



xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā

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

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Review of Foltz, Richard. *Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to the Present.*

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In reading this very interesting book I immediately found myself challenged by Richard Foltz's definition of "the national pre-Islamic religion(s) of the Iranians" (p. xii). While agreeing with the author on the fact that employing the term "Zoroastrianism" may not be the best way of referring to it, I believe that the role played by such a powerful religious innovator, as Zarathushtra must have been, was crucial to its coming into existence, at least in the form that we know through surviving religious literature.¹ Moreover, there certainly is a considerable degree of continuity in its literary and cultic tradition, as shown among others by the fact that the majority of Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts derive directly or indirectly from the Middle Persian commentary to the Avesta (Zand).

Nonetheless, I partly share the author's position when reporting Alessandro Bausani's point of view:

"We are not dealing – as some believed when this studies started in Europe – with one Iranian religion, but with various 'religions' or types of religiosity characteristic of one or another branch of the Iranian family." (p. xii)

¹- In this matter, I still largely agree with the hotly contested and today minority position expressed by Gherardo Gnoli in his 1997 Yarshater lectures, later published as G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster in History*, Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York, 2000.

Which I understand, at least for the period of the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty, through the lenses of Shaul Shaked's powerful synthesis on late Sasanian Zoroastrianism.² Limiting it to his understanding of the presence of various types of religiosity – sometimes even wide apart – under the umbrella of a main religion, which one may variously name “Mazdaism”, “Zoroastrianism” or as do the believers of Sasanian times, *Wehdēn* the “Good Religion” that is attested throughout the Iranian world.

Quite interesting to my eye is also his concise exposition of the “Pool Theory” according to which there is “a pool of ideas and behaviours from which individuals and communities may draw in constituting their particular world views”. This is certainly true for individuals, though when dealing with communities and their religious or ethical beliefs one must also take into account “identitarian” characters and values. Though not stating it openly, Richard Foltz seems to have taken into consideration this aspect, since he chooses to devote a large part of his book to religions that were born in Iran, though discussing “Foreign Religions in Iran” as well. Central to our understanding of Iranian religion is its definition, both synchronically and diachronically. In this respect I found puzzling the limited space dedicated to Islam (only Chapters 12, 13 and 14, since Ch. 18 on “The Islamic Republic” is quite different in its nature), showing an approach quite different from that of Alessandro Bausani. In fact, the Roman scholar in his “*Persia religiosa*” traces a line of continuity between religious phenomena in pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, identifying specific traits of Iranian religiosity lasting through the ages.³ Moreover, Bausani draws an interesting picture both of the impact of Islam on Iran and of the peculiar “Iranization” of Islam, i.e. the persistence of Iranian themes in Islam, to some extent comparable to the “Hellenization” undergone by Christianity in the early centuries.

Foltz's discussion on “Mithra and Mithraism” as well as his chapter on “Two Kurdish Sects: The Yezidis and the Yaresan” ultimately derive from a belief that he clearly declares at the beginning of his book: “This book devotes separate chapters to what appear to be the three most visible religious tendencies in pre-Islamic Iran: the worship of Mithra, of Mazda and of the Goddess (who is most recognizable as Anahita)” (p. xiii).⁴ Further stating that:

“It may be that the proper status of Mithra-worship in the ancient Iranian world has been underestimated. Most often subsumed under Mazda-worship, as in Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Iranian Mithraism may deserve to be considered a religion in its own right. (...) Prior to the political efforts of the early Sasanians (backed by fanatical and ambitious Mazdean priests such as Kerdir) to articulate and forcibly impose a particular Zoroastrian orthodoxy upon a very religiously heterogeneous Iranian society, it seems more likely that across the Iranian lands there were at least three major religious tendencies (along many minor ones).” (pp. 19-20)

Mithra was certainly an important cultic divinity for Zoroastrians,⁵ as shown by the extensive and

2- Sh. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation. Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, School of Oriental Studies, University of London, 1994.

3- A. Bausani, *Persia religiosa da Zaratuštra a Bahâ'u'llâh*, Milano, 1959; English translation: *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York, 2000.

4- On the Goddess, see Manya Saadi-nejad's chapter “Iranian Goddesses”, pp. 56-74.

5- For clearness sake I stick here to common usage, though as stated above this name derives from the application of concepts that are foreign to the culture we are speaking of, belonging rather to the realm of prophetic religions.

ancient hymn to Mithra, as well as by the mention of his name alongside those of Ahura Mazda and Anahita in royal Achaemenid inscriptions dating to the time of Artaxerxes II and, limitedly to Ahura Mazda, of Artaxerxes III. However, taking a closer look at the inscriptions themselves it becomes clear that for both these kings Ahura Mazda was the greatest of gods, while the other two were invoked only in a specific context.

The inscriptions of Artaxerxes II in Susa (A²Sa) and Hamadan (A²Ha) both read:

“... This palace Darius my great-great-grand-father built; later under Artaxerxes my grandfather it was burned; by the favor of Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras this palace I built. May Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras protect me from all evil, and that which I have built may they not shatter or harm”.

