

A pentadic rethinking of Goshtāsp in the *Shāhnāma* of Ferdowsi

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Résumé: Suivant la formulation de Nicholas Allen au sujet des modèles pentadiques d'organisation sociale tels qu'ils sont reflétés dans les langues indo-européennes, cet article analyse quelques récits pertinents au sujet du personnage royal de Goshtāsp dans une épopée classique persane, le *Shāhnāma* de Ferdowsi. On y montre que ce shāh d'Iran, tel que dépeint dans le *Shāhnāma*, représente les trois fonctions de la société, telles qu'elles sont représentées dans les mythes qui forment les traditions de l'épopée héritées par le poète Ferdowsi.

Mots-clés: Mythe et épopée iraniens, poésie persane classique, *Shāhnāma*, shāh, Goshtāsp, Ferdowsi, modèles pentadiques, trifonctionnalité, Nicholas Allen, Georges Dumézil, Stig Wikander.

Abstract: Following the formulation of Nicholas Allen concerning “pentadic” models of social organization as reflected in Indo-European languages, this essay analyzes some relevant narratives about the royal figure of Goshtāsp in a classical Persian “epic,” the *Shāhnāma* of Ferdowsi. It is argued that this shāh of Iran, as portrayed in the *Shāhnāma*, represents all three “functions” of society as represented in the myths that shape the traditions of epic that were inherited by the poet Ferdowsi.

Keywords: Iranian myth and epic, classical Persian poetry, *Shāhnāma*, shāh, Goshtāsp, Ferdowsi, “pentadic” models, trifunctionalism, Nicholas Allen, Georges Dumézil, Stig Wikander.

In the *Shāhnāma* of the Persian poet Ferdowsi, the lengthy composition of which started in the late tenth century CE and lasted into the early eleventh, we read about an old Iranian dynasty called *Kayānī* in Persian. Experts who study the evolution of Iranian traditions extending from the earliest attested texts of the Avesta all the way to the classical Persian poetry of Ferdowsi and beyond refer to the kings of this dynasty simply as the ‘Keyānids’ or ‘Kayānids’. The Persian form *Kayānī* is derived ultimately from a noun attested as *kauui* in the Avesta, related to the Indic noun *kaví-*, which can be interpreted as ‘priest’ or, more generally, ‘seer’ or ‘sage’. In the Avesta, the noun *kauui* is applied as a title to kings in the Keyānid dynasty’s line of succession.¹ I focus here on one particular king in this dynastic arrangement: he is *Vištāspa*, whose name becomes Goshtāsp in the Persian *Shāhnāma*.

In an article I originally published over a third of a century ago,² I studied the role of this king Goshtāsp in the narrative of the *Shāhnāma* by analyzing

1. For background, I recommend the article of Jean Kellens, 1976.

2. Davidson, 1987, recast as Chapter 8 in a book, Davidson, 2013a.

convergences and divergences between his role and the role of his father, the previous king in this same narrative, whose name is Lohrāsp in Persian, to be derived from the name Auruuat-aspas as attested in the Avesta. In my new study here, written in honor of my sorely-missed friend Nicholas J. Allen, I revise my earlier study by now applying to it some of Nick’s theories about “pentadic” relationships in myths.

In my earlier study, I was building on theories developed in an article by Stig Wikander and, subsequently, in a book by Georges Dumézil with reference to narratives we find in the *Shāhnāma* about the king Goshtāsp—and about his father, the king Lohrāsp.³ In that study of mine, I had pursued the idea that both these two kings, father-and-son together, represent the “third function”—I am using here a special terminology devised by Dumézil in his modeling of three social “functions” or “ideologies” prevalent in languages belonging to what is known today as the Indo-European linguistic family. In terms of Dumézil’s model of “trifunctionalism”—a model followed by Wikander—the three “functions” correspond to the social roles of (1) priests, (2) warriors, (3) producers.

In terms of this model, the Iranian pair of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp, father-and-son, is comparable in “function” with an Indic pair of brother-and-brother, the twin heroes Nakula and Sahadeva, who are featured prominently in the great Sanskrit epic known as the *Mahābhārata*. In the narrative of that epic, these twin heroes were fathered by twin gods named the Aśvin-s, who represent the “third function” of “productivity” in the Indic pantheon, as Wikander and Dumézil argue persuasively.

