In 825 the Caliph al-Ma’mun fell gravely ill. His physicians, among them Yuhanna ibn Masawayh, were unable to cure him, and he was advised to summon Jibra’il ibn Bakhtishu’ ibn Jurjis, who “changed the treatment completely,” after which the illness diminished so rapidly that in three days the caliph was cured. Al-Ma’mun rewarded Ibn Bakhtishu’ with “a million dirhams and a thousand measures (kurr) of grain.”

Like Yuhanna ibn Masawayh, Jibra’il ibn Bakhtishu’ was a Nestorian, and despite the contrast in their approaches to this particular case, both had received their training at the famous School of Medicine at Jundishapur. In fact, Jibra’il ibn Bakhtishu’ belonged to an illustrious dynasty of doctors several generations of which were associated with the School, and he was by no means the only one to serve an Abbasid caliph, having been preceded by his grandfather Jurjis ibn Jibra’il (d. ca. 771), who was personal physician to al-Mansur (r. 754–75). Of the later members of the family, ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Jibra’il may be singled out for his intellectual accomplishments as much as his skill as a physician, and it is with the textual tradition related to one manuscript of his works, together with its attendant miniatures, that we are here concerned.

Ibn Abi Usaybi’a (ca. 1203–1269) provides us with the following biographical notice:  

Abu Sa’id ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Jibra’il ibn ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu’ ibn Jibra’il ibn Bakhtishu’ ibn Jurjis ibn Jibra’il. He was a distinguished physician, renowned for the practice of medicine, skilled in its principles and branches, and one of the most prominent figures among those in this profession. He was also very knowledgeable in Christian science and its schools. He wrote several books on the art of medicine. He lived at Mayyafariqin. He was a contemporary of Ibn Butlan and very close to him: indeed, there was a great friendship between them. ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Jibra’il died sometime during the 450s [1058s].

There follows a list of nine works written by ‘Ubayd Allah—who is usually known simply as Ibn Bakhtishu’—among which we may note a Kitāb tabā’i’ al-hayawān wa-khawāṣṣihā wa-ma‘nāfī’ a’dā’ihā (“Book of the Characteristics of Animals and Their Properties and the Usefulness of Their Organs”) written for the Amir Nasir al-Dawla.

Although other Nestorian medical centers existed, most were influenced by Jundishapur, particularly in the organization and administration of hospitals, and the important hospital (bimāristān) founded by Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad was also designed and staffed by Jundishapur physicians. Medicine itself still remained within the dominant Greek-derived Galenic tradition, but it is possible to detect at Jundishapur the beginnings of a shift, first articulated in another treatise by Ibn Bakhtishu’, the Risāla fī al-tibb wa-al-ahdāth al-nafsāniyya (“Treatise on Medicine and Psychological Phenomena”), towards a more empirically based approach. The Risāla argues against tutelage to philosophy of medicine and can be considered the earliest work in which an independent status is claimed for it, on the grounds that philosophical theory is incapable of dealing with medical questions. But Galenic orthodoxy was never seriously challenged, forming as it did the basis for the authoritative works of Ibn Bakhtishu’s celebrated contemporaries Ibn Sina (d. 1037), the influence of whose Qānūn fī al-tibb can hardly be overestimated, and Ibn Ridwan (998–ca.1067–68), the great physician who lived in Cairo. Considered a follower of the school of Alexandria, Ibn Ridwan was the author of the famous Kitāb daf madarr al-abdān and was in dispute with the Iraqi physician Ibn Butlan, who as we have seen was a friend of Ibn Bakhtishu’.

Nevertheless, the likelihood that the medical expertise and the particular approach of the Jundishapur School as represented by Ibn Bakhtishu’ were to remain influential, at least in Iraq, is suggested not only by...
the textual tradition to which his name is attached but also by the continuing importance of Christian physicians at the caliphal court in Baghdad. The ca. 1220 Kitāb nāʿt al-hayawan (henceforth Nāʿt), the earliest surviving bestiary containing material derived from Ibn Bakhtishu’, was produced during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah (r. 1180–1225), under whom the most celebrated physician, and the caliph’s favorite, was the archdeacon Mari Abu al-Khayr ibn Hibat Allah ‘Abd al-Baqa’ ibn Ibrahim al-Mu’ammal, of the al-Masihi family. After him other members of the al-Masihi family also served al-Nasir and ran the famous al-ʿAdudi hospital in Baghdad. The influence of Ibn Bakhtishu’’s medical works could still be felt at this time, and it may be conjectured that the Nāʿt could well have been compiled and illustrated precisely at the instigation of such learned Christian families, especially given that the cultural environment in which it was produced was one that encouraged the production of such scientific, medical texts in the scriptoria of Mesopotamian and, in particular, North Jaziran monasteries.

SCHOLARLY APPROACHES

Despite their importance for the history of Arab and early Persian painting, the illustrated Ibn Bakhtishu’ manuscripts have hitherto only barely caught the attention of historians of art. The reason may be sought straightforwardly within the fundamentally Eurocentric bias of the methodologies of art history as hitherto applied to Islamic art. This is not to say that no adequate methodological approaches exist; one might cite, in particular, the research on the Western medieval bestiary tradition fostered by the Warburg Institute, which integrates the study of iconography within a wider examination of textual transmission. But traditional scholarship on early Islamic miniature painting has been dominated by different approaches: either the miniatures have been regarded as subservient to the text they illustrate, or they have been brought to the foreground and studied in isolation from the surrounding text.

In this latter case, attention has been focused especially on late miniatures and, in particular, on Persian and Indian examples. As such paintings often illustrate literary subjects, scholars have certainly attended to their narrative content, but the Eurocentric search for masterpieces has still resulted in a concentration on content at the expense of context and a disregard of the function of paintings within an integrated, text-based series.

As Charyar Adle has pointed out, the interest of specialists has been mainly in “aesthetic effect” rather than in the causes of this effect. This tendency has been further reinforced by what might be termed an evolutionary approach, in which a selected spread of isolated pictures is arranged chronologically to give an idea of stylistic development. One of the unfortunate consequences of this approach is its influence on dealers and collectors, with the result that many manuscripts have been mutilated, their miniatures taken out and sold as separate items. As a result, miniatures from the same manuscript are now often dispersed in public and private collections all over the world, thus confronting the art historian with problems that are sometimes insurmountable and at best require painstaking and time-consuming study. This is true not only for “masterpieces” of Persian painting such as the so-called Demotte and Houghton Šāhnaḥmas, but also for certain earlier scientific Arab manuscripts, such as the 1224 Dioscorides.

The category of illustrated scientific manuscripts into which the Ibn Bakhtishu’ bestiaries fall has thus been triply disadvantaged. Not regarded as “masterpieces,” their miniatures have been largely neglected, so that their pictorial conventions are still insufficiently understood and appreciated; the crucial and intimate relationship between miniatures and text has not been taken into consideration, let alone adequately studied; and in cases where a manuscript has been dismembered and its miniatures dispersed, the possibility of such essential study has been severely inhibited. It should be further underscored that a significant aspect of scientific works is the occurrence of their miniatures in thematically related groups. Each one has a particular function within the group, and the failure to study it not only as an individual entity but also as a member of a complex series may be seen as a further form of neglect.

Even if we now have a rather better understanding of later Persian painting because it has been the object of considerable scholarly attention, it remains the case that painting from the early periods has been relatively neglected. Topics requiring further investigation include the nature of its relationship with earlier Arab painting, concerning which one may query the commonly implied assumption that early Persian painting somehow represents an evolutionary step. In fact, what survives of early Persian painting exhibits