The triumph of Islam is a leitmotif of the Hamza legend. It is expressed in some stories in the use of the oath ‘sun-worshippers,’ and briefly at the conclusion of many others when an offending idolator converts or is punished for his recalcitrance. In one illustration in the Mughal manuscript, the rivalry among actual religions is given more attention when Hamza desecrates a Zoroastrian temple (cat. 73). This painting, however, makes explicit the new order that the advent of Islam ushered into the world. The caption relates that the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, the most sacred city of Islam, has astonishing repercussions: idols fall head over heels in a worship hall and the seabed rises and drains the sea. The text describing these and other events has vanished, and the following passages begin a separate tale featuring Hurmuz. They do, however, preface it with a few sentences describing Hamza’s appointment of Hurmuz to Anshirvan’s throne, and Hamza’s engagement and marriage to Mbir Guhartaj at Mecca. Thus, successive stories jump from an event from Hamza’s childhood—the birth of his childhood companion Muhammad—to one of his early adulthood, suggesting that the geographical connection is paramount here. This example reminds us that the stories of the Hamza legend are often linked by elements other than chronological time, which has a much stronger grip on our own sense of events than it ever did in the realm of myth.

The composition is divided into two distinct parts, each apparently by a different artist. One part depicts a crowd of men gathered along the seashore. They point excitedly toward the disappearing water, where a veritable menagerie of aquatic creatures thrashes about on the muddy seabed. The first artist, Mahesa, makes it clear that this is no ordinary scene of the sea teeming with life; he depicts the entire bodies of the fish and marine animals—often belly up—rather than showing them half-hidden by water, and he torques a few of them in a manner that constitutes an example of waves and ripples. This remarkable sight, then, is presented as a sign of a miraculous event, the geological equivalent of the irrevocable religious upheaval. As if the plight of these few denizens of the sea were not bad enough already, an iconoclast later defaced their heads, as he did to most living creatures depicted in the other Hamzanama paintings acquired in eleventh-century Kairouan.

The remainder of the painting, by Mukhis, illustrates the self-destruction of the idols. Four large paintings of idols—all frontal, heavily garlanded, and seated in an Indian manner—have plummeted from their niches and are now inverted, a position that indicates their religious capitulation. The images lean against a large framed niche and the side walls of a tiled courtyard, a formalistic bit of architecture bearing only a meager resemblance to actual Indian temples. Two nearby worshipers react to this cataclysm with predictable despair; outside the front gate, which has a high threshold, as Indian temples normally do, five more devotees weep and wail at the sight of the rubble to which their gods have been reduced.

Mukhis’s hand is evident in the heavy, schematic folds of the idolators’ garments as well as in many architectural details. The latter can be as subtle as the half-shaded bricks or as obvious as the exaggerated white highlights left on nearly every architectural member. The florid ornamentation of domes and neckings and the generally tippy quality of the densely packed buildings are also characteristic of his work.
Missives bearing alarming news are featured prominently in the Honamana. In some cases, the letters or scrolls are intercepted by an ayur, allowing for a hero’s narrow escape or an unexpected turn of fortune; in other instances, they are delivered as intended and set off a more developed chain of events. This scene of two princes, Alamshah and Qubad, excitedly discussing the contents of a scroll falls into the latter category. The preceding text is missing, and the caption below is now partially damaged, but the text following the illustration suggests that it is the news contained in this scroll that spurs Alamshah to rush off to a city named Kharishma. Alamshah insists that he must undertake this journey alone, but he eventually allows Prince Sad and Umarasp to accompany him. When he reaches Kharishma, where the Franks have laid waste to his former home, he rediscovers a secret tunnel dug precisely for such perilous circumstances, and there meets up with his covering mother and distressed former servants.

To emphasize the drama induced by this disturbing letter, the artist isolates the two princes in the center of the crowded composition. One prince grasps the scroll and talks animatedly, his hand raised to head level. The other prince leans forward to grab his wrist, clearly with the intention of compelling him to relinquish the letter so that he may verify the news himself. Although Mughal artists often included real information on such painted letters (see, for example, cat. 3, 6a, and 7), this artist was content to simulate text with a few lines of pseudo-writing.

As in the following painting (cat. 24), a huge hexagonal canopy overlies the central action. Here, however, the artist has not shunted away to the perimeter the seemingly numerous supporting poles; instead, he stages them in an experimental configuration that simultaneously obstructs the view of the two princes and foils the standards of even Mughal visual logic.

