The Lilly Shamshir Khani in a Franco-Sikh Context: A Non-Islamic "Islamic" Manuscript

The Shahnama (Book of Kings) has long been one of the staples of Persian civilization. Written by Abu’l-Qasim Hasan Firdawsī (935–1020 CE) in the tenth century, the work recounts the stories of Persian heroes and kings, beginning with Kayumars, believed to have established his rule at the dawn of time, and ending with the Arab conquests in the seventh century. Consisting of about fifty thousand verses, the Shahnama includes the tales of the Persian heroes Rustam (Figure 7.1) and Isfandiyar as well as historical events, such as the arrival of Alexander the Great (356–323) in Persia. Written at a time when the Arab-Muslim invasion had reached Iran and almost obliterated both Persian national identity and the Persian language, the Shahnama, composed entirely in Persian, was intended to revive both the language and the population’s national pride. Interestingly, this cornerstone of Persian, non-Islamic pride was used during subsequent centuries to validate the rulership of various Islamic dynasties throughout the vast areas of the Islamic world.

Frequently, the ruling elites of new dynasties in Persian-speaking lands commissioned spectacular copies of the Shahnama in order to insert themselves both literally and figuratively into Persian history and consequently into the "royal" line, thereby validating their sovereignty. For example, the Ilkhanids (1258–1336), a powerful Mongol warrior state whose dynasts ultimately embraced Islam, produced several lavish Shahnamas throughout their reign; the volumes include many battle illustrations that bear contemporary overtones.1 The Mongols’ Timurid successors (ca. 1370–1500) also produced many spectacular Shahnamas, including the famous luxury manuscript copied for Prince Baysunghur (1397–1434) in 1430.2 Finally, in the sixteenth century, the so-called Houghton Shahnama was produced for Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576). A spectacular book that took many years to produce (ca. 1522–1532), Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama was given by Tahmasp to Sultan Selim II (r. 1566–1574), ruler of the Ottoman Empire, in 1568. Tahmasp’s gift highlights the use of manuscripts, including the famed Shahnama text, as political gifts.3 As this chapter aims to demonstrate, even abridged Shahnamas produced by non-Islamic dynasties may have fulfilled similar functions.

The Lilly Library at Indiana University is fortunate to have in its possession an abridged text of Firdawsī’s Shahnama, known as a Shamshir Khani. The abridgement is named after Shamshir Khan Tatin, the governor of Ghaznavī,4 who originally commissioned its composition. In his introduction to the text, the author of the abridgement5 states that he was asked in the year 1651/1652, the twenty-sixth year of the reign of

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FIG. 7.1. Rustam fights Pilaos, Firdawsī (d. 419/1028), Shahnama, ca. 1650, 19 × 17 cm. Near Eastern Mus., Firdawsī, Shahnama, folio 177r. The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.
Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658), by Shamshir Khan to write the abridgement. The reason for the abridgement, he notes, was that while Firdawsi's *Shahnama* was the best history of Iran available, its purpose was essentially to glorify poetry and, consequently, the work was too lengthy. Furthermore, because the meaning or moral of each tale becomes clear only at the end, listeners, booklovers, and especially members of government tended to get bored and to relinquish reading. The abridgement therefore uses prose to relieve some of the poetic wordiness and tedium, forcing the tales to be briefer and come to the point more quickly, while still retaining the original expressive quality of the narratives themselves.

The Lilly abridgement is bound in a beautifully tooled and decorated leather cover (Figure 7.3) and consists of 271 folios and 70 illustrations. The text begins with an elegantly illuminated frontispiece, consisting of a rectangular chapter heading decorated with a large gold and blue floral rosette with red highlights and a predominantly gold and blue floral border (Figure 7.3). None of the paintings are in a full-page format, the majority being less than half the size of the text blocks (10.5 x 20.5 cm). All illustrations are contained within the text frames, usually with text both above and below each illustration. There are seven instances of paintings facing each other on sequential folios, sometimes illustrating a sequence of events in a particular story (Figure 7.4). Pastel colors dominate, although some patches of dark blue appear in the characters' clothing and a distinctive ruddy orange, often patterned with gold, is used for clothing and tent fabric. The backgrounds are characterized by a very high horizon, marked by a tall, rounded hilltop and a sky typically painted in gold. The hills are almost always painted in pastel colors as well as in shades of pink, blue, and yellow.

