

# MITHRAIC SOCIETIES

*From Brotherhood Ideal to Religion's Adversary*



*Abolala Soudavar*



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**From Brotherhood Ideal to Religion's Adversary**

*by*

*Abolala Soudavar*

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تقدیم به حضرت استادی،  
همو که فرهنگ ایران زمین را "یار شاطر" بود،  
و شیفتگانش را نار خاطر

*To Professor Yarshater*

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## PREFACE

When I first decided to write this book a decade ago, my aim was to reverse a trend that presented Roman Mithraic societies as an indigenous Roman phenomenon unrelated to the Iranian world. Because elements of the Roman phenomenon could explain odd aspects of Iranian history and society, I had to find ways to bridge the gaps between the Iranian and Roman worlds, and between pre and post-Islamic Iran. In both cases, I had to counter existing theories by offering an alternative view that strove to demystify ancient accounts tainted by politico-religious considerations. The process itself guided me into territories that I had initially wished to avoid, especially Christianity, Judaism, and Freemasonry; but as it turned out, the widened scope of study provided crucial support for my conclusions.

Academia, however, does not readily accept contrarian views, and the few preliminary essays that I presented to scholarly journals drew the ire of the "experts." Anonymity in the review process of these journals seems to bring out the worst in the scholarly community. This should not be. Available web outlets provide alternative forums and circumvent the barriers that scholars sometimes create to protect their turf. My hope is that by adopting this path, I can generate further discussions on matters pursued in this study, and reemphasize that Iranian history is a continuum that should not be unduly compartmentalized.

In writing this book I had the help and support of many friends and colleagues. My sincere thanks goes to Burzine Waghmar for providing me with copies of Mithra-related publications, to Mehran Afshari, Ali Asadi, Claude Lepage, Bernard O'kane, Nasrollah Pourjavadi, Fazel Pakzad, and François Vallat for their precious advice, and to my daughter Sara for partially editing my text. I am indebted forever to the late Xavier Tremblay, a most erudite scholar with whom I spent hours discussing Zoroastrianism and the *Avesta*. But mainly, I owe the writing of this book to the pioneering works of insightful scholars such as Frantz Cumont and A.D.H. Bivar who saw Mithraism as the repercussion of an Iranian phenomenon in a distant world, which was as globalized and inter-connected as the world is today.

*Abolala Soudavar*  
Houston, August 2014

### Illustrative Diagram of the Roman *Mithraeum*

*Mithraeum* : the cave-like space that served as a gathering place for the adherents of Mithraic societies

*Mithras* : name given to the Roman Mithra

*Mysteries* : the Roman appellation of Mithraic societies, which were secretive and closed to the outsider

*Tauroctony*: the bull-slaying image of Mithra at the center of the *mithraeum*

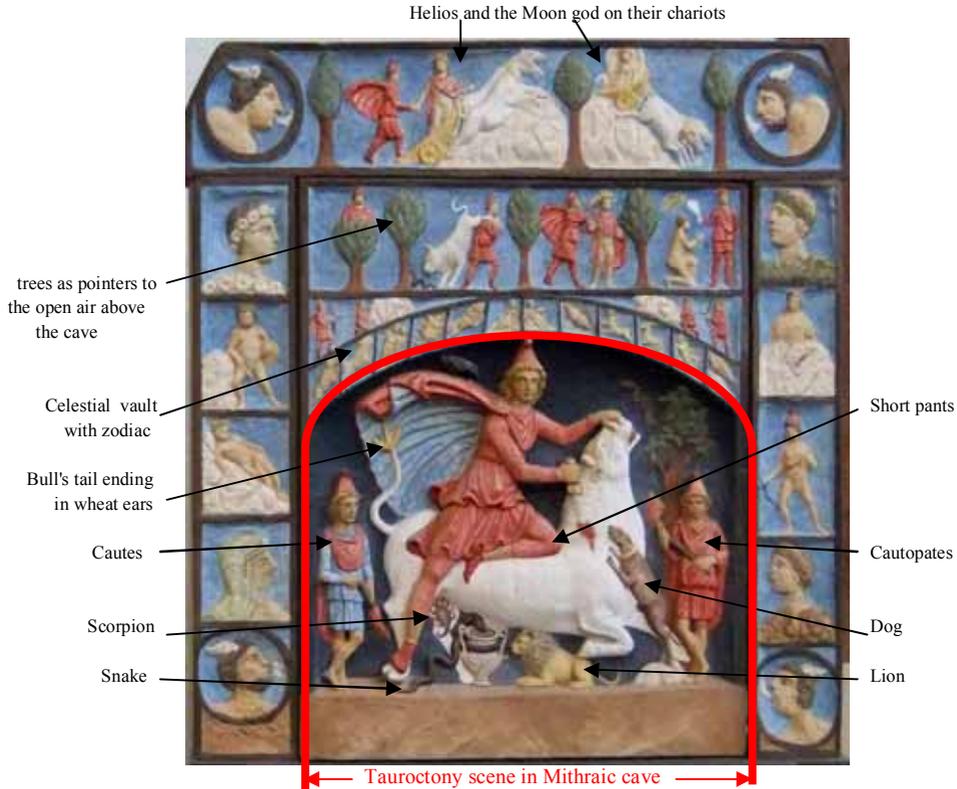


Fig. 1 - Modern rendering of the Hedernheim tauroctony panel (CIMRM 1083; see also Fig. 289). Inside the cave, the Tauroctony scene is mostly based on an Iranian tradition, but plastically rendered for a Roman audience. The images outside and above the cave (delimited by the thick red line) pertain to a more elaborate myth developed in the Greco-Roman world.

## Mithraic Grades

The seven grades of the Mysteries are as follows:

1-*Corax* (raven), 2- *Nymphus* (bridegroom), 3- *Miles*, 4- *Leo*, 5-*Perses*,  
6- *Heliodromos* (sun-courier), 7- *Pater*

A mosaic floor from the *mithraeum* in Ostia (Italy), depicts the symbols associated with each grade, and illustrates the pathway for hierarchical advancement (Figs. 2, 3)



Fig. 2 - Rendering of a fictitious Mithraic sanctuary.  
Museumpark Orientalis, Groesbeek, The Netherlands (wiki)



Fig. 3 - Mosaic floor fom Ostia, with  
grade emblems (wiki)

## Abbreviations

### For languages and texts:

NP: New Persian language and script  
MP: Middle Persian language and script  
OP: Old Persian language and script

*Yt.*: *Yasht* (Avestan hymn)  
*Y.*: *Yasna* (Avestan hymn)

### For museums:

BNF: Bibliothèque National de France  
MMA: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

MFAB: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
TKSM: Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul

## Photography credits

All photos are by the author, unless another source is cited within parentheses



Fig. 4 – The Borghese tauroctony scene, Louvre (Lens)

# CHAPTER I

## MODERN REVISIONISM

### I.1 - Anti-Cumonism

There was a time when men of knowledge were curious, open minded, and insightful. Steeped as they were in their own culture, they did not hesitate to explore realms beyond their own in pursuit of explanations for oddities and the deeper understanding of their surroundings. One such person was Frantz Cumont. In his pioneering work on Roman Mithraism, he envisioned it as a blend of ancient Iranian traditions and Roman mythology. He saw the phenomenon as important per se, and also in relation to the evolution of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

But then came the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when deconstructivism became a trend, and increasing specialization resulted in a myopic approach toward history. Rather than looking at an ancient world with no frontier posts, one in which ideas travelled freely, they preferred to see segregated cultures, impervious to neighboring influences. Rather than looking at an evolutionary process over extended periods of time, they only valued contemporary evidence, preferably from the Greco-Roman world. Rather than trying to grasp the essential, they chose to grapple with the superfluous. Richard Gordon, for instance, attacks Cumont for holding:

"the unitarian belief that evidence widely scattered in space and time could legitimately be fitted together to produce an account of a single, essentially unchanging, religion as evidence for the same unchanging reality."<sup>1</sup>

And yet, whatever faults can be imputed to Cumont's approach, a belief in "unchanging reality" is not one of them. If he and his followers sought the root of Mithraic Mysteries in ancient Iran, it is because they saw a complex phenomenon that had evolved over time, was encumbered with all sorts of transplants, and remained a mystery. For them, neither was Christianity an entirely new religion unconnected to its Judaic past, nor was Roman Mithraism a homespun phenomenon of the Greco-Roman world unconnected to the Iranian World. One cannot evaluate a tree by simply looking at its leaves from above, and ignore its trunk and roots. The quest to find the root of the Mithraic phenomenon was not an exercise to award originality or "copyrights" to Iranians, but to understand its very

---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon 2005, 6090.

essence and the reason for its immense popularity. A popularity that stretched not only across the whole of the Roman Empire, but across a wide spectrum of its society, "among legionaries (of all ranks), and the members of the more marginal social groups who were not Roman citizens: freedmen, slaves, and merchants from various provinces," as Gordon himself observed.<sup>2</sup>

The said popularity becomes even more relevant considering that it was linked to a deity recognized as Iranian in the midst of a Roman Empire constantly at war with Iran, and a deity who wore Iranian garments and bonnets instead of the Roman tunics and headgear. But more serious is Gordon's general attack on "Iranists," in both content and tone:

"the ever more hypothetical claims made by certain Iranists, for example Geo Widengren's (1907-1996) theories about ancient, non-Zoroastrian, Iranian religion, including the role of Aryan warrior-societies (Mannerbunde) and supposed analogies with a Mazdakite revivalist sect, the al-Babakiyah,"<sup>3</sup>

He not only discredits a major source of information proposed by Geo Widengren—as offering "supposed" analogies—but belittles "Iranists" and by extension, Iranian studies in general, as irrelevant and unreliable, since they deal with such arcane names as Mazdakites and al-Bābakiyah! As we shall see in Chapter II, the story brought to light by Widengren, and further expounded in an extensive study on Mithraism by Hassan Pirouzdjou<sup>4</sup> (whom Gordon never mentions), actually offers a major parallel, and a solid bridge, between the eastern and western avatars of Mithraic societies.

Gordon seems to perceive himself as Alexander building the Wall of Gog and Magog against the intrusion of Iranists into the sacred domain of Romano-Hellenistic studies, and criticizes those who find explanations based on the interpretation of Iranian texts:

"Perhaps even more seriously, texts were treated as atemporal sources, blithely disregarding the argumentative contexts within which the supposed information occurred."<sup>5</sup>

The question then is: How is it that a scholar feels free to disparage a whole group of Iranists in order to emphasize his point? And more generally, how can it be that phantasmal theories such as those proposed by David Ulansey (see next section), in support of Gordon's views, are readily accepted, and even hailed as the definitive

---

<sup>2</sup> Gordon 2005, 6090.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon 2005, 6088, Beck 2006, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon 2005, 6090.

explanation of Mithraic Mysteries? It almost seems as if Mithraic studies have become emblematic of a "West vs. East" battle, in which the merits of the former must be exalted, and the achievements of the latter minimized or negated. One feels surrounded by an atmosphere in which socio-political considerations overwhelm scholarly endeavors, and slogans take precedence over logical arguments.<sup>6</sup>

At the root of the problem may lie a controversy initiated by Ernest Renan's celebrated conjecture: "if Christianity had been stopped at birth by some moral illness, the world would have become Mithraic."<sup>7</sup> In the early twentieth century, Mithraism was recognized as the ancient rival of Christianity, and perceived to have greatly influenced its development. The idea that some of Christianity's most important emblems (e.g., the names "Pope," "Miter," and the Christmas celebrations; see sec. XIV.8) had Mithraic antecedents, and therefore Eastern roots, was perhaps not an appealing prospect to the Christian faithful. Thus, any attempt to sever its links with the Iranian world, and relocate its origin closer to Europe, was probably aided by a subconscious that favored a Eurocentric conception of the world, and a Christianity untainted by Iranian ideas. Ulansey, for instance, believes that:

"The study of Mithraism therefore provides us with an insight into 'the road not taken' by Western civilization nearly two thousand years ago—insight that is, into an unrecognized part of who we are today."<sup>8</sup>

While he projects Mithraism as the "road not taken" by the Western World, he also anchors it in the kingdom of Pontus in Anatolia,<sup>9</sup> to the north of the area from where the founding figure of Christianity, Saul of Tarsus, otherwise known as St Paul, launched his campaign to propagate the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth; a campaign more in tune with a Greek mode of thinking than a Jewish one. The Pontus provenance subtly implies that Mithraic mysteries too must have been a Greek endeavor, despite its very Iranian designation.

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<sup>6</sup> North 1995: it first advises "A reader seeking one paper that would provide a sober assessment of what can be known about "our Mithraism" -- Roman Mithraism..." then continues "Several writers represented here were deeply impressed by the 1989 monograph by David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, and accept, though not without qualifications, his theory that Mithras personified the force responsible for the precession of the equinoxes (discovered by Hipparchus in the second century B.C.). None had as yet had an opportunity to consider the review of Ulansey's book by N.M. Swerdlow in *Classical Philology* 86 (1991) 48-63, which is likely to engender second thoughts, especially about the identification of the torchbearers in the tauroctony with the equinoxes."

<sup>7</sup> Ulansey 1989, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ulansey 1989, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ulansey 1989, 89-90.

But religious bias comes into play from the opposite direction as well: Any attempt to explain a present day Iranian Sufi or guild phenomenon as an avatar of Mithraic societies is severely criticized on account of their Islamic appearances being incompatible with ancient rituals and beliefs. Thus, the late Mehrdād Bahār's cautious suggestion to link certain elements of the traditional wrestling practices of Iran (*zurkhāneh*) with a Mithraic past was strongly condemned—on religious grounds—by his own compatriots, but also gave rise to a blasting tirade by Philippe Richard who espoused those condemnations, and characterized Bahār's work as "imaginary" and "outdated," and his followers as "delirious."<sup>10</sup>

Religious considerations notwithstanding, political propaganda affected Mithraic studies, and Iranian studies in general. Following the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran, a concerted effort by Arab nations to emphasize their Arabness and belittle the Iranian influence, was supplemented by intense anti-Iranian propaganda orchestrated by Western governments, and amplified beyond measure by the media. Academia was not impervious to such propaganda and eventually accommodated itself to the prevailing political winds. Its impact is nowhere more evident than on a recent work, A. Kuhrt's *The Persian Empire; A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, which is a collection of original sources pertaining to the Persian Empire. What was supposed to be an unbiased assembling of historical material for Achaemenid history produces instead a geographical map of that period in which the Persian Gulf is named "Arab-Persian Gulf" (Fig. 5), and characterizes Achaemenid inscriptions as instruments of deceit inscribed by the order of a liar Darius trying to falsify history.<sup>11</sup> Political propaganda, as well as oil money, can indeed subdue the best of scholarly minds to equate the mighty Achaemenid Empire with a Bedouin non-state, and transform Darius the Great into a petty liar.<sup>12</sup>

And then, there are those who, because of an idea expressed in the past and a stance once taken, think that they have to dig in and refuse any opinion to the contrary. Such is the case of the gatekeeper of the *Studia Iranica* journal who rejected the publication of an article that I had submitted, because it relied on topics invoked by A. D. Bivar on Mithraism, which they had condemned in the past and could not change their stance

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<sup>10</sup> "On ne peut que recommander la lecture des travaux de Partow-Beyzā'i —de loin la plus riche étude jamais faite sur l'histoire du zurkhāneh— ainsi que l'article d'Hasan Gusheh et les travaux récents de Sadreddin Elāhi (1994) qui apporte un original et indispensable regard critique, et remet à sa place les délires laudateurs de K. Kazemaini, ou l'hypothèse historique datée des origines « mithraïque » du zurkhāne, qu'avait imaginée Mehrdād Bahār à la fin des années soixante-dix" ; <http://tc.revues.org/document208.html>

<sup>11</sup> Kuhrt 2007, I:136-37, II: 804.

<sup>12</sup> See section XI.3.

when presented with new arguments.<sup>13</sup> To this date, *Studia Iranica* still believes that any article hinting at a rapprochement between Roman and Iranian Mithraism should be rejected (see Appendixes II and IV).

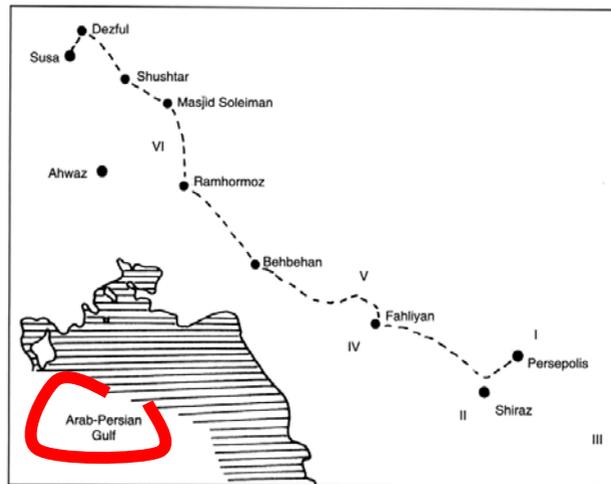


Fig. 5 - Map from Kuhrt 2007, II:804.

For Mithraic studies, the net effect of all these negative considerations is disdain for any approach that tends to look for common ground between Eastern and Western Mithraic societies. But such disdain is not without cost. It deprives both sides of valuable—and complementary—information pertaining to secretive institutions whose members took an oath not to divulge their secrets. This information is disseminated in bits and pieces among various avatars of these societies, each providing a clue for the reconstruction of their common past. For instance, the names of two grade holders in Roman Mithraism, *heliodromos* (6<sup>th</sup> grade) and *perses* (5<sup>th</sup> grade), have remained a mystery. As we shall see, the meaning of their respective names, as well as functions, can only be explained by considering their Iranian counterparts. Conversely, the structure and names of the leadership of different Iranian Sufi congregations and guild organizations can only be understood if the latter are perceived as avatars of Mithraic societies, and if the ranks of their leaders are juxtaposed with those of Roman Mithraism (see chapter V).

Furthermore, what the proponents of an autochthonous Roman Mithraism fail to see is the political power emanating from the organizational structure of these secretive "underground" societies. By concentrating on its cultic aspects, their congregational

<sup>13</sup> See Soudavar 2003, xiii.

potential for insurrections, or for action as pressure groups, is overlooked. Many political dynasties in the East and West actually built their power base around brotherhoods that were avatars of Mithraic societies. The philosophy and organizational structures that they inherited provided their leaders with a cohesive power base that, no matter what their apparent religious affiliation was, gave them enormous political clout.

The study of Mithraic societies should, therefore, primarily delve into the beliefs and rituals that bonded the members of these congregations together, and explain the reasons for their lasting and widespread appeal, which was both cross-cultural and intercontinental. Fictitious divides can only hinder such an endeavor.

## **1.2 - Problems of Methodology**

The attacks on Cumont's point of view are generally based upon three observations and objections:<sup>14</sup>

- 1- The widespread dissemination of *mithraea* in the Roman World (Fig. 6), and the lack of any structure in the Iranian World resembling a *mithraeum*.
- 2- Cumont's arguments are elliptical and affected by his strong belief in the Iranian origin of Mithraism, to the extent that he sees the dog and the snake of the Tauroctony scenes as symbolizing the fight between good and evil in Zoroastrianism, whereas, in reality, there is no sign of such a conflict between the two (see Fig. 1, Fig. 4).
- 3- The absence of any reference to bull slaying or other aspects of the *mithraeum* in the *Avesta* or any other Zoroastrian text.

Unfortunately, these superficial observations are inherently misleading. A quick glance at the map in Fig. 6 can of course induce one to see Mithraism as an entirely Roman phenomenon. In the Roman world though, multiple statues of Mithra were bound to arise as it was deeply affected by Greek mythology and the Greek taste for the plastic representation of deities; whereas in the Iranian World, as already observed by Herodotus,<sup>15</sup> there was an aversion to represent gods as such.<sup>16</sup> Thus the absence of *mithraea* in the Iranian World was not unexpected. On the other hand, Mithraism's footprint on the Iranian side is substantial; but rather than being in the form of *mithraea*

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<sup>14</sup> Ulansey 1989, 6-10.

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus (1: 131): Persians "have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly."

<sup>16</sup> Despite centuries of Hellenic domination, the depiction of gods in the Parthian and Sasanian era was symbolic, stylized, and an instrument of the glorification of the king rather than the worship of the deity.

and tauroctony sculptures, it can be detected in the numerous avatars of Mithraic societies that manifest themselves as Sufi congregations, guild formations, or wrestler communities, all carrying in their rituals remnants of a distant past.



Fig. 6 - Spread of mithraea in the Roman Empire (Cumont 1903)

If one wants to play the numbers game, one should also acknowledge that the number of Iranian-related references in the Roman aspects of Mithraic societies is so high that it's almost impossible for Roman Mithraism *not to have* an Iranian counterpart or antecedent. A quick browse gives the following list:

- a) the very Iranian name of Mithra, as well as his Iranian clothing,
- b) the third highest grade is named *perses* (understood as "Persian"),
- c) the deity name Arimanius, occasionally invoked with Mithras, is clearly derived from Ahriman, the evil deity who was the opponent of Ahura Mazdā,<sup>17</sup>
- d) the use of Persian words, such as *nama* (MP *namāz*, Hail!) in their discourses,<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gordon 2005, 6089.

- e) the fact that figures in many Mithraic scenes depicted on vessels found far outside Iran, often wear a "Persian dress" or a "Persian cap with ear flaps,"<sup>19</sup>
- f) Porphyry's *mithraeum* description (3<sup>rd</sup>-century): "*Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which the souls descend and go back again. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honor of Mithras, the creator and father of all...*"<sup>20</sup>

The above references are by no means exhaustive, and do not include the host of connections that we shall later produce in our study, but they are all invoked in passing by Cumont's opponents. Strangely, not only is the weight of their cumulative correlation with Iran and Iranian ignored, but the relevance of each is completely pushed aside by the flick of a hand. While Cumont is criticized for basing all of his arguments on an a priori stance favoring an Iranian origin, one clearly sees that his opponents do the same, but the other way around. For one only needs to look at the last reference to see that a learned person from antiquity, namely the Neo-Platonist Porphyry, at the height of Mithraic activities in the Roman Empire, unambiguously alludes to the Persian origin of the *mithraeum*'s cave-like structure; he explains that it was the Persians who called it a cave, and that Persians practiced the same rituals because they too introduced their initiates to the mysteries in their caves. More importantly, he attributes the creation of the first of these caves to Zoroaster. Even though the latter information is evidently incorrect, it still shows that Porphyry, rather than attributing the original cave to a Roman or Greek mythological figure, favors an Iranian one. In other words, the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century learned Porphyry believed that the phenomenon had Persian origins but 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars who quote him don't!

Cumont may have used elliptical arguments based on his strong convictions about the Iranian origins of Mithraism. But so have his opponents. In neither case can these types of errors be used as proof of non-validity of a thesis as a whole.

As for the third objection, that no parallel can be found between *mithraeum* rituals and the practices described in the *Avesta* or other Zoroastrian texts, the fact is that Cumont negationists have been looking at the wrong Mithra. Because, the original Mithra was a mighty god, perhaps perceived as "the creator and father of all" as Porphyry suggests,

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<sup>18</sup> Gordon 2005, 6089.

<sup>19</sup> Beck 2004, 11, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon 2005: 6091; Beck 2006, 41.

and a god who, by his very name,<sup>21</sup> supervised contracts and covenants, and therefore was the divinity in whose name initiates took an oath (see sec.V.9). The Mithra preserved in Zoroastrianism is one that has been sanitized, and whose prominent position among deities pushed down to make room for the ascendancy of Ahura Mazdā. The Mithra of Mithraic societies thus maintained attributes that were stripped off in Zoroastrianism. The said Mithra was reviled in Iran, and its associated priesthood was persecuted and driven underground.

With the firm belief that Cumont was wrong, his negationists readily slide into biased and flawed arguments based on an erroneous Zoroastrian depiction of Mithra. Before investigating the Mithraic phenomenon, in what follows I have chosen to criticize, by way of example, the approaches taken by two of the most prominent champions of the autochthonous Roman Mithraism theory, namely David Ulansey and Roger Beck.

### 1.3 - The Ulansey Tale

In 1989 David Ulansey published *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries, Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, which in the then-prevailing anti-Iranian atmosphere was immediately hailed as a work that liberated the Roman Mysteries from Iranian influence, and relocated them squarely in the Hellenistic world. As a staunch follower of Gordon, he naturally began with the common attacks on Cumont's point of view, and went on to offer a tale that, as Italians would say, was *se none vero e ben trovato* (well-imagined, though not true).

The lynchpin of his theory was a celestial phenomenon discovered by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus circa 126 BC, called the Precession of the Equinoxes, which describes the conical gyration of the Earth's daily rotational axis (Fig. 7). It's about a slow gyration that takes 25,920 years to complete a full cycle (!) and is not perceptible to the human eye. Nevertheless, Ulansey conceived the knowledge of this phenomenon as an important "secret" known to a hypothetical group of Stoics living in Tarsus some two centuries later, who must have attributed the shift in the Earth's axis to Perseus the god of their city. The latter, perceived as a most

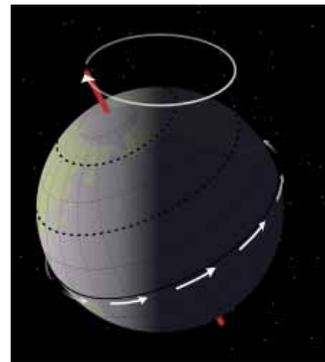


Fig. 7 - The Precession of the Equinoxes (wiki)

<sup>21</sup> Originally, *mithra* meant covenant, and it has kept the same meaning in passages of the *Avesta* and later Pahlavi texts.

powerful god capable of changing the course of the universe, was then somehow equated with Mithra.<sup>22</sup>

The idea that immediately struck me after I began reading Ulansey's book was that he had probably never read the adventures of Tintin in Inca territory. For there is a scene in which Tintin is tied up to a post and ready to be sacrificed, and remembering that an eclipse had been predicted, he lifts his head toward the sun and commands it to disappear at the precise moment the eclipse was to occur.<sup>23</sup> When the sun went dark, and reappeared by the order of Tintin, the panic-stricken Incas prostrated themselves before the one whom they perceived as having sway over the Sun and the Heavens (Fig. 8).

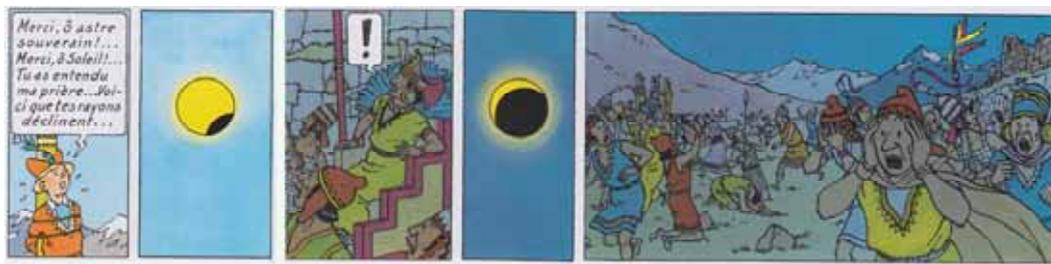


Fig. 8 - Tintin ordering the sun to disappear and reappear (Hergé 1949, *Temple du Soleil*, 58)

Unlike Tintin, Ulansey's Stoics, who presumably developed the Perseus-Mithra myth, do not claim to be in possession of an astral power by which they could punish or reward their followers. They simply claimed the knowledge of a "secret" that happened a long time ago and had no intrinsic value, because an astral phenomenon, imperceptible to the eye and incomprehensible to the average person, was neither a sellable nor attractive argument. If they were to act as apostles or priests, inviting people to worship this new god, they needed to claim powers akin to those ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>24</sup> which they didn't.

<sup>22</sup> Ulansey argues that the reason for equating the two deities was perhaps because, the Stoics found out that, prior to the Greco-Roman era, the last constellation in which the spring equinox occurred, was Taurus (the bull); and since the Constellation of Perseus is right above, it would have induced them to see it as Mithra (alias Perseus) killing the bull, because it symbolized the death of the Age of Taurus, now supplanted by the Age of Aries; Ulansey 1989, 82-83. But why would this be attractive to pirates and artisans alike?

<sup>23</sup> Hergé 1949, 58. I am indebted to Guiv Farmanfarmaian for the scan of these images.

<sup>24</sup> When Jesus's companions encountered a storm, they asked him to intervene, and he "rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm," which prompted them to utter "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." (Luke 8:22-25).

Besides using a hodgepodge of arguments shuffled around by sleight of hand,<sup>25</sup> Ulansey tries to buttress his theory with the oft-quoted remark by Plutarch (c. 46-120) that in the year 67 BC, pirates who had more than a thousand sails and had captured more than four hundred cities, "offered strange rites of their own at Mount Olympus, and celebrated there, certain secret rites, among which those of Mithras continue to the present time, having been first instituted by them..."<sup>26</sup>

He uses the Plutarch story in two ways. First, since the date provided by Plutarch is the earliest evidence related to Mithras, the Mysteries must have started then and among this powerful group of pirates. Second, since the king of Pontus, Mithridates IV Eupator (r. 120-63BC), had used pirates in his wars against Rome, he argues that, in order to honor him, the pirates named their rites after Mithra rather than Perseus, because if Mithridates saw Perseus as his ancestor and his name meant Mithra-given (in Persian), then "it did not matter which of the two names was chosen."

Unfortunately, contrary to Beck's assessment that Ulansey's reconstruction "flows with great elegance,"<sup>27</sup> the latter's arguments are neither fluid nor solidly constructed. For there is obviously no proof that Mithraic activities did not exist prior to the year 67 BC. And it defies common sense to believe that pirates were the propagators of a cultic practice or doctrine that was embraced by such a wide variety of people, including the Roman military that were sent to annihilate these very pirates. Also, if the pirates wanted to give a name to their "secret rites" while honoring Mithridates, why didn't they simply adopt the name Mithridates? If they broke it in two, and kept the first part only, they were actually honoring Mithra, above Perseus, the all powerful god who could supposedly change the course of the universe. As for the assertion that Mithridates depicted Perseus on his coinage to claim descent from him, it is simply not true. The Greeks thought that Perseus, through his son *Perses*—whose name meant "Persian" in Greek—was the ancestor of the Persian kings, i.e. the Achaemenids,<sup>28</sup> and according to Diodorus of Sicily, the kings of Pontus traced their lineage to Cyrus the Great (r. 559 – 530 BC) on the one hand and Pharnakes, the ruler of Cappadocia, on the other, while, according to Justin (38.7), Mithridates descended from Cyrus and Darius on his father's side, and from Alexander the Great (r. 336-23 BC) and Seleucus Nikator (312-281BC) on his mother's

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon berates Ulansey's claims, and states that his thesis "rests undeniably upon misunderstandings both of Hipparchus and of his ancient reception"; Gordon 2005, 6089; Swendlow (1991) too severely criticizes Ulansey's astronomical assumptions and extrapolations.

<sup>26</sup> Ulansey 1989, 40-41; Plutarch 2001, II:88.

<sup>27</sup> Beck 2006, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Roman & Roman 2010, 363.

side.<sup>29</sup> The Perseus on their coinage was basically chosen to bridge the gap between the Greek and Iranian worlds, because it was a Greek god with a Persian name.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is Gordon who delivers the fatal blow to Ulansey's theory by arguing that this cult—which remained in practice for a while on Mount Olympus—was actually Lycian and not Cilician. This obviously severs the imagined cultic affinity between the Cilician pirates and Mithridates.<sup>31</sup>

#### **I.4 - Beck's "Star Talk" and his Universalist Approach**

Seemingly tired of the controversies surrounding Mithraic studies, Beck proposes to start with a clean slate, and follows a synchronic approach rather than a diachronic one, because he believes that the uncertainties of the latter approach cannot be easily resolved and there is "not enough evidence" to reconstruct the path of Mithraism's historical evolution.<sup>32</sup> His synchronic approach rests on the analysis of the most manifest remnant of Mithraic Mysteries, i.e., the *mithraeum* itself. He conjectures that the iconography of this cave-like precinct is so spectacular that the message it conveys to the initiate must express the core belief of the Mysteries. The medium of the message is supposedly the astral imagery of the *mithraeum* (fig. 1), each station of which relied on the initiates' "store of knowledge" to facilitate the understanding of its symbolism.<sup>33</sup> He labels this imagery as "Star-Talk," and posits that "the primary star-talk meaning of Mithras killing the bull is the monthly conjunction of the Sun and Moon when the light of the former overwhelms the latter." The lunar eclipses were thus perceived as the Sun's victory over the Moon.<sup>34</sup> The *mithraeum*'s cave and astral imagery, he then concludes, provide an "intimate microcosm of the universe," isolated from the tangible world and one which is conducive to the actual mystical experience of "descent and return" of the soul, rather than just hearing about it.<sup>35</sup>

Although the *mithraeum* message is designated with the folksy "Star-Talk" label, a plethora of logico-technical terms, and allusions to scientific models and neuro-cognitive methods, are included to provide a scientific aspect to his arguments. And to add universality, he compares his model to the cosmogony adopted by the Chamulas Indians, who reside in the Chiapas region of Mexico. Their belief in the Sun as the force that

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<sup>29</sup> Briant 1996, 145; [www.attalus.org/translate/justin6.html#38.1](http://www.attalus.org/translate/justin6.html#38.1); also Badie 1991, 155.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance McGing 1986, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon 2005, 6088.

<sup>32</sup> Beck 2006, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Beck 2006, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Beck 2006, 235

<sup>35</sup> Beck 2006, 145.

regulates their entangled universe, is used by Beck to highlight the inherent similarities of sun-cults. The sun-like orbit, which the officiating priests of the Chamulas follow in their rituals, is juxtaposed with the pattern that regulated the order of astral stations in the *mithraeum*, in order to emphasize how this processional order was essential to the comprehension of the Star-Talk. Also, the similarities between the list of ingredients—incense, candles, fireworks, etc—used in the Chamulas rituals as well as the Mysteries are proposed as necessary paraphernalia to "sanctify the actions" of the male-dominated hierarchy of their respective ceremony-officers, who all "engage in a mimesis of the Sun," presumably by replicating the Sun's movement.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 9 - The Chichicastenango cathedral, Guatemala.

Counter examples can of course easily challenge this last claim, since many religions and cults, e.g. Buddhism, use the same ingredients for their ceremonies, without being a solar cult per se. As for the Chamulas, Beck rightly observes that their religion is a blend of "Christianity and Mayan sun cult," but focuses his attention on its Mayan aspects rather than exploring the intermingling of the two. I believe he would have been better served if he had delved into the Christian-Maya syncretism, such as the one that can be observed at the cathedral of Chichicastenango in neighboring Guatemala (Fig. 9).

The Chichicastenango cathedral has all the characteristics of a church, with a nave, and an apse with a standing cross. But it is built on an ancient Mayan holy site, and as you enter, you can see shamans performing their own rituals by chanting a non-Latin and incomprehensible hymn to the dead for clients who have lost a relative. White petals are spread on the ground, in the image of the Milky Way, in order to point the deceased to a

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<sup>36</sup> Beck 2006, 74-81.

path to salvation. When the shaman looks to the right of the nave, he sees nine statuettes of saintly figures dressed in black and red that—for him—allude to the nine Mayan gods of the Underworld, and when he looks to the left he sees thirteen of them dressed in green and white, which recall the gods of the Heavens. A Christian who enters the cathedral, however, may see them as saints or bishops. Clearly, the "talk" that emanates from the statuettes depends on one's point of view. Some may perceive it as Mayan and others as Christian. Some, however, may see them as both.



Fig. 10 - Aya Sofia *mihṛāb* and Arabic inscriptions



Fig. 11 - Aya Sofia. Uncovered Byzantine mosaics

A better example, and closer to the epicenter of *mithraea*, is perhaps the Aya Sofia mosque of Istanbul. Its tall minarets, the prayer niche (*mihṛāb*) oriented toward Mecca, the ablution bowls, the surface decoration, and the Islamic calligraphy, clearly establish the premises as a mosque (Fig. 10). In lieu of a Star-Talk, we have a "script-talk" in Arabic that displays Koranic verses on its walls, or the names of God, the Prophet Mohammad, and the Four Initial Caliphs. But if you scratch the surface you will find mosaic images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Byzantine emperors who had originally contributed to the erection—or restoration—of a monument that was conceived as a church named Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) (Fig. 11). Obviously, the "image-talk" that one gets from these mosaics emphasizes the Christian past of the monument. But in the early twentieth century, the average visitor to Aya Sofia, whether literate or not, only saw the "script-talk," which vouched for its function as a mosque. The more curious people, those who like Cumont wanted to know what lay underneath, had layers removed to uncover the Christian mosaics. That is why, today, we have an "image-talk," side by side with the more prominent "script-talk," each telling a different story.

By the same token, the superficial astral decoration of the *mithraeum* may convey a symbolism that was superimposed on its original function, without fully explaining it. Beck suggests that the image of "Mithra slaying the Bull" was meant to show the triumph of the Sun over the Moon, with lunar or solar eclipses consolidating such a perception.<sup>37</sup> But here again, unlike the Tintin story, he cannot demonstrate by what means this brought added power to the Mysteries' hierarchy or made the initiates more docile and/or more dedicated to their cause. Surely, the average initiate to the Mysteries, whether pirate, military man or guild member, was neither acquainted enough with astrology to understand the astral imagery and its relational significance, nor literate enough to draw on the "antiquity's store of knowledge," as Beck proposes.



Fig. 12 - Guedra dancers in Goulimine (Web)



Fig. 13 - Qāderi dervishes in trance (Ph. K. Golestān)

Furthermore, the possibility that the *mithraeum* may have induced the "descent and return of the soul" is an interesting idea, but not one that could draw in pirates and military men alike. Said movement of the soul was neither Mithraic specific, nor was it exclusively induced by the *mithraeum* environment. The chant practices of the Qāderi dervishes in Iranian Kurdistan, as well as those of the Guedra dancers of Goulimine in southern Morocco, can push both of them into a state of trance in which they may experience the "descent and return" of their soul (Fig. 12). But, whereas the Qāderi dervishes are an avatar of Mithraic societies (Fig. 13), the Guedra dancers are not. And neither needs the *mithraeum* environment for their practice. What they need is chanting or rhythmic music to induce a cadenced movement of the head, with a guide to control the tempo of these

<sup>37</sup> Beck makes reference to a solar eclipse that occurred on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Aug. 212 AD; Beck 2006, 234

movements, in order to let their minds flow in and out. One needn't understand Beck's neuro-scientific reasoning to see that this is not a solitary practice but a group act.<sup>38</sup>



Fig. 14 – The Lion Stele (web)



Fig. 15 – Reconstruction of Nemrud Dagh (web)

Finally, even though at first Beck chooses a synchronic approach for his study, he eventually comes back to a diachronic one, essentially for two reasons.<sup>39</sup> First is the fact that his Star-Talk construct is a theory that hovers in time and space, and needs to be anchored to a starting point to explain where, when, and why the phenomenon started. Beck also needs to give some explanation as to why many Iranian particularities and attributes penetrated the cultic practice that he wishes to portray as non-Iranian. By pinning down its starting point to the kingdom of Commagene in the first century BC, he tries to provide a solution to both problems and kill two birds with one stone; because, the ruling dynasty of Commagene was of mixed Helleno-Persian heritage, and the influx of the Iranian aspects of Roman Mithraism could be argued to have emanated from them without really being Iranian.<sup>40</sup> The lynchpin of his diachronic endeavor is the famous Nemrud Dagh monument of Antiochus I (r. 70-38 BC) that he calls the "Lion monument," which is a misnomer. The edifice was a sanctuary erected to the glory of Antiochus with colossal statues of gods as well as his presumed ancestors overlooking the sacrificial space next to his tomb, including statues of the Achaemenids Darius I (r. 522-486BC) and possibly Xerxes (r. 486-465BC). There is of course a Lion Stele (Fig. 14) with astrological symbols that pointed to a precise date corresponding to the year 62 BC. But as the reconstruction model of the site clearly shows (Fig. 15), this stele was a tiny element of the edifice, and its presence therein did not warrant calling the whole

<sup>38</sup> Beck 2006, 148.

<sup>39</sup> Beck 2006, 227.

<sup>40</sup> (Gordon 2005, 6089) on Beck: "The second scenario is that the cult emanated from the court of Commagene, which had both the requisite Irano-Hellenic culture and familiarity with astrological lore."

monument after its lion. In this site, where Antiochus's protectors cast such a large shadow, and he himself is portrayed next to deities whose names are given in both Greek and its Iranian equivalent—such as Mithra-Apollo—the Lion Stele provided a sophisticated medium to record the date of the edifice.<sup>41</sup> It was conceived in the way of literary conceits and chronograms that were only understandable to a learned king and the courtly elite, and not to the commoners. Therefore, Beck's assumption that the star-talk embedded in this plaque was the model by which later *mithraea* developed a Star-Talk for their initiates cannot be true, for, the former addressed the king and the elite, and the latter was for commoners. Furthermore, as Mithra is associated with Apollo in Nemrud Dagh, any impact of this monument on the subsequent development of Roman Mithraism would have resulted in the adoption of Apollo as the solar counterpart of Mithra, and not Helios. Finally, Antiochus emphasizes that he had the priesthood wear sumptuous "Persian robes" to perform rituals at his sanctuary, according to rituals established by his ancestors.<sup>42</sup> Why would he choose Persian robes if the rituals were not Persian in essence?

But Beck's arguments, like those of Ulansey, ultimately fail to address the fundamental questions about the *mithraeum*: What was it that attracted the elite as well as the commoner, pirates as well as military men? What bound them together? If it was good, why keep it a secret? And if it could not be revealed, how could it be effective? And what did initiation really mean? And how did Mithraic societies situate themselves *vis à vis* the rest of their society? What was their role in society, and what was their impact on the political scene?

### **I.5 - Brotherhood vs. Religion**

My aim here is not to analyze or explain Roman Mithraism, but to use it as a mirror to explain the development of Iranian brotherhoods as avatars of Mithraic societies. I intend to show that these brotherhoods existed in Iran and migrated to Anatolia after the advent of the Achaemenids, and that they were driven underground by Darius, as a result of the monotheism that he advocated and the hatred he unleashed against the Mithraic magi.

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<sup>41</sup> O. Neugebauer and H.B. Van Hoesen have astutely construed the presence of the planet symbols of Mars, Mercury and Jupiter on the Lion plaque, together with the absence of Sun, Saturn and Venus, as a conjunction in Leo that could have only occurred in 62 BC; Beck 2006, 228. The lion stele was therefore a sophisticated dating device, and not a simple decorative element. See also Duchesne-Guillemin 1978, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Antiochus's inscription : " ... the priest should don a Persian attire (*la tenue perse*) that we bestowed on him according to our ancestral customs"; (translated from Greek into French by G. Lambert) in <http://www.institutkurde.org/en/kurdorama/nemrud/nemrud.php>

At the 1975 conference on Mithraic Studies, M. Simon had aptly noted: "once initiated, a Roman didn't abandon any of his previous beliefs."<sup>43</sup> In other words, adhesion to a Mithraic society did not entail conversion to a new religion. One could remain a Christian or Zoroastrian even after initiation. Mithraic societies functioned as a brotherhood, membership to which required initiation rites and an oath, originally administered under the aegis of Mithra as the Lord of covenants. What survived through time were the brotherhood principles, hierarchy, initiation rites, and symbols, many of which were renamed or reinterpreted in order to conform to the prevailing politico-religious atmosphere. The non-dogmatic aspect of these brotherhoods proffered a chameleon-like quality that allowed them to constantly adapt to new situations, while keeping the more vulnerable practices hidden and cloaked in secrecy. We therefore do not have a description of the original Mithraic societies, and we need to reconstruct them in the way that philologists recreate a theoretical root for words, and mark that root with an asterisk. I shall do the same and denote the original/theoretical Mithraic society as \*M-S. In my quest to understand the elusive \*M-S, I shall use both a diachronic and synchronic approach, moving back and forth in time and space, in order to find tangible elements that can become stepping stones toward our understanding of this historical phenomenon. Essential to this understanding is the study of the formation of Zoroastrianism, its further development, and its antagonism toward older beliefs. Unfortunately, this matter too is fraught with controversies, and one needs to untangle present-day misconceptions one by one to get a better grasp of the evolution of events.

As Beck has emphasized,<sup>44</sup> the foremost test in the presentation of a theory is coherence. My hope is to present a coherent evolutionary pattern for the avatars of the \*M-S, which not only explains their common characteristics but sheds light on the roles they played in shaping various historical events.

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<sup>43</sup> Simon 1978, 461.

<sup>44</sup> Beck 2006, 58.

## CHAPTER II

### ADAPTING OLD RITES TO NEW RELIGIONS

#### II.1- The Order of the Golden Fleece

In the year 1430, the Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (1397-1467) instituted the Order of the Golden Fleece, a knightly order that has survived today through two distinct branches—one presided by the Hapsburgs of Austria and the other by the Bourbons of Spain—each claiming to have inherited the mantle of the Duke Philip.

From its very inception, the Order of the Golden Fleece purported to be the guardian of the Christian faith, with a chancellor who had to be an ecclesiastic by statute, and its main seat located at the Sainte Chapelle (Holy Chapel) of Dijon.<sup>45</sup> And yet, this very Christian order used pagan emblems, and pursued rituals that clearly emanated from a non-Christian origin. There was of course the very emblem of the Golden Fleece that suggested a pagan origin (see further below), but a closer look into the gatherings—called *chapitres*—of the Order reveals much more, since many of their symbols and practices replicated those of the Mysteries.

#### II.2 - The *Mithraeum's* Organizational Space



<sup>4</sup> Fig. 16 - Order of the Golden Fleece gathering in 1470



Fig. 17 - Crypta Balbi *mithraeum* reconstruction (Crypta Balbi)

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<sup>45</sup> Paviot 1996; Soudavar 2008, 12-13.

A quick comparison of a manuscript illustration depicting the 1468 session presided by Philip's son Charles the Bold (1433-77), with a reconstructed image of the *Crypta Balbi mithraeum* in Rome (Figs. 16, 17), shows how much the former is indebted to the latter: a) The red cape and bonnet of the Order members recalls those of the Mithraic officials;<sup>46</sup> b) while in the Roman *mithraeum*, the *pater* presided by sitting on an elevated throne on the longitudinal axis of the room, the Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece does the same; and c) while the *heliodromos*, or the second in command of the Mysteries, conducted the ceremonies, the second in command of the Order of the Golden Fleece, i.e., the chancellor—who was Bishop Guillaume Fillastre (1400-73) at the 1468 and 1473 sessions—was similarly in charge of the administrative seal of the Order and conducted its reunions.<sup>47</sup>

### II.3 - Swearing by the Pheasant

More importantly, at the celebrated Banquet of the Pheasant that Philip the Good organized in view of recapturing Constantinople (after its fall to the Turks in 1453), the Duke and the knights of the Order had to swear, not by a cross or other Christian symbols, but by a pheasant whose neck was adorned with a "gold necklace with pearls." They vowed to take back Constantinople, which constituted the gateway to the Holy Lands. In the words of the master of ceremony who presented the pheasant to the Duke, it was an "old custom" of chivalry to make a vow by swearing over a "peacock or other noble bird."<sup>48</sup> The peacock and pheasant do not have deep-rooted Christian attributes, but their joint appearance on a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Roman sarcophagus, along with the heads of Mithra and a sacrificial bull (Fig. 18), establishes a Mithraic antecedent for them. Moreover, the pearl necklace of the Burgundian pheasant evokes the three-pearl necklace of the auspicious pheasant Chamrosh (sec. IV.6), which frequently appears on Sasanian textiles as well as vessels (Figs. 19-20). It clearly links them to the Iranian world as well.

### II.4 - The Three Pearls

As we shall explain (sec. IV.2), the three pearls of the bird Chamrosh symbolized the auspiciousness of the Iranian star-god Tishtrya, associated with the fixed star Sirius.

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<sup>46</sup> For the red cape and bonnet of Mithraic orders see Pirouzdjou 1995, 220.

<sup>47</sup> De Gruben 1996, 80-81.

<sup>48</sup> "Toison-d'Or, roy d'armes, lequel portoit en ses mains un phaisant en vie, orné d'un riche collier d'or, garny de pierres fines et de perles ; ... ledit Toison-d'Or parla à icelui duc en ceste manière : « ... et pour ce que c'est la coutume qui a esté anciennement instituée, après grandes festes et nobles assemblées, on présente aux princes et seigneurs et aux nobles hommes le paon ou quelque autre noble oiseau pour faire des vœux utiles et valables,»" de la Marche 1883-88, II : 340-380; de Coussy 1826, XI : 83-185.



Fig. 18 - Sarcophagus with Mithraic head, pheasant, peacock, and bull. Roman 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Trablos. Istanbul Archeological Museum



Fig. 19 - Pheasant bird with pearl necklace. 5<sup>th</sup> century. EMS coll.



Fig. 20 - Sasanian silver jug. 6<sup>th</sup> century. MFA Boston



Fig. 21 - Hilt of Charles the Bold gifted by his daughter to Maximilian. Kunstkammer, Vienna.



Fig. 22 - Dervish with triple burn marks. 17<sup>th</sup> century Safavid Iran. British Museum.



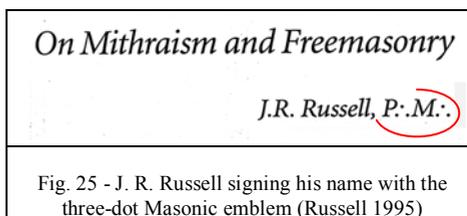
Fig. 23 - Anāhitā with triple-pearl ornaments. Bandyān.



Figs. 24 a, b - (a) Goblet of Mary of Burgundy with heraldic emblems and triple pearls, (b) Cross of the Order of the Golden Fleece with triple pearls. Kunstkammer. Vienna.



Tishtrya was seen not as one star but a triplet of luminous stars perceived to be responsible for the distribution of water on earth. It was thus a symbol of nighttime, light, and water, all at once. The three-pearl symbol admirably reflected all of these aspects. As such, it often adorned the robes of the Sasanian goddess of waters, Anāhitā (Fig. 23); but it also appeared as three dots on Sasanian coinage (see sec. X.9). As three pearls it became a heraldic symbol in the Order of the Golden Fleece, especially after the marriage of Charles the Bold's only daughter, Mary (1457-82), with Maximilian of Habsburg (r. 1493-1519). Initially, it appeared on the cross that the members of the order were sworn in upon (Fig. 24b); but was later set on gifts that Mary gave to Maximilian, on the hilt of her father's sword (Fig. 21), and on an ornate goblet (Fig. 24a).<sup>49</sup> On Charles's sword, the three pearls are juxtaposed with the Flaming Flint Stone emblem of the Order of the Golden Fleece, and on the goblet, they figure among a series of emblematic symbols that include the Flaming Flint Stone, the Fleur de Lys that Mary had inherited from her mother,<sup>50</sup> and more importantly, the knotted letters M & A which symbolized the union of Mary and Maximilian, both of whose names started with these two letters.<sup>51</sup> But as three dots, the same emblem survived in dervish orders of Iran (Fig. 22), as well as in Freemasonry (Fig. 25).



Curiously, a two-legged *ankh* symbol, which, in Iran, represented Apam Napāt or the original Iranian god of waters (see sec. X.9), appears on Mary and Maximilian's seal of Fig. 27.<sup>52</sup> One may therefore question if this peculiar symbol of Apam Napāt, who as Lord of the Night had taken Tishtrya under his wings and given him his brightness, had not preceded the three pearls as an auspicious and aquatic symbol of chivalry. The

<sup>49</sup> Soudavar 2009b, 161-63.

<sup>50</sup> Soudavar 2008, xiv-xv.

<sup>51</sup> There was a Burgundian tradition to create a two-letter knotted symbol after each matrimonial alliance. Thus the marriage of Charles the Bold with Margaret of York resulted in a C&M symbol, and that of Mary and Maximilian's son Philip the Fair with Johanna the Mad in a P&J. The knotted letters of the goblet, although similar to those used by Philip the Good, are nevertheless different for they are in the shape of two super imposed M&A, while those of Philip are stylized and project the union of Philip with Isabella of Portugal, as well as the mythical union of Jason and Medea; Soudavar 2009b, 163-64. A medal of Mary of Burgundy at the MMA (no. 25.142.37) shows a pair of unknotted but intertwined "M" letters that also bear the illusion of two "A"s; see also Van den Bergen-Pantens 1996, 170.

<sup>52</sup> René Laurent, however, recognizes the sign on Maximilian's seal as the engraver's signature symbol; Laurent 1996, 27. But, considering that it appears with other heraldic symbols such as the *briquet*, it must have heraldic value as well. See also note 671 infra in sec. XIV.2.

presence of another symbol of Apam Napāt in Mithraic tauroctony scenes may indeed provide added support for such a supposition (Fig. 57). These symbols, whether as three pearls, three dots, or a two-legged *ankh* sign, stood for the aquatic and night aspects of a duality that was at the core of Mithraic symbolism.

## II.5 - The Sun Symbol

Mithraism was based on an inherent duality that usually manifested itself as sun and moon, day and night, or fire and water, and is expounded in the opening verses of an oath found on a papyrus fragment that Frantz Cumont had deciphered:

In the name of God, who has separated *Earth*  
from *Heaven*  
*Light* from *darkness*, the *day* from the *night*,  
The *cosmos* from *chaos*, *life* from *death*

And *generation* from *corruption*, I swear  
Indeed and in sincere good faith to preserve  
As secrets the mysteries transmitted to me  
By the most worshipful Father Sarapion...<sup>53</sup>



Figs. 26 a, b - Mithraic signet with solar emblems, and a bezel with winged bull referring to the sacrificial bull of tauroctony. Late Hellenistic or Roman period, EMS Collection.

This duality is also reflected on the signet of a senior official of the Mysteries (Fig. 26), most probably the *pater* whose set of symbols generally included a staff and a ring (Fig. 30). On the bezel of the signet is carved a winged bull alluding to the sacrificial bull of tauroctony (Fig. 26b); and on each side of its gold ring is incorporated a radiating sun, surrounded by triple gold granules set as filigree triangles. One triangle is placed between the muzzle and front paws of each of the running dogs on the sides of the ring (Fig. 64). Clearly, the latter combination alludes to the tri-star grouping that included Tishtrya as the Dog Star Sirius of Canis Major, also referred to as Canicula (see sec. IV.2). When its

<sup>53</sup> Russell 1995, 271.

rise in the sky occurred near sunrise, it was believed to fortify the heat of the Sun and produce the—hot—dog days of summer. Thus, by juxtaposing a symbol of Tishtrya next to a sun emblem, there was a clear reference to the luminous symbols of night and day, and a reminder of the duality on which Mithraic orders were based. Nevertheless, the sun symbol is the more prominent one in this duality, and it is the sun symbol that knightly orders mostly favored, as exemplified by the one that adorns the chest of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century knight-master wearing a Mithraic bonnet in Fig. 28.

## II.6 - The Flaming Flint Stone

No wonder then that the most important emblem that adorns the necklace of the Order of the Golden Fleece (Fig. 29), as well as crowns and other Burgundian paraphernalia, was a sparkling flint stone, which evoked the Mithraic symbol of the sun (Fig. 31). Moreover, the transformation of the sparks emanating from the flint stone—from straight rays into curved flames—was a reminder of the prominence of the fire altar at the heart of the *mithraeum*.<sup>54</sup> It also reflected the motto, *Ante ferit quam flamma micet* (It strikes before it sparks flames) that Duke Philip adopted in 1421, in conjunction with a flint stone and fire steel (with a B-shaped metal handle) that he chose as his personal emblem. It was named *briquet* and, in due course, became the perpetual emblem of the house of Burgundy (Fig. 29).<sup>55</sup>

Philip the Good, however, adopted a new motto at the time he established the Order of the Golden Fleece: *Aultre Naray* (I shall have no other). There has been much discussion on the meaning of this motto, some even suggesting that it was a vow of fidelity to his new wife, Isabella of Portugal (1397-1471). But considering that Philip had some 30 mistresses and 17 bastards,<sup>56</sup> it is hard to imagine that it was meant to be a marital vow of fidelity, especially since it was incorporated in the decorative programs of princely Burgundian manuscripts as an emblem of the duchy (Fig. 32). Because similar pledges were pronounced by the initiates of the Iranian avatars of Mithraic societies,<sup>57</sup> it stands to reason that Philip's motto reflected an oath of allegiance to his Order, or to the person who entrusted him with the secrets of such an order. His motto becomes even more

<sup>54</sup> According to article III of the Statutes of the Order, the flint-stone had to throw "flaming sparks" (*étincelles ardentes*), Pastoureau 1996, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Paviot 2000, xix; Pastoureau 1996, 104.

<sup>56</sup> Calmette 1949, 179; Bourassin 1963 (47) mentions only 24 mistresses and 16 bastards. Lemaire 1996 (84) doesn't believe that the *Aultre Naray* motto—which was at times completed by *tant que je viveray* (as long as I'm alive)—was a gage of marital fidelity either.

<sup>57</sup> In some *fotovvat-nāmehs* for instance, the initiate is required to avow his total dedication (*erādat*), and disavow (*towbeh*) his past behavior; Afshāri 2003, 172-74.

pertinent when we see that in the Germanic Copiale document that has recently been deciphered, the initiate to an order—which has all the trappings of Freemasonry—is asked to forgo his previous affiliations and take an oath not to join any other secret society or fraternity (see Appendix I) .

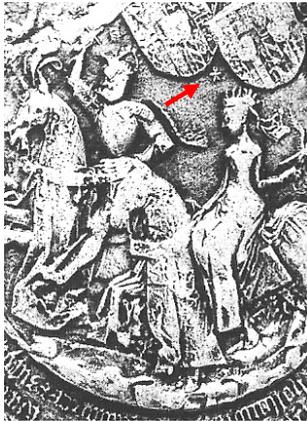


Fig. 27 - Caricature of Apam Napāt (†) on Maximilian's seal<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 28 - Knight master with solar emblem (†) awarding knighthood (Meuleau 2010, 6)



Fig. 29 - Order of the Golden Fleece necklace. Kunstkammer, Vienna.



Fig. 30 - Emblems of the pater with signet, staff and bonnet. Ostia mithraeum (Web)



Fig. 31 - Detail of Burgundian crown with a flaming sunburst. Dijon Museum.



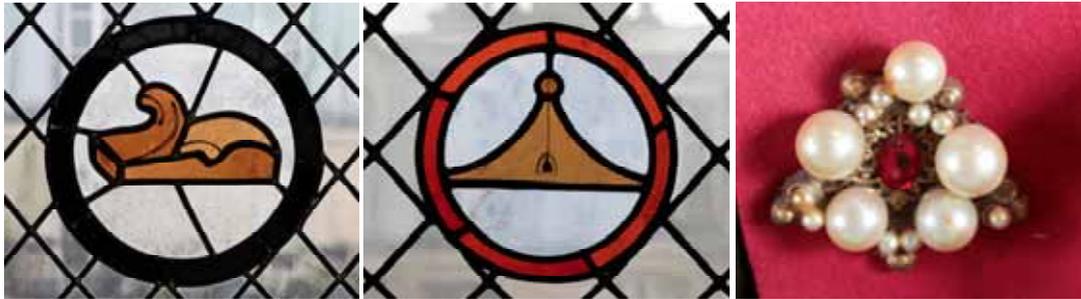
Fig. 32 - Philip the Good's Coat of Arms and motto "Aultre Naray". Photo: King's College, Cambridge.

### II.7 - Artisanal Emblems and Christian Saints

The Duke Philip chose the *briquet* as his personal emblem, while his father Jean Sans Peur (John the Fearless, 1371-1419) had previously chosen a planer (Fig. 33a). It is rather odd for a princely house to adopt, as heraldic emblems, artisanal tools used by blacksmiths and carpenters. But judging by the Iranian avatars of Mithraic societies whose members were mostly artisans, and Western brotherhoods such as Freemasonry that originated in the milieu of stone cutters and cathedral builders, one is led to believe

<sup>58</sup> Laurent 1996, 27.

that these Burgundian symbols established an affiliation with a brotherhood of similar artisanal origin.



Figs. 33 a, b, c - Planer and level emblems of Jean Sans Peur, and headgear ornament. Tour Jean Sans Peur, Paris.

Even though the planer adorned Jean Sans Peur's throne and clothing, another artisanal tool, the leveler—which is essentially a mason's tool—figured prominently in the tower and residence he built in Paris in order to project his status as protector of France (Fig. 33b). Interestingly, both of these tools appear in a miniature of Jean Sans Peur's personal prayer book in which a crucified St Andrew is set against a background of levelers and planers (Fig. 33). It begs the question: What do these tools have to do with the saint, and what is the reason behind Jean Sans Peur's decision to adopt the Cross of St Andrew as one of the official emblems of Burgundy?

The example of later Iranian brotherhoods, which, in order to gain legitimacy, introduced Islamic saints into their past hierarchy (see sec. V.8), may suggest that Jean Sans Peur adhered to a sort of Masonic order that lacked Christian legitimacy, and brought St Andrew into the equation to gain religious respectability. The mason's leveler was perhaps his initial choice for an emblem, but the planer was then added to provide a linkage with the saint. Indeed, the Burgundian X-shaped Cross of St Andrew, rather than consisting of two regular planks used for the execution of the saint as in Fig. 34, consisted of two X-shaped tree trunks with visible remnants of cut branches (Fig. 35). The knotted tree trunks of the cross, in lieu of planks, were to link it to the planer whose function was to level out wooden surfaces.<sup>59</sup> The knotted tree trunks were then

<sup>59</sup> Since the emblem of the Duke d'Orléans (d. 1408) was a stick, legend says that his archenemy, Jean Sans Peur, adopted the planer so that it would shave away his opponent's emblem. In 1405, shortly after his accession to the ducal throne, and before the quarrel with the Duke of Orleans flared up, Jean Sans Peur had already struck silver coins with the arms of Burgundy on the obverse, and the planer in between two tree-trunks (similar to the cross of St Andrew) on the reverse; Chaumont 1887, 18. Also, this story does not

incorporated into the architecture of the spiral staircase that Jean Sans Peur created in his Parisian tower, since at the very top of the staircase, the central pillar turns into a bunch of knotted tree trunks from which more branches grow anew (Fig. 34). As the only architectural decorative element of the staircase, it uses the metaphor of St Andrew's tree trunks, to show how a masonry base transitioned into a thriving brotherhood of branches.<sup>60</sup> More generally, the Duke seems to have used Masonic symbols in a tongue-in-cheek manner, for besides trying to obscure the Masonic origin of his leveler, he also tucked a number of three-pearl elements under the larger and dominant pearl ornaments of one of his medallion (Fig. 33c).



Fig. 34 - St Andrew over a background of planers and levels. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Fig. 35 - Staircase twisting stone pillar with knotted branches. Tour Jean Sans Peur.



Fig. 36 - Knotted cross of St Andrew and Golden Fleece necklace, on Spain's royal coat of arms (wiki)

explain the presence of the leveler so tightly linked to the planer. On the other hand, it is probable that Jean Sans Peur's motto (*Je le tiens*) was formulated in response to his rival's motto (*Je l'ennuis*).

<sup>60</sup> The knotted protrusions still appear on the X-shaped cross of the royal House of Spain (Fig. 36), which also incorporates the necklace of the Order of the Golden Fleece with its fire steels. They are both part of the Burgundian heritage of Spain that honor manual labor. Like the Masonic apron that was considered to be a "badge of honorable labor," ([masonicworld.com/education/files/artoct02/apron.htm](http://masonicworld.com/education/files/artoct02/apron.htm)) the planer, the leveler and the cross of St Andrew may have represented the dual concept *laborare* and *orare* (work and prayer), a motto that 16<sup>th</sup>-century alchemists espoused (see Lemaire 1996, 85). Interestingly, a motto of uncertain origins that the Order of the Golden Fleece also used, *Pretium non vile laborum* (This is the non-vile price of labor), emphasized once again manual labor; *idem*. As we shall see, dervish orders too valued manual labor.

Another avatar of Mithraic societies, the Coquillards, were also active in Europe at the same time, especially in Burgundy (see sec. XIV.13). With their sheepskin, pouch, knife, wine gourd and leather shoes (Fig. 37), they had all the trappings that we shall recognize for their Persian counterparts, namely the *`ayyārs* and *shāters* (Fig. 92). Whereas Jean Sans Peur adopted St Andrew as their patron saint, the Coquillards must have opted for St James of Compostela, and by marking the pilgrimage road to his supposed tomb with their sign (Fig. 342), they seem to have transferred their shell symbol to him (see sec. XIV.13).

Be that as it may, the Masonic sympathies of Jean Sans Peur, and the loyalty that his entourage displayed in the direst moments of his political life when he risked banishment from the French Court,<sup>62</sup> must have inspired his son Philip to create a more elaborate brotherhood that would bring together different warlords under his patronage.

### II.8 - Sanitizing Pagan Elements

At the 1468 *chapitre* held in Bruges, certain knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece were expelled for the sin of practicing "magic."<sup>63</sup> The gathering was the first one presided by Charles the Bold after the death of his father. Charles who was brought up under the influence of his very pious mother, the Duchess Isabella of Portugal, could not accept practices that perhaps his less god-fearing father tolerated. The sources do not describe the nature of the "magic" practices but, given that the word magic itself is derived from the name "magus" that referred to ancient Iranian priests, we can very well imagine that they too reflected some ancient pagan and most probably Mithraic rituals.

While non-Christian symbols and practices could gradually be abolished, there was one—an onerous one—that could not be discarded, i.e., the very name and symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece. The reason for adopting it is not described in the statutes of



Fig. 37 - Coquillard with sheepskin, pouch, gourde and *knife* (Mediavilla 2006, 23)<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> This Coquillard is depicted next to the papyrus shop of Pietro Villola, circa 1351 (Bologna ms BUB1456).

<sup>62</sup> His entourage stood by Jean Sans Peur after he had the king's brother assassinated, and was being harassed by the French Court; Schnerb 2005, 235.

<sup>63</sup> The most important member to be excluded, for the sin of practicing magic (sorcellerie), was the Count of Estampes; Richard 1996, 69, see also Marti et al. 2009, 186.

the Order.<sup>64</sup> Whatever Philip's inspiration was in this regard, the Iliad's mythical story of Jason and the Argonauts pursuing the Golden Fleece—of a ram—in the distant land of Colchis gave an undeniable pagan flavor to it. It's therefore not surprising that as early as 1431, its first chancellor, the bishop Jean Germain (d. 1460), who saw a contradiction in representing a Christian order with a pagan emblem, sought to find a biblical interpretation for it. He did what a man of the Book would do: Try to find a fitting story in the Bible to justify the awkward situation at hand. He thus found a lamb in the story of Gideon from the Book of Judges, and proposed its fleece to be the true or hidden origin of the Order's symbol. Later on, Bishop Guillaume Fillastre, who succeeded him as chancellor, added four more biblical interpretations, but had to keep the Greek myth, since none of the fleeces in the biblical stories were golden, nor did any of them relate to a ram. But being more astute than his predecessor, Fillastre attached a virtue to each interpretation: Jason's fleece (of the Iliad) stood for magnanimity; that of Jacob (Genesis 30:40), for justice; that of Gideon (Judges 6:36-40), for prudence; that of Mesha (2 Kings 3:4), for fidelity; that of Job (Job 31:20), for patience; and that of David (2 Samuel 24:17), for clemency.<sup>65</sup> He thus created an all encompassing symbolism for the Golden Fleece that was fully wrapped in Christian virtues. It's a justification process that we shall see time and again on the Iranian side, regarding the practice of sanitizing Mithraic symbols that lingered on in brotherhoods. Among these, the sheepskin was the most important and an enduring symbol; it alluded to the central Mithraic theme of tauroctony and had to be redefined with changing religious environments.



Figs. 38 a, b - A pair of Hellenistic gilt silver bowls with a golden ram, and a pheasant carrying a pearl necklace

<sup>64</sup> Paviot 2000, xviii.

<sup>65</sup> Beltran and Prietzel 1996, 124; Lemaire 1996, 87-88. Gideon had one thing in common with Philip the Good and that was his lust for women: He had 70 children from multiple wives plus one from a concubine. Philip was no less active, see note 56 supra.

From the time when the Mithra-loving emperor Julian II ("the Apostate," r. 361–63) opted to worship Mithra, Mithraism had been perceived as the main rival to Christianity (see sec. XIV.8). Therefore, no Christian order could be tainted with Mithraism, and a Greek veneer would have served to dispel such a possibility. We may then think that the "Golden Fleece" appellation was an attempt to blur the sheepskin's Mithraic origin. But, for the sin of deceiving Medea with his infidelities, and ultimately for being responsible for the destruction of Troy, the Iliad's Jason had acquired a negative image in early French literature.<sup>66</sup> It therefore seems rather odd for a French chivalry order that emphasized loyalty to adopt Jason as its role model. Thus, the Hellenization of the myth must have occurred at an earlier date.

After Alexander's conquest, the Iranian world gradually became Hellenized, to the extent that Greek became the official script on coinage, and some Arsacid rulers even qualified themselves as "philhellene." More relevant is perhaps the anecdote that when the head of the defeated Roman general Crassus (ca. 115 BC - 53 BC) was brought to the Arsacid King Orodes (r. 57-38 BC), the latter was enjoying a performance of Euripides's *Bacchae* in Greek (Plutarch, *Crassus*, 33). One can well imagine that, in such an atmosphere, the Hellenization of the Mithraic myth may have taken place in Hellenistic Iran or Anatolia, especially since two bowls from this period, depict the very animals that the Order of the Golden Fleece held in esteem, namely, the golden ram and the pheasant with a pearl necklace (Figs. 38a, b). While the Iliad's story of Jason revolved around the golden fleece of a ram—an animal often considered as both "royal and solar"—it also had another solar component, since the king of Colchis, Aetes, was purported to be the son of Helios.<sup>67</sup> It thus offered a suitable substitute for symbols and practices that related to the tauroctony of the sun god Mithra, at a time when the Zoroastrian clergy was trying to deemphasize the prominence of Mithra in the Iranian pantheon of gods (see sec. XI.20).

In any case, the enduring presence of a bovine's skin, whether as the emblem of the Order of the Golden Fleece or as leather in the apron of the Freemasons, provides us with a good thread to follow in our quest to define the hypothetical \*M-S, especially since they all seem to be interconnected, and the memory of one is embedded in the other, as the Freemasons, for instance, invoke the Golden Fleece in their sermons.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> This negative image was implanted as early as 1165; Queruel 1996, 91-98.

<sup>67</sup> Lemaire 1996, 86. The king's name, Aetes, may have originally derived from the Iranian name *ātash* (fire). For the solar and royal significance of the ram in Iranian iconography, see Soudavar 2003, 19-25.

<sup>68</sup> See note 723 *infra*.

## CHAPTER III

### FOLLOWING THE SKIN

#### III.1 - The Louvre Stele

A most intriguing double-sided stele at the Louvre has a tauroctony scene on the front (Fig. 39 a) and a banquet scene on the back, in which, following the Roman manner, Helios and Mithra are seated in a reclining position on a couch covered by a bovine skin (Fig. 39 b). Two other characters, perhaps the ubiquitous pair Cautes and Cautopates, are present at the banquet scene, one advancing with a wine rhyton toward Helios, and the other, bringing fire to the fire-altar. Remnants of color pigments attest that both once wore a red Phrygian bonnet and a red cape.



Figs. 39 a, b -. (a) Tauroctony scene watched by the sun and moon from outside the cave . (b) Mithra and Helios seated on a bull skin inside the *mithraeum*. Back and front of a Mithraic stele. Louvre.

While in most Mithraic rock-reliefs the Sun and the Moon appear on the top corners, only the moon appears in Fig. 39 b, since Helios, as the personification of the sun, is invited to Mithra's banquet and sits next to him. As Robert Turcan suggests, it's as if Mithra and Helios are presiding over a solemn ceremony, such as initiation rites, to remind the initiates that their oaths were witnessed by two deities, who were perhaps personified in

the *mithraeum* by its two highest officers, the *pater* and the *heliodromos*.<sup>69</sup> Owing to the secretive nature of the Mysteries, we do not have a written account to verify this hypothesis. However, a story recounted by the historian Ebn-e Nadim (932-990), about the election of Bābak (d. 838) as the head of the Khorramdiniyyeh congregation, marvelously reflects the banquet scene on this stele and provides some insights into its overall composition. The relevance of the story was first pointed out by E. Wright in 1948, was taken up by G. Widengren in 1978 and further elaborated upon by H. Pirouzdjou in 1997, but was nonetheless pushed aside and neglected by Cumont negationists; perhaps because they were only "Iranists" as Gordon has labeled them.<sup>70</sup>

### III.2 - The Enthronement of Bābak

Ebn-e Nadim recounts that upon the death of the Khorramdiniyyeh leader Jāvidān, his wife took the hand of Bābak and presented him as the chosen successor and the new leader of their congregation, and she:

"revealed to them that Jāvidān had said that he had wished to die on that night so that his soul would leave his body and seek *unison* with that of Bābak, in order for him to accomplish for you and himself what nobody achieved before him, and what no one shall achieve after him; he shall conquer the world, kill the tyrants and shall restore the religion of Mazdak."

Once that was explained to the congregation members, they each repeated their motto "my only Word is my oath to you,"<sup>71</sup> and declared their allegiance to Bābak, at which time (1) Jāvidān's wife orders a bovine animal to be brought forward and slain; (2) it is then flayed and its skin set on the ground; (3) a bowl of wine and a loaf of bread cut in small pieces is then placed on the skin, after which (4) she asks the members to approach one by one, stand over the skin, take a piece of bread, dip it into the wine and eat it; and declare: "O spirit of Bābak, I believe in you as I believed in the spirit of Jāvidān"; (5) they then take the hand of Bābak and kiss it; (6) she then sits with Bābak on the skin; (7) she offers him a spray of basil and becomes his wife as the congregation extols their marriage and once again declares its full allegiance to the couple. Ebn-e Nadim further

<sup>69</sup> Turcan 2000, 68.

<sup>70</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 215-17. Widengren uses for comparison a similar stele from Konjic in present day Bosnia and Herzegovina; *idem*. Another similar composition from Troyes in Italy is reproduced in Vermaseren 1956, fig. 217.

<sup>71</sup> Ebn al Nadim 1872, 344: "فقالوا لها: "قرلى ما عهد اليك"

qualifies the Khorramdiniyyeh as the *mohammara* or the red-clothed ones, and an offshoot of the Mazdakites, many of whom also wore red and had red banners (8).<sup>72</sup>

The above-described ceremony provides a host of useful information for our study, the most important of which is an actual account of bull slaying similar to tauroctony (1). Despite a multitude of tauroctony scenes, we do not have such a vivid account of bull-slaying for the Mysteries. This obviously negates the myth that tauroctony was solely a Roman practice and never existed in Iran. The fact that members of the congregation had to come, one by one, over to the skin and had to taste the bread and wine (3), recalls on the one hand, the left figure of the Louvre stele offering wine before the skin-throw, and on the other, the Eucharist that Justin thought was a practice that the Mysteries had copied from the Christians (see sec. XIV.8). The fact that the Khorramdiniyyeh wore red obviously ties in well with the red garments of this stele, as well as other *mithraea* (8). As for the members of the congregation finalizing their pledges of loyalty by taking the hand of Bābak, it recalls the final right-hand shake of the Mystery initiate called *dexiosis*, which Diodorus of Sicily and Xenophon described as a gesture that Persians used to seal a covenant.<sup>73</sup> What the Ebn-e Nadim narrative suggests is that the bovine-skin on which the couple sat had the actual function of a throne (6), which Pirouzdjou rightly connected to the *pust-takht* (skin-throne) of Persian dervishes, especially the *qalandars*.<sup>74</sup>

A 17<sup>th</sup>-century miniature depicts the initiation of a *qalandar* before his master who is seated on a sheepskin (Fig. 40). The *qalandar's* initiation process required eating a piece of bread sprinkled with salt, and drinking water from a bowl offered by his master.<sup>75</sup> The miniature reflects what the texts describe. The initiate is taking salt and bread from a small tablecloth laid on the ground, and an elongated blue vessel is set next to his master's sheepskin, presumably containing water. But as A.S. Melikian-Chirvani has demonstrated in his admirable series of studies that he qualifies as *archéologie en terrain littéraire*, these types of elongated vessels are in fact wine bowls called *kashti* (boat) in Persian literature. By digging further in the literary terrain, he also uncovers ample evidence that the wine itself was perceived as a substitute for the blood of the sacrificial bull—hence the multitude of *rhyta* and ewers in the shape of a bull (Fig. 41)—and that

<sup>72</sup> Ebn an-Nadim 1872, 343-44; Yusofī 1988.

<sup>73</sup> Diodorus (XVI, 43): "the King, hearing what he said, again changed his mind and recalling the attendants directed them to release Thettalion, and then he gave him his right hand, *which is the surest pledge amongst the Persians*;" Xenophon mentions in his *Annabasis* (I:6.7 and II:5.3) that Iranians used the right hand shake to seal a pledge.

<sup>74</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 221. The *qalandars* were wandering, semi-naked and disheveled ascetics.

<sup>75</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995, 22-23; Mahjoub 2000, 54-55.

wine drinking was always associated with the practice of "Magians" or ancient Iranian priests.<sup>76</sup> We thus see a substitution process: First from blood to wine that was brought about by the advent of Zoroastrianism (see sec. XVI.3) and next, from wine to water, which was exacerbated by Islam's forbiddance of alcoholic beverages.



Fig. 40 – Master dervish and initiate. School of Esfahan, 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
(Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva)



Fig. 41 – Bronze ewer. Khorāsān, 12<sup>th</sup> century. Private coll.

The young *qalandar* also wears two signs than can be traced back to an ancient—Mithraic—past. First is a bonnet that is an avatar of Mithra's Phrygian bonnet, variations of which we shall see more of in the Iranian avatars of Mithraic societies; and second, a three-dotted tattoo or burn mark that we shall explain to be a symbol of Tishtrya (see sec. IV.2). It's the same symbol that, as we previously noticed, appears on a Roman Mithraic ring, and on objects pertaining to the Order of the Golden Fleece. It also appears in the heading of an article on Freemasonry by James Russell, who avows to be a Freemason himself, and signs his name flanked by the three dots (Fig. 25).

While Moslem dervishes had to sanitize their ceremonial drink by simply substituting water for wine, the sanitization process of the sheepskin proved to be even easier: It was simply called *sajjādeh* or prayer rug. Nevertheless, as the below story demonstrates, the *sajjādeh* of the ruler had the symbolic function of a throne in dervish orders.

<sup>76</sup> Melikian-Chirvani 1990a, and Melikian-Chirvani 1992.

### III.3 - The *Sajjādeh* as Symbol of Sufi Orders' Succession Rights

One of the greatest dynasties of Iran, the Safavids (r. 1501-1722), sprang from a splinter dervish order named after its eponymous founder, Shaykh Safi-od-din of Ardabil (1252–1334). As a youth, Safi-od-din had joined the ranks of the most powerful dervish order of its time, the *Zāhediyeh*, which was headed by one Shaykh Zāhed from Gilān (1216-1301), a Sufi saint very much respected by the Mongol rulers of Iran, especially Ghāzān Khān (r. 1295-1304). As later Safavid chroniclers report, the succession of Shaykh Zāhed went to Safi-od-din who had married the *shaykh's* daughter. This provided the Safavids with a justification to take over all the properties previously endowed to the *Zāhediyeh*. A closer look at these chronicles, however, reveals that the succession stories are flawed and were fabricated at a later date. The document that really sheds light on the issue is an edict decreed by the last of the great Mongol rulers of Iran, Abu-Sa`id Bahādor Khān (r. 1317-35), who intervened in the succession disputes that erupted among the progenies of Shaykh Zāhed, after the demise of his true successor, his son Jamāl-od-din `Ali. The Safavids, who had meticulously eradicated all documents pertaining to the succession of Shaykh Zāhed, had overlooked this edict for the simple reason that it was written in Uyghur and nobody could read it by the time they rose to power. In this edict, the successor is defined as the one who "inherited the *sajjādeh* of Shaykh Zāhed." In other words, the *sajjādeh* was really considered as the order leader's throne, and the document shows that the succession of Shaykh Zāhed actually went to his son, and not to his son-in-law, Safi-od-din.<sup>77</sup>

A number of documents pertaining to dervish orders, called *fotovvat-nāmeḥ*, provide information about the questions and answers incorporated in the initiation process of their members, called *fatās*. Within that context, when the initiate is asked: "What is the *sajjādeh*?" the initiate must answer: "It's actually the *pust-takht*."<sup>78</sup> In other words, they understood that the *pust-takht* of old had been conveniently presented as an instrument of Islamic prayer. This, however, may not have been sufficient to Islamicize the ubiquitous sheepskin, which was part of the paraphernalia of dervishes, and of different guilds such as the cooks.<sup>79</sup> And that's why a number of quotes in praise of the *pust-takht* were fabricated and attributed to saintly figures, such as the 6<sup>th</sup> Shiite Imam, Ja`far as-Sādeq (702–765), who was a renowned Islamic jurist.<sup>80</sup> In addition, as we shall next explain, the

<sup>77</sup> Soudavar 2006a, 235; Cleaves 1953, 67.

<sup>78</sup> Afshāri 2003, 179. Another text explains that "sitting on the *pust takht*" is like "sitting on the *sajjādeh*"; `Abd-or-rahim 1672, p. 94. بدانکه پوست تخته نشستن کنایه از سجاده نشستن است.

<sup>79</sup> Afshāri 2003, 65.

<sup>80</sup> Afshāri & `Ābedini 1995, 149

sheepskin was associated with Abraham who thus became one of the most revered figures of Iranian brotherhoods.

### III.4 - The Stature of Abraham

Abraham, whom the *fotovvat-nāmehs* refer to as *Abol-fetyān* (father of all *fatās*), is often described as "the first point in the circle of *fotovvat*."<sup>81</sup> The Arabic term *fotovvat* is a generic term that has been used to qualify a variety of brotherhoods that are Islamic in appearance: They profess to be Moslems; they invoke Koranic verses in their ceremonies, and revere Abraham as well as the Prophet Mohammad, the Imam `Ali, and a host of other Moslem saints. And yet, as in the case of the Order of the Golden Fleece, their rituals and symbols betray a tradition that goes back to pre-Islamic times. For instance, the short pants, *servāl* (pl. *sarāvīl*), that the Caliph An-Nāser (caliph: 1160-1225) famously donned at his *fotovvat* initiation rites in Bagdad, couldn't have come from an Arab tradition, because Arabs did not wear trousers, but Iranians did; and the word *servāl* itself is the Arabicized version of the Persian *shalvār* (pants).<sup>82</sup>

Despite the secretive nature of these orders, a multitude of *fotovvat-nāmehs* were prepared, primarily as initiation manuals describing the question and answer sequence in a process that very much reflected those of the Roman Mysteries.<sup>83</sup> Over time, the question and answer lists had grown so extensive that no one could memorize them, and the manuals served as aide memoires. But to put them in writing would inevitably invite scrutiny by religious zealots; their authors, therefore, tried to couch every procedure and odd phenomenon in Islamic garb.

As a result, the *fotovvat-nāmehs* do not reflect the true history of these brotherhoods. But nevertheless, the sum total of the bits of information they provide directs us to a distant past, a past that was Iranian and non-Islamic. For instance, Ebn-e Rasuli (act. 12<sup>th</sup> century) declares that the *fotovvat* was created with Adam but "sprang to life under Abraham," then went into hiding and reappeared under Moses, who then transmitted it to the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>84</sup> Clearly, the author is asserting that it came from a lost pre-Islamic tradition that was resurrected by Abraham, and remained in the Jewish realm at

<sup>81</sup> Dehkhodā: "fotovvat"

<sup>82</sup> Cahen 1959,72; Dehkhodā, "sarāvīl." See also Āzarnush 2008, 59, where he argues that *servāl* (pl. *sarāvīl*) was actually borrowed from Persian in pre-Islamic times.

<sup>83</sup> A papyrus from Hermopolis in Egypt indicates that the initiation process for Roman Mithraism also involved question and answers; Beck 2004, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Ebn-e Rasuli was actually quoting Ebn al-Jowzi; Mahjoub 2000, 39. Another manuscript entitled *Arbāb-ot-tariq* explains that the dervish bonnet (*kolāh*), which Adam first donned, got lost in Noah's Ark, and it was Abraham's hat that was transmitted anew; `Abd-or-rahim 1672, p. 32.

least until Moses. The question that obviously comes to mind is: How did Abraham enter into the equation, since the *fotovvat* is not a known Jewish phenomenon?

The key to understanding this question is the initiation procedure described in most *fotovvat-nāmehs*, in which the initiate must be introduced by one of the brothers who must recite the name of all of his predecessors, i.e., those who had introduced previous generations to the brotherhood. Obviously, this chain of transmission (*selsela*) could not end with an ancient Iranian name. At the same time, the ubiquitous skin throw needed a more solid justification than just a name change. The solution was to open the Holy Book—as Bishops Jean Germain and Guillaume Fillastre had done to find a biblical interpretation for the Golden Fleece—and find a relevant Koranic passage. The sacrifice of Abraham was the obvious choice: The skin throw and its leather derivatives could be interpreted as reminders of the skin of the ram that Abraham sacrificed in lieu of his son. Two birds were thus killed with one stone.

Moreover, only the word *fatā* (meaning young—in the masculine mode), and not *fotovvat*, existed in ancient Arabic texts, as well as in the Koran.<sup>85</sup> Since Abraham was qualified as *fatā* in the Koran (XXI:60), it could be used to translate the Persian word *javān-mard* (young man), an adjective that defined the qualities of adolescents who espoused a certain code of conduct that was called *javānmardi*. As we shall later explain (sec. V.3), the concept of *javānmardi* was the inspiration and the reason for the creation of the Arabic word *fotovvat* that—structurally—only meant "youth," but came to mean "brotherhood." The two notions were so intertwined that one of the *fotovvat-nāmehs* even claimed that "*javānmardi* began with Abraham."<sup>86</sup>

As a result, Abraham became the "Father of all *fatās*," and gained a saintly status that popularized his name among dervishes. The celebrated Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq-e Kāzeruni (963-1035), for instance, upon conversion from Zoroastrianism to Islam, adopted—like so many other Sufis—the name Ebrāhim (Abraham) and the *konya* Abu-Es'hāq (father of Isaac).<sup>87</sup> In Urfa (ancient Edessa), in south Turkey, there is even a complex built around a cave that is supposedly the birthplace of Abraham (Fig. 42a). It has become a Sufi shrine where many dervishes are buried (Fig. 42b), all bearing epithets such as dervish, *bābā*, *qalandar*, or *dede* (i.e., father in Turkic). Their association with Abraham provided much needed protection in an Islamic environment.

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<sup>85</sup> Cahen 1959, 34.

<sup>86</sup> Afshāri & Madāeni 2006, 289.

<sup>87</sup> Soudavar 1992, 78-80.



Figs. 42 a, b – Abraham's "birthplace" complex. A list of dervishes and *qalandars* buried in the complex. Urfâ, Turkey

Since the proposed goal for this chapter was to pursue the skin-throw, we shall leave the discussions on these brotherhoods to later chapters and next visit the remains of Mithraic-inspired imagery within the Judeo-Roman world of circa 2-5<sup>th</sup> century.

### III.5 - Mithraic Leather Tunics and Candelabras

Recently excavated mosaics in Sepphoris (Safuriyya) have been described as those of a "synagogue," but as I shall later argue, they actually belong to Mithraic edifices (sec. XIV.12), even more so since some of the mosaics depict figures with a Phrygian red bonnet, i.e., the most distinctive feature of Mithraic affiliation. In a scene where two huntsmen are charging forward with a spear in their hands, they both have a red Phrygian bonnet; the first is wearing a red Persian garment with trousers, of the type worn by the Roman *pater*, and the second one is wearing a white Roman tunic (Fig. 43a).

The most important aspect of these mosaics, however, is that they provide a unique depiction of Roman Mithraic initiates, who are naked to their waists and are sporting a red Phrygian bonnet as well as a Roman-type leather tunic (Fig. 43b). Even though the damaged frescoes of Santa Maria Capua Vetere *mithraeum* seem to depict a completely naked man subjected to the initiation ordeal,<sup>88</sup> in most other brotherhoods, the initiates had only a naked torso and wore a leather garment below the waist.<sup>89</sup> Such is the case, for instance, of Turkish wrestlers (Fig. 45), and an Indian warrior taking an oath in Fig. 44.

<sup>88</sup> Turcan 2000, 84 ; see also Yamauchi 1996, 511.

<sup>89</sup> Ebn-e Athir 1965, VI:275, in which *'ayyârs* are described as naked; Afhâri 2003, xxiii.

Thus, the mosaics of Fig. 43b must reflect Mystery initiates, perhaps the *miles*, since they hold a spear in their hands. They also display menorah-like candelabras, which were probably used as symbol of the fire that was placed at the heart of the *mithraeum* and that lit its cave-like environment. A similar symbol, a candlestick with five branches was used by Iranian dervish orders,<sup>90</sup> while the Freemasons used candelabras with three, five or even seven arms; in Judea though, it was normal to use a seven-branched one as it was in tune with the prevailing type of local candelabras (see sec. XIV.10).<sup>91</sup>



Figs. 43 a, b – a) Mithra hunting, b) Roman Mithraic initiates with leather tunics.  
Mosaics from Sepphoris. 5-6<sup>th</sup> century (web)



Fig. 44 – Initiation ceremony of an Indian warrior.  
India, 16<sup>th</sup> century (Soudavar 1992, 325)



Fig. 45 – Turkish traditional wrestlers with leather pants (Turkish Airlines' magazine)

<sup>90</sup> Dekhoda: "fotovvat"

<sup>91</sup> Arlene Fradkin of the Florida Museum of Natural History thinks "the mosaics are the work of traveling artisans who had books of patterns, as other scholars have suggested. The citizens of Sepphoris might have picked out the designs not because the animals were important to them but because they were fashionable (quoted in *Science News*, Apr. 12, 1997, vol.151, no. 15, 226). We beg to differ, see sec. XIV.12.

### III.6 - The Spread of the Leather Garment

While the leather garment was a byproduct of sacrificial ceremonies, it also had to follow—as with the candlesticks—local fashion and tendencies. Thus, in keeping with Roman fashion, the leather garment of Roman initiates was a leather tunic, while that of Iranian initiates was a pair of trousers. The more common and easy to use leather garment, however, was the leather apron such as the one famously adopted by the Freemasons (Fig. 47). It was also worn by Indian warriors affiliated to the Jalāli dervish orders and by Iranian dervishes, who called it *tanureh* and had it decorated with nail-heads.<sup>92</sup> As such, the prominent full-hide apron of the French Foreign Legion members (Fig. 46) may have also derived from a brotherhood tradition that went back to Roman Legions affiliated with the Mysteries. These emblems, and certain elements of their paraphernalia, were all meant to induce a sense of unity among brotherhoods.



Fig. 46 – French Foreign Legionnaires marching the Champs-Élysées, with a leather apron and an ax on their shoulder (web)



Fig. 47 - Plain Masonic leather apron. Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie.

As pagan symbols they had to be justified, and for Moslem brotherhoods, the religious justification always went back to Abraham. Thus, as recounted in a *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* that, for instance, dealt with the activities of butchers (*qassābān*) and skinners (*sallākhān*):

"After sacrificing a ram in lieu of his son, Abraham summoned some forty dervishes and gazed upon the skin of the sacrificial ram, at which time said skin expanded and split into several parts. One part became the skin-throne (*pust-takhteh*) of dervishes,

<sup>92</sup> Afshāri & Madāeni 2006, 203. Ebn-e Battuta 1958 (192) speaks of dervishes who wore 1000-nail garments (*hezār-mikh*). These garments were also made of leather as it is difficult to imagine that nails would be used on softer textiles. Poems cited in the Dehkhodā dictionary vouch for the association of the *hezār-mikh* garment with the *tanureh* apron, as well as the fact that it was worn at night-time ceremonies; Dehkhodā "hezār-mikh" :

۱- چو پشت قنغذ گشته تنورش از پیکان  
 هزارمیک شده درعش از بسی سوفال  
 ۲- دلق هزارمیک شب آن من است و  
 چون روز سر ز صدره خارا براورم

another became the bonnet (*tāj*) of dervishes, another part became the pouch (*charas-dān*) of dervishes, and Abraham also gave parts of that hide to other congregations who transformed them into trousers (*kasvat*) and robes."<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, the *qantureh* or short tunic of the *shāters* (foot messengers) is said to have been made with the wool of the ram sacrificed for Abraham's son, Esmā'il.<sup>94</sup> The most explicit explanation, however, is offered by Molla Hosayn-e Kāshefi (d. 1505) in his *Fotovvat-nāmeḥ-ye Soltāni*: When the initiate is asked about the provenance of the skin-throne, he must answer that "it is the skin of the *kabsh* (ram) of Esmā'il, which was slaughtered by Abraham on God Almighty's order, and which Esmā'il took home" and placed on the floor for his family to sit on.<sup>95</sup> In the section about the wrestlers, however, the same Kāshefi gives a different explanation. When the initiate is asked: "From whom are your short pants (*tonbān*)?" he must answer: "From Abraham who took the skin of Esmā'il's ram and cut it into short pants and wore it himself, but then passed it on to his progenies."<sup>96</sup> Thus, the justification for the use of unorthodox leather items, or entire skins, always reverted back to Abraham.

Furthermore, as Iranian dervish orders drifted eastward, the sheepskin was adopted by ascetics along the Silk Road all the way to China. We can see, for instance, a Chinese *lohan* (Buddhist holy man) depicted in a 16<sup>th</sup> century Persian miniature with an alms bowl in his hand and a sheepskin on his shoulders (Fig. 48).<sup>97</sup> To emphasize his affinity for Persian dervish orders, he is wearing under his sumptuous silk overcoat, the short and open robe of *qalandars* (Fig. 49).<sup>98</sup> Another painting, from the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-96) in Beijing, depicts a *lohan* seated on a sheepskin hovering over lush scenery (Fig. 50). A salient feature of this composition is the presence of a Sogdian figure seated in reverence before the *lohan*. For centuries after the introduction of Buddhism in the Eastern Iranian world, Sogdian merchants, who controlled trade on the Silk Road,<sup>99</sup> acted as a conduit for the spread of Buddhism, as well as Iranian ideas into

<sup>93</sup> Afshari & Madāeni 2006, 180.

<sup>94</sup> Afshari & Madāeni 2006, 128. In the Koran, Abraham's son is named Esmā'il (Ishmael) rather than Isaac.

<sup>95</sup> Kāshefi 1971, 202.

<sup>96</sup> Kāshefi 1971, 310.

<sup>97</sup> Chinese *lohans* are Buddhist saints originally called *arhats*, the enlightened disciples of Buddha. Venerated as divinities in China, they are represented in Chinese painting with consistent iconography: "clean-shaved head or white hair, prominent eyes and nose, thick eyebrows, high cheekbones, unproportionally large hands and feet, large belly, long-lobed ears (which are a badge of honor), at times with conspicuous earrings"; Sugimura 1981, 84-119. See also Soudavar 1992, 256.

<sup>98</sup> Shafii, for instance, states that a prominent early Sufi, Mohammad b. Karrām, wore a sheepskin and that the Qalandariyyeh too wore some kind of skin, Shafii 2007, 144.

<sup>99</sup> De la Vaissière 2004.

China. Some of these merchants eventually settled in China, and commissioned funerary monuments—and other objects—with a decorative program that blended Chinese motifs with Iranian and Central Asian features (Fig. 87).<sup>100</sup> The presence of the Sogdian at the foot of the *lohan* points to a Buddhist holy figure originally revered in Sogdiana or in the Eastern Iranian world, who maintained the sheepskin tradition of his western brethren.



Fig. 48 – Chinese *lohan*. 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Soudavar 1992, 256)



Fig. 49 - *Qalandar* with bell. 16<sup>th</sup> century, (Martin 1912, pl. 120)

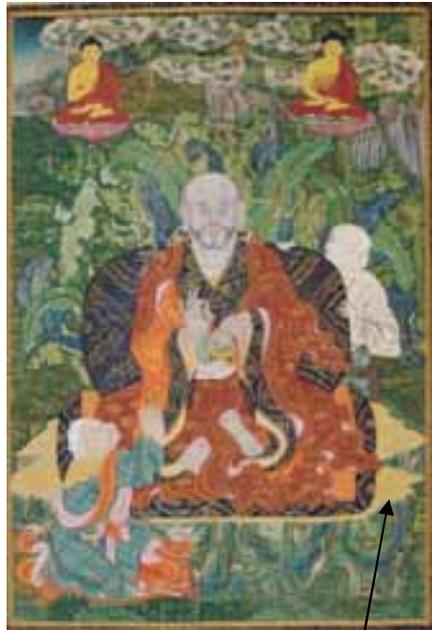


Fig. 50 – *Lohan* seated on a **sheepskin**, with Sogdian disciple. China, 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, if tauroctony lost its prominence within brotherhoods,<sup>102</sup> the sheepskin and leather garments, as byproducts of the sacrificial animal, had a much longer life and persisted as a brotherhood symbol, from the Mediterranean shores to the Sea of China. Moreover, the

<sup>100</sup> See also Delecour 2004.

<sup>101</sup> It has a descriptive note which states: "On the first day of the sixth month of the 59<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong [period], a lama painted an image of the blessed Bakula by official decree"; Sotheby's New York, sales catalogue of March 21, 2012, lot 350 (Photo courtesy of Sotheby's).

<sup>102</sup> The sacrificial animal still plays a role within ceremonies of certain dervish orders. For instance, the Ahl-e Haqq have ceremonies that end with the sacrifice of a cock, called *Khorus-koshān*, Arakelova 2011, 37; but they can also sacrifice a lamb, cow, or a camel, Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 77; in Hamzeh'ee 1992, 33-34, the sacrificial practices of the Yazidis and Ahl-e Haqq (Yāresān) are likened to those of the Zoroastrians.

very name Sufi, which has often been said to derive from the Arabic word *suf* (wool), may have originally alluded to those who wore the sheepskin on their shoulders.

### III.7 - The Sacrificial Animal

While Mithra is killing a bull in tauroctony scenes, the skin elements that we have seen so far are mostly those of a lamb or ram. The reason for this discrepancy is that tauroctony scenes refer to a myth developed in the Greco-Roman world, which may have originally been inspired by sacrificial rituals but had subsequently taken on a meaning of its own. Indeed, the bull was being killed but not sacrificed in the *mithraeum*. On the other hand, the skins, as byproducts of the sacrifice, alluded to the original sacrificial rituals rather than the later myth.

A 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC stele from Dascylium in Anatolia (Fig. 51) shows bovines and sheep being led toward sacrifice. But as Antonio Panaino has noted, in Greek the word *πρόβατον* (forward going) designated the sheep as the most desired sacrificial animal, for it could gently be led to slaughter.<sup>103</sup> Sheep were more abundant than the cow, more economical, and more mobile, particularly for nomadic tribes such as those who had descended on the Iranian plateau. In the *Avesta*, bovines were called *gao*, a word that comes from the same Indo-European root that produced "cow" in English. But unlike English, in which the cow and the bull have two different names, the *Avesta* used *gao* as a generic term, i.e., cattle. Like modern Persian, in which the cow is *gāv* and the bull is designated as a "male cow" (*gāv-e nar*), only additional information, or context, explained the nature of the *gao*. By the same token, *gao-sepanta* or "holy-*gao*" denoted the sacrificial *gao*, which gradually came to mean "sheep," or *guspan* in New Persian, because, as a small size *gao*, it was the sacrificial animal of choice.<sup>104</sup>

Like "mink" in English, which can designate both the animal and its fur, in the *Avesta*, *gao* also referred to the cow's primal produce, i.e., milk.<sup>105</sup> That is why the Moon came to be qualified as *gao-chithra*, or "milk bright" (i.e., has a milk-like glow).<sup>106</sup> For nomadic and pastoral people, the white color of the most prominent stellar object of nighttime was equated with the color of a primordial substance, i.e., milk. Thus *gao* became closely associated with the moon and that is why the chariot of the Moon Goddess in Fig. 53 is

<sup>103</sup> Panaino 2009, 111. See also Thayer's Greek lexicon: <http://concordances.org/greek/4263.htm>.

<sup>104</sup> Boyce 1990.

<sup>105</sup> See Soudavar 2009a, 449 (n. 104) ; Lubotsky 1998, 485; also Hamzeh'ee 1992, 34 n.23, where he gives examples such as *gao-jivya* that designates goat-milk for Persian Zoroastrians.

<sup>106</sup> Soudavar 2010b. The usual incongruous translation of the moon epithet *gao-chithra* as "carrying the seeds of the bull" stems from the incorrect understanding of *chithra* by philologists, see also note 111 infra.

being pulled by four flying horned cows<sup>107</sup> rather than four horses as in the case of the sun chariot in Fig. 52.



Fig. 51 – Bull and sheep driven for sacrifice. Archeological Museum Istanbul



Fig. 52 – Sun god riding a quadriga. Altes Museum, Berlin



Fig. 53 - Moon god riding a bull chariot led by Apam Napāt. Courtesy of A. Kevorkian.

More importantly, its cows are guided by an Eros-type figure symbolizing Apam Napāt, the Iranian aquatic deity who was the Lord of the Night, and was Mithra's counterpart in a duality that juxtaposed fire with water, sun with moon, and day with night (see secs. X.7, XI.12). While, according to Herodotus (I.31), Iranians had "no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly," Alexander's conquest changed the Iranian outlook on this matter, and the image of the winged Eros was adopted from the Greek repertoire, to represent Apam Napāt. As a key figure in the conveyance of *farr*, Apam Napāt was often depicted handing a *dastār* (i.e., a flying ribbon and symbol of victory) to kings (Figs. 54-55). Eros was a perfect fit since he had wings that designated him as supernatural (i.e., a deity), and could personify Apam Napāt whose very name meant "Child of the Waters,"<sup>108</sup> As Lord of the Night, Apam Napāt controlled all nocturnal movements, including that of the Moon; that's why the Moon's chariot is being pulled by the childlike Apam Napāt in Fig. 53. It should therefore come as no surprise if in a tauroctony scene from the *mithraeum* of San Stefano Rotundo (Fig. 57), the Moon's chariot is guided by Apam Napāt. The Roman myth, which laid the foundation for the tauroctony scene, was built around Mithra, but in other areas of the

<sup>107</sup> The cows of this plate are horned and humped zebu, also called Brahman, which are holy in India.

<sup>108</sup> For Apam Napāt's role in the conveyance of *farr*, and his position vis à vis Anāhitā as conceived in Fig. 56, see secs. X.7-10.

*mithraeum*, an allusion to the original Iranian deity pair was still very much in evidence, e.g., in the pairing of the sun and moon above tauroctony scenes, and the presence of *water* next to the *fire* of the *mithraeum*.<sup>109</sup> Sun and fire were linked to Mithra, while the moon and the waters related to Apam Napāt.<sup>110</sup> If the Roman Mithra dominated the tauroctony scene, he was implicitly accompanied by Apam Napāt, who had an equally important role as we shall further elaborate in sec. XI.12.



Fig. 54 - Apam Napāt handing a *dastār* with three pearls. Sasanian silver plate. (Miho Museum).



Fig. 55 - Apam Napāt handing a *dastār* with three pearls. Sasanian plate. Islamic Kunst Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 56 - Apam Napāt (Child of the Waters) held by Anāhitā (Lady of Waters). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.



Fig. 57 - Apam Napāt (↑) guiding the moon's chariot pulled by cows. Tauroctony scene from San Stefan Rotondo (web)

<sup>109</sup> Turcan 2000, 76.

<sup>110</sup> See also note 122 infra.



Fig. 58 – Dervishes with sheepskin bonnets (↑), woven bonnets (↑) and sheepskin shoulder covers (↑), distributing the communal meal. Institute of Oriental Studies, St Petersburg.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EPICENTER OF MITHRAIC BROTHERHOODS

#### IV.1 - An Alternative "Image-talk"

The geographical distribution of *mithraea* within the Roman world, and the multiplicity of its tauroctony scenes, have induced many scholars to believe in a Roman origin for Mithraic societies. To paraphrase Beck, it's a conclusion based on "image-talk." But it is a restrictive and biased one, because it primarily focuses on a later-developed Roman phenomenon rather than fundamental symbols and indices that were common to both the Roman and Iranian sides. To counter it, I wish to present a substitute image, one that will show the spread of Mithraic symbols from the Mediterranean coast to the Sea of China, and one that will relocate the epicenter of the Mithraic phenomenon in Iranian lands.

The primordial example is that of the sheepskin, which, as we saw, appears in different congregations and brotherhoods, from Europe to China. It clearly transcends the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and has a prominent presence in Iran proper, in the guise of the dervishes' *pust-takht*. In what follows, I shall further investigate such indices.

#### IV.2 - The Three Dots

To my knowledge, the three-dot symbol first appeared on Sasanian coinage (Fig. 59), in tandem with the caricature sign of Apam Napāt (which as we saw in sec. II.4, was conceived as a two-legged *ankh* symbol). The two appear on opposite sides of the fire altar on the coin's reverse. Fire was at the center of Iranian religious ceremonies held in open air. For fire to be visible it had to be lit at nighttime, i.e., under the aegis of Apam Napāt as Lord of the Night. In such a setting, the officiating priest would have naturally tried to invoke the power of celestial elements above, in order to capture the attention of his flock. The most important one was the moon; and next was Sirius (named Tishtrya in the *Avesta*), the brightest of all visible stars. In the *Avesta*, they each have an epithet ending with *chithra*, a word that primarily means brilliance and is used in conjunction with celestial objects; the moon is qualified as *gao-chithra*, and Tishtrya as *afsh-chithra*.<sup>111</sup> The epithet *gao-chithra*, which meant "milk bright," was applied to the moon because it shines in the whitish color of milk. The moon was thus associated with the

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<sup>111</sup> *Gao-chithra* is often translated as "which carries the seed of the bull," and *afsh-chithra* as "which carries the seed of water"; they are meaningless and provide too long a translation for a two-word adjective; Soudavar 2009, 427-29.

cow, and a cleverly devised cow caricature was adopted to reflect its different phases;<sup>112</sup> it too was placed opposite the caricature symbol of Apam Napāt as Lord of the night (Fig. 60). Similarly, the three-dot symbol was devised to provide a graphic symbol for Tishtrya's *afsh-chithra* epithet. Indeed, *afsh-chithra* meant "whose light is like a raindrop," and was applied to stars in general since they all scintillate like raindrops. The raindrop was then equated with a dot, which appeared on Sasanian coinage in association with other celestial symbols such as a crescent or stars (Fig. 61).<sup>113</sup> The dot was then tripled for Tishtrya because, as Antonio Panaino explains, its name meant "the one who belongs to the three stars."<sup>114</sup> Panaino further argues that, based on Vedic mythology, this tri-star concept may be attributed to a perceived relationship of Tishtrya with three stars from Orion's Belt (*delta, epsilon, and zeta Orionis*).<sup>115</sup>



Fig. 59 – Coin of Bahrām II (rev.), with triple dots and Apam Napāt caricature.



Fig. 60 - Coin of Bahrām II (rev.), with a Moon symbol and Apam Napāt caricature.



Fig. 61 – Coin of `Abdollāh b. Zobayr, with triple dots as emblem of Tishtrya, crescent, and simple dot as emblem of stars.

The *triskeles* sign that appears, for instance, on the coinage of the rulers of Persis, may symbolize this relationship, since it has a central element with three arms reaching outward (Fig. 62). If true, this must have been a secondary consideration, for it was difficult for the officiating priest to readily point to such a relationship among stars in the sky. Instead, I believe that Tishtrya's name mainly stemmed out of the discovery of a fixed triangle called the Winter Triangle, which comprised three fixed stars: Sirius, Betelgeuse, and Procyon (Fig. 63). They form a *perfect* equilateral triangle that is easily recognizable. This triangle better relates to Tishtrya's etymology through a tri-star grouping, instead of a linkage to the three Orion stars (which results in a quartet).

<sup>112</sup> See sec. IV.3, and note 398 *infra*.

<sup>113</sup> Soudavar 2009, 428-31.

<sup>114</sup> *Afsh-chithra* is an adjective that was applied to stars in general and thus, single dots represented single stars; Soudavar 2009, 428-30.

<sup>115</sup> Panaino 2005.

As a perfect equilateral triangle, the Winter Triangle can lend itself to a number of magical interpretations, and must have been viewed as a source of power, perhaps superior to the moon, since it maintained a steady shape and intensity—every night—while the moon didn't. Furthermore, the three-dot symbol is primarily configured as an equilateral triangle, which clearly evokes the geometric configuration of the Winter Triangle. On a flat surface such as coins, the raindrops of Tishtrya had to be flattened as dots. But when the medium permitted, the raindrops took the form of granules, as on the gold ring of a Mithraic *pater* (Fig. 64). What's more, the positioning of the granules in between the legs of its dog clearly alluded to Tishtrya as the Dog Star of the Canis Major constellation, and ascertained that this triangular formation symbolized Sirius.



Fig. 62 - Triskeles in lieu of the three dots for Tishtrya.



Fig. 63 – Sirius forming the *Winter Triangle* with two other stars (Wiki)



Fig. 64 – Three granules between a dog's legs. (same as Figs. 26a, b)



Fig. 65 – *Farr* emblem enclosed in a pearl circle. Islamic Museum Berlin.

A further step in the development of this symbol was from granules to pearls. It was a logical evolution; for the pearl not only scintillated like raindrops but had a clear aquatic connection. In addition, as we shall see in sec. XI.12, the pearl was considered to be the underwater receptacle of the *farr* and was therefore imbued with auspiciousness. It thus became an oft-used auspicious symbol (Fig. 65).<sup>116</sup>

What needs to be explained, however, is the reason for its adoption by Mithraic societies and their avatars. Was there a particular link to Mithra that justified its popularity in the Mithraic milieu? I believe the answer is yes, for two reasons. Even though the *Avesta* has been purged of many pre-Zoroastrian aspects of Mithra, it still contains useful information for our study. Stanza 143 of the *Mehr Yasht* (*Yt.10*), for instance, likens the brightness of Mithra's face to Tishtrya. In other words, Tishtrya's brilliance reflected

<sup>116</sup> See Soudavar 2003, 56-62.

Mithra's solar brilliance. Moreover, Tishtrya is strongly attached to the Aryan *farr* (*Yt.18.2-7*), which therefore makes it an associate of Mithra as the main purveyor of *farr* (*Yt.10.16, 10.27*). Furthermore, Tishtrya was directly linked to Apam Napāt as Lord of the Night, since *Yt.8.4* explains that it derives its brilliance (*chithra*) from this deity, and that's why in Sasanian coinage, the three dots are sometimes juxtaposed with the two-legged *ankh* sign of Apam Napāt (Fig. 59). In another instance, Apam Napāt—in the guise of an Eros-looking deity—is offering a *dastār* (symbol of victory and *farr*) with a three-pearl pendant to a Sasanian king (Figs. 54, 55). As emblem of Tishtrya, the pendant obviously increased the *farr* power of the *dastār*.

