# Trumping Religious Taboos: The Art of Sophisticated Imagery

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## *Introduction*

Christianity and Islam both stemmed from an Abrahamic tradition. Christianity, though, spread through a Western World dominated by the Greek culture, while Islam saw its major development in lands greatly influenced by an Iranian thinking mode.

Herodotus (1: 131) had already noticed that, contrary to the Greeks, Iranians “have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly.” For Iranians, gods were abstract notions that were usually referred to—iconographically—through their attributions, that is, by indirect means. For the Greeks, however, the boundaries between the worlds of the gods and the humans were blurred. Gods interacted with humans, had even intercourse with them, and acted very much like them. They were thus represented in human forms with full flesh in the most realistic possible way. By contrast, even after six centuries of Hellenistic cultural dominance, when Iranians represented—in the Sasanian era (224-656)—gods, kings and mortals, they were in a stylized and conventional manner (fig. 2), in which identities were not established through likeness but through symbols and signs, such as specific crowns.

In a Hellenized roman world where not only the emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138) was deified (fig. 1) but also his lover-boy Antinous, Jesus of Nazareth had to be considered “God of God,” and “of one substance with the Father” (Nicene Creed), while in the Islamic world, the Prophet Mohammad, son of `Abdullah, was born a man and died as one.

In the Islamic tradition, man remained severed from the divine. God was unique and the highest sin was *sherk,* i.e.*,* finding him equals. Thus one of the most potent attacks against figurative representation was that the painter, or sculptor, was threading on God’s prerogative of creation. It was an act of *sherk* and blasphemy. The fact is, however, that when figural paintings reemerged and blossomed in the Iranian world after the advent of Islam, it never embraced a realistic mode but fell back unto the stylized and conventional mode of past. On the other hand, when figurative painting was freed from iconoclastic attack in the Western world, it gradually moved back to the realistic mode of the Greeks. Therefore, deeply rooted cultural traditions greatly conditioned the figurative modes of these two worlds, irrespective of acquired religious beliefs.

It is interesting to note, however, that intellectual sophistication provided a major push for the development of painting in both worlds, in spite of their cultural differences. Since erudition, as well as the patronage of works of art, became the vehicle to achieve high status for rulers who lacked legitimacy, painting provided a potent medium to advertise intellectual refinement. Artists and patrons were gradually drawn into a game in which works of art became more and more complex and enigmatic. Allegories and layered meanings were woven into their composition, thus breaking the mold of

traditional models and creating new patterns and standards. These new standards had to be matched, or improved upon, by later artists and aspiring patrons. In what follows I shall try to demonstrate how this process invigorated both Renaissance painting and Persian painting in very similar ways.

## ***Two early altarpieces***

Traditionally, an altarpiece was the focal point of a chapel and the central element for devotional rituals; and as such it represented the Virgin Mary and Jesus along with saintly figures. Yet, as early as the 1420s two altarpieces, the *Fountain of Grace* (at the Prado, fig. 3) and the *Adoration of the Magi* (at the Uffizi, fig. 4), depart from this model and present an elaborate composition with an embedded message. While the latter's embedded message is very much political in nature, the former's seems to emphasize its patron's cultural affiliations. Nevertheless, they both pave the way for representing worldly events under the guise of religiosity.

A) The *Fountain of Grace* is a painting long thought to have been inspired by the celebrated Ghent Altarpiece of Jan Van Eyck, the *Mystical Lamb*, and of later manufacture. Technical analysis, in combination with the historical identifications of persons depicted therein however, vouch for an authentic work that was most probably commissioned in support of the controversial 1422 Treaty of Troyes.[1] By this tri-partite treaty, signed between England France and Burgundy, Henry V of England (r. 1413-22) was nominated successor to Charles VI of France (r. 1380-1422), while the crown prince (the future Charles VII) was disinherited. Drastic events had thrust previous enemies to embrace a controversial and unpopular treaty. The defeat of the French troops in Agincourt (1415), and the assassination of the Duke of Burgundy, John the Fearless (d. 1419), ordered by the crown prince, had left no other alternative for Charles VI. Without the military backing of Burgundy, the French had no chance against the English. And on the Burgundian side, the assassination of the Duke had created such an animosity towards the crown prince that any alliance against him was more than welcome. In addition, the new chancellor of Burgundy, Jehan de Thoisy (1350-1433), saw the alliance with the English as providing the duchy with more clout, and an equal status with France. While he lived, the Anglo-Burgundian alliance remained in force; it was only after his demise that John the Fearless' son, Philippe the Good (1342-1404), abrogated this alliance, and realigned his duchy with France in 1435.