There is a major problem, however, in comparing the Iranian pair Goshtāsp and Lohrāsp with the Indic pair Nakula and Sahadeva. If we follow Dumézil’s model of “trifunctionality,” the Iranian pair must belong primarily to the first function. That is to say, Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp are “priestly” by virtue of their status as Keyānids, since even the name of that dynasty signals membership in a priestly class, as it were. Moreover, again in terms of Dumézil’s model, the roles of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp as kings should be seen as a confirmation of their membership in the first function: as Dumézil argues, sovereignty is a defining aspect of the priestliness that characterizes figures belonging to the first function in myth.

So, to restate the problem, I ask this question: how can we justify the idea that the Iranian pair of Goshtāsp and Lohrāsp are cognate with the Indic pair of Nakula and Sahadeva in terms of a shared Indo-Iranian—and, ultimately

3. Wikander, 1950 ; Dumézil, 1971, p. 232-236.

Indo-European—mythological tradition? How can one pair belong to the first function if the other pair belongs to the third? This problem is especially acute in the case of the Iranian figure Goshtāsp, since the myths in which he is primarily involved seem to contradict, as we will see, the very idea that he should belong to the third function.

The problem is solved, however, if we apply the “pentadic” model developed by Nick Allen,⁴ which can serve as a refinement of the “trifunctional” model developed by Dumézil and Wikander. Allen’s thinking about the institution of kingship in general is especially pertinent to the role of Goshtāsp as a king belonging to the dynasty of the Keyānids. As Allen argues, the very idea of kingship or “sovereignty”, which Dumézil had tied to the first function, fits not only the “priestly” aspect of the first function as formulated by Dumézil: it fits also the other two of the three functions, in that the role of a king is “transcendent.” Kingship “transcends” all three functions as represented by (1) priests, (2) warriors, (3) producers. To use Allen’s terminology in referring to these three functions, F1 F2 F3, there is a fourth function that “transcends” the other three, and Allen’s way of referring to this fourth function of “transcendence” is F4+. In terms of Allen’s “pentadic” model, then, kingship belongs to the category F4+.

And, to round out Allen’s pentadic model, there is also a fifth function, Allen’s F4-, which stands for the “negative” aspect of any one of the three functions F1 F2 F3. As I will argue, the figure of Goshtāsp represents not only the “transcendent function” that Allen labels as F4+ but also the “negative function” that Allen labels as F4-, since this Iranian figure exhibits negative as well as positive aspects of Dumézil’s three functions, abbreviated as F1 F2 F3 by Allen, which are the functions of priests, of warriors, of producers.

Applying, then, Allen’s “pentadic” model, I will argue that the role of Goshtāsp in the *Shāhnāma* is a variable that can relocate from F1 to F2 to F3 by way of “transcendence,” F4+, but also by way of “negativity,” F4-. In making my argument, I will now proceed to rethink what I argued in my earlier work⁵ by reformulating my arguments in terms of Nick Allen’s F1 F2 F3 F4+ F4-. My reformulations in what follows will trace Allen’s pentadic classifications, nested within braces (“{“ and “}”).

In analyzing the relationship of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp, I use the term “dioscurism”,⁶ taken from the Greek name Dioskouroi, which means ‘children

4. Allen, 2014, 2020.

5. Starting with Davidson 1987.

6. Davidson 1987 and thereafter.

of Zeus’ or, in etymological terms, ‘children of the Sky’. This term is primarily applicable to the ancient Greek divine twins known as Kastor and Polydeukes in myth and ritual, or as Castor and Pollux in Romanized versions of the myth. In an influential book, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition*, Donald Ward uses such an idea of “dioscurism” as a way of describing a broad range of patterns that exist in myths about divine twins.⁷ Specifically, he finds a complementarity in behavior, where one twin tends to be aggressive and dynamic—in Allen’s terms {F2}—while the other twin is passive and static {F3}. For example, as we read in the analysis by Ward,⁸ Castor was characterized as warlike {F2}, rash {F2, F4-}, and hot-tempered {F2, F4-}, preoccupied with going afield to fight {F2}, while his twin brother Pollux was peaceful {F3} and docile {F3}, disposed to staying at home {F3} and minding domestic affairs {F3}. This idea of “dioscurism” extends from divine twins to heroic twins—or, to say it more generally, from a pairing of gods to a pairing of heroes, exemplified by the twin heroes Nakula and Sahadeva in the Indic *Mahābhārata*. Here is where the work of Stig Wikander becomes essential:⁹ as he has argued, the twin heroes Nakula and Sahadeva are an epic “hypostasis” of the Indic Divine Twins known as the *Ásvin*-s, who are characterized as generally the same when they are considered together but who are “dioscuric” when they are considered apart. The two *Ásvin*-s, dual *Ásvinau*, can be differentiated, just as Castor and Pollux are differentiated: in Indic traditions, one of the two *Ásvin*-s is “the son of *Sumakha* [‘Good Warrior’]” while the other of the two is “the son of *Dyaus* [‘Sky’]” (*Rig-Veda* 1.181.4); when treated as a pair, however, the *Ásvin*-s are both known as “sons of *Dyaus*”.¹⁰

