

Illustrations from the Wellcome Library

A Persian Anatomical Image in a non-Muslim Manuscript from Gujarat

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The Tradition of *Manṣūr*

In 1396 (798/799), two hundred years before Vesalius, the Persian author *Manṣūr* ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf ibn Faḳīh Ilyās composed a treatise on anatomy entitled *Taṣṭīḥ-i Manṣūrī* that summarized many of the observations of Galen. It was not the first such treatise to be composed in the Islamic world, but it was the first to be accompanied by drawings of the human body in anatomical detail. About seventy manuscripts containing these drawings survive to the present day, scattered in libraries from Baghdad to Paris, and of course in the Wellcome Library in London.

This tradition of anatomical illustrations has been known to medical historians as the *Fünfbilderserie* or “Five-picture” series since the early study by Karl Sudhoff.¹ In fact, as the series has become better known through the study of a wider sampling of manuscripts, it has become clear that it consists of six, seven, or even more standard images. This Persian tradition of anatomical illustration has many interesting features and questions associated with it, which have more recently been discussed by Roger French, Emilie Savage-Smith, and others.² For the present purposes, however, it is sufficient for us to see one of these images, in order to recognize the main pictorial details of this tradition. Figure 1 shows an example. These figures typically face the viewer (although one of the other standard figures faces away), the legs are bent, the hands are on the thighs, the head is circular, the internal organs, including intestines, are displayed, and labelled with text.

After Islam, and in particular the Mughal dynasty, had established itself decisively as a cultural power in the South Asian subcontinent, manuscripts such as these were copied in

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¹ Karl Sudhoff, ‘Anatomische Zeichnungen (Schemata) aus dem 12. und 13. Jh. und eine Skelettzeichnung des 14. Jhrs.’, *Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin*, 1907, 1: 49–65; Karl Sudhoff, ‘Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Anatomie im Mittelalter speziell der anatomischen Graphik nach Handschriften des 9. bis 15. Jahrhunderts’, *Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin*, 1908, 4: 52–73; E Seidel and Karl Sudhoff, ‘Drei weitere anatomische Fünfbilderserien aus Abendland

und Morgenland’, *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin*, 1910, 3: 169–83.

² Roger French, ‘An origin for the bone text of the “Five-figure Series”’, *Sudhoffs Archiv*, 1984, 68: 143–56; Emilie Savage-Smith, ‘The depiction of human anatomy in the Islamic world’, in Francis Maddison and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Science, tools & magic. Part one: Body and spirit, mapping the universe*, vol. 12 of Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, 2 vols, London, The Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 14–24; Dominik Wujastyk, ‘Interpréter l’image du corps humain dans l’Inde pré-moderne’, in Véronique Bouillier and Gilles Tarabout (eds.), *Images du corps dans le monde hindou*, Collection Monde Indien, Sciences sociales, 15–20 siècle, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2002, ch. 2, pp. 71–99, plates I–V.

