FERDOWSI'S SHĀHNĀMA

MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by
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and
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The Production of Mughal Shāhnāmas
Imperial, Sub-Imperial, and Provincial Manuscripts

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In keeping with the Persianate nature of courtly culture in India during the Mughal era, familiarity with the canon of classical Persian literature was a standard feature of the education of princes and noblemen. Their reading lists would have included classics such as the dīvāns of the poets Anvari (d. 1189) and Hāfiz (d. 1379), the khamsas of Nizāmī (d. ca. 1209) and Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325), the various masnavīs of Jāmī (d. 1492) and, of course, Firdawsi’s (d. 1020) Shāhnāma, completed in CE 1010. While selections from most of these works were read, copied, and imitated chiefly for their literary and artistic value, the Shāhnāma is believed to have held a symbolic significance in the life of Persianate courts. The reason why this epic achieved this lofty status is explained by Charles Melville: “A consequence of the Shāhnāma’s preoccupation with kingship and legitimacy is a perception of the political relevance of the work to later rulers, who in turn sought to exploit it as propaganda for their own dynastic aspirations.”¹ Not all courts and dynastic houses, especially in Persianate India, may have held the same attitude towards this text. The Mughals, for instance, emphasized their connections with their Timurid Turko-Iranian past, of which the Shāhnāma was a part, on the one hand, and sought to integrate themselves into Indian culture by patronizing translations of Sanskrit literary works on the other. Thus, the position of the Shāhnāma among the Mughals is a complex subject that cannot be treated in a monolithic fashion. In order to address the problem of Mughal Shāhnāmas, instead of focusing solely on imperial copies of the epic it is necessary to study the entire spectrum of Mughal illustrated manuscripts of the text.

Som Prakash Verma has noted that “some of the Persian favorites that were repeatedly illustrated in Central Asia and Western Asia find little place in the imperial Mughal atelier. A case in point is the Shāhnāma of Firdawsi, of which no illustrated manuscript from the Imperial Mughal school is

¹ Melville 2006, xxii.
known." Whether entirely true or not, there was an evident lack of imperial attention to Firdawsī’s work during the early Mughal age, while the same period witnessed a proliferation of so-called sub-imperial or popular copies of the epic. The term “popular Mughal art,” coined by Pramod Chandra “to denote the breadth of its class of patrons and its derivative relationship to imperial Mughal painting,” is the most useful one for classifying the many non-imperial Mughal Shāhnāmas. According to John Seyller, popular Mughal painting “consists primarily of illustrated manuscripts of the classics of Persian literature;” thus the appropriateness of this term for the Shāhnāma. Other terms such as “provincial Mughal” and “sub-imperial Mughal” are also in use but can be problematic due to the overlap between the two categories. The latter is used for works that are “firmly or plausibly associated with members of the Mughal nobility,” but such patrons could also have been located in the provinces and not necessarily in the imperial capitals of Agra, Delhi or Lahore.

Early Mughal Period

Illustrated copies of the Shāhnāma appeared in India from at least the fifteenth century, if not earlier, although only a few folios of such works have been recorded. According to Marianna Shreve Simpson, “Indian admiration for the Shāh-nāma remained strong during the Mughal period, particularly among the dynasty’s early rulers.” The Shāhnāma produced for the Timurid prince Muhammad Jūkī in ca. 1444 was a prized Mughal copy and bears the ownership seals of five emperors, including those of Bābur (r. 1526-30), who originally brought the manuscript from Herat to India, Shāh Jahān (r. 1628-58), whose hand-written note about the manuscript entering the royal library on the day of his accession to the throne is included, all the way to ‘Ālamgir (r. 1658-1707) (Figure 1). Such books, therefore, were an important component of Mughal pride: “Th[e] treasure trove of Timurid books, like

5. The term “provincial Mughal” was first used by Barrett and Gray 1963, while “sub-imperial Mughal” was coined by Archer 1960; Seyller 1999, 24; footnotes 19-20, 40.
6. For an argument for illustrated Shāhnāmas appearing in India beginning in the first half of the fourteenth century, see Robinson 1983, 280-81; for a discussion of a possible Indian provenance of the so-called Gutman Shāhnāma, see Świetochowski 1994, 80; also see Brac de la Perrière 2008.
7. Simpson 2012.
Figure 1. Jāḫī Shāhnāma, RAS Persian MS 239, f. 536b. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, London.
crown jewels, were perceived as part of the ruling elites' imperial charisma: symbols of current role and reminders of a fabled past.” Notwithstanding the paucity of newly produced imperial Shāhnāmas, there is sufficient evidence that several members of the Mughal royal family and nobility owned copies produced in Iran.10

