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Whipping the Sea and the Earth: Xerxes at the Hellespont and Yima at the Vara

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Often myth and history are indistinguishable in ancient Iranian history. To this end, a long time ago R.N. Frye commented that in Iranian history patterns repeat themselves, or that the reporter of events seizes upon past accepted patterns to tell us of an event (Frye 1974: 66). I very much agree with his view, in that to understand the deep patterns in Iranian history, one must have studied the religious, epic and mythic traditions of the ancient Iranians. It is in this way that one can understand the recurrent patterns and motifs in the history of that particular civilization. For this purpose I have come to see the primordial Iranian king, Yima (Persian Jamšīd), as the model for describing the rise and fall and the glory and majesty of kings and rulers in the Iranian world. I would like to boldly propose that one may be able to see what may be called a “Yima paradigm,” from the early Achaemenid, through to the Pahlavi period in describing several historical instances. I would like to propose that the Yima paradigm unveils itself in such episodes as the Xerxes whipping of the Hellespont; Darius’s (OP) *Paradaida- activity; and Khosrow Anūšīrwān’s defensive walls around Ērānšahr, to keep it as a paradise. I also believe that the Yima paradigm appears in the same way in the Sasanian times in calling Persepolis the Throne of Yima, i.e., Takht-e Jamšīd, and again in the eleventh century, in the Shi’ite well of Jamkarān (Jam-made), where for both in Medieval Zoroastrian and Shi’ite theology, the savior is to appear. Lastly, one is able

to even see the Yima paradigm in the life of the last Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose taking of the title Khodāyegān (MP xwadāyγān), and sense of hubris, brought him down, as it happened to Yima, when they both neglected the principals of Iranian kingship.

In this short essay I would like to propose an example from the Avestan tradition of Yima which can explain an episode in Herodotus about the motives and actions of the Achaemenid king of kings, Xerxes (486-465 BCE). Herodotus discusses Xerxes' invasion of Greece and his dealings with the land and the sea after the storm which upset his plans in the following manner. The passage in question appears in Herodotus Book 7.35:

ὡς δ' ἐπύθετο Ξέρξης, δεινὰ ποιούμενος τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον ἐκέλευσε τριηκοσίας ἐπικέσθαι μάστιγι πληγὰς καὶ κατεῖναι ἐς τὸ πέλαγος πεδέων ζεῦγος. ἤδη δὲ ἤκουσα ὡς καὶ στιγέας ἅμα τούτοισι ἀπέπεμψε στίζοντας τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον. [2] ἐνετέλλετο δὲ ὦν ῥαπίζοντας λέγειν βάρβαρα τε καὶ ἀτάσθαλα: ὦ πικρὸν ὕδωρ, δεσπότης τοι δίκην ἐπιτιθεῖ τήνδε, ὅτι μιν ἡδίκησας οὐδὲν πρὸς ἐκείνου ἄδικον παθόν. καὶ βασιλεὺς μὲν Ξέρξης διαβήσεται σε, ἦν τε σύ γε βούλη ἦν τε μή: σοὶ δὲ κατὰ δίκην ἄρα οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων θύει ὡς ἐόντι καὶ θολερῶ καὶ ἀλμυρῶ ποταμῶ. [3] τήν τε δὴ θάλασσαν ἐνετέλλετο τούτοισι ζημιοῦν καὶ τῶν ἐπεστεῶτων τῆ ζεύξι τοῦ Ἑλλήσπόντου ἀποταμεῖν τὰς κεφαλὰς

“When Xerxes heard of this, he was very angry and commanded that the Hellespont be whipped with three hundred lashes, and a pair of fetters be thrown into the sea. I have even heard that he sent branders with them to brand the Hellespont. [2] He commanded them while they whipped to utter words outlandish and presumptuous, “Bitter water, our master thus punishes you, because you did him wrong though he had done you none. Xerxes the king will pass over you, whether you want it or not; in accordance with justice no one offers you sacrifice, for you are a turbid and briny river.” [3] He commanded that the sea receive these punishments and that the overseers of the bridge over the Hellespont be beheaded.”¹

Reading Herodotus may give us a notion that Xerxes exhibits irrational behavior, and plays in the mold of Oriental despotism which was often associated with the Persian king of kings and the East (Briant 2002: 517). To use a whip (μάστιξ) by Xerxes to punish the sea, as Herodotus mentions is indeed curious, but to subdue the sea and land is not without the realm of possibility and precedence.

Before the battle of Salamis, Herodotus discusses Xerxes' hubris (Rollinger 2003; Briant 2002: 517), where the king dreams that his crown is a wreath with an olive bow, where the shoot covers the entire world. The Magi are only too happy to interpret that this is a sign of world domination and mastery over the earth.² Not heeding the advice of his father's brother, Artabanus, he takes on the campaign and sides with the hawkish advisor, Mardonias. The notion of Xerxes' hubris is further developed in Aeschylus' *Persians*, where various reasons are provided from the Greek perspective. Here Darius is invoked in the Greek play to tell his son, Xerxes, that he has committed hubris, by yoking the sea, but also plundering

1- For Herodotus' text see: www.perseus.tufts.edu; For Herodotus' translation see: www.perseus.tufts.edu

2- Herodotus 7.19.1.

the sacred places (Aeschylus II. 828-29) (Bouchard 1989: 28).³ More importantly his greed toward world domination is seen as one of the main reasons for his fall, which is identified as the underlying cause of his hubris (Papadimitropoulos 2008: 457).

