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Sharwīn of Dastabay: Reconstructing an early Persian tale

[The article discusses a little-known lost Persian tale, The Story of Sharwin of Dastabay, and traces references to it in Arabic, Persian, and Byzantine sources. The earliest references to the story come from the mid- to late eighth century, and it seems to have remained well known in Arabic and Persian literature until the early twelfth and possibly the early fourteenth century, while Byzantine literature shows that at least some of its elements circulated already in the mid-sixth century. The article also discusses how the story may have been transmitted both in Iran and, crossing the linguistic boundary, in an Arabic context.

Though much of the story remains unknown, it is clear that it relates to later epics and reveals something of the literary context of Firdawsi and his Shahname.]

Non-religious Persian literature of the sixth to ninth centuries has been poorly preserved. This is equally true whether we speak of works written, or composed, in Middle Persian or Early New Persian or of their Arabic translations and Classical Persian rewritings.

On the other hand, Arabic bibliographical and historical sources, Ibn al-Nadīm’s (d. in the 380s/990s) Fihrist over all, provide us with a number of titles of Arabic books, mostly lost, said to have been translated from (Middle) Persian. Many of these belong to history, wisdom literature, or entertainment literature, notorious for their pseudepigraphs and distorted titles. Thus, coming across a title in, e.g., Ibn al-Nadīm’s Fihrist, said to have been translated from Persian into Arabic and usually lost in translation, there are several possibilities. The book may never have existed, and its title may be a misunderstanding either by Ibn al-Nadīm or his source. If it existed, it may be an Arabic book that only claims to derive from Persian – as we know from al-Jāḥiẓ’s (d. 255/868) Fasl, pseudepigraphs were selling well in the ninth century and probably later, too. It may go back to Persian materials other than written books: an Arabic author may have retold Persian stories, which he had received through oral transmission, popular or learned. Finally, he may have translated from a Middle Persian manuscript with more or, usually, less fidelity to the original.


While all this might entice one to ignore such titles, the small number of preserved Persian texts forces us to make the best use we can of the information gleaned from Arabic sources. The aim of this article is to study one particular case, the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay*, only known from a few passing mentions in our sources and never properly studied before.

Evidence in Arabic

Arabic and later Persian historical sources have some vague knowledge of an Iranian nobleman from the Sasanian period by the name of Sharwīn of Dastabay. He makes his first appearance in a poem by Abū Nuwās (d. *circa* 198/813):

By what they (the Persians) read allegorically in the *Avesta*,
the book of Zarathustra, the proselytiser of the Magians,
and by what they read in *Sharwīn of Dastabay*
and the chapters of *Wīs and Rāmīn*.

*Sharwīn of Dastabay* is given by Abū Nuwās as the title of a story, rather than a personal name. His commentator, Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. 350/961 or 360/971) writes:

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4 For the name and the character, see F. Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch* (Marburg, 1895), p. 290.


6 For metrical reasons, the geographical name has to be read Dastbay in the poem.


Sharwīn is a story that took place in ancient times, and it is sung. Dastabay is the district in which the city of Qazwin is located. Firjardāt are like qaṣīdas, and Wīs and Rāmīn is a well-known story of theirs (the Persians).

The expression أحمدثة جرت في قديم الزمان simultaneously refers to the event and the story. There is little in Abū Nuwās’ verse or Ḥamza’s commentary to show what kind of story this was. As we shall soon see, elsewhere Ḥamza only refers to Sharwīn as a trusted administrator, but the juxtaposition of Sharwīn of Dastabay with “the chapters of Wīs and Rāmīn” might imply a love story, romances and heroic epics being the most common types of literature Arabic authors would have us to believe Persians had been writing or composing, which also fits tenth/eleventh-century and later Classical Persian literature.

In the poem from which these verses come, Abū Nuwās uses Persian words and Zoroastrian concepts correctly, which gives credence to the real existence of Sharwīn of Dastabay, too. The Avesta and Wīs and Rāmīn were really existing books, and there is no reason to assume otherwise in the case of Sharwīn of Dastabay. Abū Nuwās was well informed about Persian literature: Zarathustra’s Avesta was well known, but Wīs and Rāmīn was not. This, in fact, is the earliest reference to the work which we know in the later version by Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī, written in 447/1055, and which Gurgānī himself tells us to have existed in an earlier version. As there is conclusive evidence for the existence of Wīs and Rāmīn, we should also, a priori, take Sharwīn of Dastabay seriously.

