Demotte's Shahnama of Firdawsi: Dying Rustam Slaying Shaghad

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of a Persian miniature belonging to the period of Mongols from the famous text of Demotte's Shahnama Firdawsi illustrated at Tabriz. The history of Shahnamas and their significance in the culture of Persia has been comprehensively studied. The formal and contextual study of the selected painting *Dying Rutam Slaying Shaghad* has been done along with comparative analysis with other miniatures and styles. This miniature reflects the grandeur of ancient Persian history focusing on heroes of Iran like Rustam and also creates a link between past dynasties regarding their painting styles.

Key words: *Shahnama, Rustam, Sassanians, Abbasids, Chinese inspiration*.

History of Persia

Persia with its long and sumptuously rich past has been conspicuous among the world's civilizations. From the earliest great empires like the Achaemenidsto the invasion of Alexander the Great then to the Macedonian's conquest this culturally rich land was open to varied influences that had far reaching effects on its heritage, language, culture and tradition. This cultural intermingling was the result of commercial and trade relations and communicationof various lands from Mediterranean to China and Asia. Its most eminent early dynasties were Parthians and Sassanians who stood as the exponents against the hierarchal supremacy of Roman and Byzantine empires. Under the Sassanian religion and literature were given equal significance(Gray, 1995). With the advent of Islam the most strong and resolute change transpired with Arab invasion between 635 and 652. Their religious book was in Arabic and after large number of converts to the new religion, Arabic became state language. Now Persian language was added with Arabic wordsand parts of speech. It was the language through which the memoirs of the remarkable past and inherent mythology werewell-preserved in the form of oral tradition. Thus these oral traditions in the form of minstrel's ballads and mythical stories were the main themes for the great epics like Shahnama of Firdawsi written in 10^{th} century AD, some three centuries after the fall of Sassanian. (Gray, 1995).

Shahnama of Firdawsi

Shahnama Firdawsi was composed by poet Firdawsi of Tus at the court of Mahmood Ghazni (998-1030) about 1010 AD and is considered as the most popular books in Middle East.Earliest Shahnama was composed in the court of Samanid ruler Nasr II (914-943)who

commissioned Rudagi, a Persian poet and blind minstrel at his court. Another earliest example belonged to another Samanid ruler Nuh II's (976-997)court bypoet Daqiqiwho composed the

Shahnama in verses(Gray, 1995). These became the foundationsfor the epic poem when written by famous poet Abdul Qasim Firdawsi who composed it during a period of thirty years. He collected pre Islamic Iranian legends in the form of prose. He wanted to revive the Persian culture, the culture of *Ajam*[1] (Musawi, 2015) in the new Persian languagewhich was a mixture of *Farsi*(Persian language) and Arabic words and letters. It represented a new convention in Persian history.(Auer, 2021).

This long poem is comprised of fifty thousand verses including thousand couplets.In this Shahnama the stories of the past including the interpretations of the late Sassanian period have been described and their source must be either in the form of oral tradition or on the walls of palaces in different regions there were large variety of paintings on court life scenes, war scenes, heroic combats etc. These paintings show varied influences according to time and area as seen in Samarra (833-838) showing Sassanian style of court art with rigidly frontal and symmetrical poses, large heads and outlined features along with sumptuous colors like red and bright blues with expensive use of gold. Movement is rare and wherever it is shown it is in the form of flying drapery with decorative folds andpleated skirts of Sassanian manner mostly seen on their metal crafts

[1] Ajam (عجم) is an Arabic word meaning one who is not understandable in speech. During Arab occupation of Persia, the term became a racial pejorative. Colloquially, it now refers to non-Arabs in general, stemming in xenophobic origins.

(Gray, 1995). Figures seen on a dish depicts Byzantine style dress. Thick outlines have been used but at places reveal volume and form (Rice, 1975).

Another prominent influence witnessed in the art of Samarra is of Nomadic art of Central Asia predominant with Turkish style introduced to Abbasids by Turks as seen in the wall paintings from early art of Turkestan with heftyfigures, decorated dresses and confrontationally drawn Cavaliers.Sassanian inspirationis also seen making both these Central Asian and Abbasid arts the descendants of Persian art and convention(Gray,1995).

