Writing and Illustrating History: Rashid al-Din’s *Jami’ al-tavārīkh*

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The *Jami’ al-tavārīkh*, or Compendium of Chronicles, the multi-volume world history composed by the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din in the early years of the fourteenth century, provides an excellent model for studying the production and transmission of manuscripts in medieval times, because we have so much information about it. In addition to the author’s instructions specifying how manuscripts should be produced, we have several copies of the text made under his supervision. These manuscripts stand at the forefront of three centuries during which the illustrated book became a major art form in Iran and the eastern Islamic lands, and so they provide important information about how scribes and artists developed the new tradition of the illustrated book. Despite the patron’s strict control over production, the three copies dated to the 710h/1310s show that already during his lifetime, scribes and artists had to make slight changes in format and illustration. The text continued to be copied for several centuries in Iran and India, and looking at these later manuscripts shows us how artists further adapted the original models. In addition to theoretical models, then, studying the *Jami’ al-tavārīkh* and other manuscripts commissioned by Rashid al-Din allows us to understand the practical problems in the transmission of medieval manuscripts, especially those with illustrations.

First, to the author and patron. Rashid al-Din Faḍl Allāh b. ‘Īsād al-Dawla Abū al-Khayr al-Ḥamadānī al-Ṭabīb was born ca. 645/1247 at Hamadan in western Iran, the son of a Jewish apothecary.¹ He converted to Islam at the age of thirty, perhaps at the time he entered the service of the Ilkhanid ruler Abuqa (r. 1265-82) as physician. Rashid al-Din rose quickly through the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy under Ghāzān (r. 1295-1304) and his brother Oljeitū (r. 1304-16), until he reached the rank of vizier. Rashid al-Din served briefly as deputy to the chief vizier, Ṣadr al-Dīn Šāhānšāḥ, and after Ṣadr al-Din’s execution in the spring of 1298, was appointed co-vizier with Sa’īd al-Dīn Šavājk. After Sa’īd al-Din’s execution in 1312, Rashid al-Din was again appointed co-vizier, this time with Tāj al-Dīn Alishāh, a wily jeweller. The two were bitter rivals, and soon after the accession of Oljeitū’s teenage son Abū Sa’īd in 1317, Alishāh succeeded in having his counterpart dismissed. Incurring the envy of his rivals, Rashid al-Din was accused of having poisoned Oljeitū and executed on 17 Juśrād 718/17 July 1318. The vizier’s head was reportedly paraded about Tabriz amidst jeers about the accursed Jew; his estates were plundered.

¹ For a brief biography, see Morgen 1995.
Rashid al-Din was a busy man. Along with his duties as vizier, he was a major patron of the arts. Like other members of the Ilkhanid court, Rashid al-Din used his wealth to finance architectural projects in the form of tax-subsidized pious foundations. He established them at Sulaymaniyah, Yazd, Bastām, and Hamadan, but the largest was the Rab‘i Rashidih, an eastern suburb of Tabriz. Although little trace remains of the quarter, the text of its endowment deed dated 1 Rab‘is 709/9 August 1309 has survived. It shows that the quarter comprised a monumental entrance complex leading to the main section with the founder’s tomb complex within a mosque, a hospice for visitors (dār al-dīya‘ī), a khansā‘ī for Sufis, a hospital, and service buildings. To support the enormous complex, the vizier set aside the prodigious sum of nearly fifty thousand dinars. One half of the endowment went to the overseers (Rashid al-Din and, after his death, his sons). The other half provided support for more than three hundred employees and slaves and upkeep for the buildings.

As part of the endowment for the Rab‘i Rashidih, Rashid al-Din provided for the copying of manuscripts: every year two scribes were to transcribe copies of a thirty-volume manuscript of the Koran and a collection of hadith, Jāmi‘ al-usul fi abjadih ar-rasil. Rashid al-Din carefully spelled out how these manuscripts should be produced. The scribes were to write on large-size baghda‘dī paper of extremely fine quality in a good clean hand. When finished, the manuscripts were to be taken to the main rū‘ūs of the tomb complex and placed on a raised platform between the minbar and the minbar, where a prayer would be recited for the donor. The superintendent was also to have the manuscripts inscribed with a prayer offering praises to God and stipulating that Rashid al-Din had ordered that the manuscripts be endowed to the residents of a specific city.

