22. Biqhan Forces Farud to Flee

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 234 recto
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1550
247 x 236 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collector

Before his assassination, Shayvush had married two wives. To one a son Farud was born, while the other gave birth to Kay Khusraw, the future Iranian Shah. Shortly after Kay Khusraw acceded to the throne, Iran resumed its war with Turan. Against Khusraw's orders, his commander in chief, Tus, led the army past the fortress of Farud and his mother. Farud came out to offer his assistance in the war, but Tus tragically disregarded his overtures and ordered him killed.

In self defence Farud was forced to humiliate and kill soldier after soldier until finally young Biqhan came forth to avenge those who had fallen. Undaunted by the death of his horse, Biqhan pressed forward after Farud. Although Farud escaped Biqhan's first attack, that night in a surprise foray the Iranian army decimated Farud's forces. Biqhan then dealt a death blow to Farud, who barely reached his castle door before expiring. s.n.c.
Of all Shah Tahmasp’s artists, Aqa-Mirak was the one who derived most joy from painting. He was also the most reckless in setting himself seemingly impossible artistic challenges—a characteristic that brings to mind an aspect of his life recorded by Qazi Ahmad, who wrote that “with carefree abandon he was constantly in love,” adding that “he was congenial in society, a man wise in his ways.” His compositions are airy free and organic, laced together by such trickling lines as the horizon here or the falling water in Faridun Tests His Sons (no. 14). Sensitive to growing plants, he enjoyed their silhouettes. His most original compositional scheme was a seemingly random arrangement of shapes across the picture, comparable to the miscellaneous objects jugglers toss into the air. And like the jugglers, Aqa-Mirak balanced his scattered horses, trees, or boulders in spontaneous harmony. He avoided symmetry, and even his superbly ornamental clumps of leaves, flowers, and stones are dynamic. Invariably, his people behave with courteous formality, however; and one senses that the artist’s special joy, other than being in love, was the release he found in such passages as the rocks here, a fluidly brushed, dazzlingly jewel-like, visionary ecstasy (color detail, p. 81).
23. The Drunken Iranian Camp Attacked at Night

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 241 recto
Attributable to Qadimi

Ca. 1530
350 x 244 mm. (miniature only)

Following the death of Fereydun, the Iranian army swept across Turan. Tus and his men successfully stormed the fortress at Giravurgird and put the renowned paladin Tashqar to flight. As the Turanians mobilized a vast army under the command of Piran, the Iranian army celebrated its victory at the castle of Girawurgird. Piran soon learned from his spies that the Iranians in their drunken revelry had posted no guards, and with an army of thirty thousand men he burst upon the unsuspecting Iranians in the dead of night. Giv first heard the cries of the enemy but failed to raise the Iranians from their stupor. Turanians swept down, daggers unsheathed, upon their drunken victims. The few Iranians who could staggered from the camp, deserting their wounded, and stumbled forward in the direction of the river Kasa. When they finally regrouped in the mountains, only one third of the Iranian army was found to have survived. S. B. C.

If quran Slays Barman (no. 18) is the grandest battle scene in the Shahnameh, this is the funniest.1 In it, broken-nosed, craggy-jawed veterans and cocks sure young firebrands slash, stab, and batter one another with unflinching, if alcoholic, bravery. The subject must have been sympathetic to Qadimi, “The Veteran,” who probably had experienced such melees, and surely knew the mixed blessings of wine. Inspired here, he surpassed his usual limits, presumably urged on by Sultan-Muhammad, whose range of moods included such burlesque. Over the years of the Shahnameh project, Qadimi’s mastery of drawing and painting gained refinement. Although his buffoonery was not welcome, it seems, in the Shah’s Quinter, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza apparently admired Qadimi’s barrack’s humor, which reappears, albeit in up to date guise, in miniatures for the Freer Janit.2

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King’s Book of Kings, pp. 156, 158.
2. See Dickson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, figs. 263–265.

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24. The Combat of Rustam and Shangul

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 279 verso
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak

Ca. 1530
296 x 258 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

Defeated in the First War in Revenge of Suyaush, the Iranians appeared to be similarly fated at the Battle of Mount Hamavan in the Second War. The Turanian forces were joined by several formidable allies—the Khusrau of Chir, Kamus of Kashan, and Shangul Shah of Hind. Only Rustam could save the day.

