Illustration from al-Biruni’s “Chronology of Ancient Peoples” copied at Tabriz dated 1307/8. The illustration shows the temptation of the first man and woman in the garden of Paradise.

Illustration from the Edinburgh Rashid al-Din. A Muslim embassy to the court of the Negus of Abyssinia. Most of the pictures in this work show obvious Chinese influence, but here the solid manner of the old Mesopotamian school is reflected. 1306

brush-strokes and its marked illusionism; even the racial type of the figures is distinct. The old convention of the trees has here been wholly discarded in favour of a new one where the trunks are twisted and knobby and the branches like those on a willow-pattern plate, the approach is in general three-dimensional, while a gentle colouring in half-tones has been substituted for the brilliant fresh hues of the Mesopotamian work.

The most important examples of the style are some volumes of Rashid al-Din’s ‘Universal History’ (Janī al-Tawārikh), and one of the finest of them is at Edinburgh (No. 20) and dates from 1306. Another volume in the same style, done seven years later, is in the possession of the Royal Asiatic Society in London, and another copy is in Istanbul. The book was actually in four volumes and it is said that Rashid al-Din had two copies of the book written and illustrated each year, one with text in Arabic, the other in Persian.

Once again several hands are to be distinguished in both these volumes. One, like the man who did an enchanting picture of the Prophet Jeremiah (Ill. 114), worked in an almost wholly Chinese style. The theme illustrated is that of the prophet who had doubted the Almighty’s power to raise up Jerusalem after its destruction; he was made to die for a hundred years and then brought to life again; his donkey was resuscitated before his eyes, and we here see its
skeleton gradually coming together. Another painter, who did such scenes as that illustrating an embassy to the court of the Negus of Abyssinia to arrange for the extradition of certain early converts to Islam who had taken refuge there ([III. 115]), must have learnt much from the old school of Mesopotamia. Another liked to draw scenes of violence and movement and took great delight in depicting the angular patterns of Mongol costumes and uniforms ([III. 116]). There are a whole series of battle scenes by him towards the end of the Edinburgh volume, and he might be described as the man amongst the illustrators who was most able to interpret the spirit and background of the Mongol world.

The most outstanding of all the painters who illustrated this volume, however, showed something of a blend of all these manners, for his work has the solidity and strength of that of Mesopotamia, the delicacy and charm of the Chinese and the mastery of movement of the Mongol painter — if we may so designate the man who executed the battle scenes — added to all these, he was possessed of a feeling for composition and an imagination and a sense of balance,

which mark him out as a master of very great ability. His picture of Jonah ([III. 117]) — for the history contains items from the Bible as well as secular events — though on a small scale, is a painting of very great power and beauty and the swirling movements of the great fish show a truly remarkable feeling for rhythm.

The mastery of movement and the subordination of a convention to the expression of an idea that we see here was soon to become the hallmark of the school of Tabriz, which reached its apogee at much the same time that the Ilkhanid dynasty, which had given the school its birth, came to an end. It is best represented by a book which has, alas, now been broken up and is divided among numerous collections. It is usually known as the Demotte Shah-nama, but would be better called the Great Shah-nama of Tabriz, for never in the whole story of Persian painting was it surpassed in richness, in quality or in the number of scenes illustrated. It must have been done at Tabriz between 1330 and 1336.