Abū Nuwās mentions Sharwīn also in a few other poems. In a hijā’ poem on a man of Sindi origin, who tries to pass for a Khurasanian, he refers to ḥusūn al-shaykh Sharwīn “fortresses of the old Sharwīn,” Sharwīn explained by Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī in his commentary to be a general name for one

13 Gurgānī, Wīs o-Rāmīn, (ed.) M. Rawshan (Tehran, 1377 AHSh) p. 37–38 (vv. 29–55). The details of this passage are not reliable, but the reference to an existing earlier story is clear.
of the minor kings of Khurasan.\textsuperscript{15} Abū Nuwās also uses it in a fragment of two verses of \textit{mujūn}, which mentions \textit{Bukhārā-khudhāh} and \textit{Sharwīn}.\textsuperscript{16} As Dastabay is not in Khurasan, it remains unclear whether these refer to the Sharwīn of the story.

Sharwīn is further mentioned in context of wine drinking in a poem by Muḥammad ibn Ḥāmza ibn Nuṣayr, also known as \textit{Wajh al-Qar’a}, a little-known singer and poet from the time of the Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 136–158/754–775) and, thus, slightly earlier than Abū Nuwās:\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{quote}
I would ransom (by my life) the one who sang to me through the night while I gave him wine to drink and he gave it me to drink.
At morning, we drank more wine, kept aging from the times of Sābūr and Sharwīn.
\end{quote}

The verses further confirm that Sharwīn was at this time famous enough among Arabic literati to be alluded to without explanation. He is presented in a context of wine drinking, with some erotic overtones. Anticipating what will follow, it would be tempting to define this as an all-male scene. However, the masculine forms refer back to the pronoun \textit{man}, without revealing the gender of the poet’s wine-drinking companion and the mention of singing actually tips the scales in favour of a female boon companion.

Discussing the Sharwīn of the Sasanian times, al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1422), \textit{Khabar/Persia II.}\textsuperscript{18} quotes from an Arabic poem, which I have not been able to locate elsewhere:

\begin{quote}
(وكان له مذهب في اللواط وشرب الخمر. وينشد:) نشربها صرفاً بلا مزنة || ونُدخل القثاء في التين
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Note, however, that this is not supported by the list in al-Bīrūnī, \textit{al-Āthār al-bāqiya ‘an al-qurūn al-khāliya}, (ed.) P. Adhkā’ī (Tehran, 1380 AHSh/2001), pp. 116–117, nor elsewhere in literature, though Sharwīn is attested as a royal personal name and a geographical name.


A poet has said:

Oh you, who ask about our religion:
we follow the way (milla) of Sharwīn.

Sharwīn followed the way of homosexuality and wine drinking. The poet said (in the same poem):

We drink it unmixed, without water,
and we drive a cucumber into a fig!19

Here Sharwīn is explicitly associated with homosexuality and wine drinking. As we will soon see, in several sources Sharwīn is associated with a (male) servant, Khwarrīn, or in Arabic sources Khurrīn. However romantic the story may have been in the original, Arab poets were ready to use it irreverently. The verses resemble some mujūn verses by Abū Nuwās:20

\[
\text{يا أيها السائل عن ديننا} \quad \text{قد ذهب المردان بالدين}
\text{نحن أساس حسن ديننا} \quad \text{نكسّر القثاء في التين}
\]

Oh you, who ask about our religion:
beardless boys have taken away our religion.
We people of a good religion:21
we’re smashing the cucumber into the fig!

The hemistich يا أيها السائل عن ديننا is also found in a two-verse poem on wine drinking composed or quoted by al-Walīd ibn Yazīd (d. 126/744) and widely circulating in early ʿAbbāsid literature, which provides us with a probable date for the verses quoted by al-Maqrīzī, too.22

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19 I.e., practice anal intercourse.
20 Abū Nuwās, Dīwān, v, p. 57 (no. 76).
21 I do not think that there is an allusion here to Zoroastrianism as beh-dīn “good religion.”
Further mentions come from Ibn al-Faqīḥ’s *Mukhtaṣar*, written in 290/903 or soon after. Ibn al-Faqīḥ quotes two poems which mention Sharwīn and Khurrīn. The first is anonymous, purported to have been found written on the Wall of Shīrīn. The middle section of the poem reads:

أما رأيت صروف الدهر ما صنعت || بالقصر قصر أبرويز وشيرين
أما نظرت إلى إحكام صنعته || كانه قطعة من طور سينين
قد صار قفا خلاء ما بها أحد || إلا التمام مع الوحشية العين
من بعد ما كان أبوريز أشحنه || بالدارعين وكثاب الدواوين
وكل ليت شجاع بأس بطل || كمثل خرینا أو مثل شروین

Have you not seen what the ever-changing Time has done
to the castle, the castle of Abarwīz and Shīrīn?
Have you not looked at its solid work,
like it was a piece of Mount Sinai?
Yet it has become abandoned and ruined with no one
but ostriches and wide-eyed wild cows living there
after Abarwīz had filled it
with iron-clad men and scribes of offices
and every brave lion, fearless hero,
like Khurrīn or like Sharwīn.

