

# Propaganda in the Mongol 'World History'

The 2010 Aspects of Art Lecture formed part of the British Academy's 'Medieval Week', hosted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Professor Robert Hillenbrand FBA discussed an extraordinary medieval manuscript held in Edinburgh University Library.

THE EDINBURGH University Library possesses in the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (commonly known as the *World History*), datable 1314 and produced in Tabriz in north-west Iran, one of the supreme masterpieces of Persian book painting. Its extreme rarity, its huge size, its lavish illustration and its very early date combine to give it a good claim to be the single most valuable illustrated Islamic manuscript in the world.

The *World History* was produced at the command of Ghazan Khan, the Mongol ruler of Iran, who ordered Rashid al-Din, a Jewish doctor from Western Iran who converted to Islam and had already served successive Mongol rulers as principal vizier, to write it – though one wonders where he found the time; it was probably ghosted. The work represents an intellectual enterprise of the first order, and one unique in the history of the medieval world, covering as it does in its original four volumes (though no complete manuscript has survived) China and India, Mongolia, and Russia and Europe as far west as Ireland. Native informants supplemented by earlier chronicles provided the raw material for its c.2,000 elephant folio text (among the largest illustrated texts of Mongol times), of which the largest surviving portion produced in the lifetime of its compiler is the Edinburgh fragment, 150 folios long; there is a smaller portion of the same copy, 59 folios long, in a London collection. So some 90 per cent of the text is lost.

The Edinburgh portion is of particular interest for several reasons. First, it contains much material from the Old and New Testaments, the Apocrypha and the Midrash, all seen through Muslim eyes (Figure 1); second, it contains the first coherent cycle of



Figure 1. Scenes from the Old Testament. Top: Jonah and the whale. Middle: Moses in the bullrushes. Bottom: Abraham destroys idols (from al-Biruni, 'Chronology of Ancient Nations', as comparison).

images of the Prophet Muhammad, images that had hitherto been taboo in the Islamic world; and third, its historical coverage is particularly full for the period of the 10th and 11th centuries, and therefore adds much interesting detail to the few extant chronicles for this period. The associated images (70 in all), many of which are beautiful works of art, are full of echoes of Arab, Byzantine, Western and Chinese art.

Thus the manuscript stands at a crossroads of history and art history alike, as the principal surviving illustrated document of the largest continuous land empire that the world has ever seen, stretching from Korea to East Germany and from the Sea of Japan to the Baltic. The multi-confessional flavour of text and images alike reflects these wide horizons, when most of Asia was briefly united under the Pax Mongolica.

### Ghazan Khan

Ghazan Khan, the young, energetic and far-sighted ruler of the Ilkhanid realm, the Persian branch of the huge Mongol empire, commissioned the work shortly before his death in 1304. It was no casual whim, but should be seen within the framework of a whole series of measures aimed at changing public perceptions of the Mongols and fostering their acculturation into Perso-Islamic society. Ghazan felt that it was time to shed the image of the Mongols as an alien and ruthless conquering horde, and to strengthen their long-term commitment to the land that they were ruling. To achieve such aims called for concessions on the part of rulers and ruled alike – and more than that, a fundamental change of attitude on both sides. The moving spirit behind this impetus for change was the young Ilkhan himself, who shortly after acceding to the throne in 1295 took the epoch-making decision to embrace Islam, and who saw to it that the Mongol elite followed suit. In quick succession he promulgated edicts that a mosque and a *hammam* should be built in every village of Iran, the mosque to be paid for from the revenues of the *hammam*, and that all traces of Buddhism (the faith in which he had been raised) should be extirpated from the land. He led this revival of Islamic piety by personal example, paying visits to key Iraqi shrines and shouldering the expenses of their refurbishment.

Ghazan himself could fairly be described as an intellectual, with a working knowledge of many fields of study including natural history, medicine, chemistry and astronomy; he ordered an observatory to be built in Tabriz with a school for secular sciences attached to it. He is also credited in the chronicles with some knowledge of a remarkable range of languages which themselves spanned most of the territories of the Mongol empire: Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, Kashmiri, Hindi, Persian, Arabic and Frankish; it is unclear whether the last of these was French or Latin. He was an acknowledged expert in the history of his own people, and indeed Rashid al-Din specifically notes that he received much of the information for the first volume of his *World History*, namely the one devoted to Mongol history, from Ghazan himself. The extensive panorama of history and geography evoked by the *World History* certainly owes much to the vision and the vaulting ambition of this remarkable monarch.

