PART 4

PALACES OF THE MONGOLS

AND THEIR SUCCESSORS

(THIRTEENTH–EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES)
THE ILKHANID PALACE

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The palaces erected in Iran under the Ilkhans, the Mongol dynasty that ruled from 1258 to 1353, continued using well-established prototypes for their form and decoration. What is new and interesting about them is the wide variety of documentation for them. The range of sources, from archaeological evidence to texts and contemporary illustrations, is useful for methodological reasons, as the various sources can be measured against one another to check the accuracy of textual variants and to verify and understand the limits of two-dimensional representation within the conventional system of Persian painting. The range of sources also enables one to move beyond the description of a single extant example, which may be an accident of survival and may or may not be typical, to the delineation of an ideal type. Following a brief review of the sources, then, I will sketch a typical Ilkhanid palace, first in terms of plan, then the materials and techniques of decoration, and finally the subjects and themes depicted, in order to show what spatial and visual means Ilkhanid rulers used to project the standard message of dynastic legitimation and imperial power.

Like many Iranian dynasties, the Ilkhans were transhumanists who migrated annually between winter and summer quarters. They usually wintered in warmer climes, such as Baghdad, and summered on the grassy plains of Azerbaijan. The royal entourage formed a giant tent-city, and the tents for the royal family were particularly large and splendid. On his victorious campaign across Iran, Hulagu, for example, is said to have ascended the throne near Balkh in a tent attached by a thousand gold nails and made of gold-on-gold material. It included an elevated pavilion and a magnificent audience hall decorated with gold and silver gem-studded vases. Ghazan's summer palace at Ujan in Azerbaijan was a tent of golden tissue which took two years to make. It comprised an audience hall with several appendages and took a month to erect. Beyond mention in contemporary texts, nothing remains of these tents, and hence I concentrate here on more durable constructions of brick, stone, and wood.

No Ilkhanid palace stands, but part of one has been uncovered at Takht-i Sulayman, southeast of Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran. German excavations there in the early 1960s uncovered the ruins of a large and elaborately decorated hunting lodge built by the Ilkhanid Abaqa (r. 1265–82) directly on the foundations of the Sasanian sanctuary of Shiz, the site where Sasanian emperors were crowned. The palace at Takht-i Sulayman is remarkable for the quality and abundance of the architectural decor, including carved marble, luster and lajvardina tiles, and carved and molded stucco. Iranian excavations at Sultaniyya, Uljaytu's new capital 120 kilometers northwest of Qazvin on the road to Tabriz, were begun in the 1970s, but only preliminary reports have been published.

Juxtaposed to the rather paltry remains is a plethora of contemporary documentation in texts, both written and pictorial. One source is contemporary history. The Ilkhanid period is generally regarded as the best for Persian historical writing, and although one may quibble about quality, there is no such argument about quantity. Undoubtedly the senior historian of the times, and one of the most remarkable historians of all time, was Rashid al-Din (d. 1318). Born ca. 1247 at Hamadan, he was trained as a physician and converted from Judaism to Islam at the age of thirty. From 1298 until the end of Uljaytu's reign in 1316, he was the principal statesman of Mongol Persia, but was executed soon thereafter. Rashid al-Din wrote on a wide range of topics, from theology to history, but his magnum opus was the Jami' al-Tawīikh (Collection of Histories), the first known history of the world. It is unmistakably "official history," for Rashid al-Din began it at the request of Ghazan and wrote it "to preserve the memory of the extraordinary events."

Rashid al-Din collected an assortment of historians around him in the court bureaucracy. They included the scribe Abu'l-Qasim Kashani, who wrote the official biography of Uljaytu and who is the closest source for the city of Sultaniyya. Abu'l-Qasim belonged to the renowned family of luster potters from Kashan: one of his brothers...
followed their father as the leading potter of his generation; another brother was a Sufi shaykh at the Suhrawardiyya khanqah at Natanz. Abu’l-Qasim’s upbringing and family connections gave him an interest in artistry, but his long internally rhyming phrases are often metaphorical asides rather than factual observations. His florid style is matched by that of ‘Abdallah b. Fadallallah al-Shirazi, commonly known as Wassaf (“the panegyrist”) or Wassafi Hadrat (“the court panegyrist”). In addition to these two scribes, several other historians and geographers were active in the period. Many of these sources give occasional details about palaces, but since all the authors were employed in the state bureaucracy, they were predisposed to describe their patrons’ accomplishments in glowing terms.

