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AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE HAMZA-NĀMA, THE EARLIEST MUGHAL
MANUSCRIPT

By...

H. Goetz

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If it had not been illustrated for the first Mughal em-
or more correctly the Dāstān-i Amīr Hamza, would be forgotten to-day. It is one of
those clusters of more or less silly adventure and fairy tales such as have accumulated
round the names of legendary heroes, far inferior to the Thousand-and-One-Nights,
Firdausi's Shāhnāma, or Nizāmi's Iskandarnāma. Not even its authorship is quite
certain; by some it is attributed to Nāsir-ud-dīn Muhammad Tūsī, by others to Abū'l-
Ma'ālī, or Mullā Jatal Balkhī. But it may have pleased the restless horsemen of the
13th century when Iran lay prostrate under the armies of the Khwārezmshāh and, then,
the barbarian Mongol hordes. And for the same reasons it may have appealed also to
the first Mughal emperors of India and their courtiers, tossed about in amazing adven-
tures from Turkistan to Kābul and Delhi, from Bengal and Gujarāt through the Thar
Desert to Sind and Iran, and again to Kābul, Hindustan, Bengal and Gujarāt, amidst
the strange surroundings not only of wild mountains and haunted deserts, but also of
Hindu idolaters feared for their magic powers. To them the tale of the heroic advent-
ures of Hamza and 'Alī, the uncle and nephew of the prophet Muhammad, against
unbelievers and demons was a glorification of their own wild fights with barbarian
Oezbeg nomads, Shi'ite heretics and Hindu heathens.

The real Hamza had not been quite so glamorous. Born A. D. 569, about one
year before his nephew, Hamza ibn 'Abdu'l-Muttalib had been famous for his strength
and prowess. But for a long time he had opposed the prophet, until in 615 he was de-
finitively converted to Islam. In 622 Hamza accompanied Muhammed in his flight to
Medina, the famous "Hijra" which proved to be the turning-point in the fate of the
new religion. In the following years he commanded several expeditions against the
Quraish, as the "Lion of God," the first bearer of the "Standard of Faith," but lost
e disastrous battle of Uhud 625, bitterly lamented by the prophet. No
legends grew round the name of this hero, expanding his deeds to a com-
ation of the Muslim victories which under the first four caliphs were to
empire extending from the Indus and Oxus to the shores of the Atlantic.

Though not the oldest painting, the Hamza-Nāma represents nevertheless the
oldest illustrated manuscript of the early Mughal school, and also the most extra-
ordinary one. For in contrast to the general custom of Islamic and Indian painting, the

illustrations of the Hamza-Nāma are of considerable size (our picture measures 28×22 inches). According to Akbar's historian Abū'l-Fazl (Ā'in-i Akbarī, ch. 34): "The Story of Hamza was represented in twelve volumes, and clever painters made the most astonishing illustrations for no less than one thousand and four hundred passages". In another passage he adds that Mīr Sayyid 'Alī of Tabriz, the famous painter whom Humāyūn had engaged during his exile in Persia, executed the illustrations. But it is obvious that such an ambitious work needed the efforts of many artists over many years so that Mīr Sayyid 'Alī can be responsible only for the supervision of the whole work and the execution of certain of its highlights. For first in the course of the 16th century the individual artist began to come to the front, and even under Akbar painting was the collective product of a workshop in which the single painters contributed one the general design, another the illumination, others specializing in animal or human figures and portraits, trees and plants, or the ornaments on the buildings, furniture, textiles, etc. illustrated.

As a matter of fact the style of the still extant illustrations of the Hamza Nāma little resembles that of the miniatures signed by Mīr Sayyid 'Alī which we know from other manuscripts of Akbar's time. The figures are animated, but their movements are conventional, most faces mere types with hardly any individual expression. Architecture and landscape are like a set of card-board stage decorations clumsily put together. The clouds often are crude repetitions of the traditional Chinese pattern. The composition shows the bird's-eye view of the whole scene combined with the direct side view of details, characteristic for earlier Persian miniatures. The colours are, on the whole, strong, but their harmony is often poor, and the mountain backgrounds are generally so exaggeratedly modelled as to throw the rest of the picture back into flatness. All these are characteristics which are known to us of the more provincial type of later Timurid painting in Turkistan, and also of the few other genuine early Mughal paintings, *e. g.* two illustrations in the Jahāngīr Album in Berlin. But what differentiates the Hamza-Nāma paintings from those latter, is the early introduction of contemporary Indian costumes, first, of course, for the adversaries of Hamza. But this extensive set of 1375 pictures cannot have been completed before the days of Akbar's cultural reforms. Thus there exists at least a number of illustrations which reveal the Persian style at its best, especially in delicious scenes of gardens with plane trees, vine bowers, tanks and rivulets. Into the late works also Hindu subjects are introduced, temples and idols, Rājput girls, genre scenes from Indian village life. And some of these latter must be the work of those Hindu artisans who were trained in Akbar's ateliers,

At present very little of this gigantic set of pictures survives, and it has even been suggested that Akbar himself may have started its break-up. For with his increasing Hindu inclinations and the promulgation of his eclectic Dīn-i-Ilāhī the glorification of a Muslim religious war must have become offensive to him, and the seals on certain sheets

create the impression that he gave away part of the pictures as presents to his courtiers. Until the outbreak of this war the largest set of illustrations to the *Hamza-Nāma*—61 pictures—was preserved in the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna; other 25 are in the India Museum; South Kensington, some more have found their way to the Brooklyn and Philadelphia Museums in the U. S. A., the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin and a few private collections. The picture here published is said to have come from Paris and is at present the only example in an Indian museum of that earliest illustrated Mughal manuscript.

Our painting belongs to the earlier type in the late Timurid style of Turkestan, except for the Indian pagris on the heads of some of the horsemen. To conclude from the fragments of the text, it illustrates the progress of Hamza's soldiers into North Western Iran. As translated by Mr. A. B. Patel, M. A. (Baroda High School), it reads as follows:

"A narrator says that when *Khawāja* 'Umar and the Muslim army besieged the castle, *Khawāja* Umar said, "Raihān Shāh of the Western country wrote that thirty merchants were lying near the base of the Caucasus mountain. They met us and gave the news that Amir Hamza had been killed by the demon 'Afrīt." He (Raihān Shāh) gave that letter to an old man and said, "Go at once and carry it to Bahmak and tell him that Raihān Shāh has sent me to you." When the letter was received by Bahmak, he was pleased and he brought it to Hormaz who said, "Give this news to *Khawāja* 'Umar." He (Hormaz) gave that letter to Zōpīn and sent him to *Khawāja* 'Umar. *Khawāja* 'Umar said to the messenger of Zōpīn, "He has forged a lie and wishes to deceive us thereby. I know his tricks better than his father and God may forbid, if one hair of the head of Amīr Hamza may have been lost, and the work should have been done by me alone, I shall destroy the whole world." The man who had brought the letter, went back and said to Zōpīn Bahmak what he had heard from unwise 'Umar, who exhibited his bravery and sprang up and said, "You should know it for certain that on account of the contents of the letter the efforts and diligence of these people will not be slackened. Now it is proper that I should continue the fight, and by surrounding the sides of the mountain we should make the work difficult for them." And the next day Hormaz desired that the drum of battle should be beaten and Zōpīn advanced with the army and from the other side 'Umar with his seventy brothers who served the Governor of that mountain with honest purpose, climbed that mountain with ropes. They spared women and killed men, but when they could not accomplish the work, they beat the drum for retreat and all went to their places for rest."

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