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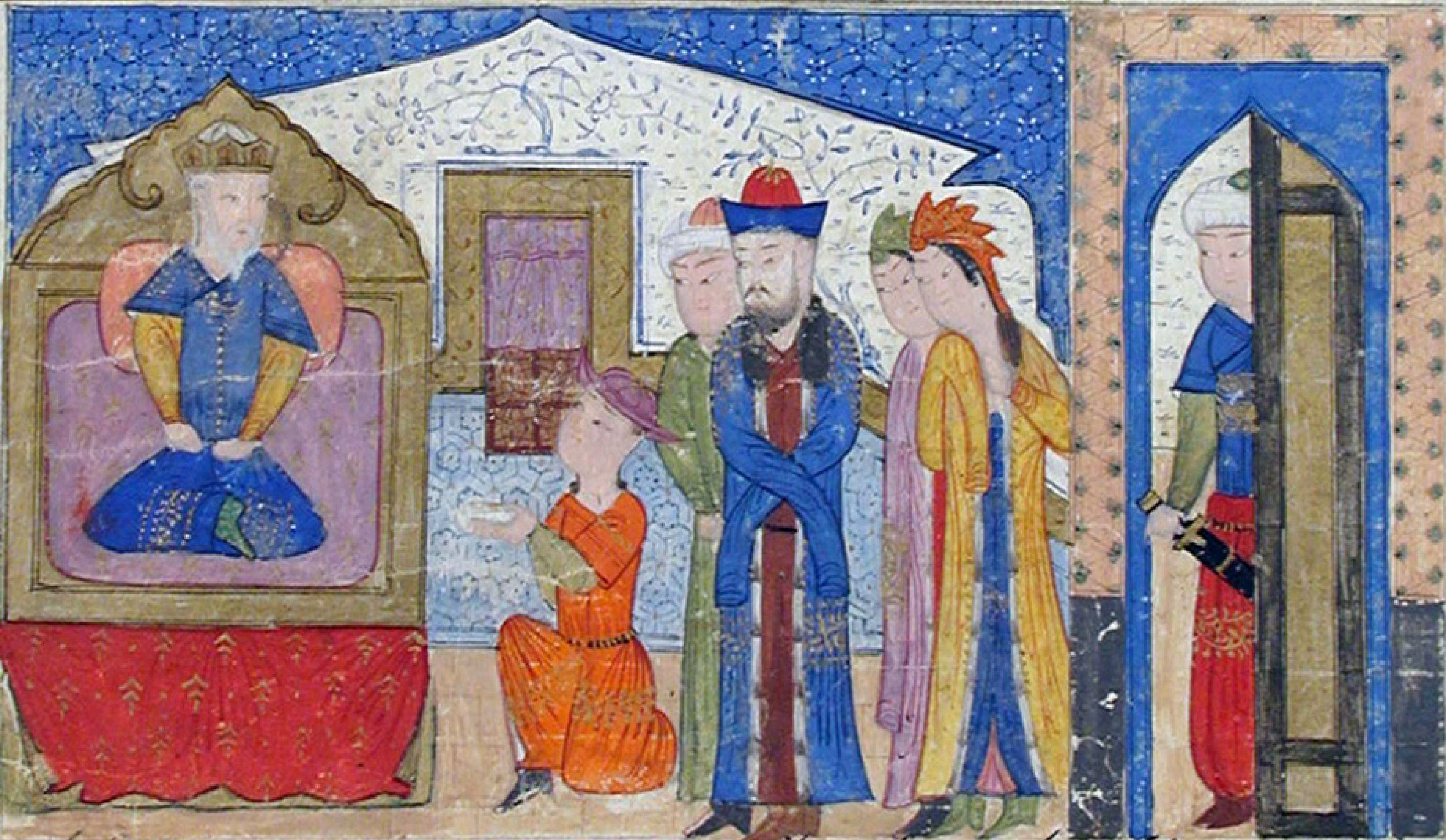
ASTERPIECE MINUTE

یکمی نقش بازی برون آورد
جو ضحاک بر تخت شد شهریار
راسر بدو ابجن کشت باز

بدل اندر درد خون آورد
دلم سیر شد زین سپرای سنج

خدا یام ازود بر تمان زنج
برو سالیان ابجن شد مسزار
برآمد برین روز کاری دراز

داستان ضحاک تازی



نمان ماند آیین سرزنانگان
شع بر بدی دست دیوان دراز

پراکنده شد کام دیوانگان
زینکی بنودی سخن جز دراز

منه خوار شد جادویی آرند
دوپا کیزه از خانه جام شید

نمان را پستی اشکارا کردند
برون آوردند لرزان چو پید

با یران زمین تاج بر سپهر نهاد
یکی از دماوشش سپید جویاد
سوی تخت جشد نهاد روی
کوهستان کرد گیتی بر روی
Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at
Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan
Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic
Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. In this
podcast (which should probably be called
Masterpiece Minutes, when I do it!), I explore
SDMA's collections of art from places such
as India, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, and the
Middle East. Drop in weekly for a new mini talk
led by SDMA curators on works of art from the
Museum's collection.

