The Caravanserai of Baba Jumayl
Page from the Hanzibnama, or "Adventures of Hamza, uncle of the Prophet", volume 11, fig. 11
In the reign of Akbar (r. 1556–1605)
Mughal school c. 1570

Disguised as a merchant, Omar one of the heroes of the book, arrives at the caravanserai of Baba Jumayl, who is known for his cantankerous humor. He refuses Omar entry, but another traveler, Nu'man (probably the figure situated in front of the door in the center of the miniatures), finds him accommodation. Although lacking in any great dramatic context, the story is interesting for its depiction of a caravanserai, which were an institution characteristic of the Muslim world. At the lower right, the three main figures are deep in conversation. Baba Jumayl has even lost one of his sandals. The rest of the image consists of a series of vignettes illustrating life in a traveler's staging post of the period: animals of all kinds laden in all sorts, meals being prepared, information being exchanged and simple gossip. Each of these episodes is represented on a large scale; the composition of the image is reminiscent of a hive bustling with activities that are not directly connected to the text but which constitute an array of memories from which each reader of the period would draw similarities with his own life. This image is an interesting example of the balance in Mughal painting between precise detail, monumentality of form and the artificiality of the framework created for the story.
Epic poetry: the *Shahnama* or "Book of Kings"

Ferdowsi, who died between 1020 and 1025, composed his Great *Shahnama* or "Book of Kings" around 996, dedicating it to Mahmud, the Turkish conqueror of northern India who had his capital at Ghazni in Afghanistan. The work is a grandiose, epic fresco glorifying Iran. It begins with the creation of the world, continues with an evocation of the legendary kings and then, after Iskandar (Alexander the Great), with a historiography of the dynasties up to the arrival of Islam. Its popularity grew from the fourteenth century onwards and continues today. The examples here come from three manuscripts: the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, the 57 pages of which are dispersed among several collections; the so-called Juk *Shahnama* (Juk being an Iranian monarch and grandson of Tamerlane) from around 1440 now preserved at the Royal Asiatic Society in London; and finally the Shat Tahmasp *Shahnama*, the more than 260 images of which, now dispersed, include some of the masterpieces of mid-sixteenth-century painting.

m. 3

Aratabus [Aradwan] before Ardashir
Page from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*
c. 1336 (probably Iran)
Washington, The Freer Gallery and Arthur Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution, 5.1986.103 a–b

Among the many masterpieces this manuscript contains (only part of which survives and is dispersed over many collections), this image stands out for two reasons.

One is the way in which the subject has been illustrated. On the left, Aradwan, the new king of Iran and founder of the Sassanian dynasty is seen on horseback facing Aratabus, the last Parthian king, whom Ardashir served. He is telling him that he is to be executed in a particularly brutal manner, by being cut in two by an executioner. The text of the *Shahnama* acknowledges that this is not an example of justice but simply the fulfillment of merciless fate. It is indeed this acceptance of destiny that explains the contrast between the resigned attitude of Aratabus, his eyes closed, wearing the gray robes of the condemned man, and that of Ardashir, dressed in splendor and wearing a crown. The simple gesture he makes with his right hand expresses his submission to the fate whose official instrument he is. The implacable fulfillment of destiny is seen as tragic necessity in the grotesque faces of the executioners, their twined swords and expressionless and cruel expressions.

By contrast, the gold-colored background transforms the drama into a piece of theater in which the actors adopt the stances of epic heroes.

The other great quality of this image is its triangular composition, a classic of painting since Antiquity: the tall, garbled tree draws the eye upward and to the right, while the furrowed soil creates movement in the opposite direction. The artist, seen from behind, acts as a repoussoir to the composition. The very different details of the heads and hand gestures suggest a wide range of expression, and the varied expressions—attributes of hierarchal status at court and in the Mongol army—are all characteristic of an artist able to handle formal vocabulary and composition with power and precision in a way not dissimilar to fourteenth-century Italian painting.

m. 39

Page from the I
by Ferdowsi (9
v. 1444, royal c
London, Royal A

In earlier (cap),
dedicate his episc
three court por
of his writing; to
the right, meet
Pl. 16: The poet Ferdowsi meets the poets of Gha'zali
Page from the Shihnama, known as the Juki Shihnama,
by Ferdowsi [940–1020/25]
c.1444, owner of Muhammad Juki [1402–1445] [Iran]
London, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms. 239, fol. 7

In Gha'zali (emir of Sultan Mahmud and the city to which he would
 dedicate his epic, Ferdowsi, author of the Shihnama, meets with
three court poets who had expressed doubts about the originality
of his writing. The four poets, Ferdowsi probably being the one
on the right, meet outside in the open air. They are soberly dressed
and their hand gestures suggest a conversation taking place in
the center of an empty space occupied only by what appears to be
the binding of a book from which one of the poets is reading. There
are two other figures, servants likely attired in striking colors.
One is holding a large gold container and the other what appears
to be a dish. One might suppose that they are bringing the poets
refreshments, although they may merely symbolize traditional
life at court, the meeting with Ferdowsi being simply a secondary
event. The most remarkable aspect of this image is the landscape:
an artificial pool with composition surrounded by rocks, the lower
third of which is separated from the rest by a pond, with a stream
overflowing the barrier surrounding the image. Flowering trees
and bushes are scattered across the ground. The often sinuous forms
of these plant elements act as a frame around the main
group of figures and contribute to the asymmetrical form of the
composition which is laid out on an oblique axis, suggesting the
existence of another world off to the right of a space, the only part
of which we can see is a promontory. The five birds in the golden
sky (scattered with small, ornamental clouds and the two ducks in
the pond serve to emphasize the somewhat unrealistic nature of what
is nothing more than a short story or anecdote in the poem (see
detail fig. 43, p. 49).