



## MARZBĀN-NĀMA

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**MARZBĀN-NĀMA**, an early 13th-century prose work in Persian consisting of various didactic stories and fables used as illustrations of morality and right conduct.

*Background and genealogy.* *Marzbān-nāma* was written during the years 607-22/1210-25 by the translator/author Sa'd-al-Din Varāvini under the patronage of the vizier Abu'l-Qāsem Hārūn, who was in service to the Ildegizid Atabak Ozbak b. Moḥammad in Azarbaijan (see [Atābakān-e Ādarbāyjān](#)). *Marzbān-nāma* has been translated fully or as an abridgement into Turkish, Arabic, French, and English. It is said to be based upon a now lost earlier specimen, which was put down in the dialect of Tabaristan around the 4th/10th century, by Marzbān b. Rostam b. Šervin of the Bavandid dynasty (see [ĀL-e BĀVAND](#); Ebn Esfandiār, I, p. 137; tr., p. 86), whose descendants traced their lineage to Sasanian kings (Kaykāvus b. Eskandar, 1967, p. 5).

Varāvini's *Marzbān-nāma* is in fact one of two versions known to us. An earlier composition, a text of slightly different form and an expanded content bearing the additional title of *Rowżat al-'oqul*, was authored in 598/1201 by Moḥammad b. Ġāzi Malaṭiawi, for the Saljuqid court of Rokn-al-Din Solaymān II (r. 592-600/1196-1204), at Konya (Qazvini, pp. 1062-66; Šafā, 1959-92, pp. 1004-5). There are two copies preserved in Paris and Leiden (Qazvini, p. 1062). This rare and earlier version by Malaṭiawi has been published only in excerpted form (e.g., Houtsma, pp. 359-92; Malaṭiawi, tr. Massé, 1938, pp. 5-67; see also Qazvini's edition, pp. ix-xii of preface). Due to the nature of the expanded content in particular (regarding the number of chapters and tales),



this version, which is less known but by no means less significant, more than merits scholarly investigation on its own terms.

Judging from introductory notes by Varāvini and Malaṭiawi, it is possible that both used the same source in existence around the 4th/10th century or earlier; but it is also possible that different compilations were already extant when Varāvini and Malaṭiawi were working on their own versions (Houtsma, 18989, p. 374; cf. Davis, 1977, pp. 109-10).

Literary annals and surviving manuscripts suggest that Varāvini's rendition has long been the version more widely available and copied. This may be partly explained by timing: not only did it physically survive, but it also did so from the 13th century onward, when paper was more widely available (see Blair, p. 302). What is more, Varāvini's version was also translated and retranslated, first into Turkish in the 1300s by Shaikh Oĝlu, whose Turkish rendering was later translated into Arabic by Ebn 'Arabšāh in 852/1448 (see Qazvini, pp. 1073-75; Pedersen; Brockelmann; Burrill).

The work is comprised of nine chapters (*bāb*) with main-framed stories, embedded minor tales, as well as Persian and Arabic poems, parables, sayings, and Qor'anic expressions (for the sources of Arabic verses used, see Mahdawi Dāmġāni). Among the several extant manuscripts, only one (Ms. 216, dated 698/1299, at the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul) is known to include illustrations (three in total, being relevant to the patron, author, and the Prophet), all within the manuscript's preface (Simpson, pp. 91-116). Varāvini's version first appeared bound and in printed format as a collation edited by Mirzā Moḥammad Qazvini as volume eight of the E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series in 1909 (Figure 1). It was reprinted in Iran in 1948. Later a new, updated version with notes, variants, and appendices edited by Moḥammad Rowšan was published in 1976, followed by one edited with commentary by Kāḷil Kāṭib Rahbar in 1984.

