NOTES ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE "DEMOTTE" SHAH-NAMA

by

O. Grabar

The unique character of the so-called "Demotte" Shah-nama has now been recognized for several decades and much has been written about its date (most probably the fourth decade of the 14th century with a number of later additions or retouches) and about the different hands involved in the execution of its miniatures. Less effort has been devoted to its iconographic peculiarities or to its possible models except in so far as there is general agreement about the existence of "pathetic" scenes centreing on death and about a clear influence of the Chinese inspired school of painting developed in Tabriz during the first two decades of the fourteenth century. Without trying to solve or even define the bewildering number of problems which are posed by the iconography and the background of the manuscript, I should like to discuss two points which have seemed to me to be of particular significance in evaluating the expressive and narrative qualities of the miniatures. The first point concerns the manner in which one can define and explain the manuscript's interpretation of the text and the second one deals with one possible source for the manuscript which has only fairly recently come to light. In both instances it will be found that much still remains tentative and my remarks are based primarily on the assumption that it is only through a series of meaningful hypotheses that eventually the striking qualities of the manuscript will be fully understood.

A first remark to be made about the illustrations of the Demotte manuscript is the rather obvious one that they are the major raison d'être of the codex. The matter has long been recognized from the point of view

1 The main detailed discussions of the miniatures were made by E. de Loeyer, E. Schroeder, and I. Schenkine. A bibliography and latest position of research will be found in I. Schenkine, "Les Peintures du Shah-nameh Demotte," Arts Asiatiques, v. (1958).

3 Among other places see B. Gray, Persian Painting, Geneva 1961, pp. 29 ff.
less uninterrupted sequences as the story of Farādīn at the beginning and the stories of Alexander and Ardashīr later on that some conclusions may be hazarded.

A cursory glance at the list of 38 miniatures from the particular point of view of their general subject-matter shows that 13 are essentially throne scenes (14, 15, 45, 25, 27, 30, 31, 41), of which the first four are simple *topoi* of enthronements, while all the others are transformed in varying degrees by specific iconographic details imposed by the text. Then 15 images are battle scenes either involving whole armies (20, 25, 27, 30, 31, 41) or single combats (20, 21, 23) or incidental events closely related to battles (3, still a rather difficult image to interpret, 6, 13, 16, 4, 42). Hunting images concern only Bahārān Gūr (51, 53) and dragon-slaying is illustrated for Alexander the Great (33, 34) and also Bahārān Gūr (49). Five miniatures (7, 8, 22, 24, 39) deal specifically with death and mourning, while five other images, all of which illustrate the story of Alexander (20, 32, 35, 36, 38), illustrate the moralizing theme of divine revelation to which we shall return. The last 15 images are precise illustrations of specific events in the text and do not lend themselves to a general classification, even though many among them pose very interesting iconographic problems.

The fact that 43 miniatures can be defined in general terms, regardless for the moment of the presence of details which may or may not give them a more precise literary context, is not in itself surprising, for, like most epics, the *Shāh-nāma* is repetitive and the succession of princes symbolized by enthronements or battles of heroes or of armies are constant motifs of the story itself. Dragon slaying or hunting scenes, although less common, also clearly belong to an epic cycle. If the preponderance of such images is not unusual and finds ample confirmation in other illustrated *Shāh-nāmas*, it is also true that, even though specific events such as the last battle of Rustam, Alexander’s defeat of the Indian army, Bahārān Gūr’s hunt with Āzīda, or the enthronement of Zaḥbāh possess unique visually identifiable iconographic features, these images belong as well to well-established standard iconographic themes found outside of the context of the *Shāh-nāma* in painting, ceramics, or metalwork; combat, hunting, or princely activities. It is, at least in part, in their relationship to the standard that these images of the Demotte manuscript must eventually be explained. More original, at least within our presently available documentation, is the existence of identifiable groups of images centring on death and mourning and concerned with fantastic revelation.

