



# The Role of *Farr* in Firdowsi's *Shahname*

by

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## I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The word *farr*, used in contemporary Persian and Tajiki, was first employed by Abu Mansur Muhammad Ibn-i Ahmad Daqiqi at the end of the 10th century AD. It is originally derived from the Avestan word *khwarnag*, with its Pahlavi form being *khwar*. In the ancient literatures of the Perso-Tajik peoples, *farr* is also referred to as *farr-i izadi* (glory of God), *farr-i shahanshahi* (glory of the king of kings), *farr-i Ariya 'i* (glory of the Aryans), and *farr-i kayani* (glory of the Kayanian dynasty).<sup>2</sup>

In Firdowsi's *Shahname*, *farr* plays three major roles. First, it distinguishes the peoples who inhabited Central Asia and Iran in ancient and medieval times. The major groups thus distinguished are the Iranians, the Turanians, and the Turks. Through the concept of *farr*, Firdowsi differentiates the Aryan Iranians and the Turanians from the Uralic-Altaic Turks. He asserts that the Iranians have possessed the *farr* since the beginning of their history and maintain it throughout the *Shahname* era. Firdowsi identifies the Turanians as Iranians who lost their *farr* after the reign of King Fereydun, who divided his kingdom among his sons. In subsequent periods, the Turanians attempt to recapture their lost *farr*, often at the expense of the Iranians. Notably, the first ten times the name of Tur—the eponymous ancestor of the Turanians—is mentioned in the *Shahname* (prior to Fereydun's tripartite division of the realm), it is blessed with the attribute of *farahmand*. The third group, the Turks, are not associated with the concept of *farr* in Firdowsi's account. Their involvement in the wars between Iran and Turan concerning *farr* stems from motivations unrelated to those of their Turanian overlords. Since this

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in *Firdowsi's Shahname: 1000 Years After*, pages 178-188. For details, see bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> See Yarshater, 1983, pp. 325, 345-6, 371-2; Boyce, 1975, p. 151.

aspect has been discussed in a separate article,<sup>3</sup> it will not be further examined here.<sup>4</sup>

The second role of *farr* in the *Shahname* is its function in establishing kingship within the family of Kayumars and promoting the concept of divine rulership among the Iranian peoples. In this context, *farr* is mentioned 451 times throughout the epic: 41 times in praise of Yazdan, the creator of *farr*; 180 times in praise of Iranian monarchs; 50 times in praise of princes; and 38 times in praise of Iranian champions. A detailed analysis reveals that those who possess the *farr* are situated within a special hierarchy, in which the king's *farr* is the most potent and exalted, with all other instances of *farr* ranked beneath it.<sup>5</sup>

The third and most significant role of *farr* in the *Shahname* is its function as divine guidance for the king in worldly affairs. It provides him with a sacred, preordained example of ideal rulership. In this role, *farr* connects the king to the "perfect mind," particularly during epoch-making decisions—those that influence the lives of Iranians for generations. Fereydun and Kaykhusrau exemplify such monarchs. King Fereydun, relying on the power of *kin* (vengeance), shielded his descendants from Ahriman's influence. He also guided his successors—such as Iraj, Kayka'us, and Siyavosh—toward reclaiming the spiritual unity lost after the fall of King Jamshid. Kaykhusrau, after deep reflection on past events, rejected *kin* as a means of combating evil and instead embraced *din* (faith purified of superstition and dogma) to ensure a unified future for Iran and Turan. Because *din*, *kin*, and *farr* are inseparable elements of ancient Iranian life, the following examination of Firdowsi's epic will focus on these key concepts.

## II. The Emergence of the *Farr*

The *Shahname* was written by Hakim Abu al-Qasim Firdowsi between the years 935 and 1026 AD.<sup>6</sup> Based on ancient documents describing the deeds of the champions of the Perso-Tajik peoples, it is the most significant historical, sociological, religious, and ethical document of the Iranian peoples. Firdowsi's epic

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<sup>3</sup> Bashiri, "Turk and Tur in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*," Dushanbe, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For the division of the *farr* among the priests, princes/warriors, and the common people after Jamshid's fall from grace, see Filippani-Ronconi, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> For the specifics of the role of *farr* in cosmic, mythic, and historic eras, see Bashiri, *Ancient Iran*, pages 10, 16, and 89, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> See Mahmadaminov, A. pp. 271-278.

recounts the ancient world from cosmological, mythological, and historical perspectives.

