Brave Warriors of Diez

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Five albums (Diez A fols. 70–74) kept in the Berlin State Library are named after Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, the former possessor of these albums, and contain paintings, drawings, calligraphy, and engravings. The contents of the albums come from a broad geographical area, particularly from Iran, Turkey, China, and Europe, and contain artworks that can be dated to a period between the late thirteenth and the late eighteenth centuries.

Within the albums, especially in Diez A fols. 70–73, there are paintings and drawings related to the art of war in the Muslim cultures of the medieval period onwards from Central Asia to Iran. These artworks are the topic of this essay, which aims to provide a general overview of arms and armour illustrated.

According to the division proposed by İpşiroğlu, the content of the albums can be divided into four groups: Seljuq-Mongol; Chinese-Mongol; late Ilkhanid up to the early fifteenth century; and drawings, studies, and sketches. The dates are debated by more recent art historians, but no definite solutions have yet been proposed. The depictions show evidence of the status of warrior culture in Islamic art, and the importance of arms and armour for written and illustrative sources to tell their stories, as emphasized by Sharaf al-Din Āli Yazdi in his Žafarnāma, completed around 1425:

An Army numerous beyond counting,
victorious and invincible.
in combat like mad elephants enraged –
all with spear, mace and dagger,
with alligator-skin shield thrown over leopard horse-armour,
with no fear of either death or sharp blade,
with no dread of water of flight from fire,
in courage, unique; in striving, united;
against blows, anvils; against attack, mountains.

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1 For detailed information, see the introductory essay in this volume. The drawings and paintings of the Diez albums were displayed in several exhibitions, but only once together with the Saray albums from the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul. See Cengiz Han ve Miraşları. Büyük Moğol İmparatorluğu, exh. cat., Sabancı Üniversitesi, Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi, 7 December 2006–8 April 2007, Istanbul 2006.
3 M.S. İpşiroğlu, Saray-Alben: Diez’sche Klebebände aus den Berliner Sammlungen, Wiesbaden 1964, p. 133.
The Diez A fols. 70–72 contain the largest group of paintings bearing the most impressive depictions of war from the perspective of the victorious warriors, comprising combat between two warriors,⁵ battles,⁶ and the occupation of a city.⁷ The paintings, especially those from the fourteenth century, are related to the most important Ilkhanid manuscripts of the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh and Shāhnāma.⁸ The Ilkhanids propagandized Mongol heritage and patronized the Iranian national epic intensively in these lavishly illustrated manuscripts. The arts of war as pictorial subjects are not a coherent subject within the albums: they were executed in a variety of styles by various artists over the course of time. The depictions incorporate weapons and warriors mounted on horses with barding. The descriptions and stylistic critical remarks made by İpşiroğlu also include the first discussions of the different types of arms and armour within the Diez albums.⁹

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5  E.g. Diez A fol. 71, p. 41, no. 1.
6  E.g. Diez A fol. 71, p. 58 and p. 59.
7  E.g. Diez A fol. 70, p. 4 and p. 7.
8  İpşiroğlu classified these paintings and drawings as belonging to the group of “Chinese-Mongolian Miniatures.” The paintings of the Diez albums are closely related to the paintings of the Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh from the fourteenth century, kept in Edinburgh, London, and Istanbul. The general relation to the Saray albums in Istanbul has been extensively researched by Roxburgh in “Heinrich Friedrich Von Diez”, pp. 112–136. Diez A fols. 70–72 to the albums H. 2153, Diez A fol. 73 to H. 2152 and B. 411, and Diez A fol. 74 to B. 411.
9  İpşiroğlu, Saray-Alben, pp. 7, 67.