Technically, the poem dates Sharwīn and Khurrīn to the time of Kisrā Abarwīz (r. 591–628), but the date is perhaps not to be taken seriously in this *Ubi sunt?* poem. What is significant, though, is that Sharwīn and Khurrīn are the only names, aside of Kisrā Abarwīz and Shīrīn, who are mentioned in the poem, which speaks volumes of their fame.

The second mention comes in a poem by an Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, which describes the royal arch, jāq, depicting Kisrā Abarwīz surrounded by his noblemen. The first four lines read:

بوستان طاق ليس في الأرض مثله || وفيه تصاويرون من الصخر محكم
وبروز فيه والمرآزب حوله || وشيرين تسبحهم وشخ مزمزم
وبهرام جور والمقاول مثل || وشروين فيهم قاعد متمم
ويركُن قد أجرى وأؤم بسيمه || إلى طفلا حسانا لا تكون

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24 The final -hā vaguely refers to the castle. Note the sudden change from the masculine to the feminine two lines earlier.
In Wastān, there is a royal arch unlike anything on earth, with pictures, made of stone, solid.

Abarwīz is there, surrounded by the marzubāns, Shīrīn pouring wine to them, and an old man reciting prayers, Bahrām Gūr and the chieftains standing, among them Sharwīn sitting, wearing a turban, and Khurrīn driving on (his horse?) and pointing with his arrow to a young and beautiful girl, who is not saying a word.

The poem does not tell us much about Sharwīn, but it is slightly surprising that he has been elevated above all the marzubāns, chieftains, and even the Sasanian king, Bahrām V Gūr (r. 420–438), who stand, while he is sitting. The characters being from different centuries, the poem does not even make a claim of dating Sharwīn to any specific time.

Here, Sharwīn is again mentioned in connection with Khurrīn, implying that they belong to the same story. Their occurrence in both poems with the famous love pair Kisrā Abarwīz and Shīrīn may imply that the story has romantic, besides the obvious heroic, elements. Whether the beautiful girl is a further character in the story or whether she is the witch in disguise, mentioned in the Mujmal (see below), remains uncertain.

Al-Dīnawarī (d. not later than 290/902) is the earliest historian to mention the story, setting Sharwīn to the time of Kisrā Anūshirwān (r. 531–579):²⁸

Kisrā appointed Sharwīn al-Dastābāy to receive and forward it (the money the Byzantine Emperor was to pay) to him every year, and Sharwīn stayed there with the King of Byzantium

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²⁶ Identified in a marginal note to the manuscript as “a village.”
²⁷ Miqwal, as a matter of fact, is a Yemenite word (Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān al-ʿarab, (ed.) A. Shīrī, 18 vols. (Beirut, 1408/1988), xi, p. 353a, s.v.), here misused in a Persian context.
together with his servant Khurrūn, whose story is well known. He was a courageous knight and a hero.

Here, Sharwīn is primarily seen as Kīsrā’s agent, appointed to receive the tax money on Kīsrā’s behalf and forward it to Kīsrā, in addition to being a hero. As often, the anonymous Nihāyat al-arab agrees with the information given by al-Dīnawarī, though using different words.

Ḥamza, Taʾrīkh, p. 17, quotes from the lost book of Mūsā al-Kisrawī, who was active around 870. Mūsā dates Sharwīn to the time of Yazdajird I, but does not mention Khurrūn:

The Yazdajird forgotten and dropped (from the king lists) was greater than his son Yazdajird the Sinner. It was he who was king at the time of Sharwīn al-Dastabī, not the Sinner. People were pleased with his governing, and he was merciful and kind, unlike his son. His faithfulness was such that when a contemporary Byzantine king was dying and left behind a small son, he expressed his will that this Yazdajird send someone from his kingdom to Byzantium to act as his viceregent and control the affairs for his son until the latter grew up. Yazdajird sent Sharwīn Barniyān, the head of the district of Dastabā, and gave him the kingship of Byzantium, which he regulated for twenty years. Then Yazdajird returned the trust by giving the kingdom of...
Byzantium to the deceased king’s son and calling Sharwīn back after he had designed a city there, which he called Bāshirwān, Arabised as Bājirwān.

