
The Edinburgh Biruni Manuscript: a mirror of its time?

ROBERT HILLENBRAND

Abstract

*The Chronology of Ancient Nations mirrors both al-Biruni the polymath and Mongol Iran in its wide calendrical, geographical and historical horizons. The pictorial programme highlights multi-ethnicity, Iranian national sentiment and religion: orthodox and heretical Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity (Annunciation and Baptism).*¹

Al-Biruni's *Al-athar al-baqiya 'an al-qurun al-khaliya* — the rhyming title reflects a pervasive fashion among medieval authors using Arabic² — was dedicated to the learned Qabus b. Vashmgir, the Ziyarid ruler of Jurjan.³ That this text has come down to us is in itself a major claim to fame, for most of what al-Biruni wrote has not survived,⁴ and this particular text, moreover, encapsulates many of those interests that set him apart from the mainstream of scientific scholarship in the eleventh-century Muslim world. So it is a peculiarly appropriate survival.⁵ What were those interests? Their scope was truly staggering, embracing as it did disciplines as diverse as mineralogy and medicine, pharmacology and star-lore, ethnography and geography, philosophy and theology, and the measurement of time and distance.⁶ He wrote a book on the astrolabe and in 1018, while in the fortress of Nandana in the Punjab, noticing the curvature of the earth at the horizon, proved to his own satisfaction that the

¹It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to David Morgan, not only a renowned master of Mongol studies but also a universally popular colleague whose genial and encouraging presence has been a force for good in the field for nigh on fifty years.

²A. A. Ambros, "Beobachtungen zu Aufbau und Funktionen der gereimten klassisch-arabischen Buchtitel", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 80 (1990), pp. 13–57.

³E. Yarshater, "Introduction", in *Biruni Symposium. Iran Center Columbia University 1976* (Persian Studies Series No.7), (ed.) E. Yarshater (New York, 1976), p. iii.

⁴B. B. Lawrence estimates that of his 146 works (a conservative estimate) only 22, that is some 15%, have survived ("Al-Biruni's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture", in Yarshater [ed.], *Biruni Symposium*, p. 28). A higher estimate of around 180 is given by D. J. Boilot, "L'Oeuvre d'al-Beruni: Essai Bibliographique", *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire II*, (1956), pp. 161–256 and 391–396. For a figure of 27 surviving works see B. Gafurov, "Abu al-Rayhan Mohammed ibn Ahmad al-Biruni", *The Unesco Courier*, 27th year (June 1974), p. 8.

⁵For the text, see al-Biruni, *Al-athar al-baqiya 'an al-qurun al-khaliya*, (ed.) P. Adhka'i (Tehran, 1380); for an English translation, see C. E. Sachau, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations. An English version of the Arabic text of the Athar-ul-Bakiya of Albiruni, or "Vestiges of the Past", collected and reduced to writing by the author in A.H. 390–1, A.D. 1000* (London, 1879).

⁶See for example the very varied contributions assembled in P. J. Chelkowski (ed.), *The Scholar and the Saint. Studies in Commemoration of Abu'l-Rayhan al-Biruni and Jalal al-Din al-Rumi* (New York, 1975), pp. 1–168.

earth was round and computed its radius at 6,338.6 km, a fraction adrift from the modern figure of 6,353.41 km at the same latitude.⁷ The book that best gives the measure of his intellectual stature, and of his quirkiness, is his *Kitab al-Hind*, a book which takes all India as its subject and is a masterpiece centuries ahead of its time.⁸

The Edinburgh manuscript, whose title means “The monuments of time past and of vanished centuries”, loosely translated by Sachau as “The Chronology of Ancient Nations”, is a work conceived in a similar spirit. Spiced with any amount of curious erudition, it records the calendars used from ancient times onwards in most of the world as al-Biruni knew it, complete with the accounts of the associated festivals and much else of a historical, theological, ethnographic and geographical nature.⁹

This somewhat lengthy preamble brings into sharp focus the first major question posed by the Edinburgh manuscript: why was this thoroughly idiosyncratic text, whose diagrams and tables would have been understandable only to a small coterie of hard-core specialists — geeks and nerds in modern parlance — exhumed at this particular time,¹⁰ some three centuries after its composition, and lent a new and richer lease of life by a full complement of paintings, decorative panels and diagrams?¹¹ Given that the colophon mentions neither the patron nor the place of production,¹² any answer to that question must remain speculative. But the paintings themselves offer clues beyond those contained in the text itself. They serve to highlight themes of special contemporary interest to either the patron, or the painter, or both.¹³ These paintings faithfully reflect the broad intellectual sympathies disclosed by the text itself — the hunger to learn more about the distant past, the keen interest in the sometimes outlandish customs of foreign peoples, and the fascination with Muslim heresies and religions other than Islam. The note of religious tolerance that al-Biruni so often sounds

⁷M. Salim-Atchekzai, “A pioneer of scientific observation”, *The Unesco Courier*, 27th year (June 1974), p. 42.

⁸Lawrence, “Al-Biruni’s Approach”, pp. 27–47. For a brief survey of his work on India, see *idem*, “Indology”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* IV (1990), cols. 285a–287a.

⁹P. P. Soucek, “An Illustrated Manuscript of al-Birūnī’s *Chronology of Ancient Nations*”, in Chelkowski (ed.), *Scholar*, pp. 103–165.

¹⁰One might ask the same question about the copy of the Edinburgh manuscript, including its images, made in Ottoman times; see M. Barrucand, “Kopie – Nachempfindung oder Umgestaltung: Am Beispiel arabischer mittelalterlicher Bilderhandschriften und ihrer osmanischen Kopien”, in B. Finster, C. Fragner and H. Hafenrichter (eds.), *Bamberger Symposium: Rezeption in der Islamischen Kunst vom 26.6-28.6 1992* (Beirut, 1999), pp. 20–23 and pls.II/3–6 to IV/4. See also C. Gruber, “Questioning the ‘classical’ in Persian painting”, *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012), Fig. 4 (accessed 19 June 2012). The most richly illustrated version of al-Biruni’s text, dated 1057/1647–8, is in the Sipahsalar Madrasa, Tehran; see *ibid.*, pp. 18–21 and Fig. 5. See also M. Hattstein and P. Delius (eds.), *Islam. Art and Architecture* (Cologne, 2000), p. 28.