We can match the texts described in Rashid al-Din’s endowment deed to several surviving examples of two thirty-part manuscripts of the Koran. The first (fig. 1) is a single volume (the 26th) from a thirty-volume manuscript (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library EH 248). According to the colophon, it was copied by Abdal-Allah b. Abī al-Qāsim b. Abdal-Allah al-Tū‘i al-Rū‘ārāvī, a scribe who apparently hailed from the small town of Tū‘ in the Rū‘ārāvī district south of Hamadan, and finished in Safar 715/April 1315. The certificate of commissioning mentions that the manuscript was made for the treasury (khizāna) of Rashid al-Din. The scribe may have been working at the Rab‘i Rashidih in Tabriz or at one of Rashid al-Din’s other pious foundations, for another thirty-part manuscript of the Koran (Cairo, Dār al-Kutubi ms. 72) was done in Rashid al-Din’s pious foundation in Hamadan (fig. 2). The colophon to the final juz‘ specifies that the scribe, Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Hamādānī wrote and gilded the manuscript in Jumādā 1 713/September 1313 at Rashid al-Din’s pious foundation at Hamadan. Certificates of commissioning at the end of each volume bear the name of the Ilkhanid sultan Ūljugrī, and the magnificent manuscript may have been intended for his tomb complex at Sulaymaniyah. Later, however, the manuscript was sent as a present to the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in Cairo, where the certificates were doctored so that the name of the Mamluk ruler was written over that of the Ilkhanid.

These two copies of the Koran share many features. Both are large manuscripts, with each folio measuring approximately 55 x 40 cm. Both have five lines of large script per page in a style that merges many features of the monumental muhāqqaq with the more curvilinear tibuṣīh. Both manuscripts have double blue rulings surrounding the text, written in black in the copy made for the vizier and in gold outlined in black in the copy made for the sultan. Both share a similar color scheme and narrow border of palmettes.

On stylistic grounds, it is possible to attribute two other dispersed thirty-part manuscripts of the Koran to the patronage of Rashid al-Din. The first was made in Mosul between 706 and 710 (1306-11). Certificates appended to the front of each juz‘ mention that the manuscript was copied for Sultan Ūljugrī under the auspices of the viziers Rashid al-Din and Sa‘d al-Din Sāvāji. Copied by Abī b. Muḥammad b. Zayd b. Muḥammad b. Zayd, the manuscript has the same five-line-per-page format as the other thirty-volume manuscripts of the Koran made under Rashid al-Din’s auspices and nearly the same dimensions (57 x 40 cm).

The second copy of the Koran that can be attributed to the patronage of Rashid al-Din (fig. 3) was copied at Baghdad by Aḥmad b. al-Sulṭarwādī and illuminated by Muḥammad b. Ayyāb b. Abīdālāh between 701 and 707 (1302-08). It shows the same large size (50 x 35 cm) and five-line format with the other multi-part manuscripts of the Koran known to have been made for Rashid al-Din. Details of the illumination connect it specifically to the Hamadan Koran: the frontispiece to the second juz‘ of the Baghdad Koran has pentagons with scrollwork sprouting five tendrils, a feature found only in the Hamadan Koran.

In addition to stylistic similarities, the historical context suggests strongly that Rashid al-Din had a hand in the Baghdād Koran. The manuscript, the finest to survive from the period, was probably begun for Ghazān, but after his death was
continued under Rashid al-Din, who supervised Ghazān’s foundations in Baghdad and had fine manuscripts read aloud there. Rashid al-Din also collected the work of Ahmad al-Suhrawardi, and so he may well have supervised its production. This copy, which took almost six years to complete, was the work of a team of calligrapher and illuminator, and on stylistic grounds the Mosul Koran seems to also have been done by a pair.

Rashid al-Din was evidently pleased with the provision for copying manuscripts in the original endowment deed for the Rab‘i Rashid, for three and a half years later at the beginning of Dhu al-Hijja 713/18 March 1314, the vizier added an addendum to his endowment expanding the commission to include the yearby transcription of two complete copies (one in Arabic and one in Persian) of six of his own works.11 The first was a theological treatise entitled Majmu‘ a‘-yi rashidiyya (Rashidian Collection), itself comprised of four volumes. The second was the multi-volume history, Jami‘ al-tawārikh. Originally commissioned by the sultan Ghazān as a history of the Mongols, it was expanded under Öljeytü to become the earliest known history of the world. Rashid al-Din initially divided the lengthy work into three volumes, but later increased this to four. Volume 1, written for Ghazān and known as the Tarikh-i Ghazāni, contains the history of the Mongols. Volume 2 contains a biography of Öljeytü, which has not survived, and a second and much longer part, containing a history of the non-Mongol peoples of Eurasia. Because this volume was so much longer than the others, the author later divided it into two parts. Volume 3 was a geography, which, like the biography of Öljeytü, does not seem to have survived.