Besides the date, Ḥamza brings to the story the motif of guardianship, Sharwīn acting on behalf of Yazdajird as the viceregent of Byzantium during the minority of its lawful king, at the behest of the former king. The second noteworthy detail is that Yazdajird Ia is defined through Sharwīn, strongly implying that the latter was a famous character around 870. In the Sasanian king list of his Āthār, p. 145, al-Bīrūnī likewise defines Yazdajird Ia as šāhib Sharwīn, most probably depending on Ḥamza.

Evidence in Persian

The anonymous Mujmal al-tawārīkh, written in 520/1126, whose author often uses Ḥamza as his source, gives a brief description of the story, which is yet the most detailed we have.36

Andr عهد يزدجرد نرم قصه شروين وخورين بوده است . وانكه روم خوانند هن روم بوده است. وشنيده ام روم خوانانده اند وروم خود روم است. وان تاه درد كه خورين اورا بشكنت راه داشته است انجا كه اکنون طاق گزا خواناند. وشروين را آن زن جادو دوست گرفت كه مريح خواناندش واورا مدني انجا بیست چنانه در قصه گويند. وخداي داند كه نيندي. واندر سير الملوك گفته است كه شروين را نوشروان عادل به روم بگذشت تا خراج بستان دران وقت كه او باتي مي گردند از جهت خروج سرخ زاد وله أعلم به.

The story of Sharwīn and Khwarrīn took place during the reign of Yazdajird Ia the Soft. What they call “Rome” (within that story) does not mean Rome: I have heard that they used to call Ḥulwān “Rome.” Rome itself is also called “Rome.” And that solitary thief,37 whom Khwarrīn killed, acted as a highway man in the place that is nowadays called Ṭāq-e Garrā.38 The female witch, called Marye, fell in love with Sharwīn and held him prisoner there for some time, as told in the tale, but God knows best how that was. In Siyar al-mulūk it is said that Sharwīn was sent by Anūshirwān the Just to Rome to collect the taxes at the time when he returned because of the revolt of his son (Anūsh)zād, but God knows it best.

36 Mujmal, p. 74 (ed. Bahār, p. 95). I wish to give special thanks to Dr Azin Haghighi (Edinburgh) for discussing this passage with me. Its language is somewhat distorted, and there is reason to believe that the passage suffers from some corruption.
37 Or thief called Tāh? The passage may be corrupt.
38 In Ḥulwān, cf. Lughatnāme, (www.vajehyab.com), s.v.
Even though the description is somewhat obscure, it contains several recognisable elements familiar from nāme literature and folktales:\(^{39}\) adventures in a foreign country, here “Rome;” a solitary highwayman; and a female witch falling in love with and capturing the hero. We will come back to these elements below. After mentioning them and dating this Sharwīn to the time of Yazdajird Ia, the Majmal turns to a respectable historical source, Siyar al-mulūk,\(^{40}\) and quoting it gives a very sober picture of Sharwīn the Tax Collector, dating him to the time of Anūshirwān. While first defining Rome as Ḥulwān, here the author seems to accept Rome as Rome, i.e., Constantinople. The Majmal does not mention the theme of guardianship. Strictly speaking, we are here dealing with two separate Sharwīns, although Arabic and Persian historiography does allow for contradictory reports to stand side by side, so we cannot say whether the author meant to separate the two Sharwīns from each other or merely reported the different opinions concerning one Sharwīn,

A much later, but occasionally well-informed source, Ḩamdallāh Mustawfī’s (d. circa 744/1344) Tārīkh-e guzīde,\(^{41}\) dates Sharwīn to the time Shāpūr II (r. 309–379), also mentioning Khwarīn, writing شروین وخوروین, with the variant شروین وخوروین, a welcome reminder of how confused little-known Persian names could become, not only in Arabic, but also in Persian, and how two obscure names tend towards rhyming. This date is unique, though perhaps vaguely supported by the verses of Muḥammad ibn Ḩamza ibn Nuṣayr, quoted above.

Ḩamdallāh first very briefly narrates the same story as Ḩamza in slightly different words (and with a different date), adding that Sharwīn did not receive permission (from the new king of Byzantium) to return to Iran until the reign of Bahrām (IV, r. 388–399). Then he continues:

نام شروین در اشعار پهلوی بسیار است وکتابیست در عشق نامه او (شروینیان) خوانند.

The name of Sharwīn is often mentioned in heroic (pahlavī) poems. There is also a book about his romantic adventures (‘išqnāme), which is titled Sharwīniyān.

