PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT

AN UNKNOWN SHĀḤNĀMA FROM ANN ARBOR

The focus of this paper is a manuscript that has been preserved for years in the collection of the Graduate Library, University of Michigan. However, in contrast with its famous Ann Arbor neighbour from the University of Michigan Museum of Art [1], this manuscript has attracted no attention yet.

I will first provide a short note about the collection itself, as it does not yet have its own published catalogue [2]. The Islamic part of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections of the Graduate Library contains manuscripts in Arabic, Persian and Turkish languages, which can be divided into smaller collections according to the date of their accession from the 15th to the 17th c., though most are from modern times. The manuscripts of refined calligraphy are highly decorated with miniatures, executed in polychrome and gold. Among those specially worth mentioning are copies of Yūsufu Zanjušī by ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414–92) with 11 miniatures, dated 24 dhūl-Ḥijja 1006 [3]; 29 July 1598, Majālis al-‘Ukhrā by Kamal al-Dīn Ḥusayn Gūzurgāḥī (d. 1524) with 68 miniatures, dated 1006/1597–8, and a Maḥnānī by Jālāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–73) with 14 miniatures, also dating from the 16th c. [4].

The provenance of the manuscript of Firūdawī's Shāḥnāma that is the subject of my account is not obvious. In the library the manuscript (acquisition No. 280) is referred to the so-called Abdullāhīdī section. In the internal library notes it is said:

The greater part of the private manuscript collection of a previous ruler of Turkey, Sultan Abdullāhīdī, is now owned by the University of Michigan. [...] he was a great lover of rare and artistically executed objects, particularly of fine and old manuscripts of the famous Persian, Turkish and Arabic authors.

On his deposition he took his private library with him into exile, and when he died it was sold to De Marinis, an Italian dealer whose shop in Florence was for years the meeting place for collectors. De Marinis expected to sell it to the late J. Pierpont Morgan, but Mr. Morgan's death in Rome brought that project to an end. Then the war came, and finally the collection was purchased by an Egyptian dealer from whom the University of Michigan has bought many extremely valuable manuscripts and papryi through the generosity of certain devoted friends.

The late dealer, after long negotiations during which an opportunity was given to both Yale and Princeton to buy the lot, brought the library to London, where the experts in the British Museum established its value and authenticity. Thanks to the generous gift of a person who did not allow his name to be published, the University bought about two-thirds of the manuscripts, 284 in all, the rest remaining with the British Museum. They reached Ann Arbor in the autumn of 1924.

However, there must be serious doubts about the credibility of some of this information, as neither in the British Museum nor in the British Library is there a single archival note that mentions acquisitions from the Abdullāhīdī collection [5].

Having arrived in Michigan as a part of the Sultan Abdullāhīdī collection, the manuscript of the Shāḥnāma, with its 14 miniatures, was nevertheless neither described nor even mentioned in any work on Muslim book painting. Hence my main aim in the present paper is to provide a factual account of the manuscript. In addition, however, I wish to concentrate on the relationship between the illustrations and the text of Firūdawī's epic, which is often ignored by art historians concerned only with the paintings themselves.

In relating the images to the written words of the poem, we can take advantage of the concept of the “break-line”, currently being developed by Dr. Farhad Mehrzad, University of Neuchâtel [6]. The break-lines, defined as the break or verses coming immediately before and after the painting, help us to anchor the image in its precise place in the text, which of course is chosen deliberately and not at random, and so to identify correctly the scene being depicted. As was usually the case, the calligrapher left a space for the artist to create his painting afterwards. This is particularly true of the Ann Arbor manuscript, in which it seems clear that the illustrations were added some time after the text was completed, and the calligrapher and artist were no longer working in unison. As we shall see, there is often

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1 I owe a special debt to Dr. J. M. Rogers and Dr. Ch. P. Melville for having read through the whole draft, generously giving me various comments on it. Needless to say that the author only is responsible for any ignorance revealed here.

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a great disparity between the text and the image. This raises the whole question of the titles assigned to miniature paintings, and whether the titles given to many pictures are actually correct: we shall argue that there needs to be a greater attention to the specific scene title and less to the general story or chapter title. We shall also be able to compare the way these scenes have been illustrated in the Ann Arbor manuscript with a few other examples, and to consider the overall scheme of illustrations in this copy of Firdawsi's work.

At present the codex contains 615 folios, and produces the impression of a complete full copy. The text is organized in 4 columns with 25 lines on each page. The manuscript has been restored and during restoration the margins were slightly trimmed, partly together with guard words (cancellations), partly removed. The missing fol. 9 was added and the text was rewritten. There are no imprints of owners' seals, or ex libris labels or signatures. The manuscript has three 'tawāris (double page illumination at the beginning of the most important chapters) and one sarīlawī (initial illumination in the beginning of the book), and 14 miniatures in local Indian style.

The text is therefore not very heavily illustrated, an average of one picture every 40 folios or so, though the distribution of paintings is rather irregular, the gaps ranging from 6 folios to 135, and, as is common, without any illustrations in the "historical" section of the poem, after the establishment of the Šūrāni dynasty under Ardašīr. Ten of the 14 paintings illustrate episodes occurring in the lifetime of the main hero, Rustam, and include several of the most frequently illustrated scenes. From this perspective, there is little that is unusual in the illustrative programme of the manuscript, though as we shall see, the iconography of the paintings does have several original and rather idiosyncratic features.