Another inscription by Artaxerxes II in Susa (A²Sd) is slightly different, assigning the more important role to the sole Ahura Mazda:

“... Saith Artaxerxes the King: By the favor of Ahuramazda this is the palace which I built in my lifetime as a pleasant retreat. May Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras protect me from all evil, and my building”.⁶

The Inscription by Artaxerxes III at Persepolis (A³Pa) clearly distinguishes between the role played by Ahura Mazda and the more limited one played by Mithra alongside Ahura Mazda:

“A great god (is) Auramazdā, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created blissful happiness for man, who made me, Artaxerxes, king, the one king of many, the one master of many. (...) Proclaims Artaxerxes, the king: This stone stairway I have built in my time. Proclaims Artaxerxes, the king: Me may Auramazdā and god Mithra protect and this country and what (has been) built by me!”⁷

These inscriptions show that that even in the late Achaemenid period the religion of the sovereigns was henotheistic, postulating Ahura Mazda as the creator god though allowing space for minor cults.

Let us now turn to the domain of onomastics. The divine name Mithra is well attested as a component of personal names (mainly compounds) already in the Achaemenid period in various Nebenüberlieferungen. Among the more meaningful examples one may mention: *Miça-Baga-, *Miça-pāta- \ *Miθrapāta \ Μιτρο-βάτης, *Miθradāta- \ Μιθραδάτης, *Miθrafarnā, *Miθranamā, etc.⁸

In the Middle Iranian period, the theonym Mithra is well attested in personal names. It is found in

6- Translations from R. G. Kent, *Old Persian. Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, American Oriental Society, New Haven, Connecticut, 1953, pp.154-155. For a more up-to-date edition, see R. Schmitt, *Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achaemeniden. Editio minor mit deutscher Übersetzung*, Reichert, Wiesbaden, 2009, pp. 186 – 195 for Artaxerxes II and 195-199 for Artaxerxes III. Another inscription from Hamadan (A²Hb) apparently invokes Mithra alone: mⁱ-i-[t-r : m-a-m : p-a-t^u-u-v] “Mithra soll mich schützen (?)” Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

7- Translation from R. Schmitt, *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum I.I.II, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2000, pp. 116-117.

8- For the examples mentioned, see J. Tavernier, *Iranica in the Achaemenid period (ca. 550-330 B.C.) Lexicon of Old Iranian Proper Names and Loanwords, Attested in Non-Iranian Texts*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, Peeters, Leuven, 2007, pp. 61, 246ff. and R. Schmitt, *Iranische Personennamen in der griechischen Literatur vor Alexander d. Gr.*, IPNB V.5a, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2011, pp. 261ff. Other examples can be found in relevant volumes of the *Iranisches Personennamenbuch*.

Bactrian texts and more limitedly in Sogdian.⁹ In Middle Persian onomastics it is widely attested and names such as *Mihr-āfrīd*, *Mihr-bōzēd*, *Mihr-dād*, *Mihr-buxt*, but also *Mihr-Šābuhr*, *Mihr-Husraw*, *Mihr-Narseh*, *Mihr-Gušnasp* are often found. Perhaps more significant in our context, the anthroponym attesting Mithra's name side by side with Ohrmazd's: *Mihr-Ohrmazd*, also found in Syriac: *Mihr-Hormizd*; or else the personal names showing Mithra accompanied by the name of a sacred Fire: *Mihr-Ādur-Farrbay*, *Mihr-Ādūr-Gušnasp*, or again containing the divine name Mithra and the name of the fire, together with that of other divinities or kings: *Mihr-Ādur-Ohrmazd*, *Mihr-Ādūr-Māh*, *Mihr-Ādur-Šābuhr*.¹⁰

The evidence listed above shows that in the Sasanian period Mithra was a divinity belonging to the Zoroastrian pantheon, and at the same time that names attesting his “creative” power were still in use. Therefore, one cannot use the occurrence of such names in the Achaemenid period to argue in favor of an independent Mithra cult.

To conclude, I doubt that there is enough evidence to postulate an independent Mithra religion in Iran – differently from what happens in the Roman world – at least in the historical period, and still adhere to the traditional view that Mithra, though understandably absent in the Gāthās, was to be readmitted in the Zoroastrian pantheon soon after Zarathustra's reform. Quite clearly, the Zoroastrian faith never was a monolith, allowing for many different variants, probably both regional and sectarian. In fact, even Pahlavi literature, definitively committed to writing in the form that has come down to us only in Abbasid times, contains traces of the religious variety that characterized Iran before – and after – the arrival of Islam. This notwithstanding the fact that Islamic domination had put an end to most Zoroastrian religious disputes, determining a forced orthodoxy, while the Zoroastrian priesthood was fighting to keep the Good Religion alive. There is no need to imagine different and separate religions of Iranian heritage, though certainly Zoroastrian religion even in Sasanian times was internally much more differentiated than what some modern scholars would like to believe.

Aspects of the old Iranian religiosity survive to present day, and ancient festivals still mark the year of all Iranians, be they Muslims or not. Certainly, the faith of both Yezidis and Yaresans contains elements inherited from the pre-Islamic past, but these need not to be necessarily “Mithraic”, since they all could derive from the Iranian popular religion of Late Antique times. More important, the doctrines and traditions of both sects can only be fully understood when set against their Islamic background.

9- See respectively N. Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Personal Names*, IPNB II.7, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2010, and P. B. Lurje, *Personal Names in Sogdian Texts*, IPNB II.8, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2010.

10- All examples taken from Ph. Gignoux, *Noms propres sassanides en moyen-perse épigraphique*, IPNB II.2, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 1986; Idem, *Noms propres sassanides en moyen-perse épigraphique. Supplément [1986-2001]*, IPNB II.3, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 2003; Ph. Gignoux, Chr. Jullien, Fl. Jullien, *Noms propres syriaques d'origine iranienne*, IPNB VII.5, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2009.