Luckily, he arrived at Mount Hamavan and immediately set about slaying Turanian heroes. As the Battle of Mount Hamavan entered its fourth and final day, Shangul Shah of Hind rode into the midst of the bloody fray rearing challenges at Rustam. The Iranian champion lunged at the Indian, and in a flash Rustam’s horse Kubish was trampling Shangul, who was spared only when a horde of soldiers rushed Rustam. They dragged the Shah of Hind back to camp where he exclaimed to the Khuyun of Chir, “No mere man is Rustam. . . . He comes raging at you like a rampaging elephant rearing atop a heaving mountainside.”  S.B.C.

While Rustam lifts Shangul from his saddle in another of Aqa-Mirak’s boldly simplified compositions, our attention is drawn to the rocks at the center of the page, which suggest a gathering of strange people and animals. Faces turn and prattle, gaze, or complain with far more animation than the sixteen battle-bent warriors who frame them. As usual in Aqa Mirak’s series of broadly treated pictures (see also nos. 22, 29, and 36), the colors are immaculate in tone, and the clear but muted landscape evokes areas near his native Isfahan. Inasmuch as Aqa-Mirak was more concerned than Shah Tahmasp’s other artists with the quality of pigments, it is not surprising that he was charged with the purchase of such materials for the royal ateliers.
25. Rustam Pursues Akavan the Onager Div

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 294 recto
Attributable to Muzaffar-‘Ali

Ca. 1530-35
268 x 173 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

A herdsman complained one day to Kay Khosraw that a particularly vicious onager was attacking the horses in his care. From the description of its golden hide and its lair near a mysterious spring, Kay Khosraw suspected that the wild ass was a new form of Akavan, a wicked and destructive div. Such was the div’s power that only Rustam possessed the strength necessary to rid the world of it. At Kay Khosraw’s request Rustam mounted Rakhsh and set off to track down Akavan. After searching for three days, Rustam spotted the golden onager galloping across the plain. Rustam and Rakhsh gave chase, but at the noise of Rustam’s lasso touched Akavan’s neck, the onager vanished into thin air. For days Rustam and Rakhsh sought the invisible div. Finally, exhausted, Rustam lay down by a gurgling spring and fell asleep. Unbeknownst Rustam had chosen Akavan’s lair as his resting place. While he slept, the evil div tunneled underneath him and lifted him high in the air. Rustam awoke to Akavan’s question, “Do I hurl you onto the mountains or do I heave you into the sea?” Although Rustam preferred the sea, he understood the workings of the div’s mind and begged, “Not the sea!” In an instant Rustam found himself in the deep. Fighting off sharks with one arm, he swam ashore.

S. R. C.

One of the most lyrical and buoyant designs in Safavid painting, this picture is also Muzaffar-‘Ali’s outstanding contribution to the Shahnama. Everything from horses to trees and tufts of grass fairly bounds off the page, while the onager-div roars away from Rustam, lent extra power by the wavy line between him and his pursuer.1

According to Sadikī, the late sixteenth-century artist, wanderer, and man of letters who was his pupil, Muzaffar-‘Ali was admirable in character as in his art—“an illuminated man, morally upright... profoundly humane.” A grand-nephew of Bihzad, he was the son of the painter Haydar-‘Ali. His family came from Turbat, between Herat and Mashhad. Sadikī also tells us that he was a fine calligrapher and excellent at chess. He died soon after Shah Tahmasp in 1576.

Although he was slower to develop as a craftsman than his contemporaries Mir Sayyid-‘Ali and Mirzā-‘Ali, in his best work, such as this miniature, spirit and charm compensate for the lack of exquisite finish. His special qualities were intuitive, and enabled him to paint cavorting animals thinly and quickly, with a vivacity stemming from inner understanding rather than outer observation. Unlike Mir Sayyid-‘Ali, whose life-like proportions and textures imply that he drew from nature, and whose methods were slow and arduous, Muzaffar-‘Ali worked rapidly with pure joy.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King’s Book of Kings, pp. 160, 163.
26. Rustam Recovers Rakhsh from Afrasiyab’s Herds

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 295 recto
Attributable to Mirza’-Ali
Ca. 1530–35
353 x 280 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

While Rustam was being tossed into the sea by Akvan, his horse Rakhsh wandered away from Akvan’s lair. Rustam tracked Rakhsh to a meadow and found him prancing in the midst of a herd of horses. The hero lassoed him and rode off, followed by the entire herd. As luck would have it, the herd belonged to Afrasiyab, the Turanian Shah, to whom the alarmed herdsman immediately sent word of disaster.