It is especially difficult to attribute the manuscript to any particular place and date. On fol. 615v there is a colophon, where the calligrapher twice had the opportunity to mention the year of finishing his work, but twice failed to do so: once after giving the date and the month (7 jamādī I) and again after the word sana (year). It seems remarkable that he could just forget to write the year. But what we have row in the Persian-Arabic colophon is as follows (fig. 1):


Unfortunately the attempt to treat the word after sana as a chronogram does not yield any satisfactory result. Being deciphered according to abjad system, the word sīyās gives 818/1419: too early to be acceptable for this manuscript [7]. According to its palaeographic features, the script and the miniatures both suggest a much later date for the production of the manuscript: end of 16th—beginning of 17th c. [8].

As for the place of origin, the scribe was evidently of Iranian background and training, even if living in India, while the paintings are clearly to be distinguished as Indian. It seems that the calligrapher and painter (there were at least two of them) did not work in the same period. Philippa Vaughan suggests that the slight disparity between the size of the picture and the size of its frame may reflect the fact that the pictures were supplied later, rather than just weak work [9]. She also proposes the "sub-imperial" Mughal style of the first quarter of the 17th c. for the paintings, with some influence of the palatte of the Kalūnīr school: especially the combination of bright pink, orange and light green. P. Noveck refers the manuscript to the later period—end of the 17th—beginning of the 18th c. Anatoly Ivanov, who looked through all the pictures, suggested a distinct Central Asian touch in depicting of the costumes and faces, especially in the first two miniatures.

The calligraphy of the manuscript creates the impression of a higher level of execution than the painting. Nevertheless, the writing, rather satisfactory in its appearance, is disappointing when read. The calligrapher seems not to have been perfectly educated in poetry, allowing himself to break the rules of prosody, which is almost impossible for a man of such a profession: it was not uncommon for calligraphers even to add some lines of their own during their work. Possibly the calligrapher did not care about his reputation, which could indicate that his priority in producing this manuscript was more commercial than aesthetic, and he tried to do his work as quickly as possible. Such an attitude affected the quality of the manuscript.

Take for example the beginning of the end of the manuscript. On fol. 2r in the famous bayt:

Tawāris buwad har dāna buwad
Zi dānish dīl-i pīr dāna buwad.

Whever is wise, is powerful.
The old man's heart is young through knowledge [10].

the rhyme and actually the sense are destroyed by a lapsus

colami:

Tawāris buwad har dāna buwad
Zi dānish dīl-i pīr dāna buwad.

The final miniature of the manuscript is followed by the bayt:

Bayājard arzī-dī rūs-i sufīd,
Bar-afshār dāna hā rūs-i sufīd.

The other version offers a more appropriate text with regard to the poetic canons:

Bayājard arzī-dī rūs-i kawād,
Bar-afshār dāna hā rūs-i sufīd.

He brought food and a brass candelabrum,
He kindled a fire for an auspicious day [11].

We will see that such discrepancies between the manuscript and other copies closer to a standard text are rather frequent, even in those short passages of text associated with the illustrations.

Turning to these illustrations, I will now describe the fourteen miniatures contained in the manuscript, with particular reference to their relationship with the text of Firdawsi's poem. They are as follows.

FIG. 2
The subject is illustrated extremely rarely. Faridun Mehtar's index of frequently illustrated scenes, based on the Michigan Index of Nuremberg and Davis compiled under the guidance of Oleg Grabar [12], analyses more than 100 manuscripts from different collections throughout the world. According to Mehtar's index, it is the scene of the murder of Iraj by his brothers Salm and Tuir that is one of the most popular among the painters; it was depicted in 42 manuscripts. The moment when Faridun learns about his son's crime is relatively less known; it was met only in 9 manuscripts, in the version: "Iraj's coffin brought to Faridun" [13].

According to Firdawsi, Iraj was killed by Tuir and Salm, who were insulted by the unfair decision of their father to grant the kingdom over their heads to their younger brother Iraj. Inflated by the news, they find Iraj, and Tuir starts rebuking him for his usurpation. Iraj readily renounces his royal rights, which does not calm Tuir down. On the contrary, he loses control over himself, jumps off his gold stool and strikes Iraj with it. Iraj falls down on his knees and begs his brothers not to kill him and their old father, explaining that his death will naturally follow his own. These words remind Tuir of his father's unjust decision and exclusive love towards Iraj, and he takes out the poisoned dagger from his boot and kills his brother, striking him many times... Finally he cuts off his head and sends it to their father, king Faridun. Immediately frightened by the terrible murder they have committed, two brothers flee the country:

Birilfand biil as du fildik i qilm
Yak i dai yi Ciltas chid, yak i dal i Rim.
Those two, ill-meaning and unjust, then went,
One went to China, one to Byzantium [14].

