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A KASHMIRI MANUSCRIPT OF THE *SHAHNAMA* OF FERDOWSI IN BUDAPEST

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Summary

This study analyses an illustrated *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi from Kashmir, datable to the middle of the 1240s A. H. / ca. 1830 A. D, coinciding with Sikh rule over the country. It will be seen that the manuscript forms a group together with several similar volumes, all profusely illustrated, which indicates that at this particular time the *Shahnama* enjoyed a remarkable popularity in the region. Apart from contextualizing the group, the presumed circumstances of its creation will also be investigated in the present article.

Keywords: Budapest, Ferdowsi, Kashmir, *Shahnama*.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the articles in this volume deal with manuscripts which are directly related to Central and South-Eastern Europe: manuscripts that were copied there, describe it, or at least arrived in the region at an early date or under noteworthy circumstances, or form part of significant collections. The subject of the present paper, however, does not belong to any of these categories. It is a sumptuous and richly illustrated Persian manuscript without a colophon which has found its way to Hungary under as yet unknown circumstances, most probably in the late 19th century. Until a few years ago, before its publication by the present author, it had not even been catalogued: this neglect can be explained by the fact that it is preserved in a rather out-of-context location.¹ Likely acquired by the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography as part of a larger donation or bequest from which it is now separated, a book of this kind was destined to be forgotten because no museum did consider a Persian manuscript as “Volkskunst” even in the 19th century, when the term was used rather derogatorily.

Such misplaced objects are often the last to be considered by scholarship and this justifies its inclusion here. The manuscript under discussion is misplaced on a different account as well, because it seems to belong to a rather small and little studied group of illustrated *Shahnama* manuscripts which were made outside the Iranian world, in Hindustan, and in our case more precisely in the frontier land of Kashmir.² With this remark, we leave Eastern Europe for the Western Himalaya Mountains where we can assign the manuscript on stylistic considerations. In the absence of a colophon, stylistic analysis becomes particularly important for locating the manuscript of a literary work as readily associated with the wider Iranian world as the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi.

ANALYSIS OF THE MANUSCRIPT AND ITS GROUP

Of the provenance of the volume, the only facts that can be established are conveyed by a stamp on the last folio mentioning Ahmad ‘Ali K?alb ‘Ali, dated 1296/1878, and a vignette of a Delhi bookseller on the binding.

¹ Béla Kelényi; Iván Szántó (eds.): *Artisans at the Crossroads. Persian Arts of the Qajar Period, 1796-1925*. Budapest: Museum of Applied Arts, 2010, cat. no. c.1.1.7; Béla Kelényi; Iván Szántó (eds.): *Honar-e Iran-e asr-e Qajar dar majmu’e-ha-ye Majarestan, 1210-1343 q. (Shahkarha-ye honar-e Iran dar majmo’e-ha-ye jahan, vol. 2)*. Tehran: Farhangestan-e Honar, 1393/2014, cat. no. c.1.1.7.

² It is noteworthy that the standard reference work on Kashmir book illustration, Adel Adamova; T. Grek: *Miniatyur’i kashmirskih rukopisey*. Leningrad, 1976, based on Russian collections, does not include any copy of the *Shahnama*.

Covered by a matt tooled brown leather binding, the folio-sized manuscript (52 x 29 cm) consists of 389 folios, the text written in *nasta'liq*, distributed into 4 columns with 37 lines to a page. The support is a thick, polished, and glazed, probably local, paper. The text starts with the old (Abu Mansuri) preface, similarly to other Kashmiri examples, and includes the satire on Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni.¹ The 18 illustrations are placed unevenly in the volume, with only one image representing the Pishdadian period (fol. 13v: *Feridun goes to war against Zahhak*); nine images depict events during Rostam's life and its immediate aftermath, although three among these nine scenes do not represent Rostam himself (they belong to the story of Esfandiyar and they come at very close intervals). Three illustrations belong to the Eskandar cycle, while the last one represents a scene from the Arab conquest of Persia (fol. 387v: *Combat of Rostam Farrokhzad and Sa'd b. Waqqas*).

The reduced scenography, lack of details, bright colours— with an accentuated preference for orange—, the absence of tonal nuances, the clothing which differs from both Mughal and Persian archetypes, all point to the book painting of Kashmir of the late 18th and the early 19th centuries.