As the bishop of Tournai, Jehan de Thoisy naturally sought to justify the Treaty of Troyes in ecclesiastic terms. Indeed, this altarpiece subtly projects the Treaty of Troyes as the extension of various processes initiated by the Council of Constance, which had put an end to Papal Schism, and had elected Martin V (p. 1417-31) as the sole pope of the Christian world. We thus see that the teachings of Christ are sung from his heavenly kingdom, but also flow on earth through a fountain. The former is used to shatter the eardrums of the heretics (bottom right), and the latter to bring peace among feuding Christian princes (bottom left). They reflect two important resolutions of the Council: to prevent local conflicts in Christian lands and to combat heresy.

Standing next to the Fountain is Pope Martin V who is inviting a group of kneeling princes and monarch to wash their differences in the Fountain of Grace (Fig. 5). Closest to him is Charlemagne whose realm,

[1] Soudavar 2008, pp. 96-108.

the Holy Roman Empire, encompassed the Christian lands. To emphasize that the peace process was meant to cover all of this territory, the king of France (Charles VI) and the Archduke Albert of Austria, who in tandem represented the two extreme kingdoms of this empire, are positioned on a diagonal row behind Charlemagne. As Archduke of Austria, Albert was also at the forefront of the defense line against the Ottoman Turks who were threatening Christian domains. Behind Charles VI is depicted the young Duke Philippe the Good, wearing black in remembrance of the tragic death of his father; he shall favor this color for the rest of his life. Further back is Henry V, in wait to inherit the crown of France.

Above the kneeling princes and behind Pope Martin V, stand a succession of ecclesiastics who had all participated in the Council of Constance, and who played a major role in organizing peace talks among feuding parties. The first two are the legates whom the new pope sent to reconcile the protagonists of the civil war in France, namely the cardinals Orsini and Fillastre. The next two are their interlocutors, namely the jurist Pierre Cauchon (in black)[2] and the bishop Martin Porée (in purple), who had championed the cause of Burgundy. Standing all the way in the back is Jehan de Thoisy. Since he had not been present at Constance, he is isolated from the group of Council participants behind Martin V. His eyes are turned toward his prince, the young Duke Philippe. While this altarpiece provides the Treaty of Troyes with a religious veneer, it also elevates the status of de Thoisy by depicting him in the company of crowned heads and the most important ecclesiastic personas of his time.

More importantly, its elaborate composition introduces a wide number of novel elements, from lofty architectural settings to musical instruments, which clearly expand the general repertoire of altarpieces. It also includes a wonderful gallery of portraits, some of which are unique and not to be found anywhere else. Narcissism had thus found a new setting for its manifestation.

One should also note that such a composition is clearly a continuation of Greek traditions, in which the Heavens reflected earthly kingdoms and divinities were humanized. Such a juxtaposition of Heaven and Earth was inconceivable in the Irano-Islamic framework of painting.

B) The *Adoration of the Magi* was painted by Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370-1427) for the Florentine banker Palla Strozzi. Under the guise of a composition in which the Magi are celebrating the nativity of Jesus, it also celebrates the “rebirth” of Constantinople after the Turks lifted their siege in 1402. As a consequence, the city had been able to prosper again (albeit for the next quarter of century only).

Strozzi had befriended the Greek philosopher Manuel Chrysoloras, who was sent in 1390 by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologos (r. 1391-1425) to implore the aid of the Christian princes against the Ottomans besieging Constantinople. He had been an ardent supporter of the renewed interest in Greek culture and had financed the chair of Chrysoloras at the University of Florence.[3] He also cherished the memory of Constantinople as the repository of ancient Greek culture. While the city remained under siege, a sense of doom and consternation had prevailed throughout Europe, especially after the defeat of the crusaders at Nicopolis 1396. The unexpected intervention of the Turko-Persian

[2] Pierre Cauchon who was rewarded with the bishopric of Beauvais for his support of the Treaty of Troyes. He is mostly remembered for trying Joan of Arc (1412-31) and condemning her to be burned at the stake.
[3] Christiansen 2006, p. 3.

conqueror, Tamerlane, who defeated the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid, effectively terminated the siege, and Manuel II who had gone to Venice seeking help against the Turks returned to a jubilant Constantinople in 1403.