Since the *mithraeum* was based on a duality that encompassed water and fire, sun and moon, day and night, and ultimately Mithra and Apam Napāt, Tishtrya became the perfect celestial symbol to reflect this duality as it was linked to both Mithra and Apam Napāt. As such, it was an auspicious symbol adopted by the Order of the Golden Fleece (Figs. 24a, b), by Freemasons (Fig. 25), and by dervish orders (Fig. 22).

#### IV.3 - Tamerlane's Three Dots vs. the Ottoman *Cintamani*

In July of 1402, Tamerlane (Teymur, r. 1370-1405) defeated the Ottoman sultan, Yıldırım Bayezid (r. 1389-1402), and put him in a cage, in which he later committed suicide. Bayezid had besieged Constantinople for more than two decades, and Tamerlane's intervention caused the retreat of the Ottomans, and postponed the fall of the Byzantine capital for half a century. Curiously, both Tamerlane and the Ottomans used a three-dot symbol as their imperial emblem. Tamerlane used it for the branding of his mounts, on his coinage (Fig. 66), and on his edicts,<sup>117</sup> while the Ottomans used it almost everywhere. It seems that Salim I (r. 1512–20) was the first to use it, initially as a solitary three-dot symbol (Fig. 67), and then in conjunction with undulated lines, in a combination that has been dubbed "*cintamani*" (Fig. 68). No satisfactory explanation has been hitherto proposed for this symbol. In adopting it, the Ottomans were certainly not trying to emulate Tamerlane who had inflicted a humiliating defeat upon them. But if they both integrated this pagan symbol into their imperial repertoire, it's because they both revered dervishes from the Eastern Iranian world. Tamerlane's patron saint was the celebrated Ahmad Yasavi (1093-1166), for whom he built a magnificent mausoleum (in

<sup>117</sup> Ghazvini (Ghazvini 1953, 61-62) quotes Tamerlane's biographer Ebn-e Arabshāh:

كان نقش خاتمه راستی راستی یعنی صدقت نجوت، و میسم دوایه و سره سکنه علی الدرهم و الدینار ثلث حلق هكذا.\*.  
(The motto engraved on his signet reads "rāsty rasty" meaning "righteousness is deliverance" and the branding sign of his mounts as well as the emblem of his coinage, whether dinar or dirham, was a triple circle symbol like .\*)

southern Kazakhstan). Salim I, on the other hand, was much indebted to the Janissaries with whose help he had dethroned his father and eliminated a rival brother. The Janissaries had as patron saint the Khorāsānian Sufi master Hājji Bektāsh Vali (d. 1271) who belonged to the same tradition as Yasavi.<sup>118</sup> Since dervishes commonly sported a triple-dot burn mark, we may assume that the followers of Yasavi and Bektāsh Vali had it as well, hence Tamerlane and Salim's adoption of the same emblem.



Fig. 66 - Three dots on Teymur's coin. Private coll.



Fig. 67 - Robe of Salim I. 16<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey. Topkapi Saray Museum.



Fig. 68 - Turkish velevet with *cintamani* sign. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Metropoliatan Museum.

The so called "Tamerlane letter" of the Archives Nationales in Paris provides further information in this respect, despite being a forgery. As I have argued elsewhere, this supposed letter of Tamerlane to Charles VI of France was the work of the Dominican Monsignor Jean of Soltāniyyeh (d. 1412) who, upon receiving word of Tamerlane's victory, decided to present himself as his envoy to various European princes and announce the good news to them. Sylvestre de Stacy had first published it in 1822, and Mohammad Ghazvini published it again in 1921 in a Persian journal that included an illustration. A prominent round seal mark that appeared on Ghazvini's illustration has literally evaporated in the meantime, because of the bad ink and poor quality of the material the Monsignor had used.<sup>119</sup> The Archives Nationales has a duplicate of the photo supplied to Ghazvini for his article, but it has darkened with time and its seal mark is hardly legible (Fig. 70).<sup>120</sup> Ghazvini's description of the seal, however, provides valuable information. While the document is a forgery, its seal mark was probably a good imitation of Tamerlane's, for it conforms to Ebn-e Arabshāh's description that it had a

<sup>118</sup> Hājji Bektāsh Vali came from Khorāsān to Anatolia, was a contemporary of Mowlānā, and a follower of Bābā Elyās Khorāsāni; Afshāri & Mir Abedini 1995, 64 and 114.

<sup>119</sup> Soudavar 1999, 256-60; Soudavar 2013, 188-89.

<sup>120</sup> I am indebted to Mme. E. Marguin-Hamon of the Archives Nationales for providing me this photo.

"triple-circle mark" and the motto "*rāsty rasty*" (righteousness is deliverance).<sup>121</sup> The latter motto can also be found on Sasanian Mithraic seals and embodies a core principle of Mithraic societies (see sec. VII.3). Ghazvini confirms the existence of both of these on the seal mark, and describes that it also bore a wobble sign that "looked like an ω." This wobble sign is faintly visible next to the dots of the seal mark (Fig. 70), and is similar to the emblem on the Mithraic *pater's* bonnet (Fig. 69). It looks like a curled wave. Wave lines convey—almost universally—the idea of water to the extent that they are often used as the symbol of Aquarius [~~~~].<sup>122</sup> Moreover, a seal from the Achaemenid period shows one such line above a blazing fire altar (Fig. 71). Since Apam Napāt presided over nighttime ceremonies, this wavy line must refer to him. It thus seems that prior to the Sasanian adoption of a two-legged *ankh* sign for Apam Napāt (Fig. 60), a less elaborate symbol was used to designate him, that of a water wave. The latter symbol must have lingered on in the more conservative parts of Central Asia to eventually reach Tamerlane and Salim. These water signs provide further confirmation for Tishtrya's close relationship with Apam Napāt, and are a testimony to the resilience of structures and symbols associated with Mithraic societies, from Rome to Central Asia.



Fig. 69 - Wiggle sign on *pater's* bonnet (detail of Fig. 30)

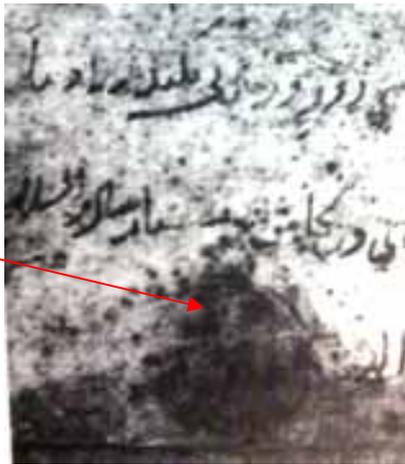


Fig. 70 - Photo of Tamerlane's letter (from 1931) still showing the fake seal imprint.<sup>123</sup>



Fig. 71 - Fire altar and Apam Napāt's wave symbol (Curtis & Simpson 2010, 389)

<sup>121</sup> See note 117 *supra*.

<sup>122</sup> Because of the rise of the seas at nighttime, water is described in the *Bondahesh* as "associated with the moon"; Dādāgi 1990, 110. There was therefore a natural association between the water, the moon, and Apam Napāt (as Lord of the Night).

<sup>123</sup> I am indebted to Mrs. Elsa Marguin of the Archives Nationales for providing me a copy of this photo.

#### IV.4 - The Solar Chariot

Since Mithra was associated with the sun, Mithra had to be able to follow it in its daily movement across the skies. Mithra was thus provided a *quadriga* with horses that had golden hoofs in the front and silver ones in the back (*Yt.10.125*). It created such a powerful image for the sun god that in the Roman World, Helios was often depicted with a *quadriga*, whether alone (Fig. 52) or part of the Zodiac (Fig. 72, see also sec. XIV.12).



Fig. 72 – Mosaic floor  
afrom Sepphoris (Fig.  
366)



Fig. 73 - Chinese textile. Jin or Yuan period  
From Hebei province. Photo: courtesy of Dale Gluckman.



Fig. 74 – Sketch of Bāmiyān  
frescoes. (Courtesy F. Grenet)

But as Frantz Grenet has noticed, in Bāmiyān, the Buddha also stands, Mithra-like, on a *quadriga*, with a nimbus behind his head and a radiant disk around him (Fig. 74).<sup>124</sup> Additionally, we recognize in the hands of the angels in the top corners of the fresco, as well as flowing behind Buddha's head, flying ribbons called *dastār*, which we described as *farr* symbols associated with Mithra and Apam Napāt. Further east, we have the example of a Chinese textile in which not only a radiant Buddha is seated on a *quadriga*, but he is flanked by two servants that strongly resemble the Cautes and Cautopates pair of the *mithraeum* (Fig. 73).

Thus, the use of *quadrigae* for these eastern divinities is one more element that pushes the origin of Mithraic iconography out of Roman territories, and into Iranian ones.

#### IV.5 - The Mithraic Bonnet

Mithra, as well as most other *mithraeum* figures, typically wears the so called Phrygian bonnet, which was red. In Europe, not only the members of the Order of the Golden

<sup>124</sup> Soudavar 2003, 27; Grenet 1993, 87-92.

Fleece wore such a bonnet (Fig. 82),<sup>125</sup> but also Marianne, the symbol of the French Revolution (Fig. 84). Red headgear was a constant feature of brotherhoods and revolutionaries, especially the Safaviyyeh dervishes (Fig. 81) and Safavid princes (Fig. 79), who were called *qezelbāsh* (red hat). But ascetics, like the one depicted in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century tinted drawing from Esfahan, wore them as well (Fig. 132). In Iran, Mithra's own bonnet was more elaborate and bore solar emblems. A Parthian bronze bonnet of Mithra from the MFA in Boston, for instance, has a quilted texture adorned with sunflowers, with two prominent ones on its two sides (Fig. 75). Mithra's bonnet on the Sasanian rock-relief of Naqsh-e Rujab has a lion head (Fig. 78), and as shall we see, Shāpur I's Mithraic bonnet had a falcon head (Fig. 167). In Gandhara, an attendant among a group of gift bearers for the Buddha wears a Phrygian hat with a stylized falcon bird carved on its side (Fig. 77). Further east, the bonnet got thicker and more rigid, especially when it served to hide the long hair of brotherhood members (see sec. VIII.6). But to proclaim their Mithraic affiliation, Sogdian merchants, who traded goods with China, wore a sunflower emblem on their upright headgear, and a lion mask on their arms (Fig. 76).

Even though the spirit of equality was essential in brotherhoods, the more important orders had a tendency to differentiate the accoutrements of their leaders, especially their headgear. Thus, the headgear of Philip III of Spain (r. 1598-1621), as the Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece, became substantially more elaborate (Fig. 83), while that of a Mevlevi dervish leader of Konya took the shape of a bishop's miter (Fig. 80).

A 16<sup>th</sup>-century tinted drawing by Mohammadi depicts a pastoral scene with dervishes distributing a communal meal (Fig. 58). It provides a catalog of dervish gear in the artist's native Khorāsān. We have of course a dervish with a red bonnet and the auspicious *dastār* (ribbon) tied around it (on the left side of the painting). Two bare-headed dervishes wear their sheepskins on their shoulders, as the *lohan* of Fig. 48 does, while many more have sheepskin bonnets tied with a ribbon. At the center is a master of ceremony who distributes the food, and wears a straight bonnet seemingly decorated with Islamic names and words, as in the case of the Mevlevi one in Fig. 80. We can thus see that the dervish paraphernalia, while constantly changing, maintained Mithraic elements, namely the bonnet, the sheepskin, and the *dastār*, often combining all of them into one single headgear.

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<sup>125</sup> This MMA painting by Simon Marmion depicts Charles the Bold's chamberlain, Jean d'Auxy, as Joseph of Arimathea wearing the red cape and red bonnet of the Order of the Golden Fleece; Soudavar 2008, 69-71.



Fig. 75 - Bronze Mithraic bonnet from Iran. MFA Boston.



Fig. 76 - Mithraic Sogdian bonnet. Tang, China. (Courtesy Gisèle Croës)



Fig. 77 - Mithraic bonnet. Gandhara, 4<sup>th</sup> century. (Courtesy: J. Tucker)



Fig. 78 - Mithra and Anāhitā. Naqsh-e Rajab.



Fig. 79 - Safavid prince Bahrām Mirzā. (TKSM, H2154/148)



Fig. 80 - Mevlevi order miter. Rumi Shrine, Konya.



Fig. 81 - Fur bonnet of the Safaviyyeh order with ribbon and plumes. (TKSM, H2160/85)



Fig. 82 - Jean d'Auxy with the red hat and red cape of the Order of the Golden Fleece (Soudavar 2008, 68)



Fig. 83 - Philip III as Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece. J.Pantoja de la Cruz, 1608. Louvre (Lens)



Fig. 84 - Marianne on the Barricades, by Delacroix, 1830. Louvre (Lens)

#### IV.6 - The Chamrosh Bird

The Chamrosh was an essential bird of the *farr* mythology, but a bird that Zoroastrianism put aside because of its affiliation with problematic gods, i.e., Mithra and Apam Napāt (sec. XI.19). Its memory, however, was kept alive in the popular mind to the extent that the Chamrosh became a prominent decorative motif, especially for Sasanian and Sogdian textiles, many of which found their way into Western ecclesiastic institutions.<sup>126</sup> A pheasant, wearing the same necklace as the Chamrosh, was used by the Order of the Golden Fleece for their swearing ceremony on the occasion of the Banquet of the Pheasant in 1454; it also appeared, in the company of a peacock, on a Roman Mithraic sarcophagus (Fig. 18). These two birds are also depicted on a silver bottle from the Iran Bāstān Museum of Tehran (Figs. 86a, b), and show that the pair portended the same auspiciousness in the Iranian world as in the Western one. But on this bottle, instead of wearing the pearl necklace, the Chamrosh holds it in his beak as if it was a gift to impart. Interestingly, a similar bird with a necklace in its beak is also depicted on an Italian church capital of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 85). It is by no means an exceptional phenomenon, for as we shall see in sec. XIV.8, early on, Christianity incorporated many Mithraic motifs into its iconographic repertoire.

Finally, the appearance of the Chamrosh on the funerary beds of Sogdian merchants who had settled in China pushes once more the epicenter of the Mithraic symbols out of the Roman world and further east, into Iranian territories (Fig. 87).



Fig. 85 - Italian capital with necklace-carrying bird. Louvre



Fig. 86 – Sasanian silver jug depicting the Chamrosh and a peacock on its sides. Iran Bāstān Museum

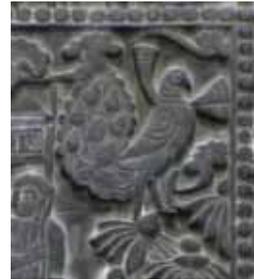


Fig. 87 – Funerary stone. Tang China. MFA Boston

<sup>126</sup> Jeroussalimkaja 1993, 115-17; see also Fig. 229 here.

## CHAPTER V

### THE AVATARS OF MITHRAIC SOCIETIES

#### V.1 - *Luti* and *Lāt*

Growing up in Tehran of the 1950s, one was inevitably exposed to a popular sub-culture that was associated with a group of roaming young men known as the *lutis* or *lāts*, who represented both good and bad. While they were generally considered to be ruffians, hooligans and enforcers, many anecdotes circulated in praise of their qualities. It was said that the *luti* would spend his last *tumān* on friends, and to show his disregard for money, he wouldn't hesitate to light his girlfriend's cigarette by setting a 100-*tumān* bill ablaze! He was often penniless (*mofles*), but magnanimous as soon as he had money.

*Lutis* or *lāts* carried a knife, which they wielded as a weapon in their brawls, mostly to defend the "honor" of their friends which they addressed as *dādāsh* (or simply *dāsh*) meaning brother. For in reality they were part of a loose brotherhood with a certain code of conduct. They would drink alcohol only by turning their back to Mecca, because they considered themselves as Moslems, and that was their way to show some respect for their religion. They would not speak in terms of I but we (*mā*); not the royal we, but one that emphasized the bonds of friendship in their brotherhood and promoted the concept of "one for all and all for one." Because this concept had a wide—almost romantic—appeal, a large segment of the population emulated their language and mode of speech, including the higher strata of society. Of particular interest to us shall be their constant use of expressions such as *chāker-am* (I am your devotee), which proffered humility, but also, as we shall see, linked them back to earlier brotherhoods.

Willem Floor has suggested that there may be an etymological connection between *luti* and the Persian word *lavāte*, as well as the Arabic word *liwāt*, both of which meant sodomy.<sup>127</sup> This kind of homosexuality, though, was by no means a trademark of the *lutis*, but an almost natural phenomenon among tightly knit groups of men whose sexual desires—particularly aroused by excessive drinking—was oriented toward young men with whom they were in constant contact, rather than women whom they seldom saw. It was rampant, for instance, among the *qezelbāsh*, i.e., the dervishes of the Safavid order who also indulged in heavy drinking, to the extent that when Shāh Tahmāsb (r. 1524-76)

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<sup>127</sup> Floor 2010.

repented from past sins and resorted to religious bigotry, he issued a decree banning his followers from engaging in wine drinking and *lavāte*.<sup>128</sup> That decree, however, neither stopped the Qezelbāsh nor the Safavid princes from continuing those practices, as Tahmāsb's son and successor, Esmā'il II (r. 1576-78), died from intoxication in the arms of one lover boy, and a subsequent heir to the throne, Hamza Mirzā (1566-86), was killed by another one.

Similar to the *fatās* who carried a bowl called *kās ol-fotovvat*, the *lutis* carried, within a shawl tied around their waist, a brass bowl that they used in their drinking bouts.<sup>129</sup> While the dervishes carried a sheepskin, *lutis* kept a ram in their backyards and greeted each other by wishing long life for their respective rams.<sup>130</sup> A 17<sup>th</sup>-century drawing of such a ram depicts it with a turban tied around its horns—which was a symbol of the auspicious glory, or *farr*, associated with this animal (Fig. 88).<sup>131</sup> It was painted by the celebrated Rezā-ye `Abbāsi (d. 1635) who, as I shall later explain, mixed with the *lutis* and wrestlers, and was constantly penniless despite high demand for his artworks. The depicted ram was a living image of a similar Sasanian symbol that also portended *farr* and was associated with Mithra (Fig. 89). Here again, we have a brotherhood that cherished the symbolism of a bovine, and engaged in drinking bouts. And like the dervishes who adopted Abraham as their patron saint, the *lutis* may have found it opportune to link their name to the Koranic—and biblical—prophet Lot (Arabic: Lut).<sup>132</sup>

Generally speaking, the *lutis* didn't have a structured organization. They clung together as a group of men with similar ideals and demeanors. There was, however, a faction among them who frequented a wrestling forum, or *zurkhāneh*, which had a hierarchical structure. The measure of strength and technical prowess created a natural hierarchy among wrestlers. But besides these two qualities, the chief wrestler or *pahlavān* was also supposed to act like a caring father, similar to the *pater* of the *mithraeum*. In fact, as the late Mehrdād Bahār had noted, there are a few markers that clearly link the *zurkhāneh* to the Roman *mithraeum*, including its shallow stone pit (Fig. 90), the presence of water, and the leather short pants that the wrestlers wear (Figs. 90-91).<sup>133</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Soudavar 1999, 51; Qomi 1980, I:386.

<sup>129</sup> Nafisi 1989, 145.

<sup>130</sup> Mo'in 1974, II:274 "سر قوچ شما سلامت باد"

<sup>131</sup> Soudavar 2003, 24.

<sup>132</sup> Dehkhodā 1994, "luti."

<sup>133</sup> Bahār 1997, 36



Fig. 88 – A ram depicted with a *dastār* tied to his horns. By Rezā-ye `Abbāsi, dated 1634. Private collection.



Fig. 89 – Ram with *dastārs*. Detail of Sasanian bronze plate. EMS Collection.



Fig. 90 – Wrestlers exercising in the *zurkhāneh* (web)



Fig. 91 – Wrestler team of a truck plant. Iran 1976

As a cohesive urban group, strongly built, armed, and occasionally led by charismatic *pahlavāns*, the *lāts* and *lutis* had the potential to wield enormous political power. There is a saying in Persian that *luti, tā sad tumān luti-ye* (a *luti* can only be magnanimous up to 100 *tumāns*), i.e., there was a limit to his magnanimity, and he could be bought if paid more. As it happened, their muscle power was often bought. Indeed, the main force that toppled the government of Mohammad Mossadegh, the elected Prime Minister of Iran in 1953, was generated by a group of *lutis* who were the beneficiaries of large sums of money distributed by the CIA.

But they could also act out of belief. A splinter group of the same people who participated in the 1953 event, was led by Tayyeb Hājji Rezāi in support of the unsuccessful 1963 uprising stirred by Āyatollāh Khomeini against the Shāh's regime. Tayyeb didn't receive money on that occasion, but paid instead with his life. On the other hand, his former companion, Sha`bān-e Ja`fari, who was a *pahlavān* of the *zurkhāneh*

and was on the government's payroll, remained a steadfast supporter of Shāh Mohammad-Rezā Pahlavi (r. 1941-78).

In sum, these groups were always perceived to have two sides to them, and the words *luti* and *lāt* were gradually used to differentiate these two sides, i.e., the good from the bad. *Luti* was synonymous with being chivalrous, giving, and a trustworthy friend, while *lāt* characterized the hooligan, the brut and the extortionist.<sup>134</sup> This dichotomy in perception also characterizes the accounts of earlier brotherhoods, for like the Roman Mysteries, they could attract disciplined military men as well as pirates. It shall therefore come as no surprise to us that the *`ayyārs* whom we shall next study, and to whom the *lutis* have often been likened, had the same type of dual reputation.

One must also note that *lut* and *lāt* are words that existed in Middle Persian. *Lut* and *lutag* meant naked,<sup>135</sup> and described a state of semi-nakedness similar to that of the Mysteries' initiates and Iranian wrestlers (Figs. 90-91),<sup>136</sup> whereas *lāti* meant "generosity" (sec.VII.3). Even though the *lāt* came to represent the brut and the extortionist, he was—by definition—generous and giving. As a result, he was always penniless (*mofles*).

## V.2 - The *`Ayyārs*

In reading the chronicles of the post-Islamic era, one often comes across the name *`ayyār*, referring to a group of militia men, usually qualified as troublemakers, bandits, or highway robbers. Occasionally though, they were praised for their chivalry and magnanimity, especially if they achieved high status as did Ya`qub-e Laith-e Saffār (r. 840-79), the founder of the semi-autonomous Saffārid dynasty based in southeast Iran. His power base was a group of *`ayyārs*, most of whom were artisans and craftsmen. Ya`qub himself was in fact a coppersmith (*saffār*).

Etymologically, the name *`ayyār* derives from MP *ayār* (NP *yār*), meaning friend, and as Claude Cahen observed, *`ayyārisim* covered a geographical expanse roughly equivalent to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>137</sup> It belonged to a pre-Islamic Iranian tradition that was more popular than aristocratic. A folkloric tale about the exploits of one of their legendary figures, namely Samak-e *`Ayyār* (Samak the *`ayyār*), gives much detail about this tradition as well as the milieu in which it flourished.

<sup>134</sup> *Luti* also came to designate various performers, which previously were qualified as *shāters* (sec. VIII.3).

<sup>135</sup> See Faravashi 2002, 348 in which he lists *lut*, *rut* and *lutag*, all meaning naked; also Afshāri 2003, Lxxiii.

<sup>136</sup> See for instance Afshāri 2003, Lxxiv; Kāshefi 1971, 86.

<sup>137</sup> Cahen 1959, [71]; Zakeri 1995, 7.

Like the knife-wielding *lutis* who called each other *dāsh/dādāsh* (brother), the *`ayyārs* carried a knife and addressed each other as *barādar* (brother). And they formed a brotherhood in which the bonds of friendship were strengthened through drinking bouts qualified as *shādi-khordan* (drinking to happiness).<sup>138</sup> And again, as in the case of *lutis*, there was mutual respect and intermingling between the *`ayyārs* and the wrestlers, as exemplified by the following anecdote:

"after a few whirls, (the chief wrestler) Qāyem took a bowl of wine in his hands, stood up and uttered: "to the happiness (*shādi*) of the man whose name has been associated with *javānmardi* all over the world, namely Samak-e `Ayyār. Having said this, he drank his wine."<sup>139</sup>

Whereas the Mongols had a similar gesture called *kāseh-giri* (lit. to hold a bowl),<sup>140</sup> by which a prince offered wine to the *khān* or a prince of superior rank, the *shādi-khordan* of the *`ayyār* community was an expression of esteem or sympathy among peers, and could also go from superior to subordinate or the other way around. It was characterized as *shādi-ye barādari* (happiness in brotherhood) or *shādi-ye rafiqi* (happiness in friendship), and consequently, the followers of Samak would refer to themselves as his *shādi-khordehs*, or "those who had drunk to his *shādi* (happiness)." A description of the pledge they made to each other describes the principles of camaraderie that they valued:

"we shall be of help (*yār*) to each other and befriend each other, and shall not revoke it as long as alive; we shall not engage in deceit or double-crossing, nor be a traitor to one another, nor consent to such (deceitful) practices; we shall be a friend to friends, an enemy to enemies, and we shall strive for the well being of each other."<sup>141</sup>

Interestingly, there are no references to Koranic verses or Islamic values in their pledge. On the other hand, the *`ayyārs* often swore on "the life of the pure (*pākān*) and righteous (*rāstān*)," or "light, fire and Mehr (Mithra)," or "Mithra and the seven stars," which clearly points to a tradition stemming from Mithraic societies. Two other requirements further strengthen these connections: that they had to be instructed in the secrets of *`ayyāri* and they had to engage in nocturnal activities (*shab-ravi*). Nocturnal ceremonies and oaths of secrecy were a staple of Roman Mysteries, and as we shall see, one of the reasons for creating a cave-like atmosphere in the *mithraeum*. The oath and the various activities of the *`ayyārs* were supposed to develop "courageous and fearless" companions

<sup>138</sup> Nātel Khānlari 1985, 39, 86-87.

<sup>139</sup> Nātel Khānlari 1985, 87-89

<sup>140</sup> Soudavar 1996a, 120-21.

<sup>141</sup> Nātel Khānlari 1985,92

in arms "who would not fault each other, would withhold criticism of each other, and above all be a *javānmard*."<sup>142</sup> The latter Persian word summed up the qualities that an *`ayyār* should have. It represented a code of conduct whose virtues were explicated in the *Qābus-nāmeḥ*, a mirror-for-princes manual composed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by a ruler of northern Iran for his son.<sup>143</sup> It did not advocate allegiance to any particular political entity or religion, but emphasized an honor code that valued loyalty among free-spirited men. It prescribed a way of life that stood above religion or other moral codes, one that could be adopted by pirates, warriors, guardsmen, ascetics, and acrobats, as well as traveling entertainers.<sup>144</sup> The depiction of one of these entertainers from 17<sup>th</sup>-century India, a *shir-bān* or lion-tamer, gives us a visual image of the *`ayyār*'s accoutrements (Fig. 92). Indeed, the general description of the *`ayyār*, as stated in the Dehkhodā dictionary, reads as follows:

In the old days, the *shāters* and the *`ayyārs* used to wear a tall hat with a pendant, had numerous leg-wraps, tied a wolf-skin around their waist, and had two knives hanging from their belt.<sup>145</sup>

It's a description that admirably reflects the details of our entertainer parading his lion, especially the grey color of the wolf-skin on his waist, in contrast with the brownish color of his leather pants, shoes and hat. And, in addition to his two knives, we can see a drinking bowl in the shape of a wine vessel hanging from his belt. It's also a description that has much in common with the Coquillard portrayed in Fig. 37. We thus observe similar attitudes, behaviors and paraphernalia among a wide category of social groupings that included the *`ayyārs*, *fatās*, *javānmards*, *shāters*, *lutis*, wrestlers, different artisans and travelers, all displaying characteristics that point to a common origin.

### **V.3 - Fotovvat, `Ayyāri, Javānmardī and the Link to the Imam `Ali**

The historical chronicles often do not differentiate between the *`ayyār*, *fatā*, and *javānmard* appellations, and use them almost interchangeably. For instance, the chief of the *`ayyārs*, who was referred to as *sar-e `ayyārān* (head of *`ayyārs*) in Persian, was also named *ra'is al-fetyān* (head of the *fatās*) in Arabic.<sup>146</sup> And we saw that Samak the *`ayyār* was renowned for his *javānmardī*, which designated qualities akin to the Western notion

<sup>142</sup> Nātel Khānlari 1985, 94.

<sup>143</sup> Kaykāvus 1999, 243-64.

<sup>144</sup> Afshāri 2003, xix-xxiii.

<sup>145</sup> Dehkhodā 1994, "*`ayyār*"

<sup>146</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2- CD: "*`ayyār*"

of chivalry. As some of the *fotovvat-nāmehs* explain, "in Persian, *fotovvat* is called *javānmardi*, and the essence of *javānmardi* is to help others."<sup>147</sup>

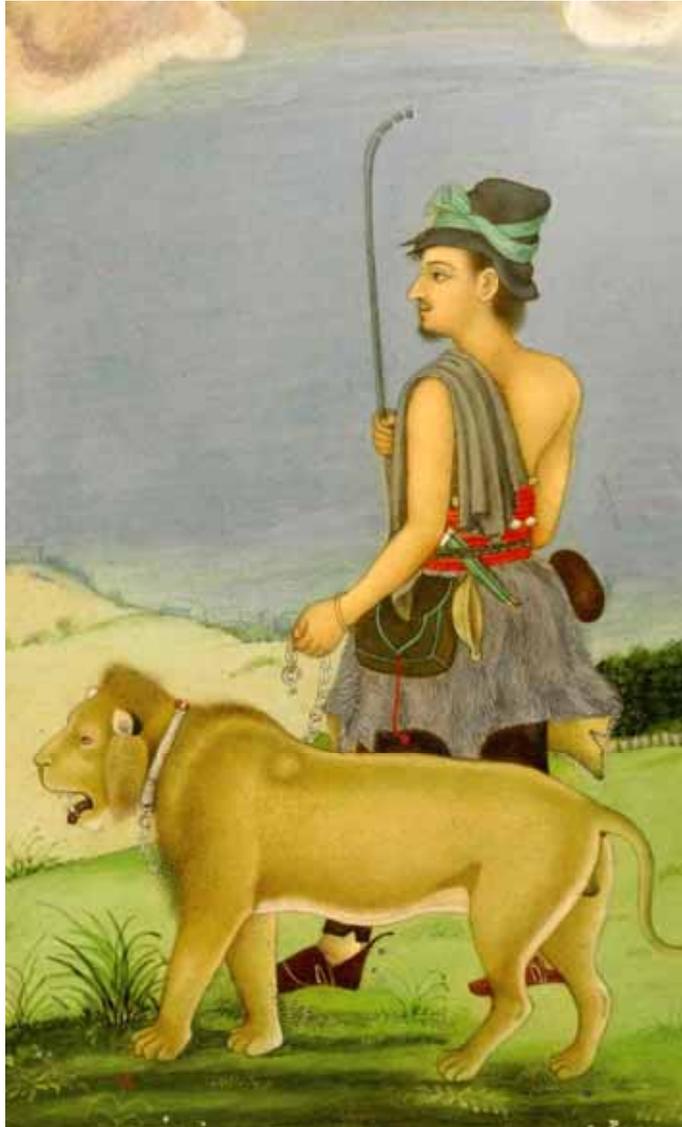


Fig. 92 – A lion tamer with *`ayyār*-like paraphernalia: A wolf skin, ribboned hat and leather pants, with two daggers, a drinking bowl and a pouch. 19th Century copy of a 16th century Mughal painting. Dehli, India. EMS Collecton

<sup>147</sup> Afshāri 2003, 31.

While many have tried to portray the *fotovvat* as an Islamic phenomenon,<sup>148</sup> Mohsen Zakeri suggests that it was in the year 683H/1285 that an Arab chronicler first used the word *fetyān* to translate the Persian word *javānmardān*, and to characterize the followers of a Persian militia leader of Basra named Māh-Afridun.<sup>149</sup> There are in fact several reasons to see the words *fotovvat/fetyān* as translations of *javānmardi/javānmardān* and not vice versa.

As noted, the word *fotovvat* neither appears in the Koran nor in ancient Arabic literature. On the other hand, the word *fatā* existed and designated "a youth" (in the masculine mode). Grammatically, *fotovvat* is an infinitive—derived from *fatā*—that has been turned into an abstract noun. It has a precise meaning "youth," which is neither associated with the masculine gender, nor imbued with qualities of chivalry. The Arabicization of the name was supposed to add an Islamic veneer to a phenomenon that ran counter to orthodox Islam; the *ʿayyārs* and *fatās* of Baghdad, for instance, were renowned for their drinking bouts, and for their skirmishes with religious authorities.<sup>150</sup>

But, in addition to its Arabic garb, the word *fatā* also offered a religious affiliation that was exploited by Abu-ʿAli Balʿami—in his Persian translation of the *History of Tabari* (c. 963)—where he proffers that "God Almighty called nobody a *javānmard* except for Abraham (in XXI:60) and the Seven Sleepers (in XXVIII:11-13)."<sup>151</sup> He seizes upon the appearance of the word *fatā* in these two verses to equate it with *javānmard*, and imbue this Arabic word with the ideals of *javānmardi*. Moreover, later literature uses the fortuitous appearance of *fatā* in conjunction with the name of Abraham in verse XXI:60, to reinforce Abraham's position as Abol-fetyān, or "Father of all *fatās*."<sup>152</sup> It also uses verse XVIII:13—describing the Seven Sleepers as "young men(*fatās*) who believed in their Lord"—to claim that, since the Sleepers *believed* in God and were qualified as *fatās* in the said verse, "true belief" was inherent to *fotovvat*.<sup>153</sup> There is, however, a major problem with these interpretations; the word *fatā* appears in another verse of the Koran,

<sup>148</sup> See for instance Elāhi 1994, or even Mohammad-Jaʿfar Mahjoub who, despite all the pre-Islamic indice that he sees in the *fotovvat*, nonetheless claims that "its practical origin is undoubtedly based on the exemplary demeanor and personality of the Imam ʿAli"; Mahjoub 2000, 15.

<sup>149</sup> Zakeri 2008.

<sup>150</sup> See section V.2. In 9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, many of them would drink and spill a cup of wine on the tomb of a revered Sufi poet, Abol-hendi Ghāleb b. Abdol-Qoddus, who had composed wine-related poems (*khamrya*), Mahjoub 2000, 28. For their skirmishes see note 163 infra.

<sup>151</sup> Balʿami 1999, 3:169. Koran XXI:60 : "They said: we heard a youth (*fatā*) make mention of them, who is called Abraham"

<sup>152</sup> See note 81 supra.

<sup>153</sup> See for instance Afshāri 2003, 112. The Seven Sleepers are also known as The Companions of the Cave.

in verse XII:36, where two youths (*fatās*) are incarcerated with Yusof (Joseph), one of whom says: "I saw myself pressing wine (*khamra*)." Although the wine-pressing image of this youth somehow reflected the *'ayyārs'* penchant for wine drinking, it nevertheless represented an activity banned by orthodox Islam, and did not confer virtuous qualities to the *fatā*.

Because these Koranic interpretations of the word *fatā* do not appear in the original Arabic work by Tabari (838-923), it is likely that Bal`ami was the first—or one of the firsts—to have elaborated a Koranic justification, even more so because he develops, in an earlier chapter of his book, a fictitious story to link the cousin `Ali of the Prophet Mohammad to *fotovvat*:

When the Prophet gave the famous Zolfaqār sword to his cousin `Ali, the latter struck his enemy in such a way that the Zolfaqār blew apart his protective shield, and split his head and chest in two; the Prophet then exclaimed: "There is no *fatā* but `Ali, no sword but Zolfaqār."<sup>154</sup>

This spurious *hadith* is one of the main reasons for portraying `Ali as the role model of the *fetyān*, at times even displacing Abraham as the Father of all *fatās*. But as the theologian and *hadith* expert Ebn-e Taymiyyah (1263-1328) once noted, all of these stories that linked the *fotovvat* to the Prophet and his entourage were baseless and of later fabrication.<sup>155</sup>

In most *fotovvat-nāmehs* these problems are conveniently bypassed, but not in the *Fotovvat-nāmeḥ-ye Soltāni* that the learned Molla Hosayn Kāshefi dedicated to the Teymurid Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā (r. 1469-1506). The court of Herāt under Soltān-Hosayn was heavily influenced by the presence of the celebrated Sufi poet Jāmi and his Naqshbandi entourage. Furthermore, the sultan, as well as his influential companion Amir `Ali-shir Navāi, were both literary figures who held dervish orders and similar congregations in high esteem. Thus, the etymological and Koranic justification problems that we previously cited could not be dissimulated from these learned patrons, and had to be addressed. Kāshefi tackles the first by avowing that *fatā* meant "a youth," and emphasizes that, in addition to this meaning, which he qualifies as "accurate" (*haqiqat*), one must also consider a figurative one (*majāz*) that pertains to the *javānmardi* traits of the *fatā*. To justify this dichotomy, he explains that: Uninitiated youth is like an

<sup>154</sup> Bal`ami, I:576, لا فتى إلا علىّ و لا سيف إلا ذو الفقار

<sup>155</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 140.

uneducated child who can reach excellence through education. That excellence is the state of *majāz*, which reflects the excellence of *fotovvat*.<sup>156</sup>

This is at best an exercise in sophistry, and doesn't explain why nobody else came up with this argument or addressed the etymological issue. Kāshefi then cleverly uses the dichotomy between his accurate and figurative meanings to justify the use of *fatā* for Yusof's prison companions: It accurately described their youthful state, but at the same time projected the potential for excellence that they were about to gain from their companionship with Yusof.<sup>157</sup> By explaining that *fatā* in this case also referred to a future state, he could whitewash the wine-pressing problem associated with Yusof's prison companions. The wine problem was thus buried in the past and disregarded.

In most of the *fotovvat-nāmehs* that trace the *fotovvat* chain of transmission back to the Prophet Mohammad, the latter's name is preceded by that of his cousin `Ali, who reputedly received his consecration from the Prophet himself. That was of course an appealing proposition to Shiites who venerated `Ali and considered him the legitimate successor of his cousin. `Ali had also displayed much valor on the battlefield and acquired a reputation for fairness, which were truly the most important characteristics of the *`ayyārs* and *javānmards*, and traits that even Sunnis recognized in him. But besides these merits, there was also a practical reason for his inclusion in that list. It emphasized brotherhood because of the oft-related Warning Hadith (حديث انذار), in which the Prophet Mohammad reputedly asked his following: "So who of you will help me in this mission and be my **brother** (*akhi*), my successor (*vasiyyi*), and my follower (*khalifati*) among you?" No one present responded except his young cousin `Ali.<sup>158</sup> Thus, in a *hadith* that even Sunnis accept as true, a bond of brotherhood was shown to have existed between Mohammad and `Ali, which allowed the *fotovvat* promoters to trace its roots to the immediate family of the Prophet.

#### V.4 - Nuh-e `Ayyār

An interesting character of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century, after the advent of Islam, was Nuh-e `Ayyār (Nuh the *`ayyār*). He was held in high esteem by many Sufi *shaykhs* who explained that Nuh was "renowned in his *fotovvat*, and all the *`ayyārs* of Neyshābur were at his command" or "he was the *pir* of Khorāsān in his own days, and renowned for his

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<sup>156</sup> Kāshefi 1971, 98-102.

<sup>157</sup> Kāshefi 1971, 98-102.

<sup>158</sup> See for instance Tabari 1967, II:321; Ebn-e Athir 1965, II:63.

hospitality and *javānmardi*."<sup>159</sup> What these statements show is that, contrary to the negative image that certain texts associated with the `ayyārs, Nuh wielded power over a vast region and commanded the respect of renowned Sufi *shaykhs* who did not hesitate to qualify him as a *pir*, an epithet usually reserved for the head of Sufi orders. It clearly shows that all of these groups shared common ideals and practices, which brought them together and created a potential for the formation of larger congregations.

The *fotovvat-nāmehs*, as well as Sufi literature, often made use of a charade type structure to explain the esoteric meaning of a name, or concept, through the association of a new word to each of its letters, provided that it began with the same letter. So, in trying to exalt the character of a *javānmard*, Nuh provides an explanation based on the spelling: ج-و-ا-م-ر-د (pronounced *joāmard* without the "n"), which was based on an Eastern dialect. It shows once again that the name *javānmard* and the concept of *javānmardi* were not borrowed from Arabic, but had firm roots in regional dialects, far away from Baghdad and outside the Arab-speaking centers of Iran.

As Nasrollah Pourjavadi astutely observes, the difference between the 9<sup>th</sup>-century "*joāmard*" charade of Nuh, and the one provided—six centuries later—by Kāshefi for "*fotovvat*," is quite telling: The words enumerated for the latter are primarily esoteric and predicated on man's orientation toward god, while the former is predicated on the relationship of one brother to another. Indeed, Nuh explains *joāmard* with the following terms: generosity, fidelity, trustworthiness, manliness, mercy, adherence to religion (جوامرد: جود، وفا، إمانت، مروءت، رحمت، دیانت), while Kāshefi explains *fotovvat* as: annihilation, detachment, fidelity, and foregoing attachments (فتوت: فنا، تجرید، وفا، ترک).<sup>160</sup> It shows that, even though the original emphasis of these congregations was on brotherhood, they gradually developed a mystical flavor and ascetic tilt. While this tilt had more appeal to the learned and literati, the brotherhood concept remained strong and even expanded among the lower strata of society whose members acquired additional names such as *akhi* (mostly in Anatolia), or *kākā* (in Kordestān and Fārs), which all meant "brother."

### V.5 - The Political Clout of the `Ayyārs

By the time An-Nāser was elevated to the Caliphate, Baghdad had lost its political clout, and power resided with the Turkic dynasties ruling over the most important centers of the Iranian Lands. The Caliph had little revenue and could not afford to maintain a standing

<sup>159</sup> Pourjavadi 2006, 109. The Sufi *shaykhs* who related these quotes about Nuh were the Malāmati Hamdun-e Qassār (Hamdun the cloth-washer) and Abol-fāzl-e Meybodī, the author of *Kashf-ol-asrār*.

<sup>160</sup> Pourjavādi 2006, 112-3; see also Appendix II for the same technique of attributing meanings to letters.

army. But, from the day the Arab armies invaded the Iranian Lands to the time they were displaced by Turkic warlords, there always existed, below the ruling elite, `ayyār-like congregations that wielded enormous power at local levels.

Some of these congregations were actually offshoots of the Sasanian cavalry. In early chronicles, they were referred to as *asvārān* (lit. horsemen), and, for instance, as Balādhuri (d. *circa* 892) recounts in his *Fotuh*, there were 4000 of them with the Persian general Rostam at the battle of Qādesiyya in 636, who negotiated a surrender agreement by which, as a group, they could join whichever Moslem army they wanted, fight whatever enemy they accepted, and settle wherever they wished. They were headed by one Daylam-e Hamrā' (Daylam the Red), and some of them were later moved to Damascus where they were called the *Pārsis*.<sup>161</sup>

Although the description is brief, it contains two points that illustrates the compatibility of the *asvārān* with the `ayyārs. First, they were a grouping that stuck together, and were free-spirited as they insisted on choosing for themselves, who to fight with or against, and on settling wherever they wanted. Second, their leader wore red, the color of choice for the leaders of Mithraic societies, such as the previously mentioned Khorramdiniyyeh.<sup>162</sup> And since many of the `ayyār groupings were described as marauders and highway robbers, one can very well imagine them as a mobile cavalry group.

Throughout the 10-11<sup>th</sup> century, these `ayyārs often rose up in rebellion, then looted and burned whole neighborhoods of Baghdad.<sup>163</sup> On one occasion, the governor of Baghdad, Bahā-od-dowleh Daylami (r. 989-1012), quelled the rebellion by sending in Ostād Hormoz, who was an `ayyār leader himself.<sup>164</sup> A few years later, the leader of the `ayyārs of Baghdad was one Abu-'Ali Borjami who grew so powerful that his followers told the Friday prayer leader: "If you want to deliver a sermon in Borjami's name, you can, but under no circumstances shall you mention the name of the Caliph or a king!"<sup>165</sup> Charismatic leaders such as Borjami of Baghdad, or Nuh-e `Ayyār who held sway over the `ayyārs of Khorāsān, or one Akhi Ahmad Shāh who headed the *fatās* of Konya

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<sup>161</sup> Balādhuri 1958, 399. The same conditions for surrender are also mentioned for another group of *asvārān* who concluded an agreement with Abu Musā Ash`ari, (*ibid*, 522).

<sup>162</sup> See note 72 *supra*

<sup>163</sup> `Ayyār rebellions broke out in the years 919, 920, 930, 937, 946, 1002, 1024, 1032, 1097, 1101, 1104, 1119, 1121, 1122, 1136, 1140, 1141, 1158, 1162 and 1170; Gabashvili 2008, 132-33; Mahjoub 2000, 35-36.

<sup>164</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 35-36.

<sup>165</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 36.

(Anatolia) and had "thousands of *ronud-o-jonud* (libertines and militia men)" at his disposal,<sup>166</sup> were obviously viable allies for political leaders.

#### V.6 - The Nāserian *Fotovvat*

It is in assessing this political landscape that the young and ambitious caliph An-Nāser concluded that, if in lieu of an army that he could not afford, he attracted the loyalty of various *ʿayyār* groupings and brought them under one umbrella, he could then dispose of a formidable force capable of defeating many a powerful army. And that is what he had in mind when he decided, in the year 1182, to be initiated through the offices of one Shaykh ʿAbdol-Jabbār, a Sufi *shaykh* who had a wide following in Baghdad.<sup>167</sup> In his quest for power, it did not matter that he, the Caliph and the Commander of the Sunni Faithful, bore allegiance to an order in which his mentor, the Shaykh ʿAbdol-Jabbār, linked his Sufi pedigree to the first Imam of the Shiites, i.e., ʿAli. It didn't matter either that he had to go through a process in which he donned the short pants of *fotovvat*, named *servāl*, and drank water and salt from the hands of a lowly *shaykh*; actions that lacked true Islamic pedigree. To the contrary, An-Nāser saw in its symbols an instrument for the control of unruly *ʿayyārs*, and in its procedures the possibility of creating a pyramidal hierarchy. He gathered different orders, unified them, instilled discipline in them, created a hierarchy, and placed himself at the top.<sup>168</sup> He also banned all other *fotovvat* and *javānmardi* associations in Baghdad. Meanwhile, he bribed his opponents to join his congregation. Some refused and chose exile rather than submission.<sup>169</sup> Those who stayed were forced to be reinitiated into his congregation. His instrument of control became the *servāl*: He would bestow it only on those he chose to.<sup>170</sup>

To a certain extent, An-Nāser's decision was not unlike that of the Duke Philip of Burgundy who instituted the Order of the Golden Fleece. As a cousin of the King of France, and ruler of the duchy of Burgundy, Philip had expanded his territories through

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<sup>166</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 96.

<sup>167</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 54, 142.

<sup>168</sup> Taeschner 1965, 986.

<sup>169</sup> Afshāri 2003, xxiv.

<sup>170</sup> Kāshefī 1971, LX. In addition to the *servāl*, An-Nāser popularized the *kamān-e goruheh* (i.e. slingshot) by presenting it as the weapon of choice for the *fatā*, one which he often practiced with, and encouraged others to follow his example. Despite the frequent mentioning of the *kamān-e goruheh* in the *javānmardi* literature, the only text that offers a semi-description of this weapon is the one published in Mahjoub 1996, 734, in which this *kamān* is used in addition to the regular slingshot, and as a more sophisticated one. It was probably a sort of mini catapult that used the spring power of bentwood in lieu of modern-day elastics. Hence the use of the word *kamān* (bow). In the *Borhān-e Qāte*, the slingshot (*falākhān*) is described as the *shāter's* weapon; Ebn-e Khalaf 185, 837.

inheritance and by matrimonial alliances. Although his expanded domain included the rich mercantile cities of the Netherlands, which generated much revenue, it lacked cohesiveness, because it was an amalgam of different nationalities, some Germanic, some Frankish, and some Flemish. In lieu of Sufi *shaykhs* with an *`ayyār* following, the feudal lords of his duchy were each capable of raising a small army from their dominions. To assure cohesiveness among such disparate entities, Philip created the Order of the Golden Fleece. His vassals and allies were invited to join the Order through an initiation process by which they swore allegiance to the Order and to its Sovereign, the Duke Philip. In lieu of the *servāl* that An-Nāser bestowed on the initiates, Philip used a golden chain with a golden-fleece pendant (Fig. 29) as the symbol of membership in the Order. The knights of the Order had to wear it at all times, and upon death or eviction, the chain had to be returned.<sup>171</sup>

An-Nāser used his *fotovvat* platform to forge alliances with neighboring princes who were sent *servāls*. The list includes the *`Ayubid* Malek az-Zāher (r. 1186-1216) and his cousin Malek al-Kāmel (1218-1238), the Saljuq ruler of Anatolia Kay-Kāvus b. Kay-Khosrow (1211-19), as well as the Ghurid ruler of Ghazna, Shahāb-od-din Mohammad (1202-1206).<sup>172</sup> Similarly, Philip sent golden chains of the Order of the Golden Fleece to form alliances with a number of rulers and feudal lords, including the King of Aragon, the Duke of Cleves and the Duke of Guelders.<sup>173</sup> In both cases, the structure of their respective orders strengthened alliances, and brought together militia men and military commanders, bound by an oath of allegiance to their Sovereign, and committed to lead a life with "honor."

An-Nāser's decision had four main effects on the subsequent evolution of the *fotovvat*. First, it partially lifted the veil of secrecy from these congregations, and brought them into the open. Second, through the edict (*manshur*) that he issued to regulate the conduct of his *fatās*, he paved the way for the dissemination of a multitude of plainly written *fotovvat-nāmehs* (these texts are in sharp contrast with congregation manuals of the Western world that remained shrouded in secrecy; see Appendix I). Third, the association of the *fotovvat* with the Caliphate allowed it to gain fame and prestige at the expense of other congregations, such as the *`ayyārs*. Fourth, the structured organization created by An-Nāser was thereafter emulated by congregations that fostered a large membership.

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<sup>171</sup> Paviot 2000, XXII.

<sup>172</sup> Kāshefi 1971, LVIII.

<sup>173</sup> Richard 2009, 68.

The *fotovvat* therefore became ennobled, and embodied thereafter the spiritual aspects of *javānmardi*, while *`ayyārisim* remained populist and gathered negative dust.

### V.7 - The Missing Link

All studies that have hitherto hinted at a possible link between later brotherhoods and a Mithraic past, have been unable to find similar organizations, or remnants of it, in the Sasanian era. This missing link, however, is essential for any theory that tries to demonstrate the continuity of the Mithraic phenomenon. In search of clues to this effect, one must concentrate on the most basic common traits and insignias, and not on later additions, such as the *paizeh* (a safe-conduct medal introduced by the Mongols) that some orders carried.<sup>174</sup>

Among insignias, we have already noted that the elaborate Roman (or Hellenistic) stone-mounted gold ring in Fig. 93 must have belonged to a high-ranking official of a Mithraic order, most probably to a *pater*. Interestingly, there exists a Persian parallel to it, with a similar gold ring and a jade bezel on which an Arabic dictum is carved (Fig. 94b):

عَزَّ مَنْ قَنَعَ وَ ذَلَّ مَنْ طَمَعَ

Powerful is the one who is content, and contemptible is the one who is greedy.



Fig. 93 - same as Fig. 26



Figs. 94 a, b- Gold ring of a Sufi leader with lion mask in lieu of a sunburst. (Christie's South Kensington. Sale of Apr. 7, 2011, lot 204)

This Arabic dictum, which is carved in an elaborate Persian *nasta`liq* script, datable to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizes detachedness from worldly goods, and promotes the state of *eflās* or pennilessness, so essential to Sufi teachings.<sup>175</sup> On the other hand, the gold ring itself is very similar to the Roman one, with one major difference: In lieu of the sunburst

<sup>174</sup> Kāshefi describes the *paizeh*, for instance, as an insignia of the *salleh-keshān* or food-transporters; Kāshefi 1971, 321.

<sup>175</sup> Kāshefi states that the Sufi neither possesses (anything) nor is possessed (by someone) الصَّوْفِيُّ لَا يَمْلِكُ وَ لَا يَمْلِكُ and must cherish the state of *eflās*; Kāshefi 1971, 44.

we have a lion mask that alludes to the Imam `Ali often referred to as Asadollāh (God's Lion). The lion, though, being a solar emblem, still connects the ring to a Mithraic past. And the rest of the composition mostly follows the pattern of the Roman ring, but instead of dogs embracing the three-dot symbol of Tishtrya, we now have a lion and a deer peering at it from a distance. Perhaps because the dog was considered unclean by Moslems, it was eliminated and replaced by more noble animals. As a result, the astrological significance of the three-dot sign is lost, and it becomes a mere decorative element, relegated to the rim of the ring (Fig. 94a). Nonetheless, when juxtaposed, the two rings demonstrate a number of points:

- a) They marvelously reflect the split of the \*M-S avatars into two parallel branches: one in the Greco-Roman world, and the other, in the Iranian world.
- b) While the Roman side emphasized astrology and mythology, the Iranian side pursued Sufi ideals.
- c) Judging by their sumptuous settings, these two seals must have belonged to high-ranking officials of their respective orders, and suggest that other members may have worn a ring too, especially since Sufi literature alludes to a ring worn by dervishes called *khātam-e tariqat* (the seal of the righteous path).<sup>176</sup>
- d) Finally, because from time immemorial office ranks were engraved on seals, we may try to find a Mithraic hierarchy among the corpus of Sasanian seals.

Since the reading of legends carved on Sasanian seals is not always obvious, our task can be facilitated by first analyzing the hierarchy of the congregations described in this chapter, in order to have an idea for what to look for on Sasanian seals.

The congregations mentioned so far fall under three general categories, each using a different name for its leadership, as summarized in the table below:

Sufi and dervish orders	artisans, guilds, `ayyārs	militias, wrestlers, `ayyārs
[ <i>naqīb</i> ]	<i>ostād</i>	<i>pahlavān</i>
<i>pir, bābā</i>		
<i>ostād-e shadd</i>		

<sup>176</sup> Dehkhodā "khātam-e tariqat"

### V.8 - Naqib

In the 1970's when I visited a Sufi gathering in Tehran, I noticed that they had invited a *sayyed* Mollā by the name of Sabzevāri, who inaugurated the evening ceremony by discussing the merits of "giving" and "detachment from earthly goods." Although he commanded much respect, he was not a member of the congregation, nor did he have a role in the hierarchy. He was just a figurehead. In reading the *fotovvat-nāmehs* of the Sufis and dervishes, one gets a clear feeling that the *naqib* too was a figurehead whose presence was occasionally necessary because of three factors: 1) since he was a *sayyed* and a descendent of the Imam `Ali, he brought a certain degree of legitimacy and prestige to the congregation; 2) because the *naqib* was supposedly knowledgeable about the genealogy of the *sayyeds* (i.e. descendants of the Prophet and the Imam `Ali), he had to certify the true *sayyed* claimants and reject the false ones; 3) he could also provide protection for the congregation. When the head of the congregation was himself a *sayyed* (as the Safavids claimed to be) there was evidently no need for a *naqib*; he could provide protection himself.

The *naqib* function thus represented an office dictated by circumstances and not by tradition. As a result, he had no Roman counterpart. We shall therefore consider him as a later addition and concentrate on the remaining ones.

### V.9 - Bābā/Pir

All dervish and Sufi orders were headed by a *bābā* or *pir*, whose names meant father (NP *pedar*). Indeed, while *bābā* is still used in that capacity in New Persian, *pir* is the condensed pronunciation of *piyar* (written as پیر), a word that still means father in the Lori dialect of Western Iran, and is akin to the French *père* in its drop of the *d*.<sup>177</sup> As such, they are the Iranian counterparts to the Roman Mithraic *pater* or *papa/pāp*, and represent a title and function called *bābāyi*, which at times was approved or bestowed by the king himself.<sup>178</sup> And whereas in the Mysteries there existed a *pater patrum*,<sup>179</sup> it had a counterpart among dervish orders as *pir-e pirān*, or *dede bābā*, which all meant "father of fathers" and obviously designated a leader of very high rank.

A derivative of *pir* is *pireh*, a title that is repeatedly encountered in the main accounts of the early Safavids, namely the *Safvat-os-safā* and the *Tazkereh-ye Shaykh Safi-od-din*.

<sup>177</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995, 33.

<sup>178</sup> Shāh `Abbās II (r. 1642-66), for instance, bestowed it on a certain Bābā Soltān Qalandar-e Qomi of the Haydari sect; Afshāri 2003, LXVI.

<sup>179</sup> For a list of *pater patrum* titles see [www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=pater\\_patrum](http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=pater_patrum)

*Pireh* is the modern pronunciation of MP *pir-ag*, which was defined as a "lesser *pir*." Out of deference for an existing *pir*, respected Sufi leaders opted for the diminutive *pireh*. The case of one Pireh Badr-od-din, qualified as *malek-ol-kholafā* (chief deputy), demonstrates my assertion, for despite his epithet of *pireh*, he was also a deputy (*khalifeh*) of the celebrated Safavid *shaykhs*; he was therefore a respected dervish leader, but lesser nonetheless than the *pir*, who in this case was the Safavid Shaykh himself.<sup>180</sup> A *pireh*, however, could gradually gather more of a following and be promoted to the status of *bābā*, as attested by several personalities called Pireh Bābā in the *Safvat*.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, both *pir* and *pirag* were epithets that were used in Sasanian times for commanders and congregational leaders, and qualified sometimes as *mehrān*, an adjective that obviously linked them to Mithra/Mehr (see sec. VII.2).

While *pir* designates the leader of a congregation, Kāshefī uses—interchangeably—two other terms, *shaykh* and *pedar-e `ahdollāh* (پدر عهدالله).<sup>182</sup> The first term designates an elderly person or a chieftain in Arabic. Similar to the name *sajjādeh* that was given to the *pust-takht*, the adoption of *shaykh* was to find an Arabic equivalent for *pir*. The second term describes *pir* as *pedar-e `ahdollāh* (i.e., father of *`ahdollāh*), and sheds more light on the Arabicization process of Mithraic terms. The *`ahdollāh* therein designates the initiate with a composite word inspired by the Koran; but it is a fabrication nonetheless. Indeed, whenever these two words appear in tandem in the Koran,<sup>183</sup> they refer to the Moslems' "covenant with God" (*`ahd allāh*); they don't refer to a person named *`ahdollāh* (even though it sounds like *`Abdollāh*).<sup>184</sup>

In reality, this composite word is a clever substitute for the name of the initiate who entered Mithraic orders by taking an oath in the name of Mithra. Etymologically, *mithra* meant covenant, and Mithra was the god who supervised all covenants. Those who broke a covenant were called *mehr-druj*, i.e., the ones who lied to Mithra. If there was a term for the one who broke a covenant, there must have been a word for the one who upheld it as well. I suggest that word to be *mehr-bān*, which etymologically means: The one who guarded or upheld the covenant. But it was a word that neither sat well with Zoroastrians

<sup>180</sup> Neshāti Shirāzi 2009, 422-25. The name of other *pirehs* are stated as Pireh Jebre`il-e Kafshgar, Pireh Hājji Āqimuny, Pireh `Ajib Fargushi, Pireh Fakhr-od-din-e Varazqāni, Pireh `Abd-ol-karim Khalkhāli, Pireh `Abdollāh.

<sup>181</sup> See for instance Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 387, 771 : پیره بابا مراغی، پیره بابا عمروجانی :

<sup>182</sup> Kāshefī 1971, 65-74; 94-95.

<sup>183</sup> For instance in verses II: 27, III:77, XIII:20, 25...

<sup>184</sup> A reason for the adoption of this combination may be that, sound-wise, *`ahdollāh* was similar to *'abdollāh*, which meant slave of God and was used as a name.

who saw Ahura Mazdā as their supreme deity, nor Moslems for whom the only god was Allāh. It was bound to disappear or be transformed. And that is why it gradually became an adjective and gained the meaning of "kind person," but was still used in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* to describe a "man of oath," or a member of the community of military leaders (*gav, pahlavān*).<sup>185</sup> And that is why a dynasty that ruled over Nimruz (Sistān) in the 14-15<sup>th</sup> century was referred to as the Mehr-bānids. More importantly, the poet Sa`di (1184-1283) makes direct references to the bond and honor code that existed among *mehr-bānān*, as upholders of the covenant:

شمشیر نگسلاند پیوند مهربانان  
 The sword will not break the bond between the *mehr-bānān*,  
 آبروی مهربانان پیش معشوق آب جوست  
 The honor of the *mehr-bānān* is worthless before the beloved.<sup>186</sup>

The word *`ahdollāh*, therefore, seems to be the Arabic substitute for *mehr-bān*, or the initiate who took an oath in the name of Mithra; Allah was just a substitute for the god who guaranteed the oath. Furthermore, as Kāshefī describes it, *pir* is the father of the *`ahdollāh*. By virtue of having the same *father*, all initiates were thus brothers; and that is why they addressed each other as *barādar*, *akhi*, *kākā*, *dādāsh*, *dāsh*, all meaning brother in different languages and dialects.

## V.10 - Ostād

Along with the *pir*, Kāshefī deems the presence of a second figure, the *ostād*, essential for the guidance of the initiates through the path of righteousness (*tariqat*).<sup>187</sup> In dervish orders, this second person is called *ostād-e shadd*, i.e., the person in charge of administering the oath of *fotovvat* and the one who tied a cord, called the *shadd*, around the initiate's waist. While the *shadd* could also designate the ribbon that some dervishes knotted around their bonnet, the Dehkhodā dictionary attributes two other meanings that link it to a Mithraic past. First is the meaning of "running," which ties it to the *heliadromos* of the Mysteries whose name meant the "runner of the Sun," and second, the "activation of fire," which recalls the fire that lay at the heart of the *mithraeum* and needed to be activated for initiation ceremonies. As we shall see (sec. VII.2), the word

<sup>185</sup> See Dehkhodā 1994, "*mehrbān*," for instance when *gav* (champion fighter) and *dalirān* (the bold fighters) are described as *mehr-bān* by Ferdowsi, i.e., "a man of oath" or one imbued with chivalry ideals: ای گو مهربان: ای کند مهربان بادلیران تو را

<sup>186</sup> Ghazal no. 88 from the Bustānof Sa`di; <http://ganjoor.net/saadi/divan/ghazals/sh88/>

<sup>187</sup> Kāshefī 1971, 61-62. See also another *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* quoted by Afshāri 2003, 46, where it says that "our sons and the *javānmards* should know that no one can be without a *pir*, *morshed* or *ostād*,"

*ostād* derived from *mehr-astāt*, or the one who ran alongside Mithra's chariot, who was the Iranian counterpart of *heliodromos*. He was the second in command and in charge of the initiation process, in the same way that the Chancellor of the Order of the Golden Fleece was responsible for administering the oath of allegiance to its knights. Already in late Sasanian times, the word was being used for a commanding position as Ebn-e Athir names one Ostād Khoshnush (?) (خشنش) who acted as an emissary between the Sasanian Shiroyeh (r. 628 AD) and his father Khosrow II (r. 590-628), and is qualified as a chancellor.<sup>188</sup>

But among guilds or artisans, *ostād* designated the master who taught a craft to his pupils. Interestingly, when describing the required qualities of the *ostād*, the texts usually enumerate moral values rather than technical prowess. Thus, in a Safavid cooking manual, written in the early seventeenth century by a certain Nurollāh, Shāh `Abbās's chief cook, the traits expected from a master cook are described as follows:

A master (*ostād*) is one that shall devote full attention to his work from start to end without reliance on anybody else, and one who does not allow arrogance and selfishness (that are associated with the devil) to take hold of him and one who has purity [of soul] and honesty . . . and he should keep his outward and inward [soul] clean and pure . . . And a sense of dignity, and endurance and good humor and kindness and good treatment of the assistant is a necessity [to be acquired] but character and talent is God-given.<sup>189</sup>

And the same is repeated by Kāshefī for describing the virtues of a master wrestler (*ostād-e koshti*).<sup>190</sup> The good virtues of the *ostāds* provided an aura of respect that cut across different guilds and congregations. More than a teacher, the *ostād* was a leader, especially for the *ʿayyārs*. Ebn-e Nadim, for instance, qualified the Khorramdiniyyeh leader Jāvidān, as the *ostād* of Bābak.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, Samak the *ʿAyyār* would address his captain and teacher as *ostād*,<sup>192</sup> and as we already saw, a certain Ostād Hormoz was recruited in Baghdad to subdue his fellow *ʿayyārs*. Another famous *ʿayyār* leader was Ostād-sis who fomented a lasting rebellion after the death of Abu-Moslem-e Khorāsāni

<sup>188</sup> Ebn-e Athir 1965, I:495. This Ostād was supposedly in charge of governmental decisions, i.e., essentially a chancellor or member of the High Council: (كان يلي تدبير المملكة)

<sup>189</sup> Afshar 1360, 194.

<sup>190</sup> Kāshefī 1971, 305.

<sup>191</sup> Ebn-e Nadim, 342: فان جاويدان وهو أستاذ بابك

<sup>192</sup> Samak's master was Shoghāl-e Pil-zur (the fox with elephant power) whose name emphasized two important qualities of the *ʿayyārs*: wily as a fox and strong as an elephant; Khānlari, 87; Kāshefī 1971, 334. Ruse and wiliness was an important characteristic of the *ʿayyārs*; Dehkhodā "ʿayyār."

(d. 755) in Eastern Iran. As "sis" meant "mount,"<sup>193</sup> *ostād-sis* was probably an epithet applied to the leader of a group of *`ayyār* horsemen, or *asvārs*.

On the other hand, in Anatolia where many brotherhoods were referred to as *akhis*, their leader in Kırşehir was named Akhi Bābā (i.e., father of brothers), and he or his deputies were in charge of admitting apprentices into guilds, and tying a belt around their waist at initiation ceremonies.<sup>194</sup> Thus, *bābā*, *pir* and *ostād* were all leaders of congregations who ordained their initiates through the symbolic act of tying a cord or a ribbon, an act which is still prevalent among the Freemasons.

### V.11 - *Pahlavān*

The champion of the wrestlers is called *pahlavān* nowadays, and so is the champion paladin of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Rostam. When a wrestler is ordained, he is given short leather pants called *kasvat* or *tonbān* (Fig. 90), similar to the *servāl* bestowed by An-Nāser to his *fatās*. A *pahlavān* of high rank is sometimes called *kohneh-savār* or "old rider," which may allude to a term formerly used by mounted *`ayyārs*.<sup>195</sup> On the other hand, some of the *`ayyār* leaders who successfully grabbed the reins of power were also called *pahlavān*. Such is the case of Pahlavān Asad-e Khorāsāni (d. 1374) who had rebelled against his Mozaffarid overlords and ruled independently in Kermān, or the *pahlavān* brothers `Abd-or-Razzāq (r. 1332–1338) and Mas`ud (r. 1338–43) who rebelled against the Mongols and founded the Sarbedārīd dynasty (see sec. IX.5).

*Pahlavān* is derived from *pahlav*, a word that is linked to Old Persian *pārsa*. The latter originally designated a fire priest, a function that the main branch of the Achaemenids proudly claimed as theirs. The name was eventually extended to the whole Achaemenid nation, which became the nation of the *Pārsas* or Persians (see sec. XII.7). As such, we have a direct correspondence between *pārsa* and the third Mithraic rank *perses*, which probably referred to the official in charge of the fire in the *mithraeum*. In Greek, the name of this Iranian fire officer was pronounced *perses*, in the same way that they pronounced Persian as *perses* in their language. Hence the confusion. But more precisely, the *pahlav* is the one that, by virtue of his closeness to the fire that harbors the *farr*, is a leader of high rank, more often than not, in the military (see sec. VII.3).

<sup>193</sup> Dehkhodā: "sis".

<sup>194</sup> Taeschner 1960a, 333–334. Kırşehir was named Justinianopolis under the Byzantines.

<sup>195</sup> Afshāri 2003, Lxxi; Mahjoub 2000, 160.

### V.12 - *Rāsty*

In sum, the three top leaders of Iranian brotherhoods have names that can be identified with the three top ranks of Roman Mithraism, and we shall use them to find equivalent grades under Sasanian rule. There is, however, one last observation that may be of help to our Sasanian investigation, and that is the frequent appearance of the word *rāsty*, as well as its derivatives or translations, in *javānmardi*-related texts. The *Qābus-nāmeḥ*, for instance, states that man is in need of three virtues: Wisdom (*kherad*), truthfulness (*rāsty*), and closeness to people (*mardomi*). It then emphasizes that the *javānmard* must do as he says, not say what is not truthful (*rāsty*), and must act true to his promises (*sādeq-ol-va`d*); it also explains that if *javānmardi* is the body that shapes being, truthfulness (*rāsty*) is its soul.<sup>196</sup> So important was the *rāsty* concept that some dervish orders were called the *rāstān* (the true ones), which, in a switch to Arabic, became the Ahl-e Haqq.<sup>197</sup> On the other hand, rather than finding a Koranic interpretation for "truthfulness," early *fotovvat-nāmeḥs* link it to the Prophet Mohammad by placing it at the very top of a list of virtues that he supposedly saw in the *javānmards*.<sup>198</sup> And so does the great Sufi poet `Attār (1142-1220) who puts *rāsty* before all other *fotovvat* requirements:

که هفتاد و دو شد شرط فتوت \* یکی زان شرطها باشد مروت  
 نخستین، راستی را پیشه کن \* چو نیکان، از بدی اندیشه کن

Seventy two conditions define the *fotovvat* \* one of them being manliness (*morovvat*)  
 First, you must espouse truthfulness (*rāsty*) \* and like the Good ones, avoid the bad

Finally, because the *Bondahesh* states that: Mithra's duty is to judge people on their truthful behavior (*rāsty kardan*),<sup>199</sup> whenever the word *rāsty* appears in Sasanian seals or documents, chances are that it is related to a Mithraic brotherhood.

<sup>196</sup> Kaykāvus 1999, 243-49.

<sup>197</sup> See Pirouzjou 1997, 115-116 where he recounts how, in his youth, Shaykh Safi was sent to see the legendary leader of the Ahl-e Haqq, Soltān Sahāk, who claimed that his congregation was that of the *Rāstāns*; and how Safi would later claim that his religion was based on *haqiqat* (truthfulness).

<sup>198</sup> The virtues that Ebn- Me`mār-e Hanbali enumerates as a quote from the Imam Ja`far, who supposedly attributes them to the Prophet Mohammad, are as follows: 1- speaking the truth (*rāst-guyi*), 2- honoring one's promise, etc.; Mahjoub 2000, 14.

<sup>199</sup> Dādaghi 1990, 113.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE SCORPION AND THE SNAKE

#### VI.1 - The Sasanian Evidence

Faulty perception of the Sasanian religious landscape lies at the root of wrong assumptions that have led to inaccurate conclusions. One such theory stipulates that Zoroastrianism was the state religion, and that all other Iranian religions or beliefs were persecuted and pushed out, as the Manicheans or Mazdakites were. Far from it. An important tenet of Zoroastrianism is that the scorpion and the snake are noxious animals (*khrafstar*) that must be eliminated. And yet, as we browse over Sasanian seals, we can see that snakes and scorpions appear on them, many belonging to dignitaries and men of high rank. Four distinct groups of seals are of interest to this study:

*a) The scorpion in the company of auspicious symbols* – In Fig. 95, for instance, the scorpion appears next to the auspicious bird Chamrosh with a ribbon tied around its neck; both are associated with the *farr*. In Fig. 96 it sits on top of a pair of wings that we have argued elsewhere to be imbued with *farr*.<sup>200</sup>



Fig. 95 – Scorpion with *chamrosh*. (Gignoux & Gyselen 1982, 30.87)



Fig. 96 – Scorpion with a pair of wings. (*Spendeur* 1993, 289)



Fig. 97 – Scorpion with star and moon. Louvre.



Fig. 98 – Scorpion with sun cross and symbol of 10000 *farrs*. (Gyselen 2006, 57)

In Fig. 97 it is surrounded by the auspicious and ubiquitous symbols of the star and the moon,<sup>201</sup> and in Fig. 98, two scorpions complement a well-known Sasanian emblem representing ten thousand *farr/khvarrah*: A hand with two stretched fingers (symbol of 10000) surrounded by a flying ribbon or *dastār* (symbol of *farr*).<sup>202</sup> Through association, all of these symbols are auspicious, and project an abundance of *farr* for its owner.

<sup>200</sup> Soudvaar 2003, 19-25.

<sup>201</sup> Soudavar 2003, 61-62; Soudavar 2006b, 175.

<sup>202</sup> Soudavar 2003, 59-62; Soudavar 2009a, 435.

Therefore, a fourth sign, the four-legged cross, which appears on the latter seal, must also represent an auspicious symbol. Indeed, as Pirouzdjou has suggested, the four-legged cross is an ancient symbol of the Sun that Iranians called *chalipā* (derived from *chār-pā* meaning four-legged), and subsequently rendered as *salib* by the Arabs, because of the lack of "ch" and "p" in their alphabet.<sup>203</sup> As such, it can be seen next to a mountain goat (symbol of the rising sun) on the mountainous landscape of a first millennium BC seal belonging to the MFA in Boston (Fig. 99), and on a goblet from the same period at the Louvre, in which the *chalipā* is incorporated in a circle and provides an unequivocal link to the Sun next to a griffin marked by a sun symbol on its hind-quarters (Fig. 100). The *chalipā* of these seals was therefore not a Christian cross, as Gyselen has presumed, but a symbol of the sun associated with Mithra.<sup>204</sup> In fact, at the basilica of St Appolinare Nuovo of Ravenna, where the three Magi are depicted as Mithraic priests with red bonnets, the name of each is preceded by a *chalipā* in order to emphasize their sun-affiliated oriental origin (Fig. 101).<sup>205</sup>



Fig. 99 – Seal imprint. Sun cross next to a mountain goat and griffin. 1<sup>st</sup> Millenium BC. MFAB

Fig. 100 - Sun cross, next to griffin with sun symbol (↑). Iran, 800 BC. Louvre

Fig. 101 – Sun cross (↑) in front of the names of the Mithraic magi (restored). 6<sup>th</sup> century. Mosaics of St Appolinare Nuovo, Ravenna

Since Mithra is the primary god who bestows the *farr*, all *farr* symbols invoked him indirectly; and so did the sun. We must therefore presume that the scorpion too was linked to Mithra. It's a linkage that finds additional support in the permanent presence of the scorpion in Roman tauroctony scenes.

<sup>203</sup> Pirouzdjou , 217. If this *chār-pā* was spelled in MP as *čl'-p`*, it could indeed be read as *chalipā*.

<sup>204</sup> Gyselen 2006, 57.

<sup>205</sup> Before the Middle Ages, the Magi depicted as Mithraic priests paying homage to the newborn Jesus implied the victory of Christ over Mithra; Félix 2000, 15 and 25; see also Soudavar 2012a, 26-29.

**b) Scorpion seals inscribed with the name of Mithra** – When the name of a deity is mentioned on a scorpion seal, it's almost invariably that of Mithra (Mehr). For instance, one seal bears the name Mehrag (Fig. 102); and the name on another one is given as *Mehr-ādur Vishnasb [i] Ruwān-bin*, the *ruwān-bin* part of the name being an adjective that refers to an exalted state in which the soul of the priestly official is so elevated that it can see the wandering souls of his predecessors.<sup>206</sup> The latter seal not only connects the scorpion to Mithra's fire (Mehr-ādur) but provides an adjective that is seemingly appropriate for the Mithraic hierarchy.



Fig. 102 – Seal of *Mehr-ādur Vishnasb*. Gignoux & Gyselen 1982, 30.94



Figs. 103 a, b – (a) Seal of Mehrak, Yale; (b) Scorpions with lion and bull, MFA Boston. (Gignoux & Gyselen 1987)



Figs. 104 a, b – Sasanian seals, BNF. Legends evoking gods (*yazatān*) in (a), and *rāsty* in (b). (Gyselen 1997, 30.E.6, 30.T.1)

**c) Scorpions with lions** – The lion was the symbol of the sun par excellence, and on seals, the appearance of the scorpion in conjunction with lions, as in Fig. 103b and Fig. 104a, is one more clue for linking it to a Mithraic environment. The legend on both reads "*abestān o yazatān*" (support from gods),<sup>207</sup> and as such, refers, in an oblique way, to the deity pair Mithra and Apam Napāt, especially on the seal which displays the lion and the bull as a pair (see sec. XI.17).

**d) Scorpion and *rāsty*** – Finally, scorpions on seals such as the one on Fig. 104b, which has a legend based on the word *rāsty*, are likely to peg this word to Mithraic sayings or precepts.<sup>208</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Gignoux and Gyselen (1982, 4) propose that the legend on seal 30 should translate as "look at the soul of Mehr-ādur Vishnasb." Unfortunately such a command has neither a precedent nor a palpable meaning. In a forthcoming work, F. PākHzād suggests that *ruwān-bin* is an adjective similar to other combinations such as *menog-bin*, and one that implies an elevated state that allows seeing things that ordinary men cannot. Similar adjectives are used for priests in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*: *mowbad-e pish-bin* (the clairvoyant priest), as well as for army commanders: *jahān-bin* (world-seer) and *zharf-bin* (with deep understanding).

<sup>207</sup> Gyselen 1993, seal 30E.6; Gignoux and Gyselen 1982, seal 40.27.

<sup>208</sup> Gyselen 1993, seal 30T1 of the Bibliothèque Nationale was read as "*rāstih veh (i) pad baxt*" by Gyselen; it should be rectified to *rāstih veh por baxt* (The righteous path is better than full fortune).

## VI.2 - The Elamite Connection

At the end of my book *Aura of Kings* (2003), I had tentatively linked the scorpion to the remnants of a proto-Elamite tradition that, later on, must have gotten enmeshed with Mithraic practices.<sup>209</sup> My only clue at that time was the abundance of scorpion images on 3<sup>rd</sup>-millennium BC artifacts from southeast Iran that were then known as "Kermān" stones, and are now dubbed "Jiroft stones," due to a multitude of similar objects that were unearthed in the Jiroft area a decade ago. The complex iconography of these objects vouched for a strong priestly tradition that could hardly disappear without leaving a trace. Indeed, the motif of the "master of animals," or a superhuman who holds two threatening animals in each hand, is one that originated in the Jiroft culture, survived the vicissitudes of history to strongly re-emerge in the bronze art of Luristan in early 1<sup>st</sup>-millennium BC, and finally landed in the Roman world. Of particular interest to us is the Jiroftian prototype of the "master of animals" who holds two serpents in his hands (Fig. 106), which is echoed in a bowl from the *mithraeum* of the Crypta Balbi in Rome (Fig. 107), as well as on a Roman Mithraic cameo in which snakes are wrapped around two sticks (Fig. 108); the double snake motif also appears among the symbols of the Ostia *mithraeum* (Fig. 112) as a stick with two serpents, called *caduceus*, which was the ancient symbol of messengers.<sup>210</sup> A similar *caduceus* is held by Cautopatēs on the Louvre stele of Fig. 39b.

The above examples clearly show that the symbolism of the serpent somehow got enmeshed with Mithraic iconography, and was integrated into tauroctony scenes where a snake and a scorpion are crawling toward the genitals of the sacrificial bull (Fig. 105). Because the scorpion and the snake appear in tandem on Jiroft artifacts, their joint reappearance in tauroctony scenes may indicate an old auspiciousness that survived at least up to Sasanian times. Therefore, Sasanian seals that depict a shamanistic person who, like the master of animals, holds two sticks in his hands, around which a scorpion and a snake are intertwined (Fig. 109), may carry symbolism that dates back to the proto-Elamite period of Jiroft on the one hand, and to the Roman Mysteries on the other. The similarity between these seals cannot be accidental.



Fig. 105 - Snake and scorpion in tauroctony scene. British Museum

<sup>209</sup> Soudavar 2003, 118-120.

<sup>210</sup> The *caduceus* was often mistakenly used in lieu of the Rod of Asclepius as a medicinal symbol.



Fig. 106 – Master of animals with two serpents. C. 2300BC. Louvre



Fig. 107 - Master of animals with two serpents. 1<sup>st</sup> century. Crypta Balbi, Rome.



Fig. 108 - Cameo with snakes, altar, cauldron. (Cumont 1903, 124)



Fig. 109 – Seal with scorpion and snake (Gyselen 1993, 10.D.2)



Fig. 110 - Seal imprint. Elamite king seated on snake throne. Louvre



Figs. 111 a, b- Jiroft crushing tool objects; c. 2300 BC. (a) abundant palmtrees; (b) scorpions. (Majidzadeh 2003, 127)



Fig. 112 - Symbols of the 1<sup>st</sup> rank of the Mysteries. Ostia (web)

An emblematic item from the Kermān/Jiroft series of objects is a handbag-shaped stone object, which is a crushing tool, probably used to crush grain in agricultural ceremonies and rituals.<sup>211</sup> Many of them feature serpents and scorpions (Fig. 111b). Because these creatures hibernate in winter, their awakening in springtime ushers in the rainy season. They were therefore considered as auspicious animals associated with water. The snake in particular became a god of water for the Elamites whose kings are sometimes depicted on a snake throne (Fig. 110). Other "handbags" show lush palm-tree plantations or water

<sup>211</sup> This type of item has often been described as a weight, but it is not, because it has a small and unstable base as standing weight, and cannot be a hanging one, since there are no signs of hook wear under its handle. They were probably ceremonial crushing tools, because: 1- there is usually extensive mechanical rubbing on the handle suggesting frequent handling, and also on the corners of the base, which indicates a movement like the sole of a shoe (it has the same kind of wear on its two ends), 2- that the motifs on these tools are mostly water motifs (e.g. water waves, serpent-shaped god of water) or dense palm-tree plantations, which augured abundant rain and crop; see also Soudavar 1992, 25.

waves (Fig. 111a) and convey the wish for good rains and an abundant harvest. We would therefore like to propose that the two sticks, which the shamanistic figure holds on these Sasanian seals (Fig. 109), were used to awaken the snake and the scorpion in their hibernation holes in order to precipitate the rainy season.<sup>212</sup>



Fig. 113 – Fully clad *kuseh*. (Mirshokrai 1978, cover)



Figs. 114 a, b – (a) Seal with 2 *kusehs*; (b) Seal depicting the chasing of the *kuseh* (Gyselen 1993, 10.E.5, 14.2)



Fig. 115- Beardless portrait of Kerdir. Naqsh-e Rostam.

I believe that traces of these agricultural ceremonies can be found in a practice called *kuseh-gardi* (also *kuseh-galin*, or *kuseh bar-neshin*), still performed in various villages of Iran. The principal objective of the ceremony was to attract the clouds and the rain. As reported by Biruni (973-1048) and Gardizi (d. 1061), this practice goes back to Sasanian times when it was held on the first day of the month of Āzar, which according to the calendar of those days coincided with the first day of Spring.<sup>213</sup> On such a day, a *kuseh* (beardless man), who personified Winter, was put on a cow (or a donkey nowadays), then paraded around town and subsequently chased out, as if to clear the way for Spring. But more telling are the accoutrements of this *kuseh* (Fig. 113), which resemble that of the shamanistic man in Fig. 109, in the type of straw hat that he wears and the stick that he holds. In some villages the ritual involve two *kusehs*, one black (for Winter) and one white (for Spring), which perhaps explains the appearance of the double shaman in Fig. 114a. The picture of the modern *kuseh* is revelatory in several respects. Firstly, his head-to-toe accoutrements were not to protect him against the cold, since they were worn at the beginning of spring when the weather was mild. They must have originally been devised

<sup>212</sup> A parallel can be drawn between these ceremonies and Groundhog Day in North America, where the weather conditions surrounding the emergence of the groundhog supposedly determines the coming of springtime.

<sup>213</sup> Krasnowolska 2006.

for protection against attacks and bites from noxious animal; if the *kuseh* had to wield his stick in snake pits or scorpion dens, he could have been exposed to such attacks and had to be protected. Secondly, the bells hanging from his belt may have been used as added instruments for awakening the hibernating creatures; but they also recall a similar bell used by *shāters* and performers (Figs. 137-38). Finally, a tail-like object hanging from his belt may allude to the snakes he was supposed to awaken. As for the name *kuseh* (MP *kusag*), today it can mean both a beardless man and a shark. Although, it may have originally referred to hairless beasts, it more probably alluded to the beardless faces of ancient Iranian priests (see for instance Fig. 115).

On the first day of the *kuseh-gardi* ceremonies, the *kuseh* walks around with a fan and complains about the heat. He asks for food and money, and if refused he spills ink on his interlocutors and beats them with his fan. On the second day, however, the roles are reversed. The *kuseh* is hunted down, and when found, he is beaten with his own stick and fan; he is then chased out of town. In a seal imprint published by Rika Gyselen and classified as "talismanic," we can recognize a *kuseh-gardi* scene, in which a man is chasing the *kuseh* and beats him with his own fan (Fig. 114b).<sup>214</sup> Moreover, the two tail-like objects hanging from his belts end with snake heads. Finally, the word *rāsty* is inscribed on the contour of the seal, which clearly links the snake to the Mithraic ideal of *rāsty* (truthfulness).

Whereas the tail of the sacrificial bull of tauroctony scenes ends in wheat ears—a symbol of fertility—the scorpion and the snake crawling toward its genitals may be interpreted as further signs of a fertility rite that somehow found its way into the Roman myth of Mithras. The chasing of the beardless *kuseh*—whom we suspect to represent the Mithraic magi—may be the result of a later conflation between these fertility rites and the yearly Magophonia beating (or massacre) of the *magi* that we shall explain in chapter XII.

Furthermore, the Armenians, who called their praying abodes *mehean* (lit. place of Mithra),<sup>215</sup> transferred substantial decorative elements from their Mithra-worshiping past to their churches.<sup>216</sup> Chief among them is the motif of two serpents converging toward a human head that is usually surmounted by a solar-disk emblem (Fig. 116). The combination clearly follows a Mithraic template, very much analogous to the Anatolian bronze object, which shows Mithra flanked by two lion headed reptiles (Fig. 117).<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Gyselen 1996, 243.

<sup>215</sup> Russell 1995, 277; Boyce 1993.

<sup>216</sup> For a similar phenomenon in Italy, see sec. XIV.8.

<sup>217</sup> See also sec. XIV.9.

Thus, from Elamite Iran, to Christian Armenia, to the Crypta Balbi in Rome, we have a recurring association of snakes with Mithraic entities. No wonder then that the Zoroastrian priesthood categorized the snake as a *khrafstar*, or noxious animal that had to be killed. As a distinctive symbol of Zoroastrians' opponents, it symbolized evil and that is why the head of Ahriman under the hoofs of Ahura Mazda's horse, in Naqsh-e Rostam, is infested with snakes (Figs. 129, 176).



Fig. 116 – Mithraic head with converging snakes and a sun motif. St Poghos-Petros church, Tatev Monastery, Armenia (Ph. Sara Kuehn)



Fig. 117 – Mithra holding two lion snakes. Istanbul Archeological Museum

### VI.3 - The Mithraic Scorpion from the Christian Perspective

As we shall argue (sec. XIV.8), the early Christians were probably sympathetic to Mithraic societies. But once Christianity became a state religion, the Emperor Julian's attempt to impose the cult of Mithra bought him the infamous "Apostate" epithet and marked Mithraism as the enemy of Christianity. In a painting by Fra Angelico (1395-1455), this animosity seems to have been transposed onto the Roman soldiers from the province of Judea in charge of Jesus's crucifixion. They operated under a banner of SPQR (*Senatus Populus Que Romanus*) that represented the Roman state, and wore capes marked by prominent scorpion signs that designated them as Mithraic practitioners (see Fig. 310). Thus, for Fra Angelico, the scorpion was the very symbol of the enemy of Christianity, i.e., Mithraism. Time and again, the scorpion was associated with Mithra, and the Zoroastrian priests decried it as a noxious animal that had to be killed.<sup>218</sup>

<sup>218</sup> See Appendix II/5.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MITHRAIC SEALS

#### VII.1 - The *Bāp* or Father

Among the most impressive Sasanian seals, in size and weight, are two whose owners bear the title *bāp*. The first is 3.7 cm long and has the following legend engraved around the bust of its initial owner: *Bāp Haredār* (*b`p hld`l*), i.e., Bāp the Protector/Guardian (Fig. 118).<sup>219</sup> The second one, carved out of rock crystal (Fig. 119), reads: *Bāp Rok* (*b`p lky*) *i Mishan moghbed* (The Blunt Bāp who is the high-priest of Mishan).<sup>220</sup> On a third seal (Fig. 120), *bāp* is followed by the epithet *rad* (master, spiritual leader). It is less imposing than the previous two seals but has a winged lion—as symbol of the sun and Mithra—on it. We thus see that, on all three, the title *bāp* is followed by reverential adjectives proper to individuals of high spiritual and social standing.



Fig. 118 – Sasanian seal Bāp Haredār.  
EMS Collection



Fig. 119 – Seal of Bāp Rok.  
(*Cambridge History of Iran*, III:1114)



Fig. 120 – Seal of Bāp Rad (Dr.  
Busso Peus, sale 395, lot435)

On the hat of the first two *bāps* appears a monogram that can be deciphered as *NWRA*, which is the Aramaic ideogram for "fire." Indeed, the individual components of the

<sup>219</sup> Based on an image in which the end letter was not very clear, A.H. Bivar had read this legend as *Bāp sardām*, and Ph. Gignoux had read it as *Bāp khordād* (personal communications). For the meaning of *haredār* as guardian, see Cereti 2002, 35.

<sup>220</sup> Rika Gyselen has suggested (private correspondence) that this legend should be read as "*Bāffarag, mogbed de Mešūn*." However, the presence of the epithet *bāp* on so many other seals militates for a different reading. My reading of *rok* is based on the fact that, in New Persian, *rok* is usually accompanied with the word *rāst* (e.g., رست و راک), which constitutes a major tenet of Mithraism.

monogram can be dissected into N, W, R and A (Fig. 121). A similar monogram opposite a fire altar on a Sogdian coin brings added confirmation to our interpretation because, by virtue of their symmetrical positioning, the fire altar and the monogram must be equivalent in meaning (Fig. 122). But fire was always closely associated with Mithra, especially for sealing an oath. Mary Boyce sees Mithra's association with the Sun arising "through an original association of Mithra, lord of the covenant, with fire; for it appears from both Iranian and Indian sources that it was ancient custom to swear to covenants by Mithra, their personified power, in the presence of fire, which, as the flame on the hearth, sustaining life, or the sun in the sky, controlling times and seasons, represented *rta/asha*, the due order of things."<sup>221</sup>



Fig. 121 – NWR A emblem on seal of Fig. 118



Fig. 122 – Coin of Khingila (S. Album sale 246, lot 175)



Fig. 123 – Seal of a *Pāpak* (Gyselen 1993, 70.29)



Fig. 124 – Seal of *Pirag* (Gyselen 2007, 256)

The fire monogram therefore alluded to the Mithraic oath. But it also evoked an important aspect of ceremonies held around a fire altar. For fire to be visible it had to be lit at nighttime; that is why the "A" of *NWRA* is represented as a moon emblem (i.e., the crescent) at the very top of the monogram. It placed the *bāp* under the aegis of the moon, and evoked his nocturnal activities. But more important is the choice of this ideogram as opposed to the more widely used spelling *dwr* (*ādur*) to represent "fire," because this ideogram, like the Arabic word *nur* (light), emphasized the light aspect of the fire. It therefore alluded to the luminescence (*chihr*) of the *farr* that was embedded in the fire. Since the *farr* was considered a primordial source of power, the monogram implicitly projected the high rank and power of the *bāps*.<sup>222</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Boyce 1996, I:28-29.

<sup>222</sup> Monograms combined letters of a word into an elegant and often symmetrical sign. For more on the *NWRA* monogram, see Appendices IV and V.

The title *bāp*—meaning father—was in fact equivalent to the Roman *pater/pāp*, and a forerunner of the dervish leaders' names such as *bābā* and *pir*.<sup>223</sup> But in the same way that the lesser *pir* was named *pireh*, a lesser *bāp/pāp* was named *bāpak/pāpak*. It's a name that we can see on a seal with a prominent *NWRA* monogram complemented by a hybrid syntax that included words and symbols, in particular a roundel (○) as symbol of *farr* (Fig. 123).<sup>224</sup> This combination of letters and symbols can be deciphered as *p`pk ○ ZY NWRA apzwn* (*Pāpak - farr i ātash afzun*, meaning: Pāpak, May the *farr* of Fire increase). As in the case of Bābak-e Khorramdin—who must have taken the title of Bābak in deference to Jāvidān, the previous Lord of the Khorramdiniyyeh—the owner of this seal may have opted for the name Pāpak in deference to a *bāp* that he was replacing. A seal from the Saeedi collection, on which a certain Bāpak is qualified as *ruwān-bin* (similar to the seal in Fig. 102), establishes that the use of *bāpak* was not by chance but was adopted by a dignitary who could be characterized with such a lofty quality as "soul-perception."<sup>225</sup> As we shall see, the adoption of the name Pāpak by the first ruler of the Sasanians was also in deference to the master of his own congregation, i.e., Sāsān (see Chapter X).

More importantly, two other seals from the Saeedi Collection show that the *pir* and *pireh* epithets of dervish orders had an antecedent in Sasanian times as *pir* and *pirag*. A seal with a winged lion—similar to the one in Fig. 120 that is inscribed with the epithet *bāp*—displays the epithet *pir*,<sup>226</sup> and another one with an image of a crouching lion, has *pirag* engraved on it.<sup>227</sup> They suggest that, already in Sasanian times, the fatherly figure at the head of the brotherhood was addressed as both *bāp* and *pir*. We may then imagine that the second connotation of the word *pir*, as "old" in NP, was a natural extension of the father figure, who had to be an elderly person.

On another seal, the *pirag* is also an army commander (Fig. 124), in the same way that the *bāp* of the seal in Fig. 119 had another official title (that of a regional ecclesiastic priest). It should come as no surprise to us that the revered head of a brotherhood held official positions as well. Later examples prove that the sanitization process in each period often allowed the integration of brotherhood members into mainstream society,

<sup>223</sup> For another seal of a *magu* with the *bābā* epithet, see Brunner 1978, 146.

<sup>224</sup> For the roundels as symbol of *farr* on seals, see Soudavar 2009, 436-40.

<sup>225</sup> Gyselen 2007, 318 (IVC/4).

<sup>226</sup> Gyselen 2007, 336-37. The winged lion of the Saeedi seal is similar to our Fig. 120, and is in the spirit of the winged bull on the *pater* seal of Fig. 38. They all evoke the deity pair of the *mithraeum*, namely Mithra and Apam Napāt (see sec. XI.17).

<sup>227</sup> Gyselen 2007, 318 (IVC/5).

and offered the possibility of appointment to high positions even though they could be persecuted later on.<sup>228</sup>

### VII.2 - *Heliodromos/Mehr-astāt/Mehr-rān*

The second highest rank in the Mysteries was *heliodromos* whose name has been translated as the "runner" or "courier" of Helios, often without any understanding as to the origins of his name. In a lively discussion that occurred at the end of a conference in 1975 on Mithraism, in which various inconclusive explanations had been proposed, E.D. Francis pertinently remarked: "but why is it important that one should be a *courier* or messenger of the sun?"<sup>229</sup> In fact, the relevance of *heliodromos* can only be grasped through the name of its Iranian counterpart, *mehr-astāt*, which is engraved on a seal with a *NWRA* monogram (Fig. 125); it designates the person who stood on the chariot of Mehr/Mithra.<sup>230</sup> As the one who stood closest to Mithra, he was also in charge of relaying his instructions (Fig. 126). It's a role that was fulfilled in later times by the *shāter*, the person who was responsible for leading the ruler's horse (as in Fig. 127). The *shāters*, who have frequently been equated with the *ʿayyārs*, formed a brotherhood with their own special *fotovvat-nāmeḥ*. They ran alongside their ruler on foot and were in charge of transmitting his orders, and as such they were also called *peyk* or courier (sec. VIII.2).



Fig. 125 – Seal of a *mehr-astāt* (Gyselen 2007, 70.7)



Fig. 126 – Gold chariot. Oxus Treasure. British Museum



Fig. 127 – *Shāter* leading a king's horse. Safavid, 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sotheby's, 18-11-2013, lot 79)

<sup>228</sup> Such is the case for instance of the *bābās* appointed by the Safavids (note 178), or Hasan-e Juri (sec. IX.5) who was a *shaykh* and political leader of the Sarbedārīds and eventually became their ruler, or the *pahlavān* Mohammad-e Havij whom Ebn-e Battuta names as an official Hajj leader (Ebn-e Battuta 1958, 233).

<sup>229</sup> Hinnells 1975, 131.

<sup>230</sup> Its monogram may be read as *NWRA ZY* (light of), and is followed by *mtr ʿst ʿt*, Gyselen though reads it as *mtr ʿšt ʿt* (*mehr-ashtāt*); Gyselen 2007, 70.7.

But the word *astāt* is derived from the verb *estādan* (to stand), which, in Middle Persian, was also spelled *awstādan*.<sup>231</sup> Thus, *mehr-astāt* could also be written and pronounced *mehr-awstāt*, the latter part of which provided the New Persian word *ostād* (master). Furthermore, as J. Cheung argues, the very word that appears as *ʿwst ʿt/ostād* in Middle Persian was transformed with a (+\*fra) prefix into a word that meant "sent out" (*fresteh*), which could allude to the *ostād* functioning as a courier.<sup>232</sup> We thus see an etymological relationship between "standing" and message transmission. Even though the word *ostād* is nowadays understood as master or teacher, the function of *ostād-od-dār* (chamberlain) that we encounter in early Arabic histories clearly goes back to the original meaning of the word, since it designates the one who *stood* by the ruler's chambers (*dār*).<sup>233</sup>

As a title, *mehr-astāt* is only found—to my knowledge—on the Saeedi seal, but as a name, it appears in early manuscripts of Sasanian history such as the anonymous *Mojmal-ol-qesas vat-tavārikh*. It is corrupted later on into a meaningless name—*Mehrān-setād*—in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*.<sup>234</sup> But its shortened form, i.e., *ostād*, may have already been in use in Sasanian times as we have a report that Shiroyeh, the son of Khosrow II, used a certain *Ostād Khoshnush* (?) as counselor.<sup>235</sup>

Moreover, Plutarch has a passage in which Alexander complains to Fortuna about the status of his opponent Darius III (r. 336-330 BC.): He asks why Darius was made king, he who was an "*astāndes* and a slave" to the (previous Achaemenid) king?<sup>236</sup> *Astāndes* is a Greek loanword from Old Persian often translated as runner or courier (i.e., the exact words that scholars have used to describe *heliodromos*), and "slave" is the translation of OP *bandaka*.<sup>237</sup> But, while Dominique Lenfant rightly guesses that *astāndes* was a function that indicated a position of closeness to the sovereign, such as "lance-bearer" that Darius had once held,<sup>238</sup> its coupling with *bandaka* reminds us of another Persian word "*chākar*" that is constantly linked to the same word (*bandaka/bandeh*) in Persian

<sup>231</sup> McKinsey 1971, 31.

<sup>232</sup> Cheung 2007, 358-59.

<sup>233</sup> See for instance Ebn-e Khaldun 1996, V:552-554.

<sup>234</sup> Bahār 1939, 77.

<sup>235</sup> Ebn-e Athir 1965, I:494. فأرسل إليه رجلا يقال له استاذ **خشنش** (؟) كان يلي تدبير المملكة.

The word in bold may represent *Khosh-neshin* (well-seated), or alternatively *Chekshnush*, it may be the same as the name of Zoroaster's great-great grandfather, but this is unlikely.

<sup>236</sup> *Life of Alexander*, chap. XVIII (674D): Δαρειός ἦν σὸν ἔργον, ὃν ἐκ δούλου καὶ ἀστάνδου βασιλέως; see also [remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/Plutarque/fortunealex.htm](http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/Plutarque/fortunealex.htm)

<sup>237</sup> *EIrO*, "Darius, v. Darius III." One suspects that *astandes* also provided "stand" in English although the latter is often described as being derived from Old English *standan*; akin to Old High German *stantan*, *stān* : to stand; Latin *stare*; Greek *histanai*: to cause to stand, set, *histasthai*: to stand, be standing.

<sup>238</sup> Lenfant 2009, 326.

literature. This coupling appears in the very first Persian verses that have come to us through the anonymous *Tāriḫ-e Sīstān*:

ای امیری که امیران جهان خاص و عام      بنده و چاکر و مولای و سگ بند و غلام  
O Amir for whom all the rulers of the world, without exception, are your  
*bandehs* (slaves) and *chākars*, loyal subjects, dog trainers, and servants<sup>239</sup>

It was regularly used afterwards to denote loyalty and submission. More importantly, similar to the *astāndes* who stood next to the chariot, the *chākar* held the reins of the ruler's horse and carried out his messages and orders (see sec. VIII.2).<sup>240</sup> Proximity to the ruler was of course a position of prestige, but since the *chākar* stood on low grounds while the sovereign was mounted, he became the symbol of humility and devotion, i.e., two of the most important characteristics of brotherhoods. Eventually, his name became synonymous with these two qualities, and the expression *chāker-am* (I'm your *chāker*, i.e., your devoted servant), which the *lutis* frequently use to greet one another, became the ultimate statement of loyalty and friendship.

The Persian counterpart to *heliodromos* thus mutated into *ostād* (master), which referred to the second in command of dervish orders or master craftsmen. His role was similar to that of the Masonic "master," and the European guild master.<sup>241</sup>

Finally, the appearance of the qualification *mehrān* at the end of the legend on the seal of the aforementioned army commander Pirag (Fig. 124), may convey yet another type of affiliation to Mithraic brotherhoods:

Pirag, the *shahrvarāz* (boar of the empire) and *spahbed* (general) of the Nimruz *kust* (South side) that the blessed Khosrow [created] from quartering Iran, the *mehrān*.<sup>242</sup>

Indeed, Gyselen has noted that the word *mehrān* did not exist on an earlier imprint and was added later as if a new title was given to him,<sup>243</sup> and according to the chronicler Dināvāri, *mehrān* represented a rank (*martabat*) for Pirag.<sup>244</sup> *Mehrān* may then represent

<sup>239</sup> Bahār 1987, 210.

<sup>240</sup> The word *chākar* is also used in conjunction with *rahi* (fellow traveler); Khāndmir 1374, VI:556.

<sup>241</sup> One wonders then, if the Latin *magister* that has provided both the English *master* and German *meister*, is not ultimately derived from a *mehr-astāt* title, perhaps described as the "standing magus."

<sup>242</sup> Rika Gyselen gives a different reading of this legend (Gyselen 2007, 254-56), that I had criticized in Soudavar 2009a, 433-34. However, one of the objections that I had raised, that the spelling of the name of kings must not vary, proved to be wrong (thanks to C. Cereti who pointed it out to me), and the *hwslwdy* read by Gyselen was correct. The new reading should therefore be: *pylky ZY štlwl'c W hwytk hwslwdy LBAY 'yl'n kwsty ZY nymylwc sp'hpty, mtr'n, (Pirag ī shahrvarāz ud hujadag-Khusrō- ¼- erān-kust ī nēmroz spāhbed).*

<sup>243</sup> Gyselen 2007, 49, 254-56.

<sup>244</sup> Dināvāri 1989, 55: *فیرک، الٰذی تدعی مرتبته مهران* (Pirag whose rank was called *mehrān*)

a title or function similar to *mehr-astāt*, which can perhaps be construed as *mehr-rān*, i.e., the one who conducts Mithra's chariot.<sup>245</sup>

Interestingly, by mixing philological considerations with literary comparisons, Philippe Swennen has taken issue with previous translations of *Yt.10.136* to conclude that the officiating priest therein impersonated Mithra's charioteer, in order to act as a liaison between the deity and the sacrificial ceremony. He calls him the "charioteer-priest" (*prêtre-cocher*), and draws a parallel with Xenophon's description of Cyrus the Younger's elaborate parade, in which Cyrus follows Mithra's chariot with the presence of a similar charioteer next to him. He then remarks that "for a Mazdean, it was impossible to imagine a god, especially Mithra, traveling without a charioteer."<sup>246</sup> But people, Mazdean or not, obviously imagined their gods according to the prevailing regal customs of their era. Like Cyrus the Younger, traveling gods needed a charioteer who could also act as a messenger or go-between, just as the *astāndes* and the *mehr-astāt* did. It then stands to reason that *mehr-rān* referred to this charioteer *qua* officiating priest (as in Fig. 126).

### VII.3 - *Perses/Pārsā/Pahlav*

No satisfactory explanation has ever been provided by Mithraic specialists as to why the third ranked officer of the Roman Mysteries was named *perses* (meaning "Persian" in Greek), especially since the word "Persian" does not evoke any particular rank or function. It was in trying to find a relationship between the third category of Persian brotherhood leaders, the *pahlavān*, and the Roman *perses*, that I realized how Darius's boast, claiming that he was "*pārsa* son of *pārsa*," was key to the understanding of this relationship.

In his seminal work on Achaemenid inscriptions, Pierre Lecoq had come to the conclusion that *pārsava* and *parthava* were the Persian and Median dialectical names for the same group of people, and were words that eventually produced MP *pahlav* and NP *pahlu* (side). He suggested for *pārsa* a meaning related to the far side, i.e., "those from the frontier lands."<sup>247</sup> I believe that he went slightly too far, as *pahlu* implies the *near* side rather than a far one. The *pārsa* was the person who stood next to, or on the side of something, which Achaemenid iconography shows to be a fire altar, especially since it was carried on a moveable throne as the king's personal fire. He was thus a fire-keeper.<sup>248</sup>

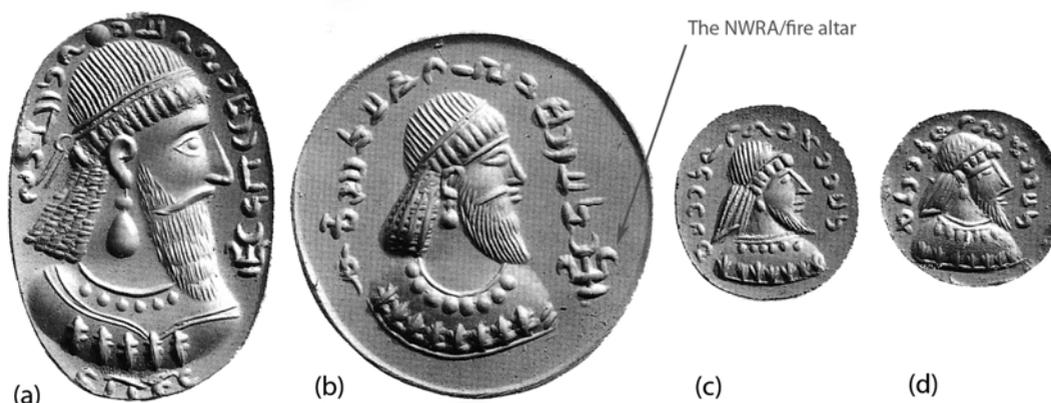
<sup>245</sup> The second part in *Mehr-rān* would be derived from the NP verb *rāndan*, to conduct, to steer.

<sup>246</sup> Swennen 2003, 432-33.

<sup>247</sup> Lecoq 1997, 146 ; Soudavar 2012b; 55-57. Also, there are a number of terms in the Iranian languages that provide a meaning for frontier people such as *marzbān* or *karān-pā*; another term was really unnecessary.

<sup>248</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 55-58.

Furthermore, Lecoq only investigated the right side of the equation, i.e., the evolution of *parthava* into NP *pahlu* (see Table 1). Had he investigated the left side of the equation, he would have discovered that OP *pārsa* had a clear phonetic similarity with NP *pārsā*, which means "pious/religious" and is mostly used as an epithet for renowned dervishes such as Shaykh Abu-Nasr-e Pārsā (d. 1461). Moreover, Fātemeh Jahānpur had drawn attention to a remark by Hamdollāh-e Mostowfī (1281-1349) about "*pārsās*" who held *nighttime* ceremonies next to a high altitude lake called Chashmeh Sau near Tus in Khorāsān.<sup>249</sup> The term *pārsā* was clearly used by Mostowfī to designate non-Islamic priests, in lieu of the usual term *mowbad*. They were akin to the *pārsa* of old, because they too held their ceremonies at night, as attested by the moon above the fire altar in Fig. 130.



Figs. 128 a, b, c, d - Sasanian Mithraic seals (Gyselen 1993, seals 20.K.6 (a), 20.K.7 (b), 20.K.8 (c), 20.K.9 (d))

Logic dictates that, in between OP *pārsa* and NP *pārsā*, there must have been a Sasanian link, i.e., a fire priest that corresponded to the Roman *perses*. Indeed, four Sasanian seals from the Cabinet des Médailles of the BNF (Figs. 128a, b, c, d), belonging to dignitaries or officials, allow us to justify this contention.<sup>250</sup> The first two (a, b) are elaborate official seals that have a modified *NWRA* monogram, complemented by a little bar underneath

<sup>249</sup> //web3.ghost-services.com/hemranib/articles.htm; Mostowfi 1983, 148-49: پارسایان در شب بر کنار چشمه . احیا داشته اند . For the mention of this lake in the *Bondaresh*, see Cereti 2007, 56.

<sup>250</sup> Gyselen thinks that these seals are fake because they are "copies of an *unknown prototype*" and were "purchased in the Middle East"; Gyselen 1993, 22-23. By her first argument, anything can be declared fake, and by the second, anything that was not purchased in Europe. She seems to make a connection to seals declared as fake by Bivar on the basis of their *imitation* Pahlavi script. None of the legends here are imitations; one cannot declare them fake if one cannot decipher them.

that acts as a pedestal, in order to visually transform them into a fire altar. Interestingly, the letters of the word *rāsty* are placed directly above this fire symbol in order to convey a concept that appears in the *Avesta's* hymn to Mithra (*Yt.* 10.3): Fire, which is presented therein as a companion to Mithra is said to grant "the most righteous path (*razishtem*) to those who do not deceive the contract." In other words, the *rāsty* that stems out of the fire symbol alludes to the "righteous path" of *Yt.* 10.3, even more so since, etymologically, it derives from the same root as the Avestan "*razishtem*." Within brotherhoods, those who did not "deceive the contract" were those who upheld the initiation oath, i.e., the *mehr-bāns* for whom truthfulness was an essential virtue.