Apart from this single period, the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi, while having been popular since the Muslim conquest, was rarely illustrated in Kashmir.² The earliest example may be a volume dated 1131/1719 and illustrated, possibly for a Hindu bibliophile, in a style which Nora Titley ascribed to Kashmir.³ As expected, Kashmir in this period represented a provincial offshoot of the general tendencies of Mughal painting. In the post-Mughal period, following the Naderid conquest in 1739 and its continuation during the Afghans from 1752, a more individualistic style developed, foreshadowing the characteristics of the Budapest manuscript as well. The best comparison comes with two manuscripts in the Free Library of Philadelphia (Lewis O 57 and 59) and one in Berlin (Staatsbibliothek, Minutoli 134).⁴ Even if only a few scenes appear in both Budapest and in either of the two Philadelphia manuscripts, those which do (for example *The deaths of Rostam and Shaghad*) reveal that the painters of these volumes followed common prototypes and they worked in a very similar, quasi-standardized manner. The catalogue of the Philadelphia collection,

¹ Cf. below, Philadelphia, Free Library, Lewis O. 57; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Minutoli 134.

² For the *Shahnama* tradition in Kashmir, see Braj B. Kachru: *Kashmiri Literature*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1981, 11; for illustrated *Shahnama* manuscripts in India, including Kashmir, see Marianna Shreve Simpson: "ŠĀH-NĀMA iv. Illustrations", in E. Yarshater (et al. eds.): *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, electronic edition, 2009, accessed May 2017.

³ Norah Titley: *Persian Miniature Painting*, London: British Library, 1983, 210-11.

⁴ For reproductions of the Philadelphia and Berlin manuscripts, see the website of Cambridge *Shahnama* Centre for Persian Studies: <http://persian.pem.cam.ac.uk/projects/shahnama-project>.

Muhammed Ahmed Simsar, assumes that the paintings in Lewis O. 59 are the work of a single artist, but this appears unlikely, as with the Budapest volume.¹ It can be suggested that in all three manuscripts more than one artist participated and possibly their work overlapped. Only one of the three volumes, namely Lewis O. 59, is dated: the day and month of completion are given at the end (f. 629r); the year (1244 A.H. / 1829) is given on f. 177v, at the end of the first *daftar*. The colophon also contains details of the place of copying, in the quarter (*mahalla*) of Zadi Bal in the town (*balda*) of Simundu in Kashmir. This location is not yet identified; however, it can be presumed that the Budapest manuscript was also copied and illustrated there.

Apart from these, a further dated *Shahnama* (1246/1830), now in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek (Minutoli 134), has been attributed to Kashmir by Stchoukine, Flemming, Sohrweide, and Luft.² It has 99 illustrations which is far more than in the other three volumes and the elaboration of the paintings is also greater, although they are closely related iconographically and stylistically. Entire compositions, individual groupings within a scene, landscape elements, or single details are repeated in the four manuscripts, sometimes inverted, sometimes in an almost copy-and-paste format (see, for example, the *Death of Rustam and Shaghad*, figs. 1-4). Given that the dated Philadelphia example is two years earlier than the Berlin one, it cannot be derivative of the latter even if their qualitative relationship would suggest so. Still, these four examples (and probably more) form a coherent group and show that from the second to the fourth decades of the 19th century the Persian national epic enjoyed an unusual popularity in the western Himalaya foothills.

This popularity can be explained by the political situation of Kashmir during the period when the country was being separated from the Afghan Empire of the Dorrans by the Sikhs of Ranjit Singh, putting an end to five hundred years of Muslim rule. The Sikhs, then, were followed by the Dogra dynasty in 1846, under its first ruler, Golab Singh. Whereas Persian literacy had been strong in Kashmir from the 14th to the 19th centuries, most of the *Shahnama* manuscripts that have been attributed to Kashmir are datable towards the end of this period. Previously the majority of Persian literary production had consisted of hagiographical and historical works (*tazkeres* and *tarikhs*, respectively), as well as lyric poetry.³ Originally, the main producers of these volumes had been sufi *khanaqas* which contributed substantially to the spread of Islam in Kashmir. Kashmiri literature, regardless of the language in which it was written and the confession which

¹ Muhammed Ahmed Simsar: *Oriental manuscripts of the John Frederick Lewis Collection in the Free Library of Philadelphia: a descriptive catalogue with forty-eight illustrations*. Philadelphia: Free Library, 1937, 89-90, nos. 57 and 59.

