Sleepers, like the Turkish copy of *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*, which dates back to 1583 and is housed at the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, displaying the Seven Sleepers' miniature as well.

The same century featured an abundance of paintings extracted from copies of *Qisas al-Anbiyā'*, manuscripts like the Aṣḥāb al-kaḥf [Companions of the Cave] with representations appearing on a folio in a manuscript copy of *Qisas 'al-Anbiyā'*, preserved at the National Library in Paris and dating back to 1581 (Plate 5). It is rich in Persian artistic attributes. (Berlekamp 2011, Pl.X) The artist succeeded in painting their sleeping positions with their bodies and heads in different directions, while the variety of colours and clothing enhanced the aesthetics of their postures. The colouring seems to be the master stroke of the illustration, extending to the rocks of the cave itself. (Brend 1991, 75)

Another representation of the same scene is found on a Turkish folio in a manuscript of *Qisas 'al-Anbiyā'*, dating back to 1579 and housed at the Topkapı Sarayı Library in Istanbul (Plate 6). In this case they were represented in a vertical, parallel position with a style departing from that found in previous models.

In the 16th century interest was expressed in the same story, with evolving features but the same number of sleepers, seven, as in the Persian folio preserved at the National Library in Berlin (Plate 7). The miniatures of the narration appeared earlier, during the 15th century, which was considered an early period in the production of religious illustrations. They appeared with quite different features, such as disproportionate body parts characterized by large heads, as found in earlier productions of Islamic miniatures. This was a characteristic commonly found in early Islamic paintings. (Tittley 1983, 280)

All the Islamic depictions featured seven sleepers, coinciding with the western tradition. The debate is usually regarding the number of the companions to be portrayed in the cave. If only one Islamic miniature is found not having seven sleepers, it could be interpreted that the miniaturist had followed the Quranic text, but they were *always* represented as seven in number, which confirms the manifest and constant western influence on the Islamic approach.

Reviewing the Islamic sources of interpretations of this number, most of the opinions found coincide with that of Ibn 'Abbās, confirming that there were seven. (al-Shāwkanī 1998, 285) At the same time, it is difficult to believe that Muslim illustrators were influenced by Ibn 'Abbās's view as regards their number, as there is no Islamic historical tradition, from the 7th century until the advent of the painted manuscripts, dictating that there should be seven, as the Quranic texts clearly indicate that there were three, or five, or seven. (Elassal 2018, 4-6)

Thus, no other explanation seems plausible except that of western influence on the Muslim miniaturists, through the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which is sufficiently similar to the Islamic version of the tale, with the Christian narrative specifying the number of youths who hid in the cave outside the city of Ephesus in the third century to escape religious persecution, emerging around three centuries later. (Liuzza 2016, 66)

The story is illustrated in manuscripts dating back to different periods - the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries - belonging to different schools of art, such as the Persian, Indian and Turkish ones, and extracted from different manuscripts and copies. All the sources featured the same details and the same number of companions in the cave: seven. Not only does the number of sleepers depicted reflect a willingness to ignore the details in the Quranic texts, but also their ages, as the companions portrayed are older than those described in the Quran.

The number of companions is invariably seven in the Islamic miniatures representing this story, and in the many Muslim illustrations of it. In addition, Islamic miniaturists were particular about representing the dog in all the miniatures found. (Milstein 1999, 152) Curiously, the dog clearly

exists in the Quranic text, but does not appear at all in Christian paintings. Representations of the dog differed from one depiction to another, presenting different artistic features, but its inclusion was an essential aspect of all the miniatures.

Another difference is that in Christian miniatures the seven generally wear a halo, alluding to their martyrdom, due to the suffering they endured for being faithful to their beliefs. In the Islamic ones, on the other hand, they usually wear a turban. As we have already pointed out, for Koloska, in the *Aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* the desire was to emphasize the sleepers' faith without the need to resort to death. If they had been considered martyrs or saints of Islam, they would have been depicted with the halo surrounding their faces, or with their facial features veiled, as is customary in Islamic miniatures for this type of personage.

There are two main divergences between the Quran and illustrations of this tale within it: the number of the sleepers, and their ages; in the Quran their number is not definitively specified, but it does state that they were young, while, conversely, in the miniatures their number is constant, and they are not invariably young. Scholars have confirmed that being young, in the western legend, concurs with what was stated in the Quranic verses. (Koloska 2017, 81)

CONCLUSION

This study points to the decisive and certain western influence on Islamic paintings and miniatures illustrating the *Aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* (Companions of the Cave) story. All the miniatures found related to the story set the number of sleepers at seven, while the Quranic narration never specifies their number. This number seven, then, is obviously a result of the influence of the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, in which seven Christians hide from a wicked emperor in a cave.

Analysing some examples of Islamic miniatures dating back to the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, different manuscripts, various schools of art, and the divine texts and verses in the Quran, we find that all these works of art coincide with western Christian versions of the legend, which clearly and emphatically state that there were seven sleepers.

This influence on Islamic art should not surprise us, as it was enriched by western sources in its representations of shared stories and events, including other stories from the same 18th chapter of the Quran, in which *Dhu al-Qarnayn* is portrayed as Alexander the Great in Islamic miniatures, though the Quranic verses did not refer to or clearly indicate the name. Another example of a story common to the eastern and western worlds is that of King *Dhu al-Qarnayn*, mentioned in the same chapter, without more details. While the Quran never states that he was, in fact, Alexander the Great, Islamic miniaturists and artists drew on the western narration and depicted him as such, manifesting a dynamic of cultural interaction and influence between the eastern and western worlds, with the Christian tradition, in this case, shaping the Islamic artistic heritage.