¹¹It is a mistake to consider this manuscript purely in terms of its text and illustrations, for its diagrams and tables — in other words, its entire scientific apparatus — are an integral part of its purpose. See T. Kirk, “The Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript. A Holistic Study of its Design and Images”, *Persica* xx (2005), pp. 43–47.

¹²S. Carboni, “The London Qazwini: an early 14th-century copy of the ‘Aja’ib al-Makhlūqat”, *Islamic Art* III (1988–9), p. 17, suggests Mosul as a possible provenance.

¹³In Ilkhanid painting this notion has been explored almost exclusively in the context of the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. The Biruni manuscript thus strengthens the case for the re-use in Ilkhanid Iran of an older text to carry contemporary messages — and, moreover, it was produced probably a generation or so before the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. The illustrated Bal’ami manuscript may also have been intended to include themes of topical relevance; see T. Fitzherbert, “Bal’ami’s *Tabari*. An illustrated manuscript of Bal’ami’s *Tarjama-yi Tarikh-i Tabari in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington (F59.16, 47.19 and 30.21)*”, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2001, I, pp. 222–223, 291–294, and 304.

also dovetailed with Mongol attitudes to religion.¹⁴ Clearly, then, this obscure, fusty old book struck a resounding contemporary chord. Its information, and the attitude of mind that it reflects, suddenly acquired an unexpected relevance. The reason was not far to seek, namely that Ilkhanid Iran was part of the most extensive continuous land empire in world history, stretching as it did from the Sea of Japan to the Baltic, from Korea to East Germany. That empire necessarily gave its Mongol rulers wide horizons. It lent the customs and religious beliefs of faraway peoples an urgent political immediacy.¹⁵ So al-Biruni's text, far from being a mere anthropological and calendrical curiosity, suddenly transformed itself into a useful almanac and *aide-mémoire*, a reference tool from which a member of either the bureaucratic or the ruling elite could derive benefit. Its pervasive historical bent, like its astonishingly wide intellectual horizons, invites comparison with a much larger contemporary project, namely Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (*Collection of Chronicles*), which was being produced at the very time that the Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript was being copied and illustrated.

So much for the general relevance of al-Biruni's text in the later Ilkhanid period. Other detailed aspects of that relevance will shortly be examined. But first it is necessary to consider, again in general terms, where the Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript belongs in the history of Persian book painting. Its substantial number of illustrations — 25 paintings in all, not to mention the decorative panels, the many diagrams and the various calligraphic embellishments of the text — make it fit neatly into a rapidly developing pattern of illustrated manuscripts produced in Iranian lands from about 1290, in which an ever greater role was allotted to the visual aspects of the book.¹⁶ Artists soon realised that images were significantly, and perhaps intrinsically, more multivalent than words, and that they lent themselves readily to multiple interpretations. Indeed, the fifty years between 1290 and 1340 was a period of experiment and innovation in book painting conducted on a grand scale and at breakneck speed. These few decades set new benchmarks of sophistication and subtlety, and propelled the illustrated book to pole position among contemporary expressions of the visual arts, with the possible exception of architecture. Thus the Edinburgh al-Biruni takes its place alongside contemporary landmarks of book painting like the Morgan Bestiary, the dispersed copy of that same manuscript, the Washington Bal'ami/Tabari, the London Qazwini, the Rashid al-Din manuscripts and the round dozen *Shahnamehs* as a major monument in this sea-change in book production.

When these illustrated manuscripts are considered as a whole, it becomes clear that such books are capable of transmitting a great many messages. These can overlap without any loss of clarity. The Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript is typical of the Ilkhanid school in that, as will shortly appear, it has not one agenda but several, which overlap, interact with and mutually enrich each other. And they also bring into play the imagination of the viewer. So

¹⁴T. Haining, "The Mongols and Religion", *Asian Affairs* XVII (Old Series) 73/1 (1986), pp. 19–32, brings this issue right into the present day.

¹⁵The Mongol habit of deportation and relocation was especially relevant here. T. Allsen, "Ever Closer Encounters: The Appropriation of Culture and the Apportionment of Peoples in the Mongol Empire", *Journal of Modern History* 1/1 (1997), p. 2, notes that the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, when visiting the Mongol capital of Qara Qorum, "met in quick succession a Hungarian servant, a French maid, a Greek soldier, a Nestorian interpreter, a Russian carpenter and a Parisian goldsmith . . . [and later,] Chinese physicians, Uighur scribes, Korean princes, and Armenian priests".

¹⁶S. S. Blair, "The Development of the Illustrated Book in Iran", *Muqamas* 10 (1993), pp. 266–274.

the illustration of the text itself, while it is of central importance, is only a starting point. Often, indeed, the text is so brief that it gives the painter very little to work on, so that he is thrown back on his own resources. And perhaps the painter chose a given passage of text precisely because it gave him more room for manoeuvre.

How else, then, apart from its celebration of wide horizons in matters calendrical, geographical and historical, is this manuscript a mirror of its time? This paper will try to identify three distinct themes—ethnography, national sentiment and religion—that together were the principal vehicle in developing the pictorial programme far beyond what is justified by the terse indications of the text itself. And ‘together’ is a key word here, for again and again the illustrations support each other and thus gain added strength and prominence, treating a given theme from different angles. Each topic, moreover, has a specific contemporary resonance. It is in the treatment of these three themes that one may recognise the attempt by the painter, whether working on his own account or responding to instructions from the patron,¹⁷ to move beyond a 1:1 correspondence between text and image and thereby give added value to the text. More is involved here than simply choosing to illustrate one passage of text rather than another. That process always involves an opportunity cost, and a value judgment on the part of the patron or the painter. It is the way that the chosen episode is developed in pictorial terms that defines the added value.