By chance, on the very day that Rustam led Afrasiyab’s herd away, the most prominent paladins of Turan were celebrating the annual inspection of the royal stud farms. When they heard the news, they hotly pursued Rustam on Afrasiyab’s war elephants and on foot. The Iranian hero slew one hundred Turanians, causing Afrasiyab and his men to flee in terror. On returning to Iran Rustam again visited Akvan’s lair. This time he caught the div, hushed in his braids and chopped off his head. With Akvan’s head and Afrasiyab’s horses in tow, Rustam returned to a hero’s welcome at the court of Kay Khusrav.  S.R.C.

Courtiers, not rustic or heroes, were Mirza’-Ali’s preferred subjects; and horses were never his specialty. But here, perhaps goaded on by Muzaffar’-Ali’s example in the preceding folio, he proved the uncanny range of his abilities. Indeed, if his interests were primarily indoor, and human behavior interested him far more than untamed nature, he could paint anything and everything. Here, he made more of the setting than of the action, and concentrated his attention on the gnarled, mossy rocks and the massive tree that holds them in a curious embrace. While painting the creamy twists of cloud, he seems to have been thinking of his father Sultan-Muhammad’s configurations of witches and dragons.
27. The First “Joust of the Rooks”: Fariburz Against Kalbad

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 341 verso
Attributable to Shaykh-Muhammad
Ca. 1540
220 x 172 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

In yet another resumption of hostilities between Turan and Iran the two sides reached a stalemate. Piran, the Turanian commander, and Gudarz, his Iranian counterpart, resolved to seek victory through a series of individual jousts. Each side would be represented by the commanders and ten champions called rooks. Whichever team won the eleven-round contest would be the victor of the war.

Having selected their contestants, the rival commanders agreed upon a battle plain overlooked by two hills—one for Iran and one for Turan. Although the site was remote, the armies would learn the results of the matches by seeing the victor’s standard on the mound of his side.

In the first joust Prince Fariburz, son of Kay Khus, met Kalbad, brother of Piran. Although Fariburz missed Kalbad with his arrows, he immediately drew his sword and cleaved his foe in two from neck to waist. Removing Kalbad’s armor, he lashed him to his mount. Atop the Iranian mound he hailed his commander, Gudarz, and his Shah. Seemingly, this first match set the tone for those that followed. Each Iranian champion in turn routed his opponent. s.v.g.

Painted on heavier, creamier paper than the original illustrations to the Shahnama, this miniature and Dust-Muhammad’s Hafhad and the Worm (no. 31) must have been inserted after the manuscript’s completion. On the basis of a signed miniature of a camel with its keeper in a landscape strikingly similar to this one, we assigned it to Shaykh-Muhammad. In this, his earliest known picture, his temperament is already definable. Spiky trees, pointed, rodent-like rocks, and exceptionally realistic wounds, gushing with blood, bespeak a militant spirit. His aggressiveness, however, combines with delicacy, as can be seen in the surgical incisiveness of outlining. His precocious gifts as a portraitist are also apparent. Fariburz and Kalbad both impress us as individuals. Like the other miniatures of this manuscript illustrating the series of jousts, Shaykh-Muhammad’s is consciously archaic, seemingly derived from a battle by Bihzad from which Shaykh-Muhammad adapted the central figures. Inasmuch as Bihzad was the master of Dust-Muhammad, who, in turn, is known to have taught Shaykh-Muhammad, this derivation is peculiarly fitting. In the Bihzadian tradition, Shaykh-Muhammad applied pigments in heavy, leathery layers, prone to developing craquelure. Unlike Dust-Muhammad, he was a patient, highly-skilled craftsman, whose services as a finisher of miniatures would have been invaluable to his master.