Furthermore, the legend on seal (a) reads *rāsty ay rasty* (righteousness is deliverance). It's a literary conceit that combines *rāsty* with a similar sounding word derived from the verb *rastan* (to obtain salvation or freedom), and expresses the promise of the brotherhoods: Out of the oath taken over the fire will spring the righteousness that will lead to happiness and salvation.<sup>251</sup> It is this adage that Teymur (Tamerlane) will adopt as his motto and will incorporate, along with the three-dot symbol of dervish orders, into his seal (see sec. IV.3). All the elements of seal (a), therefore, reinforce brotherhood ideals that have a Mithraic tint, and the seal itself must have belonged to a brotherhood official. Likewise, the second seal (b) that displays a similar composition, but with a slightly different legend, must have belonged to another such official. Its legend reads *l'sty p'lswm*. A similar inscription appears on the other two seals, but with different spellings in their last word, engraved as *plswm* on (c) and *pls'm* on (d). For (c), Ryka Gyselen has read this word as *pahlom* (translated as: best, excellent), but has been unable to suggest a reading for the other two,<sup>252</sup> while Oktor P. Skjaervo believes that the difference in spelling must be due to engraving mistakes and slippage, and that all three were meant to be *plswm* (i.e., *pahlom*).<sup>253</sup> I think there are two problems with such a supposition. First, to blame oddities on the engraver is too facile a solution, and it makes abstraction of the fact that if he made careless mistakes, his learned patron, i.e., the seal owner, would not tolerate it, as the caste of Persian bureaucratic officials were very educated and meticulous. Second, to treat the spelling differences for the second word as engraving mistakes, even though the spelling of the first word is uniformly correct on all three, is statistically unacceptable. One must therefore find another explanation for this anomaly.

<sup>251</sup> A variant of this legend is *rāst i rast*, which is engraved on a seal from the Saeedi collection, Gyselen 2007, 70.1.

<sup>252</sup> Gyselen 1993, 20.K.7-9.

<sup>253</sup> Personal communication.

Also, the spelling of *pahlom* itself is problematic, for occasionally it is spelled *plswm* or *plswmy* (as in the Paikuli inscriptions), but is read as *pahlom*.<sup>254</sup> Even though "l" and "s" are transposable, the transformation of *pls* into *pahl* is not a common phenomenon, and if it also occurs in relation to *pārsa* (which has given us *pahlav* and *pahlu*), chances are that the two phenomena are interconnected.

The solution to all of these problems lies in the very structure of *pahlom*, which incorporates an ordinal suffix *-om* that, for instance, transforms *panj* (five) into *panj-om* (fifth). It is applied here to *pahlav/pahlu*, which originally referred to the person standing next to the fire altar. The application of the ordinal suffix implies a hierarchy based on proximity to the fire, one that gave the highest rank to the closest person. Thus, *pahlu-om* (*pahlom*) designated the person closest to the fire. Figuratively, it acquired the meaning of best, excellent, or more generally, a person of high rank.

A legal sentence from a document that explains the succession process for the trusteeship of an endowed Fire supports our supposition. Maria Macuch has translated this passage as follows:

"MHDS 16.8-11, *ka gōwēd kū ēn ātaxš hamē az frazandān-ī man mard-ē(w) ī pahlom dārēd hamē ān ī hast ān ī pahlom dārišn*. If he declares: 'This fire: let it always out of my children be held by the best man, (then) among the (children) he has it should always be held by the best (man).'<sup>255</sup>

There is, however, a basic problem with this translation because "best" is not a legally definable term (or condition) in the court of law. That is why, in most Islamic *vaqf* documents, which follow the models established in Sasanian times, the successor to the donor is the male progeny closest to him. Alternatively, it's the eldest son (*pus i meh*) as some MP legal documents suggest.<sup>256</sup> Thus the *pahlom* of the above succession condition must read as "the closest," i.e., the one who generation-wise, and age-wise, is closest to the endower.<sup>257</sup> The sentence should thus be translated as:

If he has stipulated that this fire must be held by the closest male among his progenies, then, from among all those alive, it should be held by the closest (i.e., to the donor).

<sup>254</sup> Humbach & Skjaervo 1983, A14.05, B11.02.

<sup>255</sup> Macuch 2005, 100. Macuch opines that *pahlom* might mean "pious," a meaning that is also suggested in Faravashi 2002, 430. But like the piety attached to NP *pārsā*, it's a tangential meaning and not original.

<sup>256</sup> See Boyce 1968, 274 where the *eldest* son is elected as the guardian of a pious Zoroastrian foundation.

<sup>257</sup> Typically, *vaqf* documents (as well as English trust documents) consider succession priority: First through generation levels (*tabaqeh*), and second by age. For instance, if the donor has an elder child **A** who himself has an child **Aa** early on, and the donor has a younger child **B**, younger than his nephew **Aa**, then upon the death of the donor, if **A** is no longer alive, between **Aa** and **B**, it is **B** who has priority.

With this in mind, we may have to revisit some of the translations of the Paikuli inscriptions where the words *p'ls'n* and *p'lswb'n* appear in tandem and have been translated as "Persians and Parthians" by Humbach & Skjaervo, as in the following passages:

A4.03-A6.03: ... the princes and grandees and nobles and *Persians and Parthians* were informed..

B5.02-B11.02: ... the remaining princes and grandees and governors (*ktkhwt'y*) and nobles and *Persians and Parthians* who were the greatest and of highest rank (*pahlom*) and the noblest subjects...<sup>258</sup>



Fig. 129 - Ardavān trampled by Ardashir's horse, and Ahriman trampled by Ahura Mazda's horse. Naqsh-e Rostam.

In Paikuli, the Sasanian king Narseh (r. 293–302), who ascended the throne by displacing his grandnephew, is trying to prove his legitimacy by invoking the support of those who, in later Persian literature, are called *arkān-e dowlat* or Pillars of the State. His was not a democratic state where ordinary people, whether Persians or Parthians, had a voice that mattered. If anything, ordinary Persians and Parthians were rebels to the state, and not its pillars, especially the Parthians who constituted the power base of the Arsacids. And the Arsacids, who were portrayed as Ahrimanic in the rock relief of Ardashir at Naqsh-e

<sup>258</sup> Humbach & Skjaervo 1983, A4.03-B11.02. The two underlined words are translations that I have corrected: a) for *pahlom*, I have substituted the "highest rank"; b) for *kad-khodā*, which the authors have translated as "household," I have used "governor," because its first part (*kad*) refers to a dwelling or city and the whole word means "city-lord," even more so since *kadag-khodā* or Lord of a *kadag* (i.e., a lesser *kad*) appears as an official title on a seal (Gyselen 2007, 288). Household didn't need official seals.

Rostam (Fig. 129), could no longer figure among the grandees of the state. Nor could the Sasanian language or script ever be called "Pahlavi" with the meaning of "Parthian."

In the string of dignitaries that Narseh is enumerating, after the princes, nobles, grandees and governors, one should expect other persons of high rank. Conspicuously absent in this translated string of dignitaries are in fact members of the priesthood and the military. We may then assume that the *p'ls'n* therein refers to high priests (those who stood close to the fire), and that the *p'lswb'n* refers not to the Parthians but to army commanders whom the *Shāhnāmeḥ* calls *pahlav* or *pahlavān*.

زواره شدش برسپه، پهلوان

Zavāreh became the *pahlavān* (commander) of the army

سپه پهلوان بود با شاه جم

The army commander (*pahlavān*) was accompanying King Jamshid

The *Mojmal-ot-tavārikh val-qesas* further explains that *pahlavān* is to be equated with the Arabic term *amir* or army commander, while the title *jahān-pahlavān* (world-commander) designated the most important rank after kingship.<sup>259</sup> More importantly, in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the *mowbad* (priest), and the *pahlavān* were usually put on equal footing and considered as Pillars of the State:

نه موبد بود شاد و نه پهلوان Neither priest was happy nor *pahlavān* (commander)

Finally, when a prince is said to join the *pahlav* of Pārs:

سوی پهلوی پارس بنهاد روی He set out toward the *pahlav* (commander) of Pārs.

one cannot translate this *pahlav* as the Parthian of Pārs, but rather "commander of the army of Pārs."<sup>260</sup> What's more, in describing the social hierarchy that the Sasanian Ardashir I instituted, the historian Mas'udi (d. 957) places the caste of fire keepers (سکنه بیوت النیران) right after the princes and nobles.<sup>261</sup> Clearly, the fire keepers had an important role and function in Iranian society. Similarly, the officer in charge of fire in the Mysteries was still called by his Iranian name *pārsa*, which for the Greeks and Romans sounded the same as Persian. He was thus called *perses*.

<sup>259</sup> Bahār 1939, 420.

<sup>260</sup> While *pārsā* and *pahlav* stemmed from the same root and were both imbued with a notion of high rank, and whereas the shift from a fire priest to a pious person (NP *pārsā*) seems to be a natural one, a question remains as to how *pahlavān* gained a military specificity? and how should the *-an* ending be interpreted? as plural or an adjective? One possible answer may reside in its very MP spelling, *p'lswb'n*, which can be read as *pahlu-bān* (flank protector). Next to the king, who stood at the center, the flank commanders were the most important army officers. The plural form of *pahlav-ān* could be the result of a conflation with *pahlu-bān*.

<sup>261</sup> Mas'udi 1988, I:269.



through punning and the insertion of an additional "ā," the engravers of seals (b) and (d) were simply emphasizing the *pārsa* title of the seal owner, who supposedly was the closest person (to the Fire).

Finally, a more elaborate legend "*lāti be-rāsty pahlom*" is engraved on another seal (Fig. 131), which can be translated as "truthfully, generosity is the best" and/or "generosity is closest to truthfulness."<sup>263</sup> The word *lāti* therein sets the tone for dervish orders and all those who sought detachment from worldly goods. It defines the character of those who, by their generosity, were impoverished and were called *lāt*. As for the use of the word *rāsty* it was meant to remind the seal owner of one of the most cherished principles of brotherhood, that of truthfulness. These adages all reflected qualities that members of Mithraic societies were supposed to have, and like the seal of Fig. 120, the presence of a winged lion on this seal is a further indicator of its owner's Mithraic affiliation.



Fig. 131 – Sasanian seal (Gignoux & Gyselen 1982, 40.27)

#### VII.4 - The Dissemination of the Mithraic Model

What the above discussions clearly show is that the hierarchical leaders of post-Islam Iranian brotherhoods derived their epithets from Sasanian antecedents whose titles are engraved on various seals. The top rank, i.e., that of *bāp* or *pir*, which defined a fatherly figure, was transmitted to dervish orders; so was the practice of adopting diminutives such as *bāpak* and *pirag*. The second-ranked one, the *mehr-astāt*, transmuted into *ostād* who eventually became the master of ceremonies for dervish orders, or master of craftsmen, or guild leader. As for *pārsa*, it produced an adjective denoting piety within dervish orders, but also provided the title *pahlavān* for the wrestlers and the military. The evolution of these titles shows a continuous process of adaptation for the structure and hierarchy of brotherhood organizations, from the pre-Islamic era into post-Islamic Iran.

<sup>263</sup> The legend of this seal reads as *l'tyhy P (WN) l'styhy p'lsomy* (Gignoux & Gyselen 1982, 40.27). The word *lāti* therein is the same as *rādi* (generosity). This legend was translated by Gignoux and Gyselen as: "la générosité (*lātih*) par la justice est excellente," which is nebulous and confusing.

## CHAPTER VIII

### REMNANTS OF A PAGAN TRADITION

#### VIII.1 - *Chākar, Shāter*

In describing the composition of the `Abbāsīd army, Arab chroniclers often mention the *shākariyya* (i.e., the Arabic plural pronunciation of *chākar*) as an unruly military unit, who like the *`ayyārs*, frequently revolted in Baghdad.<sup>264</sup> Etienne de la Vaissière explains that the Chinese considered the *chākars* as a formidable force against whom "no foe could stand," and emphasizes that "in Sogdiana the *chākars* were the personal soldiers of the nobles and kings."<sup>265</sup> Numerous Persian texts also attest that rulers and viziers had their own personal *chākars*.<sup>266</sup> We thus see two distinct, and almost contradictory, functions for the *chākar*: Belonging to a military unit, or attached to the personal services of an officer. Whereas de la Vaissière believes that they "were mainly horsemen," I suggest that they were foot soldiers, for, as we saw, the horsemen were called *asvārs*; and, where he sees a purely Sogdian phenomenon,<sup>267</sup> I see another avatar of Mithraic societies that roamed the Iranian territories.

If the *chākars* were a formidable force, it was because they were trained to run fast. And for this ability, they were selected to run alongside their master's horse. In later times, they would be called *shāters*. We not only have images for them (Fig. 127), but also *fotovvat-nāmehs* that are indicative of their Mithraic origin. As such, we can readily understand the change of name. In order to make it more Islamic, the *chākar* (pronounced *chāker* in daily parlance) was switched to an Arabic and similar sounding name, *shāter*.<sup>268</sup> Indeed, a primary quality that dictionaries emphasize for the *shāter* is their ability to run fast.<sup>269</sup> And luckily, we have the account of Jean Chardin, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century

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<sup>264</sup> Ebn-e Athir 1965, 7:105, 131, 202.

<sup>265</sup> De la Vaissière 2006.

<sup>266</sup> See for instance Bayhaqi (1995, III:1156) where `Ali Rāyez is said to be the *chākar* of Bu-Sahl; or (Narshakhi 1984, 134) where `Amr-e Laith complains that his own *chākar* had betrayed him; or (Sajjādi 2006, 232) where a man refuses tip money because of being the *chākar* of somebody else.

<sup>267</sup> De la Vaissière 2007, 86-87.

<sup>268</sup> This name change process for socio-political reasons was first signaled in Francfort & Tremblay 2010 (89) and then expounded in Soudavar 2012b (65), where examples from post 1979 Tehran were given, such as the change of the name of Sorayyā street into Somayya (both pertain to women and begin with an "s").

<sup>269</sup> Dehkhodā: "*shāter*."

French traveler to the Safavid court, giving us an interesting description of the *shāter*, on the occasion of the Feast of the Shāter, or "Feat of the Footman of the King":

"This is, when the Overseer of the Footmen has in mind to be received into the King's Service. He must go from the Gate of the Palace to a Pillar, which is a French League and a half from the Palace, and fetch twelve Arrows from thence one after the other, between the two Suns. He is not received as the King's Footman till after that Trial."

Chardin then explains how he himself accompanied the *shāter* on a horse through his seventh course, at a time when the *shāter* had slackened his pace because of extreme heat and fatigue. And yet, to keep up with him, Chardin had to gallop all the way. He further recounts that:

"... it was said that he had not run well, because he had not brought the twelve Arrows in twelve Hours, but had taken near fourteen to do it in. They say that a Footman in the Reign of Chasafy (*Shāh Safi*), did it in that Time. It is a fine Foot-Course, to run six and thirty Leagues in twelve Hours."<sup>270</sup>

It is quite a feat to run a distance of 86 miles—equivalent to 3.5 Marathon runs—let alone in 12 to 14 hours.<sup>271</sup> Although we do not have a similar description for the *chākar*, historical accounts reveal that the *shāters* and *chākars* were used in the same capacities (for instance, they were both used as couriers).<sup>272</sup> On the other hand, the following anecdote about the Ziyārid warlord Mardāvij (d. 935) shows that the *chākars* were in charge of quadrupeds and led them rein in hand (Fig. 133):

Mardāvij, who was one night awakened by the noise of mules and horses as well as their *chākars*, asks: Who are in charge of these animals? The answer he got was: The Turkic slaves. To punish them, he orders: "Have the saddles taken off the quadrupeds and let the *chākars* carry them on their backs, and with reins still in their hand, it is they who should be led to the stables."<sup>273</sup>

It therefore seems that the personal *chākars*, in addition to running and acting as couriers, were in charge of the mounts and guided them. That is why, in his rage against them, Mardāvij ordered a reversal of roles: The mules were to lead the *chākars*. And the choice of Turkic slaves for *chākars* was to be expected, since, reputedly, they were strongly

<sup>270</sup> <http://www.iras.ucalgary.ca/~volk/sylvia/Chardin12.htm>.

<sup>271</sup> One French *lieue* of that time was approximately equal to 2.4 miles.

<sup>272</sup> For instance, in *Shabānkāreh-yi* 2002 (2:60), the governor of Damascus sends out a present at the hands of his *chākar*, and in *Fumani-ye Gilāni* 1970 (137), the *shāter* of a Gilān ruler arrives with a written message.

<sup>273</sup> Ebn-e Meskavayh 1976, 5:414.

built, and devoted to their masters. Like the *shāter*, the personal *chākar* would stand next to his master's horse, rein in hand.<sup>274</sup> They were thus one and the same.

The question then is: What was the difference between the *astāndes/mehr-astāt* and the *chākar*? It seems that the former, while occasionally acting as a courier, did not run alongside the chariot but stood on its foot rail (side-step); hence the appellation *mehr-astāt* for the one who stood on Mithra's chariot. A much used sentence to designate a loyal servant in Persian literature is "*gholām-e pā bar rekāb*" or the "slave who stood on the chariot's foot-rail," which provides further insight for this function. In fact, within the literature of the Ahl-e Haqq, there is a question and answer sequence—similar to those of the *fotovvat-nāmehs*—in which, when the initiate is asked "who is the deputy (*khalifeh*)" of their *pir* called Benyāmin, he must respond: "his servant David, who is his *gholām-e pā bar rekāb*."<sup>275</sup> We thus have yet another equivalent to *heliodromos*, within a congregation whose members called each other "brother," broke bread into wine as a sign of friendship, and followed many customs that can be traced back to a Mithraic past.<sup>276</sup> Also, the devoted servant of the celebrated and martyred Sufi, Mansur-e Hallāj (858-922), was a certain Shākar-e Sufi (i.e., the Sufi *chākar*) who, like his master, was beheaded by the city gates.<sup>277</sup> Thus, similar to "*gholām-e pā bar rekāb*," the word *chākar* described the loyal servant of dervishes and Sufi leaders.

As already mentioned, the second hierarchical position in dervish orders was the *ostād-e shadd*, who tied a cord around the initiate's waist or a ribbon around his hat. The first part of his name (*ostād*) obviously came from *mehr-astāt*, or the one who stood next to Mithra. It entered Arabic as *ustādh*, and with the addition of the Arabic word *shadd* (to tie), the *ostād-e shadd* became a full-fledged Arabic compound that described the ceremonial function of the officer who tied ribbons and cords. Nevertheless, the Arabic *shadd* portends two other meanings: "running" and "the rise of fire,"<sup>278</sup> which connects it back to *heliodromos* and to the fire at the heart of the *mithraeum*. So resilient were the original symbols of Mithraic societies that despite all efforts to conceal them, they reemerged time and time again.

<sup>274</sup> Other passages of Persian literature also hint at the fact that the *chākar* acted as a horse attendant; see for instance the following verse in Āsaf 2003, 98: "If you don't feed your horse and *chākar*, \* your horse won't go, but your *chākar* will go (away)" ( اسب و چاکر، چو نان و جو ندهی \* نرود اسب و چاکرت برود )

<sup>275</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 128.

<sup>276</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 114; and notes 102, 197 supra. They also held their main festivities in the month of Mehr, *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>277</sup> As-Solamy 2010, 34.

<sup>278</sup> Dehkhodā, "*shadd*."

All of these congregations emphasized the spirit of brotherhood and loyalty. The highest form of loyalty manifested itself in the relationship between master and *chākar* (or *shāter*), to the extent that the latter was often equated with *bandeh*, *gholām*, and slave. But loyalty among brothers and peers was no less important, and that is why the poet Sa'di famously wrote that he was: "a faithful friend (*yār-e shāter*) in the service of men, and not an unnecessary burden" (که در خدمت مردان یار شاطر باشم نه بار خاطر).<sup>279</sup> For Sa'di, the *shāter* epitomized loyalty and friendship.

### VIII.2 - *Shāter, Peyk, 'Ayyār, Wrestler*

As noticed in sections V.3-4, chronicles and literary texts often equate *'ayyārs* with *shāters*. And in the same way that *javānmard* qualities were recognized in *'ayyārs*, the *shāters* were also qualified as *javānmard*.<sup>280</sup> Similarly, wrestlers were called *'ayyār*,<sup>281</sup> and *shāters* used the *'ayyārs'* slingshot (*kamān-e goruheh*), the one that had been popularized by the Caliph An-Nāser among the *fetyān*,<sup>282</sup> and like the Mazdakites and *qalandars* (Fig. 132), they often wore red headgear, red robes or red pants (Fig. 133). There was, thus, much intermingling and many common traits between them.



Fig. 132 – *Qalandar* with red hat and red pants. Iran 17<sup>th</sup> cent. EMS coll.



Fig. 133 – A *shāter* with red headgear and red robe, and dagger and bells tied to his belt. Mughal India. MMA

<sup>279</sup> Dehkhodā, "*shāter*."

<sup>280</sup> Dehkhodā, "*shāter*": جوانمردِ شاطر زمین بوسه داد

<sup>281</sup> Nasavi 2005, 83; عیار و کشتی‌گیر بود; see also note 139 supra.

<sup>282</sup> Tabari 1967, 7:636; see also note 170 supra.

More important, however, is the respect that brotherhoods felt for each other, as if belonging to a wider—almost universal—congregation. Even though the concept of brotherhood thrived among the lowly, it could also permeate the highest strata of society. A case in point is the prevalence of dervish orders, and the Sufi spirit, at the court of the Teymurid Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā. The presence of the celebrated Jāmi and the sultan's childhood friend and chancellor, Amir `Ali-shir Navāi, had allowed for an atmosphere in which the Naqshbandi Sufi order had gained prominence and shaped the social behavior of the elite, who freely mixed with the literati, Sufis, artists, and wrestlers.

When Amir `Ali-shir was deeply hurt by the behavior of a former protégé seeking to dislodge him, he commissioned the painter Shāh Mozaffar to expose his scheme through the bias of an illustrated text. And Shāh Mozaffar used a story from the Golestān of Sa`di, about the perfidy of a young wrestler *vis à vis* his master (Fig. 134), to illustrate his patron's point.<sup>283</sup> Although he had to imagine a composition that combined Sa`di's story with the political situation at hand, one gets the impression that his illustration very much reflected a real gathering in which the sultan and his entourage were present. Indeed, the chronicler Vāsefi recounts a number of stories about the sultan's encounters with wrestlers, including a competition that he had organized between two renowned *pahlavāns*, Mohammad-e Abu-Sa`id and Mohammad-e Mālan, which was attended by all the grandees of Herāt.<sup>284</sup>

The *pahlavān* Mohammad-e Abu-Sa`id was much praised by Vāsefi for his literary ability, erudition, and noble character. He was a celebrity who many tried to befriend. In his praise, Amir `Ali-shir, had written the following quartet when exiled to Astarābād:

در کعبه و دیر، ما به ارشاد تو ایم \* در صومعه و میکده، با یاد تو ایم  
ذاکر، سحر و شام، به اوراد تو ایم \* یعنی که یتیم نعمت آباد تو ایم

Whether at the Ka`ba or temple, we are guided by you \* whether in church or tavern,  
our thoughts are with you  
Our morning and night recitations are through your dicta \* we are but an orphan at your  
House of Charity

And in reply, the *pahlavān* laments the Amir's exile through another quartet:

ای میر، تو پیر و ما به ارشاد تو ایم \* دایم به دعاگویی و با یاد تو ایم  
این شهر به تو خوش است و ما با تو خوشیم \* مردیم و خراب استرآباد تو ایم

O Amir, you are our *pir*, and it is we who are guided by you \* we are constantly  
praying for you and thinking about you

<sup>283</sup> For the complete story, see Soudavar 1992, 101-105.

<sup>284</sup> Vāsefi 1970, 498.

This city (Herāt) is happy when you are present; and we are (only) happy when with you \* we are all dying, as the real victims of your Astarābād exile



Fig. 134 – Two wrestlers before Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā (Soudavar 1992, 104)

One night, the sultan organizes a feast at the Jāhān-ārā Garden. The head of his *peyks* (courier corps), a most handsome man named Teyfur, excuses himself for having to attend the *peyks*' own gathering in a nearby building, at the end of the same garden. The

guest of honor at the sultan's feast was *pahlavān* Mohammad-e Abu-Sa`id who, after a few drinks, wandered off toward the *peyks'* gathering place. He is greeted with much respect by the *peyks*, and joins them for a few more drinks after which he forgets to go back, and falls asleep. Having not seen the *pahlavān* for a while, the sultan and Amir `Ali-shir are about to retire to their own quarters when an attendant informs them of the whereabouts of the *pahlavān*. The sultan is infuriated, because he himself had his eyes set on the handsome Teyfur and took it as an insult that the *pahlavān* had preferred the company of the *peyks* to his. To show his displeasure, he orders another *peyk* to take his gear to the *pahlavān* and tell him: "Since this is what you like, you are henceforth to be a *peyk*." After being woken up, the *pahlavān* obliges; he shaves off his beard in the style of the *peyks* and dons the paraphernalia sent to him. Upon seeing Abu-Sa`id emerge from his room in this fashion, Teyfur prostrates himself before him, and performs a whirling dance to honor the new addition to their ranks. Afterwards, they all go to the court, where the *pahlavān* asks for forgiveness through a poem that he had just composed. The sultan rejects his pleas, and, to belittle him further, proclaims the *pahlavān* to be his new *peyk*. At which time, Amir `Ali-shir rushes in and asks permission to wear the same outfit, for he had vowed to follow the *pahlavān* in whichever congregation (*tariqat*) he entered. Now that Abu-Sa`id had become a *peyk*, he too needed to be one. Confronted with such a display of solidarity between vizier and wrestler, Soltān-Hosayn had no choice but to reinstate the *pahlavān*.<sup>285</sup>

This episode is indicative of a few important points. First, not all brotherhoods wished to Arabicize their name, especially in Khorāsān. Since *chāker* had gradually taken on a lowly connotation, the word *peyk* (meaning "courier" in NP, and "foot-soldier" in MP) was adopted instead for a function that had much prestige at the court of Soltān-Hosayn. Second, we saw how the prestige of a *pahlavān* could attract the respect of viziers, and courtiers, as well as brotherhoods. Third, that the *peyk's* initiation involved a whirling dance by existing members. More importantly, a powerful political figure such as the Sufi-minded Amir `Ali-shir, or a *peyk* such as Teyfur, could both recognize in *pahlavān* Mohammad-e Abu-Sa`id the noble qualities of a congregation leader who commanded respect. They all followed him to the court in order to express their devotion to him.

### VIII.3 - Performers

The evolution from *chākar* to *shāter* was not only in name but also in function. The *shāter* gradually took on a ceremonial role, along with other performers who in Kāshefi's

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<sup>285</sup> Vāsefi 1970, 496-97.

*Fotovvat-nāmeḥ-ye Soltāni* are all lumped into one category as the *ma`rekeh-girān* (performers). According to Chardin, some of the *shāters* danced in the festivities. We may assume that their dance too involved a fair amount of whirling, for such a movement is common among dervish orders as well as wrestlers of the *zurkhāneh* (i.e., the traditional gymnasiums of Iran). An amusing anecdote by Chardin is about the visit of a Safavid envoy to France who is taken by his host to a ceremony in which Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) himself was dancing. And upon being asked about the king's performance, he replied, "By the Name of God, He is an excellent *shāter*!"<sup>286</sup>

Included among the *ma`rekeh-girān* were the *bildārān* (the shovel men), and the *zurgarān* (wrestlers and gymnasts) of whom we have miniature sketches (Fig. 135-38, 140-42). In a compilation of poets of his time, the Safavid prince Sām Mirzā (1517-67) inserted the following entry:

Khājeh Khord-e *bildār* – He is the *pahlavān* of the age and the *ostād* (master) of the *bildārs* of Erāq and Khorāsān (east and west). In dancing, despite an enormous body, he had such technique (*osul*) that the learned would call him the "mountain of technique." And he was also a master *kamāndār* (bowman). He spent most of his time reading the Koran and praying...<sup>287</sup>

Once again, we see a fluid use of terms among various congregations. The leader of the *bildārs* is qualified as *ostād*, but at the same time he is a *pahlavān*, i.e., a master wrestler. He is also a dancer like the *shāters*. In addition, he is said to be a *kamāndār*, not one who would shoot with a bow but rather one who would handle a heavy bow such as in Fig. 138 and 142. This bow-like instrument was used for muscle development, and has been transformed nowadays into the *kabādeh* of the *zurkhāneh*. Moreover, in the poem that Sām Mirzā quotes from Khājeh Khord, the *bildārs* are qualified as penniless (*mofles*) and estranged from society (*gharib*); these are adjectives that often qualified the *lāt*, the *luti*, the *ayyār*, the *wrestler* and other people from the same milieu.<sup>288</sup>

Since the *shāter* handled a double-sided spear at times (Fig. 141), the *bildār* was most probably considered to be an offshoot of the *shāter*. That is why, in Iran, the bread maker who handles a wooden shovel (similar to the pizza shovel) is called a *shāter*. This

<sup>286</sup> <http://www.iras.ucalgary.ca/~volk/sylvia/Chardin12.htm>. Louis XIV was an avid dancer and often had the lead role in ballets organized by his chief musician Jean-Baptiste Lully.

<sup>287</sup> Sām Mirzā 1973, 190.

<sup>288</sup> Sām Mirzā 1973, 190: مفلسند و غریب و قلاشند \* بیلداران که در جهان فاشند (despite being renowned in this world, the *bildārs* are - penniless, estranged and hooligans)

appellation connects the *shāter* back to the fire of the *mithraeum*, and the shovel held by the *leo* (lion) grade holder (see Fig. 139, also the 4<sup>th</sup> station of Fig. 3).

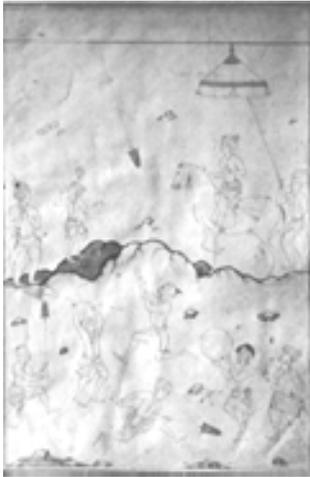


Fig. 135 – *Bildārs* performing (Martin 1912, pl. 102a)



Fig. 136 – A *bildār* (Robinson 1976, 65)



Fig. 137 – Acrobat (TKSM, H2154)



Fig. 138- A gymnast (TKSM, H2154)



Fig. 139 - The Leo with shovel and disheveled hair. Ostia (web)



Fig. 140 - Performers (Martin 1912, pl. 102b)



Fig. 141- *Shāter* with lance (Robinson 1976, 187)



Fig. 142 - A gymnast (Soudavar 1992, 226)

The Venetian traveler Michel Membré gives some added specificity about the *shāters* of Shāh Tahmāsb:

"When the king rides, about 10 footmen go before him, who are called *shāters*; each of them wears a white cloth skirt, cut short to knees; and they wear trousers, and have plumes on their heads, and on the front of their belts, a little bell."<sup>289</sup>

Interestingly, the bell hanging from the *shāters*' belt is a feature that we also see in the images of various performers, such as the *kuzeh-bāz* (juggler, Fig. 137) and *zurgar* (gymnast, Fig. 138), which once again vouches for practices that used symbols and rituals deriving from a common pre-Islamic origin.

#### VIII.4 - The Janissary Corps or the New *Chākars*

A few years ago, in an article about the relationship of the early Safavids with their neighbors, I had focused on two paintings by Shāh Tahmāsb's (r. 1524-76) court painter Āqā Mirak, which I had suggested to be caricatures mocking the *shāh*'s enemies, the Uzbek `Obaydollāh Khān (r. 1512-39) and the Ottoman Solaymān the Magnificent (r. 1520-66) (Figs. 143-44).<sup>290</sup> Besides open warfare, the Ottomans and the Uzbeks had embarked on an intense propaganda campaign against the Safavids, sending out insulting letters and accusing them of being heretics. As it happened, Tahmāsb had repented from wine drinking at an early age, and had issued edicts for his officers to do the same.<sup>291</sup> This gave Tahmāsb a potent weapon to counter attack. Thus the message embedded in `Obaydollāh Khān's caricature focused on the Uzbek's vulnerability in this respect: How dare he, who indulges in wine and music, treat Tahmāsb as heretic? As for the second caricature, because of a hat that looked like those of the Janissaries, I had guessed that it was Tahmāsb's answer to Solaymān's insults, but could not decipher its full message, nor could I explain Solaymān's accoutrements. In view of our discussions about *chākars* and *shāters*, I now believe that Solaymān is portrayed as a *shāter* and head of the Janissaries.

This proposition rests on the fact that the highly trained Janissaries were essentially foot-soldiers, and their Turkish name, *yeni cheri* (new army), must reflect the Ottoman pronunciation of *yenge chakari* because of their tendency to suppress the "k" and the "g". In fact, the origin of this composite name can be found in a poem composed by Ruzbahān-e Khonji who had fled the Safavid court and resided in Herāt. His poem, which was delivered through an intermediary to the Ottoman Soltān Salim I (r. 1502-20),

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<sup>289</sup> Membré 1993, 24.

<sup>290</sup> Soudavar 2002, 101-105.

<sup>291</sup> Soudavar 1999, 52-53.

was a mix of Persian and Chaghatāy Turkish that echoed Central Asian traditions; and therein, he advocates the formation of a new army that he defines as *yenge chakar*.<sup>292</sup>



Fig. 143 – Caricature of Soltān Solaymān. By Āqā Mirak, 16<sup>th</sup> century (Ph.: J. Soustiel)



Fig. 144 – Caricature of `Obaydollāh Khān, by Āqā Mirak, 16<sup>th</sup> century (Soudavar 1992, 181)



Fig. 145 – Caricature of a courtier, attributable to Shāh Tahmāsb (Roxburgh 2005, 205)

The Janissary Corps was created in the nascent Ottoman state with the same aim and reasons that had compelled Phillip of Burgundy to institute the Order of the Golden Fleece, and the Caliph An-Nāser to join the circles of the *fotovat*. By relying on a cohesive dervish order that had a hierarchical organization with a wide following in Anatolia and the Balkans, and had as patron saint the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Khorāsānian Sufi, Hājji Bektāsh Vali, the Ottomans had the possibility of creating a powerful Praetorian Guard based on the rigorous *chākari* training. Out of this mix was born the Janissary Corps of foot soldiers who were as formidable warriors as the Sogdian *chākars* that the Chinese had so admired. Moreover, Hājji Bektāsh Vali was a *qalandar* dervish whose followers had much in common with those of the Ahl-e Haqq, and revered their spiritual

<sup>292</sup> انتظار ینگ چکر خراسانلق \* قیل خراساندا داقی سلطانلق, Espenāqchi Pāshāzādeh 2000, 157

Doerfer however only explains the etymology of *yengi* ("new") and then relies on Persian sources to define the *yengicheri* as foot-soldiers without an explanation for the second part; Doerfer 1963, IV:203-204.

leader as well as his successors.<sup>293</sup> The transplant of the Ottoman sultan onto their leadership, effectively directed their loyalty to him, in the same way that Baghdadian brotherhoods swore allegiance to the Caliph An-Nāser when he assumed the mantle of their leadership.<sup>294</sup>

There was much affinity between the Bektāshis and the Safavid dervishes, and as a result, the Safavid court had good knowledge about the origin of the Janissaries. Thus, to mock Soltān Solaymān, Āqā Mirak portrayed him not as the commander of the *chākars*, but as a performing *shāter*, handkerchief in hand, and in the guise of an animal tamer parading a small dog rather than a mighty lion. His attire is indeed that of a *shāter*, with short pants and leather shoes; he also wears a Janissary hat that is similar to that of our lion tamer (Fig. 92). From his belt hangs the traditional dagger, the leather pouch called *charas-dān*, and more importantly, a gourd alluding to the drinking habits of the Janissaries. All of these are remnants of symbols that the avatars of Mithraic societies carried. The choice of the dog as the animal that Solaymān was parading, though, was not accidental. It was a substitute for the symbol of the three dots that had become an imperial Ottoman symbol (see sec. IV.3). The Safavids must have known that the three-dot tattoo of dervish orders was a symbol of the tri-star grouping of Sirius within the Winter Triangle, and a symbol that leaders of Mithraic brotherhoods used to wear on their signets, as on the ring of Fig. 93. The painter's aim was to show Solaymān in the most negative way, and thus alluded to every un-Islamic motif that he could think of, and the dog suited his purpose because it was an unclean animal with respect to the Islamic *shari`a*. Tahmāsb, who took much pleasure in drawing caricatures himself, and making fun of his own entourage (as in Fig. 145), must have been delighted to see these derogatory caricatures of his enemies.

More importantly, this caricature establishes the close link between *chākar* and *shāter*, and how they were looked upon as one and the same, at least by the Safavids.

### VIII.5 - Of Painters and Wrestlers

The wide-ranging respect that later *pahlavāns* commanded derived from the popularity of wrestling among different strata of society, as well as the spiritual qualities that one expected their leaders to have. Indeed, the examples of two famous painters, one Teymurid and the other Safavid, are testimony to the attraction that the milieu of

<sup>293</sup> Algar 1989. It was said that Hājji Bektāsh Vali was "a man of gnostic and illumined nature who failed to follow the *shari`a* (*dar motābe`at nabūd*)," *idem*.

<sup>294</sup> Soltān-Hosayn's elder son, Badi`oz-zamān Mirzā, became a dervish and after Salim I's capture of Tabriz in 1514, he greeted him in the company of the *qalandars* of the city; Karamağaralı 2004, 30. He was obviously paying homage to Salim as the head of the Janissaries (of Bektāshi affiliation).

traditional wrestling had for painters and members of different guilds. Both had a disdain for monetary rewards and preferred the company of libertines to courtly people. And the style of both is characterized by an exuberance that matched their free-spirited nature.

One is the 15<sup>th</sup>-century painter Mirak-e Naqqāsh-e Khorāsāni who in the list of painters active at the court of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā—provided by the Turco-Mongol historian Mohammad-Haydar Dughlāt (1499-1551)—occupies the top spot and is praised with the following entry:

He is one of the wonders of the age. He was Behzād's master. His sketching is more masterly than Behzād's, although his execution is not up to the latter's. However, all his works were done outside in the open air, whether traveling, at home, or at [Soltān Hosayn] Mirzā's court. And he never felt compelled to [work in] a studio nor [to use an] easel. This is strange enough, but further yet he practiced muscle building (*zurmandihā mikard*) that is absolutely at odds with being a painter. For muscle building, he practiced all kind of exercises, from wrestling to wielding the *tukhmāq*, and gained a reputation in this field.<sup>295</sup> It is quite strange to combine painting with such practices."<sup>296</sup>

Mirak's eagerness for wrestling was combined with a lack of interest in material rewards to the extent that Amir `Ali-shir once threatened him with imprisonment in order to induce him to work.<sup>297</sup>

A century later, the chronicler Qāzi Ahmad depicts a similar behavioral pattern for another painter, namely Rezā-ye `Abbāsi. Having praised his talents and his affiliation to the court of Shāh `Abbās in his first edition of the *Golestān-e Honar* (c. 1596), the Qāzi expressed concern about the artist's lifestyle in a revised version produced around 1606:

The company of hapless people and libertines is spoiling his disposition. He is addicted to watching *wrestling* and to acquiring competence and instruction in this profession.<sup>298</sup>

And later on, the chronicler Eskandar Beyg echoed the same:

"...on account of his uncouth ways, he (Rezā) has not prospered and remains *penniless* and distraught."<sup>299</sup>

<sup>295</sup> The *tukhmāq* was a heavy mace-type object, which nowadays is called *mil*.

<sup>296</sup> There are several translations of this entry based on different manuscripts of the *Tārikh-e Rashidi* of Dughlāt. The best is the one provided in Melikian-Chirvani 1988, 99-100.

<sup>297</sup> Vāsefi 1970, 152-53.

<sup>298</sup> Minorsky 1959, 192.

<sup>299</sup> Eskandar Beyg 1971, I:176.



Fig. 146 – Wrestler, by Rezā `Abbāsi (Sotheby's sale 6-12-1967, lot 61)



Fig. 147 - Dervish Beheshti with three dot burn marks and wine bowl. Rezā `Abbāsi Esfahān, dated 1625. Golestān Palace Library.

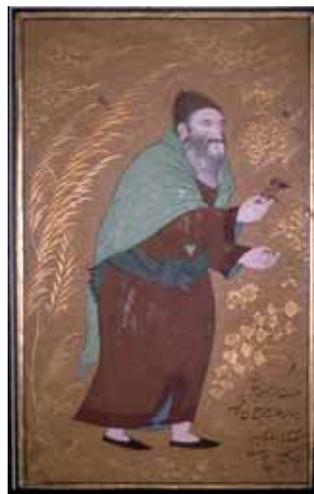


Fig. 148 - Dervish Ghiāth-e Semnāni by Rezā `Abbāsi. Ex-Khosrovani Coll.

As a result, in the corpus of Rezā's work, we not only see drawings of wrestlers (Fig. 146) but also numerous *qalandars* and dervishes (Figs. 147-48) The traditional wrestling community was infused with popular Sufism, and the same type of master-pupil relationship existed there as in the Sufi orders. Among these groups of people, the master was more than a mere teacher; he was a fatherly figure, a role model, and a spiritual leader. One such revered figure for Rezā may have been the dervish Ghiāth-e Semnāni (Fig. 148), whose image he often reproduced in various compositions. Rezā's body of work is in fact a testament to the close-knit relationship that existed among the guilds, wrestlers and dervish orders.

### VIII.6 - Bonnet and Hair Style

A striking feature of the performers depicted in Figs. 135-38 is their hairstyle: Long hair, ponytailed toward the back. But long hair was a feature of dervishes and *qalandars* as well. A 17<sup>th</sup>-century treatise on dervish orders actually argues that long hair was in following the example set by the Prophet Mohammad and had to be "from ear to shoulder (از گوش تا دوش), no more and no less."<sup>300</sup> For active performers, the ponytail kept their long hair tidy. On the other hand, for dervishes and *qalandars*, their tall hats helped them to dissimulate their long hair, and spared them aggravation from an unsympathetic public

<sup>300</sup> که موی سر ماندن صفت آن حضرت (محمد) ع است : 33 ، Abd-or-rahim 1672،

(Fig. 150). As a general rule, miter-like hats and bonnets (Fig. 149) adorned the heads of dervishes, as well as most members of congregations that were avatars of Mithraic societies. While most started with a red-colored straight bonnet, they gradually opted for more complicated, and sometimes extravagant, shapes to distinguish themselves from their peers. The extravaganza included feathers (Fig. 151a), perhaps as a symbol that evoked the auspiciousness of the Chamrosh bird.

And yet, as we shall see in the Sasanian graffiti, many members of past Mithraic congregations sported their long hair without a cover; for them, wearing a bonnet seemed to be the prerogative of the rank holders. And it is, perhaps, in consideration of such practices that *Denkard III.29* qualifies the enemies of Zoroastrianism as the *divs* with "disheveled hair," because, in the parlance of the early Zoroastrian priesthood, those who had rejected the supremacy of Ahura Mazda, and honored Mithra instead, were treated as *divs* (sec. XII.6). An example of such a person could be the *chākar* leading the horse of Shāpur son of Pāpak in the Persepolitan graffiti (Fig. 162). Nevertheless, in Safavid times, members of the nobility also donned a sheepskin hat tied with a ribbon, to show their sympathy for dervish orders (as the polo-playing prince in Fig. 151b).



Fig. 149 – An *ʿayyār*.  
A page from the *khāvarān-nāmeḥ*. MMA



Fig. 150 – Dervishes with long hair. (Detail of Fig. 13)



Figs. 151 a, b – (a) A Safavid *shāter* with short pants and axe. (b) Safavid noblemen wearing sheepskin bonnets with ribbon. (Soudavar 1992, 235 and 244)



### VIII.7 - Camouflaged Wine Bowls and Wine Prohibition

Wine drinking constituted an essential part of the Mithraic oath, and Persian literature often associates wine with the sun and Mithra (*mehr*):

از آن ماه پرورده مهر بخت      که از ماه تن دارد از مهر جان  
چو بر کف گرفتیش گویی مگر      همی بر سخن بشکند ارغوان

Of that Moon-nurtured being that the Sun-released \* whose body was given by the moon and its soul was given by Mithra

When you shall lift a cup of it, you may wonder \* whether it's a purple blossom  
responding to poetry<sup>301</sup>

And as we saw, drinking wine was an important feature of the enthronement ceremony of Bābak-e Khorramdin: His followers swore allegiance to him, and drank wine after sacrificing a bull (sec. III.2). By digging into the literary terrain, Melikian-Chirvani has relied on verses such as the ones here below to argue that wine was actually a substitute for the blood of the sacrificial animal:<sup>302</sup>

ساقیا موسم عید است، بده جام شراب      بنشان در دل ما آتش سی روزه به آب  
هین رگ خون بگشای از گلوی گاو سفال      تا شوم مست و برانم نفس خر به خلاب

O cupbearer it's the end of Ramadan, give me a cup of wine,\* to put out my burning  
desire of thirty-days

Ho! Open the blood artery in the throat of the pottery bull \* So I get drunk, and cry out  
loud like an ass in the mud

According to Shafii-ye Kadkani, among the remnants of the Mazdakite movement, many drank wine and called themselves *parsiyān* (probably *pārsāyān*),<sup>303</sup> and according to Pirouzdjou, the Horufids, who were the followers of the dervish Fazlollāh Astarābādi (b. 1340), also drank wine.<sup>304</sup> Like the Khorramdiniyyeh, the Qezelbāsh followers of Shāh Esmā'il drank to be invigorated in battle; it was effective at times, but could also lead to catastrophe.<sup>305</sup>

Wine drinking was therefore very much part of a social ritual rooted in a pre-Islamic past. More often than not, dervishes and *qalandars* didn't even feel obligated to hide such activities. The young dervish depicted by Rezā-ye `Abbāsi in Fig. 147 not only wears a red Mithraic bonnet but is drinking red wine from a cup. The 14<sup>th</sup>-century Najm-od-din-e Zarkub (the goldsmith) even avows in his *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* that, prior to the Prophet Mohammad, the *fetyān* drank wine and it was only on his urging that "forty of his youthful companions" switched from wine to water and salt.<sup>306</sup> The salt and water in the dervish initiation ceremonies were thus substitutes for the wine and bread of Mithraic

<sup>301</sup> Dehkhodā 1973, 19345 ("wine")

<sup>302</sup> Melikian-Chirvani 1992, 132. Melikian provides numerous other examples combining blood (*khun*) with wine utensils such as *khun-e khom* (blood of the wine jar), *khun-e piyāleh* (blood of the bowl), *khun-e raz* (vine blood), Melikian-Chorvani 1992, 109.

<sup>303</sup> Shafii 2007, 58-59.

<sup>304</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 89.

<sup>305</sup> Esmā'il's son, Tahmāsb, complained in his memoirs about the Qezelbāsh troops who drank all night before the battle of Chāldirān (1514), and were defeated the next day by the Ottomans, because of their drunkenness; Tahmāsb ND, fol. 27v.

<sup>306</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 56.

societies. Others preferred a clean break with the past, and advocated that it was inappropriate to have water and salt from a bowl shaped like a wine vessel.<sup>307</sup> This criticism targeted elongated bowls hanging from the performer's belt (Fig. 92) or placed next to the skin throne (Fig. 40), which mimicked the shape of wine vessels. To avoid harassment, these vessels, which the initiates wanted to carry at all times, had to be concealed or camouflaged. Thus, in lieu of a wine vessel, a bowl-shaped bell hung from the belt of *shāters* and performers (Fig. 138), which nevertheless incorporated subtle references to past symbols and practices. A particularly elaborate one has reached us from Safavid times (Fig. 153a). Among the symbols that adorn this bowl-shaped bell are the bull and lion in combat (Fig. 153b), the auspicious bird Chamrosh (Fig. 153c), and it also bears a lengthy poem by Hāfez in praise of wine:

می دمد صبح و کُله بست سحاب \* الصَّبُوح الصَّبُوح یا اصحاب  
 می چکد زاله بر رخ لاله \* المُدَام المُدَام یا احباب  
 می وزد از چمن نسیم بهشت \* هان بنوشید دم به دم می ناب  
 تخت زمرّد زده است گل به چمن \* راح چون لعل آتشین دریاب

Morning is breezing in, and clouds are setting up their dome, \* A cup, (give me) a cup,  
 O companions  
 Dews are dripping from the tulip's forehead, \* Continue, continue, O friends  
 The scent of Paradise is blowing from the green grass, \* Keep drinking the pure wine,  
 time after time,  
 Flower has set its emerald throne on green grass, \* Seek the wine that's like molten ruby



Fig. 152 – Hanging bowl. V. Kooros coll.



Figs. 153 a, b, c – Dervish drinking bowl camouflaged as a bell (Sotheby's, London, sale of 14-4-2010, lot 206)

Such an elaborate ode to wine establishes this semi-spherical object as a drinking cup camouflaged as a bell, rather than the other way around. It is in fact a modified version of

<sup>307</sup> Mahjoub 2000, 158

the wine cup that Mongols had hanging from their belts (Fig. 152). The strong association of wine with brotherhoods may in fact offer us a partial explanation as to the enigma of wine prohibition in Islam, for the Koran does not advocate a strict prohibition, nor does it prescribe penalties for drinking. As the thorough *Dictionnaire du Coran* now explains, such a prohibition poses numerous theological problems for Moslem jurists, since the Koran provides three different assessments of wine and inebriating substances that range from positive to negative. On the positive side, verse XLVII:15 promises to the faithful a paradise where inebriating liquors freely flow.<sup>308</sup> On the negative side, we have verse V:90 that associates wine with Satan (*Shaytān*). But by being both a rational angel and an evil one,<sup>309</sup> Satan is such a controversial character in the Koran that no prohibition can be strictly based on an association with him. Verse IV:43, on the other hand, places a strict restriction around prayer time: One cannot be drunk when praying. But such a specific restriction is no different than modern laws prohibiting driving when intoxicated. Driving, as well as praying, requires one to be in full possession of his or her faculties, and if interdictions are devised and penalties spelled out for such situations, they cannot be extrapolated to all other circumstances.

More importantly, in Islam "the Eloquence" of the Koran is often presented as a miracle that parallels the miracles attributed to Jesus and Moses. Therefore, the idea that an exegete is needed to extract a strict prohibition out of the Koran dents the very premise of its "Eloquence" as a miracle. If it was an important issue, God and his Messenger were fully capable of spelling out an absolute prohibition, and devise penalties.

All of these contradictions are resolved by the very balanced explanation that verse II:219 offers, if properly assessed. Unfortunately all present-day assessments are based on a tradition that has deliberately altered the meaning of this verse to allow a strict wine-prohibition policy. Verse II:219 is composed of three sections for which the middle one is crucial, in that it provides a bridge between the first and third sections, and advocates a compassionate approach to the problem. But the present-day redaction makes a mockery of this verse:

(١) يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ وَمَنَافِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِن نَّفْعِهِمَا (٢) وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنْفِقُونَ قُلْ الْعَفْوَ (٣) كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ

<sup>308</sup> "Paradise which the pious have been promised, in it there are rivers of ... and rivers of wine," XLVII:15. In addition, XVI:67 seems to present the "inebriating juice of grapes" as a sign from God; Amir-Moezzi et al. 2007, 910-911.

<sup>309</sup> Satan was an angel who got expelled from the heavens for refusing to prostrate himself before Adam (VII:11-12). Because prostration before any being but God was considered as idolatry, this refusal of Satan was deemed by some as the ultimate expression of belief in monotheism.

Persian translation (Khorramshāhi):

(۱) از تو درباره شراب و قمار می‌پرسند، بگو در آنها گناهی بزرگ و نیز سودهایی برای مردم هست، ولی گناه آنها بر سودشان می‌چربد، (۲) و از تو می‌پرسند که چه چیزی ببخشند، بگو آنچه افزون بر نیاز است، (۳) بدین‌سان خداوند آیات خود را برایتان روشن می‌سازد، باشد که اندیشه کنید

English translation (Sahih - international):

"(1) They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, "In them is great sin and [yet, some] benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit." (2) And they ask you what they should spend. Say, "**The excess [beyond needs]**." (3) Thus Allah makes clear to you the verses [of revelation] that you might give thought."

The primary meaning of *ʾafv* (عفو) in (2) is not superfluous or in-excess, but effacement, obliteration, or forgiveness, and, as such, it is clearly linked to the word "sin" in (1). In its present form, this tripartite *ʾāya* does not read well: (3) is severed from (1), even though the very purpose of this third section is to promote thinking among men through what God has revealed to them in (1). Clearly, by presenting drinking and gambling as activities that are both good and bad, a choice is put before Man that requires thinking. To have a coherent succession of sentences in this one *ʾāya*, (2) cannot jump to a subject unrelated to (1) and (3). If *ʾafv* is understood—as it should—as forgiveness, it proffers a different consequence for drinking and gambling: Although sinful, it will be forgiven by God. It would then depict God as compassionate and merciful, which is what religion should be about. As for Man, he has to decide whether the good overwhelms the bad; and if he errs, he would be forgiven nonetheless. But as now written, we have a verb with an undefined "they" as its subject, so that the very awkward meaning of "surplus" for *ʾafv* could be introduced, in lieu of "forgiveness"; thus (2) becomes unrelated to (1).<sup>310</sup>

Two structural problems further militate against the accepted interpretation. Firstly, the Koran has twelve other verses that comprise question-and-answer sequences. In eleven of them, one Q&A sequence basically covers all the verse. In the twelfth, namely VII:187, we have two Q&A sequences that are complementary. In other words they all deal with one subject, and not unrelated ones. Secondly, the same question (ماذا ينفقون؟) is separately asked in II:215, and has a different answer. One cannot have two answers for the same question. As the two are just four verses apart, the Koranic compilers would have surely noticed the disparity in answers. If they didn't, it's because they saw two different verbs, therefore two different questions. I can only guess that the original verb of II:219 was *ينفقون* but written *ينفقون* as the *alef* and diacritical marks were omitted in early manuscripts. It explained God's reaction to the sinners' deeds. Sentence (2) would then read: If they ask Thou, what outpour would they (sinners) cause (from Allah)? Say: forgiveness.

<sup>310</sup> There is evidence that at least کثیر was changed into کبیر; see [quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura2-aya219.html](http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura2-aya219.html)

It didn't sanctify wine drinking, but prohibited punishment: If God forgave, the Moslem jurist could not punish. Oddly, a verse that bore testimony to the mercifulness of Allah, and encouraged Man to think on his own, was deliberately misconstrued to give jurists an instrument of repression. If anybody merits lashes in this tragedy, it's the jurist and the exegete who have turned this verse on its head.

The question then is what was the real reason behind wine prohibition? Coercive rules based on false religious justifications are usually adopted for political reasons, and punitive rules are generally directed against combative adversaries. As noted, the unruly *'ayyārs*, *shāters*, and brotherhood members were the real troublemakers in the early Islamic cities. And since wine drinking was part of their rituals, the imposition of penalties in this respect was a useful tool to punish and subdue this troublesome crowd. If not the main reason, it certainly contributed to the stiffening of rules and the wide application of penalties in this respect.

The dervishes' wine-drinking predicament and their adversarial attitude toward Islamic restrictions are nowhere better exposed than in a poem by Hāfez:

به می، سجاده رنگین کن گرت پیر مغان گوید    که سالک بیخبر نبود ز راه و رسم منزلها  
Taint your prayer rug with the red color of wine, if so orders the magi *pir*  
For the initiate should know about the requirements of his journey's stations

He beautifully weaves the initiate's quandary into one verse: Despite the promotion of his skin-throne as an Islamic prayer rug (*sajjādeh*), he might be asked by his *pir* to spill wine on it. Hāfez qualifies the *pir* not as an Islamic *shaykh*, but as a magi in clear reference to his Mithraic attributes and the choice of the color red that so characterized Mithraic societies.

Of all people, the learned poet Shams-od-din Mohammad, known as Hāfez (1317-90), should have understood whether the Koran really prohibited wine or not; for his very epithet, *hāfez*, meant that he was a reciter of the Koran and knew it by heart. If he, and so many other learned poets, wrote poems in praise of the wine, they must have known that its prohibition had political roots and not religious ones. They could all read and understand the Koran, perhaps even better than the jurists and exegetes. What's more, Hāfez not only explained the religious acceptability of wine, but also evoked a past in which blood was drunk instead of wine:

خون پیاله خور که حلال است خون او

Drink the blood of the cup, for that blood is *halāl* (religiously lawful)

## CHAPTER IX

### POPULARITY, HIERARCHY, AND POWER

#### IX.1 - Brotherhood Popularity

The most striking aspect of the congregations that we have discussed so far, from *lutis* to *`ayyārs*, dervishes and *chākars*, is the political power that they wielded. Their power emanated from two main characteristics: 1- they formed a cohesive group bonded together by a code of friendship, 2- they had a hierarchy at the top of which sat a revered figure, who was their leader as well as spiritual father. Any group with such characteristics had the potential to grow militant, enter the political arena, and eventually seize power, especially if led by a charismatic and ambitious leader. A well-known example is that of the Safavid dervish order, but there are many more, and our study shall reveal that they existed in both the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods.

Shafii Kadkani has argued that the popularity of these congregations was in reaction to religious bigotry.<sup>311</sup> Since religious bigots usually gravitated around the power elite, the brotherhood congregations became a refuge for the oppressed and those who wanted to distance themselves from the powerful. More generally, these congregations attracted the lower tier of society and provided a social envelope that insulated them—to a certain extent—from the oppressive environment that they lived in. They offered protection but also gave their members a sense of identity, pride, and ultimately happiness. To understand their popularity we need to understand the principles that forged their identity and motivated their behavior.

#### IX.2 - The Fundamental Principle

Various studies have listed a number of characteristics that are common to almost all of these congregations. They can be summarized as follows: (a) truthfulness, fairness, humility, giving, (b) mutual support, loyalty, hospitality, keeping oaths and secrets, and defense of the weak.<sup>312</sup> The first set (a) enumerates personal qualities, and the second set (b) is about interacting with others. But the core principle, on which all these characteristics depend, is *generosity* or the ability to give, which necessitates detachment from worldly goods. As one author explains, it is "giving" (*ithār*) that generates *mardom-*

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<sup>311</sup> Shafii 2007, 34.

<sup>312</sup> Afshāri 2003, XLVI-LXIV; Mahjoub 2000, 13-14.

*dusti* (the love of mankind) for the *fatā*.<sup>313</sup> It is the precondition for establishing a relationship of trust and support, for if one is willing to give—whether worldly goods, effort, or even one's life—then one can think in terms of one for all and all for one. Pushed to the extreme, it can bring a state of pennilessness (*eflās*), which, as we saw, characterized the *lutis* and the likes of the painter Rezā-ye `Abbāsi. Within the congregation, it strengthens the bonds of loyalty, and in isolation it leads to asceticism. It also encourages hospitality, which is an act of giving toward friends as well as strangers. It brings humility because nothing is left to brag about; and it promotes the defense of the poor rather than their exploitation. These were all characteristics that enhanced the bonds of friendship. But `ayyārs such as the Saffārid Ya`qub-e Laith also acted much like Robin Hood: They robbed the rich and gave to the needy.

### IX.3 - Hierarchy

As a congregation, the brotherhoods had a hierarchy that closely followed those of Mithraic societies, even though they were constantly under pressure to adapt their rituals and expressions to the prevailing politico-religious atmosphere. What was deemed necessary, but not permissible in the new environment, was often kept secret. Thus, many *fotovvat-nāmehs* mention secrets that cannot be written down but must be transmitted orally. As a result, the oath to secrecy was an important part of the initiation procedure, and "keeping secrets" was a virtue much emphasized in this type of literature. For the Ahl-e Haqq, certain secrets could not be told because they were defined as "unspeakable secrets" (*serr-e magu*).<sup>314</sup> More generally, sharing a secret enhanced the sense of belonging to a privileged group, and reinforced the concept of brotherhood.

In addition, rituals, rules, and initiation procedures were used to strengthen the hierarchy, because the very existence of these congregations depended on the respect that the hierarchy commanded. Thus, a set of behavioral protocols were devised for members to observe, especially in the presence of their leader or *pir*: They had to sit on two knees before him, they could not gesticulate before him nor could they speak in his presence, and had to accept whatever he said.<sup>315</sup> These were spelled out as part of a literature genre called *adab* (pl. *ādāb*) that defined Sufi ethics and behavioral protocols.

Nasrollah Pourjavadi has unearthed an interesting anecdote about the early Sufi *shaykh* `Abdollāh b. Mobārak (736-97) who was seated uncomfortably on his knees before

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<sup>313</sup> Shafii 2007, 27.

<sup>314</sup> Khwaja-ad-din 1970, vi.

<sup>315</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995, 167.

another Sufi master, Abu-`Omar Hafṣ b. Hamid al-Akkāf, and when asked to relax his legs he answered: *khord, pish-e Hafṣ pāy derāz nakonad* (the lowly cannot extend his legs before Hafṣ). On another occasion, `Abdollah directed the question of one of his Khorāsānian disciples toward a learned man who was present, and when, after receiving his answer, the Khorāsānian turned to `Abdollah for his opinion, the latter answered: *mā be majles-e mehtarān sokhan naguyim* (we will not utter a word in presence of the great ones).<sup>316</sup> What is interesting, though, is that both of these sentences were quoted untranslated, i.e., in Persian within an Arabic narrative. It's not that the narrator could not translate it into Arabic, but he left it as such because what seemed a sign of respect within the Khorāsānian context was not necessarily so in the Arab context. Expression of one's opinion was a virtue for Arabs, while silence was for Iranians; Persian *adab* differed from the Arab one. Thus, in these anecdotes, we have proof that a century and a half after the advent of Islam, the Khorāsānian Sufi *shaykhs* followed an *adab* that was rooted in their own cultural traditions and not adopted from the Arab conqueror. Moreover, in the Persian world, form and protocol often overshadowed the essence of actions, to the extent that `Abdollah b. Mobārak once said: "The protocol (*adab*) of servitude (*khedmat*) was more important than servitude itself."<sup>317</sup> Arabs, however, preferred simplicity and had a more straightforward attitude.

Ultimately, like in any other hierarchical organization, titles were important for the projection of power. We have already seen how titles inherited from Mithraic societies were often Arabicized to fend off persecution. The Arabic *shaykh*, for instance, came to gradually supplant *bābā* or *pir*. When a dervish order aspired to compete with local rulers, however, temporal epithets such as *soltān* or *shāh* were added to the name of their *shaykhs*. And in Anatolia, where the Ottoman ruler was addressed as *khwāndgār* (a compressed form of the Persian *khodāvandegār*, meaning lord/majesty), the ultimate Sufi-*shaykh* epithet was *khwāndgār* as well. A dedicatory inscription on a Koran endowed to the shrine of Bālim Soltān (1457-1517) is quite revealing (Fig. 154). Bālim Soltān was the most respected figure of the Bektāshi order after Hājji Bektāsh Vali, who was the founder of the order and the patron saint of the Ottoman Janissaries. Because Bālim had gained a notoriety of his own, the epithet *soltān* was added to his name. In the

<sup>316</sup> Pourjavadi 1999, 22-23. Afshāri (2003, 9) relates a similar saying from a much later *fotovvat-nāmeḥ*: the *fotovvat* practitioner "shall not speak among the great ones, and if he does, it must not be in a loud voice,"

"فتوت دار" در جمع اکابر سخن نگويد، چون سخن بگويد بلند نگويد

<sup>317</sup> Pourjavadi 1999, 24: ادب الخدمة اعز من الخدمة

shrine's Koran, though, the endower wants to make sure that he himself is recognized as a member of the Bektāshī congregation. He thus signs his name as:

پوست نشین درگاه حنکار، حاجی بکتاش ولی، الحاج محمد علی حلمی دده

The skin sitter?? of the court of the Hongār Hājji Bektāsh Vali, al-Hājji Mohammad-`Ali Helmi the Dede<sup>318</sup>



Fig. 154 – Last page of a Koran dedicated to the shrine of Bālim oltān. Turk ve Islam Museum, Istanbul.



Fig. 155 – Mevlevi dervish effigy. Rumi Shrine. Konya.

It is interesting to note that the endower, who is obviously a man of means for endowing such a precious Koran, uses the epithet al-Hājji in addition to the title *dede* (the Turkic equivalent of *bābā* or *pir*) in order to shore up his Islamic credentials. Symbols of a pre-Islamic past, such as the ubiquitous skin throne, were ever present in these congregations, and dervishes had to constantly protect themselves from orthodox Islam. A wax effigy of a dervish initiate at the shrine of Mowlānā Jalāl-od-din-e Rumi (1207-73) in Konya vividly illustrates the use of the skin throne by the initiate (Fig. 155). It also illustrates the ordinary dervish's seating posture—on two knees—within the congregation and in the presence of his master, as defined by the *adab* literature. Furthermore, the Dede qualifies himself as *pust-neshin* (seated on a skin) on his dedicatory legend, i.e., whether novice or master they all sat on a sheepskin. More importantly, the epithet *hongār*—a further compression of the already compressed *khwāndgār*—is posthumously bestowed on Hājji Bektāsh Vali to emphasize his supreme position as founder of the order.

<sup>318</sup> The seal imprint repeats the signature legend of Mohammad-`Ali Helmi the Dede (on the left margin).

Similarly, `Abdollāh b. Mobārak was called *shāhānshāh* (king of kings) by his followers;<sup>319</sup> and one often encounters in the Sufi literature of northeast Iran names with lofty titles and epithets, such as Pireh Shervān-Shāh-e Garmrudi.<sup>320</sup> The latter's string of titles is indicative of a gradual rise in the hierarchy of dervishes. He came from Garmrud and had initially been called a *pireh* (lesser *pir*), but eventually rose to prominence and was named *Shervān-shāh*, an epithet that competed with the temporal rulers of the Shervān area of the Caucasus, who bore the title Shervān-Shāh. As we shall see, these were by no means hollow titles but often reflected the power of the leaders of dervish congregations, who behaved at times like *shāhs*, *soltāns* and emperors.

#### IX.4 - The Network

When congregations were formed, their expansion depended very much on the network they could develop. The belief in hospitality played a major role in this respect.<sup>321</sup> Brotherhood members saw it as their duty to feed and shelter the passersby. Thus, hospices (*zāviyyehs*) were erected for this purpose, and travelers, whether dervish or not, were invited to spend the night there. The Moroccan traveler Ebn-e Battuta relates an interesting story about his passage through Antalya (Turkey), where he comes across a congregation of bachelor men called *akhis* (brothers), and who considered themselves as *fatās*. Whatever they gained in the daytime, they brought to the hospice in the evening in order to buy food and other necessities, which were then shared with the others. Because they were in the habit of sheltering foreign travelers, they invited Ebn-e Battuta and all his retinue to their hospice. The Moroccan traveler marvels at their generosity and the fact that they often fought against tyranny, and remarks that these were traits that he had also seen among the young men of Esfahan and Shiraz.<sup>322</sup>

Whether in central Iran or Anatolia, these brotherhoods followed similar protocols and principles, which facilitated their networking and provided a fluidity that allowed easy displacement from one congregation to the other. And travelers such as Ebn-e Battuta helped to consolidate these networks by extolling their merits, and lauding the virtues of their *pirs* and *shaykhs*. Eventually, some of these networks came to mobilize a full-fledged army of militants, such as the Sarbedārs and the Safavids.

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<sup>319</sup> Pourjavadi 1999, 22.

<sup>320</sup> Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 425.

<sup>321</sup> Afshari 2008, 78.

<sup>322</sup> Ebn Battuta 1983, I:347-48.

### IX.5 - The Sarbedārid Dynasty: A Reflection of Congregation Diversity

A major consequence of the Mongol invasions of the thirteen century was the weakening of Islamic orthodoxy. Mongols practiced a policy of religious tolerance, and held in high esteem holy people who had a following, especially Sufi *shaykhs*. It was an ideal situation for dervish orders; and many thrived under the Mongols. Because of the respect that they commanded, Sufi *shaykhs* could offer protection to their followers, and shield landowners from rapacious Mongol tax collectors. As a result they became a pole of attraction for the rich as well as the poor.

At the tail end of Mongol rule in the Iranian lands, when no prominent Changizid prince was left and Turco-Mongol commanders sought to enrich themselves by taxing the population more and more, a rebellion broke out in eastern Iran, near the city of Sabzevār, spearheaded by an *ʿayyār* group called the *sar-be-dārs* (lit. "those whose head hung from the gallows"). By their very name, the Sarbedārs were militants who were ready to die for their cause. They were the followers of the Shiite Sufi *shaykh*, Shaykh Khalifeh (d. 1335), who was killed by the instigation of Sunni jurists attached to the Turco-Mongol ruling elite. His mantle was picked up by a member of the landed gentry, known as Pahlavān `Abd-or-Razzāq (d. 1338), who successfully led the Sarbedārs into battle against the Mongols. The Sarbedārid state that he founded became the first Iranian state of the post-Mongol era. He was killed by his own brother, the Amir Vajih-od-din Mas`ud (r. 1338-43). The latter joined forces with another follower of Shaykh Khalifeh, Shaykh Hasan-e Juri (d. 1342), to further combat the remaining Mongol satellite states. Mas`ud's successors included Amir Yahyā Karāvi (r. 1353-58), a member of the Sabzevāri aristocracy, as well as Haydar-e Qassāb (Haydar the Butcher, r. 1358-60), a prominent guild member.<sup>323</sup>

The leadership mix of the Sarbedārs is a reflection of the composition of dervish congregations, in which *pahlavāns*, Sufi *shaykhs*, guild members and *ʿayyārs* sympathized with each other, and joined forces to combat the ruling elite. Pirouzdjou gathered much information in this respect, especially the fact that the followers of Shaykh Hasan-e Juri were "primarily artisans" and how the "*ʿayyārs* and *javānmards* gathered around Mas`ud."<sup>324</sup> The true nature of this dynasty, however, is nowhere better described as in the *Tārikh-e Rāqem*:

<sup>323</sup> Amir Yahyā killed the last of the Mongol pretenders ruling over eastern Iran.

<sup>324</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 68: (quoting Hāfez Abru's *Joghrāfiā moridān-e u aksar sāheb-e herfeh budand* (his followers were mostly artisans); also (quoting Zahiruddin-e Mar`ashi's *Tārikh-e Gilān, Māzandarān...*):

هر جا برنا پیشه و عیاری بود متوجه امیر مسعود گشت (*javānmards* and *ʿayyārs* gathered around Amir Mas`ud from all over)

بعد از نوبت سلطنت امیر یحیی ، حیدر قصاب در پوست تختة امارت تکیه زد  
 After the reign of Amir Yahyā, Haydar the Butcher sat on the skin-throne of  
 rulership<sup>325</sup>

By describing the throne of the Sarbedārs, as a skin throne (*pust-takhteh*), its author explains that they were in fact dervishes ruling as *amirs*.

### IX.6 - The Morshediyyeh: Focusing on Mercantilism

One of the most organized dervish orders that prospered under the Mongols was the Morshediyyeh congregation, which had an extensive network of hospices (*zāviyyehs*), with devotees reaching to Anatolia, India and China. The founder of the order was Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq Ebrāhim (963-1035) who was born into a family of Zoroastrians from Kāzerun in southwestern Iran. While Ebrāhim was still young, his father converted to Islam and encouraged him to study the Koran and Islamic jurisprudence, but he leaned toward Sufism. Eventually, he became a much respected and charismatic Sufi leader who converted many Zoroastrians and Jews to Islam.<sup>326</sup> The very choice of his name, Ebrāhim, and his *konya*, Abu-Es'hāq, may indicate that—like all other dervish orders—his congregation sat on sheepskins, and he needed the reference to Abraham to fend off potential attacks from Islamic jurists. But in deference to their spiritual leader, Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq's followers would only refer to him through the reverential formula: *hazrat-e moqaddaseh-ye monavvareh-ye morshediyyeh* (his holy guiding presence, filled with radiance), or simply Shaykh al-Morshed (the guiding *shaykh*); hence the Morshediyyeh appellation of his congregation.

His mausoleum in Kāzerun was the seat of the order and the center of an alms-gathering operation that mainly targeted traveling merchants who came to consider Abu-Es'hāq as their patron saint. Ebn-e Battuta, who visited the shrine in 1347, describes how representatives of the order would approach merchants in ports along the trade routes between the Persian Gulf and China and gather their pledges issued in the name of Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq whose spirit they thought was ever present. Each pledge was supposed to attract the goodwill of the Shaykh's spirit as insurance for shipment of goods. Because of a steady stream of pledges and donations, the Morshediyyeh was able to create a vast organization at the top of which sat the *khalifeh* (deputy), who was the acting successor of the Shaykh and ruled in his name. Even though the *khalifeh* vicariously led a dervish congregation, the edicts that he issued had all the trappings of

<sup>325</sup> Rāqem 2003, 14.

<sup>326</sup> See Lawrence 1983, where the number of converts ranges from 24,000 to 100,000.

imperial decrees, including a gold seal mark (*āltun tamghā*) that was the prerogative of Mongol rulers.<sup>327</sup> The Morshediyyeh acted in effect as a state within a state. And yet the order never grew militant. It simply focused on attracting more and more pledges, and on expanding its network. As a result, it was unable to withstand the onslaught of the Safaviyyeh who had their eyes set on their riches and could not tolerate the presence of a rival Sufi order, especially a Sunni one.

Within structured and rich dervish organizations, the principles of brotherhood were often overshadowed by the lust for power; one dervish order could decide to wipe out a rival one in order to ascertain its supremacy. And that is what happened when the Safavid Shāh Esmā`il conquered Iran; his followers simply eliminated the Morshediyyeh and confiscated their treasury.



Fig. 156 – *Farmān* of Abu-Sa`id. Iran Bāstān Museum.



Fig. 157 – The *khalifa* of the Morshediyyeh congregation issuing an order in the name of Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq (Soudavar 1992, 79)



Fig. 158 - Teymur before Soltān `Ali Siyāh-push, by Mo`in Mosavver, 17<sup>th</sup> century, Iran. EMS Collection.

### IX.7 - The Safaviyyeh: A Violently Militant Order

The Safaviyyeh was an offshoot of the Zāhediyeh order established in the thirteenth century by Shaykh Zāhed-e Gilāni, a venerated Sufi *shaykh* much respected by Ghāzān Khān. The eponymous founder of the Safaviyyeh was Safi-od-din Abu Es'hāq from

<sup>327</sup> Soudavar 1992, 78-80.

Ardabil,<sup>328</sup> who had joined the Zāhediyeh as a novice, and had married the Shaykh's daughter, Bibi Fātema. Later Safavid historical accounts present Shaykh Zāhed as a respected leader who presided over a powerful and rich congregation based in Gilān.<sup>329</sup> They also portray Safi-od-din as his designated successor, who rightfully inherited the endowments of the Zāhediyeh. In reality though, the succession of Shaykh Zāhed had gone to his elder son Jamāl-od-din `Ali, and it is only after his death that Safi was able to take control of the Zāhediyeh. Had it not been for one surviving Mongol decree (Fig. 156), written in the Uyghur script, we would have never known the truth. Said decree clearly shows the rift that existed between the senior branch of Shaykh Zāhed's progenies and the junior branch, which sided with Safi-od-din in their fight over the control of the Zāhediyeh endowments.<sup>330</sup> Both sides understood that he who controlled the endowments also controlled the network of hospices, and through them, the allegiance of their dervishes. The conflict must have been resolved in favor of Safi-od-din and the junior branch, since all Zāhediyeh endowments were eventually absorbed by the Safaviyyeh.

To attract more endowments, Safaviyyeh propagandists had to exalt the status of their *shaykhs*; therefore, fabricated stories were propagated such as Teymur's visit to Safi-od-din's grandson, Soltān `Ali-ye Siyāh-push (d. 1429), whose blessings had supposedly brought him victories and conquests (Fig. 158).<sup>331</sup> And later on, a new genealogy was created to connect Safi's Kurdish ancestor, Firuz-Shāh Zarrin-kolāh to the seventh Shiite Imam, Musā al-Kāzem (745-799). They thus became *sayyeds*, i.e., descendants of the Prophet Mohammad and professed to be Shiites, even though Safi and his immediate progenies had been Sunnis.<sup>332</sup>

In many regions of Iran, successive confiscations of properties by raiding Turco-Mongols had blurred lines of land ownership. The unique position of Sufi masters, as spiritual leaders with political clout, allowed them to acquire land with contested titles and obtain

<sup>328</sup> In the extant manuscript of *Safvat-ol safā* (Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 70), Safi's *konya* is written as Abol-fath Es'hāq, which is the result of applying the later epithet of Safavid kings, Abol-fath, to Safi. Sufi *shaykhs* were always named Abu Es'hāq (father of Isaac, i.e., Abraham) to justify their skin-thrones.

<sup>329</sup> The folkloric *Ālam-ārā-ye Shāh Esmā'il*, for instance, states that Shaykh Zāhed had 100'000 followers, 12'000 of whom were with him in Gilān; Montazer-Sāheb 1970, 8.

<sup>330</sup> Because the decree was written in the Uyghur script, it must have eluded the attention of Safavid propagandists and censorship officials; Soudavar 2006a, 233-35. The junior branch was represented by Safi-od-din's brother-in-law Shams-od-din.

<sup>331</sup> Montazer-Sāheb 1970, 14-20.

<sup>332</sup> According to a contemporary historian Hamdollāh-e Mostowfi "the people of Ardabil adhered to the Shāfe'i branch of Sunnism and were followers of Shaykh Safi; Mazzaoui 1972, 6; Kasravi (n.d.), 218-53.

clearance from claim holders. As their wealth accumulated, they purchased more land at depressed values.<sup>333</sup> Accumulated wealth provided immense power, and matrimonial alliances further consolidated it. Such was the clout of the Safaviyyeh that the powerful Aq-qoyunlu sovereign, Uzun Hasan (r. 1453-78), gave his sister to Soltān Jonayd (d. 1460), and subsequently his daughter (Halimeh Begi) to Soltān Haydar (d. 1488), who were Shāh Esmā'il's grandfather and father respectively.

But matrimonial alliances had come into play at least once before. Indeed, it was no mere coincidence that the young Safi joined the Zāhediyeh and married its leader's daughter. The sources clearly indicate that Safi's ancestor, Firuz-Shāh Zarrin-kolāh, was the head of a dervish congregation in Ardabil. The very title *shāh* added to his name and the epithet *zarrin-kolāh* (golden bonnet) prove that his congregation was modeled after Mithraic societies, for the word *zar* (gold) was often used as a substitute for the sun, as well as Mithra.<sup>334</sup> In giving his daughter to Safi, Shaykh Zāhed was probably trying to bring the Ardabil dervishes into his fold, especially since Safi had lost his father at a young age and the Ardabil congregation might have been in disarray. As it turned out, it was the Ardabil order that was able to absorb the Gilāni one, and not vice versa. The Ardabil power base of Safi played a crucial role in the outcome of these events.

With its strong power base and accumulated wealth, the Safaviyyeh was in want of a charismatic leader who could turn it into a militant one. That charismatic leader proved to be Safi's great grandson, Soltān Jonayd. In a split with the more conservative branch of the order in Ardabil, Jonayd journeyed westward as far as Syria, and gathered a following among the Turkaman tribes of western Iran and eastern Anatolia. The same Turkaman tribes would later become the core of the Safavid army, known as the Qezelbāsh (i.e., red heads). It is Ruzbahān Khonji, who first describes Jonayd as wearing red headgear.<sup>335</sup> In previous color descriptions of the Safaviyyeh, the sources refer to Soltān `Ali as *siyāh-push* (black-wearing) (Fig. 158), and to some dervishes from Tālesh as *kabud-jāmegān*

<sup>333</sup> Aubin 1959, 37-81.

<sup>334</sup> The sources also insinuate that Firuz-Shāh came to Ardabil by the order of a certain Soltān Adham, a descendant of the famous mystical figure, Ebrāhim Adham. Clearly, Soltān Adham is not a monarch but the head of a Sufi congregation; Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 72, Montazer-Sāheb 1970, 1. Like in so many other instances, Firuz may have started as a regional deputy *shaykh* but ended up presiding over his own congregation. At the Sarajevo ASPs conference of Sept. 4, 2013, Behrooz Chamanara (*A Brief Survey of the Structure of the Triad-Divinities in the Kurdish Shahnameh*) explained the connection of *zar* to the sun, and provided examples of derivatives such as the names *Zar-dād* and *Zar-`Ali*, which parallel names such as *Mehr-dād* and *Mehr-`Ali*, and vouch for the use of *zar* as a substitute for *Mehr*.

<sup>335</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 137-38; Khonji 1992, 269:

و همچو شمع، با کلاه سرخ، سر خود را در دهن گز از سلطنت فکند

(blue shirts).<sup>336</sup> The switch to red headgear was a novelty that Jonayd introduced. As Pirouzdjou observes, it was accompanied by two major shifts in Safaviyyeh policies: One political, by which the pursuit of power became the primary goal of the order, and the other doctrinal, by which the Safaviyyeh abandoned regular Moslem religious practices and espoused behavior akin to the Khorramdiniyyeh.<sup>337</sup> The primary source on this double transformation is once again Khonji:

گویند همگنان او را معبود خویش میدانستند و از وظایف نماز و عبادات اعراض کرده جنابش را قبله و مسجود خود میشناختند . شیخ هم دین اباحت را برای ایشان ترویج داده قواعد شریعت خرمیان بابکی در میانشان نهاده از غایت مکاری در سر کلاهی صوفیانی و در بر خرقه درویشانه کرده، و جوشنها در خانه ساخته و تیغها برای جنگ پرداخته

They say that his followers worshiped him, and turned away from *namāz* and praying duties, and considered him to be their Qibla and idol. And so, the Shaykh propagated among them the religion of *ebāhat*, and set forth for them the laws of the Khorramdiniyyeh of Bābak, and out of deceit wore a Sufi hat and dervish robe, but made armor at home and sharpened swords for battle.<sup>338</sup>

Khonji also claimed that they called Jonayd مجاهرة الله (God's revelator) and ابن الله (Son of God).<sup>339</sup> What's interesting, though, is the fact that more than five centuries after the death of Bābak, the memory of the Khorramdiniyyeh was still alive and Khonji saw much similarity between their practices and those of the Safaviyyeh. There was of course the color red of Jonayd's headgear that matched the red-color of the Khorramdiniyyeh who were known as the *mohammara* or the red-clothed ones. In addition, he labeled their religion as *ebāhat*, which pertained to the non observance of religious rites and the wine-drinking ceremonies of certain orders, such as the Horufids, that continued with a distribution of bread among congregation members, similar to the ceremony held for the enthronement of Bābak.<sup>340</sup> But more importantly, he emphasized their unconditional obedience to the supreme master of the order to the extent that they saw him as god incarnate, which is what Ebn-e Nadim had accused the Khorramdiniyyeh of. Khonji then continues to say that Jonayd spent his whole life doing "pahlavāni" exercises,<sup>341</sup> presumably wrestling and body building, which prepared him for military actions and

<sup>336</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 139.

<sup>337</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 138.

<sup>338</sup> Khonji 1992, 274. Pirouzdjou seems to have either erred in his translation, or had a faulty manuscript, for, he attributes these traits to Haydar rather than to his father Jonayd, who was Khonji's contemporary and the focal point of his attention.

<sup>339</sup> Khonji 1992, 272.

<sup>340</sup> See for instance Pirouzdjou's description of the *ebāhat* as it pertains to the Horufids; Pirouzdjou 1997, 89.

<sup>341</sup> Khonji 1992, 275.

raids. One way or the other, all of the preceding underlined peculiarities are reminiscent of Mithraic orders and their avatars.

But the *ebāhat* labeling also encompassed the belief in metempsychosis (*tanāsokh*) or the transmigration of the soul, which usually came into play after the death of a revered leader. In the case of the Khorramdiniyyeh, they believed that Jāvidān's soul migrated into Bābak's body. His very name (*Jāvidān*) literally meant eternal, and could be an indication of how his followers perceived him. As in most other religions and congregations, once a believer became attached to a leader, it was hard for him to accept his disappearance. If the body was no longer around, it was comforting to claim that his spirit was still watching over the congregation. Such was the charisma of Jonayd that when he died in battle and his follower saw his inert corpse, they still refused to admit that he was no longer there; the simple solution was to claim that his son Haydar now embodied his spirit. Thus, the fervor that the Safaviyyeh once displayed for Jonayd, was transferred to Haydar, and after his death, to the young Esmā`il.

Energized by Jonayd, the Safaviyyeh became militant and restless. A convenient outlet for the militancy of the order was to engage in *ghazās*, or war with nonbelievers, up north, in Georgia. These forays, thinly disguised as missionary in purpose, were opportunities to loot and to capture Georgian women. To reach Georgia, the Safavids crossed the territories of the Shervān-Shāhs, wreaking havoc wherever they went. Weary of these destructive expeditions and apprehensive about the rising power of the Safavids, the Shervān-Shāhs first killed Jonayd, and later his son Haydar. When the young Esmā`il emerged in the year 1500 to take leadership of the order, his first battle was with the Shervān-Shāh Farrokhyasār to avenge the deaths of his father and grandfather. Barely twelve years old, but venerated by his followers as a semi-god, Esmā`il drove his troops from one victory to another, preaching a militant brand of Shiism that lauded the Imam `Ali to a degree that eclipsed the Prophet Mohammad himself. `Ali was almost seen as God and Esmā`il as god incarnate.

Unlike the congregations that Ebn-e Battuta had encountered, which emphasized brotherhood and fought against tyranny, the lust for power changed the Safaviyyeh outlook *vis à vis* other congregations and the rest of the people. They no longer fought against tyranny but became tyrants themselves. They raided and plundered Georgia under the pretext that they were non-Moslems, and robbed the Morshediyyeh by labeling them as Sunnis. But their attack on fellow Shiites left no doubt that their behavior was neither

conditioned by religious considerations nor self defense. Esmā`il's treatment of Hosayn-e Kiyā Cholāvi (d. 1504) is a case in point.

Hosayn-e Kiyā was a Shiite who ruled in the mountainous strongholds of Firuz Kuh and Damāvand in northern Iran.<sup>342</sup> Fearing the attack of Shāh Esmā`il, he had retreated into the fortress of Estā together with the Shiite Turkaman warlord, Morād Beg Jahānshāhlu. They had to capitulate when Esmā`il diverted the river that provided water to the fort. All of Kiyā's men were put to the sword and he himself was put in a cage and tortured until he committed suicide; his body was then incinerated. A more severe punishment was reserved for Morād Beyg who was tied to a long stick and put to roast (*kabāb*) on a fire; after which the "true believers" (*mo`taqedān*) among Esmā`il's Qezelbāsh troops were ordered to "take a bite."<sup>343</sup>

Shahzad Bashir who has analyzed this act of cannibalism, together with other instances reported in Safavid sources, sees a common purpose with the ritual of *chub-e tariq* (lit. "stick of the path"), "in which the Qezelbāsh received blows on their bodies by representatives of Safavid kings to symbolize their religious and political loyalty to the Safavid house," and concludes that:

"The eventual social import of the *chub* ritual lies in the fact that it solidifies the relationship between the Shah and the Qezelbāsh in a highly corporeal way. The stick literally imprints the king's mark on the devotee's body, and the pain caused by the hit acts as a jolting affirmation of the allegiance the recipient owes to the Shah. In much the way the cannibalism is described, the ritual is highly communal, the attendees "from the first to the last" participate without individuation."<sup>344</sup>

Giorgio Rota sees Safavid cannibalism as "connected to the wish to prevent somebody else's resurrection and to beliefs which were widespread in the Turkic world in particular, and in Eurasia in general."<sup>345</sup> More simply, it could perhaps be associated with an act of vengeance, which a story from the *Hamza-nāme*—a text that was popular at the Teymurid and Safavid courts—well illustrates. Therein, a companion to Hamza named `Amr the *`ayyār* takes vengeance upon a rival by capturing him, dismembering his body and making a stew that was distributed among his troops.<sup>346</sup>

<sup>342</sup> Ilchi 2000, 24.

<sup>343</sup> Ilchi 2000, 24-27; Qomi 1980, I:297

<sup>344</sup> Bashir 2006, 238-52. He insightfully sees cannibalism as "a negation and an affirmation: the devoured bodies mark a total obliteration of political alternatives consisting of other dynasties, even as the acts of consumption solidify the socio-religious relationship between the Shah and his troops."

<sup>345</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>346</sup> Zekāvati-Qarāgozlu 2013, 98-99. The stew is then fed to his victim's son, see note 654 infra.

The rowdy Turkaman tribes that Jonayd found in northern Syria and eastern Anatolia had become enamored with the Safavids and constituted their main power base; to the extent that when, later on, the Ottoman Salim I was preparing to march against Shāh Esmā`il, he had to kill some forty thousand of them to dry out this Safavid recruiting base.<sup>347</sup> The area where they resided was once the cradle of Roman Mithraism and had become the hotbed of extreme dervish orders (*ghollāt*). It stands to reason that the *ghollāt* were affected by certain practices of ancient congregations. Therefore, this form of cannibalism may be an offshoot of sacrificial rituals that they originally performed. In the Mysteries, for instance, the initiates had to endure much pain, with their bare torsos exposed to extreme cold or extreme heat, before acceptance. Dervishes too had to bear burn marks at initiation (Fig. 49, Fig. 147). To this date, many dervish congregations enact rituals by which a rooster or lamb is killed, cooked, and distributed as food among all its members.<sup>348</sup> And as we saw, the Khorramdiniyyeh had to partake in a ceremony in which they each had to dip bread into wine and eat it. More generally, wine seems to have been a facilitating agent for both pain endurance and the exaltation that was necessary to engage in the anomalous and abhorrent act of cannibalism. But as odd as it seems, it does fit the pattern of rituals that solidified the bonds of brotherhood. As Bashir remarks, it was "a jolting affirmation of the allegiance" they bore for their leaders, and a communal act that required the participation of many.

The proof of a Mithraic connection for these practices, however, resides with the description that a Safavid source provides about the accoutrements of two special "shock" units that Shāh `Abbās I (r. 1588-1629) had instituted. To stop the infighting among various Qezelbāsh tribes, and in order to place them under unitary command, `Abbās broke up the Qezelbāsh tribal system and organized them in units only accountable to himself. These two shock units were composed of ferocious Qezelbāsh individuals who would administer the worst kind of torture to the enemies of the *shāh*, and would occasionally eat them alive. The accoutrements of the first unit are described as:

لباس مخصوص و مختار شیخ احمد آقای میر غضب و متابعاتش بر آن نهج بود که تاجهای عظیم ضخیم، معمّم به عمامه‌های سرخ بر سر می‌گذاشتند و اطراف آن را به انواع پر گلنگ و غنّاب آراسته اکثر لباس و اثواب سرخ پوشیدندی و به حلق محاسن و اطلاق مشارب اقدام می‌نمودند.

The special accoutrements of the executioner Shaykh Ahmad Āqā as well as his followers were such that they wore tall and thick *bonnets* wrapped in *red* turbans,

<sup>347</sup> Bacqué-Grammont 1987, 53.

<sup>348</sup> See note 102 supra.

which they would adorn with crane and eagle feathers; most of them wore *red* clothing, and would shave their beards but sport long moustaches.

As for the second unit, which specialized in eating the victims alive "bite after bite," they are described as follows:

این جماعت نیز لباسی مخصوص داشتند جهت امتیاز، بدان طریق که تاجهای بی‌عمامه ضخیم طویل به قدر یک ذرع بر سر می‌گذاشتند و اطراف آن را با تاغهای پر کلنگ و بوم می‌آراستند

Members of this unit too had distinctive clothing, marked by thick bonnets on the head, almost three feet tall (*yek zar'*) and with no turbans, which were adorned with rows of crane and owl feathers.<sup>349</sup>



Figs. 159a,b – (a) Safaviyyeh officer holding the *chub-e tariq*; (b) Safaviyyeh officers being presented a golden plant (TKSM, albums H2153/38 and H2160/10)

These headgear descriptions remind us of those of the *shāters*, and ultimately the Mithraic bonnet; and the color red of their clothing is a clear pointer to the Mithraic origin of this shocking tradition. An overwhelming number of indices, therefore, vouch for an affiliation with ancient Iranian rituals, rather than Turkic ones. Also, we have a detailed drawing of these Safaviyyeh officials (Fig. 151a), in which one is holding a *chub-e tariq*, and the other has red clothing and a headgear with an impressive golden cupola that indicates superior rank (Fig. 159a); in a second one (Fig. 159b), we have a beardless novice offering a precious plant—depicted as golden—to his superiors wearing golden headgears of the type that may have been worn by Shaykh Safi's ancestor, Firuz-

<sup>349</sup> Jonābādi 2000, 724.

Shāh Zarrin-kolāh (Firuz Shāh whose bonnet is golden).<sup>350</sup> This precious plant is the mandrake, which, because of its medicinal qualities and hallucinogenic potentials was considered as magical by the Yazidis.<sup>351</sup> It has human-form roots, large leaves, and poppy-like flowers with long stems that usually hang down. What's more, it is called Mehr-giāh (Mithra's plant) in Persian. This appellation may explain its popularity among the avatars of Mithraic societies, including the Coquillards, who adopted it as an auspicious symbol for their patron saint (see Figs. 376-78).

Finally, in the Safaviyyeh we have the example of a dervish order that followed the principles of brotherhood and hospitality when it was of modest size, but became imperial and tyrannical when it grabbed the reins of rulership and power. Confronted with this new imperial phenomenon, other dervish orders were either swept away or had to adapt their practices to an atmosphere dominated by Safavid extremism.

### IX.8 - The Ahl-e Haqq: Outlasting the Safaviyyeh

The Ahl-e Haqq, or Yāresān, is a congregation still very much alive among the Kurdish population of western Iran and northern Iraq. The members of this congregation follow a religion that they believe to have been founded by the mystic Soltān Sahāk in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, when you delve into their traditions you can see many indices that are reminiscent of a Mithraic past.

Similar to the Mysteries that had a hierarchy of seven grades, the revered characters of the Ahl-e Haqq form a heptad (*Haft Tan*), and are named: 1- Pir Benyāmin (i.e., Benjamin), 2- Dāvud (i.e., David), 3- Mostafā, 4- Pir Musā, 5- Shāh Hosayn, 6- Bābā Yādegār, 7- Khātun-e Ramz-bar. As already mentioned, the second figure of this heptad, Dāvud, is recognized as the *gholām-e pā bar rekāb* of Benyāmin (i.e., the slave who stood on his chariot's foot-rail) which mimics the functions of the Roman *heliodromos* and the Sasanian *mehr-astāt*.<sup>352</sup> We must also observe that the epithets *pir*, *shāh* and *bābā* of this heptad are common titles among most of the avatars of Mithraic societies. As for the seventh persona, she is Dayrak, the mother of Soltān Sahāk, who is also called Khātun-e Ramz-bar (lit. the secret-carrying lady). The latter epithet alludes to secrets that could not be revealed but were passed from mouth to ear, or in this case from mother to son.<sup>353</sup> Among their heroes, they recognize Shahāb-od-din `Ayyub-Shāh-e *charmineh-*

<sup>350</sup> All of this headgear predate the twelve-sided red baton introduced by Soltān Haydar.

<sup>351</sup> Arakelova 2014, 152-53.

<sup>352</sup> See note 275 supra.

<sup>353</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 171.

*push* (the leather wearing), which means that he dressed like the *shāters* and *`ayyārs*. Furthermore, wine drinking is common among them, especially among a subgroup known as the *Ilakhchis*. Like the *Khorramdiniyyeh*, they dip bread in wine and eat it, and they call each other "brother."<sup>354</sup> As a matter of fact, the *Ahl-e Haqq* are often referred to as the *Kākāis* or "*the brotherlies*" (*kākā* = brother). For them, Sunday is the day of the "Mir," an obvious transformation of Mehr/Mithra into an Arabic name. Their main festivities are always celebrated in the Persian month of Mehr, and end up with an animal sacrifice that is cooked and distributed among congregation members.<sup>355</sup> Like all other avatars of Mithraic societies, they changed names and adapted their rituals to the requirements of Islamic laws. Occasionally though, they had to hide certain activities as in the story related by the *Shāhnāmeḥ-ye Haqiqat*, in which a *pir* had to hide the sacrificial meal upon learning of the imminent visit of Moslem jurists.<sup>356</sup> It must have been tainted by a practice unacceptable to Islam. In any case, the same *Shāhnāmeḥ-ye Haqiqat* avows that the true pioneers of their religion were the mythical kings of Iran.<sup>357</sup> They were thus well aware that their "religion" had pre-Islamic origins.

But the interesting question is: how did the *Ahl-e Haqq* survive as a congregation so close to the *Safaviyyeh*? There are probably a number of reasons, including affiliation and intermingling. The fact that *Safī-od-din's* ancestors were of Kurdish origin probably helped intermingling, even more so because in the *Safvat-os-safā*, both *Shaykh Zāhed* and *Shaykh Safi* are said to have described their religion as *mazhab-e haqq*, or "religion of truth."<sup>358</sup> What they preached and perceived as *haqq* must have been very close to what the *Ahl-e Haqq* believed.

More importantly, the *Ahl-e Haqq* saw themselves as part of the same tradition, and made sure that their stories and literature reflected that. In one of their stories, young *Safī-od-din* is sent by his master *Shaykh Zāhed* to *Soltān Sahāk* (sometimes spelled *Es'hāq*), for initiation. Because of the presence of women in the circle of *Soltān Sahāk*, *Safī* feels uncomfortable and returns back to his own master. *Shaykh Zāhed* scolds him and sends him back, whereupon *Soltān Sahāk* gives him a moral lesson. He tells him that in the presence of God, men and women are equal, even though they are different, and his congregation is the House of the *rāstān* (the truthfals), where truthfulness is

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<sup>354</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 90, 102, 114.

<sup>355</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 126, 145.

<sup>356</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 153-155.

<sup>357</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 15-25.

<sup>358</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 115.

advocated for all. Safi acknowledges his mistake, and he is then initiated and girdled by Soltān Sahāk. Within the story, there are several passages that not only reemphasize the Safaviyyeh connection but also enhance the prestige of the Ahl-e Haqq. In one instance, Shaykh Zāhed avows that Soltān Sahāk is of greater spirit than he, and in another, Safi is helped by Pir Benyāmin when lost in his mystical journey.<sup>359</sup> Moreover, in the list of 40 great dervishes that the Ahl-e Haqq revere, Shaykh Zāhed is ranked 29<sup>th</sup>, and Shaykh Safi, 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>360</sup> There was thus a noticeable effort to portray the Ahl-e Haqq as related to the Safaviyyeh, in order to avoid harassment by their zealots.

Finally, the Ahl-e Haqq remained low-key, and in lieu of accumulating wealth, they looked after the welfare of their members. As a result, they neither posed a threat to the Safaviyyeh, nor had riches to rouse their greed. They remained a brotherhood, and as such, outlasted the Safaviyyeh.

### IX.9 - The Esmā`ili Adaptation of the Brotherhood Precepts

A most interesting brotherhood document is a 15<sup>th</sup>-century manual entitled *Pandiyāt-i Javānmardi* (advice on *javānmardi*), prepared at the behest of the Esmā`ili Imam, Shāh Mostanser-bellāh II (1463-1475), for his followers.<sup>361</sup> He was from the line of the Imams who emerged in Iran after the Mongol conquests and who are buried in Anjedān. His mausoleum therein is known as "Shāh-e Qalandar," which is a testimony to the liking he had for dervishes and *qalandars* and his status among the latter. By its very title, the manual is proffering advice based on the same principles of *javānmardi* that inspired brotherhoods such as the *fatās* and *ʿayyārs*. These principles were used to instill loyalty, obedience, and community spirit among the Imam's followers, and to prepare the ground for Esmā`ili doctrines, which tried to reveal the inner meaning of Koranic verses, the *bāten*.<sup>362</sup>

At the very beginning (p.2), a step by step path is presented to the believer (*mo`men*):

... from the "observance of the rules of the *shari`at*, one arrives at the rules of *tariqat* (i.e. the Sufi path), and from the latter to *haqiqat* (the truth) which is the real inner meaning (*bāten*) of *shari`at*."

It astutely proclaims that the Islamic *shari`at* is the foundation of Esmā`ili thought, in order to avoid allegations of blasphemy. It then presents the Sufi path as an intermediary

<sup>359</sup> Pirouzdjou 1997, 116.

<sup>360</sup> Khwāja-ad-din 1970, 10. Ahl-e Haqq is the translation of the word *rāstāns* (truthful).

<sup>361</sup> Ivanov 1953. I am indebted to Nasrollah Pourjavadi for lending me his copy of this book.

<sup>362</sup> Hence the appellation "*bātenids*" of the Esmā`ilis.

station on the way to acquiring the highest degree of truth, which comes from the revelation of the *inner meaning* of Islamic tenets (i.e., through Esmā`ili teachings). It implicitly invites dervishes to join his congregation in order to benefit from this higher degree of knowledge.

The necessary condition to attain that higher truth is said to be *ma`refat* (knowledge), which is then explained (p.9) as "the recognition of the Imam of the Time," i.e., the Esmā`ili Imam. To enhance loyalty, the initiation oath of brotherhoods is taken as a model (p. 3) and presented as a covenant (*`ahd*) with God, in the same way that the *fatās* were called *`ahd-allāh*:

"the real believer is one who never breaks a promise, whose promise is always sincere and reliable, who always remains faithful to the covenant (*`ahd*) with god into which he has entered."

To induce total devotion (p. 5), it advocates that the believer "is one who treats himself as already dead, and regards himself as non-existent (*nist*)." Total effacement is of course a necessary condition for total submission, and therefore, the dervish goal of reaching the stage of non-existence is used here as a way to bolster obedience. But only lip service is being paid to the principle of mutual help in brotherhoods (p. 35):

"to attain salvation, the *dindār-e haqiqi* (the truly religious man) must help his religious brothers attain salvation as well. A real brother is one who assists his brother in religion."

Finally, it advocates (p. 10) detachment from worldly goods by stating that "pebbles or precious stones should look the same" to the believer, and that he should be hospitable and be able to give. The ground is thus prepared for establishing monetary obligations. Under the guise of recapitulating the principles of *javānmardi* (p. 54), the *Pandiyāt* places obedience to the Imam, first, and the payment of tithe, second:

"from whatever you earn, you must put aside a tithe (*dah-yek*) which is your religious duty (*māl-e vājebāt*) and deliver it to the treasury of your *mowlā* who is `Ali, the Master of this world and of hereafter. You must do it with a feeling of perfect love...if not, your wealth is like a slaughtered sheep that has not been bled and therefore unclean (!) ... The tithe was established by `Ali, and is necessary if one seeks his *didār* (seeing/encounter)."

In the same way that the Morshediyyeh received their pledges in the name of Shaykh Abu Es'hāq, the Esmā`ili treasury is presented as `Ali's, and the tithe (a 1/10<sup>th</sup> tax) is said to have been established by `Ali himself. Like the Christian Church, which sold

*Indulgences* (salvation certificates) at the time of Martin Luther (1483-1546), the Esmā`ili Imam was promising a reunion with `Ali, if the believer paid his tithe.

The brotherhood philosophy and organization therefore provided a very efficient model for congregations that sought unquestioned loyalty to the leadership, cohesion among its members, and more importantly, donations. Time and again the model was used for such a purpose.

### **IX.10 - Survival**

The common denominator between all of the aforementioned congregations was that they emerged in the lower strata of society and away from the poles of power. They were popular among guilds and libertines, and provided social networking across cities and provinces. They became the refuge of the destitute and the oppressed, because it gave them a sense of belonging to an egalitarian community in which meals were shared, and rituals were performed in communal sessions. Together, they could withstand oppression and fight against tyranny. Their leader, whether *pir*, *bābā*, *dede* or *shaykh*, was a fatherly figure and a role model who embodied the virtues of brotherhood, and whose prestige was a source of protection.

But the expansion of these orders often created a lust for power, which was contrary to the egalitarian principles of brotherhood. The order could become rich and stately, as in the case of the Morshediyyeh, or grab the reins of power and become tyrannical like the Safaviyyeh. But even the tyranny of the Safaviyyeh could not wipe out the spirit of brotherhood in Iran. It was engrained in its cultural identity, and would survive in the low-lying Ahl-e Haqq congregation as well as the community of dervishes, wrestlers, *lāts*, *lutis*, and all of the libertines and hooligans whose company the free-spirited Rezā `Abbāsi and Mirak-e Naqqāsh-e Khorāsāni preferred to royalty.

As Hāfez would say:

دولتی را که نباشد غم از آسیب زوال      بی تکلف بشنو، دولت درویشان است  
The fortunate kingdom that fears no destruction \* hear well, it's that of dervishes

## CHAPTER X

### THE SASANIAN ERA: A SAFAVID PRECURSOR

#### X.1 - The Sasanian Enigma

The origin of the last pre-Islamic dynasty of Iran, i.e., the Sasanians, remained a mystery despite numerous attempts to explain the confusing situation at hand. Although the Arabic translations of Middle Persian sources give a detailed account of their lengthy reign, the stories pertaining to the forefathers of the dynasty, and their relationship with a man named Sāsān, are all muddled up. Moreover, these texts present the Sasanians as devout Zoroastrians, which is often contradicted by imagery and text. To wit:

- Shāpur I (r. 242-72), whose role in the founding of the dynasty was perhaps as important as his father Ardashir's, allowed the prophet Māni to come to his court, present a *new* religion, and prosper until he was killed by the order of Shāpur's grandson, Bahrām II, by the instigation of the Zoroastrian zealot, Kerdir.
- The Sasanian royal imagery is replete with allusions to Apam Napāt, the aquatic deity whom Zoroastrians saw as a rival to Ahura Mazdā, and replaced with Anāhitā.<sup>363</sup>
- As already mentioned, in Zoroastrianism, scorpions are characterized as *khrafstar* or noxious animals that must be annihilated; and yet, they appear as auspicious symbols on many Sasanian seals, along with Mithraic titles (see sec. VI.1, and chapter VII).

In addition, the advent of the Sasanians is accompanied with three major shifts from past practices:

- Ardashir opts for a new headgear dominated by a bulging cloth bonnet, the so-called *korymbos*.
- A new epithet, *bay* (lord), is adopted for the king, which in ancient times used to qualify only deities.
- In lieu of claiming to possess the Aryan *chihr/chisa*, as the Achaemenid Darius had done, Sasanian kings were claiming to have obtained their *chihr* from the *yazatān* (gods), through a formula that has often been mistranslated and requires explanation.

In what follows, I shall argue that the Sasanians rose from a Mithraic-type congregation, and even though they officially embraced Zoroastrianism, they did not abandon the

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<sup>363</sup> Soudavar 2003, 165.

Mithraic principles that gave strength to their power base, in the same way that the Safaviyyeh embraced Islam but also maintained pagan practices.

## X.2 - Explaining a Convoluted Origin

The primary pointer to the existence of such a congregation is the very name of Ardashir's father, Pāpak, which meant lesser *bāp/pāp*, and provides a parallel with Bābak, Jāvidān's successor as the head of the Khorramdiniyyeh (sec. III.2). We must therefore try to seek the *raison d'être* of such an appellation, and understand the relationship of Pāpak to Sāsān. The latter relationship, however, is marred by a number of confusing tales, which are summed up in *Encyclopaedia Iranica's* entry for Bābak/Pāpak:

There are several traditions regarding the relationship of Pāpak to Sāsān, who gave his name to the dynasty. One tradition, reported by Tabari and other Islamic authors says that Pāpak was the son of Sāsān, while another tradition found in the Middle Persian *Kārnamag*, Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*, and elsewhere claims that Pāpak's daughter was given in marriage to Sāsān, a shepherd who had royal blood, and from this union Ardashir was born. Variations of this theme occur in the *Bondahesh* where the genealogy of Ardashir is given "Ardashir son of Pāpak whose mother (was) the daughter of Sāsān son of Weh-āfrid, etc.," and in Agathias (2.27.5), where Pāpak is described as a shoemaker who allowed an itinerant soldier called Sāsān to sleep with his wife, from which Ardashir was born ... Another version calls Ardashir the son of the daughter of Pāpak, for which reason he was called Ardashir Pāpakān.<sup>364</sup>

The above accounts are all secondhand and written centuries later. But we have two early official Sasanian documents (a & b) that give us partial information on Sasanian ancestry, which are unequivocal, and a third one (c) that is somehow confusing and needs elaboration:

a) On his early coinage, Ardashir produces the effigy of his father on the reverse side and gives his name as Pāpak (see fig. 161):

*bg̃y artaxšer MLK` BRH bg̃y p`pk MLK*  
The lord (*baγ*) Ardashir Shāh, son of the lord Pāpak Shāh

b) In the extensive inscription that Shāpur had engraved on the sacred fire edifice of Naqsh-e Rostam (SKZ), he refers to Sāsān as *khvadāy* (master, lord), omitting any family relationship with his father Ardashir and grandfather Pāpak.

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<sup>364</sup> Frye 1988 (corrected 2011).

c) We also have a passage in the Paikuli inscriptions of King Narseh, where it is claimed (in Parthian) that:

(36) | [y]'ztn GDE W hštr-h[wtwyp]y OL | twhm ME s'[s]nkn YNTNt  
yazatān farr o shahryāri be **tohm-i sāsānagān** dādand

which Humbach and Skjaervo translate as:

"...the gods gave glory and rulership to the **family of Sāsān**"<sup>365</sup>

The latter translation, in so far as *tohm-i Sāsānagān* is concerned, needs clarification and rectification, and we shall come back to it at a later stage. But what transpires from the above is that official Sasanian documents attest an ancestral relationship with Pāpak, but are only reverential toward Sāsān, and that later sources disparage that ancestry. Such a confusing situation most likely arises when, for one reason or another, later descendants of the founder are reluctant to refer to the movement that brought their dynasty to power. They thus engage in muddying up their origins in order to conceal what is subsequently deemed inappropriate. Later historians will then develop numerous stories trying to explain the confusing situation they are confronted with.

The most blatant example is that of the Safavids. They had to change the early account of their ancestry the *Safvat-os-safā* twice. The first occurred when the Safaviyyeh took over the Zāhediyeh endowments. To legitimize these takeovers, they had to portray Shaykh Safi as the designated successor of Shaykh Zāhed-e Gilāni; numerous fictitious tales were thus added to the original text, in which Shaykh Zāhed denigrates his own son, and designates Safi as his successor.<sup>366</sup> The second was to justify the later Safavid claim that they were *sayyeds*, i.e., descendants of the Prophet Mohammad. All stories alluding to the non-Shiite origins of the Safavids had to be scratched or modified, and their genealogical tree was extended in order to link them to the seventh Shiite Imam, Musā al-Kāzem.<sup>367</sup> As a result, all the information about Firuz-Shāh Zarrin-kolāh and his congregation is lost, and what remains is a Kurdish leader said to be of Arab descent!

In the case of the Sasanians, things are even more complicated, for as David Frendo explains, adverse propaganda emanating from the Armenian Arsacids must have further distorted Sasanian ancestry. Since the Sasanians had dethroned the Arsacids, the latter's Armenian cousins had every incentive to depict the Sasanians as parvenus and of lowly

<sup>365</sup> Humbach & Skjaervo 1983, line 36.

<sup>366</sup> Soudavar 2006a, 234-35.

