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The Book-Illumination under the Il-Khanid rulers and the Mongolian influence on further miniature-styles

The subject of this contribution is intended as a kind of answer to the still wide-spread conviction that the Mongolian invasion into Middle and Near East in the 13th century marked a complete cultural hiatus. Visiting the different monuments and excavations during the last year's Silk Road Expedition through the five republics of Central Asia - the so-called "Steppe-Route" – historical explanations of the different scholars too often found an abrupt end by the statement: "And then the Mongolian storm sets in". The arrival of the Mongols was understood as a synonym for "total devastation", "holocaust" and "break of every cultural manifestation", i.e. the beginning of long lasting "dark-ages" – if we want to use a term that was hitherto exclusively applied to the history of the mass migration in the early mediaeval occident. The wide field of Book Illumination easily gives proof of the fact that the reign of the Mongolian dynasties did not extinguish the existing pictorial tradition at all. On the contrary the new rulers took over this excellent medium for their own representational claims. In adding new elements such as Chinese and Mongolian iconographical items to the art of Illumination, this "new" style even out lived the end of direct Mongolian influence for many centuries.

As well as the Jews and early Christians before them, the Moslems - the youngest among these religious groups with monotheistic belief – knew the prohibition of any representation of God. This shyness of showing or depicting something that can't be shown led to a general fight against idolatry. While Judaism strictly clung to this law, Christianity reconciled itself with the antique heritage after the iconoclasm in the byzantine Orthodox Church and developed Christian art. Another mentality makes itself felt in the Islam. In the Coran prohibition of image isn't really mentioned anywhere. The only allusion is based on the hadith, the sayings of the prophet. The founder of Islam, Mohammed, chosen by God to spread his message, was considered as a common human being without supernatural powers.

Probably as a parallel to the ascension of Alexander the Great a miniature from Herat dated 1495 represents the ascension of Prophet Mohammed above the Ka'aba. DIA 1

Although the mosque remains without icons and the decoration of the holy monument is limited to purely abstract ornamentation, book-illustrations – even with religious contents have been excluded from iconoclasm. This open-minded attitude towards figural representation is of course especially blatant in profane art – exemplified for instance by the wonderful wall-paintings in the Syrian residences of the early Ommayad rulers of the 7th/8th century A.D.

Under the subsequent Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad literature in a broader sense was flourishing to a hitherto unknown degree. Many Greek authors were translated into Arabic and the scientific writings on astronomy, mathematics and medicine had been illustrated following the Greek and the early Byzantine traditions

The two scientists in "The medical matter" of Dioscurides are still depicted on the typical late antique golden background. DIA2

In the same tradition stands the naturalistic representation of wine leaves in another manuscript – both probably originating from Baghdad. DIA 3.

Since the 8th century A.D. the Arabs from the West and different Turkic tribes from the East pushed forward to Persia and Mesopotamia. They met a strong local antique tradition, which had been upheld under the Sassanian dynasty, especially in the field of monumental painting. Arab invaders admired the frescoes in the palace of Ktesiphon near Baghdad. The wall painting in Nishapur in the Chorassan, the capital of the Samanids shows stylistic elements as we know them for example from the frescoes of the 6th and 7th century in Pendjikent, a city 60 km east of Samarkand.

When in the 11th century the Seldjuq arrived from the central Asian steppes, one tribe, the Rums advancing to Anatolia, the other, the Ghuz after having destroyed local principalities, establishing their power until 1194 in Persia and Mesopotamia. Bringing with them figurative art tradition, like the one of the Uighurs in Turfan, they introduced for the first time eastern elements to the local art.

Not only has the round faced with its long almond-shaped eyes, flat nose and small lips, but also the fashion of central-Asian costumes appeared from now on in painting, and also in sculpture: As a typical example I show you an Iranian head in stucco from the 12th cent. now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. DIA 4.

By comparing a cosmological illustration from the Seldjuq period (DIA 5) with the moon-goddess on a fresco from Pendjikent (DIA 6), we realize the iconographical dependence on central-Asian examples.

In the late 12th century Seldjuq predominance – at least in the east of the Seldjuq empire – decayed. When in 1215 Mongols conquered Peking, the strong cavalry of Nomad tribes could be combined with the efficient Chinese siege technique. In a few years the Mongol invaders besieged and took important cities like in 1220: Buchara, Samarkand, Rayy, Chodschent and Urgentsch – and one year later: Merv, Nishapur and Balch. The farthest extent was reached in 1260, when the Mongol commander Hulagu was halted in Syria by the Mamluks firm Mongol rule can be said to date from the capture of Baghdad in 1258. Soon, after Mesopotamia and Persia were united under the control of the Il-Khanid Mongol dynasty, which lasted until 1336. The capital was transferred to Tabriz. The Il-Khanid rulers stood in a very regular relationship to the occident. Khan Argun sent messages to the pope and the kings of France and England. As emissaries of the pope and king Louis the Saint of France, in the mid-thirteenth century, the European missionaries Carpini and Rubruk came to Mongolia.