The third of his own works that Rashid al-Din ordered copied was entitled Aštār u aqī‘ī (Monuments and Living things). It deals with a variety of matters connected with meteorology, agriculture, arbiculture, apiculture, destruction of noxious insects and reptiles, farming and stock-breeding, architecture, fortification, ship-building, mining and metallurgy. The text was thought to have been lost, but an abridged copy made in the seventeenth century was recently identified and published.12 Rashid al-Din’s three other works, Baya‘a al-baqiyya, Tabātib al-mahābīb (Verification of topics), and As‘a‘l, aṣ-ṣibā‘a u tā‘līqāt (Questions, Answers, and Comments), are less well-known.

In the addendum ordering copies of his own works, Rashid al-Din stipulated many of the same provisions he had stipulated for the religious manuscripts ordered in the original endowment. Like the religious manuscripts, the copies of his own works had to be copied on large sheets of fine-quality paper in a clean hand. When finished, the manuscripts were to be brought to the large ivan in the tomb complex and placed on a raised platform between the mihrāb and minbar. Each was to be inscribed on the back that it had been given to a specific

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12 Rashid al-Din 1368/1989; see also the comments and summary by Lambton 2000.
Shahrūkh charged his historian with completing a manuscript of Rashid al-Din's *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh* that had a missing volume. Hāfiz-i Abru interpolated sections he had written into the incomplete text by the Ilkhanid historian. The result, often mistakenly confused with a volume of Hāfiz-i Abrū's own four-volume world history known as the *Ma‘ṣma‘ al-tawārīkh*, is actually a replacement volume of the *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh*. The holograph copy of Hāfiz-i Abrū's replacement volume (H 1653) contains 220 folios (folios 164–219, 227–341, and 343–91) from the original fourteenth-century copy of Rashid al-Din's *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh*. A colophon on folio 375 at the end of the section on the Fatimids and Nizāris identifies the work as that of Rashid al-Din and states that it was finished at the end of Jumādā II 714/October 1314. This section contains 68 paintings. Another 208 folios of the manuscript (folios 1–63, 242, and 392–435) are in the hand of Hāfiz-i Abrū. A colophon on folio 148a identifies this part as Hāfiz-i Abrū's work, done in his own hand and finished on 6 Muḥarram 829/18 November 1425, and a third colophon at the end of the history of the Franks gives the completion date seven months later in Sha‘bān 829/July 1426.

The other manuscript in Istanbul (H. 1654) is a more complete copy of Rashid al-Din's *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh* (fig. 6). According to the colophon on folio 350a, it was copied for Rashid al-Din and finished on 3 Jumādā I 717 (14 July 1317); a note below indicates that the manuscript once contained 375 folios, but that someone stole 25, leaving only 350. Like the other manuscript in Istanbul (H 1653), H 1654 has been remarqued with a pinkish paper and now measures 560 by 370 mm, but the written area is slightly smaller than the fourteenth-century folios in H 1653 (340 by 240 mm versus 370 by 260) and has fewer lines per page (31 versus 35). The manuscript now contains 118 paintings as well as 78 pages with depictions of Chinese emperors and attendants. On stylistic grounds all but the first three paintings seem to have been added later, and these three Ilkhanid paintings are damaged.17

The copies of Rashid al-Din's history made during his lifetime share physical characteristics. All are transcribed on large sheets, which originally measured on the order of 50 x 35 cm, with bifolios measuring 50 x 70 cm. All have fine illumination and space for illustration. All show the same uniformity throughout the manuscript. Like the theological treatise in Paris, each page of the historical manuscripts has 30 or more lines of nashī script written on pages ruled with a masṭīr.

