Muhammad Juki’s Shahnamah of Firdausi

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The *Shāhnāmeh* of Firdausi produced for the Timurid Muhammad Jūkī (a grandson of Timūr) in the 1440s is one of the finest surviving Persian manuscripts produced between the heyday of Baysunghur’s academy in Herat and the appearance of Bihzād.

It has thirty-one exquisite miniature paintings depicting scenes from the epic tale and fine illumination on two pages. The manuscript was presented to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834 by Lt. Col. C. J. Doyle who had probably received it as a parting gift from Lord Hastings on leaving India. It had previously been in the Mughal Imperial Library and bears the seals of the Mughal emperors Bābur, Humāyūn, Jahāngīr, Shāh Jahan and Aurangzīb; there is an autograph note by Shāh Jahan and further notes reveal its subsequent history.

This monograph written by Dr Barbara Brend is the first complete study of the manuscript and provides a detailed analysis of the cycle of illustrations; a commentary on the Mughal notes by A. H. Morton which offer telling insights into the practices of the Mughal library.
Muhammad Juki’s
Shahnamah of Firdausi
To those who have studied this manuscript before me
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Foreword

Gordon Johnson

The copy of Firdausi's epic Shāhnāma made in Herat in the 1440s for Timur's descendant Muhammad Jūki is the finest Persian manuscript to have survived from the fifteenth century. It is in remarkably good condition, with thirty-one illustrations and two pages of exquisite illumination. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, took the manuscript to India, and Firdausi is one of several great writers Babur used as a stylistic model and as a source of aphorisms for his Memoirs. The manuscript remained in the Mughal imperial collection until the eighteenth century when, with the decline of Mughal authority, it passed to the Navvabs of Awadh. From Awadh it was presented to the British in the person of the Marquess of Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal 1813–23, and he in turn gave it to his Military Secretary, Lt. Col. Charles Doyle. The Shāhnāmah then formed part of a collection of books and manuscripts which Doyle gave to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834. The Society has since deposited the manuscript in the British Library to ensure its proper conservation and to make it more easily available for study.

Muhammad Jūki's Shāhnāmah has already attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, and has featured in several exhibitions of Persian art. But this is the first monograph to consider the manuscript as a whole, and to publish the illustrations in full colour. Until recently, the costs of doing so would have been prohibitively expensive and the resulting book would have been bought by only a few institutions or wealthy collectors. Changes in print technology, however, have made possible the production of a book which brings the manuscript in all its glory, together with a scholarly commentary within reach of individual students and the general public. The purpose of the RAS is "the encouragement of science, literature and the arts in relation to Asia"; making an important manuscript widely available fulfils an essential part of that purpose. Moreover, the study of classical Persian literature, and knowledge of the extraordinarily complex cultural history of the Iranian plateau and the surrounding regions, are of enormous importance for a better understanding of our contemporary world.

The Society is grateful to the Islamic Manuscript Association which bore the cost of making new digital photographs of the whole manuscript. Philip Wilson Publishers, specialists in the publication of art books and catalogues, agreed to be the co-publisher of this edition and the Society has benefited enormously from the collaboration. Many people have contributed to the preparation of the volume, but a special thanks must go to Mr A. H. Morton for new work on the Mughal seals in the manuscript. Above all, the Society is profoundly grateful to Dr Barbara Brend who ten years ago undertook the task of overseeing the project. Her own research for this edition of Muhammad Jūki's Shāhnāmah has ensured that the book is not only an aesthetic delight but a significant contribution to scholarship.

Gordon Johnson
President of the Royal Asiatic Society
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Preface
Barbara Brend

The illustrated Shahnama manuscript made for Muhammad Jaki has been in the possession of the Royal Asiatic Society for some one hundred and eighty years and has been discussed by scholars in print for some eighty. Thus the present volume must open with an expression of consciousness of the debt owed to previous work, both in the matter of identification and of interpretation. For this basis one cannot but be grateful. Beyond points of detail, the scholars’ respect for this manuscript, particularly its illustrations, is evident in the carefully chosen words of their generalizations. In his preface to J. V. R. Wilkinson’s book of 1931, Laurence Binyon assesses the painted pages’ function as illustration: ‘in the finest of these designs we find, with all the elaboration of lovely detail, an impressive presentation of the subject’. While in 1979 B.W. Robinson quotes from Basil Gray for the pictures’ aesthetic quality: ‘that superb combination of crisp and faultless execution, romantic and evocative atmosphere, and dazzling colour that rakes one, literally, catch one’s breath’. Following on from such scholarship, it may seem an act of temerity to have embarked on a further publication. I can only say that to them I dedicate this monograph.

The main purpose of the new project, as conceived by Andrea Belloli, formerly Publications Officer at the Royal Asiatic Society, was to make all the illustrations available together in colour; the idea has been brought to a conclusion under her successor Anna Lethbridge. Meanwhile, with regard to the RAS, thanks are due to Helen Cordell, former Hon. Librarian, for her encouragement, and for help with associated material, to the former Librarian Michael Pollock, to the present Librarian Kathy Lazenbatt, who has also checked the index meticulously, and to the Assistant Librarian Alice McEwan. I should like to thank succeeding Councils of the RAS for favouring the project, Francis Robinson and Tony Stockwell, former presidents, for their support for it, and Gordon Johnson, President, for his foreword. In particular I wish to thank Alison Ohta, Curator, for sustained encouragement and advice.

