

By Sabuhi AHMADOV,
PhD in History

UNMANNED ARMORED VEHICLES ON 14TH-CENTURY TABRIZ MINIATURE: FORESIGHT OF A MEDIEVAL ARTIST?

The Tabriz school of miniature painting rightfully occupies an outstanding place in the world's medieval art. However, only a handful of people will know that one can also find futuristic ideas in the works of medieval Tabriz artists. Particularly noteworthy in this

respect is the manuscript of the so-called "Great Tabriz Shahnameh", or the "Demotte Shahnameh". It is considered the most magnificent monument in the history of miniature painting in the Muslim East.

Our attention was drawn to the miniature "Iskander's Iron Horsemen in the Battle against the Indian King Porus (Fur)" from this manuscript.

Before describing the miniature, let us briefly touch upon the manuscript. As is well known, "The Shahnameh" is a poem by outstanding poet Abul-Qasem Ferdowsi (940-1020). This work, considered to be the longest poem belonging to one author (its volume is twice as large as the volume of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined), is replete with a huge number of diverse plots. The poem was repeatedly rewritten during the Middle Ages and illustrated, with min-

Miniature "Iskander's Iron Horsemen in the battle against the Indian king Porus (Fur)"



"Iron Horseman" (drone) and its operator (actual rider in the second row) (fragment of a miniature)



miniature artists depicting the subjects and characters of the poem in the clothing and interior of their era, not the era of the 9-11th centuries. Therefore, miniature illustrations to the poem are considered to be sources not for the era of Ferdowsi, but for the era in which the artist lived. The most famous illustrated manuscript of the poem is considered to be the one made in Tabriz by local artists in the 1330-1340s. At that time, Azerbaijan was part of the Mongolian state of Ilkhans. It is believed that after the official adoption of Islam under Ghazan Khan (1295-1304), the Mongol upper class joined the cultural life of the country. As Profes-

or Jamila Hasanzadeh, a prominent researcher of the history of Tabriz miniature painting, wrote, "from this time onwards, the Turko-Mongols and the Ilkhanid state



*"Iron Horseman" (drone)
(fragment of a miniature)*

Armored vehicle LAV-150 Commando, AFV Cockerill 90 mm Gun (USA)



began to actively join the Muslim civilization, of which Azerbaijani culture in all its manifestations, including artistic ones, had been an integral part for many centuries”.

According to Western art historians, the Tabriz “Shahnameh” of the 1330-1340s had a huge number of illustrations for those times – 190 illustrations on 280 sheets, which was why it was called “The Great Tabriz Shahnameh” or “The Great Ilkhanid Shahnameh” (earlier it was named “The Great Mongolian Shahnameh”, but as different sheets were discovered and the names of the artists were established, this name was no longer used as the manuscript had nothing to do with Mongolian culture). The manuscript remained in Tabriz until the beginning of the 16th century, but then, due to the transfer of the capital, it moved with the Shah’s court and by the end of the 19th century it ended up in Tehran. What happened to the manuscript then is a mystery. It is only known that a certain Hagop Kevorkian (1872-1962) transported it from Tehran to Paris. As an American archaeologist, he conducted excavations on the territory of the Qajar state in 1903 and 1907 and then organized the sale of oriental antiques in London, New York and Paris. History is silent as to who gave the archaeologist

the right to appropriate and sell the found artifacts. It is also unclear how this archaeologist was selling not archaeological objects, including manuscripts, at all. Researcher M. Volait, in a paper published in 2012, attributes H. Kevorkian to a group of “notorious Armenian art dealers in Paris, which also included Dikran Khan Kelekian and Antoine Brimaud”. She believes it was this group that moved the trade in Islamic antiquities from Damascus and Cairo to Paris, London and New York. Kevorkian donated part of his collection to a number of major museums in the United States, which secured him favorable treatment of the Western scientific and art history community. He established a foundation in his own name and also introduced his relatives to the trade in Islamic art. The “sensitive” Western scientific and art community did not question the archaeologist, who finally moved to the United States, about the source of his inexhaustible Islamic works, although by that time his “archaeological” research had long since ended. His relative Shemavan Malayan sold “The Great Tabriz Shahnameh” to art dealer George Joseph Demotte (1877-1923) in 1910.

Jamila Hasanzadeh, in her article “Fates of Manuscripts, Fates of People”, describes the history of the



Russian miniature from the "Lyceum Chronicle". 1568-1576

the Qajar Shah of the early 20th century wandering around Parisian stores without money (which his attendants did not have either), but with a pile of ancient manuscripts, which he sold to raise money. Thirdly, what kind of a dress could he buy by selling a manuscript for nothing? At the same time, it is known that the commander-in-chief of the Qajar army in 1910-1912 was a certain Efrem Davtyan (an Armenian by nationality, in 1909-1910 he was the chief of police of Tehran and the chief of police of the Qajar state), under whom the exports of Islamic antiques to Europe reached fantastic proportions. It is reasonable to conclude that a group of Iranian-Armenian business people, having bought or stolen the manuscript cheaply, took it to Paris, where they spread the above legend, legalizing (in modern language, "laundering") the fact of obvious smuggling.