Inscribed on Fariburz’ banner at right, and repeated on the pennant of his helmet
O God! O Muhammed! O ’Ali!
on illuminated chapter heading, serving here as a picture caption as well
The Killing of Kalbad at the Hands of Fariburz


2. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King’s Book of Kings, pp. 156, 167.
28. Gushtasp Slays the Dragon of Mount Saqila

From Shah Tahmāsp’s Book of Kings, folio 402 recto
Attributable to Mirzā ‘Ali
Ca. 1530–35
268 x 238 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

Gushtasp, the son of Shah Luhrasp, served the Iranian court for that of Rum. Disguised as Farrakhanad, he arrived at the court of Constantinople just as the Qaysar’s daughter was choosing a husband. When the princess caught sight of Gushtasp, she desired only him as her mate; and they were married despite the Qaysar’s disapproval. Because the Qaysar considered his first daughter’s choice of a husband unsatisfactory, he announced that the suitors of his other two daughters would have to perform feats of daring before earning the princesses’ hands.

The suitors of both daughters turned to Gushtasp to perform these feats in secret for them. First he killed a monster-wolf in the forest of Pasqan; then he set out to slay the ferocious dragon of Mount Saqila. With a specially designed dagger, the point of which was tempered in venom, Gushtasp lay in wait for the terrible creature. The minute the dragon spotted him, it began to suck in its breath and pull Gushtasp toward its maw. Undaunted, Gushtasp showered the dragon with arrows, then rammed his dagger down its throat. Once the monster’s strength was sapped, Gushtasp hacked at its head with his sword and killed it. Fortunately, the feat of Gushtasp’s valor became known to the Qaysar and the royal couple was restored to favor at the Rumī court. S. R. C.

Shot with light, this is Mirzā ‘Ali’s most compelling image for the Shahnama. As usual in his work, the hero, horse, and dragon are shown in arrested motion, frozen at the perfect moment of equilibrism, so that they are simultaneously ornamental and dramatic. Trees and bushes vibrate, and the foreground splutters like breaking waves—lending urgency and monumentality to the action. Especially effective and innovative is the brilliant airminess produced by stark silhouetting against a light blue sky and dazzling gold ground. Few Safavid artists ever attempted such plein-air effects, which instill this picture with paradoxical naturalism and bring to earth the stuff of myths.1

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1. For a color reproduction, see Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 9.
29. Jamasp Envisions the Disaster Awaiting Gushtasp

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 413 recto
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1530–35
270 x 201 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

Gushtasp was reunited with his father Luhrasp, Shah of Iran, who later abdicated in favor of his son. During his reign Gushtasp converted to Zoroastrianism. Although Iran followed the Shah's example, the refusal of both Turan and Chin to accept the new faith touched off yet another war. Before the opposing armies clashed, Gushtasp sought a prediction of the battle's outcome from his chief minister, Jamasp. The trusted vizier described how the two sons of the Shah and his own son would be cut down. He foretold a few Iranian victories followed by the death of the Iranian commander. Nonetheless, the title would turn and Isfendiyar would avenge the Iranian dead, putting the Turanian shah to flight.

Distracted at this dreadful news, Gushtasp asked Jamasp whether by forbidding his sons to go to battle, he could stave off their fate. Jamasp replied, "Know that these are the workings of the Lord: nor is He an unjust tyrant, . . . What will be will be. Accept with joy what the just Lord gives!" The battle turned out as Jamasp had augured. In the aftermath of the Iranian victory, Jamasp was instated as chief magus and priest of a newly constructed Zoroastrian fire temple. s.r.c.

Unmistakably one of Aqa-Mirak's boldly simplified series for the Shahnama, the painting includes the delightful characterizations that lightly spoof those of Mir Musavvir. Such traces of personal interaction, when recognizable, lend humor and humanity to a manuscript which must have been an exasperating trial as well as a delight to patron and artist alike. In poking fun at the Mir's portrayals of stout courtiers, Aqa-Mirak was also commenting on the Shah's court, proof no doubt of his own privileged position within the inner circle. As a young man, Shah Tahmasp shared such private joviality, as is proven by his own comically satirical portrait of his household staff. If Aqa-Mirak enjoyed lampooning in this miniature, he also found deeper satisfactions in it. Once again the rocks released subconscious delights, and clusters of flowers were transformed into emblematic jewels.

1. See Welch, A King's Book of Kings, fig. 14.