Visualization of Texts:
Scenes of Mourning in the Great Mongol Shāhnāma

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The so-called “Great Mongol Shāhnāma” is an illustrated manuscript attributable to Tabrīz (northwest Iran) in the 1330s during the Ilkhanid period. Only one-fourth of the original manuscript survives and its folios are currently dispersed among collections. To examine how the painters prepared their illustrations for this manuscript, this paper takes up the scenes of mourning, which was an uncommon subject for illustration. When the text and the image are closely examined together, it is clear that the painters followed only the text transcribed on the folios they were assigned to illustrate. They tried to visualize what was written in the text as much as possible, almost word by word, but had to compensate for some lack of information with contemporary funerary customs. The discrepancy between the text and image (i.e. exterior vs. interior setting) of the “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar” (Freer Gallery of Art, F1938.3), one of the most famous paintings from the manuscript, can be fully understood when this suggested procedure of creating illustrations is considered.

Keywords: Ilkhanid, Persian, manuscript, illustration, funerary

I. Introduction

The Shāhnāma of Firdawsī (ca. 934–ca. 1025) is a Persian epic dealing with the history of fifty generations of kings from the mythical beginning of Iran to the end of the historical Sasanian period (224–651). This massive composition with more than fifty thousand distiches was completed around 1010. Numerous manuscript copies of the Shāhnāma have been produced and a considerable number of them has been illustrated. While the oldest extant Shāhnāma manuscript is dated to 614/1217 (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Ms. Cl. III. 24), it does not contain illustrations. The earliest of the surviving illustrated manuscripts are dated as late as from the first half of the fourteenth century: one dated to 731/1330 in the Topkapı Palace Library (Hazine 1479) in Istanbul and another to 733/1333 in the Russian National Library (Dorn 329) in St. Petersburg. Both of them were produced under the Inju’ids, a local dynasty that ruled southern Iran (1303–57). There is also another group of early illustrated Shāhnāma manuscripts, which are missing their inscribed dates but can be attributed to the Ilkhanid period (1258–1353), when the Mongol Ilkhans ruled Iran and Iraq. The so-called “Great Mongol Shāhnāma” is not only among the earliest but also one of the most magnificent illustrated manuscripts to survive to this day. Although it is missing its colophon, the stylistic characteristics of its paintings and scripts point to the 1330s in Ilkhanid Iran and suggest that it was copied and illustrated most probably in Tabrīz (northwest Iran). The manuscript is luxe, with its sheer number of folios and paintings and a broad range of pigment colors including gold and silver; furthermore, the quality of artistic representation and composition speaks for its

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close association with the Ilkhanid court workshop.¹

The whereabouts of this manuscript until the nineteenth century is unknown.² When it reappeared at the Qajar (1796–1925) court in Tehran, it was already in a very bad state, with some folios restored with Russian paper (with a watermark dated to 1832) and some damaged paintings retouched in the Qajar painting style (Blair 2004; Bloom 2004). Then, the manuscript was taken out from Iran to Paris, where the art dealer Georges Demotte acquired it circa 1910. Demotte, who was unable to resell it as a whole, decided to break it up into folios, split the folios with both recto and verso paintings into two separate sheets, and then paste the loosened pages on irrelevant text folios so that he could sell individual folios. Presently 58 paintings (some pasted on text folios) and nine text folios are preserved in about twenty different collections around the world.³

The text frame of a regular folio measures 410 × 290 mm and generally contains 31 lines in six columns divided for hemistiches; thus on a page in a full text folio, 93 distiches (or 186 hemistiches) were transcribed. After the loss of a part of the manuscript, rebinding during the Qajar period, and the complicated alterations of the folios by Demotte, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the original state of the manuscript. With her detailed studies on the surviving folios, however, Sheila S. Blair reconstructs the original state as a two-volume manuscript with 180 to 200 illustrations in 36 quires, which amounted to about three hundred folios (Blair 2004). The frequency of illustrations is higher than any other folio, underscoring the unprecedented scale of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma manuscript in terms of illustrated episodes. Even in the entire history of Iranian art it was probably only second to the Safavid Shāhnāma manuscript for Shāh Ṭahmāsp (r. 1524–76) which originally contained 258 paintings.⁴

In the production of illustrated manuscripts in Iran, calligraphers transcribed the text first and then the painters added paintings in designated spaces left blank by the calligraphers. In the case of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma, the calligraphers often indicated what was to be illustrated by writing the titles of paintings in bold letters above the painting spaces. To meet the demand for such a great number of illustrations, the painters must have created original paintings of the myriad scenes without relying on existing models, if indeed, there were any. The aim of this paper is to clarify how the painters of this manuscript tried to visualize the text on their own.