The established tradition of depicting this scene is based more or less closely on the original text. Faridun receives the gold coffin, with the remains of his beloved son. However, according to Firdawsi, the coffin contained Iraj's head only, so that it is possible to suppose that it was not a coffin of a regular size but some smaller container for carrying the severed head. Firdawsi mentions that Faridun is informed of the terrible news, by being shown Iraj's head, covered with silk. The traditional treatment of messengers bringing bad news in Medieval courts is well known: such a messenger could even be killed, in contrast to a bearer of good news who could be rewarded with pearls to fill his mouth, horses, houses or whole provinces. The poet describes the messenger as a black knight who brought the soul parcel and unveiled it:

Zi tibhit chilm parnavin har khojtid
Burkha xur a Iraj ismad putul.
When he drew aside the silk from the coffin
The severed head of Iraj was revealed [15].

In the text, Faridun had spent some time preparing for a lavish meeting with his sons. Then he could not wait any more, mounted his horse and accompanied by his courtiers left town to meet them on their way. But he met the black knight instead, received the horrible news and:
be a sort of reverse image of the scene itself. Faridūn, in his
sight, gave orders for his wonderful gardens to be
destroyed:

Gulzān-e-āgh bar-kānd-u sārvān hūzūrī
īī zuhārīnīī gārīī-i āgh bālīdūkht.

He uprooted his flower garden and burned the cypresses
He hitched up the eye of happiness once and for all [20].

What is striking is the contrast of mood between two
parts of the composition: the horror of the scene
with Faridūn and the peaceful and idyllic work of two gardeners
in the royal park. Such striking contrasts between the represen-
tation of death, torture, sufferings and executions and
the surprisingly indifferent attitude of the “occasional” fig-
ures in the painting towards the main action of the com-
position are a common feature of Persian miniature painting
up to the end of the 18th c.

In other words the picture seems to be formally equal
(in size, palette) between the two parts of the composition,
beside to each other by their contrasting moods. The con-
trast could be seen as an effective way of intensifying ex-
pression, or in this case, the idea of this garden to be raised
in a moment according to the order of Faridūn as a result of
such grievous events — though such an interpretation, of
cause, is far from reflecting Firouzān’s text.

The details of the painting betray its Indian origin in ar-
chitecture, palette, birds and vegetation, which is quite rec-
ognizable in terms of the different kinds of trees, plants and
flowers: palms, cypress, bananas and jasmine. In depicting
the pavilions the painter has attempted to show three-di-
ensional depth, shading the corners of buildings.

2. “Shāh Manūchehr sends Sām to fight Mīhrāb, ghān of Kābul” (fig. 3)

This painting introduces one of the most intriguing
subjects in the Shāhnāma, the story of how two royal ladies
(a queen and a princess) saved their country from the exter-
nal invasion of the far stronger enemy, while their husband
and father, Mīhrāb, the king of Kābul, cowardly lost any
hope of defending his kingdom. In comparison with the Biblical
subject about Judith and Holofernes the story from the
Shāhnāma ends happily: two young persons, chil-
dren of two hostile clans fall in love with each other and get
married due to the diplomatic skills and cleverness of two
women, Rūdhīrī and her mother Sindokht. Rūdhīrī herself is
a bright image of a young and romantic but also strong
willed girl who knows what she wants and knows how to
get it.

In the picture Shāh Manūchehr sends his faithful knight
Sām to conquer the mountain country of Kābul. Sām has
just reached the ghānī with his report about his successful
expedition to the land of demons who inhabit of
Mīzandarūn and Karagārān. Having heard the detailed
story of how Sām with his army killed almost all the dīvān
in the conquered country, Manūchehr gives him another
task to go to Kābul [21], burn it to the ground and kill not
only the ghānī but all those who were connected with him:

Hūr ṣīn kās kī paymānhā-yī bā bawad
Bamagūk di dīvān-yī bā bawad
Dīwūr ṣī bā ṣād tūkhna-yī bā bawad
Zī payvand-yī Zāhībī kāšt bawad
Sīr az rū ṣīn kās kāfam-yī fākhā
Zī payvand-yī Zāhībī-yī wālī-yī bā bawad

Everyone who is connected with him
The great, who is faithful to him,
Secondly: everyone who descends from him,
Due to Zāhībī, is a wizard —
Cut off his head, wash the earth
From any connection with Zāhībī and his relatives [22].

The reason why Manūchehr decided to send Sām im-
mediately after his previous campaign was not only his
anxiety to destroy the root of Zāhībī, the sublimation of
the demonic nature in the human being and his readiness
to serve the God of Good, Ahura Mazda and clear the earth of
dīvān, the slaves of Angra Mainyu, the God of Evil [23].
It was Sām who came to Manūchehr asking his support over
a very delicate question: Sām wanted to prevent his son Zīl

from a marriage which he disapproved. Relations between
father and son were rather tense from the very birth of Zīl,
who was rejected by his father because of the colour of the
baby’s hair. Sām considered the baby with the white hair to
be a bad omen and ordered him to be left in the mountains
to be eaten by wild animals. Zīl was lucky enough not to
be eaten. When he was found by the mysterious bird Simurgh
and taken to her nest as a meal for her nestlings, it was they
who felt pity towards Zīl and refused to eat him. After
some time Sām dreamed of his son, repented of his cruelty
and tried to find him. Now the grown up Zīl, passing by the
castle of Mīhrāb, saw his beautiful daughter Rūdhīrī and
fell in love with her. Being unable to prevent his son from
marrying, Sām decided to use the royal military force. That
is why he came to the ghānī, complaining of Mīhrāb. His
words produced a strong impression on the ghānī:

Bo-a-dā ghānī shāhn kāעד-nūsī ʃīr-nāmād
Naṣṣūrān ādū gū ṣīn gū ṣīn bā fārād

The ghānī demonstrated to him such rage and fury,
That he did not dare to add a word [24].