This episode is the second of a two-part
exploration of illustrated examples of the
Shahnama, the Persian epic celebrating
ancient Iranian kingship. As I mentioned last
week, the *Shahnama*, or 'Book of kings,' was
written from oral tradition around 1010 by

Firdawsi. Its stories have inspired the visual and literary culture of the Persianate and Islamic worlds, from Iran and Central Asia, to South Asia, Turkey, and the Diaspora. Last week, we introduced a page from one of the earliest illustrated examples of this text made in 14th-century Iran under the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty. After their conquests of Iran and Iraq, the Ilkhanids commissioned copies of the *Shahnama*, which they used as a manual for princely conduct as well as a symbol of legitimacy.

The Mongol legacy survived through the dynasty founded by Timur, a Central Asian military leader who claimed lineage from both the Great Mongol Chinggis Khan and the Muslims' Prophet Muhammad. *Zahhak*

enthroned — today's folio, from another dispersed copy of the *Shahnama* — comes from the Timurid period, and dates about a hundred years later than last week's example. *Zahhak* enthroned depicts the legendary Zahhak, Arabia's villainous ruler, after taking the throne from Jamshid, one of the *Shahnama's* most beloved Iranian kings. Zahhak reigned for a thousand years under the influence of Ahriman, the manifestation of darkness in Zoroastrianism, the monotheistic religion of ancient Iran. After convincing Zahhak to kill and succeed his own father, the ruler of another kingdom, Ahriman, disguised as a cook, kissed Zahhak's shoulders, causing a snake to grow from each. Satiated only with human brains, the invincible snakes served as a perpetual reminder to the Arab king of

his debt to Ahriman. In the painting, the artist identifies Zahhak with a snake growing from each shoulder. The figure holding a bowl may represent Ahriman as cook.

Despite their separation from the rest of the manuscript, here image and text work together to present a cautionary tale for aspiring princes. On the preceding page, we learn about the decline of Jamshid's reign. Memorialized in Persian folklore as Iran's greatest ruler, Jamshid had been invested with the royal *farr*, or divine splendor, revered by all of his subjects. His 300-year reign was marked by peace and prosperity, until his power led to excessive pride and forgetting God's role in his success. On the next page, where the painting appears, we learn of Zahhak's designs on the

Iranian throne and of his campaign against Jamshid, who ultimately surrenders his *farr*, or glory, to the evil king. The Persian text, read from right to left, was penned in an elegant, cursive script known as *nasta'liq*, developed in the 14th century.

Both the painting of Zahhak enthroned and the story of his reign are introduced by a caption in a larger *thuluth* script, reading “*Dastan-i Zahhak-i Tazi*,” or “The Story of Zahhak of the Tazi,” referring to his tribe. The last four lines of text refer to the villain’s long rule, during which peace, wisdom, and virtue were shunned in favor of disaster, madness, and sorcery. The final couplet identifies the two women approaching Zahhak in the painting as “pure souls from the house of Jamshid” (*du pakiza az*

khana-yi Jam Shid, possibly his sisters) — who were brought before the new king “trembling like a willow leaf” (*larzan chu bid*). (If you look closely, you might see the floating catch-word cut off at bottom left of the torn folio — this would have signaled the first word of the subsequent page, helping the binder order the folios in their proper narrative sequence.)

Zahhak enthroned illustrates the vulnerability of even the greatest kings, and the consequences suffered in the absence of just rule. The painting has been attributed on stylistic grounds to Shiraz around the end of the reign of Ibrahim Sultan, the Timurid prince who governed this area before his death in 1435. The work’s quality and the absence of a dedication suggest that the manuscript

to which it belonged may represent early commercial production in this region.

It would take several sessions to delve fully into the visual culture of the *Shahnama*, so hopefully we can revisit the subject in the future. For now, I hope these two examples illustrate how the *Shahnama* served both as a legitimizing tool for foreign rulers, and as a template for royal behavior for the eastern Islamic world. As a manual or *mirror-for-princes*, the *Shahnama* fit perfectly into a culture promoting *adab*, or refined conduct, which existed for centuries at the courts of the Islamic rulers of Iran. In this context, books were valued as repositories of knowledge and tools for education. Royal commissions, commercial production, and the subsequent

dissemination of the *Shahnama* over centuries have enabled the remarkable impact of this text on visual culture both within and beyond Iran.

Thank you for listening! This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute, here at Virtual SDMA.

BALBOA PARK

THE SAN DIEGO
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