According to Firdowsi, the first world created by Ahura Mazda was a cosmic realm inhabited by celestial beings such as Kayumars. In this world—especially in its early stages—equality prevailed, and no one was preferred over another. However, after the creation of his cosmic realm was completed, Ahura Mazda altered the balance by appointing Kayumars as His deputy and lord over the others. To distinguish Kayumars meaningfully, He bestowed upon him the power of divine rulership. This cosmic world served as a model of righteous governance for future generations who would inhabit the earth.

After Ahriman's destruction of Ahura Mazda's cosmic world and following Kayumars's death, the divine window to guidance remained open. And the blessing of receiving inspiration from divine wisdom was extended to Kayumars's descendants. These descendants, who emerged in the form of male and female branches of a sacred rhubarb plant, constituted the mythical population of the world. In accordance with the demands of the *farr*, these mythical beings were divided along sociopolitical lines. Kayumars's descendants—Jamshid (Yama), Fereydun (Thraetaona), and Kayka'us (Kavi Usa)—were all endowed with the *farr*, each wielding it according to his own understanding of the era's needs, whether wisely or otherwise.

The *farr* was thus a divine blessing conferred by Ahura Mazda upon select individuals. Whenever a chosen individual neglected the *farr* or failed to fulfill its requirements, the *farr* was withdrawn and granted to another. Crucially, this sacred endowment was not hereditary, nor could it be acquired through war or bloodshed. Rather, it was bestowed as a reward for admirable foresight, virtue, and commitment.

### III. *Farr* and the Lie

A summary of the creation of the *farr* and its role in organizing Ahura Mazda's world appears in the "Zamyad Yasht."<sup>7</sup> This text covers both the defeat of the Lie (*Druj*) by heroes like Tahmuras and its triumph over kings like Jamshid. The *Zamyad Yasht* explains that the *farr* increases the power of those who strive to improve Ahura Mazda's world through truth, while distancing themselves from pride, arrogance, and falsehood. The Lie constantly lurks in darkness, waiting for an opportune moment to infiltrate the world of truth built by kings through the power of the *farr* and destroy it from within.

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<sup>7</sup> Muller, F. Max. "Zamyad Yasht," pp. 286-309.

Therefore, it is imperative that kings remain vigilant against the deceptions of the Lie, so as to protect their realms from its dangers. Tahmuras represents a king who governed in accordance with the divine order of Ahura Mazda, while Jamshid is an example of a monarch who succumbed to pride and, consequently, fell from grace and lost his power. After attaining mastery over both the spiritual and physical aspects of the *farr*, Jamshid rebelled against Ahura Mazda. As a result, he lost his kingdom and betrayed the helpless people who had placed their trust in him—delivering them, as it were, into the grasp of the dragon of the Lie, Zahhak (Azhi Dahaka).

During Zahhak's reign, the Lie infiltrated the minds and actions of the people, leading them to turn against one another in hopes of escaping the dragon's wrath. By the final days of his rule, the people of Ahura Mazda were nearly annihilated. The world would have descended into eternal darkness under the dragon king, were it not for the emergence of a courageous blacksmith named Kaveh and a *farahmand* (chosen by Ahura Mazda) youth named Fereydun.

#### IV. The *Farr* and *Kin*

According to the "Zamyad Yasht," young Fereydun captured the royal *farr*, rose against Zahhak, liberated the world of Ahura Mazda, and became king. His reign marked a period of reconstruction and the restoration of Iran's former glory. However, while military restoration was achieved relatively easily, the spiritual reconstruction required deep contemplation. Fereydun realized that Jamshid's downfall stemmed from his confusion of Ahura Mazda's greatness with his own worldly splendor—an error caused by the Lie's insidious infiltration into all aspects of the realm, rendering the *farr* impotent.