If this environment has a few structural shortcomings, it compounds them with an anomaly in its brilliant decorative scheme. The princes sit on a narrow floral carpet with an exceptionally broad and exuberant foliate border; a feature that Shrawana uses in most of his works in the manuscript. Beyond this central horizontal band of carpet is what appears to be a tiled hexagonal platform. This reading raises a problem of material. On the one hand, it would be wholly impractical to set up such a platform each time the court pitched its tents, as it obviously has done here. On the other, this kind of star pattern is found on no other carpet in the whole of the Honamana. Moreover, the same foliate border used for the central carpet runs around both the front and rear edges of this larger violet area, which could not if the latter were truly a raised platform (see, for example, cat. 77). We must conclude that the incongruity of pattern and material is the result of a change in communication between artists working on different parts of the given painting.

From work elsewhere in the manuscript, we can surmise that Shrawana contributed the canopy, carpet, and foliate borders, and a second artist, Banavari, supplied all the figures, the tiled surface, the surrounding tent, and the courtyard in the lower right. Although an iconoclast attempted to obscure all the faces, he applied the muddy paste too lightly or incompletely on some figures, and these survive all have faces like those found in Banavari’s other works. More telling are the slender, compact bodies and delicate jamā patterns. Banavari is accomplished in his own way, but he often overlooks refinements that Shrawana never fails to make. In this scene, for example, Banavari constructs the tent so that the upright stays that are visible in the upper right fan out from the center of the painting, and the crosswise ones meet in an arched fashion. In Shrawana’s hands (cat. 24), these same elements are marshaled to the true vertical and form a powerful, regular pattern.
24. AN AYYAR MISUNDERSTANDS ANOSHIRVAN’S ORDER AND MURDERS QUBAD IN HIS SLEEP

Life has few sorrows greater than the loss of one’s child, particularly when one knows that it was both needless and preventable. Hamza, who takes pride in his steady nature, suffers this bitter tragedy as deeply as any in his life, and shows an emotional depth rarely intimated or fathomed.

How it all came to pass is somewhat unclear. The text that precedes this illustration is missing, and that following it is abraded in parts, but enough remains to deduce this: it begins when an ayyar named Rūg-Ear hears Shah Anoshirvan—Hamza’s father-in-law—speak of a certain handsome youth. Rūg-Ear badly misconstrues his remarks, and, proceeding as if in a trance, murders the beautiful Prince Qubad, Hamza’s second son, in his bed. Once his assassin’s knife has caused the youth to roll up the carpet of existence, the ayyar is beset by a rush of contradictory impulses, thinking, on the one hand, of the acclaim he expects he will be given by Anoshirvan, and on the other, of the terrible end he has brought to a life in full blossom. Rūg-Ear bundles up Qubad’s severed head, and rides back to Anoshirvan’s camp. When he deposits his bloody trophy at the feet of Bakhšak, Anoshirvan’s minister, even that wicked one is dismayed. Anoshirvan, dumbstruck that this vile deed was committed purportedly at his instigation, is overcome with sorrow, and he dutifully sets out to inform Hamza.

Meanwhile, Hamza has already had a premonition of his son’s death:

“From the fire in his heart came such a cry that fire fell into all people.”

In short, the Sahib-Qirān’s camp was like doomsday, and the leaders, commanders, and princes gathered themselves in mourning for that sapling of the garden of martyrs, putting on clothing as black as night.”

Once the meaning of his dream is confirmed, his grief deepens to despair, a state expressed most poignantly when Hamza removes from his head the useless crown that, for all the glory it conferred, could do nothing to avert this cruel fate.

Shravana, who painted most, if not all, of this work, depicts the distantly murder itself into a spacious tent compound, manned laxly by dozing sentries, slips Rūg-Ear. His target sleeps peacefully on a hexagonal bed raised up and backed with throne-like features and sheltered by a sumptuous canopy. Rūg-Ear creeps up and quickly draws his knife against Qubad’s exposed throat; the prince, awoken by the pain of the first cut, jerks awake and makes a brief but futile effort to resist.

Shravana fleshes out this core action with many engaging details. He furnishes the prince’s domain with an elaborate set of steps, an assortment of luxurious candlesticks, and an exquisite carpet. The throneback is wonderfully extravagant, both in the strikingly innovative pattern on its dome and the now-defaced dragon-headed finials that protrude from its sides. Overhead hovers a magnificent canopy, its golden top adorned with scenes of a dragon and other mythical creatures, around this runs the distinctive foliate design that recurs throughout Shravana’s work. Further out in the compound is a red chest of armor, on it rest two golden vessels capped with what appear to be two inverted translucent jade drinking cups. Even the tent itself is made attractive by the attention the artist gives to the rhythm of upright and cross-crossing stays against the brilliant white cloth. Finally, a measure of human interest is provided by the guards. In most cases, they cradle their weapons, their constant companions, but one figure in the lower right corner has put duty aside for the night and allows his infant son to nestle against him.