For this purpose, I would like to use the images of mourning in the manuscript. The Great Mongol Shāhnāma includes as many as five mourning scenes in its present state although only one-fourth of the entire manuscript has survived. In the narrative of the Shāhnāma, the mourning scenes occur right after the dramatic scenes of heroes’ deaths, the latter lending themselves naturally as ideal subjects for illustration. Although in ordinary manuscripts, limited budgets

¹ Two personages have been suggested for its patron. The first, as proposed by Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair (1980, 54–55), is Ghiyāth al-Dīn (d. 1336), who was son of Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318) and became vizier to the ninth Ilkhan, Abū Saʿīd (r. 1316–35) in 1328. Abolala Soudavar (1996) and Robert Hillenbrand (2002, 158), however, consider Abū Saʿīd himself to be the patron rather than his vizier.

² Jonathan Bloom suggests that it was rediscovered by the Safavids in the early sixteenth century in Tabrīz (Bloom 2004, 25).

³ See Blair 1989; 2004 for the history of the manuscript in Europe. See Grabar and Blair 1980 for the list of all the surviving paintings (no. 16 was destroyed in 1937). Since the Grabar-Blair publication, the owners of some paintings have changed. For example, paintings previously in the Henri Vever Collection (nos. 7, 8, 10, 14, 32, 37, 42, and 43) have moved to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. See Lowry and Nemazee 1988.

⁴ For the Shāhnāma manuscript for Shāh Ṭahmāsp, see Canby 2014.
allowed only these more important scenes of death to be illustrated, the painters of this magnificent Great Mongol Shāhnāma were able to add the less exciting scenes of mourning.

I do not think that the mourning scenes were deliberately handpicked to express or add any particular sentiment, since they were also preceded by the death scenes in the surviving cases; instead I believe that an unusually large number of illustrations was requested by the patron for this special manuscript and that the mourning scenes were inserted merely to meet the extraordinary pace of illustration production. The painters must have created the illustrations by themselves because these mourning scenes were rarely painted and there must have been few models to consult.

None of the mourning scenes exhibits stereotyping or repetition; the illustrations are different from each other and seem to have been composed independently. Each of these minor scenes in the Shāhnāma cycle has been turned into a masterpiece of emotion and pathos in this manuscript. This paper will examine the painters’ efforts to create these scenes by comparing the painting details with the text description. I believe that these mourning scenes will show how the painters at the atelier of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma attempted to tell the story through images.

II. Mourning of Īraj
The sixth king of the Iranian Pīshdādī dynasty, Farīdūn, had three sons. He divided his kingdom into three for his sons to rule, but the two elder brothers were unhappy because the most important territories in Iran were given to their youngest brother Īraj. In the narrative, Īraj goes to soothe his brothers but is killed by them. This scene of Īraj’s death is painted in “Salm and Tūr Killing Īraj” (Kushtan-i Salm va Tūr Īraj rā) in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Pers. MS 111.3 (Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 6, fol. 11v of their reconstructed manuscript).

The succeeding mourning scene is shown in the partially damaged painting preserved in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. (S1986.101) and titled “Farīdūn Greeting Īraj and Seeing His Coffin” (Pažīra shudan-i Farīdūn Īraj rā va didan-i tābūt) (Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 7, fol. 12r) (Fig. 1). The text relates that Old Farīdūn waits for Īraj’s return with a stone-studded crown for him, wines, and musical instruments, only to find a messenger on camelback with a gold coffin in which Īraj’s head is kept. Sighting this, Farīdūn falls from his horse and is stricken by sorrow.

The painting is on a recto from a folio that originally had paintings on both sides; Demotte split the folio and pasted the page, without its last line of text, on the back of a text folio (Grabar and Blair 1980, 70). The page with the painting originally contained the text I:120:497–123:537 of Khāliqī-Muṭlaq’s edition (1987–2008) and I:200–203 of Warner’s translation (1905–25).

On the right hand of the painting, the messengers, all clad in dark costumes for mourning, have arrived. In the upper right, a person on camelback carries a wooden coffin with a gold front. On the left are Farīdūn and his courtiers; they are wearing colorful clothes to welcome Īraj’s return

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5 Grabar and Blair suggest that the theme of death and mourning was one of the conspicuous choices of subject matter in the Great Mongol Shāhnāma (Grabar and Blair 1980, 18).
6 See http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/card/ceillustration:-946911511 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016). See below for further discussion of this painting.
7 See http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=S1986.101 for the color plate (accessed August 31, 2016).
8 The upper remnants of the missing final line are visible underneath the extant penultimate line.
but are struck by the terrible news of Īraj’s death. Farīdūn is represented larger than the other figures; he has dropped the crown for Īraj and shows his sorrow by beating his chest with his fists; since he is not able to stand by himself, he is supported by one of his courtiers. Other male figures in front of Farīdūn have dropped their colorful headdresses. All the figures except the musicians twist their faces; even Farīdūn’s horse lowers his head as if it were mourning. It seems that the news has not yet reached the musicians on the left, who are standing still without emotion. The painter skillfully represents the moment when Farīdūn’s welcoming ceremony turns into a tragedy upon the arrival of Īraj’s coffin.