Figures are quite stiff and rigid, many with poses that are repeated as if drawn from a restricted selection of figural templates. Architectural details, likewise, are limited mostly to tent compounds and a few structures—often, only the outer walls of buildings or walls with windows are depicted. As is the case of figural depiction, architectural details reveal very little attempt at three-dimensionality. Finally, almost 70 percent of the illustrations in the manuscript depict battles or great feats of heroism—such as a valiant protagonist killing a mythical beast (Figure 7.5)—while the remaining 30 percent represent great moments in history (such as Surab's birth) or diplomatic visits.

The Lilly Shamshir Khan's colophon, or signature panel, reads: "The Book of Shamshir Khan, which is an abridgement of the *Shahnama*, is completed by the grace of God the Glorious. It was written in the capital (Dar al-Sultanat) of Lahore in the morning (chsabt) of the month of Rabi’ II. Thanks be to God" (Figure 7.6). Although the colophon does not record a specific day or year, the reference to Lahore as a capital significantly narrows the manuscript's possible dates of production, as Lahore served as a capital only twice: once from 1584 to 1598 during Akbar's reign (r. 1556–1605), and again during the rule of the Sikh dynasty (1799–1850). Upon a close iconographic examination as well as
an analysis of codicological details—including some of those mentioned above—we can date this manuscript to the reign of the Sikh dynasty in the Indian subcontinent.

The manuscript's date of production is borne out by a dedication written in French and located on the manuscript's first folio (Figure 7.7). This note, identifying both the donor and the recipient, helps to place the manuscript's production around 1835. It reads:

Ce manuscrit a été donné au Lieutenant Général, Comte de Ramigny, aide de camp du Roi Louis Philippe Premier, par le Général Ventura, compagnon du Général Alard, tous deux au service du Roi de Lahore Runget-Sing [Ranjit Singh], mort en 1840.

Many Shāhnāmas were given as gifts, often from one member of a royal family to another, to commemorate a special occasion, or from one Muslim ruler to another. In addition to familial gifts, exchanges were often made with political partners, as well as potential allies. Often, the conveyed ideas and symbolic gestures associated with such presentations were more important than the actual gifts exchanged. This manuscript is unusual because, as will be demonstrated, it must have been commissioned purposefully as an official Sikh gift to a French diplomat active in Lahore. However, while foreign exchanges were known, most often it was Christian foreigners who were imitated by Muslim rulers, not vice versa. 12
In this particular case, the manuscript draws upon previous Islamic-Indian paintings to assert the Sikh right to rule. Historical and codicological details and facts confirm that this manuscript was created in a Sikh “revivalist” style, meant to evoke not only the grandeur of the Indian past but also to celebrate political legitimacy. In addition, the volume was prepared for a French member of the Sikh court, specifically to be used as a political gift to a member of an allied foreign power. Given the political relationship of the two countries involved, as well as the comparative rarity of the chosen text, this copy of the Shamsir Khani becomes both an acknowledgement of services rendered and a bold statement of Sikh power in the Indian subcontinent.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire in India was in decline. The increased monetary demands on the populace incited resentment, which, when coupled with religious and political rivalries, led to the emergence of popular movements, such as the Sikhs, in the Punjab. During the mid-eighteenth century, Lahore was often threatened by foreign armies, particularly the Iranians and, later, the Afghans. In addition, the Sikhs were gaining control of the surrounding countryside, creating a conflict between metropolitan and rural areas. During this period of decline, Sikh lords occupied Lahore many times, first in 1757 to retaliate for an attack on the Harmandir Sahib, a Sikh shrine at Amritsar. This occupation was short-lived, but in 1764, after another attack on Amritsar, the Sikhs ousted the governor of Lahore and a triumvirate ruled from the city until 1799, at which time Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) founded the Sikh Empire and declared Lahore as its capital (Figure 7.8), where his coronation took place in April of 1801. The Sikh Empire would last until 1849, by which time the Punjab, unable to maintain political unity and strength after the death of Singh in 1839, had fallen to the British, fulfilling Singh's prophecy that all of India would eventually turn red.