Manichean period's illuminated manuscripts have been an exception belonging to 9th century found from Turfan. Mani, their founder had been himself a very accomplished painter. Although most of their books were burnt but remaining fragments shows some examples of Iranian style of book illustration with text and picture closelyinterrelatedalong with bright colors and simplified landscape elements. Various other examples of these early Persian wall paintings can be viewed in the eastern areas like Turkestan, Khurasan, Sistan and Central Asia.Open space in paintings was filled with floral and vegetal forms and while writing Shahnama, Firdawsi has mentioned these styles of mural decoration done onthe walls of these great palaces,while his Shahnama shows no record of book illustration (Gray, 1995).

In the tenth century during the Samanid rule emperor Nasr II called painters from China to illustrate the translated version of kalila Wa Dimna which shows only in written records the earliest Chinese influence as none of these books now survive. In the reign of Seljuqs from Central Asia in eleventh century and after them in the rule of Atabegs, Persian famous book of poetry Khamsa

by Nizami was illustrated which was found on pottery from Ray and Kashan etc. Even poems were written on them along with beautiful paintings. In Iraq also under Seljuqs despite of Persian, Sassanian style is seen in some frontispieces. While in thirteenth century Badruddin Lu'lu got twenty volumes of Arabic poetry illustrated with court and hunting scenes.

Iraq school style is similar to this Seljuq Persian style in the depiction of colored spaces filled at intervals with stylized natural patterns like trees, flying birds, scrolls and flowers. Draperies were painted with natural folds in Baghdad style but figures were more like those on Seljuqi pottery.

Heads were painted with circular halos and horses were drawn energetic in action. Although Persian art absorbed all these influences through centuries but its rightmanifestation was achieved after Mongol's invasion when it came in contact with Chinese skilled drawing and brush art. It became the most prominent influence breaking up with the subordination of older styles (Gray, 1995).

Firm Mongol rule can be dated from the capture of Baghdad in 1258 AD soon after which Mesopotamia and Persia were united under the control of Il Khan. The capital was shifted to Tabriz. Although Baghdad declined but a number of cities such as Isfahan and Shiraz achieved a new significance. After the settlement of Mongol rule various schools were formed and flourished in these new centers.Many books were illustrated in other provincial centers too but for the private patrons and among them there are three examples of miniature sized Shahnameh attributed to Shiraz, Isfahan, Western India and Baghdad schools dating from 1300-1340. Although these were not imperial assignments but they show Mongol school style in rendering landscape, horses,

dazzling garments etc. They are considered by some scholars as the earliest example of Shahnameh illustrated after written by Firdawsi two hundred years ago. These Shahnamehs with their dramatic war and indigenous scenes are significant as they represent a close representation of life of late Il Khanid period (Canby, 1993).

Tabriz was the main hub of artistic and literary activities which reached its climax when the empire was at the verge of its downfall. This school of painting excelled in its expression of movement and manifestation of concepts which are best displayed in the representation of Demotte's Shahnama that is also famous as Great Shahnama of Tabriz (Rice, 1975). It included old stories of Persian kings and heroes like Feridoun, Zal, Rostam, Sohrab, Khosraw, Afrasiyab, Isfendiyar and many more. It showed varied representations of iconographical subjects many centuries old.Firdawsi's enormous effort produced a Shahnama with a unique conceptualization of time and of the past epics that was entirely different from Greek epics. It well-preserved the unifiedaccount of Iran's pre Islamic history.The changes in social conditions after Arab invasion placed Firdawsi in a difficult and unhappy situation and he searched for a more ideal and functional past with a romanticized descriptionthus as to revive the true Persian spirit through his poetry.With his intellect at its besthe followed the trails of history to get discernment into ancientadvancements which, when reachedFirdawsi'stime,already lost their vitality and exuberance. Thus he has preserved the legendary rich past of ancient Iran (Gazerani, 2016).This book displays the art taking shape of its true Persian style and identity.Here the transformation is seen in the fact that Chinese influence has been subordinated to a new strong style that has more local influence and appearance. It was thebeginning of the development of true Persian style of miniature(Rice, 1975).

Demotte's Shahnamahas its characteristic style and conception with a more intimate and insightful discernment in the characters. The charm of the paintings lies in the integrated compositions, sentimental expressions and emotions rendered with perceptible feelings (Rice, 1975). There is no exact date or names of artists who illustrated this Shahnama and it is likely to be illustrated in the reign of Abu Sa'id (1317-1335) (Canby, 1993).

