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Extended Abstract

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The Transformation of the Narratives of Bahram Chubin: Reflections of Diverse Perspectives in Ancient Sources and the *Shahnameh*

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Introduction

Bahram Chubin, who in 588 CE served as commander of the Iranian army, defeated the Hephthalites and overcame the Turkic Khagan. Yet Hormizd IV, who had distrusted him from the outset, dismissed him on a pretext. This event paved the way for Bahram's rebellion.

The story of Bahram Chubin became intertwined with legend and assumed a contradictory character in historical sources. A survey of Arabic, Persian, and Byzantine accounts reveals four principal perspectives: first, popular narratives and epic legends supporting Bahram; second, the view of the magi and military elites aligned with him; third, the perspective of the magi and military factions loyal to Khosrow; and fourth, accounts shaped by popular traditions favoring Khosrow.This study identifies the various narratives about Bahram Chubin and examines their written or oral origins. It seeks to demonstrate how these accounts were formed and how they differ from one another. By analyzing their reflection in historical and literary texts—especially the *Shahnameh*—it further explores which tradition Ferdowsi favored and how his version relates to official sources and to oral narratives.

Method, Review of Literature, Purpose

The works of Nöldeke (1358), Christensen (1368), and Shahbazi (1393) are foundational sources for Sasanian history. Christensen (1403) independently examined and rewrote the narrative of Bahram. Czeglédy (1958) studied Bahram's position in Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts, while Cherti (1996) and Daryaee (2015) criticized his views. Taheri (1390), Mir Eskandari (1391), and Mehraki (1392) focused on the epic features of the story; Gilani (1393), concentrating on the Shahnameh, analyzed the causes of the rebellion. None of these studies, however, has comparatively examined the differing perspectives on Bahram and their reflection in the Shahnameh with the aim of identifying Ferdowsi's sources. Adopting a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing on these viewpoints, this study investigates the oral or written origins of the narratives of Bahram Chubin in historical sources and the Shahnameh.

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Discussion

In narratives that appear to derive from popular tales and epic legends supporting Bahram Chubin, he is portrayed not merely as a great commander but as a mythical hero. In these accounts, historical reality merges with epic tradition, and his figure is blended with legendary champions such as Esfandiyar and Arash. Elements such as magic and the presence of supernatural beings occur in these stories, clearly indicating their popular origin.

In accounts reflecting the perspective of magi and military elites who supported Bahram and were close to the House of Mihran, he is depicted as a noble and worthy commander endowed with military prudence. Although this image was rejected in the official Sasanian narrative, it survived in traditions independent of state policy and was echoed in Persian, Arabic, and even Byzantine sources. By contrast, in narratives representing the viewpoint of magi and military factions loyal to Khosrow, emphasis is placed on Bahram's disobedience.

Just as collective memory produced stories that fashioned Bahram into a hero defending his homeland, the dominant ideology of the Sasanian court and its extensive propaganda against him also generated, in popular traditions favoring Khosrow, accounts that portrayed him in a demonic light.

Shahnameh

In the *Shahnameh*'s account, both elements favoring Khosrow and heroic motifs supporting Bahram are present. This suggests that all narratives about him in Iran were unlikely to have derived solely from the official Sasanian Khwaday-namag tradition. More plausibly, they represent a combination of the Bahram Chubin-nama and official sources. The Middle Persian Bahram Chubin-namag was probably not limited to his campaigns in Turkestan but also included his exploits in Iran.

Although in most historical sources and in the *Shahnameh* the story of Bahram in Turkestan begins under a new heading—indicating a degree of independence—the assumption that the accounts of his heroism in Iran stem exclusively from the Khwadāy-nāmag is unconvincing. Examination of the narrative suggests that the original version likely ended with Bahram's death, while episodes such as the killing of Bistam and Gordiyeh's marriage to Khosrow were later additions. The story of Gordiyeh itself also appears to have derived from an independent source.

Conclusion

Ferdowsi's account of Bahram Chubin can be divided into three main sections: first, from Bahram's appointment to fight the Turks to his dialogue with Khosrow near Nahrawan; second, from Khosrow's flight to Byzantium to his return; and third, the final battle between Khosrow and Bahram and Bahram's escape to the Khagan of China.

Analysis of the various perspectives within the narrative suggests that accounts reflecting the first and second viewpoints likely derive from works such as the *Bahram Chubin-nama*, rooted in oral and popular storytelling traditions. By contrast, the more official, pro-Khosrow narratives are based on written sources. In recounting the story of Bahram Chubin, Ferdowsi draws both on formal written traditions concerning Khosrow and on epic narratives shaped by heroic lore.

In the first section, Bahram's story is interwoven with national and heroic traditions and figures such as Esfandiyar and Arash, and parallels appear in Persian, Arabic, and even Armenian sources (such as the *History of Sebeos*). This part was shaped by oral tradition and the *Bahram Chubin-nama*, and the coexistence of popular and official strands is clearly visible. Their integration reflects not only Ferdowsi's poetic craft but also a gradual and deep historical process.

In the second and third sections, official courtly traditions—especially the *Khwadāy-nāmag*—and pro-Khosrow or anti-Bahram perspectives dominate. Narratives concerning Bahram's valor at the Khagan's court or Gordiyeh's heroism stem from oral tradition, particularly the *Bahram Chubin-nama*. Accounts of Gordiyeh's presence at Khosrow's court and Shirin's jealousy likely derive from popular romances centered on Shirin. Overall, the story of Bahram Chubin in the *Shahnameh* represents a multilayered fusion of competing discourses, reshaped by Ferdowsi into a coherent epic structure.

Keywords: Bahram Chubin, *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi

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