The study assured a clear interpretation of the number seven for the companions of the cave in the Islamic miniature of being seven accompanied by their dog and the absence of other problems that the Quran has given at the Islamic art production.

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Plate 1, Companions of the Cave or Aṣḥāb al-kahf, a Turkish folio from the manuscript *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, 16th Century. Topkapı Sarayı Library, Istanbul. After: <https://www.akh-images.co.uk/archive/> (Accessed 1-4-2022, 12:30 am)



Plate 2, Companions of the Cave, a folio from the manuscript *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, 1581. National Library, Paris. After: Berlekamp, Persis. 2011. *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Pl. XX.



Plate 3, Aṣḥāb al-kahf, a Turkish folio from the manuscript *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, 15th century. National Library, Berlin. After: <https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de> (Accessed 1-4-2022, 2:40 pm)

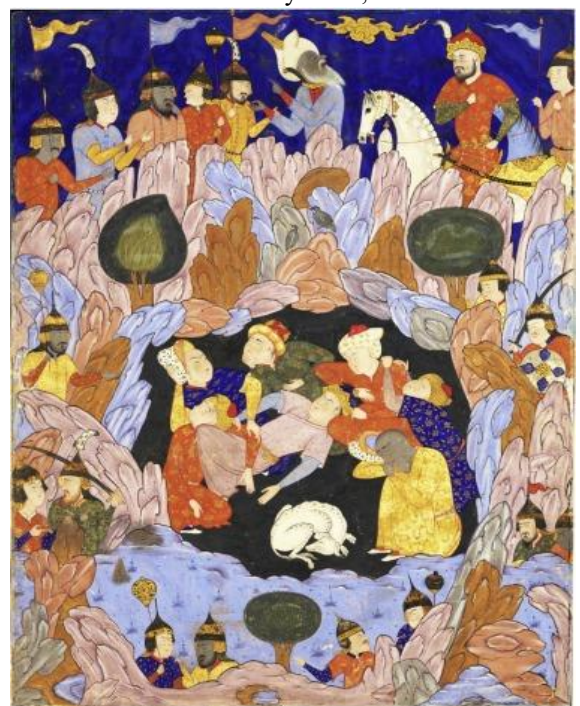


Plate 4, Companions of the Cave or Aṣḥāb al-kahf, a folio from the manuscript *Falnameh*, 16th century. Metropolitan Museum, New York. After: Welch, Stuart C. 1985. *India. Art and Culture, 1300-1900*. New York: Metropolitan Museum. 23



Plate 5, Companions of the Cave, a folio from the manuscript *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, 1581. National Library, Paris.

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Plate 6, Companions of the Cave or Aṣḥāb al-kaḥf, a Turkish folio from manuscript *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, 1579. Topkapi Serail Library, Istanbul. After:

<https://www.akg-images.co.uk/CS>

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Plate 7, Companions of the Cave, a Persian separated folio, 17th century. National Library, Berlin.

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التأثيرات الغربية على تصاوير النائمين السبعة في المنمنمات الإسلامية

الملخص

لقد حظيت قصة اصحاب الكهف بأهمية بالغة في الموروث العربي والتراثي في الحضارة والفنون الإسلامية، ولقد ضاعف من أهمية القصة ذكرها في القرآن الكريم في صدر السورة الثامنة عشرة في الجزء الخامس عشر من القرآن الكريم التي حملت اسم الكهف اشارة الى المكان الذي عاش فيه النائمون السبعة، ولم يحدد القرآن عددهم واختلفت الروايات حول العدد، بل أعطى القرآن ثلاثة احتمالات لعدد فتية الكهف اما ثلاثة رابعهم كلبهم، او خمسة سادسهم كلبهم، او سبعة ثامنهم كلبهم، ولم ينفي القرآن معرفة البعض بعددهم حيث اخبر بأن القليل هو من يعلم عددهم، الا ان المصور المسلم من خلال المنمنمات الإسلامية قد صورهم دائما سبعة نائمين وثمانهم كلبهم ولم يلتفت الى الاحتمالات الاخرى التي وضعها القرآن، تهدف الدراسة الى معرفة السبب وراء تجسيد فتية الكهف في تصاوير المنمنمات الإسلامية سبعة افراد وعدم وجود الاحتمالات الاخرى التي وضعها القرآن مما يشير الى التأثير الغربي لرواية النائمين السبعة في المصادر المسيحية الغربية على فكر المصور المسلم وهو التأثير التي شهدته أوجه أخرى عديدة من الحضارة الإسلامية، يأتي ذلك من خلال دراسة المصادر الغربية للقصة وتحليل تأثيرها على الحضارة الإسلامية كذلك دراسة نماذج من المنمنمات الإسلامية المختلفة التي صورت قصة اصحاب الكهف.

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بيانات المقال

تاريخ المقال

تم الاستلام في ١٥ يناير ٢٠٢٤

تم استلام النسخة المنقحة في ٤ أبريل ٢٠٢٤

تم قبول البحث في ١٧ أبريل ٢٠٢٤
متاح على الإنترنت في ١٧ أبريل ٢٠٢٤

الكلمات الدالة

المنمنمات الإسلامية
النائمون السبعة
اصحاب الكهف
الفن الإسلامي
المسيحية
الإسلام