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## Sendebar

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### Comments

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**Plot of the Castilian version (1253)**

The *Sendebar* is a frame tale narrative, and consists of a series of stories gathered under an encompassing framing narrative, which dictates the general storyline of the collection as a whole. While the frame provides the stage and context for the narrations that follow, their thematic content can be, conversely, independent from the framing story. The *Sendebar* presents a well-developed framing structure, which is summarized as follows:

King Alcos from Judea is much loved by his subjects and reigns justly. Unfortunately though, despite the fact that he has ninety wives, he has not yet been able to produce an heir. One day, he declares his worries about this situation to his favorite wife, who suggests they pray to God in order to conceive a son. The good wife's advice is followed to the letter and, nine months later, she gives birth to a healthy boy. King Alcos, who strongly believes in astrology, asks his advisers to cast a horoscope for the heir to the throne. The horoscope foretells that the prince will be in danger of losing his life around the age of twenty.

From the age of nine to fifteen, the prince undergoes an apprenticeship that completely fails. Worried that his son is not receiving the necessary training, King Alcos decides to entrust the young boy to a wise man named Çendubete, who proposes to educate him in less than six months. At the end of the training, the prince is ready to report to the court and display his acquired knowledge. But before he has a chance to do so, Çendubete casts him a second horoscope and predicts that if the prince speaks anytime in his first seven days back at court, his life will be in danger. Then, the wise man disappears, after asking the prince to keep quiet.

Back at the royal palace, a second favorite wife of the king asks permission to talk to the prince in order to make him break his silence. Like in the Biblical story of Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39, once they are left alone, Alcos' wife attempts to seduce the young man, proposing they kill the king and marry so that they can reign together. The outraged prince cannot contain his disdain and, breaking the promise made to Çendubete, answers her. Having disclosed her real intentions, the stepmother's situation is now highly delicate: if her stepson reports to the king, she will surely be punished. Therefore, she starts screaming and accuses the prince of having tried to rape her. Enraged, Alcos wants to kill his son, but the king's advisers intervene to protect the sole heir to the throne. The framed stories that follow alternate between the tales told by the queen and those told by the advisers, in a veritable storytelling contest. The goal is to convince the king either to kill or spare his son, depending on who tells the story. On the morning of the eighth day, the prince has completed his apprenticeship, part of which has just consisted in witnessing the storytelling debate. He finally breaks his silence and reports the stepmother's betrayal to his father. The prince then tells five more stories which demonstrate he has assimilated all the learning necessary to be a just and wise ruler. The book ends with Alcos condemning the stepmother to be burned alive.

### **Origins and the Diffusion of the *Sendebar***

The *Sendebar* gained wide popularity throughout the centuries and in different lands. Between the ninth and the fifteenth century, it circulated both in oral and written form first in the Near East, and then in Latin Christian Europe. The range of versions existing in various languages and cultures attests to its fame and the high esteem in which

it was held. Furthermore, the *Sendebar* is deeply connected to another central example of the frame tale genre, the *Arabian Nights*, not only because its stories are part of it, but also because they both feature a female protagonist, Sheherazade and the stepmother respectively, who tell stories to save their lives.

Although the most ancient extant manuscripts date from much later, we find the first references to the *Book of Sindibad* in Arabic texts from as early as the ninth century; specifically, the Arabic writer al-Yaqubi mentions it for the first time in 880. In the middle of the tenth century, the historian Masudi even indicates a possible author of the *Kitab-es-Sindbad*, our *Sendebar*, whose name is es-Sondbad. Another author from the tenth century, Mohammed Ibn el Nadim el Werrak, alludes to two different *Book of Sindibad*, the “greater” and the “lesser”, attesting that the text circulated both in a shorter and probably more accessible version, and in a longer, more elaborated one. Finally, a lyric version of the story, produced by Aban Lahiqui (d. 815-816), seals the fame that this text enjoyed in the Arabophone Mediterranean.

Although these references testify to the existence of the *Sendebar* at a fairly early date, the question of its ultimate origins remains unanswered until this day. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Theodore Benfey advocated for the Indian origins of the *Sendebar*. According to him, it was composed in Sanskrit and subsequently entered the Islamic world, specifically bilingual Persia, where it was translated into Pahlavi first, and then into Greek and Arabic. The *Sendebar* shares a number of tales with the *Panchatantra*, another Indian frame tale translated from Pahlavi into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa’ around 750, and known today as the *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. Although there are no extant manuscripts in Sanskrit or Pahlavi, the very name of the wise man protagonist of

the *Sendebar* (Siddha in Sanskrit), and similarities among the stories of the collection and certain Sanskrit tales seem to give credit to the Indian origins of the *Sendebar*.

Ben E. Perry proposed a second theory that sets the origins of the *Sendebar* in Persia. In his opinion, this collection of stories was first composed in Pahlavi during the sixth century, and later it was translated to Arabic and then Castilian. Finally, a theory developed by Morris Epstein places the Hebrew version of the *Sendebar* in a particularly relevant position. According to him, the text was first translated from Sanskrit to Hebrew between the fourth and second century BC, and later to Pahlavi. Between the seventh and eighth century, the text underwent a second translation to Hebrew, which was the base for the Arabic and Castilian versions, as well as a third Hebrew version from the twelfth and thirteenth century (*Mishle Sendebar*). For Epstein, of all the extant versions of the *Sendebar* the Hebrew is the most important, for it was probably the bridge linking eastern and western forms.

