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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

## Contents

<b>I</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>1</b>
1	<i>A re-examination of two terms in the Elamite version of the Behistun inscription</i> Saber Amiri Pariyan . . . . .	2
2	<i>Alexander and the Arsacids in the manuscript MU29</i> Touraj Daryaee . . . . .	8
3	<i>Take care of the xrafstars! A note on Nēr. 7.5</i> Shervin Farridnejad . . . . .	11
4	<i>The kings of Parthia and Persia: Some considerations on the ‘Iranic’ identity in the Parthian Empire</i> Leonardo Gregoratti . . . . .	14
5	<i>Brief comments on the so-called Xorde Avesta (1)</i> Götz König . . . . .	17
6	<i>Some thoughts on the rock-reliefs of ancient Iran</i> Ali Mousavi . . . . .	22
7	<i>A note on the Alkhan coin type 39 and its legend</i> Khodadad Rezakhani . . . . .	24
8	<i>Relieving monthly sexual needs: On Pahlavi daštān-māh wizārdan</i> Shai Secunda . . . . .	28
9	<i>Preliminary observations on word order correspondence in the Zand</i> Arash Zeini . . . . .	32
<b>II</b>	<b>Reviews</b>	<b>36</b>
10	Smith, Kyle. 2014. <i>The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Sabba’e</i> Sajad Amiri Bavandpoor . . . . .	37
11	Mayor, Adrienne. 2014. <i>The Amazons. Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World</i> Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones . . . . .	39
12	Llewellyn-Jones, Lloyd & James Robson. 2010. <i>CTESIAS’ History of Persia: Tales of the Orient</i> Yazdan Safaee . . . . .	40
<b>III</b>	<b>Special Issue</b>	<b>43</b>
13	<i>Of dirt, diet, and religious others: A theme in Zoroastrian thought</i> Bruce Lincoln . . . . .	44

## List of Tables

1	Sequence of instructions in V 18 . . . . .	20
2	Sequence of instructions in Yt 13 . . . . .	20
3	Ritual instruction in Ny 1 & 2 . . . . .	20
4	Aməša Spəntas in Yt 3.1 . . . . .	20
5	<i>fradaiθiš(a)</i> in Yt 3 . . . . .	21
6	Yt 1.24 . . . . .	21
7	<i>Yazišn</i> in PYt 1.24 . . . . .	21
8	<i>iθā</i> in the <i>Gāθās</i> . . . . .	33
9	Homology of judgement of the dead and digestion, following Greater Bundahišn 28.10 . . . . .	48
10	Homologic relations implied by Farbag-Srōš's opinion on whether Zoroastrians can buy prepared foods from their non-Zoroastrian neighbors (Rivāyat of Farnbag-Srōš 25) . . . . .	51

## List of Figures

1	Cuneiform text of DB 8:18 in KT's report . . . . .	5
2	KT's comments on unread signs in DB 8:18 . . . . .	5
3	Cuneiform text of DB 10:26 in KT's report . . . . .	5
4	Column I from line 18 to line 28. Note the erosion in lines 18 & 26 . . . . .	5
5	The eroded signs of <sup>fv</sup> <i>hal-la-ma<sup>1</sup>-ir</i> (DB 8:18) in sun light . . . . .	6
6	The eroded signs of <sup>fv</sup> <i>hal-la-ma<sup>1</sup>-ir</i> (DB 8:18) in the shade . . . . .	6
7	The restored signs of DB 8:18 on a scale of one-quarter . . . . .	6
8	The eroded signs of <sup>r</sup> <i>mi-ul(?)</i> - <i>ka<sup>4</sup>-iš</i> (DB 10:26) in sun light . . . . .	6
9	The eroded signs of <sup>r</sup> <i>mi-ul(?)</i> - <i>ka<sup>4</sup>-iš</i> (DB 10:26) in the shade . . . . .	6
10	The restored signs of DB 10:26 on a scale of one-quarter . . . . .	6
11	Photoshop reconstruction of DB 10:26 by the present author . . . . .	7
12	Coin type 39 . . . . .	24
13	The legend on coin type 39 . . . . .	24
14	The Alkhan tamgha S1 . . . . .	25