*Sources of Marzbān-nāma as related to Varāvini's authorship, the genre, and content.* To what degree Varāvini's version is based upon or is independent of the original text he used is not known (on this issue, see Borjian, 2009, pp. 12-13; Davis, 1977, p. 3). Varāvini states in his preface, however, that the manuscript he consulted was in the Ṭabari dialect (*ba zabān-e Ṭabarestān*) of its period, and that he considered the contents as worthy of presentation in standard New Persian (Varāvini, pp. 6-7 in Qazvini's ed., and pp. 10-11 in Rowšan's ed.; Şafā, 1959-92, pp. 1007-8).



In general, *Marzbān-nāma* is similar to other popular works of the medieval period, in the way that it encompasses various Perso-Islamic literary traditions (e.g., see Ġazāli, tr., pp. xiii-xvi, 46-47). While there is a religious tone invoked from the very first chapter, which is the mainstay of the book, the work also noticeably contains various pre-Islamic elements and references, which in turn blend different didactic themes of wisdom, advice, and Mirror-for-Princes: this is seen in the repeated striving for moral rectitude, the constancy of sage advice, and above all the ideal of Persian kingship being upheld.

More specifically, *Marzbān-nāma* is known for its similarity in content to the *Kalila wa Demna* fables, one of many books that Varāvini tells his readers he consulted as a literary model (Varāvini, pp. 2-3, in Qazvini's edition and pp. 5-6 in Rowšan's). Of particular note, however, is that while both *Kalila wa Demna* and *Marzbān-nāma* depict kings, viziers, and the running (smoothly or not) of a kingdom, in the Indian, *Panchatantra*-based *Kalila wa Demna* collection, the king is often weak and displaying naïveté in the management of his court. In *Marzbān-nāma*, however, harmony at court is disrupted from the very beginning and then it is restored, and this is the main topos throughout the book.

*Narrative structure.* In the first chapter, Prince Marzbān endures friction with his brother, who is king, caused by the undermining of the court vizier. Through debate and the aid of moral examples and fables, the brothers achieve harmony by the end of the chapter. Each successive chapter explores various difficult challenges that a king may encounter, and how a restorative process with a positive outcome may result. In chapter two, a ruler who is on his deathbed attempts to subdue the rivalry between his sons, by preparing the next in line and referring him to a trusted peer for guidance. In chapter three, a royal daughter is preparing for marriage, but instead of the traditional custom of marrying for prestige or increased wealth, she prefers to marry a wise, modest man. Chapter four portrays how a man who is steadied by wisdom and religion may overcome the temptations often inflicted by evil. Chapters five, six, seven, and eight shift to animal framed stories, and each depicts how a well-intentioned king handles adversity at court or with an unruly neighbor, and by extension how the experience may apply to the successful rule of a kingdom. The final chapter shows in a condensed form how all lessons also apply to the most vulnerable of beings, and it is precisely by this that the reader is meant to be edified and uplifted. At the core of the entire text is the reinforcement of the maxim that Islamic justice and Islamic



virtues are to be sought by the ruler and the ruled alike.

*Manuscripts.* The following is a brief sampling of the older extant manuscript copies of Varāvini's *Marzbān-nāma*: Ms. 216 (Library of the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul), the only known manuscript with illustrations, dated 698/1299; OR 6476 (British Library, London, used in the collation of Qazvini), dated 8th/14th century, displays evidence of more than one copier; Ancien Fonds Persan 384 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; also used in Qazvini's collation), dated 9th/15th century. For these and other manuscript copies held in London, Paris, Istanbul, St. Petersburg, and throughout Iran, see Blochet, 1905-34; Dorn; Schefer (II, p. 209 with expanded details on Dorn); Meredith-Owens; Monzawi; Rieu (comparison between these catalogues shows some variance in dates and manuscript identification); also Mikluho-Maclay (I, p. 542; II, p. 144, partial update to Dorn); Richard (1989, p. 386, an update to Blochet, 1905-34); Grube (1991, p. 170, a 9th/15th-cent. anthology from Yazd, which includes *Marzbān-nāma*); Waley (1998, p. 66; *Marzbān-nāma* written in the margins of *Kalila wa Demna*, and listed as text 2 of OR 13163).

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