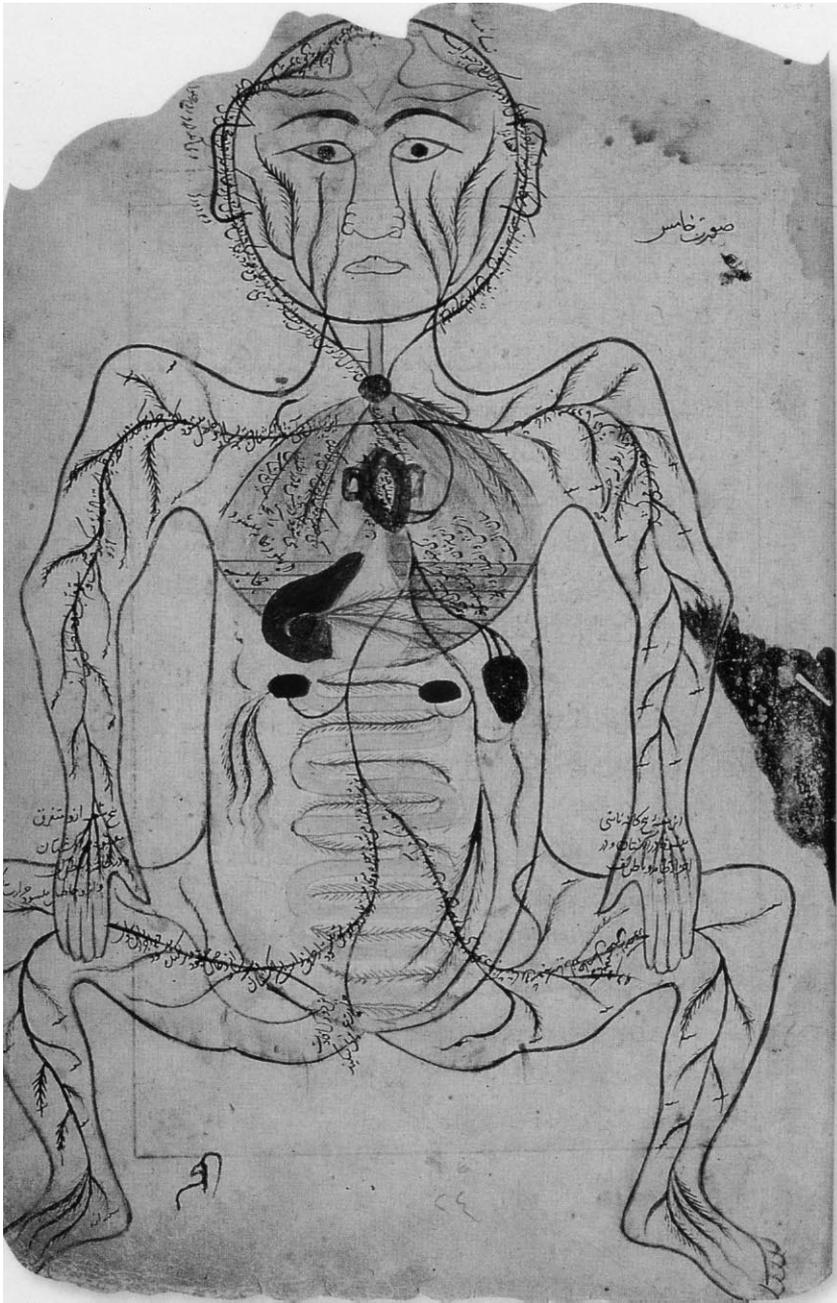


Figure 1: An anatomical image from the *Taṣṭīḥ-i Manṣūrī* tradition, 1576. (Wellcome Or. MS Persian 613(B). Wellcome Library, London.)



Figure 2: Indian anatomical painting c. eighteenth century, western India. In the *Tasrīh-i Manṣūrī* style, but in an old-Gujarati manuscript. (Wellcome MS Indic δ 74. Photo Wellcome Library, London.)

India as well as Persia and elsewhere. For example, C A Storey lists a manuscript copy in Lahore.³

Indeed, it is likely that the image in Figure 1 was actually painted in India, since the bulk of the Wellcome Persian collection was acquired in India in the early twentieth century.⁴ However, documentation for the provenance of this particular manuscript is not available.

³ C A Storey, *Persian literature, a bio-bibliographical survey*, London, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1958–[1997], vol. 2, pp. 226–8.

⁴ See Sergei Tourkin, 'Astrological images in two Persian manuscripts', in Nigel Allan (ed.), *Pearls of the Orient: Asian treasures from the Wellcome Library*, London and Chicago, Serindia Publications, 2003,

