



DEMOTTE ŠĀH-NĀMA

“DEMOTTE” ŠĀH-NĀMA, illustrated manuscript, now dispersed, of Ferdowsī’s epic poem, often identified by the name of a former owner, the Paris dealer Georges Demotte (active ca. 1900-23). A more accurate designation is “the great Mongol *Šāh-nāma*,” for it is generally believed to have been produced for a patron associated with the Il-khanid court (Grabar and Blair, pp. xi-xiv, 46-55) and is particularly renowned for the intrinsic quality of its paintings. The large format of the manuscript and the incorporation of Chinese motifs into the paintings are characteristic of other Il-khanid examples, like Rašīd-al-Dīn’s *Jāme’ al-tawārīk* (Rice and Gray; Gray, pp. 15, 17-19). The paintings in the *Šāh-nāma* are exceptional, however, for their depiction of emotion, particularly grief, which is achieved through the figures’ gestures and postures, often echoed and amplified by the expressive use of settings. Some features of the compositions continued in use in later 14th-century and 15th-century paintings, but the expressive quality of the illustrations in the Mongol *Šāh-nāma* was rarely matched in later works.

The Mongol *Šāh-nāma* has also acquired notoriety from the circumstances surrounding its appearance on the art market and the subsequent dispersal of its pages in various public and private collections.

Demotte is said to have acquired the manuscript in Paris in about 1910; he bought it from Shemavan Malayan, brother-in-law of the well-known dealer Hagop Kevorkian, who had brought it from Tehran. The manuscript is thought to have belonged to the Qajar royal library, for it was photographed while still bound ([Plate XXIV](#)) by Antoin Sevrugin, court photographer to the rulers



Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96) and Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (1313-24/1896-1907; Lowry, 1988a, p. 68; idem, 1988b, pp. 32-33). Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah (1324-27/1907-09) and members of his household are said to have been selling manuscripts from the dynastic collection as early as 1908, in order to meet personal expenses. Some of these manuscripts were transmitted to Paris, where collectors were learning to appreciate Persian painting (Robinson, p. 1).

It is reported that when the manuscript of the Mongol *Šāh-nāma* came into Demotte's hands it was still bound but that, after he had failed to find a purchaser at the desired price, he removed the binding in order to sell the pages separately, an approach that was well received by collectors (Robinson, p. 1). In 1913 Demotte sold several pages to the collector Charles Vever, and by 1914 ten illustrations from the manuscript had been published by W. P. Schulz (II, pls. 20-29; Lowry, 1988b, pp. 32-34). Over the next sixty years illustrations from this manuscript were gradually dispersed by Demotte and other dealers.

Dispersed paintings from the *Šāh-nāma* have been repeatedly exhibited and published by scholars. There have been two particularly noteworthy attempts to record and analyze the scattered miniatures. In 1939 Doris Brian prepared an inventory of all fifty-eight known miniatures, and in 1980 Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair published a more thoroughly documented list, along with a series of hypotheses about the original state of the manuscript and a historical interpretation of the paintings. They argue that the manuscript originally contained about 280 folios and as many as 180 illustrations, of which, beside the fifty-eight identified illustrations, only a few unillustrated text pages are known to have survived (pp. 10-12).

Their study also revealed that changes to the *Šāh-nāma* after it reached Paris went far beyond removal of the binding (Grabar and Blair, pp. 2-10), a conclusion that is confirmed by more recent information about the pages purchased by Vever, which are now in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. A close examination of Vever's pages, which include some bifolios, reveals that they had been subjected to a complex process of alteration and restoration, which has been documented for other pages as well. The apparent purpose of these changes was to increase the number of salable pages by splitting leaves originally illustrated on both sides into two separate sheets, each with a painting on one side; the remaining side of each new "page" was thus blank. Various kinds of damage resulting from this process were repaired in various ways; blank pages were covered



with new text, either an existing text page or newly written, and miniatures were often partly repainted. Sometimes miniatures were glued to pages from different sections of the text (Lowry, 1988a pp. 58, 65, 68, nos. 66-73; Grabar and Blair, pp. 2-12, 177-82). Contiguous unillustrated pages from the story of Sīāvūš are thus now paired with illustrations about Ferēdūn, Rostam, Eskandar, and Ardašīr; one illustration of Ferēdūn and another of Eskandar are now backed by identical verses from the Sīāvūš story (Lowry, 1988a, pp. 58, 65, nos. 66, 67, 71, 73; Grabar and Blair, p. 177, nos. 3, 7, 8, 37, 43, 44). The creation of these new “pages” must have been accomplished by persons literate in Persian, including a trained calligrapher, but the forgeries (q.v. ii) were clearly aimed at buyers ignorant of the language.

Although the surviving portions of this *Šāh-nāma* manuscript carry no direct information about its original owner or the circumstances surrounding its manufacture, since its first appearance in Paris it has been associated with 14th-century Persia. Various opinions have been expressed about its illustrations, which reflect tensions between the Il-khanid dynasty and Persian subjects; it was probably commissioned by Rašīd-al-Dīn’s son Ġiāṭ-al-Dīn Moḥammad in about 1335 (Grabar and Blair, pp. xi-xiii, 46-55).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

S. S. Blair, “On the Track of the ‘Demotte *Shāhnāma* Manuscript,” in F. Déroche, ed., *Les manuscrits du Moyen-Orient. Essais de codicologie et de paléographie*, Varia Turcica 8, Istanbul and Paris, 1989, pp. 125-31.

D. Brian, “A Reconstruction of the Miniature Cycles in the Demotte Shāh Nāmāh,” *Ars Islamica* 6, 1939, pp. 97-102.

O. Grabar and S. Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History. Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*, Chicago, 1980.

B. Gray, *The World History of Rashid al-Din*, London, 1978.

G. Lowry, *An Annotated and Illustrated Checklist of the Vever Collection*, Washington, D.C., 1988a.



Idem, *A Jeweler's Eye. Islamic Arts of the Book from the Vever Collection*, Washington, D.C., 1988b.

D. T. Rice and B. Gray, *The Illustrations to the "World History" of Rashid al-Din*, Edinburgh, 1976.

W. P. Schulz, *Die persisch-islamische Miniaturmalerei*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1914.

B. W. Robinson, "Ismā'īl II's Copy of the *Shāhnāma*," *Iran* 14, 1976, pp. 1-8.

(PRISCILLA P. SOUCEK)

Plate XXIV. Photograph by Antoin Sevrugin of the "Demotte Šāh-nāma" in its binding, taken while it was still in the Qajar royal library in the late 19th century; the illustration of Bahram Gūr hunting is now in the Fogg Museum, Harvard University. Courtesy of the Myron Bement Smith Collection, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., neg. no. 40.7.