The end is problematic and its syntax curious. Sharwīniyān could refer to a group of people, but elsewhere in the admittedly scanty material, there is no mention of any group of relatives or

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39 I use this term to refer to semi-popular romantic and heroic epics, mostly featuring various Sistanians and usually bearing a title hero’s name + nāme.
40 Elsewhere (Majmal, p. 2), the author identifies this as Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s (d. circa 139/756) book of this title, but the same title was used for many other books, too.
dependants of Sharwín. It would also be possible to take the verb khwānand, not in the sense “(which) they call,” but in the sense “(which) Sharwínians read/recite,” in which case Sharwínians would refer to a group of storytellers specialising in the story of Sharwín. Yet, there is no evidence for such groups in the fourteenth century, although similar specialised storytellers are known from the nineteenth century.

In any case, Ḥamdallāh either refers to a book title or to storytellers reading from such a book, which in both cases would by his time have been in Classical Persian, assuming that he is not merely quoting an earlier author. Note also that for Ḥamdallāh, the term “Pahlavi” would have meant “heroic,” not the Middle Persian used in Zoroastrian books, and much less “Parthian,” which is the etymological origin of the word (*Parthava > Pahlav-).

The scattered Arabic and Persian evidence allows us to reconstruct some main lines of the Story of Sharwín of Dastabay and its development. There are two historical currents of material related to Sharwín, with some overlap between them. First of all, historical sources know of a Persian nobleman Sharwín of Dastabay, who was sent to Byzantium to help the infant king in ruling the Empire. Secondly, they mention that Sharwín, together with his servant Khwarrīn or Khurrīn, was sent to ascertain that payments were secured and sent to Iran. The latter function may also be located in Ḥulwān, not Byzantium. This happened either at the time of Shāpūr II, Yazdajird Ia, or Khusraw Anūshirwān.

**Evidence in Greek**

The first current finds surprising confirmation in Greek sources. In his Persian War, Procopius (d. 570) relates\(^{42}\) that when he was dying Arcadius appointed Isdigerdus (Yazdajird I) guardian over his son Theodosius II, who was still a minor. This, obviously, does not corroborate the historicity of the fact itself, but it does show that the story circulated already in the sixth century. Procopius does not mention any character who would take the role of Sharwín.\(^{43}\) In his version, Yazdajird receives a letter from Arcadius, accepts the commission, threatens by war any who would plot against Theodosius, and keeps his word honourably. Later, Agathias (d. 582), in his Histories,\(^{44}\) repeats this,

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43 In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranicaonline.org, s.v. “Byzantine-Iranian relations,” Shapur Shahbazi erroneously claims that Procopius mentions a tutor sent by Yazdajird to bring Theodosius up.
quoting Procopius, but adding no new details. Agathias speaks very highly of Procopius, who has been able to preserve this otherwise undocumented story. However, Byzantine scholars disagree as to whether or not this should be taken at face value or as sarcastic criticism of Procopius for taking common gossip for historical information.45

Theopanes Confessor (d. 818) adds an interesting detail in his Chronographia. Sub AM 5900 (AD 407/8), he otherwise keeps to Procopius’ narrative, but adds that Isdigerdes dispatched “Antiochos, a most remarkable and highly educated advisor and instructor” before writing to the Roman Senate. Antiochos “stayed at the Emperor’s side and wrote many letters on behalf of the Christians” in Iran.46 Sub AM 5905 (AD 412/3), he says that “Antiochos the Persian departed, and the blessed Pulcheria gained complete control of affairs.”47 Much later, sub AM 5936 (AD 443/4), the final fall of the eunuch Antiochos – now back in Byzantium – is mentioned.48

Since at least 1905, Byzantinists have been arguing about whether or not we should accept Antiochos as a historical character. The discussion is conveniently summarised in Greatrex, “Deux notes,” who himself supports taking Antiochos as a historical character. No Greek source introduces a character similar to Khwarrīn or tells any more details about this Antiochos, so the romantic and/or heroic story is not corroborated by Greek evidence, only the story of the guardianship and the sending of a tutor/viceregent to Byzantium.

Whether historical or not, Antiochus takes the same role as Sharwīn in the guardianship story. There does not seem to be any ready explanation for the names, which are neither phonetically nor semantically related. The Arabic tradition knows him as Sharwīn, which shows that the story reached the Arabs through Iran, as might be expected.