In addition, there are a few examples of Mughal gift-giving that involved the Shāhnāma. In his memoirs, Jahāngīr writes that in 1622, “I viewed the Shāhnāma [of Firdawsi] and a khamsa of Shaykh Niẓāmī illustrated by master painters, along with other presents, sent by Mustafā Khān, governor of Thatta, as an offering.”11 Another such gift is a large, illustrated Shāhnāma manuscript that was personally presented to the Emperor Shāh Jahān by ‘Ali Mardān Khān, a Safavid nobleman, who defected to the Mughals in 1637 after their victory over Qandahar and who was later governor of Kabul and Kashmir.12 A Shāhnāma from the city of Shiraz in Fars province was perhaps gifted to Shāh Jahān and then to Prince Murād; the latter owned it by 1646 at the latest, and subsequently it was in the possession of one of ‘Alamgīr’s officials.13 From all this we may surmise that there must have been scores of such Shāhnāma manuscripts in circulation all over the pre-modern Persianate world.14

As for the actual patronage and production of Shāhnāma manuscripts in early Mughal India, it has been suggested that the Timurid treasure known today as the Muhammad Jūkī Shāhnāma may have inspired the third Mughal emperor, Akbar (r. 1556-1605), to commission his own copy of the Shāhnāma in 1582, as a way of connecting with “past royal glory and asserting his authority and rule.”15 Akbar’s court historian ‘Abd al-Qādir Badā‘ūnī does record the production of a copy of the Persian epic in the early years of Akbar’s reign, although he does not specify whether this was an illustrated copy. This supposedly lost (or perhaps still to be located) copy of the Shāhnāma has long intrigued modern scholars and has led some to propose at least five dispersed paintings as being of Akbari provenance. These are introduced briefly in an appendix in the context of whether they necessar-

10. One such work is described by Stanley 2004, 85-87.
11. Jahāngīr, Jahāngirnāma, 392. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
12. This manuscript is in the Khuda Bakhsh Library, Patna, and is described by Marshall 1985, no 472, 147.
13. “It seems likely that the Shāhnāma was confiscated by ‘Alamgīr when Murad bakhsh was arrested, since the first annotation by one of his officials was made on 15 October 1658,” Stanley 2004, 87.
14. There have been few studies of the movement of manuscripts during this period.
ily belonged to Firdawsi's version of the Shāhnāma or to an abridgment, or perhaps even an album.

Three of the five paintings in the appendix (1, 4, 5) do not have any text on them, while the other two (2, 3) have text panels that are either blank or appear to have been erased. The existence of prose text (3) challenges the common assumption that it was Firdawsi's work that was commissioned or read at Akbar's court. As discussed below, there were several other prose or mixed prose-verse abridgments in existence that these paintings could have illustrated. Of course, all of these five Akbar-period paintings may not have been part of the same manuscript, and it is also possible that they may have been in an album, rather than a manuscript, which included scenes from the Shāhnāma. But if there was an Akbari Shāhnāma, its disappearance raises all sorts of complicated questions about its fate. In any case, the production of an Akbari Shāhnāma must be seen in the larger literary context of the late sixteenth-century Mughal court, and it is possible that there were multiple copies of the Shāhnāma transcribed and illustrated in Akbar's time.

Mughal sources note Akbar's interest in having the Shāhnāma copied in the royal atelier. There is also a reference to his interest in this book of stories as purely a work of entertainment with didactic value. In the list of books that the Emperor Akbar was fond of listening to, the historian Abū al-Fazl includes the Shāhnāma among other Persian classics:

The Akhlāq-i Nāsirī [by Ṭūsī], the Kīmiyā-yi Saʿādat [by Ghazālī], the Qābānsāna, the letters of Sharaf Maneri, the Gulistan [by Saʿdī], the Ḥadiqa by Hakim Sanāʾi, the Mathnawi-i maʿnavi [by Rūmī], the Jān-i Jam [by Awḥādī], the Būstān [by Saʿdī], the Shāhnāma [by Firdawsi], the khamsa of Shaykh Nizāmī, the kalīliyyāts of [Amīr] Khusrāw and Mawlana Jāmī, the divāns of Khāqānī, Anvari, and other history books are read out to him.