The composition of this painting cleverly juxtaposes the birth of Jesus—in the center—to the "rebirth" of Constantinople, conveyed through the upper lunettes. The three Christian princes deemed to have delivered Constantinople are represented as the Magi visiting the new born Jesus (Fig. 6): Melchior is in the image of the Holy roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg, Balthazar in the image of Manuel II, and Caspar in the image of John the Fearless of Burgundy.[4] Manuel II was of course the emperor of Byzantium, and most directly involved in the defense of Constantinople; the other two had levied a crusading army and marched toward Constantinople only to be crushed at Nicopolis by the Turks. John the Fearless was imprisoned and release upon the payment of a heavy ransom. Thus, the lunette on the left alludes to the massacre of the inhabitants of Rahova by the crusaders prior to Nicopolis. The one in the center shows the crusaders' advance barred at Nicopolis. The third shows the Magi before a liberated Constantinople, with the *Stella Maris* (Star of the Sea) shining above as symbol of the Virgin Mary, the protector of Constantinople. It had guided their journey from the first lunette to the last.

Contrary to Italian art historians who have previously considered the princely attires of the Magi as the "fruit of (Gentile's) fantasy,"[5] it can be argued that Gentile sought to individualize each with characteristic details: Sigismund whose profile closely follows sketches by Pisanello, has a Germanic hat; Manuel II wears a Byzantine crown and robe, with designs that ultimately derive from royal Sasanian iconography; and John the Fearless, who had to reconstitute his wardrobe upon release from captivity, is sporting a new fashion, mixing Venetian fabrics with Ottomanesque turbans.[6] The latter became a staple of Burgundian clothing in the 15$^{th}$ century. In addition, the exotica in the landscape, especially the falcon and the leopard, were extra pointers to the presence of Manuel II, as it alluded to the hunting habits and the paraphernalia of Byzantine emperors.

Finally, in contrast to the dour and serious composition of the previous painting, Gentile's painting concealed humorous anecdotes in the periphery of the "rebirth of Constantinople" theme. Whereas in Nicopolis, John the Fearless stayed with his men and was captured by the Ottomans, Sigismund fled the battlefield aboard a Venetian vessel that ferried him to Constantinople and then to Europe.[7] His escape is alluded to by the symbol of a horse-looking camel[8] carrying a hidden load (fig. 7b), wrapped in a cover with a modified Luxembourg coat of arms (the Luxemburg escutcheon must display a golden lion and crown, on a blue and white striped background, see fig. a). In Gentile's painting though, the lion has been suppressed. With a touch of humor, the painter is insinuating that in the process of his inglorious

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[4] Gentile portrayed the first two Magi through visual sighting or based on sketches and coin effigies made of them when passing through Italy; Soudavar 2008, p. 124.
[5] Ronchey 2006, p. 104.
[6] Soudavar 2008, p. 126.
[7] Ostrogorsky 1999, p. 552.
[8] In Italian paintings, the Magi were usually accompanied by camels, but because the mount here was supposed to represent Sigismund's, it was painted as a hybrid camel-horse.

escape, while slipping in and out of Constantinople, Sigismund lost his lion (or lionhood)! Painter and patron must have greatly enjoyed the intricate details woven into the fabric of this painting.

## *The Procession of the Magi*

To achieve supremacy in Florence, Cosimo dei Medici (1389-1464) drove his rival Palla Strozzi out of the city. The rivalry that existed between the two was not limited to financial and political issues alone. Cosimo had to prove that he was even a greater patron of the arts. No wonder then that for the magnificent frescoes of his palazzo chapel (fig. 8), he picked up the double nativity concept of the Strozzi altarpiece, and transposed it into a grander setting in praise of his own glory. While the Magi of the Strozzi altarpiece were princes who had fought to liberate Constantinople, the Medici Magi were princes who had helped to achieve the unity of the Latin and Greek churches, deemed as the "rebirth" of the Christian Church. Interestingly, the Magi in both are either the same princes or closely related to each other.[9]

The reconciliation of the Latin and Greek churches was theoretically achieved at the Unification Council of Florence. In reality though, the Florence council was the last leg of a process that began with the Council of Basel convened in 1431 by the Emperor Sigismund, then moved to Ferrara, and landed in Florence in 1438. The crucial transition was from Basel to Ferrara. For, in an attempt to impose his will on the independent-minded Council of Basel, the pope Eugene IV (p. 1431-47) ordered it to be moved to Ferrara. The Basel Council refused, and the pope inaugurated his own council in Ferrara. For a while there was a standoff between the two, as each sought the support of various princes and constituencies. What tilted the balance of power in favor of Ferrara was the recognition that the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaeologos (son of Manuel II) and the Duke Philippe the Good of Burgundy extended to it.