The least developed of these three major themes is that of ethnography. In many ways, the world of medieval Islam, like that of medieval Europe or medieval China, could be characterised with some justice as forming a closed circle, and broadly speaking uninterested in the lands beyond its borders.¹⁸ Most Muslims, it seems, happily believed that the *dar al-Islam* was particularly blessed in geographical and climatic terms.¹⁹ Those who lived outside that privileged territory tended to be described in distinctly unflattering terms, for example as physically unprepossessing and mentally backward,²⁰ and in fairness one should add that similar views were held by medieval Europeans about those who lived outside their own charmed circle.²¹ Al-Biruni was a notable exception to such knee-jerk prejudices. Deported from his native Khwarizm by Mahmud of Ghazna, he took advantage of that monarch’s predatory interest in India to visit that country several times and to make it a major focus of his studies for some twelve years. But he also pursued his ethnographic researches into the Volga Turks, the Uighurs and the Chinese.²² Ilkhanid painters on occasion attempted to depict exotic foreigners such as Africans,²³ Indians,²⁴ including Brahmins,²⁵ and the tribes of Gog and Magog,²⁶ and devised distinctive facial characteristics for them. But for the

¹⁷But perhaps the manuscript was made for the market.

¹⁸B. Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London, 1982), pp. 59–64.

¹⁹Thus al-Ya’qubi begins his geography with a description of Baghdad, which he unselfconsciously terms the centre of the world (*Kitab al-Buldan*, translated by G. Wiet as *Les Pays* [Cairo, 1937], p. 4).

²⁰Lewis, *Discovery*, p. 68.

²¹D. H. Strickland, *Saracens, Demons and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003).

²²J. Boilot, “A long Odyssey”, *The Unesco Courier*, 27th year (June 1974), p.13, p.16.

²³The Edinburgh Rashid al-Din *World History*, f. 52a, depicts Ethiopians.

²⁴Such as King Kaid of Hind and the sage Mihran in the Great Mongol *Shahnama*; compare the Schefer Hariri’s parturition scene, with its Indian *dramatis personae* (R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* [Geneva, 1962], p. 121).

²⁵G. D. Lowry, with S. Nemazee, *A Jeweler’s Eye: Islamic Arts of the Book from the V&A Collection* (Washington, D.C., 1988), p. 84.

²⁶Depicted in the Great Mongol *Shahnama*; see *ibid.*, p. 87.

most part the standard conventions currently employed for figural types were applied to natives and foreigners alike, with a corresponding neglect of physiognomical detail. The Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript falls into this pattern. Thus the Romans watching the delivery of Julius Caesar by caesarian section, the Jewish onlookers witnessing Eli's death, the Arab congregation listening intently to the Prophet Muhammad forbidding intercalation, the Babylonian monarch Bukhtnassar/Nebuchadnezzar and his henchmen, and the Persian courtiers attending Ardashir all fit a standard type. Notions of anachronism were foreign to these painters. Accordingly, it was the text itself that defined an exotic setting; the capacity to capture expression, to define a distinct personality in pictorial terms or even to distinguish one racial type from another, was still at a very early stage of development. That said, the people depicted in these illustrations form a colourful patchwork of humanity. There are Romans and Jews, Bedouins (Fig. 1, *The fair of 'Ukaz*, folio 157b) and Khwarazmians, Persians and Indians (Fig. 2, *Indians celebrate the autumnal equinox*, folio 129b). Executioners, physicians and breast-feeding women; the poor, the prisoner and the tortured; servants, scholars and peasants; confidence tricksters, priests and traders; soldiers, bureaucrats and courtiers; kings, bishops and prophets — all have their exits and their entrances. A particular penchant for nudity, both male and female, without precedent on this scale in Islamic painting to date, manifests itself in one scene after another — Misha and Mishyana, the first man and woman, being tempted by Ahriman (Fig. 3, *Temptation of the first man and the first woman*, folio 48b) the mother of Julius Caesar being delivered of her son; a pederast being punished; and Zahhak before Faridun. Nor is this all. The depictions of exotic festivals, which include for example birds flying through the flames and bonfires kindled on rooftops; tales from myth and legend; vignettes from everyday life; episodes from sacred texts — all are grist to the artist's mill. Thus the range of historical contexts, and the wealth of reference to exotic architecture, textiles, clothing and the like, bear testimony to the consistent determination of the two artists who worked on this manuscript²⁷ to do justice to its admittedly eccentric but panoramic view of the past and of other societies. Rich saturated colours in such unusual hues as canary yellow, vermilion, indigo and mauve add a flamboyant touch to these evocations of distant peoples and places. In short, despite the limitations imposed by a painterly technique unsuited to recording nuances of expression and appearance, and by the convention of disposing large figures along the frontal plane and thereby leaving spatial subtleties unexplored, these paintings lift the curtain on a wider world than is conjured up by any earlier Islamic illustrated manuscript, even the Schefer Hariri of 1237.

Of course this reflects the preoccupations of the text itself, which follows no continuous narrative but investigates, through the unexpected prism of the calendar, an array of societies past and present, presenting a ragbag of random data *en route*. And it was the coming of the Mongols, and the daily reality of their huge empire — which must have seemed to its citizens to have embraced the whole world — that created a uniquely appropriate up-to-date setting for much of al-Biruni's text and propelled it out of obscurity, conferring on it a startling relevance and contemporaneity. Its ethnographic aspects, however underplayed in the text

²⁷The work of the second artist, characterised *inter alia* not only by a dramatically different and richer palette but by a much finer graphic line and a different technique for depicting haloes, begins at fol. 129b; see Fig. 2.



Figure 1. (Colour online) The fair of ‘Ukay.

itself, clearly struck a chord in the painters charged with illustrating that text. And so it is the illustrations themselves that propel into the foreground of the reader’s attention a vivid and varied panorama of people, places, customs and events from almost all over the known world.



Figure 2. (Colour online) Indians celebrate the autumnal equinox.

A second theme worth exploring through the medium of these images is that of the burgeoning national sentiment²⁸ that marked Ilkhanid rule from quite early on.²⁹ Its

²⁸For comments on al-Biruni's views on what might be termed "nationalism", see F. Rosenthal, "Al-Biruni between Greece and India" in *Biruni Symposium*, (ed.) Yarshater, pp. 1-2.

²⁹See G. Lane, *Early Mongol Rule in Thirteenth-Century Iran. A Persian Renaissance* (London and New York, 2003), especially pp. 177-212.