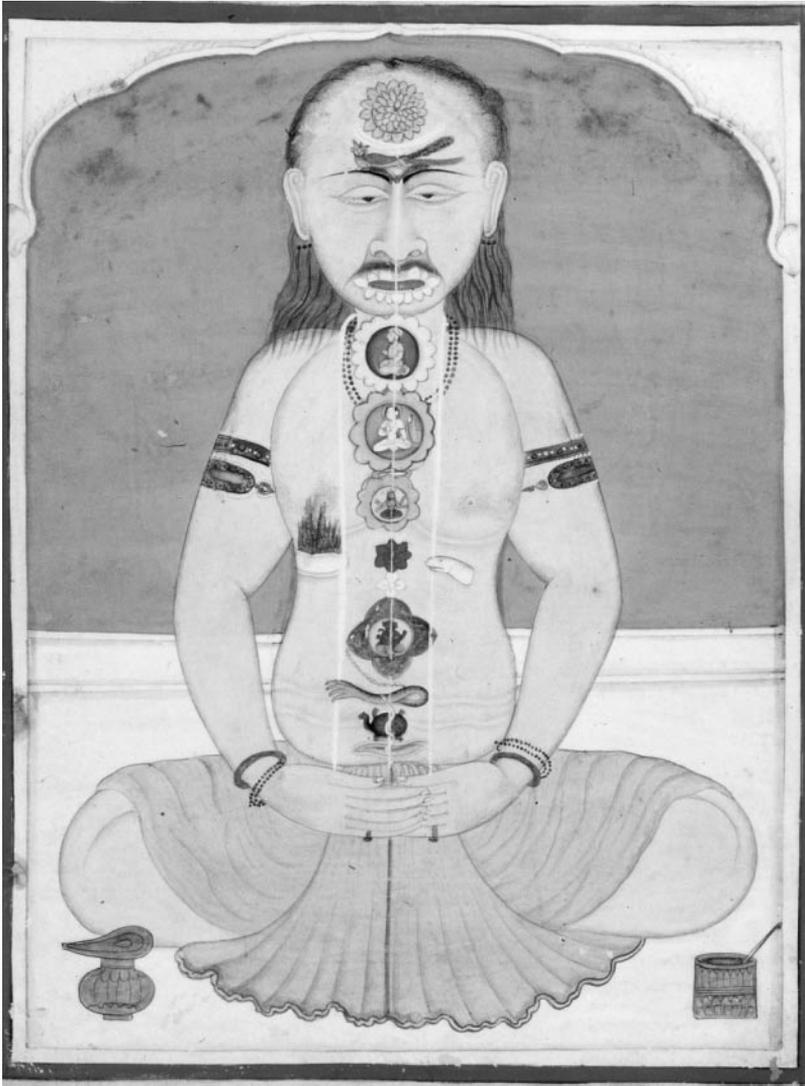


Figure 3: The body as locus of tantric cakras. (Wellcome MS Indic δ 511. Wellcome Library, London.)

A Maṅṣūrī Image in India

Having familiarized ourselves with the stylistic features of the *Taṣrīḥ-i Maṅṣūrī* anatomical images, let us turn to a recently identified image of the same type, but in a Hindu setting. The image in Figure 2 was first published in a popular study of tantric art.⁵

pp. 73–85, and especially the description of Wellcome MS Persian 373, which shows mixed Indian and Persian cultural influences.

