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PERSIAN HEROES OR TIMURID PRINCES:
THE CASE OF AN ILLUSTRATED
MANUSCRIPT OF THE TABAQAT-I NASIRI

Abstract: The paper deals with a particular illustrated manuscript of the Tabaqat-i Nasiri in which scenes of Persian heroes are also depicted and illuminated. Analyzing this manuscript, but also the codicological tradition of the Prince Baysunghur era and various other manuscripts, the author raises the question whether in reality the author of these illustrations had in mind Persian princes when he depicted characters of epic heroes.

Key words: Prince Baysunghur, Tabaqat-i Nasiri, Persian manuscripts, Persian heroes

INTRODUCTION

The Nasirean Generations (Tabaqat-i Nasiri), a history of dynasties that ruled Iran and India, was composed by Minhaj b. Siraj Muhammad Juzjani in the tabaqat genre in 658/1260. The book contains 23 chapters, each in one tabaqta (section), beginning with the history of the prophets (tabaqta-yi anbiya) from Adam to Muhammad, a short account of the caliphs, the history of pre-Islamic Persian kings and the history of Yemen, as well as the dynasties that ruled in Iran and Central Asia during the Islamic period up to the time of the author in the Ilkhanid period.

Juzjani was born in Ghur (today’s central Afghanistan) in 589/1193 and died in Delhi in the second half of the 13th century. Iqtidar Siddiqui, who has studied the Tabaqat-i Nasiri and its author, observed that Juzjani was a “profound scholar of religious sciences, a statesman, well-versed in the arts of diplomacy and expert in intricate political

1 The term tabaqta is more normally applied to a biographical work, with the meaning of ‘generation.’ There is a very full account of Juzjani’s life and his Tabaqat by Siddiqui, I. H. (2010) Indo-Persian Historiography up to the Thirteenth Century, Delhi: Primus Books, pp. 93–157.
manoeuvre”. He wrote the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* in his retirement and dedicated it to Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah, son of Ilutmish, Sultan of Delhi. Juzjani names as his sources the same chronicles that were sources for the *Shahnama*, saying he regards the information provided by those sources as dubious and problematic compared with what he will retell of history as illuminated by the pure light of Islam. One of the world’s longest epics (around 50,000 couplets), the *Shahnama* was composed by the Persian poet Abu’l-Qasim Firdausi between c. 977 and c. 1010, and is considered the national epic of Greater Iran.

A copy of the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* was copied in Herat for the Timurid bibliophile prince Baysunghur Sultan (1397–1433), who is considered one of the greatest patrons of manuscript production in the history of Persian art. He was the grandson of Timur (Tamerlane) and heir apparent to the throne of his father, Shahrurkh, who had united eastern and western Iran under his rule. Baysunghur’s royal workshop and library was located in a beautiful garden (*Bagh-i Safid*) in the Timurid capital, Herat. This exquisite copy, housed in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek (Petermann I 386), is the earliest illustrated manuscript associated with his celebrated library, and as Thomas Lentz observes, “it is decidedly a royal product in terms of both quality and execution of the text and its decorations”.

David Roxburgh further suggests that the narrative history of exemplary figures in this work was designed to provide models and incentives to the young prince. According to the colophon (on which more below), it was copied to educate the prince and prepare him for discussions in erudite courtly company. This education was to cover the sequence of dynasties to which he was heir.

In this imperial, edificatory context, the illustrations of this manuscript are of utmost significance, which I will analyse after providing a brief description of the physical and codicological traits of the work. It is bound in a modern European binding of dark brown leather covering the pasteboards and doublures. The cover does not have any decoration except for simple rectangular borders with minimal tooling. The edges and corners are worn and decayed. The codex contains 155 folios of light ochre coloured paper of lower quality than would become the norm for Baysunghuri papers later. The text is written in a beautiful *naskh* script and the rubrics are mostly in *riqa*’ in outlined

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4 Siddiqui, *op. cit.*, 93.
5 Bosworth C. E, *Menhāj-e Serāj*.
gold. It has been heavily damaged and poorly restored. Almost all the folios have been re-margined and remounted; only a few pages have survived with catchwords. The top corners of the folios have been damaged by water and damp, which has affected the colours in the illuminations and washed them out. The illuminations are in blue and gold with tiny floral patterns of the so-called Shirazi style and the borders are adorned with knotted chains in gold (fig. 1). The palette includes lapis lazuli, crimson red, sky blue and pink. The folios are ruled in gold outlined in black with an outer line in blue. The text is also adorned with numerous genealogical charts rich in circular elements.10