During this time of conflict preceding the Sikh rise to power, much of Lahore's population fled. Although high-ranking Muslims and many Hindu tradesmen and bankers left the city, many Muslim artisans remained. Similarly, educational services continued uninterrupted, as evidenced by the number of talented and educated Lahoreis who lived and prospered under the reign of Singh. The maharaja used both his position in Lahore and the forces under his command to unite the various Sikh factions in the Punjab into a single Sikh state, which then became a major financial and political power in the Indian subcontinent.

As the Sikhs were expanding their regions of rule, Britain, in the guise of the East India Trading Company, was slowly gaining control over much of the rest of India. In fact, by 1820 the only Indian state that could have possibly posed a threat to British expansion was the Sikh kingdom, thanks in part to Singh's remarkable army, trained according to a western model by European officers in his employ. Recognizing the great might of the British, Singh chose instead to expand to the north...
reforms and military progress, was necessary for the survival of the Sikh kingdom.  

Singh’s military concerns are particularly important for the purposes of this chapter because his modernization of the Sikh army was achieved with the help of foreign officers whose names are mentioned in the Lilly Shamshir Khani. Many of these officers were Italians or Frenchmen who had served under Napoleon. There were notable exceptions, however: Colonel Josiah Harlan, who served as governor of several regions of the Punjab, was an American, as was Colonel Alexander Gardner, one of Singh’s artillery advisers. With the help of these foreign military men, Singh built himself such a large and well-trained army that by 1820 the Punjab was the only remaining Indian state that could have posed any threat to the British. However, the Sikh monarch recognized the futility of confronting the British and instead concentrated on expanding to the north and west. Conversely, the British also realized the futility of trying to wrest Sikh territories from Singh and his impressive army, preferring instead to maintain an uneasy peace through a series of treaties.

In addition to his impressive military and political prowess, Singh seems to have been well respected by the inhabitants of his kingdom. As one scholar notes, he is believed to have had a “kind, personal approach to the people and as much as he could he tried to understand their feelings and always respected their beliefs.” As a Sikh, he firmly believed in the right of all people to follow their own religion. Although Sikhism has its own sacred book, the Granth Sahib, it is not so much a religion as a way of acting toward others; the emphasis of ethical conduct as opposed to elaborate ritual, social cohesiveness (including the absence of caste divisions or discrimination against women), and compassion are some of its mainstays. In this way Sikhism aims to incorporate the best parts of many religions.

To help achieve the ethical tenets of Sikhism, Singh ensured that representatives from each religion present in his lands were employed at his court, and he allowed the building of places of worship, including Hindu and Sikh temples, as well as mosques for his Muslim subjects. Singh also believed that for a religious institution to function properly it had to be able to disseminate its knowledge and culture, and therefore each institution included some sort of educational program or school. Christians, too, enjoyed freedom of religion. For example, a priest was brought to Lahore specifically to officiate General Ventura’s wedding, and General Allard was given two years leave to take his four (Punjabi) children to France for their Christian education. When asked his reasons for being so liberal, Singh reportedly replied (to Allard): “Since you mention religion, I can say nothing more to oppose your wish. It is a matter of conscience. Every person should be free to follow the religion he chooses, and it is his duty to obey its commandments.”