### Propaganda

I want to argue in this paper that among the many new departures which the *World History* of Rashid al-Din represents was a propaganda dimension. Manuscripts had not hitherto served such purposes. Nor was this strange. Each manuscript is unique. Manuscripts are aimed at a very limited readership – and reading is essentially a private activity. Certainly public readings were common in the medieval Islamic world, but these were for an academic audience; and erudition, not propaganda, was the aim.

How, then, was the *World History* any different? First, they were copied *en masse*. Second, they were intended for free public display. Third, they were exceptionally large. Fourth, their content was truly global in its reach. Fifth, they were lavishly illustrated with big paintings. And I hope to show that it is principally through the medium of these paintings that the propaganda dimension operated.

### Mass copying, for public display

First, then, the issue of copying. The text was planned from the outset to be produced in multiple identical versions on as near to an industrial scale as medieval production

methods – as well as the sheer scale and expense of the enterprise – would permit. And although the reproduction of texts was a profit-oriented business in this society, no charge to users was levied – which suggests that something very unusual was going on here.

These multiple free copies were produced every six months in the two literary languages of the eastern Islamic world, namely Persian and Arabic. Rashid al-Din's endowment deed stipulated that a copy should be sent (presumably in whatever language was appropriate) to the major cities of Ilkhanid realm, whose fluctuating boundaries extended over this period from Syria in the west to the Black Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia in the north and to modern Pakistan in the east. They were to be displayed, so Rashid al-Din's deed runs, in mosques and *madrāsas*, in other words in public venues, and were to be made available to all comers. Thus no specific class of readers was identified, and the prevalence of numerous illustrations meant that the manuscripts could reach the illiterate as well as the literate.

The decision to target the major cities meant that in fairly short order (say ten years) the majority of the urban population under Ilkhanid rule could have had access to these manuscripts, and in the longer term most city-dwellers in the realm. One may deduce that there was never any intention to reach those who lived in villages.

### Size

A third factor which distinguishes the *World History* from earlier secular manuscripts is quite simple: its huge size. In their present severely trimmed state, little more remains of the original page than the multi-framed text block, which includes illustrations, and measures 36.5 by 25.5 cm. That was unprecedented at the time. But it gives a misleading impression of the size of the original manuscript, for the aesthetic of the time dictated that the text block should be set within very substantial upper, lower and outer margins so that the reader's attention would immediately focus on it. The original size was probably not less than 50 by 36 cm per page, so that when the bound manuscript was open at a double-page spread it probably measured something over



a metre across and over one-third of a metre high. This, then, was comparable to the elephant folio which is the largest standard size in Western book production. It was cumbersome to a degree, hernia-inducing and quite unsuited to ordinary reading, and it required a lectern or some similar raised support if it were to see regular use.

### Global content

Fourthly, the *World History* broke new ground in its content, which was nothing short of revolutionary. That content responded to Mongol experiences, needs and ambitions, rather than recycling the familiar formulae of Islamic universal histories, with their unselfconscious bias towards a Muslim-centred view of the world. Rashid al-Din's *World History*, by contrast, lives up to its name. He was well informed about China, and he knew that there were no snakes in Ireland. His is by far the most comprehensive history written anywhere in the pre-modern world, and that makes it an astonishing achievement.

There is no intention here to claim that its coverage is either balanced or complete. Indeed, the decision to devote one entire volume out of a total of four to the history of the Mongols announced right from the outset that there is frank bias at work. After all, the history of the Mongols was not only heavily dependent on oral tradition, but also reached back only a few generations before entering a world of legend and myth. So to spin out its exiguous material into a complete volume implied a corresponding reduction in other sections of the *World History*. Moreover, to put the history of the Mongols first, in pole position, as the umbrella under which the rest of the world's history can unfold, is also a move fraught with political significance. It underlines the paramount nature of Mongol rule in the contemporary world; and further, it seeks to project that paramount status back into the past, and thereby to rewrite history.