² Ivan Stchoukine; Barbara Flemming; Paul Luft; Hanna Sohrweide: *Illuminierte islamische Handschriften*. Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1971, 201-5, no. 73.

³ Kachru, 1981; Girdhari L. Tikku: *Persian Poetry in Kashmir. An Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 213-225.

it expressed, developed over a strong and never forgotten Sanskrit substructure throughout the centuries. By the late 18th century, however, Persian increasingly came to become the vernacular written idiom for Muslims, while Hinduism came to successfully monopolize the Sanskrito-Kashmiri heritage. The Sikh and later Dogra takeover led to the gradual decline of Persian literacy which continued throughout the 20th century. However, in this process we witness a final peak in the popularity of the great Persian classics, such as Hafez, Sa'di, Nezami, etc., and it appears that most of the illustrated Kashmiri volumes of these authors originate from this late period. This is also true for the Book of Kings. In fact, both the Sikhs and the Dogras kept Persian as the administrative language of their Kashmiri domain, ensuring that literacy itself remained closely connected with Persianate culture, which would, in turn, influence the developing Kashmiri written language and literary genres.¹

This situation, i. e., the preservation of the prestige and infrastructure of Persian on the one hand, but the decline of Kashmir as a state, on the other, might have served as a rationale for the sudden surge of popularity of the *Shahnama*. The years around the creation of the Budapest-Berlin-Philadelphia group were rife with the Sikh-Afghan wars fought between Ranjit Singh and the Dorrani and (from 1826) Barakzai rulers, during which the Afghans lost most of their possessions south of the Khyber Pass, including Peshawar (Battle of Nowshera, March 1823). In these battles, Shoja Shah Dorrani was played out as a figurehead by Ranjit Singh against the Barakzai *amir*, Dost Mohammad. Those who commissioned and perused these manuscripts may have sided with the Afghans whose demise they regretted and compared to the earlier decline of Kashmir itself. A monument of Persian literature which in Kashmir can be linked to local *tazkeres* and *tarikhs*, the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi may have been copied or illustrated in specialized library-ateliers for sale and/or educational purposes during this period.² Combined together, the standardized nature yet relative costliness of these *Shahnamas*, indicate a high market demand for the Persian national epic in the era.

CONCLUSION

The *Shahnama* in the Eastern Islamic world— and Kashmir is no exception— often expressed Muslim statehood as opposed to the surrounding non-Muslim environment, even if, paradoxically, Ferdowsi had originally composed his epic in remembrance of the Pre-Islamic past. It may be significant that one of the few illustrations which reappear in nearly every

¹ Tikku 1971, 215-225.

² For the availability of Persian manuscript at bazaars in Srinagar at the time, see Godfrey Vigne: *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo, the countries adjoining the mountain-course of the Indus, and the Himalaya, north of the Panjab*, vol. 1. London: Henry Colburn, 1842, 375.

manuscript in the group, the killing of Rostam Farrokhzad by Sa‘d, is also the closing miniature in each volume (figs. 5-6).¹ For Ferdowsi, the triumph of Sa‘d marked the end of Persian statehood; for Kashmir, the scene paradoxically represented the fall of Muslim rule. Thus, in the particular Kashmiri setting the meaning of Qadisiya was inverted, but the tone nevertheless remained the same, because in Kashmir the end of Muslim rule also heralded the beginning of the end for the Islamicized Persian idiom of Ferdowsi. This scene lamented the demise of a Persian literary paradise which, far away from Iran, had been established by Sufi mystics and flourished for half a millennium under the Muslim rulers of the Himalaya.

¹ Gershon Lewental: “The Death of Rostam: Literary Representations of Iranian Identity in Early Islam”, *Iranian Studies*, 50/2 (2017), 223-246.



Fig. 1: Rostam and Shaghad, from a manuscript of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi. Kashmir, ca. 1830, Budapest, Museum of Ethnography, fol. 139v.

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