Over time, as the Mughals expanded the frontiers of their empire and became more multicultural, Akbar's interest shifted to the Indian, i.e. Sanskrit, classics. Badaʿūnī provides the chronology and motivation for the

16. In a popular Mughal Shāhnāma dating from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, now in the Royal Asiatic Society (Codrington no. 241), there is a painting of Zāl and his father Sām in distinctive dress and head-dress; according to Digby 1979, "the iconology of the scene may contain a reference to the restoration of his son and heir Akbar to the emperor Humāyūn after the reconquest of Rābul in A.D. 1544," in which case, "the representation must surely derive from the missing, probably dispersed, Shāh-nāma illustrated for the imperial library of Akbar," 113.


large-scale projects of manuscript production and translation in the royal atelier; here he discusses the circumstances leading to the translation of the Mahābhārata:

When he [Akbar] had had the Shāhnāma and the tale of Amīr Hamza copied in seventeen volumes over fifteen years, with much gold spent in illuminating them, likewise he repeatedly heard the story of Abū Muslim, the jāmiʿ al-hikayāt, and others. He realized that most of these [works] were poetry and fiction, but since they were composed at an auspicious hour and their star was passing, they received great fame. Now he ordered Indian books, written by wise ascetics and which were all correct and decisive texts, being the axis of the religion, beliefs and worship of this group. It was thus written in the preface of those books, “Why should I not have them done in my name for they are novel and fresh, and they will produce fruits of felicity, both temporal and spiritual, and lead to undying pomp and glory and an abundance of children and wealth.”

Akbar’s atelier was occupied with the large-scale Hamzanāma project during the years 1558–72. Thus, according to Badāʿūnī’s narrative, the now-lost Shāhnāma must have been produced during the same years. It is not clear, of course, whether it was illustrated on the same grand scale as the Hamzanāma. The translation of the Sanskrit classics began a decade after the production of these manuscripts. The Mahābhārata was translated during the years 1582–84 with the participation of Naqīb Khān and the reluctant historian Badāʿūnī, and the imperial illustrated manuscript was executed in 1586. The translation and manuscript production of the Rāmāyana was begun in 1584 and finished in 1588–91, about which Badāʿūnī writes that this is “a superior composition to the Mahābhārata,” but that “it is clear that either these events are not true, and this is a mere tale and pure imagination, like the Shāhnāma, and the stories of Amīr Hamza, or else they must have happened in the time of the dominion of the beasts and the jīmns.”

Badāʿūnī’s attitude suggests that all literary works on the subject of epic and adventure were lumped together as fiction. Indeed, even those people who were favorably disposed towards one tradition or the other would have been aware that the Sanskrit and Persian epics shared elements in common. In comparing illustrations from manuscripts of epics from the two traditions, Mughal/Indo-Persian and Safavid/Iranian, one finds an almost identical

20. Detailed essays about this project can be found in Seyller 2002.
Figure 2. Rāma and Lakṣmana Confront the Demons Mārica and Subāhu. *Rāmāyana* of Valmiki, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1907.271.38b.
Figure 3. Rustam Carried by the Div Akván about to be Thrown into the Sea.
representation of demons, Indian rākshasas and Persian divs (Figures 2 & 3), indicating that some of the iconography of the separate traditions had fused together in the Mughal imagination. This was, of course, part of Akbar's program for a dialogue of religious communities that was executed at a literary and visual level.

Later Mughal Period

At the beginning of the emperor Jahāṅgīr's reign (r. 1605-27), when the prospects of large projects from his father's time had dried up, many artists from the imperial atelier found themselves working on a freelance basis or for provincial patrons. According to Asok Kumar Das, unemployed artists, "even entire families of artists, moved to the courts of the Mughal governors, generals and of other high-ranking officials." John Seyller suggests that the move away from the imperial workshop had begun earlier:

[W]hether for reasons of social fashion, conspicuous self-promotion, or sincere interest in literature and painting, some members of the Mughal nobility and merchant class set out to imitate imperial sponsorship of the arts, and began to collect and commission the same types of manuscripts produced in the imperial atelier.

From 1590 to 1620 imperial artists found themselves working for Mughal nobility in or outside the imperial capital. On the basis of Seyller's study of non-imperial paintings from this period, it seems "likely that these manuscripts were neither commissioned individually nor produced by a stable body of artists. They appear to be the perfunctory products of a commercial atelier, whose members were probably newly itinerant artists working in the vicinity of Agra." Thus, there is evidence for the production of non-imperial copies of the Shāhnāma, among other texts, from the late sixteenth century onwards, with their artists and owners having some connection to the Mughal court. Regional courts of local rulers or nobles, or Mughal princes and officials posted in the provinces, would have attracted such artists. Perhaps groups of people who were newly educated in Persianate learning in cities and town also commissioned manuscripts on a modest scale.