In the lower center of this painting is the rarest of all documentation in the Hamzanama: a date. This one, which reads as 592 (Hijrá), corresponding to 1054–55, is particularly valuable because it is accompanied by a volume number, 6. Together these numbers support a redating of the entire manuscript to circa 1551–72, five years earlier than had previously been thought.1

LANDHAUR IS ABDUCTED IN HIS SLEEP BY A DEV

So brave and magnanimous is Hamza that he regularly transforms an inexorable foe into a staunch supporter. The Arab champion Umar Madikar, for example, is shown being vanquished by Hamza in one painting early in the manuscript, but converts to Islam and becomes Hamza’s loyal lieutenant. Landhaur, the gigantic figure depicted here, travels a more colorful road to Hamza’s side. Soon after the premature death of his father, Sa’dan, the king of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), his mother dies of grief, and the infant Landhaur is forced to spend his first six years living at the grave site. He is taken there by his uncle, who sends him to an island inhabited by a herd of elephants, who adopt Landhaur as one of their own and sustain him with their milk. Hence, for the rest of his life Landhaur is rarely far from his elephant mount.

More strife ensues. Landhaur quarrels first with his uncle and later with his cousin. Eventually Umar is sent to his court to good him in a battle, and does so by stealing his crown. Finally, Landhaur encounters Hamza, who defeats him in a seventeen-day-long wrestling match and imprisons him. In the meantime his cousin converts to Islam, and prevails upon Hamza to release Landhaur from prison. A grateful Landhaur immediately converts to Islam and Hamza’s cause.

This striking illustration has lost its text, both on the reverse and presumably in the blue area above the painting, but it shows the kind of peril that even a brief lapse in vigilance can bring. A weary Landhaur has drifted off to sleep on a luxurious, if dangerously portable bed. Seeing this, a fearsome white dev seize the opportunity to press his advantage and snatches Landhaur, bed and all, almost certainly to bear him to confinement or worse.

Dasavanta uses a figure scale well suited to the struggle of Islam. The dev bestrides nearly the entire composition, and carries effortlessly a low bed that now extends slightly beyond the lateral edges. Like most dev, he has flaming eye-rims, fangs, horns, and spots. The artist also adds a few flourishes, gilding the dev with a serpentine belt, and complementing the belted bracelets adorning the demon’s arms and legs with a jangling bell on each of the two horns — odd apparel. It seems, for one engaged in stealthy abduction, Most of all, Dasavanta injects new life into this familiar creature by playing freely with paint, so that the dev’s spots seem simultaneously to hover above and lurk below his skin, and his mane and beard are both matted and scraggly. Dasavanta allows his collaborator, Shrawana, to fill in the dev’s kit with one of his precise floral patterns. Shrawana does so with a pattern featuring a bright blue ribon-like form, a pattern he applies elsewhere to canopies, carpets, and architectural bands. Dasavanta completes the form with a thick, modeled edge — something that Shrawana never uses on his own.

The same blending of work occurs on the dev’s sleeping victim. Dasavanta is surely responsible for Landhaur’s broadly conceived jama and the voluminous sheets, while Shrawana supplies the bed’s golden merlons, the inlay, and brilliantly patterned pillow. Landhaur’s flat and heavily painted features and hair have been repainted in modern times.

The landscape is simple, a prudent choice for a composition dominated by two huge forms. At the same time, its pink ground and regular pattern of tufts are throwbacks to a purely Persianate tradition, an effect continued in the schematic chameleon foliage along the left edge and the ornamental arrangement of yellow-tipped leaves on either side of the dev. The only overtly Mughal landscape feature is the small lobed rocks with dark internal markings, a distinctive element used by Shrawana in cat. 51.

Attributed to Dasavanta and Shrawana

Volume and painting number unknown.
India, Mughal dynasty, 1610-1755.
59.3 x 45.2 cm.
Published: Eggert 1974, pl. 15; Eggert 1984, pl. 1; Glück 1975, pl. 3.

2. The dimensions of the painting, together with the cropping of the horizon and the dev’s feet, indicate that the painting has been trimmed on at least two sides.

CAT. 2

94 CATALOGUE