The Shah-nama, or 'Book of Kings', was composed by the poet Firdausi at the court of Mahmud of Ghazni about 1010 and at once
became one of the most popular books in the whole of the Middle East. It was frequently reproduced, but it is only from after the early fourteenth century that any number of copies have survived, and only from that date are there any that contain illustrations; thereafter it was perhaps the most frequently illustrated of all Persian manuscripts. Some of its scenes were included in Rashid al-Din’s history, because in Persia there was never any very clear distinction as to where real history ended and fiction began, but most of the scenes are different and depict iconographical themes which must often have dated back for several centuries. Stylistically these illustrations represent a marked development from the manner of the Rashid al-Din volumes, for the Chinese elements have been subordinated to a new, more forceful manner, which owes its character to something more than an affection for the old art of Mesopotamia. In fact, the truly Persian element has here come to the fore at last, and we are for the first time in the presence of a painting which can truly be described as Persian. From this moment onwards the development of the school was to be continuous and uninterrupted. The interest in pure expression, almost approaching caricature, which characterized the Harriz, has given place to a more intimate and profound insight into character; the delight in colour or pattern for its own sake has become absorbed in a feeling for a unified composition which was a basic part of the theme, while the profounder emotions of life have become one of the matters of chief concern for the artist. We see here, in fact, works of art where deep emotions are rendered with real understanding.

Several different painters must have been responsible for the illustrations of the Tabriz Shah-nama. One was at his best when movement was involved (III. 118), one seems to have preferred subjects where majesty and dignity were to the fore, and one at least was a real master of the pathetic. It was he who painted the scene of the Bier of the Great Iskander surrounded by mourners (III. 119); the conqueror is possessed of a wholly Oriental grandeur, while the prisoner is rendered with a profound understanding of the misery of his plight. This is one of the most expressive pictures in the whole of Persian art.
With the end of the Mongol dynasty the country was for a time divided, petty rulers rose to power in various centres, and a number of minor schools of painting grew up in different localities. Work continued to be produced, however, in north-west Persia at Tabriz, and probably also at Maragha, and a group of Shah-namas, usually known as the ‘Red Ground Shah-namas’ (Ill. 120), is probably to be associated with that region; they are usually comparatively small in size and their illustrations are vivid but not very subtle.

Another school, known as the Inju, was centred at Shiraz under the patronage of the Inju dynasty (1333-53); it ended when the city fell to the Muzaffarids soon after the middle of the century. There was much less Chinese influence here, and the work of these painters has been compared to that of those who decorated pottery of the Minai group; it may well be that some of the illuminators turned from time to time to the decoration of pots of one sort or another.

A third school grew up under the patronage of the Jala-ird dynasty which ruled at Baghdad from the mid-fourteenth century until about 1400. A magnificent book in Paris, the ‘Book of Marvels of the World’, dated to 1388, is to be assigned to this school (Bib. Nat. supp. Pers. 332). Its style is grand and impressive, showing more of the influence of the old manner of Baghdad than of the Far East. Its pictures are also interesting because of their subject-matter, for many of them depict methods of cultivation or the customs and habits of diverse peoples; thus on one page the planting and cultivation of pepper is shown and on another Bulgars are depicted bathing in the Volga and, below, Tibetans adoring a new-born child (Ill. 121).

Though the paintings constitute the most important and most interesting art of the Mongol period, the ceramics of the age are far from insignificant, and though the potteries of Isfahan and a number of other centres were destroyed, some, like Kashan, survived and
others which had hardly been known before rose to prominence. The mantle of Rayy seems to some extent to have descended upon Kashan, and lustre wares were produced there for a time. Sgraffito wares were still no doubt made in a number of centres, for those above all others were the wares in everyday use. Just as with paintings, new ideas in pottery were introduced from the East, and the imitation of Chinese styles and techniques became all the vogue. The favourite blue and black wares which grew in popularity as the century advanced were made at Kashan; the bodies were thin and fine, in contrast to the rather heavier type of blue and black made at Sultanabad.

During the course of the fourteenth century, however, Sultanabad to some extent supplanted Kashan as the main centre, its products being characterized by rather thick white bodies, with flat, returned rims and thick glazes forming tear-drops outside and thick pools at the base inside. The decorations were painted under the glaze, either direct on to the body or over a grey slip, which was sometimes so thick that it produced a design in relief. Modelling in low-relief was often associated with the painted decoration. Sometimes the finest of the bowls had fluted sides (Ill. 122). The designs were loose and flowing, consisting mainly of leaves or animals of a very naturalistic type (Ill. 122). Miniatures of the period, especially those done at Shiraz, often showed a similar affection for flowered backgrounds, with animals or birds among the foliage.