The case of a Shāhnāma (British Library Add. 5600) owned by the Mughal general and man of letters 'Abd al-Rahim Khān-i khānān is an example

23. For divs in Iranian culture and art, see Leoni 2008.
of a manuscript that started life in the imperial atelier and ended up being completed in a non-imperial setting (Figure 4). In 1613 it was presented by the emperor Jahangir to a certain Allahvardi Chelā, who in turn gave it to Khvāja Muhammad Rashid, who passed it on to the Khān-i khānān. In 1616 it was refurbished in the latter’s workshop and the over-painting of some of its images has been described by Seyller as “one of the most fascinating cases of the renovation of damaged or incomplete manuscripts in Mughal painting studios.” In addition to the over-painted pages, this manuscript includes newly executed paintings. The text was more important than the paintings in this case since the Khān-i khānān “was generally content to experience paintings through the mediation of literature, and displayed a relative indifference to the power of images in their own right.” Sanskrit classics, such as the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and the Rāgamanī, as well as Persian texts such as the Khamsa of Amir Khusraw and Hâfi‘ī’s Timūrnāma, were all illustrated in the Khān-i khānān’s workshop, showing the eclectic nature of the patron’s literary taste. A transition from imperial to sub-imperial, such as the British Library Shāhnāma reveals, would also naturally have resulted in the creation of provincial copies of Firdawsi’s poem as Mughal princes, governors, and other nobility posted in various provinces imitated the trends in the imperial capitals and used local artists and calligraphers.

Jahangir’s reign witnessed a turn towards everything Iranian, from the prevailing trends in Persian literature to the appointment of grandees at court. As a result, there must have been a serious interest in the Shāhnāma at the imperial level. Given their ornate gold margins, two Shāhnāma paintings dating from around 1610 were probably commissioned by Jahangir. While stylistically similar to sub-imperial compositions, the “lively and unusually colourful” character of these paintings, as, for example, Feridun striking down Zahhâk (Los Angeles County Museum of Art M. 78.9.5), executed by the artist Dhanrāj, who had previously worked on several Akbari manuscripts, makes them likely products of the imperial atelier at the “height of the fashion for Persian-influenced works” At the same time that

27. Seyller 1999, 264; also see Qureshi 2012 for a comparative study of a manuscript with later paintings from Akbar’s reign.
28. In addition to Seyller, also see Brend 2010, 226. Another instance of the retouching of an Akbari period sub-imperial Shāhnāma is described in Leach 1995, 670.
30. The reason for this change was chiefly owing to the political and cultural influence of the empress Nūr Jhānān, who was of Iranian origin.
31. Leach 1995, 581. According to Brend 2010, however, “No Shāhnāme is known to have been made for Jhāngir;” 53.
32. Leach 1995, 80.
33. Leach 1986, 78.
Figure 5. Rustam and the Akvān Div. CBL In 47.10. © The Trustees of The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.
such Persianate-style paintings were in vogue, there is also evidence for the existence of an Indian-oriented trend in *Shāhnāma* painting, as in the image of Akavān and Rustam (Chester Beatty Library In 47.10)\textsuperscript{34} (Figure 5). This striking and unique representation of Akavān dīv as an elephant continues the trend of blending Indian and Persian iconography in Akbari paintings and perfectly signifies the *Shāhnāma*’s principle value in Mughal society; as a book of tales that resonated with Indian stories drawn from Sanskrit literature.

**Shāhnāma Imitations, Abridgments and Prose Adaptations**

It is relevant here that imitations of Firdawsī’s epic were also produced by poets at Persianate courts in India, substituting the martial victories of contemporaneous figures for the exploits of traditional heroes.\textsuperscript{35} According to Badā’ūnī, a poet named Manzâr Sâmarqandî planned to compose one of the many pseudo-*Shāhnāmas*, i.e. a continuation or imitation of Firdawsī’s poem, and wrote several tales, including one on the battle between Sikandar Sūr and the Mughals. Apparently, the Mughal general and courtier Bayram Khān suggested some corrections on it to the poet, who in one night revised the poem of 300–400 couplets and in the morning recited it in an assembly.\textsuperscript{36} The interest in contemporary history especially appealed to the emperor Shāh Jahān, whose court poets produced at least three *Shāhnāma*-like epics to honor him, parts of which may have been read aloud in his presence. During Shāh Jahān’s reign, imperial energies were directed towards producing epics in which the hero was the emperor himself.\textsuperscript{37} These works, however, are only related in poetic form to the *Shāhnāma* and cannot be considered spinoffs of the original tales.

