Threads of Continuity
Zoroastrian Life & Culture

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IRIDISCENT IRAN: PERSIAN PALIMPSEST, MAZDEAN MOSAIC

Burzine Waghmar

Statecraft, hegemony, the arts of war, fine cuisine and the composition of dishes, medicine, clothing, public works, savoir-vivre, chanting, oratory, intelligence, perfect cleanliness and appearance, and royal gravitas, in all of which the precedence is theirs [ = Persians].
— Mas‘udi, Akhbār al-zaman

If faith [īman] were hung from the Pleiades, then men of Persia would obtain it.
— Prophetic hadīth [saying]

Despite the glories of art and literature produced by the Iranian peoples, the Zoroastrian religion must be acknowledged as their greatest cultural and spiritual achievement.
— Ehsan Yazdani

Zoroastrianism’s near-fatal encounter with Islam left it a remarkable remnant by the historical wayside. It lacked recuperative power, following the Arab annexation of Iran, but just as Hellenic civilisation was to Christianity, its three-millennia-old legacy transformed Islam, a tribal cult, into an international credo with an unassailably Iranian impress. Early Islamic theology, whether as a receiver or rejecter of its dualist philosophical attitudes, was remoulded considerably if unconsciously. No less uninfluenced were Islam’s Abrahamic forebears, Judaism and Christianity. For R. C. Zachner observed: “The importance of Zoroastrianism, however, like that of Judaism, lies not in the number of those who profess it, but rather in the influence it has exercised on other religions, and particularly on Christianity [which] claims to be the heir of the prophets of Israel. If there is any truth in this claim, it is no less heir to the Prophet of ancient Iran, little though most Christians are aware of this fact. ... Zoroastrianism has practically vanished from the world today, but much of what the Iranian prophet taught lives in no less than three great religions— Judaism, Christianity and Islam.”

The Pax Persica was the ‘largest empire by share of population’ and ‘accounted for approximately 49.4 mn of
the world's 112.4 mn people in around 480 BC — an astonishing 44%. The Achaemenids (Old Persian *hāhmanishāyāt, r. ca. 559-330 BC), designating themselves 'Aryan' (Old Persian *ariya), were suzerains from Punjab to Libya, including Central Asia, Anarolia, Caucasus and the Black Sea, with their imperial heartland in the historic plateau of Iran (Middle Persian singular *ar'yan, plural *aran 'aryans', *aran-shahr 'land of Aryans'). They had adopted a faith founded by the Persian poet-prophet, a 'historical Zarathustra' (Middle Persian Zarad(kh)shra, Modern Persian and Arabic Zardosht, Greek Zoroastres, Latin Zoroaster) who preached between the Aral Sea and southern Central Asia, and whose dates have divided Iranists as either the thirteenth or sixth century BC. Slightly better known is the *Avesta* (probably 'pure/praise instruction'; Avestan *upa-stauka-, Middle Persian *ašēstak, Modern Persian avesta, Arabic bīstā, a compilation of ritual hymns and paeans orally composed presumably between 1500 and 500 BC by those Iranians who later defined their tradition as Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism (Avestan mazda-pāna 'one who sacrifices to Ahura Mazda'). The *Avesta* was committed to writing, having been transmitted verbally: just after AD 600 by Sasanian clergy who practiced the *den mazdeš* (Middle Persian 'den [religion] of the Mazdayasnians', Armenian *denimazdestan*).