The manuscript is on long-term loan at the British Library. I first became acquainted with it there in the 1970s, when it was in the care of Miss Norah Titeley, and to her I am ever grateful for numerous opportunities to see it. More recently I have studied it in its present separated condition: its pictures under the supervision of Jennifer Howes, Helen George, Jodie Butterworth and Malini Roy of the British Library, and its text under the supervision of David Jacobs, Senior Conservator of the Library, to whom I am grateful for various comments and sorts of technical assistance. It is through the good offices of Susan Whitfield, the British Library’s Head of Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, that the illustrations and other features were photographed digitally by Rachel Roberts, with great skill and under considerable pressure of time.

On renewed study of the text section it became apparent that the verso of the last folio was covered in notes, which had been lost to view since this was stuck to a later endpaper. A separation was performed by David Jacobs. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to
A. H. Morton of the RAS for his scholarly reading of these notes and seal imprints and his placing of them in their Mughal context. I also thank A. H. Morton for preserving me from committing various errors to print, and I am also grateful to him for accepting a mode of transliteration which would not have been his choice.

I am very grateful to Teresa Fitzherbert for reading the text at a time when it had become rather set in its ways, and for her academic precision and kindness of expression. In the few instances where I have not followed her advice the consequences will be on my own head.

For various corrections and for points of information I thank Manijeh Bayani, Pip Dodd of the National Army Museum, Robert Skelton, Nabil Saidi, Andrew Wilton, and Eva-Maria von Knnitz. For administrative and technical assistance I thank Manijeh Bayani again, and Ali Aghar Bakhtiar, Caroline Finkel, Francesca Galloway, Judith Kolbas, and Keith Ostler. I also thank Julian Collis who has guided me through tangled thickets of word-processing to the sunny uplands of Jobhuni diacritics and farsi in Nisus.

I am grateful to Philip Wilson for his enthusiastic acceptance of the proposal for his eponymous publishing company; to the designer Linda Wade who has been creative and diligent; to Stephen Rose for deploying his expertise in colour-matching, Matthew Hartley for organisation; and to David Hawkins for his exemplary copy-editing.

My thanks are due to all the institutions that have permitted the reproduction of images from their collections: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; British Library; Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Goestan Palace Museum, Tehran; Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum; National Army Museum, London; School of Oriental and African Studies, London; Staatsbibliotek zu Berlin; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; Topkaps Sarayi Muzesi, Istanbul; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Serindia Publications—and also to a private collector. I am grateful to all their administrative staff who have seen me through the various ordering procedures.

I am of course more than grateful to the RAS for having permitted me this opportunity. And with the RAS, I am very grateful to the Islamic Manuscript Association for a generous grant for the digital photography.

Along the way various choices have been made. The illustrations of the RAS manuscript are reproduced almost as in life, but because they have been remargined with a blue ruling near the outer edges of the margin paper, a feature that would have created an unsteady effect in reproduction, the folios have been very slightly enlarged in order to avoid this problem. A sample page with blue margin is included. However, the illustrations from the RAS manuscript (though not the comparative pictures) have been set in according to their Persian recto or verso position. This is in order to respect the intentions of the artists who used extensions into the margin with deliberate intention, those towards the fore-edge sometimes indicating expansion or liberty, and those towards the gutter sometimes resistance or confinement. Measurements of text space and of pictures have been taken with rulings included. Where there is an extension into the margins the main picture size is given in brackets.

The opportunity afforded by the new photography to include details and considerable enlargements has been taken. Though the results are rather beyond the aesthetic of the originals, these are instructive in showing that, even much enlarged, the brushwork appears exceedingly fine. The question so often raised again presents itself: how could the artists see to do their work? A satisfactory answer is yet to be presented.

We know that the Arab scientist, Ibn Hayham, wrote his Kitab al-Mansur (Book of Optics) in 1021, and that a Mughal painting shows a Persian painter wearing glasses in the 1550s, but it is not clear what comes in between. Perhaps a form of microscopic vision was a necessary physical attribute of painters, and, if so, perhaps it ran in families.

Following the lead of Wilkinson's publication, the pictures are accompanied by condensed accounts of the relevant portions of the narrative, in the endeavour to supply a general background for the understanding of the pictures as illustrations. Then, in consideration of more recent scholarship's interest, the 'break lines', those couplets that immediately preceed illustrations and may in consequence sometimes be the proximate stimulus for an artist's work, have been emphasised by verse translation. The versification is somewhat free, aiming to reproduce the spirit rather than the letter, and if it contains errors or laxity it is no one's fault but my own. With these preliminaries the attempt is made to interpret the artists' intentions and methods.
Manuscripts often have a many-layered history that requires multiple expositions. In the case of the Shahnameh it seemed useful to start with some account of the times of the author, when the text in its abstract sense came together, in order to show the broad outlines of the narrative and its conceptions, against which subsequent patrons and artists would make their art-historical choices. Timurid patronage is treated in greater detail in order to situate the production of the manuscript. The second phase of its existence is in the context of Mughal history, and here, through notes read and interpreted by A. H. Morton, detail is added to a known framework. Thirdly, as discerned by Robinson, nineteenth-century Lakhnau must be the setting where it came into British hands.

It has been the policy of this monograph to push beyond the dry recital of data towards interpretations, whether of intentions and approximate identity of the artists, or the intentions and state of mind of the patron. This is of course a potentially risky procedure. I may have erred, but I hope that I shall have provided material for further discussion.

Note on transliteration

Transliteration has been used as is the custom in publications of this material by the Royal Asiatic Society. It is sometimes said that transliteration is not of interest to the general reader and is not needed by the specialist, but it is useful to those of us who may be somewhere between those states. The mode employed here was acquired in SOAS, and is used with an inclination to Persian rather than Arabic. Place names that are likely to occur in newspapers are not transliterated; however, Iran, when referred to in the narrative and as the counterpart to Firan, does bear diacritics. In rendering the names of the Turkmen Sheik confederations I have proceeded from the spelling in published Persian histories of the period.