Although the role of the Mongols in the overall schema of the *World History* is unduly privileged, the sheer scope of the enterprise remains unprecedented. Its surviving portions treat the history of China

and of India, and of the Turks, the Franks and the Jews, admittedly all in condensed form, as well as covering in uneven detail the history of the Islamic world. This interest in the wider world, whatever its deficiencies in factual information, reflects the direct personal experience which the Mongols had accumulated about the vast Eurasian world, and their desire to get to know their new dominions better, as well as the areas adjoining them. Thus Rashid al-Din's *World History* is an outgrowth from, and a testament to, the greatest continuous land empire in the history of mankind. The *World History* reflects that colossal achievement, and without needing to drive the point home, its very structure reminds its readers of the fact of that empire. The various sub-sections could indeed be seen as an attempt to stake a Mongol claim to past cultures, whether Arab or Persian, Jewish or Christian, Indian or Chinese, Turkish or Frankish. And here the unity of style and presentation in the illustrations could play its part, especially in all details of military type, which are presented in an instantly recognisable and exclusively Mongol idiom (Figure 2). Thus, whatever the historical or geographical context, Mongols are everywhere and dominate the past.

### Lavish illustration

The fifth unusual aspect of the *World History* was the significant role allotted to illustration, even though the content of those illustrations was strikingly limited and repetitive. In the Edinburgh fragment there are 70 illustrations unevenly divided across

the 150 surviving folios of the manuscript in its present state, an average of one illustration for every two folios or so. This means that the paintings were not merely supplementary, as it were random grace notes for the text, but were intended from the outset to be integrated with it so that the pictures and the narrative are interdependent, or alternatively tell different stories. Moreover, the huge size of the page meant that the illustrations, even though for the most part they took the form of a narrow strip extending for the full width of the text block, would still have a substantial painted surface. They were thus capable of accommodating quite complex compositions.

This increased size of the paintings made it possible for several people at once to study the paintings, just as the huge size of the text block allowed several people to read the text simultaneously. Studying this manuscript in some provincial city could therefore become a group activity and could be expected to generate discussion and debate. At all events, it opened the door to a primitive kind of propaganda.

The desire to use the images for propaganda purposes – at any rate to carry a message over and above the requirements of illustrating a given event in the narrative – involved whoever was responsible for choosing the subjects for illustration (let us call him the project manager) in concentrating that visual material into a few themes. Repetition, after all, was a key element in the success of this strategy. The



Figure 2. Alexander the Great enters the Land of Gloom.



opportunity cost of restricting the subject matter of the illustrations in this way was to renounce the option of using the paintings to reflect the full richness of the narrative, and thus to leave many unique and fascinating events unillustrated.

It must be conceded too that another factor may have been at work here – the perennial demand for speed, to meet unforgiving production deadlines that were a necessary part of the whole copying enterprise. But the two factors of propaganda intent and keeping to deadlines, far from being mutually exclusive, actually point in the same direction – for the emphasis on key themes which have a propaganda dimension ensured that the painters themselves could execute at greater speed the limited range of subject matter, and thus could more easily keep to the tight timescale set for the whole project.

### Three themes

In looking more closely at the illustrations of the *World History* and at what they say, I shall confine my remarks to the Edinburgh portion. I propose to deal with three major themes as expressed in its illustrations. Those themes may be defined broadly as violence, authority and piety. Each of them, I would argue, carries a simple message that requires no literacy at all to understand and that is moreover driven home by sheer repetition. The cumulative impact of a succession of related images is not to be underestimated. All that the viewer needs to do is to turn the pages.

It is no part of my argument that the images illustrating these three themes served exclusively propaganda purposes. Each had its appropriate place within the general narrative and functioned at the primary level as an illustration of a specific episode. But simultaneously they discharged a generic as well as a specific function in that they contributed to what might be termed the hidden agenda of this great government-generated project. The stress on violence and on authority in particular trumps everything else, as if history were no more than this.

### Violence

There can be no doubt that the overriding visual impact of these paintings is of an unrelentingly violent and brutal world. Of the 70 paintings in the Edinburgh fragment, 35 – exactly half the total – deal with battles,

sieges, punishment or violent death. So far as its paintings are concerned, this is quite simply a book drenched in blood. That is an awesome and uncomfortable finding. At one stage there are 54 sides of richly illustrated text in which *all* the paintings,



Figure 3. Scenes of violence. Top: Abraham and Nimrud. Middle: Rustam shoots Saghad. Bottom: Samson brings down the temple of Dagon.



with only two exceptions, are about violence.

Let me recall the lethal brevity of one Persian historian describing the Mongol conquest: '*amadand, kandand, sukhtand, kushtand, bardand, raftand*' – 'they came, they uprooted, they burned, they slaughtered, they plundered, they departed'.