In the upper middle of the painting, a face with radiating rays is shown in the midst of a blue sky. It is similar to the representation of the sun depicted on Persian and Mesopotamian pottery and metalwork objects from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. Is this a depiction of the sun to indicate that the scene occurs during the daytime? The sun is rarely depicted in Persian manuscript illustrations but there are a few Ilkhanid examples; the Persian translation of a work of Ibn Bakhṭīshū, the Manāfī-i ḥayāvān from the end of the thirteenth century (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, M. 500) contains some paintings with the sun (Schmitz 1997, figs. 18 and 35). The Shāhnāma text does not specify the time of this event but Firdawsī comments on this episode as follows: “The heaven (sipīhr) turns above us in such a way to show his cheek first but then to withdraw it.” These verses would have appeared on the verso if the folio were intact (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1987–2008, I:123:539). The painter may have visualized the heaven’s face (cheek) like that of a sun here literally.

The painting on the verso of this folio was split from the recto, cut out from the page, and pasted onto another irrelevant text folio. It is “Farīdūn Going to Īraj’s Palace and Mourning” (Raftan-i Farīdūn dar kākh-i Īraj va ‘azāʾ dāshtan) now also in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (S1986.100; Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 8, fol. 12v) (Fig. 2). Considering the dimensions of the painting, the original page should have included almost the same number of distiches as it does presently, that is, 59 distiches of the text, which would cover the whole episode of the painting, starting with I:123:538 of Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1987–2008.

In this painting, Farīdūn goes to Īraj’s palace with his beloved son’s head. The sight of the empty throne and the beautiful garden with a pond overwhelms Farīdūn with sadness and he orders the rose garden to be torn down and the palace and garden to be set on fire. In the upper half of the painting Farīdūn and Īraj’s wives, all wearing dark clothes, are wailing over Īraj’s head in front of the throne. One wife wears a white transparent veil; another tears at her hair; the third has just appeared from the doorway to mourn. The fourth wife is stepping up the stairs to the doorway on the right without showing her face at all. This last wife could be thought of as following on the heels of the third wife; perhaps she too is rushing into the palace to mourn. This figure is also the spatial connection between the interior scene of mourning and the exterior scene of the destruction of the palace and garden. Although these two scenes are consecutive but naturally

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9 For example, see a mīnāʾī bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 57.36.4. See Carboni 1997, 20–21.
10 Literal translation by the author. Warner’s translation I:203 is: “The process of the turning sky above / Is, favouring first, to plunder in the event.”
11 See http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=S1986.100 for the color plate (accessed August 31, 2016).
could not happen at the same time, it appears that the painter wished to include as much content as possible in a single painting to visualize the text.

In the foreground of the lower half of the painting, a servant cuts down rose trees in the garden and another is trying to set them on fire with a torch. A pair of ducks swimming in the octagonal pool seems to be talking about what is going on and a white Persian cat in the lower left corner is looking back to see this unusual event. The abrupt change from ordinary life through deliberate destruction is well represented with such details of animals.

III. Mourning of Isfandiyār

In the stories of the Kayānī dynasty following the Pīshdādī, the hero Rustam is born into a warrior family and plays an active role fighting for and aiding the royal family of Iran. The fifth Kayānī king Gushtāsp promises his son Isfandiyār that he will abdicate his throne if Isfandiyār can chain Rustam and drag him before the throne. The prince and the hero are therefore to confront each other only by the irony of the heavens; otherwise they had nothing to fight about. In the battlefield, Rustam shoots a double-headed arrow into Isfandiyār’s eyes. The prince drops his own bow and falls from his steed while holding its mane and neck (“Rustam Shooting an Arrow into Isfandiyār’s Eye” (Tīr zadan-i Rustam bar chashm-i Isfandiyār), Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge MA, 1958.288; Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 21, fol. 152r). The dying Isfandiyār tells Rustam that his death is not because of Rustam but his father Gushtāsp and asks Rustam to take care of his son Bahman. When Isfandiyār dies, Rustam issues orders to bring his coffin to Iran. The coffin is beautifully made of iron and draped with Chinese brocade. Rustam carefully applies bitumen to the inner surfaces of the coffin and perfumes it with musk and ambergris. He wraps Isfandiyār’s body with gold brocade and lays it in the coffin, then places a crown of turquoise onto Isfandiyār’s head and seals the lid. He selects forty mules, adorns them with Chinese brocade, and has two of them carry Isfandiyār’s coffin. The narrative indicates that the people in the funeral procession have haggard faces and disheveled hair. Isfandiyār’s brother Bashūtan leads the way. The mane and tail of Isfandiyār’s black steed are cut short and from the saddle reversed front-to-back, Isfandiyār’s mace, helmet, surtout, quiver, and head-cover are hung.