Indeed, Singh not only tolerated other religions, he actively supported them. In addition to donating copiously to the Harmandir temple,
Unfortunately, very little is known about Sikh art and artists. Scholarly works treating the arts of India tend to examine only artwork produced until around 1700, almost a full century before the beginning of Sikh rule. However, we can assert that painting thrived, that portraiture was the favored genre of Sikh painting, and that Sikh painting covered a wide variety of techniques and styles. As Susan Strange notes, "[Ranjit Singh's] tolerance allowed Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to live and work together, and this harmonious coexistence makes it almost impossible to define a recognizably 'Sikh' art, because there were no rigid restrictions where patronage was concerned."^35

Most scholarly research has focused on the Sikh arts of metalworking, textiles, and weaponry. The dearth of information about manuscript production and painting in Lahore during the Sikh period hinders systematic research. However, metalwork and other accoutrements provide iconographic analogies to the Lilly Shamshir Khani, providing further evidence to support its Sikh provenance. For instance, the round black shields with four gold "buttons" placed centrally, which appear in almost every painting in the manuscript, are very similar to Sikh shields (Figure 7a). Additionally, the armor represented in the manuscript's paintings reflects military artifacts from the Sikh period, consisting of separate metal chest-plates fastened together, along with a pointed helmet with chain mail hanging down to protect the sides of the head and a plume on top.

Singh also supported the preservation and restoration of historic monuments and buildings throughout his domain and constructed magnificent new monuments all over the Punjab, many of which were highly decorated (Figure 7a). In fact, under his patronage several distinct artistic schools developed. Singh encouraged his courtiers to patronize the arts and architecture; reports by European travelers describe the homes of the French officers as being lavishly decorated with great frescoes and smaller portraits, some in so-called "native" styles and others using European painting techniques such as shading and perspective. For example, the shared residence of Generals Ventura and Allard was a classically colonized European building with exquisite paintings and gilded mirrors. On the other hand, the home of General Court, another of Singh's foreign officers, was built in the style of a typical Punjabi farmhouse, with a rich and elegantly decorated interior. Besides metalworking and architecture, Sikh manuscript painting also flourished. In addition to patronizing large works in the form of frescoes and wall paintings, both the maharaja and his officers commissioned sumptuously illustrated manuscripts. Several painting styles evolved during this time, but two are particularly noteworthy. The first is the almost entirely European mode of painting, which flourished in a workshop of the old Lahori school of painting. Under Iamn Bakhsh Lahori, Indian and Punjabi traditions were blended with European painting techniques, resulting in European paintings with some Indian

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he handed over a state-controlled mosque to a Muslim community. At one point he also spent ten thousand rupees on a Qur'an, saying that while he, being a Sikh, had no specific use for the Holy Book of another religion, he believed that "God intended him to look at all religions with one eye. That is why he took away the light from the other." Singh was also known for giving lavish gifts to those he respected, such as foreign emissaries and officers, and for being a patron of the fine arts and archaeology. He even helped the Afghans as a benefactor for their return of the famed Kuh-i Nur (Mountain of Light) diamond, which Singh then wore on special occasions.

The names of Allard and Ventura, both mentioned previously, are worthy of close attention due to their connection with the Lilly Shamshir Khani. General Jean Francois Allard, mentioned in the manuscript's dedication as Ventura's companion, was a French artilleryman who trained the Sikh cavalry. General Jean Baptiste Ventura, an Italian, mentioned in the dedication as the donor, trained Singh's infantry. Arriving in Lahore in 1823, after the disbanding of Napoleon's army, both Allard and Ventura were immediately employed by Singh to train special Sikh units to fight against his enemies (especially the British), as well as to pursue conquests to the north and south.

Well educated and fluent in several languages, Ventura achieved great distinction in the Sikh army. In 1831 he was offered a governorship and in 1835 he was publicly acknowledged by the maharaja for the "remarkable work he had done as instructor of the Punjab army staff." By the end of his career, he was considered the commander in chief of the Sikh army and was given the title "Count of Mandi." By then, he had enough influence to help determine who was to be Singh's successor.

