26 BASU BEHEADS NAMADPOSH, DISGUISES HIMSELF, AND CAJOLES HIS WAY INTO ACRe CASTLE

The game that spies play is a ruthless one, with stakes as high as life itself. Hamza’s spy Basu clearly wins this round. He waylays one of his counterparts, Namadposh (Clad in Coarse Material), and murders him not far from Acre Castle. Basu is on a mission to release Pahlavan Karb, and rightly surmises that Namadposh has information that will help him complete the rescue.

"... when Basu cut off Namadposh’s head and buried it in the ground, a letter fell from Namadposh’s belongings. Basu read the letter, and when he learned the contents of the letter, he put on Namadposh’s clothes and departed. Although Namadposh was tall, and Basu was short, nonetheless he got himself somehow to the gate of the Acre fortress in the middle of the night and cried out, ‘Open the gate. I have come from Pahlavan Qaran.’

‘Who are you?’ asked the castellans.

‘I am Namadposh the oggar,’ he said. When they heard that it was Namadposh, they opened the gate and let Basu in. They saw that he was not Namadposh, but he was wearing Namadposh’s armor. Once again, to make certain, they asked him who he was.

‘I am one of Namadposh’s servants,’ he said. ‘Never mind who I am. Take me to Gurgana, and I’ll tell him who I am.’"

He continues to weave this web of deceit when he is brought before Gurgana, telling him unverifiable stories that lead him to postpone Karb’s execution for a few days. By good fortune, Gurgana orders him to guard the prisoner Karb lest some tricky oggar try to rescue him; which, of course, is exactly what Basu himself has in mind.

This illustration is one of the few images in early Mughal painting to make use of continuous narration, an approach that allows a single figure to be depicted several times within one composition. Accordingly, Basu is shown once kneeling beside the ambushed Namadposh, and again outside the castle gate. There, Basu, whose stolen fancy tunic is decidedly not too long, has the guard, who leans out from his high watchtower to reply, in the upper right corner, the plumed and enthroned figure of Gurgana is given the news of the spy’s arrival.

One element only marginally related to the story but prominent in the painting is the domestic compound in the lower right. Its nominal function is to establish the time of night—already clear from the torches blazing inside the fortress and the schematic dark-blue stars in the sky—but it also allows the artist to provide a glimpse of village life, where a watchdog barks at a passing stranger and a man dutifully tends his flock even as he dozes on a humble bed. A particularly unusual detail is the rough brushwood fence enclosing the cluster of huts; this ubiquitous feature of village India appears in only three other Mughal paintings of the period, all apparently the work of the same artist.

Given the obliteration of all the faces, it is difficult to attribute most of the painting with any certainty. Nonetheless, several ancillary features suggest that the lower half of the scene was painted by Mahesa. The most telling of these are the insubstantial, pastel-colored outcrops that look like puffball clouds before the fortress, these resemble in many ways the ridges found in cat.46 and 49, both attributed to Mahesa. The contours of the rocks in those works are strengthened with thick, darkly colored outlines, whereas the ones here conspicuously lack that feature. The outline appears to be a convention developed only once the Hamzanama project was well under way, for it is absent from all paintings belonging to the early volumes of the manuscript. In this respect, the numbers 7 and 10 inscribed on the wall of the hut to the right of stacked water jars take on added importance, for they are an informal record of the volume and painting number of this illustration, positioned less than halfway through the project.

The remainder of the painting was added by Mahesa and an artist who supplied the architectural backdrops for many a scene. His trademark conventions are everywhere: the precariously stacked gate towers, the tiny, highly abstracted machicolations, and the boxy, slightly disjointed architectural forms. The inhabitants of his architectural creations rarely merit much interest, but the poignant scene of a mother tenderly cradling her child in the area above the tree is a welcome exception to this tendency.
Every seafarer can tell gripping stories of the awesome mysteries of the deep, when an unfathomable force or terrifying creature came so close to snuffing out his life that he vowed never again to venture far from the safety of dry land. This spectacular leviathan, so enormous that an entire ship could disappear into its mouth, is surely the stuff of such lore.

Without its caption and preceding text, the illustration has lost its original identification, but there are enough references in the following text that we can at least determine the destination toward which these heroes are sailing. The fourth line of the damaged text on the reverse of this painting introduces a physician named Muhandas, who attends King Atras Sutam-Bow. Atras goes to investigate a formidable army that has somehow made its way to the shore of the island he rules. When he does, he meets Hamza, and the two swap stories about certain trees of legendary height and power. Eventually, Hamza urges Atras to convert to Islam; Atras agrees to do so only if Hamza can defeat him at wrestling, thereby tacitly acknowledging that spiritual righteousness normally manifests itself as physical superiority. The result of the contest is therefore beyond doubt.

Before Hamza can even reach the kingdom of Atras, however, he and his men must overcome the fearsome obstacle that looms before them. Their seafaring ships are so large that they fill more than half the composition, but still they are dwarfed by the huge monster suddenly rising up from the depths of the sea. The champions use every conceivable weapon to try to stave off the scaly beast. Hamza, dressed in orange and occupying the most prominent position in the centermost ship, has just let fly an arrow; in light of the Amir’s legendary prowess and the arrow’s trajectory, it must be this very arrow that has struck the enraged monster directly in the right eye. A prince to Hamza’s left takes aim at the other eye, while Umar whirs his saber about and prepares to launch a pelt at the creature’s snout. Other supporters attack with traditional weapons—swords, spears, maces, and lances—but at least two men fire muskets and another wields a newfangled crossbow.

