



**Today's Masterpiece:** Miskin and Durga. [The chironji nut and date palm, folio from a manuscript of the Baburnama \(Memoirs of Babur\)](#). Mughal India, ca. 1589. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. The San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.283.

Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, Dr. Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to hear a new mini talk led by Museum curators or guests focusing on works of art from the Museum's collection.

This week we are looking at an illustrated manuscript folio from a copy of the *Baburnama*, the memoirs of the famed emperor Babur, who founded the Mughal empire in what is northern India and Pakistan today, reigning from 1526 to 1530. The page includes a pair of beautifully painted landscapes featuring two different species of trees and a colorful array of birds pictured in flight, perched on branches, or drinking water from a silvery stream. A line of the Persian written in a cursive script known as *nasta'liq* identifies the tree in the upper image as *chirunchi*, which bears a fruit known as the chironji nut; Babur likens it to something "between the walnut and the almond," which can be "put in custards and halwa." You can see the species name indicated in red ink on that first line of text.

In the image below, the date palm is represented by four trees of varying heights, the species and its fruit—*khurma*—identified in black on the middle line of text, followed by some of its properties in the final block of writing on the page. Further examination yields interesting details about the journey of this work as an object. For example, a shadow of a border framing a smaller portion of the page—from the upper line of text to just below the lowest block of text within the gold frame—suggests that the composition was once expanded into a larger folio. Another detail is the addition of two numbers—"162" and "163"—glossed in the outer border near the images in an effort to sequence the manuscript's entire corpus of illustrations.

Babur was a descendant of the great Turkic warlord Timur, who founded the Timurid dynasty in 1370 and ruled over Iran and Central Asia until his death in 1405. Subsequently, Timur's empire split into several principalities amongst his sons and grandsons, eventually declining as the Timurids' vast domains were challenged by the Ottomans from the west and the Uzbeks from the east. Babur, one of the last Timurid princes, fled the Uzbek armies encroaching upon his native Ferghana. He conquered Kabul and Ghazni in Afghanistan and traveled through other cities in Central Asia before establishing his own dynasty at Delhi and Agra in India.

The *Baburnama* contains a wealth of information about the ruler's observations and experiences over twenty years of travel across a diverse landscape, mapping a kind of "micro" cosmography of the cities, people, flora, and fauna encountered from Ferghana to Kabul to Delhi. Babur completed the text in his native Chagatay (a Turkic language), but it was later translated into Persian and subsequently copied and illustrated by his successors. Babur's deep interest in nature and the world around him is reflected in his detailed descriptions of the plants and animals he encountered, which include over a hundred species new to the ruler. The chironji and date palm species featured on the present folio come from the Persian translation completed in 1589, one of several illustrated versions of the text commissioned by Babur's grandson, the emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Akbar's



workshop included the renowned artist Miskin, who was known for his sensitive capturing of humans and animals. An inscription in red overlapping the gold frame at the bottom of the page identifies Miskin as the artist responsible for compositions seen here, and another artist, Durga, as the colorist or painter.

Babur's observations about the date palm closely recall a description of this "blessed tree" found in one of the most influential texts of the Islamic world, a thirteenth-century cosmography by the Islamic judge and scholar Zakariyya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini, entitled *'Aja'ib al-makhluqat wa ghara'ib al-mawjudat*, or "The Wonders of Creation and the Rarities of Existence." Both note the date palm is not native to India, and that it resembles an animal due to its species existing in both male and female forms for the purpose of reproduction. As Babur observes, "People say that the date palm amongst vegetables resembles an animal in two respects: one is that, just as if an animal's head is cut off, its life is taken, so it is with the date-palm: if its head is cut off, it dries off. The other is that, as the offspring of animals is not produced without the male, so, too, with the date palm: it gives no good fruit unless a branch of the male tree be brought into touch with the female tree." The similar descriptions in these texts, written centuries apart, suggests Babur had read Qazwini's popular text and reflects the Mughal emperor's pedigree as a product of Timurid princely education, his appreciation of nature complemented by his intellect and proper training in the letters and sciences.

Thank you for listening! This has been **Dr. Ladan Akbarnia** on **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!**



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