**Part I**  
**Articles**

# Alexander and the Arsacids in the manuscript MU29

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FROM the material culture, namely the coinage, it appears that the Arsacids represented themselves firmly in their Irano-Hellenic cultural setting. Of course depending on the time period and the region where they ruled over, the Arsacids provide different sets of imperial propaganda to appease both the Iranian and Greco-Macedonian inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> We should not forget that they followed the existing tradition on the Iranian Plateau which was dominated by the Seleucids. Of course the Seleucids themselves were the consequence of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, but with Seleucus and the establishment of their empire, they distanced themselves from Alexander. Their adoption of a calendar based on their ascension on the throne (314 BCE), renaming of cities and other activities suggest an independence from the past and a more balanced Irano-Hellenic approach (Khurt & Sherwin-White 1993:22–23).

The Arsacids followed this imperial tradition that catered to the Iranians and Greco-Macedonians, but in time there were also shifts in their policies. It is thought that after victories over Crassus in 54 BCE and Antony in 37 BCE, the Arsacids gravitated further towards Iranian<sup>2</sup> and specifically Achaemenid ideology (Neusner 1963:50). Thus, Arrian's attention to the genealogy of the Arsacids and connection to an Achaemenid Artaxerxes may be for good reasons. Still we can not be sure which Artaxerxes he is referring to, although Artaxerxes II has been the usual propagator based on the Nisa documents where the royal vineyard, Artaxšahrakān, of the Arsacids is mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Shahbazi did not accept this identification because already Artaxerxes I was also called Aršu in the Babylonian cuneiform documents as well (Sachs 1979:131ff.).

In the *Šāhnāmeḥ*, or the *Book of Kings*, the Arsacids are noted in only a few lines. This of course is no fault of Ferdowsī, as he was working based on the existing documents, notably the oral and the Iranian his-

torical records, or the (Middle Persian) *Xwadāy-nāmag*. The most important piece of information that we get from the *Šāhnāmeḥ* about the Arsacids is that at Ferdowsī's time there wasn't much known. That is a dynasty which ruled over parts of Central Asia, Iranian Plateau and eventually Mesopotamia for four centuries was wiped off the (Iranian) historical memory.

Ferdowsī states: "Since their (i.e., Arsacids) branch and root were cut short, the learned narrator holds no record of their annals, I have heard nothing of them but their name, nor seen anything in the Book of the Kings."<sup>4</sup> Only the name of the founder of the dynasty, *Ašk* (Arsace), and some rulers such as Šāpūr, Gudarz, Bižan, Narsī, Hormizd and Āraš, as well as Ardavān who is Artabanus IV, the last Parthian king are mentioned. The *Šāhnāmeḥ* remembers the Arsacid rule as a time of disunity, chaos and when *Ērānšahr* "Domain of the Iranians" became weak (Yarshater 1983:473).<sup>5</sup>

But in the Mediterranean world, even in the ninth century CE George Syncellus (1.539.16f. D.) still mentioned the Arsacid claim and connection to the Achaemenid Artaxerxes.<sup>6</sup> In the Persian documents the Arsacids are connected with the Eastern Iranian world and no connection is anywhere seen to be made to the Achaemenids.

As far as I can tell, one of the few passages, if not the only passage, that mentions a historical ancestor rather than an epic past for the Arsacids in the Persianate texts is the manuscript MU29.<sup>7</sup> The text is what de Jong (2003:77 fn. 31) calls a curious or strange neo-Pahlavi work. Mazdapour (1378:14–15) suggests two authors for the text, the first having collected material from such texts as the *Dēnkard*, while the second simply copied these in later times. It is of interest to our investigation that several traditions which are not found in other Middle Persian texts are mentioned here (see Mazdapour 1378:78–81). A short apocalyptic text, which is at the beginning of the second author's work, is referencing the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (ZWY). Both the ZWY (III.22) and MU29 mention seven branches

<sup>1</sup>Nikitin (1998:14–15) suggests the reason for which Mithradates II (123–87 BCE) minted the title of φιλελληνος beside his usual title in the East was his attention to the Greco-Macedonian settlements.