Fig. 1. The illuminated. Ťabaqāt-i Nāṣirī (814/1411). Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Petermann I 386, ff. 1v–2r. frontispiece

Illustrating Persian Kings


The manuscript contains two illustrations on folios 27r and 54v, both measuring 113 × 13 mm. The first depicts the moment from the *Shahnama* in the narrative of Iskandar and Dara, when Iskandar asks the dying Dara for his last wishes (fig. 2). Two horses in the middle of the scene confront each other, which serves to emphasise the horizontal line of Dara's body prone on the battleground. His abandoned sword next to his corpse provides another horizontal element. Iskandar is kneeling by his dying body holding Dara's head on his lap. The motionless horses and figures convey a pause in time with a profound sense of peace. Dara dies calm in the knowledge that Iskandar promised to protect his family and respect his people's faith.

![Fig. 2. Iskandar and Dara. *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* (814/1411–12). Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Petermann I 386, f. 27r.](image)

11 The illustrations are reproduced in a catalogue by Stchoukine et al., op. cit, tafel 13, no. 2. This illustration is identified only as 'a royal audience'. See also Pope, A. U. (1938) *A Survey of Persian art, from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, ed. P. Ackerman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 5 pls. 941 & 943. Lentz refers to these two plates as examples of Shirazi illuminations. Lentz, op. cit, p. 181, n. 4.

12 Dara in the *Shahnama* is believed to be the same historical figure as Darius III (r. 336–330 BC), the last Achaemenid ruler.
The painting includes aesthetic elements found in earlier paintings from Shiraz, such as the high horizon, golden sky and sparse foliage. The composition has left-right symmetry: the two symmetrically opposed horses differ only in their colouring and saddle decoration, while the umbrella on the right above Iskandar’s horse is balanced on the left by a diagonal flagpole bearing a flag fluttering above Dara’s horse.

The second illustration (folio 54v) depicts the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar (r. 1097–1118) on the throne with three standing figures on the right and two on the left, one of whom is seated on a chair, appearing to be a prince (fig. 3). Lentz states that “the relationship between image and text also remains old-fashioned, the paintings solidly bracketed and with no penetration by the text into the image, a situation which may however be due more to the conservative nature of painting done for the historical manuscripts.”\(^\text{13}\) However, the figures are identifiable from the text directly below the image.\(^\text{14}\) If the imagery was meant to follow the text closely, it would seem that the three men on the right are Sanjar’s sons: Muḥammad, Yuzbak and Ihsan; the figure on the far left is Sanjar’s slave, Altakin, to whom he granted Arran, Iraq and Azarbaijan; and the seated prince with a crown in the foreground would be Sunqur, whom Sultan Sanjar appointed atabeg governor of Fars. This would provide a pleasing visual pun to be deciphered by the intended recipient (Prince Bay-Sunqur) as he read the text below the image.\(^\text{15}\)

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13 Lentz, op. cit., p. 70.
14 The text is found in Minhāj Sirāj, op. cit., p. 257.
15 The predominant spelling of Baysunghur’s name in Persian sources is Baysunqur.
A dedication note on the final folio (f. 155v) connects the manuscript to the Prince Baysunghur (fig. 4). According to the scribe, he completed copying the book of *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* on the history of previous kings and rulers on Monday, 15 Rajab 814/2 November 1411, and it was produced only for the prince to study and to use in courtly discussions with scholars of Baysunghur’s circle. He signed his name as Ahmad b. Mas’ud from Khorasan (his nisba is illegible).

Fig. 4. Colophon. *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* (814/1411–12). Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Petermann I 386, f. 155v.

The place the manuscript was transcribed is not mentioned in the colophon or elsewhere in the manuscript, yet in many studies it has been stated without evidence that

16 The month is illegible but based on the adjectives, it is very likely Rajab.
it was copied in Herat.\textsuperscript{17} The illuminations are considered by both Thomas Lentz and Elaine Wright to be in the Shirazi style and the illustrations, as Ivan Stchoukine correctly stated, manifest Muzaffarid influence and are similar to works executed in Shiraz.\textsuperscript{18} Barbara Brend argues that the forward set of the faces in the illustrations of this manuscript "contains hints at a style of Shiraz, and this agrees with the 'soft leaf' or 'floral' illumination of the frontispiece". She continues: "the style is not Muzaffarid at its mannered extreme but shares the feature of the forward face".\textsuperscript{19} It is thus highly likely that the manuscript was produced in Shiraz rather than Herat.