The popularity of the *Sendebar* is attested by the numerous versions proceeding from various cultures. Oral circulation facilitated both the transmission of the frame tale and its re-elaboration in multiple variants and in different languages. These versions are grouped in two branches, the eastern and the western one, according to their place of diffusion and language of translation. The western version of the *Sendebar* reached wide popularity in Europe and was translated into Latin, French, Italian, English, Dutch, Swedish, and Welsh. Although the western branch derives from the eastern one, it introduces an important change into the main framing story: the character of the lone wise man is substituted by the sole presence of seven sages. For this reason, the adaptations of the western branch are usually referred to with different titles. Once the

collection of stories started to circulate in Europe, the western branch further split into two different groups, the first one entitled *Dolopathos* and the second one named *Historia Septem Sapientium Romae*. This second one is the largest group, containing over one hundred manuscripts, and it dates the twelfth century. The *Dolopathos* survives in two versions: the Latin prose poem by Joannes de Alta Silva, composed between 1184 and 1185, and the Old French poetic rendition by Herbert, known as *Li romans de Dolopathos*, which dates 1223.

The eastern branch is the oldest and includes eight adaptations: Syriac (*Sindbad*, tenth century circa), Greek (*Syntipas*, second half of the eleventh century), Hebrew (*Mishle Sendebar*, twelfth-thirteenth century), Castilian (*Sendebar*, 1253), Arabic (*The Seven Viziers*, mid-eighth century), and Persian (the *Sindibad-Nameh* prose version of 1160 was the source of the fourteenth century *Tuti-Nameh* by Nashebi, as well as a 1375 poetic version). All these versions vary in numerous aspects: they gather a different number of interpolated stories, they show overall distinct details and motifs, and their framing tales have dissimilar endings. However, they all have in common the title of the text, the main plot of the framing story, and the figure of the wise man who educates the prince. The most ancient one is the Syriac version, from which the Greek and Castilian ones derive. According to Morris Epstein, the Syriac, Greek, and Castilian adaptations all developed from an unidentified Arabic version.

The Castilian version of the *Sendebar*, also called *The Book of the Wiles of Women* (*El Libro de los engaños e los asayamientos de las mugeres*), is the only version in a European language that developed from the eastern branch. This frame tale entered the Iberian Peninsula after the Muslim invasion (711) and circulated orally in Arabic.

Given the multilingual environment that prevailed in Iberia at that time, it is likely that adaptations of the *Sendebar* also existed in written forms and in the different languages spoken there. The fact that there are no extant Iberian manuscripts in any language leave this question unanswered. However, the interpolated stories must have been very well known, as some of them are gathered also in other Iberian collections of tales, such as the twelfth-century *Disciplina Clericalis*, the *Calila e Dimna* (1251), and later in the fourteenth century, Don Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*.

In 1253, the *Sendebar* was translated from an unknown Arabic manuscript into Castilian under the patronage of the Infante Fadrique (1223-1277), the brother of King Alfonso X of Castile. The only extant Spanish manuscript preserved to our days also includes a version of *El Conde Lucanor*, and was copied presumably in the fifteenth century. It once belonged to the Count of Puñonrostro, but today it is the property of the Real Academia Española.

### **Cultural and Literary Contexts:**

The cultural context in which the *Sendebar* needs to be placed is the concept of *adab*. This tradition was meant to provide moral and ethical training that taught the individual how to approach a variety of everyday situations. Thus, the stories of the *Sendebar* can be seen as examples of wise conduct and knowledge that a king, but also people of lower social status, need to assimilate in order to achieve a complete education and face the difficulties of life.

The immediate literary contexts of the *Sendebar* are the vernacular *compedios de castigos* and the Latin *speculum principis*. The main purpose of these traditions is to train

a king-to-be to become a wise monarch through the recounting of morally challenging stories. The prince, in fact, completes his apprenticeship only after he has witnessed the storytelling contest between his stepmother and the advisers, and after he has proven his ability to tell stories. At the end, he shows he has assimilated the necessary knowledge to reign wisely. The same cannot be said for his father, whose depiction clearly indicates that he is an inadequate king. Although at the beginning of the book he is presented as a just monarch, soon enough he demonstrates his foolishness. Alcos' indecision and lack of wisdom, which make him change his mind regarding his son after each story, reveal the *Sendebar* as a critique of an unfit ruler.

The Castilian version of the *Sendebar* is also an example of *mudejarism* -- a literary trait that develops within the Christian territories of medieval Iberia and that bears clear signs of its Arabophone background. The *Sendebar*, in fact, preserves the polygamous aspect of the story (Alcos has ninety wives), a trait that clearly indicates the syncretism and hybridism of the text. The same cannot be said for the texts from the Western branch (*Liber septem sapientibus*). Since they developed in Latin Europe, they underwent a stricter adaptation process, which forced them to adhere more coherently to the Christian doctrine. In these western versions, the king remarries after the death of his first wife, and his new one is the one who attempts to seduce the prince.

The depiction of the female characters, particularly the stepmother, has favored gendered interpretations, which considered the *Sendebar* an example of misogynist literature. While misogyny is present in the text, its role is instrumental and strongly tied to the concept of knowledge and it is therefore meant to condemn the use of knowledge for depraved purposes.



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