Fereydun understood that unless the Lie was confronted openly, its deep roots could not be severed, nor could its hold on the hearts of his people be broken. Thus, the central question during the latter part of Fereydun's reign was this: What force could, for centuries to come, distinguish good from evil and uphold truth without threatening national unity? He convinced himself that the answer lay in the concept of *kin*—a force that could keep future kings and their subjects aware of the ever-presence of the Lie and protect themselves against its ruses.

The family has always been a foundational pillar of Iranian life, and its governance often mirrored that of the nation. In ancient times, Iran itself was viewed as a vast family, with the *shah* serving as the father. After observing the conduct of his sons—future rulers and commanders—Fereydun concluded that his eldest, Tur, was unworthy of receiving the *farr*. Nonetheless, he recognized Tur's potential importance in relation to his youngest son, Iraj. Thus, in a calculated move, Fereydun awarded the *farr* to Iraj, contrary to custom, and ignited the flame

of *kin* in Tur's heart. He foresaw that Tur and his descendants would serve as a necessary counterbalance to Iraj's rule, ensuring two things: the persistence of vigilance against the Lie and containment of the Lie within the family.

Fereydun's foresight proved accurate. Tur's murder of the innocent Iraj ignited a fierce and lasting desire for vengeance among the Iranians, leading to generations of family feud over the possession of the *farr*. After being rescued from prison,<sup>8</sup> Kayka'us invoked the memory of Iraj as justification and sent his son, Siyavosh, to confront the Turanians. Guided by the *farr*, Siyavosh established a diplomatic rapport with Piran-i Vise and Afrasiyab and built a fortress named Siyavoshgird near the city of Khutan. Despite this peaceful effort, Afrasiyab—driven by fear of Siyavosh's *farr*—eventually had him killed.

Afrasiyab's fear was not unfounded. Siyavosh, empowered by his *farr*, could have inspired a Turanian uprising and reunited Turan with Iran. Indeed, Siyavosh foresaw both Afrasiyab's betrayal and its consequences. Comparing his own fate to that of Iraj, he concluded that his death would evoke an even stronger and more transformative *kin* among the Iranians than Iraj's had. He also knew that his son would one day ascend the Kayanian throne and avenge his death—raising Turan to the ground in the process.

Thus, Siyavosh willingly walked to his death after securing a haven for his future son. Through this act of sacrifice, he laid the foundation for his son to fulfill Fereydun's vision of *kin* and reclaim the unity of Iran and Turan.

## V. *Farr* and Government

Born of Afrasiyab and Kayka'us's lineage, the blessed son of Siyavosh—Kaykhusrau—is perhaps the most illustrious of the mythical kings of the Perso-Tajik peoples. With the help of Piran-i Viseh, Kaykhusrau escaped from Turan and the clutches of Afrasiyab and ascended the throne of Iran. From his position of power, he dispatched a mighty army under the command of Tus to Turan to avenge his father. When Tus was defeated and returned in shame, Kaykhusrau used Afrasiyab's lust for power as justification to initiate a series of reforms and prepare Iran for final victory.

With these reforms, Kaykhusrau had two main objectives in mind. The first was the complete reconstruction of Iran, which had been devastated by Afrasiyab's

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<sup>8</sup> Nazari, Jurabek. "The Shahname Epistles," pp. 226-253.

repeated incursions. The second involved launching a large-scale military campaign into Turan to execute his vision of total conquest.

Following the principles of *farr*, Kaykhusrau did not engage directly in the initial stages of the conflict. He waited until Afrasiyab was forced to abandon Gang Dezh. Leadership of the army initially fell to Tus, and later to Fariburz, the son of Kayka'us. Kaykhusrau also enlisted Iran's most seasoned champions, especially Giv and Rostam, to accompany the campaign. Once the war began, Kaykhusrau ordered the army to remain stationed near Khutan—Piran's strategic base and the operational center of Turan's military strength—until Piran, his son, and his brothers were all eliminated.

Following the defeat of Turan's domestic forces, Kaykhusrau turned his attention to external powers that supported Afrasiyab. With Rostam's help, he defeated and killed Kamus the Kushan and the Khaqan of China, and routed Afrasiyab's remaining allies, including Shangol of India. Forced to flee, Afrasiyab took refuge in water—his most intimate element. Using the power of his *farr*, Kaykhusrau drew Afrasiyab from the depths and decapitated him. With the death of Afrasiyab, the second Zahhak, Iran regained its spiritual unity and looked forward to a bright future under the auspices of the royal *farr*.