The possible meaning of these miniatures can be made more precise if we consider in slightly greater detail two cycles of images in their}

sequential order, preferably cycles in which we can be fairly well assured that most of the illustrations have remained. For instance the twelve illustrations dealing with Alexander the Great show in that order the following subjects: the enthronement of the king when he became ruler of Iran (28), the trip of the Indian king to a mysterious sage who explains to him the irresistible character of Alexander’s conquest (29), the extraordinary invention of iron horses to defeat king Für (30), the single combat between Alexander and Für (31), Alexander’s visit to the Brahmins who tell him that his conquests do not affect the only true human reality which is decay and death (32), the slaying of the Ethiopian monster by the king alone (33), the slaying of a mythical beast (34), the visit to the Mountain of the Angel of Death with a message on the arbitrariness of human affairs and endless suffering (35, 36), the building of the wall against Gog and Magog at the end of the world (37), the visit to the Talking Tree with its message of impending death (38), the final victory of death in the celebrated image of Alexander being mourned (39). The simple list of the scenes suggests that the story of Alexander the Great was given in the choice of illustrations a precise moralistic aspect, that of the contrast between the conqueror of the universe who can defeat dragons and reach the outer limits of the world and the mortal man who fails to conquer wisdom by seeing the Brahmins refuse his offer of worldly goods and who is constantly warned of death through various more or less fantastic means.

A second cycle of images illustrates a different point. The five miniatures dealing with Ardashīr show Gulnār, daughter of Ardawān, coming to Ardashīr (40), the battle between Ardašīn and Ardashīr (41), the execution of Ardašīn (42), the failure of Gulnār’s attempt at poisoning the king (43), and finally the revelation to Ardashīr of the existence of his son (44). The choice of illustrations emphasizes here another central idea of Firdawsi’s book, the idea of the legitimacy of the Sāsānian dynasty, both in its lineage *par alliance* and in the protection it receives from fate. These two central ideas, human frailty in the face of death and the legitimacy of Iranian kings, can be shown to exist as well in other groups of images, such as the cycle of the first eight images with the victory of the hero Farādīn identified through his lineage over the anti-king Zaḥbāh, and then the tragedy of his succession through the death of Īraj (nos. 1–8), or in the Islāndiyār and Rustam cycle (nos. 17–25) as well as in the striking miniature of Dārāb asleep (no. 26) who will mysteriously be identified as the legitimate heir to the Iranian throne. Thus, in addition to the point that the miniatures were the main object of the manuscript, we may put forward the hypothesis that their
choice was directed, at least in part, by the desire to emphasize a number of precise philosophical or national ideas ultimately tied both to the literary themes of the Shāh-nāma itself and to a number of traditional attitudes of the mediaeval Islamic world. But we may be able to make these hypotheses more precise by analyzing in some detail a few miniatures which are particularly striking in the illustration of these ideas.

A first instance involves miniatures nos. 41 and 42, the combat of Ardashīr and Ardawān and the appearance of Ardawān in front of Ardashīr. The text pertinent to both miniatures is fairly short. The battle has been raging for forty days.

“ So all the wise one day, when fight was fiercest,
Arose quarter, and Ardashīr charged from the centre;
Amidst of the mellow Ardawān,
Was ta’em, and for his crown gave up sweet life.
The hand of one Kharrad seized on his bridle,
And bare him captive to the atheling.
Ardashīr saw him from far. King Ardawān
Lit from his steed, his body arrow-pierced,
His soul all gloom, and Shah Ardashīr commanded
The deathsman: “Go, seize on the great king’s foe,
Cleave him asunder with thy sword, and make
Our evil-wishers quail.”

So did the deathsman:
That famous monarch vanished from the world,
Such is the usage of the ancient sky!
The soul of Ardawān Ardashīr too found;
Him whom it raiseth to the stars on high
It giveth likewise to the sorry ground!”

Quite obviously neither miniature follows the text very closely. The first image (fig. 9) is one of two armoured knights galloping toward each other in a simple and typical landscape setting and framed by elements of two armies. A study of this miniature by Mrs. Joanne Travis will be published in the Art Quarterly. It may be identified as an iconographic cliche of a battle between two heroes in which nothing identifies either one as the specific personages involved in the story and furthermore nothing is said in the text about a battle between Ardawān and Ardashīr. The second image (fig. 10), one of the most magnificent and most studied ones in the whole book with its triangular composition and its fascinating use of a repoussoir in front, is equally unrelated to the specifics of the text.

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9. Battle between Ardawān and Ardashīr