Despite their uniformity, the copies of Rashid al-Din's *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh* made during his lifetime show small changes over time. The size of the written area decreases. The 37 x 26 format in the Arabic copy and the Ilkhanid pages of H 1653, both transcribed in 714/1314–15, was slightly reduced to 34 x 24 cm in the Persian copy H 1654 made three years later in 717/1317. The number of lines per page correspondingly diminished, from 35 lines per page in the first copies of the histories (and in the theological treatise dated 710/1310) to 31 lines per page in the Persian copy made in 717/1317.

In addition to differences in transcription among the manuscripts of Rashid al-Din's history made during his lifetime, there are small differences in the illustrations, both between manuscripts and within the same manuscript. The text and addendum to Rashid al-Din's *waqf* both stipulated that manuscripts be copied yearly, but the surviving manuscripts of the *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh* suggest that this stipulation was overly optimistic and that Rashid al-Din deliberately encouraged his scribes to speed up production.18 The Arabic copy, with a date of 714/1314–15, was apparently fully illustrated before the scribes were interrupted in 718/1318, but the scribes were clearly under some pressure as the paintings towards the end of the manuscript become more simplified. Production of the first Persian copy (H 1653) lagged. Although one section of the text was completed at the end of Jumādā II 714/October 1314, the illustrations were never finished and those at the end of the history of the Turks (from folio 384 onwards) were added only when the manuscript was refurbished under the Timurid sultan Shahrūkh.19 Presumably there was not enough time to complete the manuscript before the vizier's death. The backlog got worse by the time of the second Persian copy (H 1654): according to the colophon, copying was finished on 3 Jumādā I 717/14 July 1317, but there was only time enough to paint the first three illustrations before Rashid al-Din's execution a year later.

There was a corresponding decrease in the quality of the illustrations between the Arabic and the Persian copies of Rashid al-Din's history made at his scriptorium. The paintings in the Arabic copy apparently served as models for those in the Persian manuscripts, but the latter showed less variety. The illustrations in H 1653 contain more standardized figures set in repetitive compositions, flattened circular arrangements, thicker lines, stockier figures, and fewer attempts at three-dimensional representation. The pigments are also cheaper: the artists of H 1653 used far less silver for shading. Most of these changes, like the scribes' changes in format, can be seen as ways to speed up production and reduce costs.

The copies of the *Jami‘ al-tawārīkh* made for Rashid al-Din during his lifetime served as the model for several centuries, and many of the trends already apparent in manuscripts made during the author's lifetime continued. For example, the folios and the text block on them decreased in size. Undated copies of the first volume of text now in Kampur and Calcutta, attributed on stylistic grounds to the fourteenth century, maintain the large dimensions of the originals (page size: 47 x 32 cm, written area 38 x 26 cm), but the writing is more spacious and each page contains only 25 lines of text (as opposed to the 30 or more in the

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18 For further details, see Blair 1995: chapter 1.

earlier manuscripts). By the Timurid period, the copies were slightly smaller. For example, a copy of the first volume containing the Tārīkh-i Ghāzānī made in Herat ca. 1430 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, or. suppl. persan 1113) measures 32 x 23 cm, dimensions similar to the written area of the fourteenth-century copies.\(^{20}\)

By the Mughal period the dimensions had shrunk further still. One example is a splendid copy of volume one of the Jāmiʿ al-tawārikh made for the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1504/1596 (Tehran, National Library). It now contains 304 folios, each measuring some 39 by 25. They are approximately the same size as those in the Timurid copy, but the text block measures only 25 by 15 cm, some one-third the size of the text block in the Ilkhanid originals, and contains only 25 lines of text per page. Mughal artists adhered to the traditional format of rectangular illustrations inserted into the text, but expanded the height of the illustrations, and, more importantly, expanded the compositions into the margin so that the paintings envelop the text. Text has given way to image. There are 98 large paintings remaining in the manuscript; several others have been detached. In most cases, the simple and additive compositions of the Ilkhanid originals have been expanded to include numerous details of daily life.

In his foreword to Henri-Jean Martin’s classic work, The History and Power of Writing, Pierre Chaunu wrote: “The century of the great take-off was the fourteenth, the century of paper and the first outpouring of reading in the vernacular. The new start happened then, it took off full tilt and foreshadowed all that followed.”\(^{21}\) Martin’s book deals mainly with the European tradition, but studying Rashid al-Din’s Jāmiʿ al-tawārikh shows that the fourteenth century was also the key moment in the production of large, fine and profusely illustrated texts in West Asia.

Bibliography


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\(^{20}\) Martin 1994: xii.