Following the analysis of Wikander,¹¹ which was accepted by Dumézil —¹² but now also following the taxonomy of Allen, indicated here within braces (“{” and “}”), I now offer an overall formulation about Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp as they appear in the *Shāhnāma* of Ferdowsi: the transcendent role of this Iranian pair is kingship {F4+}, but this role can be traced back to a pair of Indo-Iranian Divine Twins {F3}; likewise to be traced back to this Indo-Iranian pair is an Indic pair of warriors {F2} named Nakula and Sahadeva in the Sanskrit epic known as the *Mahābhārata*. Both the Indic and the Iranian pairs represent, to

7. Ward, 1968.

8. Ward, 1968, p. 23.

9. Wikander, 1950, 1957.

10. Nagy, 1990, p. 255-256 ; Frame, 2009, p. 62-63.

11. Wikander, 1950, 1957.

12. Dumézil, 1971, p. 232–236; 1994, p. 142–165.

quote the description of Ward, “a heroic euhemerization of the Indo-Iranian twins.”¹³

In the case of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp, Wikander analyzes a variety of twin-like parallelisms shared by this pair of kings.¹⁴ For example, the names of both figures share the element *-āsp*, which can be derived from the Avestan form *aspa-*, meaning ‘horse’, cognate with Indic *aśva-*, also meaning ‘horse’, from which is derived the Indic dual form *Aśvinau*, the name of the Indic Divine Twins. Relevant is the observation of Wikander that Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp are exceptional in sharing the element *-āsp* in their names.¹⁵ We may compare such an onomastic parallelism with what we find in Old English traditions about the young twin brothers Hengest and Horsa, who, according to Bede, were said to be descended from the god Odin and who were reported to have led the Saxons in their invasion of the British Isles, thus saving their people from overpopulation and famine.¹⁶ There are also other traces of dioscurism in the pairing of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp. For example, Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp are unique in being the only successive kings to be assigned the same number of years—120—to their reigns in the overall narrative of the *Shāhnāma*.¹⁷

Another example comes from a detail in the Avesta (*Yašt* 5.105), where we read that the goddess Anāhitā was worshipped by the Keyānid king Auruuat. *aspa*—which is the Avestan name for Lohrāsp. As for the Avestan Anāhitā, her name corresponds to Persian Nāhid, the name of the wife of Goshtāsp in the *Shāhnāma*.¹⁸ These relationships of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp recall the common Indo-European theme of “les Dioscures au service d’une déesse”.¹⁹

Another example of dioscurism in the relationship of Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp is their connectivity with the cult of two sacred fires known in Pahlavi as the Adhur Burzin, founded by Lohrāsp, and the Adhur Mihr Burzin, founded by Goshtāsp. The founders of these fires, classified as “third function” by Wikander,²⁰ that is, as {F3} in terms of Allen’s taxonomy, can also be seen as “first function,” {F1}, when we consider the sacredness of Zoroastrian “eternal” fires that these two kings are credited with establishing in their priestly roles.

13. Ward, 1968, p. 95-96, n.25.

14. Wikander, 1950, p. 318.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Ward, 1968, p. 54-55; Joseph, 1983, p. 104.

17. Wikander, 1950, p. 318.

18. *Ibid.*; Puhvel, 1987, p. 123.