Several condensed versions of the *Shāhnāma*, in prose or mixed prose-verse, also were composed in pre-Mughal and Mughal India. These usually included stories from the mythological and heroic sections of the epic that were popular in India, but omitted the more obscure historical parts dealing with the Sasanians. The compilation of an early abridgment of the epic,

\textsuperscript{34} Leach 1995, 581. Another instance of such a cultural blending is the depiction of the early Iranian king Hūshang before a Hindu shrine with three yogis in a Deccani copy of an abridged *Shāhnāma*, Leach 1995, 904-905.

\textsuperscript{35} For the general phenomenon of epics inspired by the *Shāhnāma*, see Sharma 2003, 112-8.

\textsuperscript{36} Munâkhâb al-tawārikh, 3: 233.

\textsuperscript{37} Losty 1982, 85. Examples of such poems are Kalīm’s *Shahânsbâhnâma* and Qâdî’s *Zafarânmâh-yi Shâhjahânî*. These non-illustrated works have not been studied from a textual point of view.
called the *Ikhtiyārāt-i Shāhnāma*, was probably wrongly attributed to the late Ghaznavid poet Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān (d. 1121). During the early years of the Delhi Sultanate, the poet 'Awfī compiled the *javāmi' al-hikāyāt*, a compendium of stories from Islamic lore, including some from the *Shāhnāma*, for al-Junaydī, the vizier of Ilutmish (r. 1210-36). A fifteenth-century manuscript of this text, perhaps from Bidar (Deccan), survives today (British Library, Or. 11676), along with another abridgment in a seventeenth-century manuscript from Golconda in the Deccan (Chester Beatty Library, In 23). The *Intikhāb-i Shāhnāma* (New York Public Library, Spencer, Indo-Pers. Ms. 1) was copied in 1501 by Muhammad Mu'tabar Badakhshi in Jaunpur, a small sultanate that was annexed by the Mughals in 1559. The paintings in this manuscript were added later, although Barbara Schmitz suggests that the manuscript could be of a later date and points out the random order of the selections and the lack of correlation between text and image in ten of the miniatures.

Further regarding the Mughal renditions of Firdawsi's poetry into prose, Badā'ūnī writes that in CE 1595, "Mullā Taqī of Shus[h]tar joined, who considers himself to be the most learned of the learned, and by order [of the emperor] is engaged in rendering the *Shāhnāma* into prose." Of all the Indian abridgments of the Persian epic, the *Tārīkh-i dilgushā-yi Shamshīrkhānī*, dating from CE 1653 and written for the Mughal governor of Ghazni, Shamshīr Beg, is the best known and survives in multiple copies. Its author, Tavakkul Beg, writes in the introduction, "Both the reader and listener get bored reading and listening to the *Shāhnāma*, especially men of governance, who are always occupied with matters of the state and important affairs, have little time to read books." From this we may infer that there were all kinds of *Shāhnāma* texts in circulation in Mughal India, and that individual paintings did not necessarily originate with Firdawsi's text.

For the late Mughal period, too, there is scant information to gauge the imperial interest in Firdawsi's poem. Regarding a copy of the *Shāhnāma* made for the Emperor Shāh 'Alām II (r. 1759-1806), who ruled during a time of political and social upheaval, Linda York Leach describes its production

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40. Leach 1995, 904-905.
42. Mantakhab al-tavārīkh, 2: 283. Copies of this work have not been identified so far.
43. de Blois 1992, 153-5; also see Khan 2012 for more on this work and the fate of the *Shāhnāma* in later Mughal times.
44. Tavakkul Beg, *Tārīkh-i dilgushā*, 15; the original Persian is as follows: az khvāndan va shunād-i ān ẓārī va sāmī ra ināl dast dihād, khūsūsīn ahl-i hakāmat rā kih hamsīsh dar tadhīr-i ẓamīliḵat va muhām-i subādārī ishtīghāl darānd va fursat-i mutālī-yi cutub, kamtar rāy dihād.
as “a desperate pretence of status,” adding that the work “may have been produced in order to impress visitors to the court, some of whom may have been influential in reporting to the British.”45 A most unusual copy is a stylistically hybrid Shāhnāma, dating from 1695, that was commissioned by a Mughal official who was temporarily stationed in the Kangra hills.46