Contemporary Mamluk historians in Cairo also reported what their rivals in Iran were building. Many of the artistic innovations of the day, including such decorative techniques as carved stucco and glazed tile revetment, were imported from Iran to Egypt during the early fourteenth century, and these Arabic authors sometimes provide useful details about architecture, as in the descriptions of the founding of Sultaniyya given by al-Nuwayri and al-Yusufi. In contrast to the official Persian historians, Mamluk historians were more willing to credit pejorative reports and offer a balanced view. Unlike their Iranian contemporaries, however, they had not usually visited the cities they described, so what they report is hearsay.

A third type of written source about Ilkhanid life in general is the travel account, for this was a period of remarkable cultural efflorescence and artistic achievement in which cultures from Europe to the Orient were bound together in a world economy which preceded European hegemony. Such merchants as Marco Polo recorded what people made, what they traded, and what had commercial value. Religious envoys were sent by Christian leaders in Europe to secure an alliance with the Mongols against the rising threat of the Mamluks in the Mediterranean. Pope John XXII established an archbishopric at Sultaniyya in 1318, and archbishops were appointed there until 1425. The mendicant Friar Odoric of Pordenone passed through Iran en route to India and China. While these travel accounts can help reconstruct the life that went on in such cities as Tabriz, called by Marco Polo the finest emporium in the Middle East, they give few details about palaces per se, for most of the travelers did not receive official audiences.

As well as written sources, there are pictorial ones, for palaces and palatial rooms are depicted in illustrated manuscripts from the period. One must be careful, however, to distinguish categories of illustration. The paintings in manuscripts produced for the market usually show a schematized view of a generic palace rather than an accurate depiction of a specific building. More useful are the large luxury manuscripts associated with court patronage and thought to have been made for a specific patron and purpose. These are mainly illustrated copies of the Shahnama, the Persian national epic. As the illustrations are thought to depict historical events in contemporary guise, they can be used as documentation for the artistic practices of the Ilkhanids. Although some illustrations in these large luxury manuscripts show generic palaces, others show specific details of decoration which confirm the evidence from excavations and the descriptions in texts.

The variety of sources allows us to reconstruct the typical plan of an Ilkhanid palace as a court with iwans on sides. The palace at Takht-i Sulayman, for example, is centered on a large court (125 x 150 meters), which is oriented on a north-south axis and encompasses an artificial pond. The court was surrounded by porticoes and had iwans on the four sides. Behind the north iwan was a domed room, which was built on the site of the Sassanian fire temple and probably served as the Ilkhanid audience hall. It was two-storied; a monumental stone stair led to a balcony supported on wooden columns, affording a fine view of the lake. Behind the west iwan was a transverse hall flanked by two octagonal kiosks; this section of the palace had served as the Sassanian throne room, and its lavish decoration suggests that it became the official quarters of the Ilkhanid sovereign.

Written sources confirm the use of a similar plan for other Ilkhanid palaces. Uljaytu’s palace at Sultaniyya has been destroyed, but the description by the Timurid historian Hafiz-i Abru (d. 1430) says that the palace (Pers. saran) had a square court (sahn) paved with marble and measuring 100 x 100 [gaz]. Assuming his standard gaz of 42 cms, then the court measured 42 meters square. The court was surrounded by a huge iwan like the one at Ctesiphon and twelve smaller saraycha, each with a window overlooking
are modeled on earlier Abbasid ones at Samarra, with an additional throne room beyond the central court (40 x 24 meters) paved in marble. A large rectangle (50 x 32 meters). A palace constructed at Ghazna by ruler Mahmud (r. 998-1030), who with his son Ilkhanid court similarly comprised courts with iwans. The residence of the Juwayni family, for example, is described by Husayn b. Muhammad b. Abi’l-Rida al-’Alawi, the author who translated Mufaddal b. Sa’d b. al-Husayn al-Mafarrukhi’s Mahāsin-i ‘Iṣfahān (The Splendors of Isfahan) from Arabic into Persian in 1329, as a lofty palace comprising four iwans (he uses the word sūffa), each one like half the arch of heaven, around an arcaded court.

