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A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MANUSCRIPT FROM TRANSOXIANA:
EVIDENCE FOR A CONTINUING TRADITION
IN ILLUSTRATION

In the field of Islamic manuscript illustration, tradition is a very important factor. Favoring subjects, notable compositions, and traits of style were perpetuated down the years, whether because of direct copying from manuscript to manuscript or because of an intensive training delivered from master to pupil — who in some cases would also be father and son. It must be supposed that many manuscripts have been lost, but in spite of this enough firmly documented pieces have survived to enable scholars to establish the main lines of development, though there is still much debate about the byways. The various strands of tradition are not totally discrete: at any one period there might be movement of manuscripts and of artists; or there might be links through time, when an artist, faced with a particular task, had recourse to an old manuscript for his model. The resultant mixing and mingling of lines form a veritable web. A manuscript that exemplifies these complexities, with interesting connections to both earlier and later work, is the Ta’rikh-i gūzida-i Nuṣratnāma, a history in eastern Turkish, copied in the sixteenth century, and now in the British Library as Or. 3222. This draws upon the illustrative tradition of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, while itself representing a type of source used in Mughal works.

The manuscript has been described in two catalogues: that of Rieu in 1888 for the textual content, and that of Titley in 1981 for the illustrations. Rieu notes that the work has a preamble on the Turkish races and then treats the period from Chingiz Khan to Shaybani Khan, often referred to in the text by his original name of Shah Bakht, the Uzbek who displaced the Timurids and established himself in Transoxiana in the early sixteenth century. Material is derived from the Ta’rikh-i Jahāngūshāy of Juvayni, from an abridgment made for Ulugh Beg of the ḫāmiṣ al-Tawārīkh of Rashid al-Din, and from records in Uighur. The work was composed by a dependent of Shaybani, and it seems clear that it must have been designed to celebrate the taking of Samarqand and to associate that achievement with the past glories of the Mongols. The manuscript appears to be a unique survival, but is nevertheless considered to be a copy of an original composed for Shaybani. This conclusion derives from two peculiarities. Firstly, a space has been left in the preface where the name of the author should have appeared. Secondly, there is a slight problem regarding the dating of the composition, since the author claims to have completed his work in Jumada I 198 (November 1502) — the year after the Uzbek capture of Samarqand — but events are included which extend to slightly beyond 17 Dhū’l qa‘da 909 (2 May 1504). It is thus clear that in this volume a history and its continuation were copied together. A possible but uncertain date of transcription is supplied at the end, where an unfinished folio and an additional folio bear the year 970 (1562–63). The contents point to an origin in Transoxiana, and the manuscript might thus have been produced in Bukhara under Abdallah II (1556–83) or in Samarqand under Khusrau Sultan (1560–67). The script is a bold nastaʿlīq on paper flecked with gold. The illumination consists of a double surlaub at the beginning, drawn in a good sixteenth-century style.

The illustrations are of a medium quality. The palette used is rather muted: mid-blue, saxe-blue, sage green, light green, light turquoise green, yellow, pink, orange, brown, gray, silver, and gold; the style supports a mid-sixteenth-century date. In her catalogue of illustrated Turkish manuscripts — where its companions are all Ottoman — Titley characterizes the style of Or. 3222 as Bukharan of ca. 1550–60. She identifies the seventeen subjects portrayed, points to considerable damage from damp, flaking, and rubbing, and suggests that some pictures were unfinished. For convenience in discussion, the illustrations will here be divided into three groups: nine pictures of rulers seated in the open with their retinues around them; two other scenes of a peaceful nature; and five scenes of war and its attendant drama. In the ruler-and-retinue group Titley notes a number of
features of particular interest for the Mongol context. The striking first illustration, “Chingiz assigns lands to his sons,” Yuji, Chaghatay, Ugetay, and Tuluy (fig. 1), presents handsome examples of the Mongol headdress with eagle’s plume prominent amongst more downy feathers; also interesting are the arrows held by each son, tokens of the commission they have received. The feathered cap is found again in subsequent ruler-and-retinue scenes, or it may be replaced by a tall white cap with a black up-turned brim (figs. 2, 3). Among these pictures Titley particularly notices the paraphernalia of the Mongol drinking tradition: flasks, cups, skins, and bowls of qumiz. The skins and a few cups in blue and white pottery apart, the vessels are shown as of richly worked gold or silver, often encrusted with stones. The first picture includes a fine large high-shouldered jar with a high foot ring and lid, rendered in pricked gold. Others show a variety of flasks with long necks and shorter jugs with lids. The jugs have a general resemblance to the mashraba type of the fifteenth century, found in jade, metal, or pottery, but tend to have a more relaxed neck ring and bag-like body.

The scenes of ruler and retinue are the dominant theme in the illustration. In each case the ruler is placed high in the picture and the retinue is loosely ranked at the sides of the composition, sometimes seated on charpoys or folding chairs; persons in the foreground sometimes turn their back to the viewer. The center is empty save for one or two small tables bearing the drinking vessels. The main lines of this compositional type are evidently derived from large scenes of ruler and retinue of Mongol or post-Mongol character, datable to the mid or later fourteenth century, which are to be found amongst the album pictures in the Topkapi Saray Library, Istanbul, and also in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (fig. 4). The pictures are usually consid-

Fig. 1. Chingiz Khan assigns lands to his sons. Ta’rikh-i guzida-i Nusratnāma, Or. 3222, 43b, British Library, London. (Photo: By permission of the British Library)

Fig. 2. Ugetay Khan and his retinue. Ta’rikh-i guzida-i Nusratnāma, Or. 3222, 50b, British Library, London. (Photo: By permission of the British Library)