Discussion

However, Arabic and Persian sources also know Sharwīn as tax collector, so it is not evident that Sharwīn would have originally had anything to do with the guardianship at the time of Yazdajird. Moreover, we have seen his connection to Ḥulwān and the “new Rome” (al-Rūmiyya) built by Kisrā

47 The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, p. 127.
48 The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, p. 151.
Anūshirwān,\textsuperscript{49} which could quite well be the original context of Sharwīn the Tax Collector, historical memory only later connecting him with the guardianship motif and retrojecting him to the time of Yazdajird. So instead of a guardian sent to Byzantium and simultaneously collecting taxes there, we may have an early story about Yazdajird acting as the guardian of Theodosius II (and, on the Greek side, Antiochos acting as his tutor) and another story, perhaps set to the time of Khusraw Anūshirwān, about an official called Sharwīn sent to Byzantium, or Ḥulwān, to oversee the collection of taxes, and these may have been combined into a viceregent-cum-tax collector called Sharwīn. Whether two separate stories or one, this historical, or pseudohistorical, story was later developed into a heroic and/or romantic tale.

First signs of a romantic and/or adventurous nature of the story come already at the end of the eighth century in Arabic poetry, and the romantic and/or heroic tale becomes more detailed in the anonymous Persian \textit{Mujmal} from the early twelfth century. The \textit{Mujmal} brings other characters into the story: a (most probably formidable) highwayman and a female witch in love with Sharwīn, presumably young and beautiful, at least when she assumes such a form, perhaps already alluded to in a poem quoted by Ibn al-Faqīh.

The \textit{Mujmal} is an interesting source. It is often our earliest source to describe nāmes that we otherwise only know from much later copies and scattered references. Its author’s wide knowledge of the nāmes explains why he, rather than anyone else, is able to present some details of the \textit{Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay}. He starts by dating the story to the time of Yazdajird Ia, having perhaps received this date from Ḥamza. He mentions Sharwīn and Khwarrīn as a pair, though not necessarily a romantic pair. It might be pointed out that he does not identify Khwarrīn as Sharwīn’s servant. He gives a variant date to Sharwīn to Khusraw Anūshirwān’s time from \textit{Siyar al-mulūk}, but in this connection only mentioning him as a tax collector, not a romantic hero.

The romantic and/or heroic side of the story is highlighted by the two episodes the author of the \textit{Mujmal} mentions, a solitary highwayman killed by Khwarrīn and a female witch in love with Sharwīn and keeping him as her captive. Here we come to recurrent motifs in the nāme literature and storytelling. Already Firdawsī (d. 411/1019) has a witch who tempts Rustam in a romantic scene during his Seven Labours (\textit{Haft khān}) and an occasional highwayman, but it is only in the other nāmes that we find these themes fully developed. Thus, \textit{Kuk-e Kūhzād}, later included in some recensions of

the Shāhnāme, relates young Rustam’s battle against the highwayman Kuk-e Kūhzād, and much of
the Burzūnāme focuses on how a bewitching temptress captures a series of Iranian and Sistanian
heroes.\footnote{Burzūnāme mansūb be-(...) ʿAṭāʾī Rāzī wa-Dāstān-e Kuk-e Kūhzād, (ed.) S.M. Dabīrsiyāqī (Tehran, 1383 AHSV).}

It should be pointed out that though the existing nāmes are later than Firdawsī, some derive from
stories prior to Firdawsī, who himself mentions Bīzhan and Manīzhe as a pre-existing tale, and many
of those listed in the Mujmal may also date from before him. The Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay further
confirms the pre-Firdawsian existence of tales that later became codified as nāmes.

The popular nāmes, as well as the romantic parts of Firdawsī’s Shāhnāme, such as Bīzhan and
Manīzhe, are heteroerotic, but later epic tradition with its Maḥmūd and Ayāz\footnote{Encyclopaedia Iranica, “Ayāz” (J. Matinī).} also knows male love
pairs. The verses quoted in al-Maqrīzī’s Khabar would favour such an interpretation. The use of
Sharwīn’s character in mujīn poetry also speaks for this interpretation, in which case the story
would be a predecessor of Maḥmūd and Ayāz. All Persian epic heroes, starting with Rustam, quaff huge
quantities of wine, yet they do not qualify as mujīn characters, so one could claim that there was
more to Sharwīn than meets the eye.

In Arabic historical literature, Sharwīn only merits a short mention, but more interesting are the
allusions to him in contexts that require some knowledge of the romantic/heroic story told about him,
as poetic references would not have worked if the audience was completely unaware of Sharwīn – an
individual case, especially in a fārisiyā, could be explained as a baffling and comic appearance of
an incomprehensible name, but the repeated allusions in late Umayyad/early ʿAbbāsid poems make
this improbable.

