14. Faridun in the Guise of a Dragon Tests His Sons

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 42 verso
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1535
292 x 253 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

The daughters of Jamshid bore Faridun three sons who grew to be tall as cypresses and noble in demeanor. When they reached marriageable age, they were sent to the Yemen to marry three royal sisters of unmatched beauty. While returning to Iran with their brides, the three princes were accused by a fire-breathing dragon—Faridun in disguise, testing their mettle.

When Faridun turned on his first son, the young man fled in terror, exclaiming that no one in his right mind would fight a dragon. The second son drew his sword and shouted that it made no difference whether he died battle with a raging lion or a cavalier. The third son faced the dragon and proclaimed, "Be off! You are a mere crocodile; beware of lions! If you have ever heard of Faridun, you will not dare fight us. For we are his sons, and each of us is a warrior like him!"

From this test Faridun gleaned the true character of each of his sons, and he named each one accordingly: the one who sought safety, Salm; the youth who displayed dragon-fearlessness, Tur; and the moderate son who kept his wits about him, Iraj. Each of these received one third of Faridun's kingdom: to Tur went the eastern portion, Turan; to Salm, the western provinces, Rum; and to Iraj, the central kingdom, Iran. s.r.e.

Of all the Shah's artists, Aqa-Mirak was said to have been closest to him. His full name—Aqa-Jamal ud-Din-Mirak the Husayni (or Hasani) the Isfahani—proclaims that he belonged to an Isfahani family descended from the Prophet's grandson, Dust-Muhammad, in his famed Preface of 1544/45, commented upon this painter's portraiture: "As for his likenesses—and where are their like?—as the farseeing view them, they are foremost in sight." This talent invites speculation as to the identities of the personages portrayed here; for each of Faridun's sons is true to life. Two of them, the lightly mustached and the black-bearded, recur frequently in Aqa-Mirak's pictures, which suggests that they were well-known to him. Another of his favorite motifs is the toothily grinning smile of dragonish Faridun, that reappears on the face of the triumphant physician in the Quintet (no. 93) and again on a pleased hare befriended by Majnun (no. 62).

His latest and most lovingly finished miniature for the Shahnama, this picture was Aqa-Mirak's reply to Sultan-Muhammad's Gyanmars. For it, he created some of the most splendid animals in Iranian art: a mighty but benevolent dragon; three supremely elegant horses; a humorously outraged bear; a noble ibex; and a timid, scared rabbit. Set against a golden, dusky sky the inhabited cliffs and rocks vie with Sultan-Muhammad's psychologically absorbing fantasies.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 121, 122.

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15. Tur Beheads Iraj

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 48 verso
Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1530–35
330 x 233 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

As the years passed, Salm and Tur grew envious of the attention Faridun paid Iraj. Eventually they threatened war unless Faridun agreed to exile Iraj to a realm as remote as their own. Faridun replied sorrowfully to Salm and Tur, beseeching them to remain peaceful and to love their brother, Iraj, who bore the letter to them. When the brothers received this message of peace and love, they blustered with rage. Tur heaved his solid gold throne in the air and brought it crashing down on the head of Iraj. Still conscious, Iraj evoked God’s name and sued for mercy. But Tur plunged his dagger into his brother’s heart and finished the deed by severing the prince’s head. The embalmed head was then dispatched to Faridun with a message, “Here is your crowning glory!” S. R. C.

Wailing choruses of women, cruelly geometric ornament, and a pinnacle of rock, upper left, red as blood, contribute to the murderous atmosphere of this miniature. Probably later than the same artist’s Faridun Crosses the River Ezila (no. 12), but earlier than The Death of Zuhak (no. 13), it recalls them both, as well as The Court of Guyumar (no. 8). Why, one wonders, were several passages barely colored in? Was the subject distasteful to the Shah, who did not care to see it in greater detail? Or does it represent a stage beyond which Sultan-Muhammad felt no need to go, a stage at which a younger man, such as Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, might have been called in to complete the picture? Whatever the answer, it is a brilliant and moving miniature; and the bold arrangement of white tents seems to have inspired the design of Mir Sayyid ‘Ali’s Majnum Brought in Chains by the Old Woman to Layla’s Tent in the Quintet (no. 67).