One of the most epic heroes of Shahnama is Rustam whose heroic escapades marka significant part of Shahnama. Not only he lived a heroic life even his death was exemplary in gallantry and valor.It is said that there was a king Bahman of Kabul who when became inept in defeating Rustam, invited him to a hunting trip.In fact it was a trap that was maliciously plotted by the king and Rustam's jealous half-brother Shaghad who dig a deep pit in his way lining with sword like spikes in it, covered from above with green turf (Rubanovich, 265). Rustam when reached the forest his horse resisted but despite its resistance moved forward and fell into the trap thus dwindling into the pit along with his horse Rakhsh. The illustration that has been analyzed and explicated hereshows the moment of Rustam's death and his last act of bravery and astuteness has been accentuated. It is a rectangular painting showing the episode of the death of the legendary hero Rustam represented in a dramatic way. Above and below is the text written in six panels. Although illustrative, yet it is highly symbolic and suggestive at the same time. The entire concept of the story is enclosed in one picture. In the small miniature the massive incident has been portrayed in the most expounding way.



(Figure 1)The Dying Rustam Slaying Shaghad, 16cm x 29cm, Source:the Trustees of the British Museum, London. Sheila R. Canby, *Persian Painting*, 33.

The composition is divided into three parts with in its setting. On the extreme left Rustam's horse Rakhsh is shown lying dead and impaled (figure 2). He is painted with soft colors and imprecise tones along with calligraphic lines.



(Figure 2) Close up view of Rustam's wounded horse Rakhsh.

He is shown in a twisted posture in the pit pierced with sharp spikes and blood exuding out of the lacerations.The animal is depicted realistically with its characteristic color and features. In a highly dismayed manner the artists has represented the story of the death of Rakhsh who was the symbol of faithfulness, beauty, integrity and loyalty. It is helplesslyand vulnerably lying dead which is quite ironic as Rakhsh has been the protector of Rustam in the time of need as seen in many previous stories of Rustam like Rakhsh killing the lion while Rustam is sleeping and Rakhsh defeating dragon with Rustam (figure 3, 4). Now Rakhsh is powerless to protect his master and

lying dead fallen in the trap laid by evil Shaghad.It is now a symbol of pity and anguish. All the beauty is lost in the shadow of death.



(Figure 3) Rakhsh Fighting the Lion(Figure 4) Rakhsh Defeating the Dragon with Rustam.
Source:Shahname Synopsis - The British Librarywww.bl.uk › Storyteller's Corner, Accessed on 12.05.2025.

Above and below the horse are plants painted in detailin Mesopotamian style.In the center next to the horse is Rustam who is also fallen in the pit and fatally wounded, his quiver loosened but still he managed to crawl out and with his failing breath requested Shaghad to string his bow for him so that he could protect againstwild animals. Shaghad accepted it as his last request. Rustam then used this last arrow to kill Shaghad hiding behind the tree. He has killed his killer before dying in a great act of hero ship, wittiness, bravery and courage.At the moment he recognized the trap and the deceitfulness of his half-brother before his imminent death his spontaneity is astounding and his reaction is abrupt and instantaneous.He has killed his plotter right on target whose vicious plan was successful but he was also not spared. The depiction of Rustam’s last act of audacity and vengeance has shown him having just discharged the arrow pinning Shaghad to the tree he had used as a cover seen in the right side of the painting. The arrow has been marked with such accuracy that it cut into the tree and piercing into Shaghad’s chest killing him on the spot and he is standing with lowered head held to the tree. The figure of elderly Rustam is enclosed by the arched branches of the tree which is highly symbolic as the depiction of arch enhances his significance in religious

context too. Arch here signify a phase of transition from this world to the other world, from the worldly existence to the transcendental one (Mind Maze, 2008). A brave person like him lived throughout his life fighting demons, monsters, evils all symbolic of the vices in man for the cause of goodness, benefitting others and his death was also heroic with sacred consecration. While the colossal form of Rakhsh spiked in the pit emphasizes the catastrophic death of a hero(Komaroff and Carboni, 2002). The massive tree on the right in front of Shaghad is bare and blue that metaphorically represents melancholy, death, desolation,dejection and despair.