The painting of this funeral procession is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (33.70) and titled “The Bringing of Isfandiyār’s Bier” (Āvardan-i tābūt-i Isfandiyār) (Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 22, fol. 153r) (Fig. 3). It is on the recto of a folio that was unaltered by Demotte. The text here is V:424:1515–428:1553 of the Khāliqī-Muṭlaq edition and V:251–253 of Warner’s translation and covers the whole passage of Isfandiyār’s funeral procession.

The painting is faithful to the text description, almost word by word. It should be noted that the coffin is carried by mules, not camels. There are two variants for the carriers among the surviving thirteenth- to fourteenth-century manuscripts: mule (astar) and camel (ushtur), Persian words

12 See http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/169512 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016).
13 While Warner’s translation (V:251) reads “one of the camels bore the prince’s coffin,” the text of the folios reads “two mules.”
14 See http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448938 for the color image (accessed August 31, 2016).
that are spelled almost the same with a difference only in the dots for the letters s and sh (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1987–2008, V:425:1526, n. 12). The fact that the painter clearly represents the animals as mules here testifies to the painter’s interpretation of the text.

The Chinese brocade draped over Isfandiyār’s coffin bears a design of crouching deer in gold thread. This may reflect the painter’s familiarity with Chinese silk designs from this period. While the text refers to a turquoise crown placed on Isfandiyār’s head inside the coffin, the painter represents a Mongol feather crown above a folding chair set upon the coffin. Here the painter may have followed a contemporary custom for royal funerals, or interpreted the verse in a different way from the literal text, or wanted to represent the crown visibly, outside the coffin.

As the text says, the people in the painting all look in a daze and their hair is disheveled. Their costumes are not black as seen in the Īraj paintings (Figs. 1 and 2) but are light-colored. This difference of color in mourning clothes can also be seen in two Mongol funeral scenes in the Diez Albums in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Diez A fol. 71, S. 55 and fol. 72, S. 25) in which mourning people are wearing black in one scene and light-colored clothes in the other. Isfandiyār’s brother Bashūtan is distinguished from the other figures; only he and his attendant have gold ṭirāz (ornamental inscribed bands) on their arms and large sashes. Bashūtan must be the younger who is supported by the other.

At the top of the painting are three flying herons, to which there is no reference in the text. It is uncertain whether they were added as a symbol of death, but the painter clearly took the time to represent the sky above the clouds to provide a background for these flying birds. In the only surviving manuscript of Varqa va Gulshāh of ‘Ayyūqi in the Topkapı Palace Library from the first half of the thirteenth century, there are also three flying birds painted in the scene of Varqa’s father’s death (Hazine 841, fol. 16v). There may have existed a now-lost motif of three flying birds over a dead person. The red flowers with eight petals growing all over the ground in the Isfandiyār painting are also an unusual motif and may also have been an established allegory at that time.

IV. Mourning of Rustam

The invincible hero Rustam finally dies soon after Isfandiyār’s death. Rustam’s half-brother Shaghād is married to the daughter of the king of Kābul in Afghanistan who wants to eliminate Rustam. Lured by Shaghād, Rustam falls into a trap full of spears and swords, along with his steed Rakhsh and his brother Zavāra. Rustam climbs out from the pit with his last remaining strength

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15 See, for example, a fragment of brocade with crouching djeiran (Central Asian antelope) in the Cleveland Museum of Art (1991.4; Watt and Wardwell 1997, cat. no. 29). A similar crouching deer motif is used for the decoration of a saddle excavated from the tomb of a Mongol princess in Inner Mongolia (Kessler 1993, fig. 101).

16 A turban on a folding chair is set besides the coffin of Mahmūd of Ghazna in a painting of the Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh of Rashid al-Din dated to 714/1314–15 in the Edinburgh University Library (Or. MS 20, fol. 136r; see Talbot Rice 1976, fig. 64; see http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/UoEsha~4~4~61307~102905?qv=q%3ARashid%2Bal-Din%3Bsort%3Awork_creator_details%2Cwork_shelfmark%2Cwork_source_page_no%2Cwork_title%3Blc%3A UoEsha-4-4&mi=108&trs=391 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016)). In addition, Ottomans put a turban of the deceased sultan on top of his coffin during funeral processions. See Atıl 1987 figs. 43b, 43d showing Süleyman’s coffin and turban in the Tarih-i Sultan Süleyman of Lokman transcribed in 1579–80 in the Chester Beatty Library (MS. 413).

17 Komaroff and Carboni 2002, figs. 87, 122, cat. nos. 27, 28. See http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN635104741&PHYSID=PHYS_0116&DMDID=DMDLOG_0118 and http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN736013601&PHYSID=PHYS_0049&DMDID=DMDLOG_0049 for the images (accessed August 31, 2016).
and is able to take revenge upon Shaghād by shooting him through a sycamore tree behind which
the latter has hidden himself (British Museum, 1948,1211,0.25; Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 23, 
fol. 155r).18

In the description of the mourning scene, the bodies of Rustam, Zavāra, and Rakhsh are 
brought before the brothers’ father Zāl in Zābul. A beautiful coffin is made out of teak wood with 
gold nails and ivory ornaments for Rustam. All the chinks are sealed with bitumen; musk and
ambergris are sprinkled over it. Zavāra’s coffin is made of elm, and the two coffins are passed from
hand to hand by the people who gathered all along the way from Kābul to Zābul. Rakhsh’s body
is carried by an elephant.