Figure 3. (Colour online) Ahriman tempts Misha and Mishyana.

immediate origins are not far to seek.³⁰ The scale of the devastation wrought by the Mongol invasions of the Persian world from 1220 was utterly unprecedented. The resultant trauma

³⁰A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Conscience du passé et résistance culturelle dans l'Iran mongol", in *L'Iran face à la domination mongole*, (ed.) D. Aigle (Tehran, 1997), pp. 135–177 and 223–225.

paralysed some aspects of cultural production, such as architecture, for almost eighty years.³¹ And it was precisely cultural production, as distinct from political rebellion, that provided a vent for that complex of feelings, memories and aspirations encapsulated in the idea of patriotism. The desire to assert a distinctly Persian identity in the face of foreign rule, whether by Arab or Turk, had manifested itself centuries earlier, and had taken so many diverse forms that it deserves a detailed study to itself.³² But these stirrings of national sentiment took place within the context of a shared Islamic faith, which proved a powerful impetus to unity and social cohesion. By contrast, between 1220 and 1295 the Mongol elite, with minor exceptions, were not Muslim. They gave their support to other faiths. That division between rulers and ruled, in the matter of confessional loyalty, proved a gulf too broad to bridge; it fostered a sense of alienation between Mongols and Persians. Small wonder, then, that people looked longingly back to the days when Persians were masters of their own destiny, lords of a world-class civilisation. Among these expressions of national sentiment in later thirteenth-century Iran one may cite the attempt to revive the ancient associations of Takht-i Sulaiman — which as the former Shiz was the site of one of the four great fires of the Zoroastrian faith in Sasanian Iran — and to link the site with the *Shahnama* by means of a series of inscriptions.³³ Another example is the frontispiece to the Paris copy of Juvaini's history, in Persian, of the Mongol conquests, the *Tarikh-i Jahan Gushay*, which shows the modestly dressed Persian author seated in scribal pose on the left-hand page and a standing Mongol *amir* in full figure on the opposite page: a vivid juxtaposition of bureaucrat and soldier, of brain and brawn.³⁴ Other illustrated manuscripts of the period celebrate Persian poetry³⁵ or the heroic Sasanian past.³⁶ And the popularity of tiles inscribed with Persian poetry, secular and amatory in tone, in Shi'ite shrines in Qumm, Damghan, Varamin, Mashhad and elsewhere in the thirteenth century³⁷ can be seen as an attempt to link a sense of national identity with religious practice.

³¹D. N. Wilber, *The Architecture of Islamic Iran. The Il Khanid Period* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 4 and 105–118.

³²For a preliminary discussion confined to ninth-century evidence, but with much wider ramifications, see S. M. Stern, "Ya'qub the Coppersmith and Persian national sentiment", in *Iran and Islam in memory of the late Vladimir Minorsky*, (ed.) C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 535–555. See also P. P. Soucek, "The influence of Persepolis on Islamic art", *Actes du XXIX Congrès des Orientalistes* (Paris, 1975), pp. 195–200, and *eadem*, "Farhad and Taq-i Bustan: The Growth of a Legend", in *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East in honor of Richard Ettinghausen*, (ed.) P. J. Chelkowski (New York and Salt Lake City, 1973), pp. 27–52.

³³A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Le Shah-name, la gnose soufie et le pouvoir mongol", *Journal Asiatique* 222 (1984), pp. 249–338. These *Shahnama* quotations occur on large square tiles featuring a trilobed arch, so that the words of the epic undulate over the palace walls. But *Shahnama* quotations are also found on other kinds of tiles excavated on this site; they are listed in A. Ghouchani, *Persian Poetry on the Tiles of Takht-i Sulayman (13th Century)* (Tehran, 1992), p. 120 and are also discussed in detail by A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Le livre des rois, miroir du destin. II – Takht-e Soleyman et la symbolique du Shah-Name", *Studia Iranica* 20/1 (1991), pp. 89, 94 and 97.

³⁴F. Richard, *Splendeurs persanes. Manuscrits du XIIe au XVIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1997), p. 41.

³⁵Such as the London *Anthology of Divans* dated 713–14/1314–15; see B.W. Robinson, *Persian Paintings in the India Office Library* (London, 1976), pp. 3–10 and colour pl. I. See too the Tehran University copy of the *Khamsa* of Nizami, dated 718/1318 (N. Tittley, "A 14th-century Nizami Manuscript in Tehran", *Kunst des Orients*, VIII/1–2 [1972], pp. 120–125).

³⁶As in an illustrated and as yet unpublished Ilkhanid (?) copy of al-Baidawi's *Nizam al-Tawarikh* (currently in Lahore) which received a preliminary airing in a paper delivered by Charles Melville at a conference on "Sasanian Historiography and Iranian Nationalism" held at St Andrews on 13–14 March 2009, or in the Freer al-Tabari, which features images of Ardashir (f.109a), Bahram Gur (ff.116a, 117b and 118b), Nushirwan (f.132b) and Khusrau Parviz (f.146b) (Fitzherbert, "Bal'ami's Tabari", II, pls.15–18, 22 and 25).

³⁷M. Bahrami, *Recherches sur les Carreaux de Revêtement Lustré dans la Céramique Persane du XIIIe au XV^e Siècles (Étoiles et Croix)* (Paris, 1937), and O. Watson, *Persian Lustre Wares* (London, 1985), pp. 122–156 and 183–188.

But of course the principal, and natural, instrument of national sentiment in this period was the *Shahnama*. The reasons for the sudden flood of manuscripts of the epic, especially illustrated copies, at this time have long been debated.³⁸ At the latest count, a dozen surviving illustrated copies of Ferdowsi's masterpiece can be attributed to the period c.1300–c.1350.³⁹ Yet not a single illustrated copy survives from the previous three centuries or so, and only one literary reference to an illustrated copy made within that time-frame has been unearthed. It refers to a copy made for a Qarakhanid monarch in the late twelfth century.⁴⁰ Moreover, these Ilkhanid *Shahnamas* display seriously ambitious pictorial programmes; most of them contain about a hundred paintings, and thus represent a serious investment of time and money. That high rate of illustration suggests that such manuscripts were aimed not just at a readership of educated Persians but also at a constituency that did not read Persian easily, or even at all. Such manuscripts may thus have functioned as teaching aids, for where the text did not serve, the pictures did the job instead. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that this pictorial emphasis was not limited to illustrated manuscripts, for some large-scale *Shahnama* illustrations on cloth have survived, and these would make best sense in the context of public recitation.⁴¹ Pictures certainly highlighted the role of the *Shahnama* as a corpus of tales of myth, legend and adventure, even if these tales were seen as history. Whether other factors were in play is not entirely clear. One may suspect, for instance, that the domination of contemporary Iran by the Mongols — foreigners from well beyond the Oxus — might have added a particular resonance to perhaps the central theme of the epic, the conflict between Iran and Turan. But the necessary evidence to substantiate such a theory has not yet been assembled.