<sup>367</sup> See note 332 supra.

origin. A series of accusations, claims, and counterclaims in between the two neighboring countries would have then further distorted the picture.<sup>368</sup> In addition, Frendo traces back the use of the term "Sasanian" in Western scholarship to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French ecclesiast de Tillemont, who adopted the dynastic name *les Sassanides* from a Latin translation of Bar Hebraeus's Arabic work entitled *Tārīkh ad-doval*. In it, Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286) refers to the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty as "Banu Sāsān."<sup>369</sup> The dynastic name "*les Sassanides*" coined by de Tillemont—which replicates a designation that also existed in later Persian sources—generated the intuitive notion that Sāsān was the eponymous founder of the dynasty, and added another wrinkle to the problem. But as Edmund Bosworth explains, the name "Banu Sāsān" was:

"frequently applied in medieval Islam to beggars, rogues, charlatans, and tricksters of all kinds, allegedly so called because they stemmed from a legendary Shaykh Sāsān. A story frequently found in the sources, from Ebn al-Moqaffa` onward, states that Sāsān was the son of the ancient Persian ruler Bahman b. Esfandyār, but, being displaced from the succession, took to a wandering life and gathered round him other vagabonds, thus forming the "sons of Sāsān."

The Banu Sāsān were dispersed in territories that ranged from southern Iran to India, and were often labeled as bandits and brigands, as well as "jugglers and conjurors," and "those who teach tricks to animals like bears, monkeys, goats and donkeys."<sup>370</sup> In sum, they seem to cumulate all the labels applied to the groups that we have described as *'ayyārs* or *shāters*. Moreover, it was thought that they were affiliated to a spiritual leader named Sāsān, who, like our Sasanian mysterious figure, may have been a descendant of the legendary King Bahman. Furthermore, in his brilliant analysis of the correspondence between Khosrow II and his rebel general Bahrām Chobin (d. 591) who vaunted his Arsacid ancestry, Frendo brings out the name of a group of people referred to as Asones or Sasones, whom he proposes to be a "Sasanian" congregation distinct from the royal family, but whose services Khosrow II was supposed to have enlisted.<sup>371</sup> If such a group had a Sāsān-related name toward the end of Sasanian rule, it must surely be equated with the Banu Sāsān of Arabic sources. We thus have more than one reason to equate "Shaykh Sāsān" with the Sāsān of the Shāpur inscriptions, and assume that the Sasanian power base was a congregation akin to the Safaviyyeh. If true, we have at least two possible

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<sup>368</sup> Frendo 2006, 21.

<sup>369</sup> Frendo 2006, 18. Frendo's assertion is based on the Arabic version published in 1663, but he emphasizes that in the Syriac version, the expression *beyth sāsān* is used. The present published Arabic work of Bar Hebraeus (Ebn- e Ebri 1992, 74) also uses the expression *beyt sāsān* (House of Sāsān).

<sup>370</sup> Bosworth 1988; Bosworth 1976, 24.

<sup>371</sup> Frendo 2006, 16-17.

solutions to the problem of Pāpak's relationship with Sāsān. The first is inspired by Shaykh Safi's assumption of power, and the second, by that of the Khorramdiniyyeh's Bābak.

By virtue of marrying Shaykh Zāhed's daughter, Safi managed to impose his leadership on the Zāhediyeh, as well as on his own Ardabili congregation. This may provide one possible scenario for the situation at hand. But since marrying the Shaykh's daughter is not an oddity that could have generated so many rumors, I prefer the second alternative: The Khorramdiniyyeh model by which Bābak married Jāvidān's wife and became his successor. The latter can indeed generate all kinds of allegations. If Pāpak's path to leadership went through Sāsān's wife, the enemies of the Sasanians could have used it against them, and made it even more negative by reversing the roles of Pāpak and Sāsān in the transfer of wives. Sāsān's role as a congregation leader can therefore shed much light on the Sasanian enigma.

Up to now, we have relied on comparative material to propose our theory. To give it added credibility, we must seek direct evidence in the Sasanian realm. There are in fact many, and they jump to the eye as they arise from Sasanian imagery.



Fig. 160 – Coin of Shāpur son of Pāpak (Dr. Busso Peus, Sale 368, lot 364)



Fig. 161 – Coin of Ardashir son of Pāpak (Private coll.)

### X.3 - The Persepolitan Graffiti

Pāpak himself did not strike any coins, but his effigy appears on the coinage of his two sons, Shāpur and Ardashir (Figs. 160, 161). On the coins of Shāpur, who was the eldest of the two, Pāpak is depicted with a peculiarly elaborate headgear. It is so unique that the figure of a high priest wearing the same headgear on the walls of Persepolis, cannot be but him (Fig. 163a).<sup>372</sup> We have already seen that multi-faceted hats, tall bonnets, and miter-like headgears, were often worn by the Mithraic priesthood. What's more, Pāpak wears a robe here with two solar emblems on his shoulders that recall the one on the signet of the Mithraic high priest illustrated in Fig. 26, the chest emblem of the knight

<sup>372</sup> See for instance Huff 2008, 33-34.

master in Fig. 28, as well as the emblems of a present day robber gang known as Vor v Zakone (Fig. 164, see sec. XIV.13). The combination of the headgear and the solar emblem clearly justifies the name Pāpak for a Mithraic leader who, out of deference for the founder of the congregation, could not claim to be a *bāp* himself. As in the case of the Khorramdiniyyeh, the successor to the paramount *bāp*—presumably Sāsān—chose a diminutive title, Pāpak/Bābak. It probably derived from the belief in the principle of metempsychosis (*tanāsokh*), similar to the one held by the Khorramdiniyyeh by which Jāvidān's soul had transmigrated into Bābak's body. And we also saw that the head of the Morshediyyeh acted as the deputy (*khalifeh*) of Shaykh Abu-Es'hāq, and issued orders in the *shaykh*'s name some four centuries after his death (Fig. 157). Because of his name, we suspect that Pāpak too purported to act as the deputy and successor to Sāsān and in unison with his spirit.

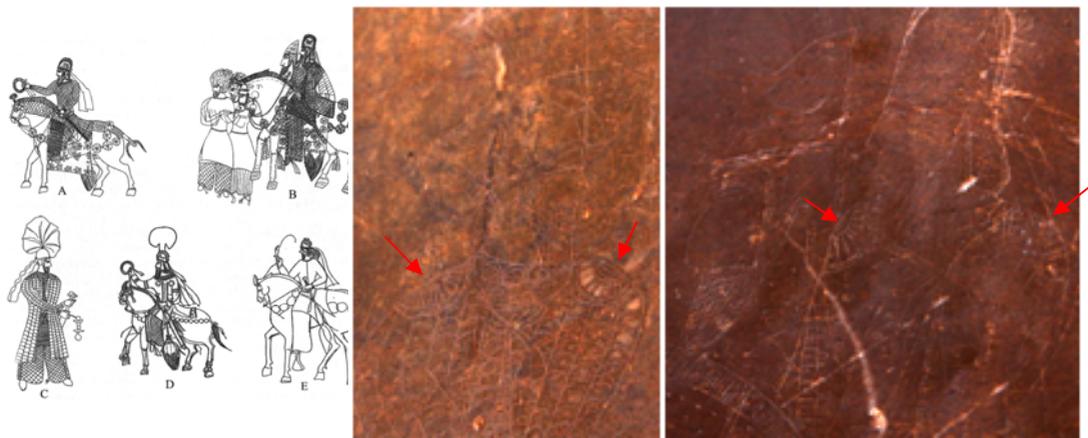


Fig. 162 – Persepolis graffiti (Huff 1993, fig. 1)

Figs. 163 a, b- (a) Effigy of Pāpak with shoulder stars; (b) effigy of Shāpur with shoulder stars (↑), riding next to a Mithraic priest. Persepolis window jamb.

According to Tabari, after defeating the king of Estakhr, Shāpur was placed on the throne of Estakhr by Pāpak, in his stead.<sup>373</sup> We may thus presume that Pāpak preferred to remain at the head of his congregation, while his son was consecrated king. The Persepolitan graffiti seem to support this contention, because opposite the window jamb on which Pāpak's effigy was carved, we have another set of graffiti that depict Shāpur riding in full regalia toward Pāpak. Shāpur too wears the sun symbols on his shoulders, and is accompanied by another rider who sports a miter-like headgear, which is most probably that of a Mithraic priest (Fig. 163b). Interestingly, the horses of these two riders are led

<sup>373</sup> Tabari 1967, 38-39.

by footmen with disheveled hair (Fig. 162-B). They depict an early prototype of the *chākars*, i.e., the devoted servants who led their masters' horses, and who are often characterized as *divs* with "disheveled hair," by antagonistic Zoroastrian priests (*Dk III.29*). This group of Persepolitan graffiti provides a vivid image of a Mithraic ceremony that is almost unique in its display of sumptuous attire and paraphernalia, and very much reflects the Iranian taste for glamour and glitter. As we shall see, a similar but less elaborate scene is depicted for a Mithraic ceremony in Dura Europos (see sec. XIV.11).



Fig. 164 – A Vor v Zakone with shoulder stars (web)

#### X.4 - Sasanian Regal Headgear

Despite the fact that Shāpur and Ardashir had the same father, they seem to have had different views about his congregation. The choice of the headgear they chose for their father might be indicative of the difference in their outlooks. On his coinage, Shāpur casts his father Pāpak with a flamboyant headgear of the type carved on the Persepolis window jamb, while he himself is depicted with a tiara (as in Persepolis). Ardashir, on the other hand, who as a youth had been in the custody of the Parthian governor of Dārābgerd, may have been inculcated with Zoroastrian precepts. As a result, upon accession to the throne, he instituted a number of reforms to accommodate Zoroastrian dogmas, including an emphasis on his Mazdean affiliation and a change of the calendar (sec. XI.2). Perhaps that's why, rather than depicting his father as the leader of a Mithraic congregation, he has him wearing a kingly tiara (Fig. 161). Such a difference in attitude among two brothers probably depended on their upbringing. A good example is provided by Shāh Esmā'il's two elder sons. The crown prince Tahmāsb was primarily educated by an orthodox tutor, Qāzi-ye Jahān, while his brother Sām Mirzā was raised under the tutelage of the Qezelbāsh warlord, Hosayn Khān Shāmlu. Tahmāsb became a religious bigot and gave up wine drinking, while his brother favored Qezelbāsh traditions and remained a heavy drinker. Like Tahmāsb who, once enthroned, vacillated between Islamic orthodoxy and Sufi leadership, the religious-leaning Ardashir must have had an ambivalent attitude toward the congregation that he had inherited from his father.<sup>374</sup> He would continue to exert his leadership over the Sāsānagān, but would nevertheless accommodate Zoroastrianism. As Agathias explains, Ardashir "was a devotee of the

<sup>374</sup> Tabari (II:42) also relates that the Nabateans had a chieftain called Bābā with whom Ardashir made peace and left to rule his nation.

Magian religion *and* an official celebrant of its *mysteria*.<sup>375</sup> Agathias is making a clear distinction between the Magian religion (read Zoroastrianism) and its "*mysteria*": Ardashir is simply a "devotee" of Zoroastrianism, but a leader of its *mysteria*. The use of the term *mysteria* by the Byzantine Agathias cannot be accidental, it unmistakably refers to a Mithraic congregation that the Romans called *Mysteria*.

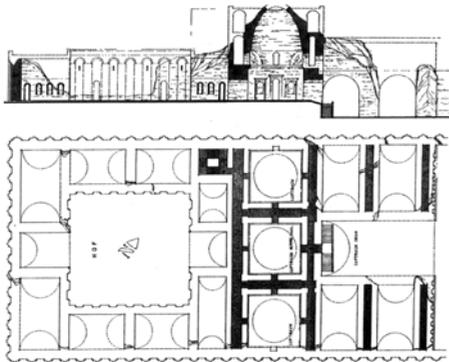


Fig. 165 – Drawings of Ardashir's palace at Firuzābād (Courtesy of D. Huff)



Fig. 166 – Shāpur I's effigy with crenelated crown and *korymbos* (Private coll.)



Fig. 167 – Shāpur I's Mithraic bonnet with symbol of Apam Napāt ↑ (Gyselen 2004, no. 78)

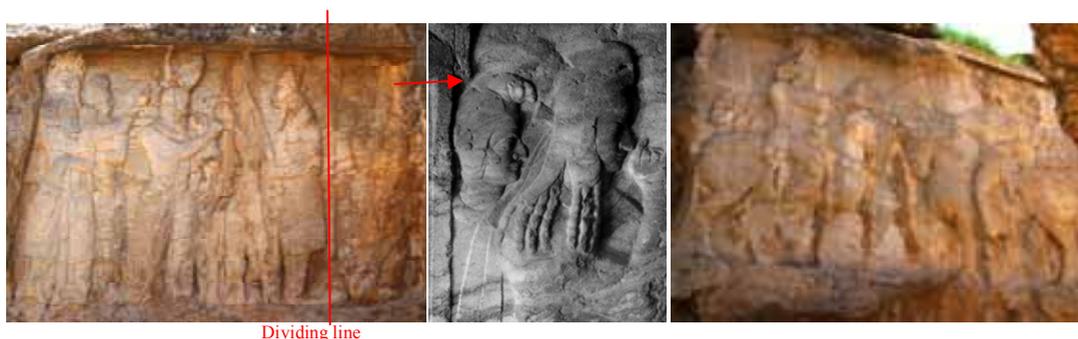
The structure of Ardashir's palace at Firuzābād may in fact be a reflection of his dual role, as a Zoroastrian king, as well as head of a Mithraic congregation. Dietrich Huff explains that Ardashir's palace therein had a vaulted sunken space, a sort of *ayvān*, that led to the throne room under the main cupola through two symmetrically-opposed staircases (Fig. 165).<sup>376</sup> And his throne was placed on top of the stairs, in a niche that had access to both the throne room and the *ayvān*. To me, the sunken *ayvān* mimics the *mithraeum*, particularly that of Crypta Balbi (Fig. 17), as its vault replicates the cave structure, and the throne niche on top of the stairs recreates the seat of the *pāp/pater*. The *ayvān* was, perhaps, where he received the congregation members, and the throne room, where he received state officials. The throne could face north or south depending on who was to be received.

While the preceding hypothesis may be mere supposition, the crowns of Ardashir and his son, Shāpur I, clearly reflect the same duality. Shāpur, for instance, wears two types of headgear on his coinage. The prominent one—which he also wears on his rock reliefs and must be his regal crown (Fig. 166)—has a crenellated metal element surrounding a

<sup>375</sup> Agathias 1975, 60 (26.3).

<sup>376</sup> Huff 2008, 48.

*korymbos*. The second one is essentially a Mithraic bonnet surmounted by a falcon head (Fig. 167). We shall explain its Apam Napāt insignia (↑) in section X.8, but at this juncture suffice it to note that its falcon top recalls bonnets that have a lion in lieu of a falcon, which appeared as identifiers of Mithra in Sasanian rock reliefs.<sup>377</sup>



Figs. 168 a, b, c – Naqash-e Rajab. (a) The sanctification of Ardashir I, with a dividing line depicting: (b) Mithra and Anāhitā addressing their blessing to a supposed scene on the right, perhaps: (c) The sanctification of Shāpur I, now situated on its right side, on a separate rock surface, split from the previous one by a water torrent

The most important of these bonnets appears in the Naqsh-e Rajab enclave, a holy site that once enclosed a pond and water source. Its focal point is a sanctification scene in which Ardashir is receiving the *yāreh*, or support ring, from Ahura Mazdā (Fig. 168a).<sup>378</sup> Oddly enough, on the extreme right we have two figures—cut from the main scene by a separating vertical line—who are looking *away* from Ardashir, toward another sanctification scene in which Shāpur I is receiving a beribboned *yāreh* from a mounted Ahura Mazdā (Fig. 168c). These two isolated figures—one male and one female—represent Mithra and Anāhitā (Fig. 168b). As we shall see, the combination of a sun god with an aquatic one was always necessary to project maximum *farr*, i.e., the Auspicious Glory that invoked kingly power.<sup>379</sup> The dividing line and their orientation suggest that they were supposed to interact with an adjacent scene. It is not clear whether they were meant to be part of an adjoining victory scene for Ardashir, or were meant to create a link to his son's nearby relief. As presently positioned, however, the two deities seem to lend support from afar to Shāpur I's majestic relief (carved at a later date). A similar triad is subsequently used to celebrate Shāpur II's victory over the Romans in Tāq-e Bostān (Fig. 206), with one difference though: in lieu of the aquatic god Anāhitā, Mithra stands on a

<sup>377</sup> Soudavar 2012a, 39-43.

<sup>378</sup> For more on the *yāreh* as a ring-shaped emblem of support, see Soudavar 2012a, 43-44.

<sup>379</sup> The coupling of Mithra with an aquatic deity was so strong that Herodotus (I, 130) even calls "Mitra" the "female deity of the Persians," whom he qualifies as the "heavenly Aphrodite" (read Anāhitā).

lotus flower—symbol of Apam Napāt. At Naqsh-e Rostam, Mithra's bonnet is not only surmounted by a lion head but has a sunflower on the side (Fig. 168b). The same sunflower appears on a bronze bonnet of Mithra that probably came from northwest Iran (Fig. 75), and has a quilted pattern replete with sun emblems. Furthermore, Mithra appears with the same lion bonnet (↑) in a number of Sasanian scenes, including one in Naqsh-e Rostam, in which a row of deities express their approval of Bahrām II through a gesture of the hand (Fig. 169).<sup>380</sup>



Fig. 169 – Mithra (↑), Tishtrya and Anāhitā expressing support for Bahrām II. Naqsh-e Rostam



Fig. 170 - Sasanian seal. British Museum



Fig. 171 – Ardashir's korymbos. British Museum

As crown prince, Shāpur only wore a basic Mithraic bonnet (Fig. 183). On his coinage though, his Mithraic bonnet becomes more elaborate and has a falcon in lieu of Mithra's lion. Moreover, the famous *korymbos*, i.e., the forward-bulging *cloth* headgear, which Ardashir and Shāpur I incorporated into their regal crown (Figs. 166, 171), is clearly a variation of Mithra's red bonnet, especially since that of Shāpur was said to be red.<sup>381</sup> Thus, not only was the Mithraic bonnet integrated into the Sasanian crown, but time and again, other princes and dignitaries donned one, as in Fig. 170.

### X.5 – The Testimony of Texts

In addition to the very succinct testimony of Agathias, certain ambiguous texts may now be better explained. For instance, Yāqut al-Hamawi mentions that Ardashir was the son of Pāpak whom he qualifies as Malek-e Sāsān (أردشیر بن بابک ملک ساسان).<sup>382</sup> As written, it can only indicate that Pāpak ruled over the Sāsānagān congregation, which is in line with our suggestions. Other texts refer to the city of Ostād Ardashir.<sup>383</sup> The epithet *ostād* (master)

<sup>380</sup> The hand gesture projects the number twenty as a sign of excellence; see Soudavar 2009, 423-24.

<sup>381</sup> Bahār 1939, 33.; the *korymbos* of the Zoroastrian-minded Ardashir, however, was blue (*idem*).

<sup>382</sup> Yāqut 1995, II:181.

<sup>383</sup> For instance, Bahār 1939, 62 : مدینه استاد اردشیر .

clearly referred to a Mithraic rank, and if used for Ardashir, it reveals that—for many—Ardashir was still a congregation master. Furthermore, what Tabari said about Sāsān doesn't seem so far-fetched anymore. Indeed, he relates that despite being of noble descent, "Sāsān went to Estakhr, and chose to forego worldly status and became a man of god (*`ābed*) who took care of a few sheep, as a result of which people said that he had become a shepherd."<sup>384</sup> Like St Francis, Sāsān seems to have favored an ascetic life over a comfortable one, and like later dervishes, he must have sat on a sheepskin. Hence the derogatory remark that he had become a shepherd. The sheepskin always invited association with shepherds, and was a recurrent offensive theme used against the avatars of Mithraic societies.

We must now go back to Paikuli and tackle the sentence in which the gods gave "*farr* and rulership" to the "*tohm* of *Sāsānagān*," which Skjaervo and Humbach have translated as the "family of Sasan." Nicholas Sims-Williams is of the opinion that the "suffix *-agān* is very often used to form patronymics and family names," but Fazel Pakzad believes that, as a dynastic name, *Sāsānagān* is problematic and only appears in one or two error-laden manuscripts, while the more common and acceptable form is *Sāsānigān*.<sup>385</sup> The suffix –*agān*, however, is itself composed of the suffix *-ag* that forms an adjective from a noun, followed by *-ān* that makes it plural, as in *Erān-ag-ān* (i.e., Iranians). We can see the exact same structure applied to later congregations. A single follower of Shaykh Zāhed or Shaykh Safi was referred to as Zāhedī, or Safavī, and the name of their congregation was obtained by applying the Arabic plural form to that appellation, which gave Zāhedīyyeh and Safavīyyeh. *Sāsān-ag-ān* too must have referred to a congregation, that of the *Sāsān-ag*s, which subsequently became known as the Banu Sāsān. But no matter how you look at it, *Sāsānagān* denotes a group or family, and therefore the word *tohm* that precedes it cannot bear the meaning of family, since it would make it superfluous and redundant. The primary meaning of *tohm* is seed, and if the gods are said to have given *farr* and rulership to the "*tohm* of *Sāsānagān*," it must mean that they placed it at the heart of their congregation, or planted it at the center of their circle. That heart and center metaphor may very well refer to the king as the heart of the congregation. In any case, it's a testimony to the continuing importance of the *Sāsānagān*. A number of problematic textual references about the Sasanians can thus gain a proper meaning if we acknowledge a parallel function for the king as head of a Mithraic type congregation.

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<sup>384</sup> Tabari 1967, I:569.

<sup>385</sup> Personal communication, with both.

## X.6 - Reflecting the Gods

The Sasanians had a political slogan that was incorporated as a motto on their coinage, the famous "*chihr az yazatān*." It claimed that the king obtained his *chihr* from the gods. Due to an incorrect understanding of the word *chihr*, this slogan has long been translated as "who is from the seeds/family of gods," thereby conferring divine status to the Sasanian king. The primary meaning of *chihr*, however, is brilliance and radiance, and as such it is the manifestation of the king's *farr*, or Auspicious Glory. The *farr* (OP *khvarenah*) conferred power and victory to the king, and the lack of it led to his demise. It was therefore imperative to project the king's *farr* in the most potent way, whether through iconography or text. Thus, opposite the king's effigy we often have a deity perceived as the god who conferred the *farr* to him. Ardashir I, for instance, had a bust of Anāhitā opposite his own effigy (Fig. 172), projecting that his *farr* came from her.

Since *chihr* had also acquired a secondary meaning as image/figure, Shāpur I decided to take advantage of it and make the motto more powerful. He thus moved the obverse deity to the reverse, and placed it to the right of the fire altar while his own effigy was placed to the left (Fig. 173). Through that symmetry, he was projecting that the king reflected the opposite deity in both image and *farr*, i.e., majesty and power. Thus, in Shāpur I's issues, king and deity are identical and the mirror image of one another.



Fig. 172 – Ardashir I  
with bust of Anāhitā  
(Private coll.)



Fig. 173 – Coin of Shāpur I  
(Private coll.)



Fig. 174 –Hormoz opposite  
Mithra (Dr Busso Peus,  
sale 388, lot 740)



Fig. 175 – Bahrām II  
standing opposite  
Anāhitā (Private coll.)

The primary meaning of *chihr*, i.e., the radiance that served as a gauge of one's *farr*, became synonymous with *farr*, and was often used in lieu of *farr*, while a new word, *chihrag*, was created for the notion of image and figure.<sup>386</sup> As a result, the exact symmetry between king and deity was set aside, and kings began to depict specific gods on the reverse side of their coinage. They thus expressed which deity (*yazata*) they considered to be their primary purveyor of *farr*. Shāpur's eldest son Hormoz I, for

<sup>386</sup> Soudavar 2009, 449.

instance, depicted Mithra (Fig. 174), while his grandson Bahrām II favored Anāhitā (Fig. 175). The choice of these deities can be indicative of the religious tendencies of the king. Hormoz I honored the god that loomed large over his ancestral congregation and power base, i.e., Mithra. But Bahrām II, who was under the spell of the Zoroastrian zealot Kerdir, favored Anāhitā, the goddess that became Apam Napāt's substitute. Furthermore, like the Anatolian dervishes who addressed their leaders as *soltān*, *shāh*, and even *khwāndgār* (Lord) (see sec. IX.3), the Sāsānagān seem to have adopted the lofty epithet of *bay* (Lord), to qualify their kings, who were also their congregation leaders.

### **X.7 - Apam Napāt and the Idea of Fire Rising From Water**

The historical texts dealing with the Sasanian era are mostly translations of works transmitted by the Zoroastrian priesthood. They seldom reflect the true nature of kingly ideology as expressed on rock reliefs or as found in archeological sites. Since people were mostly illiterate but could intuitively relate to standardized imagery, a special iconographical vocabulary and syntax was developed to transmit political propaganda. The primary concern in this iconographical expression, whether on coinage or rock reliefs, was to show that the king was imbued with *farr*. The *farr* was an ancient Iranian tribal concept that Zoroastrianism had tried to appropriate without laying a theological foundation for it (sec. X.10). As a result, the concept of *farr* is ill-defined in the *Avesta*. There is just one small passage that tells how the mythological King Jamshid lost his *farr* when he strayed from the path of righteousness, and how the loss of *farr* resulted in a loss of power. His *farr* is then taken by a falcon bird, *vareyna*, to Apam Napāt who hides it for safekeeping in the waters of Lake Vourukasha. While Apam Napāt acts as the guardian of the *farr*, it is mostly Mithra who bestows it. As we shall further discuss in sec. XI.12, they had interchangeable as well as complimentary roles in respect of *farr*, and the presence of both was often necessary to show its full conveyance, because Apam Napāt first had to release it from the waters for Mithra to bestow it.

Nevertheless, this simplified myth underlines, three important aspects of *farr*: a) that it is not permanent and can be lost, b) when non-active it is kept underwater in a dormant state, c) for one to possess it, the *farr* must come out of water first. But here and there in the *Avesta* emerges another notion, that the most important source of *farr* was the Aryan *farr*, and that was the *farr* that Jamshid lost. One had to be empowered by it to vanquish non-Iranians, or the nations of *an-Erān*.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Soudavar 2009, 173-75; Soudavar 2012b, 58-60.

The primary reason for not having a clear definition of *farr* in the *Avesta* is that, in ancient times and prior to the Zoroastrian era, it was the aquatic god Apam Napāt who created beings. In Zoroastrianism though, creation was the prerogative of Ahura Mazdā. Apam Napāt was therefore a deity that had to be eliminated or replaced. Although the aquatic goddess Anāhitā was adopted as a substitute, so intertwined had become the role of Apam Napāt with the *farr* that kings—who wished to publicize their victories—had to resurrect him and show that it was he who released the *farr* to them.



Fig. 176 – **Ardavān** and **Ahriman** under the hooves of Ardashir and Ahura Mazdā's horse, respectively. Detail of Fig. 129, Naqsh-e Rostam

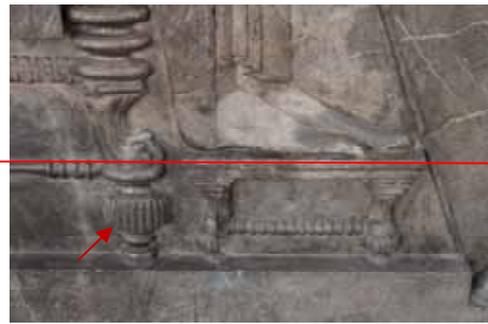


Fig. 177 – Darius's feet resting on pedestal at the level of the lion paws of his throne legs (which have an attached stand ↑ underneath). Iran Bāstān Museum

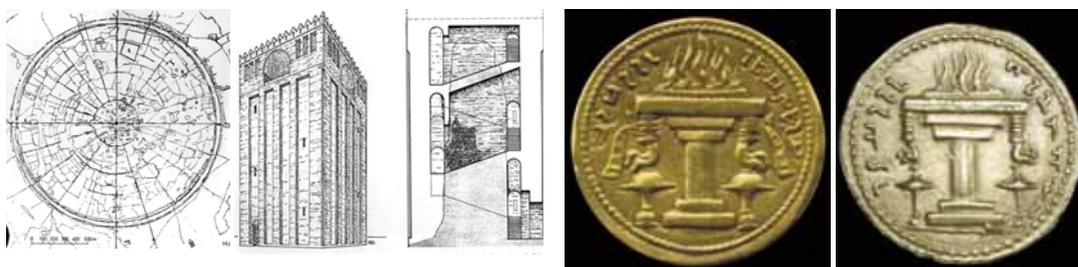
In Naqsh-e Rostam, by depicting the Arsacids as Ahrimanic (Figs. 129, 176), Ardashir insinuates that the Aryan *farr* had been dormant under their reign. While Ardashir invokes here the support of Ahura Mazdā for his victory over Ardavān, his grand project of Ardashir-khvarrah—the capital city he built in Fārs—divulges his fixation on Apam Napāt. Indeed, the very architecture of this circular city built on marshlands filled with water, projected the rise of fire from water, since at its very center stood a tall tower on top of which fires were lit (Figs. 178a, b); it's the very expression of what Georges Dumézil had once qualified as "fire rising from waters," which alluded to the release of the *farr* that Apam Napāt had guarded underwater; and it is in the image of *naphtha* (petrol) burning over water, a phenomenon whose name the ancient Greeks derived from the second component of Apam *Napāt*.<sup>388</sup>

The *Fārsnāmeḥ* specifies that there were actually two fires on top of that tower, each coming out of a water fountain.<sup>389</sup> Lacking the space to illustrate this entire concept on his coinage, Ardashir opted for a fire altar on the reverse side, incorporated on a movable

<sup>388</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 58-60 ; Dumézil 1973, 21-89.

<sup>389</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 60.

table placed on a pedestal. As such, it resembles the Achaemenid movable throne (Fig. 193) that also carried a fire altar. Throne legs usually ended with lion paws, at the level where the monarch's feet were supposed to hit the ground. If the monarch had a foot-rest or a pedestal before his throne, his throne legs rested on attached pompomed stands that raised its lion paws to the level of the king's feet (Fig. 177). What appears under the legs of Ardashir's movable altar table, though, cannot be qualified as stands since they are clearly separated from the legs and have a nipped top rather than a flat one (Figs. 179a, b).<sup>390</sup> These stand-like objects under the altar table are in fact water fountains that recall the water fountains from which sprang the fire on top of Ardashir's tower.



Figs. 178 a, b – (a) Plan of Ardashir-khvarrah; (b) Fire tower built at the very center of the city (Courtesy of D. Huff)

Figs. 179 a, b – Moveable fire altar resting on a pedestal and hanging above two water fountains; Coins of Ardashir I: (a) British Museum, (b) Private coll.

To qualify this imagery, Ardashir added the legend "*artštr NWRA*," which is usually translated as the "Fire of Ardashir." But considering that he chose the Aramaic ideogram *NWRA* in lieu of the more common MP *ādur* for "fire," one senses that it was meant to be both a symbol of the *farr* that the fire harbored, and the light that it emitted, because, like the Arabic word *nur*, *NWRA* primarily meant light. Indeed, the geographer Yāqut ascertains that Ardashir-khvarrah meant the "Light of Ardashir."<sup>391</sup> Ardashir was thus promoting the radiance (*chih*r) of his fire as the manifestation of his god-given *farr* that sprang from the waters.

Moreover, the fire altar on the Achaemenid moveable throne (*takht-e ravān*) represented the king's personal fire, and therefore, the fire on Ardashir's coinage must be his personal fire as well, i.e., the one that he carried along on his campaigns. But to show that this fire stemmed out of the kingly fire that he had lit in Ardashir-khvarrah, he placed his

<sup>390</sup> Following Pfeidel, Alram assumes that the legs of the altar table were copies after the Achaemenid throne legs (Alram 2003, 24). But these table legs end with paws that, unlike the Achaemenid throne legs that have a pompomed protrusion underneath, are *clearly unconnected* to the fountain-like objects below.

<sup>391</sup> Yāqūt 1995: 146; اردشیر خوره، هو اسم مرکب معناه بهاء اردشیر

moveable altar on a fixed pedestal, with two fountains on each side. Together, they were supposed to convey the affiliation of his personal fire to the main fire positioned on the central tower of his new capital. As symbols of *farr*, the flying ribbons tied to the legs of the moveable fire altar echoed the symbolism of Ardashir-khvarrah, i.e., that it harbored the *farr* that had made Ardashir victorious, and was therefore called Ardashir's *Farr*, or Ardashir-khvarrah. The artifice also allowed Ardashir to subtly evoke the fire-water duality that was so prevalent in the *mithraeum*.

### **X.8 - Apam Napāt as the Purveyor of the Aryan Farr**

With the demise of the Achaemenids, there was a concerted effort among the Zoroastrian clergy to shift the balance of power from kingship to priesthood. In this context, it was necessary to elevate Zoroaster to the position of god's most powerful creature on earth. Since power derived from *farr*, the ultimate *farr*—i.e., the Aryan *farr*—was reallocated to him. A new *farr* was thereafter devised for kings, namely the *Kayānid farr*.<sup>392</sup> It created a highly confusing situation as to: Which source of *farr* was the most powerful? And whether kings could claim the Aryan *farr* or not? This confusing situation is nowhere better reflected than in Ardashir's geste, the *Kārnamag of Ardashir Pāpakān*. Therein, Ardashir first wishes to receive the *khvarrah* of Irānshahr (i.e. Aryan *farr*), but the one he actually gets is qualified as the *Kayānid khvarrah (farr)*, which is subsequently described as the *farr* that rose from the waters.<sup>393</sup> The *farr* that rises from the water, however, is precisely the Aryan *farr* that Jamshid had lost and Apam Napāt guarded underwater.

Despite the Zoroastrian priesthood's attempt to empower their prophet with the *Aryan farr*, popular perception still held that the king who was endowed with the ultimate *farr*, whether qualified as *Aryan* or *Kayānid*. Indeed, as Estakhri remarks, the people of Fars referred to Ardashir's fire tower as both *Aryan* and *Kayānid farr*.<sup>394</sup> For them, the two were one and the same. But for Ardashir himself, the Aryan *farr* must have belonged to Zoroaster. Like Shāh Tahmāsb who assumed the leadership of the Safaviyyeh but claimed to follow the *shari`at*, Ardashir must have donned the mantle of leadership of the Sāsānagān while being reverent toward Zoroastrian precepts. Rather than continuing Darius's motto by which the latter claimed possession of the Aryan *farr (Ariya chisa)*, he devised a new formula that claimed his *chihr* (as radiance of *farr*) was given by the gods:

<sup>392</sup> See Soudavar 2012b, 59-60.

<sup>393</sup> Grenet 2003, 66, 77 and 87.

<sup>394</sup> Estakhri 1961, 76 : (و هو بناء بناه اردشير و يعرف بلسان الفرس بايران و كياخه) , as corrected and explained in Soudavar 2012b, 59-60.

*ke chihr as yazatān (dārad)*. For him, the *Aryan farr* had been allocated to Zoroaster and the most he could wish for was the *Kayānian* one. His motto was cleverly crafted to avoid running afoul of the Zoroastrian priesthood while projecting power and majesty. He was claiming to have god-given *chihr* without specifying which *farr* it really was, and who gave it to him. His son Shāpur I, however, was more assertive about the *farr* that he received, and the deity who bestowed it on him.

### X.9 - Symbols in Lieu of Deities

Having vanquished three successive Roman emperors, Shāpur needed to publicize his victories in the customary stone reliefs. As reflected in the *Avesta's Yt.18:2-5*, victory over non-Iranians had to be empowered by the *Aryan farr*; and since it was Apam Napāt who guarded it underwater, he had to release it first. He was thus perceived as the primary purveyor of the dormant *Aryan farr*. The question was: How should this deity be represented? The Hellenistic period had given flesh to Iranian deities, and the winged Eros provided a suitable model for Apam Napāt, since his wings attested to supra-natural qualities and his childish figure was well suited to a deity whose very name meant the "Child of the Waters." It's therefore a childlike Apam Napāt who delivers the flying ribbon (*dastār*) as symbol of *farr* and victory to Shāpur (Fig. 182).<sup>395</sup>



Fig. 180 - Symbols of Apam Napāt and the Moon.  
(det. of Fig. 174)



Fig. 181 - Symbols of Apām Napāt and Tishtrya.  
(Gyselen 2004, 109)



Fig. 182 - Apam Napāt giving the *dastār* to Shāpur I. Bishāpur



Fig. 183 - The Moon chariot pulled by Apam Napāt.  
(det. of Fig. 53)

If large scale stone reliefs permitted the visualization of an anthropomorphic Apam Napāt, on coinage, bonnets, and limited surfaces, a substitute and smaller emblem had to be devised. Traditionally, the lotus flower was a symbol of the waters and of Apam Napāt; but with the aquatic goddess Anāhitā gaining ascendancy, it became a symbol of both. A two-legged *ankh* sign was then devised as a caricature of the childlike Apam Napāt, and an emblem that solely represented this deity (Fig. 180).<sup>396</sup>

<sup>395</sup> Soudavar 2012a, 31-33.

<sup>396</sup> Soudavar 2009, 426-27. Apam Napāt was previously alluded to with water waves (Fig. 71).

As Lord of the Night, Apam Napāt held sway over all other nighttime entities. On several silver plates, for instance, the chariot of the moon is being pulled and directed by an Eros-like symbol of Apam Napāt (Fig. 53). In *Yt.8.4*, another celestial entity, Tishtrya, is said to derive its light (*chithra*) from Apam Napāt. Tishtrya, which referred to Sirius as well as two other stars (Procyon and Betelgeuse), appeared in the form of an equilateral triangle known as the Winter Triangle (see sec. IV.2). In the *Avesta*, the epithet of Tishtrya is *afsh-chithra* (i.e., whose light was like rain drops), and that of the Moon is *gao-chithra* (i.e., bright as milk; see sec. III.7).<sup>397</sup> These two epithets gave rise to the creation of two other caricature symbols. Because *gao* meant both milk and cow, *gao-chithra* produced a "cow sign" that comprised three elements, each representing one phase of the moon: A crescent on top representing the early phase, a circle in the middle as symbol of the full moon, and a bar sign at the bottom as symbol of nothingness (Fig. 180).<sup>398</sup> *Afsh-chithra*, on the other hand, produced a three-dot symbol that mimicked the triangular shape of the Winter Triangle with each dot representing a rain drop or a pearl (Fig. 181).



Fig. 184 – Ardashir and Shāpur defeating the Arsacids. Sketch of Firuzābād relief (Overlaet 1993, 89)

All three caricature signs embodied the auspiciousness of *farr*, but also followed an inherent hierarchy in which the symbol of the Lord of the Night naturally came first. This hierarchy is reflected in the Firuzābād reliefs depicting Ardashir's victory over the last of the Arsacids (Fig. 184). Leading the charge is Ardashir whose horse is adorned with the two-legged *ankh* sign of Apam Napāt, and after him comes Shāpur riding a horse marked by the cow-sign.<sup>399</sup> For the same reason, Apam Napāt's symbol is placed next to the king

<sup>397</sup> Soudavar 2009, 428-31; see also sec. IV.2.

<sup>398</sup> Expanding on the Moon description of the *Avesta* (*Yt.7.2*), the *Bondahesh* describes how in a first phase called *andarmah*, it grows from a state of nothingness into a thin crescent, to subsequently reach a state of fullness called *por-mah*, and follows a reverse path in the second half of the month; Soudavar 2009, 427-29.

<sup>399</sup> As argued elsewhere, chances are that the Firuzābād victory relief was actually commissioned by Shāpur, for he is given prominence by appearing at the center of the composition. This supposition also ties in well

on Sasanian coinage (Fig. 180-81), while the Moon and Tishtrya symbols are placed on the opposite side of the fire altar.

With the rise of Zoroastrian orthodoxy, not only does reliance on Apam Napāt symbols become subdued, but an artifice is found to render him less important than Anāhitā who had gradually become the paramount deity of the Waters. Since the former was the Child of the Waters, and the latter was recognized as the Lady of the Waters, a composition was devised by which Apam Napāt would figure as a child next to his mother (Fig. 56). More powerful than any theological explication, the deity who conferred the ultimate *farr*—but had creative powers that were in conflict with those of Ahura Mazdā—was thus relegated to a secondary and childish position, in order to be gradually pushed out of the Zoroastrian pantheon.

### **X.10 - Gauging Sasanian Religiosity through the Effigies of Apam Napāt, Mithra and Anāhitā**

The Sasanians' use of deities in their rock reliefs provides a visual gauge for the religiosity of their kings and their respect for orthodoxy. Within a society regulated by the Zoroastrian priesthood, both Ardashir and Shāpur I had rock reliefs in which Ahura Mazdā showed his *support* through the offer of the beribboned *yāreh* (ring) to them (Fig. 129, Fig. 168c). While Ardashir tried to accommodate the Zoroastrian priesthood with calendar changes and other religious reforms, Shāpur was less of a conformist since he accepted Māni into his court, and displayed his respect for the Sāsānagān constituency by adopting a Mithraic bonnet as official headgear (Fig. 167). Ardashir subtly invokes the intervention of Apam Napāt in the erection of his *farr* tower at the center of the circular city of Ardashir-khvarrah, while Shāpur depicts him anthropomorphically as the main purveyor of *farr* in his victory reliefs (Fig. 182). The latter's son, Hormuz I, also seems to have been lukewarm toward orthodoxy, since he depicted Mithra on his coinage and not Anāhitā or Ahura Mazdā (Fig. 175).

The appearance of Anāhitā on Sasanian coinage—as the deity from whom the king was claiming to obtain his *chih*r—may actually be a pointer to Zoroastrian orthodoxy. Indeed, Ardashir struck her effigy on some of his coins, while Shāpur and Hormoz did not. On the other hand, Anāhitā gained prominence in the reliefs and coinage of Bahrām I and II, both of whom approved of the Zoroastrian orthodoxy of the high priest Kerdir.

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with the fact that these celestial symbols are not found on Ardashir's coinage but appear on Shāpur's. The two-legged *ankh* for instance appears on his bonnet in lieu of the flying Eros of his rock reliefs (Fig. 167).



Fig. 185 – Victory relief of Narseh after initial victories over Galerius (unfinished after defeat). Naqsh-e Rostam



Figs. 186 a, b - a) Victory relief of Shāpur II over Julian showing Ahura Mazda with a pompom (↑).  
b) Sanctification of Khosrow II by Anāhitā and Ahura Mazdā with a pompom (↑). Tāq-e Bostān

By the time Narseh ascends to power, it is Anāhitā who is presented as the paramount deity, especially in his rock relief of Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 185). This rock relief was to celebrate his early victories over Galerius (Caesar 293–305, Augustus 305–11), before being severely defeated in the third battle of 298. As a result of defeat, the completion of the relief was stopped, and it remained unfinished.<sup>400</sup> The gods that he is surrounded

<sup>400</sup> Soudavar 2012a, 44-45.

with—including the childlike Apam Napāt—are all purveyors of *farr*, expressing their satisfaction in regard to his initial victories. They show their approval through a finger sign of the number 20, which projected excellence.<sup>401</sup> By this time, Apam Napāt had clearly lost prominence and was being overshadowed by Anāhitā.

The Mithra and Apam Napāt tandem was resurrected for the last time in the victory relief of Shāpur II over the emperor Julian at Tāq-e Bostān, albeit the latter is invoked through the symbol of a prominent lotus (Fig. 186a). Facing Shāpur II is Ahura Mazdā who, like in the adjacent cave (Fig. 186b), has his hair knotted above his head. It is he who gives the beribboned *yāreh* to Shāpur. But to emphasize the importance of the victory over a Roman emperor, the traditional deity pair who guarded and bestowed the Aryan *farr*, namely Mithra and Apam Napāt, had to be included as well. They thus appear in a supporting role behind Ahura Mazdā: Mithra through an effigy, Apam Napāt through a lotus symbol.<sup>402</sup> The prominence of Mithra in this relief was in response to the propaganda campaign that Julian had launched prior to his campaign against Shāpur. Indeed, as the Roman emperor who established the supremacy of Mithra as Helios in the Roman pantheon, who would write treatises honoring Mithra on the occasion of his birthday on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, who would sacrifice bovines to him and confess to having taken an oath not to divulge the Mithraic mysteries, and who would depict the bust of this solar divinity on the gate of his military camp, Julian must have tailored his war propaganda toward the Sasanian military by claiming that Mithra was on his side; and since Shāpur's brother Hormizdas (Hormoz) commanded part of the Roman cavalry, and Julian had plans to place him on the Persian throne, the Roman propaganda must have shaken the very legitimacy of Shāpur's right to rule.<sup>403</sup> Thus, in depicting Mithra behind Ahura Mazdā, Shāpur was emphasizing that the supreme deity venerated by his enemy was a mere second in the Persian pantheon, and one who had favored him over his opponent. Shāpur II was merely reciprocating Julian's taunt with one of his own. I do not believe that he was trying to resurrect Mithra (see also sec. XII.10).

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, orthodoxy had settled in, and that's why when Khosrow II decided to celebrate his victory over the Byzantines in Tāq-e Bostān, he is only flanked by Ahura Mazdā and Anāhitā (Fig. 186b). Toward the end of the Sasanian era, Mithra and Apam Napāt had lost their grip on the *farr* that was once exclusively theirs.

<sup>401</sup> In Soudavar 2003 (62-67), I had wrongly suggested that the deity behind Shāpur was Ahura Mazdā.

<sup>402</sup> Through misinterpretation of headgears, the scene has often been perceived as a pact between Shapur II and his brother, rather than the gods' support for Shāpur II for his victory over Julian; Soudavar 2012a, 16-19.

<sup>403</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 45-48.

### X.11 - The Tribal Aspects of the *Farr*

In Tāq-e Bostān, far more eye-catching than the image of Khosrow flanked by two deities, are the two hunting scenes that dominate its *ayvān* space and allude to his victories against the Byzantines and the Hephtalites. They project increases in his own *farr* (added halo in Fig. 187a), as well as the Aryan *farr* (running rams with *dastār* in Fig. 187b).<sup>404</sup> They proclaim that his hunting grounds—as metaphor for empire—stretched from India (elephants) to the Nile (boars in marshlands), and included Bactria (camels).



Figs. 187 a, b - (a) Khosrow haloed after a successful hunt, his hunting grounds (read empire) now stretching from India to the Nile. (b) The Aryan *farr* (ram with *dastār*s) increased because of Khosrow's hunting feats *qua* conquests. Tāq-e Bostān

This double action on the *farr* was the subject of propaganda that found its way onto the official seals of Sasanian bureaucrats. Indeed, the seals of two *āmārgar*s (tax collectors) from this period read as follows:

	<p><i>Farreh (o) afzud Khosrow ki shahrvinārd Yazdgerd, āmārgar</i> Khosrow's <i>farr</i> was increased when he rebuilt the citadel of Yazdgerd, <i>āmārgar</i>.</p>
	<p><i>Farreh (o) Erān afzon kard, Khosrow ki niwisenid [ ? ] ud Aruastān ud Arzon, āmārgar</i> Khosrow increased the Iranian <i>farr</i>, (when) he proclaimed (victory) over [ ? ] and Aruastan and Arzon, <i>āmārgar</i>.</p>

<sup>404</sup> Soudavar 2012a, 47-53.

One of them projects that Khosrow's own *farr* was increased due to the restoration—after conquest—of the citadel of Yazdgerd;<sup>405</sup> and the other proclaims that the Aryan *farr* was increased by the capture of new domains. As such they emphasize the true nature of the *farr* as a source of power belonging to the Iranian nation as a whole; one that can empower each of its individuals, while each individual's feats can in turn increase the nation's potential. It's a tribal concept that seems to be common among the hordes that came from the Asian steppes. The Iranians, Mongols and Turkamans, all believed in such a concept.<sup>406</sup> But where it's most palpable and well researched is among North American tribes who came from the same steppes by crossing the Siberian expanses. In a study of Sioux customs, Julian Rice describes a similar phenomenon for the Lakota tribes:

"Though *wakan* is usually translated as "holy" "sacred" or mysterious, and *Wakan Tanka* is usually taken to mean "Great Mystery" or "God" the term probably resembles Robert Lowie's definition of the Crow equivalent, *maxpe*, an all-suffusing cosmic energy obtained through personal visions. According to Lowie, the Crow sought to maximize the tribal store of *maxpe* through individual reception."<sup>407</sup>

Thus the *wakan* of the Sioux, the *maxpe* of the Crow, and the Iranian *farr*, all designated a *tribal* source of power that must have existed prior to any later-devised theological framework.<sup>408</sup> The proponents of kingly ideology, as well as new religions, naturally sought to take advantage of it. As we shall see, the Medes attached the *farr* to the Mithra/Apam Napāt pair of deities, while Darius and the Zoroastrians sought to place it under the aegis of Ahura Mazdā.

## X.12 - The Borz Mehr and Yazatān Dilemmas

Duality had always been a major tenet of Iranian ideology, and had permeated the *mithraeum* through the juxtaposition of fire and water. It reflected the division of the world into the two realms of day and night; each presided by its own deity, namely Mithra and Apam Napāt. As a tandem, these two deities posed a major problem for the monotheistic Mazdaism that Darius promoted, and for Zoroastrianism (see sec. XI.9): On the one hand, the division of the world into two realms ran counter to the ideology that saw Ahura Mazdā as the sole master of the universe, and on the other, the creative powers associated with the aquatic god Apam Napāt clashed with the creation

<sup>405</sup> The heading of one *Bondahesh* chapter reads: "On the citadels that the Kavis built with Glory (*farreh*)," and confirms the association of *farr* with citadel building; Dādagi 1990, 137; Pakzad 2005, 359.

<sup>406</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 131-33.

<sup>407</sup> Rice 1968, 21.

<sup>408</sup> Lecoq had already remarked that the later *Avesta* "est encore imprégnée d'une pensée naturaliste qui confond les dieux et les éléments de la nature"; Lecoq 1997, 156. The *farr* was one such element.

prerogatives of Ahura Mazdā. Thus, Apam Napāt had to be eliminated. But as Mary Boyce has observed, such was Apam Napāt's stature that he could not be easily removed or wiped out. Not only did his name linger on, but he was even occasionally referred to with a lofty Avestan epithet, *bərəzantəm ahurəm* (High Lord), which was reduced to Borz in Pahlavi literature and even glossed in one Pahlavi text as *Borz ī Ābān-nāf* "The High One who is Son of the Waters."<sup>409</sup> What is interesting though is that Borz appears, at times, in tandem with Mehr/Mithra, and at others, as a qualifying adjective for Mehr—as in Borzen-Mehr, which is usually translated as "the Exalted Mehr." But Borzen-Mehr is primarily known as the Fire dedicated to farmers, and more generally agriculture. As such, it makes a lot more sense that it had something to do with both water (i.e., Apam Napāt) and Sun (i.e., Mehr), which provided the universally recognized necessary conditions for a good crop, rather than Mehr alone. Significant in this respect is a passage of the *Bondaesh*, which reveals that the Fire Borzen-Mehr underwent a radical change with the advent of Zoroastrianism. It recounts:

The Fire Borzen Mehr was continuously alight until the reign of Goshtāsp, and stood watch over the world. And when Zoroaster of Eternal Soul brought his Religion, then ... Goshtāsp took this Fire to the Rayovand Mountain.<sup>410</sup>

Goshtāsp (Vishtāspa) was the prince whom Zoroaster initiated to his religion, and what this passage insinuates is that the said fire was removed from its original location at the dawn of Zoroastrianism. It was thus Goshtāsp, or perhaps a member of his family, who imposed this change, but not Zoroaster. Since it specifies that it was alight *until* then, it must have been temporarily extinguished afterwards, or appropriated, or given a lesser status. Whatever occurred, it happened after the advent of Zoroastrianism and under the Achaemenids, since we shall explain that Goshtāsp was Darius's father (sec. XI.11).

We may then surmise that the expression Borzen-Mehr was actually a fusion of these two deities into one, dictated by the desire to eliminate the problematic Apam Napāt. Initially, the fire must have been in the name of Mithra *and* Apam Napāt; it was demoted by the Achaemenids but resuscitated later on as the Fire Borzen-Mehr. This has so confused scholars that in regard to the legend "*abestān o Borz Mehr*" (support from Borz Mehr) engraved on a Sasanian seal, Ryka Gyselen wonders "who Borz Mehr might be?"<sup>411</sup> She

<sup>409</sup> Boyce 1986. Panaino affirms that from a surname, Borz actually became the *name* of Apam Napāt, and that *ābān-nāf*—which meant the navel of the waters—was only his attribute; Panaino 1995, 124.

<sup>410</sup> Dādāghi 1990, 91.

<sup>411</sup> Gyselen 2007, 252 & 284. Gyselen considers these two words as separate while Gignoux believes that Borz-Mehr refers to one deity, therefore a Fire name; Gignoux 2005, 39.

seems to envisage one deity, whereas the seal owner is actually invoking a tandem as he seeks support from "Borz and Mehr." Another seal bears the legend: *Dād-Borz-Mehr, asped i pahlav, panāh ō Borzen-Mehr*, which may be translated as "Dād-Borz-Mehr, the cavalry commander, (under) Borzen-Mehr protection." The seal owner's name, *Dād-Borz-Mehr* (Given by Borz Mehr), follows a well-known formula in which Borz and Mehr are credited to have brought him into this world.<sup>412</sup> On the other hand, he seeks the protection of a Borzen-Mehr (i.e., the exalted Mehr).<sup>413</sup> Chances are that the seal owner's name was given by unorthodox parents, but in seeking protection, he himself invokes Borzen-Mehr, i.e., the convoluted entity that was in tune with orthodox Zoroastrianism.



Fig. 188 – Seal with NWRA, lion and beaver (Gyselen 1993, 70.17)



Fig. 189 – Lion with scorpion and *farr* roundels. V. Kooros collection.



Fig. 190 - Praising the gods through the lion and scorpion (Gyselen 1993, 30.E.6)

A more telling example is a seal from the Bibliothèque Nationale (Fig. 188), where the *NWRA* monogram is combined with a cryptic legend that reads: [*farr*] *ZY NWRA ZY borz mehr chihren* ((may) the *farr* of the Borz-Mehr Fire be radiant).<sup>414</sup> The word *chihren* (radiant) refers to the *farr* that the fire harbored, which is produced in the image of a pair of wings, the central element of which is shaped as the letters *ZY*. The name of the fire is then specified as Borz Mehr (i.e., Mithra and Apam Napāt). More importantly, the monogram is flanked by a lion and a beaver. The latter animal is described in the *Bondaresh* as: *babr-e ābi ke sag-e ābi khwānand* (the aquatic *babr* that is called water-dog),<sup>415</sup> and consequently, the aquatic *babr* is depicted as a dog with prominent beaver paws. Thus, in relation to the two named deities, we have two animals, a lion that always

<sup>412</sup> Well known examples of this type are *Khodā-dād* (god-given), or *Mehr-dād* (given by Mithra).

<sup>413</sup> Gyselen 2003, 134-135. According to Gyselen, if Borzen-Mehr was referring to the famous fire, it should have been preceded by the word "Fire."

<sup>414</sup> See Gyselen 1993, seal 70.17, where only the legend is read and not the monograms and symbols.

<sup>415</sup> Dādaghi 1990, 79; Pakzad 2005, 172.

referred to the sun and/or Mithra, as well as a beaver, the aquatic animal that was at other times associated with Anāhitā (*Yt.5.129*). It emphasizes Borz and Mehr's association with the *farr*, an association that persisted despite all the problems that Apam Napāt posed for Ahura Mazdā.<sup>416</sup> Finally, the lasting impact of the pairing of Mithra and Apam Napāt can be seen in the *mihrāb/mehr-āb* concept that we shall discuss in sec. XIV.9.

The same conflation that occurred for the Borz-Mehr tandem, can be observed for the word *yazatān* (gods), which is plural but was gradually used in the singular in expressions such as *abestān o yazatān* (support from gods), and the NP *yazdān* (which is the Persian substitute for Allāh) (Fig. 190). As such, it must have already been referring to a singular god in Pahlavi, before it was applied to Allāh in Persian.



Fig. 191 – Arab-Sasanian coin inscribed *mhmt pgt'mbl Yyzdt'*. (Courtesy of H. Rezai-Baghbidi)

As Hassan Rezai-Baghbidi has recently demonstrated, when the sentence (محمد رسول الله) was supposed to be engraved on Arab-Sasanian coins (Fig. 191), it was transcribed as *mahmad paygāmbār i yazad* (Mohammad the apostle of god).<sup>417</sup> The learned administration officials clearly understood that the unique god Allāh should be translated with *yazad* in the singular, but because the plural had been engrained in the popular mind, the oft-used *yazdān* eventually prevailed over *yazad* in Persian literature.

With this in mind, we can now revisit the motto that Sasanians adopted at the outset, the famous *chihr az yazatān* (whose Light/Farr is from the gods). The use of the plural *yazatān* was a clever ploy to deflect any criticism from the Zoroastrian clergy who probably suspected the Sāsānagān of favoring Mithra and Apam Napāt—at least insofar as the bestowing of *farr* was concerned. And in the same way that the Sasanians referred to their dynastic *farr* as the Kayānian one, but people continued to call it the Aryan *farr*,

<sup>416</sup> Two priests who assist Ardashir in his bid for power are named Borzag and Borz-ādur (Grenet 2003, 87-95), which shows their affiliation to a theological framework dominated by Borz (i.e., Apam Napāt).

<sup>417</sup> Rezai-Baghbidi 2011, 85-86.

it is probable that, for the general population, *yazatān* primarily represented the "Mehr/Apam Napāt" tandem, since they were considered as the main purveyors of *farr*. When these two were fused into one, so was *yazatān*. As such, its New Persian version, *yazdān*—although used in the singular—was in reality a reflection of the high powers that the general population associated with this traditional pair of deities.

Finally, there must be a reason for the scorpion to accompany the lion on seals bearing a reference to *yazatān* (Fig. 190) or depicted with numerous *farr* roundels as in Fig. 189. One can reasonably think that if the lion was a symbol of Mithra, the scorpion must have been a symbol of Apam Napāt, and equivalent to the snake; but the scorpion—being more compact than the snake—was easier to depict; hence the multitude of scorpions on Sasanian seals, all attesting to the parallel existence of a non-orthodox Zoroastrianism.

### **X.13 - The Sasanian Religious Landscape**

The image that emerges from our above analysis depicts the religious tendencies of Sasanian kings as more complex than generally presented. Far from practicing a monolithic brand of Zoroastrianism, their religiosity was in a state of flux, as it needed to address different constituencies. Their initial power base was a Mithraic congregation that they had to deal with—as the Safavids had to—when they rose to power. They had liberal kings like Shāpur I who, while not rejecting Zoroastrianism, was more focused on his victories over the Romans and the Glory (*farr*) that it brought to the dynasty, than religious orthodoxy. Victories over the Romans played a major role because it reinforced kingship. The lack of it, or defeat, on the other hand, provided an opportunity for the priesthood to assert itself and promote orthodoxy. Thus, by the end of the Sasanian era, the priesthood managed to impose orthodoxy and bring kingship under its spell. The parallelism of the evolution of events with that of the Safavids is quite extraordinary. Both dynasties sprang from Mithraic-type congregations that remained outside religious orthodoxy, both had to contend with the rising power of the clergy, and both succumbed to their intransigence, and as a result, lost their empires.

And similar to the Safavid times, it seems that many congregations continued to exist with a Mithraic-type hierarchy under the Sasanians. The Sāsānagān, in particular seem to have been active all along and survived the Sasanian dynasty's downfall, since we can trace them to the Banu Sāsān of the Islamic era. Moreover, one wonders if the Mazdakites were not an offshoot of the Sāsānagān. How else could a "heretical" movement have easy access to the king and convert him to its cause? If Mazdak

persuaded the king to convert, he must have had good access over an extended period of time, as "heretic" members of the Safaviyyeh had access to Shāh Tahmāsb.<sup>418</sup>

Although we do not have a clear description of Mazdakite doctrines and practices, we can project back to Sasanian times the peculiarities attributed to post-Islamic groups labeled as "Mazdakites." They all seem to relate to Mithraic societies because of their red clothing, their communal philosophy, their cohesiveness, and their popular outlook. Among these, the Khorramdiniyyeh had solid Mazdakite credentials. While many Islamo-Persian sources qualify them as Mazdakites, a more telling Mazdakite label is the one used by Zoroastrian sources for this movement. As Touraj Daryaee has insightfully demonstrated, Zoroastrian sources had an ambivalent attitude toward the Khorramdiniyyeh. On the one hand, they welcomed their rebellion against Arab invaders, and on the other, considered them as heretic Mazdakites that needed to be annihilated. The Zoroastrians displayed even greater animosity, when the remnants of the Khorramdiniyyeh joined the Byzantines after the death of Bābak, and participated in a raid against Iranian territories.<sup>419</sup> Byzantines, who were known as *rumi* (Romans) in Iranian sources, were traditionally considered as the "enemy"; and the act of switching allegiance to them was more proof of the wickedness of the Khorramdiniyyeh in the eyes of the Zoroastrians. This switch of allegiance, however, demonstrates once again the self-contained ideology of these congregations, and their allegiance to their own oath, rather than any other religion, old or new.

In addition to the Sāsānagān, there is at least one other Sasanian-era congregation that survived the Arab invasions, namely the *sa`luks*.<sup>420</sup> They were known as poor dervishes, whose names were often mentioned with *ayyārs* and *javānmards*. In some sources, the name *sa`luk* (plural *sa`ālik* صعالیک) is spelled with the Arabic ص, whereas in others, it is spelled with the Persian س as سالوک;<sup>421</sup> but when it appears in a Jewish-Aramaic context, it is accompanied with an Iranian name.<sup>422</sup> It therefore seems to represent an original Iranian name that was later Arabicized, rather than the other way around. Besides the dervishes and the lowly, it was also applied to men in positions of power. A certain Saluk

<sup>418</sup> These supposed "heretics" were also accused of *ebahat* and *cherāgh-koshān* (i.e., promiscuity) as the Mazdakites were, and were occasionally persecuted by Tahmāsb for political reasons, Riazul Islam 1970, 29.

<sup>419</sup> Daryaee 2004a, 64-76.

<sup>420</sup> We also saw a number of seals belonging to the hierarchy of Mithraic orders (sec. VII.1-3). The name of their congregations is not known, and we have no information on the extent of their organizations.

<sup>421</sup> Dehkhodā, "sāluk" and "sa`luk"; the *Tārikh-e Sīstān* mentions سالوکان خراسان, Bahār 1987, 224.

<sup>422</sup> "Saluk son of Hormizdukh performed a magic act for me..." from ms 2053/198 in

[www.schoyencollection.com/magical2.html](http://www.schoyencollection.com/magical2.html).

(*slwky*), for instance, was the judge of Kabul under Shāpur II,<sup>423</sup> and As-Solami names one Ostād Abu-Sahl-e Sa`luky, who was a highly regarded dervish master,<sup>424</sup> while Hamdollāh-e Mostowfi and Zahir-od-din Mar`ashi mention rulers from Gilān who were referred to as *sa`luk*, or *amira(g) sa`luk*.<sup>425</sup> Interestingly, we have a Sasanian seal with the following inscription: *Adur-saluk, khwesh-rāst* (Fig. 192).<sup>426</sup> It may be translated as the "Saluk-Fire, with its own righteousness." Once again we have a fire symbol on a seal, in conjunction with a legend based on the word *rāst*—which appears on so many Mithraic seals of the Sasanian era—and a name that designates Islamic dervishes as well as Persian rulers. The later *sa`luks*, therefore, clearly had Mithraic roots that went back to the Sasanian era. Dynasties came and went, but dervish orders remained. We can marvel once again at Hāfez's insightful remark:



Fig. 192 – Saluk seal (Ginoux & Gyselen 1982, 20.79)

“The Fortunate Power that fears no destruction \* hear well, it's that of dervishes”

#### X.14 - Doctoring the Dynastic Background

We began this chapter by suggesting that the confusion in dynastic history usually arises when later rulers wish to expunge a past that does not conform to religious orthodoxy. And we offered examples of the successive modifications brought to the early Safavid chronicles to erase problematic aspects of their early movement. As it turns out, the *Kārnāmag of Ardashir-e Pāpakān*, which is supposedly an account of Ardashir's rise to power, provides the same kind of misinformation about his lineage and early encounters.

The first is about the relationship between Pāpak and Sāsān, in which Ardashir is presented as the issue of Sāsān's marriage to Pāpak's daughter, while Sāsān is ennobled through descent from the last of the Achaemenids. The Sasanian kings thus became direct progenies of the Sāsānagān's celebrated founder. However, it not only contradicts the numismatic evidence, but also the *Kārnāmag's* own text where a few lines later Pāpak is said to have "a son" named Ardashir whom the Arsacid king wants to be sent to him.<sup>427</sup>

<sup>423</sup> Daryaee 2004b.

<sup>424</sup> As-Solāmi 2010, 19.

<sup>425</sup> Mar`ashi 1985, 433; Soudavar 1996b, 89. It's interesting to note that the 14<sup>th</sup>-century historian Mostowfi asserts that one of these rulers is from the "*tokhm* of Sāsān," idem.

<sup>426</sup> *twry slwky* "NPSH r'st"; Ginoux & Gyselen 1982, seal 20.79. "*khwesh-rāst*" is my reading.

<sup>427</sup> Grenet 2005, 59.

Moreover, two other stories, half-true or totally invented, serve the purpose of distancing Ardashir from Mithraic congregations. In the first, he is said to have killed a rival by the name of Mehrag, and all his male progenies, after expressing that he did not want "anybody from the lineage of the 'corrupt-soul' Mehrag to ever rule Iran."<sup>428</sup> By his very name, Mehrag seems to have had Mithraic affiliation, and his assassination was supposed to show where Ardashir stood between orthodoxy and Mithraic sympathies. A young daughter of Mehrag, however, survives the massacre, and is later discovered by Ardashir's son Shāpur who marries her. The contrast in attitude toward Mehrag's progenies is perhaps reflective of the difference in outlook between Ardashir and Shāpur toward their Mithraic power base.

The other story is about a warlord by the name of Haftovād the Snake Lord (*haftovād-i kerm khvadāy*) who inflicted many casualties on Ardashir's troops while stationed in a mountain citadel. Frantz Grenet, who has edited the text of the *Kārnāmag*, seizes upon the expanded version of the same story in the *Shāhnāme* (in which it begins with a girl holding a spindle in her hands) and upon the NP meaning of *kerm* as worm, to suggest that it alluded to the Iranian quest for obtaining the secret of the Chinese cultivation of the silk worm.<sup>429</sup> And yet it's almost self-evident that a worm does not metaphorically project the image of a worthy adversary for Ardashir, and that *kerm* must be understood by its MP meaning of *snake*; even more so because Haftovād is said to have been fed daily with *bull's blood* and a *sheep*, which, as we shall, see characterizes the activity of the Mithraic magi. Once again, the story was meant to bolster Ardashir's orthodox credentials by demonstrating his animosity toward the radical Mithraic magi. These manipulations of Ardashir's early history only prove how uncomfortable the Zoroastrian priesthood felt about the Sasanian kings' relationship with their Mithraic powerbase.

### **X.15 - Carrying the Sasanian Flame: The Pārsis**

The "Pārsi" appellation of the Zoroastrian Iranians, who migrated to India and mostly settled in Gujarat, has hitherto never been satisfactorily explained. The Gujarātis had seen quite a number of Iranian traders who came from the port of Sirāf in the southern province of Fārs (Pārs); and they may have referred to them as *pārsis*. But the Zoroastrians who settled there mostly came from inland Iran and the Greater Khorāsān. Some may have come overland and some may have taken a maritime route, through Hormuz. Either way, it is highly unlikely that they would have identified themselves as

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<sup>428</sup> Grenet 2005, 85 and 109.

<sup>429</sup> Grenet 2005, 32.

*Pārsis*, i.e., from Pārs (Fars). On the other hand, as reflected in their saga entitled *Qesseh-ye Sanjān*, their migration to India goes through different stages that revolve around the sacred fire that they were carrying. They move it first to the hill of Bahārut, then to Bānsdah, to finally settle in Navsāri.<sup>430</sup> Significantly, this fire was referred to as "Iran Shāh," i.e., the fire of Iranian Kings, and was characterized as *ātaš-bahrām*, the victorious fire. Clearly, those who took such pains to transport this fire to India believed they were carrying the kingly fire that the Sasanians depicted on their coinage; the very fire that the Arsacids had dispersed, but Ardashir had reignited at the top of the tower that he had erected in the center of his circular capital of Ardashir-khvarrah. It then stands to reason that those who brought this fire to India would consider themselves as *pārsas*, i.e., fire keepers. But for Gujarātis, there was no need to make a distinction between the fire-keeper *pārsa* and the *pārsi* traveler from Fars. They were all looked upon as Persians, in the same way that the Romans of the Mysteries called their fire keeper *perses*, i.e. Persian.

There is an intriguing verse in the *Qesseh-ye Sanjān* that describes the pilgrimage of certain Pārsis to the newly established Fire in Bānsdah:

*bedinsān pārsi dar bānsdah niz ze har jā āmadandi bā basi chiz*  
In this way did **Persians** come to Bānsdah, from many places, with many offerings.<sup>431</sup>

While the word *pārsi* therein is not incompatible with the meter, and can hardly be construed as a plural noun that acts as the subject of the plural verb *āmadandi*, the plural *pārsān* is a better substitute for it, both in terms of grammar and the flow of the poem.

*bedinsān pārsān dar bānsdah niz ze har jā āmadandi bā basi chiz*  
In this way did **fire-keepers** come to ....

This may indicate that they originally referred to themselves as Pārsāns rather than Pārsis. It's a tenuous argument, especially since no extant manuscript of the *Qesseh-ye Sanjān* reveals such a substitution.<sup>432</sup> But, on the slim chance that it can help to uncover an earlier use of the word *pārsā* in India, I thought it worthwhile to raise the question.

<sup>430</sup> Williams 2012, 86; Edeljee 1996, 25-27

<sup>431</sup> Williams 2012, 86.

<sup>432</sup> Alan Williams who kindly confirmed (personal communications) that only *pārsi* appears in all the manuscripts, also believes that *pārsi* sits well in the poem. Having doubts about my own ability to dissect the meter of a poem, I put the question to a number of Persian colleagues (A. Karimi-Hakkak, B. Mokhtāriān, N. Motallebi-Kāšāni). While they concurred with Williams on the acceptability of *pārsi* (even though it creates a slight hiccup, or *sekteh*), they all thought that *pārsān* was a better fit and more fluent.

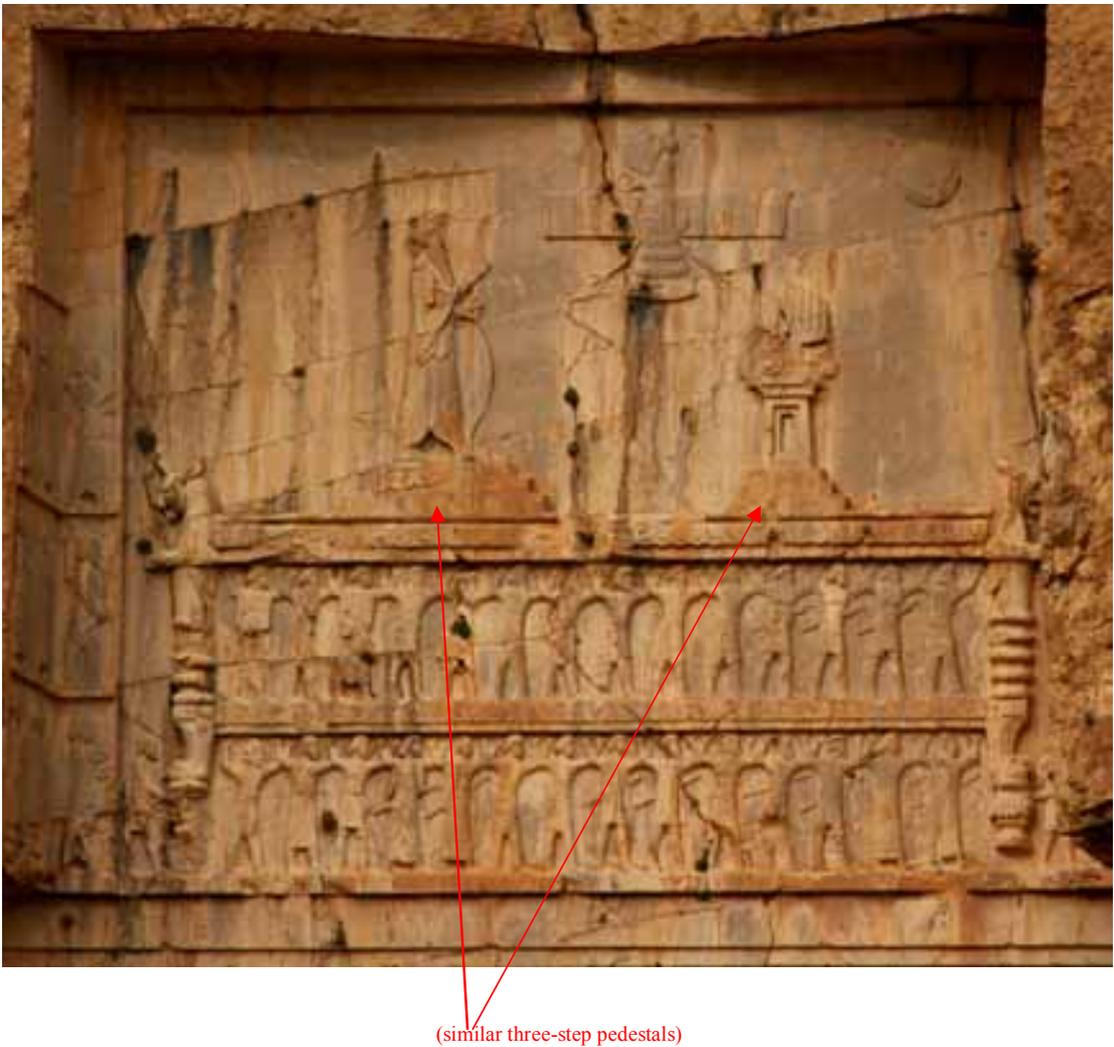


Fig. 193 – The Achaemenid king standing on his moving throne and greeted as a *pārsa* by Ahura Mazdā. Naqsh-e Rostam. The warrior king and the fire altar are both placed on a three-step pedestal to emphasize their equivalent roles in this setting, as well as the king's close association with fire.

## CHAPTER XI

### BLURRING THE PAST

#### XI.1 - The Predicament of Ancient Iranian Studies

In Chapter I, I criticized the revisionist theories advanced by the proponents of an autochthonous Roman Mithraic theory. To be fair though, the blame is not all theirs, because their mistakes have been exacerbated by a series of unwarranted theories afflicting the studies of pre-Islamic Iran, which deprived them of reference points for assessing their conclusions. Four sets of misguided theories, in particular, have derailed ancient Iranian studies in the past three decades. They contend that:

(A)- The Sasanian slogan of "*chīhr az yazatān*" meant that the king claimed to be from the "family of gods," or from the "seeds of the gods."

(B)- Darius's proclamation that he was "*vishtāspahyā pusa, hakhāmanishiya, pārsa, pārsahyā pusa, ariya, ariya chisa,*" meant that he was: "the son of Vishtāspa, an Achaemenid, Persian son of Persian, Aryan and of Aryan origin," in which the underlined part supposedly described his clan affiliation and ethnicity.

(C)- Darius was a liar, had no relationship to Cyrus, had created a "fictitious" common ancestor for himself and Cyrus, namely Achaemenes, and all inscriptions in Pasargadae were forgeries produced by Darius.

(D)- Zoroaster either never existed, or if he did, he lived and preached circa 1000 BC, or much earlier.

(A) and (B) have been around for some time, but the other two have only gained momentum in the past thirty years; and yet, all four are somehow interrelated. If they are not dealt with together, one cannot grasp the full effect of the religious cataclysm that occurred in the early Achaemenid period, the one which Herodotus termed as Magophonia, or massacre of the magi. It had significant implications for the development of Zoroastrianism, the reformulation of its principal tenets, and the propaganda scheme that was devised to blur the past in order to further empower the Zoroastrian priesthood. It produced a Zoroastrian pantheon that incorporated sanitized gods, including Mithra, all placed under the aegis of Ahura Mazdā. This sanitized Mithra is not the one that can be

identified with the main god of the *mithraeum*. More importantly, if Zoroaster's era is pushed back to the stratosphere of the second millennium BC, it becomes very hard to imagine that an independent Mithra—with different preoccupations and qualities than the Zoroastrian one—ever existed as a revered deity.

## XI.2 - Redundancy and Ridicule

Assertion (A) leads to a scenario by which Sasanian kings had supposedly adopted a pharaonic stance, and claimed to be of godly descent, whereas nowhere in Iranian literature—pre or post Islam—did a king ever have such a pretense. Unlike the Greeks or Egyptians, this idea was anathema to the Iranians. (A) was based on a Greek translation of a Sasanian slogan, in which, for lack of an equivalent notion in his own language, the translator had taken the liberty to present the king in a way that appealed to the Greek audience and not to an Iranian one. In 2003, I was the first to object to such a translation and proposed instead that the Sasanian slogan meant: The king "reflected the gods in power and Glory."<sup>433</sup> In two subsequent studies (2006 and 2009), I came to the conclusion that, more generally, *chihr* embodied the radiance of *farr*, and as such was a gauge for its intensity. It therefore became synonymous with it. But *chihr* also supported a second meaning, that of image, which was gradually relegated to a new word, *chihrag*, in order to better differentiate the two. Thus, *chihr* mostly meant radiance, while *chihrag* was exclusively used for "form" and "image."<sup>434</sup> By postulating that their *chihr* was from the gods, the Sasanians were claiming to reflect them in *farr* and radiance (see also sec. X.6).

In the meantime, by analyzing Latin and Greek texts, Antonio Panaino had reached a similar conclusion, and confirmed that the Sasanians did not claim to be from "the family of gods."<sup>435</sup> Since then, some have accepted it, while others cling to the erroneous translation of old. The misleading Greek translation notwithstanding, there was a redundancy problem that should have caught the attention of philologists, but did not. In Naqsh-e Rājab for instance, the slogan appears as a qualifier for both father and son, which O.P. Skjaervo had translated as:

"I am the Mazdean Lord Shāpur, . . . whose seeds is from the gods, son of the Mazdean Lord Ardashir, . . ., whose seeds is from the gods," . . .,<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Soudavar 2003, 41-48.

<sup>434</sup> Soudavar 2009; 442-50.

<sup>435</sup> Panaino 2004.

<sup>436</sup> Skjaervo 1985, 594.

But if the father is from the family of gods, so must be the son. There was no need to repeat it. The caste of Persian scribes and administrators who devised these slogans were extremely savvy. Unnecessary redundancy was a sin of craft that they avoided at all cost, especially in a tight space. If they wanted to emphasize an issue, they would use synonyms but never repeat the same word or idiom twice. This insensitivity to redundancy has led to a similar mistake for (B) in the translation of *pārsa*, *pārsahyā pusa* as "Persian, son of Persian." Here again, if the father is Persian so must be the son, there is no need to emphasize it for both. The contrast with the use of the qualifier "Achaemenid" is telling. If either of the two is a descendant of Achaemenes, so is the other; that's why it is not repeated. Thus, if in (A) and (B) we have qualifiers that are repeated for father and son, they define a nonhereditary trait. Like *soltān ebn-e soltān*, they pertain to a status that a son may or may not inherit.

I had long suspected that the qualifier *pārsa* that Achaemenid kings used in their inscriptions was connected to NP *pārsā* (pious), but I could not bridge the gap between the two. What put me on the right track was Pierre Lecoq's observation that *pārsava* and *parthava* were the Median and Persian dialectical pronunciations of the same word that eventually produced MP *pahlav* and NP *pahlu* (side).<sup>437</sup> The *pārsa* had to be a person who stood next to, or on the *side* of, something, which Achaemenid iconography showed to be a fire altar (Fig. 193); every detail of the scene was meant to link the king as warrior priest to the fire. The Achaemenid king was thus a fire priest, or the officer in charge of the main fire of the kingdom. This conclusion, which I reached in 2012,<sup>438</sup> is now fully supported by the additional discoveries pertaining to *pārsa* derivatives, such as *pahlom* and *pahlav* (discussed in section VII.3). Since fire was at the center of all religious activities, a hierarchy was established in relation to proximity with fire: The closest person to the Fire had the highest rank.

The second element that binds (A) and (B) together is the presence of a particular word in both: It appears as OP *chisa* in the latter, and as MP *chihr* in the former. The erroneous translation of *chihr* in (A) as "seed" or "origin" had led philologists to translate Darius's second claim, i.e., *Ariya, Ariya chisa*, as "Aryan, and of Aryan origin." The problem is that no tribal person whether Kurd, Bakhtiyāri, Goth, Visigoth, Franc, or other, would say for instance I am a Kurd *and of* Kurdish *stock*. If one says he is a Kurd, he has said it all; there is no need to emphasize his DNA. Similarly, Richard the Lionhearted (r. 1189-99) wouldn't have insisted that he was a "Norman, son of a Norman," because it would

<sup>437</sup> Lecoq 1997, 146; see sec. VII.3.

<sup>438</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 55-58.

have insinuated the existence of Normans of Saxon descent! It was a ridiculous statement, whether in the English context or the Iranian one. Thus, by presenting himself as *Ariya chisa*, Darius was simply claiming to be in possession of the highest degree of *farr*, i.e., the Aryan *farr*, which radiated through its *chisa*.

There was no honor or distinction for Darius and his successors to repeatedly claim that they were Persians or Aryans, since their servants as well as enemies were mostly Persians and/or Aryans.<sup>439</sup> What Darius wished to emphasize was his status as *pārsa*, and his possession of the Aryan *farr*, especially after the conquest of non-Iranian territories.<sup>440</sup> These were not banal qualities such as Persian or Aryan, but two honorifics that gave him a distinct aura of power. The two were also interlinked, because the locus of the Aryan *farr* was the main fire of the kingdom, the one depicted on top of the king's moving throne (Fig. 194). As reported by Diodorus of Sicily, this Fire was named after the king and was only extinguished after his death.<sup>441</sup>



Fig. 194 – Achaemenid king as *pārsā*.  
Naqsh-e Rostam



Fig. 195 – Vadfrad II,  
opposite the Aryan *farr*  
standard with *vareyna*



Fig. 196 – Crown of  
Khosrow II with  
wings of *vareyna*



Fig. 197 – Shāpur I  
opposite deity

The same concept reappears on the coins of Persis. On these, the king stands, *bow in hand*, before the main fire edifice of his kingdom—presumably the so called Ka`ba of Zardosht—while Ahura Mazdā is depicted above and the Aryan *farr* standard is visible on the opposite side; to emphasize the *farr* symbolism of the standard, it is occasionally surmounted by the bird *vareyna* (Fig. 195).<sup>442</sup> It conveyed the idea that if the *vareyna* was there, the *farr* had not departed and resided with the standard. It's an artifice that had been previously used by Darius (see sec. XI.12); and one which the Sasanians frequently used through the bias of wings adorning the royal crown on the obverse of their coinage

<sup>439</sup> In Bisotun, for instance, a number of the chained rebels before Darius are recognized as Medes or Scythians, who are Aryans nevertheless.

<sup>440</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 129-30.

<sup>441</sup> Shahbazi 1993; Soudavar 2012b, 60-61.

<sup>442</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 57-58; Haerinck & Overlaet 2008.

(Fig. 196).<sup>443</sup> The reverse of the Sasanian coins conveys the same concept: The king stands weapon in hand, on the left side of his fire altar, but instead of a symbol of Ahura Mazda hovering above, a deity appears on the opposite side of the fire altar, mostly as a mirror image of the king (Fig. 197). Slight changes in iconography do appear from one period to the other, but, remarkably, the underlying concept remains the same, i.e., that the king is the keeper of the main royal fire and the recipient of a powerful *farr*.

Significantly, Darius's claim of being endowed with the *Ariya chisa*, which appears in the OP version of the *DNa* inscriptions, is omitted in the Babylonian version. As for the Elamite version, it simply transcribes *chisa* with the Elamite alphabet. In other words, the Babylonian scribe could not find an equivalent notion and skipped it, while the Elamite one used the Old Persian word as a loanword. That's because the *khvarenah* was a tribal concept that the Aryan tribes brought to the Iranian plateau, and had no parallel among the urbanized people of the region. Although Wouter Henkelman argues that the Elamite word *kitin* represented a concept that ultimately influenced the Achaemenid ideology of royal power, the examples that he provides mainly suggest a meaning of "protection," especially when Humban is said to be the god "under whose *kitin* a king (stands)."<sup>444</sup> Because of the word "under" that precedes it, *kitin* can only mean something akin to protection or aegis. It certainly confers added power to its recipient, but it's basically different from the *khvarenah*, which was a live force belonging to the "Aryan nation" and was up for grabs; that's why many, including Afrāsiyāb and Azhi-dahāga, tried to seize it (*Yt.5.42, Yt.19.57-60*). Moreover, in most other cultures, divine blessing or protection is usually sacral and permanent. The most distinctive aspect of the *khvarenah*, however, is its varying nature. One can have it in various degrees or even lose it. If the Elamite scribe did not use *kitin* instead of *chisa*, it's because he did not see them as one and the same.

### XI.3 - Darius's Lineage

In Bisotun, Darius's most important claim was to have brought back kingship to the main line of the Achaemenids. François Vallat astutely observes that Darius uses therein the Elamite word *numun* (family) when he claims that eight kings from his "family" had ruled before him, but uses the word *eippi* when talking about his lineage. This lineage, to which belonged Achaemenes, Teispes, Ariaramnes, and Arsames, was the principal one he considered to be legitimate within the Achaemenid *numun*.<sup>445</sup> For Vallat, Darius's lineage was paramount because of the title "King of Kings" that his grandfather and great

<sup>443</sup> Soudavar 2003, 19-25.

<sup>444</sup> Henkelman 2011b, 97 & 130.

<sup>445</sup> Vallat 2011, 274-75.

grandfather used on their gold plaques. One must add, however, that Darius's forefathers had another equally important distinction: They too were *pārsas*. The plaque of his grandfather Arsames (Fig. 198), for instance, reads:

*AsH*: "Arsames, the great king, king of kings, *pārsa* king,<sup>446</sup> son of king Ariaramnes, an Achaemenid. King Arsames says: the great god Ahura Mazdā, greatest of gods, made me king. He bestowed on me the land of Persia, with good people, with good horses. By the favor of Ahura Mazdā I hold this land. May Ahura Mazdā protect me, and my royal house, and may he protect this land which I hold."<sup>447</sup>



Fig. 198 - Plaque of Arsames

Like Darius, he proudly asserted his *pārsa* title and function on a par with kingship. Moreover, Jean Kellens postulates that the name Achaemenes meant that "he was a friend of Fire."<sup>448</sup> If true, Achaemenes must have been a *pārsa* himself, and the one who transmitted this function to his progenies.

But, as it happened, a member of the junior branch of the Achaemenids, Cyrus II, King of Anshan, defeated his maternal grandfather, the Median emperor Astyages. And similar to Alexander the Great who defeated the last of the Achaemenids to inherit their empire, he suddenly became the emperor of a vast empire that he further expanded through the conquests of Lydia and Babylon. His prestige must have overwhelmed his cousin, Arsames, who presumably recognized him as overlord, and was forced to abandon the title "King of Kings," as Cyrus now claimed to be "King of the World/Universe" as well as "King of Persia."<sup>449</sup>

As a result, Darius's father was never king but maintained his title of *pārsa*. When Cambyses II died with no direct heir to succeed him, the magus Gaumāta usurped the throne but was killed by a group of seven conspirators. They were led by the elderly statesman Otanes, who, according to Herodotus (3.61-79), was perhaps the most noble of the Persians, was brother-in-law to Cyrus and father-in-law to Cambyses, and the main instigator in the conspiracy to overthrow Gaumāta. Besides Darius, the rest of the conspirators were all noblemen, governors, and army commanders such as Gobryas. And

<sup>446</sup> As per Soudavar 2012b, 70, I have translated the *khshāyathiya pārsa* therein as "Pārsa King."

<sup>447</sup> This gold plaque and that of Ariaramnes were thought to be fakes, or belonging to later periods, supposedly because of containing lexical "errors." Reverend Sharp (Sharp 1975: 21) and F. Vallat (Vallat 2011, 279) have not only refuted these claims, but have provided lexical and scriptural proofs of authenticity. As for physical problems, nothing has ever been said; and yet, nobody dares to refer to them. It was only written in Old Persian because Babylon had not yet been conquered to warrant a translation in Babylonian.

<sup>448</sup> Kellens 2013, 556.

<sup>449</sup> Gardizi explains that Arsames took refuge in religion, presumably as a *pārsa*; see sec. XII.11.

yet, it is the young Darius, twenty-eight years of age, who is elected king. As clever as he was, he could have never persuaded the other six to choose him as king, unless he had an impeccable legitimacy that no other could match. How could a young man persuade an elderly statesman such as Otanes, or a powerful commander such as Gobryas, that he merited the throne because of descent from a "fictitious" ancestor? How could Otanes swallow such a lie and pass on kingship to a meritless Darius?

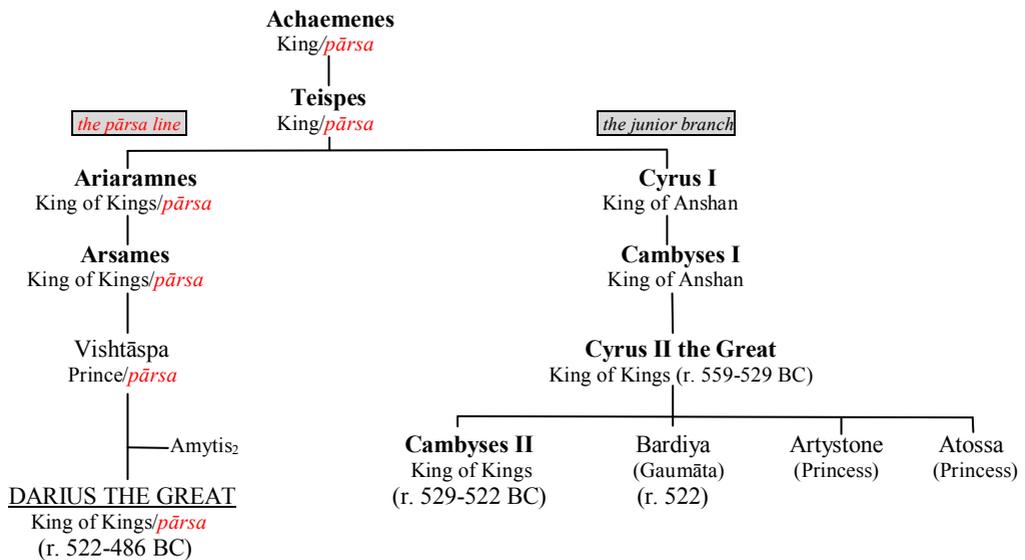


Table 2 – Darius's eight predecessor kings (in bold), who ruled as Achaemenids

Darius had been the quiver-bearer of Cyrus and the lance-bearer of Cambyses;<sup>450</sup> but those were credentials that, although important, were not enough to elect him king. If he became king, it's because, among all the conspirators, he was not only a descendant of Achaemenes, but he belonged to the principal dynastic line, the *pārsa* line.<sup>451</sup> His lineage was his legitimacy. Far from trying to create a fictitious link between Cyrus and himself, Darius proclaimed to be the rightful heir by boasting that he was not only an Achaemenid, but *pārsa* son of *pārsa*, a distinction that Cyrus did not have. In the process, he was almost portraying Cyrus as a usurper. That may explain his disdain for Cyrus; for it is a fact that Darius basically ignores Cyrus in his inscriptions, and only mentions his

<sup>450</sup> Briant 1996, 124-25. There is some evidence for Darius being a brother-in-law of Cyrus, and very much part of the inner circle of the Achaemenid royal household; see section XI.11, and Soudavar 2012b, 67-68.

<sup>451</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 70. According to Herodotus (III.2 & 68), Otanes was brother to Cyrus's wife Cassandane, and an Achaemenid through his father Pharnapses (perhaps through matrilineal descent).

name in passing.<sup>452</sup> As a member of the main branch of the Achaemenids, he looked down on members of the junior branch, even though they had left him an empire far larger than what his forefathers ever controlled.

#### **XI.4 - The Fallacy of the "Liar Darius" Theory**

Despite much concordant evidence for Darius's Bisotun narrative, a set of unfortunate circumstances have led to the development of a "Liar Darius" theory (assertion (C)), amplified by unsubstantiated hyperboles. At the root of the problem was the mistranslation of Darius's Bisotun inscriptions, supposedly suggesting that the Old Persian (OP) cuneiform script was invented by him.<sup>453</sup> It followed that any inscription in the OP script was either by Darius or his successors, but not by Cyrus. Consequently, it was asserted that the Pasargadae inscriptions, which proclaimed Cyrus to be an Achaemenid, promoted a lie concocted by Darius trying to create a common ancestor for Cyrus and himself, in order to justify his "usurpation" of the Persian throne. A corollary to this is that Darius must have killed the real Bardiya to ascend to the throne, while pretending that his victim was the usurper *magus* Gaumāta. Therefore, Bisotun, Herodotus and Ctesias were all wrong to assume that a magus by the name of Gaumāta ever usurped the Achaemenid throne. The second corollary is that Cyrus is not an Achaemenid, and perhaps not even a Persian!

In his analysis of the uprisings against Darius, Willem Vorgeslang concludes that four of the revolts, including that of Nidintu-Bel in Babylon whose seal imprints bare a date of *only four days* after Gaumāta's assassination, must have been underway *before* Darius's ascent to the throne. It therefore seems that, besides Darius and his co-conspirators, there were others who had doubts about the legitimacy of Cambyses's successor.<sup>454</sup> If this successor was really Bardiya, there should have been no contestation whatsoever, since he was the only living male progeny of Cyrus. Those early rebellions can only confirm Darius's version of events, and yet Vorgeslang opines that Darius must have killed the real Bardiya and not the usurper Gaumāta!

What baffles me is the general readiness to accept a bizarre theory, claiming that:

Darius fabricated a false lineage, years after he had crushed his enemies, and when he was firmly seated on his throne! If Herodotus recognized Cyrus as an Achaemenid, he must have been fooled by Darius's alleged misinformation! The concordant stories of

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<sup>452</sup> Vallat 2011, 278.

<sup>453</sup> Vallat 2011, 265-68.

<sup>454</sup> Vogelsang 1998, 197-200

Bisotun and Herodotus, in regard to the events that led to Darius's ascent to the throne, were fabrications that only modern historians could detect but not the people in antiquity! That to dupe everybody, Darius chose the less frequented site of Pasargadae, and not Persepolis—which was the seat of his empire—to inscribe his misinformation! And at a time when hardly anybody could read the Old Persian script, he chose a narrow strip of a robe in a door jamb to write his propaganda on (Fig. 199a)! Like an Easter egg hunt, the visitor had to first discover in Pasargadae that Cyrus was labeled an "Achaemenid" (but not Darius whose *name appears nowhere therein*), he then had to go to Bisotun and climb a steep vertical mountain to notice that Darius too had claimed to be an Achaemenid, after which the visitor had to connect these *two* affiliations together and exclaim Eureka, as he would suddenly realize what Darius had in mind: That Achaemenes was a common ancestor to him and Cyrus, and therefore Darius was legitimate! *What an absurd way to conceive propaganda.*



Figs. 199 a, b, c. scenes from Pasargadae. (a) Cyrus's minute inscription on the fold of a robe; (b) a corner pillar (*anta*) bearing the *CMA* inscription; (c) the deeply incised letters of the *CMA* inscription

These were assertions that defied common sense, and kept piling up like a house of cards on a philological theory that was supposed to be rock solid, but wasn't.<sup>455</sup> If anybody dared to characterize Cyrus as an Achaemenid, he was immediately chastised.<sup>456</sup> But thanks to Vallat's thorough analysis of the Elamite version of the Bisotun inscriptions—which was the first and primordial version among its three inscriptions<sup>457</sup>—we now know that the belief in the OP script being Darius's "invention" was wrong.<sup>458</sup>

<sup>455</sup> As argued in Soudavar 2012b (61-64), D. Stronach's art historical analysis of Pasargadae was flawed, and predicated on the supposed attribution of the OP script to Darius, which proved to be wrong as well.

<sup>456</sup> Garrison even apologizes in (2011, 378, n.4) to Henkelman for committing such a sin. Oddly, he does that in the same volume in which Vallat's article appears, contradicting this whole thesis, and for which Garrison is one of the editors.

<sup>457</sup> The other two languages being Old Persian and Akkadian.

<sup>458</sup> Vallat 2010; Vallat 2011.

Once the erroneous philological basis was removed, the house of cards should have collapsed. And yet, it seems that for those who have vested intellectual capital in this false theory, it is hard to accept the truth. Vallat's refutation is either totally ignored, or if acknowledged, it is done in a mere footnote where it is unduly belittled. Wouter Henkelman, for instance, characterizes Vallat's refutation as "an adventurous re-interpretation of the Bisotun" without explaining why, and delves into generalities rather than detailed logical rebuttal. Surely, Vallat's thorough arguments merit more than dismissive generalities; especially on the dating of Cyrus's Pasargadae inscriptions.<sup>459</sup> Instead, Henkelman adds:

"Since dated contemporary Babylonian sources consistently label Cyrus "king of Anshan," and since there are no contemporary sources that identify Cyrus as a Persian (or an Achaemenid, for that matter), it has to be concluded that Cyrus was not a Persian, but the ruler of an independent polity centered on Anshan which was linguistically and culturally *Elamite*. In this view, Darius would be the first truly Persian king"; (my underlining).<sup>460</sup>

It's an erroneous and self-serving approach to the problem. Henkelman's enunciated theory is based on inscriptions that solely appear in the Babylonian context and qualify Cyrus as "King of Anshan." Conveniently, the Pasargadae inscriptions have been rejected as fake, and what remains is only *one* royal inscription,<sup>461</sup> namely the Cyrus Cylinder, on which his theory is based. By the same token, and following this erroneous methodology, one can claim that: Darius was an



Fig. 200 – Egyptian plaque.  
(Louvre Museum)

<sup>459</sup> Henkelman 2011a, 582. A key element of Vallat's argument rests on the relationship between the three consecutive words *daae ikki hutta*, for which he demonstrates that the middle *ikki* should not be the suffix of *daae*, but must be read in combination with *hutta* as "j'ai traduit." The key sentence in the Elamite inscription *DB L*, which is equivalent to *DB§70*, is then translated as: "I (Darius) translated this differently in Aryan; it did not exist here before.." Accordingly, Darius explains that his OP version of the Elamite text was translated differently, and was written where it did not exist before (i.e. at the time the Elamite version was first written); Vallat 2011, 265-68. This, Henkelman never addresses. Nor does he address the importance of the *CMc*'s Elamite characteristic that only appears in texts prior to Darius (see note 621 *infra*). Instead he faults Vallat for the wrong use of Anshan and Parsa from the Nabonidus Chronicles, which appears nowhere in Vallat 2010 and 2011. His use of *coup d'état* in reference to Cyrus gaining the upper hand over his cousins, is also criticized. But no matter how you name it, Cyrus became an emperor by virtue of capturing the Median Empire, which prompted the *de facto* recognition of his supremacy.

<sup>460</sup> Henkelman 2011a, 597: Henkelman approving with minor caveats Potts 2005 and others.

<sup>461</sup> Henkelman acknowledges that Cyrus is not only called "King of Anshan" but also "King of Parsu" in the Nabonidus Chronicles, and is called "King of the Persians" by Berossus (Henkelman 2011a, 597) but treats them as inconsequential nevertheless (*ibid*, 582). In the process, the multiple references of Greek and Latin writers to Cyrus as "King of the Persians" are totally neglected (e.g., "Cyrus the Persian," (Diodorus IX:20)

Egyptian but never a Persian or an Achaemenid! It can be done by relying on the inscription on an Egyptian plaque in the Louvre, which reads: "The perfect god, lord of the two lands, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Darius; life forever," (Fig. 200). With Henkelman's methodology, one can then pretend that all inscriptions ascribed to Darius were ordered by Xerxes, because he wanted to expunge his father's Egyptian identity! It uses the same fallacious argument as the one used for Cyrus. One can reach any desired objective with false arguments.

In regard to the *CMa* inscriptions, David Stronach advances another argument:

"Cyrus would have violated standard Achaemenid building practice if he had indeed erected the *CMa* inscription on any part of the stone fabric of Palace P while that structure remained largely unfinished. Furthermore, the tenor of the *CMa* text can be seen to bear little if any resemblance to those titularies of Cyrus that are known from Mesopotamia."<sup>462</sup>

In other words, the engraver would have only added the inscription at the last moment, as a finishing touch. But anybody who has seen this inscription in situ knows that the carvings are deep, complicated, and needed advanced planning (Fig. 199c). Contrary to Stronach's assertion, any building planner in his right mind would have had the carving done while the slab was on the ground rather than erected at a height of several meters above ground (Fig. 199b).<sup>463</sup> As for the discrepancy in titlature, Antigoni Zournatzi has clearly demonstrated that the "King of Anshan" title made sense in the Babylonian context because it was following a local tradition.<sup>464</sup> Likewise, when Darius styled himself as "King of Upper and Lower Egypt" in Egypt, without mentioning Persia, he was doing it for an Egyptian audience and not an Iranian one. One cannot make up a general rule based on one example alone, taken out of context.<sup>465</sup>

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"Cyrus, the king of the Persians," or "Cambyses the Persian" (Diodorus X:13-14)), even though their words are elsewhere treated as gospel.

<sup>462</sup> Stronach & Gopnik 2009. In private correspondence, Stronach argues that "Stone masons ... were assuredly trained to carve inscriptions on vertical stone faces, e.g. Bisitun and Naqsh-e Rostam." True, Michelangelo too painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling lying on his back; it doesn't mean that he always painted that way.

<sup>463</sup> The height of the *anta* is 6.14 m, and the inscription measures 90 x 40 cm; Pasargadae 2004, 14. What's more, it was perhaps repeated as many as 20 times, if not more. It was therefore a serial operation that was easier to work on, on the ground and side by side, rather than individually and up in the air.

<sup>464</sup> Zournatzi 2011.

<sup>465</sup> Even without Vallat's refutation of the premise by which Darius became the inventor of the OP script, there is a methodological flaw in the reasoning of the proponents of the "Liar-Darius" theory. They consider Darius's claim to be an "Achaemenid" as wrong, but his supposed boast to have invented the OP script as correct. If Darius had lied about his genealogy there is little reason to believe his other boasts. It's almost a

### XI.5 - Crisis in Avestology

Despite my limited exposure to Avestology, I sense that this jealously guarded domain harbours a discipline in crisis, since it has severed all possible links with historical reality. It's a conclusion that I have reached after three random forays into the Avestan world. The first happened as I was investigating various iconographical representations of the *khvarenah/farr* and stumbled upon *Yt. 13.94-95* that pegged the birth of Zoroaster to a political event that was clearly related to the conquest of Assyria by the Medes, and validated a dating of 6<sup>th</sup> century BC for Zoroaster's activities (see sec. XI.12).<sup>466</sup> Here were two stanzas talking about Zoroaster's *birth* and what happened afterward, and yet nobody wished to situate them in time and space.

The second occurred when, trying to establish a connection between the *chisa* of Darius's inscriptions and the *chihhr* of the Sasanian slogan (sec. XI.1), I sought to examine its meaning in the *Avesta* as well. I came to realize that Av. *chithra*, OP *chisa*, and MP *chihhr*, all defined a radiance that gauged the intensity of the *farr* and as such had become synonymous with it. Philologists, though, opted mostly for a meaning of nature, origin, or seed, and produced incongruent translations. More importantly, they failed to understand the cosmogony of light around which Zoroastrianism had built a reward and retribution system; one by which good deeds increased one's *farr*, while bad behaviour diminished it. The luminescence of *farr*, i.e., its *chithra*, followed the same pattern, and gave rise to a light concept that is omnipresent in Persian religious and philosophical works, and a system that Shahāb-od-din-e Sohrawardi (1155-91) later borrowed for his famous *Hekmat-ol-Eshrāq* (Philosophy of Light).

The third came to me as a shock. I was asked to give an opinion on a paper that was criticizing Jean Kellens's interpretations of certain passages of *Yasna* 19 of the *Avesta*. Since Kellens had graciously sent me a copy of his publication on this subject, I had a peek at it and suddenly realized that, structurally, *Y.19* was following a well-known pattern used in the *qalandar-nāmehs*. Familiarity with this pattern allowed me to guess the purpose of its compilation. As a result, I could not only provide a translation that revealed the true intentions of its compiler, but I could explain why Zoroaster had been presented as the omnipotent ruler of the world, how his opponents were branded as

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Kafkaesque reasoning to claim that his second boast is true, in order to ascertain that his claim to the throne was false. What's more, *where did Darius find the time to invent the OP script* in his first two years (which were entirely spent on fighting the rebels)?

<sup>466</sup> Soudavar 2003, 122.

scorpion men, and why Fire was labelled as the son of Ahura Mazdā.<sup>467</sup> My opinions were neither to the liking of the authors I had criticized, nor were they agreeable to those who had supported unfounded assertions. It was thus rejected by three successive journals. I produce it here as Appendix II, and further elaborate the issue hereunder. Time will tell if my translation and my contentions are right or wrong. Meanwhile, a wrong perception of the *Avesta* derails Achaemenid studies.

### **XI.6 - The Avestan Myth**

While the *Avesta* is regarded as the foundation of Zoroastrianism, it is also looked upon as the repository of ancient Iranian beliefs and mythology. Thus, the root of all Iranian themes is often sought in the *Avesta*. To my surprise though, the more I looked for answers therein, the more I realized that many of its themes were fashioned with a political agenda in mind, namely to empower the priesthood and to weaken kingship. To achieve this, historical facts were erased, altered, or replaced, and contrary to Zoroaster's monotheistic vision, numerous deities were sanitized and thereafter integrated into one all-encompassing polytheistic ideology. It resulted in a confusing text that was an amalgam of existing popular hymns, all doctored according to this agenda. Its content, therefore, cannot be deciphered without the proper understanding of the motives that led to its compilation. Avestologists, though, seem to concentrate their efforts on philological techniques rather than the comprehension of its historical context. That is why situating Zoroaster in time is so crucial to our understanding of the religion that bears his name, as well as the chronicles of past kings that the Zoroastrian clergy transmitted down to us.

### **XI.7 - The Traditional Date**

The birthdate of Zoroaster is an issue fiercely debated among two schools of thought. The first relies on the *Avesta*, and places Zoroaster in between 1800 BC and 800 BC (assertion (D)). The second argues for a birth date of 618 BC by relying on an axiom transmitted by 10<sup>th</sup>-century documents, which specified that 258 years elapsed between the coming of Zoroaster and that of Alexander, and provided a birthdate of circa 618 BC.<sup>468</sup> This later date is often referred to as the Traditional Date. Mary Boyce, who was

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<sup>467</sup> One's task is much facilitated if one can somehow guess the purpose of a text. After all, hieroglyphs and the Old Persian script were deciphered through guessing: How repeated words in a hieroglyphic text pertained to Cleopatra and Ptolemy, and how repeated words in an OP inscription designated Darius and Hystaspes (Vistāshpa). Continuity being a staple of the Iranian culture, familiarity with Persian literature and bureaucratic correspondence can indeed be of help for deciphering ancient texts.

<sup>468</sup> The 258 years measures the time elapsed between the conquest of Iran by Alexander (i.e., the death of Darius III in 330 BC) and the 'Coming of Religion' that Gnoli has convincingly argued to refer to the year Zoroaster envisioned his new religion, and which the mini-calendar of *Zādspram* specifies to have occurred

the grand lady of Zoroastrian studies, always believed that Zoroastrianism was an inherently conservative religion for which preserved traditions had to be treated as primary sources. And yet it is she who cast the first stone against an axiom transmitted—in a plurality of forms—through Zoroastrian channels, making the "258 years" a core element of Zoroastrian writings. Indeed:

- It is quoted by Mas'udi (d. 957), in his *Moruj-oz-zahab*, and Biruni (973-1048), in his *Āthār-ol-bāqiyya*, who obtained the same information from two distinct Zoroastrian communities, one from southern Iran, and the other from the eastern Iranian world, while living a century apart.<sup>469</sup>

- It appears as an immutable time bracket in the chronology of Iranian kings who ruled prior to Alexander's invasion. The *Bondahesh*, for instance, fills the same 258-year time bracket with a different list than Mas'udi.<sup>470</sup>

- It correlates with information here and there, such as a remark by Mas'udi who states that the father of Vishtāspa—the prince whom Zoroaster converted to his religion—was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BC). And Bar Hebraeus affirms that Zarathushtra, "who had predicted" the appearance of Jesus as the Messiah, was the contemporary of early Achaemenids,<sup>471</sup> while an earlier Syriac ecclesiast, Theodore Bar Konai (8-9<sup>th</sup> century AD), dated the birth of Zoroaster to 628 BC.<sup>472</sup> Furthermore, Tabari quotes another story that, while garbled and imprecise, still places Vishtāspa close to Cyrus: "some say that Keyrash (Cyrus) is actually Vishtāspa, while others negate this, and say that he was the uncle of his grandfather."<sup>473</sup> Gardizi even names a Cambyses as one of Vishtāspa's ancestors and provides additional concordant information (see sec.

at the age of thirty; Gnoli 2000, 156. The mini-calendar of *Zādspram* suggests a lifespan of 77 years for Zoroaster (Gignoux and Tafazzoli 1993, 87); it consequently puts his death at circa 541 BC.

<sup>469</sup> Biruni 1377, 20: "258 years from the beginning of Zoroaster's prophethood (*zohur*) to the beginning of Alexander's era (*tārikh-e eskandar*"); Biruni 1377, 174 and Mas'udi 1962, vol. II, 551: "258 years from Vishtaspa until the advent of Alexander."

<sup>470</sup> The *Bundahishn* (Dādaghi, 1, 56) gives Kay Goshtāsp as 120-30=90 years, Bahman 112, Homāy-e Bahman-dokht 30, Dārā-ye chehr-āzādan ('who is Bahman') 12, Dārā-ye Dārāyān (i.e. Darius III) 14. Mas'udi (*At-tanbih val-eshraf*: 85-88) gives: Kay Goshtāsp 120-30=90 years, Bahman 112, Khomāni 30, Dārā 12, Dārā-ye Dārāyān 14. Both lists total to 258 years.

<sup>471</sup> Bar Hebraeus 1947, 31. The story is used to justify the appearance of the three magi who, as supposedly predicted by Zoroaster, followed a brilliant star. He could have placed the Prophet anywhere in time for his story; the more ancient he was, the more powerful his prediction would have been. But he nevertheless placed him in the Achaemenid time bracket.

<sup>472</sup> Herzfeld 1947, 19.

<sup>473</sup> Tabari 1967, 1:571

و قد زعم بعضهم ان كيرش هو بشتاسب، و انكر ذلك من قبله بعضهم، و قال: كي أرس انما هو عم لجد بشتاسب،

XII.11). Such a *variety* of information that *all* situate Vishtāspa and Zoroaster close to Cyrus's reign can only stem from a historical reality and not fiction.

