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ABOUT A GROUP OF TRUNCATED SHĀHNĀMAS:
A CASE STUDY IN THE COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION OF
ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS IN THE SECOND PART OF
THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The group of illustrated Shāhnāma manuscripts produced in the late 1570’s and in the 1580’s that are dealt with here have a number of traits in common, especially in content and style. As a discrete group bound together by time and place the manuscripts offer a particularly good chance to study the patterns of commercial production at that time.

For two hundred years considerable effort has been invested in establishing the original text of Firdausi’s great epic. For this endeavor the later, sometimes heavily interpolated, manuscripts are more of a nuisance than a subject of study, and often the considerable changes in the text are not mentioned in catalogue entries. The first descriptions recording these interpolations were published in 1934 by Giuzal’ian and D’iakonov in their book about the Shāhnāma copies in the collections of St. Petersburg. The authors concluded that interpolations became more and more frequent after the second half of the sixteenth century. In contrast to the smaller changes and additions that already appear in the earliest copies of the Shāhnāma these more major interpolations were taken from post-Shāhnāma epics, most frequently from the Garshāpnmā, the Sāmnāma, the Barznāma, and the Bahmannāma. Although some of these manuscripts could more accurately be called anthologies of heroic epics, they were obviously not regarded as such at the time they were made, and they were usually entitled Shāhnāma.

The manuscripts we are dealing with here represent a particularly strange version of these later collections. Not only do they contain long interpolations, but they also omit the so-called historical part of Firdausi’s Shāhnāma altogether. What is really hiding under the title this time is an expanded version of the legendary part of the Shāhnāma finishing either with the reign of Queen Humay or with the story of Iskandar. Since the place of the post-Shāhnāma epics in manuscript production has so far attracted no attention, we believe it useful to sketch the process that led to the creation of these unusual Shāhnāma manuscripts.

The earliest copies of post-Shāhnāma epics date from the fourteenth century, that is, a century later than the earliest Shāhnāma manuscripts. The first is a Garshāpnmā, dated 755 (1354), followed by a collection of four epics (the Garshāpnmā, the Shāhānshāhnāma, the Bahmannāma and the Ġūshnāma), dated 800 (1397–98) and complementing a separately bound Shāhnāma. While these are all illustrated, a copy of the Barznāma, from 1425, does not have any miniatures. A picture preserved in a Diez Album indicates that the illustration of post-Shāhnāma epics may have started about the same time as the illustration of Firdausi’s work.

As far as we can conclude from the small number of existing examples, in the fourteenth century the post-Shāhnāma epics were treated as separate entities from Firdausi’s Shāhnāma, and then lost status. No illustrated manuscripts of post-Shāhnāma epics are preserved from the fifteenth century, and even the unillustrated ones are extremely rare, while copies of the Shāhnāma are abundant; at the same time, the first interpolations appear in Shāhnāma manuscripts. To judge from two illustrated copies the process started with extracts from the Barznāma centered on the episode of the fight between Rustam and Barzu. The corresponding miniature usually shows the heroes confronting each other in single combat. The Baysunghur Shāhnāma of 1430 may be the earliest example, soon followed by Shiraz commercial production. The stage for future development was set: Firdausi’s great epic had emerged as the dominant version that would swallow the others. However, now the Shāhnāma began to serve as a kind of entry way for the post-Shāhnāma epics inconspicuously to reappear, bit by bit, as part of enlarged versions of the Shāhnāma.

Although enlarged versions are common in the second half of the sixteenth century, there is no comparable increase in the number of separate copies of post-
Shāhnāma epics.\textsuperscript{14} It seems that they did not fully regain their earlier position as discrete works but were more often treated as links to be added to a chain in order to make it more impressive. Oral tradition deals with the epic material in the same way. It seems that the growing acceptance of transformed Shāhnāma copies and the way their texts are organized reflect the influence of the oral epic tradition in Iran on manuscript production.\textsuperscript{15} As the practice of the storytellers in modern times shows, the oral tradition always included stories that were not part of Firdau’s work. They were not treated as separate topics but woven into the material that also appears in the Shāhnāma.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, the structure of the mixed copies is basically the same as in the oral presentation of the national tradition: the main line is provided by the sequence of events as related in Firdau’s Shāhnāma. At the appropriate points the narrative is interrupted to provide more detail about heroes dealt with summarily or not at all by Firdau. The manuscripts, of course, borrow from the epic versions at hand to fill in at these points.