John VIII came to Ferrara seeking military help to once again liberate Constantinople. And the Duke Philippe sent a delegation in support to Ferrara (he had vowed to liberate Constantinople and needed the pope's help for his crusading projects). But soon after the delegations arrived, Ferrara was hit with the plague and money ran out. Cosimo's intervention—to invite the Council to Florence and pay for the expenses of the delegation members—effectively allowed the Council to conclude its deliberation and the pope to proclaim the Unification of the two churches in 1439. It dragged on for a few more years to allow for other Christian splinter groups such as the Armenians and the Jacobites to join in by 1442.

The three stages of the Council allowed the painter Benozzo Gozzoli to distribute the procession of the Magi over three walls: the section on the East wall referred to the Basel Council, the one on the South wall to the Ferrara interlude, and that of the West wall to its final stage in Florence (figs. 8,9). The three Magi could then be fitted into the composition by placing each on one wall, but in reverse order. In doing so, images of the three foreign princes who intervened, either personally or through a delegation, were substituted to the Magi. Thus, Emperor Sigismund (Fig. 13), who initiated the process by convening the Basel Council, appears as the elder Melchior on the West wall (i.e., the last leg of the procession). The South wall, i.e., the focal point of the procession is occupied by the middle-aged Balthazar portrayed as John VIII Plaeologos (fig. 12), with a similar headgear as his father in the Gentile da Fabriano

[9] Soudavar 2008, pp. 39-58.

altarpiece. As for the young Caspar, he could not be represented by the Duke Philippe, because the latter's age did not qualify him for that role. Through a clever compromise however, Caspar was projected in the image of the duke's son, Charles the Bold (1433-78), who as Count of Charolais was a prince in his own right (fig. 11). In addition, Charles had been admitted to the Order of Golden Fleece at the age of one; thus on his tunic is embroidered a simplified replica of the necklace of the Order of the Golden Fleece. It is for this reason that Caspar is not in the image of a young man, but a very young boy. The Magi are therefore all in the image of the three foreign (i.e. non-Italian) princes who allowed the "rebirth" of the chirstian Church.

The composition of the frescoes was divided into two time-frames to doubly enhance the glory of the Medici (fig. 10). Cosimo's clan was regrouped on the extreme left of the East wall, in a 1459 time-frame that is the year of the construction of the chapel. It was also a year of festivities, and visits for distinguished guests such as Sigismondo Malatesta and Galaezzo Maria Sforza, who are all portrayed in the same grouping. The Medici are looking back at the Unification Council that took place some two decades earlier and for which they wanted to take credit. The Council is allegorically visualized by the procession of the Magi. It evolves within the 1931-42 time frame over three walls; and to emphasize that it was celebrating not the birth of Jesus but an event deemed to be almost equivalent, the procession starts on the top of the East wall, turns around and comes back on the West wall, and goes up again, but never approaches or aims for the real Nativity altarpiece placed in the apse (figs. 8, 9).

The exotic fawn and fauna introduced by Gentile, such as the leopards and falcons, are picked up by Gozzoli and reintroduced in a more colorful way. While the Medici *Procession* surpassed the Strozzi *Adoration* in splendor and complexity of its composition, it still needed to compete on the anecdotal level. Whereas Gentile had used the lionless escutcheon of Luxembourg to allude to Sigismund's flight, Gentile had to insert an enigmatic component as well. He therefore devised through a pair of self-portraits, another pointer for the division of the frescoes into two time-frames (fig. 10). Indeed, Benozzo Gozzoli portrayed himself once within the Medici retinue with an inscription on his hat that reads "*opus Benotii*" (work of Benozzo), to indicate that this grouping must be situated in the construction time frame of the chapel. He also portrayed himself with a thinner and thus younger face on the West wall, looking on at a Florentine spectator who is making a hand sign with his right hand. The latter is the condotierre Neri di Gino Capponi who was born on July 3, 1388. By making a hand gesture that projects the number 50 he is stating his age on the date the Procession/Council arrived in Florence, i.e., 1438.