Its most distinguished sovereign and founder was Cyrus II the Great (r. 558-530 BC; Old and Modern Persian *Kīrāvš, Hebrew *Kōresh, Arabic *Kūšā, Greek *Kóros, Latin *Cyrus*). Cyrus has gone down for history's consumption: he conjures Ashokan connotations as does that ruler for Indian identity and was, arguably, the earliest honorary gentle blesses by Jews for their liberation from 'Babylonian captivity' (587-539 BC). As the Lord's messiah or 'anointed' (*Isaiah* 45:1-2), Yahweh enjoined upon Cyrus: 'You shall be my shepherd to carry out all My purpose' (*Isaiah* 44:28). This politic tolerance towards the Jews, by permitting them in 538 BC to rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem (515 BC), was also extended to other subjects of what was a multi-national if unwieldy empire who, in exchange for fealty and taxes, were free to follow their own laws and religious traditions, continue their artistic norms, retain their own languages, write in their own script, and maintain their own social system. The Achaemenids originated monolithic administration, theocratic absolutism, political hegemony, and a well-organized provincial administration. But Achaemenid sovereigns, formally Zoroastrians, tolerated religious syncretism and were not averse to the propitiation of Greek and Syrian deities included in their Iranian pantheon besides Ahura Mazda 'omniscient Lord' (Old Persian Avarmanzda, Middle Persian Ormazd, Armenian Aramazd, Modern Persian Ormazd), such as Anahita (Old Persian Ahurita, Middle Persian Anahid, Armenian Anahit) and Mithra (Old Persian, Vedic Sanskrit Mitra, Middle Persian Mithr, Bactrian Mīrā), as protectors. The hitherto held contention that the Achaemenids were not Zoroastrians is untenable. Likewise the Cyrus cylinder, politically inspired then and popularly regarded now as an ecumenical charter, was but a bid by Babylonian priests currying favour with an alien ruling elite.

Ahura Mazda made 'happiness' (Old Persian *šāvāt*) for humankind and supported (Old Persian *upastamhara-*) the king-of-kings in his activities. The king-of-kings (Old Persian, *khshayatišvī khshayatišvānum, Middle and Modern
Persian, shahanshab) ruled through 'divine glory/fortune' (Old Persian probably farrah, Avestan khwarrah, Middle Persian khwarrah, Modern Persian khorra, far) divinely bestowed upon him as well as prophets, heroes and poets.

The sovereign, should he stray from asha 'right order', would be bereft of it. The Shia imams as well as Muhammad, who received revelation at the time of his birth, were also deemed imbued with such 'divine light', an esoteric ideal permeated into Islam. The ruler was assisted by the sacerdotal class of magi (Old Persian magu, Greek magos, Latin magus, Sanskrit maha), the only recorded collective of western Iranian priests who were historically experts on cultic rituals and customs of Iranian tribes. As hereditary clergy they became official exponents of Zoroastrianism. In Arabic, majus 'Zoroastrians' (Quran, 22:17) and din al-majus 'Zoroastrianism', retain currency for the faith and its followers.

During Parthian times these magi, being skilful sages, were appropriated in the gospel (Matthew 2:1-12), as 'wise men from the east' (magi apo Anatolion) adoring the Christ child in Bethlehem. It is to be read as a midrashic explication of the outside gentile world, unlike Israel, which recognized the saviour's universal kingship. The 475-year-old Parthian period (247 BC–AD 224) was the longest but was frequently disregarded as neither Iranian nor Zoroastrian. Scholarship has sought to revise the prejudices of their Sasanian successors who erased them from communal memory. Our scant, cradled evidence permits a limited sketch of their legacy following the Alexandrine invasion and Seleucid interregnum. It was the Parthians who adopted the Zoroastrian calendar and its holy months and deployed Avestic references in Parthian minstrelsy. (Acknowledged in the lyrics of the Islamic republic's new national anthem adopted in 1990 is bahman mah-i far-i izadi manar 'Bahman (month) is the glory of our faith.') By mid-Parthian times were probably instituted the three greatest 'victory fires' (Middle Persian adarvarahna) whose patrons were priests (adarfarnabag), rulers (adarshinap) and husbandmen (adarburznmehr). The last was particularly exalted by the Parthians—eulogised in Gorgani's Parthian romance, Vis u Ramin—and it is to them we owe not only the oldest descriptions of a sacred 'place of burning fire' (Middle Persian atarvahan attested via Armenian), but also, at the initiative of Walagash I (r. ca. AD 51-c. 76-80; Greek Vologases), Middle and Modern Persian, Arabic Wadash, Balash), codification of a dispersed, post-Alexandrine Avesta, and the oldest surviving fire-temple, Kab-i Khwaja (probably first century AD). In the Shabnama Firdawsi highlights how Bahram Gur returned with Sepinoud from India and both visited the adarshinap fire temple where she was instructed in the Mazdean creed.