Clearly there was a fervent attachment to this particular text, whose popular appeal easily trumped all others selected for illustration in Ilkhanid times. Moreover, this period saw the primacy of Arabic decisively dislodged in favour of Persian in the field of illustrated manuscripts. From about 1290 onwards, and for the entire fourteenth century, illustrated manuscripts in the Islamic world were written almost exclusively in Persian, with only a few — the London Sufi and Qazwini manuscripts, some Mamluk codices and the Biruni and the Rashid al-Din fragments — in Arabic. And both the latter manuscripts contain *Shahnama* illustrations, clear proof of the pervasive influence of that text at the time. The language itself had become both a symbol and a vehicle for national identity. And the *Shahnama* was at the very heart of this process.

How, then, do the illustrations of the Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript, whose text is in Arabic, develop the theme of Persian national sentiment? It might be argued that they

³⁸B. Gray, "Shahnama Illustrations from Firdausi to the Mongol Invasions", in *The Art of the Seljuqs in Iran and Anatolia, Proceedings of a Symposium held in Edinburgh in 1982*, (ed.) R. Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa, CA, 1994), pp. 96–105.

³⁹M. S. Simpson, *The Illustration of an Epic: The Earliest Shahnama Manuscripts* (New York and London, 1979); eadem, "Shahnama as Text and Shahnama as Image: A Brief Overview of Recent Studies, 1975–2000", in 'Shahnama': *The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings*, (ed.) R. Hillenbrand (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 9–23.

⁴⁰A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Le Livre des Rois, miroir du destin", *Studia Iranica* 17/1 (1988), pp. 43–45.

⁴¹Cf. a group of large fifteenth-century paintings with little or no text preserved in the H.2152 album in the Topkapı Sarayı in Istanbul: N. Atasoy, "Illustrations prepared for display during Shahname recitations", in *The Memorial Volume of the Vth International Congress of Iranian Art & Archaeology Tehran – Isfahan – Shiraz 11th–18th April 1968, Volume 2*, (eds) M. Y. Kiani and A. Tajvidi (Tehran, 1972), pp. 262–272; see especially pp. 263 and 265, Fig. 5, which measures a gargantuan 62 x 35.5 cm. Cf. C. J. Gruber, "The Keir Mi'raj: Islamic Storytelling and the Picturing of Tales", *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 4/1 (2005), pp. 36 and 38 (accessed 27 June 2012).

do so in four distinct ways: first, by illustrating events that feature personalities from the *Shahnama*; secondly, by focussing on personalities celebrated in Persian history; thirdly, by depicting Persian festivals; and fourthly, by evoking the rebellions fomented by Persians against their foreign overlords. These themes may overlap. In the first category we see Zahhak, the exemplar of foreign tyranny, arraigned as a prisoner before his opponent and successor, Faridun (Fig. 4, *Zahhak kneels before Faridun*, folio 101a). This scene is a highlight of the early part of the *Shahnama*.⁴² Clearly this ancient tale, whose dominant theme is the overthrow of a foreign tyrant by an Iranian hero, could be given a subversive contemporary spin. The second category features the Sasanian shah Peroz seeking, with the help of the Zoroastrian priestly hierarchy, to alleviate the distress of his people in a time of prolonged drought (Fig. 4b, *Peroz seeks to alleviate suffering during drought*, folio 104b).⁴³ Those who wield royal and religious authority, then, combine forces to help the suffering population: again a hopeful message for the Ilkhanid present, drawn from the distant Persian past. The comforting memory of traditional Persian festivals lies at the heart of the depiction of Mihragan (Fig. 4a, *Depiction of Mihragan*, folio, 100a) and Sada (Fig. 5, *The feast of Sada*, folios 103a [and 103b]), both of which also feature in the *Shahnama*.⁴⁴ Such festivals, which have nothing whatever to do with Islam, and are the very stuff of childhood memories, go back to the mists of antiquity and are bound up with the foundation myths of the nation itself. Here is some of the warp and weft of what it means to be Persian. Finally there are the scenes of rebellion against those in political authority. This theme is not confined to Persian examples; the best-known of such images depicts the execution of al-Hallaj at the behest of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir bi’llah (Fig. 4, folio 94a).⁴⁵ The other scenes of rebellion feature followers of al-Muqanna, who professed divinity and founded a sect,⁴⁶ being besieged by caliphal troops (Fig 4c, *al-Muqanna’ is besieged by the caliph’s troops*, folio 93b), and the head of Mani exposed near a city gate (folio 91a). The motive behind selecting these scenes is hard to fathom, since their message is plainly that such rebellions end badly for the rebels. But they also serve to remind the reader that Persians have a long history of rising up against those in power. And given that al-Biruni’s text was crammed with subject matter that invited illustration, and that therefore the opportunity cost of selecting any one topic for illustration over another topic was high, the choice of rebellion scenes is unlikely to have been a casual or random one.⁴⁷

It is now time to tackle the major theme that marks out this pictorial cycle as a remarkable document of its own time, namely its idiosyncratic approach to religion.⁴⁸ As such, the Edinburgh al-Biruni manuscript is a classic example of how a set of paintings can serve simultaneously to illustrate a text written centuries earlier and yet be packed with

⁴²*The Shahnama of Firdausi*, I, translated by A. G. and E. Warner (London, 1905), pp. 135–170.

⁴³Soucek, “Illustrations”, p. 139 and p. 165.

⁴⁴*Shahnama*, IV, translated by Warner (London, 1909), p. 313 and I (1905), pp. 123–124 respectively, and Soucek, “Illustrations”, pp. 125, 134, 136 and 164–165.

⁴⁵Note the idiosyncratic and ambiguous use of the halo in this image, which suggests that the painter was expressing a personal reaction.

⁴⁶Al-Biruni, translated by Sachau, p. 194.

⁴⁷The uneven rate of illustration provides supplementary evidence to this effect.