The Ilkhanid palace plan of a court with iwans continues a long tradition in Iran. The best-known prototypes from medieval Iran are the palaces built by the Ghaznavids in their winter and summer capitals at Lashkar Gah and Ghazna in Afghanistan. The ruins at Lashkar Gah extend more than six kilometers along the east bank of the Helmand River. The site, which had been developed in the tenth century as a garden suburb of Bust, was expanded by the Ghaznavid ruler Mahmud (r. 998–1030), who with his son Mas’ud I (r. 1031-41) built the South Palace. Two other palaces were added later. The site stands in an area of low rainfall, and although constructed of mud brick, the buildings are exceptionally well preserved and were excavated by the French in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Three main palaces were uncovered: the North Palace, a large rectangular enclosure containing three self-contained buildings, each with a central court; the compact two-story Central Palace (35 x 52 meters); and the South Palace, the largest of the three (65 x 115 meters). It has a court (38 x 43 meters) with iwans on the four sides. Beyond the north iwan lies another iwan, which overlooks the river at its bend. The palace constructed at Ghazna by Mas’ud III and dated by inscription to 506 (1112) is also a large rectangle (50 x 32 meters). A central court (40 x 24 meters) paved in marble is surrounded by 32 niches and iwans on the four sides, with an additional throne room beyond the south iwan. In plan, these Ghaznavid palaces are modeled on earlier Abbasid ones at Samarra, and it is no surprise that the Ilkhanids continued the tradition, for they were much enamored of their Ghaznavid predecessors.

Such a plan does not allow for significant progression through space, for in Iranian tradition the ruler or an emissary often went out to meet the visiting dignitary (Pers. bi istiqlāl-i ʿishān bīrān āmādan). Apparently there was little elaborate ceremonial in Ilkhanid palaces, and the major events in them were feasts and enthronements, in which the ruler was surrounded by serried rows of family and courtiers. The plan suggests that the visitor entered the palace through one iwan and moved to the court; the ruler sat in audience in the throne room behind the opposite iwan. From there or a nearby space, he was accorded views of the site.

The finest and most expensive materials available were used to decorate Ilkhanid palaces. Floors were paved with marble. Plastered walls on the interior were painted or revetted with tile dadoes. Windows were fitted with metal grilles and wooden shutters. Porches were supported on carved capitals of wood or sandstone. Walls were articulated with elaborate cornices of molded and cut plaster, and ceilings were often covered with muqarnas domes. In addition, there were splendid portable furnishings, such as rugs and textiles. As with plans, these materials and techniques of decoration can be documented in a variety of contemporary sources.

Elaborate wall revetments were found during the excavations at Takht-i Sulayman, particularly in and around the west iwan. The kiosk on the north, for example, had a 44-cm banquette covered with star-and-cross tiles, a narrow frieze of green-glazed relief tiles measuring 24 x 44 cm, a high 1.3-meter dado of star-and-cross tiles, and another narrow frieze of 35-x-35 cm luster tiles decorated with dragons and simurghs. The wall above was covered with painted plaster. Many tiles and fragments were found in a heap near the west iwan between the south octagon and a nearby stair. They were made in such expensive techniques as luster and lajvardina, a type of enameled and gilded ware whose name, from the Persian lājvard (lapis lazuli), refers to the deep blue glaze that characterizes many of the pieces.

