In the nearly twenty years since I first met Oleg Grabar, much has changed in the world, not the least in Iran. The era of Islamic fundamentalism has drawn attention to Iran’s Shi’ite majority and to its recently persecuted religious minorities. Its Bahai, Jewish, and Zoroastrian populations remain there today, but Manicheans, Buddhists, and several sects of Christians had also continued to live in Iran after the advent of Islam. By the thirteenth-century Buddhism had receded to its far-eastern fringes, where it was really little more than a memory, and, in the space of the hundred years between the 1220’s and the 1320’s the Mongols had conquered Iran, introducing new ideas and customs from Central Asia and the Far East. At the Ilkhanid capital of Tabriz different Mongol rulers adhered to different religions. Some followed Mongol shamanist beliefs; others married Nestorian Christian women and had Christian leanings, and still others converted to Buddhism.

Lack of sources hinders us from fully understanding the nature and impact of Buddhism on thirteenth-century Iran. Yet, we can assume that the religion was fully tolerated and encouraged from the reign of Arghun (1284–91) to Ghazan Khan’s conversion to Islam in 1295. From Marco Polo, among others, we know that Tabriz in the thirteenth century was highly cosmopolitan. As a major trading center on east-west and north-south trade routes it lured merchants, scientists, artists, and men of talent from all over the civilized world, much of which was then controlled by the Mongols. J. A. Boyle has noted that Chinese physicians were at the court of Ghazan Khan along with Chinese artists, who he assumes worked mostly in Buddhist temples. Few traces of these temples exist today, although portable objects suggesting a Buddhist presence have been found in Iran.

Only one painting has survived that even remotely suggests a Buddhist context from the time before Ghazan Khan’s conversion to Islam in 1295. This work (fig. 1) shows a ruler enthroned with a Buddhist monk, apparently a Tibetan, at the right presenting him with a jewel. Detached from its original place in a manuscript, this page divulges little information about the state of Buddhism in Iran around 1295. All we can say is that the style of the work combines elements of thirteenth-century Arab painting — the treatment of drapery, for example — with some traits associated with earlier Central Asian painting and that the inclusion of a Tibetan Buddhist monk verifies the presence of such figures at Tabriz in the 1290’s. Most likely this painting and a badly damaged procession scene to which it is attached functioned as a frontispiece for a manuscript, but we have no way of knowing whether it was a Buddhist or a Muslim tract. Possibly the enthroned figure is meant to represent the Buddha himself as King of the World, but such an identification is by no means certain. The vertical format of the page conforms to that of the Muslim arts of the book.

The lack of Buddhist monuments and images from Mongol Iran is directly connected with Ghazan Khan’s conversion to Islam in 1295. Apparently Ghazan Khan was convinced by one of his generals, a Muslim called Nauruz, of the expediency of adopting Islam. At the time Ghazan was battling his cousin Baidu for the throne and control of the Ilkhanid lands. The value of leading Muslim troops as a Muslim and defeating “the last non-Muslim leader” of Iran was not lost on Ghazan. By the fall of 1295 Ghazan had captured and executed Baidu and had taken full control of the empire. Despite his Buddhist upbringing and the Buddhist temples he had erected in Khurasan, Ghazan’s first royal decree was for the destruction of all churches, synagogues, and Buddhist temples in Tabriz, Baghdad, and throughout the realm. Because of the good favor they had earlier enjoyed, the Buddhists were the hardest hit by this proclamation. Many converted to Islam or fled eastward toward Central Asia, China, and Tibet. Even so, textual and artistic sources lead us to assume that the Buddhist community of Tabriz did not disappear all at once, but dispersed gradually in the years following Ghazan Khan’s decree.

Not only foreigners, but also Iranians, were attracted to Ghazan Khan’s court, of which the most renowned member was Rashid al-Din. Born in Hamadan about 1247, Rashid al-Din came to Tabriz as a court physician. By 1298 he had converted from Judaism to Islam and had
According to Rashid al-Din’s plan, one Persian and one Arabic copy of the four-volume Jami’ al-Tawārīkh were to be produced each year. These were then sent to cities throughout the Ilkhanid realm. We must assume that the annual production of copies of the Jami’ continued from about 1305 until 1318, the year of Rashid al-Din’s death. In that year the Rabī Rashidi was looted as a result of Rashid al-Din’s execution at the hands of Uljaytu’s successor, Abu-Sa’id. This certainly resulted in the destruction of one of the world’s great libraries and probably of some of the copies of the Jami’ Of the twenty-four or so original copies, only two fragments have survived. This paper will examine the illustrations of the Buddha Sakyamuni from one of these fourteenth-century fragments of the Jami’ as well as several fifteenth-century illustrations from a related manuscript. The fragment of the Jami’ in which the illustrations of the Buddha occur was completed in 1314, eight years later than the other extant fragment, which is now in the Edinburgh University Library. Written in Arabic, both fragments contain sections of the third and fourth volumes of the Jami’, consisting of the histories of Muhammad and the caliphate, China, Hind and Sind, the Franks and the Jews. Although they overlap to a certain degree, only the 1314 manuscript contains the history of India (Hind and Sind) in which the life of the Buddha is recounted. Formerly in the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society and now in private hands, the 1314 manuscript includes twenty-one chapters under the heading, “The Life and Teaching of Buddha.” The three illustrations in this section are the earliest of the small group of depictions of the Buddha Sakyamuni in Persian painting.

Before proceeding to the paintings, let us briefly consider the text. Rashid al-Din states unequivocally that this source for the life of the Buddha was a Kashmiri Buddhist priest named Kamalashri. Although Karl Jahn, the leading specialist on the text of the Jami’ al-Tawārīkh, states that Kamalashri was “otherwise completely unknown,” a person of that name is mentioned by Jean Naudou as the author of a number of minor works that were translated into Tibetan by one Gzon-nu ses-rab the lo-ca-ba of On in the fourteenth century. Possibly the latter Kamalashri was the same as Rashid al-Din’s man. In any event, Kamalashri’s account consists in part of certain familiar events in the Buddha’s life presented in a form which often differs from the standard Indian, Tibetan, or Far Eastern versions. Jahn has suggested that