- The same information in the *Zadspram* (23.5), and in another account of Mas'udi, the *Tanbih val eshrāf*, is rounded up to 300 years to accommodate a prediction by Zoroaster that, three centuries later, Iranian kingship would succumb to Alexander while Zoroastrianism would survive.<sup>474</sup> As Gherardo Gnoli had argued, this was an approximation within the millenary context, which envisioned history in centuries and millenniums. When it comes to the regnal years though, Mas`udi maintains—even in the *Tanbih*—the same regnal years tabulation that added to 258 years, as in his *Moruj*.<sup>475</sup>

- More importantly, the "258 Axiom" provides an explanation for a very odd historical question and otherwise *inexplicable* phenomenon: Why did the Sasanian Ardashir change the calendar, upon ascending to the throne in 224 AD, by cutting out a chunk of 206 years and reducing the Arsacid period to 266 years? Based on arguments previously advanced by Taqizādeh and Henning, Gershevitch demonstrated through a mathematical equation that the cut was due to a blind faith in the 258 Axiom, and the belief that the five-century-old calendar (which was the Seleucid calendar) actually began when Zoroaster revealed his religion.<sup>476</sup>

Year 538	=	<b>258 years</b>	+	14 years	+	266 years
Ardashir's ascension date in the Seleucid calendar (equated with the Zoroaster era)		Between Zoroaster and the death of Darius III		Reign of Alexander		Reduced Arsacid rule

Table 3 - Equation showing how Arsacid rule was decreased as per the 258 Axiom

Where I differ with the aforementioned scholars is on the reason the starting point of the Seleucid calendar (i.e., 312 BC) was adopted for the beginning of the Zoroastrian era. Whereas they believe that the turmoil following Alexander's conquest produced such confusion that later priests erroneously thought the 312 BC epoch date could not be anything but the year Zoroaster revealed his Religion, I have advocated that this was a deliberate attempt by the Zoroastrian priesthood to bring back one more trophy to their camp: They simply claimed that the starting point of this long existing calendar was the date of the introduction of Zoroastrianism, rather than the victory of a forgotten and

<sup>474</sup> Mas`udi 1377, 93.

<sup>475</sup> Gnoli 2000, 154; Mas`udi 1377, 87-88.

<sup>476</sup> For detailed reasoning, see Gershevitch 1995, 6-7, and also Taqizadeh 1947, 34-38, where the latter provides full explanation and extensive data on how the Seleucid era was equated with the tenth millennium of the Zoroaster era. See also Henning 1949, 38-39.

foreign Seleucid king.<sup>477</sup> It is very much in line with other appropriations—or rather misappropriations—that the Zoroastrian clergy undertook after the demise of the Achaemenids, in order to inflate the importance of their religion.<sup>478</sup>

Be that as it may, only faith and dogma can trump common sense in such a fashion. And since dogma does not develop overnight, the "258 Axiom" must have been well established by the time Ardashir rose to power. And yet there are many today who, because of their own dogmatic belief in an early date for Zoroaster, deflect this essential argument by claiming that "it's a Sasanian forgery." But one cannot claim forgery without explaining a beneficial motive.<sup>479</sup> The 258 dating offered no advantage, and only intervened as a constraint. It forced the Sasanians to wipe out more than half of Arsacid history, which many Iranians still remembered then. Rather than having a benefit, it brought *ridicule*, and that is not a good motive.

### **XI.8 - Negation of Facts**

Against all of the above, a trend was initiated by some Avestologists to rationalize the antiquity of the *Avesta*, through comparative philological considerations. But as Gershevitch has argued, philology is not an exact science and the development speed of languages can vary.<sup>480</sup> English, for instance, which is an offshoot of Germanic languages, has evolved more than present day German, and Persian more than Afghani. In addition, I had argued that out of respect for tradition and/or to impress their followers, men of religion have always favored an archaistic or mysterious language. If one stumbles on a copy of *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* (dated Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1983) by the late Pope John Paul II, one cannot declare it to be a very old document on the basis that no one spoke Latin in twentieth century Italy. The priestly style of the *Avesta* is archaistic but not necessarily archaic or ancient.

Philology, does not, and cannot, offer a methodology for measuring the evolution speed of languages. The only way to establish the date of the *Avesta* is to establish a correspondence between its text and historical events, a task at which the proponents of Avestan antiquity have miserably failed. They rely on a series of quotations by Greek authors who either propose that Zoroaster lived "6000 years before Xerxes's passage of

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<sup>477</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 69.

<sup>478</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 64-69.

<sup>479</sup> For instance, the reclaiming of the Seleucid calendar. Misrepresenting an event that was initiated five centuries earlier by a foreign ruler, gave added prestige to Zoroastrians and thus provided an incentive for forgery.

<sup>480</sup> Gershevitch 1995: 2-3

Hellespont in 480 BC" (as per Xanthos of Lydia, and Eudoxus of Cnidus) or "5000 years before the fall of Troy" (as per Hermodorus, Theopompus, and Plutarch), which are unrealistic numbers and beyond the historical horizon of any Greek philosopher.<sup>481</sup> Gherardo Gnoli, who has thoroughly analyzed these quotations, shows how, based on the Zoroastrian millenary concept, the Greeks were told that Zoroaster's *fravashi*, or primordial spirit, was conceived some 6000 years before his material birth.<sup>482</sup> What remains to be explained is how modern scholars use it in order to establish a circa 1000-BC date for Zoroaster. That is done, unfortunately, by quoting the principle of *lectio facilior* (the easier reading), which they take to mean: If a number bothers you, change it to what suits you! Thus, they conveniently quote Xanthos alone, and correct the 6000 to 600 by suggesting scribal error. But how can anybody argue that the accounts of four or five *different* Greek authors, from *different* centuries and *different* places, were subject to the same scribal error that added an extra zero to all of them? It seems that anything goes when defending the indefensible (see also Appendix II/7).

In the same way that Ardashir and the Zoroastrian priesthood had a dogmatic belief in the "258 Axiom," the 1000-BC dating of the *Avesta* has become a dogma that has blinded many modern specialists. Unable to counter historical and philological arguments, they deflect them by falling back on an erroneous suggestion by Boyce that the Avestan people were "stone-age people with only a confused notion of the distinction between stone and metal objects," which Malandra has demonstrated to be based on false assumptions and without merit.<sup>483</sup> But then came the discovery by anthropologists that the proto-Indo-Aryans, on their route to India, had settled down in the second millennium in an area that is situated between present day Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan, known as the "Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex," or BMAC.<sup>484</sup> In the emblematic BMAC, the believers in the antiquity of the *Avesta* claim to have found the missing link that justifies their theory, even though there is absolutely no tangible link between any of the BMAC characteristics and those of the *Avesta*. More importantly, a

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<sup>481</sup> Gnoli 2000, 47-48.

<sup>482</sup> The millenary conception allotted four 3000-year segments for the evolution of the world, and as per *Dk VII.2.16-17*, Zoroaster's *fravashi*, or primordial spirit, had been conceived at the end of the first segment, some 6000 years before his material birth at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> segment. *Dk V.2.1* adds the precision that he was then fashioned in a pure spiritual state, in pure light, similar to the Ameshaspentas.

<sup>483</sup> Malandra 2003: 273.

<sup>484</sup> Parpola 2002, 246-47.

text that talks about *quadrigae* or four-horsed chariots, as does the *Avesta* in *Y.57.27*, *Yt.5.13*, and *Yt.10.125*, can hardly be about primitive or Stone Age people.<sup>485</sup>

Again, in lieu of countering this objection, they switch to another issue: How come there are no names and personas in the *Avesta* that correspond to historical figures? That—we shall argue—is an irrelevant question, because, most of the *Avesta* was conceived for the purpose of empowering the Zoroastrian priesthood, and therefore, all those who could cast a shadow on Ahura Mazdā or Zoroaster were deliberately left out. Nevertheless, the *Avesta* does have names that relate to the Achaemenid period, and does incorporate concepts that clearly postdate the Achaemenid era. But one must set aside dogma in order to detect them and understand their purpose.

### **XI.9 - The Empowerment of Ahura Mazdā and Zoroaster**

While the archaistic language of the *Avesta* is of no help to situate it in time, the fabricated aspects of certain themes can be revelatory. And the most important element in this respect is how the essentially tribal concept of *khvarenah* is incorporated in the *Avesta*'s theological framework, how it is referenced, how it is labeled, and whether the outcome is logically sound.

In the Gathas, Zoroaster uses the word *khvarenah* only once (in *Y.51.18*), with "auspiciousness" as its meaning. But in the non-Gathic *Avesta*, what jumps to the eye is the "Mazdā-created" refrain that qualifies the word *khvarenah* each time it is mentioned. Such overemphasis is often an indication to the contrary, even more so when accompanied by inconsistencies and contradictions. Indeed, as the "creator" of the *khvarenah*, the all-powerful Ahura Mazdā must be able to exert continuous control over its creation. In the *Avesta*, however, it's Mithra who bestows the *khvarenah* and the one who can take it back, while Apam Napāt is the one who guards it underwater, in its non-active phase; Ahura Mazdā does not, and cannot, interfere with their functions.

The most blatant contradiction, though, appears in the *Farvardin Yasht* where Ahura Mazdā is in need of the *khvarenah* of the *fravashis* of the Righteous to carry out various functions such as protecting Anāhitā (*Yt.13.4*) or the Earth (*Yt.13.9*). In another instance, in *Yt.13.12*, he even avows that if it weren't for the help of the *fravashis*—presumably through their *khvarenah*—he wouldn't have been able to protect the good people and beneficial animals. Logically, a god cannot be in need of what he can create. While "Mazdā-created" labels were added to project the omnipotence of Ahura Mazdā, all

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<sup>485</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 113.

contradictions could not be ironed out. Contradictory notions were bound to appear in a manipulated text that was orally transmitted and not in writing.

By the same token, the strong concentration of the "Mazdā-created" label in some of the liturgies, such as *Y.4* and *Y.6*, seems to be an attempt to attribute to Ahura Mazdā, the creation of entities that may have been previously associated with rival deities. In *Y.4.10*, for instance, where the "Mazdā-created Waters" are praised in the same sentence as the aquatic deity Apam Napāt (whose name meant Child of the Waters), the label was introduced to sever the creation ties of Apam Napāt with the Waters. In dry areas such as the Iranian plateau, water is looked upon as the primary source of life, and in the polytheistic pre-Zoroastrian environment, the creator deity of choice would have naturally been an aquatic one.<sup>486</sup> In Zoroastrianism though, it had to be Ahura Mazdā. Apam Napāt had to be eliminated or demoted before Ahura Mazdā could be exalted. We are, therefore, lucky that in *Yt.19.52*, its author inadvertently characterises Apam Napāt with a legend of old, "who created men, who shaped men," which qualified him as a creator.<sup>487</sup> Without this slip of the tongue we may have never been able to grasp the real reason behind Apam Napāt's demotion: He had creative powers that clashed with those of Ahura Mazdā, whom Zoroastrianism was promoting as a unique creator.

Like Ahura Mazdā, Zoroaster too had to be empowered, for, the more powerful their prophet was, the more powerful the priesthood could become. Some of Zoroastrian writings reveal this thought process. In a laudatory exegesis of the ancient hymn of *Ahuna Vairiya*, for instance, the author of *Y.19* ties the lot of the priesthood—qualified as *ratus* (guides, masters)—to that of Zoroaster, qualified as *ahu* (lord), and explains that they were both created at the dawn of Creation in order to present the virtues of Ahura Mazdā to the people (see appendix II, *Y.19.12*). Within this perspective, they were bound to seek for their prophet the ultimate prize, i.e., the Aryan *khvarenah*. To do so, they claimed it indirectly in *Yt.5* & *Yt.19*, within the story of Jamshid and through the mouth of one of its protagonists, the Turānian Afrāsiyāb (Frangrasyan). In that story, after Jamshid lost the *khvarenah*, it flew away and was hidden underwater by Apam Napāt; then came Afrāsiyāb who repeatedly tried to recover it (*Yt.5.42*, *Yt.19.57-60*), but was unsuccessful, and uttered each time:

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<sup>486</sup> In New Persian, the word *āb* (water) has generated a number of words such as *ābādāni* (developed areas), attesting to the essentiality of water for growth and prosperity.

<sup>487</sup> Boyce 1986.

"I have not been able to conquer the *khvarenah* that belongs to the Aryan nations—to the born and the unborn (i.e., now and forever)—and to the holy Zoroaster"<sup>488</sup>

The problem though is that Jamshid's myth precedes Zoroaster because he himself alludes to it in his Gathas (*Y32.8*). Furthermore, in *Vendidad* 2.2, Ahura Mazda tells Zoroaster that Jamshid was the *first* man he ever talked to, i.e., much before Zoroaster.<sup>489</sup> It was therefore impossible for Afrāsiyāb to have known Zoroaster, in order to attribute the Aryan *khvarenah* to him.

Moreover, by allocating the Aryan *khvarenah* to Zoroaster, the priesthood had to devise another one for kings. They thus created the Kayānid one, supposedly inferior to the Aryan one, as the attribute of the Achaemenids whom they referred to as the Kavis (see sec. XI.15). But as we saw, the tribal concept of *khvarenah* was deep-rooted in Persian culture, and the two appellations were considered one and the same by ordinary people, whether qualified as Aryan or Kayānid by the priesthood (sec. X.8).

Interestingly, Afrāsiyāb gave to Zoroaster what he avowed belonging to the Aryan nations. He thus shifted the recipient of the tribal Aryan *khvarenah* from temporal leaders to a religious one. If Zoroaster was to possess the Aryan *khvarenah*, he would indeed be more powerful than all temporal rulers. This new world order was explicitly projected in *Y.19.18*, where Zoroaster sits on top of a hierarchical pyramid of community leaders (see appendix II):

*Y19.18* "(Question) who are the leaders? (Answer) They are the masters of the house, of the village, of the tribe, of the nation, and Zarathushtra is the fifth"

A similar hierarchy is cited by A.D.H. Bivar, in an attempt to highlight different borrowings from "Mithraism."<sup>490</sup> It appears in the Mehr Yasht (*Yt. 10.115*), where Mithra is hailed as "master of the house, of the village, of the tribe, of the nation, of the *zarathushtrōt*." The polity above "nation" is thus named *zarathushtrōt*, or Zoroaster's domain. Supposedly, it's the same polity that Zoroaster is implicitly ruling in *Y.19.18*, where he's designated as a super king, above all nation-chiefs. The question that then comes to mind is: Who copied whom and which one came first?

<sup>488</sup> In *Yt.18*, the Aryan *khvarenah* is both qualified as *airiianəm x'arenō* (i.e. the Aryan *khvarenah*) and *airiianqm x'arenō* (i.e. the *khvarenah* of the Aryans). The formula here, of a *khvarenah* that is emphasized to forever belong to the Aryan nations, is just a more explicit way of describing the same concept (I am indebted to the late Xavier Tremblay for this clarification).

<sup>489</sup> The myth of Yima can in fact be traced back to the Indo-European heritage; Malandra 1983, 175.

<sup>490</sup> Bivar 2005, 344.

It seems rather self-evident that in a hymn dedicated to the god Mithra, the ultimate realm of this important deity should not be confined to, or capped by, the domain of a mortal, i.e., Zoroaster. Therefore, the designation "master of *zarathushtrōt*" must be replacing an older title of Mithra, one that Bivar argues to have been *khshathra-pati*.<sup>491</sup> He relies on the Xanthos inscriptions,<sup>492</sup> as well as analogy with a pentad of divinities in Māni's *Shāpurgān*. This pentad is modelled after the hierarchy presented in *Y.19.18*, and is listed as: 1- *mānbed* (house-chief), 2- *visbed* (village-chief), 3- *zanbed* (tribe-chief), 4- *dehbed* (nation-chief), 5- "*pahragbed*." Bivar who translated the 5<sup>th</sup> position ("*pahragbed*") as "lord of the frontier-post," sees it as "out of place" in a "sequence of widening territorial responsibilities." But if this 5<sup>th</sup> position is corrected to *pahlav-bed* (the *w* and *g* are almost identical in written MP), it would refer to a super-*pahlav* (i.e., a super commander) of the caliber of the original *khshathra-pati*. In the Manichean context, the title of the ultimate Manichean leader was changed to *pahlav-bed*, or "commander in chief,"<sup>493</sup> whereas in Zoroastrianism, the title *khshathra-pati* (empire-chief) was replaced by "master of Zarathushtrōt" and the whole world became the appanage of Zoroaster.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
<i>Yt.10.115</i>	<i>nmān(-iia ratuuō)</i>	<i>vīs</i>	<i>zañtu</i>	<i>daxiiu</i>	<i>zaraθuštrōt</i> (replacing <i>kshathra</i> )
<i>Y19.18</i>	<i>nmān (-iio ratuuō)</i>	<i>vīs</i>	<i>zañtu</i>	<i>daxiiu</i>	<i>Zaraθuštrōt</i> 's realm
<i>Shāpurgān</i>	<i>mān (-bed)</i>	<i>vis</i>	<i>zan</i>	<i>deh</i>	<i>pahlav-bed</i> 's realm

This 5-level hierarchy was based on an archetype that probably originated with the ancient hymn to Mithra, and was subsequently used by whoever wanted to empower his own prophet. All he had to do was change the definition at the top level (level 5) by substituting one to his liking. Interestingly, not only does the title *khshathra-pati* no longer appear in this—doctored—stanza of Mehr Yasht, but it was scratched from the whole of the *Avesta*. As a result, the highest temporal title that we can find in Zoroastrian texts is *dahyu-pati*, or nation-chief, which is applied to Vishtāspa, the friendly "king" of Zoroastrianism.<sup>494</sup> In a system where Zoroaster was supposed to be the ultimate ruler, the

<sup>491</sup> Bivar 2005, 344; Boyce: [www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra\\_khsathrapati\\_ahura.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra_khsathrapati_ahura.php)

<sup>492</sup> The Xanthos inscriptions are situated in Antalya; an area that was conquered by Cyrus's Median general Harpagus, who was instrumental in propagating pre-Zoroastrian Mithraic ideology in Asia Minor.

<sup>493</sup> This Manichean substitution confirms once more the importance of the *pahlav* in the Sasanian era, one akin to a local ruler or army commander.

<sup>494</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 71.

title *khshathra-pati* (empire-chief) had to be suppressed. These misappropriations of *Yt.10.115* and *Y.19.18* reveal a deliberate attempt to tilt the balance of power from kingship to religion. While kings were driven down, Zoroaster was pushed up to become a universal leader. The more Zoroaster was made powerful, the more his priesthood benefitted from his prestige. It was no different in Christianity; the more divine Jesus became the more important his clergy became. Zoroaster was in essence declared "King of Kings" or "King of All Lands," as Cyrus, and before him, the Assyrian kings had claimed to be. But this kingly Zoroaster is nowhere mentioned in Achaemenid inscriptions, nor does he or a Zoroastrian priest ever appear in Achaemenid iconography.

If the *Avesta* was as ancient as Kellens suggests, it would have already been canonized by the Achaemenid era. Zoroastrian priests had a daily obligation to recite its verses and to orally transmit them to their disciples. Imagine priests regularly chanting that Zoroaster was a super king. It was incompatible with the Achaemenids' claim to be *khshāyathiya khshāyathiyānām* (King of Kings). Darius would have cut their tongues, noses, and ears off, as he did with those who had challenged his supremacy in Bisotun.

Even worse, imagine Darius was told that it was actually Zoroaster who possessed the Aryan *khvarenah*, and therefore, he could no longer use "Arya *chisa*" in his titlature. The rebellious satrap of Ionia, Datames (385–362 BC), who dared to portray himself with a symbol of *khvarenah* above his head, paid dearly with his life. The claim of *khvarenah* and sovereignty—for any other person but the Great King—was an affront that could not be tolerated. And that is why Zoroaster's exalted position in *Y.19.18* could not have been derived from an earlier tradition, for it could never pass through, and survive, the Achaemenid era.

The attempt to empower the priesthood, at the expense of kingship, could have only happened in the chaotic environment following Alexander's conquest; probably in the Seleucid era when Iran was ruled by Hellenic rulers who neither understood the *Avesta*, nor cared about how the Iranians reinterpreted ancient hymns. Such a supposition is strengthened by the fact that a similar power shift occurred in the chaotic situation that appeared in Iran after the fall of the Safavids and under the Afghan occupation. It provided the Shiite clergy with the opportunity to develop theories that gave them power at the expense of kingship, the ultimate manifestation of which is the theory of *Velāyat-e Faqih*, the backbone of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> The steps undertaken by the Shiite clergy are very similar. 1) In lieu of Zoroaster, the position of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, the Mahdi, was exalted so as to be the ultimate savior of the world. 2) In the occultation period, the

### XI.10 - The Zoroaster Seal

I believe that a seal from the Cabinet des Médailles at the BNF seals the discussion on the dating of the *Avesta* (Figs. 201, 232a-b).<sup>496</sup> For Alberto Cantera, the importance of this seal stems from the fact that it's the earliest representation of a Zoroastrian priest (on the right) performing the ritual of "sacrifice" to the fire as described in the *Nerangestān*.<sup>497</sup> Frantz Grenet qualifies it as the *ābzohr* ritual, and observes that the engraver has astutely placed a circle at the end of the stick held by the priest, in order to depict the spoon holding the holy liquid that had to be offered to the fire.<sup>498</sup>



Fig. 201 - The Zoroaster seal imprint  
(Bordreuil 1986, p. 104)



Fig. 202 - *Pārsa* king by the fire  
altar. Qizqapan (web)



Fig. 203 - Darius.  
Nemrud Dagħ



Fig. 204 - Coin of  
Datames (web)

While there is no specificity pertaining to the priest on the right, the dignified status of the figure on the left is emphasized through a number of visual devices and conventions. First and foremost are two indicators—an inscription and a winged symbol—crammed together and placed above the head of the left figure. They are clearly meant to reveal his identity. Of the two, the more significant one is the winged symbol, which was a universally recognized regal emblem, and a symbol of the Aryan *khvarenah* in the Achaemenid context. In all of the Zoroastrian literature, the only religious personality said to be endowed with the Aryan *khvarenah* is Zoroaster himself. Not even the Sasanian high priest Kerdīr ever pretended to be blessed with the *khvarenah*, let alone the Aryan *khvarenah*, the most important source of regal power.

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*marja`-e taqlid*, or the worthy-of-being-followed cleric, is man's only valid interlocutor on the Mahdi's behalf; to prepare the ground, these clerics must rule under the *Velāyat-e Faqih* umbrella.

<sup>496</sup> Bordreuil 1986, p. 104. I am indebted to Alberto Cantera for sending me the reference for this seal, and to Mss. M. Avisseau-Brousset and M. Pic for allowing me to take a picture of it.

<sup>497</sup> As per the paper he presented at the Collège de France on Nov. 7, 2013.

<sup>498</sup> Frantz Grenet is actually the one who wrote the entry for this seal in the Bordreuil catalog.

The left side of the BNF seal is in fact a vivid rendering of Zoroaster as universal ruler, for not only is he named ZRTŠTRŠ (Zoroaster) and endowed with the winged symbol of the *khvarenah*, but he also wears regal attire. Indeed, the overcoat he dons is a symbol of rulership: The rebel satrap Datames wears it, while seated on a throne and holding a bow and arrow as a sign of his sovereignty (Fig. 204); it is also worn by the elderly ruler in Qizqapan who holds a bow next to the fire altar (Fig. 202); and by Xerxes and Darius as ancestors of Antiochus in Nemrud Dagħ (Fig. 203).<sup>499</sup> As for the *barsom* that the left figure holds in his hand, it does not indicate actual participation in the ceremony, but was an insignia of the authority under which the fire ceremony was conducted. If Mithra holds the *barsom* in Tāq-e Bostān (Fig. 185), it is not to depict him as a performing priest, but as the nominal head of fire ceremonies in addition to his role as the purveyor of *khvarenah*.

What needs to be emphasized, however, is the fact that the engraver of the seal did not use the winged symbol as a mere decorative device, but in full recognition of its significance. Same is true for Datames who claimed sovereignty by using the symbol of the *khvarenah* after two consecutive victories over Persian troops sent by Artaxerxes II (r. 404–359) to quell his rebellion. No vassal or subject of the Great King was allowed such a pretense; it was at odds with Achaemenid kingly ideology, and Datames had to be eliminated. Since it could not be done on the battlefield, Artaxerxes had him assassinated.

In sum, neither could Datames last as a sovereign within the Achaemenid Empire, nor could a holy text that gave the Aryan *khvarenah* to a person other than the Great King pass through the Achaemenid era. The *Avesta* could have only been assembled in the post-Achaemenid period.<sup>500</sup>

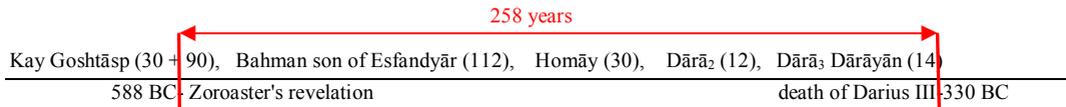
### **XI.11 - Changing the Kingly Chronology**

The chronological oddities that the Zoroastrian priesthood created weren't only confined to the reduction of the Arsacids' length of reign. They inevitably created one each time they tampered with historical data, and simultaneously upheld the 258 time bracket between "the coming of the Religion and the reign of Alexander." One should note that the 258 Axiom had no *positive* implications whatsoever, but acted as a negative constraint that only highlighted the implausibility of their chronological tampering. Thus, when the priesthood decided to alter the chronological tables by wiping out "enemy"

<sup>499</sup> None of the priestly figures in Persepolis wear a long coat.

<sup>500</sup> The entry by Frantz Grenet in the BNF catalogue is mistyped as 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Grenet believed that the seal was of the Achaemenid era (personal communication).

kings and plugging in spurious "friendly" ones, the 258 Axiom forced them to come up with implausible regnal years. As a result, the *Bondaresh* (XXXVI, 8) provides the following chronology:<sup>501</sup>



In looking at this string of regnal years, the first question that comes to mind is: How can anybody, let alone learned Zoroastrian priests, accept that a man's reign could last 120 years? Secondly: What happened to Cyrus, Cambyses, Xerxes and the Artaxerxes? And thirdly: Who are Goshtāsp and Homāy for whom we otherwise have no historical evidence that they ever ruled. The answer to all three is that those who tabulated this chronology had no concern for historical veracity, but wished to engage in "religious cleansing" by which perceived enemies were suppressed while friendly-but-spurious rulers were inserted. In this quest, the 258 Axiom acted as a spoiler once again. Since they could not find enough "friends" to fill the void created by the suppression of supposed enemies in the 258 time bracket, the reigns of the remaining figures had to be inflated beyond plausibility.

If we go back 258 years from the death of Darius III (named as Dārā-ye Dārāyān), we reach the year 588 BC, which supposedly coincides with the 30<sup>th</sup> regnal year of Kay Goshtāsp. Goshtāsp, who is the Kavi Vishtāspa of the *Avesta*, is thus a contemporary of Darius's father, Vishtāspa, and therefore the same person. Although he never reigned, he was inserted in the list while Astyages, and his progenies, namely Cyrus and Cambyses, were suppressed. As I have argued elsewhere, the suppression of these three was mainly due to the sin that Astyages had committed: He had chased Zoroaster from his lands. Vishtāspa, on the other hand, had harbored him and was, therefore, praiseworthy.<sup>502</sup>

The list reflects the Zoroastrian priesthood's view of the Achaemenids. By their absence, many must have been considered unsympathetic to Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism, especially Artaxerxes II and III who invoked Mithra in their inscriptions. Darius, who so fervently promoted Ahura Mazdā but never mentioned Zoroaster, is called Bahman (*vohu manah*, of good thoughts); Ernst Herzfeld had already guessed in 1935 that Darius's full

<sup>501</sup> Dādāgī 1990, 156; see footnote 470 supra.

<sup>502</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 64-69.

name meant or evoked "*dāraya-vohumanah*," (he who has good thoughts).<sup>503</sup> What's more, Darius I's namesake, Darius II, is described in the *Bondahesh* list as "Dārā<sub>2</sub> son of Chihr-āzād *who is Bahman*."<sup>504</sup> Darius II is thus declared to be son of Chihr-āzād, who is immediately identified with Bahman (alias Darius I). Clearly, Darius I's epithet of *chihr-āryā* (endowed with the Aryan Light) was switched to *chihr-āzād* (endowed with the Light of the brave), since, in the meantime, the Aryan *farr* had been allocated to Zoroaster.<sup>505</sup> As for Darius III, he had to be mentioned because Alexander needed an adversary to wrest the Persian Empire from; he figures as Dārā-ye Dārāyān (Dārā<sub>3</sub>, son of Dārā<sub>2</sub>). While Dārā<sub>3</sub> corresponds to a real historical figure, and Dārā<sub>2</sub> relates name wise (but not date wise) to the historical Darius II, Bahman is a semi-real character conceived as an amalgam of Darius I with most of his missing successors. As a result, he is credited with a 112-year-long reign.

The mystery person of the list is the enigmatic queen Homāy, who is qualified as *Bahman-dokht* (daughter of Bahman). In trying to reconcile Greek sources with later Perso-Arabic chronicles, I had produced, in a previous study, a table that explained various Achaemenid relationships, and shed some light on the presence of four women named Homāy (Gr. Amytis, OP Umati, Av. Humaiti) in a short period of time, including one who was a daughter of Vishtāspa—therefore sister to Darius. The presence of so many Homāy/Amytis had been a source of much confusion, for past historians as well as modern ones. The one that Zoroastrians were likely to honor was obviously Vishtāspa's daughter who had a close relationship with Zoroaster. It's alluded to by more than one source, including the *Avesta* (*Yt.13.139*) where her name appears as Humaiti, right after her own mother Atossa (Hutaosā), and after Zoroaster's wife Hvovi, within a list of people to be praised in prayers.<sup>506</sup> Confounded by the existence of so many women

<sup>503</sup> Herzfeld 1935, 40, more elaborated in Herzfeld 1947, 96-98. In trying to argue that Achaemenid names were inspired by the *Avesta*, Kellens reiterates the same, that Darius's name stem (OP *dārayavāu-*) is inspired by *Y.31.7 (dāraīiat vahištem (mano))*, meaning "(he who) supports the good thought," Kellens 2013, 556. It does strengthen our argument that Bahman was Darius's nickname, but to say that the Achaemenids chose their names as a variation of the *Avesta*, is to say that the Prophet Mohammad whose name appears in the Koran was named after the Koran. The *Avesta* and the Achaemenids had a common Iranian heritage and were inevitably linked by a common phraseology and common expressions.

<sup>504</sup> See footnote 470 supra. In Soudavar 2012b (65) I had surmised that the Dārā of the list was an amalgam of Darius I & II, and *chihr-āzād-an* was his epithet. I now prefer to see the suffix *-an* as a sign of affiliation and not an adjective. In either case, *chihr-āzād* was supposed to designate Darius I.

<sup>505</sup> For phonetically similar name changes see Francfort and Tremblay (2010, 89), and also Soudavar (2012b, 65), where examples from modern day Tehran are given, such as the change of the name of *Vali-`ahd* (crown prince) to *Vali-ye `asr* (the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam).

<sup>506</sup> Tabari, for instance, confirms this relationship by stating that Homāti was a daughter of Goshtāsp (Vishtāspa); but her name in Arabic (خُمَانِي) is misspelled as خُمَانِي (Khomāni), Tabari 1996, 2: 477-79.

named Amytis, the author of the *Bondahesh*, simply mistook Darius/Bahman's daughter Amytis<sub>3</sub> for his sister Amytis<sub>2</sub> (see Table 4).<sup>507</sup>

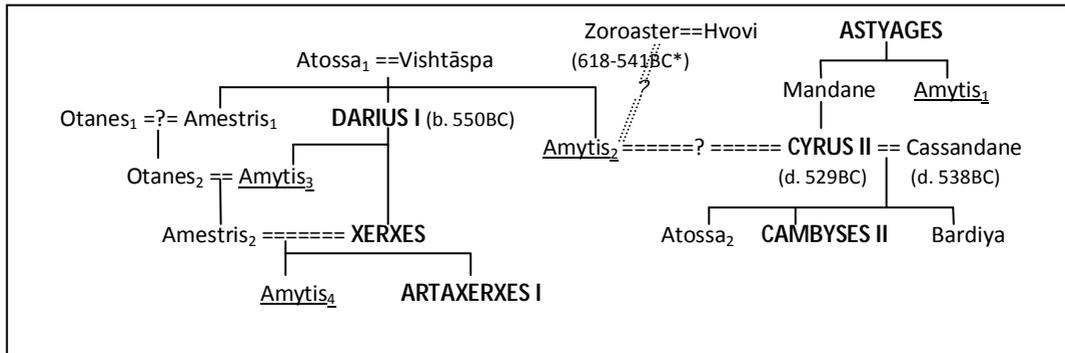


Table 4 – The possible relationship of Zoroaster with Cyrus and Darius through Vishtāspa's daughter Amytis<sub>2</sub> (? means only one source provides this information, i.e., Ctesias, but concurs with much circumstantial evidence)

Ctesias, on the other hand, offers a story cited by no other, which despite being convoluted and garbled, has elements that seem quite pertinent, especially in consideration of the Magophonia massacres that we shall describe later. Ctesias was the court physician of Artaxerxes II, and wrote his *History of the Persians* some twenty years after he returned to his homeland, excerpts of which have survived in second hand accounts, including in the *Persica* of the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine ecclesiast, Photius. Errors were bound to creep into this chain of transmission. To begin with, Ctesias's memory must have been less than sharp when writing his observations twenty years after his return. And then, the plethora of repetitive names among the Persians and Medes (see Table 4) must have been confusing to him, as well as later scribes. After weeding out probable mistakes in a previous study, I retained two elements that I thought merited attention, since they could hardly be the fruit of pure imagination or an outright mistake.

<sup>507</sup> The primary information for this table is provided by Herodotus (VII, 61), who describes a commander by the name of Otanes as "father of Xerxes's wife and son of Amestris." This Otanes<sub>2</sub> is obviously not the elderly statesman Otanes<sub>1</sub>, who led the conspiracy against Gaumata, was a contender to the throne, and got privileges that no other Persian had (Her. III.83). If Herodotus's sentence is not clear, it's because Otanes<sub>2</sub> was the son of one Amestris and the father of another one. The latter information is provided by Ctesias (fr. 13 §24) who says that "Xerxes married Amestris," the daughter of Otanes (or Onophas as Ctesias spells it), from whom he had a daughter called Amytis<sub>4</sub> named "after her grandmother." This last information, in conjunction with Herodotus's statement (V, 116) that a daughter of Darius was married to an Otanes<sub>2</sub>, indicates that the wife of Otanes<sub>2</sub> was also named Amytis<sub>3</sub>. As for the father of Otanes<sub>2</sub>, Diodorus mentions that Otanes<sub>1</sub> (spelled Anaphas) who was one of the Seven Conspirators, had a successor by the same name.

The first concerns a woman by the name of Amytis<sub>2</sub>, married initially to a Spitamas (read Spitama), and later to Cyrus II.<sup>508</sup> The name Spitama, being the clan name of Zoroaster, must allude to him. Ctesias's account thus confirms the closeness of Amytis (Homāy) to Zoroaster, and takes it one step further in proposing that they were actually husband and wife. The second is the fact that Cyrus's son Bardiya had an ongoing feud with the usurper magi Gaumāta, and was "put to death by being forced to drink bull's blood." It referred to a practice dear to the Mithraic magi, and one that Zoroaster abhorred (see sec. XVI.3). Bardiya's death is therefore blamed on these magi.

In the *Bondahesh* list, Bardiya is presented as a "semi-friend," not dear enough to be allocated regnal years but good enough to have his name appear as Esfandyār, father of Bahman. Because the reign of Gaumāta—as Bardiya—could not count, the latter is allocated no regnal years. But Ctesias informs us that the magus presented himself as Sphendadates (i.e., Esfandyār, which seems to be the name he adopted when ruling as Bardiya). Like the Esfandyār of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Darius's real father didn't rule either; but being the main supporter of Zoroaster, Vishtāspa is nonetheless included in that list as the most prominent king of the Zoroastrian era. Presenting Bahman (alias Darius) as son of Esfandyār was a clever ploy to allude to the fact that his father never reigned, while citing the name of Bardiya/Esfandyār who had sided against the Median magi and perished at their hands. Bahman's fictitious 112 years of rule is a testimony to Darius's pivotal role in the promotion of Ahura Mazdā, which paved the way for the advent of Zoroastrianism.

Despite its very odd composition, the regnal list of the *Bondahesh* acts as a mirror in which the attitude of the Zoroastrian priesthood toward past kings is reflected. It offers a falsified chronology, which is set according to a specific outlook—who it should include and who not—and a list that had to respect the 258 Axiom at all costs.

### **XI.12 - Mithra and Apam Napāt**

It was in the course of my study of the iconography of the *farr* that I stumbled upon two stanzas of the *Farvardin Yasht* (*Yt.13*) that spoke about Zoroaster's birth and the new era that it ushered in. This new era was defined as a period in which Mithra and Apam Napāt shared the exact same responsibilities for upholding authority and vanquishing rebellion:

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<sup>508</sup> Ctesias's transmitted text most likely confuses Amytis<sub>1</sub> (wife of Nebuchadnezzar II, see note 587 *infra*) with Amytis<sub>2</sub>; Soudavar 2012b, 67-68. There is, however, one other possibility, that as prince of Raga, Zoroaster had first married a daughter of Astyages, was then chased by him, went to Vishtāspa, and married his daughter.

<p><i>Yt.13:94</i>  <i>Let us rejoice, for a priestly man is <b>born</b>, the Spitamid Zarathushtra...</i>  <b>From now on</b> the good Mazdean Religion will spread through all the seven Climes of the Earth<sup>509</sup></p> <p><i>Yt.13:95</i>  <b>From now on</b>, Mithra ... will promote all supreme <b>authorities</b> of the nations and will pacify those in <b>revolt</b>.  <b>From now on</b>, strong Apam Napāt will promote all the supreme <b>authorities</b> of the nations and will subjugate all those in <b>revolt</b>.</p>	<p>} birth of Zoroaster</p> <p>↕</p> <p>} political event</p>
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Since power and authority emanated from *farr* (*khvarenah*), these stanzas portrayed Mithra and Apam Napāt as purveyors of *farr*. The question then is why were there two deities performing the same exact tasks? Mary Boyce has explained that this duplication was because each of them held sway over a different realm: Mithra over daytime and Apam Napāt over nighttime.<sup>510</sup> This duality is also reflected in the Avestan myth of the *farr*, which describes it in two different states. When lost, it was kept in a dormant and dark state underwater, and its guardian was the aquatic god Apam Napāt; when resurrected, it shone like the sun and was bestowed by Mithra. In tandem, these two deities controlled the full cycle of the *farr*, from darkness to light and from sea to sky, and conveyed power and authority. A higher degree of *farr*, or *farreh-afzun*, could only be projected through symbols and repeat patterns, and to do so, many *khvarenah/farr* symbols had to be devised.

The most widely used symbols of the *khvarenah* were the sunflower (*gol-e hamisheh beshgoftēh*) and the lotus (Fig. 205). As per the *Bondaesh*, the former was the symbol of Mithra and the latter the symbol of Apam Napāt—or aquatic gods (*ābān*) in general. Because of their appearance and their surroundings, one in the mountains and the other in water ponds, they were ideally suited to represent a sun god as well as an aquatic one.<sup>511</sup> As such, Mithra standing over a lotus flower in the victory relief of Shāpur II over Julian projects the full backing of the purveyors of *khvarenah* for the Sasanian king (Fig. 206).



Fig. 205 -The *hamisheh beshgoftēh* flower (web)

<sup>509</sup> For further comments on this see note 517 infra.

<sup>510</sup> Boyce 1986.

<sup>511</sup> The *Bondaesh* names Mithra's flower as *hamag-wiškōfag*; Pakzad 2005, 219. In New Persian it translates as *gol-e hamisheh beshgoftēh* or *hamisheh-bahār*, which is a sunflower with orange petals (*Calendula persica*), and grows above 2500m altitude; see //fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/گل\_همیشه\_بهار; also, Soudavar 2003, 55.



Fig. 206 - Shāpur II's rock relief. Tāq-e Bostān.

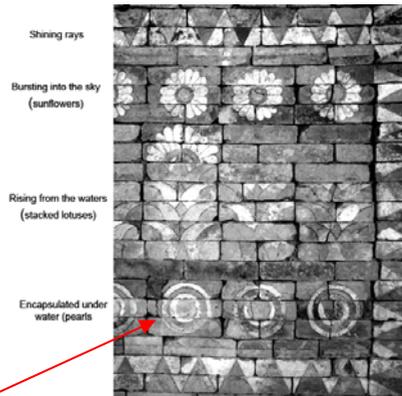


Fig. 207 - The cycle of the *khvarenah*. Persepolis



Fig. 208 - The encapsulated *khvarenah* depicted as a pearl engulfed in waves. Brick panel from Susa, Louvre.

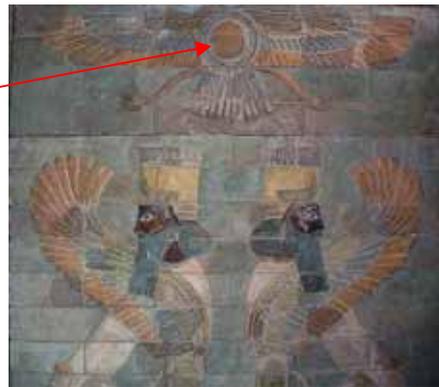


Fig. 209 - The *khvarenah* symbol guarded by two sphinxes. Brick panel from Susa, Louvre.

Whereas, the Zoroastrian texts do not elaborate on the *khvarenah*, certain iconographical representations admirably complement the little information that is divulged in the *Avesta* about this very important concept. A brick panel from Persepolis, for instance, represents the full cycle of the *khvarenah*, from its encapsulated underwater state to its burst in the sky through stacked lotuses (Fig. 207). The ideal capsule in the underwater stage is of course the pearl because of its spherical perfection as well as its shiny surface.<sup>512</sup> A brick panel from Susa shows capsules, similar to those of Fig. 207, engulfed in water waves (Fig. 208). They can only be pearls. Sunflower, lotus and pearl come together in other brick compositions from Susa, attesting that these elements are homogenous in purpose, and all associated to one another. Finally, inspired by the presence of the flying-disc or

<sup>512</sup> As the guardian of the pearl (i.e., *farr*), Apam Napāt was often represented by a shell, see note 692.

flying-globe symbols in neighboring countries, especially Egypt, Darius picked as his principal symbol of *khvarenah*, a winged emblem that carried the *khvarenah* capsule on its chest (Fig. 209). It depicts the bird *vareyna* that had carried the *khvarenah*—lost by Jamshid—to Apam Napāt. The image of *vareyna* with the *khvarenah* capsule in its chest conveyed that it had not departed, but resided in the king's palace. And to further emphasize this point, two sphinxes were placed underneath as guards. If it was guarded, it had not departed.<sup>513</sup>

But, *Yt.13.94-95* clearly pegged Zoroaster's birth date to a political event: The time when Mithra and Apam Napāt were paired up to uphold authority and vanquish rebellion in a plurality of nations. The two underlined words pointed to the formation of an empire, which could only be that of the Median Empire toward the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Such a conclusion is in perfect harmony with the 258 Axiom since it gives us a circa 618 BC birth date for Zoroaster. The validity of this deductive process, I had argued, was further strengthened by two independent observations. The first was purely iconographic: the pairing of the lotus and the sunflower (Fig. 210), as emblems of Mithra and Apam Napāt, occurred circa 7-6<sup>th</sup> century BC, confirming once more that these two deities were integrated into the Median kingly ideology at the time when the Medes created a vast empire after sacking Assyria and subjugating Urartu.



Fig. 210 - Kalmākareh plate, 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (Soudavar 2003, 167)

The second was explanatory; it provided a context for Darius's insistence on having his orders carried out by "day and by night" (*DB* §7-8). Indeed, it is rather odd for a king to emphasize such a point, as kingly orders are absolute and must not be constrained by time. This oddity can only be explained against the foil of a Median concept that considered night and day as two separate realms, one governed by Mithra and the other by Apam Napāt. Darius's monotheistic vision of a world presided by Ahura Mazdā alone, required an amalgamation of the two.<sup>514</sup>

In sum, these two stanzas of the *Avesta* that announce the auspicious birth of Zoroaster, not only situate it at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, but also open a vista into the Median kingly ideology dominated by Mithra and Apam Napāt. They had developed such strong

<sup>513</sup> Soudavar 2003, 96-101, 174.

<sup>514</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 127.

ties with the *farr* that neither Darius's monotheistic fervor, nor subsequent Zoroastrian priests' attempts to link the *farr* to Ahura Mazdā, could easily sever those ties.

### XI.13 - Celebrating Zoroaster's Birth

The fall of Assyria was a landmark in the history of the region, especially for the Iranian nations. For centuries, the Assyrians had bullied their neighbors, plundered their cities, and taken their entire population hostage. Victory over the Assyrians brought enormous prestige to the Medes. They had led the coalition that fought against them, and became a superpower overnight with an empire that stretched from Assyria to Afghanistan. Their fame was such that all neighboring countries sought matrimonial alliances with them. Thus, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BC) married Astyages's daughter, while Croesus (r. 560-547 BC), king of Lydia, and Tigran (r. 560-535 BC), king of Armenia, gave their sisters to Astyages.<sup>515</sup>

Among hagiographers, it is almost standard practice to ascertain that the birth of prophets, or great rulers, ushered in a new era of peace, prosperity and justice. Iranian Moslem theologians, for instance, fabricated a *hadith* by which the Prophet Mohammad had proudly proclaimed that "I was born during the time of the most just king," alluding to the reign of the Sasanian Khosrow I (r. 531-79) renowned for his justice.<sup>516</sup> In so doing, they were associating the Prophet's birth with an era of justice, and at the same time moving the centre of gravity of the Islamic empire closer to the Iranian lands.

Since Zoroaster was born a few years before the Medes' victory over the Assyrians, that momentous event had to be credited to his birth. The problem was that the victors, i.e. the Medes, were Zoroaster's enemies, and had been wiped out of history. The solution the priesthood found was a clever one because it alluded to the event without mentioning the Medes. Indeed, as part of the Median propaganda, Mithra and Apam Napāt must have been introduced throughout the empire, and their symbols must have adorned many a monument or object, in lieu of Assyrian gods. The Medes' victory caused the rise in popularity of these two deities in tandem, which *Yt. 13.94-95* credit to the auspicious birth of Zoroaster, along with the spread of the Mazdean Religion.<sup>517</sup> It's in line with other

<sup>515</sup> Schmitt 1987; Khorenats'i 1978, 114.

<sup>516</sup> (ولدت في زمن الملك العادل انوشيروان), Majlesi 1983, 5:250, 254, 275.

<sup>517</sup> Kellens notes (Kellens 1994, 167) that the expression *daēnā māzdaiiasni* in *Yt. 13.94*, can only be translated as "Mazdean Religion" since *daēnā* took the meaning of "religion" in the Young *Avesta*. But then, to justify the appearance of Mithra in the following stanza, he proposes a common auroral association between this divinity and the *daēnā*. As a result, he misses the hagiographic aspect of these stanzas that were supposed to glorify the birth of Zoroaster in light of the good things he supposedly ushered into this world.

attempts by the priesthood to aggrandize Zoroaster, and irrefutably ties his birth to the Median victories.

#### **XI.14 - The non-Zoroastrian Achaemenid Calendar**

If Zoroaster had existed some five centuries earlier, surely Zoroastrian priests would have established their own calendar. And yet, the calendar months that Darius uses in Bisotun are essentially non-Zoroastrian.<sup>518</sup> What's more, its seventh month was named *baya-yadish* (i.e. god-worship) in which *baya* (god) implicitly referred to Mithra, and thus made him—and not Ahura Mazda—the god *par excellence* of that calendar.<sup>519</sup> This only confirms that prior to Darius, Ahura Mazda was not the paramount god of the Iranians in Cyrus's empire, and that neither Mazdaism nor Zoroastrianism had had time to develop a calendar.

At a conference in Krakow (2011), I questioned Jean Kellens on how he would explain the supremacy of Mithra in the Achaemenid calendar, in a supposedly Zoroastrian environment; he pushed it aside by saying that calendars were agricultural in essence and devoid of political value. I beg to differ. Like coinage, an official calendar had a utilitarian aspect but was also a political instrument that reflected the state's religious ideology. That is why, upon ascent to the throne, the Sasanian Ardashir not only modified his coinage but also the basis of his calendar.

As Kellens himself acknowledges, the Achaemenid calendar was in use at least until the year 459 in Persepolis, whereas the first inscription bearing traces of the new Zoroastrian calendar is only datable to the reign of the last of the Seleucids, Antiochus Soter (d. 261 BC).<sup>520</sup> This strengthens our argument that only the post-Alexander period gave the priesthood the opportunity to manipulate religious hymns and the calendar, in order to buttress its position in the political arena.

#### **XI.15 - Zoroastrianism in the Achaemenid Era**

On the gold plaques of Darius's forefathers (Arsames and Ariaramnes), Ahura Mazda is already evoked as the ultimate deity who lent his support to the Persian kings (see sec. XI.4). Since the *Avesta* avows that the first "king" to have espoused Zoroastrianism was Vishtāspa (whom we have argued to be Darius's father), Arsames and Ariaramnes couldn't have been Zoroastrian converts even though they worshiped Ahura Mazda.

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<sup>518</sup> Lecoq 1997, 157.

<sup>519</sup> Herzfeld 1935,40 ; Razmjou 2003:22-24, 31-32; Soudavar 2010a:114.

<sup>520</sup> Kellens 1998, 512.

In Bisotun, Darius attributes his ascent to the throne, and the crushing of his enemies, to the support of Ahura Mazda. He praises him 72 times but not once does he mention Zoroaster. Not only is Zoroaster never mentioned in any Achaemenid inscription, but no Zoroastrian priest ever appears in Achaemenid iconography. On Achaemenid royal tombs, from Darius onwards, the king stands as a *pārsa*, bow in hand, next to the fire altar. Because of the weapon he holds, and the *padām* he does not wear,<sup>521</sup> he cannot qualify as a Zoroastrian priest. If Zoroastrian priests existed, they certainly did not have the status of the Sasanian-era priest Kerdīr to appear next to the king, or to be mentioned in the inscriptions. Ahura Mazda was thus revered in Persis independent of Zoroaster.<sup>522</sup>

When I first explained the meaning of *pārsa* to the late Xavier Tremblay, he pointed out two anomalies of the *Avesta* that had bothered him for a long time, and for which he had found no explanation: 1) unlike all other priests of the Iranian world, who are called *magu*, the Avestan priest is called *athravan*; 2) despite the fact that the word "king" is derived, in all Iranian languages, from either the root *khshā* (NP *Shāh*) or *rāz* (Old Ind. *Rājā*), no such word exists in the *Avesta*; instead, there was the diminished title of *dahyu-pati* (*daiṅhu.paiti*) or nation-chief.

Of the two, we have already explained the second one. The kingly titles based on *khsha* were suppressed to allow Zoroaster be the master of the world, above the *dahyu-patis*. Even the beloved Vishtāspa merited no higher title than *dahyu-pati*. That was the temporal title that Zoroastrian priests gave him when they inserted his name among the *Bondahesh* list of rulers. Zoroaster himself, though, only used the title *kavi* for Vishtāspa. As a word, *kavi* derives from an Indo-Iranian root that also gave the Vedic *kavi* (seer, sacrificer, hymn composer), and must have been used as a generic term to designate priests and shamans, but not kings. The priestly connotation of *kavi* is corroborated by *Y.46.11*, in which the *kavis* gang up as enemies of Zoroaster. Clearly, there couldn't have been a multitude of kings in Zoroaster's community to attack him. Zoroaster appropriately applied *kavi* to Vishtāspa, who was *pārsa* but not king. He used an archaic term in the archaistic language of the Gathas. And since the Achaemenids, from Darius onward, all claimed to be *pārsas*, they were naturally referred to as *kavis* by later Zoroastrians. As a matter of fact, the title *kavi* that certain Sasanian kings later adopted

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<sup>521</sup> The Zoroastrian *padām* is a separate mouth piece to stop the official's breath from contaminating the fire; it is not to be confused with the chin cover of the Iranian headgear that, for instance, Anatolian satraps used to wear, which was an integral part of their headgear.

<sup>522</sup> Herzfeld provides additional arguments to show the exalted stature of Ahura Mazda prior to Zoroaster, and insists that it was not him who "invented" Ahura Mazda; Herzfeld 1947, 372-380.

should also be understood in the same vein. Those who used it wished to reemphasize, or perhaps reclaim, the king's role as fire priest and possessor of the main fire of the kingdom (see sec. XII.8).

When Zoroaster first started to preach, he obviously had no "church" and his priesthood was not established as yet. One notices that in his Gathas, Zoroaster mainly speaks about two categories of priests: the *kavis* and the *karpan*s. While both are said to have acted against Zoroaster, the first category is not intrinsically bad since the friendly Vishtāspa is qualified as *kavi*. The term *karpan*, however, retains a negative connotation all along. As Bivar has observed, the Xanthos inscriptions refer to a cult that is qualified as *kṛp'*, which is a cognate of the Avestan *karpan*.<sup>523</sup> In the same inscriptions, Mithra is qualified as *khshathra-pati*, which clearly associates the *karpan*s with the pre-Avestan Mithra. In all probability, the *karpan*s referred to the Median magi who, if not the enemy of Mazdeans in general, were certainly despised by Darius.<sup>524</sup> Be that as it may, the revelatory word is the "*athravan*" that Tremblay had pointed out. It was a term that was artificially created for the *Avesta* and that Zoroaster himself did not use. It did not last long as it was pushed aside in the Sasanian era, when the *magu* of old was reapplied to the Zoroastrian priesthood. Attempts to designate Zoroaster as *ahu* (lord), and the priesthood as *ratu* (guide, master), didn't last either (see Appendix II, *Y.19.12*). People still thought of religious officers as *magu*, no matter what term the *Avesta* wanted to promote. If anything, the rejection of these terms indicates that the *Avesta* was not all that holy.

If the Zoroastrian priesthood did not adopt the *magu* appellation at first, it's because they could not, since it referred to the Median magi who were their enemies and were being massacred (see next chapter). The word *pārsa* couldn't be used either, since it was attached to the Achaemenid dynasty and had a kingly connotation. The solution was to create an equivalent term, *athravan*, which meant fire-keeper. In the Pahlavi language, it became *ādur-bād*, and Sasanian priests occasionally adopted it as a name; it persists today as *āzar-bād*, with the same meaning.<sup>525</sup> If Zoroaster had existed circa 1000 BC, Zoroastrianism would have certainly had a well-defined priesthood and a solid name for them by the time of Darius. It didn't. Neither had it, as yet, developed guidelines for

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<sup>523</sup> Bivar 1998, 13.

<sup>524</sup> Darius qualified his enemy, the usurper Gaumāta, as a mere *magu* in Bisotun.

<sup>525</sup> Mary Boyce downplays the connection of *athravan* to fire by suggesting that fire only acquired importance in Indo-Iranian religions in later times (see ElrO "*athravan*"). Since she dogmatically believed in a 1700-1200 BC *Avesta*, she saw the designation of priests as fire-keepers in the *Avesta* as an impossibility. But once that dogma is set aside, and given the historical context, the Zoroastrian's choice of *athravan* made perfect sense: it simply emulated the Achaemenid *pārsa*.

turning Zoroastrianism into an all encompassing religion. As we shall see, many of these were actually developed by Darius and subsequently pursued by Zoroastrians.

Darius's zeal in promoting Ahura Mazdā was akin to the zeal with which the Safavid Shāh Esmā`il I exalted the Imam `Ali and promoted Shiism as the new religion of Iran in 1512 AD, without really knowing what it entailed, but with a marked antagonism toward Sunnism. It took more than a century and a half for Safavid Shiism to take shape, mostly through the intervention of foreign clerics who came from Lebanon; but Safavid kings maintained ultimate authority over religion and religious affairs. It was only after the demise of the Safavids, that the Shiite clergy emerged as a force capable of challenging royal authority. Similarly, Zoroastrianism may have gradually become popular among the Persian elite who, in contrast to the Medes, revered Ahura Mazdā but lacked a theological framework. And in the same way that a minority of Safavid Shiite zealots converted Iran to Shiism, and ultimately shaped their religion by adopting Sunni concepts as their own, Darius and his supporters may have paved the way for the development of a Zoroastrianism that ended up absorbing numerous pre-existing beliefs of Iranian communities.

#### **XI.16 - Empowering Ahura Mazdā and Darius through the *Khvarenah***

Darius preached his monotheistic Mazdaism with a fervor that far surpassed that of Zoroaster himself. To do so, he almost had to start from scratch, as he did not dispose of any theological framework for his endeavor. Neither a Zoroastrian priesthood existed nor a Zoroastrian calendar was in use when Darius became king. His own *pārsa* clan was probably more involved in officiating fire ceremonies, than promoting a state religion. If not, they would have certainly tried to replace the month name of *baḡa-yadish*, which designated Mithra as the ultimate god to be worshiped, with one that invoked Ahura Mazdā. The decisions that Darius took to remedy this situation are telling. They show on the one hand, a step by step approach, through trial and error, in order to establish a sound basis for his Mazdaism, and on the other, they serve as a mirror through which we can better assess the Median ideology that prevailed before him.

His first priority was to promote Ahura Mazdā. Inscriptions were not enough as most people were illiterate. He needed a universally recognizable symbol to complement the inscriptions. For lack of a suitable model in the Persian tradition, he chose a Mesopotamian one for the personification of Ahura Mazdā: A bearded man within a winged symbol (Fig. 212). The Assyrians had used it (Fig. 211); and the Babylonians, Urartuans, and perhaps the Elamites, had all produced their own version of it. It was an

instantly recognizable symbol that he used in Bisotun, where he repeatedly mentions the "support" of Ahura Mazda in his victories against his enemies. How could he not have a visual translation of this idea in a composition where he stands—bow in hand—before his vanquished enemies? Whether the Persians previously had another symbol for Ahura Mazda, within their own community and for their own ceremonies, we cannot tell. The fact is that Darius had now inherited an empire and needed to act accordingly. The choice of a foreign but universal symbol for Ahura Mazda was dictated by a new situation that he had to confront. This choice does not reveal much about the state of maturity of Darius's brand of Mazdaism; but tentative changes in the attributes of Ahura Mazda do: They reveal a weak foundation and an ideology in the making.



Fig. 211 – Symbol of the God Ashur (British Museum)

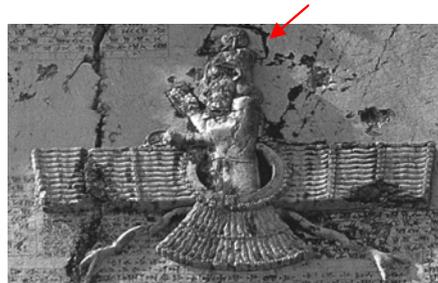


Fig. 212 – Symbol of Ahura Mazda in Bisotun

Indeed, after being confronted with the popularity of solar deities among his various subjects,<sup>526</sup> Darius decided to empower his god with solar attributes, and thus added a *solar* emblem on Ahura Mazda's hat in Bisotun (Fig. 213). It came as an *afterthought* since a new piece of stone had to be inset on top of Ahura Mazda's hat, on a previously flattened surface that would otherwise not allow the carving of an additional emblem in relief. A noticeable gap line around it (↑) clearly shows that it was a later addition. Although the sunflower was the easier choice for a solar emblem, it was so associated with Mithra that Darius decided to use a foreign symbol—that of the Babylonian solar god Shamash with pointed rays (Fig. 214). This amalgam was neither to the liking of the Persians nor his other subjects. As it happened, this was the first and last time that such an attribute was given to Ahura Mazda. Be that as it may, the insertion of this solar emblem clearly shows that not even the attributes of Ahura Mazda were solidly defined by the time Darius rose to power, let alone Mazdaism or Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda

<sup>526</sup> For the importance of sun gods in Anatolian and Mesopotamian cultures, see Beckman 2002, 37-40.

was being experimented with; solar attributes were given to him one day, and stripped off the next.

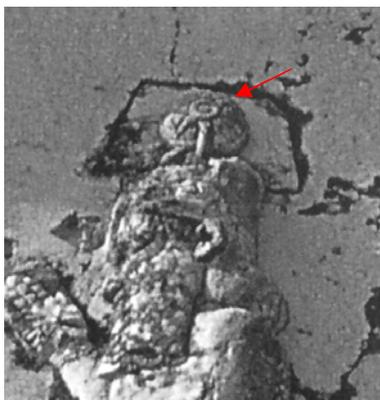


Fig. 213 - Later-added Shamash-like sun emblem on Ahura Mazda's hat in Bisotun



Fig. 214 - Sun emblem on Shamash's hat Pergamon Museum, Berlin

Even though this early solar symbol experiment failed, Darius still needed to show that Ahura Mazda was all-powerful; otherwise how could this god support him? For Iranians, power was linked to the tribal concept of the *khvarenah* (*farr*). The Medes had successfully incorporated two deities into the myth of the *khvarenah*: Mithra as its purveyor, and Apam Napāt as its guardian. The *Avesta*, on the other hand, tried to appropriate this concept by attributing its creation to Ahura Mazda, and giving a secondary role to Mithra and Apam Napāt. Nevertheless, some of the original tribal aspects of the myth are still reflected in the Avestan narrative and allow us to resurrect its original framework.

Indeed the *Avesta* explains that when Jamshid lost his *khvarenah*, it was taken by a falcon bird named *vareyna*, to Mithra (*Yt.19.35*). This ties in well with what the *Avesta* divulges elsewhere, that Mithra bestows the *khvarenah* and takes it back (*Yt.10.16 & 27*). But afterwards, the *vareyna* inexplicably takes the *khvarenah* to two mortals, Fereydun (Thraetona) and Garshāsb (Kereshaspa), who are said to be the most victorious and powerful men "after Zoroaster." Thus, not only is Mithra equated with mortals and his hold on the *khvarenah* diluted, but Zoroaster is simultaneously presented as more powerful than two of the most victorious heroes of Iranian mythology. The artifice was only meant to reemphasize Zoroaster's prominence through the possession of the Aryan *khvarenah*, since nothing is disclosed as to what happened at each of these stations, and what was the role of these two mortals. After this calculated intercalation, the story seems

to fall back on its original track, as it next explains the fight, between Fire and the snake-monster Azhi-dahāga, over the possession of the *khvarenah*. Neither is successful, but Fire manages to scare away the snake-monster, as a result of which the *khvarenah* is dropped into the Farākh-kart Lake to be guarded by Apam Napāt (*Yt. 19.35-52*).

If we strip this Avestan narrative of its seemingly added deities and mortals, three natural elements remain: fire, water and the bird *vareyna* as a go-between. Among American Indian tribes, extraordinary forces were always associated with natural elements. Such is also the case for the Iranian tribes, whose *khvarenah* we argued to parallel the Sioux' *wakan* and the Crows' *maxpe*.<sup>527</sup> Moreover, the concept of fire rising from water as a manifestation of the *khvarenah* was precisely the metaphor around which the Sasanian Ardashir built his city of Ardashir-khvarrah in order to project his newly acquired *khvarenah* (see sec. X.7). Therefore, to bypass the Median gods Mithra and Apam Napāt, all Darius had to do was rely on the original myth of the *khvarenah*, where it moved between water and fire, or, alternatively, between sea and sun. And that's precisely what his brick panel of Persepolis visualized (Fig. 207).

While we have no text to this effect, the iconography of Darius's palaces explicitly shows how he and his counsellors further relied on the original myth of the *khvarenah* to formulate an Achaemenid kingly ideology. We saw that, to show the presence of the *khvarenah*, Darius chose a winged-globe to represent *vareyna* carrying a pearl (as the encapsulated *khvarenah*) on its chest (Fig. 209). This symbol too had parallels among Hittites, Assyrians, and Babylonians (Fig. 218). The prototype that Darius opted for, however, was Egyptian, one which clearly depicted a sphere in the middle of its wings rather than a discus (Fig. 216). Moreover, what clearly distinguishes the Egyptian model from the others is the curved shape of its wing tips, while the others are rectangular.

Strangely, in his palaces, which he sprinkled with *khvarenah* symbols—winged-globes, sunflowers, lotuses and pearls—Darius abandoned the Bisotun prototype of Ahura Mazdā for one with curved wing tips similar to those of his *khvarenah*-carrying *vareyna* symbol (Fig. 215). It was by no means a casual decision. Darius would not have changed the symbol of a deity that he so prominently promoted in Bisotun—at the crossroad to all major provinces of the empire—for esthetic reasons only. If he did, it must have been for good reason. He must have realized that it was more important *vis à vis* his own constituency to associate Ahura Mazdā with the *khvarenah* rather than a solar emblem, and that a modified symbol of Ahura Mazdā could project just that.

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<sup>527</sup> See note 407 *supra*.

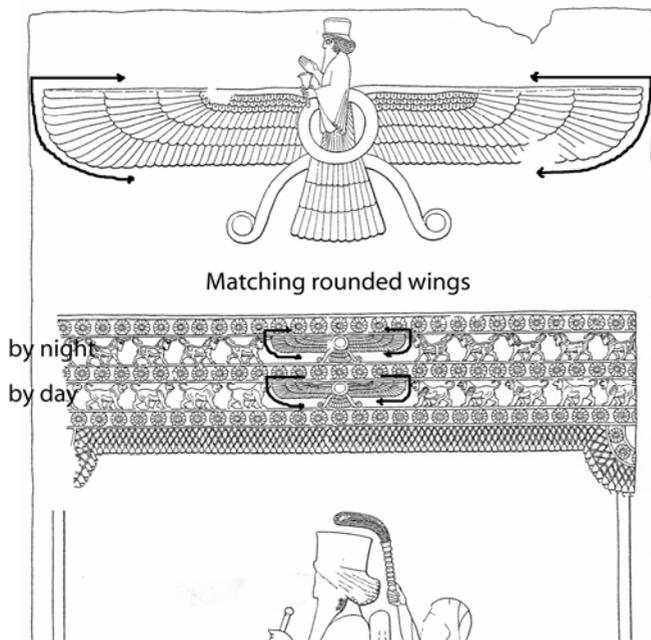


Fig. 215 - Matching the wing tips of Ahura Mazda's symbol with that of the *khvarenah* (Soudavar 2010b, 125)



Fig. 216 – Egyptian winged-globe. Egyptian Museum, Berlin



Fig. 217 – Squared wings. Bisotun



Fig. 218 - Assyrian winged symbol  
Istanbul Archeological Museum



Fig. 219 – Ahurā Mazdā riding the *khvarenah*'s winged symbol. Persepolis

In Persepolis, Ahura Mazdā looks as if he controls the *khvarenah* emblem from which he emerges (Fig. 215). In a later version Ahura Mazdā sits on top of it as if he was riding it (Fig. 219). The *khvarenah* supports Ahura Mazdā but also emanates from him. As a result, the empowerment of Darius could come from the *khvarenah*, instead of Ahura

Mazdā's solar-disk. Similar to Ardashir who, on his coinage as well as his city of Ardashir-khvarrah, projected the light of his Fire as the manifestation of his *khvarenah*, Darius emphasized the radiance of his *khvarenah*, both visually and textually. Indeed, many of his *khvarenah* emblems or panels displayed sun rays on their contour, in the guise of outwardly pointed triangles (Fig. 207); and as we saw, rather than mentioning the Aryan *khvarenah* in his inscriptions, he claimed to be *Ariya chisa*, i.e., possessor or reflector of the Aryan light. Because the word *khvarenah* was attached to Mithra in the popular mind, by focusing on its radiance (OP *chisa*, MP *chihhr*), he was reassociating the *khvarenah* with the fire that he controlled as a *pārsa*. So did Ardashir by emphasizing, on his coinage, the light (*NWRA*) of its fire altar, and adding ribbons as symbols of *farr*.

The epithet that Darius thus created for himself must have stigmatized him, to the extent that when later priests gave the Aryan *khvarenah* to Zoroaster, they also had to modify Darius's epithet to a phonetically similar expression, from *chihhr-āryā* to *chihhr-āzād*.<sup>528</sup> Like *chihhr* for the Sasanian Ardashir, *chisa* was a manifestation of Darius's *khvarenah*.

But unlike Ardashir, who could no longer claim the Aryan *khvarenah* (as it had been meanwhile allocated to Zoroaster), Darius naturally aimed for the highest degree of *khvarenah*, i.e., the Aryan one. The most important characteristic of the latter is to be found in *Yt.18.2*. It specifies that non-Aryan nations are vanquished through the Aryan *khvarenah*. Accordingly, Darius claimed to be *Arya chisa* only after he had conquered non-Aryan nations. In Bisotun, he made no such claim when he took control of an empire that he had only inherited. But in Naqsh-e Rostam, where he lists a series of non-Aryan nations that he had subsequently "conquered," such as the Thracians and the "Scythians From Beyond the Seas," he obviously felt that such a qualification was merited.<sup>529</sup>

Thus, for the Medes, as well as Darius and the Zoroastrian priesthood, the *khvarenah* was a source of power that each tried to appropriate for their own benefit. They all understood the basic concept of the original myth but tried to modify it according to their own philosophy and necessities. Darius's choice, however, in the use of the term *chisa* for the light that symbolized the *farr* had a lasting effect, since it gave rise to a parallel power concept in Zoroastrianism, and the Sasanians used it in their slogan (as *chihhr*).

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<sup>528</sup> See note 505 supra

<sup>529</sup> *DNa*, §3 - Darius the King says: By the will of Ahura Mazdā here are the nations (*dahyu*) that I conquered beyond Persia: ... the Mede, the Elamite, the Parthian, the Ariens, the Arachosians, the Sattgydians, the Gandharian, the Indian, the Amyrgian Scythian, the Tigrakhoda Scythians, the Babylonian, Assyria, the Arab, the Egyptian, the Armenian, the Cappodocian, the Lydian, the Greek, the Scythians From Beyond The Seas, the Thracian, the Aspidophores Greeks, the Libyans, the Ethiopians, the Macians, the Carians.

### XI.17 - Median Duality against the Foil of Darius's Monotheism

On ideological grounds, Darius's biggest challenge was to abolish the Median concept of the division of the world in the two realms of night and day, each presided by its own deity. His monotheistic religion necessitated the fusion of these two realms into one. As the "man" whom Ahura Mazda chose to rule,<sup>530</sup> Darius had to establish his authority over both realms. He thus insisted in Bisotun that his orders had to be obeyed by night and by day (*DB* §7-8). Iconographically, two series of images conveyed the unification of these two realms. The first was Darius's canopy, which had two symbols of the *khvarenah*, one set within a row of lions, and the other, within a row of cows/bulls (Fig. 215). As the lion was a symbol of the sun and daylight, and the bull was a symbol of the moon and nighttime, this composition clearly insinuated that Darius was empowered by the *khvarenah*, by day as well as by night.



Fig. 221 – Entangled sun and bull symbolizing day and night's perpetual rotation (Soudavar 2010b, 129)



Fig. 220 – Sardis seal with lion and bull, sun and moon (Cahill 2010, 185)



Fig. 222 – Seals equating the sun and moon symbols with lion and bull (Bivar 1969, pl. 11)

A more clever attack on the night and day duality was the creation of the iconic lion-and-bull emblem in Persepolis, which is prominently on display on each staircase (Fig. 221). It hits any visitor about to take the stairs. As such it must have carried a message that was very dear to Darius. There are of course many variations on the theme of a lion attacking another animal. What distinguishes this composition from the others is that the bull, rather than being a prey, is springing back to its feet and ready to attack the lion. Through

<sup>530</sup> In *DSf* 8-22, Darius states that Ahura Mazda chose him "as his *man* on earth."

the metaphor of an unsettled lion-bull combat, the composition evokes the perpetual day-night revolution, thus blurring the divide between the night and day realms. This interpretation is further confirmed by the imagery of several seals, which not only depict an entangled pair of lion and bull, but also bear sun and moon symbols that give added precision to their symbolism (Figs. 220, 222). Perhaps that is why Darius buried Lydian coins—with confronting heads of a lion and a bull—under the foundation slabs of his palace in Persepolis. These coins were tossed in along with two foundation plaques, one in gold and the other in silver, which Cyndy Nimchuck has argued to reflect "golden sunlight" and "silvery moonlight."<sup>531</sup> By these symbolic gestures, Darius was metaphorically burying the separation of the day and night realms.<sup>532</sup>



Fig. 223 – Lions converging toward a lotus-sunflower emblem. Tomb of Artaxerxes II, Persepolis.



Fig. 224 – Lion frieze without a flower emblem. Tomb of Artaxerxes III, Persepolis.

The lion-and-bull icon was part of a decorative program that was primarily concerned with abolishing Median duality. Remarkably, it used previously established symbols to interpret opposite themes. A similar use of previous motifs for a new ideology can be seen on the tomb of Artaxerxes II, north of Persepolis. It has a frieze of lions converging toward a lotus-sunflower combination (Fig. 223), which does not appear on any of his predecessors' tombs. This should come as no surprise since Artaxerxes II is also the first Achaemenid king to invoke Mithra and Anāhitā in his inscriptions.<sup>533</sup> Artaxerxes's

<sup>531</sup> Nimchuck 2010, 226. After noting that such a gesture was quite unusual in antiquity, Cindy Nimchuck tries to tie it to Zoroastrian cosmogony beliefs, but nevertheless emphasizes the association of gold and silver with day and night. As we have argued, Zoroastrianism was not developed as yet, and both the design of the Lydian coins and the metal composition of the buried material point to a simple dichotomy, rather than a complicated abstract cosmogony.

<sup>532</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 128.

<sup>533</sup> *A2Ha*: "Artaxerxes ... says: this hall I built, by the support of Ahura Mazdā, *Anāhitā*, and *Mithra*. May Ahura Mazdā, *Anāhitā*, and *Mithra* protect me against evil..."

legitimacy must have been seriously challenged by his brother, Cyrus the Younger (d. 401 BC), who led an insurrection against him, but was unsuccessful in his bid for the Achaemenid throne. From the Achaemenids to the Sasanians, it was almost standard practice for the king whose legitimacy had been challenged, to not only show that he possessed the *khvarenah*, but also enjoyed the full backing of the deities most attached to it. As always, two deities were needed, one solar and one aquatic. For the Achaemenids as well as Zoroastrians, Apam Napāt's creation powers posed a problem *vis à vis* Ahura Mazda, and was replaced by the aquatic goddess Anāhitā. Since the lotus was a symbol of the Waters, it could represent Apam Napāt as well as Anāhitā. The lotus-sunflower symbol inserted between the converging lions is, therefore, as much a symbol of the emergence of the *khvarenah* from the waters, as that of the deity pair Mithra and Anāhitā that Artaxerxes II invoked. Iconography precisely followed kingly ideology.

This precision is visible once again on the tomb of Artaxerxes III, who seems to have not accepted the introduction of Anāhitā in the Achaemenid pantheon, and only invokes Mithra after Ahura Mazda in his inscriptions.<sup>534</sup> Unlike the tomb of Artaxerxes II, its throne frieze is devoid of the double flower symbol (Fig. 224), and is only adorned with converging lions as symbol of Mithra.

### **XI.18 - From Duality to Monotheism to Pantheism**

In ruling a vast empire, Darius had to temper the monotheistic zeal that he had displayed early on in Bisotun. But unlike Cyrus who praised the Babylonian god Marduk on his famous cylinder, Darius merely acknowledged the existence of local deities. Thus, in Babylon (*DSw*) he says: "... Ahura Mazda, the greatest of *the gods*, created me, made me king." Eventually, he also made a vague reference in Persepolis to other 'gods' after invoking Ahura Mazda.<sup>535</sup>

This acknowledgment of a plurality of gods led to imagery in which Ahura Mazda dominated all other deities. One example can be found on an earring from the MFA in Boston (Fig. 225).<sup>536</sup> A supernatural winged figure is depicted at its centre, riding a winged *khvarenah* symbol. It can only be Ahura Mazda. On the contour, he is surrounded

<sup>534</sup> *A3Pa*: "King Artaxerxes says: May Ahuramazda and the god Mithra preserve me, my country, and what has been built by me."

<sup>535</sup> *DPd*: "May there never be upon this country an army, famine, or Lie! This I pray as a favor from Ahura Mazda and the gods of the royal house. May Ahura Mazda and the gods of the royal house do me this favor!"

<sup>536</sup> The six deities on the contour of this earring were said by Shāpur Shahbāzi to be representations of the Amesha Spentas, with a frame of mind that absolutely wanted to see Achaemenid art following Zoroastrian norms. It was rejected in Soudavar 2003, 102-03, especially in consideration of the Miho pectoral (Fig. 226 here) that displays a group of 16 deities; which obviously viciates his Amesha Spenta theory.

by a number of smaller bearded men riding a crescent. They too are deities, but obviously of lesser stature than the central figure. While they all salute Ahura Mazda, he reciprocates with the same gesture. At the lowest point of the contour, we have a combined lotus-sunflower symbol—similar to the one on Artaxerxes II's tomb—which, like the aforementioned deities, sits over a crescent and is confined within a circle. One single motif had no decorative value. If the objective was embellishment, they would have interspersed one between every deity pair. On the other hand, associativity and homogeneity being important principles of Iranian iconography, this lone emblem placed among a string of deities had to be a deity symbol as well. It confirms once more our interpretation of the lotus-sunflower emblem on Artaxerxes's tomb as alluding to Mithra and Anāhitā. A more elaborate version of this imagery can be found on a magnificent pectoral of the Miho Museum, which has sixteen deities on its lower contour, all saluting Ahura Mazda, who is consecrating the victory scene of its lower register (Fig. 226).



Fig. 225 – Achaemenid earring, with Ahura Mazda presiding over 6+2 deities. MFA Boston.



Fig. 226 - Achaemenid necklace with Ahura Mazda presiding over 16 deities (Miho Museum)

What the above analysis shows is that, far from having an established Zoroastrianism that regulated kingly ideology and popular beliefs, we had a constantly evolving situation in the Achaemenid era. For want of a developed state religion, Darius had to experiment with the ways he could project Ahura Mazda as an omnipotent deity governing the whole world as one realm, in contrast to the Median ideology based on a night-day dichotomy. Whatever success he gained in this respect was ultimately compromised by Artaxerxes II, who, in order to buttress his legitimacy, had to claim the support of Mithra and Anāhitā,

in addition to Ahura Mazdā. Still, what must be noted is the substitution of one aquatic god for another, namely Anāhitā for Apam Napāt. More than the latter's linkage to the *khvarenah*, it was his creative powers that were incompatible with the Mazdaism that Darius had promoted. The introduction of Anāhitā fulfilled, on the one hand, the need for an *aquatic* deity to release the *khvarenah* from the seas, and on the other, avoided reliance on a direct rival of Ahura Mazdā.

### **XI.19 - Suppression of the Bird Chamrosh**

A powerful bird of Iranian mythology is the *vareyna*, which acts as a transfer agent in the *Avesta*; when Jamshid strays from the path of righteousness and loses the *khvarenah*, it is the *vareyna* that takes it away and gives it to Apam Napāt for safekeeping underwater. Curiously, the opposite transfer agent, i.e., the one that delivers the *khvarenah* to a recipient, is missing in the Avestan myth. The *khvarenah* concept was a thorny issue for Zoroastrianism, and its incorporation into the *Avesta* required certain adjustments. It seems that the purveyor bird of the *khvarenah* was a victim of this process, most probably because of its strong ties to Apam Napāt who, if not totally eliminated, was stripped of most of his attributes. Luckily, this suppressed part of the *khvarenah* myth was not totally lost, and resurfaces in the *Bondaresh* in its description of the bird Chamrosh. Indeed, the *Bondaresh* describes the Chamrosh in the following terms:

"It is on the summit of Mount Alborz that every three years many people of an-Erān gather, in order to go to Iran, to cause damage and devastation all over; but then Borz-yazad (the deity Borz), rises from the depths of the Lake Arang, and places that very bird Chamrosh on the top of that lofty mountain, who will dispose of all an-Erān people, in the way that birds dispose of seeds."<sup>537</sup>

What we immediately detect is that the name of Apam Napāt has been replaced by his pseudonym Borz, and that may explain the survival of this passage. Nevertheless, there are enough indications in this passage to identify Borz with Apam Napāt. Indeed, Borz is said to rise from the waters, which is where Apam Napāt resided (*Yt.19.52*). Moreover, Chamrosh is endowed with the power to vanquish the non-Iranian enemies of Iran, a power that necessitated the support of the Aryan *khvarenah* (*Yt.18.2-5*). As such, Chamrosh is clearly an active agent of Apam Napāt, and endowed with the *khvarenah*. So important was this bird that, despite its suppression in the *Avesta*, it was used as a major decorative motif throughout the Sasanian Empire and Sogdiana.

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<sup>537</sup> Dādāgi 1990, 102.



Fig. 227 –Sogdian textile displaying the chamrosh with a pearl necklace, above a pearl-carrying duck (EMS coll.).



Fig. 228 - Chamrosh bird on Mount Alborz, surrounded by *khvarenah* symbols. 5<sup>th</sup> century, Antakia. Louvre.



Fig. 229 – Chamrosh motif on a textile from the Vatican treasures. (*Splendeur* 1993, 116)



Fig. 230 – Late Sasanian silver plate. Rezā `Abbāsi Museum, Tehran.

Among these, the textile of Fig. 227 provides all the necessary elements to identify this pheasant-looking bird with the Chamrosh of the *Bondahesh*. Firstly, its head is placed

against a solar-disk, symbol of the *khvarenah*. Secondly, its neck is adorned with the three pearls of Tishtrya, which was also associated with the Aryan *khvarenah* (*Yt. 18.2-7*). Thirdly, the Chamrosh is placed right above a similarly decorated duck. As a bird that rose from the waters with Apam Napāt, it clearly had an aquatic existence prior to its celestial flight. In its aquatic stage, the duck verily symbolized the Chamrosh, and once out of the waters, a multicolored pheasant seemed more appropriate. Hence the duck carrying a pearl necklace as symbol of the *khvarenah* that was kept underwater by Apam Napāt.

A 5<sup>th</sup>-century mosaic floor from a courtyard in Antioch (present day Antakya in Turkey), presents the Chamrosh in full glory. Perched on top of Mount Alborz, the Chamrosh is depicted by the local artist as a crane with a radiating solar-disk, in a landscape bordered by a series of motifs that are symbols of the *farr*: Rams, *dastārs*, and a pair of wings (Fig. 228).<sup>538</sup> It thus seems that the name Chamrosh did not define any specific type of bird, and it was left to the artist to depict it as he pleased.<sup>539</sup> The most popular prototype, however, was the pheasant, numerous specimens of which were depicted on precious textiles that landed in the European treasuries (Fig. 229).

The *Bondaresh* also reflects later attempts to minimize the importance of the Chamrosh, where it compares it to the Simorgh. Indeed, another passage from the *Bondaresh*, subordinates the Chamrosh to the Simorgh:

"Of birds Chamrosh is the one valued higher than all other birds in between the Sky and the Earth, except for the three-toed Simorgh."

As a decorative motif, the Simorgh appears primarily in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. This is a period of rising orthodoxy, when the Borz appellation of Apam Napāt was gradually suppressed, and Anāhitā replaced Apam Napāt for good (see sec. X.10). Concurrently, another bird of the *Avesta*, the Saena, was chosen to supplant the birds that were associated with the *farr*. Judging by the *Shāhnāme*'s description, it was a colorful bird whose feathers had magical powers, and was therefore a good candidate to overshadow the Chamrosh.

Two types of Simorgh prevailed in this period. The one that appears on a plate from the Rezā `Abbāsi Museum of Tehran (Fig. 230), conforms to the aforementioned *Bondaresh*

<sup>538</sup> Soudavar 2003, 21.

<sup>539</sup> The etymology of Chamrosh is not known. One possible explanation may be to consider it as *cham-rosh*, in which *cham* is a diminutive of *chashm* (eye) as per the Dehkhōā dictionary, and *rosh* is a diminutive of *roshan* (bright), describing it as a "bright-eyed" bird.

description as it depicts a three-toed bird. In Tāq-e Bostān, however, the king's robe is adorned with a motif that is half dog/half bird, as if the *simorgh* was read *sag-morgh*, or dog-bird (Fig. 231).

But the question that comes to mind is: Were there two birds in the original myth or one? Logic dictates that only one bird must have acted as carrier of the *khvarenah*, and that *vareyna* was the Avestan appellation of *chamrosh*, in the same way that the *pārsas* were referred to as *kavis* in the *Avesta*. Be that as it may, we had argued that the *khvarenah* was based on a tribal concept that most probably incorporated three natural elements: Fire, water, and a bird (sec. X.11). The existence of so many firebirds in the Indo-European culture suggests that the Chamrosh too was perhaps conceived as a firebird. The Greek phoenix, which famously rose from its ashes, is often depicted with a nimbus, and the Slavic firebird, which is the subject of Igor Stravinsky's celebrated composition, is called *zhar-ptitsa* (fire-bird); but neither is associated with gods. We may thus assume that, in the original tribal lore, the Chamrosh and the *khvarenah* were not associated with any abstract god.



Fig. 231 – Simorgh sketch from Tāq-e Bostān.(web)

As such, it provides added context for the two Avestan stanzas *Yt.13.94-95* that situate the empowerment of Mithra and Apam Napāt right after the birth of Zoroaster circa 618 BC. As a solar and aquatic pair of deities, they were perfectly suited to be enmeshed into the *khvarenah* cycle. In the new kingly ideology that the Medes tried to establish after their victories over the Assyrians (c. 614 BC), and over the Urartuans (c. 612 BC), the *khvarenah* was subordinated to Mithra and Apam Napāt. It was only then that the *khvarenah* became associated with gods.

While Cyrus maintained the Median ideology, Darius, in full knowledge of the *khvarenah*'s appropriation by the Medes, tried to undo what they had done; he thus severed the *khvarenah*'s ties with the Median deity pair, and placed it under the aegis of his all-powerful Ahura Mazdā. But the Median scheme was so compatible with the *khvarenah* cycle, and so widely accepted, that the composers of the *Avesta* preferred to harmonize the two ideologies, by keeping Mithra and Apam Napāt, and placing them under the aegis of Ahura Mazdā. From no god at all, the *khvarenah* thus acquired the patronage of many different deities.

### **XI.20 - Assembling the *Avesta***

For years, many have tried to portray the Achaemenids as Zoroastrians.<sup>540</sup> Apart from Ahura Mazdā who was revered by both, no other solid correlation was ever found; but that did not stop certain scholars from doing their utmost to prove that Zoroastrianism predated the Achaemenid era.<sup>541</sup> Kellens, for instance, tries to do this through an analysis of the amalgamation process of Avestan hymns into liturgies.<sup>542</sup> He explains that the *Avesta* we have inherited is a grouping of liturgies, called Yasna, in which he detects two early strains that he names Proto-Yasna-A and Proto-Yasna-B.<sup>543</sup> While he dates Proto-Yasna-A to the early 6<sup>th</sup>-century BC, he situates the canonization of Proto-Yasna-B in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC, and a final canonization of the whole Avestan corpus in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC, after which, nobody was supposedly able to compose in the Avestan language.

In presenting this evolutionary scheme, Kellens follows Skjaervo in counting two different stages in the crystallization process of an orally transmitted text, "fixation" followed by canonization. For Kellens, fixation comes much later than composition and is the result of the incorporation of a text in religious rites; canonization occurs when the text becomes so holy that no further alteration is permitted.<sup>544</sup> But to bridge the long gap between an early composition date of circa 1200-1000 BC that he favors, and the assembly of the Avestan corpus, Kellens introduces a sequence that goes from fixation to canonization to "decanonization," and back to a newer canonization.

While his analysis of verse details is solid, he stumbles on the question of dating, as he dogmatically wants to fit it into an early time bracket. For starters, "de-canonization" is an oxymoron. Within the same religious tradition, a *canonized* text is not subject to manipulation. It must lose its sacredness before modification. If it becomes onerous or irrelevant, it can be marginalized or discarded all together, but not selectively; that can

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<sup>540</sup> By producing statistics based on the Fortification and Treasury tablets, Wouter Henckleman has recently showed that in the festivities and ceremonial activities that depended on the king's largesse, the number of "Ahura Mazdā" mentions in official ceremonies paled in comparison to that of other deities. What's more, most of the named deities therein did not belong to the Zoroastrian pantheon. In other words, despite heavy promotion of Ahura Mazdā at the top, government officials still had to cater to popular demand for past religious practices; Henckleman (forthcoming).

<sup>541</sup> O.P. Skjaervo had seized upon the appearance of the name of Spenta Armaiti in one of the tablets to claim that, as one of the Amesha Spentas, it constituted proof of Zoroastrianism (Skjaervo 2005, 52-53). It's a position that I had criticized in Soudavar 2010a (114) because said deity was clearly invoked in a non-Zoroastrian context.

<sup>542</sup> Zoroastrian liturgies consist of a string of hymns to be recited in the performance of religious rites.

<sup>543</sup> Kellens 1998.

<sup>544</sup> Kellens 1998, 492-93.

only happen in a shift of traditions, after a major political upheaval such as Alexander's conquest, or the advent of the Mazdaism championed by Darius who tried to break the hold of Mithra and Apam Napāt over the *khvarenah*.

Rather than representing two liturgies separated by centuries, Proto-Yasna-A and Proto-Yasna-B represent two parallel and competing trends trying to incorporate popular beliefs into Zoroastrianism. The parallelism of the two is suggested by their contrasting views as to who the god of waters was. Proto-Yasna-A relies on the *Zāmyād Yasht* (*Yt.19*), which refers to Apam Napāt in a muted fashion, while Proto-Yasna-B invokes Anāhitā through the *Abān Yasht* (*Yt.5*). The distinction is important and depends on how each construes the fundamental concept of *khvarenah*, in order to incorporate it in its liturgies.

*Yt.5* follows the kingly ideology of Artaxerxes II, who, alongside the solar god Mithra, invoked the aquatic goddess Anāhitā in lieu of Apam Napāt. But not everyone was ready to discard the known for the unknown; there were probably those who preferred to keep Apam Napāt, by sanitizing him as much as possible; as we saw, Artaxerxes III did not favor Anāhitā, and only invoked Mithra. *Yt.19* of the Proto-Yasna-A reflects the latter tendency, especially where it recognizes Apam Napāt as the "god who resides in the waters" (*Yt.19.52*). On the other hand, in *Yt.5*, the control of the *khvarenah* is relegated to Anāhitā, and successive heroes sacrifice to this deity to seek her protection and help. She is so exalted that even Apam Napāt becomes an accessory in the sacrifices dedicated to her (*Yt.5.72*).<sup>545</sup> Nevertheless, both hymns use the exact same means to attribute the Aryan *khvarenah* to Zoroaster: It is done in both through exclamations by Afrāsiyāb, who seeks it but cannot obtain it.<sup>546</sup> Kellens observes a similar parallelism between *Yt.10* of Proto-Yasna-A, and *Yt.5* of Proto-Yasna-B, where he contends that *Yt.5.53* was copied from *Yt.10.11*.<sup>547</sup> These two liturgies are, therefore, very much intertwined, and present two different solutions for the same concern: Wrestling the Aryan *khvarenah* from kingship. They were both conceived in the post Achaemenid era, not far from each other, and were most probably inspired by concepts that emerged under Artaxerxes II and III.

<sup>545</sup> *Yt.5.72*: "To her did ... the sons of Sayuzhdri, offer up a sacrifice, with a hundred horses, a thousand oxen, ten thousand lambs, by Apam Napāt, the tall lord, the lord of the females, the bright and swift-horsed."

<sup>546</sup> Afrāsiyāb utters the same in both hymns: "I have not been able to conquer the *khvarenah* that belongs to the Aryan nations—to the born and the unborn (i.e. now and forever)—and to the holy Zoroaster," once in *Yt.5.42*, but thrice in *Yt.19* (*stanzas 57, 60, 63*).

<sup>547</sup> Kellens saw an incompatibility in *Yt.5.53*, where the adjectives *raθaēštārō*, *jaiīdiantō*, and *tanubiiō* that appear in a sentence describing the valors of the single hero Tus (Tusō) are plural (Kellens 1978, 265). The exact same sentence, with the same adjectives, is correctly applied in *Yt.10.11* to qualify warriors (plural) praising Mithra. The correct plural form of *Yt.10.11* was thus the original.

Because of the longstanding attachment of Apam Napāt to the *khvarenah*, Proto-Yasna A prefers to keep him, albeit in a subdued fashion, while Proto-Yasna-B prefers to replace him with Anāhitā.

The passages attributing the Aryan *khvarenah* to Zoroaster were not the only additions to the aforementioned hymns. Kellens himself argues that stanzas *Yt.10.119-122* and *Yt.10.137-138* were added to the *Mehr Yasht (Yt.10)*, when liturgies were being formulated; what's more, they were done in full harmony with the ancient texts, at times even respecting their archaic "octo-syllabic meter."<sup>548</sup> But once one admits the possibility of later additions or alterations, one needs to forfeit the relevance of the archaic nature of the language to its dating. The archaic nature of the Avestan language offers no more proof of antiquity than the archaic aspect of papal treatises composed in Latin. The priesthood had probably maintained fluent knowledge of the Avestan language, long after the composition of its core components. It was a language that priests presumably thought of as being uttered in the "tongue of gods," and appropriate for sacrificial rites.<sup>549</sup> They cherished it as a "godly cant" that they alone understood (and their followers didn't). The power to communicate with the gods was what differentiated the priesthood from its flock. As Daniel Heller-Roazen has noted: "Whether one looks to Homer or to ancient Sanskrit hymns, to the Druids or to medieval Ireland, one finds that poets, scribes and priests have all laid claim to a godly cant, which they alone master."<sup>550</sup>

There is no philological method to measure the evolution speed of a language. One needs to peg undated texts to historical events in order to establish a date. Philology can only establish relativity in this evolution process, such as X>Y>Z, but cannot anchor them in time. Any pretense to the contrary is intellectually dishonest. And yet, by relegating the Avesta to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-millennium BC, Avestologists pretend to have such knowledge, but rather than providing compelling arguments, they try to establish it through repetition.

The goal of the *Avesta* was to attract as many Iranians as possible into the Zoroastrian fold. As a result, all major deities were brought in, and their differences ironed out so that believers would feel comfortable with this all-new all-encompassing religion.<sup>551</sup> The amalgamation of so many disparate deities in the *Avesta* was contrary to the monotheistic

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<sup>548</sup> Kellens 1998, 502-504.

<sup>549</sup> Heller-Roazen 2013, 89.

<sup>550</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2013/08/19/opinion/learn-to-talk-in-beggars-cant.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/19/opinion/learn-to-talk-in-beggars-cant.html)

<sup>551</sup> The only problematic deity was Apam Napāt whose creation powers clashed with those of Ahura Mazdā who was brandished as the all-powerful creator, he is the only exception to the harmonization process, because he was basically forced out.

propaganda of Darius and to the Sufi-like lamentations that Zoroaster expresses in conversation with Ahura Mazdā. What is remarkable, though, is the harmonizing effort put into this amalgamation process, which ironed out conflicts and smoothed out differences. The seventh month of the existing Iranian calendar, for instance, belonged to Mithra and had been named *baya-yadish* in his honor. In the amalgamation process, the seventh month of the Avestan calendar could no longer be called *baya-yadish* since it made Mithra the absolute *baya*; it was simply named Mehr/Mithra. This was an acceptable name because “Mehr” now referred to a deity who had been sanitized and incorporated into the *Avesta*; this went hand in hand with the cleansing of the *Mehr Yasht*, such as the replacing of the onerous *khshatra-pati* with the more Zoroastrian-friendly “master of the *zarathushtrat*.” Similarly, the *khvarenah* was labeled “Mazdā-created” while Mithra remained its purveyor under the aegis of Ahura Mazdā; it cleverly incorporated the tribal concept of *khvarenah* into Zoroastrianism. Most importantly, Apam Napāt, was almost squeezed out, and stripped of all of his attributes and acolytes, such as the bird Chamrosh. Finally, fire, which was at the heart of every ancient Iranian religious ceremony, had to be brought into the fold; it was astutely qualified as “Son of Ahura Mazdā” (see Appendix II/4). Thus, the *Avesta* brought a considerable amount of Iranian deities under one tent, and forged their disparate hymns into one comprehensive corpus to be used in Zoroastrian liturgies. More than a religious text, it’s a testimony to the political savvy of the Zoroastrian priesthood in forging a new all-encompassing politico-religious ideology, in the chaotic aftermath of the Macedonian conquests. It is in this period that Zoroaster was visualized as a king under whose aegis the Zoroastrian clergy performed its rituals (see Figs. 232a, b).



Figs. 232 a, b—Religious ceremony conducted under the aegis of Zoroaster in Majesty.  
Post-Achaemenid seal. Cabinet des Médailles, BNF

## CHAPTER XII

### A RELIGIOUS CATAclySM: THE MAGOPHONIA

#### XII.1 - The pre-Achaemenid Geo-Political Landscape

Even though the Babylonian chronicles attribute the fall of Assyria to a joint Babylonian and Mede initiative, it is clear from the sequence of events that the main victors were the Medes, since they were the first to defeat the enemy, to plunder their riches, and to establish their hegemony over the northern Assyrian heartland up to Harran.<sup>552</sup> By virtue of these victories, the Medes controlled an empire that stretched from the borders of Lydia to the eastern parts of the Iranian plateau, where resided those whom the Assyrians called "the distant Medes." Our aim here is not to establish the exact boundaries of this empire but to concentrate on two entities, Raga and Persis, and to assess the Median hegemony over them. The Medes' control of these entities, or lack of it, is important to the understanding of the religious conflicts that pitted two priestly castes against each other, namely that of the Median magi and the Persian *pārsas*.

While the far eastern limits of the Median Empire are not well defined, most scholars agree that it comprised the Badakhshān (in present day Afghanistan), the main producer of the lapis stone that the Medes supplied to the Assyrians. Raga was thus at the very heart of this empire, a fact that is confirmed by Darius who emphasized in Bisotun that Raga (present day Shahr-e Rey near Tehran) was "a district of Media."<sup>553</sup>

More complicated, however, was the situation in Persis (present day Fārs), which was the home of the Achaemenids. In his analysis of the uprisings against Darius, Willem Vorgeslang perceives two different patterns of behavior among the rebels, and depicts a Median Empire culturally split between "the Scythianized North and the non-Scythianized South."<sup>554</sup> He sees the main proof of such a division in the alternating Mede/Persian rows of guards in Persepolis, in which the Medes carry an *akinakes*, a short sword believed to be of Scythian origin. While such a split was likely to exist under Cyrus and Cambyses, I believe that it must be attributed to different polity affiliations rather than a hardly perceptible Scythian influence. The *akinakes* is too thin an evidence

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<sup>552</sup> Dandamayev & Medvedskaya 2006.

<sup>553</sup> *DB* 2:71-72, "Phraortes fled thence with a few horsemen to a district in Media called Raga."

<sup>554</sup> Vorgeslang 1998, 212-16.

to build such a theory upon. And if the Median Empire stretched horizontally across the Iranian plateau, there is no tangible evidence that it encompassed Persis. To the contrary, the little information that we have shows a Median Empire in the north, bordered on its south side by some independent or semi-independent polities that *were not* Mede vassals.

Chief among these polities was the Persian state, perhaps organized as a confederacy. The plaques of Ariaramnes and Arsames are quite telling in this respect. Firstly, the mere fact that they had *a script of their own* (while the Medes apparently did not) vouches for a more developed and structured state. Secondly, its rulers are qualified therein as: *Great king, king of kings*. Whatever meaning the word king (*khshathya*) conjures up, the title "king of kings" is not one that a vassal would have used.<sup>555</sup> In other words, Ariaramnes and Arsames were not only independent rulers but semi-emperors or overlords in their own right; that is, until Cyrus II took over the Median Empire in 559 BC, and became king of kings and virtual emperor of western Asia. Prior to that date, the junior branch of the Achaemenids, who had established themselves as rulers of Anshan, may have only paid lip service to the suzerainty of the *pārsa* line of the Achaemenids.<sup>556</sup> But they were important enough for Astyages to give his daughter's hand to Cambyses I of Anshan. Since the Medes formed matrimonial alliances with sovereign neighbors (sec. XI.13), the kingdom of Anshan was probably considered as a sovereign state and not a Mede vassal.

In addition, two smaller states can be mentioned, which, like the Babylonians and Persians, had probably joined forces with the Medes in their conquest of Assyria. The first is the state of Eilipi whose constant skirmishes with the Assyrians are documented in Assyrian chronicles.<sup>557</sup> The second is the state of Samati, for which we had scant textual references until the fabulous silver hoard of Kalmākareh was unearthed.<sup>558</sup> Most items of the hoard have dedicatory inscriptions in the name of a series of Samati rulers, such as "Ampirish son of Dabala," that do not mention any Median overlord. Based on the epigraphic peculiarities of these inscriptions, Vallat has suggested a dating between 589 and 539 BC.<sup>559</sup> An interesting piece of the hoard is an Assyrian goblet (now in the al-Sabah Collection) that has two sets of inscriptions, one in the name Esarhaddon (r. 681-

<sup>555</sup> Herodotus (I.127): "The Persians had long been discontent that the Medes ruled them."

<sup>556</sup> A certain Kurash of Parsumash had accepted (c. 641 BC) to become a tributary of Assurbanipal and send his son as a hostage. But Vallat (Vallat 2010, 58), concurring with de Mirochedji, stipulates that this Kurash should not be confounded with Cyrus I of Anshan, grandfather of Cyrus II.

<sup>557</sup> See for instance Medvedskaya 1999. François Vallat enumerates Zamin, Zari, Samati and Parsa as small states that had correspondences with Susa in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Vallat 1998, 104.

<sup>558</sup> Among the sparse references to Samati and Samatians, there is one in an Old Babylonian administrative text from Susa dating back to 1932-1910 BC; Tavernier 2011, 193.

<sup>559</sup> Vallat 2000, 29.

669 BC) son of Sennacherib, and the other in the name of Ampirish (Fig. 233).<sup>560</sup> A silver bucket from the same hoard also has a dedicatory inscription in the name of Esarhaddon.<sup>561</sup> These pieces prove that the Samatians were indeed part of the coalition that defeated the Assyrians and took a big cut of the booty. The looted pieces were either preserved and rededicated, or melted down for new production. Most Kalmākareh pieces are neither Assyrian in design nor bare Assyrian inscriptions; their silver, though, must have come from the Assyrian loot, for one can hardly imagine a fringe state being capable of acquiring and accumulating such a large quantity of precious metal.

The victors came into possession of so much silver and gold that, in the Old Testament, Isaiah remarks that the "Medes" cared no more for silver (13:17).<sup>562</sup> This abundance of silver is also reflected in two technical characteristics of the Kalmākareh hoard: a) the silver is very thick, and, b) has a high degree of purity, to the extent that the slightest knock might create a dent on some pieces.<sup>563</sup> But aside from its silver content, what distinguishes the Kalmākareh hoard from Assyrian, or even Achaemenid, vessels is the boldness and variety of its designs. There are of course some highly complex zoomorphic compositions, specimens of which are in the Miho Museum, Iranian museums, and in private collections (Figs. 234-35). But more important is the shape of these vessels, which display an unprecedented array of geometric patterns informed by a sober and pure sense of esthetics (Figs. 236a, b, c). The elegance and boldness of their designs attest to a tradition of craftsmanship that was available long before "Achaemenid art" was developed. If anything, by standardizing some of these patterns, the Achaemenids lost the creative impulse that had allowed such a variety of vessels to be produced.

Furthermore, the Kalmākareh vessels show a distinct penchant for Mithraic symbols, including sunflowers, lions and mountain goats. The lion is the sun animal par excellence and the mountain goat heralded the rise of the sun over high mountains (Figs. 238-39); that is why they bore a sun sign on their hindquarters (Fig. 238). References to Apam Napāt are less prominent; they appear as a lotus flower, or a bovine, which are water or night symbols (Fig. 237). In other words, even though the Medes had based their kingly ideology on the parity of Mithra with Apam Napāt, some of the smaller western states favored Mithra. By all evidence, Mithra had a dominant status in Western Iran.

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<sup>560</sup> Freeman et al. 2013, 85.

<sup>561</sup> Seipel 2000, 205.

<sup>562</sup> "I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold"; Isaiah (13.17)

<sup>563</sup> The analysis conducted at Oxford in 1993 by Peter Northover on some Kalmākareh pieces reveal, for instance, a 92-96% silver purity on samples referred to as R718-19, and 98.35 % on sample A47.



Fig. 233 – Assyrian vessel from Kalmākareh (Al-Sabah Coll.)



Fig. 234 – Silver statuettes from Kalmākareh (Miho Museum)



Fig. 235 – Kalmākareh vessel with fire altar on its lid. (Mahboubian Coll.)



Figs. 236 - a, b, c – Three silver vessels with intricate geometric designs from Kalmākareh. EMS collection.



Fig. 237 – Kalmākareh vessel lid, with a lotus-shaped fire altar. Surena coll.



Fig. 238 – Lions with solar marks (†) on their hindquarters (Mahboubian Coll.)



Fig. 239 – Kalmākareh vessel with goat over fire altar (Miho Museum)

In sum, although, because of common names and titulature,<sup>564</sup> these domains are usually assigned to Media, they were independent principalities and not Median satellites.

## XII.2 - Cyrus's Kingly Ideology

Historians generally shy away from defining Cyrus's religion.<sup>565</sup> But the facts speak for themselves. Cyrus *never* mentions Ahura Mazda in his inscriptions; and in stark contrast to the decorative program of the tombs of later Achaemenids who praised Ahura Mazda, a colossal sunflower-lotus combination (49cm wide) is carved on Cyrus's tomb, which was the dual Median symbol of Mithra and Apam Napāt (Fig. 240).<sup>566</sup>

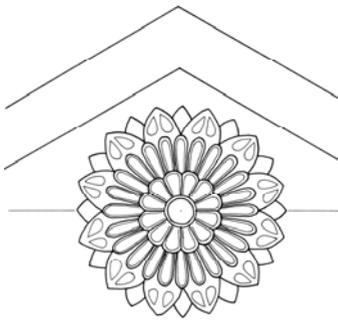


Fig. 240 – Lotus-sunflower combination on Cyrus's tomb (Roaf 1983, 137)



Fig. 241 – Drawing of Mithra by Ker Porter (Courtesy of P. Briant)



Fig. 242 - Lower part of door jamb depicting Apam Napāt. Pasargadae.

Furthermore, there are two figures in Pasargadae that, because of their impressive sizes, cannot be treated as mere decorative motifs. One is a winged anthropomorphic figure vaguely named "winged genius" by archaeologists and historians alike (Fig. 241), and the other, a half-broken fish-clad anthropomorphic figure that has received much less attention (Fig. 242). But if iconographic conventions are to inform one's perception, they must be categorized as deities, because one is a supernatural being by virtue of its wings, and the other has a bovine chimera standing guard behind it, spear in hand.<sup>567</sup> They both

<sup>564</sup> Potts 1999, 306.

<sup>565</sup> Briant 1996, 106-108.

<sup>566</sup> Stronach 1971, 155-58; Soudavar 2003, 88.

<sup>567</sup> David Stronach rightly argues that both the large bodied guardian sphinxes (found as shattered pieces) and the winged figures of Pasargadae were inspired by Assyrian prototypes, but then goes to great lengths to justify that even though the winged figures were facing "inwards and not outwards," they had apotropaic functions and were meant to "prevent malevolent forces to make their way in" (Stronach 2013, 66-69). But

belong to the realm of the gods, and since the double flowers on Cyrus's tomb point toward a Median ideology, we will try to prove that they indeed represent Mithra and Apam Napāt.

The winged figure wears royal Elamite attire;<sup>568</sup> and as such, it must represent the supreme deity of Cyrus—King of Anshan<sup>569</sup>—in the same way that Ahura Mazdā is clad like Ardashir I in Naqsh-e Rostam, and Jesus is often represented in the attire of Charlemagne (r. 768-814). This supreme deity must have been Mithra, to whom sacrifices continued to be made at his tomb site long after his death.<sup>570</sup> And indeed it can be perceived as such, provided we put aside the common misconception that Mithra's head must necessarily be adorned with shining rays.



Fig. 243 - Egyptian *hemhem*-type crown of Horus. Ptolemaic, Louvre



Fig. 244 - Syrian crown. 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, MMA



Fig. 245 - Crown of Mithra. Pasargadae

Mithra was first and foremost a god of covenant, but also associated with light and sun. He is the main purveyor of the *khvarenah*, and the qualities that *Yt. 13:95* recognizes in him, namely to support authority and vanquish rebellion, are predicated on his control over the *khvarenah*. As such, the primary symbol of Mithra within the context of Median ideology should be in reference to *khvarenah* and not solar luminescence. In fact, the

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the Assyrian winged figures, and even their guardian sphinxes, whether inside or outside, were not apotropaic, but were there to project the king's majesty and grandeur rather than scare spirits off. Kings were inclined to display their strengths and not their weaknesses, especially in the Iranian context.

<sup>568</sup> See for instance Sekunda 2010, 268-71.

<sup>569</sup> For Cyrus's dynastic hold on the Elamite capital city of Anshan, see Potts 2005; for the use of this title in the Babylonian context, see Zourmatzi 2011.

<sup>570</sup> Kuhrt 2007, I:87 (quoting Arrian); Briant 1996, 106 and 108.

regal crown of the winged figure projects just that (Fig. 245). Granted that the origin of this complex crown was foreign, i.e., the Egyptian *`atef* crown (single cone) or the *hem-hem* crown (triple cone) that entered Iranian iconography via Syria or Mesopotamia (Figs. 243-44),<sup>571</sup> but so were the origins of the lotus, sunflower, and the winged-disk. Although they are of foreign origin, they were adopted because they could represent the Iranian concept of *khvarenah*. Borrowing without adaptation simply had no value.

The Egyptian-type crown was adopted because it could admirably project the full cycle of the *khvarenah*, as in the Persepolis brick panel of Fig. 207. At the bottom of the crown we have pearl roundels with concentric circles on a slightly spherical surface. Instead of stacked lotuses, we have a cluster of reeds tied together to indicate the rise of the *khvarenah* from the waters. And finally, at the top we have solar-disks that radiate the *khvarenah* (Fig. 245). It is perhaps no mere coincidence that the *Bondahesh* states that the "*khvarenah* of Fereydun sat at the bottom of the *reed*."<sup>572</sup> Since Fereydun is the one who defeats and captures *Zahhāk* in the *Shāhnāme*, Cyrus's lore must have been partially transplanted onto this mythical hero of Indo-Iranian past. In addition, because the serpent was associated with the waters, especially in the Elamite tradition, the symbol of a solar-disk on the head of a rising snake projected the rise of the *khvarenah* from the waters.<sup>573</sup> The crown completed the *regal* outfit of Mithra, in tune with the title *khsathrapati* that he formerly had (see sec. XI.9).