Allard, the senior French officer in Singh's employ, served not only as a field commander but also as a diplomatic adviser to the maharaja. He was fully entrenched in Punjabi life, having married a native woman and having had five children with her, as well as living in a lavish compound in Lahore. He became a favorite of the maharaja, and in 1834 he went on leave to France armed with specific diplomatic instructions. He returned as a French ambassador, bringing gifts and letters of greetings to the Sikh ruler from King Louis-Philippe of France (r. 1830–1848).

The Lieutenant General Comte de Rumigny (1789–1860), mentioned as the recipient of the manuscript, was the aide-de-camp of King Louis-Philippe of France. He was never employed under Singh's rule, rather having served in the French army with Napoleon, he became a devoted confidant to the family of King Louis-Philippe, and was often charged with protecting various members of the royal family. Based on this evidence, it is clear that the Lilly Shamshir Khani was a diplomatic gift from Ventura to Rumigny, given during Ventura's visit to France (1831–1840). As such, the manuscript traded hands not once but twice, and thus served as a versatile diplomatic gift whose course can be traced from Lahore to Paris sometime around 1830.
influence. This style is most obviously seen in books commissioned by the foreign officers who resided in the Punjab.

The other prominent school of painting developed from a desire to link Ranjit Singh with Mughal rulers, particularly Shah Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Connections with the Mughal Empire can be found in the everyday life of the Sikhs, such as the use of Persian as a prominent court language and the inclusion of archaic formulas on newly minted coins. Singh also deliberately collected jewelry and other items that had either belonged to Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) and Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658) or were somehow related to the Mughal court—an attempt to restore the grandeur of the past (even the famed Kuh-i Nur diamond falls into this category, having at one point belonged to Shuh Jahan). In a very real sense, the conservation of cultural traditions and artifacts provided the Sikh ruler a strong link to—and perhaps a desired restoration of—a celebrated past.
In painting, this Sikh interest—if not infatuation—with the Mughal past has been interpreted as forming a "historical" or "revivalist" pictorial style. In many portrait paintings, Singh is portrayed as a Mughal ruler, often on horseback, wearing traditional Mughal garments, and surrounded by a royal retinue. Similarly, several Sikh manuscripts were made in imitation of the Mughal classics, themselves based on earlier Timurid prototypes. Such is the case of the Turākh-i Nādirī (History of Nadir Shah), produced in Lahore around 1850, which resembles the famous illustrated Zafarnāma (Book of Victory) of 1496. Splendid copies of the Akbarnāma (Books of Akbar) and the Akbarnāma (Book of Akbar), often containing juxtapositions of Akbar's and Singh's portraits, further illustrate the symbolic potential of pictorial associations.

There are also a few recorded instances in which nineteenth-century Punjabi painters took inspiration from illustrations included in manuscripts held in Sikh libraries. Often, painters did not just blindly imitate the older composition but altered it to reflect a modern context. For example, certain portraits of Singh painted in a Mughal style and setting, as well as Sikh copies of Mughal battle scenes, contain patently modern clothing.

The clearest examples of this kind of pictorial replication consist of Shāhnāma manuscripts. The first, a Shāhnāma produced in Lahore ca. 1850, was inspired by a Shāhnāma produced in 1653 for Shah Jahan by the scribe Tawwakul Beg. The original comprises 400 folios and 65 illustrations and actually carries the seal of Singh's library, giving a rare glimpse of just what kinds of manuscripts were in Lahore during this time. The second is another Shāhnāma manuscript, most likely produced in Lahore in 1836. While containing 464 folios and just 64 illustrations, the layout and illustrations are remarkably similar to the Lilly's Shamsi Khani. The "provincial" painting style is like that of the Lilly manuscript, as is the "sloppy cursive" of the text. Just as the Shāhnāma text itself was often used to insert rulers into this glorious history, the use of the historical Mughal style also appears to have helped to add another layer of connection with the past.