⁴⁸For al-Biruni’s own attitudes to this subject see W. M. Watt, “Al-Biruni and the Study of non-Islamic Religions”, *Report of al-Biruni International Congress (November–December 1973)*, (Rawalpindi, 1979), pp. 357–361.



Figure 4. (Colour online) Zahhak kneels before Faridun.

contemporary meanings and resonances. Illustrated books, in short, can be much more than books with illustrations. In this particular case, the emphasis on religion in these paintings is so marked that to some extent it skews the reader's impression of the book. No less than 18 of the book's 25 images (72%) have to do with religion, either in the most direct way or by



Figure 4a. Depiction of Mihragan, folio 100a.

religious architecture or the presence of priests, prophets or holy figures — not forgetting heretics.⁴⁹ And a picture, of course, continues to resonate in the mind long after the text itself

⁴⁹Besides the heretics depicted on pls. 8 and 9, the illustrations refer to the followers of Bihafarid b. Mahfurudhin (f. 92b) and of Ibn Abi Zakariyya (f. 95a); see Soucek, "Illustrations", Figs. 8 and 11 respectively. Note that the accounts of Islamic heretics are bunched together pictorially.



Figure 4b. Peroz seeks to alleviate suffering during drought, folio 104b.

has moved on. So the picture is a way of highlighting, italicising, emboldening, recalling or otherwise emphasising a particular passage of the text.

As with the themes of ethnography and national sentiment, the theme of religion appears in multiple guises in these paintings. First and foremost comes the cycle of images of



Figure 4c. al-Muqanna' is besieged by the caliph's troops, folio 93b.

Muhammad.⁵⁰ Carefully spaced to occur roughly at the beginning, the middle and the end of the manuscript, they form a continuous thread of meaning that runs through the whole

⁵⁰Hillenbrand, "Images of Muhammad", pp. 129-146. See also Soucek, "Illustrations", pp. 151, 154-155 and 168; P. P. Soucek, "The Life of the Prophet: Illustrated Versions", in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, (ed.) P. P. Soucek (University Park, Pa., and London, 1988), pp. 198-199 and 208.



Figure 5. (Colour online) The feast of Sada, folio 103a.

book and ensures that the Prophet is never far from one's thoughts. This is not to claim that this mini-cycle of five images has any marked coherence, in other words that these images naturally belong together. Such a claim could certainly be sustained of the last three of them, with their pronounced Shi'ite emphasis; indeed, this is the earliest clutch of Shi'ite images in Islamic book painting. But it will not extend to the first pair of images, which show the

Prophet on a *minbar* haranguing the congregation about the need to avoid intercalation in the Muslim calendar (f. 6b), and then Muhammad and Jesus riding side by side observed by a watchman in his tower—an improbably eccentric interpretation of Isaiah 21:6–7 and 9–10 (f. 10b). Overall, then, this cycle of images featuring Muhammad has a random, unpredictable, unplanned quality about it, as do the other two contemporary cycles of images of the Prophet in secular books, namely Bal‘ami’s Persian version of al-Tabari’s *Tarikh* and Rashid al-Din’s *World History*. None of these three cycles overlap, and none are tightly planned. Their uncertain and even gauche quality betrays a lack of confidence in dealing with this highly charged subject matter, long considered taboo by Muslims.⁵¹ A similar awkwardness is apparent in the Ilkhanid *mi‘raj* scenes preserved in the H.2154 album in the Topkapı Saray Library in Istanbul.⁵² This uncertainty was, of course, only to be expected from Muslim artists peremptorily called upon to produce the very kind of sacred images of which their faith had traditionally disapproved. Unsurprisingly, their reactions to such commissions were somewhat schizophrenic. Al-Biruni himself writes in this context: “If, for example, a picture of the prophet were made, or of Mecca and the Ka‘ba, and were shown to an uneducated man or woman [al-Biruni presumably means an uneducated Muslim man or woman], their joy in looking at the thing would bring them to kiss the picture, to rub their cheeks against it, and to roll themselves in the dust before it, as if they were seeing not the picture, but the original”.⁵³ His disapproval of idolatry, in defiance of his customary scrupulous objectivity, comes out loud and clear in these words. Ilkhanid painters were simply not granted time enough to accommodate themselves to such contested subject matter, so it is small wonder that these first serious attempts at Muslim religious painting should be littered with false starts, dead ends, outright copies from other religious traditions and flawed endeavours to re-interpret such models for Muslim purposes.

As already noted, the three images of pronounced Shi‘ite tenor stand out for their inner consistency and their strong visual message.⁵⁴ They depict in turn Muhammad and his family rejecting the overtures of the false prophet Musailima (Fig. 6, *Muhammad, his family and he ambassadors of Musailima*, folio 92a); the same group, this time plus Fatima, confronting the Christians of Najran (Fig. 7, *Muhammad, his family and the Christians of Najran*, folio 161a); and Muhammad proclaiming ‘Ali as his successor at Ghadir Khumm (Fig. 8, *Muhammad, proclaims ‘Ali his successor*, folio 162a), watched by the three men who, according to Shi‘ite belief, in turn usurped ‘Ali’s right to the caliphate: Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman; a later user of the book has physically cut out their faces.⁵⁵ The emotional temperature rises steadily

⁵¹For background information, see Arnold, *Painting*, pp. 1–40.

⁵²R. Etinghausen, “Persian Ascension Miniatures of the Fourteenth Century”, *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, XII Convegno “Volta”, promosso della classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche. Tema: Oriente e Occidente nel Medioevo* (Rome, 1957), pp. 360–383; S. S. Blair, “Ascending to Heaven: Fourteenth-century Illustrations of the Prophet’s Mi‘raj”, in *Proceedings of the Colloquium on Paradise and Hell in Islam. Keszthely, 7–14 July 2002. Part One* (The Arabist, Budapest Studies in Arabic), (ed.) K. Dévényi and A. Fodor (Budapest, 2008), pp. 19–35; C. Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension. A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London and New York, 2010), pp. 24–31 and colour pls. 3–12.

⁵³C. E. Sachau [translator], *Alberuni’s India* (London, 1910), I, p. 111.

⁵⁴Al-Biruni himself is said by some to have had Shi‘ite sympathies (Sachau, *Chronology*, xiii) and he ends his book by invoking God’s mercy and blessing on Muhammad “and upon his holy family” (*ibid.*, p. 365). But his confessional affiliation is disputed by some scholars, but other passages in this very book – for example, when he discusses the death of al-Husain (Sachau, *Chronology*, 328) – betray his strong Shi‘ite sympathies.