(Figure 5) Close up view showing Rustam and Shaghad

Threeparts of this painting shows varied concepts in idea and composition, on the left the curvy form of Rakhsh is reverberated by the bending tree-trunk and drooping body of Shaghad on the right. In the middle the dying Rustam who is shown sitting straight to fire his last arrow, marks a vertical line at the center of the composition. This again reflects Mesopotamian influencealthough not as simplistic as Abbasid style of book illustration yet has followed the

concept of central axis.The trees in the front and in the background are of the same style as seen in Rashid al Din History of the world.The trees resemble in their twists and forms, character and composition with these examples from Rashid al Din's book of History.The patterns on the blue tree shows Chinese influence, the design form of its texture show similarity with various previously illustrated books in Mongol as seen in Prophet Jermiah, and The Grove of Jetavana from Jamia al Tawarikh (figure 6 and 7) along with the Chinese art where in bothtraditional and contemporary styles fragmented designed representation of texture in trees and mountains are observed which are echoed in Persian art during Mongols period (figure 9). Although when it is transmitted into Persian Mongol expression it has its own distinctive style.Similar is the deep space in gold color that was thefavorite since the start in Persia as evident in the wall paintings of Samarra in Sassanian style (Gray, 1995) which is evident in later schools in Iran too like Abbasids and Mongols Schools (figure 7, 8).The use of gold enhances the decorative effect along with heavenly quality.



(Figure 6) The Grove of Jetavana (or suggested as Nagavrka, Maitreya's tree of enlightenment), 10.5 x 25.5 cm Source: 1514 mss-0727-36b.jpg. The Khalili Collections…Compendium of Chronicles. Rashid al Din's Illustrated History of the World, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, Volume XXVII, London 1995.



(Figure 7) Prophet Jeremiah, Rashid al Din's Universal History, Tabriz.
Source: David Talbot Rice, Islamic Art, 116.



(Figure 8) Discorides and a Student, De Materia Medica,
Arab Painting 1229 (626 A.H.). (192 x 140 mm.) Ahmet 111, 2127,
folio 2 verso, Library of Topkapu Sarayi Muzesi, Istanbul.

The dresses Rustam and Shaghad are wearing, bear folds in the characteristic Sassanian forms (figure 10) which were first adopted by the Baghdad school with simplistic folds, dark outline bright colors and designs (figure 8) and later transmitted to the Mongol School with more linear folds softer colors and calligraphic linedue to Chinese inspiration (figure 11, 12). Shahnama marks the climax of Mongol art because of the use of subtle tone, calligraphic line and realistic forms as seen in the dresses of Rustam and Shaghad where folds of their dresses are more expressive of their texture and moves around the contoursmore effectively(figure 13).



(Figure 10) Samanid period wall painting from Jausaq Plalace, Samarra; original: Smithsonian learning lab Smithsonian Institution and reconstructed;Source: David Talbot Rice, Islamic Art,32.



(Figure 11) Shikayamuni offering fruit to the devil (from the life of Budha) 9.5 x 25.5 cm. Source: 1514 mss-0727-36b.jpg. The Khalili Collections…Compendium of Chronicles. Rashid al Din's Illustrated History of the World, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, Volume X XVII, London 1995.



(Figure 12) Mahmood of Ghaznbi Crosses the Ganges. Source: http://materialislamica.com/image/6/61jamialtawarikh-mahmud_og_ghazni_crosses_the_ganges.jpg.Accessed on 14.07.2025



(Figure 13) Close up view of the dresses of Rustam and Shaghad.

The remarkable curves and contours of Rakhsh's body show the command and skill reflecting Chinese influence in the use of soft colors and calligraphic lines (figure 2). Nature is represented as the only assenting element in this painting. Small plants with leaves and flowers around the pit and around the figures are painted in details expressive of the decorative effect. Thus in this painting each element has constituted in its own right some deeper meaning. The entire story has a conceptual undertone suggesting that life and death go side by side. Here nature in the form of plants and tree is the symbol of life while the pit with spikes underneath the turfsignifies death underneath life. The landscape acts as a stage of life where the whole drama occurred. Rustam, Rakhsh and Shaghad are symbolic of bravery, loyalty and malevolence, all the human characteristics that are part of life andalthough very ironically all faced death in the end but Rustam and Rakhsh die with great dignity while evil Shaghad gets a well-deserved end. The formal and contextual analysis shows a combination of conflicting emotions createdby the extrinsic and

intrinsic elements. It creates a harmony and balance between the contrasting components that creates coherence and tension at the same time. The symbols of life and death, morality and immorality, loyalty and deceitfulness, goodness and evil run parallel in the entire scene thus in a small miniature a whole realm is incorporated with a deeper thought and meaning of life.

This miniature is a true representative of the primary shift of transformation of Mongol art into true Persian style of miniature that further developed in the preceding centuries into the iconic form of Irani or Persian art. In this miniature extrinsic and intrinsic both elements worked simultaneously producing an art form that is exemplary in its own self.

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