One possible reason that some scholars have assumed it was produced in Herat seems to have been the identification of the scribe. The \textit{nisba} of Ahmad Mas'ud is illegible due to damage, but from what has remained we can speculate that it probably indicates 'al-Rumi'. Ahmadal-Rumi is recorded by Mustafa 'Ali and later by Habib Isfahani to have been one of the scribes employed in Baysunghur's library.\textsuperscript{20} This is mainly based on a well-known calligraphic exercise on a folio done by Baysunghur and other calligraphers and courtiers after a model line in \textit{riqa} attributed to Maulana Ahmad al-Rumi (Topkapi Palace Library, album H. 2152, f. 31v).\textsuperscript{21} In the same album (H. 2152, f. 10r) there is a calligraphic specimen signed by "Ahmad, the least of Baysunghur's staff", with no further information:

\begin{verbatim}
ملح ملح و مرجم و لیامت طلا مادا روغن سبیاب ناطلسیلا دابیلاب لوا دم
\end{verbatim}


\textsuperscript{18} The two illustrations contain Muzaffarid elements but more elaborately executed. Stchoukine provided further examples of Muzaffarid aesthetics in Stchoukine \textit{et al.} op. cit., p. 18. See for example the \textit{Shahnama}, 772/1371, H. 1511, Topkapi Palace Library, Istanbul (compare with the folio 276r: 'Khusrau Parviz enthroned'); and the \textit{Shahnama}, 796/1393–94, MS. Tarikh Farisi, no. 73, Dar al-Kutub, Cairo (compare with the folio 94r: 'Kay Khusrau reproaches Tus for his actions' and the folio 135v: 'The third combat: Guraza kills Siyamak by throwing him to the ground') (last accessed: 15. 8. 2017).


Lale Uluç states: “he was probably the same calligrapher who had signed his name as Ahmad al-Rumi in the exercise on H. 2152, f. 31v.” Ahmad Rumi seems to have been an accomplished calligrapher under Baysunghur; however, at the time this copy of the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* was being produced (814/1411), the library and atelier in Herat had yet to be established. Therefore, Ahmad Rumi’s whereabouts in 1411 are unknown and there is no evidence to confirm his presence in Herat rather than Shiraz. In the light of the Shirazi style of decorations, I consider it more likely that the codex was prepared by artists working in Shiraz, probably under Iskandar Sultan and created specifically as a gift for his cousin Baysunghur. Clues to support this hypothesis are found in the choice of subjects for illustration.

**DISCUSSION**

The *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, as noted, was copied for and dedicated to Baysunghur in 814/1411 to educate the young prince in the history of Iran and the sequence of dynasties from ancient times up to the Ilkhanids. The copy made for Baysunghur is a summary of the original book, enlivened by diagrams and charts and two illustrations, to be digestible for and attractive to the 14-year-old. The limited number of illustrations and the choice of scenes are therefore significant for deducing who commissioned the manuscript.

Among all the narratives and characters in this extensive work, only two are singled out for illustration: Alexander and Sanjar. The first scene is placed precisely at the beginning of the account of Iskandar, section 10 in *tabaqā* 5, and the second precisely at the beginning of the account of Sultan Sanjar, section 6 in *tabaqā* 12. One reason for the choice of scenes is surely the familiar concept of creating a ‘mirror for princes’ and emphasising the exemplary character of these two rulers. Iskandar promises the dying and defeated Dara that he will marry his daughter, protect his people and deal with his murderers. This depicts a just and moral ruler who promises his enemy to fulfil his last