⁵⁵The original aspect of the painting can broadly be reconstructed by reference to the Ottoman copy (see n.xii above).



Figure 6. (Colour online) Muhammad, his family and the ambassadors of Musailima.

from one image to the next. And of course all these images support each other, thereby strengthening their sectarian message in cumulative fashion. That is particularly true of (Figs. 7 and 8, folios 161a and 162a) the last two images in the book, and also physically the largest. Indeed, visually speaking, they bring the entire volume to a rousing climax. They set the seal on this cycle of images; one is reminded of the common appellation of



Figure 7. (Colour online) Muhammad, his family and the Christians of Najran.

Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, and it is possible that a visual pun was intended here. The following chapter of the book is devoted to the lunar stations, and although it has several passages which could have inspired illustrations, there are none. No such Shi'ite character



Figure 8. (Colour online) Muhammad proclaims 'Ali his successor.

at all marks the much longer Muhammad cycle in the 1314 *World History* of Rashid al-Din, with its 13 images. Had Sunni orthodoxy re-established itself at court by this time?⁵⁶

⁵⁶Bausani cites evidence that Öljeitü reverted to Sunnism before he died (A. Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols", in *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 5. The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, (ed.) J. A. Boyle (Cambridge,



Figure 8a. Adam, Eve and Abel eat together.

It seems reasonable to enquire why these two brief text passages, which rate no special emphasis in al-Biruni’s text, are, so to speak, propelled to centre stage and spotlighted in these images. In all three cases, empty space is used to demarcate the Prophet and his family

1968), p. 543; and this chimes with the redecoration of the Sultaniyya mausoleum (S. S. Blair, “The Epigraphic Program of the Tomb of Uljaytu at Sultaniyya: Meaning in Mongol Architecture”, *Islamic Art* 2 [1987], pp. 71–73).



Figure 9. (Colour online) The Death of Eli.

from the other people in the image and thus to draw attention to them. The last two images exploit powerful saturated colours and natural features such as clouds or trees to inject extra drama and significance into the scene.



Figure 10. (Colour online) Bukhtnassar destroys the Temple of Jerusalem.

Contemporary developments in religious affairs might shed some light on this issue. Following the fall of Baghdad, and the replacement of the caliphate by pagan Mongol rule, the time-honoured enmity between Sunni and Shi'ite understandably lessened in the face



Figure 11. (Colour online) Abraham destroys the idols of the Sabaeans.

of the new dispensation, and there was even some rapprochement on both sides.⁵⁷ Several

⁵⁷Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols", pp. 543-544.



Figure 12. (Colour online) The Annunciation.

Ilkhans from Hulagu onwards had shown favour to the Twelver Shi'ites,⁵⁸ particularly Ghazan (despite his conversion to Sunni Islam); he not only visited major Shi'ite shrines but also

⁵⁸B. Spuler, *Die Mongolen in Iran. Politik, Verwaltung und Kultur der Ilchanzeit 1220–1350* (4th revised and expanded edition, Berlin, 1968), pp. 201–202.



Figure 13. (Colour online) The scene of the Baptism.

exempted descendants of 'Ali from paying taxes.⁵⁹ In the very year that this manuscript

⁵⁹Rashid al-Din, *Jami'u'l-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles; A History of the Mongols. Sources of Oriental Languages & Literatures* 45, translated W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 676. Cf. A. F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 67–68.

was produced, a violent disputation between Hanafis and Shafi'is conducted in Öljeitü's presence so disillusioned him (and some of his nobles) against Sunnism that he was fervently advised to abjure Islam altogether. In the event, following a visit to Najaf in the winter of 709–10/1309–10, he embraced Shi'ism.⁶⁰ Öljeitü's conversion is documented not just in the chronicles but also in his coins⁶¹ and monumental inscriptions.⁶² Coming events cast their shadow before.⁶³ Perhaps, then, recent events were not only in the minds of the patron and the artists of the Biruni manuscript but were also, to some extent, the catalyst for some of these images. One can only admire the ingenuity with which a basically neutral text has been turned to politico-religious account.⁶⁴ The wider context of these years is the construction of Öljeitü's tomb at Sultaniyya, with its original programme of pro-'Alid decoration,⁶⁵ and the refurbishment of the 'Alid shrine at Najaf by his brother Ghazan.⁶⁶ A little further back, perhaps the defining event of Ilkhanid rule of Iran occurred in 1295 — the conversion of Ghazan Khan and much of his elite to the Muslim faith. In the short term, this was to lead to the extermination of Buddhism in Iran; in the medium term, it signalled the eclipse of Jews and Christians as significant actors on the political stage.

The theme of religion does not manifest itself in merely Muslim ways. And here the illustrations corresponded well-nigh perfectly with the spirit of the text. Thus there are several references to the patriarchs and other key figures of the Old Testament, such as Adam, Eve and Abel—indeed, these three are shown together in a scene not found in the Biblical text,⁶⁷ which illustrates how the spirit of Abel appeared to his parents for ten days to comfort them (Fig. 8a, Adam, Eve and Abel eat together, folio 101b). The artist plays this scene straight and has created an affecting tableau, adding on his own initiative the detail of a shared meal, no doubt inspired by the preceding passage of text which describes the Persian festival of Farwardajan/Fawardijan (*The Persian festival of Farwardajan/Fawardijan*, folio 101b). The various Old Testament references make the chronological range of al-Biruni's

⁶⁰For this sequence of events, see J. A. Boyle, "Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khans", in *CHI* 5, pp. 401–402 and Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols", p. 544.

⁶¹S. S. Blair, "The Coins of the Later Ilkhanids: Mint Organization, Regionalization and Urbanism", *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 27 (1982), pp. 211–230; *eadem*, "The Coins of the Later Ilkhanids: A Typological Analysis", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 26, no. 3 (1983), pp. 295–317.

⁶²*Eadem*, "The Inscription from the Tomb Tower at Bastam: An Analysis of Ilkhanid Epigraphy", in *Art et Société dans le Monde Iranien*, (ed.) C. Adle (Paris, 1982), pp. 263–286.