Eighth-century Europeans would check Arab jihad west of the Pyrenees thanks to the Parthian strategy of 'armoured cavalry' or cataphract (Greek kataphraktes). It overwhelmed the Romans, as did their fatal 'Parthian shot', from expanding east of the Tigris for nearly three centuries—Sanskrit Pahlava 'Parthian' whence Modern
Indo-Iranian languages pahlavan ‘hero, champion’. But they also originated the Islamic iwan, a three-sided, barrel-vaulted, open-fronted reception or roofed hall. Parthia (Chinese an-shi) was famed for its ‘Parthian fruit’, pomegranates (Chinese shih-liu), saffron (Chinese fan-bung-bua), and ostrich or ‘Parthian bird’ (Chinese tu-niao). Although the peach (Chinese tao, Latin prunus persica) went west, its identity remains attached to its Iranian intermediation and was one among a host of other Silk Road exotics that created prosperity for the Parthians and their Sasanian successors. The last empire of pre-Islamic Persia (Assyrian Parnia, Old Persian Parsa, Hebrew Pars, Bactrian Pars, Sogdian pr’s, Middle and Modern Persian Pars, Arabic Fars, Greek Persis, Latin Persia, Chinese Bosi, Middle Persian parsig, Bactrian parsiq, Sogdian prvykilq and Sanskrit paraskha ‘Persian’; Sanskrit paraskha samayai ‘Persian religion’, parasi ‘Persian language’, Parsi, the ethnonym for South Asian Zoroastrians, means pari ‘Persia’ plus adjectival suffix -i ‘related to’ hence ‘Persian’.

Zoroastrianism became the official faith of Sasanian Iran (AD 224-651), a centralised, cosmopolitan society with a tradition of chivalry and courtesy generally lacking in the Greco-Roman world. Each of the classes, vasupuragan ‘feudal peers’, nayeban ‘priests’, vaqarjan ‘nobles’, azadan ‘free men and women’, dibiran ‘scribes’, vasaranagan ‘merchants’, butakshia ‘artisans’, dawran ‘farmers’, wustaryshjan ‘herdsmen’ and anshahriyan ‘slaves’ pursued their khvoshkarar ‘proper function’. This West Asian empire, where crown and clergy were inextricably identified with the religion, was one where the former’s political credentials were spiritually bolstered by the latter’s dictum acknowledged in the Zoroastrian encyclopaedic compendia. Dinkard ‘acts of the religion’, that ‘kingship is religion and religion kingship’ (Dk. 3.58). This modus vivendi was, as Hugh Kennedy observed, the Muslim model because Sasanian Iran provided the most pervasive of the legacies to the Islamic world and it would be possible to argue that Khosro I and Muhammad shared the honor of being the two begetters of Muslim statecraft. Indeed the wellsprings of Muslim political thought on this hark back to Middle Persian precepts (andarz) evinced in two treatises, the Testament of Ardeshir (Abd Ardeshir) and the Epistle of Tanwar (Tanwar namaz). In the former is the classic counsel attributed to Ardeshir towards Shapur I: ‘Religion and kingship are two brothers, and neither can dispense with the other.’ As the renowned Muslim theologian and philosopher, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), reminded the Seljuq ruler: ‘It is recorded among the chronicles that the Magians held this world for 4,000 years and that kingship remained in their family because they maintained justice among the subjects and looked after them. According to their religion they did not consider tyranny or oppression permissible and they made the world prosperous by justice.’

And from the social standing of these magi or ‘Pahlavi sages’ (Arabic hukuma fahlaawiyan), conceptually evolved Modern Arabic dastur ‘constitution, statute’ (classical Arabic dastur ‘set of rules, formulary’. Classical and Modern Persian dastur ‘religious leader, high priest’, Middle Persian dastwar ‘one in authority’).

Mary Boyce plausibly posited that the Testament, whose antecedents must be sought in the late Sasanian period and the reign of Khosro I Anoshirwan ‘immortal soul’ (r. AD September 531-February/March 579; Greek and Latin Chosroes, Arabic Kshna), was consciously attributed to Shapur I (r. AD 240-270; Greek Saporos, Arabic Sabur) to
privilege its origins, but did 'evidently contain a core of matter transmitted from that period.'