## *The History of Alexander the Great*

As we have seen from the last two examples, the constant interaction between patrons and artists pushed the level of painting sophistication higher and higher, while moving away from strictly religious themes. A culminating point in the quest for sophisticated imagery is the manuscript of the *History of Alexander the Great*, presently at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles. It was produced c. 1470 as a gift to Duke Philippe's son and successor, Charles the Bold of Burgundy.[10]

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[10] Soudavar 2008, pp. 70-90.

Groomed as a warrior prince and educated by refined courtiers that gravitated around the opulent court of Burgundy, Charles was often compared to the Alexander of his age, especially since his father was named Philippe, as Alexander's was. It is thus that his childhood preceptor, Jean IV d'Auxy, commissioned a group of artists and intellectuals to produce an illustrated but enigmatic version of the *History of Alexander* of Quintus Curtius Rufus as a present for his prince. It was enigmatic because each illustration was chosen with a double purpose: to depict, simultaneously, an episode in the *History of Alexander* and an event in the life of Charles. To render it more comprehensible and popular, the Latin text of Curtius was rendered into French by one Vasco da Lucena, a Portuguese in the retinue of Charles.

The painting that best reveals the double purpose nature of the illustrations is on folio 133v: *Bagoas Pleads on Behalf of Nabarzanes; Thalestris and the Amazons Visit Alexander* (fig. 14). Oddly, it incorporates two stories of Alexander into one illustration. At the center is the story of Alexander pardoning Nabarzanes, one of the regional governors (*satrap*) of the Achaemenid king Darius III who had betrayed his own master and caused his demise (Curtius 6.5.22-23). Frightened to meet Alexander in battle, he surrenders to him, and is pardoned through the intervention of the King's lover, the eunuque Bagoas. To the right is the story of Thalestris, the Queen of the Amazons, who comes from the Caucasus with the aim to have a child by Alexander (Curtius 6.5.29-30). The latter obliges, and Thalestris departs a short time later.

This type of double story illustration is uncommon, and a rather incongruous feature, because the texts of the two stories are not contiguous, and the painter was better off illustrating each episode separately, next to its text. The question then is why were these two put together? If they are juxtaposed it's because they have a common denominator in the person of Isabelle de Bourbon, whom Charles married in 1454. Like Thalestris, Isabelle had come and borne a child for Charles, and then departed shortly after (she died in 1465). Isabelle thus appears as Thalestris accompanied by Amazons, who are depicted in Burgundian dress but in the manner described by Quintus Curtius: "The dress of Amazons does not entirely cover the body: the left side is bare to the breast but clothed beyond that, while the skirt of the garment, which is gathered into a knot, stops above the knee."[11]

Right before her death, Isabelle had also implored her husband to pardon the rebels of Liège. To grant a pardon Charles demanded that the prominent citizens of Liège should crawl before him bareheaded and on their knees, and beg his forgiveness. We thus see Nabarzanes of the Alexander story impersonating the grandees of Liège who sought Charles' forgiveness.[12]

When Scott McKendrick published this manuscript for the Getty, he took at face value Vasco's contention that the handsome eunuque Bagoas had been transformed into beautiful maiden to "avoid a bad example," and did not suspect that each illustration had a double purpose.[13] While Vasco da Lucena couches his modification in a moral justification, his main objective was to facilitate the production of a double-layered illustrated manuscript. He thus alters Cutius' text on several occasions (see below). As it happens though, each time he altered the text, it better serves the purpose of superimposition of a

[11] Quintus Curtius 2004, p. 128.
[12] Soudavar 2008, p. 79-80.
[13] McKendrick 1996, p. 82.