This mourning scene is painted on a verso with verses V:455:202–460:254 of Khāliqī-
Muṭlaq’s edition and the last line of V:272 to V:275 of Warner’s translation. It is titled “Picture of
Rustam and Zavāra’s Coffins” (Ṣūrat-i tābūt-i Rustam va Zavāra) (Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 24, 
fol. 155v) (Fig. 4) and preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (22.393).19 It was originally
on the verso of “Rustam Killing Shaghād” in the British Museum; the folio was split by Demotte
and each page was pasted onto an unrelated text folio.

In the painting of the mourning scene, standards with a lion and a dragon are carried in front
of the coffins. The lion and the dragon may be metaphors of the heroes, as lamented by their father
Zāl in the text, “That noble warrior, that valiant Dragon, / That famous Lion! […]” (Warner 1905–
25, V:273)” in Khāliqī-Muṭlaq V:456:213. Two coffins are being carried by barefoot people in dark
mourning clothes. Rustam’s coffin is apparently the one in the foreground with the red brocade;
Zavāra’s has the green brocade. While brocades are draped over the coffins directly in other
paintings, here the portable coffins have upper roofs, and these roofs are covered by the brocades.
Since the text specifies the materials of Rustam’s and Zavāra’s coffins, the painter perhaps made
the coffins visible by adding the roofs and showed the differencing wood color of the two coffins, the
gold nails used to fasten Rustam’s coffin, and the ornament on the front. Two incense burners are
hung from Rustam’s coffin. According to the text, musk and ambergris were sprinkled over the
bitumen to seal the chinks of the coffin but not hung from the coffin. Here again the painter may
have made the incense burners visible to convey the information available in the text.20

Rakhsh’s body is tied onto an elephant behind Zavāra’s coffin. The complicated way of tying
the steed’s body onto the elephant shows Rakhsh’s considerable weight and is proof of the “two
days’ task” referred to in the text. The mourning procession is being conducted solemnly and
silently rather than with emotional gestures of grieving but the figures’ faces are sorrowful in

18 See http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=231522&partId=
1&object=21667&page=5 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016). The title of this painting is not given above the
painting. Instead, the chapter heading is written far above the painting, separated by fourteen lines of text and it reads
“Rustam Falling into a Pit in Kābul” (Uftādan-i Rustam bi-Kābul dar chāh). The folio was split by Demotte. The same
subject is represented in the Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh of Rashid al-Din in the Edinburgh University Library, Or. MS 20, fol. 15v
(Talbot Rice 1976, fig. 19), where the arrangement of the figures is the same but their appearance and some details are
different. The painter of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma apparently did not copy the Edinburgh painting but similarities
in composition, Rustam’s shooting posture, and the way the sycamore tree is represented may have been caused by a
close relationship in the training of the workshops to which the painters belonged.
19 See http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/firdawsis-shahnama-the-coffins-of-rustam-and-zavara-16556 for the color
image (accessed August 31, 2016).
20 It is also possible that incense burners were ordinary utensils used in contemporary funeral ceremonies as shown in the
painting of Iskandar’s coffin (Fig. 5) which I will discuss next.
expression. The relatively small space for illustration at the bottom of the folio did not allow the painter to depict many details. In particular he did not succeed in accurately representing that the coffins were passed from hand to hand; instead, they look like they are simply being carried.

V. Mourning Iskandar

From the end of the story of the Kayānian dynasty, the Iranian kings narrated in the Shāhnāma correspond with historical kings. Iskandar can be associated with Alexander the Great of Macedonia (r. 336–323 B.C.E.). In the Shāhnāma his parents are Dārāb the Kayānian and the daughter of the king of Rūm (Greece). He becomes king of Iran according to the wishes of his half-brother Dārā (Darius III of the Achaemenid dynasty, r. ?–330 B.C.E.) who is killed in a plot by one of his ministers. As many as twelve illustrations from the Book of Iskandar have fortunately survived from the Great Mongol Shāhnāma.

According to Firdawsī, Iskandar dies from illness in Babylon. His coffin is brought to Alexandria (Iskandarī), the Egyptian capital named after him, and set down upon the plain (hāmūn). Children, men, and women gather in Alexandria and mourn him. Aristotle steps forward, puts his hand on the coffin, and grieves. Many other Greek sages are also assembled and each expresses his lament over Iskandar’s death. Then, Iskandar’s mother comes up and presses her face upon his coffin. Iskandar’s wife Rūshanak also grieves deeply. When the crown of the heaven (sippihr) sets and the sages have spoken enough words of sorrow, they hide the coffin in the soil.