To Khosro I—celebrated by Suhrawardi for his bikmat-i khusravoni 'khusravani theosophy'—is also owed a legal code, fiscal and land reforms and a canonical compilation of the Avesta. According to variant Dinkard traditions, it was delegated to the aforementioned priest, Tarsar, by the dynasty's founder and father of Shapur I, Ardashir I (r. AD 224-240; Greek Artaxerxes, Arabic Ardas(h)ir). Under Shapur I were added secular subjects to the Avestic corpus covering astronomy, geography, medicine, philosophy and science. Much of this came from Greece and India (Avestan hindu-, Old Persian bij(n)du-, Middle Persian hndagus, Sogdian yentukshin, Bactrian tundo, Modern Persian hindustan 'India'). From India came backgammon, chess and the Fables of Bidpdti or Panchatantra 'five topics'. Written in Sanskrit ca. AD 300, its westward sojourn began with a Middle Persian (Kalile god Dimnag) translation by Khosro I's physician, Burzoy, and from Middle Persian into Arabic (Kalilquou Dimnab) by Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. AD 759). The antecedents and frame narrative of the Arabian, correctly, 'Thousand and One Nights' (Arabic Al'f layla wa-laylah) are situated in the Sasanian 'Thousand Tales' (Middle Persian Hazar Afsanag, Classical and Modern Persian Hasar Afsaneh).  

Translation and learning flourished at the winter capital founded by Shapur I, Gundeshapur (Middle Persian Wbiantiok-shapur 'better Antioch [of] Shapur': Syriac Bet Lapat, Classical Persian Gundeshapur, Arabic Jundayabur). Gundeshapur was the bridgehead between Greco-Sasanian and Arabic sciences: the city boasted not only a famed hospital and medical school but also scriptoriums where Nestorian (Dyophysite) Christians, fleeing persecution by Monophysite Byzantines, translated Middle Persian and Greek learning into Syriac, and subsequently Arabic, thus laying the foundations of collated research at the Abbasid royal depository or 'house of wisdom' (bayt al-hikma), whose forerunner was the Sasanian palace library (Middle Persian gajt 'treasury, storehouse'), where were preserved volumes on pre-Islamic lore, romances and warfare.

History which informed the Sasanian worldview, both semi-legendary and real, was committed to the Khudaynamag 'book of lords', known to us from a lost Arabic translation by Ibn al-Muqaffa' among Arabo-Persian sources, and the prototype of Firdawsi's eleventh-century Shabnam 'book of kings'.

Zoroastrianism, by then, had collapsed with the fall of the Sasanian state. It unobtrusively rehabilitated itself—such is the Persian capacity for resilience —within the matrix of Islam. For a new convert its shadowy presence was noticeable: upon hearkening the call to prayer from a minaret, a Sasanian spiral structure, one entered a kiosk (Arabic kusab) mosque, a free-standing square base with its domed roof supported on squinches resembling a Zoroastrian chaharbagh 'four-arched', open vaulted fire-temple. On this dome was mounted a biqal 'crescent' and star, symbols of caliphal authority whose earliest evidence comes from Arabo-Sasanian coinage depicting a crescent with five- or six-pointed star, now a ubiquitous Muslim motif in flags, military banners and religious architecture. Islamic iconography borrowed it from the crescent and globe resting on the winged crown of Sasanian shaps. Pursuant to completion of ablutions (Zoroastrian pad-yab kusti, Islamic wudu'), and expression of 'intention' (Arabic niyya, Avestan fravashme 'confession of faith' Yasna 11.16-13.8), an aspect shared with the older faith, the Muslim, as his Zoroastrian counterpart, was in a ritual state of purity and ready to offer the 'canonical prayer', namaz (Sanskrit namaste and Avestan nemaste 'homage to you!'), Middle and Modern Persian namaz 'reverence, prostration', the second 'pillar' of Islam which enjoins five, mandatory, diurnal prayers, unique to Zoroastrians only in the Near East, and lacking a Quranic basis. It was devotionally ascribed to a prophetic tradition founded in Muhammad's miraj, the nocturnal, celestial ascent through the 'seven heavens' to the 'Divine presence'. Zoroastrian literary models considerably adumbrated the miraj which, centuries later, influenced Dante's Divine Comedy for such soul-journeys to heaven and hell are elaborated in the Auda Wiraz namag 'book of Wiraz': Zarathustra's seven meetings with Ahura Mazda; and the Sasanian high-priest Kirdi's extra-terrestrial vision to hell undertaken for the Shah's soul so as to contain his empathy for Manichaism, a third-century, gnostic, anti-cosmic dualism propounded by Mani (AD April 216-February 277).  

