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Putative Persian perversities: Indian Buddhist condemnations of Zoroastrian close-kin marriage in context

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Abstract

Ancient and medieval sources from Greece to Korea speak of the morally reprehensible habits of the Persians, who engage in close-kin marriage. Indian Buddhist texts also preserve similar ideas. One interesting passage in a narrative text makes use of this motif in a particularly interesting way, thereby indicating the character who appeals to the trope as ethically beyond the pale. The present paper explores the background of this common depiction of Persian marriage customs for its own intrinsic interest, and as a means to explicate the passage in question.

As a river, road, tavern, assembly hall or road-side drinking-water shed,
So indeed are women in the world – wise men are not angry at their evil.²

This verse from Pali Buddhist literature is elaborated by a commentary as follows:³

- 1 I would like to express my thanks to Prods Oktor Skjaervo and the anonymous reviewers for the journal for their advice on Iranian matters. Victor Mair kindly introduced me (electronically) to Sanping Chen, whose guidance on Chinese sources on Central Asia has been most valuable. I also thank Walter Scheidel for his encouragement.
- 2 The verse is found in *Jātaka* 65 (Fausbøll 1877–1896: i.302, 3–4 = Cowell et al. 1895–1907: i.161), *Jātaka* 536 (Fausbøll 1877–1896: v.446, 1–2, [and see 447,7–9] = Cowell et al. 1895–1907: v.241), and in the *Dhammapada* commentary to XVIII.5 (Norman 1906–1914: iii.349, 8–9 = Burlingame 1921: iii.124). The version in *Jātaka* 65 reads: *yathā nadī ca pantho ca pānāgāraṃ sabhā papā | evaṃ lokitthiyo nāma nāsaṃ kujjhanti paṇḍitā* ||. Other versions have in d: *velā tāsāṃ na vijjati*, “they know no limits”. The verse has been treated by Bollée 1970: 60.12–13, translated p. 160: (“Like a river or a path, a drink shop, a traveller’s inn or a booth for water [by the roadside] so are women in the world. They cannot control themselves”), and commented on p. 109. How to understand *velā* here is a delicate question. Cowell et al. 1895–1907: v.241 render “no limits check their sin”, while Katayama Ichirō in Nakamura 1982–1988: 8.268 translated *kanojora ni kejime arihasenu*.
- 3 Fausbøll 1877–96: I.302,5–16; Burmese Sixth Council edition (Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā 70 [Dhammagiri, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1998]) 289.20–290.5.

There (in the verse) *as a river* means as a river with multiple bathing spots, to which outcastes and kṣatriyas and the like all come to bathe in common. And with regard to expressions like *road* and so on, as a highway is common to all people, everyone is permitted to use it. A *tavern* or wine house is common to all; whoever wants to drink just goes in there. An *assembly hall* is constructed, by those in search of merit, anywhere at all, for people to stay together in common, and everyone is welcome to enter. A *road-side drinking-water shed* is constructed for all to use in common, having been set up on a highway and outfitted with drinking cups. Everyone is welcome to drink water there. *So indeed are women in the world* means that in this very way, my dear young man, in this world women are common to all, to be used in common just as a river, road, tavern, assembly hall or road-side drinking-water shed. Therefore *wise men are not angry at their evil*, meaning that thinking “this sinful misconduct, misbehaviour, of these women is common to all”, wise men clever and endowed with wisdom do not become angry.

We meet here the expression of a broad sentiment about women, fully in concert with generalized Indian Buddhist misogynistic notions, which see women as sexually dangerous and inconstant beings. The warning or admonition, inherent in the verse and made explicit in the commentary, is clearly intended to be generic: all women, not just those in some specific time or place, are this way. Hence, the wise man should always take care, and never expect different behaviour – there is no sense in bothering oneself about a basic fact of nature. It seems most unlikely, however, if not wholly impossible, that as a piece of folk-wisdom, much less as a Buddhist aphorism, the adage was intended as an invitation to men to make free use of any women, as one would of a road.