On the other hand, among the older Iranian material we can point to the *Avesta*, namely the *Widēwdād II* which is about the story of Yima, the ruler of the paradise which was created and lost to the ancient Iranians (Kellens 2012: 12-13). In the Iranian tradition Yima acts as the ultimate king and ruler of a world and its creatures. The world of Yima, of which he is the overseer, is filled with humans and animals to the brink of explosion. However, he is able to do the following three times (the number is significant) as a preventive method (WD. 10):

*āat yimō frašūsāt raočā a upa
rapiθwam hū paiti adwanəm hō imam zam
aiwišuuat suwrya zaranēniia auui
dim sifāt aštraīia uitīiaojanō
friθa spənta ārmaite frača šuua uuiča*

"Then Yima went towards the daylight at midday
along the sun's path. He drove this earth with
a trumpet adorned with gold,
he passed (lashed) over this earth with his whip saying:
Beloved holy Ārmaiti, move forth and asunder,
bearer of small cattle, large cattle and men"

Yima is in fact the first and the archetype of an Iranian ruler, who in the Zoroastrian tradition took on a more subdued position, namely because of Zoroaster's reforms (Lincoln 1981: 233). What is important for us is the mode in which Yima enforces his will on the sacred earth, namely a whip. By whipping it, he is able to control the earth and save the world from complete overpopulation. Andrea Piras has already figured this out in another and more detailed manner, where he gives a complete discussion of the way to control the sea and the land. For the control of the land (Av. *zam-*), he discusses the very same passage (Piras 2011: 124-126),⁴ taking into consideration Kellens' important contribution to the study of Yima as a magician who intercedes between the gods and men (Kellens 1984: 267-218).

If we take this passage of the *Widēwdād* into perspective, one can better understand the motives of Xerxes in whipping the land/sea to do what he desired to do, as Yima had done. Xerxes was only performing a cultural trick which his religious tradition had taught him. Yima was the primordial ruler who subdued the earth, and now Xerxes was attempting to do the same at an important juncture in history. Thus, the use of Av. *aštraīia* / MP. *aštar* "whip" in the ancient Iranian world-view can better explain Herodotus' report on Xerxes on the Hellespont.

3- Darius states: "Zeus, in truth, is a chastiser of overweening pride and corrects with heavy hand." For Aeschylus' Persians see: www.perseus.tufts.edu.

4- Piras's discussion is much more complex and complete in terms of waters, alluding to the Tištar Yašt.

We should also note the proximity of the date of the composition of Herodotus' *Histories* and that of the *Wīdēwdād*. While Herodotus of Halicarnassus's life is clearly dated to the fifth century BCE, the dating of the *Wīdēwdād* presents to be challenging. However, I believe A. Hintze's assessment to be more appropriate in that she believes that the time of composition cannot be so very far from that of the Achaemenid period. The notion that linguistically there are close associations between this Avestan text and that of the Achaemenid inscriptions, as well as the content, Hintze rightly points to in terms of the description of the Persian religion as described by Herodotus (Book I 140) and the *Wīdēwdād*, she believes, makes them close in time (Hintze 2009: 45).

If this is the case, then Xerxes' whipping the sea comes close to date with that of the *Wīdēwdād*'s story of Yima whipping the earth. In this way one may state that we are witnessing in Herodotus a "Yima Reflex," playing out in the history of the Achaemenid Empire in the fifth century BCE. No doubt, Xerxes, a Mazda-worshipper and one whose devoutness is clearly exhibited by his Daiva inscription, would have been attune to the story of the all-important Yima, whose rule over the *Vara-* would be emulated.

In the end, a more interesting parallel is presented in both narratives and that is the downfall of Xerxes due to his hubris at the battle of Salamis. Yima as well lost his Glory (similar story is presented for Xerxes in Herodotus), because of a false speech (Av. *draogəm vacim*, Yašt XIX.33) (Humbach & Ichaporia 1998: 37). This false speech in the *Šāhnāme* of Ferdowsī, is given more elaboration, in that Jamšīd/Yima in fact does not see anyone beside himself, and became ungrateful of God (Khaleghi-Motlagh 2008: Vol. 1, 44-45). Jamšīd's hubris subsequently causes him to lose his glory (*farr*) and falls from power (Levy & Banani 1985: 11). The moral of the story is that even the greatest of the kings can lose power if they go against the nature of kingship as established by the deity.

Thus, one can see Yima's reflection as portrayed in the *Avesta* in Xerxes' life career in Herodotus and Aeschylus. We now can understand Xerxes' motivation for whipping the sea, looking through the prism of Iranian world-view. But what about the loss of Glory and hubris, how can one explain the correspondence there? Herodotus of Halicarnassus was a Persian subject and he traveled throughout the western half, and he must have picked up the stories about Xerxes from the Persians themselves, who had already reformulated the tales of Xerxes through already existing literary motifs (Briant 2002: 525-526).

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