There is also evidence that Singh's foreign officers commissioned works of art or sponsored specific artists. Living for so long on the Indian subcontinent, marrying Indian women, and being so enmeshed in Punjabi politics, foreign officers naturally developed interests in the culture, archaeology, and history of the land. As mentioned previously, their residences were decorated in a variety of styles, ranging from completely "native" to combinations of "native" and European styles. Some officers commissioned Punjabi artists to illustrate their memoirs. General Allard commissioned the aforementioned painter Imam Baksh Lahori to illustrate a copy of Jean de la Fontaine's Fables, and when the product was incomplete at the time of his death, General Ventura took charge of the project. This exchange provides evidence that both of the officers mentioned in the dedication of the Lilly Shamsi Khani
were involved in the commissioning of manuscripts. While Allard and Ventura are known to have commissioned manuscripts painted in the more European style, the possibility remains that they also requested manuscripts executed in the more “native” and historical style. The existence of Persian, Sanskrit, and Punjabi manuscripts, old and new, in both generals’ libraries suggests that the men were familiar with “native” styles and thus perhaps were likely to request a historicizing pictorial mode, based on manuscripts available in their libraries, for some of their own commissions.

Based on the existence of these other historicizing illustrations, as well as the existence of a very similar *Shahnama* manuscript, there can be little doubt that the paintings in the Lilly Shamshir Khan are painted in the revivalist style. However, this revivalist style is remarkably flexible. During Shah Jahan’s reign, at which time the 1653 *Shahnama* was produced, figural painting became increasingly formal, with faces and figures drawn from previous studies, which led to increasingly stiff and formal poses (Figure 7.15). There was also an abundance of illustrations depicting court receptions. On the other hand, despite the style’s apparent formality, it was seen as a harmonious blending of Indian and European elements. Therefore, this revivalist style, while linking the Sikhs to the glorious past of the Mughals, already contained many hybrid pictorial elements, therefore emphasizing the unique “Indianness” of the painting style.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Kashmiri region of India became known for the production of illustrated manuscripts meant specifically for export to both Europe and Central Asia. Kashmiri manuscripts were produced in a “folk” style, in which Persian figures are presented in three-quarter profile, dress and textiles are often shown in bright orange or red, and recession into space is indicated by a series of colored hills (Figure 7.12). These characteristics marked the revivalist style of Sikh formal painting, too. Book production in Lahore during the early nineteenth century using this style rivaled that of the better-known Kashmiri book production industry, which had a limited repertoire. By the use of this style, the Sikh period *Shamshtir Khan* proclaims its specifically Indian character, while also forging a connection with the Mughal past.

