

An Analysis of Major Events during the Reign of King Vishtaspa, with a Comparative Study of Various Texts (Differences and Similarities)

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ABSTRACT

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By examining various texts and sources that discuss kings and mythical figures, notable similarities and differences can be observed. One such figure is King Vishtaspa of the Kaianids. During his reign, numerous events occurred, which have been narrated differently across various texts and sources. One of these events is the emergence of Zoroaster. In different sources, references are made to Zoroaster's appearance during Vishtaspa's time, but historical texts present these accounts in different ways. Additionally, the battle between Vishtaspa and Arjasp is another significant event of this period. Some texts cite religious reasons for the conflict, while others attribute it to Arjasp's demand for tribute, and yet some accounts mention Arjasp's imperial ambitions as the cause of the battle. The battle between Rostam and Esfandiyar is another major event that took place during Vishtaspa's reign. While some sources detail this event with precision, many others do not provide thorough descriptions. In this research, we aim to analyze and interpret the major events using a variety of sources to describe the differences and similarities, ultimately shedding light on the reasons behind these conflicting narratives.

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Introduction

The legendary Kayanian king Goshtasp (Avestan: *Vištāspa*) occupies a pivotal, transitional juncture in Iranian epic, mythological, and historical traditions. Situated between mythic archetypes and historicized annals, his reign is framed by watershed events that reshaped Iran's spiritual, political, and heroic landscapes. Among these, three defining episodes stand out: the advent and institutional adoption of Zoroastrianism, the destructive wars between Iran and Turan led by King Arjasp, and the tragic confrontation between Rostam and Esfandiyar. Modern scholarship and historiography have long debated Goshtasp's historical identity—varying from identifying him with Hystaspes (the father of Darius the Great) to Arsacid Vologases I or an eastern Iranian tribal chieftain. However, an equally critical scholarly task involves tracing how Goshtasp's reign is represented across divergent textual genres. Across Zoroastrian Middle Persian treatises, Islamic-era universal chronicles, classical heroic epics, and popular oral storytelling (*naqqali*) scrolls, these central events undergo narrative mutations, theological reinterpretations, and ideological interpolations. This study conducts a systematic comparative textual investigation of the major episodes of Goshtasp's reign to identify structural similarities, narrative divergences, and the underlying ideological and sociocultural causes driving these transformations.

Method

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical, and comparative textual methodology. The corpus spans four primary categories of primary sources:

١. **Zoroastrian Scriptures and Pahlavi Texts:** Including the *Avesta*, *Bundahishn*, *Dēnkard* (Books 5 and 7), *Mēnog-ī Khrad*, *Pahlavi Rivayat*, and *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*.
٢. **Historiographical Chronicles of the Islamic Era:** Works by al-Tabari, al-Mas'udi, al-Dinawari, Hamza al-Isfahani, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, al-Maqdisi, al-Tha'alibi, Ibn Balkhi, Bal'ami, Gardizi, and the anonymous *Tarikh-e Sistan* and *Mojmal al-Tawarikh wa al-Qasas*.
٣. **Heroic Epics:** Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

- ξ. **Folkloric and Oral Traditions (*Naqqali* Scrolls):** Primary manuscripts such as *Tumar-e Naqqali-ye Shahnameh*, *Haft Lashkar*, *Meshkin-Nameh*, and *Shahnameh-ye Naqqalan*.

The analytical procedure categorizes and contrasts each source's treatment of causality, narrative motifs, character motivations, and structural omissions across the three focal events.

