



## BĀYSONĠORĪ ŠĀH-NĀMA II. THE PAINTINGS

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Of the three great extant royal *Šāh-nāmas*—the others being the Il-khanid (“Demotte”) version of ca. 1335 and the so-called Houghton *Šāh-nāma* done for the Safavid Shah Ṭahmasb (r. 930-84/1524-76) in ca. 929-42/1522-35—the BāysonġorĪ manuscript is perhaps the most calculated in its formal presentation. Its twenty-one paintings (one a double-page frontispiece) represent a particularly intense crystallization of early Timurid notions of pictorial creativity within the context of a book, and its adroit exploitation of past artistic traditions eloquently underscores the evolution of the dynasty’s ruling ideology twenty-five years after its founder’s death. It was copied at Herat on 5 Jomādā 833/30 January 1430 by Mawlānā Ja’far BāysonġorĪ, the TabrĪzi calligrapher who appears to have also served as the prince’s chief librarian. It is unlikely that this copy is the original manuscript of the new text prepared for the prince (see [BĀYSONĠORĪ ŠĀH-NĀMA i. The Manuscript](#)); an unillustrated version done for the prince in 833/1430 is also known (Malek Library, Tehran, no. 6031), and, while reports of earlier illustrated BāysonġorĪ copies have occasionally surfaced (Binyon et al., p. 69; Gray, pp. 85-88), the Golestān Palace manuscript remains the only known illustrated version. In reality a distorted hybrid, the BāysonġorĪ *Šāh-nāma*’s textual codification nevertheless achieved authority as the canonical recension, partly due to the cultural prestige of the prince’s court, and this revisionist impulse is mirrored in the manuscript’s illustrative program. Enhanced by jewel-like illumination that provides a glittering framework reminiscent of enameled metalwork, the



visual tone of the book is set by a splendid frontispiece of a royal hunt; the seamless formal qualities of this terse, stylized orchestration of hunters, courtiers, attendants, and musicians are characteristic of the remaining illustrations: precise draughtsmanship, compositional clarity, and a sophisticated, frequently daring, use of color. Included in the upper right corner of the composition is a mounted royal figure under a parasol generally accepted as an idealized “portrait” of Bāysonġor himself; similar figures have been identified in other manuscripts executed for the prince (Robinson, pp. 386-87).

Apart from the frontispiece and the addition of an illustration to the preface (Ferdowsī and the poets of Ġazna), the text proper contains only nineteen illustrations, a dramatic contraction in the rate of illustration for royal copies of the epic; the great Il-khanid and Safavid versions yield an estimated 180 and 258 illustrations respectively. Stylistically, the paintings represent the culmination of a process first apparent in the prince’s copy of Sa’dī’s *Golestān* (830/1426-27; Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, p. 119) and carried through to one of his two copies of *Kalīla wa Demna* (833/1429; Topkapi Saray Library, Istanbul, R. 1022); traditional vocabulary, drawn in large part from earlier west Iranian book painting, namely Jalayerid manuscripts as well as those done for Bāysonġor’s cousin Eskandar Mīrzā at Shiraz, is maintained, but it is now given perceptibly greater clarity, precision, and balance. While elements of scientific perspective, i.e., foreshortening, are in evidence (The murder of Sīavoš, Esfandīār slays Arjāsp), they are subordinated to an emphasis on design in two dimensions. Earlier conventions are not so much changed as they are distilled into brilliant refinements that approximate surface pattern, and within this context color, here achieving a breathtaking degree of quality and purity, assumes a powerful new importance as a spatial and compositional device.