Fig. 246 – Seal with fish-clad deity behind the Moon god. Suren Collection



Fig. 247 – Neo Babylonian seal. Hermitage Museum



Fig. 248 – Assyrian basin. Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

As for the broken fish-clad figure, it clearly projected an aquatic deity. Even though it was inspired by Assyrian or Neo Babylonian prototypes (Figs. 247-48), in the Iranian context, it represented *Apam Napāt*, or the Child of the Waters. Like the plate of Fig. 53,

<sup>571</sup> For the origins and subsequent popularity of this crown in Egypt, see sec. XVI.4 and note 788 supra,

<sup>572</sup> Dādāghi 1990, 151.

<sup>573</sup> It is interesting to note that, according to Kellens, the Vedic *Apam Napāt* was described as a serpent at the bottom of the sea; Kellens 2010-11, Cours 6.

in which Apam Napāt is associated with the moon god, an Elamite seal (Fig. 246) from the Surena collection shows a similar fish-clad deity following the Moon deity sitting on a crescent carried by hoofed creatures like the one depicted in Fig. 237. As Lord of the Night, Apam Napāt had always been associated with the moon, and had to be invoked for nighttime ceremonies held around the fire.

This once again exemplifies the adaptation of foreign ideas to Iranian needs, and provides visual proof for the Median ideology that, according to *Yt.13.95*, gave equal status to Mithra and Apam Napāt. If the effigy of one had to be displayed, so must have the other. As such, these two prominent bas-reliefs provide clear proof that Cyrus, and probably Cambyses,<sup>574</sup> adhered to the kingly ideology that the Medes had previously formulated and did not favor a Mazdean one. The preceding conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that Cyrus's generals had erected temples to Mithra and Anāhitā (as Apam Napāt's substitute), and not Ahura Mazda.<sup>575</sup>

Finally, we have a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Greek copy of Darius's letter to the *satrap* Gadatas in which he scolds him for his disrespect toward a sanctuary dear to his predecessors:

... you have taxed the sacred gardeners of Apollo and compelled them to cultivate a profane land in disrespect of my ancestors' reverence for the deity who spoke to the Persians with words of truth.<sup>576</sup>

Even though Pierre Briant has suggested that this copy is a "fake," I have argued that forgery needs a motive, and one can hardly find any incentive for reproducing, in the midst of a Roman Empire at war with Iran, a translation of Darius's words concerning the temple of Apollo in Magnesia of Meander, unless its purpose was to assure the continued function of this sanctuary as one dedicated to a solar deity.<sup>577</sup> Darius was certainly not insinuating that any of his ancestors (read predecessors) were Apollo worshipers. When translating Persian texts, Greeks always took the liberty of changing concepts and names into more understandable ones. This temple was probably dedicated at first to Mithra, the deity that Cyrus's Median generals favoured. Apollo came to replace Mithra at a later

<sup>574</sup> If Herodotus (III, 65) is to be trusted, when Cambyses asks his followers to seek revenge on Gaumāta, he does it "in the name of the *gods* of [his] royal house" and not Ahura Mazda (or Zeus in the Greek context).

<sup>575</sup> Strabo (XI.8.4); Soudavar 2003, 107-111; Bivar 1998, 12-13; Razmjou 2005, 150.

<sup>576</sup> *DMM* (preserved in Greek); see Lecoq 1996, 277. The text appears on a stele from the Louvre (MA 2934). The Greeks regularly translated Mithra as Apollo, and in any case, Darius's predecessors could not have revered this Greek deity.

<sup>577</sup> Soudavar 2003, 108-111; for Briant's article, see: [www.achemenet.com/pdf/grecs/gadatas.pdf](http://www.achemenet.com/pdf/grecs/gadatas.pdf).

date.<sup>578</sup> In any event, Darius was enraged by Gadatas's lack of sensitivity for a deity that members of his family had worshiped. *Vis à vis* an outsider, family pride and prestige was more important than ideology, even if it meant protecting a Mithraic sanctuary that was not to his liking.

Against this background, Darius's promotion of Ahura Mazda at the expense of the Median deities must be regarded as a major religious upheaval. And like all such upheavals, it was accompanied by much turmoil, factional animosity, and infighting. It was in fact a true revolution, a revolution that Zoroaster had perhaps unsuccessfully attempted to bring about before him.

### XII.3 - Situating Zoroaster in Time and Space

We have already produced much evidence in support of the Traditional Date for Zoroaster, according to which he must have been active in the first half of the sixth century BC (circa 618-541 BC). To fully understand the role he played in the spread of the religion that bears his name and the mechanism by which it spread across the Iranian plateau, we must first find his powerbase and assess his stature therewith.



Fig. 249 – Raga within the Achaemenid Empire

The crucial evidence is offered by the author of *Y.19* (see Appendix II), who suggests that Ahura Mazda gifted the world with five levels of leadership, which he then expounds through a series of questions and answers:

<sup>578</sup> Cyrus's general, Mazares, gave Magnesia along with the plain of Meander "to his army to pillage" (Her. I:108-10). If there ever was an Apollo sanctuary there, it probably didn't fare well. Harpagus, who then became satrap of Magnesia, either rededicated a ruined temple to Mithra or erected a new one in its stead.

*Y.19.18.* (Q) Who are the leaders? (A.) They are the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, the nation-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fifth, except for the nation in which Zarathushtra reigns. Zarathushtra's Raga has four chiefs (only).

(Q) Who are the chiefs there? (A) (They are) the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fourth.

Since the author's aim was to make his Prophet more powerful than all rulers, he placed him above nation-chiefs in every region of the world, except in Raga where he saw no need for it. For Raga, he enumerated only four hierarchical levels, Zoroaster occupying the fourth as nation-chief. It clearly designates Zoroaster as the ruler of Raga.

Mary Boyce admits that already in the Achaemenid era the priesthood believed that Zoroaster was born in Raga; but trapped in her dogmatic beliefs about Zoroaster, she dismisses this information by relying on a presumed theory that there existed a similarly named region, somewhere in the Eastern Iranian World, which was his real birth place.<sup>579</sup> In other words, the very clear information of *Y.19.18* must be wrong because it doesn't fit the dogma; Zoroaster had to be from BMAC or its vicinity! In fact, the rulership of Zoroaster is corroborated by supporting evidence.

Firstly, by his own words where he laments in *Y.46* being chased from his land:

*Y.46.1* - To what land shall I turn, and whither turning shall I go? For my kinsmen and my peers have deserted me. Not the people, nor their wicked rulers, favor me. How shall I satisfy Thee, O Ahura Mazda?

A simple priest might be chased from his temple, but Zoroaster complains about the loss of his land, and kinsmen who no longer support him. What's more, the animosity that he attracts comes from other nations and their rulers, beyond the borders of Raga. He is thus a man of stature and not a mere preacher unknown to the outside world.

Secondly, by the regal attire he wears on the BNF seal (Fig. 232). Indeed, if the engraver's aim was solely to follow the *Avesta* and emphasize Zoroaster's possession of the Aryan *khvarenah*, he would have simply put a winged-disk above him. But if in addition, he depicts him in regal attire, it's because he considered him as a ruler in his own right. Political or religious propaganda is seldom built on a non-existent foundation; there usually exists a basis, no matter how thin, which is then strengthened and amplified in successive stages. So much insistence on Zoroaster's rulership must therefore reflect a certain reality: He truly was the ruler of Raga, no matter how important or unimportant Raga was.

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<sup>579</sup> Boyce 1996, II:8.

Because of Raga's strategic position on the Silk Road (Fig. 249), and within the Median Empire, one can very well imagine that neither the Medes were happy with a zealot who praised Ahura Mazdā, nor neighboring kinglets and governors. Astyages must then have invaded Raga, and pushed Zoroaster to flee.<sup>580</sup> But where to? The only logical place was Persis, which was beyond the reach of Astyages, and where its rulers revered Ahura Mazdā. Zoroaster sought refuge there, with Darius's father Vishtāspa who was sympathetic to his cause:

*Y.46.14* - O Zarathushtra, what man is thy faithful friend for the consummation of the Great Cause? Who wishes to have thy mission announced? Verily, he is Kavi Vishtāspa...

But not everybody applauded the arrival of Zoroaster. Although the caste of Persian fire-keepers, i.e., the *pārsas*, whom Zoroaster calls the *kavis*, were also Mazdā worshipers, they did not necessarily welcome him into Persis. That is why, along with the *karpans*, Zoroaster complains about the tyranny of the *kavis*, even though Vishtāspa himself was a *kavi*:

*Y.46.11* - The Karpans and the Kavis have *tyrannized* over humanity. Their evil actions are destructive of Life. Verily, the conscience of such a one shall torment his soul. And thus, when they shall come to the Bridge of Judgment, their abode for endless ages shall be in the House of the Lie.

According to *Denkard VII.4.65* and *VII.5.4*, once at Vishtāspa's court, Zoroaster had to submit to numerous tests and ordeals, probably administered by the *kavis/pārsas*. His stature as a prince must have played an important role in his acceptance by Vishtāspa; to the extent that the latter's daughter, Amytis<sub>2</sub> (Humaiti), may have married Zoroaster (see Table 4). Although Ctesias's account is garbled, and confuses Amytis<sub>1</sub> (daughter of Astyages) with Amytis<sub>2</sub> (daughter of Vishtāspa), it emphasizes that she was married to a "Spitamas" and had two sons from him. Throughout the *Avesta* (e.g., *Yt.13.94*), Zoroaster is designated as a "Spitamaid" (*spitamō zaraθuštrō*); a designation that is akin to Darius's "Achaemenid" affiliation. It is confirmed by the *Bondaresh*, which says that Zoroaster's eighth ancestor was called "Spitaman." As such, Vishtāspa would have welcomed the marriage of his daughter to a neighboring prince, even though the latter was on the run. Ctesias's "Spitamas" can hardly refer to anyone but Zoroaster.

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<sup>580</sup> For texts that attribute Zoroaster's kingdom and birthplace to Raga, see Herzfeld, 1947, 61-65. The chasing of Zoroaster from his land must have coincided with the turmoils that afflicted Astyages's end of reign, and allowed Cyrus to topple him from the Median throne, circa 555 BC. The conversion date of Vishtāspa had to be modified within an unsubstantiated reign that reached 120 years in the *Bondaresh*.

Ctesias then purports that Cyrus killed Spitama and married Amytis. But one can very well imagine what Ctesias had heard, something like: "after Spitama's death, Cyrus married his wife," which in the course of successive transmissions was changed into a Greek-like tragedy in which Cyrus had to kill the husband in order to marry his wife. Zoroaster, however, died at the advanced age of seventy-seven; there was no need for Cyrus to kill him. On the other hand, it would have made perfect sense for Cyrus to marry Amytis<sub>2</sub> after Zoroaster's death, not only to consolidate his relationship with the main branch of the Achaemenids, but also to win the favor of Zoroaster's followers.

Zoroaster's sojourn in Persis must have paved the way for, if not the conversion of a few *pārsas* to his cause, at least for bringing their ideology closer to his. *Pārsas* held a weapon standing before the fire and were probably more involved with warfare than theology. On the other hand, the members of the Hvogva family, whom Zoroaster entrusted with spreading the tenets of his religion, seemed to have belonged to a caste of learned priesthood; they were urged to act as role models, and explain the laws of Ahura Mazdā to people (*Y.46.16-17*). By contrast, when addressing his own kinsmen (*Y.46.15*), Zoroaster encourages them to be able to distinguish between Right and Wrong. This, in conjunction with his earlier lament about them (*Y.46.1*), shows that they had neither totally espoused his teachings nor had followed him in exile.<sup>581</sup> He must have fled with only a few devotees.

Over the long run, if a Mazdean religion was to take root among Iranian nations, it had to be through the more theological-minded disciples of Zoroaster rather than the *pārsas*. Like Shāh Esmā'il who imposed Shiism on the Iranian population, Darius promoted Mazdaism as a new state religion. But the task to popularize it befell the Zoroastrian priesthood, who, once the Achaemenids were removed from power, saw an opportunity to fashion it for its own glory. That is also what the Shiite clergy undertook after the fall of the Safavids. In both cases, the clergy had to patiently develop its theology under the aegis of monarchs who shared the same passionate veneration for Ahura Mazdā, or for 'Ali, until a time when they could emerge from the shadow of their protectors.

#### **XII.4 - Turning Astyages into Zahhāk**

A major mystery of Iranian history is the infamous tyrant Zahhāk, whom the *Shāhnāme* and histories of ancient Iran describe as having two serpents springing out of his

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<sup>581</sup> Zoroaster not only addresses his own kinsmen as "O ye Spitamaids," but also emphasizes that they were descendants of Haechtaspa (*Y.46.15*). Chances are that Haechtaspa is the one who first ruled over Ragae, and Zoroaster is reminding his progenies to defend his legacy *vis à vis* the Medes.

shoulders. A closer look at the sources, however, reveals that he is not all that evil, since he is described as more "powerful than pharaohs" with achievements "unequaled by any of the prophets," was more powerful than any known human being, and was a king whose lineage reached back to the primordial man/king Gayumarth. His Iranian "name" was said to be Bivarasp, which, by its very meaning (*bivar*=10000, *asp*=horse), designated a man of immense fortitude and fortune,<sup>582</sup> it was more likely to be an epithet than a name and correlates with the **Aspandas** that Diodorus of Sicily purports to be the name of Astyages.<sup>583</sup> Furthermore, his descent from Gayumarth, who gave the Aryan people its *chithra/chisa* (i.e., *khvarenah*), qualified him as a legitimate Iranian ruler.<sup>584</sup> Without the *khvarenah*, he could not have reigned at all, let alone for a thousand years.

While later sources provide an Arab genealogy for him, the tenth-century historians Bal`ami and Ebn-e Meskavayh explain that Zahhāk, whom the Zoroastrian priests called Bivarasp, was nicknamed "Azh-dahāq" because he had two protrusions on his shoulders that looked like snakes (*azhdahā*).<sup>585</sup> The powerful Bivarasp had therefore been likened to the mythical three-headed Indo-Iranian snake-monster that the *Avesta* names "Azhi-dahāga." But why? And who was Bivarasp?

The answer is provided by the Armenian chronicler, Moses Khorenats`i. He mentions that the last King of the Medes, named "Azhdahak," married the sister of Tigran, the King of Armenia. Although he credits the actual killing of Azhdahak to Tigran, he acknowledges that he did it with the "willing help and encouragement of Cyrus." He also relates that because of intermarriage with the Medes, later kings of Armenia were said to be descendants of "Azhdahak," which he says "meant dragon in our tongue."<sup>586</sup>

As early as the 1900s, scholars had noticed a great similarity between Herodotus's story of Astyages and that of Azhi-dahāga, not only phonetically, but also in the narrative details, such as: They were both defeated by the defection or mutiny of their own people, and, both Astyages and Azhi-dahāga were left alive after defeat. And, whereas Berossus

<sup>582</sup> Tabarī 1996, 1:136, Ibn al-Athīr 1996, I:264, Dādagī 1990, 128.

<sup>583</sup> Diodorus (IX:20): "When Astibarās, the king of the Medes, died of old age in Ecbatana, his son Aspandas (Ἀσπᾶνδαν), whom the Greeks call Astyages, succeeded to the throne."

<sup>584</sup> See *Yt. 13:87*, and its interpretation in Soudavar 2006b, 169-70.

<sup>585</sup> Bal`ami 1999, I:102; Ebn-e Meskavayh 1976, I:55.

<sup>586</sup> Khorenats`i 1978, 110-123. Martin Schwartz follows James Russell in suggesting that the identification of Astyages with Azhi-dahāga was due to a double conflation: A phonetic one between Azhidahak and the name of the last Median king "Astuag" that Khorenats`i supposedly got from Eusebius, and the confusion arising from the Armenian word *mar`k* (Mede) and Middle Persian *mār* (snake); Schwartz 2012, 276. Yet, no contradiction emerges from either of these conflations to invalidate them as evidence. To the contrary, they tie in well with the explanation we offer on the next page and the *Shāhnāme* (see note 637 *infra*).

attributes the construction of certain gardens in Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar II trying to recreate—in lower Mesopotamia—a Median climate for his wife Amytis, daughter of Astyages,<sup>587</sup> the *Bondahesh* and other Zoroastrian texts relate that Azhi-dahāga built a dwelling in Babylon.<sup>588</sup> There are simply too many correlating factors to ignore the possibility of common identity between Astyages and Azhi-dahāga.<sup>589</sup>

What is suggested by the above is that the last of the Medes, i.e., Astyages, otherwise called Bivarasp, was vilified by subsequent chroniclers who nicknamed him Azhi-dahāga, or snake-man.<sup>590</sup> They also wiped out his ancestors and predecessors, by giving their regnal years to Azhi-dahāga, in order to credit him with one long reign of one thousand years. Such a hypothesis meshes perfectly with our suggestion about Zoroaster being chased from his fiefdom of Raga by Astyages. In the eyes of Zoroastrians, Astyages had committed a cardinal sin and merited eternal damnation. He was thus equated with the mythical monster Azhi-dahāga. But such a vilification is never made up out of thin air. The question is: where did the Zoroastrian priesthood get the idea to turn Astyages into a snake-man?



Fig. 250 - Astyages's crown on Mithra's head. Pasargadae

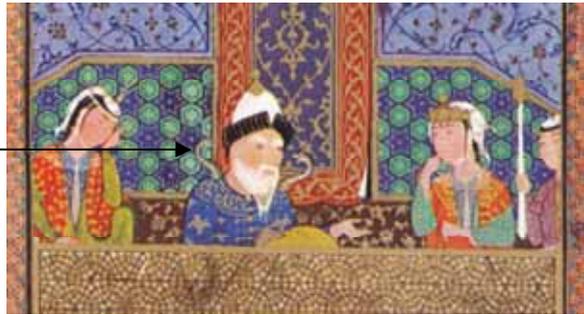


Fig. 251- Zahhāk with his shoulder snakes (Freer Gallery)

As far as I can tell, Astyages was nicknamed as such for two reasons. Firstly, the crown of the Pasargadae Mithra—which I explained to reflect Median kingly ideology—must have been his. For Astyages, who had to compete with neighboring kings with whom he had struck matrimonial alliances, it was essential to show pomp and grandeur, whereas

<sup>587</sup> Kuhrt 2007, II:44. Briant notes that Berossus's account of Amytis cannot be reconciled with facts (Briant 1996, 35), even though the name of Amytis concords with Ctesias's account, and despite the fact that Emily Kuhrt believes Berossus had access to "original documents." What is of interest to us, though, is that the Babylonian Berossus saw a tie between Astyages and Babylon, which concords with the *Bondahesh*.

<sup>588</sup> Pakzad 2005, 361; Dadagi 1990, 138: "Zahhāk's mansion in Babylon was just like a crane (*kolang*)."

<sup>589</sup> See Oldham 1905, 37-40, for an early identification of Astyages with Azhi-dahāga.

<sup>590</sup> Schwartz 2012.

for Cyrus, who had subjugated all his neighbours, there was no such need. On the other hand, Cyrus, who so highly praised a local god (Marduk) in the Babylonian context (i.e. on the Cyrus Cylinder), would have certainly done the same in the Iranian context. More than being his god, Mithra must have been the god of the Median Empire that he had inherited from his grandfather. It therefore made sense to adorn Mithra in the most regal fashion possible. Chances are that Cyrus hadn't had time to create a new imperial crown when he got to Pasargadae. He must have therefore opted for Astyages's crown to adorn Mithra's head. And that's where Zoroastrians got the idea to turn Astyages into a snake-man. They simply took the two snakes of Astyages's crown and planted it on his shoulders (Figs. 250-51).

Secondly, as we have explained,<sup>591</sup> in the game of changing names, people in general, and Iranians in particular, try to have a phonetic similarity between the old and the new, no matter how tenuous it is. Thus, Astyages's name Ishtevega (Babyl. *Iš-tu-me-gu*), which reflected the Old Iranian form *\*Ršti-vaiga-* (swinging the spear, lance-hurler) was switched to Azhi-dahāga, both ending with *-ga*, in order to turn him into a snake-man.<sup>592</sup>

### XII.5 - Assessing the Magophonia

In describing a very odd event that he names Magophonia, Herodotus recounts (III:79) that after Darius and his six conspirators had killed the usurper magus Gaumāta/Smerdis:

... five of them carrying the Magi's heads ran outside with much shouting and commotion, calling all Persians to aid, telling what they had done and showing the heads; at the same time *they killed every Magus that came in their way*. The Persians, when they learned what had been done by the seven and how the Magi had tricked them, resolved to follow the example set, *and drew their daggers* and killed all the Magi they could find; and if nightfall had not stopped them they would not have left one Magus alive. *This day* is the greatest holy day that all Persians alike keep; they celebrate a great festival on it, which they call the Massacre of the Magi (Magophonia); while the festival lasts no Magus may go outdoors, but during this day the Magi remain in their houses.

As unbelievable as such a general massacre of the magi may sound, Ctesias (who does not always see eye to eye with Herodotus), as well as Agathias, also relate the event and provide added credibility to it.<sup>593</sup> Agathias (2.26.4), however, explains that those who

<sup>591</sup> See note 505 supra.

<sup>592</sup> In post-Revolution Tehran, Vali-ye `ahd (Crown prince) square was changed to the Vali-ye `asr (the Mahdi) square; Sorayyā street was changed to Somayya (both women, with a name starting with an S sound), but Takht-e Jamshid avenue was changed to Tāleqani, only on account of the T sound at the beginning.

<sup>593</sup> de Jong 1997, 377.

were massacred were the usurper's "political and religious sympathizers." The story is further supported by the *Bondahesh*, which describes a state of chaos and fratricide when Darius (alias Bahman) ascended to the throne:

"In that same millennium, when kingship came to Bahman son of Esfandyār, [Erān-shahr] was in a bleak state and Iranians destroyed one another."<sup>594</sup>

Moreover, there are a number of phenomena that can only be explained through the Magophonia. First and foremost is the fact that the *Avesta* does not use the term *magu*, despite its common use in Iranian languages to designate a priest (see sec. XI.15). Zoroastrians chose instead the artificial word *athravan*, which also meant fire-priest or fire-keeper. It did not last very long, since Zoroastrians gradually switched back to *magu*. But there was no such option in the aftermath of Magophonia when the *magi* were being massacred. *Pārsa* couldn't be used either as it designated the Achaemenid line of priests, whom Zoroaster referred to as *kavis*. The only choice was to create an artificial word, *athravan*. It was modeled after the Achaemenid *pārsa* whom Zoroastrian priests tried to replace after Alexander's conquest of Iran.

Second is a set of emblematic compositions in the doorways of Persepolis, usually described as a "hero" or "royal hero" grappling with a chimera. But the decorative programs of ancient Iranian palaces were neither to illustrate mythology, nor to reflect a circus scene before the king. They were all conceived to project the majesty and power of the king, either through the support that was shown to him by deities and his own subjects, and/or through his own extraordinary deeds. They essentially served as propaganda tools; and the more dominant and impressive the composition was, the more important the message it was supposed to convey was. By their position in the doorways of a ceremonial hall, *and their impressive size*, this beast-killing series of bas-reliefs must have reflected Darius's most important concerns, i.e., the annihilation of the Median ideology on the one hand, and the killing of the usurper Gaumāta, on the other.

We have already explained that, as the most iconic motif of Persepolis, the lion-and-bull emblem projected day and night as a continuous revolution, in opposition to a world divided into two realms. But to establish this unified vision, the Median dual realms had to be annihilated first. And that's what the killing of the bull in one doorway of Darius's palace, and the lion in the other, were meant to convey (Figs. 252-53). In the same way that he buried Lydian coins struck with lion-bull motifs in the corners of his palace, Darius was projecting, above ground, the annihilation of the Median day-night division.

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<sup>594</sup> Dādagi 1990, 140; Pakzad 2005, 366.



Fig. 252 -Darius fighting a lion.  
Persepolis



Fig. 253 - Darius fighting a bull.  
Persepolis



Fig. 254 - Darius grappling with a  
lion chimera. British Museum caste



Fig. 255 - Assyrian lion hunt.  
British Museum



Fig. 256 - Urartuan killing a lion with a  
solar emblem (†). Louvre



Fig. 257 - Griffin and scorpion-tailed  
chimera (†). Ziviyeh pectoral. MMA



Fig. 258 - Griffin on Nero's breast  
plate. Istanbul Archeological Museum



Fig. 259 - Darius grappling with a  
griffin. Persepolis

In ancient Assyrian traditions, the king was often portrayed hunting a lion, or occasionally a bull, but never the two in the same context (Fig. 255). A seal imprint from the British Museum, as well as palace drawings, shows an Assyrian king grabbing a lion by his mane and killing it with a dagger.<sup>595</sup> We also have an Urartu belt with a series of gold plaques depicting a similar composition; and as it most often happens in Northwest Iran, the lion is marked by a solar emblem (Fig. 256). Even though the prototype of these compositions may have been Assyrian or Urartuan, when adopted they were supposed to be relevant in the Persian context. These doorjamb images are neither about a hunt, nor a singular display of strength; rather they project a brawl ending in an assassination by single or double daggers. The brawl aspect is emphasized by the fact that the animals are *grappling* with the hero. As such, they recall Herodotus's description by which Darius and his co-conspirators stabbed the Magus Gaumāta, as well as every magus that they encountered afterwards, with a *knife* (III:78-79):

... as Gobryas and the Magus wrestled together, Darius stood helpless in the darkness, afraid of stabbing Gobryas. Gobryas, seeing Darius stand helpless, asked why he did not lend a hand; and he said, "Because I am afraid for you, that I might stab you." And Gobryas answered, "Stick your sword even if it goes through us both." So Darius complying stabbed with his *knife* and somehow stuck the Magus.

Parivash Jamzadeh has noted that the hero's "mode of fighting is like subduing a human foe."<sup>596</sup> Her description befits the stabbing of the lion monster (Fig. 254), which must represent the Median magi in general, and Gaumāta in particular.<sup>597</sup> Indeed, this type of winged chimera with a lion face, bull's horns, bird feathers, ostrich feet, and a scorpion tail had long been associated with Mithra and the sun, as they often carried a sun emblem on their hindquarters (Fig. 417). In addition, since scorpions were always associated with Mithraic congregations (see sec. VI.1), it stands to reason that this scorpion-tailed chimera was emblematic of the magi that engaged in bull sacrificing ceremonies. Ctesias's remark (Fr.13 §12) that Gaumāta had Bardiya killed by feeding him bull's blood provides further confirmation for such an assumption.

Be that as it may, it is clear that as a group, these bas-reliefs were in praise of actions undertaken by Darius and not an imaginary hero. All credit was given to him for killing the reviled magus, and if Darius is portrayed in non-royal garb, it's because he was not yet a king when stabbing Gaumāta.

<sup>595</sup> Curtis & Reade 2005, 188. To my knowledge, we don't have an Assyrian king killing the bull one-on-one.

<sup>596</sup> Jamzadeh 1995, 9.

<sup>597</sup> See also Soudavar 2012b, 53-55.

The propaganda tone in praise of Darius's deed seems to have increased from his palace to Xerxes's Hall of one Hundred Columns. The escalation is visible in two ways: a) the increase in size of the beasts relative to Darius (Fig. 399 vs. Fig. 254), b) the addition of a fourth doorjamb with a griffin (Fig. 259).<sup>598</sup> By virtue of its eagle head and wings, the griffin was supposed to fly high in the sky, and that's why the Greeks and the Romans associated it with the sun.<sup>599</sup> Apollo's chariot was said to be pulled by a griffin, and the Roman Emperor Nero (r. 54-68), whom Tiridates I of Armenia (r. 63-?) had likened to Mithra, had two griffins on his armor plate (Fig. 258).<sup>600</sup> Moreover, in Iran, the griffin had been traditionally associated with the scorpion-tailed chimera, with or without a sun-emblem (Figs. 99, 257, 417). Its stabbing thus conveyed the same animosity toward the Mithraic magi as did the stabbing of the scorpion-tailed chimera.



Fig. 260 – A *div* with a dragon tail from the Tahnāsh Shāhnāmah. MMA

This escalation in form and content may go hand in hand with the zeal that Xerxes showed in pursuing those he saw as "*daiva*-worshippers" in his *XPh* inscriptions:

And among these nations there was a place where previously demons (Av. *daeva*, OP *daiva*) were worshiped. Afterwards, by the grace of Ahura Mazdā I destroyed that sanctuary of demons, and I proclaimed: 'The demons shall not be worshiped!'

As such, the transformation of the Indo-Iranian *daeva* into the Persian *div* (Fig. 260) is crucial to the understanding of the Magophonia as a milestone of Persian history.

<sup>598</sup> In a previous article (Soudavar 2012b, 54-55), I had mistakenly assumed that for maintaining symmetry, the group comprised four beasts in Darius's palace, as well as Xerxes's "harem" and Hall of One Hundred Columns. A closer look at the plans and images, however, revealed that the first two did not have the griffin. I am indebted to Shahrokh Razmjou for verifying this for me in situ.

<sup>599</sup> True 2002, 107; Wikipedia: "Griffin."

<sup>600</sup> Cassius Dio, 63.5.2; see the full quotation further below, on page 283.

## XII.6 - Turning the Indo-Iranian *Daeva* into *Div*

A major dilemma of Iranian history is how a word, which in the early Indo-European context referred to divinities with a positive connotation, turned into the demoniac Persian *div*, but kept its original positive connotation in Sanskrit as *deva*, in Latin as *deus*, and in French as *dieu*.

Citing a number of previous studies, Clarisse Herrens Schmidt and Jean Kellens conclude that in the Gathas, the *daivas* hadn't as yet "become demons" but constituted a category of "genuine gods" who had been "rejected." While other scholars have suggested a gradual transformation, they foresaw the possibility of an abrupt change if "the survival of a positive sense for \**daiva*-" could be detected somewhere in an Iranian dialect. They present four possibilities, but reject them all for not being "conclusive." Their most important one is the onomastic evidence. They proffer that names with a *div/daiva* component only existed in Sogdiana, where they insinuate Buddhism might have been of influence, and therefore, push it aside and leave the whole discussion in limbo.<sup>601</sup>

But their contention about the onomastic evidence is simply not true. Chronicles of the Mongol and Safavid eras name, for instance, Mohammad-e Div and Shams-od-din-e Div, who ruled in Māzandarān.<sup>602</sup> The Safavid chronicler Eskandar Beyk relates that a certain Mirak-e Div, who was from the "caste of the *divs* of Māzandarān," was appointed deputy governor to a prince.<sup>603</sup> For Eskandar Beyk, not only were these rulers part of a caste surnamed as "the *divs*," but they belonged to Māzandarān, the very region that the *Shāhnāme* says was ruled by *divs* (see also sec. XV.2). While these rulers proudly assumed the name Div, others associated the word *div* with demoniac creatures. A divide was thus created at one point in time, with some Iranians demonizing a certain category of divinities, while others refused to follow suit.

Such a crucial divide about religious beliefs could only happen as the result of a coercive policy implemented from above, over a *sustained* period of time. A one-time outbreak, no matter how intense, couldn't have provoked this. If the dogmas about Zoroaster belonging to the second millennium BC, and Cyrus being a Zoroastrian, are set aside, logic dictates that the only cataclysmic event capable of producing such a situation was

<sup>601</sup> Herrens Schmidt & Kellens 1993.

<sup>602</sup> Khorshāh 2000: 227; Qomi 1980, II:690-702. In Transoxiana, the name Div-dād (div-given) is found with some odd combinations: Div-dād b. Div-dast (Tabari 1996, XIV:6337), or Div-dād b. Zardosht (Gardizi 1984, 182).

<sup>603</sup> Eskandar beyk, I:210 : میرک دیو را که از طبقه دیوان مازندران بمزید عقل و کیاست ممتاز بود بوکالت شاهزاده تعیین کردند

the Magophonia, an event that Herodotus explains in detail, but nobody seems to assess its consequences.

The Magophonia was essentially the eruption of long-simmering animosity between the *pārsas*, who revered Ahura Mazdā, and the Median magi who believed in the supremacy of Mithra and Apam Napāt. Imagine Cyrus conquering the Median Empire and trying to preserve its administration as well as religious institutions. Inevitably, members of the royal family and Cyrus's kinsmen must have tried to position themselves in the higher echelons of the hierarchy. Darius, for instance, managed to be "quiver-bearer" to Cyrus and "lance-bearer" to Cambyses. Along with the princes, the *pārsas* must have asked for their fair share—or perhaps unfair share—of power.

In the same way that the Amon clergy of Egypt resented, under Akhenaten (r. 1351–1334 BC), the takeover of official functions by the Atonian priesthood, the Median Magi must have resented the rise in prestige and function of their Persian opponents. But unlike the Amon priests who were successful in recapturing their lost privileges after the demise of Akhenaten, the coup d'état that Gaumāta and the Median magi concocted after the death of Cambyses lasted only a few months. The Magophonia must have erupted in reaction to the harshness of the actions undertaken by Gaumāta and the Median magi.<sup>604</sup>

Herodotus, as well as Darius (in Bisotun), hints at the reign of terror implemented by Gaumāta. But it is Ctesias who provides us with a more vivid description of the harsh measures taken when he recounts that Bardiya was killed by making him drink bull's blood. He also relates that Vishtāspa's daughter, Amytis<sub>2</sub>, committed suicide in the process, but chances are that she and her two sons were actually killed by the instigation of Gaumāta.<sup>605</sup>

No matter how mild or intense the Magophonia was at first, it seems that it provoked a witch-hunting atmosphere that escalated under Xerxes, for in his *XPh* inscription he not only claims to have destroyed the sanctuary of demons in an undefined province of the empire, but to have forbidden the worship of rival deities branded as *daivas*. By all indications, this province was the Māzandarān, which, throughout its history, always resisted sudden religious changes, mostly because of the formidable protection it enjoyed from the Alborz chain of mountains. It resisted conversion to Islam after the Arab

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<sup>604</sup> As Herzfeld rightly points out, Herodotus emphasizes that the Magophonia massacre happened on a festival day, probably the Mithrakāna (Mehregān); Herzfeld 1947, 206-207. Throughout history, a festive day has often been chosen to mount an insurrection or stealth operation. See also note 636 *infra*.

<sup>605</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 68.

invasions, and must have equally resisted the imposition of Darius's brand of Mazdaism. Not only did we see that the names with a "div" component remained popular in that area, but the *Avesta's* frequent references to "Mazandari *daevas*," reflected the demonization of a category of people who refused Mazdaism and clung to earlier gods, especially Mithra.<sup>606</sup> They incarnated the heretic and the villain whom Zoroastrian prayers regularly sought to eliminate.<sup>607</sup> By their very name, the Mazandari *daevas* indicate that the province Xerxes had singled out must have been the Māzandarān. Furthermore, while the early Achaemenids branded their religious opponents as *daiva* worshipers, Zoroastrian priests further escalated the rhetoric by labeling the Mithraic magi as *khrafstar-ish daevas* (scorpion-like demons), thus associating snakes and scorpions with them (see Appendix II.5). Moreover, the provincial rulers of the Gilān and Māzandarān areas often had epithets such as *div*, *amirag/amira*, *mirak* and *sa`luk*, which all link back to the Mithraic societies (see sec. XVI.1). They clearly vouch for the strong survival of non-Zoroastrian beliefs in the northern regions of Iran.

### XII.7 - The Pārsa Academy

In his *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon (c. 430-354 BC) asserts (8.1.23) that "for the first time the college of magi was instituted" under Cyrus. This college of the magi was certainly Pasargadae (Her.1.125: Πασαργάδαι), since Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) affirms (VI.39) that, in his days, "Pasargada" was "held by the Magi." This name must reflect OP *Pārsakadag* meaning "dwelling of the *pārsas*," especially since, Pliny's contemporary, Quintus Curtius Rufus spells it as "Parsagada."<sup>608</sup> The fourth-century BC Greek writer, Anaximenes of Lampsacus, who relates that Pasargadae meant "Persian camp,"<sup>609</sup> only provides a half-truth because the suffix *kadag* implies residency.<sup>610</sup> Pasargadae was not

<sup>606</sup> Gherardo Gnoli, taking his cue from Ilya Gershevitch, noted that Mithra and the goddess Anāhitā "besides being two *yazatas* for the authors of the Avestan Yashts and two *bagas* for Artaxerxes II, were also two *daevas* for the disciples of a religion that was repudiated by the Zoroastrians"; Gnoli, 2000, 32. Gnoli also refers to Gershevitch's analysis of *Yasht* 5:94, and *Yasht* 10:108, showing that those qualified as *daeva*-worshipers offered libations and sacrifices to Mithrā and Anāhitā.

<sup>607</sup> The "Mazandari *daevas*" expression has no Vedic parallel, and appears in *Y.27.1*, *Y.57.17*, 32, *Yt.1.32*, *Yt.5.22*, *Yt.9.4*, *Yt.11.12*, *Yt.15.8*, *Yt.17.125*, *Yt.19.26*, i.e., mostly in the Late *Avesta*. As such, it is proper to the Iranian context. One can hardly imagine a situation by which a whole region accepted to be named after demoniac creatures, and proudly kept that name thereafter. The naming process usually follows the opposite pattern. It's because the people of Māzandarān were regarded as demoniacs, or more likely heretics, that the expression "Mazandari *daevas*" came into being.

<sup>608</sup> Quintus Curtius (5.6.10): *Accessere ad hanc pecuniae summam captis Parsagadis sex milia talentum. Cyrus Parsagada urbem condiderat.* Pliny (VI.39): *inde ad orientem magi optinent phrasargida castellum, in quo cyri sepulchrum.* See also Soudavar 2012b, 56-58; Lecoq 1997: 146.

<sup>609</sup> Asher et al. 2007, 163.

<sup>610</sup> For instance *ātash-kadeh* is where the fire resides or is sheltered. Same for *dāneshkadeh*.

an encampment where Persians would come and go, but was a dwelling where certain *pārsas* took residence.

The name *Περσεπόλεως* (Persepolis)<sup>611</sup> that Greeks used for Darius's capital could not have meant "Persian City" (*Περσεσ-πόλεως*), nor "City of the Persians" (*Πέρσαι-πόλεως*); it neither made sense nor represented a known formula, and if that was the Greek writers' intent, they would have probably called it Perso-polis. But the city founded by Darius should have borne his name; it was probably named Pārsa-gerd, i.e., the city of the *pārsa*, since Darius was the ultimate *pārsa*. Therefore, the Greek "Persepolis" was a translation that they understood to indicate the Pārsa's *polis*.

As Vogelsang had noted, the word "Persian" in Darius's inscriptions was not necessarily an indicator of ethnicity, and could have meant something else.<sup>612</sup> The Normans who came to England were from Normandy, but Normandy itself got its name from the Vikings who settled there and whom the Franks referred to as "North man." The Germanic Saxons who came from Saxony got their name because of the weapon ("sax") that they carried. Thus prior to meaning a "man from Persia," where the *pārsas* had settled, *pārsa* must have had a meaning of its own. That we argued to be "fire priest."

It would be wrong to assume, as Stronach and Gropnick do,<sup>613</sup> that Pasargadae was Cyrus's capital. If it was meant to be his capital, it would have been named Kurosh-gerd, or something similar, but certainly not Pārsa-kadag, which referred to a priestly dwelling. Strabo (15.3.8) related that Cyrus built Pasargadae in the location where he first defeated Astyages, and referred to it as a "city" he founded, and not his capital.<sup>614</sup> Cyrus further honored that place by bringing the college of the *pārsas* and building a pavilion or palace. That does not mean that he moved his harem and administration there; in fact, there is no archeological evidence to warrant a "capital" labeling for Pasargadae.<sup>615</sup> Cyrus's capital must have remained in Anshan, for he still styled himself "King of Anshan" on the Cyrus Cylinder, more than sixteen years later.

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<sup>611</sup> This is the spelling used by Strabo (2.1.24).

<sup>612</sup> Vogelsang 1998, 2001.

<sup>613</sup> Stronach and Gropnick 2009.

<sup>614</sup> Strabo Geography 15.3.8: "Cyrus held Pasargadae in honour, because he there conquered Astyages the Mede in his last battle, transferred to himself the empire of Asia, founded a city, and constructed a palace as a memorial of his victory."

<sup>615</sup> In private conversation, Rémy Boucharlat, who has extensively excavated in Pasargade, has confirmed to me that there is absolutely no evidence Pasargadae was an active city, let alone a capital.



Fig. 261 – Warrior priest. British Museum



Fig. 262 - Old and young (i.e., father and son) warrior priests in Qizqapan (web)



Fig. 263 – Autophradates I with Ahura Mazda above fire edifice.

A famous votive plaque from the British Museum shows a Scythian priest wearing a short sword and holding the *barsom* wood sticks next to a fire (Fig. 261). It perfectly illustrates the double functions of the warrior priest called *pārsa*. In Qizqapan, we have a rendering of "*pārsa* son of *pārsa*" as two princes, one young and the other older, standing bow in hand by a fire altar (Fig. 262). Numerous seals reproduce similar compositions with one or two warrior priests standing by a fire altar.<sup>616</sup> As a group they attest to the high rank of the *pārsa* as an officiating priest presiding over fire ceremonies and/or as keepers of the fire. And the "*pārsa* son of *pārsa*" expression suggests that such a function, like so many other positions of prestige, was often hereditary.<sup>617</sup> Moreover, priestly positions required rigorous training, probably from a young age, which inevitably led to the formation of a privileged caste. Consequently, Herodotus's remark (I, 125) about the Persian tribes ("of these the *Pasargadae* are the most noble, of whom also the *Achaimenidae* are a clan") is really not off the mark. Even though he misapplies the name of the dwelling of the *pārsas* to their caste, he correctly perceives that the *pārsas* were a tribe within which the Achaemenids, or at least a certain branch of them, constituted a clan. Within this tribe, the bonds of loyalty must have been very strong. That is why

<sup>616</sup> For instance, on seals from Anatolia (Facella 2009, 406), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Kuhrt 2010, II:561), or from Persepolis (Garrison 2010, 384, fig. 32a).

<sup>617</sup> Certain offices seem to have been transmitted from father to son, like the guardianship of Cyrus's tomb as reported by Arrian; see Panaino 2009, 111.

Darius chose trusted *pārsas* to quell the rebellions of strategic areas: Dādarshi to Bactria, Hydarnes to Media, and Vaumisa to Armenia.<sup>618</sup>



Fig. 264 – "Zendān" fire edifice. Pasargadae

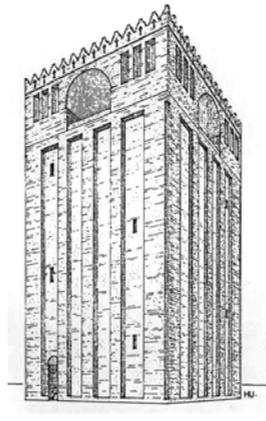


Fig. 265 – Fire tower at the center of Ardashir khvarrah (see Fig. 165)



Fig. 266 – Tomb of Darius II aligned with the Ka'ba fire edifice.

The caste of the *pārsas* probably wielded enormous political power within their territories and by creating Pasargadae, Cyrus was trying to win their support. If Achaemenes was the founder of this caste as we have suggested (see sec. XI.4), or at least one of its historically important figures, Cyrus had an incentive to remind the *pārsas* that he was indeed his descendant. Thus, following the Elamite tradition, he wrote his name—as founder of the edifice—in numerous corners of Pasargadae.<sup>619</sup> These repetitive inscriptions read: "I, Cyrus the king, an Achaemenid" (*CMa*), or "Cyrus, the great king, an Achaemenid" (*CMc*).<sup>620</sup> They were not written to establish a common ancestor for Cyrus and Darius, *since the latter is nowhere mentioned in Pasargadae*, but they constituted an attempt by Cyrus to establish a *pārsa* pedigree for himself.<sup>621</sup>

The most logical place for the training of the *pārsas* was a compound next to the main fire of the realm. The monument that is generally known as the Zendān-e Solaymān in Pasargadae is, by all appearances, the edifice where this fire was kept (Fig. 264). The Ka'ba of Zardosht in Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 266), the central tower of Ardashir-khvarrah

<sup>618</sup> They are all qualified as *pārsa* in *DB* col.3, line 13, and col. 2, lines 18 and 49.

<sup>619</sup> Soudavar 2012b, 63-64.

<sup>620</sup> The *CMc* is on the border of a man's robe.

<sup>621</sup> Further proof of the validity of these inscriptions is provided by Vallat who notices that at the beginning of the Elamite version of the *CMc* inscription (*é ku-raš ...*), appears the determining adjective *é* that was used in the Neo-Elamite period, but never in Darius's inscriptions nor in any of his successors'; Vallat 2011, 278.

(Fig. 265), and the tower on the reverse of Persis coins (Fig. 263) are all similarly square-shaped. The fact that on the Persis coins the king stands, bow in hand, before such a monument (Fig. 263), clearly indicates that it is a fire edifice similar in function to the fire altar before which stood the Achaemenid king, bow in hand. As for the Ka`ba, the Sasanian high priest Kerdir referred to it as a *bon-khānak* (lit. fundamental house), i.e., the locus of the fundamental fire from which all other fires were derived.<sup>622</sup> The "Zendān" must have been built for the same purpose. As a matter of fact, aerial and magnetic surveys conducted by Rémy Boucharlat, indicate that the Zendān was by no means an isolated monument because a substantial edifice existed behind it.<sup>623</sup> Chances are that part of this edifice was meant to be a *pārsa* academy.

If Darius decided to place his tomb next to the Ka`ba, and Darius II decided to align his tomb with the axis of the Ka`ba (Fig. 266), it's probable that this is where the main fire of the realm was located. In other words, Darius I must have decided to move this main fire from Pasargadae to Naqsh-e Rostam; and that tallies with the pattern of animosity that Darius displayed all along toward Cyrus and what he perceived as usurpation of a privilege that belonged to his own lineage. There was, however, a more important reason to move the fire. The Zendān was located in an area where symbols of Mithra and Apam Napāt were prominently on display, in the palace next door, and perhaps on the academy walls as well. The transfer of the Achaemenid fire from Pasargadae to Naqsh-e Rostam re-established the preeminence of the *pārsa* line of the Achaemenids, in a new Mazdean environment untainted by Cyrus's Median ideology.

### **XII.8 - The *Kavis*: A Historical Perspective**

Zoroaster addressed the *pārsas* as *kavis*, especially Vishtāspa. Since kingship remained with the *pārsa* line of the Achaemenids, their dynasty became known as the *kavis* in Zoroastrian circles. Antonio Panaino remarks that, in Iran, *kavi* was "strongly linked to the sphere of power and authority." He further notes that even in the Vedic tradition the *kavi* could embody both a "sage-priest" as well as a "sage-ruler." He then foresees:

"a framework in which a tribal leader, lord of a territory and chief of a clan, might patronize the most important rituals as the main *yazəmna*-. In doing so he should have been trained according to a secular consuetudinary ritual tradition, and most probably

<sup>622</sup> Von Gall 2009. In Bishāpur, this main fire is designated as "King of Fires"; Herzfeld 1947, 12. The actual fire was in the open air, either on top of a tower, like in Ardashir-khvarrah, or on an outdoor fire altar, as on the Achaemenid tombs.

<sup>623</sup> Boucharlat 2002, 281; and personal communication.

also through a kind of special initiation, which, as in the case of the Indian *dīkṣā*-, gave him a higher qualification." (my underlining)<sup>624</sup>

In the underlined words, we can find the main elements of what we suggested in the previous section: The *pārsas* belonged to a clan—possibly founded by Achaemenes—who had to be trained in a special academy, and among whom existed a special bond of loyalty. It provided the king with a strong institution through which he could exert his authority in both the secular and religious spheres. In contrast, Zoroastrian priests never wielded a weapon and were never addressed as *kavi*.

Thus, the Sasanian kings, who centuries later adopted the *kavi* title, must have wished to reemphasize, or perhaps reclaim, the king's role as warrior priest and possessor of the main fire of the kingdom. A case in point is King Peroz's (r. 457-84) adoption of this title.



Fig. 267 – Seal of Peroz with shoulder stars (Freeman et al. 2013, 176)

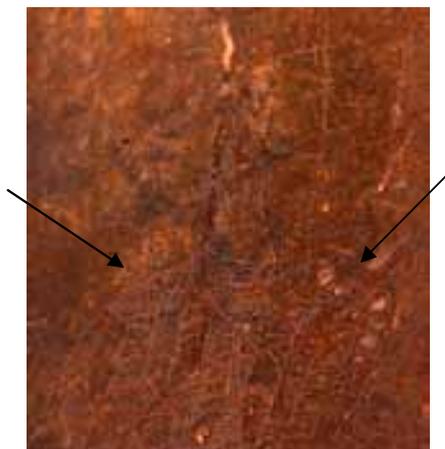


Fig. 268 – Pāpak with shoulder stars. Persepolis

Peroz had a tumultuous reign. He first allied himself with the Hephtalites to ascend to his father's throne, then fought the Hephtalites only to become their prisoner, and was liberated after ransom payment, only to lead another series of inconclusive wars with different enemies. Typical of rulers in want of legitimacy, his seal reveals his attempt to refurbish his glory and offset his failures with propaganda (Fig. 267). It is a large and impressive seal, with a lengthy inscription, and a beautiful effigy of Peroz with elaborate

<sup>624</sup> Panaino (forthcoming). I am grateful to Antonio Panaino for sending me an advanced copy of his article; Herzfeld also opines that *kavi* "is not an office bound to a place, but a rank"; Herzfeld 1947, 101.

paraphernalia. A prominent pair of wings proclaims as usual that the *farr* is with him and has not abandoned him. More importantly, he sports two prominent Mithraic solar emblems on his shoulders (↑), as his ancestor Pāpak once did (Fig. 268). They were probably meant to reemphasize his leadership of the Sāsānagān.<sup>625</sup> Its inscription reads:

"Signet (*nishān*)<sup>626</sup> of the Mazdean Lord—the one who keeps the land at peace—Kay Peroz, King of Kings, . . . , son of the Mazdean Lord Kay Yazdgerd, King of Kings, . . . , grandson of Lord Warahrān, King of Kings, . . ."

Not only is he using the title Kay (i.e., *kavi* = *pārsa*) for himself, but repeats it for his father, in the same way that Darius was referring to himself as *pārsa* son of *pārsa*.<sup>627</sup>

### XII.9 - Animosity toward Anshan

In her recent analysis of Persepolis bas-reliefs, Margaret Root advances interesting theories that deserve further elaboration. She might have further developed these theories had she not been sidetracked by the "Liar Darius" theory.<sup>628</sup> Within the frieze of Elamite gift bearers, Root detects the odd appearance of a "full-teated (nursing) lioness" with no parallel in "pre-Achaemenid Greater Mesopotamia" (Figs. 269-70). She also notices that, in contrast with all the other animals in the procession friezes, the two lion cubs behind the lioness are *carried* rather than walking on their own. Lions, she argues, were, in the eyes of the Assyrians, "surrogates for Elamites" and, therefore, appropriate gifts from Elam in the Persepolitan context. As a gift, one would have normally expected a male lion, symbol of royal power, in lieu of a lioness; to explain this oddity, Root proposes different allegorical meanings for the frieze, including the possibility that the cubs

<sup>625</sup> Similar sun emblems appear on the shoulders of Shāpur II & III, on silver plates that are now at the British Museum and the Hermitage, respectively.

<sup>626</sup> Skjaervo offers the spelling *nycny* for the first word, and correctly guesses that it must refer to the actual object; Skjaervo 2003, 283. I believe that it is the predecessor of NP *neshān* (signet), which was used at the beginning of Ottoman *farmāns*: *Nishān-e sharif-e ʿāli-shaʿn*... (This noble and lofty signet ...). Despite their Turkic background, the Ottomans kept using traditional Iranian bureaucratic terms.

<sup>627</sup> Peroz's main Hephtalite adversary, as named by the sources, was Khoshnavāz who perhaps ruled in Central Asia. Khingila ruled over Kushan and Bactria, and was either the latter's *tegin* (governor), or a semi-independent ruler. By claiming to be a *kavi* and leader of the Sāsānagān, Peroz was probably trying to impress his Hephtalite rivals more than his own constituencies. That may be because his rivals had similar claims, for as we saw in the case of the Hephtalite Khingila, his coins depicted both a fire altar and a *NWRA* monogram (Fig. 122).

<sup>628</sup> Root 2011, 420. She wrongly assumes that "Cyrus was not an Achaemenid except in Darius's reinvention of his genealogy" (emphasis added).

evoked the princely brothers Cambyses and Bardiya and the tragedies leading to Darius's ascent to the Achaemenid throne.<sup>629</sup>

Root's propositions are interesting but she seems to have overlooked the most obvious and the most plausible explanation: That the depicted lioness is a pointer to the gender of the two cubs as two princesses rather than princes. Since Darius married Cyrus's daughters, namely the Anshanite princesses Atossa and Artystone, the cubs must represent the "gifts" that Elam had sent to Darius. As such, two of Root's important observations fall into place: That the "lioness has command, poise, and regal bearing," and the fact that the princesses are being carried, i.e. handled with deference. Following Herzfeld, Root also proposes that "the queen" in the British Museum's *Banquet of Assurbanipal* was a captured Elamite princess.<sup>630</sup> If Assurbanipal took pride in marrying an Elamite princess, so would have Darius. The grouping of a lioness with two cubs must therefore represent the transfer of the Anshanite "harem" to Persepolis, and as such, it denotes a complete transfer of power.<sup>631</sup> Gaumāta had appropriated all of Cambyses's wives, and Darius was following suit by doing the same.

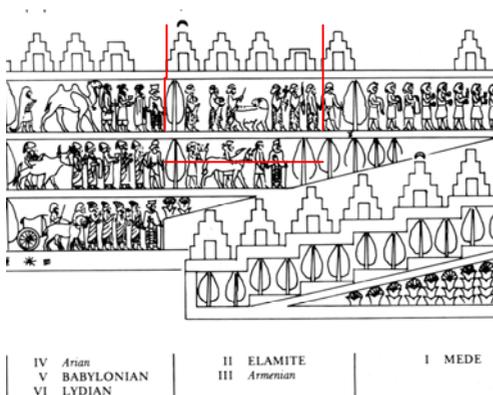


Fig. 269 – Sketch of Persepolis gift bearers with the Elamites following the Medes (Roaf 1983, 51)



Fig. 270 – A lioness and two cubs as gifts from Elam. Persepolis (Photo courtesy of Ali Asadi)

What is striking in this composition, though, is the angry gesture of the lioness turning her head back toward the cubs. Atossa was the full sister of Cambyses and Bardiya,

<sup>629</sup> Root 2011, 422-57. The Persepolis reliefs represent various delegations that had attended Darius's court, at one point or another, and brought presents. But Cambyses and Bardiya never attended his court, nor did they bring him anything. Moreover, each element of the procession was supposed to add to the glory of Darius; the Cambyses-Bardiya episode, however, was all negative, and didn't convey added glory.

<sup>630</sup> Root 2011, 450-53.

<sup>631</sup> In some dynasties such as the Mongols, a new ruler inherited his father's harem as a sign of sovereignty.

whose mother Cassandane had died in 538 BC. If Artystone had a different mother, the lioness might represent that mother. Alternatively, she might represent the elder princess Atossa, and the two cubs would then stand for Artystone and Bardiya's daughter Parmys, whom Darius also married. According to Herodotus (III.88), Artystone was a virgin when married to Darius. She must have been in her teens and Bardiya's daughter couldn't have been any older. Cubs were thus befitting symbols for both.

The composition follows the pattern of disdain that Darius exhibited all along toward Cyrus and the junior branch of the Achaemenids, especially in the way that the lioness is leashed and accompanied by ordinary Elamites, none of them wearing a princely outfit. But if Darius looked down on the Anshanites, chances are that they too, or at least some of them, had the same attitude at first toward the one who now ruled the empire created by Cyrus; hence the angry lioness.

Darius had more than one axe to grind with the Anshanites. He resented the junior branch's ascendancy at the expense of the *pārsa* branch of the Achaemenids, their commitment to Mithra and Apam Napāt rather than Ahura Mazdā, and their eventual support of some of his enemies within the Magian community. This lion frieze is only one expression of Darius's animosity toward Anshan; Daniel Potts points out to a more important one by demonstrating that Anshan fell in desuetude after the ascent of Darius to power.<sup>632</sup> His massacre of the Median magi, his disdain for the Anshanites, and the discipline that Darius imposed on the population, had probably created a latent hatred that was bound to explode. A catalyst was needed, and that, we shall argue, was provided by Alexander's invasion of Iran.

### **XII.10 - The Backlash**

Throughout history, there have been many attempts to condemn a hated predecessor to oblivion by defacing his effigies. In Egypt, Thutmose III (r. 1479–1425 BC) defaced the statues of Queen Hatchepsut (r. 1479–1458 BC) who was nominally his co-regent, but had kept the reins of power for twenty-two years (Fig. 273). The Romans even had an expression for this practice: *damnatio memoriae*. Closer to Iran, Assyrian kings were defaced in bas-reliefs that celebrated their past victories over the Elamites. One such example is the banquet scene of Assurbanipal (r. 668-627 BC) in which the head of the defeated Elamite king Teumman (d. 657 BC) is hanging—untouched—from a tree at the far left of the bas-relief (Fig. 272a), while the head of Assurbanipal is defaced (Fig. 272b). As it has been suggested, the defacing must have been the work of Elamite

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<sup>632</sup> Potts 2011.

soldiers accompanying the Medes in their conquest of Assyria. It was a targeted measure aimed at "punishing" those who had humiliated the Elamites.<sup>633</sup>

A curious phenomenon in Persepolis is the fact that many of the royal faces have been damaged. By way of explanation, various theories have been advanced. The blame was first put on Moslem iconoclasts who tend to destroy or vandalize figural statues, and second, on robbers, who, in seeking to steal the encrusted gold and jewellery of the bas-reliefs, must have damaged the effigies. Neither theory measures up to the weight of the physical evidence.

If it was the work of orthodox Moslems, they would have attacked all the faces indiscriminately, and not those of royalty alone. As for the theft theory, the extent of the physical damage is indicative of a different motive. Although many of the bas-reliefs have suffered extensive natural degradation, there are a number of better-preserved doorjambs, especially in the Hall of Xerxes (the so-called Harem), which show that the destruction went deep into the stone where no gold or jewellery could ever be found (Fig. 271). The destruction of the faces is so systematic and thorough that no purpose but defacing can be counted as a motive. The question then is: Who had such a motive?



Fig. 271 - Darius and Xerxes defaced (or Xerxes and his sons). Persepolis



Figs. 272 a, b - a) Teumman's head hung on a tree, b) Ashurbanipal defaced (two details of a bas-relief, British Museum)



Fig. 273 – Hatshepsut defaced. MMA

<sup>633</sup> Henkelman 2003, 90; Root 2011, 453.

It seems that, in the same way the Elamites took revenge on Assurbanipal upon the conquest of Assyria, some elements of Alexander's army took revenge on Darius and Xerxes by savagely defacing their effigies. I suggest that these must have been the persecuted followers of the Mithraic magi, i.e., those labelled as *daiva*-worshippers.

Herodotus's account of Magophonia clearly shows a continuous process of witch-hunting for years after. The reason for such a sustained display of animosity was that the *pārsas* and the Zoroastrians were in minority, and Mithra continued to command the respect of most of the population, to the extent that, in the end, a sanitized version of Mithra had to be integrated into the Zoroastrian pantheon, a pantheon that clearly negated the monotheistic outlook of Zoroaster, as well as Darius. While this sanitized Mithra may have provided the means to woo the majority of people, there was certainly a sizeable portion of the population that nevertheless did not accept the subordination of Mithra to Ahura Mazdā, and continued to be persecuted.

In every subsequent invasion of Iran, whether by the Arabs or Turco-Mongols, some locals joined the invading army to settle the score with their neighbors. The Macedonian invasion of Iran must have been no different. Many of those who felt persecuted by the Achaemenids probably joined Alexander's army, especially from Eastern Anatolia, which was the hotbed of Mithraic brotherhood societies. This may also partly explain the relative ease with which Alexander marched into Persian territories. Alexander must have exploited the disgruntled *daiva*-worshippers to his full advantage.

This backlash also shows how the animosity between the Mazdeans and the Mithraic magi was very much alive at the end of the Achaemenid era, and would continue for years to come. It's against this background of continued animosity that the Zoroastrian reformulation of older hymns, and their doctoring, makes sense. They too sought *damnatio memoriae* for their enemies and were successful at it because, as it turned out, Astyages, Cyrus, and many more were erased from Iranian histories. Finally, we may also speculate that the propaganda campaign that Julian mounted against Shāpur II, with its strong Mithraic penchant, resonated positively in Iran and had the potential to rally those whom the Zoroastrians had alienated. If Alexander could attract such dissidents, so could have Julian. Hence Mithra's prominence in Shāpur II's rock-relief (see sec. X.10).

### **XII.11 - Turning History into Myth**

Napoleon (r. 1804-15) conquered most of Europe but subsequently lost whatever he had gained, including his throne. The Bourbon kings who took back the throne of France did everything to efface the memory of Napoleon; and yet, to this day, he remains the most

popular and remembered ruler of France. Alexander conquered a vast empire that lasted less than two decades, but his saga is still sung about the four corners of the world, especially among the Greeks.

Oddly, Cyrus, who founded the first great empire of antiquity, who is praised in the Bible as the Anointed One, and whom the Greeks eulogized as a magnanimous ruler despite their generally negative attitude toward the Persians, was completely wiped out from Iranian histories and Persian memory. As already explained, the main culprit was the Zoroastrian priesthood who, in the post-Achaemenid period, had a chance to glorify Zoroastrianism at the expense of kingship.<sup>634</sup> It's hard to imagine, though, that one concentrated effort could have achieved such a result. The process had probably started under the Achaemenids, albeit in a subdued fashion. Despite Darius's negative attitude toward Cyrus, the latter still enjoyed considerable prestige in the Achaemenid era, to the extent that the enthronization of kings, such as Artaxerxes II, took place by his tomb in Pasargadae.<sup>635</sup> Astyages the Mede, however, must have been fair game, and his demonization must have started early on, when he was equated with the snake-monster Azhi-dahāga. By the same token, the archenemy of Darius, the Mede Gaumāta, was also labeled a snake-man or dragon. Any myth involving a dragon needs a dragon slayer. The dragon slayer of old, i.e., the Thraetona (Fereydun) of Indo-European lore, naturally fulfilled that role. That is why in the stories of Fereydun vs. Zāhhāk, we have a reflection of two sets of antagonists: Cyrus capturing Astyages, and Darius eliminating Gaumāta. Indeed, we have already cited the similarities of the Zāhhāk story with that of Cyrus and Astyages (see secs. XII.2, XII.4). As for the second set, Zāhhāk very much resembles Gaumāta in the harshness of his rule and the fact that he had married all the wives and sisters of his predecessor. Moreover, in later chronicles we have the additional information that Fereydun captured Bivarasp (alias Astyages) on the Mehr day of the month of Mehr, called Mehregān, a day that was celebrated every year thereafter.<sup>636</sup> It clearly indicates a conflation of Astyages's defeat by Cyrus and the yearly celebration of the Magophonia on the day Gaumāta was killed.

Once Astyages was labelled a snake, his progenies were treated as pariahs. Thus, in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, when Zāl is about to marry the daughter of the king of Kabul called Mehrāb,

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<sup>634</sup> Ehsan Yarshater believes that the "historical amnesia" developed in the Parthian era, after the loss of the Achaemenid annals and documents, while we suggested the Seleucid era because of their probable lack of interest in religious matters (see sec. XI.9); Yarshater 1983, 389.

<sup>635</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Artaxerxes* 1.3.

<sup>636</sup> See, for instance, Ibn al-Faḳīḥ 1970 : 115; Ṭabarī 1996, 1 :138.

the *shāh* of Iran orders Zāl's father to slay Mehrāb, because he is an offspring of Zahhāk the Dragon:

Set fire to Hindustān, and burn Kabul and the castle of **Mehrāb**  
He should not go unharmed, for he is an offspring of the **Dragon**  
Cut off his head, and clean the earth from the strand of **Zahhāk** and his progeny.<sup>637</sup>

This ties in with the fact that Armenian kings were also called "dragon" for the sin of being descendants of Astyages.<sup>638</sup> Moreover, the name Mehrāb (Mehr + *āb* (water)) incorporates an obvious reference to Mithra and Apam Napāt (who was the god of waters, and whose name meant Child of the Waters). It categorized him not only as a person to be killed, but one whose "filth" should not sully the earth. It reveals, on the one hand, the high level of antagonism toward the Medes, and on the other, how the snake and scorpion came to be characterized as *khrafstars* in Zoroastrianism.<sup>639</sup>

The suppression of Cyrus's exploits inevitably led to their resurgence as myths. But these narratives must have been so powerful that they generated not one, but a multitude of myths, with a lot of "cut and pastes" from one story to the other.<sup>640</sup> Since myth and *topoi* always carry elements of the original stories, they can indeed reveal past secrets. A case in point is Gardizi's account of Esfandyār and Goshtāsp. As a follower of Biruni, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century historian Gardizi had gone to India where he must have had access to sources different from those available to Tabari and Mas`udi, since this section of his history is more explicit than theirs.<sup>641</sup> A number of important points in his account confirm our reasoning about the appearance of Goshtāsp and Esfandyār on the *Bondahesh* list of regnal years (see sec. XI.11).

We had suggested that Esfandyār stood for Bardiya who never reigned, and if his name appeared therein, he must have been a supporter of Zoroastrianism. This finds an echo in Gardizi's account of Esfandyār where he is portrayed as a steadfast supporter of

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<sup>637</sup> Ferdowsi 1988: 226:

همه کاخ مهرباب و کایل بسوز	به هندوستان آتش اندر فروز
که او ماند از بچه‌ی اژدها	نباید که او یابد از بد رها
ز پیوند ضحاک و خویشان او	سر از تن جدا کن زمین را بشوی

<sup>638</sup> See note 586 supra.

<sup>639</sup> The kings of Ghor were also considered as descendents of Zahhāk; Oldham 1905, 116.

<sup>640</sup> The story of Kay Khosrow, for instance, closely follows the Cyrus sagas reported by various non-Iranian sources, and reflects yet another version of the Cyrus story. For a detailed study of this parallelism, see Zarghamee 2013, 538-39.

<sup>641</sup> Gardizi 1984, 50-53. Indian sources have provided much pertinent information on Iran's pre-Islamic past even though compiled between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century; see, for instance, Soudavar 2003, 2,3, and 60.

Zoroastrianism, without any further elaboration. According to Gardizi, when Esfandyār is sent to convert Rostam to Zoroastrianism, it's on behalf of his father Goshtāsp (i.e., Vishtāspa) and not by his own initiative. This, he explains, was a ploy by Goshtāsp to renege on his earlier promise of kingship to Esfandyār—who finally dies by the hands of Rostam without ever being king.

Goshtāsp's promise was in reward for Esfandyār's valiant campaign against the Turanian invaders who had occupied Balkh. Esfandyār's Balkh campaign links him once more to Bardiya whom Cyrus had appointed on his deathbed as "governor of Bactria, Chorasmia, Parthia, and Carmania, free from tribute" (Ctesias, Fr.13 §8). Balkh was the capital of Bactria, and if later episodes of Iranian history give us any insight, it must have been the seat of the viceroy; for, traditionally, the Northeast was the most strategic frontier because of its exposure to the Central Asian hordes. Herat, for instance, was the seat of the viceroy of the Mongols as well as the Safavids, and was the vanguard battle-station against Chaghatāy and Uzbek invaders. The situation must have been no different in Achaemenid times, since Cyrus finally died combating intruders from the same area. The Northeast was the territory where the mettle of a prince was tested. It therefore seems that either Bardiya proved his valor in Bactria and had been promised a partial kingdom (if not Cyrus's throne), or in retrospect, his appointment to the governorship of Bactria—free of any tribute—was perceived by later historians as a promise of kingship.<sup>642</sup>

Gardizi further informs us that at the time Esfandyār fought in Balkh, Goshtāsp was in Gorgān. This corresponds with the fact that Darius had sent his father Vishtāspa to quell a rebellion in Hyrcania (present day Gorgān) and Parthia (*DB* §35).<sup>643</sup> It clearly links the Zoroastrian Goshtāsp to Darius's father Vishtāspa. Gardizi also refers to Goshtāsp's father as Lohrāsp son of Kayuji (کیوجی), which is an obvious corruption of Cambujiya (کمبوجی), i.e., Cambyses; Kayuji himself is then presented as son of Kay-Manesh son of Kay-Qobād.<sup>644</sup> In actuality, Darius's grandfather was not a son of Cambujiya (Cambyses I) but his cousin. Even though Gardizi's information is not totally accurate, it still connects the Zoroastrian Goshtāsp to a member of the junior branch of the Achaemenids (see Table

<sup>642</sup> Even though Cyrus appointed Cambyses early on as ruler of Babylon and made him co-regent only in the very last months of his reign (Dandamayev 1990), it is hard to imagine that he ever intended to push aside his first son as his successor. On the other hand, if Bardiya's fiefdom was "free from tribute," it was semi-autonomous and almost a separate kingdom; for a slightly different perspective see Zarghamee 2013, 377.

<sup>643</sup> Chances are that Vistāshpa was sent there because of past involvement with Hyrcania under Cyrus.

<sup>644</sup> Gardizi 1984, 50: *کی لهراسپ بن کیوجی بن کی منش بن کیتباد*. Tabari though gives another sequence Kay-Lohrāsb, son of Kayuji, son of Kay-Manesh, son of Ka-Fāshin, Tabari 1967, II:453. Kay-manesh may be a corruption of the name Hakhāmanesh (Achaemenes).

2). On the other hand, he correctly qualifies Goshtāsp and Lohrāsp as *Kay* (*kay=kavi=pārsa*) since Darius's father and grandfather were both *pārsas*. What's more, he gives the additional information that Kay Lohrāsp had retired into a fire temple where he was leading a monastic life. It stands to reason that when Cyrus became emperor, his cousin Ariaramnes (alias Lohrāsp), would retire from kingship and devote himself to his *pārsa* obligations. According to Herodotus (I.125), the *pasargadae* (read *pārsas*) were one of the three clans that immediately joined Cyrus against the Medes. Thus, unlike Darius, his forefathers must have been supportive of Cyrus, who must have reciprocated their early support by creating Pasargadae in their honor.

Whether through myths or chronicles, we have a fair amount of information that attests to the common identity of Goshtāsp and Vishtāspa on the one hand, and of Esfandyār and Bardiya, on the other. As Ehsan Yarshater has noted, the mythological Kayānian dynasty of Iran is divided into two strains: A later one starting with Lohrāsp, and an earlier one starting with Kay-Qobād and ending with Kay-Khosrow.<sup>645</sup> This division was not arbitrary. The Zoroastrian priests, who reconfigured the past history of Iran, deliberately opted for a division based on Mazdean affinity and not chronological order. The Achaemenids of the line that began with Ariaramnes were not only Mazdeans, but forefathers of Vishtāspa who was the main supporter of Zoroaster. They are all qualified as *Kays*; oddly, so are the members of the other strain. Early Zoroastrians would not use such a title in vain; their prophet had only used *kay* (i.e., *kavi*) to designate the *pārsas*, especially the Achaemenid Vishtāspa. If it was extended to all of the Achaemenids, it must have been done at a later date when they were only remembered as one dynasty, as the *Kays* or the Kayānian dynasty. The early strain thus reflected the junior branch of the Achaemenids that ended with Cyrus and his sons, and the second strain represented the *pārsa* line of the Achaemenids. It does not mean that events pertaining to one branch were not partially recombined with the other. As already argued, veracity was not the purpose of this exercise. To the contrary, the past had to be blurred so that Zoroastrianism could be glorified beyond measure.

Nevertheless, in Gardizi's account, Vishtāspa's lineage reverts back to Kay-Qobād who is therefore presented as the founder of both lines, and supports the parallelism that we suggested among the two strains of *kavis*, because both strains emanated from a common ancestor. This Zoroastrian rearrangement of Achaemenid history gave free rein to mythology to develop and replicate itself *ad infinitum* in later histories.

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<sup>645</sup> Yarshater 1983, 437.

## CHAPTER XIII

### FROM CYRUS TO REZĀ SHĀH: THE SPIRIT OF BROTHERHOOD

#### XIII.1 - Rezā Shāh's Road to Kingship

A most daunting figure of Iran's recent history is Rezā Shāh who rose from the low ranks of the Iranian army to be its Supreme Commander (Sardār-e Sepah), and eventually king of Iran. Like Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725), he was impressive in stature, as well as charismatic. But unlike the Russian king, he was not born into a princely family and had to work his way up, the hard way. He was astute, bold, and had an innate sense of management, with a strong emphasis on verification and feedback. Besides personal qualities, external factors facilitated his bid for power, of which the collapse of the Qajar regime, the devastations brought by World War I, and the backing of the English general Ironside, have often been cited. But the circumstances that led to his rise through the rank and files of the Cossack Brigade that he served have generally been neglected. We shall argue that, as in the case of almost all previous Iranian dynasties, the brotherhood spirit played an important role.

Rezā Shāh was born in the Alasht district of Savād-kuh, in the province of Māzandarān. As we saw, this was the province that was associated with the *divs* because of their adherence to pre-Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Traces of these ancient beliefs still persist as the people of Alasht, to this day, swear by the sun and keep an archaic calendar with ancient names. More importantly, even though they pronounce the Islamic *Besmillāh* at the start of a task, they refer to this process as *mehr-kardan* (doing *mehr*).<sup>646</sup> The fact that in NP the word *mehr* refers to both Mithra and "kindness" created of course an ambiguity that provided protection against attacks by Islamic bigots. But the "*mehr-kardan*" expression goes back to a time when it was customary to invoke the name of Mithra for protection and auspiciousness, when embarking on a new task. The Islamic "*Besmillāh* (In the name of God)" was later substituted for "*mehr-kardan*" as in other parts of Iran, but remarkably, in Alasht, the invocation *process* itself still carries the name of the ancient deity.<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> Niāzmand 2007, 12-13. I'm indebted to J. Davoody for lending me his copy of this book.

<sup>647</sup> Today, Shiite Iranians prefer to invoke the Imam `Ali by uttering "*yā`Ali*."

The family of Rezā Shāh was known in Alasht as the Pahlavāni, or Pālāni in the local dialect, which pointed to a tradition of brotherhood leadership.<sup>648</sup> What's more, Rezā Shāh's father was known as Dādāsh Beyg, which is composed of the Turkish words *dādāsh* (brother) and *beyg*, an honorific that was applied to tribal leaders, and which was ultimately derived from the *bay* that the Sasanians used for their kings as leaders of the Sāsānagān.<sup>649</sup> As such, he must have been a leader of a certain group of *dādāshes* or *lutis*. Rezā Shāh lost his father at a young age and left Alasht early on, but continued to frequent the *luti* and the brotherhood milieus. As a son of Dādāsh Beyg he might have enjoyed a certain prestige among the *lutis*, for as we saw, respect for fatherly leaders was not just confined to their own congregation. He carried a knife (*shushkeh*), and often got into fights and brawls. In fighting with a knife, *lutis* typically don't aim to kill but want to mark their adversary with a scar. In one of his brawls, the young Rezā was left with a knife scar that he carried for the rest of his life.<sup>650</sup>

While Rezā did not have his own congregation to conquer Iran with, his closeness to his subordinates and peers built a loyal following that proved to be valuable in the midst of a disintegrating political situation. In that very volatile environment of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a small group of dedicated supporters was all that he needed.<sup>651</sup> And with that, he achieved what, in retrospect, was a seemingly impossible task: In a mere time span of seventeen years he catapulted Iran from backwardness to modernization, not only by building the necessary infrastructures, but by creating institutions such as universities, academies, the national registry, and also revamping the judicial system.

We thus have two models by which brotherhoods gained power. One is the Safaviyyeh model of a well-organized congregation that turned militant, and eventually gained power through insurrection. The Sasanians, Khorramdiniyyeh, and Sarbedārs, all followed this model. The other model is that of the Saffārid Ya`qub-e Laith, who built his power base on a less formal structure of camaraderie among the *`ayyārs*, and maintained the principles of brotherhood through sharing and self-sacrifice. Rezā Shāh belonged to this second category, and I dare suggest that Cyrus's road to kingship must have followed the same road.

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<sup>648</sup> Niāzmand 2007, 44. As we argued in sec. VII.3 the word *pahlavān* designated the leader of a certain group of brotherhoods.

<sup>649</sup> Turkish speaking nomads had penetrated many remote areas of Iran and affected local expressions. Rezā Shāh himself spoke Turkish as a film of his meeting with Atatürk well shows.

<sup>650</sup> Niāzmand 2007, 82, and 90-91.

<sup>651</sup> The initial tight group of Cossack officers included Khodāyār Khān, Karim Aghā Buzarjomehri, Yazdānpanāh, Amir-Ahmadi.

But Rezā Shāh's story can also shed light on how Cyrus was pushed into oblivion in Iran proper. Rezā Shāh's son and feeble successor, Mohammad-Rezā Pahlavi, could not tolerate comparison with his capable father, nor did he like to be reminded of his modest origins. As a result, Rezā Shāh became an almost unknown entity for the younger generation of Iranians who grew up under his son. Now imagine Darius ascending the throne of Cyrus, with the grudge he held against him and with the monotheistic religion that he was promoting in contrast to Cyrus's dualistic ideology. He did not even have to issue an order to censor Cyrus; courtiers simply knew what was expected from them, as they knew not to mention Rezā Shāh before his son.

### **XIII.2 - The Cyrus Saga**

Our aim in this section is to provide a plausible scenario for Cyrus's rise to kingship, no matter how speculative it might look. We have little reliable information available and most of it seems contradictory. But if the models that we have seen up to now can be of guidance, there is a good chance that Cyrus too relied on a brotherhood structure to achieve his goals.

As Muhammad Dandamayev describes it, two basic accounts of Cyrus's early years have reached us: A sympathetic one from Herodotus, and a biased one from Ctesias.<sup>652</sup> According to Herodotus (I.107-115), he was the son of Astyages's daughter Mandane (married to Cambyses I). Fearful about a dream in which he saw a vine growing "out of the genitals" of his daughter, covering "the whole of Asia," Astyages orders his trusted advisor Harpagus to dispose of Mandane's newborn son. Harpagus though, instead of killing the baby himself, gives it to one of the king's shepherds named Mithridates. But the shepherd's wife Spako (which Herodotus explains to mean "dog" in Median) switches Cyrus with her own stillborn baby, thus sparing his life and providing Harpagus with proof of a baby corpse devoured by wild beasts in the wilderness. Years later, when Cyrus is brought by chance before Astyages, he has such an air of nobility that it makes Astyages wonder whether he's really the shepherd's son. Under pressure, the shepherd reveals the true story, at which point Astyages is happy to have a grandson, but furious at Harpagus for having disobeyed his orders. To punish him, Astyages has Harpagus's son killed and served as a stew to the unsuspecting father, on the occasion of a feast he organized to celebrate the recovery of his grandson. Cyrus is then sent back to his parents in Persia, and when he becomes king in his own land, Harpagus invites him to take

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<sup>652</sup> Dandamayev 1993.

possession of the Median throne. And, in revenge for Astyages's cruel act against him, Harpagus then defects with his whole army to Cyrus.

A century and a half later, Herodotus picks this story—out of four circulating in his days—as the most "plausible" one about Cyrus's early years. If so many versions existed and the most "plausible" one was still wrapped in a fairy tale, it's because Darius and his early successors didn't encourage Cyrus's true story to circulate. The grudge that Darius held toward the junior branch of the Achaemenids notwithstanding, the fact that Cyrus had favored Mithra and Apam Napāt over Ahura Mazdā went counter to the ideology that Darius was promoting, especially in an atmosphere in which the Median magi was chased and persecuted. Cyrus's story had to be altered. It is a testimony to the genius of bards and storytellers that, through metaphors and myths, they could still allude to politically unacceptable notions. In the instant case, the baby-killing scheme was devised to reveal Cyrus's religious affiliations through the introduction of the shepherd and his wife under whose aegis he grew up. The very names of the shepherd, Mithridates (Mithra-given), and his wife Spako (dog), insinuated that Cyrus grew up under the protection of the Median deity pair Mithra and Apam Napāt. Indeed, as we have indicated on several occasions, for the Achaemenids, Apam Napāt was a problematic deity who had to be suppressed because of his creation powers, which undermined those of Ahura Mazdā. In the days of Artaxerxes II, Anāhitā became his substitute. Before that, the Dog-Star Tishtrya may have provided another alternative, because as the brightest star of nighttime, it was closely associated with Apam Napāt, who was the Lord of the Night and to whom it owed its brightness (*Yt.8.4*); in addition, Tishtrya was responsible for moving the *waters* on earth (*Yt.8.18*), and as such was a good substitute for an aquatic deity. Thus, the names of the shepherd and his wife provided a subtle reference to the ideology that Cyrus had favored and that Darius and his progenies had tried to suppress.

An intriguing aspect of the story is the gruesome episode about the killing of Harpagus's son, as a consequence of which Harpagus defected to Cyrus. A massive Median defection on the eve of the battle with Cyrus is independently reported by the Babylonian Chronicles.<sup>653</sup> We may therefore assume that Harpagus's defection did actually occur, especially since, afterwards, he becomes a trusted general of Cyrus and the lead commander in the conquest of Lydia. But the question is why did he defect? In Herodotus's story, Harpagus is entrusted with the army that was supposed to quell the rebellion of Cyrus. But no king in his right mind would have taken such a risk after so

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<sup>653</sup> Babylonian Chronicles: "The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner. Th[ey handed him over] to Cyrus. ([...])"; see [http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/abc7/abc7\\_nabonidus2.html](http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/abc7/abc7_nabonidus2.html)

deeply hurting a subordinate. Therefore, if Harpagus's son was killed it was possibly after the defection of his father, and in revenge for his treason. We can then envisage a possible flesh-eating scenario not by the father of the victim, but by his enemies. Indeed, such horrific acts may have been the staple of a certain group of extremist magi, like those who killed Bardiya by feeding him bull's blood, and those from whom the Safavids might have inherited their cannibalism (see sec. IX.7).<sup>654</sup>

Be that as it may, the Herodotus story provides two clues as to why Harpagus defected to Cyrus. When captured, Astyages admonishes Harpagus—who had boasted to be a kingmaker—for putting a Persian on the throne rather than himself. Harpagus must have been of noble birth if Astyages entertained the idea that Harpagus could have been king himself. In all probability, he was Mandane's maternal uncle, or cousin, since one of the reasons that he gives for not executing Astyages's order to kill Cyrus is that "the child is related to me" (Her I.109). Thus, by soliciting Cyrus to take over the Median throne, Harpagus was actually backing a prince of his own blood, perhaps with the hope of becoming himself the strongman of the new empire. Such a scenario is even more credible if Astyages had a son—from a wife other than Mandane's mother—who was about to succeed him.<sup>655</sup>

A second set of stories, fundamentally transmitted by Ctesias and Nicholas of Damascus, is unsympathetic to Cyrus and considered by Dandamayev as "derived from a Median tradition devised to discredit Cyrus."<sup>656</sup> And yet, in its negativity, it follows a pattern that enemies of brotherhoods often pursued by labeling them as bandits, and by introducing a shepherd in their tale. In this other version, it is Cyrus's father who is described as a bandit and his mother as a shepherd.<sup>657</sup> These are pointers to a possible brotherhood milieu that we need to investigate.

### **XIII.3 - Pointers to a Brotherhood Milieu**

Of all the Greek writers, it is Xenophon who gives us an extensive analysis of Cyrus's character and upbringing. Even though his *Cyropaedia* has often been described as a clever "mirror for Princes" destined for a Greek audience, it was undeniably based on a real person. As in every other myth or embellished story, it cannot be all *topoi* and devoid

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<sup>654</sup> It's interesting to note that in the *Hamza-nāme* story (note 346 supra), `Amr gives the stew to the son of his victim, for him not to commit the same treachery as his father had done.

<sup>655</sup> If Xenophon is to be believed, Astyages did have a son by the name of Cyaxares whose daughter Cyrus had married (1.4.10-8.5.28).

<sup>656</sup> Dandamayev 1993.

<sup>657</sup> See also sec. X.2 and X.5.

of reality. One should not throw out the baby with the bathwater because it smells like *topoi*. There may be relevant indices that one can recover. First among these is Xenophon's insistence on several occasions about Cyrus's penchant for sharing food and gifts with his followers and friends. On two occasions (1.3.6-7 and 1.4.10-11) he is said to have distributed hunted animals among friends, after first proposing them to Astyages. And before leaving his grandfather, Cyrus asks permission to give all his Median belongings to his friends (1.4.26). Xenophon then concludes (8.2.7) that "Cyrus far surpassed all others in the art of making much of his friends by gifts of food." One can hardly imagine that such a strong emphasis on food sharing was solely developed to gratify a Greek audience, whose penchant was usually for wittiness and heroic deeds. Cyrus's generosity also finds an echo in the Old Testament where he is said to have returned the looted gold and silver of the Temple of Jerusalem back to the Jews, decreed a new Temple to be built and paid for it from his own treasury.<sup>658</sup> Thus, even if it became a *topos* afterwards, it must have been based on traits that made Cyrus famous and well-liked, among his own subjects as well as conquered people.

Food sharing and generosity were the main characteristics of brotherhoods; it is therefore hardly a coincidence that Herodotus says (III.89.3) that Cyrus was called "father" by the Persians. The head of a brotherhood was always considered as a father, *pater* or *bābā*. Moreover, Herodotus (I.71) gives an important clue in his description of Cyrus's army about to engage the Lydians: They wore "*breeches of leather*." As we saw, from wrestlers, to *fatās*, to *shāters*, leather breeches (i.e., short-pants) were the hallmark of Mithraic-type brotherhoods.

A final clue may be provided by the story of Zakhāk. As previously argued, the triumph of Fereyduṅ over Zakhāk reflected a conflation of the victories of Cyrus over Astyages on the one hand, and Darius over Gaumāta, on the other. Fereyduṅ's march against Zakhāk was sparked by the revolt of a blacksmith by the name of Kāveh, who mysteriously disappears afterwards. In a forthcoming article I shall argue that Kāveh was a conflation of two personalities, Harpagus and Otanes, each of whom initiated action against a reigning tyrant. But for the purpose of this study, suffice it to say that to lead his revolt, the blacksmith Kāveh hoisted his leather apron on a stick and marched forward. That leather apron was then adopted as the Achaemenid standard. The rank and file of

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<sup>658</sup> Ezra 6.45: "...and let the expenses be given out of the king's house. Also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought to Babylon, be restored, and brought again to the temple which is at Jerusalem, everyone to its place; and you shall put them in the house of God."

brotherhoods was usually constituted by artisans, and if Kāveh is described as a blacksmith, it was meant to emphasize the artisan following of Cyrus; and if a *leather* banner was hoisted as his standard, it too was the mark of a Mithraic brotherhood. Cyrus must have acted as their *bāp* or father.<sup>659</sup> To his credit, Cyrus maintained this fatherly approach long after his initial victories. Xenophon sees him as unparalleled in magnanimity and wonders (8.2.8): "who, besides Cyrus, ever gained an empire by conquest and even to his death was called '*father*' by the people he had subdued?"

#### XIII.4 - The Red and the Black

Karl Marx saw Asian societies as backward and devoid of the proletariat that was necessary to push them into class warfare. And yet, Iranian history has always been dominated by a class conflict that has pitted the "reds" against the "blacks." Black was the color of the banner of the Khorāsānian Abu Moslem (d. 755) in the service of the `Abbāsids, and black was the color of the Safavids when they were essentially acting as landed gentry (see Fig. 158). It was the color of the ruling elite that comprised warlords, the landed gentry, members of the administration, and the clergy. The latter two were usually educated in the same channels, were often intermarried, and provided the backbone of an administrative system that survived a multitude of invasions, and at the same time, assured cultural continuity. The "blacks" were in control of the tax levies, which could become oppressive. Those whom the "blacks" oppressed often took refuge in brotherhoods that were avatars of Mithraic societies, and therefore wore "red." They vied for an egalitarian society, and were labeled as Mazdakites, or simply "reds."

Dervish orders and brotherhoods were inherently egalitarian since their communal meals emphasized the equal sharing of what was available. They could attract the poor as well as people from the highest echelons of society. We thus see a famous member of the Qajar aristocracy, Alikhān-e Zahir-od-dowleh (1864-1924), respectfully seated behind the celebrated Sufi Safi-`Ali-shāh (1835-99), who was his Master and *pir*, and whom he eventually succeeded as head of his congregation (Fig. 274); or the Zand prince Rostam Khān wearing a three-dot mark on his hand, in a portrait of circa 1779 (Fig. 275).<sup>660</sup>

Moreover, detachment from worldly goods had a liberating effect. The very cries of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" that shook French society emanated from such a milieu; the French Revolution was infused with the spirit of brotherhood (*fraternité*), and French

<sup>659</sup> Xenophon (2.1.30) says that he often dined with small groups of soldiers and officers. But that is perhaps a characteristic shared by many good generals rather than a sign of brotherhood.

<sup>660</sup> For a full image and description see Dib & Ekhtiar 1998, 154-55.

revolutionaries wore the red Phrygian bonnet of Mithra (Fig. 84). It naturally attracted, as an early supporter, the Marquis de Lafayette (1754-1834), who was a Freemason and whose flaming sword (Fig. 276) had symbols that recall the Burgundian ones, such as the Flaming Flint Stone and the Masonic emblems of Jean Sans Peur.<sup>661</sup> The red color, and the egalitarian aspirations of successive French revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which so marked the communism that Marx advocated, clearly followed a tradition set by the Mithraic brotherhoods and the "red" Mazdakites.



Fig. 274 – Zahir-od-dowleh seated next to Safi-'Ali-shāh. Ink drawing. EMS Collection



Fig. 275- Three-dot mark on the hand of Rostam Khān-e Zand. Shirāz, c.1779. Private Coll.



Fig. 276 – Sword of Lafayette (Marcos et al. 2011, 161)

Marx was not only muddled in his assessment of Asian societies, but also in his vision of the utopian state brought about by the rule of the proletariat. For a fundamental lesson of history is that power corrupts, and whenever the oppressed took the reins of power, it quickly became an oppressor itself. The red headgear of the Qezelbāsh Safavids became as much a symbol of oppression in Iran, as the red robe of Christian bishops was in the Middle Ages, and the red flag of the Soviets was in the Stalinist era. They all carried in their reds the inherent problem of brotherhoods: A membership oath that was conducive to a hierarchy at odds with the egalitarian spirit of the brotherhood. Sooner or later, ambitious leaders would use their organization for power and fortune. Mithraic societies attracted the prince and the pauper, but also had the potential to move from the "good" to the "bad." This inherent duality has been the source of much confusion about secretive Mithraic societies. It has also been a source of confusion about Persian polities as a whole, from Cyrus to Rezā Shāh.

<sup>661</sup> Lafayette created the red, white and blue cockade for the revolutionaries, colors which were adopted for the French Republic's flag.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE WESTWARD SPREAD OF BROTHERHOODS

#### XIV.1 - Dual Deities of Anatolia

A previous influx of Indo-Europeans had prepared the ground for the introduction of Median deities in Anatolia, because they revered similar deities to the Medes. First were the Hittites who established a powerful empire in Anatolia in the second millennium BC, followed by the Mitanni, who settled below them, in southern Anatolia and present day Syria, between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. In regard to the Mitanni, we have the text of treaties—they concluded with their neighboring countries—that name their deities. The two most important ones were Mitra and Varuna, who, in the Vedic context of India, were the guarantors of oaths and contracts, and were probably invoked by the Mitanni for the same reason.<sup>662</sup> But as Mary Boyce remarks, this "divine pair are so closely knit that it has been said that the only trait which makes a palpable difference between them is that Mitra dwells in fire, Varuna in water."<sup>663</sup> Varuna was also referred to as Apam Napāt, i.e., Child of the Waters, and it is this name that prevailed in the Iranian context. Moreover, the Mithra/Apam Napāt tandem was not only associated with fire and water, but also with the sun and moon, as well as the lion and bull. These were dualities that remained ever-present in the *mithraeum*.



Fig. 277 – Hittite Moon God and Sun God assisting King Pugnus-mili in a ritual ceremony. Ankara National Museum.

<sup>662</sup> Thieme 1960, 308-10.

<sup>663</sup> Boyce: [www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra\\_khsathrapati\\_ahura.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra_khsathrapati_ahura.php).

As per the Neo-Hittite rock-reliefs of the 8<sup>th</sup>-century BC, the Hittites worshiped a deity tandem personifying the moon and the sun (Fig. 277). More importantly, they had a winged solar emblem, which carried a sunflower (Fig. 278), or a solar-disk (Fig. 279). These were used like the Achaemenid *farr* symbols, and seem to be emblematic of an analogous concept, because, when the Anatolian satrap Datames rebelled against the Achaemenids, he placed a similar Neo-Hittite emblem next to his enthroned effigy (Fig. 280). Anatolians must have believed in the same concepts of authority as Iranians did, since their winged solar symbols were often accompanied by a crescent or water waves.



Fig. 278 – Hittite Sun disk with crescent (↑)  
Ankara National Museum



Fig. 279 – Hittite Sun disk below water waves (↑)

Thus, Cyrus's conquest of Anatolia did not provoke a cultural shock, but introduced a Median dualistic ideology that found itself on compatible and sympathetic grounds. An early impact of this Median ideology can be seen in the minting of new Lydian coins, which are adorned with a lion-bull pair (Fig. 282). Prior to Cyrus's conquest of Lydia, its ruler Croesus (r. 595-546BC) had minted coins with a single lion head (Fig. 281). As king of the plains, the lion symbolized royal power. Therefore, the sudden change in iconography, from a single lion to a lion-bull pair, could not be fortuitous but represented a major shift in ideology. Two confronting animals, neither subjugating the other, did not project sovereign power. Its sole purpose was to reflect the dualistic Median ideology, in which the bull was a nighttime symbol associated with Apam Napāt, while the lion symbolized daytime and Mithra. What's more, the shift in iconography was accompanied with a stylistic change by which the Lydian "light-bulb" nose of the lion was abandoned (Fig. 281), and an Iranian/Mesopotamian model was adopted for these animals.<sup>664</sup> It was precisely for this reason that Darius chose to symbolically bury these Lydian coins under

<sup>664</sup> In two recent papers (Soudavar 2010b, 137-38; Soudavar 2012b, 75-76), I have rejected the claims of Cahill and Kroll who attribute this lion-bull Lydian coin to Croesus (Cahill & Kroll 2005).

the Persepolis foundation slab.<sup>665</sup> The lion-and-bull imagery was the lynchpin of a Median ideology that saw the world divided into day and night realms, and constituted the antithesis of the monotheistic Mazdaism that Darius was trying to promote. Their minting was abandoned as soon as Darius rose to power.



Fig. 280 – Coin of Datames  
British Museum



Fig. 281 – Pre-Cyrus Lydian coin  
Private collection



Fig. 282 – Post-Cyrus Lydian coin  
Private collection

With so many sun gods worshiped in Anatolia, one would expect that any Mithraic cult or practice introduced by the Medes would have been diluted in a pool of indigenous sun-god-related practices, and would have gradually lost its original slant. Surprisingly though, it did not, and most elements of the *mithraeum* still reflect their Median origin.

#### XIV.2 - The Median Aspects of the *Mithraeum*

The most important ceremony of brotherhoods was the initiation process that culminated in an oath. In Indo-Iranian cultures, oath ceremonies were conducted as much over fire as over water; and they are both present in the *mithraeum* for this very purpose.<sup>666</sup> A fire altar in the *mithraeum* of Jajce in Bosnia (Fig. 283) emphasizes the linkage between these two elements through the lotus petals depicted on its rim; it recreates the symbolism associated with Apam Napāt, as the fire that sprang out of water like burning *naphtha* (see sec. X.7, also Fig. 257). Moreover, the shape of this fire altar is closely associated with those depicted on Achaemenid tombs and Iranian seals (Fig. 284), and indicates an Iranian origin for this pedestal-shaped stone object that stood at the heart of the *mithraeum*.

The oath over fire was taken in the name of Mithra, because his very name meant contract and covenant. As Mary Boyce has suggested (see sec. VII.1), fire and light were so associated with Mithra (as Lord of the Covenant) that he was eventually identified with the Sun God in the Iranian pantheon. Furthermore, the spelling of Mithra with a "th"

<sup>665</sup> See Soudavar 2010b, 128.

<sup>666</sup> Boyce 1975, 33-34. In fact, fire and water became ceremonially so entangled that *Denkard* (V, 19. 24) says: "Because Water accompanies Fire, it must be praised and handled with deference."

or (θ) in the Greco-Roman world offers a clue as to its Median origin, since the Hittite and Vedic versions of this name are spelled with a "t" only ("Mitra"), and its Old Persian name would have been "Misa" and not Mithra.<sup>667</sup> Thus, the Greek spelling "Mithra" of this deity's name clearly points to a Median origin.



Fig. 283 – Fire altar from the mithraeum in Jajce, Bosnia.



Fig. 284 – Fire altar on the tomb of Artaxerxes III. Persepolis



Figs. 285 a, b – Cautes and Cautopates statues. Louvre Museum

Moreover, Mithra's popularity was such that Zoroastrians ended up incorporating a sanitized version of this deity into their pantheon. And the *Mehr Yasht* (i.e., the Avestan hymn dedicated to Mithra) still reflects original themes sung in his praise. Stanza 10.104 of this hymn is particularly relevant to the *mithraeum*, for it explains the presence of Mithra's two acolytes, the torch bearers Cautes and Cautopates. Jean Kellens interprets this stanza as describing the two arms of Mithra, one upward, toward the East, and the other plunging downward, toward the West.<sup>668</sup> Cautes and Cautopates stand, stand so to speak, for the two "arms" of Mithra, one heralding the rising sun, and the other, announcing the setting sun (Figs. 285a, b).<sup>669</sup> But on a seal imprint from the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore where, for lack of space, Cautes and Cautopates could not be depicted, fire altars are



Fig. 286 – Mithraic seal (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore)

<sup>667</sup> Lecoq 1997, 48.

<sup>668</sup> Kellens 1994, 165.

<sup>669</sup> Of all the tauroctony scenes, one from Esquiline (CIMRM 368) and one in the Louvre are among the very few in which the two torch bearers keep their torches downward.

placed on both sides of the tauroctony scene instead (Fig. 286). *Cautes* and *Cautopates* torches were obviously equated with the fire altar, and their light, with that of the sun.

Similarly, the *Avesta* contains scattered references about the Aryan *farr* that was once closely associated with Mithra. The stanzas *Yt. 18.2-7*, for instance, specify that the Aryan *farr* was accompanied by the Strong Wind. Thus, in the victory rock-reliefs of the Sasanian Shāpur I, his *dastārs* (flying ribbons) have an amplified wave pattern to project the action of the Strong Wind and to show a high degree of *farr* for the sovereign (Fig. 288).<sup>670</sup> We may then surmise that Mithra's windblown cloak in tauroctony scenes was also meant to project his association with the *farr*. Furthermore, the lion, which as a sun symbol was affiliated to Mithra in the Iranian context, is often present in the *mithraeum*, as in Jajce (Fig. 287), or as in Hedernheim (Fig. 289).



Fig. 287 – The lion from the Jajce *mithraeum*.



Fig. 288 – Shāpur I's billowing ribbons as sign of his powerful *farr*. Naqsh-e Rajab



Fig. 289 - Mithra's cape blown as sign of his powerful *farr*, with a lion below. Hedernheim (web)

The duality that juxtaposed water with fire was also reflected in the depiction of the sun and the moon on the upper corners of tauroctony stone-reliefs in the *mithraeum*. In the Iranian context, many deities—especially Mithra—rode a *quadriga* (sec. VII.2). Same is true in the Roman context, where Sun and Moon are often depicted with a *quadriga*, as on the Borghese tauroctony monument of the Louvre (Figs. 290 a, b). Moreover, since the moon was qualified as *gao-chithra* (brilliant as milk/cow) in the *Avesta*, its *quadriga* was often pulled by horned cows. That is why the moon chariot of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century *mithraeum* found under the church of San Stefano Rotondo in Rome (Fig. 291) is pulled by cows. Furthermore, an Eros-type Apam-Napāt, similar to that of Sasanian rock-reliefs

<sup>670</sup> Soudavar 2006b, 175; Soudavar 2010b, 440.

and silver plates of Figs. 54, 55, and 292, is hovering over the cows of its Moon chariot. As Lord of the Night, Apam Napāt was often invoked in Iranian nighttime ceremonies, and its presence in the San Stefano monument only confirms that *mithraeum* ceremonies were essentially based on Median ideology.<sup>671</sup> As such, they were bound to suffer from the persecution frenzy that accompanied the Magophonia, especially since they contained elements that became associated with the enemies of Darius's Mazdaism.



Figs. 290 a, b – Top corners of the Borghese tauroctony scene (details of Fig. 4)

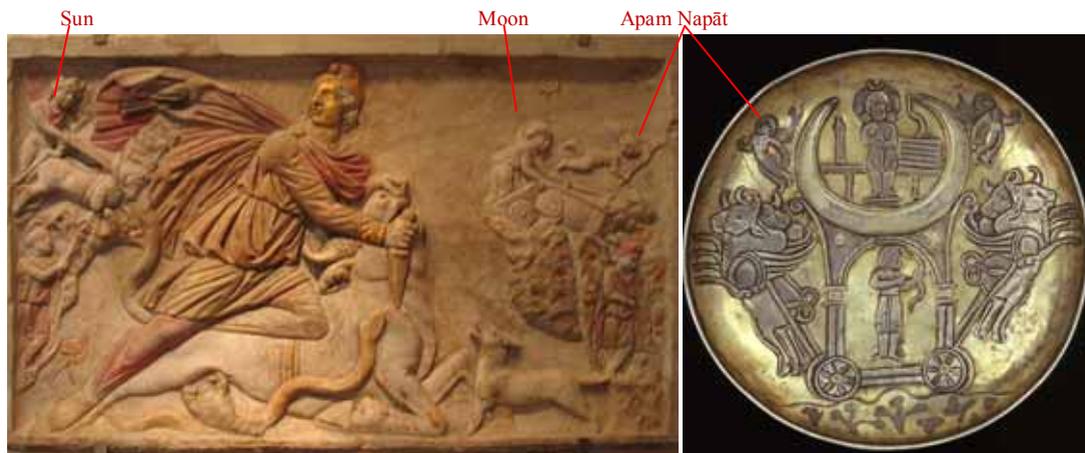


Fig. 291 – Tauroctony stele from San Stefano Rotondo with Apam Napāt directing the Moon's chariot (web)

Fig. 292 – Apam Napāt pulling the flying cows/bulls of the Moon's chariot. Sasanian silver plate

<sup>671</sup> When I first encountered the double-legged *ankh* symbol on the seal of Maximilian of Habsburg, I was not sure whether it was meant to be a symbol of Apam Napāt or not (see note 52 supra). But the appearance of Apam Napāt's symbol on the San Stefano monument seems to indicate that some member of the Order of the Golden Fleece, either understood its significance, or at least knew that it was an auspicious brotherhood symbol.

### XIV.3 - The Median Demoniac Symbols

The very symbol of the Median magi whom Darius was killing in Persepolis was a standing lion-headed chimera with wings and a scorpion tail (Fig. 293). It provided the prototype for the representation of *divs*, whom Zoroastrians came to consider as demoniac creatures and opponents of Ahura Mazdā. Several *mithraea* display statues of a standing lion-headed creature with wings, and a snake wrapped around it, in lieu of the scorpion tail (Fig. 294). They occasionally label it as Arimanius, perhaps to mark their disagreement with Zoroastrians, for whom, Ahriman was the embodiment of evil.



Fig. 293 – Darius killing the *div* (Gaumāta)



Fig. 294 – The snake-wrapped, lion-headed and winged chimera. Louvre



Fig. 295 – A *div* from the Tahmāsb Shāhnāmeḥ (Courtesy of S.C. Welch)



Fig. 296 – A giant snake from the Bordeaux *mithraeum*

In Zoroastrianism, the snake and scorpion were considered as *khrafstar*, or noxious animals that had to be killed, and the priesthood of Mithraic congregations was labeled as "*khrafstar-ish*" (see Appendix II.5). Yet, Mithraic congregations of the Sasanian era continued to consider these animals as auspicious species (as witnessed by their numerous seals). And tauroctony scenes illustrate the prominence of these two symbols within the *mithraeum*. The Bordeaux *mithraeum* once harbored a gigantic stand-alone coiled snake (Fig. 296) that recalls the Elamite snake throne of Fig. 110. On the Louvre stele of Fig. 39, a snake encircles the fire altar, as if to emphasize that fire rises out of the waters that the snake represents. Moreover, the Crypta Balbi image of a man holding two snakes (Fig. 299) establishes a clear connection with the "master of animals" figural type that long existed on the Iranian plateau (e.g., Fig. 298). A more imaginative composition of this type is a bronze object from the Archeological Museum of Istanbul in which

Mithra holds two lion-headed serpents (Fig. 300). Similarly a Mithraic cameo, with snakes wrapped around two sticks (Fig. 297), echoes the Sasanian seals and the *kuseh-gardi* ceremonies of Iran that are reminiscent of Elamite fertility rites, as argued in sec. VI.2.

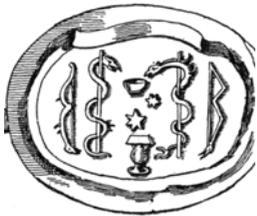


Fig. 297 – Mithraic cameo  
(from Fig. 108)



Fig. 298 – Master of animals  
with two snakes. Louvre



Fig. 299- Vase from  
Crypta Balbi



Fig. 300 – Mithra holding two lion-  
snakes (from Fig. 115)

While it is not clear how these Elamite symbols and traditions were fused into the Median ones, it is nevertheless obvious that most of the symbols of the Roman *mithraeum* belonged to an Elamo-Median tradition that Darius and later Zoroastrians abhorred and tried to eradicate.

#### XIV.4 - Going Underground

As Darius and his *pārsas* decided to persecute the Median magi—after the demise of Gaumāta—any brotherhood or organization with a Mithraic affiliation had to hide and "go underground." In Anatolia, they literally did so and chose the cave as their gathering place. Since fire was at the heart of their ceremonies, once underground, they recreated in the cave the star-studded sky under which they were used to conducting their nighttime ceremonies and performing their rituals next to the fire altar that was now situated inside the *mithraeum*.<sup>672</sup> In a sense, Roger Beck is right to say that the *mithraeum* was an "intimate microcosm of the universe"; in going underground, Mithraic societies were replicating, in their caves, the universe they used to see at nighttime above ground. To emphasize this even more, some tauroctony scenes depict a few trees above the cave (Figs. 1, 4). As for Porphyry's statement that "Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honor of Mithras," it may reflect an attempt by Mithraic societies to have made

<sup>672</sup> Bjørnebye rsays of the cave that its "ceiling was often painted blue, and sometimes 'stars' of precious stones or metals were inserted with the express purpose of turning the ceiling into the vault of heaven"; Bjørnebye 2007.

their practices acceptable to Zoroastrianism,<sup>673</sup> in the same way that dervish orders falsely ascribed the principles of *fotovvat* to the Prophet Mohammad.



Fig. 301 – Tauroctony scene from Dura Europos (Yale University Museum)

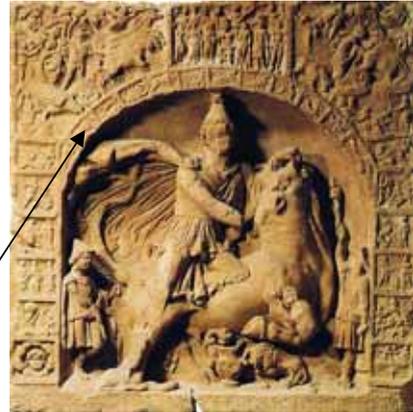


Fig. 302 – Tauroctony scene. Römermuseum, Osterburken (wiki)

Be that as it may, the placing of zodiac symbols above the tauroctony scenes provided an additional way to project the celestial vault within the cave. As such they were placed on the rim of the vaulted ceiling of the cave (Figs. 301, 302). Later on, the zodiac signs may have served to invoke astral power in initiation ceremonies. Since the Sun and the Moon were prominently figured on the top corners, and the dog, as symbol of the Dog Star, was present below, it made sense to expand the celestial imagery with zodiac symbols.

#### XIV.5 - Sacrificial Utensils

Three interrelated bronze objects may shed some light on *mithraeum* activities. The first is a tripod from Berlin's Altes Museum that is adorned with sacrificial animals, namely the bull and the horse,<sup>674</sup> as well as with the snake and the lion that were affiliated to Mithra and were usually present in the *mithraeum* (Fig. 304a). The functional purpose of this tripod is demonstrated by an earlier (7<sup>th</sup> century BC) tripod from the Ankara National Museum that carries a cauldron on top, with bull heads on its rim (Fig. 303). A similar cauldron from the Altes Museum—but without a tripod—has four ram heads on its rim, in lieu of bull heads. As both the cow/bull and the ram were sacrificial animals, one can guess that these cauldrons contained the sacrificial meal that had to be distributed among

<sup>673</sup> J. Russell, "Imagery of Zarathushtra: continuity and change in tradition," paper delivered at the Oct. 14, 2013, conference at SOAS: *Looking Back: Zoroastrian Identity Formation Through Recourse to the Past*.

<sup>674</sup> Horses were sacrificed in the name of Mithra at Cyrus's tomb; Briant 1996, 106.

congregation members (see also Fig. 366).<sup>675</sup> But the Altes cauldron is so shallow that it can hardly be used for preparing a stew for an entire congregation. One can only speculate that it was meant to capture the blood of the sacrificial animal to be offered to the congregation members or to the initiates.



Fig. 303 – Tripod with cauldron.  
Ankara National Museum



Figs. 304 a, b – (a) Roman Mithraic tripod, (b) Mithraic cauldron  
Altes Museum Berlin

#### XIV.6 - Mithraic Silver Plates as Tools of Diplomacy

Shāpur I's successive victories over the Romans stabilized—for a while—the rapport de force between the Sasanian and Roman empires. The Romans acknowledged the superior strength of the Persians, and chose to engage Shāpur with diplomacy rather than war. In diplomacy, common grounds are always exploited. Since Shāpur cherished his Mithraic power base, and even wore a Mithraic bonnet (see sec. X.4), the Romans saw therein the opportunity to send an emissary of high rank affiliated, or at least familiar, with Mithraic societies. The *Historia Augusta* provides an anecdote about how this diplomatic avenue was explored, and how the Persians reacted to it. It's about the visit of the Roman Emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) *prior* to his ascent to the throne, therefore at a time when Shāpur I (d. 270) was still reigning in Iran:

... when he (Aurelian) had gone as an envoy to the Persians, he was presented with a sacrificial saucer, of the kind that the king of the Persians is wont to present to the emperor, on which was engraved the Sun god in the same attire in which he was worshiped in the very temple where the mother of Aurelian had been a priestess.<sup>676</sup>

<sup>675</sup> Soudavar 2003, 111-12.