No folio including the text of Iskandar’s death has survived and thus we do not know whether it was ever illustrated, but the mourning scene found in the “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar” (Ṣūrat-i tābūt-i Iskandar) is one of the most famous paintings from the Great Mongol Shāhnāma for its emotional representation of the wailing figures (Fig. 5). It is preserved in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (F1938.3; Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 39, fol. 178r). There is no alteration by Demotte on this folio. The painting is on a recto containing the text VI:127:1877–129: variant 1 of Khāliqī-Muṭlaq and VI:187–189 of Warner’s translation.

While Iskandar’s coffin is set upon the plain of Alexandria according to the text, the painter changed the scene from outdoors to indoors. The coffin is placed in a vaulted hall (īwān) with beautifully decorated hangings. A large carpet with geometric designs is spread over the floor and Iskandar’s coffin is placed upon a red platform with panels of floral decorations on its sides. There are four large candles, two white and two dark, burning on gold candlesticks set upon round plates at the four corners of the platform. One large stone-studded gold lamp showing its flame is hung from the vault; two smaller lamps are hung at the doorways on either side of the īwān. Two gold incense burners near the platform are emitting scented smoke.

Iskandar’s coffin is decorated with gold and precious stones and covered with a gold brocade. A man with long black hair and beard stands close to the coffin and weeps with his handkerchief; another man with brown hair and beard stands behind him; these two seem to be speaking their mourning words. The back of a woman with her hair in braids and in a semi-transparent veil is shown leaning toward the coffin. Although her face is not visible, her deep sorrow is fully

21 See http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=F1938.3 for the color image (accessed August 31, 2016).
expressed by the way she clings to the coffin. Her hair has been retouched, but her hair looks gray, and it can be surmised that she is Iskandar’s mother. In the foreground a group of female figures, young and old, is also rendered from behind; all of them are in veils; some of them are beating their heads or tearing at their hair in sadness, exposing their heads from the veil. They may be Iskandar’s wives (including Rūshanak) and their maids but it is impossible to identify Rūshanak. Other men and women are grouped to the right and left of the platform. Some male figures are crossing their hands before their chests or extending their hands upward and exposing their bare chests from their long upper garments.

Thus far the representations of mourning (of Īraj, Isfandiyār, and Rustam) have generally been faithful to the corresponding text description. There is an earnestness with which the painters tried as much as possible to visualize the text word for word and to supplement the text where necessary with carefully thought-out details. In contrast, changing the scene from outdoors to indoors here is a major alteration, and the painting clearly contradicts the text. Why did this happen? Was there any intention for this change?

Basil Gray was the first to point out this drastic change (Gray 1961, 33) and theorizes that the painter reproduced the Chinese tradition of setting an emperor’s coffin in the palace, or in other words, adopted a Chinese painting element in the symmetrical composition of traditional Iranian painting. This probably means that the painter was eager to show off his skill and knowledge by inserting new pictorial images of royal funerals learned from Chinese paintings brought to Iran by the Ilkhans’ courtiers, even at the expense of straying from the text description. Abolala Soudavar suggests that the painting depicts the actual mourning of the death of Abū Saʿīd’s predecessor Öljeitū (r. 1304–16) in Sulṭāniyya in 1316 (Soudavar 1996, 143). He believes therefore that the alteration was intentionally made to conform with Ilkhan Öljeitū’s real funeral. As mentioned above, Iskandar is a foreign ruler of Iran; this may have led to a comparison with the Ilkhans, who were also foreign (Mongol) rulers of Iran (Grabar and Blair 1980, 25, 51; Melikian-Chirvani 1984, 304–310; Soudavar 1996, 183). It is possible that the painter was mindful of the Ilkhans when working on Iskandar and deliberately chose to represent the funeral in Mongol/Chinese settings.

Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, on the other hand, thinks that the text above and below the painting describing the lamentation of the people around the coffin “would instantly call to the mind of an Iranian Muslim an indoor scene” without any association with or reference to Mongol elements (Melikian-Chirvani 1987, 122). As he points out, the placing of Iskandar’s coffin on the plain of Alexandria occurs much earlier in the text (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq VI:125:1845; Warner VI:185). After this verse, lengthy mourning words by sages continue before the first line of this painted folio (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq VI:127:1877; Warner VI:187). Unlike the other mourning scenes discussed above whose corresponding texts are situated immediately around the paintings, the information about the setting of the scene is not on the folio of the painting. The text on this folio starts with the last two sages’ lament, then Iskandar’s mother and wife appear and wail, and finally, Firdawsī’s plaints to heaven and appeals to God conclude the Book of Iskandar. It is uncertain whether the textual content of the folio definitively signals an interior scene as Melikian-Chirvani suggests but it is likely that the painter did not read the earlier verse on the outdoor setting of the scene.