Apart from richness of materials and refinements of technique, it is the structural nature of the illustrations—the implementation and repetition of both compositional formulae and components—that explains the book’s particular visual resonance. Wildly imaginative compositions (e.g., Esfandīār slays Arjāsp) are not absent, but many of the manuscript’s illustrations comprise figural motifs and even architecture duplicated and modified from the stock reserve of the prince’s earlier work; the frontispiece, for example, includes among its constituent parts sections of paintings from Bāysonġor’s 831/1427-28 *Homāy o Homāyūn* (Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, N.F. 382) and the



830/1426-27 Berenson *Anthology* (I Tatti, Florence, Berenson Collection). The copying process is operative internally as well; three scenes—“Jamšīd teaching the crafts,” “Kay Kāvūs listening to the minstrel Dīv,” and “the presentation of Bahrām Gōr to Monder”—are virtually duplicates of one another in their enthronements. Both entire compositions and specific figural components, most likely preliminary works or contemporary copies, have survived among a group of Timurid drawings preserved in albums in Istanbul and Berlin, many of them with pricked outlines for transfer: frontispiece (Topkapi Saray Library, H. 2152, fol. 45a); “Esfandīār slays Arjāsp” (Topkapi Saray Library, H. 2152, fol. 93a); “Jamšīd teaching the crafts” (Staatsbibliothek, Diez A, fol. 73, S. 77, no. 1); “the murder of Sīāvoš” (Topkapi Saray Library, H. 2152, fol. 62b); “Rostam lassoes the Khagan of China” (Staatsbibliothek, Diez A, fol. 73, S. 57.6 and 76.1; Topkapi Saray Library, H. 2152, fol. 87b). In addition, a remarkable workshop document of about 830/1427 (Topkapi Saray Library, H. 2153, fol. 98a), addressed to Bāysonğor from Jaʿfar Bāysonğorī, may well include the Golestān Palace *Šāh-nāma* among the listing of works in progress, and its details shed further light on the structure and creative process of a royal Timurid library (Ozergin),

Nowhere, however, is the distinctive nature of the Timurid transformation of the past more apparent than in the manuscript’s nearly exact duplication of three late 8th/14th-century *Šāh-nāma* paintings, most likely Jalayerid, now preserved in Istanbul (Atasoy, figs. 20, 21, 27). What were earlier perceived as powerful and dramatic evocations of the epic have been reduced to a uniform, stylized mime that is artificial and theatrical in effect and a brilliant visual celebration of royal splendor. Of the known remaining royal Timurid *Šāh-nāma* manuscripts or fragments—a ca. 838/1435 copy executed at Shiraz for Bāysonğor’s brother Ebrāhīm Solṭān b. Šāhroḳ (Bodleian Library, Oxford University, MS Ouseley Add. 176), a ca. 838/1435 detached miniature (Tahmīna enters Rostam’s chamber) from a lost *Šāh-nāma* probably copied at Herat for Bāysonğor’s son ‘Alā’-al-Dawla (Harvard University Art Museums, 1939.225), and a ca. 843/1440 *Šāh-nāma* done for Bāysonğor’s brother Moḥammad Jūkī b. Šāhroḳ, then governor at Balk (Royal Asiatic Society, London, MS 239)—none approaches the Bāysonğorī copy’s brilliant imperial facade. The distinctive artificiality of the manuscripts’ illustrations, with their tenuous links to physical reality, stands as a remarkably inventive embodiment of Timurid cultural aspirations. It can be viewed as a specific reaction in the wake of Tīmūr’s death in 807/1405 to the new cultural demands facing Šāhroḳ and his sons, a Turkic military elite no longer deriving their power and influence



solely from a charismatic steppe leader with a carefully cultivated linkage to Mongol aristocracy. Now centered in Khorasan, the ruling house regarded the increased assimilation and patronage of Persian culture as an integral component of efforts to secure the legitimacy and authority of the dynasty within the context of the Islamic Iranian monarchical tradition, and the BāysonġorĪ Šāh-nāma, as much a precious object as it is a manuscript to be read, powerfully symbolizes the Timurid conception of their own place in that tradition. A valuable documentary source for Timurid decorative arts that have all but disappeared for the period, the manuscript still awaits a comprehensive monographic study.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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A complete pictorial record of the manuscript's illustrations can be found in *An Album of Miniatures and Illuminations from the Baysonghori Manuscript of the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi dated 833 A.H./1430 A.D. and Preserved in the Imperial Library*, Central Council of the Celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971.

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