<sup>676</sup> Magie 1998, III:201.

The story conveys two interesting points. The first is that the Sasanians must have given Aurelian a silver plate, with an engraved effigy of Mithra, in full knowledge of Aurelian's family ties with a Mithraic temple; and the second is the fact that said Mithra's attire was similar to what this deity wore in the Roman Empire. We can thus only speculate that the gift of silver plates similar to the pair of the Altes Museum would have been appropriate for the occasion.<sup>677</sup> One of these plates has an effigy of Mithra as the sun god (Fig. 305a), and the other, an effigy of his aquatic counterpart depicted as Anāhitā (in lieu of Apam Napāt). Mithra has a bonnet with sunflowers similar to the bronze bonnet of Boston (Fig. 305b), and a crescent behind him to indicate that he is but one god of a deity pair that symbolized the Sun/Moon duality. Conversely, the effigy of Anāhitā has a solar emblem in its background to confirm her belonging to the same duality.<sup>678</sup>



Figs. 305 a, b – Two silver plates from a hoard datable to Tiberius's reign. Altes Museum, Berlin  
(a) Mithra against a moon crescent, (b) Anāhitā against a sun emblem

Be that as it may, the existence of Mithraic societies in both empires must have facilitated rapprochement between the two, especially when their rulers and their high elite were affiliated with the same type of congregations.

<sup>677</sup> These two silver objects were part of a silver hoard found in northern Italy. The hoard has been dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, based on a coin from Tiberius's reign (r. 14-37 AD).

<sup>678</sup> The eight-sided crown of this female deity, and the sun emblem behind her head, can hardly refer to Artemis as the twin sister of Apollo, because otherwise the crescent of Mithra should refer to a twin brother, or sister, that Mithra did not have. Identification with Aphrodite/Venus does not work either.

#### XIV.7 - From Persian God to Romanized Mithras

The spread of the *mithraea* across the Roman Empire only attests to the enormous popularity of the Mysteries among Romans (Fig. 6). Thousands of people, from every strata of society, were accustomed to taking an oath in Mithra's name. Such a popular deity was bound to enter the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods. An easy in was to weave him into Greek mythology. A mid 2<sup>nd</sup>-century sarcophagus from Konya illustrates this blending process, as it integrates Mithra into the Herakles cycle (Figs. 306a, b).



Figs. 306 a, b – Roman sarcophagus depicting the feats of Herakles. 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Konya Museum.

Herakles was sent by the King of Mycenae to perform a series of difficult tasks. His seventh task was to bring back the Bull of Crete that was terrorizing the island. The décor of the sarcophagus was meant to illustrate this whole series, but as Herakles is about to kill the bull, he is seemingly prevented by a Mithraic rider (Fig. 306a). The latter is pushing Herakles back with his hand, as if to say that the killing of the bull is Mithra's prerogative. It was a futile attempt, because on the following corner, Herakles manages to kill the bull (Fig. 306b). It's not clear whether the rider—who is wearing a Mithraic bonnet, but not the Persian garb of Mithra—was meant to represent Mithra himself or an emissary. This rider, however, has features that reappear in Sepphoris, in a Mithraic environment (see sec. XIV.12). If it was meant to represent Mithra himself, it would indicate one more step in the Hellenization of Mithra as he is stripped of his Persian clothing and is wearing a Greek tunic.

Mithra eventually entered the Roman pantheon, in large part through the intervention of rulers of Iranian origin who straddled the border zone between the Roman and Iranian empires. Mithridates I of Commagene (109-70 BC), whose name meant Mithra-given,

had erected statues of himself shaking hands with Mithra (Fig. 307), in which the sun god wears the same bonnet—with the same sunflowers—as on the silver plate of Fig. 305a. Mithridates's son, Antiochus I, shook hands with Herakles (Fig. 309a), but his paraphernalia was nonetheless replete with Mithraic symbols such as lions and sunflowers (Figs. 309a, b). The Commagene dynasty obviously considered Mithra as a protector, and a deity who had to be revered on a par with Greco-Roman ones such as Herakles. On another stele, on which Antiochus is shaking hands with Mithra, this deity is given the double name of Apollo-Mithras (Fig. 308).

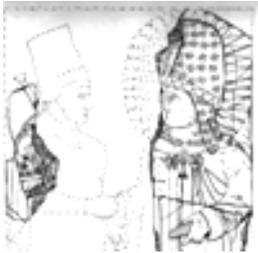


Fig. 307 - Mithridates and Mithra (Dorner 1978, p. V)



Fig. 308 – Antiochus and Apollo-Mithras (web)



Figs. 309 a, b – (a) Antiochus and Herakles. Nemrud Dagh; (b) Sunflowers on Antiochus's arm and lion on his hat

The Arsacid Tiridates I of Armenia came to Rome in 66 AD and famously said to Nero: "I have come to you, my god, worshiping you as I do Mithra"; he also brought along his magi to perform Mithraic rituals (Cassius Dio, 63.5.2). Thereafter, Commodus (r. 180-192) was initiated into the Mysteries, and Aurelian erected a magnificent temple to Sol Invictus (i.e. Mithra) in Rome, with its own special college of priests.<sup>679</sup>

But the emperor who raised Mithra to the top of the Roman pantheon of gods was Julian. As Dominique Hollard has recently demonstrated, Julian, who had been initiated into the Mysteries, was so enamored with Mithra that he often sacrificed bovines to him, wrote a treatise in his honor (on the occasion of Mithra's birthday on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December), and placed his bust at the gate of his military encampments.<sup>680</sup> The importance that Julian accorded to Mithra can be evaluated by the reactions it drew from two antagonist camps, namely the Persians and the Christians.

<sup>679</sup> *Historia Augusta*, XXV.6, XXXV.3, XXXIX.6

<sup>680</sup> Hollard 2010, 147-63.

On the Persian side, Julian so provoked Shāpur II that, on the Sasanian king's victory relief at Tāq-e Bostān, Mithra stood behind Ahura Mazdā to emphasize that the supreme deity that Julian had venerated had ultimately favored Shāpur II over his opponent, even though he was a mere second in the Persian pantheon (Fig. 206).<sup>681</sup> Mithra had never had such prominence in Sasanian rock reliefs, and his presence in Tāq-e Bostān was only in response to Julian's propaganda.

On the Christian side, the reaction was even stronger. Julian was branded the "Apostate" and the Mithraic congregations were perceived as enemies, although, as we shall next argue, Christianity must have initially joined forces with them. If Julian was declared an apostate, it is not that he was ever a Christian and renounced his faith to deserve such a label. It was because he took the Roman Empire—which Christians had considered as theirs since Constantine I (r. 306-37)—back to paganism. It's the Roman state that slid into apostasy and not Julian; but he got branded as such for causing it. Julian's Mithra-oriented actions prompted a severe rift among two interconnected movements, with all the animosity and venom that often spills out when betrayal is felt, or imagined, among next of kin or comrades in arms. It is thus that the centurions of Judea in charge of Jesus's crucifixion in Fra Angelico's *Scenes from the Life of Christ* operate under the Roman SPQR banner, but wear capes adorned with scorpions as symbols of their Mithraic affiliation (Fig. 310). Fra Angelico is insinuating that it was not the Roman state that committed this crime, but a Mithraic faction within that state. Fifteenth-century Italy was still under the spell of that 4<sup>th</sup>-century rift between two former allies.



Fig. 310 - Scenes from the Life of Christ, by Fra Angelico, circa 1451.  
Museo di San Marco, Florence



Fig. 311 - St Peter with red miter.  
15<sup>th</sup> century Burgundy. MMA

<sup>681</sup> Julian must have tailored his war propaganda toward the Sasanian military by claiming that Mithra was on his side; and since Shāpur's brother, Hormizdas (Hormoz), commanded part of the Roman cavalry, and Julian had plans to place him on the Persian throne, the Roman propaganda must have shaken the very legitimacy of Shāpur's right to rule; Hollard 2010, 147-63, Soudavar 2012a, 46.

The rift between the two also produced a rivalry that, from the Christian perspective, manifested itself as a desire to project Christianity's triumph over Mithraism. Thus the Magi who came to visit the infant Jesus were portrayed as Mithraic priests in early Christian artifacts (Figs. 312-13). This was based on *Matthew* 2.12:

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time, of King Herod, magi (Gr. *μαγοι*) from the east came to Jerusalem,"

and conceived to show the subordination of the Mithraic magi to Christianity.<sup>682</sup> The Magi were imagined as a threesome, so that each could carry one of the three gifts that they supposedly brought.<sup>683</sup> Centuries later, as Mithraism was left behind, the image of the gift-bearing Mithraic priests was set aside and the *μαγοι* were imagined as kings paying homage to the newborn Jesus (Fig. 314). Mithraism was no longer a threat; instead the Church's authority was challenged by kings. As with Zoroastrianism, subduing kingship became a major concern. Kings submitting their offering to the infant Jesus reflects such a concern, and projects the subordination of kingship to the Church.



Fig. 312 - Three Mithraic Magi visiting Jesus. 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, San Vitale, Ravenna



Fig. 313 - The Mithraic Magi visiting Jesus 6<sup>th</sup> century. British Museum



Fig. 314 - Sigismund of Luxembourg, Manuel Paleologos II & Jean Sans Peur in lieu of the three Magi, 1423. Uffizi<sup>684</sup>

#### XIV.8 - Adoption of Mithraic Rites and Symbols in Christianity

Marvin Meyer once wrote that "early Christianity ... in general, resembles Mithraism in a number of respects – enough to make Christian apologists scramble to invent creative

<sup>682</sup> Félix 2000, 15, 25.

<sup>683</sup> *Matthew* 2.10-12 explains that the magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The number of magi varied between 2 and 12 but got fixed at 3 in consideration of the gifts; Félix 2000, 84.

<sup>684</sup> This image is a detail of the *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano at the Uffizi, Florence. For an explanation, see Soudavar 2008, 110-27.

theological explanations to account for the similarities."<sup>685</sup> Indeed, similarities abound. The Eucharist, for instance, was so similar to the Mysteries' rituals that Justin (d. 165 AD) imagined them copying the Christians, rather than the other way around:

"...the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated..."<sup>686</sup>

Furthermore, the name of the Pope is directly derived from the Mithraic leader *pater/papa*, and the bishop, who wears a red robe like the *pater*, has a headgear named *miter* after Mithra (Fig. 311) that is often shaped like those of dervishes (Figs. 80, 147). The very concept of a *pater* presiding over a congregation of brothers was the model that inspired ascetic Christian orders such as the Franciscans who referred to themselves as friars (i.e. brothers). The celebration of Christmas on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December—first attested in 354—had its origin in the celebration of the winter solstice, which in the Julian calendar fell on that very day.<sup>687</sup> The Emperor Aurelian had dedicated that date to the Romanized Mithra (i.e., Sol Invictus) in the same way that Iranians recognized in the winter solstice the awakening of the sun god Mithra.

Moreover, early Christians gathered in caves, i.e., the very environment that also harbored the original *mithraeum*. Mithraic societies had gone underground for fear of persecution, so did the Christians. Gary Wills who characterizes early Christianity as "only a Jesus movement within the Jewish community," recognizes that its principal activity was "a communal meal in which memories of Jesus were shared."<sup>688</sup> He also notes that a spirit of brotherhood prevailed among them as Jesus said to his companions:

"You, however, should not be addressed as "Rabbi," since you have only one teacher, and you are *brothers* to each other. Do not address any man on earth as *father*, since you have only one father, and he is in heaven" (*Matthew 23.8-9*).<sup>689</sup>

Thus, the cave, the communal meal, and the brotherhood spirit that prevailed in the early Christian communities provided a common ground for a rapprochement with Mithraic congregations: To meet, to learn from one another, to emulate each other, and to

<sup>685</sup> Meyer 2010, 179. See also Simon 1978, 464.

<sup>686</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 66. It is not clear why Justin describes the Eucharist as the practice of breaking bread into water, for the Christians as well as Mithraic initiates dipped their bread into wine. But as in the case of dervish orders, some of whom used water, and others wine, in their initiation ceremonies, Christians and Mithraic societies may have used both.

<sup>687</sup> Yamauchi 1996, 520.

<sup>688</sup> Wills 2013, 7.

<sup>689</sup> Some Nabatean congregations addressed their leaders as *bābā*, see note 374 supra.

eventually join forces. One can readily understand that besides the communal meal, the practice of secrecy, the initiation procedures, and the Mithraic hierarchy would have been of interest to the early Christian activists. But as far as Jesus was concerned, *Matthew* 23.9 clearly reveals that he was aware of congregations that addressed their leaders as "father," but rejected that practice. Later priesthood, however, saw great benefit in that type of hierarchy, and espoused it in contravention of the spirit of simplicity and brotherhood that Jesus had preached.



Fig. 315 – Portal of the 13th-century Parma Baptistery  
(Photo: Nasrin Soudavar)



Fig. 316 – Byzantine ivory plaque. MMA

In sections XIV.11-12 below, we shall see that Mithraic societies were popular within Jewish/Christian communities, and a fair amount of intermingling may have occurred in that context; to the extent that Jesus's warning in *Matthew* 23.9 may have been in consideration of what he had actually observed in such societies. Our aim here is not to study the full impact of Mithraism on Christianity, but to find elements that provide a better comprehension of Iranian Mithraism, and the array of symbols and practices that originated within that sphere. We shall therefore concentrate on duality symbols that permeated Christianity, despite its strong emphasis on monotheism. The Mithraic sun and moon symbols, for instance, often appear in church architecture, as well as its decorative elements. One can of course consider them as celestial symbols or signs of the heavens. But when *personified* as a sun god and a moon god—as in the *mithraeum*—they obviously had a pagan tint, and should have been rejected. If they were not, it's because Mithraic symbols were so enmeshed with Christianity that they could not be discarded overnight. The portal of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Parma Baptistery displays the sun god and the

moon god, each riding a *quadriga* driven by four horses and four cows respectively (Fig. 315). It's a feature that has a meaning in the Mithraic context but none whatsoever in Christianity. Similarly, the sun and moon gods that appear on an ivory plaque from the MMA (Fig. 316), are featured with crowns like those of the *mithraeum*, and are located in the same corners.

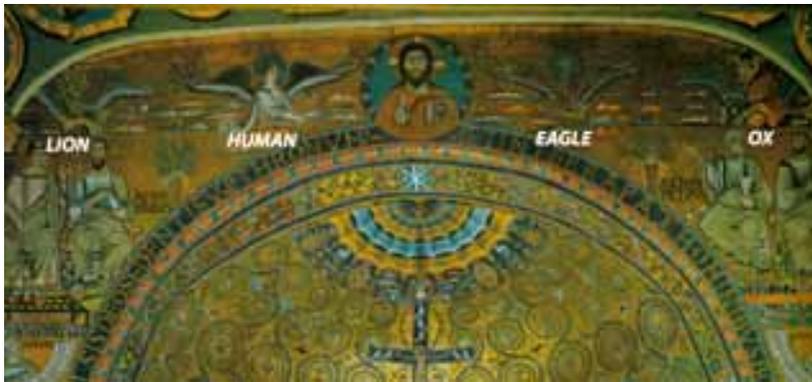


Fig. 317 – Apse of the San Clement Basilica in Rome.



Fig. 318 - *Mihrāb* of the Al-Mansur mosque (web)

These pagan settings and symbols had to be modified or reinterpreted over time. Thus, in the top row of the apse of the San Clemente Basilica in Rome, the emblems of the four Evangelists are set in a way that the lion (symbol of Mark) is situated on the top left corner, and the ox (symbol of Luke), on the top right corner (Fig. 317). But in *Revelations* 4:7, which provided the inspiration for attributing these symbols to the four Evangelists, the ox comes right after the lion.<sup>690</sup> The San Clemente re-ordering of the symbols is a clear attempt to blur the Mithraic heritage of Christianity, especially since the Basilica was actually built on top of a *mithraeum*. Shortly after San Clemente—which is datable to the 12<sup>th</sup> century—a similar blurring scheme was attempted on the portal of the Parma Baptistery. Over the sun and moon gods riding their *quadriga*, a lion is inserted into a medallion that contains another effigy of the sun god, on the left, and an ox is inserted into the medallion of the moon god, on the right (Fig. 315). Through the lion and the ox, the sun and the moon were being justified as symbols of Mark and Luke. More than eight centuries after the rift caused by Julian, Christianity was still trying to divest itself from the sun and moon symbolism that it had inherited from Mithraism. It

<sup>690</sup> *Revelations* 4.7: "the first living creature like a LION, the second living creature like an OX, the third living creature with a face like a HUMAN face, and the fourth living creature like a flying EAGLE," (4.8): "And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside."

could never do it completely, since "Sunday" and "Monday" are constant reminders of the prominent role that the sun and the moon once played in Christianity.



Fig. 319 – Byzantine platter with a shell between lamps. Dumbarton Oaks Museum



Fig. 320 – Virgin and Child under a shell. Bordeaux Museum



Fig. 321 – Malta Order Altar piece. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Furthermore, a striking feature of the Metropolitan ivory plaque is a shell-like dome under which the Virgin Mary is seated (Fig. 316). It's a motif that is often used in Christianity, not only with respect to the Virgin Mary (Fig. 320), but in other circumstances such as the Last Supper scene of a Byzantine silver platter (Fig. 319), or the 1522 crucifixion altar of a Malta Order monument (Fig. 321).<sup>691</sup> As such, the shell must have been a symbol that portended auspiciousness. We shall further elaborate this topic in the next section, but, for the time being suffice it to say that its meaning is divulged by the name of the prayer niche of Islamic mosques, i.e., *mihṛāb* (Fig. 318), which originally referred to a holy space adorned with the dual symbols of Mithra (*mehr*) and Apam Napāt (*āb*). Mithra could be symbolized by the sun, fire, or candle light; Apam Napāt, however, was represented by the shell, an elegant aquatic symbol that also conveyed his role as guardian of the *farr*, when encapsulated underwater as a pearl.<sup>692</sup> An elaborate sun motif set at the heart of a shell niche from an 8<sup>th</sup>-century monastery of El-Tod in Egypt (Fig. 325) clearly vouches for a tradition related to a Mithra/Apam Napāt symbolism.

<sup>691</sup> It's interesting to note that the stone altar which came from the Commanderie of the Order of Malta in Soultz (Alsace), has kept the basic Mithraic architecture with the two sun and moon medallions on the top replaced by the effigies of the Order's founders.

<sup>692</sup> See note 512 supra.



Fig. 322 – San Simeon with a Mithraic bonnet under a shell. 6<sup>th</sup> century Syria. Louvre



Fig. 323 – Chi-Rho symbol placed under a shell. MMA



Fig. 324 – Sun cross and shell above archangel Michael (British Museum)



Fig. 325 – Sun emblem at the center of a shell. Architectural fragment from El-Tod, Egypt. Louvre



Fig. 326 – Mithraic head between snakes and a sun motif (same as Fig. 116)



Fig. 327 – Sun emblem between two snakes, 13<sup>th</sup> century, Anatolia. Ince Minar Madrasa, Konya

But a more telling setting for the shell is a 6<sup>th</sup>-century silver plaque from northern Syria dedicated to San Simeon, who is said to have lived for thirty seven years on top of a pillar (Fig. 322). The saint wears a Mithraic bonnet and seems to be preaching from the top of his pillar, which is depicted as a combination of a fire altar and the *pater's* throne in the *mithraeum*. More importantly, a prominent snake is coiled around the pillar, while the whole scene is dominated by a shell placed above the saint. There cannot be more vivid proof of Mithraism's intermingling with Christianity.

The shell on the silver Byzantine platter (Fig. 319) is incorporated into a structure held by *two* columns and adorned with *two* lamps that replicate the Islamic *mihrah*, with its *two*

side columns and *two* candlesticks. This pattern of a shell, in combination with two columns, is not Christian-specific and seems to replicate itself across various religious settings. In another variation, a Byzantine ivory plaque has a sun cross at the center of a shell (Fig. 324, see also Fig. 364). When the sun cross was turned into the *Chi-Rho* monogram of Christ, it was again placed under a shell and between two columns (Fig. 323). Furthermore, the previously discussed sun symbol of an Armenian church flanked by a pair of snakes (Fig. 326) provides a link to a similar architectural element from a mosque in Konya that has a sun symbol flanked by two snakes (Fig. 327).<sup>693</sup> We thus have a number of common motifs between Christianity and Islam, which, because of their sun, shell, and snake motifs, betray a Mithraic heritage.



Figs. 328 a, b— Church of Ana Meryem. Diyarbakir.  
 (a) portal with shell décor over suncross  
 (b) sun and moon emblems

Fig. 329 - Jesus's monogram  
 and cross within sunburst.  
 Bordeaux Museum

Fig. 330 - Sun-cross  
 within Jesus's nimbus.  
 Aya Sofia

At the Syriac Church of the Virgin Mary (Meryem Ana *kilisesi*) in Diyarbakir, besides sun-and-moon symbols that are prominently on display (Fig. 328b),<sup>694</sup> there is a portal with a shell-like domed structure, at the heart of which is placed a Greek cross (Fig. 328a). We had previously argued that this type of four-legged cross was a sun symbol. Christians themselves recognized it as such, since it appears next to the names of the Mithraic magi in Ravenna (Fig. 101). The same cross is incorporated in the sun-disk behind Jesus's head in Aya Sofia, and leaves no doubt as to the equivalence of this cross with the sun (Fig. 330). Sun and light were very much Mithra's attributes, which Christianity borrowed because of the powerful imagery that it provided. A 17<sup>th</sup>-century architectural element from Bordeaux, for instance, incorporates Jesus's IHS monogram in a sunburst that is reminiscent of the Flaming Flint Stone of the Order of the Golden

<sup>693</sup> The snake on the right is partly destroyed.

<sup>694</sup> The sun symbol next to the crescent recalls similar ones on the hindquarters of the Mithraic lions as in Fig. 100, Fig. 238, and Fig. 256.

Fleece (Fig. 329), as well as the sunburst of a Masonic leader (Fig. 348b).<sup>695</sup> The most important use of this imagery, however, occurs in the text of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.  
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten;  
that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, *Light of Light*, very God of very God,  
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...

The Nicene Creed is Christianity's fundamental doctrine of faith, proclaimed by the first ecumenical council in 325 AD. The council had been convened by Constantine in Nicaea to establish Christianity's superiority in a Hellenized Roman world, where many mortals were regularly deified, including Emperor Hadrian's (r. 117-138) young lover Antinous. The proclamation's objective was to ascertain that Jesus was as divine as possible, within a monotheistic religion where God was supposed to be the sole Supreme being. Jesus was presented as God incarnate, based on the appellation "Son of God" that St Paul had advocated.<sup>696</sup> But what Jesus meant by addressing God as "father" was not what the Nicene Council proclaimed, since in *Matthew 23.9*, Jesus says that God was *father to all the apostles* and by extension to all humanity. And that's why there was strong dissent in Nicaea, and the dissenters, led by Bishop Arius (d. 336), were verbally condemned in the proclamation.<sup>697</sup>

More problematic, however, was the *Light of Light* qualification. Supposedly, it was based on *1 John 8:12*, where Jesus says: "*I am the light of the world.*" But the use of "light" in this verse is metaphoric, and to accept it literally creates enormous theological problems, even more so if extended to God himself. Because, if God is light, how did darkness appear? If God is creator of all, how can he be equated with only light and not darkness? If God "separated the light from the darkness," as per *Genesis 1:4*, did he do it within his own substance? i.e., did he also carry darkness at one point in time?

These are questions that do not arise in a dualistic framework, where you have a day god and a night god. Mithra, for instance, could be equated with light and not be associated with nighttime, which was the domain of his counterpart, Apam Napāt. That is why God

<sup>695</sup> See sec. II.6. "IHS" stood for "*Jesus Hominum Salvatore.*"

<sup>696</sup> As Reza Aslan argues, the appellation "Son of God" was not an unusual title in ancient Judaism. It was the Greek-speaking Hellenist Saul of Tarsus (i.e., St Paul) who promoted the literal meaning, by which Jesus was understood to be the actual son of God; Aslan 2013; 186, 266.

<sup>697</sup> Their objections can be deduced from the condemnation that appears at the end of the Nicene Creed: "But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church."

was never identified with light in the Old Testament.<sup>698</sup> Light can be an instrument in the hands of a monotheistic god, but not his essence. Moreover, it was not essential for conveying Jesus's divine status.<sup>699</sup> If *Light of Light* was inserted in the Nicene Creed, it was probably in competition with Mithraism. God, and his Son, had to have all the attributes of Mithra, and more.

In sum, many elements of Median ideology had permeated Christianity via Roman Mithraism. They are all based on a duality that manifested itself as sun and moon, or fire and water. Through the pagan symbols that Christianity adopted, such as the shell and the sun cross, we find an enduring presence of the dualistic ideology that Darius and Zoroastrianism had once banned in Iran; and through the divergences that developed between Christianity and Mithraism, we have yet another gauge for measuring the latter's popularity in the Roman world; and through rituals such as the Eucharist, we can assess the attractiveness of brotherhood initiation rituals for a wide variety of congregations.

#### **XIV.9 - Explaining the Islamic *Mīhrāb* as *Mehr-āb***

In pursuit of his *archéologie en terrain littéraire*, Melikian-Chirvani has dug out much evidence to show that two of the most important components of the Islamic mosque, namely the minaret and the *mīhrāb*, were borrowed from pre-Islamic Iran. For the minaret, he follows Robert Hillenbrand in suggesting that it does not originate in "functional use," and if it is perceived today as a tower from which the call to prayer (*azān*) is announced, its etymology, as well as the meanings that early dictionaries attribute to it, suggest a columnar structure that carried fire on its top, such as a light house, road indicator, or lamp stand.<sup>700</sup> The fire, up high, signaled where believers had to gather for prayer in the dark of the night.

Similarly, Melikian-Chirvani argues that the Islamic *mīhrāb*, or the prayer niche, was an adaptation from a fire edifice that stood at the heart of Zoroastrian monuments. His first observation is etymological. In contrast to the traditional explanation of the word *mīhrāb* (محراب) as a derivative of حرب (battle), i.e., as the battlefield between good and evil, Melikian-Chirvani relies on early lexicons to explain this word as the "heart" of an edifice and its most important spot.<sup>701</sup> He then uses numismatic evidence and the

<sup>698</sup> 2 *Samuel* 22:29 : "the Lord turns *my* darkness into light."; 2 *Samuel* 23:4: "he is *like* the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning"; (*Psalms* 76:4) "You are radiant with light"

<sup>699</sup> The question of God or his Son being equated with Light does not appear as a point of contention between the antagonists of Nicea, for it is not mentioned in the final threat against the dissidents; see note 697 supra.

<sup>700</sup> Melikian-Chirvani 1990b, 109-112.

<sup>701</sup> Melikian-Chirvani 1990b, 110; see also Porter 2007, 555.

*Shāhnāme* to argue that it actually referred to a domed structure that harbored a fire underneath, which was called *chahār-tāq* in Sasanian times.<sup>702</sup> In Persian, *tāq* meant arch and the *chahār-tāq* referred to a four-arched edifice with a dome on top. If in open air, the structure warranted heavy corner pillars as in Fig. 331, but if inside, it looked more like a domed canopy supported by four columns. To this day, the Zoroastrian fire altar is called *dar-e Mehr* (Mithra's gateway); and that may be the reason why the Islamic *mihṛāb* is conceived as a portal or gateway. What's more, a Zoroastrian tradition states that *dar-e mehr* or "place of fire" should have four doors.<sup>703</sup>

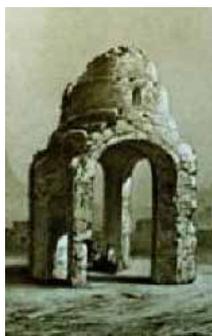


Fig. 331 - Roknābād  
*chahār-tāq* (web)



Fig. 332 – *Mihṛāb*  
with lamp. MMA



Fig. 333 – Stone  
*mihṛāb*. Ince Minar  
Madrasa. Konya



Fig. 334 – Aya Sofia  
*mihṛāb* with sun  
symbol on top



Fig. 335 – *Mihṛāb* of  
Dome of the Rock  
(Melikian 1992, 118)

Since the fire-harboring *chahār-tāq* was the focal point of pre-Islamic religious ceremonies, the same structure was used to orient the Moslem believer within the mosque, and to direct his prayer toward Mecca. Thus the *mihṛāb* was conceived as the two-dimensional image of the *chahār-tāq* fire altar on a wall, and it became the "heart" of the mosque. And that's why numerous *mihṛābs* have the image of a lamp hanging under the arch (Fig. 332), or the image of a pair of lamps at ground level (Fig. 333), or two actual mosque lamps set in front of them (Fig. 334).

More importantly, Melikian-Chirvani uses the example of the *mihṛāb* at the Dome of the Rock to show that its fire symbol could be replaced by a sunburst called *shamseh*, which

<sup>702</sup> Melikian-Chirvani shows through numerous examples how loan words in Arabic would conform to the Arabic pronunciation, in this case by turning the soft Persian "ه" into the guttural Arabic "ح"; and the relevant *Shāhnāme* verses that he quotes are (Melikian-Chirvani 1992, 113-117):

که آتش بدان گاه محراب بود      پرستنده را دیده پر آب بود

For fire stood then as the *mihṛāb* \* And worshipers' eyes were full of tears

<sup>703</sup> Boyce 1993.

obviously alluded to the sun (*mehr*) (Fig. 335).<sup>704</sup> But he falls short of grasping the full meaning of *mihrāb* by thinking that its second component (*āb*) only meant water, rather than alluding to Mithra's eternal companion, Apam Napāt. As noted before, the king of Kabul (who was thought to be a descendant of Astyages) was similarly named Mehrāb in the *Shāhnāme* to emphasize his Median religious affiliation as opposed to a Zoroastrian one.<sup>705</sup> And pre-Achaemenid objects display this duality with the appropriate dual symbols, such as water waves and sunburst on an Elamite silver beaker from the Sackler (Fig. 336), as well as fish and sunburst on a Ziwiyyeh beaker from the Louvre (Fig. 337).



Fig. 336- Elamite beaker with wave and sun motifs. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery



Fig. 337 – Ziwiyyeh beaker with sun and fish motif (8<sup>th</sup> cent. BC). Louvre



Fig. 338 - Sasanian shell vessel. EMS coll.

Zoroastrians incorporated existing expressions into their all-encompassing religion by simply sanitizing them, which in great part consisted of eradicating Apam Napāt who stood as a rival to Ahura Mazdā. Where his name appeared in tandem with Mithra, it was mostly changed to the neutral and inconspicuous *āb* (Av. *ap*); at the same time, various appellations such as Borz-Mehr, or even *yazatān*, were devised to refer to them as a pair, without openly naming Apam Napāt (see sec. X.12.). What's more, shell-shaped vessels remained popular in the Sasanian era, as obvious symbols of Apam Napāt (Fig. 338).

While Iranian *mihrābs* frequently incorporate a lamp motif, they rarely display a recognizable water symbol, despite the fact that water always accompanied fire in ancient Iranian religious rites.<sup>706</sup> Outside Iran however, especially where Zoroastrianism was never strong, or was supplanted by Christianity, the dual symbols of Mithra and Apam

<sup>704</sup> An interesting observation that Melikian makes is that the Dome of the Rock sunburst is a jadeite piece that must have previously belonged to another structure, but was reused again because of its preciousness, Melikian-Chirvani 118.

<sup>705</sup> See note 637 supra.

<sup>706</sup> See note 666 supra.

Napāt were often on display. We already saw that in Armenia, where churches were still called *mehean* after Mithra,<sup>707</sup> sun and snakes—as symbols of Mithra and the waters—adorned their portals (Fig. 326). Moreover, the two-dimensional *mihhrāb*-like design was also used in the Christian context, for instance, on the Armenian wooden door of Fig. 339. In lieu of the mosque lamp, it has a Greek cross—that was once viewed as a sun symbol—and lush vegetation, which may or may not be perceived as a water symbol. The two medallions above the *mihhrāb*-like arch, however, are undoubtedly in lieu of the Mithraic sun *and* moon placements, since they are not symmetrical and incorporate two different geometrical sunbursts.<sup>708</sup> On a *mihhrāb*-like marble slab from a Gujarati monument, a lamp is hanging from a lotus flower that may have also been designed with the aim of producing this dual symbolism, since we have two sunburst medallions on its top corners (Fig. 340).<sup>709</sup> Symmetry being an important principle of Islamic architecture, the two Gujarati medallions are designed to be identical; so are the protruding globular medallions of a stone *mihhrāb* from Konya (Fig. 341). Nevertheless, they all occupy positions (†) similar to the corner spots of the sun and the moon in Mithraic edifices.



Fig. 339 – Armenian wooden door (Courtesy of Sam Fogg)



Fig. 340 – Gujarati *mihhrāb*-like motif (Melikian 1992, 118)



Fig. 341 – Shell motifs adorning the *muqarnas* of the *mihhrāb*. Ince Minar Madrasa, Konya



Fig. 342 – Shell symbol on the road to St James of Compostela (web)

<sup>707</sup> See note 215 supra.

<sup>708</sup> On the Islamic *mihhrābs* of Anatolia, however, the two medallions are transformed into two identical hemispherical designs for the sake of symmetry (Fig. 333).

<sup>709</sup> Melikian-Chirvani who reproduced this slab as a *mihhrāb* in Melikian-Chirvani 1990b, subsequently found out that this was one slab out of several that came from a dismantled monument, and therefore, it was not a *mihhrāb*, but a *mihhrāb*-like wall decoration (personal communication).

The very presence of the sun-and-moon-like medallions, in tandem with the hanging lamp of this Konya *mihṛāb*, implies affiliation with a *mehr-āb* tradition. If so, its hanging lamp must have had a water counterpart somewhere. At first glance, the design elements of its *muqarnas* squinches can look like lotus leaves (which can be interpreted as water symbols). But a closer look reveals that they are stylized shells, similar to the Sasanian vessel of Fig. 338, and to the shell markings (Fig. 342) that pave the pilgrimage road to St James of Compostela—the saint after whom the "Coquilles St Jacques" shell and scallop were named. They were elongated to fit the squinches and/or to look more vegetal and more Islamic. As such, one possible explanation for the hitherto unexplained *muqarnas* is to see it as a replacement of the shell niche, especially since the earliest known *mihṛāb*, the one made circa 709 for the Medina mosque, was reportedly conceived as a shell niche flanked by two columns.<sup>710</sup> It may have looked like the circa 762 *mihṛāb* of the Al-Mansur mosque in Baghdad (Fig. 318), and probably followed a pre-Islamic model, a specimen of which was found in the mosque of Estakhr, as a reused element from a Partho-Sasanian monument (Fig. 343).<sup>711</sup>



Fig. 343 – Reused shell structure from Estakhr. Arasacid or Early Sasanian. Persepolis Museum.



Fig. 345 - Baldachin of the Santo Spirito cathedral, Florence



Fig. 346 – Bernini baldachin at St Peter's Cathedral (web)



Fig. 344 – Raphael's rendering of the earlier twisted columns (web)

What the above analysis allows us to conclude is that, through the spread of Mithraic congregations, the canopied fire structure with a shell motif became a design model for the focal point of various religious structures, be it in Zoroastrianism, Christianity or Islam. As symbol of Apam Napāt, the shell niche was lost or pushed aside in Iran, and

<sup>710</sup> Porter 2007, 555-56. The squinches of the Kairouan's mosque are shell-shaped; O'kane 2012, 4.

<sup>711</sup> A 3<sup>rd</sup>-century shell niche was also found in Bishāpur. I am indebted to Ali Asadi for this information.

may have been replaced by the *muqarnas* in later times. Christianity though continued to use it as an optical device for establishing an architectural focal point.<sup>712</sup>

Interestingly, many churches, such as the Santo Spirito of Florence, have a baldachin that is a replica of the Sasanian *chahār-tāq* (Fig. 345). A famous baldachin is Bernini's bronze canopy in St Peter's in Rome (Fig. 346), which replaced an earlier structure whose columns were supposedly from Solomon's Temple, sent to Rome by Constantine. It is now proven that these columns are from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century AD, and their Solomonic attribution happened in conjunction with a forged imperial decree by which Constantine was said to have transferred authority over Rome and the western part of the empire to the Pope.<sup>713</sup> A circa 1524 painting from Raphael's workshop illustrates the four Solomonic columns in a linear format (Fig. 344); but the Bernini baldachin—which replicates their twisted shape—suggests that the linear format was a convention to project a canopied structure in a two-dimensional setting; the same convention was used to depict "Solomon's Temple" on Byzantine plates (Fig. 347). Be that as it may, what is of interest to us here is the "Solomonic" attribution. To justify a pagan structure within a holy Christian setting, the Temple of Solomon provided the necessary excuse, and cover up. Similarly, as Melikian-Chirvani has explained, when Cyrus's tomb in Pasargadae was incorporated in early 13<sup>th</sup> century into a mosque, and a *mihṛāb* was carved inside its tomb chamber, it was purported to be the Mosque of Solomon's mother.<sup>714</sup> Time and again, canopied structures, or columns that were symbolically used by various congregations, were justified through a Solomonic attribution. Such is also the case for the Masonic iconography that we shall study next.



Fig. 347 - Solomon before his Temple.  
Byzantine plate, 7<sup>th</sup> century. MMA

#### XIV.10 - Freemasons

The earliest documents on the history of Freemasonry are usually traced back to 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, or more precisely Scotland. It's not that the order did not exist before, it certainly did, but as its name indicates, it must have consisted of a group of artisans, stone cutters, and cathedral builders that did not share their secrets with outsiders, and left no written documents explaining their rituals and organization. At one point in time, perhaps early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Freemasonry must have had a rebirth that opened it up and

<sup>712</sup> Like the three pearls, and sunbursts, the shell eventually became a staple of European royal iconography.

<sup>713</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donation\\_of\\_Constantine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donation_of_Constantine)

<sup>714</sup> Melikian-Chirvani 1990b, 120-121.

allowed nobility to join them. We already saw that Jean Sans Peur used purely Masonic symbols in his Parisian residence (Figs. 32a, b); and although there are no written documents to this effect, the artisanal tools that Jean Sans Peur and his son Philip chose as their ducal emblems, and the Order of the Golden Fleece that the latter instituted, indicate that they were close to a milieu that had kept a Mithraic-type formalism alive.

The oath to secrecy usually concealed the activities of these congregations, and only factionalism provided outsiders with a glimpse into their organizations. An early rift among English Freemasons, for instance, caused one faction to publicly deride the other, through the printed press and in the form of a caricature with commentaries. The rift occurred when the Duke of Wharton (1698 –1731) was excluded from the Grand Lodge, and a rival faction, who styled themselves as the Gormagons, rallied to his cause against the Freemasons. A certain William Hogarth (1697-1764) then decided to mock the Masons by publishing a parody (Figs. 348a, b). It was published as an etching that is quite revealing, with a versified commentary below it entitled *The Mystery of Masonry Brought to Light by Gormagons*:

From Eastern Climes, transplanted to our Coasts,  
Two Oldest Orders that creation boasts,  
Here meet in Miniature, expos'd to view,  
That by their Conduct, Men may Judge their Due,  
The Gormagons, a venerable race,  
Appear Distinguished with peculiar Grace,  
What Honour! Wisdom! Truth! & Social Love!

Sure such an Order has its Birth Above,  
But Mark Free Masons! What a farce is this  
How wild their Myst'ry! What a Bum they kiss  
Who would not Laugh when such Occasion's had?  
Who should not Weep, to think y' World so  
Mad.



Figs. 348 a, b - Printed parody on the Freemasons, which alludes to the virtues of their rivals, the Gormagons

The caricature offers several points of interest for our study. We saw that on the Iranian side, the avatars of Mithraic societies included street performers such as the lion tamer of Fig. 92, as well as guild members such as butchers (see sec. III.6). Here too, in addition to the butcher standing with his large apron on the far right, we have a monkey with an apron representing street performers and animal tamers. The supposed forefathers of the Masons are depicted on the left, and include (A) Chin-Quaw-Ki-Po, the legendary first Emperor of China, (B) Confucius, (C) the Grand Master In-chin.<sup>715</sup> Even though the origin of their order is placed in China, the Chinese emperor has a Mithra-like sunburst emanating from his head, and Confucius is wearing a sun emblem. It clearly acknowledges a non-European origin for the Masons. But more important are the noble virtues that Hogarth recognizes for the Gormagons: *wisdom, truth, and social love*; they are the exact virtues that the *Qābus-nāmeḥ* enumerated as principles of *javānmardi: kherad* (wisdom), *rāsty* (truthfulness), *mardomi* (to be of the people, i.e., social love).<sup>716</sup>



Figs. 349 a, b, c - Documents from Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie ; (a) Triangular emblem with the three-dot symbol and an ancient Iranian motto, (b) Letterhead honoring the three dots as triangle, (c) written manual

These are not the only set of virtues that have a counterpart on the Persian side. A Masonic triangular emblem from the Grand Orient Museum in Paris (Fig. 349a), for instance, incorporates the auspicious three-dot symbol of Tishtrya, as well as a tripartite motto (*Bien penser, Bien dire, Bien faire*) that replicates the famous Zoroastrian motto:

<sup>715</sup> After (A), (B) and (C), comes the Mandarin Hang-chi (D) who is pulling a donkey on which is sitting the Venerable Old Gentlewoman, as a parable for the craft of masonry. Supposedly, the Masons, such as the one with his head emerging from the ladder behind the seated woman, had to kiss her bum, i.e., that of her effigy. Wharton is looking on as Don Quixote, while his Pancho—as the epitome of common sense—is laughing at this disheveled crowd of artisans who are all wearing an apron, as symbol of their allegiance to Freemasonry; Marcos et al. 2011, 54-55.

<sup>716</sup> See note 196 supra.

Good thought, Good speech, Good action.<sup>717</sup> Since it's hardly conceivable that Freemasonry borrowed anything from Zoroastrianism, we are pushed to envisage this triple motto as words of wisdom that Zoroastrianism itself borrowed from an older tradition, most certainly the Mithraic one, especially since dervish orders had espoused it as well.<sup>718</sup> The mottos that travelled westward, along with brotherhood symbols and hierarchical structures, can therefore provide further elements for our understanding of the original nature of Mithraic congregations.

In our discussion of the three-dot symbol of Tishtrya, we had argued that Sirius and two other stars formed the Winter Triangle; it was an exact equilateral triangle that was perceived as auspicious, and perhaps magical. A document from the Grand Orient Museum puts these assertions into perspective (Fig. 349b). While, according to Freemasonry customs, the triple-dot replaces many abbreviations that appear in the text, its second title line invokes the power of these points as a triangle.<sup>719</sup> As a result, the equilateral triangle itself became an auspicious motif that Freemasonry used in a variety of ways, for medals as well as different emblems (Fig. 349a).

Another document in the same museum is a manual that lists the question and answer sequence of the initiation procedures (Fig. 349c); it is organized very much like the *fotovvat-nāmehs* of Persian guilds and the *qalandar-nāmehs* of dervish orders, and provides justifications and explanations for the symbols that they use. To justify their skin throws and leather utensils in Islamic terms, Persian congregations linked them to the sacrifice of Abraham in the Koran.<sup>720</sup> Similarly, the easiest way to make the Masonry emblems acceptable in the Judeo-Christian world was to evoke the Temple of Solomon. But like the Islamic *mihṛāb*, which has two side columns (Figs. 332-35), and like the Byzantine plate that has two columns under a shell dome (Fig. 319), the double columns that appear in various Freemasonry artifacts cannot allude to Solomon's temple. Even though marked with the Solomonic initials J and B,<sup>721</sup> they are freestanding and not temple pillars; what's more, there is often a temple structure next to them (Fig. 350d). That this pair of columns were linked to a Mithraic tradition is suggested by the fact that they often carry on their top: Three globes (as symbol of Tishtrya), fire, or the sun and

<sup>717</sup> See also Appendix II.1.

<sup>718</sup> See, for instance, Jalāli & Bāng 2010, 74: "know O dervish that the motto of all god-fearing people in the circle of prophethood and *velāyat* is *good thoughts, good words, good deeds*" بدان ای درویش که آیین و شعار مجموع خدایپرستان و خدانشناسان در دایره نبوت و ولایت، انکار نیک و گفتار نیک و کردار نیک بوده است

<sup>719</sup> The line reads: "Salut sur tous les points du triangle "

<sup>720</sup> See sec. III.4.

<sup>721</sup> Two of the Temple's columns were named Jachin and Boaz by a worker from Tyre (*1 Kings* 7:13-22).

the moon (Figs. 350a, b, c). What's more, the supposed temple itself often looks more like a *chahār-tāq* than a temple (Fig. 350d).



Figs. 350 a, b, c, d – Objects from Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie ; (a) plate, (b) floor mat, (c) cup, (d) apron

In the *mithraeum*, its mosaic floor often depicted a procedural order (Fig. 352). Freemasons used a floor mat instead, which they could roll or unroll depending on the type of ceremonies they held. A series of 18th-century etchings (known as the Gabanon) illustrates initiation ceremonies organized around floor mats that display elaborate Masonic compositions. Not only do many of these floor mats depict candelabras, but they also had actual candlesticks placed all around them; as in the *mithraeum*, fire was a necessary element for initiation, and was provided in various forms, mostly as candlesticks and candelabras with three, five, or seven arms (Figs. 353a, b).

Furthermore, the sun and moon of tauroctony scenes is also a staple motif of Freemasonry, as it appears on their plates and aprons, as well as floor mats (Figs. 350a, b, c, d). The leather apron was the main attribute of Mason initiates, as the leather *servāl* was for the *fatās*, and the leather tunic was for the members of the Mysteries. And it is on these aprons that we find further links to Mithraism. An apron of the Grand Orient Museum, for instance, has a fire altar in between its pair of columns that is reminiscent of Persian fire altars, and is set on a pedestal on which a snake is crawling toward its fire (Fig. 354b). On another one, the fire of the altar turns into blazing lotus leaves that hold a cauldron framed by two twisting snakes (Fig. 354a); it is reminiscent of the vase at the bottom of the Hedernheim tauroctony scene, toward which a snake is crawling (Fig. 1). Similar to the *mehr-āb* that became the focal point of mosques and Byzantine churches, both of these aprons incorporate the dual symbolism of water and fire at their focal points.



Figs. 351 a, b – Masonic ceremonies held around a floor mat with candlesticks placed around it. Scenes from the Gabanon etchings, Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie

Fig. 352 - Mithraic symbols as floor mat (see Fig. 2)



Figs. 353 a, b – Floor mats with different candelabras.  
Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie

Fig. 354 a,b – Aprons with: (a) snake cauldron, (b) fire altar under a *chahār-tāq*. Musée de la Franc-Maçonnerie

In Chapter III, when we followed the skin to establish a common thread between various congregations, we began with the Golden Fleece, which, as a pagan motif, posed a serious problem for the Order of the Golden Fleece. Bishops Jean Germain and Guillaume Fillastre strove to justify it in biblical terms. So did the Freemasons, who explained their symbols as pertaining to a tradition that went back to the construction of Solomon's Temple. It must have been quite effective, since as early as 1691, a Scottish pastor by the name of John Kirk described their organization as deriving from a "rabbinical tradition."<sup>722</sup> Nevertheless, because of a sense of competition that prevailed among these congregations, when the Mason's apron is first explained to the initiate, it is said to be "more ancient than the Golden Fleece."<sup>723</sup> They all understood that the biblical references only served as window dressing, and their orders derived from a pagan and much older tradition.

Finally, an interesting aspect of Freemasonry is how an artisanal congregation morphed into an elitist club. As we saw in the Persian case, the principles that prevailed in brotherhood congregations attracted artisans as well as nobility, to the extent that the

<sup>722</sup> Marcos et al., 2011, 30.

<sup>723</sup> Mackey 1917, 355.

Qajar nobleman Zahir-od-dowleh felt honored to be seated next to his dervish master (Fig. 274). Besides the leveling effect that congregations had on the strata of society, it seems that the enormous building activities that Europe experienced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century allowed a further rapprochement between the builders and the nobility.

A case in point is the city of Bordeaux, which prospered not only through wine exportation, but also trade with the Americas. As a result, major construction projects were undertaken in the 18th century. More than six hundred quarries were actively exploited to provide the stones for its buildings. In Roman times, Bordeaux had a *mithraeum*, which may have paved the way for the establishment of Freemasonry among its stone cutters. Judging by one of their funerary stelae (Fig. 355), the stonecutting craft must have been a respectable one. As a matter of fact, it's the son of one of these stone cutters, the architect Victor Louis (1731-1800), who designed the sumptuous Grand Théâtre of Bordeaux. When visiting it, city guides explain how Louis, who was a Freemason, built the Grand Théâtre on Masonic principles, with black and white flooring imitating that of Solomon's Temple (Fig. 356a). So strong was Bordeaux's Masonic tradition that the modern emblem of this city is a triple Masonic eye, arranged as a triangle. In using this emblem in the theater, the architect further accentuated its Masonic symbolism by placing it over a sunburst (Fig. 356b). Moreover, in the entry hall, he provided a shell-domed niche, underneath which a statue has now been placed; it most probably had a candelabrum in the old days (Fig. 356c). By Louis's time, the shell-domed niche had perhaps become a standard architectural ornament, but it's not beyond the realm of possible to imagine that he placed it there in full recognition of what it originally meant, i.e., a water symbol above a fire niche.



Fig. 355- Stone cutter's tombstone. Bordeaux Museum



Figs. 356 a, b, c - Grand Théâtre of Bordeaux. (A) Solomon's floor pavement, (b) Bordeaux's Masonic emblem set in a sunburst, (d) Shell niche

#### XIV.11 - The Judeo-Mithraic Blend in Dura Europos

Built by the Seleucids on the banks of upper Euphrates in eastern Syria, Dura Europos was a trade center that often changed hands between Iranians and Romans. As a result its cultural backbone was an amalgam of all the tendencies and religions that crisscrossed this region. It has two interesting monuments, a *mithraeum* whose elements are now at Yale University (Fig. 301), and a larger premise that has been labeled as a "synagogue," even though it's not. Certain scholars tend to explain the anomalies of this supposed synagogue in terms of "necessity and adaptation to local conditions,"<sup>724</sup> while others note that it has multiple frescoes in contravention of the Second Commandment, and that it has a single hall, where men and women could not be segregated. As a matter of fact, nobody has been able to discern "an overall pattern to these scenes," or provide a coherent explanation as to why they were part of a synagogue.<sup>725</sup>



Fig. 357 - Main hall wall of Dura Europos, with shell niche, and images delineated by three-dotted bands

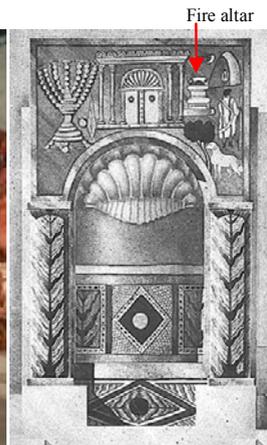


Fig. 358 – Rendering of the shell niche (web)

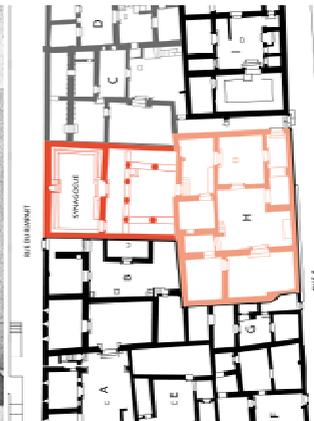


Fig. 359 - Integration of the sanctuary into the city grid

What is labeled as a synagogue is in fact a big hall in the far back of a larger complex. This hall has a central niche surrounded by frescoes, for each of which a biblical interpretation has been advanced (Fig. 357).<sup>726</sup> Judging by available images, they do not all seem to be of the same period; but since the building underwent major repairs prior to its burying by Roman soldiers circa 256 AD, it is difficult to judge which of the images came first. Two elements therein are of interest to us, the niche and a fresco next to it.

<sup>724</sup> Lambert 2006-2007.

<sup>725</sup> Levine 2005, 255.

<sup>726</sup> See [divd.library.yale.edu/dl/Browse.aspx?qc=Eikon&q=379](http://divd.library.yale.edu/dl/Browse.aspx?qc=Eikon&q=379)

The niche is regularly explained as a "Torah niche in the direction of Jerusalem." But as the plan of the building shows (Fig. 359), it is completely integrated into the city grid of Dura, and its wall—on which the niche is situated—follows the street line, in continuation of adjacent buildings. It is hard to imagine that the Seleucids, Parthians or Romans had any desire to orient a whole city toward Jerusalem. The orientation of the niche is dictated by the city grid and has nothing to do with Jerusalem; it just so happens that it follows that general direction. More importantly, it is conceived as a typical *mehr-āb*; it not only has a shell dome with two side columns, but its upper imagery clearly shows Mithraic elements (Fig. 358). Granted that there is a menorah-like candelabrum on the left, but as we saw in Freemasonry, different sorts of candelabras were used in lieu of the Mithraic fire altar, and in Byzantine Judea it made sense to choose one with seven arms. On the opposite side, however, there is a Persian-style fire altar (↑) that counterbalances the candelabrum and emphasizes the importance of the fire to this setting. Like in Freemasonry, the twisted columns of the latter edifice may evoke Solomon's Temple. But these were evocations that were necessary for protection from religious adversaries. As for the lamb on the right side, it is not clear whether it alludes to the Mithraic sacrificial lamb, or the story of Abraham, or both. And if the Christian and Islamic examples can be of guidance, candlesticks, rather than a Torah, must have been placed under the shell dome.



Fig. 360- Mithraic *pater* seated on a **skin throne** next to his wife; arrival of the *pater* or his deputy (on the left); **three-dotted** black border ↑; lion and bull. (web)



Fig. 361 – Arrival of Shāpur with a Mithraic priest (det. of Fig. 162)

The second element whose Mithraic aspects can further strengthen our previous interpretation is the fresco immediately to the left of the niche (Fig. 360). Again, it's not

of uniform composition since the people on the left and on the right are wearing Mithraic garments, and those in the middle seem to wear Roman togas. Either the two outer sections were initially separate, and were then patched together through the addition of people dressed in togas, or the latter were simply added to cover damages underneath. In biblical terms, the fresco has been described as a rendition of the Purim episode from the Book of Esther, in which the Achaemenid king Ahasuerus (Xerxes)<sup>727</sup> marries Esther, the Jewish girl who had been brought up by Mordecai. The king's chancellor, Haman, plans to kill Mordecai but providence reverses the outcome of events. The king orders Haman to honor Mordecai and to lead "him on horseback through the city streets," and has his chancellor killed afterwards (Esther 6:11). Thus the left part is interpreted as Mordecai being paraded on horseback, and the right part as Ahasuerus enthroned next to Esther.

But this cannot be, for if we look attentively, the image has Mithraic peculiarities that preclude such an interpretation. To begin with, the "king" is wearing the full regalia of the Mithraic *pater*, which replicates that of Mithra in tauroctony scenes: A red Phrygian bonnet and a red cape bordered by a band of square motifs that also appear on his pants. More importantly, he is seated on a series of bovine skins, which is reminiscent of the Louvre stele, or the enthronement story of Bābak as head of the Khorramdiniyyeh, even more so since his wife is seated next to him (see sec. III.1). The horseman on the left is dressed like the seated *pater*, and it may show a prior episode in which the new leader of the congregation was ushered in to occupy his throne. Alternatively, the horseman on the left may depict the leader's successor who is ushered in to swear allegiance. As such, it recalls the Persepolitan graffiti that depicted Shāpur riding toward his father Pāpak (Fig. 361). One must note that in both cases, the rider is being led by a *chākar* with disheveled hair, who is generally qualified as *div* by Zoroastrians (see sec. X.3). What's more, all the images are bordered with a wave line, sprinkled with Mithraic triple dots, like the *cintamani* that we described in Fig. 68.<sup>728</sup> We thus have a fresco that vividly illustrates a Mithraic enthronement scene, and brings together Ebn-e Nadim's story of Bābak, the Louvre's Mithraic stele, the Persepolitan graffiti, and the *cintamani*.

#### **XIV.12 - The Judeo-Mithraic Blend in Sepphoris**

A number of 5-7<sup>th</sup>-century floor mosaics recently excavated by Israeli archeologists have been dubbed as "synagogues," despite the fact that their imagery is in clear violation of

<sup>727</sup> Xerxes's son, Artaxerxes I, was named "Keyrash" (i.e., Cyrus) (Tabari 1996, 2: 486), who, according to Ebn-e Balkhi 1995, (154-55), was the son of Akhshvāresh (?) (read *khashāyār*=Ahasuerus=Xerxes) and a Jewish mother. Touraj Daryaee mistook this Keyrash for Cyrus the Great (Daryaee 2006, 499).

<sup>728</sup> See sec. IV.3. I am indebted to Claude Lepage for pointing out these bands to me.

the Second Commandment. The most exotic one is from Sepphoris.<sup>729</sup> It has two menorahs that appear on top of an elaborate composition dominated by a gigantic circular zodiac at the center of which the Sun rides a *quadriga* (Fig. 366). In a synagogue, there was no need to remind the visitor that he was in such a premise by depicting a menorah on the floor rather than placing a real one on an altar. And wouldn't walking on such a floor be improper, if not sacrilegious? And why should a synagogue have Greek inscriptions on some of the images, and Hebraic ones on others? More generally, Judaic scholars have noticed a "gap between the appearance of certain symbols," such as the menorah, and their lack of prominence in "rabbinic sources,"<sup>730</sup> and yet, they still want to see the menorah as a signifier of the synagogue. But one menorah does not make a synagogue; nor can the short shovel that appears on these mosaics only be seen as a Judaic "incense shovel," since a shovel is also included among the 4<sup>th</sup> grade symbols of the *mithraeum* (Fig. 3, Fig. 139). As for the horn (referred to as *shofar* in Jewish literature), it could represent the corn of abundance (*cornucopia*), or be related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade symbols, i.e., those of the *miles*. In Ostia we have, for the *miles*, a lance and a helmet, and a third emblem that has been likened to a pouch (Fig. 3). This third emblem may actually be a marshal sound instrument, such as the horn, since dervishes and *shāters* had a similar horn, along with a lance and sheepskin (Fig. 368).

As Beck has observed, the Zodiac was a dominant feature of the Roman *mithraeum*, and the presence of a sun god on a *quadriga* alluded primarily to Mithras/Helios on his stellar chariot rather than a synagogue, especially since the Zodiac is under the aegis of two lions, each resting a paw on a bull's head (Fig. 366). Because of the lion's association with Mithra and the sun,<sup>731</sup> the image of its paw on a bull's head refers to Mithra overcoming the bull—as in tauroctony scenes. It's a composition that also appears under the Mithraic enthronization scene of Fig. 360, and goes back to the pre-Achaemenid era, when Mithra was revered as the most powerful deity of the Median Empire and the lion was a symbol of the sun, while the bull was a symbol of the moon (and nighttime). A zoomorphic silver container from the Median period vividly illustrates the same concept as it depicts a standing lion, marked by a sun emblem on his hindquarters, crushing a bull's head with his paws (Fig. 363).<sup>732</sup> Other mosaic floors, such as the one from Hammat Tiberias, also display lions. But the question is: Why should there be lions in a synagogue at all?

<sup>729</sup> Weiss et al. 2005. Weiss's tenuous arguments are summarized in [www.isjm.org/jhr/nos3-4/sepmos.htm](http://www.isjm.org/jhr/nos3-4/sepmos.htm).

<sup>730</sup> Levine 2005, 484.

<sup>731</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 126-27; Soudavar 2012b, 40-43, see also note 91supra.

<sup>732</sup> It is presently at the Miho Museum, and comes from the 6<sup>th</sup>-century-BC Kalmākareh silver hoard.



Fig. 366 – Sepphoris mosaic floor (Weiss 2005, 240)



Fig. 362 – Top mosaic panel (i.e., the heading) in Ostia, depicting a communal meal cauldron (web)



Fig. 363 – Kalmākeh container (Miho Museum)



Fig. 365 – Mosaic floor from Beth Shean (web)



Fig. 364 – Door beam from the Coptic monastery of Baouit, 6<sup>th</sup> century. Louvre

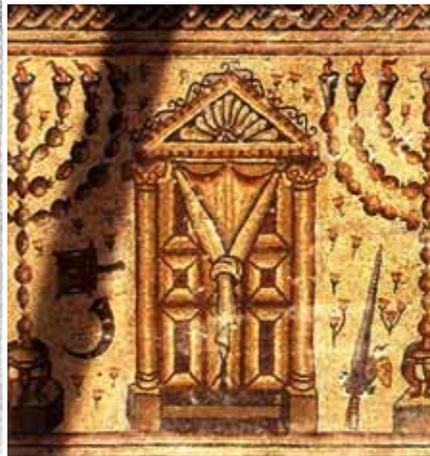


Fig. 367 – Mosaic floor from Hammat Tiberias (web)



Fig. 368 – Qalandar with horn (Louvre)

Furthermore, as Lee Levine has argued, these facades do not fit the description of Solomon's Temple.<sup>733</sup> The supposed Temple of this floor has a middle element conceived as a gateway. The gateway concept is even more pronounced in Hammat Tiberias where a door appears behind curtains (Fig. 367). On the mosaic floor of the Beth Shean "synagogue," this curtained gateway is incorporated into a canopied structure underneath a temple edifice (Fig. 365); it cannot be a temple *within* a bigger temple. The gateway must therefore symbolize a focal point similar to the *mihrāb*. Whether gateway or canopied structure, they are all topped by a shell that confirms their *mihrāb*-like purpose, especially since the same edifice has a shell and sun-cross in a Christian monastery (Fig. 364). Moreover, the Sepphoris floor has two rows (above its Zodiac) that show bovines, food baskets, and a cauldron with four protruding animal heads (↑), similar to the bronze ones from the Berlin and Istanbul cauldrons (Figs. 303, 304b).<sup>734</sup> It is not beyond reason to suppose that these two rows define the main activity of the premises, i.e., the distribution of sacrificial meals, especially since a similar food basket appears at the very top square of the Ostia mosaics—which functions as its heading (Fig. 362).



Fig. 369 - Initiate with a strong breast and tunic



Fig. 370 - Mithra with a strong breast (Fig. 304)



Fig. 371 - Mosaic floor from Naro (web)



Fig. 372 - Cauldron on Masonic apron (from Fig. 346c)

Some of these so called synagogues, like the one in Beth Alpha, have a pair of lions and a pair of peacocks similar to the Yazidi shrine of Shaykh Adi (see sec. XV.1). And the floor of the supposed Naro "synagogue" (Fig. 371) has a cauldron that is the replica of the one on the Masonic apron of Fig. 372, with some minor modifications: The pedestal under the cauldron is smaller, and the two snakes have been turned into handles. What's more, above the cauldron register, there is a panel with a sunburst within a fish pond, very much in the spirit of the pre-Achaemenid beaker from the Louvre (Fig. 337).

<sup>733</sup> Levine 2005, 233.

<sup>734</sup> See sec. XIV.5.

These mosaics were found in an area with numerous sites, including the supposed Merot "synagogue" that depicts a Roman Mithraic warrior with a solar emblem on his upper arm as well as his tunic (Fig. 373).<sup>735</sup> He may be a legionnaire affiliated to a *mithraeum* (which may be this very Merot building). Sepphoris has other monuments such as the "Villa" and the "Nile Festival Building,"<sup>736</sup> where two sets of Mithraic mosaics were found; one set displays two Mithraic riders (Fig. 43b), and the other, depicts Mithraic initiates wearing a leather tunic (Fig. 369). No other *mithraeum* provides such a clear image of Roman initiates.



Fig. 373 – Roman warrior with solar emblems from Merot (web)

Two aspects of these mosaics connect it to the Roman sarcophagus from Konya (Fig. 370), and further strengthen the Roman character of the imagery as opposed to a Jewish one. One is the men's protruding breasts, and the other is Mithra's Roman tunic. Was the latter a stylistic change, or was it the tail end of the Romanization of Mithra? We cannot tell. What we can conclude, however, is that Byzantine Palestine is uniquely important for Mithraic studies, and its socio-religious mix in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century is more complicated than it seems. In trying to rationalize the bizarre aspects of these premises as synagogues, many scholars have proposed that they were either erected by Samaritans or Hellenistic Byzantine Jews. But these so called synagogues may simply have been gathering places for Jews or Christians who were attracted to Mithraism and to the principles of brotherhood, as well as sharing. These principles were after all compatible with the Jewish religion, if not its very essence. As Edmund Bosworth explains, the Old Testament preaches that man does not profit from treasures and riches whereas "righteousness delivers from death,"<sup>737</sup> and that the Hebrew *שֶׁדָּאָה*, like the Arabic *sadaqa*, meant "righteousness" but later acquired the meaning of "alms."<sup>738</sup> They both encompass the notion of *rāsty* (righteousness), so prevalent in Mithraic literature, and reflect the almsgiving activity of brotherhoods. Jews thus had a propensity to emulate Mithraic activities. But, whereas Jews were an accepted minority in the early days of the Roman Empire, the Christians were not; professing Christianity in the Roman Empire was for long an act of sedition punishable by death.

<sup>735</sup> The same sunburst appears on the white tunic of the rider in Fig. 43a, which may represent Helios hunting behind Mithra; it also appears on plates made for Heraclius (Fig. 319), especially on shields.

<sup>736</sup> Weiss et al. 2005, 170.

<sup>737</sup> Proverbs 10.2, 11.4 (New King James Version).

<sup>738</sup> Bosworth 1996, 1-2.

Thus, Christians who had espoused the organizational structure of Mithraic societies at first had an incentive to enrobe it in Jewish garb. It produced a cultural mix that must have continued under the Byzantines. Mithraism's role in that mix is not clear, but it is certainly present and merits more attention in future studies.

#### **XIV.13 - The Outlaws : the Coquillards and the Vor v Zakone**

Throughout this study we have emphasized how the structural organization of Mithraic societies attracted both the good and the bad, pirates as well as Roman legionaries, *lāts* as well as *lutis*. It's mainly because the oath of secrecy, and the resulting devotion toward the master, could equally serve Sufi orders and gangs of robbers. Of the latter, two groups are of interest, since they can shed more light on Mithraic emblems and practices. They are the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Coquillards, and the present day Vor v Zakone.

**The Coquillards** - They appeared in Burgundy in parallel to the Order of the Golden Fleece. Like the *ʿayyārs*, they wore a sheepskin and leather shoes, and had a knife, a wine gourde, and a pouch that hung from their belt; they also wore a shell insignia (Fig. 37). Normally, no detailed account of a lowly band of secretive robbers should have survived, but as it happened, many of them were tried and condemned in Dijon in the year 1455. We not only have a list of their crimes in the court proceedings—breaking locks, plundering coffers, and robbing travelers—but, thanks to an enthusiastic magistrate who characterized their jargon as "an exquisite language that people could not understand," we have a recording of the words they used and their meanings.<sup>739</sup> A contemporary poet, François Villon, even wrote poems in the peculiar jargon of the Coquillards. Like present-day upper class Iranians who show a penchant for the jargon of the *lāts* and *lutis*, the "exquisite" jargon of the Coquillards seems to have seduced at least one magistrate and a poet. Exquisite or not, their jargon was incomprehensible to others, and gave them the means to communicate in a crowd, to transmit orders, or sound the alarm.

While their language has often been studied, no plausible explanation has hitherto been advanced for the name "Coquillards," which is usually translated as "People of the Shell" or "Holsters."<sup>740</sup> But considering our identification of the shell as an emblem of Apam Napāt, and a dominant symbol of the *mehr-āb* duality, we can readily guess that they had named themselves after Apam Napāt's shell sign (Fr. *coquille*). Moreover, their leader was called le Grand Coësre, which Edmund Bosworth explains to mean the Great

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<sup>739</sup> Heller-Roazen 2013, 19-21.

<sup>740</sup> Heller-Roazen 2013, 20.

Khosrow, i.e., the name of Sasanian kings.<sup>741</sup> Khosrow II, for instance, had claimed to be the leader of the Asones (i.e., the Banu Sāsān or Sāsānagān congregation),<sup>742</sup> which ties in well with the fact that Safavid kings were also the leaders of the Safaviyyeh order. It is not clear, however, whether in adopting Khosrow's name, the Coquillards continued the Sāsānagān tradition of recognizing the king as their leader, or, like the Bektāshis, they simply adopted the epithet of a powerful monarch for him. In any case, similar to the dervishes who revered the Imam `Ali, the Coquillards chose St James as their patron saint, and it is their shell that got affixed to him.<sup>743</sup> Not much else is known about them.

**The Vor v Zakone-** Unlike the Coquillards, the Vor v Zakone is a secretive organization that still exists, and has even thrived after the breakup of the former Soviet Union. Their inroads and expansion in European countries, especially France and Spain, has allowed Western investigative journalists to provide certain details about them.<sup>744</sup> "Vor v Zakone," which is usually translated as "Thief in Law," describes thieves who follow a law that is their own law, and adhere to their own code of conduct. By their law, they:

- cannot lie, and cannot deny being a "vor" (especially before the police),
- must make good on promises given to other vors, and must help them,
- must keep secrets and not divulge the whereabouts of accomplices,
- never have a legitimate job or significant property (e.g. a house)
- must not marry and must have no children, and must abandon their family.

This code of conduct was clearly devised to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood by stressing detachment from family and worldly goods, as in all Mithraic circles.

The Vors provide two points of interest for our study. The first is their sunburst tattoo that denotes high rank (Fig. 374). The placement of these tattoos on their shoulders links this practice to the sunburst insignia worn by Pāpak and his son Shāpur in Persepolis (Figs. 163a, b), and ties it to a Mithraic tradition. Second, the very name (and background) of one of their godfathers who was recently assassinated, provides further linkage to this tradition.<sup>745</sup> He was called Dede



Fig. 374 – Star-tattooed Vor (web)

<sup>741</sup> Bosworth 1997, 7.

<sup>742</sup> See note 371 supra.

<sup>743</sup> The myth of St James the Elder, supposedly buried in Compostela, was created during the 11<sup>th</sup> century by mixing chivalry lore with ascetic values.

<sup>744</sup> See for instance: [www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/08/21/vory-v-zakone-une-organisation-criminelle-ultrahierarchisee\\_1748141\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/08/21/vory-v-zakone-une-organisation-criminelle-ultrahierarchisee_1748141_3224.html)

<sup>745</sup> <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/22375068.asp>. I am indebted to Garnik Asatrian for this information.

Hasan Aslan Usoyan (1937- 2013), and although born in Georgia, he was a Yazidi of Kurdish origin. His Georgian name was Leo, but he subsequently switched it to the Turkish "Aslan"; both meaning "lion."<sup>746</sup> The lion was of course a symbol of the sun and Mithra, and the Yazidis were often tied to a Mithraic tradition. The fact that Usoyan was named Dede (i.e., father in Turkish), further reinforces the Mithraic aspect of the *vors*. The very name "*vor*," which nowadays means thief in Russian, only applies to high ranking individuals and godfathers of the Vor v Zakone organization. Interestingly, it is spelled as "*bop*" in Cyrillic, which recalls the Mithraic *pāp*, *bāp*, or *pater*.

#### XIV.14 - Truthfulness in Trade

Artisans, pirates and legionnaires were all attracted to Mithraic congregations because of the concept of mutual support that it advocated, and because of the oath that sealed their bond of brotherhood. But these congregations were also popular among merchants, mainly because Mithra—as the Lord of the Covenant—was the guarantor of truthfulness and rectitude; and these were qualities that traders and merchants, who had to trust each other, needed in order to conduct transactions. Through the merchant guilds, Mithraism has left us two symbols of transaction rectitude. The first is the hand shake with the right hand, a practice that was named *dexiosis* in the *mithraeum*,<sup>747</sup> and was later interpreted and referred to as *fides*, i.e., mutual trust. The "hand shake" is still, to this day, the contractual jesture that binds the parties to a transaction.

The second is the "meter," which owed its name to Mithra and provided a correct measurement standard for guilds to adhere to, especially textile merchants. The city of Paris had several "meter standards" placed in various corners of its boroughs, one of which is still in its original setting in the rue de Vaugirard, opposite the French Senate (Fig. 375).



Fig. 375 – A meter standard of Paris in its original setting

In sum, even though Christianity subdued Mithraism, it could not eradicate it completely. Mithraism so profoundly marked Western Civilization that it's still affecting it today, for good and bad.

<sup>746</sup> I am indebted to Garnik Asatrian for informing me about Usoyan's name and epithets.

<sup>747</sup> See note 73 supra.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE HITTITO-MEDIAN CORRIDOR

#### XV.1 - Occult Activities and Symbolism

**The Alavi-Qezelbāsh congregations** - In a split with the conservative branch of the Safaviyyeh congregation, Shaykh Safi's great grandson Jonayd had travelled westward, to Anatolia and Damascus. It is there that he discovered a more militant brand of Turkaman dervishes who recognized him as the leader of the Safaviyyeh, and it is there that he first wore a red headgear (see sec. IX.7). Even though the Safaviyyeh were based in Ardabil and eventually conquered all of Iran, most of their Qezelbāsh followers came from Turkaman tribes that had settled in a corridor stretching from Anatolia to Syria and Iraq. These Turkaman tribes supplied the bulk of the Safavids' fighting forces,<sup>748</sup> to the extent that, before engaging Shāh Esmā`il in battle, the Ottoman Soltān Salim decided to dry up the Safavid recruiting bases by massacring some forty thousand Qezelbāsh militants and sympathizers, and blocking the passage of the rest to Iran.<sup>749</sup>

Despite two centuries of Safavid-Ottoman warfare, Alavi-Qezelbāsh communities perdured in Anatolia, and maintained rituals that reveal their linkage to a Mithraic past. A recently published story is most interesting in this respect.<sup>750</sup> It narrates a circa-1914 visit to an Alavi-Qezelbāsh community in Kistim (now called Avcilar), a village in the province of Erzinjan. The narrator was led into a room in which a huge stick hung, coil-wrapped with a green ribbon. As the stick was unwrapped, the head of a snake emerged, which people addressed as the Snake of Kistim (*Kistim Mār-i*) or the Saintly Being of Kistim (*Kistim Evliyasi*). The Snake mesmerized the crowd, who prostrated themselves and greeted it with *Khodā yā* (O god) exclamations, while the crippled and the sick touched it in the hope of being healed. It's interesting to note that the Snake was greeted with the Iranian cry of *Khodā yā* rather than the Islamic clamor of *Allāh Akbar*. Its prominent presence in the room recalls that of the massive snake of the Bordeaux *mithraeum*; but to give it an Alavite garb, it was wrapped with a green ribbon, i.e., the very color of the Imam `Ali's descendants.

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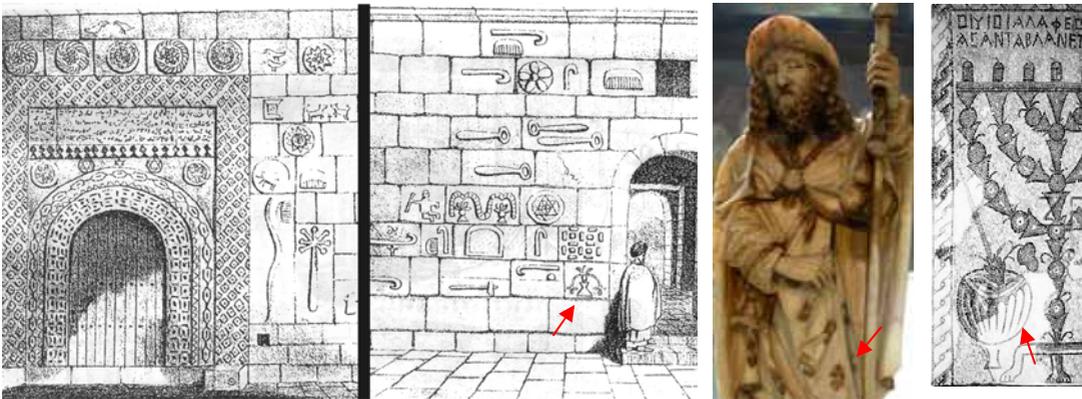
<sup>748</sup> Some of the Qezelbāsh tribes such as the Shāmlu (i.e., from Damascus), or the Mosulu (i.e., from Mosul), who originated from the same corridor had been moved earlier on to Iran by Tamerlane.

<sup>749</sup> See note 347 supra.

<sup>750</sup> The anecdote is from the *Dersim Tarikhi* written by Nuri Dersimi, as related by Riza Yildirim; Yildirim 2012, 2. I am indebted to Riza Yildirim for telling me about this, and sending me a copy of his article.

This episode is a testimony to the persistence of Mithraic symbols such as the snake and the scorpion in the rituals of esoteric dervish congregations.

**The Yazidis** - Another congregation, spread over the same corridor, is that of the Yazidis who have much in common with the Ahl-e Haqq.<sup>751</sup> They too are predominantly Kurdish, i.e., descendants of the Medes. And like the Ahl-e Haqq who switched their name from Rāstān (the righteous ones) to an Arabic equivalent, the Yazidis created an Islamic veneer by naming themselves after the second Omayyad caliph, Yazid (647-83). As Percy George Badger who visited their dwellings in 1850 observed, it was a switch from the Persian *yazad* (god) to a similar sounding Arabic name, and a "stratagem" to fend off Moslems.<sup>752</sup> *Yazad* must have referred to Mithra, as it mostly did in regions where Zoroastrianism did not hold sway, even more so in the Yazidi context. The Yazidis paid daily homage to the rise and setting of the sun, by facing the sun and kissing the ground,<sup>753</sup> and the saintly figure of Shaykh Adi (d. 1162), whom they revered, was thought to be conceived by Light, and envisaged as god incarnate (i.e., Mithra incarnate).



Figs. 376 a, b – The Yazidi shrine of Shaykh Adi  
(Badger 1857, courtesy of M.I. Mochiri)

Fig. 377- St James  
MMA Cloisters

Fig. 378- Flower  
pot of Fig. 365

The Yazidis developed a fairly elaborate functional hierarchy for their community, which contains many of the titles that Mithraic societies and their avatars used, namely *bābā*, *pir*, *shaykh* and *ostād* (written as *hosta*). As with the *mithraeum*, fire and water are

<sup>751</sup> Kreyenbroek 1995, 45; see also note 102 supra.

<sup>752</sup> Badger 1987, 112. We have previously observed similar name changing processes in note 268 supra.

<sup>753</sup> Badger 1987, 109 and 116. As Kreyenbroek demonstrates, Shaykh Adi was a historical figure and a Sufi saint by the name of Adi b. Mosāfer; Kreyenbroek 1995, 5. Like Bābak within the Khorramdiniyyeh, and Shāh Esmā'il within the Safaviyyeh, charismatic leaders can initiate a new direction within a congregation and become revered figures and god incarnate themselves.

sacred, and they leave a lamp burning near the fountains or springs of their shrines,<sup>754</sup> and they sacrifice a cow, and at times a sheep, during a yearly festival celebrated in the month of Mehr.<sup>755</sup> The shrine of Shaykh Adi was adorned with a snake (symbol of water), lions (symbol of the sun), and dual sunbursts over an arched portal (Fig. 376a), in lieu of the Mithraic sun and moon. The snake is described as huge, and black, by various visitors who have seen it, and to its right was an object that no longer exists, but based on Badger's image, was often referred to as a "seven-branched scepter."<sup>756</sup> One can perhaps imagine a seven-headed mace, but not a scepter. On the other hand, the Masonic imagery and the Sepphoris mosaics seem to suggest that what Badger sketched was a seven-branched candlestick. Iranian dervish orders use five-branched ones for their rituals, and as we saw, the Masons used an entire gamut of candelabras. Aslo, the image of the snake precludes any Zoroastrian connection, while its presence next to a candelabrum establishes a *mehr-āb* duality that points to the Yazidis' Mithraic heritage.



Fig. 379 – Wooden door and *mihṛāb* sidings from the Ankara Ethnography Museum.  
(a) A pair of lions over a solar motif, (b) A pair of peacocks over a solar motif

The most peculiar aspect of the Yazidi ceremonies is one related to Malek Tāvus, i.e., King Peacock, and a brass symbol this peacock is circulated during their *Tāvusgerān* festival. As a sacred symbol, the peacock has no counterpart in other congregations, except for the Order of the Golden Fleece, where, as we saw, the master of ceremony explained that it was an "old custom" of chivalry to take an oath by swearing over a "peacock or other noble bird" (see sec. II.3). A pair of doors and a wooden *mihṛāb* from the Saljuq period vouch for the Mithraic symbolism of the peacock (Fig. 379 a, b).

<sup>754</sup> Badger 1987, 117.

<sup>755</sup> For the extended list see Kreyenbroek 1995, 127-36 and 152-54.

<sup>756</sup> Kreyenbroek 1995, 81-82.

Indeed, both are designed as *mihrāb* portals that—instead of a lamp—have a sunburst (*shamseh*) under the arch, similar to the *mihrāb* of the Dome of the Rock (Fig. 335). One has a pair of lions above the sunburst, and the other has a pair of peacocks. This cannot be accidental. As per Philip Kreyenbroek, Shaykh Adi's shrine had a pair of lions flanked by peacocks, which seems to confirm the parallel symbolism of the lion and the peacock in these congregations. Since the lion was a symbol of the sun, the peacock may represent the Chamrosh, as the bird of Apam Napāt (sec. XI.19). The flower pot (↑) that appears on the right wall also appears in the hand of a Safavid devotee, as an offering to his superiors (Fig. 159b), as well as on the Sepphoris mosaic floor (Figs. 366, 378), and on St. James of Compostela's robe (Fig. 377). It represents the mandrake, which the Yazidis cherished for its medicinal and hallucinogenic powers; it is called Mehr-giāh in Persian and as such, leaves no doubt about its Mithraic affiliation.<sup>757</sup> Finally, even though some scholars reject the oft-used "devil-worshippers" epithet for Yazidis as erroneous,<sup>758</sup> the Kurdish scholar Taufiq Wahby has suggested that *Dasni* (i.e., the ethnic self-designation of Yazidis) derives from *daeua-yasne* (i.e., *daeua*-worshipping) used by Zoroastrians to label their enemies.<sup>759</sup> Mithraic societies were indeed labeled as devil-worshippers by Xerxes, and thereafter by Zoroastrians. What's more, their priests were labeled "*khrafstar*-ish devils" (Appendix II.5), an appellation that connected the snakes to the *daevas* (*divs*). Such a labeling had a lasting effect; to the extent that, as we shall see next, certain dervish congregations were indeed depicted as *divs* in Persian miniatures.

## XV.2 - *Divs* and Dervishes: the Siyāh Qalam Drawings

A great number of Persian albums were sent by successive Safavid rulers as a present to the Ottomans. They are now kept at the Topkapi Saray Museum of Istanbul, and contain works that Shāh Esmā'il had inherited from the Aq-qoyunlus, after conquering their capital of Tabriz. A most fantastic series of drawings and paintings from this lot are those bearing an attribution to the painter Siyāh Qalam (the Black Pen) whose epithet was *ostād* (master). Art historians have mostly described them as reflecting Central Asian shamanistic activities, and datable from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>760</sup> But stylistic uniformity suggests a single atelier, attached to the court of Soltān Ya'qub Aq-qoyunlu (r. 1478-90) as these paintings accompany other works by artists who signed their names with a *ya'qubi* epithet. These paintings mostly depict *qalandar*-type figures, and I shall

<sup>757</sup> For a description, see note 351 supra. A similar vase appears on a Mazdakite coin of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Mochiri 2003, fig. 3). In Persian lore, the Mehr-giāh is said to worship the sun; Dehkhodā: "Mehr-giāh".

<sup>758</sup> Kreyenbroek 1995, 1.

<sup>759</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidi#cite\\_note-6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidi#cite_note-6)

<sup>760</sup> For a complete survey of publications in this respect see Karamağaralı 2004.

argue that they reflect the activities of dervish congregations from the Aq-qyunlu kingdom, rather than *shamanistic* and Turkic traditions imported from Central Asia.<sup>761</sup>

The corpus can be divided into two general categories; one depicts humans and the other, demon-like creatures. Those of the first category include fully clad dervishes who have peculiar accoutrements of the type prevalent among previously discussed congregations. In Fig. 380, for instance, we see master dervishes with a tall bonnet wrapped with a ribbon of the type we have already seen (Figs. 381-82). Because of a golden element on top, it must designate high rank, probably a Sufi master. Furthermore, they hold ornate sticks that cannot be for walking. Their gold ornaments are indicative of a ceremonial instrument, one akin to the *chub-e tariq* that the Safavids used (sec. IX.7).



Fig. 380 – Two Safaviyyeh officers (TKSM, albums H2153/38)



Fig. 381 – Bonnet of a lion tamer (detail of Fig. 92)



Fig. 382 – Janissary hat of the Ottoman sultan (Malek Library)<sup>762</sup>

The more problematic drawings however, are those of the second category involving demon-like creatures. They all have human-like expressions, as if the demoniac features were only a camouflage for real human beings. Siyāh Qalam must have had a specific group in mind, a group that could be characterized as demoniac. Wine and intoxicants created such a state of ecstasy in the Safaviyyeh ceremonies that they indulged in

<sup>761</sup> Many of the previous studies have alluded to the possibility of *qalandars* being the conduits of Central Asian shamanistic rituals to Anatolia, Karamağaralı 2004.

<sup>762</sup> This drawing is a circa-1650 copy of Fig. 143, when Safavids were once again mocking the Ottomans.

activities unacceptable to civil society, whether Islamic or not. The cannibalistic behavior of the later Safavid shock units can only suggest that such egregious behavior also existed among the Safaviyyeh militants. Similar to the Janissaries, these militants must have had *shāter* training for warfare, and like the *`ayyārs* and *shāters*, they wore short pants and drank wine. It is this group that Siyāh Qalam must have portrayed as *divs*, wearing short pants and drinking wine (Fig. 384).



Fig. 383 – Soltān Ya`qub giving audience to Qāzi `Isā and Chinese ambassadors (TKSM, H2153)

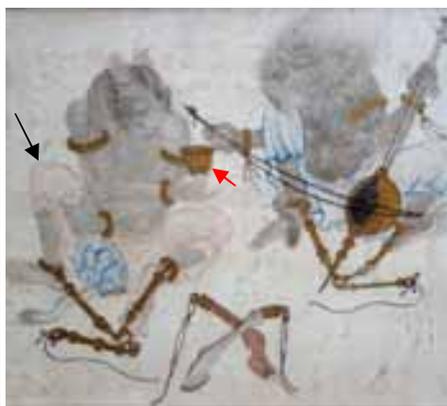


Fig. 384 – Siyāh Qalam drawings of *divs* with short pants (↑) and wine cups (↑). Freer Gallery

Under Ya`qub, the court of Tabriz was pressured from two directions. One was initiated by his *sadr* (i.e., the head of religious affairs), the notorious Qāzi Isā Sāvaji (d. 1490) who was pushing the realm toward religious orthodoxy.<sup>763</sup> The other was due to the rising power of the Safavid *shaykhs*, with whom the Aq-qoyunlus had intermarried. Traditionally, the Aq-qoyunlus had tolerated Safavid militancy, as long as it could be channeled against Georgia under the guise of war with the infidels. But fearing the growing prestige of Soltān Haydar, who was once again leading the Safaviyyeh toward Georgia, Ya`qub joined forces with the ruler of Shervān to bar his route. Haydar was defeated and killed in battle in 1488. His sons, including the young Esmā`il (the future Shāh Esmā`il), were sent to Estakhr; his wife Halimeh then left Ardabil and followed her sons into exile. The Safaviyyeh dervish-warriors were thereafter perceived by the Aq-qoyunlus as enemies, troublemakers, and un-Islamic.

<sup>763</sup> Such was Qāzi `Isā's prestige and power that he once had the *soltān* remove his gold-embroidered coat in public, before foreign ambassadors. He told Soltān Ya`qub: "It is forbidden [by religion] for men to wear gold-embroidered clothes," and had his assistant take the sultan's coat away, and replace it with a khaki-colored dervish robe; Kh<sup>w</sup>āndamir 1974, 432.

But Qāzi Isā's strict application of Islamic law created such resentment among the population that no sooner had Ya`qub died than riots broke out and the *qāzi* was hung. In an atmosphere in which the court resented the Sufi dervishes, and the population perhaps sympathized with them, the talented painter Mohammad Siyāh-Qalam created a style of painting that portrayed these dervishes as *divs*, i.e., the traditional enemies of royalty, but, at the same time, depicted them with so much humor and realism that they seemed sympathetic. Siyāh Qalam, who was also referred to as Darvish Mohammad and Shaykh Mohammad, must have been close to the milieu of the dervishes and wrestlers. As such, he was no different than a contemporary painter at the court of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā, Mirak-e Naqqāsh-e Khorāsāni, who also engaged in wrestling and frequented the wrestler milieu. No wonder then that, among the Siyāh Qalam paintings, we have wrestling *divs* depicted in the classical position by which one is grounding the other (Fig. 386-87).



Fig. 385 – Two wrestlers  
(detail of Fig. 134)



Fig. 386 – Two *divs* wrestling  
(TKSM, H2153/109)



Fig. 387 - Two *divs* wrestling  
(TKSM, H2153/165)

What triggered these series of paintings must have been the embassies sent to the Ming Court, which came back accompanied by Chinese envoys. We have two testimonies for these visits. The first is a painting that may be attributed to Siyāh Qalam's fellow painter who signed his works as Shaykhi-ye Ya`qubi (Fig. 383).<sup>764</sup> Ya`qub is seated under a tree, with the white-bearded Qāzi Isā kneeling before him and two Chinese ambassadors on the far right wearing a Chinese hat and a Ming insignia on their chest. The second is an entry in the Ming annals for embassies from Esfahān and Shirāz (i.e., Aq-qoyunlu territories) in 1483.<sup>765</sup> They probably brought back Chinese paintings as presents, for we have a number of Ming paintings in the Aq-qoyunlu albums of the Topkapi, with

<sup>764</sup> By his very name, Shaykhi must have been affiliated with dervish circles as well.

<sup>765</sup> Bretschneider 1888, II:293-95.

imitations drawn by Ya`qubi court artists. A Chinese man riding on a donkey (copied twice), for instance, replicates a popular Ming model depicting the "demon queller" Zhong Kui (Fig. 388). Another popular theme was the procession marriage of Zhong Kui's sister, illustrations of which are kept at the MMA and the Freer Gallery (Fig. 389-90). They seem to have inspired the Ya`qubi painters to depict the Safaviyyeh dervishes as demons, and Ya`qub as a demon-queller who had given his sister in marriage to them.



Fig. 388 – Copy by Siyāh Qalam of the traveling Zhong Kui (TKSM, 2153/15)



Fig. 389 – Marriage Procession of Zhong Kui's sister (MMA)



Fig. 390 – Marriage Procession of Zhong Kui's sister (Freer Gallery of Art)



Fig. 391 – Marriage procession of Ya`qub's sister, Halimeh Begi, accompanied by demonized *shāters*. Painted by Siyāh Qalam (TKSM, H2153/77)



Fig. 392 - A regular *shāter* (TKSM, H2153)

One scroll-like painting depicts Ya`qub's sister, Halimeh Begi, on her way to marry Soltān Haydar (Fig. 391); in lieu of Chinese demons, she is accompanied by demon-like *shāters* of the Safaviyyeh order, but whose paraphernalia are very much like that of regular *shāters* (Fig. 392). Another painting depicts a distraught Halimeh Begi leaving Ardabil, with the dome of its octagonal abode painted in black, and a black horsehair standard (*tuq*) planted in front, in mourning of Soltān Haydar; a dervish master with a golden bonnet is left behind grieving in his black cloak (Fig. 393). In a more barbaric scene, *divs* are devouring an animal (Fig. 395), perhaps as a pointer to the Safaviyyeh militants who devoured their enemies. More generally, the *divs* are shown engaging in activities that Moslem jurists severely condemned, such as wine drinking and debauchery (Fig. 396). Similar to the caricatures drawn for Tahmāsb (Figs. 143-44), these paintings were to mock the Safaviyyeh dervishes at Ya`qub's court; it's otherwise inconceivable to have so many paintings in a royal album, without a courtly audience for them.



Fig. 393 - A distraught Halimeh Begi leaving a black-domed Ardabil, with a black *tuq* (↑) planted in front, in sign of mourning. By Shaykhi (TKSM, 2153/130)



Fig. 394 - Zhong Kui scroll detail of Fig. 389 (as model for Fig. 393)



Fig. 395 – *Divs* devouring a horse (TKSM, 2153/40)



Fig. 396 – Dancing *divs*. (TKSM, 2153/64)

The fact that some of the Safaviyyeh dervishes were actually called "*div*" facilitated their assimilation with the Zhong Kui demons. Among Shāh Esmā`il's officers, for instance, was one `Ali Beg Rumlu (d. 1531), entitled Div-Soltān, who occupied the important positions of *vakil* and *amir-ol-omarā*.<sup>766</sup> His epithet—sultan of *divs*—was clearly used as an honorific and not in a derogatory way. Unlike other regions of Iran, where under the influence of Zoroastrianism, the word *div* had acquired a negative connotation, in Northern Iran and close to the Safavid stronghold of Ardabil, it still resonated positively. Also, a host of names with a *div* component indicated that many congregations had defiantly maintained the Mithraic tradition that the Achaemenids had branded as *daivas* and *daiva*-worshippers.<sup>767</sup> Two millennia after Darius and Xerxes, the *divs* had not been eliminated, and were still very much active.

### XV.3 - A Possible Hittite Influence

From Gaumāta to the Qezelbāsh, the avatars of the Mithraic congregations, especially the militant ones, seem to have concentrated in a corridor that stretched from north-east Turkey, to Syria and western Iran. The top section of this corridor coincided with the Hittite dominions. We noticed that the Hittites invoked the powers of the sun and the moon in tandem, as did the Medes; it's therefore not beyond reason to think that some Hittite practices eventually found their way into Mithraic societies. We have no textual information in this respect but iconography may provide a clue. Indeed, some of the Hittite rock reliefs from Yazilikaya in Turkey (Figs. 397a, b) depict a series of guards who look like *shāters* (Fig. 398), insofar as they have similar tall bonnets, wear short pants, and carry an axe on their shoulders. These similarities may be purely coincidental, but experience proves that one cannot overlook such visual indices. It's an avenue that must be further explored in the future.



Figs. 397 a, b – Hittite relief replica, Altes Museum



Fig. 398 - *Shāter* (Golestān Library)

<sup>766</sup> Savory 1995. The *vakil* was the *shāh*'s delegate, and the *amir-ol-omarā* was his commander in chief.

<sup>767</sup> A summer camp, for instance, was named Div-khāneh (Khonji 1992, 150); a Safavid prince was called Div-Mirzā (Allāmi 1996, 325); Alvand-e Div was a Qezelbāsh commander (Eskandar Beyk 1971, I:243), so was Div-dorāq (Espenāqchi 2000, 76). See also sec. XII.6.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ELUSIVE \*M-S

#### XVI.1 - The *Marika* : An Antecedent of the *Javānmard*

In our quest to find the origins of Mithraic societies, we have been able to identify a number of common traits and principles that defined them, and we have tried to establish that their primary purpose was to instill a spirit of brotherhood among the members of their congregations. Etienne de la Vaissière has produced an interesting document concerning a rebel Turco-Sogdian warlord whom the Chinese named "An Lushan," with the name Lushan being an obvious Sinization of the Persian word *roshan* (i.e., luminous). To consolidate his position, An Lushan built a fortress for the military training of his *chākars* who were considered to be "his adoptive *sons* and loyal servants."<sup>768</sup> It describes a Mithraic congregation in which its leader acted as a *pater/father* to his devotees. The "loyal servant" qualification unambiguously translates the *chākar's* main characteristic, and the name Roshan of their leader resonates with the light that was associated with Mithra. Bonding was thus instigated through Mithraic rites, while military training was provided by specialists.

In the early Islamic period, the principles that governed these congregations were defined as *javānmardi*, but, to give them an Islamic veneer, they were redefined through the Arabic term *fotovvat*. In the same vein, it seems that *javānmardi* itself was the result of a previous name change, possibly from a term that also pertained to young men, as the Arabic *fatā* and the Persian *javānmard* both did. Indeed, in an article that is a synopsis of past researches, including those by S. Wikander and G. Widengren, Bahār Mokhtāriān has shown how the root *\*maryaka-* had derivatives that in most Indo-Iranian languages referred to "young men" or "young warriors," except in the *Avesta* where, as *mairiia-*, it had gathered a negative connotation, and stood for the enemy of the Zoroastrian religion. In *Yt.10.2*, these young men are even qualified as *mehr-druj*—or those who broke their covenant with Mehr/Mithra—even though they are acknowledged as Mithra worshipers; clearly, their worshiping was different than what was allowed within the framework of Zoroastrianism.<sup>769</sup> This, the above-mentioned scholars note, is in contrast with the positive connotation that this word carried in its later derivatives, a contrast that they

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<sup>768</sup> De la Vaissiere 2007, 78-79.

<sup>769</sup> Mokhtāriān 2006, 89. See also Gnoli's comment in note 606 supra.

attribute to the antagonism that the Zoroastrian community must have developed against these groups of young men, mostly characterized as bachelors.

If the Magophonia turned the *daevas* into demons, chances are that these Mithra-worshipping young men and warriors were affiliated with the magi whom Darius drove underground, and whom Zoroastrians continued to persecute, especially since Mokhtāriān points to common traits between them and the later *`ayyārs*: First, the drinking of a special potion during initiation; second, their state of semi-nakedness in combination with a leather garment; third, their long hair. All three are of course traits that we have previously discussed for various avatars of Mithraic societies.

But a lot more can be said on the subject. In OP, these young men were referred to as *marīka-*, a term that emphasized "devotion" and was used to qualify "military servants," similar to *bandaka* (i.e., devoted servant).<sup>770</sup> It's clearly a synonym of *chākar*, a term that, as we saw, was often used in tandem with *bandeh/bandaka*, and symbolized devotion. In MP, it becomes *merak* (young man), which, like *chākar*, also meant "courier." Similar to the *chākars* and the *shāters*, running was an essential part of the training that the Iranian nobility received as youths (i.e., as a *marīka*) in the Achaemenid period;<sup>771</sup> and as Herodotus noted (I.136), they were taught to speak the "truth," a virtue that Mithraic societies always emphasized. The *marīka/merak* was thus akin to the *chākar* and was a member of groupings structured as Mithraic societies presided by a fatherly figure. No wonder then that as late as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we have names such as Bābā-Mirak,<sup>772</sup> which defined the paternity of a *bābā* in relation to the *meraks*. As such, *merak* must have been an antecedent of *javānmard*, of the *`ayyār*, and the *fatā*. It survived in New Persian as *mirak* and *amira/amirak*, the former as a name frequently encountered among guild members such as painters (see secs. V.8, VIII.5), and the latter as an Arabicized epithet that was applied to the rulers of Gilān,<sup>773</sup> as well as guild members.<sup>774</sup> In fact, the name of a Safavid warlord, Amira Pahlavān-e Gilān,<sup>775</sup> epitomizes the survival of Mithraic epithets within dervish orders as well as ruling families of this northern region of Iran, and the intermingling of the *marikā* tradition with that of Mithraic societies. Moreover,

<sup>770</sup> Mokhtāriān 2006, 91, quoting Schmitt and Widengren.

<sup>771</sup> Shahbazi 1986.

<sup>772</sup> Vāsefi 1970, II:160. The name *merak* also survived among some dervish orders, as attested by the name of the Malāmātiyyeh dervish, Mira-ye Neyshāburi (Mokhtāriān 2006, 92-93)

<sup>773</sup> See sec. XII.6 and note 425 supra.

<sup>774</sup> In the *Safvat*, for instance, we have names such as Amira Kolāh-duz (the hat maker) or Amira Kahriz-can (the waterway digger); Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 1311. Despite its Arabic appearance, *amira* was a widely used epithet that was not a derivative of the Arabic *amir*.

<sup>775</sup> Ebn-e Bazzāz 1994, 796. He built the *zāvīyeh-ye bozorg* (the Great Abode) for the Safavid *shaykhs*.

the *marikās* were at times described as energetic fighters who donned wolf skins,<sup>776</sup> which may suggest that the wolf skin of the *ʿayyārs* and performers (Fig. 92) also belonged to a tradition that went back to the *marīka*.

### **XVI.2 - The Upbringing of Cyrus as a *Marīka***

Herodotus (I,136) gives a general description of the Achaemenids' upbringing: "they educate their children, beginning at five years old and going on till twenty, in three things only, in riding, in shooting, and in speaking the *truth*." Xenophon offers an expanded version that concurs with Herodotus, but with more emphasis on the hunt (Cyr. 1.2.10). He then continues by stating that Cyrus received the same education until the age of twelve but, afterwards, was summoned to the court of Astyages. From thereon, he elaborates a tale that caters to the Greek taste but nevertheless provides details pointing to Cyrus's strong penchant for camaraderie, very much in tune with that of the *marīkas* (see sec. XIII.2). But it is Ctesias that once again provides interesting details. As previously mentioned, he described Cyrus's background in wholly negative terms, but in so doing he qualified him in Greek as *meirakiskos*, which, like Gr. *meirakion* and Gr. *marikās* referred to "young men" and was equivalent to OP *marīka* and derived from a common root;<sup>777</sup> what's more, Ctesias described Cyrus's father as a bandit and his mother as a shepherd, two negative qualifications that enemies of brotherhoods often used to discredit them (sec. X.1). We thus have a congruence of elements that seem to define the *marīkas* as a group of young men who valued brotherhoods, and gathered around Cyrus who was addressed as "father" by his subjects (Her. III.89.3).

### **XVI.3 - The Median Synthesis**

Troop cohesion has always preoccupied army commanders, and every general has tried to develop his own recipe to enhance bonding among the soldiery. While the Medes may have initially favored a military upbringing similar to that of the Persians, their conquest of Assyria and subjugation of neighboring countries allowed them to infuse foreign trends into their own practices. Assyrians, for instance, seem to have had troops that entered the battlefield bare-chested, wore short pants, and sported long hair;<sup>778</sup> these are traits often encountered in Mithraic societies. Also, if Hittite accoutrements left an imprint on these societies, so could have some of their practices. More importantly, we saw that Elamite fertility rites had a probable impact on Mithraic societies, especially

<sup>776</sup> Mokhtāriān 2006, 90.

<sup>777</sup> Mokhtāriān 2006, 92-93; Schmitt 2003.

<sup>778</sup> Mokhtāriān 2006, 91. The Assyrians themselves seem to have adopted this from Indo-Europeans (*idem*), perhaps the Hittites, as Figs. 397a, b may suggest.

with respect to the omnipresence of snakes and scorpions. But ultimately, the one element that distinguished Mithraic societies from other associations of men was the oath that its members had to take. As Mary Boyce has surmised, Indo-Iranians took an oath over both the fire and the water.<sup>779</sup> If Mithra, by his very name, was the Lord of the Covenant, and the guarantor of oath, the participation of his aquatic counterpart, i.e., Apam Napāt, was no less necessary in initiation ceremonies. Water and fire were present in tandem in the *mithraeum*; the initiations of Masons, for instance, included a candelabrum and a bowl of water (Fig. 353b). If dervishes drank only water for their oath—while the Khorramdiniyyeh drank wine—it was not necessarily to conform to Islamic precepts, since Justin specified that even some of the Mystery initiates used a cup of water in their ceremonies.<sup>780</sup> What these various practices indicate is that there were at least two trends: One more subdued and content with water, and the other bent on wine. But as Melikian-Chirvani has demonstrated, wine itself was a substitute for bull's blood, and therefore, there must have been others who indulged in more egregious behaviors.<sup>781</sup>

In other words, some had tried to conform to the prevailing religious tendencies, and some hadn't. The Sasanian Ardashir I, for instance, headed the Sāsānagān congregation while upholding Zoroastrianism. But one of his opponents, Haftovād, was depicted in the *Kārnāmag* as a serpent (*kerm*) who was fed daily with bull's blood.<sup>782</sup> The very appellation *kerm* categorized him as a *khrafstar* and perceived enemy of Zoroastrians. Gaumāta too seems to have indulged in similarly cruel acts, for he and his acolytes choked Bardiya to death by feeding him bull's blood. The Avestan hymn of the *Lament of the Cow* (Y.29) reflects Zoroaster's revulsion against such practices. Even though he seems to profess vegetarianism elsewhere,<sup>783</sup> the thrust of Y.29 is against the savagery that the cow is subjected to in sacrificial ceremonies, and not carnivorous activities in general; what the Cow wishes for is to be "sacrificed" under the aegis of a new *ratu* (master), who shall be Zoroaster (Appendix III). From Zoroaster's perspective, certain sacrificial rites were improper, and others acceptable. As a result, the animosity that Zoroastrians felt toward the Mithraic brotherhoods was partly due to Zoroaster's refutation of their improper practices, and partly to the historic confrontation of the Median magi with the *pārsas*, which erupted as the Magophonia.

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<sup>779</sup> Boyce 1996, 27-33.

<sup>780</sup> See note 686 supra.

<sup>781</sup> See note 302 supra.

<sup>782</sup> Grenet 2003, 93.

<sup>783</sup> In Y.32: 8, Zoroaster reproaches Yima for introducing flesh eating: "Among these sinners, we know, Yima was included, Vivanghen's son, who desiring to satisfy men gave our people flesh of the ox to eat."

The common denominator for all of these congregations was the brotherhood oath that bonded its members into a formidable cohesive entity, with the potential to become politicized or belligerent. That, I believe, was institutionalized under the Medes, when they promoted Mithra and Apam Napāt as the deities that regulated the world. Stanzas *Yt.13.94-95*—through which Avestan compilers tried to demonstrate the auspiciousness of Zoroaster's birth—clearly peg the ascendancy of these two deities to the formation of the Median Empire, toward the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (see sec. XI.12). Not only was the tribal concept of *khvarenah* associated with these deities, but they became the ultimate guarantors of oath, with Mithra gaining the upper hand by virtue of his name.

#### XVI.4 - *Daiva* symbols in Iran, Sogdia, and Egypt

As Dinon has related, the magi sacrificed in the open air while considering "water and fire as the only images of gods."<sup>784</sup> So intertwined had these two symbols become for sacrificial ceremonies that Zoroastrians couldn't untangle them and adopted them as their own, while in the *mithraeum* they continued to represent Mithra and Apam Napāt.



Fig. 399 – Lion monster representing Gaumāta



Fig. 400 – Lion monster from the Bordeaux *mithraeum*.  
Bordeaux Museum



Fig. 401 - Div monster with dragon tail and a *chub-e tariq*. (TKSM, 2153)

<sup>784</sup> Lenfant 2009, 238: based on Dinon, as quoted by Clement of Alexandria.

The most enduring aspects of this duality can be seen in the *mehr-āb* symbolism that Christianity and Islam incorporated into their architecture as the focal point of their religious edifices. If the *mehr-āb* symbolism resurfaced in Iran in the guise of the Islamic *mihrāb*, the scorpion and snake—as the notorious symbols of the banned Mithraic congregations—became very much associated with the notion of *div*, or the demoniac creatures that came to represent the enemies of Zoroastrianism. Interestingly, from Persepolis, to the *mithraeum*, to the Aq-qoyunlu court of Tabriz, these demoniac entities maintained the same physiognomy, except perhaps for a switch of the tail from scorpion to snake or dragon (Figs. 399-401).

A Sogdian drawing from Dunhuang that F. Grenet and G. Zhang have recently published puts into perspective the divide that was created between the followers of Zoroastrianism and the adherents of Mithraic societies (Fig. 402). Since these two scholars could not find any Sogdian text explaining their drawing, they used the *Avesta* to interpret the figure on the left as the "good Dēn," i.e., the good religion, on the basis of a passage that describes her accompanied by two dogs at the Chinwad Bridge; then, reading the symbols held by the left figure as negatives, they inferred that she must represent the "bad Dēn." They observe, however, that the four-armed figure on the right is a replica of the goddess Nana, and of the two globes that she holds in her upper hands, one bears the image of a three-footed phoenix and the other a cinnamon tree, which, in the Chinese context, symbolized the sun and the moon.<sup>785</sup> These Sinicized symbols replaced the regular sun and moon symbols that Nana holds in her upper hands on other Sogdian plates.

Religious imagery is usually conceived to convey a quick impression, and the clear impression that one gets from the appearance of these two goddesses is that the right one, if not superior to the other, is in no way inferior. Therefore, the "good" and "bad" dichotomy does not hold up, especially since they argue that the drawing was meant to be hung during special ceremonies, perhaps as part of a procession of divine statues and images.<sup>786</sup> I see no reason to parade a bad divinity on a par with a good one. On the other hand, what this drawing conveys is that the symbols accompanying the right deity are all associated with Mithraic rites: The sun and moon symbols are on the upper corners, as in tauroctony scenes; the snake and scorpion she holds are symbols that Mithraic societies cherished; the wolf behind her is the animal whose skin was worn by the *ʾayyārs* and *shāters*, and, which, the *Bondaresh* associates with the *khrafstars* and the *kuseh*.<sup>787</sup> It

<sup>785</sup> Grenet & Zhang 1998, 176. I am indebted to F. Grenet for having sent me a copy of this image.

<sup>786</sup> Grenet & Zhang 1998, 179-81.

<sup>787</sup> Dādagi 1990, 99-100; the *kuseh* therein is described as *gorg-e ābi* (water-wolf).

seems that, even if the Sogdians accepted Zoroastrianism, they did not reject Mithraic brotherhoods; because they probably did not consider them as incompatible doctrines. In other words, the Zoroastrianism that they favored may have been a Mazdaism devoid of all the animosity that it had gradually developed against Mithraic societies. The Zoroastrian priesthood doesn't seem to have convinced the peripheral provinces to join the fight against the "*khrafstar*-ish devils" that cherished the snake and the serpent.



Fig. 402 – Sogdian drawing honoring both Zoroastrianism and Mithraism (BNF, Courtesy of F. Grenet)



Fig. 403 – Horus holding Mithraic symbols. MMA

A similar use of Mithraic symbols for a local deity occurred earlier on in Egypt, under Nectanabo II (r. 360-343), the last of the pharaohs who temporarily supplanted the Achaemenids. In a magical stele that was supposed to provide protection against various diseases and poisoning, the power of the young god Horus is enhanced by appropriating an array of symbols seldom used as a group in the Egyptian repertoire (Figs. 403-404). They included scorpions, snakes, a lion, and an animal usually described as an oryx. But an oryx has horns, while the stele animal has long ears instead, similar to the beavers of the Sasanian seal in Fig. 188 (which is also coupled with a lion), and the dog on the signet of Fig. 26, or the wolf in Fig. 402. In any case, lions were royal animals and not noxious like scorpions and snakes. These were clearly symbols introduced in Egypt by Cambyses, as they all reflected the powers of Mithra and Apam Napāt. What's more, Horus is placed under the aegis of the sun god Ra whose nighttime sojourn through the

Netherworld is marked by a sun disk at the very top of this stele. Within the sun disk (Fig. 404b), Ra is depicted in his nocturnal form, as a ram-headed deity wearing a triple-coned crown; this is in lieu of the sun-disk that usually adorned his falcon-headed effigy in daytime. This is the same Egyptian-looking crown (the *hem-hem*) that was adopted for Mithra in Pasargadae (Fig. 245). Its association with the sun god of Egypt reinforces the appropriateness of such a crown for Mithra. Furthermore, as far as I can tell, this particular variant of the crown, which first appeared in the Amarna period, becomes popular only after the Achaemenid conquest of Egypt, during the 30<sup>th</sup> dynasty, and mostly in the Ptolemaic period (as in Fig. 243).<sup>788</sup> It stands to reason that it was Cambyses's conquest of Egypt that revived the use of the three-coned crown there once again.