## VI. *Kin* and *Din*

Kaykhusrau's life was turbulent, yet profoundly meaningful. As a child, he lived under the care of Piran, hidden from Afrasiyab. His youth was spent planning military campaigns and commanding the armies of Kayka'us. After the "Great War" annexed Turan to Iran and the stronghold of the Lie was once again destroyed, Kaykhusrau began contemplating the spiritual reconstruction of Greater Iran and its transition away from vengeance, or *kin*.

He reflected on Fereydun's decision to divide his kingdom among his three sons and to bestow the *farr* on the most deserving. Kaykhusrau concluded that Fereydun withheld the *farr* from his eldest son because the Lie was with him, and gave it to the youngest to symbolically contain the ongoing struggle between truth and falsehood within the family. Despite the prolonged wars fought to avenge Iraj and Siyavush, Kaykhusrau realized that the Lie not only had endured, but also contaminated a large portion of the kingdom. Ultimately, he acknowledged that *kin* had failed as a viable weapon against the Lie, and that although Iran and Turan seem to have become united, in reality they were in the same divided state as they were in Fereydun's time.

In other words, Kaykhusrau had followed Fereydun's path to preserve unity, only to discover that *kin* was a flawed instrument. Not only was it unproductive,



but it nourished both good and evil indiscriminately. Moreover, it did not serve the aspirations of righteous kings or the divine will, which sought peace and prosperity.

This realization weighed heavily on Kaykhusrau's conscience. He withdrew into seclusion for forty days and nights, conversing with the Creator. In that time, he found a new vision for the future of the reunited Perso-Tajik peoples. He understood that the *farr*—like water, wind, or fire—possessed both destructive and constructive potential. Fereydun and Jamshid had harnessed its destructive force, especially Fereydun, whose use of *kin* had brought about massive bloodshed. Kaykhusrau now saw *din* (faith purified of superstition and dogma), the constructive dimension of *farr*—as the force capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood, protecting life, and generating unity.

Supporting *din*, he believed, could end the cycles of vengeance brought on by *kin*. *Din* could penetrate the territory of the Lie so thoroughly that falsehood would vanish, not just in appearance, but in essence.

Fereydun, having seen *kin* as a necessary tool, did not wield it immediately. He first sowed its seeds within his family, nurtured it through his descendants—Iraj and Siyavosh—and only gradually introduced it at the governmental level. Kaykhusrau followed a similar approach. To prepare the nation for a future grounded in *din*, he abdicated the throne—abandoning kingship based on *kin*. Like Fereydun, he timed the selection of his successor with his departure from rule.

To the shock of Iran's princes, governors, commanders, and nobles, Kaykhusrau chose Luhrasp—an unknown man, far removed from the traditional nobility. Guided by his *farr*, Kaykhusrau recognized in Luhrasp not only the divine aura but also a natural inclination toward *din*. The wisdom behind this choice became clear only when Zal, in disbelief, attributed the decision to the manipulations of Ahriman. In response, Kaykhusrau affirmed that Luhrasp was blessed with the *farr*, and that from his lineage would arise a champion of a Prophet who would usher in a new spiritual order based on *din*. This prophecy would be fulfilled in the story of the Prophet Zoroaster's acceptance at the court of Gushtasp.

## VII. *Farr* and History

In historical as well as cosmic and mythological periods, the *farr* retained its sacred significance. Among the Achaemenid kings, Cyrus the Great and his son Cambyses were both blessed with the *farr*. Darius I the Great, although born close to the royal line, did not initially possess the *farr*. He had to prove his legitimacy through military conquests and by forging ties to the royal family. This may explain why, in the first year of his reign, Darius fought nineteen battles, overthrew nine

kings,<sup>9</sup> and married Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great. In fact, Darius I was the king of kings of Iran at the same time that he was the pharaoh of Egypt. In that position, he followed the dictates of *farr*, as well as the rules of *ma'at*. that. However, is a separate topic discussed in full elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

By the final years of Xerxes I's reign, the *farr* abandoned the Achaemenid dynasty.<sup>11</sup> None of the later kings succeeded in restoring it, and in 332 BC, Alexander the Great conquered and dismantled the dynasty.