It is thus of considerable interest to discover an adaptation of this saying put into the mouth of a mother who uses it to justify to her son the propriety of their ongoing sexual relationship. As recounted in the *Dharmarucy-avadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna*, an Indian Buddhist Sanskrit narrative text of uncertain date, a mother has secretly seduced her son – she knows his identity, but he is ignorant of hers. When it is finally revealed, he is, unsurprisingly, shocked, and faints away. After reviving him, his mother rationalizes:⁴

4 Cowell and Neil 1886: 257.13–20: *panthāsamo mātṛgrāmo yenaivaṃ hi yathā pitā gacchati putro 'pi tenaiva gacchati | na cāsau panthā putrasyānugacchato doṣakārako bhavaty evam eva mātṛgrāmaḥ | tīrthasamo 'pi ca mātṛgrāmo yatraiva hi tīrthe pitā snāti putro 'pi tasmīn snāti na ca tīrthaṃ putrasya snāyato doṣakārakaṃ bhavaty evam eva mātṛgrāmaḥ | api ca pratyanteṣu janapadeṣu dharmatāivaishā yasyām eva pitā asaddharmaṇābhigacchati tām eva putro 'py adhigacchati |* I have studied the whole episode in detail for my forthcoming book *Riven by Lust: Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography* (University of Hawaii Press), and edited the story in Silk, forthcoming.

The female sex is like a road. For that upon which the father goes, the son too goes upon just the same. And this road is not the agent of fault to the son who follows it – it is rather the female sex [which is the agent of the fault]. And the female sex is also like a bathing spot, for at just that bathing spot in which the father bathes the son too bathes, and the bathing spot is not the agent of fault of the son who is bathing – it is rather the female sex.

This adaptation of the folk-wisdom concerning women's universal sexual accessibility is here given a special, and bizarre, application as a justification of mother-son incest. The inference is that if any woman may be approached freely, then father and son may legitimately make use of the same woman, even if that woman is the son's mother. While this is not without interest as a piece of casuistry, its value probably does not extend much beyond that, and it is most unlikely to reflect any ethnographic reality. In ancient India, roads, taverns and the like were no doubt freely accessible, but whatever regional or local exceptions there may have been, we can hardly credit the idea that even in some remote corner of the Indian world free sexual access to any female whatsoever, including one's mother, received social sanction. The *Dharmarucy-avadāna* immediately follows this appeal, however, with the following sentence:

Moreover, in a bordering country, just this is the normal way things are done: the son also approaches that same woman whom the father approaches for illicit purposes.

This second part of the argument is parallel to the first in offering another rationale for the son to continue his incestuous affair with his mother. While the first appeals to a popular conception of the nature of women, its ethnographic basis is undoubtedly fictional, and would probably have been felt to be so even by ancient Indian audiences. This second element of the mother's persuasion is wholly different in this regard. For although it is stated vaguely, with reference only to "a bordering country", the appeal here is to a widely known trope. As with the previous manipulation of the aphoristic folk-wisdom, now a stereotyped criticism of immoral behaviour, attributed here to nameless foreigners, the depraved, degenerate and obscene Other is, through a kind of rhetorical Aikido, made a justification for mother-son incest. In this case, however, unlike the ethnographic vacuum of the appeal to women's universal sexual accessibility, there exists a factual basis for the argument. The reference is to a phenomenon cited not only by Indian sources, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, but moreover in literatures of cultures from Greece to Korea. Of further interest is that the connection of the two themes invoked by the incestuous mother is not an innovation of the author of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*; in fact, he has taken over, and subverted, a well-known cliché.

In order to set the mother's seductive rhetoric in context, in the following I will survey the variety of references representative of the motif in Indian Buddhist literature. Further, I will demonstrate the commonality of this

rhetoric with that of other ancient literatures, in order both to illustrate the background within which the justification for incest would have been read within an Indian context, and to emphasize the much broader human scope and evident emotional power of the imagery upon which the author of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna* drew.

The combination of the aphoristic appraisal of universal female sexual accessibility and the depraved behaviour of (certain specific) foreigners is found repeatedly in Indian Buddhist texts. In contrast to the use to which this rhetoric is put in the dramatic frame of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*, however, in these contexts it is naturally invoked in highly critical terms. As I will argue below, it is precisely this counterpoint which makes the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*'s application of the cliché so very effective.