Burgundian event on Alexander's stories. Imagine the scribe, the painter, and more generally, the team in charge of production of this complex manuscript, trying to find a linkage between historical events and epical stories in order to produce a layered illustration. Naturally, some of the links would be strong and some would be weak. To reinforce the latter or to create a link where it did not exist before, the team had to be inventive, which meant that, occasionally, "minor cheating," i.e., a slight modification or addition of text, was necessary. The eunuque Bagoas was therefore transformed into a maiden to better reflect Isabelle de Bourbon.[14]

Another change in text occurs in reference to the painting on folio 123, usually labeled as *Alexander and the niece of Artaxerxes*. According to Curtius (6.2.8-9), Alexander spots among the Persian captives brought to his banquet a shy noble-looking woman who turns out to be the granddaughter of the Achaemenid king Ochus (r. 359-338 BC). He orders the captive to be released and her belongings returned. The Alexander banquet scene and the restitution of the princess' belongings had the potential to be equated with the banquets organized on the occasion of Charles' marriage to Margaret of York in 1468, when he bestowed lavish gifts on her.  While in Curtius' original text the princess was the daughter of Ochus' son, in the translation she is designated as the *niece* of Ochus, with the caveat that she may have been "procreated by his son."[15] The word *niece* was obviously introduced to create a better linkage between this Achaemenid princess, and Margaret of York, who was a niece of Edward IV of England (r. 1461-83). It clearly shows that Vasco da Lucena was part of the production team of this manuscript, and was deliberately altering the Latin text in order to maximize the linkage possibilities between the Alexander stories and events involving Charles the Bold.

In commissioning this wonderfully enigmatic manuscript, Jean d'Auxy meant to amuse Charles; but he also wanted to endear himself with his prince. Thus, he figures in many scenes to remind his prince of his long years of service. On folio 133v he appears as man of arms in the bottom left corner (next to the throne), with his characteristic beard and pointed cap. On folio 123, as Charles' First Chamberlain, he is the one who brings the new bride to the banquet. To emphasize that the scene is also about a wedding, the initials A (for Alexander) and R (for Alexander's wife Roxanne) are knotted together by a cord in the Burgundian manner, and placed on the canopy above Alexander/Charles. But in a double play on this pair of letters, they also appear—unknotted—on the chest of the Chamberlain's companions; these were to remind that his companions were from the twin cities of Audenarde and Rupelmonde, the garrisons of which were under the command of Jean d'Auxy. Such enigmatic details must have delighted not only the recipient of the manuscript but all those involved in the project.

## *The Persian context*

Strangely, whereas the above mentioned *History of Alexander the Great* manuscript was the culminating point in image sophistication for Renaissance painting, a similarly enigmatic manuscript, the *AbuSa`id-Nāmeh*, marked the starting point for Persian courtly painting.

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[14] The transformation of Bagoas into a maiden also created a better fit for another illustration on folio 226, in which Bagoas is cast in the role of Charles' mother; Soudavar 2008, p. 84.

[15] "Icelle dame doncques interroguee de son estre respõdr estoit niepce de Ocus qui avoit regne en Perse unpou devant Si etoit procree de son fils et femme de.. » ; Soudavar 2008, pp. 73-74.

As explained before, the advent of Islam had created an environment in which Persian courts had shunned painting. But the colorful array of Persian poetry offered a great potential for illustration, one that was in need of the right impetus to flourish on its own. The impetus came through a fortuitous observation in the course of producing copies of the *Jāme`ot-tavārikh* (Universal History) written under the supervision of the great Il-Khānid vizier, Rashid-od-din Fazlollāh (d. 1319). The text of this historical work had been prepared in competition with a similar project launched in China. The Il-Khāns of Iran being vassals to the Yuans of China, often tried to emulate their overlords in cultural activities. And since the Yuans had continued the Chinese tradition of compiling the history of past dynasties, the Il-Khānids too wanted to have an "official" history of the lands over which they ruled. It began of course with the history of the Mongols, but was subsequently expanded to include the history of the Iranian lands, as well as the Muslim world and neighboring countries, from the dawn of creation to the last of the Il-Khānids. It thus covered the legendary and mythical dynasties, which were also to be found in the versified Persian epic, the *Shāh-nāmeh* or *Book of Kings* (compiled at the end of the 10th century). Illustrated copies of the *Jāme`ot-tavārikh* were produced and sent out to the main capital of the Islamic kingdoms; and it is in the course of preparing one such a copy, that somebody in the entourage of Rashid-od-din—or perhaps the vizier himself—saw similarities between the Mongol history and the early history of Iran, and the possibility to superimpose the former on the *Shāh-nāmeh*. Indeed, the 1314 copy of the *Jāme'-ot-tavārikh* at Edimburgh University, already makes use of the story of Rostam to invoke the story of the Mongol Great Khan, Qubilāy (r. 1260-94) who had moved the seat of the empire to Beijing. Both had a treacherous brother that they ultimately had to kill. Consequently, the *Jāme'-ot-tavārikh* illustration depicts Rostam not in his usually tiger-skinned armor but in the robe of Chinese emperors, and in the image of Mongol Great Khan (fig. 16).[16]