As described above, in the ordinary procedure of producing illustrated manuscripts and
coordinating the text with paintings, calligraphers transcribed the text on a folio first, leaving space blank in appropriate positions for illustration, and then the folio was handed to painters. In the case of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma, even the titles of paintings were often given by the calligraphers so that the painters could be sure of what they were supposed to paint. The painters could also refer to the texts already written on the folios. Nevertheless, the painter of the “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar” did not have enough information of the scene because the painting space fell into a recto without the preceding verses on the Alexandrian plain. He might have had to create the illustration only from the text written on the folio he was in charge of. In this process, he may have mistaken the scene for an indoor scene and accordingly supplemented the painting with his own details.

This suggestion implies that a painter of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma was possibly given only a bifolio to complete so that several painters could work on their bifolios at the same time. According to Blair, the folio of the “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar” (fol. 178) was paired with another folio split by Demotte (fol. 175): a recto with “Iskandar Building the Iron Rampart” with the text VI:98:1443–100:1470 of Khāliqī-Muṭlaq, and a verso with “Iskandar Arriving at the Talking Tree” with the text VI:100:1472–102:1518 (Blair 2004, 41, fig. 4.6). A bifolio now missing separated folios 175 and 178, consisting of folios 176 and 177 and containing the verse on the Alexandrian plain. It is most likely that the painter did not refer to this bifolio of folios 176–177 when he was painting Iskandar’s coffin.

How did the painter create the painting? In my opinion, he followed the text available on the folio as far as he could and worked around the missing information by depicting contemporary funerary customs in the first half of the fourteenth century when the Ilkhans were Muslims. That is why previous studies have pointed out both Mongol and Muslim funerary elements in this painting. According to Blair, this painting gives a good idea of the setting of Ilkhanid tombs for funerary services (Blair 2002, 128–129). The “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar” exhibits a mixture of elements of Mongol funeral customs and Muslim tombs.

In the Arabic manuscript dated to 714/1314–15 of the Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh of Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318), the painting of the coffin of Maḥmūd b. Sebüktigin (r. 998–1030), the Turkish Muslim ruler of the Ghaznavids (977–1186) who ruled Afghanistan and North India, shows the coffin on a red wooden table behind curtains inside a building (Edinburgh University Library Or. MS 20, fol. 136r). This Ilkhanid representation of a Muslim ruler’s coffin is closer to that of Iskandar’s than the two paintings of the funerals of Mongol rulers mentioned above in the Diez Albums (Diez A fol. 71, S. 55 and fol. 72, S. 25) which show the coffin placed on the oblong cushion of a Mongolian throne made with red wooden frames called ta.

22 While Soudavar identifies three original calligraphers; one for volume 1 and two for volume 2 (Soudavar 1996, 162–169), Blair identifies four calligraphers, two for each volume (Blair 2004, 41–43).
23 According to Blair, a quire of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma consisted of four bifolios (eight folios). See Blair 2004, 39 and fig. 4.6.
24 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1986.104, Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 37, fol. 175r. See http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/edan/object.php?q=22063 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016).
25 Freer Gallery of Art, F1935.23, Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 38, fol. 175v. See http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/edan/object.php?q=10115 for the image (accessed August 31, 2016).
26 See note 16 for the reference and the URL of the image. In this painting the coffin is shown with a turban on a folding chair, a gold cup, and a gold ewer on a gold basin.
these Mongol rulers and Iskandar’s are covered with a drape but the platform on which Iskandar’s coffin is placed lacks a back unlike a ta. The platform and coffin also look like the cenotaph of contemporary tombs of Muslim saints which consisted of a rectangular platform and a coffin-like tombstone surmounting it, both often clad with tiles. In other words, Iskandar’s coffin and platform appear to be contemporary Muslim in shape, while the brocade draping the coffin and the red color of the platform appear to be contemporary Mongol. If a cenotaph of an Ilkhanid ruler had survived, it might likewise have been a combination of Muslim and Mongol traditions as observed in the representation of Iskandar’s coffin.

As the cenotaph of an Ilkhanid royal or saintly figure was usually placed inside a building (Blair 2002, 123–129), the painter who did not read the verse referring to the Alexandrian plain chose to represent the scene indoors without knowing that he was contradicting the narrative as a result. The candlesticks, hanging lamps, and incense burners were all common equipment for Ilkhanid mausolea. The painter lights all the candles and lamps probably because he deduced that this was a scene in the evening from the verses “Now when the Crown of heaven had set, and when / The mighty men had had their fill of talk, / They hid Sikandar’s [another spelling of Iskandar–T.M.] coffin in the dust” (Warner 1905–25, VI:188), which explains that the mourning continued until the evening when they decided to bury the coffin.