Many details of this elaborate wall decoration are confirmed in texts, which mention luxury materials like gold and silver and many colors. Kashani, for example, says that the roofs at Sul-taniyya were silvered; the doors and walls were
studded with gold, pearls, and gems; and the surfaces of the court shone with rubies, jewels, and turquoises. He uses the word *mīnāḥ*, often translated as enameled, but perhaps meaning tiled. Many of these descriptions are hyperbolic generalizations, and better confirmation of the archaeological findings comes from contemporary illustrations, particularly in paintings from the great dispersed copy of the *Shāhnāma*. The illustration "Sindukht becomes aware of Rudaba’s actions" (fig. 1), for example, shows an arrangement similar to the one found at Takht-i Sulayman: a large dado of star-and-cross tiles sandwiched between narrower friezes. The upper frieze even resembles the tiles at Takht-i Sulayman with the name of ‘Ali. The painting shows a projecting cornice which can be interpreted as a frieze of cut stucco with sgraffitini in cartouches, and a similar cornice once surmounted the mihrab added to the congregational mosque at Isfahan in 1310 under Uljaytu. Several of the illustrations in the dispersed *Shāhnāma* manuscript show painted wall surfaces. Most of the mural paintings, such as that shown in "The bier of Alexander," have geometric designs, but one illustration, "Isfandiyar approaching Gushtasp," shows a landscape scene above a narrow frieze and a high dado apparently composed of tiles.

Other paintings from the dispersed *Shāhnāma*, such as "Faridun mourning," confirm the use of elaborately carved or sculpted capitals and window grilles. Three ball joints (diameter 13 cm) for window grilles, made of bronze inlaid with gold, silver, and a bituminous material, are in- cluded in the two mosaics once surmounted the mihrab at Sultaniyya; they are decorated with cartouches, arabesque scrolls, and T-fret designs. A related but smaller piece (diameter 9 cm) bears a representation of a mounted falconer set against arabesque scrolls in the central medallion and peony scrolls outside it. These paintings apparently give accurate depictions, then, of contemporary settings and can be used to confirm and date other objects. The painting of "Zahhak enthroned," for example, contains a rare representation of an animal carpet and is important evidence for dating the introduction of this type of object.

Muqarnas vaults were apparently common in Ilkhanid palaces. Kashani says that the roofs of the arches and arcades at Sultaniyya were covered with muqarnas, and the lyrical poet Hafiz uses the word to describe the dome of heaven. Both kiosks flanking the west iwan at Takht-i Sulayman were covered with muqarnas vaults. Using the muqarnas vault in the south kiosk (fig. 2), which was composed of four tiers of 45-degree and 90-degree elements, and the fragments from the fallen vault in the north kiosk, Harb reconstructed how these muqarnas vaults were built in the period. Units were prefabricated in fragile plaster molds and fitted in tiers with chiseled filler elements. These tiers were then corbeled from the corners of the room. Harb was also able to reconstruct how the technology was disseminated, thanks to a 50-cm stucco plate which had been built into the wall of a local farmhouse (fig. 3). The pattern of squares, rhomboids, and triangles incised on the underside was a ground projection of one-quarter of a muqarnas vault. Harb hypothesized that with such a two-dimensional representation in hand, builders on the site could have assembled muqarnas vaults using the practical skills they already possessed.

Most of the materials and techniques used to decorate Ilkhanid palaces are found in other contemporary buildings. The tomb of the Sufi shaykh ‘Abd al-Samad (1307) at Natanz, for example, has a muqarnas vault (fig. 4) and traces of an elaborate wall revetment in luster tiles, including a high dado of cross-and-star tiles and a frieze of tiles with birds, whose heads have been defaced. The combination of muqarnas vault and luster tiles may have been a practical one, for the skilled craftsmen who made the luster tiles may also have molded the stucco pieces for muqarnas vaults. A luster panel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 5), for example, is inscribed in the spandrels "the work of Hasan b. ‘Ali b. Ahmad Babawayh the builder (al-banni?)." His name is also inscribed on the colonnettes in the tomb at Natanz. Hasan b. ‘Ali the builder belonged to one of the major families of Kashan luster potters. His father, for example, made several important pieces of lusterware, including a medium-sized mihrab dated 1305, which was removed from the Imamzada Yahya at Varamin to the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Like the plan, many of these materials and techniques used to decorate Ilkhanid palaces were part of the palatine tradition in Iran and the surrounding area for several hundred years. Interior walls elaborately decorated with paintings and carved stucco are found in Ghaznavid palaces. The throne room in the south palace at
Lashkar Gah, for example, had a dado painted in fresco showing a procession of guards and panels; inscriptions in baked brick and geometric decoration in carved stucco surmounted the dadoes. A distinct type of small tile with molded decoration of animals, plants, and inscriptions and a monochrome lead oxide glaze was found at Ghazna. The palace of the Seljuq of Rum at Qubadabad, built ca. 1256, was decorated with a variety of figural tiles in various techniques.98