Throughout Islamic history, rulers have always presented gifts to their political friends and foes. High-ranking members of the courts and dignitaries who served well benefited from the magnanimous gestures of their rulers. Those who served Ranjit Singh, including his foreign officers, were no exception. They received all kinds of gifts, ranging from “fine garments” to animals, and they were even granted titles. For instance, in his book chronicling Singh’s rule, Lala Sohan Lal Suri states that on December 21, 1856, “on account of his well-wishing, faithfulness, service, devotion, sacrifice in rendering meritorious services to the...
Maharaja, General Chevalier Ventura Sahib was granted the title of ‘Faithful and Devoted’ out of great kindness of the Maharaja.” All of these gifts were in addition to regular salaries. As a result, foreign officers were rather well off, with large households for which they were able to commission large wall paintings as well as books and other items. This largesse made them excellent patrons of the arts, and while sources tend to highlight works commissioned in the European styles, other pictorial materials were commissioned in either native Punjabi styles or in a revivalist Mughal-Islamic mode. Another fact that supports the idea that this manuscript was utilized as a gift in a diplomatic exchange is the fact that in 1838, Singh, considering the prospect of having a Punjab empire extending from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, and from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej River, allowed Allard to take a trip to France. Having to travel through British India in order to reach a seaport, Allard carried no official letters but did deliver a message from Singh to the French court, meeting not only with King Louis-Philippe but also with the French ministers of war, finance, and commerce, all in their official capacities. As a result of this diplomatic exchange, Allard was appointed an Agent de France (French Ambassador) to Lahore and returned with military equipment and experts to help further modernize the Punjab army. This incident shows that diplomatic exchanges, while not easy to arrange, did indeed occur, and it would not be surprising if gifts were exchanged as well, this kind of cultural currency having formed a political custom for centuries. Unfortunately, the above incident involves Allard, not Ventura. However, Ventura did make at least one trip to France. The manuscript dedication itself states that General Ventura had come to Paris in 1839 and then returned to Lahore in the same year. A chronicle of the Sikh court partially confirms this. An entry for October 7, 1838, states that “thirteen months has passed since the aforesaid person [Ventura] had gone on leave,” while the entry for April 24, 1839, states that “Collins Sahib, the French, had gone to England along with Ventura Sahib and had brought some very effective medicines of tried utility.” The first entry confirms that Ventura was on leave from approximately 1837 to 1839, while the second places him somewhere in Europe during his leave. Even more specifically, Ventura’s colleague Gardner states in his memoirs that Ventura was indeed on leave in France from 1838 to 1840. These facts show that it is entirely possible that he had indeed visited Paris in 1839, as stated in the manuscript’s dedication. In addition, Lafont states that before Allard’s return from France in 1837, Allard had written a letter indicating that he would return from France as both an ambassador of that country and as the bearer of “friendly gifts.” The chronicles of the Sikh court state that one of those gifts included a personal letter to Ranjit Singh from King Louis-Philippe, and that Ventura asked to be charged with bringing a response from Singh back to France. However, by this time diplomatic relations between the Sikhs and the British were breaking down, and the British refused to grant Ventura a passport to travel through British-occupied territories—a necessary route to reach a seaport—if he carried an official reply to France. After some controversy, Singh decided not to send an “official” reply with Ventura. When Ventura left for France in 1837 (arriving in Paris by 1839), he must have visited the French court. As an important figure in the government of one of France’s allies, he could hardly have avoided doing so. It is therefore logical that he would have carried messages to the French court, much as Allard had done two years prior. In addition, as it was standard practice for diplomatic envoys to exchange gifts, he could not have arrived without gifts—even if they were unofficial or in his personal possession. Several other factors present in the manuscript itself suggest that it was not only given as a gift but actually conceived as a gift. The first is its size: the volume is roughly equivalent to a small modern-day hardback, and therefore is small in comparison to many large-scale royal Islamic manuscripts. The manuscript’s size suggests mobility, a useful quality when a gift is intended to be carried across long distances. In addition, the simple fact that the text is an abridgement—and a rather odd form, blending prose and verse narration (Figure 7.1)—suggests that the full text of Firdawsi’s Shahnama was not needed. If the work was conceived as a gift to a foreigner, there would be no need for a full text since the recipient very likely would not be able to read, or be comfortable reading, the Persian. Furthermore, the sheer number of illustrations adds to the possibility that the Lilly Shamshir Khani was intended as a gift to a foreigner. Many Shahnama manuscripts focus on select illustrations or series of illustrations, featuring large sections of text interspersed with the paintings. For example, an illustrated Shahnama made in Lahore in 1835, with very similar illustrations, contains approximately forty paintings but comprises the full Shahnama text transcribed on almost 600 folios. The Lilly manuscript has only 271 folios, but contains more than twice as many illustrations. In this way a recipient who did not understand the Persian text could still in essence “read” the tales—much as a child can follow a story from a picture book—and appreciate the artistic qualities of the manuscript. Despite its relatively high level of artistic achievement, the Lilly Shahnama appears to have remained an unfinished manuscript. While the 1835 Lahore Shahnama mentioned above reveals the same inconsistencies and some of the sloppiness, there do not seem to be any glaring abnormalities in the illustrations. However, the Lilly manuscript has illustrations of people conversing while seemingly sitting in midair (Figure 7.14). This convention appears in at least three illustrations, each of which are toward the end of the manuscript. Upon closer examination, each such illustration depicts a “kingly” situation, in which a dais, or throne platform, should have been painted in. The figures are present, but the gold dais has not been inserted yet. There are also no dais
Painted after these illustrations, suggesting either that the painter ran out of time to finish inserting the thrones, or that the process of gilding, usually reserved for last, was not completed. This incompleteness suggests a commission that was not quite ready on time but still complete enough to be given or sent as a gift.