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16. Zal is Sighted by a Caravan

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 62 verso
Probably by 'Abd ul-'Aziz, closely directed by Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1525
310 x 172 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collector

Sam, the guardian of Faridun's great-grandson and the greatest paladin in Iran, ruled the eastern provinces of Sistan and Zahbulistan as the Shah's vassal. After many childless years Sam finally fathered a son. Endowed with good health and a fine complexion, the boy had one major flaw—totally white hair. When Sam observed this, he despised and banished the boy, named Zal, to almost certain death on Mount Alberq.

The abandoned babe waited for a day and a night until a magical bird, the Simurgh, spied him in her flight. She grasped Zal in her talons and carried him off to her nest, where she reared him with her own young. Occasionally caravans passed far below and people caught sight of the striking-looking child in the Simurgh's aerie. Rumors spread of the white-haired child living atop a mountain crag too high to climb, and at last the strange news reached Sam himself. s. a. c.

Durat-Muhammad's Preface refers to the "creative works" that Sultan-Muhammad "painted and sketched." Doubtless, this miniature belongs to the second category. For while none of its color can be ascribed to the great master, it is one of the most arresting lesser pictures in the Shahnama and could not have come into being without Sultan-Muhammad's deep involvement. The smoldering mood, sinuous wiggle of forms, and odd profile faces, with strongly protruding brows, all point to an artist we have identified with slight hesitation as 'Abd ul-'Aziz. We trace his work from about 1525 through the more naturalistic phase of the Quintet (to which he did not contribute) and into the years of the Freer Jami of 1566-1568. Although his later miniatures are calmer, with fewer recollections of the expressive turbulence seen here, his temperament seems to have been sensual and torrid, comparable perhaps to that of the alluring Simurgh shown here bringing the day's catch to Zal and her own young. Although Sadiki Bek, who grew up in Tabriz in the 1540s, refers to 'Abd ul-'Aziz as a young pupil of Bihzad, adding that "he was an artist of many talents . . . particularly good at ornamentation," his early pictures for the Shahnama reveal him as a follower of Sultan-Muhammad, with a strong taste for Turkman art.

1. This miniature was such a success that it was followed immediately by Sam Comes to Mount Alberq (folio 63 verso) by the same artist. It is now in the Museum Ski Islamisch Kunst, Dabern. See Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 124-127.

2. For a color plate of this miniature, see Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 8.

66 - Book of Kings of Firdawsi
17. Sam Returns from Mount Alburz with His Son Zal

From Shah Tahmasp’s *Book of Kings*, folio 64 verso
Attributable to Qadimi, closely directed by Sultan-Muhammad

Ga. 1535
354 x 268 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collector

One night Sam dreamed a noble horseman dashed out of the land of Hind to announce that his son lived. Sam’s magi interpreted this to mean God had saved Zal despite Sam’s abandonment. The humbled paladin set out at once for Mount Alburz to retrieve his son.

Sam saw the Simurgh’s nest from the foot of the mountain, but could not scale the cliff. The bird understood Sam’s mission and carried the boy to his father, but first she gave Zal one of her plumes, telling him to burn it if he ever needed her.

Sam greeted his son like a true prince, recognizing his beauty and nobility. Reunited, Sam and Zal rode home in triumph.  s.w.c.

Qadimi, too, excelled under the eye of Sultan-Muhammad; here he works over a design sketched by that great master. “Primitive” compared to Aqa-Mirak or Mir Musavvir, he compensates with earthy gusto, flashes of ribald humor, and heartfelt sympathy. The Simurgh’s sad flight back to her nest after leaving Zal is one of the more tearful moments in the manuscript. The miniature is also festive with panoply, and explodes into the upper margin.

Qadimi’s highly individual style, known from inscribed works in Istanbul,1 retains much of the powerful but raw Turkman idiom of his birthplace, Gilan.2 Under Sultan-Muhammad, he modified such Gilani ways as painting overly large heads with deep wrinkles. But, in the words of Dust-Muhammad, “He holds to the priority of generic type over individual form; for him, in poetry as in painting, everything must conform to that.” Qazi Ahmad reinforces this view of Qadimi when he describes him as “an abdul type of person,” using a word, still current in Turkish, meaning “bumpkin.”

1. Both are reproduced in Arsenag Beg Saksian, *La Miniature perse du XIXe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris and Brussels: G. Van Oest, 1930) Figs. 64, 175.