10. Execution of Ardawān
Two explanations may be provided for this anomaly. One is that the illustrations reflect here some more involved cycle of the story of Ardashir, for instance some mediaeval version of the Kār-nāma-i Ardashir-i Pāpābān, in which the battle and subsequent execution of Ardawān would have received peculiarly strong emphasis. But, without necessarily denying this possibility of an influence from an otherwise unknown cycle of images, a second explanation would perhaps elucidate the peculiarities of these two images more adequately. It is that the artist of the Demotte Shāh-nāma interpreted and enlarged his images beyond the text in order to emphasize specific concerns of his. If we begin with the image of Ardawān in front of Ardashir, its most striking iconographic feature is the contrast between the brilliantly impassioned victorious Sāsānian at the head of his troops and the dejected Arsacid prince surrounded by two grotesquely caricatured soldiers with unusually long swords. The image does not illustrate so much a precise incident as two aspects of the mood of the story: the acceptance of a pre-ordained fate in the passage from one dynasty to the other through mute resignation on one side and noble acceptance on the other, but also the cruelty of fate which compels the execution of a man who was not evil, like Zāhāb in earlier images, but who had fulfilled his destiny. It is this latter feature which transformed the executioners into horrifying instruments of fate rather than of justice, as, for instance, in the illustration of the headdress of the evil Nāwad (no. 13). Death, legitimacy, and fate as they appear in this particular image help also in explaining the one that precedes it. The transformation of a rather prosaic discovery of Ardawān in the midst of his defeated army by an obscure follower of Ardashir into a heroic but standardized (i.e. without specific iconographic features which would make it clearly this particular battle) scene heightens the drama of the confrontation of kings and makes the following miniature all the more striking.

A second group of closely related images will help in defining even further the modus operandi of the artist or artists. It is the peculiar group dealing with death and mourning. The first two miniatures which belong to this group are nos. 7 and 8 illustrating the story as Farīdūn was making preparations to greet his favourite son Iraj.³

¹ A. Christensen, L'Iran sous les Sassanides. Copenhagen 1944, p. 58. The existing version of the Kār-nāma (tr. D. Sunjana, Bombay, 1896) does not, however, explain our images.
² Waror, i, 202-4.
II. The coffin of Ḩraj brought to Farīdūn

and by emphasizing physical pain through the distortion of facial expressions. The following miniature (fig. 12) is easier to explain iconographically. It depicts Farīdūn holding his son's head and the destruction of the palace's garden, in which at the extreme left there appears a curious frightened cat. The architectural features or the natural elements of this miniature are fairly close to the text, but the image of the three women (one of whom was later interpreted as the mother of Ḩraj, even though the text does not mention her) and especially the strange personage disappearing through the door on the right give to the miniature a mysterious quietude rather than a sense of violent physical pain.

The following related image, that of the funeral of Isfandiyār (no. 22) (fig. 13), has an amazingly faithful central core with the bier, the mules, the horse, and the Chinese brocade over the bier, but the statement that the accompanying figures had "torn cheeks and hair, purple with blue dresses" is only followed to a degree with respect to the dominant colour

12. Farīdūn holding Ḩraj's head

effects in this linear image. Otherwise it has been transformed into a fascinating dance of death around the bier, which may have to be connected with specific Mongol funeral practices. The funeral of Rustam (no. 24) (fig. 14) is also faithful to the text in the details of the central subject but the processional cortège was given here a Far Eastern character which is in no way inspired by the story. And, finally, the celebrated and extraordinary image of the bier of Alexander (fig. 15) has been inspired by the following lines: "the coffin was put in the plain... children, men, and women gathered by the coffin and there were 100,000 of them. In the middle was Aristotle... he put his hand on the narrow coffin" and pronounced a speech, followed by sages, noblemen, and finally Alexander's

13. Funeral of Isandiyar

The image was reinterpreted here in a different setting with a unique arrangement of personages and a striking mixture of many different stylistic devices of composition as well as of details of execution, but with particularly clear Mediterranean, almost Giottesque, elements in the composition of three choirs around a bier, and with a more traditional but also definitely western robe on the mother of the hero.

Granted our original point that for some reason the planners of the manuscript wanted to give particular stress to the point of the death of heroes, the explanation for the various ways in which this emphasis was shown can be done in several ways. It may be argued that there were in each instances precise iconographic models available for the stories. We know of the existence of an Isandar-nama, so far unpublished, which

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* Warner, vi, 187.
* The last analysis of the painting is by H. Gray, op. cit., p. 33.
may explain the Alexander scene, and it is possible that other epics existed around Ishanlîyâr, Rustam, or Fârsîn. It may also be thought that several different artists were involved, each of whom contributed his own version of the theme of mourning. But, from the point of view of the manuscript seen as a whole and without denying the possibility of either one of these explanations, it may be suggested that this variety of visual translations of a single theme served primarily to illustrate the specific intent of the manuscript's designer or patron who would have proposed a series of interpretations—emotional, simply illustrative, locally Mongol, Far Eastern, western—for the subject of mourning. This particular group of miniatures may then serve to show the great variety of artistic models and ideas available around Ikhânîd times and perhaps in Tabriz itself, a conclusion which is fully confirmed by the diplomatic and cultural history of the first third of the 14th century.