Book-Illumination very often reflects such audience scenes. DIA 7.

Intense commercial connections existed with Italy: On this context we can mention the mission of Marco Polo and his important book of travels. In Tabriz lived people from Venice, Geneva and Pisa, who had their consulates and commercial houses. The Polo's sent a Chinese bride to Khan Argun, but she arrived only after his death in Tabriz. Under the rule of Khan Ghazan Mahrnud (1295-1304) Jews and Christians were important civil servants. A big palace, a library and a hospital were built. Chinese specialists worked as gastronomes, surgeons and engineers of hydraulic structures.

The court life at Tabriz around 1300 with its strong Mongolian influence in ceremonial and costumes is illustrated on this miniature, where the persons fill the whole page and create a free pictorial space. DIA 8.

Rashid-al Din, a Jew, who converted to Islam, served Ghazan as vezir. He was one of the most prominent personalities in the I-Khanid-Period. He founded a university and an academy and different schools in Tabriz. By his order a big world chronicle was written. In

this universal history were compiled Biblical, Buddhist, Chinese and Islamic legends and episodes, with a predominance of scenes from the life of Buddha and Mohammed. A big part which is nowadays lost was probably also dedicated to the history of the Mongols. For this big enterprise a couple of foreign scientists and artists were needed; they came from all over the empire: Mongols, Uighurs, Persians and Turks, representing all the different confessions: Buddhism, Shamanism, Islamic and cast Christian belief.

Out of this manuscript, the so called "Jami al-Tawarik", now in the Edinburgh University Library, which dates from 1306, I show you the folio, which illustrates the legend of "The Prophet Jeremiah". DIA 9. God caused the Prophet to die for a hundred years because of his lack of faith and then brought him and his donkey back to life.

Beside this world chronicle of Rashid-al-Din, another very important illustration type was created under the Mongolian predominance: the heroic epic. In the beginning of the 11th century, the poet Firdauzi had written the famous "Shah-nama", the king's book, based on the oral tradition of an old Iranian heroic song. But during three centuries the work had never been illustrated. It needed the influence of the pictorial language of the East for the ice to be broken. Except the luxurious edition destined for the court, there must have existed also a lot of popular editions. From then on the "Shah-nama" and its illustrations was considered for centuries as a cultural common property of the whole Islamic world.

From the same "Siwh-nama"-Manuscript, dated around the year 1330, nowadays dispersed in different American collections (Cambridge, Cleveland and Detroit) we see:

DIA 10: "Bahram Gur who kills the dragon". DIA 11: In the upper miniature "The hero Rustam, who kills Isfandiyar and in the lower the illustration of the 40 days lasting "Battle between Ardashir and Ardawan"

DIA 12: In the last scene "Bahram Gur kills Karg (a monster half wolf half rhinoceros)

Also the invention of landscape-painting in the Tabriz-illumination schools goes back to Mongol influence. Until then nature was only represented in a rudimentary way, some plants were added on the standing-line of the persons. As a novelty, nature is observed now from the bird's perspective. A panorama-like view contains in the same moment depth and width. Cloudy heavens, Rocky Mountains and whirling waters now form the surroundings of the persons who very often appear or disappear in these landscape elements like in the scenery

of a theatre. The plastically rendered "thunderstorm"-clouds, the coloring of the rocks in marble technique and the linear ornaments of the waves in the water of brooks and streams are all unthinkable without Chinese model, and arc still to be observed in Safavid times, like on this example from the mid-15th cent (DIA 13).

Largeness and solitude of nature are masterfully expressed in a seasonal picture of wintertime, with two lonely horsemen in the mountains (DIA 14).

That the Il-Khanid-Period was of fundamental importance for the entire Persian Illumination-Schools, emerges also from a rare written source. In 1544 Dush Muhammad, the librarian of Shah Bahram Mirza, wrote his book about "The relationship of the painters of yesterday to those of today". He stressed the fact that under Abu Sa'id, the last of the Il-Khanid princes (1317-1335) a new pictorial style had been introduced, that was still valid in his times, that is in the Safavid Period. From Dush Muhammad we also know that the king's poem "Shahnama" had its parallels during Il-Khanid times in the "Chingiznama", the book about Chingis Khan and in the "Abu-Sayyid-nama", the book about the last Mongol ruler. Both manuscripts, which are lost today, have been illustrated by Ahmad Musa, the most famous artist in the Il-Khanid-workshops in Tabriz. Dush Muhammad says about Ahmad Musa that "he lifted the veil from the face of painting", that "he invented the new painting".