Blending the Mongols into the fabric of the legendary *Shāh-nāmeh* served the purpose of legitimizing them in the eyes of their Iranian constituencies, and at the same time facilitated the Persianization of the Mongols by luring them into the wonderful world of Persian literature and culture. It was a challenging idea, both intellectually and politically.

As a result, a project was conceived to produce a grand illustrated *Shāh-nāmeh* manuscript in which all the images would be doubly layered. The first task was to have a complete and correct *Shāh-nāmeh*; the more there were verses, the more there was a chance of linkage between the history of the Mongols and the *Shāh-nāmeh*. The second was to identify all the illustration possibilities prior to the production of the manuscript. It seems that these two processes dragged on for quite a while. In any event, the project was put on hold upon the death of Rashid-od-din in 1318. It was revived a decade later by the initiative of the latter's son, Ghiyās-od-din, who was the vizier of the last of the great Il-Khānids, Abu-Sa`id Bahādor Khān (r. 1316-35). Unlike his predecessors, this young Il-Khān was steeped in Persian literature and intellectual games, and actively participated in the creative process of this *Shāh-nāmeh* project. The span of Mongol history was naturally extended to cover his reign, and thus many of the illustrations pertain to events of his rule. Consequentially, this particular copy of the *Shāh-nāmeh* was later nicknamed *Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh,* and that is how we shall refer to it from here on.

[16] Soudavar 1996, pp. 178-79; Soudavar 2006, pp. 473-74.

## *The Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh*

The text of the *Shāh-nāmeh* includes a sizeable section about Alexander, and as in the case of the *History of Alexander* manuscript for Charles the Bold, its varied episodes provide ample opportunities for linkage. A point in case is *Alexander Coming out of the Land of Darkness* (fig. 18).

The passage through the Land of Darkness allowed an easy linkage with the story of the Kerait chieftain Ong Khān, who after befriending Genghis Khān fell at odds with him. According to the *Jāme`-ot-tavārikh*: In the autumn of 1196, Ong Khān rode with Genghis through a valley called "Qarāun Qabchāl, meaning dark forest," and since he was like a brother to Genghis' father, "they became like father and son."[17] Rather than reflecting the story of Alexander, the illustration incorporates clever pointers to the Mongol episode. To emphasize the "father and son" relationship, Genghis is depicted as a young boy riding a caparisoned horse while the elderly Ong Khān is riding an ass. The difference in mounts was to emphasize the higher status of Genghis, in spite of the acquired affiliation with Ongh Khān. On the other hand, because "Ong" meant king, he is depicted with a golden crown. Many in the lineage of Abu-Sa`id, including his father, had married descendants of Ong Khān; thus the latter had to be honored in this illustration, despite his later rebellion against Genghis.[18]

As for the previously mentioned story of Rostam, it is illustrated in the *Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh* (fig. 17) with the same compositional elements and features adopted in the 1314 copy of the *Jāme`-ot-tavārikh* (fig. 16).

## *The rules of the game*

The production of the *Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh* must have been perceived as a humorous game that involved many a courtier. Initially, the idea was to find corresponding stories between two texts, the *Shāh-nāmeh* and the first volume of the *Jāme`-ot-tavārikh*—which covered the history of the Mongols only. As the project advanced, increasing the number of illustrations became the ultimate goal and thus, the counterpart to the *Shāh-nāmeh,* i.e., the sources of Mongol history, were expanded to include all the writings of Rashid-od-din. But the death of Abu-Sa`id's father, the Il-Khān Uljāytu, in 1316, followed by that of Rashid-od-din, created an opportunity for added illustrations. Since the annals pertaining to the life of Uljāytu had not been closed, new anecdotes were added to match stories of the *Shāh-nāmeh*; and parts of these annals were modified to get a better concordance. Thus, metaphoric language was added to describe Uljāytu's troops in his Gilān campaign, so as to liken them to the fire-spouting iron cavalry that Alexander fielded in his battle with the Fur of India. The relevant section title, which also serves as illustration caption, reads *Alexander Battling the Fur of India - Picture of the Iron Horses and Soldiers* (fig. 19). Traditionally, such section titles consisted of one sentence only; the second one here was added to reveal the nature of the linkage, which was not about the story itself but referred to the armor description—later—incorporated in the annals of the reign of Uljāytu.[19] While in the case of the Burgundian *History of Alexander the Great,* the modification of the initial rules actually reached