The subject of the picture is one of the rarest in the
Mīhrāb list; it occurs only once. The text does not merely
correspond to the image: the bayān before the painting con-
tains the conclusion of the audience of Manūchehr given to
Sām:

Sīr-i ʃīhīn bīhūrū bār ba ṣīn
Bar ṣīn ba-ʃīhūn-i pūndara-ʃīh
He left for home together with his army,
Very fast, searching for the right way [25].

The following line introduces the scene in Kābul:

Bar Mīhrāb-u dīvān rafī-yī bā šīn
Kī ṣīn bā ʃīhūn dīvān-dā kāfam hūn
Bar ṣīn-bād bānūn-gūhūn-i Kābul ba ṣīn
Wā-u ʃīhīrī̇n Mīhrāb bār ba šīhūn bīhūrū

The news reached Mīhrāb and his friends
About the decision of ghānī and his general.
The whole town of Kābul became anxious
A cry resonated from Mīhrāb’s palace [26].
As for the details of the painting itself, in some respects, this picture shows similarities to the previous one, in the positioning of the central figure in a small pavilion to the right of the composition, and in his gestures. The figures in their long dresses with turbans in a fashion very characteristic of the Central Asian region of that time, are distinguished in both paintings; in the first one it is the figure of the sad ambassador, in the second — it is Sām and "an occasional spectator" watching the scene, leaning against his thin stick. The same vegetation — banana, cypress, palm trees, and some blossoming bushes — can be seen to better effect and in more detail than on fol. 20v. Large brightly-feathered birds (yellow, red, purple) are depicted in flight in the trees, characteristic of the artist, in groups wheeling in the sky, which fades from light blue down to white at the horizon.

The miniature is in rather bad condition: large areas of paint are mostly missing. Moreover the picture produces the impression of being unfinished: the decoration of the wall behind the king's throne, the nimbus halo round his head, the base frieze of the royal pavilion and probably his dress, as well as the hands of a servant, massaging or about to kiss the king's feet, are left unpainted. However, we may suppose that they have lost their colours now because of the bad quality of the pigments, which pealed off completely, leaving only traces of ultramarine blue (on the jacket of Sām's attendant, the cushion on which Manāchtīr sits, and the surface of the basement on which the king's throne stands, together with the hat of Manāchtīr's servant).

Despite the bad state of the painting, and the partially mutilated faces of six of the seven figures, it is possible to conclude that the painter tried to differentiate their faces, as well as their dresses and hats. The most interesting feature is the halo round the head of Manāchtīr, unique in this manuscript (though not completed). It could perhaps be argued that in this manuscript two pictorial traditions meet, expressed in the representation of the divine: Persian and Indian. The first is Persian, mostly Muslim, where even the heavenly representatives do not have very visible attributes. The only angel depicted in this manuscript in miniature No. 8 (see below) has none of the features typical of Muslim angels: huge multicoloured, long-feathered wings, simulating coiffure hairdo, long tight dresses decorated with long silk girdles floating in the air. The angel, or whoever he is, is coming from the sky to assist Rustam in his flight with Adhikābīs, is completely human-like, dressed as an average Muslim man, though with a flaming nimbus round his head, while in the miniature under discussion we can see a king, sitting on his throne with the halo, the adopted sign of divinity around his head, which is very typical of the Indian miniature painting by the Mughal period [27].

3. "The wedding of Zāl and Rūddāh" (fig. 4)

The miniature illustrates the conclusion of the story started in the previous painting: the luxurious feast of the royal wedding instead of the mortal damage, deaths and fires of the conquered town.

This enigmatic picture once again provides a good example of the importance of studying the text of the poem to identify the scene, and the disparity between the text and the image created by the artist. Despite the title from the previous page ("Ağāšt-bār Zāl ba Rūddāh"), no woman can be seen in the miniature at all.

The painting could perhaps be taken to represent the preparations for Zāl's visit to Rūddāh on the day of the official ceremony of their marriage. He is checking the presents he intends to give to his bride and her relatives. If so, the enthroned figure in red and green, with the crown decorated with the royal plume is Zāl, who stretches his arms towards the dishes being presented by the procession of his courtiers. However, it is unlikely that the painter would have neglected Zāl's essential distinguishing white hair. The partially effaced figure of the prince has dark hair under his crown, and none of the other figures has white or grey hair, whereas paintings should contain at least one of the personalities involved in the scene that is being illustrated.