Demotte, who bought the manuscript of "Shahnameh" from Malalyan, specialized in reselling works of French art, but decided to earn serious money on this manuscript. He launched a whole campaign, giving the manuscript his own name ("the Demotte Shahnameh") and then tore it into

manuscript presented by Armenian dealers. Allegedly, the Shah of Iran and his wife came to Paris, where she asked to buy her expensive dresses. The Shah had no money with him, and a certain Armenian happened to be nearby at that moment and helped him to sell the precious relic of the Middle Ages. In the end, the Shah sold the manuscript for nothing in order to buy his wife expensive French clothes. This story doesn't hold up to scrutiny: first, in 1910 the Shah was Sultan Ahmad, who came to the throne in 1909 at the age of 11. Of course, he was not married and was not in Paris at the specified time (his successor Muzaffaraddin Shah could not be the specified character either. Since 1907, he was busy suppressing the revolution, rebellions and uprisings, and the schedule of his whereabouts is known literally by the day). Secondly, it is difficult to imagine

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the miniature "Iskander's Iron Horsemen in the Battle against the Indian King Porus (Fur)" from the above

A page from the "Great Tabriz Shahnameh" of the 1330-1340s



manuscript is kept in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which is a gallery of Asian art in the Harvard Art Museums in the United States. According to art historians, the author of the miniature is Tabriz artist Ahmed Musa. The miniature depicts the scene of a battle between the troops of Alexander the Great (in Muslim tradition he is called Iskander) and the Indian king Porus (in Muslim literature Fur). As is known, in the battle of Gidaspes (326 BC) Alexander won the last victory of his life by defeating Porus. The Macedonians won this victory at a high cost, first due to the undoubted commanding qualities of Porus and, secondly, because of the mass use of fighting elephants by the Hinds. The turning point of the battle, when the Macedonians managed to force the elephants to turn back, attracted the attention of medieval poets and artists. It was common to describe Iskander's (Alexander's) heroic warriors with traditional weapons, but the above-mentioned Tabriz miniature of

the 14th century depicts a technical novelty. Art historians have repeatedly described it, paying attention to the expression of the image, the color scheme, the effect of billowing clouds and dust, and the huge golden flames. However, the technical aspects of the depicted plot was not analyzed, although it is very interesting.

Ferdowsi describes the battle as follows: "Hardly had Fur heard of the army coming when he chose a wide field for the battle. He led a countless army forward to the field... The spies rushed back from the Hindi camp and told the Shah (i.e. Iskander - S.A.): the enemy's elephants are such that they can trample any army. They move, crushing everything on their way, so the cavalry will not be able to withstand the danger. Their trunks rise up to the sky... Then they depicted the monster and put the paper with the drawing before the king. He ordered his craftsmen to get to work – to make a wax elephant. Then he asked his wise men: whoever will

find a remedy against such monsters...? The king then summons the most skillful blacksmiths from different parts of the world. No less than thirty hundred of them came from Misra, Pars and other cities. The horse was forged by them in due time - a saddle of iron, an iron rider. Having sewed up all the cracks with nails and copper and filled the horse with black oil, they set it on fire from inside and brought it in a chariot to the king ... The crowned one looked at it and thought and ordered to make ten thousand more such horses and riders. Who has seen iron fighters riding gray horses! A new month came and the matter was over, the wise man solved the wise task ... Iskander led the army forward. Far saw the approaching army from afar... The dust rose like a pillar over the battlefield. The oil in the iron horses was set on fire by the Rumiyans, and the Hinds were in confusion. It wasn't riders on horses, it was burning iron that was rushing towards them. The Hind warriors shouted in vain, heating the fighting elephants with spikes – their trunks were already scorched, the huge elephants were stumbling in fear and riders trembling. The Hind warriors were already rushing back in horror."

So, according to the poem, Iskander moved horses made of iron and iron riders filled with oil inside against the Indian army with elephants. After approaching the enemy, the Macedonians set fire to the oil and the elephants were scorched and fled in fear.

Let's now have a look at how the Tabriz painter depicted this. We see the first row of iron riders moving on wheels (four wheels on each horse), spewing flames and driven by real riders galloping in the second row. They are steered by means of red ropes. Thus, the Tabriz painter thought about what Ferdowsi had not imagined: how to set the iron riders in motion? How to control them if they have to cover the distance to the enemy army, if they are filled with oil and if they will need to be set on fire?

As a result, the Tabriz artist depicted something similar to a modern armored vehicle with cannon armament. The role of the cannon in the miniature is played by a spear extended forward by an iron rider. But amazingly, the Tabriz artist managed to show another incredible innovation for that time - unmanned vehicles. After all, there is no crew inside the iron rider (armored vehicle, in modern terms), it is controlled remotely – albeit not by radio beam, but by ropes. It is eventually controlled by the operator and at a distance.

For comparison, let's look at a miniature from the "Lyceum Chronicle", a Russian chronicle from the era of

Tsar Ivan the Terrible. It was compiled in 1568-1576 especially for the tsar's library and is replete with illustrations. The Russian artist depicted a similar plot (attack of enemy elephants by burning horsemen) simply and artlessly: red-hot warriors placed in wagons and galloping horses spewing fire. How can horses spewing fire (i.e. not alive) gallop? How can red-hot warriors set the enemy on fire if they are placed on ordinary wooden wagons? Why don't the wagons burn? After all, red-hot riders are placed on them. These questions are not answered by the work of the Russian artist.

It turns out that the Tabriz artist artistically depicted someone's technical idea (his own or some court "technician's"), trying to illustrate the plot of the poem in a technically competent way. Tabriz miniatures were created in the library of the ruler, and not only expensive paints were used, but also gold (as in this miniature). Therefore, when depicting remotely controlled horsemen, the artist was sure that he would be understood and understood correctly. Had there been any previous experiments with such weapons and techniques? Only future research can answer this question. ❀

The miniature "Iskander's Iron Warriors" is taken from the resource: "Ilkhanid Illustrations in Great Mongol (Demotte) Shahnameh. Tabriz, Iran, p. 1335."

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