I will begin with punishment and violent death. Even events of the distant past are given a raw contemporary edge, as in (Figure 3) the Mongol catapult that precipitates Abraham into the flames, Rustam's Mongol compound bow whose arrow pins a traitor to a tree, or the bloody shambles as a turbaned Samson brings down the temple of Dagon, where the corpses heaped high would revive memories of Mongol holocausts among older viewers. Other unfortunates are drowned or swallowed up in earthquakes. In Figure 4, cowering captives are unceremoniously hauled by their beards towards a blazing fire, kneeling prisoners await the executioner's sword, and St George, already tortured, is pulled half-naked before the king with a chain round his neck. Courtiers look on impassively as a wretch in the stocks, his teeth bared, watches his own arm being methodically amputated, while another victim thrashes wildly on the floor while the executioner kneels on the small of his back, yanking up his head and cutting his throat. In almost every case an enthroned monarch presides over the bloodshed, whether actual or imminent. Each of these scenes depicts an episode in the text, but running through them all is an unmistakable moral for every viewer to draw: it doesn't pay to oppose or alienate the monarch. Bad things happen if you do. Collectively these images of punishment encourage unquestioning submission to the ruling authority.

All the other violent images have to do with battle, either actual or imminent, apart from four which depict sieges (Figure 5). All these paintings, as I noted earlier, have an instantly recognisable Mongol air. This extends well beyond facial characteristics to embrace headgear, clothing, footwear, armour, weapons and equipment. Even their mounts are depicted as hardy Mongol ponies. To Iranians traumatised over a



Figure 4. *Scenes of punishment. Top: Early converts to Islam being tortured. Middle: Zahhak and a prisoner. Bottom: Prisoner led before monarch.*

period of three generations by invasions, sieges and massacres at the hands of Mongol hordes, and currently enduring government by an alien Mongol elite, this presentation of the past, including their own past, embodied in Mongol form, would have operated as a kind of brainwashing. And the concomitant emphasis on violence and

bloodshed could scarcely fail to recall the havoc wrought in Iran all too recently by people looking just like these soldiers. These scenes of conflict, then, like those of punishment, would have had a menacing if subliminal subtext of the retribution that awaited any rebellion by Persians against Mongol rule. These threatening images,





Figure 5. Scenes of warfare. Top: City besieged. Middle: Hand to hand combat with a mace. Bottom: Horseman attacks an elephant.

their impact intensified by relentless repetition, glorify brute force. That force has a Mongol face. And it is found in a book produced by government edict. As one leafs through its pages, one realises that in

simplistic terms it presents history as being about war, and the pity of war; but there is little poetry in the pity. If this is not propaganda, it is something very similar; and it is plainly repressive in intent.

### Authority

The second major theme, authority, is also expressed in a consistent and notably repetitive way. The pictorial language is spare and formulaic. The focus of the image is always the ruler himself, surrounded by empty space and isolated on a throne that usually floats above the ground line and is furnished with bolster and footstool (Figure 6). It raises him above his surrounding bodyguards and courtiers, most of whom are marked out as Mongols by their headgear. Their grouping into twos, threes and fours, usually on either side of him, underlines both their subordinate role and their lack of individuality. Their body language of inclined heads, eyes cast down or fixed attentively on their lord and master, of crossed hands, of arms held straight across the chest or gripped by the other hand, speaks of disciplined obedience. He alone is seated in comfort and ostentatious magnificence; they, on the other hand, stand, kneel or sit on a simple low stool. Thus clear visual distinctions operate to ensure that the ruler takes pride of place. His throne is usually a bright scarlet, a tone that suggests Chinese lacquer-work, while its lobed outlines, foliate feet and dragon finials as well as the imbricated waves, and the lotus and peony decoration of its upholstery, all intensify its Chinese character. Once again, the reference to the East Asian origin of the Mongols is unmissable even though none of these monarchs is a Mongol. The ruler's chest is often ornamented with a mandarin square, and he like some of his courtiers sometimes follows the Chinese fashion of long sleeves.

The accumulation of these details excludes any possibility of identifying the monarch as a Persian; they underline his East Asian character and thereby stress his remoteness from his Persian subjects. These remarks apply with almost equal force to the images of pre-Islamic Persian shahs; these too bear the same marks of East Asian character, and here too the attendants are obviously Mongol in appearance and dress. These monarchs constitute a roll-call of the rulers who people the *Shahnama*, the Persian 'Book of Kings': Hushang, Tahmuras, Jamshid, Zahhak, Minuchihr, Luhrasp, Gushtasp, Kaika'us, Iskandar and Hurmuzd. Even the greatest of the *Shahnama* heroes,





Figure 6. Depictions of rulers. Left: Ruler dictates to scribe. Right: Ruler listens to old man.