As a result of the discovery of pottery wasters at Sultanabad, the important group with designs in black on a blue ground, above a friable white body, can be associated with Sultaniya as well. Sultaniya is known to us primarily because of a superb building which survives there, the mausoleum of the Mongol ruler Uljaitu Khodabandeh Shah, begun in 1305 (Ill. 124). The basic idea of its plan goes back to the Seljuk gumbat, the mausoleum of centralized plan, which became so important wherever the Seljuks penetrated. But the conventional scheme has been left far behind in this strangely imaginative octagonal structure, which originally had a thin pencil-like minaret at each of the corners of the octagon. It may be somewhat barbaric in its conception, like an immensely enlarged Mongol

122 Bowl with underglaze decoration of birds and foliage in black and turquoise. Fourteenth century. The type of decoration was characteristic of the potteries of Sultanabad, a centre which vied with Kashan in importance.

123 Pottery bowl with decoration in dark blue, turquoise and black. It was probably made at Kashan, late fourteenth century.
tent, yet it is also extremely evocative of the Mongol age, and remains not only as one of the most original but also one of the most striking contributions to the art of that period in Persia and to the Mongol spirit as a whole. If its exterior is experimental and daring, its interior, on the contrary, is almost reticent in the quality of its decoration and elegance of its proportions (Ill. 135).

To judge by the other buildings that survive from this age, it was a period of great brilliance in architecture. Tall, elegant minarets (Ill. 126), decorated with tiles or brickwork, seem to illustrate the feeling for fantasy that dominated much of what was done, yet the tremendously massive walls of the citadel at Tabriz (Ill. 137) indicate a wholly distinct approach, for this immensely solid building cannot have been inspired wholly by functional aims. The architect, one feels, must have rejoiced intensely in the sheer mass of its brickwork. The Masjid-i-Jami at Varamin (Ill. 128), built in 1325–6, on the other hand, presents a more conventional conception, though it
is none the less of great beauty and fine proportion and boasts some most attractive stalactite work in its interior. Its glazed tiles are impressive and were perhaps made locally, for Varmain was certainly a centre of pottery making, though the characteristic blue and white ware which is usually associated with the place only became really important with the fifteenth century.

128. The Masjid-i-Jami at Varmain, 1325-6. In spite of the record of destruction wrought by the Mongol invasions, the period of their rule was particularly rich in architecture. The mosque at Varmain is typical

CHAPTER SEVEN

Syria and Egypt: Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries

During the latter part of the eleventh and the earlier part of the twelfth century the situation in Syria was by no means stable. Jerusalem was captured by the Seljuks in 1071 and by the Crusaders in 1099; Aleppo and Antioch were constantly fought over; the coastal fringe was mostly in Crusading hands, and it was not until the arrival on the scene of Saladin in the seventies that anything like unity or stability were enforced. But from then onwards the destinies of Syria and Egypt were closely knitt together and the arts of the two countries thereafter developed hand in hand. Under the patronage of the Ayyubids (1176-1250) and, still more, under that of the Mamluks (1260-1382), they flourished very considerably, and though it was at the capital, Cairo, that the finest buildings were set up, it was in Syria that much of the best work on a small scale was done. It was there that much of the most accomplished pottery was made and much of the most delicate glass manufactured, there, as much as, if not more than in Mosul, that metalwork was most intricately inlaid, there that some of the best carved woodwork was produced, many of the textiles most skilfully woven, and there too that some of the miniatures which were so much favoured by the Mamluks were painted.