On the other hand, there is no evidence in Arabic of any written work, whether original or translated,
on Sharwīn. Ibn al-Nadīm mentions several stories of Persian origin in his Fihrist,\footnote{Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, (ed.) R. Tajaddud (Tehran, 1381 AHSV). One might expect to find it on p. 364, which lists
Persian story books under two headings, or on pp. 365–366, which list love stories, though mostly Arab ones. None of
the stories, moreover, would match whatever corrupt form we can imagine of Sharwīn, Dastabay, and Khwarrīn to
appear in.} but not the Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay. While the existence of such a book cannot be excluded, it is more probable
that Sharwīn was familiar to the Arabs in the same way as most Persian heroes would have been: the
literati were aware that there was a story which involved romance and adventure and that Sharwīn
had Khwârîn either as a sidekick or a love interest. This much would already make the allusions work and the sources do not show any deeper knowledge of the story.\footnote{Cf. how poorly Rustam was known in Arabic sources, see Hämeen-Anttila, \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, pp. 174–199.}

In Persian, the situation is different. Even though Persian historians were capable of using Arabic sources and the story could have been an Arab invention, based on the historical existence of Sharwîn of Dastabay, its wide occurrence and the ability of Persian authors to tell us more about the story than the Arabs speak in favour of its primary existence in Persian.

Whether these stories transmitted into Arabic were based on oral lore or on Middle Persian books, is yet another question. In trying to answer this, we have little concrete evidence and our study must remain speculative. The existence of Middle Persian books and a vivid tradition of oral singing of epics is too often accepted without further study. Both questions are too general to be answered in this article, but let us briefly discuss how the \textit{Story of Sharwîn of Dastabay} may have been transmitted.

First of all, we have little evidence for long, non-religious Middle Persian texts. The idea of a voluminous \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, comparable to Firdawsî’s \textit{Shāhnāme}, is based on a number of misunderstandings, and the existence of a Middle Persian \textit{Alexander Romance} is dubious.\footnote{For the \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, see Hämeen-Anttila, \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, and Hoyland, \textit{History}. For specifically the \textit{Alexander Romance}, see Hämeen-Anttila, \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, pp. 45–51, and Ciancaglieri’s studies referred to there.} There would seem to be more evidence for the one-time existence of Middle Persian fable collections later translated into Arabic, such as \textit{Kalīla and Dimna}.\footnote{See F. de Blois, \textit{Burzōy’s Voyage}.}

Strictly historical works are better attested, and some have even been preserved, such as \textit{Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr}. Al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956) mentions some historical and legendary Middle Persian texts that had been translated by his time.\footnote{Kitāb al-Sakīsarān (Murūj al-dhahab, (ed.) Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, Revised by C. Pellat, 8 vols. (Beyrouth, 1966–1979), §§541, 543) and Kitāb al-Baykār (Murūj §§479–480) narrated epic stories involving Sistanian heroes, while Kitāb al-Šowar (Kitāb al-Tanbih, (ed.) M.J. de Goeje (Lugduni-Batavorum, 1894, repr. Beirut, n.d.), p. 106) and Kāhnāmāh and Āyīnāmāh (Tanbih, p. 104) related to Sasanian times. For these and other lost Middle Persian books, see Hämeen-Anttila, \textit{Khwadāynāmag}, pp. 30–45.} Shāhmardān ibn abī l-Khayr mentions in his \textit{Nuz’hatnāme} (written around 500/1100), extensive Middle Persian books on legends and history, covering some 1,500–2,000 pages,\footnote{Shahmardān ibn abi l-Khayr, \textit{Nuz’hatnāme ye Alāī} (Tehran, 1362 AHSh), here p. 342.} but there is no further evidence for the existence of such a gigantic library of Middle Persian texts, and his information remains suspect.
In addition, there is some evidence for the prior existence of written, probably new Persian stories in prose or verse dating from the tenth century or earlier Middle Persian stories that have been preserved in later versions. Much of this information comes from the *Mujmal*, which mentions a *Garsāsfnāme*, prior to Asadī Ţūsī’s version (written in 458/1068), a *Farāmarznāme*, and a few other stories, all related to the mythological and legendary part of Iranian history.58 *Wis and Rāmīn* and *Bīzhan and Manīzhe* seem to be the only romantic tales that can securely be traced back to times before Firdawsī.59

Thus, written Middle Persian historical and legendary texts did exist, whether in prose or verse, but references to romantic or heroic epics, with mainly Sistanian heroes and not set in the Sasanian period, probably refer to New Persian versions of stories that may well have circulated as oral stories for a longer period. If the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* did exist as a written Middle Persian story, it would still be necessary to postulate the existence of an oral, probably learned, tradition to explain how Abū Nuwās and other Arabic poets and their audience came to know it without a translation, of which we have no traces. Written existence in Middle Persian would also probably mean that the story was not of excessive length.