The Seleucid rulers, unlike Darius I, could not legitimize their rule through Iranian bloodlines, heroism, or marriage alliances. Consequently, they were unable to forge any connection with the *farr* and failed to win the hearts of the Iranian people. Lacking divine legitimacy, the Seleucids turned to the model of the "man-god," believing that the formula that had worked in Egypt might work in Iran. But this notion was deeply flawed. Iranian kings had always presented themselves as bearers of the *farr* and representatives of *Yazdan*—never as living gods. Thus, the idea of a man-god was rejected by the Iranian public, and Seleucid rule failed to take root in Iran.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout history, many Iranian dynasties utilized and symbolized the *farr*. In the architecture of Persepolis in Fars province, the *faravahar* symbol is depicted hovering above Darius I's head,<sup>13</sup> with the *farr* symbolized by a ring forming the torso. In mural art from ancient Panjakent, Varakhsha, and Qahqaha, the *farr* appears as a lamb standing beside the king. In some images, golden lambs carry the royal throne. One such lamb's head was discovered during excavations in Isfara. In the *Shahname*, Kayka'us gifts Rustam a throne bearing similar motifs.<sup>14</sup>

The *Karnamak-i Ardashir-i Babakan* (The Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Babak) narrates how a lamb delivered the *farr* to Ardashir, founder of the Sassanian dynasty—a scene that inspired countless Iranian artists over centuries.<sup>15</sup> Other representations show the *farr* as a ring around a bird's neck or a banner flowing behind the headgear of later Sassanian kings.<sup>16</sup>

During the Islamic period, considerable effort was made to erase the concept of *farr* from Arabic texts concerning Iranian history. For instance, in his

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<sup>9</sup> Bashiri, 1988, pp. 598-604.

<sup>10</sup> See, Bashiri, *Imapact of Egypt*, pp. 33-49.

<sup>11</sup> Boyce, 1979, p. 10; Bashiri, 1988, pp. 2364-69; Filippani-Ronconi, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> See, Pirnia, 1964, 2119.

<sup>13</sup> See, Zuka, 1973, pp. 14-22.

<sup>14</sup> See Soudavar, "FARR(AH) ii. ICONOGRAPHY " at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farr-ii-iconography>

<sup>15</sup> Browne, vol. I, 1919, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Hinnells, 1975, p. 100.



summary of the *Khudaynameh* (Book of Kings), Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari reinterprets the wars between Iran and Turan—which had been fought explicitly for the possession of the *farr*—as mere border disputes between Iranians and Turks.<sup>17</sup> Both Afrasiyab and Piran, lifelong seekers of the *farr* for Turan, are referred to simply as "Turks." This undermines the deep bond Firdowsi established between the Iranians and Turanians in the *Shahname*.<sup>18</sup>

Despite such revisions, the third and most essential function of the *farr*—guiding the king in noble governance according to a divine model—remained influential in Islamic Iran. Yet here too, significant changes occurred. With Allah replacing Ahura Mazda, both kings and Shi'ite Imams began to claim separate access to the divine light.

The role of *farr* in Islamic times is complex and deeply intertwined with *Ishraqi* (Illuminationist) philosophy,<sup>19</sup> which deserves its own dedicated discussion. Briefly, *Ishraqi* thought rests on two principles: *hikmat al-kashfiyyah* (the wisdom of unveiling) and *hikmat al-bahthiyyah* (the wisdom of inquiry). The former concerns the hidden world of *Nur al-Anwar* (Light of Lights), akin to Zoroaster's seventh heaven (*Garodman*), while the latter pertains to reason, senses, and the material world. Within this framework, *farr* is a light from *Nur al-Anwar*, illuminating the physical world and guiding it toward righteous order.

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<sup>17</sup> Tabari, 1980, pp. 3-8.

<sup>18</sup> Ya'qubov, Y. "Tur and the Turanians," pp. 218-225.

<sup>19</sup> Filippini-Ronconi, pp. 58-59.

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