It is actually the scene of a feast, with a servant cooking food in the first plane and two musicians, dancing and playing different instruments. The text surrounding the painting is of special interest here. The break-line before the illustration is the following bayān:

Rvaštān tīrīt dar nimī rīz Chāmār xāntū ba xandānū afīt-farīz:
They arrived triumphantly in the middle of the day,
So happy, laughing, lighting up the world [28].

The line following the painting:

Sigurār ān zamūr Sām zākhīr ba Zāl Barān hawd lajīkūr ba jīršōndūnū fīl.
Then Sām handed over his royalty to Zāl Marched out the troops in a sign of blessing

is No. 1755 in the DS edition, leaving a lacuna of two verses. The first of these reads:

Yah-thalamm Sām inghār rīz kard Si rīz under ān bāzm ba gawīz hānd.
Sām then organized a feast He celebrated that feast for three days.

This point to the correct identification of the scene: we may suggest that the crooked figure sitting on the throne is Sām, Zāl's father. He is either inspecting the presents to be sent to his future in-laws, or trying the dishes cooked for the wedding party of his son. A courtier of high rank (according to his costume of an Indian prince [29]) lifts up the lid of the small box or a plate to show what he has brought to his guest; his servants are queuing behind him with the heavier presents. Sīm is receiving the gift, but his attention is attracted by the musicians. His attendant with a fan stands behind his throne; he is also watching and listening to the rād-bāwīn, playing his instrument in sophisticated way, dancing and singing a panegyric to the rhythmical accompaniment of the tambourine player. Perhaps this is the first performance of a qażīdī on Zāl's wedding compiled by his court poet.

If we take Ferdowsī's text, several boys before where the calligrapher started the page on which the picture to be inserted, there could be another interpretation of the figure of the king in the pavilion. He could be the Žāhil of Kābul, who is waiting sleeplessly for Sām's arrival for the wedding
ceremony of their children. The entire town, together with Zil and Rûdîbä, had been preparing for a whole week to meet the honoured guest:

Huma shâla biâd bîm zâvâyi nîqûh
Sarâ-zi sîâbâbâ biâd bîm jîgâh
Na Żalâm na zîm mawâ bûâla-lab
Naftûndam yâh hafta dar rî-cîn sûbâh.

The whole town was full of sweet sound.
The commander's palace was a paradise in ferment
Neither Zal, nor that corn-tipped moose
Slept for a whole week, by day or by night [30].

The nobles of the whole country were brought to participate in the event. It is perhaps this moment we can see in the picture: courtiers lined up outside the palace for a personal audience with the king:

Bâzqâyxi bîlqawar-âqah bi darboband
Kuñbânand saf pîshfî bûâla-balab.

The great man of his country in groups,
Lined up in ranks in front of the lofty palace [31].

However, the first suggestion is preferable, because of the association of the scene with the missing break-line. The empty space left for this verse after the line "ruzdand fisrâ..." could be a scribal omission that was due to be rectified later, as the ruled columns suggest that the space was indeed intended for it. It is also possible, however, that the calligrapher chose to stop there, and left a stepped shape for the artist to fill in. That he did did not so suggests that the calligrapher and the artist did not work together. Perhaps the text was produced in one of the Persian commercial ateliers, or by a Persian hand in India. For reasons that cannot now be investigated, the miniatures were not painted at that time, but were added later by another artist, whose taste preferred a strictly rectangular shape of painting, even though space allowed him to carry the building on the left up into the blank text area. Later, however, he began to fit his works into the stepped shape offered him by his predecessor, which can be seen on ff. 109v, 126r, 167v, 353v and 366v.

Despite the painter's obvious attempt to distinguish the features of the different figures in his picture, and his characteristic way of dressing them in hats and clothes of different styles (Persian, Indian, Chinese and European), the impression it produces is quite odd: all the faces are deliberately sad. Was it the intention of the painter to reflect Sâm's negative attitude to his son's choice, or did the artist simply fail to express any joy and satisfaction in their faces? Nothing in the details of the painting can help resolve the question, though nothing either really encourages the idea of a great royal feast. The very mean foreground of the local light green colour, the modest vegetation, represented by one short cypress and a branch of a blossoming tree with small blue flowers, make the whole scene rather subdued in mood. Only the pair of birds could be treated as an allegory of the human event that is taking place. This is a beautiful love story of two magpies: one is sitting in the fragrant blossoms of the tree and waiting for her beloved to hurry and join her for the rest of their lives. These two are surrounded by three groups of birds flying in formation, typical of the manuscript illustrations, greeting them and praising the spring of their feelings and lives. The symbolic meaning of the birds' images as human souls is ancient and well known, especially in the Muslim world through Shi'i literature.

While it is tempting to conclude that these birds are the main subject of the scene indicated by the given title, it is also quite possible to think that the painter included them just to fill in the empty light sky along the horizon, or at least to indicate the season of the year.

This miniature might also be unfinished if the wall decoration were left unpainted. It might be also left unpainted intentionally, like sky above, typical of this artist in this manuscript, which in places imitates water colour technique.