<sup>2</sup>For the use of Zoroastrian calendar and Zoroastrian burial practices, see Wisehofer (1996:62–63).

<sup>3</sup>This view had been first mentioned by Gutschmidt (1888:180). For the evidence see Schmitt, apud., Gignoux (1972:46b).

<sup>4</sup>See *Šāhnāmeḥ*, Moscow edition, 1968, VII.116 and Levy (1990:251) for an English translation.

<sup>5</sup>For the Arsacids in the *Šāhnāmeḥ*, see Omidšalar (2010).

<sup>6</sup>See Schmitt (1986) and Adler & Tuffin (2002).

<sup>7</sup>For the manuscript, see Jamasp-Asa & Nawabi (1976).

which represent the seven ages of the world era (Cereti 1995:151). The third branch is the *brinjēn* (brass) or, representing the rule of the Arsacids. The ZWY describes the rule of the Arsacids in the following manner:

*ud ān ī brinjēn xwadāyīh ī aškānān šāh kē  
jud-ristagīh <ī> but az gēhān be barēd ud ān  
ī druwand aleksandar ī kilisāyīg az ēn dēn  
be abesihēd <ud> az gēhān wany ud abaydāg  
šawēd*

The one of brass is the reign of the Arsacid kings, who will rid the world of the heresy of the Buddha and <by whom> the evil Alexander the Ecclesiastic will be cancelled from the religion <and> he will be lost to the world and become invisible.<sup>8</sup>

As Cereti notes, this passage only appears in one manuscript of the ZWY, namely in K20 and not the others, and the manuscript in this section is ruined, necessitating the use of the Persian version (see Cereti 1995:152 fn. 11). Indeed, this appears to be a strange passage where the Arsacids are made responsible for the ridding of Buddhism and that of the rule of Alexander whose religion is Christianity! None of this is confirmed in our historical sources, unless here we are seeing an anti-Kushan stance, but this possibility seems to be remote. The MU29 passage which is inspired or connected to the ZWY, however, has a very different reading, as follows (MU29 87.9):

*ud seyom tāg brinjēn ka dīdē kē pādixšāyīh  
ī aškiyānīyān ast kē abar rāh ud ristag  
(ī) druwand padīd dārēnd ud abar askan-  
dar (ī) xēšm-tohm andar ērānšahr pādixšāyīh  
kunēnd ud dēn ī weh rāy tawāh kunēnd ud az  
pas xwad andar dušox az gēhān nigūn oftēd*

And the third brazen branch that you saw, which is the rulership of Arsacids, who are manifest in the way and manner of evil, and in the manner of Alexander of the seed of wrath, they rule over Ērānšahr, and they destroy the Good Religion, and then themselves will fall inverted into hell from the material world.

I believe that the author of MU29 had access to material that gave a proper Sasanian view of the past. This sevenfold division of time in the ZWY has been dated to the end of the Sasanian empire (see Cereti 1996:252). The author of the text under study in MU29 had access to the material which the ZWY drew upon or maybe a better historical source. However, we can know none of this for certain with such a late text with

<sup>8</sup>See Cereti's (1995) work on III.26 for the transcription (p. 135), translation (p. 152) and commentary (p. 184–185).

Persianisms, Arabic vocabulary and a nebulous textual and authorial tradition.

What is really of interest in this passage is that beside it being one of the few times that the Arsacids are mentioned and given their own era, their work is represented divergently in the two manuscript traditions (K20 & MU29). The Arsacids are not associated with the Achaemenid Empire, which had been forgotten by then, but MU29 is silent about their connection with the eastern epic past too, i.e. with Araš the Archer and what is found in the *Šāhnāmeḥ*. Instead their philhellenism (φιλελληνος) which had been made clear during their own time is brought to fore in MU29. In MU29 the Arsacids are connected with Alexander and his legacy in Iran which is rarely, if ever, mentioned in Middle Persian and Persian texts, and contrary to the portrayal in the ZWY. With MU29 we are dealing with an interesting and curious text, which suggests that it was copied from sources that do not seem to be common to the other genre of Pahlavi and Pāzand texts.

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