It remains to be seen whether the peculiar emphasis which were given to the manuscript's choice of illustrations and manner of execution should be considered simply as whims of an unknown patron or whether they may not be related to some characteristic trait of the time. The theme of legitimacy and the peculiar emphasis on mortality which occur in the Alexandre cycle are clear reflections of the Shâh-nâma itself as Firdawsi had conceived it and interpreted conditions around the year 1000, when non-Iranian dynasties were asserting themselves as champions of the Iranian past. But very much of the same situation prevailed in the Ikhânîd period, when world conquerors like Alexander the Great had become Iranian Muslim princes and in their architecture as well as in their mode of life sought to emulate and to outdo their Iranian predecessors. The spectacular revival of the old Persian epic's central theme is thus particularly appropriate to the times and could have been sponsored by a Mongol prince or, as is perhaps more likely, by one of the high Iranian officials who surrounded them. As to the theme of death, it is perhaps more difficult to explain, for in both the Shâh-nâma and in the more general ethos of mediaeval times in the Near East the frailty of human endeavour in the face of death was a constant literary and philosophical cliché. Yet its striking appearance in the Demotte manuscript may be explained by one specific development of Iranian literary taste up to that time. It seems that during the 12th and 13th centuries the popularity of the Shâh-nâma itself was to a degree overshadowed by a large number of other epics, like the Garshasp-nâma, the Bursû-nâma, the Khash-nâma, and

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12 D. Wilber, The Architecture of Islamic Iran, the Ikhânîd Period, Princeton 1955, p. 125, among other possible references.


14 Main publications are Zhospiç Drevnego Pisânsfikenta, Moscow 1954, and Skulptura i Zhospiç Drevnego Pisânsfikenta, Moscow 1959. Although important for Soghdian art, the paintings from Varahshâ and Balâlykh are of lesser significance for our precise purposes here.

conversely many a scholar dealing with 14th-century miniatures has thought of mural paintings as models for certain features of book illustrations.  

The problems are, in the latter instance, to discover or at least reconstruct the original mural paintings and, in the former instance, to explain how themes known in the 8th century survived until the 14th. The first problem is hampered by an almost total lack of appropriate remains and the few known texts referring to such paintings are usually quite brief and tantalizingly uninformative, 17 although it is conceivable that further work—especially systematic analyses of literary texts—could bring some interesting results. The second problem lends itself somewhat better to a more precise definition. It seems clear that certain compositions of the Panjikent frescoes—such as the triangular composition for battles between armies—18—or such features as the contrast between a "pathetic" and an "elegant" figure style 19 find striking parallels in some of the pages of the Demotte manuscript. 20 Yet one may wonder how a Soghdian tradition depicting Iranian heroic themes would have been revived in the 14th century or where it continued in the intervening centuries. From a stylistic point of view Diakonov has already pointed out the close parallels to Panjikent found in the frescoes of the Tarim basin as late as in the 9th and perhaps 10th centuries. There, largely thanks to their considerable mercantile activities, Soghdians maintained themselves after the Islamization of Central Asia and appear to have participated in the cultural transformation of Turks and Mongols. As late as in the 13th century a Persian source relates that the Turks learned both the Soghdian and the Uighur alphabets. 21 It may be suggested then that to the new coming Mongols Soghdians or people influenced by them gave their first taste of the culture which will be theirs in Iran and that the ancient themes of the epics and especially certain modes of expression found in manuscripts like the Demotte Shāh-nāma were brought back by the Mongols rather than merely found by them in Iran itself and then transformed under their direct or indirect sponsorship.

The question whether to interpret the Demotte Shāh-nāma's iconographic characteristics as a revival inspired from the outside or as the continuation in new forms of an art which was already flourishing in Iran itself cannot as yet be answered. But the problems may be posed and further iconographic studies either in pre-Mongol art or in the Shāh-nāma itself may eventually provide us with enough information about the ideas expressed in its miniatures so as to permit a more precise identification of the men who made it and a better appreciation of its striking aesthetic qualities.

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16 B. Gray, op. cit., p. 59.
17 I hope to complete soon a list of such known texts; preliminary lists are found in Diakonov's article in the first of the two publications quoted in note 16.
18 Zirkopfi, pl. XXV.
19 Ibid., pls. XXII and XXXIII, for instance.
20 In the Demotte manuscript the matter is somewhat confused by the question of retouches but the existence of a contrast seems assured if we compare some of the "pathetic" scenes we have examined with some of the ones at the beginning of the manuscript (nos. 2-4).