4. "Rustam battles Afrasiyâb for the first time" (fig. 5)

The painting represents the fight of the national Iranian hero, the victorious knight Rustam, with the eternal enemy of Iran — the Turanian king Afrasiyâb, in a rather uncharacteristic way. The subject itself is quite popular, it is met 32 times in the version "Rustam catches Afrasiyâb by his belt and lifts him". In the version, which is depicted in the Ann Arbor manuscript, "Rustam pursues the fleeing Afrasiyâb", it occurs only once [32]. The story describes the first battle of the young Rustam, where he managed to catch the Turanian king by his belt, took off his crown and lifted him high in the air. Fortunately for Afrasiyâb his belt became unbuttoned and he fell down to the ground and escaped from Rustam.

The text above and below the painting is as follows:

Yah-i mañqaba bûran(y)an nezâdî-zi shâb
Kû Rustam bidarand qatîl-zi styâwî 

Bu nezâd-i sîâbâbâ-rî turabz rûstâd
Drâyqal-dû sîâbâbâ styâl nîptâfîl.

Good news was brought to the shah: Rustam tore apart the middle of the army

He reached the commander of the Turks
The commander's banner disappeared [33].

Actually the painting is very close to depict the episode described earlier:

Bu yak dast Rustam kûmar mânâd frîd
Bu dast-i dîgar tîfût-ûqûm ez sar rûstah
Sîhâb-î sîr ez chîng-î Rustam biyazt
Bâhîâ-î Sulaym Rustam ham rûstî-û dast.

With the belt in one hand Rustam Grasped his crown with the other
When the general escaped from the hands of Rustam Rustam bit his hand [in rage] [34].

Literally the miniature shows Afrasiyâb on foot, having jumped from the ground after his fall, fleeing from Rustam, mounted on his Bâhîb. Rustam is depicted very young, without even a moustache. He has in his right hand Afrasiyâb's belt, but Afrasiyâb's crown is still on his head.
As in the previous picture, a space was left by the calligrapher as if for one more bayt. But according to Dahir Siyyaql’s text, nothing is missing, unlike in the previous case (where two bayts were absent). This seems to be another proof that the calligrapher and the actual painter did not work together. It is very likely that the calligrapher had another painter as his business partner who preferred the stepped shape of the miniatures. He may well have asked the calligrapher to leave the space he would have liked for his painting, which did not happen. After some time the unfinished manuscript was given to another artist with different aesthetic taste, who did not care to execute the stepped painting. He did not either use the empty space, left for him in the previous miniature [15].

At least, some elements of this painting are made by a different hand from the rest of the manuscript. The representation of Rustam is quite different from that of all the other paintings (Nos. 6, 8, 11, 12, 13). Rustam’s helmet is made of the mask of tiger (not of the white leopard as usual) as well as his coat. Rustam’s face is very pale, compared with those of others in the picture, probably it was retouched later. However, the upper part of the painting is typical of this manuscript, with different kinds of trees, and birds flying in the sky executed almost in the same manner as in Nos. 2 and 3. The dark brown colour of the foreground with the reddish, greenish and yellowish spots, is the same as in No. 1. But the green paint of the grass is different from that in Nos. 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 14, and closer to Nos. 2 and 9. The dominant element of colour and composition in the painting is the rocks, depicted in a very lively manner unusual for the manuscript. The paint is missing in several places. A comparatively large space at the foot of the mountain is left empty, with no attempt to add details to fill in. Rukhshad is traditionally dark pink, while Afrasiyab’s horse is frankly blue, possibly with the name of the painter on its saddle cloth.

5. “The wedding of Rustam and Tahmina” (fig. 6)

In comparison with the painting of the wedding of Zal and Rūdbahā (No. 3), there are a lot of women in the scene: six out of eight figures are female. Rustam’s costume is intended to combine ordinary and wedding elements: the scarlet robe with the belt luxuriously decorated with jewels and gold, but also his leopard’s mask helmet, put on over his small green fancy hat.

The movements of the dancers in both “wedding” paintings are very well expressed. Their compositions are very close, but the latter, “Rustam and Tahmina”, has more in common with the painting “The wedding of Zal and Rūdbahā” in a manuscript in the British Library, dated 1616 and signed by Qāsim [36]. It is unlikely that the painting in the Ann Arbor manuscript was executed by him, but its composition and palette recall that in London: in the details of architecture (pavilion, design of the tiles on the floor and the roofs, the fence of the park), in the same vegetation (banana, cypress, blossoming trees), the postures of the bridal couple, the dancers, the musicians, the servants and their dresses.

According to the text above and below the picture, one would conclude that instead of another wedding scene, which the present painter preferred in his work, the calligrapher intended the scene more traditionally depicted: namely the episode when Tahmina visits Rustam in his bedroom in the castle of her parents in Samangān, where he was staying the night, and introduces herself as his admirer. The text on the page represents her introduction speech, while the first bayt following the painting, at the top of the next page was supposed to conclude the subject depicted:

Bar khwāsh khwānd-o-ūḏ chū sarvī rawnān
Khāndūn khyāmatū bar pakshin-de.
He called her to him like a flowing cypress
She came gracefully over to the champion [37].

However, instead of the romantic first meeting of Tahmina and Rustam, the painter has chosen another subject, having broken the logical sequence of events. Probably it was he who filled the space left by the calligrapher in the centre directly above the picture with the heading, entitling the scene, which has nothing to do with the text.