Results

The comparative analysis reveals systematic thematic and structural divergences shaped by the ideological agendas of the respective textual traditions:

١. **The Advent of Zoroaster:**

- *Pahlavi Religious Texts:* Universally place Zoroaster's revelation in the 30th year of Goshtasp's reign (marking the start of the fourth cosmological millennium). Goshtasp's acceptance is framed as a cosmic and theological necessity, preceded by divine visions, miraculous trials, and the sacred potion (*mang*) administered by the Archangel Ardibehesht.
- *Historiographical Chronicles:* While preserving the tradition of Zoroaster appearing in Goshtasp's 30th regnal year, Islamic-era historians frequently syncretized Iranian lore with Semitic-Abrahamic traditions. Tabari, Bal'ami, Tha'alibi, and Ibn al-Athir record accounts describing Zoroaster as a Palestinian disciple of the Prophet Jeremiah (or Saint George/Elijah in Biruni), who was struck with leprosy after betraying his master and subsequently fled to Azerbaijan and Balkh.
- *Naqqali and Popular Scrolls:* In *Shahnameh-ye Naqqalan*, the event is thoroughly re-mythologized within an Islamic-Abrahamic idiom: Zoroaster manifests miraculously from inside a sacred plane tree (*chenar*) in the plains of Ray, introduces himself as "the Prophet Ibrahim, titled Zoroaster," and delivers divine revelation to Goshtasp.

٢. **The War Between Goshtasp and Arjasp:**

- *Religious and Pahlavi Texts (Ayādgār ī Zarērān, Bundahishn)*: Frame the conflict strictly as an existential religious holy war (*daēnēk*) ignited by Arjasp's vehement rejection of Goshtasp's conversion to the Good Religion (*Behdin*).
- *Epic and Historiographical Sources (Shahnameh, Dēnkard 7, Tha'alibi, Gardizi)*: Recast the war around political and economic sovereignty. The primary catalyst is Arjasp's demand for tribute and tax (*bāzh wa sāv*) or overt imperial expansionism and territorial conquest of Balkh, overshadowing purely theological motivations.
- *Naqqali Scrolls*: Synthesize both motivations, portraying Goshtasp dispatching proselytizing emissaries demanding conversion, which provokes Arjasp's court into military retaliation.

۳. The Battle of Rostam and Esfandiyar:

- *Theological Texts*: Pahlavi and Avestan corpuses contain virtually no account of an armed duel between Rostam and Esfandiyar (with only fleeting symbolic mentions in *Draxt ī Asūrīg*), largely omitting the fatal fratricide of the Mazda-worshipping prince.
- *Historiographical Accounts*: The conflict is bifurcated: religious chronicles (*Tarikh-e Sistan*, al-Dinawari) depict it as a religious confrontation triggered by Rostam's staunch refusal to abandon the ancestral faith for Goshtasp's new Zoroastrianism; whereas mainstream dynastic histories (Tabari, Bal'ami, Tha'alibi) describe it as an intra-dynastic political plot driven by Goshtasp's jealousy, paranoia, and Machiavellian desire to eliminate Esfandiyar's claim to the throne by sending him to chain the indomitable hero of Sistan.
- *Epic and Naqqali Traditions*: Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Tha'alibi preserve the complete tragic, heroic-psychological dimensions derived from the Sasanian *Khwadāy-namag* tradition via the lost prose *Abu-Mansuri Shahnameh*. Conversely, *naqqali* manuscripts introduce elaborate folkloric variants: altered princely names (e.g., Nush-Lab), domestic and tactical disputes, supernatural

elaborations, and alternative lethal weapons (such as Rostam striking Esfandiyar with a perfumed golden orange [*toranj*] in *Meshkin-Nameh* and Enjavi Shirazi's variants).

Conclusion

The historical and mythic events defining the reign of Kayanian Goshtasp exhibit substantial thematic shifts across Persian literary genres. The cross-textual variations do not represent random narrative drift; rather, they reflect purposeful ideological reframing:

- Pahlavi texts theologize events to validate Zoroastrian orthodoxy and cosmological paradigms.
- Early Islamic historiography rationalizes, abbreviates, or harmonizes Iranian heroic lore with Biblical-Semitic genealogical frameworks.
- Ferdowsi's epic elevates political-humanistic tragedy, ethical tension, and heroic honor.
- Popular *naqqali* scrolls integrate dramatic folkloric inventions and vernacular syncretism.

Despite these divergences in narrative motivation, detail, and tone, Goshtasp's royal tenure remains the definitive historical anchor uniting clerical, royal, epic, and popular Iranian collective memory.