The illustrations of the travels of the prophet, "Miraj-nama" from 1360-70, now in the Istanbul Topkapi Serail probably show the hand of Ahmed Musa: "Offering of a town to the prophet ". There had been big discussions whether this city rather represents Constantinople or Medina. DIA 15.

In 1335 Abu Sa'id, the last Mongol ruler had died, but the continuity of the artistic inventions under the Il-Khanids was granted by the fact that Ahmad Musa in his later years was the teacher of Shams al-Din. Shams al-Din worked already for the first Gilarid-Khan, Uways Gialais (1356-74).

"Isfandiyar kills the animal karg, a miniature from a "Shah-nama" also in Istanbul, has been attributed to Shams al-Din (about 1375) DIA 16.

The 3rd artistic generation was represented by the Gilarid painter Jumayd. In Dush Muhammad's opinion he was one of the best scholars of Shams al-Din.

The illustrations of three by Khwaju Kirmani (1396), today in the British Museum in London, are attributed to Jumayd. You see here "Humay and Azar Afuz who find Bizhad drunken". DIA 17.

The Safavid calligraph, librarian and chronist Dush Muhammad refers the consciousness of pictorial tradition not only from the 11- Khanid to the Gilarid -Dynasty, but also the continuity of the same style to the Timurid period and later on. Timurlenk, the founder of the Timurid dynasty established his new residence in Samarkand.

Probably he also transferred there the painting-school, formerly in Tabriz. The region of Turkestan, from which Timur originated, began to play a much more important role.

The so called Siyah Qalem foils, most of them today conserved in the Istanbul Topkapi-Serail, command the highest possible interest in this context. Siyah Kalem, black pin, - even when it figures as a later signature in a very incompetent writing on a part of the drawings -, isn't the name of an artist.

The drawings can be divided into two groups: Representations of religious and of nomadic life. The first category is to be considered under the influence of shamanism (DIA 18). The hybrid beings (DIA 19) wear a half human, half bestial aspect. They frighten by their demoniac grimaces; they dance (DIA 20) and fight with each other, they steal men or horses.

A painted silk, probably made around 1400 in Herat, shows the same very Chinese style. It represents an imperial couple carried by monsters and accompanied by an ailed genius holding a baldachin. DIA 21.

In the second group we are confronted with the hard life of the nomads in the steppe. The feet of these always moving men are as big as their faces (DIA 22). We can see, how they behave in their caravans, how they prepare meals or wash their clothes during their stops in the desert. DIA 23.

The depicting of caravan scenes has a long tradition. The drawing of a camel's caravan from Mazar Tagh, now in New Delhi, dates from the 8th cent (DIA 24). Another impressive picture in Berlin from the "World chronicle" of Rashid-al-Din, shows, how the

Mongol warriors (with their famous composite bows) used the sexual instinct of horses to make an ambush to the enemy (DIA 25).

In three examples from the so-called 15th century-Saray-album in Istanbul, originating probably from Herat, the long-lasting influence of the Siyah-Qalem style can be observed.

DIA 26: A pure animal study of a lion and a bull,

DIA 27: A warrior with his horse,

DIA 28: A hunting scene.

The dating of the Siyah Qalem drawings varies between 1200 and 1500. Probably there are some archaisms to be observed, but even when we accept a later dating, the fact must be stressed that they had surely their earlier exact forerunners. Scholars like Aurel Stein, le Coq, Richard Ettinghausen and Mazhar Ipsiroglu think that they are the work of different artists, working in Transoxania or Turkestan. In any case this rude, so-called Mongol-style has absolutely nothing to do with the Persian tradition. When we have a look at other Timurid illumination we are aware of certain monumentality in the representation of human beings. Landscape is less important than during the Il-Khanid or the Ghilarid period and a very fresh new impulse of Chinese elements can be felt.

Two court ladies. Painting on silk, perhaps from Samarkand 1400 (DIA 29). An album leaf, probably originating from Transoxania, and once more conserved in the Topkapy Serail in Istanbul, depicts the activities on a trade road. It is not so much the commerce of silk, but those of vessels in precious metal or painted Chinese porcelain, which attracts here our interest.

It would be interesting to follow artistic development further on in Islamic miniatures. During the Safavid dynasty in Persia as well as during the Ottoman Empire in Turkey it would be possible to find concrete relics of Mongolian influence. The Osman sultan Suleyman the first, the predecessor of Suleyman the Magnificent, during his conquest of Persia not only robbed the majority of Persian illuminated books in Tabriz, but the year 1514 was also marked by Suleyman's order to transfer a hundred Persian artists and craftsmen to Istanbul. On the basis of such facts not only the high estimate of these masterpieces is evident, but the continuity of this art is also historically been proved.