Bizhan killing the wild boars of Irman: an illustrated page and a text page from a Shahnama of Firdausi (cat.3)

Deccan, Bijapur, circa 1610
Ink, opaque watercolor and gold on gold-sprinkled paper, text above and below in nast’aliq script in black ink with interlinear gold
The text page with twenty-five lines of nast’aliq script and heading in red thuluth script on gold giving the heading of the story of the combat of Rustam and Sohrab
Page: 8¼ x 4¾ in (20.6 x 12.1 cm)
Miniature: 2½ x 2¾ in (6.4 x 7 cm)
Provenance:
Acquired from Terence McNerney, New York, July 1980

This illustration is from an important manuscript of the Shahnama made at the court of Bijapur in the early years of the 17th century. At least eleven illustrated folios survive, along with a handful of unillustrated text pages. In addition to the present pages, they are as follows: five in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1985.404.1; 1982.476.3; 1983.354.2; 1983.354.1; 1985.405.1); one in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.81.12); one in the Asian Arts Museum of San Francisco (1990.219); two in the San Diego Museum of Art (1990.437.2-4); one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (S.75-1993); two published in McNerney 1982, nos.18a-b; one published in Sotheby’s 1994, lot 131 (and possibly one each in the Rietberg Museum, mentioned by Falk in Sotheby’s 1994, but not confirmed). It is noticeable that all the extant folios fall within a relatively small part of the Shahnama as a whole, namely a portion of around 15% of the text from the story of Rustam and Sohrab to the later episodes of Kai Khusrau’s reign. Thus it seems that the only surviving part of the manuscript to have been so far discovered is this section.

The episode illustrated here concerns Bizhan, the son of Giv and one of the great heroes of the Shahnama. He comes to the aid of the people of Irman (Armenia) to rid them of a herd of enormous wild boar that are ravaging their fields and crops. The story is as follows:

“They reached the forest of wild boar; the animals were milling about with no knowledge that Bizhan had saddled his horse to deal with them, and the young warrior was enraged by their number and the effrontery….He entered the forest like a lion and set about shooting arrows at the herd of boar. His war cry was like a spring cloud’s thunder, and the trees; leaves came pattering down like rain. He went after the herd like an enraged elephant, a glittering dagger in his hand; they turned to charge him, tearing up the ground with their tusks, sparking fire where their tusks struck rock, as if they would burn the world. One sprang at Bizhan like a devil, ripping open his armor, then withdrew and rubbed its tusks against a tree, as if it were an armorer honing a sword on a stone. But when it renewed its attack, the young warrior plunged his dagger into its belly, splitting its mammoth body in two. Then the remaining boar scattered like foxes, their bodies wounded, their hearts sick of combat. Bizhan lopped off the heads of those he’d killed with his dagger and fixed them to his saddlestraps.”
(Transl. Davis 2007, p.310)

Despite the fact that the story describes Bizhan killing the boar with both bow and arrow and dagger/sword, the overwhelmingly large proportion of illustrated versions of this scene throughout the history of illustrated copies of the Shahnama, including the present example, depict Bizhan hunting them with a dagger/sword only. Of the forty-six examples of this specific scene viewable on the website of the Cambridge Shahnama Project, only two show Bizhan killing any boar with a bow and arrow (British Library, I.O. Islamic 3265, and Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, Ms. Hamilton 260, http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/index/depiction). The British Library example is an unusual composition that shows several aspects of the story (including Bizhan’s hunting on the way to Irman) all in the same illustration. Even then, it still shows him killing the wild boar with a sword as well as with a bow and arrow. Quite why artists and patrons consistently preferred the sword to the bow and arrow is not clear. The drama inherent in a scene of a mounted warrior leaning forward in the saddle (or even on foot, which several examples show) with a sword in his hand is not significantly greater than that afforded by a similar scene with a bow and arrow. And yet even the earliest examples, from the so-called “Small Shahnmas” of the early 14th century, and an example in the Diez Albums in Berlin of the same period, employ the dagger/sword version.

The illustrations of the present Shahnama exhibit a style that is essentially Deccani and Bijapuri, but with occasional variants. While several of the backgrounds and skyscapes relate to other contemporary Bijapuri manuscript illustrations, such as the Pem Nem produced at Bijapur between 1591 and 1604 (British Library, Add.16880; see figs.3-6 below, and Hutton 2011), the great majority of the human figures are somewhat more Persianate, with more squat physiques and less “Bijapuri” facial types (see figs.1-2 below). The face of Manizeh
in one illustration (LACMA, M.81.12.A) and a female onlooker at the left of the scene of Rustam raising Bizhan from the Pit (V&A, S.75-1993) do show closer links to the Pem Nem facial type, but the others are all closer to the Persianate style we see on this page, which also has echoes of Sultanate style, perhaps indicating a common forebear in Timurid Persia. Even the stylized Chinese clouds in the skies exhibit a stylistic variance, with the examples in this Shahnama again referencing Persian antecedents, while the Pem Nem examples show a more Deccani character (see figs. 5-6 below).

The reason for this differential in specific aspects may lie in the origins of the texts being illustrated; the Shahnama of course being the Persian text par excellence, and of earlier literary origin, while the Pem Nem (Laws of Love) was a Sufi romance written in Dakhni Urdu at Bijapur by Hasan Manjhu Khalji in the late 16th century,
giving it both a local cultural essence and a contemporary immediacy. Thus the artists may have been consciously aligning certain stylistic aspects with the character of the literary text.

A remarkable instance of the early penetration of European motifs into Deccani art is seen in one of the pages from the present manuscript in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982.476.3), where the ship in which Kai Khusrau is travelling is a very accurate depiction of a European carrack, specifically a Portuguese carrack of the 16th century, which had a high stem and stern and was square-rigged on the main and foremost, and lateen-rigged on the mizzenmast, just as shown in the Shahnama illustration (see figs. 7-9 below).

7. A Portuguese carrack of the 15th century
8. Detail of Kai Khusrau Crosses the Sea from the present Shahnama (MMA 1982.476.3)