68 - Book of Kings of Firdaws
18. Qara\n
From Shah Tahmasp's **BOOK OF KINGS**, folio 102 verso
Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad, assisted by Mir Sayyid-\'Ali
Ca. 1530-35
305 x 223 mm. (miniature only)
Lent anonymously

The murder of Traj incited hostilities between Iran and Turan that continued for centuries. To avenge one of their defeats by the Iranians, Ahravat and Barmen, ancestors of Tzar, raised a huge army for the invasion of Iran. Although the weakening Iranian Shah tried to flee, the fortress in which he and his army took refuge soon came under Turanian siege.

Qara\n, the brother of a slain Iranian warrior, desired to seek vengeance and to insure the safety of the inner provinces of Iran. Against the Shah's will he led a nocturnal mission behind Turanian lines. Soon after advancing into enemy territory Qara caught sight of Barmen, his brother's murderer. At once he gave chase. Closing in on his prey Qara speared him through the waist. Next he hacked off his victim's head and dangled it from his saddlebow. The members of his party joined in the fray and routed the Turanians under Barmen's command. Nonetheless, the Shah and those who had remained with him met an ignoble fate. While trying to escape, they fell one by one into the hands of Ahravat's soldiers. *s.a.c.*

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A glowing, peacock-hued palette—among the most original in the entire manuscript—makes this one of the memorable battle scenes in Iranian art, along with another in Edinburgh, from Shah Tahmasp's *Quintet* (no. 66). Similarities between the two are to be expected, for Mir Sayyid-\'Ali, the extraordinarily talented and meticulous young master who helped finish this one, was solely responsible for the other. Evidently his weeks or months bent over this picture were instructive. Several figures and horsemen were re-employed. He did not, however, master his mentor's knack for communicating feel and sound; and with this distinction in mind one can survey this battle group by group to differentiate the artists' hands. Qara spears Barmen, for instance, in dispassionate silence, and their horses seem equally unmoved. On the other hand, we can hear and empathize with the fleshly trial of horses, right foreground, who gallop provocatively out of the picture.

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1. For color reproductions, see Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 137, 138.

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70 - Book of Kings of Firdawsi
19. Rustam Finds Kay Qubad

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 110 verso
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1530
356 x 248 mm. (miniature only)
Lent anonymously

Following the Turanian invasion and years of strife and famine, Zal and his giant son Rustam, Iran's legendary hero, pledged to find a rightful heir to the Iranian throne. Luckily, a magus informed Zal that Kay Qubad, a legitimate descendant of Faridun, lived on Mount Alburz. Without delay Zal dispatched Rustam and his newly acquired horse, Raksh, to seek him out. As Rustam neared Mount Alburz he entered a lush grove, and, in the shade by a sparkling stream, he spied a throne on which sat a beautiful young man surrounded by attendants. Led before the throne, Rustam explained his mission to the moon-like youth. The prince smiled and introduced himself as Kay Qubad. Rustam bowed in deference to the future Shah as the musicians began to intone their melodies. S.n.c.

Painting over two hundred and fifty miniatures for a single manuscript must have been a fearful challenge, even to Shah Tahmasp's ambitious and enthusiastic artists. Over the years of the project, therefore, the major artists devised ways of painting more quickly, if possible without sacrificing aesthetic standards. Sultan-Muhammad and Mir Musavvir found adept followers, for whom they provided guidance, sometimes to the point of making detailed sketches to be colored. Inasmuch as Sultan-Muhammad's earlier, pre-Bihzadian, miniatures such as Rustam Sleeping (no. 2), were dashingly sketchy, he was apparently used to working in this quicker vein, and some of his liveliest pictures for the early phase of the project are of this sort. Later, to please Shah Tahmasp's increasingly refined taste, he employed such young masters as Mir Sayyid-'Ali as assistants. Aqa-Mirak also assigned Mir Sayyid-'Ali to such tasks; and he also guided lesser painters as well. But his own pictures, stemming from the meticulously hard-edged tradition of Bihzad and Shayskh-Zadeh (see no. 42), required much time; moreover, his later miniatures, such as Faridun in the Guise of a Dragon (no. 14) took even longer to paint than his broader, simpler and earlier ones, of which Bishan Forces Farad to Flee (no. 22) is the outstanding example. Rustam Finds Kay Qubad is the key transitional picture linking Aqa-Mirak's powerful, richly colored, broad style to his later, less vivid, subtler, more polished manner. Dartingly designed, with a mountainscape looming into the margin, it is also innovatively sunlit, and its characterizations anticipate yet more penetrating portraiture to come.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 145, 146.