Although every face has been reworked in a style drier and more precise than any known in this period, the remaining appears to follow the original underdrawing, leaving most figures—particularly those in the flanking ships—with the highly animated poses and expressions reminiscent of Shravana’s figures in cat. 51 and 69. Conversely, the brownish color of Umar’s turban and the soft, voluminous treatment of those worn by Hamza and the prince indicate the hand of Basavana, as do the painterly forms of the two billowing sails. The construction details of the ships themselves also resemble those found in another of Basavana’s works (cat. 30). And with the possible exception of Shravana, it is difficult to imagine another artist conceiving such an inventive form as the long, leering wolfish prow of the central ship.

But even such captivating forms as the two animate paws pale before the living behemoth that confronts the heroes. Other paintings (cat. 34 and 36) include roughly similar creatures, which are actually based upon a kind of Indian alligator known as a gharial. This creature, however, is a type of indigenous Indian crocodile called a syhishor, which, as Emperor Babur recorded in his memoirs, could grow as large as four or five yards and whose toothy snout was more than half a yard in length. Both lizard-like creatures are depicted with rounded ears, streamers, and a snarly ridge, but the syhishor is often shown with fangs projecting like horns from the front of the snout. Indeed, Basavana himself features an identical syhishar bearing down on Nuruddah in cat. 80. But in this case, Basavana, like many a fisherman, is unwilling to let even impressive facts get in the way of a good story, and exaggerates the scale with such relish that an already fierce sea creature becomes the whopper of all Mughal painting.

Attributed to Basavana and Shravana
Volume unknown, text number 69
India, Mughal dynasty, circa 1540
71 x 55 cm (detail on p. 7)
Private collection
Published: Christie’s, New York, 3 October 1990, lot 28.

1. Although a warrior named Muhandas is mentioned in cat. 62, the painting and text numbers of the preceding illustrators preclude an immediate connection with this one, and suggest that it does not belong to volume II.

2. The Berlin manuscript (see above, p. 11) contains an illustration (cat. 53), in which Hamza wields the saber of Shatran, which is probably the name of the island ruled by Atras.


4. Rohbanana, p. 34.

Zumurrud Shah, king of the east, suffers many adversities in his long struggle against Hamza, but none more abject than the punishment inflicted on him by a handful of ordinary gardeners. This illustration falls in the middle of a very entertaining story. We pick up in the text that follows the painting:

"The narrator says that when Zumurrud Shah (the man who) leapt from ambush and beat him senseless with sticks and clubs, he cried out, 'Friends, I am just a wayfarer. I entered this garden unknowingly. I have not yet touched anything that I should suffer such a fate.'

'Follow,' they said, 'we thought that a bear was responsible for the ruination of our garden, but you are a desert ghooul that has come and wrecked this garden every day.'"

Zumurrud Shah, who is thoroughly perplexed by this thrashing, plaintively proclaims his innocence, and the gardeners grant him a temporary reprieve. Shaken and sullied, he crawls out of the pit, and declares that he is the lord of the east, the son of Lahut Shah. Taking such a grandiosc identity to be an outrageous lie, the gardeners become even more determined to assault him with whips. A cowed Zumurrud Shah quickly disavows his claim, and, after being teased and prodded relentlessly, submits to being bound with chains and locked in a barn. There, his tribulations continue. When the gardeners' cattle return for the evening, they are none too pleased to find an intruder occupying their stalls. One cow tears at him with her horn, shredding his nose. Then, while Zumurrud Shah tries to save his wound, another stops by and unloads a pile of dung on him!

Kesava Dasa illustrates this tale with great economy and wit. Once again, Zumurrud Shah dominates the composition by virtue of his enormous size, even though the artist cleverly conceals most of his huge bulk in the pit. Four angry gardeners assault the giant with sticks, as the text specifies, while the fifth wields a spade as a sign of their collective occupation. The object of their wrath has been stripped of his usual regal ornaments, and is now grazed only by a pair of bloody wellies. Beyond a zigzagging garden wall lies the source of the forbidden fruit, neatly trellised grapevines, a tall date palm, and assorted other vegetation. Finally, hidden from the gardeners by a spreading tree and rocky scree, are the guilty bears, not just one but a whole family, the female playfully withholding a piece of fruit from one cub while another looks on with amusement from the crook of the tree.

There are many indications that Kesava Dasa was responsible for most, if not all of this painting. Zumurrud Shah's face is the most obvious, its large eyes, grimacing expression and wispy beard being enlarged versions of the features of the distressed ayyar in cat. 55. Familiar, too, are the giant's hands, which have fine, elongated, and somewhat rubbery fingers. The trees and vegetation also show signs of being Kesava's handiwork. The bark of the tree sheltering the bears, for example, is rendered with the same distinctive contoured striations found on Umar's shorts in cat. 55; similarly, the fine grasses surrounding the pit appear in both cat. 55 and 56. Even the rare palm has a counterpart in the former work.

This illustration is marred slightly by the repainting of four of the five gardeners' faces, which have unbrushed, greyish complexities and thinly drawn features.

One highly intriguing feature of this painting is a series of three black marks—apparently numbers—written obliquely beside the rightmost bear. These tiny numbers are somewhat malformed and generously spaced, but if they are what they seem, that is, the numbers 975, they probably represent a Hirja date corresponding to AD 1567-68. Like the other date in the manuscript (that of AH 972/AD 1564-65 on cat. 54), this one is written and placed so informally that it should be regarded as the most fortunate kind of paintedly graffiti.