6. “Rustam kills Suhrāb” (fig. 7)

This, the most tragic episode of the poem is deliberately quite laconic: only the two heroes, Rustam and his son whom he has just slain unaware of the identity of his rival. No spectators, no other warriors, expressing grief, joy or surprise, supporting their representatives in the single combat: no other figures, only Rustam, about to kill his son Suhrāb on the battlefield, and their horses. No symbols of life and death are reflected in the surrounding nature, only countless pairs of birds flying high in the sky.

This painting has very much in common with No. 8: Rustam’s costume is the same in colour and style, almost identical depiction of rocks and stones. Rustam’s leopard helmet has wide open eyes, while in the other miniatures they are closed (Nos. 11, 13) or only slightly open (Nos. 8, 12). This is the only painting in the manuscript where Rustam has his forked beard.

The line, preceding the painting is not standard according to the edition of Dahir Siyyaql [38]. Instead of:

Bāzad dast-i Suhrāb chūn pil-i mast
Chū dū ’i damauna iz jā bar-jāst.
He struck Suhrāb’s head like a drunken elephant,
He sprang from his place like a roaring lion [39].

After the second mirzā in the manuscript, starting with: “bar āward bar jāy-o birshāh bust...”, three bayts are missing, describing the dying Suhrāb. It is worth mention that here, for the first time, the artist does use the full space available in the stepped format left by the text.
This rather feebly painted appears to have elements in common with the previous illustration. The scene, rather frequently represented (27 times) [40], is very modest in terms of the number of the participants: besides Siyyuwaq and Afrasiyab, there are only three attendants. Usually this scene is much more crowded. Firdawsi even lists teams by name:

Sipahdar gazin kard Gulbad-
Chi Garshadz-e Jahan-e Polad-ro
Zo Pirin-e Naushah-e jangij-
Chi Humun-e Kar-baigur-ta dib koy
Ba naadaq-e Siyyuwaq bozork xaraj [41]
Chi Ruyt-e ch-zan Khatun-yi mawar-
Dugar Farahman xwar-i dalay-
Chi Arzasp-e aqfnayn-nar-e shir.
The general chose Gulbad,
As well as Garshad, Jahn and Puluband.
Also Pirin and quarehmoone Naushah.

This is the most unusually conceived illustration in the manuscript. The scene itself is one of the most popular [43]: according to the statistical analysis made by Farhad Mehran, “Rustam and the King of Ashkabads” [44] is the fourth in the list of 655 scenes, being depicted 59 times [44], behind “Rustam kills the White Dra” (74 times), “Rustam kills Spahd.” (67), and the “Fire ordeal of Siyyuwaq” (67) [44]. This painting appears to be the only one where a supernatural character appears in the clouds, aiding Rustam in his battle against the legendary Turanian warrior Askhabad. The figure has human attributes: a torso, head and arms, dress, turban and satb (rosary). His heavenly origin is betrayed by his flame like halo. He protectively extends his arms with the satbli towards Rustam. Rustam is almost at the crest of the hill, fighting on foot, about to fire an arrow at Askhabad. But Askhabad has already been shot by another horseman.

This raises another curious feature of the illustration. The horseman who has shot Rustam’s enemy looks exactly like Rustam: he has the tigher skin jacket, beard and bow, and his under dress is of the same color and style as the real Rustam’s. Only the leopard-head is missing: the strange horseman has a white turban instead. Maybe these two warriors, one on foot and one mounted on his dark horse, are both Rustam at different stages of the story?

This idea seems very attractive until we read the text of Firdawsi, where there is no mention of Rustam’s Rakhat or any other horse. Moreover, Rustam intentionally preferred to fight Askhabad without a horse. Again, according to Firdawsi, Askhabad was very proud of his strong and beautiful steed, which he lost at the very beginning of the fight, thus becoming equal to Rustam. In this picture, however, Askhabad is shot first, still sitting on his wonderful white horse.

It is obvious that the calligrapher was not anticipating the original composition of the painter. The text proceeding the picture is:

Humay leghmarin dar daraghad
Sar-dar hamra naqy shad.

Also Humay who used to catch the ball from the water, he sent to Siyyuwaq such friends:
As Ruyt, noble Shilad,
Then Askhabad, a glorious horseman,
Arzasp, knocking over horses like a lion [42].

The figures are of almost the same size: only the ghulam in the right corner is much smaller than the others. All of them are in Indian style turbans and monochrome dresses. The painting itself is unmistakably Indian, with no “outside” influence from Iran or Central Asia, in costumes, colours, or composition. The grass of the foreground is green of two tints. Both horses are richly decorated with double head garments (makhzun): white plume and black aigrette. Their tails are also tied and plated.

In contrast to other paintings in the manuscript, the horseman does not have trees and vegetation, and the sky empty of birds. Once again, as in the previous picture, the painter has used the stepped space left by the calligrapher.

Firdawsi’s text suggests three options: qaidar or faqlak (heaven), qaidal (fate) or qaidar (power), and miiyl (angel).