19. Wikander, 1950, p. 318.

20. Wikander, 1950, p. 313-319.

Citing another example of a third-function symbolism connected with Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp, Wikander documents a narrative in the *Shāhnāma* where the warrior Zāl {F2} is initially opposed to the coronation of Lohrāsp {F3} as king;²¹ there is a parallel in Indic myth, where the second-function warrior-god Indra {F2} is opposed to the participation of the third-function Divine Twins, the Aśvin-s {F3}, in the soma-sacrifice {F1}. In general, Wikander connects the hypothesized third-function background of the pair Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp {F3} with the narrative difficulties encountered in both the Avesta and the *Shāhnāma* with regard to accounting for the transition of kingship to Lohrāsp by way of his predecessor, Key Khosrow.²²

Coming back to Ward's describing Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp as "a heroic euhemerization of the Indo-Iranian twins," we now see that Wikander's original argument in favor of this kind of description is based exclusively on the existing parallelisms between these two figures. In making his argument, however, Wikander had not taken into account various patterns of contrast between the two figures—patterns which, as I now hope to show, are also a part of the dioscurism of this pair. In noting that Lohrāsp is but a pale, impersonal, and inactive doublet of Goshtāsp, Wikander assumes that this description fits because Lohrāsp was originally just a "twin" of Goshtāsp, parallel in every way. My point, by contrast, is that the description "twin" fits also because Lohrāsp was the passive member in a simultaneously divergent and convergent pair, while Goshtāsp was the active member. We can find a point of comparison in the Old English names Hengest and Horsa, mentioned earlier. The name of Hengest, who turns out to be the more aggressive brother, means 'stallion' or 'steed', as in German *Hengst*, while the name of the more passive Horsa means simply 'horse', as in English *horse*. So, these two names convey divergences as well as convergences:²³ whereas both names converge in meaning 'horse', they diverge in that the first name indicates a war-horse {F2} but the second, a farm-horse {F3}.

Moreover, I propose that the symbolism of a simultaneously divergent and convergent pair, even if we choose to call that symbolism dioscuric, does not require that the relationship between the pair be that of twin brother and twin brother. The same sort of dioscuric symbolism could also be expressed in the relationship of father and son. I conclude with a brief retelling of such a

21. *Ibid.*

22. Wikander, 1950, p. 321.

23. Ward, 1968, p. 56.

relationship between the kings Lohrāsp and Goshtāsp in the *Shāhnāma*, drawing on my earlier analysis²⁴ – but this time I add to my retelling the categories of Allen’s pentadic taxonomy.

Lohrāsp, once he has ascended the throne, proclaims that his reign as king will be marked by the rejection of aggressiveness and the promoting of peace {F3 with reference to F2}. In fact Lohrāsp is so opposed to aggression and war that he prefers to hand down the crown to successors other than his own rash son Goshtāsp {F4- with reference to F2}. This preference, of course, angers Goshtāsp to the point where he demands of his father that Lohrāsp should relinquish the throne and pass it down to him. Lohrāsp refuses, because he is opposed to the violence of Goshtāsp. Goshtāsp, enraged at his father for not agreeing with him, now leaves Iran and goes into self-imposed exile in Byzantium, that is, in “Rum.” When he first comes to Rum, he has great difficulty in getting any sort of gainful employment {F3} because of his belligerent nature and excessive strength. The only tasks that he is able to undertake successfully in Rum are hunting, fighting monstrous beasts, and winning brides for less heroic men (*Shāhnāma* VI 24–25.281–598 in the Moscow edition, Bertels 1960–1971). Hence Goshtāsp has taken on the role of an extremely aggressive and warlike hero. He finally comes back to Iran after several adventures and does take over the throne, leaving a “little corner” for his father to rule {F3}. He remains aggressive {F2} until his father dies and then loses his aggressiveness {F2}. As the new king, he performs the ultimate priestly function {F1} of converting the warrior heroes Zāl and his son Rostam {F2} to the religion of Zoroaster (*Shāhnāma* VI 133.980–981,987), while the son of Goshtāsp, the prince Esfandiyār, converts the rest of Iran (*Shāhnāma* VI 122–123.830–836). But the priestly function of Goshtāsp can also be negative {F4- with respect to F1}, since he is blamed for the death of his son Esfandiyār, paragon of Zoroastrianism, at the hands of the warrior hero Rostam.

In sum, if we apply the pentadic model devised by Nick Allen to the figure of Goshtāsp as portrayed in the *Shāhnāma*, we find that this figure fits all five functions of such a model: Goshtāsp fits F1, F2, F3, thus transcending the first three functions, F+, but he can also be seen a transcendently negative as well as positive example of all three, F-.

24. Davidson, 2013a, p. 122.

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