Among the earliest examples of the trope in Indian Buddhist texts is that in the *Karmaprajñāpti* (Elucidation of the Workings of Karma), a scholastic Abhidharma treatise belonging to the Sarvāstivāda school, preserved now only in Tibetan translation. The text is impossible to date with any confidence, but perhaps belongs to the early centuries of the Common Era. Here the practice of sanctioned incestuous relations is attributed to a group I will discuss in a moment, the Maga-Brahmins.⁵

In the West there are those called Maga-Brahmins,⁶ and they speak as follows: "No sin comes about from the practice of perverted lustful

5 Derge Tanjur 4088, *mngon pa*, i, 192b7–193a6; Peking Tanjur 5589, *mdo 'grel*, *khu* 233a5–b5; sTog Kanjur 286, *mdo sde*, *ci* 302b4–303a5.

I learned of the passage from Kasugai 1954, who quotes and translates most of it, but neglects to give any reference (fortunately the *Karmaprajñāpti* is a relatively short text). Kasugai 1960 also translates the passage (into English, but with many errors), without the Tibetan text and again without any precise reference.

Comparatively little has been published on the *Karmaprajñāpti* (*Las gdags pa*), which is extant only in Tibetan translation. Somewhat more is available on the two other closely related texts, *Lokaprajñāpti* and *Kāraṇaprajñāpti*, the three as a set constituting the *Prajñāptiśāstra*. For a detailed outline of the *Karmaprajñāpti*, see Fukuda 2000 (based on an unpublished complete translation of the *Prajñāptiśāstra* by Katō Sei 加藤清 (1907–1956)). For a few notes on the text's treatment of the sins of immediate retribution, see Arai 1982a, who also began a translation (1982b), although I do not know how far it progressed. See also Dietz 1997 for a brief sketch (and earlier and even more briefly, Miyazaki 1982).

The canonical status of the *Karmaprajñāpti* (as indeed of all three of these related texts) is a matter of dispute. In some editions it is assigned to the Tanjur, the collection of ancillary works of known authorship (Derge 4088; Peking 5589), in others to the Kanjur, the collection of canonical writings attributed to the Buddha (e.g., Tokyo 283, sTog 286, Ulan Bator 332, London 201c, Lhasa 290), and in some to both (e.g., Narthang Kanjur 786, Tanjur 3580). According to various sources, this difference of opinion is an Indian sectarian one: for the Vaibhāṣikas the text is considered to be *āgama* (*bka'*), while for the Sautrāntikas it is *śāstra* (*bstan bcos*); see Cordier 1915: 393, citing the Narthang Tanjur catalogue (*dkar chag*, folio 125b8), and Bu ston's catalogue contained in his *Chos 'byung* (History of Buddhism), # 485, as edited by Nishioka 1981: 48.

6 I am familiar with no other occurrence of the Tibetan term *bram ze mchu skyes*. However, its equation with Maga-Brahmin is not problematic, as Kasugai (1954: 301) recognized. On the other hand, in the *Tarkajvālā* Maga is simply transcribed in Tibetan as *ma ga* (Kawasaki 1975 = 1992; Lindtner 1988). The reason for the

behaviour towards a mother, a daughter, a sister, or a friend, a kinsman or the aged". Why? They say: "Women are like cooked rice: just as cooked rice is to be enjoyed (by all in common), so too are women to be copulated with (by all in common). Women are like pestles:⁷ just as pestles are to be used for pounding (by all in common), so too are women to be copulated with (by all in common). Women are like roads: just as roads are to be travelled on back and forth (by all in common), so too are women to be copulated with (by all in common). Women are like river banks: just as river banks are for (all communally) to gather at to bathe, so too are women to be copulated with (by all in common). Women are like flowers and fruit: just as flowers and fruit are to be enjoyed (by all in common), so too are women to be copulated with (by all in common)."