In summary, the Lilly Shamsir Khan was most likely conceived specifically as a gift to Rumigny. As mentioned earlier, similar Kashmiri manuscripts were commonly produced to be exported. Through its connection with the Mughal painting style, this illustrated manuscript emphasizes the legitimacy of Sikh rule, and, by its use of Indian folk styles, the unique Indian heritage of Ventura’s employer. In addition, the use of an abridgement and the multitude of illustrations are consistent with the hypothesis that the work was intended as a gift to someone who did not read Persian, such as Rumigny. Unfortunately, the manuscript was
only partially completed at the time of Ventura’s departure, and so the few remaining unfinished illustrations simply had to remain as such.

The choice of this particular manuscript—that is, an Islamicate manuscript given by a Christian envoy to a foreign dignitary—may at first seem odd, but in reality fits in well with the idea of a gift intended for the French court from the Sikh ruler. If the gift had been meant to represent nothing more than a simple acknowledgement of a Franco-Sikh friendship, then any luxury manuscript would have sufficed. However, the Shāhnāma is essentially a martial work, saturated with fighting exploits, feats of conquest, and heroes defending their homeland even against demons (Figure 7.35). Therefore, this particular Shamsīr Khānī manuscript could be seen as a military commemoration, celebrating the Franco-Sikh alliance against the British, mirroring the tales found in the text that describe the Persians joining forces to fight off their outside enemies.

As discussed previously, it was not uncommon for members of the Muslim elite to commission manuscripts for use as gifts. However, such gifts were usually offered to family members or members of the court. The Lilly Shamsīr Khānī is a rare example of an “Islamic” manuscript actually conceived as a gift for a member of a foreign power. Commissioning manuscripts that commemorate the various military exploits of rulers, as in the case of the Akbarnāma, was not unusual. However, that the Lilly manuscript’s commemoration is made in acknowledgement of military help from a foreign country is rare. In addition, while most splendid Islamic manuscripts were probably only seen by a select few, they were meant to be read. In this case, the manuscript was produced as a luxury item for a foreign man, meant to be enjoyed for its aesthetic qualities rather than perused.

For these reasons, the Lilly Shamsīr Khānī crosses disciplinary and transcends cultural boundaries. It abridges a non-Islamic, Persian text that had been appropriated by Muslim rulers and, consequently, came to be seen as an Islamic literary masterpiece. If used as a political gift intended to emphasize, both literally and figuratively, the Sikh right to rule, the manuscript is once again being used for the purposes of political legitimation, much as it had been by previous Ilkhānid, Timurid, and Mughal patrons. Through its use as a diplomatic gift, moreover, this manuscript punctures cultural and religious boundaries as well. It is a Persian Islamic manuscript, produced under Sikh patronage in the Mughal style, given to French Christians. By incorporating so many issues, this illustrated Shamsīr Khānī manuscript provides a fascinating glimpse into the political, cultural, and artistic climate of Sikh rule in the Punjab during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. It also proves that one particular manuscript can carry a myriad of cultural, religious, and political implications.
42. Ibid., 396.
44. Ibid., 397–398.
45. Schmidt, Islamic and Indian Manuscripts, 98.
47. Ibid., 388.
48. Lafont, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 127.
49. Jean-Marie Lafont, Painj-i-Khus, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His French Officers (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2003), 93.
51. Sarl, Undar-i-Tawarikh, 335.
52. Ibid., 455.
54. Lafont, Painj-i-Khus, 99.
55. Sarl, Undar-i-Tawarikh, 485.
56. Lafont, Painj-i-Khus, 106.
57. Currently held in the Benoisisches Historisches Museum in Bern, Switzerland (inv. no. N.3.16).