That this happened in the sixteenth century should not surprise us. “The real flourishing of storytelling as an art of entertainment came in the Safavid period,” writes one scholar: “here we see a more obvious mingling of the courtly and common threads of storytelling.”\textsuperscript{17} Since the oral tradition represents a “romantic rendition,”\textsuperscript{18} that is, one influenced by popular romances, its impact shifted the balance in favor of a similar mood in the written text as well. The incorporation of post-Shāhnāma epics, with their stories about journeys to distant countries and wonderful islands, the encounters with witches, divs, and fabulous animals, and endless searches for the beloved satisfied the taste for romance.\textsuperscript{19}

Since the early fifteenth century, this taste had already influenced the interpretation of the Shāhnāma without substantially changing the text. At that time the impact of the romantic mood was visible only through the selection of subjects for illustration. In one anthology produced for Iskandar Sultan in 1411 the excerpts from the Shāhnāma were not only very brief but also consisted of such stories as “Sudaba and Siyawush” and “Bizhan and Manizah” which are among the rare romantic episodes in Firdausi’s work.\textsuperscript{20} In the Shāhnāma volume made for Ibrahim Sultan in Shiraz about 1430, the selection of subjects for illustration reveals a preference for miraculous adventures.\textsuperscript{21} Only two out of forty-two miniatures illustrate the historical part. In commercial production as well, the selection of subjects often shows a diminished interest in the historical part of the Shāhnāma.\textsuperscript{22} In the second half of the sixteenth century, the influence of romance on choice of subjects for illustration was sometimes supplemented by changing the text itself to satisfy this same preference.

Given the way Firdausi’s text has often been treated, then, it comes as no surprise that the choice of interpolations varies considerably in selection of epics or episodes taken from the post-Shāhnāma epics, in the removal of verses to shorten the sections, and in the addition of verses to smooth the transition from one epic to the other. This variety in interpolations reinforces the individuality of each manuscript, making it remarkable if two or more manuscripts exhibit a number of common choices in the sections they use for interpolation, in the length and the wording, and in the illustrations.

In the second half of the sixteenth century the use of interpolations from post-Shāhnāma epics in Shāhnāma volumes was practiced in several centers which produced illustrated manuscripts. Identifying the center to which a given manuscript should be attributed, which is usually not mentioned in the colophons, is accomplished by the different styles of the miniatures accompanying the texts. Using style as the basis for attribution it is clear that some of the manuscripts with sizable interpolations from the Garshāspnāma, the Sāmnāma, and the Barzināma originated from Shiraz, the most important center of commercial manuscript production in that period, though on the whole the workshops there took a rather conservative approach and preferred the “pure” Shāhnāma.\textsuperscript{23} Among the smaller number of illustrated Shāhnāma manuscripts produced in Qazvin or directly related to the Qazvin style are also some interpolated ones, but these early manuscripts with sizable interpolations are now known only through sales catalogues. The earliest one, copied in 976 (1569) by “Abd al-Vahhab,\textsuperscript{24} is described as a compendium of epics including parts of the Shāhnāma, the Garshāspnāma, the Sāmnāma, the Barzināma, and the Bahmannāma.\textsuperscript{25} Another copy, dated 991 (1583), has illustrations in three different styles, but the majority of the miniatures are fine Qazvin work attributed to the painter “Ali Asghar by B.W. Robinson.\textsuperscript{26}

Among all the interpolated manuscripts with illustrations mentioned so far, this Shāhnāma of 1583 is the only one that comprises only the first part of Firdausi’s epic up to the death of Iskandar. Thus it belongs to the small group of truncated Shāhnāma manuscripts of which about a dozen illustrated copies are known.\textsuperscript{27} They always include long excerpts from post-Shāhnāma epics, often nearly the complete Bahmannāma. Through their