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20. Rustam and the "Seven" Champions Hunt in Turan

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 133 verso
Attributable to Mir Sayyid-'Ali

Ca. 1530
264 x 211 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

When Rustam was not battling demons or armies on behalf of Kay Khusrau, he enjoyed his favorite pastimes—hunting and feasting. During one peaceful interlude, Rustam invited the "Seven" Champions (who really numbered twelve) to a splendid feast. As the men sat drinking, one proposed a hunt at the expense of Afrasiyab, the Turanian Shah. Ali agreed to it; and, after crossing the River Shahid, Rustam and the "Seven" slaughtered scores of deer, sheep and other beasts which accumulated in piles higher than the Iranian tents. When the hunters had exhausted the supply of game on the ground, they raised their bows toward the sky and showered the earth with slain fowl. The Champions kept up their hunting and feasting for a week, even after learning that Afrasiyab was leading an army of thirty thousand men in their direction. Since each Champions knew he was equal to five hundred Turanians, why stop drinking toasts and arm for battle until the Turanians actually appeared on the horizon? Fortunately, on this occasion Iranian pride was justified. S.B.C.

One of the fascinations of the Houghton Shahnama is the presence among its illustrations of early work by the second generation of Safavid artists, such as Mir Sayyid-'Ali. Already in this picture, from his late adolescence, one senses pride of accomplishment, in his jewel-like technique, design of ornament, and analytical studies of still life. Combining close observation of nature with gracefully curving abstract forms—a talent learned from his father—he also gained much from his apprenticeship to Sultan-Muhammad and Aqa-Mirak. Compare, for instance, the lion in the left foreground with that in Faridun Crosses the River Dīlā in folio 120. Although here the treatment of rocks, the slightly puffy faces with unfocusing eyes, and the ornament identify Mir Sayyid-'Ali's hand, the presence of a particular hook-nosed, weak-chinned man at the upper right confirms the attribution. For this unique characterization, shown at several stages of life, appears frequently in Mir Sayyid-'Ali's Tabriz miniatures, and is a virtual signature.

74 - Book of Kings of Firdawsi
21. Siyavush and Afrasiyab in the Hunting Field

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 182 verso
Probably by Qasimi Son of ‘Ali, supervised by Mir Musavvir
Ca. 1525-30
239 x 173 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Hougham, Jr.

To Kay Ka’us and one of his wives, a Turanian princess, was born a son named Siyavush. As a grown man, Siyavush commanded the Iranian army in its defense of Balkh against the invading armies of Turan. When Afrasiyab sued for peace, Siyavush and his co-commandant Rustam accepted the bid, much to the consternation of Kay Ka’us, who did not trust the Turanians. Berated by Kay Ka’us, Rustam sullenly returned to Zuhuhistan while Siyavush chose self-exile in Turan, where Afrasiyab greeted him as an honored guest with feasts and sporting events.

Having bewildered the Turanians with his skill at polo and archery, Siyavush dazzled them again at the hunt. In one day of hunting he cleaved an onager into two perfectly equal halves and amassed heaps of game. While Afrasiyab was truly delighted with his guest’s prowess, jealous favorites at court schemed against him. Their evil plans took time to mature, however, and over the next year Afrasiyab and Siyavush became inseparable companions. S.R.C.

The Shah’s painting studios included humbler men as well as outstanding masters. Some, like Qadimi and ‘Abd al-Aziz, worked in styles so individual that they can be recognized even when aided by more powerful artists. The painter of this miniature is more difficult to identify. Chameleon-like, he took on the ways of his mentors. When working with Sultan-Muhammad, he aped him; and when assisting Mir Musavvir, he conformed to the latter’s mellifluous artistic personality. Occasionally, as here in his most successful picture, he pieced together elements from both senior masters, and devised a lively, if archaic, composition of considerable originality. Sam Mirza, a brother of the Shah, wrote that Qasimi son of ‘Ali came from Shiraz, assigned him about the same rank as Qadimi, and added that he died young, in 1540/41. Our identification is based upon the similarity between many of his other pictures painted for the Shahnama in collaboration with Mir Musavvir, and signed work in a copy of the Ahsan al-Kihar in the State Public Library, Leningrad.1


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