The other possibility is that the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* circulated in an oral form in Persian, which by the late Sasanian and early Islamic times would have been an early form of New Persian, possibly with some Middle Persian elements, depending on the age of the story. How fluid or fixed60 such texts were, is beyond our evidence, as the vacillation concerning the date and the role of Sharwīn probably comes from historical literature, not the story itself.

If the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* was transmitted orally, was it sung, recited, or freely told in prose to the audience? Since Boyce’s 1957 article on *gōsāns*,61 the existence of oral singers of tales in Iran prior to the time of Firdawsī has often been taken for granted, even though Boyce’s evidence is far from conclusive and she, in fact, provides little evidence for the existence of such performers

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58 *Mujmal*, p. 2.
59 For all these, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, pp. 167–173. In addition, of course, there are occasional references to romantic stories and love pairs, such as Kisrā Abarwīz and Shīrīn, or the less well-known story of the Indian marriage of the Parthian Balāsh, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, pp. 80–81.
60 With "fixed" I refer to a story that is recognised as a separate entity, even though there may be fluidity in its performance.
specifically in Late Sasanian and early Islamic times. Even though the word gōsān is attested once or twice in contemporary texts, it is questionable whether at that time it signified a singer of tales or a musician.

There are, however, occasional references to stories having been sung in early Islamic Iran, and even though not conclusive, they do give us reason to assume that at least occasionally tales were indeed sung. The case of Firdawsī is a bone of contention and I will come back to it in a later article, but it seems clear that Firdawsī’s main source was the written Prose Shāhnāme (completed in 346/957), while he may have used oral tales as secondary sources.

Turning now back to the evidence specific to the Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay, we see that Abū Nuwās speaks of Persians reading, or reciting, (yatāna) this story, and juxtaposes it to the Avesta – a book written down by this time, although recited, most probably by heart, during ceremonies – and Wīs and Rāmīn. Ḥamza, commenting on this verse is somewhat contradictory. First, he terms the story as an uḥdīthā, which primarily calls to mind a prose story, instead of using words such as ughniyya or qašīda, the latter used by him to explain the firjardāt of Wīs and Rāmīn. Then, however, he says that it is sung (yutaghannā bihā), an important addition to our meagre corpus of references to singing of tales at the time.

Ḥamdallāh mentions a book on Sharwīn’s romantic adventures, which was read/recited. Keeping strictly to what Ḥamdallāh says, by his time the story would have been read by storytellers from a book, a method which we know quite well from later times. After Ḥamdallāh, references to this story peter out, and it is quite possible that he only reflects his sources, so there is no saying that the story did live on until the fourteenth century, and even if it did, it left few traces in literature. The evidence is far from conclusive, and the eighth/ninth century Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay may as well have existed as a book or been performed by singers of tales or both.

Even though much remains uncertain, there are a number of reasonably firm conclusions we can draw from the evidence. The first and foremost in importance is that there already existed in the sixth

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62 It should be evident that while Firdawsī’s Shāhnāme can be used as a valuable source for the main events of Persian history, reading books and singing tales to the kings are literary topoi that cannot be considered factual reports of Sasanian times. For the heated discussion concerning singing of tales in the early Islamic period, see, e.g., O. Davidson, Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings (Ithaca, 1994) and M. Omidsalar “Unburdening Ferdowsi,” Journal of the American Oriental Society, 116 (1996), pp. 235–242.


64 See also Hämeen-Anttila, Khwadāynāmag, pp. 141–146, 158–167.
century, as shown by the Greek evidence, a story about Antiochos the Persian in a role later ascribed to Sharwīn of Dastabay. Early Arabic evidence shows that the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* was famous enough to be known by an Arabic audience. Although the Persian evidence comes from books later than Firdawsī, these are known to draw from early sources and, supported by the Arabic evidence, it may be considered relatively certain that the story did circulate in Early New Persian, too. Furthermore, this gives credence to the existence of the so-called orphan stories, such as *Bīzhan and Manīzhe* and some of the *nāmes* as separate stories before Firdawsī.

There is a crucial difference between the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* and most other stories claimed to derive from pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. While there is no reason to deny that there must have existed tales at the time, we usually lack concrete evidence for them and the result is that conclusions tend to be rather speculative. In the case of the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* the information we have is admittedly meagre but it is firmly anchored to existing textual evidence from the sixth century onward.

The study of lost books is always complicated. When working on the basis of a single mention in, e.g., Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*, one is in danger of misunderstanding, as the case of *The Book of Mazdak* shows. The case of the *Story of Sharwīn of Dastabay* shows that a careful collection and analysis of small shreds of evidence may bring us closer to understanding the literature of late Sasanian and early Islamic Iran.

Sharwīn of Dastabay: Reconstructing an early Persian tale

Sharwīn of Dastabay

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