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[17] Rashid-od-din (1976), 1:266--67. Rashid-od-din translates Qarāun Qabchāl as "black forest *(bishé)*".
[18] Soudavar 1996, pp. 98-101.
[19] Soudavar 1996, pp. 134-35, 173-75.

“cheating” levels (e.g., “granddaughter” was changed into “niece”), the same objectives were achieved in the Persian case through additional material and metaphoric descriptions.[20]

## *Popularized kingly tradition*

Such was the renown and prestige of Genghis Khān that after the demise of the Il-Khānids, subsequent Turkic rulers of Iran either elevated a puppet Genghisid prince to the throne or married a Genghisid princess to gain nobility. It was then a fortuitous event that the last of the great Il-Khānids was fully versed in Persian literature and had an active library-atelier (*ketābkhāneh*) that produced a number of illustrated manuscripts, the most important of which was the *Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh.* He set a precedent for ensuing rulers who wanted to emulate the Il-Khānids. Tamerlane for instance, tried to outshine the exquisite Korans produced for his Mongol predecessors, by commissioning a magnificently grand Koran copied, which pages measured 210 x 140 cm and weighed approximately one ton.[21] His grandson Bāysonghor (1397-1434), however, tried to surpass the *Abu-Sa`id-nāmeh* by ordering his own version of a grandly illustrated and complex *Shāh-nāmeh* (fig. 20). While it made political sense for rulers to focus on the production of *Shāh-nāmeh*, an expanded repertoire that included other poetical works signaled a higher degree of erudition. Thus, Prince Bāysonghor commissioned a number of illustrated copies of literary works from celebrated Persian poets such as Sa`di and Nezāmi.

After the commission of the *History of Alexander the Great* for Charles the Bold, some other forty manuscripts were produced for Burgundian barons and noblemen. They all wanted to emulate their prince.[22] Similarly, the demand for illustrated manuscripts in the Iranian context expanded rapidly as the nobility began to emulate the rulers, to the extent that in some city as Shiraz they were produced for stock; they were subsequently sold either locally or exported abroad—from India to Anatolia—where the elite boasted a Persian culture. Occasionally, viziers and noblemen would also commission enigmatic manuscripts with double layered illustrations.[23] Embracing intellectual sophistication was no longer a princely privilege.

## *Religious taboos*

One may conclude from the above that the prestige of illustrated manuscripts in the Iranian context came as a result of the relaxation of Islamic orthodoxy under the Mongols. But the same type of prestige must have been associated with a certain group of illustrated manuscripts under the rule of the very orthodox Saljuqs. These were not, however, literary manuscripts but copies of the *Sovar al-kavākeb al-thābeta* (Book of Fixed Stars) of the famous astronomer `Abd-or-Rahmān as-Sufi (903-986). The original work had been dedicated to the Buyid Prince `Azod-od-dowla (r. 949-83) who entertained the most sophisticated court of the Islamic realms, in terms of both Arabic literature and scientific projects. In consideration of the intellectual prestige of this prince, it seems that many subsequent rulers and noblemen tried to emulate him by ordering copies of al-Sufi’s astronomical treatise; for numerous copies—datable to 11-12th centuries—have survived, the most famous being the Bodleian copy (March

[20] Soudavar 1996, pp. 172-76.
[21] Soudavar 1992, pp. 59-62.
[22] McKendrick 1996, pp. 27, 34.
[23] Soudavar 1992, pp. 101-09, 227-35.

144).[24] The latter has a spurious date of 400AH/1009AD but is nevertheless dateable to the 12th century.[25] In it, constellation figures such as the Orion (fig. 21) are drawn with grace and dexterity. The artist was certainly not affected by a supposed Islamic ban on the drawing of human figures. Here, as later on, the emulation of sophisticated princely activities trumped religious taboos.

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[24] Wellesz 1959, pp. 1-26.
[25] Soudavar 1999, pp. 260-64.