Mani was regarded as the 'Seal of the Prophets'. In this he anticipated Muhammad whose similar epithet (Quran 33:40) has endured on the Persian palimpsest sketched here. What truly sealed Persia's fate with that of the Arabian
prophet and his family was the alleged matrimonial alliance between Husain b. Ali, Muhammad's grandson, and Shahrbanu, daughter of its last ill-fated dynast, Yazgird III (r. AD 632-651), thus siring the fourth Shia imam. Ali Zayn al-Abidine. Her tomb rests on the outskirts of the old town of Rayy, where this shrine of the 'Mother of the Nine Imams' now assimilates that of an earlier one, where was venerated 'Anahid the Lady'.

Notes and References

Diacritics have been dispensed for the benefit of general readers. Specialists are familiar with what is stated in simplified transcription.

1 Encyclopaedia Iranica, ‘Mas’udi’ (by Michael Cooperson), http://www.iranica online.org/articles/masudi: Zoroastrian cleanliness was remarked upon by several observers down the ages including the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) who was taken in by this as well as their pragmatism and industriousness. See Annemarie Schimmel, The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture, tr. Corinne Attwood, ed. Burzine Waghmar (London, 2004), p. 116.


5 Patricia Crone, recently deceased, analysed this in her final monograph, a customarily learned study with some contentious conclusions. The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism (Cambridge, 2014).

6 R. C. Zaechner, ‘Zoroastrianism’, in idem, ed. The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, 4th edn. (London, 1994), pp. 200, 213. Previous generations of Indian readers will recall Zaechner was Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan’s successor as the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics, University of Oxford, upon the latter’s departure to become India’s first Vice-President in 1952. Zaechner was invited to deliver the Westcott lectures at St. Stephen’s College, New Delhi and subsequently Bishop’s College, Calcutta and Christian College, Tambaram in 1969. By this time his focus had shifted from Zoroastrianism to Hinduism and Comparative Religions. His output on these topics remained prolific until his demise in 1974. Still in print and consulted are his Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (1960); Hinduism (1962); Hindu Scriptures (1966); and The Bhagavad-Gita: with a Commentary based on the Original Sources (1969).


The cylinder, contrary to contemporary misconception, is unconcerned with human rights. Such incorrectly inflated appeal notwithstanding, it does represent a departure, both in tone and content, as well as in previous measures by emancipating Jews and other forcibly deported denizens of Neo-Babylonian despot. Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. VI. 'Cyrus iv. The Cyrus Cylinder' (by Muhammad Dadamayev). 1993, pp. 521-22; John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, eds. Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia (London, 2005), p. 59. Comprehensively Irving Finkel. ed. The Cyrus Cylinder: the King of Persia's Proclamation from Babylon (London and New York, 2013). It was formerly maintained that the edict, like other Mesopotamian building inscriptions, was typically buried in the foundation deposit. But in fact versions were produced and circulated 'as part of Persian state politics' (p. 2).

P. Oktar Skjaervo, 'Zoroastrianism,' in Michele Renée Salzman, ed. The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World, Vol. 1: from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Age (Cambridge, 2013) p. 120f.


Bahman 22. 1357 (= February 11, 1979) is commemorated as the anniversary of the Islamic revolution for on that day monarchy ended and the royalist farz turned republican.


37. Muslims offer the *niyya* prior to their ablutions: Zoroastrians do so subsequent to it.