Another question for this painting is whether its motifs were borrowed from foreign sources. Grabar and Blair point out that the spatial arrangement of the three groups of mourners, especially those seen from the back, were modelled after contemporary Italian paintings; they suggest that models from Chinese art are missing from the representations of man in this manuscript and that Chinese elements are confined to the landscape, although by this time such elements already had become conventional rather than consciously Chinese (Grabar and Blair 1980, 41–45; Blair 2002, 128).

The mourning gestures of the female figures (beating their heads or tearing at their hair) and those of the male figures (crossing their hands before their chests or extending their hands upward and exposing their bare chests from their long upper garments) are also observed in the two Diez Album paintings, as well as in Timurid paintings of the fifteenth century (Sims 2002, 142–145). Such peculiar gestures of mourning seem to have been customary at least during the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries in Iran and are not observed in contemporary Christian or Buddhist images of mourning. This fact, in addition to the mourning costume types represented consistently throughout the manuscript, implies that the painters relied on contemporary customs and costumes to fill in the images and that the existence of any immediate foreign sources is unlikely.

VI. Conclusion

The analyses of the mourning scenes show how the painters prepared their paintings for this magnificent manuscript. They were given a bifolio, read the text written on that particular bifolio and conceived the images based solely on what they read. They did not dare to read another copy of the Shāhnāma even when their bifolios did not contain sufficient verses. To complete the

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27 For example, see the reconstruction of the cenotaph of the tomb of Pir Husayn in Baku in the Republic of Azerbaijan by Krachkovskaya (1939).
scenes they sometimes had to compensate for the lacking information by adding contemporary Ilkhanid customs and costumes, as observed from the painting of Iskandar’s coffin. In the process of illustrating the text, the painters made an effort to include any and all details in their paintings as far as the text indicated, such as the sun face in the painting of the arrival of Īraj’s coffin and the dragon and lion standards in front of Rustam’s coffin. As seen in the painting of Farīdūn’s mourning in Īraj’s palace, at times they put slightly different moments from the narrative into a single painting to cover the verses transcribed on the relatively large folios of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma. Nevertheless, certain discrepancies between the scenes and the text were inevitable due to the absence of the appropriate text on the folio, as reflected in the indoor setting of the Iskandar painting.

This process and attitude of the painters may also be applicable to other paintings in the Great Mongol Shāhnāma, for example, the painting “Salm and Tūr Killing Īraj” (Chester Beatty Library, Pers. MS 111.3, Grabar and Blair 1980, no. 6, fol. 11v). In this painting, Īraj’s brother Tūr grabs a stool and both brothers catch Īraj by his hands, but there is no depiction of the actual killing of Īraj. Grabar and Blair suggest that the scene incorporates two scenes in which Tūr strikes Īraj, first with the stool and then stabbing and killing him. But Salm the other brother does not have a dagger in his hand. In my opinion, the reason for this representation is that the text on this folio contains only up to the part where Tūr grabs the stool but has not yet struck with it (Khāliqi-Muṭlaq I:120:496; Warner’s translation of the last line on I:200, “And then advancing suddenly, and grasping / The massive seat of gold, [he smote Iraj].”). The painter probably did not know the successive story of how Īraj was killed because the pertinent verses are written on the next folio (Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S1986.101, “Farīdūn Greeting Īraj and Seeing His Coffin”) in a different bifolio. Thus in spite of the title indicated by the calligrapher, the painter was not able to depict the very moment of Salm and Tūr killing Īraj.

The very diligent way of visualizing the text written on the folio in the Great Mongol Shāhnāma paintings attests to the painters’ conscientious attitude towards illustration. Furthermore, the painters did not copy preexisting paintings but created the images on their own, according to what they read. If each painting is compared with the text written on the same folio, the extraordinary inventiveness of the painters will be revealed and certain characteristics of visualization will be further clarified. This may also help in evaluating to what degree foreign influences had been absorbed and conventionalized by the time of the Great Mongol Shāhnāma.

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28 See n. 6 for reference of the image.
29 This inventiveness may not apply to all Persian illustrated manuscripts, however. For example, the painters of a group of the Inju’id Shāhnāma manuscripts (Sims 2002, 48) and the Timurid Khamsa manuscripts (Soucek 1971) must have followed a different method of illustrating the text, as the paintings repeat established iconography for particular scenes.
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Fig. 1: “Faridun Greeting Iran and Seeing His Coffin,” Great Mongol Shahnama, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Purchase – Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.101.

Fig. 2: “Faridun Going to Iran’s Palace and Mourning,” Great Mongol Shahnama, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Purchase – Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.100.
Fig. 3: “The Bringing of Isfandiyār’s Bier,” Great Mongol Shāhnāma, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 33.70.

www.metmuseum.org

Fig. 4: “Picture of Rustam and Zawāra’s Coffins,” Great Mongol Shāhnāma, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 22.393.

www.mfa.org
Fig. 5: “Picture of the Coffin of Iskandar,” Great Mongol Shāhnāma, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Purchase – Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1938.3.