So far as pottery was concerned the most important centre in early times had been at Raqqa on the Euphrates, on the fringes of Syria and Mesopotamia. Close contacts must always have been maintained between that city and Persia, for some of its pottery was directly modelled on the Persian, especially the lustre and the black and blue wares which were to become so popular in the fourteenth century. The city retained its importance until its destruction at the hands of the Mongols in 1259. Barbotine ware, both unglazed and with a moulded decoration under a green or blue glaze, was made there, though it is not easy to distinguish the Syrian from the
Mesopotamian or Persian variants; lustre was also produced. But most important of all was a ware with a rather sandy white body and a decoration in black, blue or blueish-purple painted under the glaze; large jars with wide mouths were popular. Sometimes a thin sgraffito design was associated with the painted decoration as on a large bowl with two fish in the Damascus Museum (Ill. 129). Their swirling movements show a real mastery of design and a similar excellence distinguishes a great deal of the Raqqa work.

It is, however, often rather hard to tell the products of Raqqa from those made elsewhere in Syria or in Egypt, for the Raqqa style was developed both at Rusafa and at Damascus after the original centre had been destroyed, and Raqqa products were also copied at Fostat. A fine, tall vase of the thirteenth century in the Damascus Museum might, for example, almost equally well be a product of Raqqa, Damascus or Fostat (Ill. 130).

The problem of attribution to sites is further complicated by the fact that there seems to have been a good deal of traffic in pottery, and it is impossible to be sure that objects found in the various centres were actually made there. This is the case with an exceptionally impressive figure of a horseman (in the Damascus Museum) which was found at Raqqa (Ill. 131). It is of fine white paste, and is covered with cream and blue glazes like those on the so-called Lakabi wares of Persia (see p. 68). The costume and facial type of the figure are of a distinctly Eastern type, like those which characterize much Persian work of the early thirteenth century. The Raqqa figure is thus perhaps to be regarded as an import from Persia, made under the patronage of one of the Seljuk rulers of the twelfth century.
Another type of vessel can also be associated with Fostat quite firmly and definitely (ill. 123), namely, that characterized firstly by a decoration in the sgraffito technique, secondly by the dark brown, highly fired glazes, thirdly by the high based and deep-sided forms that prevailed, and finally by the thick, heavy bodies. This was really the most characteristic Fostat type, and when we speak of Fostat pots it is usually to these that we refer. The decorations, in addition to depicting the birds and animals which were so frequently used in association with the sgraffito technique elsewhere, also often included birds with spread wings or cups on tall stems, which were used as heraldic symbols during the Mamluk age. They often occur on other works of art also, especially on the enameled glass vessels. Fish, rare elsewhere, were usual, and very effective use was made of script, treated to show off its decorative qualities.

Nevertheless, in spite of these problems, certain types of pottery of the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries can be associated with Damascus. The products of its kilns are to be distinguished by their heaviness and by the rather coarse bodies. In addition to bowls, wide mouthed jars and albarelli were especially popular. The decorations were done both in lustre and blue and black, and consisted of large arabesques, heavily and robustly handled, birds and fish; human figures hardly ever appear. A few pieces are dated by inscriptions to about the middle of the fourteenth century, and in the fifteenth century blue and white wares of a rather Chinese type were also made at Damascus.

Numerous fragments of bowls which are very closely akin as regards the decoration, but which on the whole are rather smaller in size, have come from the rubbish mounds of Fostat. These often bear signatures on the bases, and the names seem to belong to Egyptians, so that the vessels they signed were apparently made locally and so constitute a true Fostat group. Some good lustre was made (ill. 122), with decorations of arabesques or birds drawn in a hard metallic style, while after 1400 blue and white wares were to become nearly as popular as in Persia or Syria.
134 Glass mosque lamp with enameled decoration inscribed with three quotations from the Koran and a dedication to Beybars II. Lamps such as this were made all over the Islamic world, but the finest are to be assigned to Egypt and Syria. Syrian, early fourteenth century.

135 Glass mosque lamp with enameled decoration made for Saif ud-din Tuqez-timur, Assessor of Sultan Malik Nasir. Probably made in Syria, 1340.