The main subjects of decoration on Ilkhanid palaces were figural representations and poetic inscriptions. The luster and lajvardina tiles at Takht-i Sulayman, dated between 1272 and 1276, included depictions of such animals as dragons and simurghs and such scenes from the Shahnāma as “Bahram Gur hunting with his slave girl Azada.” From a small fragment found in a heap at the site, Melikian-Chirvani has reconstructed a frieze of large molded luster tiles with verses from the Shahnāma in arched niches.99 He has identified some twenty tiles with verses from the Shahnāma. In two cases the text was changed from the third to the second-person singular so that the resident of the Ilkhanid palace is metaphorically compared to the kings of ancient Iran: he is the one endowed with Faridun’s glory, the second Alexander. The verses on the tiles are taken from various parts of the epic40 and do not present a continuous narrative. Rather, they suggest general themes so that the text would have served as an aide-memoire to evoke the glorious past and metaphorically relate the current ruler to the heroes of the past. On stylistic grounds, notably the highlighting with turquoise and cobalt blue, Melikian-Chirvani has dated the frieze to the 1280s and suggested that it was made in honor of the accession of Aqa’s successor, Ahmad (r. 1282–84). Melikian-Chirvani also identified a similar series of wall tiles in a detached painting now mounted in an album in Istanbul.41 The painting shows an enthroned sovereign, probably Kaykhushraw receiving the arms of the divs he had defeated, and has been removed from a large copy of Shahnāma. On analogy with the painting, Melikian-Chirvani suggested that the frieze from Takht-i Sulayman framed a window embrasure behind the sovereign’s throne in the audience hall.

Using epic verses as palatine wall decoration had a long tradition in Iran and related areas. The Seljuq sultan of Rum, ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I, for example, had maxims from the Shahnāma affixed to the walls of Konya and Sivas in 1221, according to a report by Ibn Bibi.42 Once again the precedent can be traced directly to the Ghaznavids, for the palace of Mas‘ud III at Ghazna had an extraordinary inscription in floriated Kufic which ran 250 meters around the court.43 One part of the inscription was in mutaqarīb meter in mathnā’ī form; another was in musjāṣṣ meter and in mathnā’ī or another form of composition, perhaps a qaṣīda. The first part, in the same meter as the Shahnāma, reviews the line of Ghaznavid rulers from Sebutegin, the founder of the dynasty, to Mas‘ud III, the builder of the palace. The section on the west speaks of Mahmud and Mas‘ud I; the patron, Mas‘ud III, was probably mentioned on the south side near the entrance to the throne room. The content of the text is somewhat unclear but may be a hyperbolic reference to the erection of the palace: the longest sentence extant, saying that “with clay and water, he laid a thousand priceless treasures on the summit of heaven,” may refer to the materials kneaded to form the mud bricks used in construction. The intent of the poem was to exalt the reigning dynasty by expounding its merits before the eyes of whoever halted in the court, resplendent with marble and sumptuous decoration. The author of the poem is unknown, but he was probably a contemporary court poet, for a myriad of verses in the encomiastic vein was composed at the Ghaznavid court.

The tradition of using poetry to decorate palaces was known throughout the Islamic world in the medieval period. The twelfth-century palaces at Messina and Palermo had verses composed in praise of buildings erected by Roger II (r. 1105–54), William I (r. 1154–66), and William II (r. 1166–89), and the fourteenth-century palace of the Alhambra in Granada has verses composed by Ibn Zamrak.44 In the Iranian world, the tradition can be traced back to the eleventh-century Qarakhanid residence of Ribat-i Malik in the Central Asia steppe 20 kilometers from Kermine along the old route connecting Bukhara and Samarkand. A large (80 x 110 meter) rectangular enclosure, it has residential units grouped around a court in the south half and ceremonial and guest rooms in the north. When the building was remodeled in 1078–79 by the Qarakhanid sovereign Shams al-Mulk Nasr b. Tamghach Khan Ibrahim, the portal was decorated with an elaborate brick inscription in floriated Kufic. The text, a verse of unknown meter ending in ay, speaks of “the sultan of the world who made this place,
building (?).”46 Most of these texts indulge in eulogistic description (Arab. wasf) of the buildings on which the verses appear. Others are narrative in character, odes to commemorate feats of the reigning sovereign.