Sipsh, faqlak, qaidal and qaidar indicate the same phenomenon — God, while miiyl can be distinguished as a different character. It will be easier to suppose that the figure is an angel (miiyl), who praised Rustam for his successful shot. But firstly it does not have any wings, and secondly it is obviously trying to reach Rustam, perhaps to give him...
a kiss as was said by the poet. In other words, the painter decided to depict an even more difficult abstract phenomenon like anthropomorphic heavens, rather than a typical sexless angel in the Muslim tradition, with huge multicolored wings, an elaborate Chinese style hairdo and long silky belts and ribbons waving in the wind.

The composition in general stresses the upper part, where the halo'd figure is placed. The figures of three horsemen, though rather large and colourful, in the first plane do not divert attention from the main scene. The warriors are dressed in different styles: Persian and Indian. Top left is a tall horseman wearing a red cap, with red leggings or boots, a tall red hat with a black feather on it. His dress may betray him as a European. This is perhaps how the painter wanted to identify him as a foreigner, supporting the hostile army of the khatlul of Chin. Once more, the painter has used the stepped space left by the calligrapher, though he does not take the sky right up to the margins.

It might seem bold to compare this image with one of the earliest representations of the subject, namely with that in a Dublin painting in the Chester Beatty Collection [49]. Rustam in this picture is with his bow in his hands. He has just shot an arrow and killed Ashkabat's horse. It is lying behind its master. The text above and below the painting is very close to what is represented. The break-line before it describes the killing of the Ashkabat's horse by Rustam:

9. "Kay Khosraw executes Afrasiyâb and Garstwaz" (fig. 12)

This is a rather strange scene of execution: on the horizon behind the hill there are figures of feasting courtiers, perhaps celebrating the end of the eternal enemy of Iran. One of them plays a stringed musical instrument, one is dancing, a servant has brought wine. Nevertheless, the two central figures seem to be sad. They are watching the scene, while the others are watching them, and their reaction towards the main action: Kay Khosrow decapitating Afrasiyâb and his brother Garstwaz. The latter are strikingly young and handsome: black hair, black beards (though the text — see break line after — refers specifically to Afrasiyâb's white beard), kneeling with their hands bound, waiting for death. They still have their swords hanging from their belts.

The painting comes at the moment in the text when Afrasiyâb has been executed and Garstwaz fears for his own fate: not exactly what the artist choose to depict. The illustration is introduced by the following line:

Bu şahsî hâlâ hâlâ bitiz gordan-vâth
Bina istan andi ast vakun-tû tar-va'ât

He [Kay Khosrow] severed his neck with the Indian sword
Three to the ground his dark body [35].

The bayat after the painting continued the text without any break:

Zar-i Parm-ûn roo gej-tû roó-i sâ'ât
Barzôdor-va'ât gagez az jahân ad-va'ât.

The idea of the divine intervention in the scene might be recognized in the bird, which traditionally symbolizes the soul, which is depicted right above the Turanian's head, flying away: it is about to leave the body of Ashkabat.

On the other hand, we might compare the romantic Ann Arbor version with that from a more realistic representation of the scene from a manuscript in Fitzwilliam museum in Cambridge (fig. 10) [51]. The painter of the Cambridge manuscript follows the text surprisingly pedantically, allowing himself free from the bright colours of his palette, and extends his composition into the margins. In this picture, he also suggests that Rustam is a true Muslim, and a Shâh: at that two flags held by his warriors are inscribed: "Alâlam" and "Yû Muhammad, yâ 'Abbâr".

The text, above and below the painting from Fitzwilliam museum is almost the same as in that Ann Arbor manuscript. To be more precise, the bayat is divided into two parts: the first mir'î appears before the miniature and the second one starts the text after it:

Chin bâûd parshûn na-shârân-i-sâ'ât
Gavar kard az shahvâs-va'ât gagez-i a.

When the arrow-head kissed his finger tip
His back passed through his face [52].

His car and white beard became red from blood
His brother told farewell to the world [54].

The landscape here is very simple. Once more, there are only two flights of birds in the sky, trees of intense dark green with small red berries, a few tiny red flowers in the background of grass, and a pale sky with a narrow stripe at the grassy hill with numerous tints of green from light yellow to dark brown and lilac. The eyes of Kay Khosrow seem to be rubbed, but perhaps not intentionally. He is not in his crown but in a big Indian style multi-coloured turban.

Usually this scene is more traically represented. Three miniatures of the 16th c. from St. Petersburg and New York show several variations of Afrasiyâb is already killed in one way or another (beheaded [55], cut in two [56]), horrified Garstwaz is waiting for his death [57], or is being killed [58]. The executioner is the shah himself [59] or someone else, whom Kay Khosrow is watching [60]. Although it can have a more peaceful impression, like that produced by the painting from the Gulistan museum in Tehran, where Afrasiyâb and Garstwaz, both with their arms tied up, are listening to the order of Kay Khosrow mounted on his horse (fig. 14) [61]. The break lines are similar for the St. Petersburg and the Ann Arbor manuscript and that of the two American manuscripts, which differ from each other almost in everything: composition, depiction of nature, faces, and costumes [62].

Fig. 13