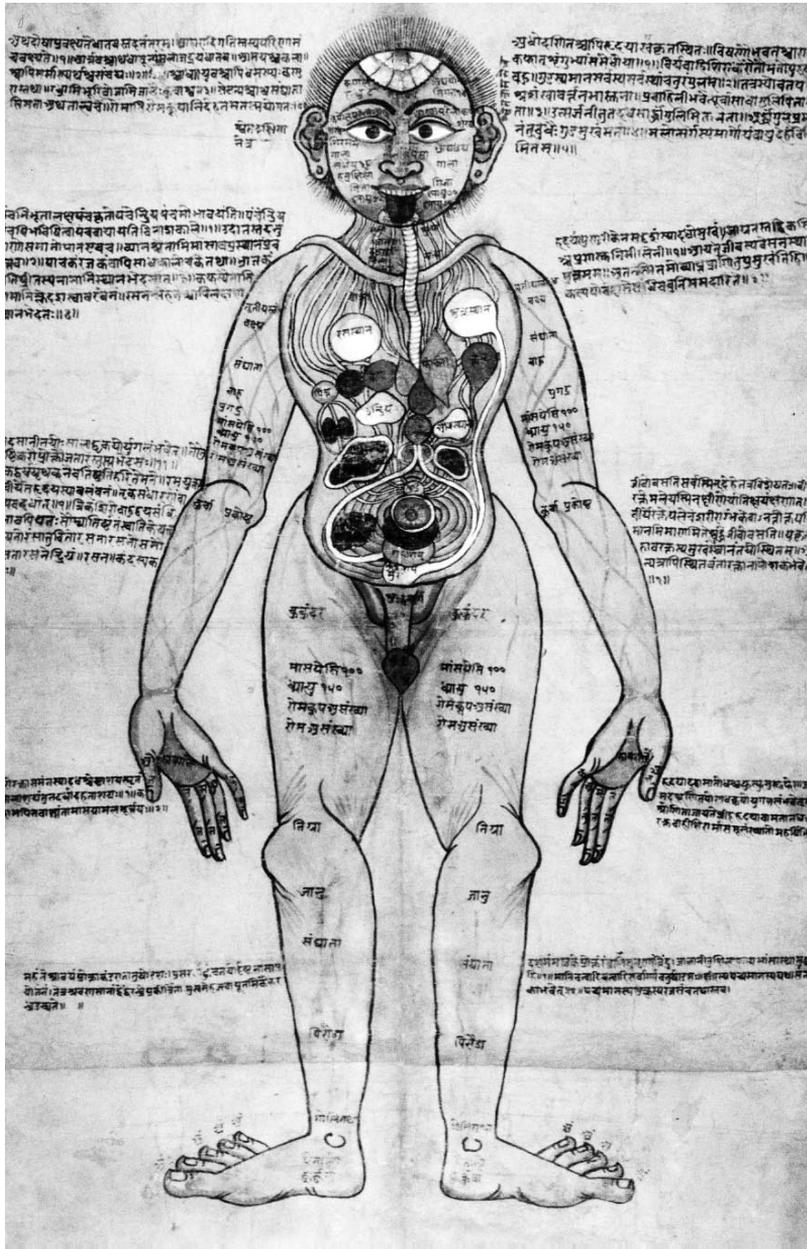


Figure 4: Nepalese anatomical man, c. eighteenth century (Wellcome Iconographic Collection 574912i. Wellcome Library, London.)

The image was identified as a tantric illustration of the “*nāḍīs*, subtle channels of the human body”. However, an acquaintance with the *Taṣṛīḥ-i Maṣṣūrī* series makes it immediately clear that Figure 2 is an adaptation derived from the Persian tradition of anatomical illustration. It is a medical, not a tantric or mystical image. The image does not illustrate *nāḍīs*, but the veins, arteries, and intestinal tract. The text surrounding the image is a mixture of Sanskrit and old Gujarati, which places the image in western India. The painting was formerly in the Hamburg collection of Jan Wichers, but a few years ago it came into the collection of Wellcome Library in London.

The text and image await detailed study, but it is plain that the *text* presents a mixture of ideas from medicine and the tantric view of the body. The text-labels on the body are a mixture of Sanskrit medical names and Persian names in both Persian and Devanāgarī scripts. In spite of the purely medical and non-Indian background of the *Taṣṛīḥ-i Maṣṣūrī* tradition which clearly inspired the Indian image, it does appear that *cakras* have been added to the spinal column, albeit very faintly and imperfectly. Mythical and astrological animal images have also been added below the image. This suggests that the Indian artist felt compelled by his artistic and cultural background to assimilate the image, in a limited way, to the common type of *cakra*/meditator image of Figure 3, which had from an early period become the sole manner of representing the interior of the human body in Indian art.

The image in Figure 2 is not dated, but may be placed to approximately the same period as the eighteenth-century Nepalese anatomical painting in Figure 4, if not slightly earlier. This latter image shows the body strictly in accordance with the classical Indian medical system, *Āyurveda*. It is not connected with tantra or mysticism, and shows internal receptacles and conduits as described in Sanskrit texts on medicine. It is to be located within the tradition of Tibetan bloodletting/moxa illustration, but with adaptation to *āyurvedic* anatomical theory.

If the Gujarati manuscript of Figure 2 is earlier than Figure 4, then it is the earliest Hindu anatomical painting presently known from the Indian subcontinent.

⁵ Ajit Mookerjee, *Kundalini, the arousal of the inner energy*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p. 15.