The purpose in decorating Ilkhanid palaces with depictions and inscriptions from the Shahnama was to legitimize the present through identification with the past. The verses used at Takht-i Sulayman show that the Mongol ruler was successively compared to the kings of ancient Iran, the Sasanian emperors, and Mahmud of Ghazna. Dynastic legitimacy was sought through incorporation into Iranian history, both legendary and real. Such epic texts were the written equivalent of the murals decorating pre-Islamic Soghdian palaces which show scenes from epic narratives, such as the cycle of the legendary hero Rustam at Panjikent, and actual royal events, such as the Chaghaniyan mission to the royal court at Samarqand.47

In the Islamic model, the image was complemented by the word. The Ghaznavids and their contemporaries apparently commissioned new poems specifically to fit their buildings, for this was the great age of epic poetry in Iran. Gradually, however, the Shahnama emerged as the preeminent example of the Persian epic, and from the mid-twelfth century to the late thirteenth, a small group of luxury metalwares and ceramics were decorated with scenes and verses from the Shahnama.48 The luster tiles used to decorate the palace at Takht-i Sulayman in the last decades of the thirteenth century are the latest objects with Shahnama decoration, for by the fourteenth century, the shift in Persian literature from epic to romance, a change in taste that had begun soon after the Shahnama was composed ca. 1000, was complete.49 During the fourteenth century, romances were added to the repertory of books deemed suitable for illustration; the first copy of Nizami’s Khamsa (five poems) with space for illustrations, for example, is dated 718 (1318).50 Hence, for the decoration of later palaces in Iran, such as those built by the Safavids at Qazvin and Isfahan, scenes from such famous romances as Nizami’s Khamsa were used to evoke the glorious past, legitimize the dynasty’s claims to sovereignty, and exalt its merits.51
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Notes

7. Only parts of this work have been published. In addition to Quatremère’s edition and translation (see n. 2), the most important is the section dealing with the reign of Ghazan, Târîkh-i mudârak-i ghâzânî, ed. K. Jahn (London: Luzac, 1940).
14. For the great dispersed copy of the Shâhnâmâ, often known after its former owner Demotte, see Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair, Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); other related pages are in albums in Istanbul and Berlin.
15. See Blair, "Mongol Capital at Sulṭânîyya," 146 and n. 87.
17. The word comes to mean court or levée of a prince.
18. Qâshânî, Târîkh-i Ulijaytû, 44-46.
24. Washington, D.C., Sackler Gallery, S86.0102, ex Vever Collection; Grabar and Blair, Epic Images, no. 10.
25. Naumann, Ruinen von Tacht-e Suleiman, fig. 89.
26. See, for example, Pope’s photograph in André Godard, "Historique du Masjid-é Djumâ d’Iṣfahân," Amthar-ī 1ran 1 (1936), fig. 155.


34. See the forthcoming article "Muqarnas" by Yasser Tabbaa in *The Dictionary of Art*.


41. Melikian-Chirvani has identified verses from the stories of Zahhak, Manuchihr, Kayka'us and the seven adventures of Rustam, Kaykhusraw, Gushasp and the seven adventures of Isfandiyar, Alexander, Bahram Gur, and perhaps Piruz; the book of Khusrav Parviz provided most of the sources of narrative hemistiches molded in blue.


44. Bombaci, *Kufic Inscription in Persian Verses*.

45. All of these are discussed with references in Bombaci, *Kufic Inscription in Persian Verses*, 36–42.


Fig. 1. “Sindukht becomes aware of Rudaba’s actions” from the Demotte Shahnameh. Iran, ca. 1335–40. Photo: courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., S86.0102.

Fig. 2. Muqarnas vault from the south kiosk in the summer palace at Takht-i Sulayman. After Harb, Ilkhaniische Stalaktitengewölbe, pl. 12.