⁶³See too C. Gruber, "Questioning the 'classical' in Persian painting", *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012), 18 (accessed 19 June 2012); J. Pfeiffer, "Conversion Versions: Öljeitü's Conversion to Shi'ism (709/1309) in Muslim Narrative Sources", *Mongolian Studies* 22 (1999), pp. 35–67; and J. Calmard, "Le Chiisme imamite sous les Ilkhans", in Aigle (ed.), *L'Iran*, pp. 279–280 and 282–284.

⁶⁴The very tight time-frame of these inter-related events makes the calculation of cause and effect hazardous. There may indeed have been an element of gamble in the choice of Shi'ite themes in these images; but the event proved almost immediately that the risk was worth taking. For Öljeitü's switch in confessional allegiance of course had political implications; suddenly, an expression of solidarity with Shi'ism became a politically correct stance, with obvious advantages for the person concerned.

⁶⁵A. Godard, "The Mausoleum of Öljeitü at Sultaniyya", in *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, (ed.) A. U. Pope and P. Ackerman (London and New York, 1939), pp. 1103–1118; Wilber, *Architecture*, pp. 139–145, Figs. 26–27 and pls. 89–102; Blair, "Epigraphic Program", pp. 43–96; E. G. Sims, "The 'Iconography' of the Internal Decoration in the Mausoleum of Uljaytu at Sultaniyya", in Soucek (eds), *Content and Context*, pp. 139–176.

⁶⁶Rashid al-Din, translated Thackston, p. 641.

⁶⁷Soucek, "Illustrations", 113–4; Biruni, translated by Sachau, 210–11.

text comparable with that of Rashid al-Din's *World History*, though the latter gives a far higher profile to this material by means of copious illustrations.

It is time to draw together the threads of this discussion. This paper has attempted to show that the paintings that illustrate al-Biruni's highly specialised if not quirky text on calendrical systems across the world do far more than simply offer pictorial equivalents for what the text says, or serve an educational function. They also reflect, perhaps not always consciously, some of the underlying concerns and preoccupations of the time in which they were created. Of course this cycle of images deserves close study in the context of the early development of Persian book painting, for example in the way it interprets elements taken from Far Eastern art or from the thirteenth-century pictorial tradition developed in Iraq. But its role as an expression of the *Zeitgeist* at an unusually turbulent time in Iranian history is surely no less important. Its emphasis on calendrical matters, including festivals, and on astronomical and astrological data, slots comfortably into the Mongol fascination with star lore,⁶⁸ and that is a study in itself.⁶⁹ No doubt other themes of contemporary interest which find expression in this illustrative cycle could be proposed; this paper makes no claim to have explored them all. But in comparison with pre-Mongol Islamic book painting of the previous century, which provided the immediate standard of comparison, the range of content in these paintings has expanded enormously.

In the Edinburgh manuscript we encounter a bewildering and technicolour variety of peoples, and it is hard not to recognise here a direct effect of the rise of a pan-Asian and part-European Mongol world empire which brought about an unprecedented awareness of the wider world. The centres of Ilkhanid rule became multi-ethnic and multi-confessional, and Tabriz astonishingly so. For a couple of decades, indeed, it was probably the most cosmopolitan city on the planet. Diplomats and administrators, missionaries and merchants, flocked there from all points of the compass. Hence the ethnographic range of these paintings. Equally marked was the emphasis on national sentiment, a barometer for the gradual recovery of the Iranian psyche from the trauma inflicted on it by the repeated onslaughts of Mongol hordes. The most obvious expression of this recovery is to be found in the revival of the *Shahnama*, especially in illustrated form, and indeed some of its tales find their way into the al-Biruni images, as do some of the traditional Iranian festivals.⁷⁰ The emphasis on Shi'ism also had its associations with national sentiment, and these were to become ever more marked with the passage of time. The ancient enmity against the Arabs helps to explain the visual references in these illustrations to the Sasanian rulers, the last great guardians of Iranian culture and heritage. Nor should one overlook the way these illustrations harp on rebellion against authority, a theme that lends itself to the expression of identity. Finally, while al-Biruni's text cannot really be regarded as focusing on religion, the illustrations accompanying text do precisely that. Heretics are attacked (Fig. 4c, folio 93b) or executed (folio 94a), Jews lose their

⁶⁸Spuler, *Mongolen*, pp. 160–161. Cf. too P. Vardjavand, “La découverte archéologique du complexe scientifique de l'observatoire de Maraqe”, in *Akten des VII. Internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archäologie. München 7–10. September 1976*, (ed.) W. Kleiss (Berlin, 1979), pp. 527–536, and E. S. Kennedy, “The exact sciences in Iran under the Saljuqs and Mongols”, in *CHI* 5, pp. 668–670, 672–673.

⁶⁹M. Carey, “Painting the Stars in a Century of Change: A Thirteenth-Century Copy of al-Sufi's Treatise on the Fixed Stars (British Library Or.5323)”, PhD thesis, University of London, 2001. See again Kirk, “Edinburgh al-Biruni”, pp. 43–47 and pls. 1, 3, 5b and 6a–c.

⁷⁰See ff.100a, 101a, 103a, 103b and 104b.

Ark (Fig. 9, folio 133b) and their Temple in Jerusalem (Fig. 10, folio 134b), Sabaeans have their idols destroyed (Fig. 11, folio 88b), Manicheans are shown succumbing to temptation (Fig. 3, folio 48b) and Mani is executed (folio 91a) — it is consistently bad news for other belief systems, and even Christianity does not escape unscathed, with Mary (Fig. 12, folio 141b) and Jesus pointedly deprived of their haloes and the Baptism degraded (Fig. 13, folio 140b). Islam, however, emerges triumphant, and that triumph is expressed not through the written word but through images, and in particular the first surviving cycle of images featuring Muhammad himself. The paintings of the Edinburgh manuscript, therefore, when seen as a whole, really cannot be interpreted as a judicious and appropriate correspondence to the text that they purport to illustrate. They reveal themselves instead as a considered response to an event that post-dated al-Biruni's text by some three centuries, namely the conversion of the Mongol elite to Islam. This paved the way to new ways of proclaiming the faith, ways which overturned former taboos. This manuscript, then, is the harbinger of religious painting in Islam. R.Hillenbrand@ed.ac.uk

ROBERT HILLENBRAND
University of Edinburgh