Figure 7. Depictions of Persian officials. Left: Ruler with Rustam. Right: Ruler accepts a bow.



Figure 8. More informal scenes. Left: Ruler with falconer. Right: Ruler with harpist.

Rustam, makes two guest appearances. Thus the chronological skeleton of the *Shahnama* is incorporated, admittedly in prose, into the *World History*. Curiously enough, these are the earliest dated *Shahnama* images in Persian painting, and it is sobering to reflect just how Mongolised they are. So even when lip service was paid to this most nationalistic of books, its Persian character was suppressed.

The general exception to this Far Eastern ambience is the presence of Persian officials, an acknowledgement of their crucial role in the daily business of government, and a tacit reminder that the Mongols could not do without them, from Rashid al-Din himself downwards. They are usually seated, sometimes engaged in taking down notes or dictation, and their dress – for example, the turban – distinguishes them from the

Mongol courtiers. Occasionally the ethnic differences are deliberately stressed (Figure 7).

From time to time an air of informality sidles into these stereotypical icons of rulership. For example, in Figure 8 the monarch is attended by a falconer holding a raptor; or he takes a cup from a salver proffered by a kneeling servant, while



further back a girl with hennaed hands strums her harp. But for the most part the atmosphere is formal and serious, though it is significantly more relaxed and lifelike than the standard royal enthronement of 13th-century date, with its unblinking frontality. Thus the seated pose is redolent of comfort rather than stateliness, with one leg stretched out, dangling or tucked in. Moreover, the ruler consistently engages with those around him, tilting his head, leaning forward or making eye contact. Only once (Figure 9) is he depicted in formal audience mode, looking blandly outwards with seated courtiers ranged in groups on either side, like a council in session. He always wears a version of the so-called

Saljuq or tricorn crown, and above the scene hovers a swathe of material pinked out with loops, ribbons and gold-embroidered bands. It is not clear whether this is intended to represent a rolled-up curtain, a canopy or even a tent, though the latter would correspond most closely to literary accounts of the peripatetic Saljuq court. A curiosity in Figure 10 is the crass misunderstanding of the ancient Persian tradition of the hanging crown as a symbol of the absent king, which in this image of the Saljuq monarch Berkyaruq, who is already crowned, floats uncomfortably and redundantly above him.

If the scenes of battle and violence transmit, alongside and so to speak beneath their

immediate narrative *raison d'être*, a sense of the raw terror generated by the Mongols, the 19 enthronement scenes, which account for more than 27 per cent of the paintings in the Edinburgh fragment, project an image of spare, solemn, dignified grandeur. The ruler, whose person and ambience are distinctively East Asian in appearance, carries the appurtenances of kingship – crown, throne, canopy – lightly. But his authority is unassailable, and he presides over a largely Mongol court in which Persian officials are demoted to a lowly and distinctly unmilitary role. The Mongol courtiers carry weapons – bows, swords, maces – but the Iranians never do. The subliminal, propagandist message here seems to be that the future of Iran, like its past, is in the hands of non-Iranians and is set to continue that way. But the ruler is presented as a man who, while touched by the charisma of kingship, and capable of inflicting fearsome punishment, nevertheless also interacts with those at his court and listens to his counsellors.

### Public piety

I come now to my third theme, public piety. Here too the images, ten in all, are concentrated in a single section of the text, which extends for 32 sides. I refer to the images connected with the early career of the Prophet Muhammad rather than those which deal with the Old and New Testaments. One of the major alienating factors of the Mongol invasions was that they were not only sudden, calamitous and of unexampled ferocity, but that the invaders were not Muslims and showed no respect for or understanding of the Islamic faith. Chinggis Khan famously stabled his horses in the Great Mosque of Bukhara. His men came as it were from Mars, and that of course made them still more terrifying. And when the Mongols established themselves as the rulers of Iran, their religious practices did not endear them to their subjects. They themselves were animists or Buddhists, and they promoted Jews and Christians to high-ranking positions in the government in the face of Muslim resentment. All this could not fail to drive a wedge between rulers and ruled. The conversion of Ghazan, the supreme ruler, and with him the Mongol elite, in 1295 changed all this. One of several



Figure 9. Ruler depicted frontally.