It would appear that the ultimate destiny of the Shāhnāma in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was as an export item that was produced by the dozen in Srinagar and Lahore, much like the handicrafts of Kashmir today, for domestic and international markets. The evidence for this may be gleaned from an unpublished work by William Moorcroft who, in the years 1819-25, made a survey of the crafts of Kashmir. Moorcroft noted that there were around 700 to 800 copyists preparing commissioned manuscripts. He wrote that “they transcribe the Quran, Firdausi’s Shāhnāma, and a very small number of other books that are the objects of a small but regular trade.” In Schmitz’s view the tastes of the book buyers in Lahore were “much more catholic.” The scribes in Lahore produced Qurans and Shāhnāmas in addition to scientific and technical works, as well as Persian literary works, including those translated from Indian languages.47 Thus, the process of producing popular Shāhnāmas that had begun when Akbari artists started working around the Mughal capital on a freelance basis continued in a new setting in the provinces of Kashmir and Punjab.

Conclusion

The Shāhnāma did not have the same cultural associations for various groups of non-Muslim Indians as the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata. In fact, and as discussed above, even Persianate Indian Muslims and Hindus often viewed it as “just” a book of stories. In Iranian lands the epic was more strongly connected to national identity than in Mughal India, although for obvious reasons the large contingent of Iranians and Central Asians at the court of the emperors Jahāngīr and Shāh Jahān would have been more attached to Firdausi’s text. Another group in India that would have a similar relationship to the work would have been Zoroastrian Parsis, but their contribution to the production of copies of the Shāhnāma is outside the Mughal cultural sphere.

In the end, what did the Shāhnāma signify for the Mughals? As Ebba Koch explains, “Confronted with the vastness and complexity of their empire and

45. Leach 1998, 155. The manuscript with 28 miniatures is described on 155-156; also see Brend 2012, 234-237.
46. Leach 1995, 1034-1042.
47. Lafont and Schmitz 2002, 98.
its heterogeneous traditions, the Mughals felt a greater need to measure and support their imperial authority with a carefully constructed image of rulers. Each emperor found his own means of translating this image into the arts, while building on the tradition of those who preceded him.”48 Thus, various texts had different symbolic valences for the Mughals and the wider literary culture of translation of Sanskrit epics and the complexities of readership and literary and artistic tastes in Persianate India must be taken into consideration while studying individual Shāhnāma manuscripts from the Mughal period.

Appendix

1. Rūdāba lets down her hair for Zāl to climb up (Figure 6). Keir Collection, London.

Skelton believes that this well-known painting, dated c. 1580, “formed part of a copy of the ... Shāhnāma made for the Emperor Akbar’s library.”49 The painting contains no text and the folio has been remounted at a later date and so lacks its original borders.


The quality of this painting relates to Akbar-period painting, although, as Skelton has observed, there is a discrepancy in size between this work and the one in the Keir Collection.50 Nonetheless, “this does not rule out the possibility that the two compositions formed part of the same manuscript.”51 A small text box at the lower left of the painting is blank.

3. Bahrām Gūr Kills Lions and Seizes the Crown (Figure 7). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14.648.52

Skelton notes that the painting’s text is “clearly not from the Shāhnāma but from a prose historical work” and questions its origin as from an Akbari Shāhnāma.53 The faint script in the text box, perhaps deliberately erased, is clearly prose, and so definitely not from a copy of Firdawsi’s text. The museum now identifies it as a scene from Bal’ami’s History of Tabarī. The painting, however, shares features of Akbar-period style.

48. Koch 2001, 162. Rizvi 2012 provides a comparative view of how the text was viewed and used by the Safavids in Iran.
51. Skelton 1976, 238.
53. Skelton 1976, 238.
Figure 6.  Rūdāba lets down her hair for Zāl to climb up. Keir Collection, London.

This painting has no text. Welch dates it to the time the emperor Humāyūn was in Kabul (1550-55) and suggests that it is the work of the Safavid artist Mīr Sayyīd ‘Alī.54


This painting comes from a Mughal album dated to the 1590s. According to Barbara Brend, “Possibly from a Shāhnāma for Akbar, the picture has experienced considerable repainting and patching, faces perhaps receiving attention before landscape.”55

54. Published in Welch 2004, 36. I would like to thank Dr. Laura E. Parodi for sharing her thoughts on the subject. She also dates this painting stylistically to Akbar’s atelier.

55. Melville and Brend 2010, no. 95, 222-223.