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22 Qazi Ahmad Qumi’s account of an Ahmad Rumi in the *Gulistān-i Hunar* does not overlap with the time of Baysunghur, for it places him in the time of Oljeitu (r. 1304–1316). Qumi, Qāżi Ahmad (1383/2005). *Gulistān-i hunar*, ed. Suhayfī Khwānsārī A., Tehran, p. 23. For the English translation, see Minorsky, V. (1959)*Calligraphers and Painters*, Washington, D. C.: Freer Gallery of Art, p. 62. That is further supported by the date in the last manuscript Ahmad Rumi is known to have copied, 716 AH. See Qilīchkhānī, H. R. (1392/2014) *Darāmādī bar khushnivāsi-yi Īrānī*, Tehran, p 260, although he does not provide any details about the manuscript. There is another scribe named Ahmdb. Isma’il b. Muhammad Rumi, who copied a collection of treatises in *naskh* script (Ms. no. 1929, Tehran Melli Library) in 804/1401–2, but he cannot be the same as Ahmdb. Mas’ud. A comparison with the hand of the *Tabaqat* shows dramatic discrepancies between the two. Sheila Blair speaks of Ahmad Rumi as “the Timurid court calligrapher”, when referring to the model for the calligraphic exercise of Bāysunghur and others (Blair, S. (2003). *Yaqūt and his followers*, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, 9:3, September. Saint Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the State Hermitage Museum, p. 41.

23 The text of this manuscript is not identical to that in Ḥabibi’s edition. The story of Dara and Iskandar comes in *Minhāj Sirāj*, op. cit., 147–48, and Sultan Sanjar in p. 257.
wishes while holding his head on his lap. I have already mentioned the aesthetic appeal to peace in this treatment.

Juzjani’s treatment of Sanjar is extensive. As Siddiqui states, the chronicler “appears to have been in a hurry to link the narrative with the history of the reign of Sultan Sanjar, the last great sultan of his dynasty who revived the grandeur of the Saljuq Sultanate”. Juzjani emphasises Sultan Sanjar’s virtues as a ruler, such as his generosity and forgiving nature, as well as his success in battle. “His reign ushered in a period of peace and prosperity and people appear to have lived a life of contentment”. The author “describes Sultan Sanjar as a great ruler, possessed of excellent qualities of head and heart. A patron of learning and the learned, the sultan gathered a large number of scholars and showed an interest in poetry”. The commissioner of the manuscript redoubled the emphasis on Sanjar’s virtues by choosing Sanjar enthroned as the subject for the second of only two illustrations. As we know, this is not a commonly pictured subject concerning Sultan Sanjar: the scene depicted most often is ‘Sultan Sanjar and the old woman’.

A further significant reason for depicting these two scenes becomes apparent when we consider the interaction between text and image. One scene depicts the virtuous king, Iskandar, and the other pointedly illustrates a scene of Juzjani’s history – one which also contains Prince Sunqur, who shared the name of the manuscript’s recipient, Baysunghur. Could this mean that it was a gift from Baysunghur’s cousin, Iskandar Sultan, the other famed Timurid bibliophile and patron of the book arts, who ruled in Shiraz? The fact that Prince Sunqur is shown in the vicinity of Sultan Sanjar, here an archetype of just kingship, might be taken to reflect Baysunghur’s position vis-à-vis his father Shahrukh, particularly since the choice to depict only Sunqur at court in the section where his rule in Fars is described by Juzjani would have been unrelated to the situation of a teenage prince while his father was in power. We can therefore speculate that the Tabaqat-i Nasiri was a gift from Iskandar Sultan in Shiraz to his cousin and the heir apparent to Shahrukh’s throne in Herat. It likewise bears remembering that a few years after this manuscript was completed, and very probably gifted, Shahrukh defeated Iskandar Sultan and took control of his grand library and artists, some of whom were transferred to Herat to serve in the atelier of Prince Baysunghur. Ahmad Rumi could well have been among those artists.

24 Siddiqui, op. cit., 111.
25 Ibid., p. 113.
26 Ibid.
27 One other instance of the illustration of ‘Sanjar enthroned’ is found on folio 142r of the Jamiʿ al-Tavarikh of Rashid al-Din (d. 1318), Or. Ms 20, Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library, Edinburgh. It is accessible on the website: https://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/UoEsha~4~4~64742~103064?page=27 (last accessed: 10. 5. 2021).
28 The account of Sunqur himself in the manuscript is only three lines, in folios 57v–58r.
This observation is pertinent to Brend’s recent suggestion that “the manuscript was some twenty to thirty years old when presented to the prince.” She argues this on the basis of the illustrations, concluding that “the dating of 1411 is difficult to reconcile with its style”. The implication for such a conclusion is that the colophon was added later. It is not inconceivable that the colophon is not original, since there is damage at the bottom of the folio and the rulings are retouched. There is no way to compare the hands, because the scripts of the colophon and the text are different. But even if the colophon were a later addition to a manuscript that was produced 20–30 years earlier, how could one explain the extraordinary relevance of the only two paintings to the eventual donor and recipient of the gift? We can be sure that the paintings are contemporary with the text, as they are positioned in the appropriate places, at the beginning of the relevant narratives. I have verified that space was dedicated to the scenes from the outset and there is no missing text before and after the illustrations.