Figure 10. Ruler with hanging crown.



possible interpretations of this epoch-making event is that it was intended as an olive branch offered by the Mongols to their subjects. But this mass conversion, which was quickly followed by a violent persecution of the Buddhists in Iran, did not mean that the members of the Mongol elite rapidly familiarised themselves with a faith that already had a complex and turbulent history of over 700 years in Iran. The constant successive confessional shifts of the Mongol ruler Oljeitu (reigned 1304-17), who was by turns Christian, animist, Buddhist, Sunni Muslim, Shi'ite Muslim and eventually – perhaps to be on the safe side – ended his days as a Sunni, reflects this unease with traditional Islamic norms. And it was this Islamic Vicar of Bray who was on the throne when our manuscript was copied.

What light does the situation I have just sketched shed on the cycle of paintings in the *World History* that illustrate the life of the Prophet Muhammad? Those images are not only the most detailed visual account of Muhammad's life that had been produced within the Islamic world for some 700 years; they are all but the first account. In fact the very first, also produced in Mongol Iran, was a mere eight years earlier and its five paintings, with subject matter quite different from that of the *World History*, are to be found in al-Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (another key Islamic illustrated manuscript now in Edinburgh). Put plainly, the Mongols shattered a powerful and very longstanding taboo in creating these pictures. It is almost impossible to imagine that a patron raised in the Muslim faith could have ordered them – though it was a different story once that taboo had been breached. It was precisely Mongol ignorance of, or indifference to, Muslim norms that made these pictures possible. Various explanations for this portentous move could be proposed – for example, that these images are teaching aids for newly converted Mongols, or that they are intended in a purely historical (rather than theological) spirit appropriate to the thrust of the work as a whole, or that the Mongol experience of Christianity and Buddhism, both of them faiths with a long tradition of using religious images, led naturally to a demand for similar images for the faith to which the



Figure 11. *Scenes from the life of Muhammad*. Top: Muhammad meets Gabriel. Middle: Muhammad and Bahira. Bottom: Birth of Muhammad.

Mongols had converted. But one might also consider these unprecedented images, some of which recycle such Christian themes as the Annunciation or the Baptism in unexpected ways (Figure 11), as a very

public profession of the Mongols' commitment to their newly adopted faith. That the means they chose for the purpose may have offended Muslim sensibilities would have been an unfortunate irony.



But there can be no question that part of the aim of these pictures was to express reverence for Muhammad – hence the frequent presence of angels in these scenes, a clear signal that he enjoys God's favour. Like the inclusion of *Shahnama* material or the extra emphasis placed on Persian history, then, this foray into Islamic religious subject matter could be interpreted as part of a programme of gradual acculturation. By that reckoning, part of the official strategy behind the *World History* was to win over the hearts and minds of as many Persians as possible.

### Conclusion

From early Islamic times, Muslim rulers had experimented with various forms of propaganda, including coins, clothing and monumental inscriptions. Within that general context, the decision to use huge books in multiple copies and in two languages, and to put them on public display in the major cities of the realm free of charge, must be hailed as an impressive example of lateral thinking. At a stroke it propelled the illustrated book from the private to the public realm. The premier target was an educated provincial audience: the intelligentsia and opinion-makers across

the land. But crucially, the project also catered for a simpler and illiterate audience, and used the big illustrations in these manuscripts as a means to that end. The three themes that I have identified – violence, authority, and piety – and the pictures that express them, speak with various voices. Some go for the jugular and are frankly terrifying. Others seek to persuade. So there is both carrot and stick. And these three themes account for the vast majority (61 out of 70, or 87 per cent) of the paintings in the Edinburgh manuscript, despite the endless opportunities offered by the text for all kinds of subject matter. This in itself is food for thought. Quite apart from the overall project of presenting history through a Mongol lens, the intention was probably to send several messages at once – the irresistible might of the Mongol war machine; the permanent nature of Mongol power; and the Mongol commitment to acculturation, which implied building bridges with their Persian subjects. Not one of these messages got in the way of the others. And they all work, both because they are simple and because they are frequently repeated. Thus between them the Mongol ruler and his Judaeo-Muslim vizier had dreamed up a radically

new use for manuscript illustration. Their gigantic picture book served, among other purposes, as a flexible vehicle for quite sophisticated propaganda. And given that this was in an age that had no concept of newspapers or radio, television or the internet, that is an achievement worth saluting.

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