Figs. 404 a, b– Details of the Metternich Stele, circa 360-343 BC. MMA.

Fig. 405- Sarapis lifted by snake. Louvre

This may also provide a context for A.D.H. Bivar's insightful proposition that the sun-related cult of Sarapis in Egypt was affiliated to Mithra, and that its very name was derived from Mithra's pre-Zoroastrian title *kshathra-pati*, eventually turned into *satrap* (*shahr-bed*).<sup>789</sup> Perhaps out of spite for their Achaemenid overlords, the Egyptians welcomed an Iranian "cult" persecuted by the Achaemenids themselves. There is just too much common symbolism to ignore such a possibility. The statuette of a snake carrying

<sup>788</sup> The *hemhem* crown first appears under Akhenaten in association with the worship of the sun disk, Aton. Said crown, however, had two more pairs of *uraei* hanging from it (see, for instance: Freed 1999, 180, fig. 139). It may be that the adoption of this crown was in full knowledge of its solar connotations.

<sup>789</sup> Bivar 1998, 14-23.

Sarapis's head (Fig. 405), for instance, relates to the image of San Simeon sitting on a platform supported by a snake (Fig. 322), and the small crown of Sarapis is clearly modeled after that of Anāhitā in Fig. 305a, or vice versa. Two centuries of Achaemenid occupation of Egypt was bound to leave a footprint somewhere.

### XVI.5 - An Amalgam with a Complex Origin

As the most dominant celestial body visible from earth, the sun has always played a major role in ancient rituals. The Trundholm Sun Chariot of the National Museum of Copenhagen, which has been dated between 1600BC-550 BC, is the ultimate example of sun veneration in the form of a sun disk paraded on a chariot (Fig. 406). It also allows the visualization of an important element in the procession organized by Cyrus the Younger, as described by Xenophon (Cyr. 8.3.12):

Next after the bulls came horses, a sacrifice for the Sun; and after them came a chariot sacred to Zeus; it was drawn by white horses and with a yoke of gold and wreathed with garlands; and next, *for the Sun*, a chariot drawn by white horses and wreathed with garlands like the other. After that came a third chariot with horses covered with purple trappings, and behind it followed men carrying *fire on a great altar*.



Fig. 406 - Sun Chariot of the National Museum of Copenhagen (web)



Fig. 407 - Elamite silver vessel for bull-blood libation MMA



Fig. 408 - Elamite priest with sun symbols holding a sacrificial lamb. Louvre.

As an Achaemenid, the young Cyrus had to honor Ahura Mazdā (named Zeus by Xenophon); thus, the first chariot in his procession was dedicated to Ahura Mazdā. But to have it followed by a chariot dedicated to the Sun (i.e., Mithra) was in contravention of Darius's monotheistic policy aimed at the eradication of the Median ideology. The inclusion of the Sun chariot becomes even more significant in light of the prince's

decision to have his Persian entourage don "Median robes"; Xenophon emphasizes (8.3.1) that it was done "for the first time"—presumably in Achaemenid territories. It shows a deliberate policy of bringing to the fore Median practices that must have been popular in the young Cyrus's fiefdom of Asia Minor. Cyrus initiated a theological shift that ultimately pushed his brother Artaxerxes II to take the same path. In the ideological battle that pitted the two brothers against each other, both had to claim the backing of a solar and aquatic tandem of gods that, in the popular mind, controlled the *khvarenah*; hence Artaxerxes II invoking Mithra and Anāhitā in his inscriptions.

The reinstatement of Mithra in the Achaemenid pantheon had little bearing on the Mithraic societies, except, perhaps, for some temporary relief from persecution. Mithraic society members, however, were not Mithra-worshippers; they invoked Mithra and Apam Napāt as guarantors of their oath. What was essential to them was the oath itself, and if need be, it could be taken in the name of another revered entity. If the structure and principles of Mithraic societies have survived to this day, it's because they did not adhere to a particular religion, and did not worship a particular deity. Their "religion" was based on the principles of brotherhood consolidated by an oath. It allowed them to adapt their rituals and practices in order to survive under successive political and religious regimes. This built-in flexibility hinders our aim to describe the original \*M-S, for not only did Mithraic societies have multiple avatars, but it seems that their original constituents were multiple as well. Whereas brotherhood principles may have been primarily developed within an Iranian warrior class such as the *marīkas*, bull sacrifice and blood libation may be traced back to the Elamites, as a proto-Elamite silver object from the Metropolitan Museum and the statuette of a sun priest from the Louvre may suggest (Figs. 407-408); also the scorpion and the snake, so associated with Mithraism, were ubiquitous symbols of Elamite rituals. An amalgam was created under the Medes from these various practices, and a Mithraic oath was instituted that ultimately gave these loose organizations a lasting structure, with tendencies that ranged from brutal to docile and from cannibalistic to spiritual. This amalgam is the \*M-S, or the original Mithraic Society, that we have tried to identify even though its constituents remain elusive. It represented an organizational structure with rituals that best suited underground movements and congregations that wished to distance themselves from the ruling elite. As such, they provided a counterbalance to the power of the rulership, and were a force to be reckoned with. The ever presence of these congregations on the Iranian political scene shows what a powerful mix the \*M-S was; a mix that offered an alternative to "religion" and became its nemesis.

## EPILOGUE

Scholars who had a global vision of history intuitively made correct assumptions, and occasionally explained them with less than compelling arguments. Duchesne-Guillemin, for instance, had correctly sensed Cyrus's reverence for Mithra, but rationalized it by linking the lotus flower depicted on Cyrus's tomb to the one under Mithra's feet in Tāq-e Bostān (Figs. 186).<sup>790</sup> He saw it as a flower associated with Mithra, whereas in reality it was a symbol of Apam Napāt. Mithra's flower was the sunflower, which became so intertwined with the lotus that the two formed an inseparable tandem. If Duchesne-Guillemin was not totally right, he wasn't all that wrong either.

It's a predicament of ancient Iranian studies that Henkelman, to counter Duchesne-Guillemin's intuitive assertion, faults him for comparing the motif on Cyrus's tomb with a "more than 900 years younger relief";<sup>791</sup> and Skjaervo evokes historical amnesia to justify the discrepancy that he wrongly sees in the meaning of the words *chisa/chihr* when used by the Achaemenids as opposed to the Sasanians.<sup>792</sup> They both seem to be oblivious to the importance of thematic continuity in Iranian history. Iranian culture adopts and adapts, but evolves within a formulaic framework that is amazingly stable.

It was mind-boggling—even for me who has long insisted on the importance of historical continuity—to discover pronounced stylistic similarities between the Avestan hymn of *Y.19* and the *qalandar-nāmehs*, composed some two millennia apart (Appendix II). Because of the template that the *qalandar-nāmehs* provided for the deciphering of this Avestan hymn, I could immediately understand its purpose; and at the same time, I realized how misguided Avestologists were in their myopic focus on details at the expense of overall purpose. Context and purpose often provide better understanding than grammatical and philological analysis. The *Avesta* that they present is an idealized entity, unrelated to historical reality; it is supposedly the repository of ancient Iranian myths and social ethos, and it is said to reflect the essence of Zoroastrianism. Far from it. The *Avesta* is a politically-motivated assembly of texts that distorts historical reality.

To begin with, today's *Avesta* incorporates a pantheon of gods that wholly negates the pure-hearted vision that Zoroaster expounded in his Gathas, where he is in conversation

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<sup>790</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin 1974.

<sup>791</sup> Henkelman 2011, 578.

<sup>792</sup> Skjaervo et al. 2007, 34-37; see assertions (A) and (B) in sec. XI.1.

with the sole god that he approves of, i.e., Ahura Mazdā. Many religions of the world have ended up being a distorted version of what their originator had formulated. Christianity is not what Jesus of Nazareth wanted to achieve, nor is the Avestan multiplicity of gods what Zoroaster had in mind. The *Avesta* was assembled with the aim of bringing the maximum number of believers under one tent, while elevating the status of its priesthood. It has effectively turned Zoroaster's monotheistic vision into a polytheistic one, with a hodgepodge of old and new hymns, all doctored to accommodate the priesthood's political aspirations.

The notions that the Zoroastrian priesthood propagated were in fact not wholly theirs. They were initiated by Darius who tried to impose Mazdaism through the Magophonia he unleashed. Such a violent outburst, followed by a long period of witch hunting, was inevitably accompanied by negative propaganda; Zoroastrians only continued the process that Darius had initiated. For posterity, the main victim was historical reality. Cyrus was wiped out from history, along with whoever was perceived as irrelevant, unsympathetic, or antagonistic to Zoroastrianism. More importantly, it created a divide within society that has lasted to this day, and by which the political elite's opponents were cast as *divs*.

But, as is customary with Iranians, the population reacted by reviving past history through metaphors and allegories, which in due process turned into myths and fables. Such was the propensity for disguising reality that no less than four versions of Cyrus's birth reached Herodotus (I.95.1), none of them providing the real story. And the deities that were incorporated into the Zoroastrian pantheon were stripped of their original attributes, and sanitized to conform to the new religion that Zoroastrians were promoting. No wonder then that scholars who sought to find similarities between the Roman Mithras and the Zoroastrian Mithra, couldn't do it. The Zoroastrian Mithra had long been divested of the *khrafstar*-ish attributes that its namesake maintained in the *mithraeum*.

The Achaemenids initiated a religion—later called Zoroastrianism—that, by virtue of the dominance of their empire, was bound to influence many a culture. Its impact on Judaism and Christianity, for instance, has been well documented. Less known, however, is the wide-ranging effect of its nemesis, i.e., that of the Mithraic brotherhoods. Their flight from persecution had provided them with the opportunity to create an underground organization that became the perfect model for those trying to operate in a hostile environment. From the Mysteries to the Masons, and from the Banu Sāsāns to the Safaviyyeh, the avatars of Mithraic societies gained strength through their cohesiveness and the devotion that they showed to their leaders. Despite the shroud of secrecy that

enveloped their activities, their organizational model survived the vicissitudes of time, and many of them rose to prominence. They could become introverts like the Ahl-e Haqq and the Yazidis, or accumulate riches like the Morshediyyeh, or grab the reins of power like the Sarbedārs. They could go from passive to militant, or switch from ascetic to feudal lord. No matter what path they chose, they always had political clout and the potential to become active in the political arena. They thus attracted the ire of the ruling elite, and had to go into hiding, and/or had to dissimulate their beliefs and practices. Ironically, their persecuted members were often dervishes and Sufis who, like Zoroaster, sought unison with their Creator, and engaged in lamentations that were not very much different than the Gathas. Zoroaster himself would have been ill at ease in the environment that his priesthood had created and perpetuated.

History cannot be understood without an intimate knowledge of how people confronted ideological and religious adversity, and how they found ways to circumvent official propaganda. The Zoroastrian priesthood who attributed the Aryan *khvarenah* to Zoroaster, invented a new one—the Kayānid one—for kings. For the people, though, they were both one and the same, and they did not differentiate between the two in their parlance. Similarly, when a new name was invented for Zoroastrian priests, i.e., the *athravan*, people continued to call them by what they were used to, namely *magu*, even though it designated Darius's and Zoroastrians' enemies. Despite multiple attempts to eradicate Apam Napāt, Iranians found ways to keep his memory alive by using substitutes. Whereas Anāhitā was supposed to replace him for good, Apam Napāt survived in camouflaged tandems such as Borz-Mehr, *yazatān*, or *mehr-āb*. It is a testimony to the enduring importance of the Mithra/Apam Napāt tandem that the *mehr-āb* niche was adopted as the focal point of Christian and Islamic edifices, and perhaps even Jewish ones.

Throughout Iranian history, learned administrators, in alliance with the clergy, devised propagandistic slogans in the service of their masters—whether Iranians or foreign conquerors—while the people continued their practices of old under a new camouflage. Camouflaged realities create a major obstacle for understanding the past, and one should not declare any document that cannot be understood, and/or contradicts established theories, as fake. Unsubstantiated forgery allegations, which are now reaching epidemic proportions, only further obscure reality. The unveiling of the truth requires, among other things, the breaking of artificial barriers erected between pre and post Islamic studies. New generations of scholars must be allowed, and even encouraged, to broaden the scope of ancient Iranian studies to its widest possible limits.

## APPENDIX I

### THE COPIALE CIPHER

The Copiale Cipher is a wholly encrypted manuscript that was recently deciphered through the efforts of a team led by Kevin Knight.\* As per the sample image below (Fig. 409), the encryption contains all sorts of letters as well as "abstract symbols."

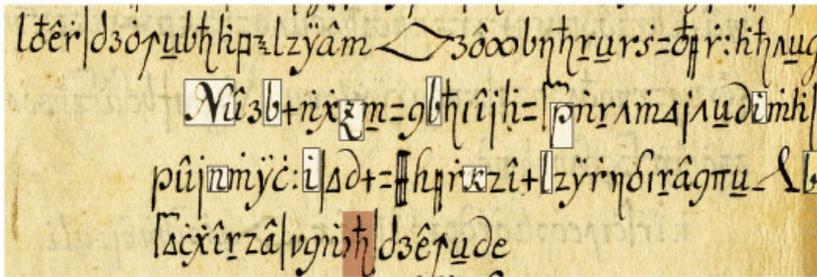


Fig. 409 – Sample of the Copiale Cipher encryption

△	tri..
○	lip
Λ	nee
⊙	o..
✱	star
X	bigx
Π	gat
☞	toe

Fig. 410 – symbols used in the Cipher

All but the "abstract symbols," or logograms, have been deciphered. The team has also provided a tentative explanation for the symbols tabulated in Fig. 410:

\*o\*= society, \*star\*=secret/knowledge?, \*nee\*=master, \*tri\*=lodge, \*bigx\* or X=Freemasons, \*gate\*=table shaped as U, \*lip\*=oculist \*bigL\*=position of feet, \*tribig\*=lodge, \*sci\*="God", \*toe\*=power.

The deciphered text proved to be written in German, and was subsequently translated into English. It has been explained as pertaining to a "18<sup>th</sup> century secret society, namely the 'oculist order'," akin to the Freemasons. Based on our analysis of brotherhood rituals we can advance further clarifications on the issue of its symbols. Their assessment of **O** as society is correct, since the brotherhoods considered themselves as a circle around their leader; he was the center point of their

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\* I am indebted to Kevin Knight who has generously put online all the information pertaining to this manuscript and graciously provided me the link to it: <http://stp.lingfil.uu.se/~bea/copiale/>. Therein, the manuscript is described in the following terms: "The Copiale Cipher is a 105 pages manuscript containing all in all around 75 000 characters. Beautifully bound in green and gold brocade paper, written on high quality paper with two different watermarks, the manuscript can be dated back to 1760-1780. Apart from what is obviously an owner's mark ("Philipp 1866") and a note in the end of the last page ("Copiales 3"), the manuscript is completely encoded. The cipher employed consists of 90 different characters, comprising all from Roman and Greek letters, to diacritics and abstract symbols. Catchwords (preview fragments) of one to three or four characters are written at the bottom of left-hand pages."

circle. More important is the symbol dubbed as **nee**, which represents in fact a ribbon. Most initiation rites, whether for dervishes or *fatās*, involved the tying of a ribbon, around the waist or the hat, by the *ostād* or Master. As for **bigx** (X) which they have proposed to designate Freemasons, I wonder if it does not designate secret organizations in general, and whether it has anything to do with the Cross of St Andrew that Jean Sans Peur adopted in addition to his Masonic emblems.

The general format of the text comprises question and answers similar to those we have encountered in the *fotovvat-nāmehs* as well as Freemasonry manuals. Of particular interest is the issue of pledges to other orders and circles, for as we saw in the case of Philip the Good of Burgundy, he chose the motto *Aultre Naray* (I shall have no other). Astonishingly, the text envisages the possibility of the candidate belonging to circles qualified as *X-thieves*, which we may assume to be orders similar to that of the Coquillards; it shows the common structure and affinities that existed among brotherhoods, whether respectable or not (according to present-day standards). Finally, I believe that they use the expression *rey* (Roy), meaning "king," to designate the leader of the order, which is akin to the lofty titles of *soltān* and *shāh* for the dervishes, "Sovereign" for the Order of the Golden Fleece, or "Grand Coësre" for the Coquillards.

In what follows I shall present a sample of the translation the team of Kevin Knight has produced, and for the sake of better comprehension, I shall substitute "Oculist," "Lodge," "Master" and "Circle" in lieu of their respective signs.

### ***THE BOOK OF LAW OF THE VENERABLE OCULIST CIRCLE (SECRET PART).***

#### ***"Secret lessons for the apprentices.***

##### ***Ceremonies of initiation.***

If the security of the Lodge is ensured by a doorkeeper and the Lodge is opened by the conducting Master by putting his hat on, the candidate is taken from another room by a younger doorkeeper and led by hand to the table of the conducting Master, he asks him:

First of all if he desires to be Oculist. Secondly to subject himself to those regulations of Circle and without any recalcitrance to endure the period of apprenticeship. Thirdly, to conceal the **star** of the Circle and to pledge himself, to obligatory keep the secrecy. The candidate answers yes. Fourthly: if he is already part of another secret Circle, for example amongst those *X-thieves* or similar to this, in comparison to confessing to honor and reputation, he must answer: yes, so the conducting Master asks him.

Fifth: *if he has not promised his previous brothers to disclose the Oculist to them.* He may answer here whatever he pleases, so he must repeat the following which the conducting Master is saying "however big the obedience and loyalty is, which I promised to them ... so then shall this honorable Oculist cross I promise not to come to any disadvantage except the

one Oculist I pledge commitment to, I will not excess during the oath which I ... took for them, so that I will be equally faithful to the Oculist Circle, as faithful as it is possible, even more faithful than the ... is and to happen in such a way as all punishment according to ... the oath to be carried out if I will reveal in any way even the smallest part of the Oculist *rey* to the ... ."

The conducting Master speaks thereupon to the ceremony Master: "Hereby I pass to the brother the candidate in body and soul, so that he sees if one cannot help his weak face with an operation." He carries him thereafter to a secondary table where, next to a lot of candles, several instruments and eye glasses, microscopic perspective, a cloth and a glass of water must be present. He has to lower himself on to a tabouret and to look upon an unwritten piece of paper for a while. If, after a while, he answers that he cannot see anything written on there, than the master of ceremonies puts him a pair of eye glasses and asks him again if he is not able to read the writing. Answer no. During this time the master of ceremonies comforts him as good as he can, raises his hopes for improvement washes his eyes with a cloth and if nothing helps, he will announce that they have to proceed with the operation then all those present members reach for the candles place themselves around the candidate and the master of ceremonies Master plucks a hair from the eyebrow with a pair of small tweezers under constant urging, comfort and encouragement and concludes herewith the operation thereupon calls the conducting Master the candidate to him and says to him: "he is perhaps in thought that somewhat serious matters are to be found at the Circle "but he should be assured of the opposite" and during the ceremony he should not think further about the shells but the core even at the end "those symbolic actions out of which none" are without meaning. hereafter the conducting Master asks him again the three questions mentioned at the beginning and if he answers them conveniently also the conducting Master must call all present as witnesses he must place his right hand over the eye so the conducting Master carries it around his neck and must repeat that which the secretary reads to him the commitment formulation is this: "*In ... n ... promise as confidently as I care about my honor that I will never divulge any secret of this Circle and of all what I have seen, heard and felt, to anybody, whomever it may be, and in any way it may happen; tell something other than I am permitted to. Moreover, I promise that I will never be part of any other secret Circle, conceivable fraternity, without special permission of the venerable great Master, this I promise to the entire Oculist Circle of which nations they may be, both to the present as well as to the future members. If I will act against my pledge, I will indulge this in such a way as to be a disgrace to the {male female} sex and of the entire honorable world even for the most unworthy member of these venerable and respectable Circle, in whichever way will be decided for me. I declare myself willing and will hold to this without complaining about it. After this, the conducting Master adorns the guard with the apprentice decoration around the right arm and leads him again to the secondary table, where, instead of the secretary's unwritten piece of paper, the entire teaching for the apprentices is placed, which everything was translated by the secretary even before the*

closure of the Lodge, so that by taking off of the hat, everybody has to tear it up, all present would congratulate the brother, and the guard explains to him in so far about the emblem above, that it symbolizes the blindness and subtleness, he instructs the apprentice - based on the essay - about what he has to know as an apprentice, and teaches him about what is to be used against strangers and false brothers. The most important of them are: not to dispute the Oculist *rey* not to advocate it, and not to brag about it to anybody without any important cause v Lodge r, to recognize a brother in the company of strangers not to give a sign to anybody and so on.

***Indicators of an apprentice.***

First of all one needs to rotate the head first to the left side, then to the right side, as one does when one looks after something. Use the handkerchief and look to the next inquirer.

Secondly, if one does not touch one hand but if one makes an arbitrary movement with the other one, and one looks to the other one. I also make an arbitrary movement, however with the other hand.

Thirdly, one takes tobacco with the thumb and the middle finger of the left hand. Touch with the left hand your left eye. Accordingly, each question has its own answer, and is not subject to any other order, but the questions are arbitrary. However, one shall never ask more than one question, as long as the answerer is not asking another question. Also, a brother, which lets himself be recognized, has to tell the entire ceremony of his acceptance, and has to know the names of the persons which were present. If there are strange people present, and if one speaks or acts careless, then the answer is that I know already.

***Secret lesson for the apprentices.***

Acceptance of an apprentice.

When the apprentices Lodge are together, have taken care of safety and they have opened accordingly, the younger doorkeeper brings the apprentice inside and he will be asked by the conducting Master: what is it that he wishes, he answers that his masterly clarity shall acquit him and make him an apprentice. The conducting Master asks further: if he, the Circle, was loyal until now, if he has kept his promise not to befall in any other secret Circle, kept it private and if he, in front of the publicly gathered Lodge with honor and conscience can freely confess no, or he will otherwise be convinced, that he has acted contrary to it, thus will he be rejected with a strong reprehension due to his disobedience and will be forever excluded from the function as an apprentice. If, on the other hand, he can prove his obedience, then the conducting Master asks further if he subjects himself freely to something which should be done to him, answer yes if he can recall correctly the above mentioned first pledge and if he wants to reiterate the same, yes, the conducting Master calls therefore all those present as witnesses, which place themselves around them, whereupon he places again

his right hand around the neck hanging eye of the conducting Master and the secretario has to repeat after him.

"I recall now to what I have pledged already as an apprentice and oblige myself once again to those previous punishments, most solemnly I don't want - not even once - to discover a novice, that I learned as an apprentice." The conducting Master stands then up and swings the scepter onto the left armpit and says to him: "this swing is the symbol and the beginning toward that privacy which the brother starting now, as an apprentice, has to expect from us and, according to his skills and other important work, to follow, according to the degree of aptitudes and obedience like this" in order for him to be allowed. Thereupon the ceremony Master places the apprentice decoration, namely a similar *band* as the previous one, so that he keeps it on his left arm, to which he accepts the good wishes from all those present and the conductor teaches him about the following apprentice indicator.

....

***The true star, namely the story about the origin of the Oculist Circle.***

Curiosity is inherited with mankind. Frequently we want to know something only because it needs to be kept secret. Once a few good friends came to talk about this subject in England. Each of them gave special examples from the Circle of a curiosity driven too far. Finally they came to think about creating a fraternity, about which only those who would be accepted should know about its purpose. In order to see how many of the impertinences he would apply to enter a Circle without knowing beforehand to what they would be bound to. They would agree immediately as they would like to pretend that a great **star** would be behind their unification and decided to come up with certain arbitrary signs, by which a brother should recognize another. But due to the fact that the time did not allow it to arrange everything with accuracy, another appointment was set and it was then when the guild of the **X** was set up, and when its strange name was ascribed. Only one did not appear at this appointment and after he arrived a while later, he found the **X** already all set, so that a great part of these *masons* couldn't even know, and the others could not remember that the newly come would understand something about their engineering, and if he was present when the first plans were made. Therefore, he did not want to uncover himself to them and since he particularly did not like that the female sex was completely excluded and that the in selection of brothers so little caution was practiced, he was prompted to found our present flourishing Oculist Circle. To entrust the arrangement of **X** *rey* an entire Circle in form of a real **star** and to commit every member of the secret intentions stated in the fifth title, but so that nobody should know anything about the secret institution of the Circle, so that our Circle would benefit that the **X star** by our brothers respect, but ours to be and remain a true and still undiscovered **star**.... "

## APPENDIX II

This unedited article, which I had submitted for publications to specialized journals, was refused based on comments that I have reproduced at the end of this appendix. Readers may judge on their own the validity of those comments.

### FROM THE *AVESTA* TO SUFI TREATISES: A STANDARD LITERARY TECHNIQUE

**Abstract:** Two accidental encounters with Jean Kellens' translations of *Y.58.1* and *Y.19* allowed me to discover how interdependent the Avestan literary format was with that of Sufi treatises. This perception allowed in turn the understanding of the motives of the Zoroastrian priesthood in composing a *Y.19* type of text, the careful step by step escalating pattern built in, and the use of recurrent slogans and propaganda for their own glory. Essential to this analysis was the comprehension of the historic environment in which various actors fought each other. It is inevitably linked to the confrontation between the *pārsās* and the Zoroastrian priesthood on the one hand, and the Median magi on the other. As such, it negates once more the dogmatic belief in an ancient Zarathushtra, living at the dawn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

#### 1. Introduction

My first foray into the Avestan world was in pursuit of the meaning of *chithra*. I had sensed that by adopting a meaning of origin, seed or nature for this word, Avestan translations often lacked clarity, and bypassed an important concept, that of *chithra*, reflecting as light, the intensity of the *khvarenah* that empowered different beings. It took me several years to assert this conclusion,<sup>1</sup> and thereafter, I continued to check its validity each time I encountered a sentence that included *chithra*. Thus, when in 2010, I attended by chance one of Jean Kellens' lectures at the Collège de France, where *Yasna 58.1* was translated with yet another meaning for *chithra*, I naturally sought to reassess the situation at hand. In doing so, I not only found more assurance in my own thesis, but also found confirmation for a thought that I had nurtured for some time: that Western specialists would be better served if they could also consult Persian translations of the *Avesta*. For if Western specialists are more competent in philological technicalities, their Persian counterparts enjoy a natural advantage in sensing the form and flow of sentences. But whenever I expressed this idea, the response was that Western Avestalogists often don't know Persian, and in any case, the *Avesta* is so distant from New Persian that no reverse projection can be of help.

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<sup>1</sup> Soudavar 2009, 442-50.

The present article is to prove the contrary. It was sparked by the fortuitous preview of an article written by Amir Ahmadi in refutation of translations previously offered for parts of *Yasna* 19, by Kellens and others.<sup>2</sup> I suddenly realized that treatises written for dervish orders, called *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* or *qalandar-nāmeḥ*, had a structural format similar to the one used in *Y.19*, a format that was essential to the understanding of each of these types of texts.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I shall first tackle the problems associated with *Y.58.1*, and then, after exploring the format of *qalandar-nāmeḥs*, I shall delve into the particularities of *Y.19* and show its stylistic parallelism with the latter, while highlighting the general lack of understanding for the structure and purpose of *Y.19*. The use of particular expressions by the author of *Y.19* will also provide the opportunity to reassess the historical process that affected the development of the *Avesta*, a process that inevitably brings to fore the late date for Zarathushtra.

### The *Yasna* 58.1

I shall compare hereafter two translations of the first stanza of *Y.58*:

*Y.58.1*            *taṭ sōidiš taṭ vərəθrəm dadəmaidē*  
                   *hiiaṭ nəmā huciθrəm ašiš. hāgəṭ ārmaitiš. hāgəṭ*  
                   *yeḥhē nəmaṅhō ciθrəm humatəmcā hūxtəmcā huuarštəmcā*

Translation by Kellens :

« Nous tenons pour un manteau et une cuirasse l'Hommage qui a bonne caractéristique, qui s'associe à la Chance, qui s'associe à la juste-Pensée. La caractéristique de l'Hommage est la (pensée) bien pensée, le texte bien dit et le (geste) bien fait. »<sup>4</sup>

The Persian translation of the same, by Jalil Dustkhāh is:<sup>5</sup>

این نماز نیک بنیاد به اشه و به آرمیتی پیوسته، این نمازی را که بنیادش اندیشه نیک و گفتار نیک و کردار نیک است، رزم افزار پیروزی می دانیم.

Which translates as : "This prayer (homage), of good foundation, which is linked to *Asha* and *Armaiti*, this prayer whose foundation rests on good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, we hold it as a weapon of victory."

In comparing these two translations, one can immediately see a difference in form: While the latter considers the stanza as one sentence, the former divides into two. For the Persian writer, the tone of the text naturally induced him to see it as a sentence in which, the power that the prayer is supposed to confer is defined along with explanations about the sources of its power.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmadi 2013.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Jean Kellens for having graciously sent me a copy of his book (Kellens 2010b), the content of which I must criticize in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Kellens 2010a, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Dustkhāh 2002, 229.

Kellens' technically more precise translation of the first line—as referring to robe and armor—is evoking the protective power of the prayer; it's fully supported by the subsequent stanzas of the prayer as they evoke protection from demons.<sup>6</sup> It's also a better fit than Dustkhāh's aggression-oriented "weapon of victory," and in line with the usually more passive tone of prayers. On the other hand, Kellens' insistence on translating *humatəmcā hūxtəmcā huuarštəmcā* as "the thought, well-thought; the word, well-spoken; the gesture, well-performed" adds an unnecessary complication that goes against the usage of the famous triple Persian motto "*pendār-e nik, goftār-e nik, kerdār-e nik*" (good thoughts, good words, good deeds). It is so engrained in Persian and Zoroastrian literature that one must believe that this is how the original Avestan motto was understood.

The translations of both authors, however, is eschewed by the everlasting *chithra* predicament. I have criticized elsewhere, instances in which philologists had extrapolated the meaning of *chithra*, from "origin" to "nature," "semen," "seed," or even "offspring."<sup>7</sup> Here, while Dustkhāh has opted for "foundation," Kellens has used "characteristic." Both are problematic, especially the latter. Because a prayer is essentially an utterance, it can consist of "good words", but it cannot "think," and therefore cannot have good thoughts. Should we envisage that "good thoughts" went into the *composition* of a prayer, it would then define a characteristic of the composer and not the song. No matter how we twist it, we will end up with an illogical proposition.

Dustkhāh's adoption of "foundation" for *chithra* is somehow less illogical, since a foundation can eventually be considered as the creation of a composer. But it leaves us up in the air as to who the composer might be, while pushing *chithra* toward a meaning that is attached to a foreign agent (the composer), rather than rooted in the prayer. If the starting point for *chithra* is "nature" or "origin," it must not be extrapolated to a foreign agent.

In reality, *chithra* is the manifestation of the *khvarenah* as light, and the source of all power. It can empower deities, humans as well as prayers. But since it is variable, one needs to increase it through good deeds and through the performance of religious duties. *Denkard III:361*, specifically explains that the *kharrāh* (*khvarenah*) increases or diminishes according to one's performance of religious duties.<sup>8</sup> And throughout Zoroastrianism, the recurring theme of "good thoughts, good words, and good deeds" appears as a motto that defines religious duty. It's almost self-evident then that, in order to increase the protection-effectiveness of the prayer, one needs to concentrate on the three "good" things to increase one's *chithra*.

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<sup>6</sup> Kellens' translation of *Y.58.2* "Qu'un tel Hommage nous protège de la nocivité des démons et des hommes. A un tel Hommage nous confions nos biens-vivants et nos corps, pour qu'il les protège, les garde, les préserve et les surveille"; Kellens 2010a, 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> See Soudavar 2006b, 166-67; Soudavar 2009, 442-50.

<sup>8</sup> Soudavar 2009, 444-46.

Like the Sanskrit word *karma*, perhaps *chithra* should not be translated in English, but simply understood as the radiance of this prayer's *khvarenah*, and the measure of its power. The stanza would then read:

Y.58.1: "We hold it as a robe and armor (of protection), this prayer of good *chithra* (radiance) linked to Ashi and Armaiti, whose *chithra* (is derived from) good words, good deeds and good thoughts"

The problem of *chithra* notwithstanding, the comprehension of Y.58.1 primarily depends on the correct perception of its literary format. If you break it into two separate sentences, *you lose the raison d'être of the second part*: How the prayer can become more effective. It's a point that will become more apparent when analyzing Y.19. But to do that, we shall first explore some relevant passages of Sufi literature.

## 2. A Literary Format

Among various treatises composed for dervish orders, there is a genre called *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* or *qalandar-nāmeḥ*. They were supposed to be simple manuals for initiation procedures of dervish orders, but gradually adopted a stratified structure that allowed different writers to show their prowess by ever expanding the stratifications. In one such a treatise, the author tries to explain the worthiness of Sufism by presenting his arguments as reflecting justifications proffered by the sixth Shiite Imam, Ja`far as-Sādeq (702-765).<sup>9</sup> The essence of Sufism is then explained to encompass the three principles of *shari`at* (religion), *tariqat* (the Sufi path) and *haqiqat* (truth), which are then expanded by the following stratification process:

- a) If you are asked: What is *shari`at*, and what is *tariqat*, and what is *haqiqat*?
- b) Say: *Shari`at* is Islam, and *tariqat* is *imān* (faith), and *haqiqat* is *ehsān* (kindness)

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- c) If they ask what is Islam?
- d) Say Islam is based on : "I swear that there is no god but God (اشهد ان لا اله الا الله)" and "present your prayer (اقموا الصلوة)" and "donate your *zakāt* (آتوا الزكوة)" and "fast in Ramadan (الصوم الرمضان)" and ...
- e) and if they ask what is *imān*?
- f) say: It is to acknowledge the uniqueness of God Almighty, in relation to which the Prophet has proclaimed: "Faith is to believe in God, and his angels, books, messengers, and the Day of Judgment, and precise assessment by God Almighty, and resurrection after death,"<sup>10</sup>
- g) and if they ask what is *ehsān*?
- h) say: It is to know the Creator through your inner eye since the Prophet has said: "*ehsān* (kindness) is in reality the worship of God,...";

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- i) also the Imam has said: that the *shari`at* is to be uttered, the *tariqat* is to be taken, and the *haqiqat* is to be known, as the Prophet has said that "the *shari`at* is my sayings, the *tariqat* is my deeds, and the *haqiqat* is my being" and the Imam said again, that "the *shari`at* is a road, the

<sup>9</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995, 106-107. The attribution of these arguments to the Sixth Imam is without any substantiation or reference.

<sup>10</sup> It is a fabricated saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammad: الإيمان أن تؤمن بالله و ملائكته و كتبه و رسله و اليوم الآخر و القدر خبيره من الله تعالى و البعث بعد الموت

*tariqat* is to engage that road, and the *haqiqat* is to reach the ultimate goal"; and the Imam also said that "the *shari`at* is a boat, the *tariqat* is the sea, and the *haqiqat* is the pearl (in the sea)."

j) if they ask: How many letters has *shari`at* (شريعة)?

k) say that *shari`at* has five letters and each letter has meanings: The ش of *shari`at* is a pointer to the acceptance of the *conditions* (شرايط) of Islam; and its "ر" is to distinguish between *permissible* (روا) and not permissible; and its ی is to *remember* (ياد کردن) God; and its ع points to *worship* (عبادت); and its ت is to *repent* (توبه) from sins.

l) and *tariqat* too has five letters: ...

m) and *haqiqat* too has five letters: ...

Of the three principles evoked in (a), the *tariqat* is what really defines Sufism, while the other two have been adjoined to give it a well-rounded definition, and better protection against accusations of non-religiosity. The reason being, dervish orders carried symbols and procedures from a pagan era, which made them vulnerable to attack by orthodox Moslems. Thus, the association of the *shari`at* with the *tariqat* was a good insurance policy. In addition, they not only rhymed together, but also with *haqiqat*. The resulting rhyming triplet became a motto that defined Sufism in a way that "good thoughts, good words, good deeds" characterized Zoroastrianism. But once this triplet was enunciated at the top level, the literary genre required further explanation for each of its components in subsequent levels. This was achieved through (b). The explanations provided in (b) were, in turn, further expanded through three pairs of question and answers: (c-d), (e-f) and (g-h). At this stage, to enhance the importance of the triplet, the author interjects in (i) three additional sets of metaphors, each of which cloak the three principles with a mystical aura. They are seemingly not his own, but borrowings from other writers. He then engages in a new process, one in which he uses the technique of revealing the inner meaning of each word by providing an explanation for each of its letters through a word that begins with the same letter. He applies this letter dissecting technique, first to *shari`at*, in (k), and then to the other two principles *tariqat* and *haqiqat*, in (l) and (m) respectively.

The question and answer sequence provides a tempo, and the stratification provides an arithmetic veneer of orderly, perhaps divine, structure. The global effect was meant to dazzle the interlocutor. Because the process is artificial, it provides *a posteriori* explanations that are forcibly fed into the literary format. They provide fanciful explanations that are seldom meaningful.

But so important is the format that if the writer cannot apply it directly, he would try to introduce it through a detour. In the following example, since the writer could not dissect the word *kherqa* (the dervish robe) directly, he first equates it with *faqr* (poverty) and then proceeds with the stratification of the latter's meaning:

A) if they ask "what is the *kherqa*?" say that it represents *faqr*

B) and if they ask what is *faqr* (فقر) and how many meaning it has? Say that it has three letters and seven meanings:

C) the ف of *faqr* points to *paucity* (فياقه), and the ق of *faqr* indicates *contentment* (قناعت), and its ر is for *hardship* (رياضت)

D) and *faqr* is described by its (seven) states and qualities:

- 1) *faqr* is nothingness, and one disappears in nothingness in order to reappear in the kingdom of eternity
- 2) *faqr* breaks the neck of all drunkenness, and then achieves its goal
- 3) the nothingness of all pure things has been gathered and thus named *faqr*
- 4) *faqr* is a mirror that never rusts
- 5) it is contentment in a kingly state, because it emanates from the Kingdom of Solomon
- 6) it's a precious gem that cannot be priced or evaluated, and one that the Imam `Ali has approved of (to be worn)
- 7) *faqr* is (to have) a lightweight mind and an empty stomach, and if the stomach is empty it will really smell *faqr*.<sup>11</sup>

In (C) the three letters of *faqr* are individually explained, and then, seven baseless and arbitrary qualities are proclaimed for *faqr*, because seven is a fundamental number for dervish orders. More generally, this is a literary genre that sacrifices meaning for form, and therefore it's almost futile to try to find esoteric meanings hidden in each of the above sentences.

Finally, this question and answer game, that was meant to dazzle the initiate, also emphasized the utterance of words and sentences. Thus, to each dervish symbol, such as *kherqa*, was associated a Koranic verse that the initiate was required to utter before using it.<sup>12</sup> Priests and religious officials always promoted the power of the word. And that is what *Yasna 19* is all about.

### 3. The *Yasna 19*

The *Yasna 19*, which is occasionally referred to as *Bagān Yasht*, is in praise of a Gathic prayer hymn, the *Ahuna Vairya*. There have been many attempts to translate it, the latest being that of Kellens as part of his analysis of preliminary recitations before the ritual of sacrifice (Kellens 2010b). It has drawn partial criticism from Amir Ahmadi who has focused on the illogical implications of many of the propositions advanced by Kellens.<sup>13</sup> While Kellens qualifies *Y.19* as "cosmogonie mentale," Ahmadi sees it imbued with "eschatological purposes," but also emphasizes its grammatical merits in terms of "how the exegete understood the syntax" of the *Ahuna Vairya*. My own views on the matter, however, are less grandiose and more cynical. I see it as a priestly composition, along the lines of the aforementioned *qalandar-nāmehs*, in which meaning is sacrificed to form. Its purpose was to induce the initiate to perform religious recitations and incantations. It thus emphasized the importance of the *Ahuna Vairya* as an empowered word, through the artificial techniques of explanation by stratification, quantification, as well as step by step escalation. It was meant to dazzle the initiate but at the same time elevate the position of priesthood. It also included rewards for good recitation, or even a deficient one. And where Kellens sees similarities with other hymns as an imbedded reference to them, I only see plagiarism.<sup>14</sup> Either the composer of this hymn copied certain passages from the others, or vice

<sup>11</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995,110-111.

<sup>12</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmadi 2013, 874-76. .

<sup>14</sup> See for instance note 22 infra on how Kellens jumps from one text to another.

versa, for as we saw in the case (i) of the *qalandar-nāmeḥ*, these authors often used borrowings from others to embellish their own.

The text of *Y.19* can be divided into five parts, each following a different literary technique and promoting a different agenda.<sup>15</sup> I shall present, hereunder, a translation of each part with an eye on various existing translations,<sup>16</sup> as well as the precisions advanced by Ahmadi. The more the general orientation of the text became clear, the less I needed to add explanatory words and sentences beyond the direct translation of each word. Like Iranian languages, English offers the possibility of expressing ideas in a concise manner. *I have thus opted for a more fluent English translation than what Avestologists prefer, which is a word by word translation that is more often than not incomprehensible, and at times utterly wrong.* They spend an enormous time to justify semantics only to fall short on meaning. The objective here is to explain Yasna 19 as a whole, i.e., its purpose and the logic imbedded in it, through a readable translation. Anomalies and particularities that need further elaboration will be explained afterwards in sections IV-VIII.

### 3.1. *Yasna 19 –Part 1*

The first part establishes the merits of this hymn, by explaining the value of its invocation, as well as situating its first utterance in the very early stage of Creation. Except for *Y.19.2* and *Y.19.4* whose meaning I shall elaborate later on, the translation of the first part does not present any particular problem, and most translations agree with each other.

One can note, however, that similar to the author of our *qalandar-nāmeḥ* who attributed his baseless arguments to the Sixth Shiite Imam, the author of *Y.19* puts his grandiose claims in the mouths of no less witnesses than Ahura Mazdā and Zoroaster, who are in conversation with each other:

19.1. Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazdā: O Ahura Mazdā, thou most bounteous Spirit, maker of the corporeal world, O Righteous one, which was that Word that you recited to me,

19.2. which came before (*para*) the sky, before the water, before the earth, before the cow, before the plants, before *Fire son of Ahura Mazdā*, before the righteous man, before the *khrafstar*-ish devils and their men (i.e., followers); and before all of the corporeal world, and those good things fashioned by Mazdā and imbued with the *chithra* (Light) of righteousness?

19.3. Thereupon Ahura Mazdā said: That was the *Ahuna-vairyā* hymn, O Spitama Zarathushtra, which I recited for you,

19.4. before (the creation) of the sky, before the water, before the earth, before the cattle, before the plants, before *Fire son of Ahura Mazdā*, before the righteous man, before the *khrafstar*-ish devils and

<sup>15</sup> Kellens (2010b, 27-51) has opted for a slightly different partition.

<sup>16</sup> I have relied on H.H. Mills' text ([www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm](http://www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm)), Dustkhāh's (2002, 173-77), as well as Kellens (2010b, 27-51). But more importantly, I found the word translations provided in the online dictionary of *Avesta.org* to be sufficiently precise—in most cases—as to not need any further extrapolation.

their men (i.e., followers); and before all of the corporeal world, and those good things fashioned by Mazda and imbued with the *chithra* (Light) of righteousness.

19.5. This *Ahuna-vairya* hymn of mine, O Spitama Zarathushtra, if incanted without mistakes and omissions, is worth a hundred other chants that are likewise well recited without mistake and without omissions; and even if incanted with mistakes and omissions, its effect will be equivalent to ten other prominent chants.

19.6. And whoever in this corporeal world, O Spitama Zarathushtra, shall memorize the godly *Ahuna-vairya*, and recite its memorized words in undertone,<sup>17</sup> or whisper them as a chant, or chant them for worship, then I, Ahura Mazda, will bring his soul over the Bridge (of Chinvat), to reach accordingly the three Heavenly stages of Excellent Life, Excellent Righteousness, and Excellent Lights.<sup>18</sup>

19.7. And whoever in this corporeal world, O Spitama Zarathushtra, while whispering by heart the *Ahuna-vairya*, omits one half, or one third, or one fourth, or one fifth, I who am Ahura Mazda will pull away his soul from the heavenly world; yea, so far off as the earth is large and wide; and this earth is indeed long and broad.

### 3.2. *Yasna 19 - Part 2*

In this part the author introduces *ahu* and *ratu* as part of an eschatological projection that has been generally misunderstood because of the wrong translation of *Y.19.9*. Although his real agenda is only revealed in Part 3, in this section, he already tries to prepare the ground for it.

19.8. Thus, the verse<sup>19</sup> that contained the word *ahu* and the word *ratu* was proclaimed before the appearance of the sky above, and before the appearance here of the waters, plants, bovine quadrupeds, before the birth of the righteous two-legged man, and before the body of the sun was made visible; but after the appearance of the *Amesha Spentas*.

19.9. And these bounteous spiritual beings of mine (i.e. the *Amesha Spentas*) proclaimed that the righteousness of the entire creation, existed in the past, exists now, and will exist in the future by the power of *šīiaoθənanəm aṅhəuš mazdāi*.<sup>20</sup>

19.10. And this Word (i.e., hymn) is the most emphatic of the words which have been pronounced before, or which are now spoken, or which shall be spoken in future; for its power is such that if all the

<sup>17</sup> Zoroastrian recitations are done as an undertone, i.e., in a low voice, as a whisper (*drenj*).

<sup>18</sup> Compare with Kellens' less concise translation of same (2010b, 30) : "Quiconque en cet état osseux, ô Spitama Zarathuštra, mémorise la version analysée de l'*Ahuna Variia*, moi Ahura Mazda je ferai passer son âme-moi par-dessus le pont vers l'excellent état de trois manières : jusqu'à l'excellent état s'il mémorise pour en métriser la diction, jusqu'à l'excellent Agencement s'il en maîtrise la diction pour la réciter, jusqu'aux excellentes lumières s'il la récite pour l'offrir en sacrifice. ». See also note 38 for my comments on the "version analysée" qualification.

<sup>19</sup> Within the primarily oral world of the *Avesta*, sentences are mostly referred to as "saying" rather than text as Kellens suggests (Kellens 2010b, 32). This paragraph, however, refers to the utterance of the first two verses of the *Ahuna Vairya* in which these two words appear.

<sup>20</sup> Having evoked the Amesha Spentas in the previous stanza, it seems logical that the *frā mē spaniā mainuuā* of *Y.19.9* (see next note) refers to them as "bounteous spiritual beings of mine" i.e., those that he, Ahura Mazda, had created.

beings of the corporeal world should memorize it, and learn it, they would be redeemed from their mortality.

*19.11.* And this Word of ours has been proclaimed in order to be memorized and learned by all beings, for the sake of (establishing) best Righteousness.

We can sense that in 19.8, he is attaching a certain importance to the words *ahu* and *ratu* by emphasizing that they were pronounced basically before life came on earth. He presents it as a logical consequence of 19.1-2, because if the whole hymn was uttered before Creation, so would be the words *ahu* and *ratu* contained in its first two verses (see below). But then, at the end of the stanza, he seemingly backtracks a little bit, and rectifies his earlier statement by emphasizing that they were actually uttered after the appearance of the Amesha Sepentas. This added precision is to avoid blasphemy. By *ahu* and *ratu* he must have referred to mortals who could not be higher ranked than the Amesha Sepentas. As we shall see, the first stanza (*Y19.12*) of Part 3 clarifies this matter.

Once he introduces the Amesha Sepentas in *Y.19.8*, he uses them in the subsequent stanza, as upholders of *asha* (Righteousness) who vouch for its ever presence, which they attribute to the power of *šīiaoθənanəm aṅhəuš mazdāi* sentence of the *Ahuna Vairya*, supposedly because it proclaims that the creation of the whole world was Ahura Mazdā's.<sup>21</sup> The *Y.19.9-10* stanzas reiterate then the fundamental eschatological idea of Zoroastrianism that Righteousness shall prevail over Evil, and present the power of the *Ahuna Vairya* as the main instrument of Righteousness' final triumph. Whereas in Part 1, our *Yasna* author used as witnesses Ahura Mazdā and Zoroaster, he uses here the Amesha Sepentas to give more weight to his assertions.

### *3.3. Yasna 19 – Part 3*

Having praised the value and power of the *Ahuna Vairya* hymn as a whole, the author pushes his praise to another level, one in which he can explain the role of each of its components individually. It's a technique similar to the one used in the aforementioned Sufī treatise, in (k), (l), (m), which not only explained the merits of a name as a whole, but described the benefits associated with each of its letters. In what follows, I have juxtaposed the *Ahuna Vairya* with *Y.19.12-14*, and underlined their common elements.

*The Ahuna Vairya (Ahuna Variia).*

*Yaθa ahu vairiō*  
*aθā ratuš ašātcī hacā*

<sup>21</sup> *Y.19.9*: "*frā-mē spaniiā maniuuā vauuaca vīspəm ašaonō sīm haiīmca bauuainīmca būšīieinīmca šīiaoθnō.tāitiia šīiaoθənanəm aṅhəuš mazdāi.*"

Kellens' translation of *Y.19.9* (2010b, 32): "Celui des deux avis [sur moi] qui est bénéfique a proclamé tout l'état existant du soutien de l'Agencement aurait un passé, un présent et un futur sous l'action des mots *šīiaoθənanəm aṅhəuš mazdāi* ». Because of the undefined « deux avis [sur moi] », his whole translation is meaningless, and cannot be integrated into the chain of ideas that bind the stanzas together; see also note 20.

vanhəuš dazdā mananḥō  
šiiəoθənanəm anḥəuš mazdāi  
xšaθrəmcā ahurāi.ā  
 yim drigubiiō dadat vāstārəm

Y19.12: (1) yaθa<sub>1</sub> frā ida āmoraot̄ yaṭ dim ahūmca ratūmca ādadaṭ, iθa dim para cinasti yim ahurəm mazdqm manas.paoiriiaēibiiō dāmabiiō

(2) yaθa<sub>2</sub> īm vīspanqm mazištəm cinasti,

(3) aθa ahmāi dāmqn cinasti.

Y19.13 (1) yaθa<sub>3</sub> mazdā hujīīš  
 (2) vanhəuš ida θritīm tkaēšəm ādrənjaieiti  
 (3) dazda mananḥō para im ida manajhe cinasti  
 (4) Yaθa<sub>4</sub> fradaxštārəm manajhe  
 (5) mananḥō aētauuaitia īm kāraieit.  
 (6) šiiəoθənanəm ida ahūm kāraieiti

Y.19.14 (1) yaṭ dim damabiiō cinasti mazdā[i] iθa təm yaṭ ahmāi dāmqn,  
 (2) xšaθrəm ahurāi cinasti, taṭ mazda tauua xšaθrəm,  
 (3) drigubiiō vāstārəm cinasti, yaθa<sub>5</sub> uruuathəm spitamāi,  
 (4) pañca tkaēša, vīspem vacō frauuākəm haurum vacō ahurahe mazdā

As their translation will show, each sentence of *Y.19.12-14* boasts the effect of the initial utterance of a component of the hymn, supposedly by Ahura Mazdā. Of these elements, only *yaθa*, which is the very first word of the hymn, is repeated five times. *yaθa* appears therein in its own capacity and on behalf of the whole hymn. To clarify the matter, the author of *Y.19* cleverly insinuates—in the last sentence of *Y.19.14*—that this number five corresponds to the five times that the hymn was recited at the dawn of creation by Ahura Mazdā himself. If Ahura Mazdā recited it five times then the initiate and believer should do the same. He is implicitly inviting them to whisper this hymn five times a day on the occasion of the Zoroastrian daily prayer, the *nemāz*. Having praised the merits of the hymn in the earlier stanzas, he now justifies the five time recitals as a standard set by Ahura Mazdā himself. In between, however, he interjects his hidden agenda in the very first line of *Y.19.12*.

There has been much confusion about the meaning of the first two lines of this stanza, and Kellens' recent translation complicates matters even further:

Y19.12 "(Le vers qui commence par) *yaθa* a proclamé que (les créations) le faisaient seigneur (*ahu*) et maitre (*ratu*). Ainsi ce vers pose en doctrine que lui, Ahura Mazdā, est préalable aux créations dont la (Bonne) Pensée est la première, comme (Y45.6a) pose en doctrine qu'il est le plus grand de tous..."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kellens 2010b, 42. Kellens introduces an unwarranted artifice by which the devotee must suddenly jump in the midst of reciting *Y.19.12* to a sentence pertaining to another Yasna, namely *Y45.6a*. One can hardly find any rationale for the introduction of such an artifice.

Not only his translation is awkward, but one wonders about the merits of introducing—unjustifiably—the created (*les créations*) in order to call Ahura Mazda a mere *ratu*, a generic term that in *Y.19.15* is applied to the head of families, clan or tribe. For Ahmadi, the subject of *ādadaṭ* must be the Amesha Sepentas since he believes that "according to *Y.19.8*, at the first utterance of the *Ahuna Vairya* they alone exist[ed]."<sup>23</sup> In truth, the subject of *ādadaṭ* (to create, to give) is neither *les créations* nor the Amesha Sepentas, but the *words* of the hymn. These words were imbued with power and gave to Ahura Mazda the *ahu* and *ratu*, whose necessity is explained by the second line. Whereas the aforementioned authors consider these two lines as two separate sentences, the *iθa* (i.e., "so that") therein is to link the two together, and explain the reason for the appearance of the *ahu* and *ratu*: They were appointed in order to teach the virtues of knowing Ahura Mazda. The *ahu* (lord) and *ratu* (master, leader) therefore represent, for the author of *Y.19*, the cast of Zoroastrian priesthood, which encompassed Zoroaster himself. They were needed at the very beginning and the *Ahuna Vairya* brought them into being. It's self-promotion through a clever artifice. If you break the sentence in two, as in the case of *Y.58.1*, you lose the purpose of the verse.

The question then is: Who were they to teach? Thanks to the analysis provided by Ahmadi, it is now clear that the addressees were a "sub-set" of the created, those who were foremost thinkers (*manas.paoiriia-*).<sup>24</sup> It implicitly chastises those who did not accept the teachings of the priesthood, and labels them in effect as those-who-could-not-think! Only good thinkers were worthy of teaching.

While this first sentence is astutely organized and pertains to the first utterance of the hymn, the rest follows the literary technique of ascribing a meaning to the components of the hymn without a precise purpose. By exploring the possible meanings of each of its components, the author develops a fictional creation process in which he projects what Ahura Mazda had created, and what existed beforehand, in order to bring relevancy to the teachings of the priesthood. As other examples of this literary format show, not all of the supposed explanations can be coherent or meaningful.

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<sup>23</sup> Ahmadi's translation of the first two lines of *Y.19.12*: "(the word) *yaθā* he (i.e., Mazda) pronounced as they (i.e., the Aməša Spəntas) made him the *ahu* and the *ratu*. In the same way one appoints him, Ahura Mazda, for the creations whose first existence is mental"; Ahmadi 2013, 873.

<sup>24</sup> For Ahmadi *manas.paoiriia- dāman-* would be the 'creature for whom the mind is the first (existence); Ahmadi 2013, 867-68.. I have preferred to substitute a more simple translation "those who are primarily thinkers" because the author is trying to define interlocutors for the priesthood who are basically the great thinkers of society.

*Translations of Y.19.12-14:*

*Y19.12* (1) When "yaθa<sub>1</sub>" was so forth uttered, it gave him (i.e. Ahura Mazdā) *ahu* and *ratu* so that they could teach who Ahura Mazdā was, to those of the created who are the foremost thinkers;<sup>25</sup> (2) "yaθa<sub>2</sub>" teaches that he (i.e., Ahura Mazdā) is the greatest; (3) "aθa" teaches that creation is his.

*Y19.13* (1) "yaθa<sub>3</sub>" (teaches that) Mazdā (provides) good life, (2) as "vañhēus" (provides) the undertone for the third incantation (*ṭkaēša*).<sup>26</sup> (3) "dazda manañhō" teaches that before this, Good Thought existed.<sup>27</sup> (4) "yaθa<sub>4</sub>" (teaches) the characteristics of Good Thought, (5) and "manañhō" much cultivates them (*kāraeiiti*). (6) "šīiaoθananqm" ploughs the ground for the Lord (i.e., prepares the ground for Zarathushtra).<sup>28</sup>

*Y19.14* (1) (As to) teaching "what he created," "mazdaī" infers that all creation was his. (2) "xšaθrəm ahurāi" teaches (to say): O Mazdā, power is yours. (3) "drigubiiō vāstārəm" teaches that "yaθa<sub>5</sub>"<sup>29</sup> is a friend of Spitama.<sup>30</sup> (4) This incantation (*ṭkaēša*) was uttered five times in its entirety, all words of which were by ahura Mazdā.

*3.4. Yasna 19 - Part 4*

In this rather isolated stanza, the *Ahuna Vairya* is presented as an instrument that Ahura Mazdā had created to fight Evil.

*Y19.15* As Ahura Mazdā, who is the greatest, recited the *Ahuna Vairya*, he fully cultivated it for greatest (future effect), as the evil one appeared, and He (Ahura Mazdā) told the wicked one: Neither our minds are in harmony, nor our precepts, nor our comprehensions, nor our beliefs, nor our words, nor our deeds, nor our consciences, nor our souls.

<sup>25</sup> Although I argue in the text that the subject of *ādadaṭ* are the words (plural) of the hymn, in translation I use "it" in accordance with the single word *yaθa<sub>1</sub>*, as representative of all the words of the hymn.

<sup>26</sup> The incantation of the hymn is referred to as *ṭkaēša*, which Kellens translates as "doctrine" (Kellens 2010b: 38). Cheung favors "teaching," but because he argues that NP *keš* (religion) is derived from it, we may consider it to have religious content; Cheung 2007: 30. Since it is religious, and recited, it is a religious utterance; it is also chanted, and as such "incantation" may be a more appropriate translation. In the context of *Y.19*, however, it is more than a mere utterance or incantation: it is a religious manifesto.

<sup>27</sup> Because *dazda manañhō* means "gift of the Thought," the author uses it, as a whole, to deduce that Thought existed before the utterance of the hymn. It goes back to the very notion of the complex nature of Thought as imbedded in *Yasna* 30.3, so lucidly explained by Ilya Gershevitch as the twin-egg that justified "good" against the foil of evil. (Gershevitch 1995: 6 & 16-19). It is these two opposing aspects of Thought that are brought up again in *Y.19.15*.

<sup>28</sup> Because *šīiaoθananqm* is about "doing deeds," it establishes Ahura Mazdā's deeds as examples to be followed, by the "Lord." The Lord here does not refer back to Ahura Mazda because he created the *ahu* (Lord). It can only refer to Zarathushtra who will be the chief-created to transmit Ahura Mazda's messages as teachings.

<sup>29</sup> This *yaθa* refers to the *Ahuna Vairya* hymn in its fifth recitation.

<sup>30</sup> The relevance of *drigubiiō vāstārəm* is that it invokes protection, and the author seizes upon that to say that the *Ahuna Vairya* acts as a protector for the one who recites it since it was a friend/companion to Zoroaster. It thus emphasizes the protection power of the hymn.

### 3.5. *Yasna 19 - Part 5*

In this part, the author is stratifying the merits of the hymn by categorizing them in an escalating order. He suggests that the hymn initiates a world order predicated on three concepts (presented as mottos), four vocations and five positions of leadership. The stratification follows a mathematical order to give it a logical tint, but I believe the main purpose of the process was to arrive to the last station, the fifth and highest rank among men, in which is placed Zarathustra. It was therefore created to induce an exalted position for Zarathustra. If Zarathustra's position was elevated, so would be that of the Zoroastrian priesthood.

But once the stratification was initiated, the literary format required the further explaining of each category (it is done from the end of 19.16 through 19.18).

*Y19.16.* And this saying (i.e. hymn), uttered by Mazda, offered the gifts (*rāiti.haṅkaraθəm*) of three mottos, four vocations,<sup>31</sup> and five leaders (*ratu*).

(Q): What are the mottos? (A) : (They are) good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

*Y19.17.* (Q) Which are these vocations ? (A) (Those of) the fire-priest (*aθrauuua*), the army commander (*raθaēsta*),<sup>32</sup> the farmer cattle-breeder, and the artisan. Good ones, among them all, will assist the brave Righteous with their right thoughts, right words, and right deeds. (These are) conscientious mortal guides/masters whose actions push the living creatures toward Righteousness.<sup>33</sup>

*Y19.18.* (Q) who are the leaders? (A.) They are the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, the nation-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fifth; except for the nation in which Zarathushtra reigns. Zarathushtra's Raga has four chiefs (only). (Q) Who are the chiefs there? (A) (They are) the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fourth.

*Y19.19.* (Q) what is good thought? (A) (it is that of) the Righteous man who is a foremost thinker. (Q) What is the well-spoken word? (A) (it is the) Mathra Spenta (i.e., Holy Words).<sup>34</sup> (Q) What is the deed well done? (A) It is the one (considered) praiseworthy by the created-ones who are the foremost righteous.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Dustkhāh is right to equate *pištrəm* with MP *pishag*, NP *pisheh* (vocation), Dustkhāh 2002:176.

<sup>32</sup> *raθaēsta* means literally: the one who stands on the chariot.

<sup>33</sup> *Y.19.17 kâiš pištrāiš, aθrauuua raθaēštâ vāstriiō fšuiiās hūitiš vīspaiiaeirina hacimna naire ašaone arš.manaṅha arš.vacaṅha arš.šiiāoθna, ratuš.mərəta daēnō-sāca yeṅhe šiiāoθnāiš gaēθā aša frādəṅte.*

<sup>34</sup> The answer here is not unlike the answers in d, f, h of the *qalandarnāmeḥ*, where they invoked mantras or Koranic quotations rather than provide explanatory sentences.

<sup>35</sup> *Y.19.19 (a) kaṭ humatəm ašauuanəm manas.paoiriō, (b) kaṭ hūxtəm maθrō spəntō, (c) kaṭ huuarštəm staotāiš aša.paoiriīišca dāmābīš*



sacrificial activities into the Mazdean fold. Their supreme god, Ahura Mazdā, was a late comer to the Iranian pantheon and they had to devise ways to impose him on the general population.

As I have explained in a previous study, the process began under the Achaemenid Darius I (r. 522-486 BC), who had promoted a monotheistic ideology and needed to claim the Aryan *khvarenah*, the ultimate source of kingly power. As the *khvarenah* had been previously associated with Mithra and Apam Napāt, he had to dissociate it from them, and link it to Ahura Mazdā. His inscriptions as well as the iconography of his palaces show that, to address the first concern he opted to emphasize *ciça/chithra* as the manifestation of *khvarenah*. And to link it to Ahura Mazdā, he found an easy solution: He insinuated that the *khvarenah*, or rather its *chithra*, was Mazdā created.<sup>39</sup> Whether Darius was the source of this inspiration or Zoroastrian priests devised it on their own, it is a fact that in the Later *Avesta*, the *khvarenah* is systematically labeled "Mazdā-created." It was an unprecedented propaganda aimed at driving an unfamiliar concept into the heads of their constituents. Like Mao's Cultural Revolution, propagandistic slogans had to be repeated ad nauseam, and the little Red Book constantly brandished. Concurrently, the Aryan *khvarenah*, the ultimate power source of leadership, was given to Zarathushtra while creating a new source, the Kayanid *khvarenah*, for kings. Such a baseless propaganda was bound to lead to contradictory and illogical situations. In *Yt.s* 13.4, 13.9 and 13.12, the Creator Ahurā Mazdā is in need of his own created (!); and in *Yt.s* 5:42 & 19:57, the Turānian Afrāsiyāb (Frangrasyan), who recognizes Zarathushtra as the possessor of the Aryan *khvarenah*, actually belongs to the myth of Jamshid that the Prophet himself alludes to in his Gāthās (*Y.32.8*), and who was the first man that Ahura Mazdā spoke to, even before Zarathushtra (*Vend.2.2*).<sup>40</sup> As for the general population, while they may have paid lip service to such a propaganda, they never abandoned the original concepts, as the example of the fire tower that the Sasanian Ardashir (r. 224-42) built to his own glory fully demonstrates: People referred to this very symbol of Ardashir's *khvarenah*, as both the Aryan *khvarenah* and Kayanid *khvarenah*, because for them it was one and the same.<sup>41</sup>

By the same token, the creation of water that had been the very symbol of Apam Napāt was appropriated for Ahura Mazdā, and usually accompanied with a "Mazdā-created" epithet.<sup>42</sup> The earth too was often labeled as "Mazdā-created" (e.g., *Yt.13.9*). Thus, two sets of questions come to mind concerning the elements enumerated in *Y.19.2*. First, why have water and earth lost their epithet in here? The answer to this question is straightforward: All the elements in *Y.19.2* are presented as Ahura Mazdā's primordial creation, and therefore a "Mazdā-created" label in front of each would have been redundant in this context. But fire's label as "son of Ahurā Mazdā" did not create any redundancy, and was therefore not scratched. The more pertinent question, however, is: Why was fire's epithet different than the one for water and earth? That I believe pertains to the

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<sup>39</sup> Soudavar 2010, 119-25.

<sup>40</sup> For more on these contradictions, see Soudavar 2010, 122-23.

<sup>41</sup> Soudavar 2012, 14-16.

<sup>42</sup> Soudavar 201, 137 n. 26.

special status that fire had in all Iranian sacrificial rituals: It was a conduit for communications with the gods. Through the sacrifice before the fire, one's wishes were conveyed to the gods, and through the *khvarenah* that was imbedded in the fire, gods empowered mortals who stood next to fires. It was thus not a natural element left at the disposal of mortals that could be simply labeled as "Mazdā-created," but an extension of god's reach over the universe, which required a different epithet. The "son of Mazdā" epithet linked fire to Ahura Mazdā in a permanent and active fashion. The artifice is not unlike the adoption of the "Son of God" qualification for Jesus Christ prior to the Council of Nicaea; it elevated his status from a mere mortal to one who was in effect from the family of gods with a mission on earth. He was a conduit of heavenly precepts on earth, and at the same time the savior of man through his interventions on his behalf.

By the adoption of the "Son of Ahura Mazdā" epithet though, fire became personified and that is why on a number of Sasanian coin issues (Fig. 411), a bust is situated in the midst of the flames of the fire altar. It represents Fire, Son of Ahura Mazdā.



Fig. 411 - Coin of Ohrmazd II (rev.) (Private collection)

### 5. The *Khrafstar*-ish Priests

In both *Y.19.2* and *19.4*, the creation of Righteous men is juxtaposed with the *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš mašiiāišca* that Kellens translates as "*les démons infectes et leurs hommes-liges*," and I translated as the "*khrafstar*-ish devils and their men (i.e., followers)."<sup>43</sup> A simple translation is not good enough. One must try to explain who are meant by such a characterization. The *khrafstar* therein needs clarification, because it's not a vague adjective but a very specific term that applies to noxious animals, mainly the snake and the scorpion. Its correct translation is not a matter of guessing but understanding the historic context by which these animals were labeled as such, as well as their relationship with *daevas*. For as C.F. Oldham explains, the labeling of Indian kings or dynasties as *ahi* (i.e. serpent) must have been the result of the hostility of the local tribes against invaders.<sup>44</sup> We know of one such a king in the Iranian context: The last of the Medians, Astyages, who was nicknamed Azhi-Dahāga, probably for the sin of running Zarathushtra off his dominions.<sup>45</sup> As Martin Schwartz has argued, Azhi-Dahāga was actually understood as "snake-man."<sup>46</sup> In the *Shāhnāme* for instance, Zakhāk (alias Azhi-Dahāga), the king with two snakes on his shoulders, is considered to be a serpent himself (*azhdahā* اژدها), and his progeny is called Mehr-āb, an obvious reference to his affiliation with Mithra and Apam Napāt (as god of waters,

<sup>43</sup> Initially I had translated it as "devilish *khrafstar*-men and their likes" but then realized that the attack was mainly aimed at enemy priests and their followers.

<sup>44</sup> Oldman 1905, 31-35.

<sup>45</sup> Soudavar 2012, 4-8

<sup>46</sup> Schwartz 2012, 276.

*āb*).<sup>47</sup> It clearly indicates a possible linkage between snakes and the followers of Mithra and Apam Napāt.

This brings out once again the controversy of Zarathushtra's date and the historical events that led to what Herodotus called Magophonia, or the massacre of the Median magi. The latter was not a fiction of Herodotus's imagination but a phenomenon also reported by Ctesias and Agathias, and reflected in Iranian sources. Its impact is nowhere more felt than in the *Avesta* itself. For as the late Xavier Trembaly had pointed out to me, the *Avesta* is the only Iranian religious text in which the priesthood is not designated by the generic term *magu*. They chose instead an artificial one, *athravan* or fire keeper, which mimicked *pārsā* that designated the cast of Achaemenid fire-priests to whom belonged Darius. *Pārsā* designated the one "close to the fire," and Zarathushtra himself referred to the *pārsās* as *kāvis*.<sup>48</sup> The only valid explanation for such an anomaly is the Magophonia. If the magi were massacred and reviled, the Zoroastrian priesthood had to adopt another term for themselves. The fact that on the tombs of Darius, and his progenies, it's the king who stands bow in hand next to the fire altar clearly shows that the *pārsās* were in control, and the Zoroastrian priesthood held at best a secondary position. While Darius' progenies ruled and continued to boast the "Pārsā son of Pārsā" title, no Zoroastrian priest would have dared to claim the ownership of the fire and call himself an *athravan*. This was an invented and artificial term, which usurped the *pārsā* role of the Achaemenids. The very proof of its artificiality lies in the fact that it was discarded later on, as Zoroastrian priests were once again called *magu* in the Sasanian era. It was all part of a campaign to shift the balance of power from kingship to priesthood, which could only occur after the fall of the Achaemenids.

The Magophonia was essentially the eruption of a long-simmering animosity between the *pārsās* (who revered Ahura Mazdā) and the Median magi (who believed in the supremacy of Mithra and Apam Napāt). A vivid expression of this animosity is displayed on the door jambs of Persepolis, where Darius is killing with a dagger a chimera monster with a scorpion tail. The scorpion and snake were of course ever present in tauroctony scenes (Fig. 412).<sup>49</sup> But their association with Mithra goes beyond that, as we have a number of objects in which Mithra is represented in the so called "master of the animal" mode, holding lion-serpents in his two hands (Fig. 413). What's more, in a forthcoming publication on Mithraic Societies, I demonstrate how a number of Sasanian seals with scorpions or snake emblems belonged to the hierarchy of Mithraic Societies in the Iranian context. Therefore, from Astyages who was labeled as the snake-man, to Roman Mithraic scenes, to the scorpions of Sasanian Mithraic seals, we have a clear association of the *khrafstars* with those perceived as enemies and rivals of Zoroastrians, i.e., those who revered Mithra.

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<sup>47</sup> See note 637 supra.

<sup>48</sup> Soudavar 2012, 27.

<sup>49</sup> See Soudavar 2012, 9-14.



Fig. 412 – Details of tauroctony scene  
British Museum



Fig. 413 – Bronze object. Mithra holding two lion-serpents.  
Archeological Museum, Istanbul

The question then is: Could this Mithra be labeled *daiva*? Citing a number of previous studies, Clarisse Herrens Schmidt and Jean Kellens conclude that in the Gathas, the *daivas* had not as yet "become demons" but constituted a category of "genuine gods" who had been "rejected." This, they argue could be the basis of an abrupt or gradual change in belief for the Iranians, except "for the fact that no known Iranian dialect attests clearly and certainly the survival of a positive sense for \**daiva*-." Four possible such cases are presented and quickly rejected for not being conclusive. The most important one is the onomastic evidence. They remark that names with a *div/daiva* component only pertain to Sogdiana, where they insinuate Buddhism might have been at play.<sup>50</sup> This is simply not true. Titles and names of the rulers of Māzandarān and Gilān, clearly vouch for a strong survival of non-Zoroastrian beliefs in Iran proper. Chronicles of the Mongol and Safavid era, often name provincial rulers of the Gilān area with epithets such as *amirag*, *merak* and *sa`luk*, which, as I shall argue in my forthcoming book, link back to Mithraic Societies and its avatars. More pertinent to our study, though, are names such as Mohammad-e Div and Shams-od-din-e Div who were local rulers of Māzandarān and Gilān.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Safavid chronicler Eskandar Beyk relates that a certain Mirak-e Div, who was from the "cast of the Divs of Māzandarān," was appointed deputy governor to a prince.<sup>52</sup> For Eskandar Beyk, not only these rulers were part of a cast surnamed "The Divs," but they belonged to Māzandarān, the very region that the *Shāhnāme*h says to have been ruled by *divs*. While these rulers proudly assumed the name Div, others associated the word *div* with demoniac creatures. And throughout the ages, the projection of the *div* (e.g., Fig. 414) remained very similar to one of the chimera monsters that Darius was killing in Persepolis (Fig. 415). In all likelihood the "Mazandari *daivas*" expression, used for instance in *Yt.* 5.22, and *Yt.* 17.25, reflected a demonization of that Supreme Mithra and its followers. Interestingly, both of the chimera monsters that Darius is killing in Persepolis—the horned one of Fig. 415, and the griffin on the opposite side—have an earlier prototype in the gold pectorals from Ziwiye of circa 8-7<sup>th</sup> century BC. While the horned chimera of Ziwiye has a

<sup>50</sup> Herrens Schmidt & Kellens 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Khorshāh 2000, 227; Qomi 1980, II:690-702

<sup>52</sup> See note 603 supra.

scorpion tail (Fig. 416), as in Persepolis, the griffin of Ziwiyeh has a solar emblem on its hindquarters (Fig. 417).<sup>53</sup> It clearly classifies both as guardians of a solar and Mithraic pantheon.



Fig. 414 - Divs from the Tahmasb *Shahnameh*. MMA



Fig. 415 - Darius killing a chimera monster<sup>54</sup>



Fig. 416 - Ziwiyeh pectoral (det.). MMA



Fig. 417 - Detail of Ziwiyeh pectoral. Tehran Museum<sup>55</sup>

The event that gave a negative connotation to a certain number of Iranian deities and at the same demonized their followers was not initiated by Zoroaster, for as we saw, in the Gathas they are still respectable entities. Such a major upheaval necessitated a cataclysmic event. It can only be the Magophonia that pitted the *pārsās* against the Mithraic magi. In the process, the Zoroastrian priesthood sided with the *pārsās* for two reasons: 1) They shared the same veneration for Ahura Mazda, and 2) their Prophet, and perhaps family members of his, had been chased and persecuted by the same Mithraic magi.<sup>56</sup> In revenge, not only the magi were massacred when Darius and his co-conspirators killed the usurper Gaumata, but that event was celebrated as a yearly festival during which no magus could venture outside and all of them had to stay home the entire day (Herodotus III:79). It clearly shows a continued process of witch hunting by which the enemy was

<sup>53</sup> This solar emblem mostly adorns lion effigies, from those found on the Kalmākareh grotto objects, all the way to 20<sup>th</sup> century Bakhtiyāri tombstones.

<sup>54</sup> From Curtis & Tallis, 2005, 82.

<sup>55</sup> From Godard 1950, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Soudavar 2012, 22.

constantly vilified, and demonized. The reason for such a continued display of animosity was that the *parsās* and the Zoroastrians were in minority, and Mithra continued to command the respect of most of the population, to the extent that at the end, a sanitized version of Mithra was integrated into the Zoroastrian pantheon—a pantheon that the monotheistic Zarathushtra would have certainly disapproved of. While this sanitized Mithra may have provided the means to woo a good portion of the population, there was certainly a sizeable portion that did not accept the subordination of Mithra to Ahura Mazda. The duel and skirmishes between the two factions must have endured for a long time, for as I mentioned before, the scorpion that Zoroastrians abhorred still adorned many Sasanian seals.

Combining *daiva* with *khrafstar* was thus the very natural outcome of the vilification process against those who were perceived as holding a doctrine that posed a major threat to Zoroastrianism. That is, those for whom Mithra remained the ultimate *baγa*—as he still was in the calendar that Darius himself had used.<sup>57</sup> Because the followers of this supreme *daiva* were vilified, so was eventually the word *daiva* itself, which Xerxes himself had used in a negative way in *XPh*, against a region that had strong reserves in accepting the supremacy of Ahura Mazda, most probably the Māzandarān.

The *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš* must therefore refer to priests who cherished scorpions or snakes, and are therefore branded as *khrafstar*-ish devils. They should be simply referred to as snake-priests or scorpion-priests. The term can apply to the Ahrimanic figure—with a snake-wrapped head—who is trampled by Ahura Mazda's horse in Ardashir I's rock relief of Naqsh-e Rostam, as well as the serpent wrapped Arimanius of Roman Mithraism.<sup>58</sup>

## 6. A Problem of Methodology

I cannot criticize neither Jean Kellens, nor any other Avestologist, for not being familiar with the *qalandar-nāmeḥ* genre, which would have perhaps facilitated the comprehension of Yasna 19. What I must criticize, however, is the contradictions that are apparent in his translations, some of which were pointed out by Ahmadi, and others that I have referenced in this study. But more importantly, I must criticize his cavalier attitude to break rules and change meanings wherever it suits him. Kellens rightly remarks that the author of *Y.19* "takes the liberty to make the texts say things that he wishes them to say."<sup>59</sup> But so does Kellens himself in his translation of *Y.19*.

In *Y.19.12(1)*, he postulates that Ahura Mazda's own creations called him a mere master (*ratu*). But then takes the liberty to change *ratu*'s meaning in *Y.19.16* to a totally unexplained "mots clés,"

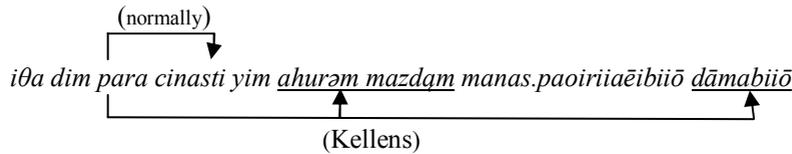
<sup>57</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin 1974, 17 ; Soudavar 2010, 114.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Turcan 2000, 62-67, pls. 9 and 10b.

<sup>59</sup> Kellens 2010b, 40.

to produce a recitation stratification for a supposed offering ritual, rather than a worldly structure that the proclamation of the *Ahuna Vairya* provided as a gift to mankind.<sup>60</sup>

For the same *Y.19.12(1)*, he argues that the adverbial *para* affects not the time sequence of the verb immediately after it (i.e., *cinasti*), but creates an order of things way beyond. He then arbitrarily moves the effect of *para* (i.e. "prior, before") further down, to state that Ahura Mazda was *prior* to "créations" (supposedly *dāmabiiō*). It's stating the obvious through an arbitrary artifice.<sup>61</sup>



And because of a dogmatic belief in the non-existence of Zarathushtra he posits that "the editors of the Ancient *Avesta* were *indifferent* to the historic Zarathushtra, or didn't know him."<sup>62</sup> To the contrary, next to Ahura Mazda, the most important witness that *Y.19's* author invokes for his propositions, is Zarathushtra. He is a pivotal actor not only for *Y.19*, but for whatever the priesthood invented. To say that they were indifferent to Zarathushtra, or didn't know him, is like saying that Jesus Christ was a non-entity for Christianity! Moreover, like in Christianity, which tried to place the Pope above kingship, in *Y.19.16* Zarathushtra is placed at the highest echelon of temporal hierarchy, above kings and other rulers. It was by no means an isolated effort, but paralleled the—previously mentioned—attempt to make Zarathushtra the possessor of the Aryan *khvarenah*. They both had the same effect and made the Prophet more powerful than kings. Aggrandizing Zarathushtra was in fact a constant preoccupation of priesthood, which Kellens cannot—or doesn't want to—see it as he reshuffles *Y.19.16* into a meaningless sacrificial procedure. The crux of the matter is that placing Zarathushtra above kings defines a post-Achaemenid context. Nobody would have dared to proclaim this under the Great Kings, and no Achaemenid imagery shows a Zoroastrian priest. One cannot simply sweep this evidence under the rug because of a dogmatic view on the era of Zarathushtra.

Kellens faults Antonio Panaino for believing that the Gathic teachings are based on a "monotheistic faith and inner religiosity that is emphatically anti-ritualistic and anti-sacrificial." He proclaims that it is in fact a "negation of existing evidence."<sup>63</sup> I wonder which evidence. For the most superficial reading of the Gathas reveals that it's about the lamentation of a pure hearted

<sup>60</sup> "Le texte qu'(Ahura) Mazda a prononcé dispense une organisation parfaite de l'offrande an trois vers, quatre figures de style, et cinq mots clés"; Kellens 2010b : 47. For yet another extrapolation of *ratu* by Kellens see Appendix IV.

<sup>61</sup> See for instance *Y.19.2* for the repeated use of *para* as "before."

<sup>62</sup> Kellens 2010b, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Kellens 2010b, 70.

man with his beloved Creator. It is a text imbued with gnostic and monotheistic fervor that displays "spiritual esoterism" down to its inner core,<sup>64</sup> and is fundamentally at odds with the pantheon that the Zoroastrian priesthood later erected for their religion. One cannot judge the Gathas by later propaganda that only paid lip-service to the Prophet's vision.

### 7. The "258" Dating

The dogmatic belief in an old or inconsequential Zarathushtra, prompts Kellens to deride the "258" on every occasion without giving a plausible argument. Sensing that the monotheistic vision of the Gathas could not have been developed early on, he wonders at the very end of his analysis whether "it did not reflect a more recent religiosity," close to the "258 years before Alexander?"<sup>65</sup> The purpose of his question is nothing but one extra gratuitous stab at an argument that he cannot refute otherwise.

The problem with 258-negationists, in general, is that they have never bothered to read or understand its development, from the very thorough calendar analysis of Taqizādeh to all the supportive material and analysis advanced by Gershevitch and Gnoli. What I have heard them say—and I have heard many—is that "we don't believe in it," or "it's a Sasanian forgery." They don't believe in it, because it's contrary to their dogmatic belief in the antiquity of the *Avesta*, even though they have never been able to prove it. They freely jump from a circa 1200 BC, to 1000 BC or 800 BC date for Zarathushtra, without methodology and without ever presenting a shred of evidence to that effect. As for the forgery argument, it's the best refuge for scholars who cannot understand or decipher a phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> But one cannot claim forgery without explaining a beneficial motive. For the Sasanians, the 258 dating forced them to restate past history by cutting 266 years of Arsacid history. Rather than having a benefit it brought ridicule, and that is not a good motive.

Helmut Humbach's opinion in this respect is quite revealing. He states:

"All transmitted dates for Zoroaster's life are speculative, obviously ranging the prophet in a religious history of salvation. The traditional date of 300 years before Alexander's invasion is transmitted in several variants, all of which are of the same type as Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī's 258 years before Alexander's invasion, which was taken by Walter B. Henning (p. 41) as a precise and reliable date but which is just derived by deducing the traditional 42 years of Zoroaster's age at Vištāspa's conversion from the round number of 300 years. In the view of the present author the only date of some historical plausibility is that of Xanthos the Lydian, a contemporary of Herodotus, according to whom Zoroaster lived 600 years (*lectio facillior* 6000 years) before Xerxes's expedition against Greece."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Humbach 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Kellens 2010b, 74.

<sup>66</sup> See Soudavar 2012, 25-27.

<sup>67</sup> Humbach 2000.

Firstly, the multitude of sources stating the 258 are all bundled up into one category because they are thought to be variants of the same type, and then dismissed en bloc. In terms of logic, my understanding is that multiplicity is an argument for higher probability and not the other way around. Moreover, these supposed variants of the same come from independent sources, because they are related by authors from different geographical areas, different centuries and different traditions: Mas`udi (9<sup>th</sup> century SE Iran), Biruni (10<sup>th</sup> century NE Iran), *Bundahishn*. These are sources that directly give us the 258 time period from "the coming of the religion," i.e., when it was revealed to the prophet, until Alexander. And it is not repeated as just a figure but given as a time bracket in which regnal years are fitted. In addition, it concords with other type of information provided by these sources: Mas`udi for instance states that the father of Vishtaspa was the contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar, which clearly situates Vishtaspa in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>68</sup> And Bar Hebraeus affirms that Zarathushtra, "who had predicted" the appearance of Jesus as the Messiah, was the contemporary of early Achaemenids.<sup>69</sup> Second, the claim that 42 (as Zarathushtra's age when Vishtaspa was converted) is the pivotal number, and that 258 is a derivative because it is the result of the subtraction from the "round number" 300, is to turn the available information on its head. Because, the basic information that appears in the sources is 258, both as a number and as a bracket, while 42 does not appear systematically, and when available it is through calculation, and therefore cannot be labeled as "traditional."<sup>70</sup> In any case, Humbach's main objection is the "roundness" of the number 300, which makes it invalid or at best suspicious. The problem is that for him, roundness is suspicious only when it concerns an Iranian source, because if a Greek source mentions the astronomical number of 6000 years it is based on truth and must be corrected, *lectio faciliior* oblige. Therefore, the right number is 600. That 600 is a round number is inconsequential for him because it preserves the dogma. A Greek number, adjusted by a Latin dictum, is enough to validate the dogma and discard the multitude of 258 evidence!<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Mas`udi 1962, I: 202.

<sup>69</sup> Bar Hebraeus 1947: 31. The story is used to justify the appearance of the three magi as following a brilliant star predicted by Zarathushtra. He could have placed the Prophet anywhere in time for his story; the more ancient he was, the more powerful would have been his prediction. Nevertheless, he placed him in the Achaemenid time bracket.

<sup>70</sup> *Dk* 7.5.1 for instance gives the age of Zarathushtra as 77 at death, and 35 years after Vishtaspa accepted the religion, which by inference gives the Prophet's age as 42 at this moment. The same number in the Zadspram is presented in an even more convoluted way (24.5): 2 years after the conversion of a certain Medyomāh, which itself occurred 10 years after the Revelation, Zarathushtra submitted to a test before Vishtaspa, at the end of which, the latter accepted the Prophet's religion. These 12 years must now be added to Zoroaster's age at revelation (30) obtained from another section to get 42. The number 42, therefore, constitutes by no means a pivotal element to build the rest on it.

For reasons as to why we have the 300 years figure, see Gnoli 2000, 138-39.

<sup>71</sup> For detailed arguments refuting the validity of the 6000 years dating, and its irrelevance to the correct dating of Zarathushtra's era, see Gnoli 2000, 43-79.

The belief in an ancient Zarathushtra is a dogmatic choice that the 258-negationists have made, the byproduct of which are uninspired translations of the type I have criticized in this study.

### 8. Conclusion

I am neither an Avestologist nor a philologist, but the translations of the few passages that I have delved into, are truly disappointing. If these are symptomatic of the rest of the corpus, then the field is seriously in need of reevaluation. Three problems come to mind. The first is a lack of interest in later Persian literature, especially in the structuring of sentences and literary formats. Second, the lack of understanding for the general subject and purpose of texts. These are texts prepared by a priesthood who are preaching with an agenda. One must perceive the agenda in order to comprehend the text. Third, the development of the corpus that was added to the Gathas, stem from political aspirations that can only be understood if the ideological position of the main actors is determined. As long as the dogmatic belief in an old date for Zarathushtra prevails, the historic dimension and the political aspects of the *Avesta*, which are so essential to its comprehension, will not be understood and will lead to unwarranted exegetic speculations.

Equally important is the correct understanding of *chithra* as the essential element of a cosmogony of light that empowers all beings, including deities. In my persistent effort to sway away philologists from meanings such as seed, origin or nature, I had finally persuaded the late, and most erudite, Xavier Tremblay to alter his views. In a review of Avestan terms, he proposed that perhaps my views on *chithra* should be taken into account for future Avestan translations.<sup>72</sup> Those who will persist on ignoring *chithra* as light and/or manifestation of the *khvarenah* will continue, at their own risk and peril, to produce incomprehensible translations.

Finally, I have no hope in changing the dogmatic belief of Avestologists in a circa 1000-BC Zarathushtra, because dogma is neither overturned by logical argument nor by a preponderance of evidence. But my hope is that a younger generation of students will finally emerge from the shadows of their tutors, and will espouse a more open-minded and logical approach.

The above was refused publication by *Studia Iranica* with the following comments:

Remarks concerning the proposed article « From the *Avesta* to Sufi treatises : a standard literary technique ».

An eminent Avestologist has been consulted and has given the following opinion :« One cannot translate an Avestan text, however simple (and the *Bagān Yašt* is a sophisticated text), without taking into account the difference between singular and plural, masculine and feminine, noun and adjective, as emerges from footnotes 19-20 and 36 ».

<sup>72</sup> Tremblay 2008: 36. His observations came even before I published Soudavar 2009 in refutation of objections raised by O.P. Skjaervo.

The second reviewer has checked this opinion concerning note 39, by looking directly into the Avestan passage *Y.19.21*. It is obvious that the author takes *bayqm* as an adjective whereas it is a substantive in the Accusative Singular, and the Genitive case ending of the following words *ahunahe vairiēhe* is ignored. These cumulative mistakes ruin his understanding of the passage. It is obvious also, as early as p. 2, that the author (following the Persian translator Dustkhāh) does not differentiate between such fundamental theological notions as *aša-* «Arrangement, Order» et *aši-* «Reward, Luck».

In fact he is consistent when he admits deriving his inspiration largely from Persian translations : like the modern Persian language, he ignores gender differences and case inflexions. The basis for his re-translations is purely lexicological (the way he proposes to understand such and such word), or intuitively contextual (« sensing the form and flow of sentences »), but they are never backed by morphological and syntactical facts *stricto sensu*.

The final sections, about a sacerdotal body of the *Pārsā* supposedly opposed to the Magi and to which the Achaemenid kings would have belonged, or about the rehabilitation of the traditional date of Zoroaster, take up previous published contributions by A. Soudovar and have no obvious logical link with the re-translations proposed for the *Bagān Yašt*.

Any attempt at dealing with Avestan material can never be more than distinguished amateurism, as long as there is no commitment to learning the language methodically; this is now very accessible through Oktor Skjaervø's online teaching or Celine Redards's initiation classes at the EPHE.

The reviewer for the *Iranian Studies* offered the following comments:

This article is not publishable.

First, it is made of disparate themes. It is not clear to me how the last three substantive sections (on the dating of Zoroaster, on the phrase *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš mašiiāišca*, and on the idea of fire as the son of Ahura Mazdā) are related to the topic of the article, which is to show how the knowledge of the (later) Sufi literature can shed decisive light on the understanding of obscure Avestan passages and ideas.

Second, the article makes a number of controversial claims without any supportive evidence or argument. Notably: 1) on page 19 the Gāthās are described as a Gnostic text. Gnosticism (as represented, say, in the Nag Hammadi library, or in Marcionism or even Manichaeism) is a specific intellectual tradition. It is usually understood on the most general level as the doctrine of the evilness of the material world. I do not see how the Gāthās can be described in this way. 2)

The interpretation of the word *pārsa-* from the Bīstūn Inscriptions as the Achaemenid caste of fire-priests (page 15) is extremely idiosyncratic. The evidence presented in Soudavar 2012, which purports to connect it with the Middle Persian adjective *pārsā*, is not probative. No other scholar as far as I know has taken this view. 3) The phrase *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš mašiiāišca* cannot mean 'devilish khrafstar-men' (page 14ff.). Nor does Kellens translate it as 'les infects hommes-liges' (page 14) but as 'les démons infects et leurs hommes-liges' (Kellens 2010, 29). The enclitic particle *°ca* coordinates two substantive nouns: the *daēvas* and the men, and the adjective *xrafstra-* describes the former. 4) The *daēvas* are certainly not 'respectable entities' (page 17) in the Gāthās, if they are meant by 'a certain number of Iranian deities'. 5) On *x'arənah-* the scholarship is ignored (e.g., Bailey 1971, Hintze 1994, Lubotsky 2002, Oettinger 2009, Kellens 2012). 6) The translation of *ciθra-* as 'light' (in the Later *Avesta*) may be right (I disagree though) but the idea that as the manifestation of the *x'arənah-* it designates the source of all power (including divine) is idiosyncratic (page 3). In *Y.58.1*, Kellens' translation of the term as 'characteristic' or mark seems right to me and in keeping with the generally accepted 'appearance'.

Third, there are serious problems of method. Contrary to the claim made in the abstract (which is central to the article), the 'Avestan literary format' (by which, it seems, the *frašna-* genre is meant) and the later 'Sufi literature' *cannot* be 'interdependent', obviously. This claim underlies the tendentious analysis of the syntax and ideas of *Y.19* (see below). The question-answer form and the attribution of some kind of potency to sacred or otherwise significant words (e.g., to their phonetic components) are common phenomena in the ancient world, and in themselves do not show genetic connection. The author brings to his analysis what he purports to demonstrate, namely the priests' attempt at self-aggrandizement through manipulating or playing with words that have a religious valence. In my view, the 'argument' basically assumes the conclusion.

Fourth, and most importantly, the translations given of *Y.19* text are unacceptable. There are quite a number of elementary mistakes. *Y.19.12 ādadaṭ* is an imperfect or injunctive plural, and not singular, (page 11: 'it gave'). *dazda manahō* does not mean 'gift of the Thought' (page 11) but, if *dazda* is interpreted as a noun, as the *Y.19* commentator seems to do, it means the 'establisher of thought', a *nomen agentis*. The term *fradaxštar-* cannot mean 'characteristics' (page 11), since it is a *nomen agentis* by virtue of its form and meaning, and moreover used in the singular in *Y.19.13*. The pivot of the interpretation of *Y.19* is the translation of *manas.paoiriia-* as 'who is primarily a thinker', which the author takes to be a self-designation of the priestly caste. The compound is a possessive adjective and it must mean something like 'for whom the mind is the first'. Whether the name of the divinity *vohu- manah-* should be read into it is a different matter. But the meaning the author attaches to it requires the word 'mind' (or 'thinking') to have the sense that it has in, say, Arendt's famous 'life of the mind', i.e., intellectual life. The compound, according to the author, denotes the 'caste of priests'. Now, in no place in the *Avesta* does the word *manah-* mean anything like the word 'mind' does in the 'life of the mind'. In *Y.19.19* the accusative and nominative cases are confounded. *Y.19.19 staotāiš aša.paoiriāišca dāmābīš* cannot mean '(considered praiseworthy by the created-ones who are primarily righteous' (page 12). Whatever *staota-* and *aša.paoiriia- dāman-* may mean, they denote two different entities coordinated by the enclitic particle. The compound adjective *aša.paoiriia-* cannot mean 'who are primarily righteous' but something like 'for whom *aša* is the first'. *Y.19.20 vahištō xšaiamnō* cannot mean 'excellence in leadership' (page 12). The two adjectives in the nominative refer to the same (elliptical) noun. There are more mistakes. The author admits he does not have a good knowledge of *Avesta* n, which raises the question why he insists on translating Avestan texts.

The project is not worth pursuing in my mind.

The reviewers are off the mark in their comprehension and in their analysis. But to answer the last reviewer's question: I delve into the *Avesta* to explain what the Avestologists seem incapable of. In the Iranian culture, substance is often sacrificed for form, and if Persian poetry can be of guidance, rules of grammar are often set aside for poetical reasons. Understanding Persian poetry is to guess the metaphors and to understand the context. Same is true for the *Avesta*; to concentrate on grammar alone and forgo the context will inevitably result in the incomprehensible translations that some Avestologists offer. I also think that if the reviewer really believes that "gnostic" cannot be used as an adjective, she needs to notify Encyclopaedia Britannica, as well as Encyclopaedia Iranica and a host of other publications that they have erred in using it.

## APPENDIX III

### *YASNA 29 – THE LAMENT OF THE COW*

In a recent analysis of the Yasna 29 (*The Lament of the Cow*), Jean Kellens correctly proposes that the Cow's first interlocutor (*Gāuš Tašan*) is the Sacrificer of the Cow (or his "menuisier" as he calls him, i.e., the one in charge to cut him into pieces).<sup>1</sup> But then, the word *ratu* that he had translated as "maitre" in *Y.19.12*, and "mots-clés" in *Y.19.16*, gets a new twist and is translated as "moment du temps"! As a result, he cannot well define the rest of the Cow's addressees in that hymn. If one looks at *Y.29's* translation on *Avesta.org*, one finds a very sensible translation, except for the 1<sup>st</sup> interlocutor who is perceived therein as "Ox-Creator". If we just substitute "sacrificer" for "Ox-creator," we have a perfectly logical text: The Cow laments that, up to then, its sacrifice followed an improper procedure, and wants it to be conducted correctly, under the aegis of a worthy *ratu*. After some back and forth discussions with various interlocutors, Zoroaster is presented as the proper *ratu* (master/guide/presiding official). The Cow is skeptical at first, but embraces Zoroaster after he presents himself as acting on behalf of Ahura Mazda.

#### *Yasna 29.*

1. Unto you (the *Sacrificer*) wailed the Ox-soul, "For whom did ye fashion me? Who created me? Violence and rapine (and) savagery hath oppressed me, and outrage and might. I have no other herdsman than you; prepare for me then the blessings of pasture."
2. Then the *Sacrificer* asked of the Right (*Asha*): "Hast thou a judge for the Ox, that ye may be able to appoint him zealous tendance as well as fodder? Whom do ye will to be his lord, who may drive off violence together with the followers of the Lie?"
3. To him the Right replied: "There is for the Ox no helper that can keep him away. Those yonder have no knowledge how right-doers act toward the lowly".(The *Sacrificer*): "Strongest of beings is he to whose help I come at call".
4. (*Asha*) "Mazda knoweth best the purposes that have been wrought already by demons and by mortals, and that shall be wrought hereafter. He, Ahura, is the decider. So shall it be as he shall will."
5. (The *Sacrificer*) "To Ahura with outspread hands we twain would pray, my soul and that of the pregnant cow, so that we twain urge Mazda with entreaties. Destruction is not for the right-living, nor for the cattle-tender at the hands of Liars."
6. Then spake Ahura Mazda himself, who knows the law with wisdom: "There is found no lord or judge according to the Right Order for the Creator hath formed thee for the cattle-tender and the farmer."
7. This ordinance about the fat hath Ahura Mazda, one in will with Right, created for cattle, and the milk for them that crave nourishment, by his command, the holy one. (The Ox and Cow:) "Whom hast thou, O Good Thought, among men, who may care for us twain?"

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<sup>1</sup> Kellens, College de France, course of 7-12-2012.

8. (Vohu Manah:) He is known to me here who alone hath heard our commands, even Zarathushtra Spitama; he willeth to make known our thoughts, O Mazda, and those of the Right. So let us bestow on him charm of speech.

9. Then the Ox-Soul lamented: "That I must be content with the ineffectual word of an impotent man for my protector, when I wish for one that commands mightily! When ever shall there be one who shall give him (the Ox) effective help?"

10. (Zarathushtra:) Do ye, O Ahura, grant them strength, and O Asha, and O Good Thought, that dominion, whereby he (the Savior) could produce good dwellings and peace. I also have realized thee, Mazda, as the first to accomplish this.

11. "Where are Right and Good Thought and Dominion? So, ye men, acknowledge me, for instruction, Mazda, for the great society." (The Ox and Cow:) "O Ahura, now is help ours, we will be ready to serve those that are of you."

## APPENDIX IV - ADVERSE OPINIONS

The arguments and conclusions from secs. V.9, VII.1-3, and X.13 of the present volume were assembled in a concise article entitled *Pârsâ, Pârsi, Pahlom: Defining Status Through Proximity with Fire*, and presented to *Studia Iranica* and to *Iranian Studies*; it was rejected by both. It's interesting to see how people react when they have no valid arguments. Without properly negating any of my arguments, the *Iranian Studies's* reviewer is basically of the opinion that if specialists have read and explained something, a non-specialist has no right to do otherwise, especially a "common person" like me.

The gatekeepers of the *Studia Iranica*, on the other hand, for want of counterarguments, revert to the classical ploy of crying fake for the seals that I have produced. It's symptomatic of today's scholarship to declare any object or document that is not understood as "fake".

### Iranian Studies's reviewer:

I have now read "Pârsâ, Pârsi, phalom" and would like to make the following comments on it. This article is ingeniously trying to provide a link between certain Old Persian and Middle Persian words and the Mithraic tradition in the Roman world. However interesting the article is, the argumentation and the evidence does not support this hypotheses.

Among such unsubstantiated suggestions is that Old Persian pârsâ meaning "Persian" which is translated as "pious." Then the connection is given for the Pârsa as someone who is in charge of the fire and the Roman Mithraic perses. This hypothetical etymology is the basis for what the article builds upon. But the author should know that the etymology of Pârsa is clear and has been shown by Eric Pirart, "les noms de Perses" in *Journal Asiatique*, 1995, fol. 283, pp. 57-68. Pârsa simply means "next," or better yet, "side." Indeed the Persians were known as "pious" because Herodotus tells us they were known as Arteens which the author should look into, but this goes back to Old Persian Arta and not Pârsa.

The author provides further corrections to the reading of Sasanian seals by experts in the field: for example, he reads a word as Rok which I am not certain of. Also another reading, NWRA which the author refers to a previous work by Soudavar (common person which the author goes to as her/his evidence). Still, here, we have only circumstantial evidence.

Again, she/he provides a hypothetical reconstruction mihr-bân as the anthesis of mihr-druj which can not be. If there was such a term which we have no evidence for, it would not be mihr-bân. Mithra/Mihr simply means "oath" or "contract" (see "Mithra" in *Ency. Iranica* by H.-P. Schmidt), and druj is used for one who breaks the oath or contract.

Again, she/he provides a hypothetical reading of three dots on seals which is connected to Tishtrya. Soudavar is given as the evidence for the suggestion. I am not competent to say anything about this matter.

As for Pahlom "righteous" is usually transcribed in MP plswm/y and is read phalom (see Nyberg's dictionary). This is simply a rule of Middle Persian transcription which has historical reasoning (article by MacKenzie is at the beginning of his dictionary). It can't simply be that pahlom is related to Persian pahlû, which is actually related to Partav/Pahlav.

Finally, a new etymology is given for the Indian Zoroastrians, called the Pârsis. It may be that they called themselves Pârsâ "righteous" in Persian, but it can also mean the are from the province of Fars (still holding on to the original p, rather under the influence of Arabic f).

Again, the article raises some very interesting possibilities and connections, but none of them are substantiated and the conclusions are based on false homonyms and other etymological errors. I do not think that the article should be published as such.

Studia Iranica's reviewer:

**RAPPORT / REPORT (St.Ir., réunion printemps 2013)**

Remarques critiques:

a) Concernant la terminologie, l'article affirme que le mot pâršâ a le sens de 'personne qui se tient à côté de quelque chose', et qu'il se réfère à la proximité avec le Feu. Mais comment et pourquoi peut-on justifier cela à partir d'un ethnique (qui n'a rien à voir avec le Feu) ?

b) Certaines affirmations philologiques sont erronées. Par exemple, pourquoi le changement de –rs- en –hl- serait-il une évolution rare, peu commune (?). Il a été démontré depuis longtemps qu'elle est normale par suite d'une métathèse des consonnes qui ont subi une évolution attendue.

c) Le monogramme NWRA :

- L'objet illustré ici en Fig. 118 a été reconnu comme un faux.

- Légende de la Fig. 119 doit normalement être lue comme « Bāffārag ». D'où vient, sur quel base, la lecture « Bāp Rok » ? L'Auteur prend bāp pour un titre, mais la position du mot dans les inscriptions sur les sceaux montre qu'il s'agit plutôt d'un nom.

- Problème avec la lecture du monogramme NWRA : « w » et « r » pour NWRA peuvent se justifier, mais il semble n'y avoir aucune raison pour prendre le croissant pour un « ā ». <sup>1</sup> Il n'est pas clair non plus ce que l'Auteur désigne comme « n ».

- Le fait que ce monogramme figure sur une monnaie de Khingila sur laquelle figure également un autel du feu n'est pas un argument suffisant pour dire que le monogramme représente le terme NWRA = ādur 'feu'.

d) Le paragraphe sur les « pâršâ seals » ne peut pas être maintenu : depuis plus d'un siècle, les quatre sceaux (Figs. 128) sont considérés comme des copies.

**Conclusion :**

-Il y a un sérieux doute sur l'authenticité des objets qui veulent servir d'appui à la théorie élaborée.

-Bien sûr il y a eu quelque part un modèle pour ces sceaux et la formule rāst pahlom est bien attestée.

-Du point de vue philologique, trop d'affirmations (non ou mal argumentées) restent discutables. Il manque ici une pratique très minutieuse de la philologie iranienne en diachronie.

-Le rapprochement entre pahlom (plswm) et 'Parthes' (p'lwb'n) et 'Perses' (p'ls'n) ne convainc pas.

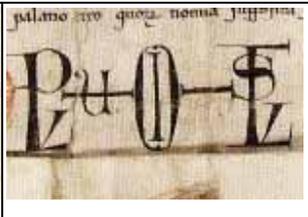
**CONCLUSION :**

Le Comité de Rédaction de Studia Iranica considère qu'il y a trop de spéculations, trop d'objets douteux, et regrette de ne pas pouvoir prendre en considération la publication de cet article sous cette forme.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix V.

## APPENDIX V - ON MONOGRAMS

The rejection of my reading of the NWRA monogram in Fig. 121 (as stated by the reviewers of *Studia Iranica* and *Iranian Studies* in Appendix IV) coincides with the recent publication of a major article on Sasanian monograms (Gyselen & Monsef 2012); which I suppose is a sample of the standard they call "pratique très minutieuse de la philologie iranienne en diachronie". Nevertheless, they seem to ignore the basic rules of monogram construction. *Studia Iranica's* reviewer argues that the crescent on top of the NWRA can "in no way" represent the letter A (written almost as "u" in Middle Persian). Presumably, a curve cannot be rendered as a square or angular form, and vice versa. But a monogram is, by definition, a rearrangement of letters in an elegant and compact form, for which many liberties are usually taken to achieve balance and symmetry. The monograms of the French kings Louis VI and IX, for instance, use a square C on their right leg to balance the L on the left leg of a monogram to be read as LVDOVICVS (Figs. 418a, b). Moreover Jean de Menasce had read the monogram in Fig. 420 as "afzun" by attributing the value "Z" to the crescent.<sup>1</sup>

				
<p>Figs. 418 a, b - Monograms of Louis VI and Louis IX (Marguin-Hamon 2012, 134 and 57)</p>		<p>Fig. 419 - Byzantine seals (Zacos &amp; Vegler, I: pl. 229)</p>		<p>Fig. 420-(det. of Fig. 64) <i>apzwn</i> monogram</p>

While the crescent is an auspicious symbol, its presence within a monogram is only justifiable if it also represents a letter, whether A or Z. There are no superfluous elements in a monogram, except for the lines that interconnect them. In Byzantine seals, some letters were even read twice, or thrice, as in Fig. 419. The lack of appreciation for this principle has led R. Gyselen and Y. Monsef to suggest readings by discarding many signs, including the "crescent" symbol. For Fig. 421a, they offer the reading *wyh* (*vēh*), instead of *ādur*, if all signs were to be included, as they should have. More bizarre is their reading of Fig. 421b in which they drop both the crescent and the "heart" symbols, but add 5 letters out of the blue to get *ḏw<ynd'ṛ>* (Even-*dād*). What's more, they elsewhere assign the values (*t*, *p*, or *č*) to the heart sign as a whole, even though there is no affinity between the letters they propose and the "heart." To become meaningful, the "heart" must be *split*

<sup>1</sup> De Menasce 1985, 159; Soudavar 2003, 20.

into two, which will then produce *ādurān* (fires). Furthermore, in Fig. 421c, they attribute the value "p" to one "circle," and not the other, to get *Pāpak*; whereas, if signs 5 and 6 were properly considered, the monogram would yield *Pāpakān*. In Sasanian monograms, the "circle" is consistently used in lieu of "p" and therefore Fig. 421d should be read as *dpyr* (*dabir*, scribe) and not *yazad* or *veh* as they have proposed. A word of caution is however warranted with respect to the "circle" sign. It takes the value "p" if fully integrated in the monogram; but if unconnected to the rest (as in Fig. 123), it represents the pearl as symbol of *farr* within a hybrid syntax in which symbols and words are mixed.<sup>2</sup>

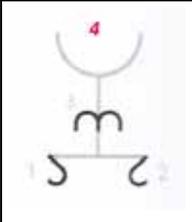
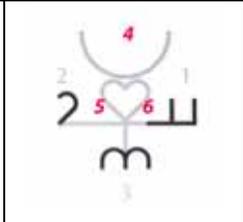
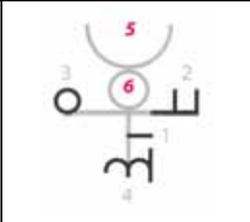
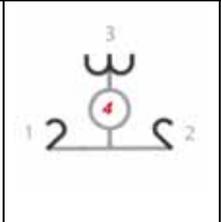
				
(a) <i>ādur</i> : 4=a, 3=d, 2=w, 1=l	(b) <i>ādurān</i> : <sup>3</sup> 1=, 3=d, 6=w, 5=l, 4=, 2=n	(c) <i>Pāpakān</i> : 3=p, 2=, 6=p, 4=k, 5=, 1=n	(d) <i>dabir</i> : 3=d, 4=p, 1=y, 2=l	(e) <i>khōr</i> : 3:h, 1=w, 2=l

Fig. 421 - Corrections for proposals given by Gyselen & Monsef 2012, 160-64. (The light grey numbers are theirs, and the red ones are my additions)

Finally, Gyselen and Monsef have assigned the value "y" to the sign 2 in Fig. 421e; it can only be done by flipping it horizontally and changing the direction of its convexity, which is not permissible. Letters can be rotated but not flipped. Sign 2 should be read as "l", which will give *hwl=khōr* (sun). As such, it is in tune with a number of other auspicious monograms like *NWRA*, *ādurān*, and *ādur*, which are all about light and fire.

What I have exposed here are methodological errors afflicting their readings. I am afraid they need to reconsider most, if not all of them. But given the reluctance of the editors and reviewers of *Studia Iranica* and *Res Orientalia* to acknowledge alternative views, let alone correct their errors, I expect more articles perpetuating the same mistakes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See note 224 supra. For a discussion on this hybrid syntax, see Soudavar 2009a, 436-42.

<sup>3</sup> An alternative reading can be *ḏwr`ny* by considering the line segment below the "heart" as "n," and sign 6 as "y." We would still get *ādurān*.

<sup>4</sup> Ryka Gyselen, for instance, keeps asserting that *hujadag Khosrow* (well-omened Khosrow) is a title (!) despite an alternative reading that I proposed; my own mistake therein is now rectified in note 242 supra.

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