If we accept the hypothesis that the manuscript was indeed commissioned by Iskandar Sultan, it remains a conundrum why the illustrations should be somewhat distant from the style of other productions from his atelier, such as the two well-known anthologies in the British Library (Add. 27261) and in the Gulbenkian Museum (L.A.161); some elements seem rather old-fashioned, recalling the illustrations of earlier decades, mainly Muzaffarid. Elaine Wright, however, states that the Muzaffarid style of painting “never fell into disuse”, thus challenging the idea that this style was revived only after the fall of Iskandar Sultan. She argues that paintings made for Iskandar’s incomplete anthology dated 816/1413–14, Isfahan (Topkapi Palace Library, B. 411, f. 161v), represent “the so-called basic Shirazi mode of painting”. The same principle could well be relevant to the question of the ‘archaic’ paintings of the Tabaqat-i Nasiri. In addition, a similar style of painting is found in an undated manuscript of the Khamsa of Nizami with 24 paintings, currently preserved in the Bryn Mawr College Library in Pennsylvania (Ms. BV 51). Yael Rice has discussed the manuscript and its illustrations comprehensively, arguing that the ‘archaic’ or ‘early’ style of the Bryn Mawr Khamsa could well have been still in use at the time of Iskandar Sultan and even after his execution in 1415.

CONCLUSION

The Tabaqat-i Nasiri dated 814/1411 was produced for the teenage Prince Baysunghur to educate him about the history and lineage of the rulers he was positioned to inherit. However, he died at the age of 35, and never ascended the throne. The only two

29 Gonnella et al., op. cit., p. 317.
illustrations of the manuscript, depicting Persian heroes, kings and princes, are selected carefully in a way that the protagonists associate with homonymous princes in the house of Timur: one shows Iskandar and the other Prince Sunqur, presenting Iskandar Sultan and Prince Baysunghur as their respective Timurid avatars. Therefore, it is possible to speculate that Prince Baysunghur received the manuscript as a gift from his cousin a few years before Iskandar was defeated and executed by Baysunghur’s father, Shahrukh, who transferred Iskandar’s cultural legacy to Herat wholesale, library treasures and book artists alike. In 1420, five years after his cousin’s death, Baysunghur established his own celebrated royal library, thereby following the model of Iskandar Sultan in patronising the arts and artists.

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ПЕРСИЈСКИ ЈУНАЦИ ИЛИ ТИМУРИДСКИ ПРИНЧЕВИ: СЛУЧАЈ ИЛСТУРОВАЊА РУКОПИСА TABAQAT-I NASIRI

Сажетак: Tabaqat-i Nasiri, односно Генерације Насирја, дело је јерсијско јунака Минхаџ ал-Сираџа Џузџанија из 13. века. Јеган од рукојиша ово дела датирани је у 814/1411. године и рађен је за младог ћимирудског јунака Бајсунгура. Намерата је да уједно илустрава и подучава јунаке, краљеве и принчеве. Ови украси рукојиша имају јасну намену, са својим дактилологијским и историјским нотама, да се у јерсијском језику сматрају драгоцељним. Отворено пропаганда је да се рукојишта узимају у обзир и врло важан је као носилац историјског и културног наслеђа. Ово дело је уперено у везу са историјским догађајима који су се највише утицали на развој и културу овог дела. Овај рукопис је увек оставао остатака и утицаја на архитектуру, уметност и културу овог временино града. Ово дело је илустровано врло добро на јоклону и овај рукојишта су и изузетно важни за разумевање и изучавање овог времена и овог дела.
Његов отац Шахрух преселио је Искандарову библиотеку, као и илустрације и илустрације књига у Херат. Конечно, принц Бајсунур 1420. године основао је своју чуvenu краљевску библиотеку, упевани се на своје постарање, султан Искандара, као мецен и захваљујући чувеним уметницима и уметностима.

Кључне речи: Tabaqat-i Nasiri, принц Бајсунур, персијски јунаци, персијски манускрипти