Having made this claim, they go on to say: "For [such] people there is no engaging in incestuous intercourse". Why? With the claim that because there are no distinctions for [such] people between different types of individuals, they say that that action [of incestuous intercourse] has no manifestation or any fruit. And seeing things in this light, they say: "This action has no [karmic result, thus karmically speaking it is a non-action]. This action does not bring about full fruition (**phalavipāka*)". Making this claim, non-Buddhists (**tīrthika*) who engage in incestuous intercourse engender [this type of] karma.

Although it contains the very same elements – the combination of reference to the similes of road, food and so on, and consequently the acceptability of incestuous relations – this characterization is considerably more detailed than the mere allusion found in the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*. In the course of its presentation, the *Karmaprajñapti* goes so far as to dramatize the defence of these actions that their practitioners would or might offer. But of course,

equivalence *mchu skyes* is not entirely straightforward. In *Mahāvvyutpatti* 3194, *mchu* is given for *maghā*, meaning the planet Venus; the compound *mchu skyes* has the same meaning, according to Zhang (1985: 1.849). I cannot find the compound *mchu skyes* in the sense of *Maga* in any dictionary, but the phonological similarity is suggestive. (On Iranian *maga* and Vedic and Sanskrit *magha* see Itō 1987; Schmidt 1991.) Dagyab (1989: 241) lists *lha'i drang srong* as one definition of *mchu skyes*, perhaps **devarṣi*? (An asterisk * here and below indicates the Indic form of a term or name not attested but which can nevertheless be reconstructed with some confidence.)

Note also Tibetan *par sig*, with which compare Middle Iranian *pārsīg* (which through Arabic ultimately becomes *Fārsī*). Sanskrit has *pārasīka*, based on an older form *pārsika* or something similar. Cp. the remarks of Uray 1983: 409 (I thank Dr. Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim for this reference).

As yet, few studies have been carried out on Tibet–Iranian relations, though the possibilities for discoveries seem to be rich. One might see Gignoux 1987, and Laufer 1916. While the examples of loan words into Tibetan from Persian (§109–142) given in the latter include some surprises, such as *deb ther*, most of the cited terms are perhaps not very old.

7 This seems clearly to be the meaning of Tibetan *gtun*, perhaps Sanskrit *musala* (*Mahāvvyutpatti* 5890). But note that other versions of the comparison clearly have *udūkhala*, *jiū* 臼, which means mortar, which makes considerably more sense.

unlike the use to which the mother in the *Dharmarucy-avadāna* puts this logic, here it is cited only to be rejected as a denial of the most basic principles of karma. Plainly based on the same tradition, another Abhidharma text, the somewhat later and very influential **Abhidharma Mahā-vibhāṣā*, preserved only in Chinese, says the following:⁸

In the West there are *mleccha* (barbarians) called Maga who produce such views as these, and establish such theories: there is absolutely no sin in behaving lustily with one's mother, daughter, elder or younger sister, daughter-in-law or the like. Why? All women-kind⁹ are like ripe fruit, like prepared¹⁰ food and drink, a road, a bridge, a boat, a bathing spot,¹¹ a mortar and so on. It is the custom that beings use

8 *Vibhāṣā* T. 1545 (XXVII) 606a16–21 (*juan* 116): 又此西方有蔑戾車名曰目迦，起如是見，立如是論。母女丘妹及兒妻等於彼行欲，悉無有罪。所以者何。一切母邑皆如熟果，已辦飲食、道路、橋、船、階梯、臼等。法爾有情共所受用。是故於彼行欲無罪。 Translated in Kasugai 1960: 113, Kawasaki 1975: 1099 = 1992: 512 and Lindtner 1988: 440. The passage is quoted by Saeki 1887: 685, and on this basis referred to by La Vallée Poussin 1923–1931: iii.148, n. 1. This and several other relevant passages are quoted in Saitō 1998: 119–21.

9 *Mūyī* 母邑 here renders *mātrgrāma*, literally taking it etymologically as “mother-village”, which is clearly impossible to understand in Chinese in the sense of “womankind”. The equivalence is, however, amply attested in other translations of Xuanzang, such as the *Yogācārabhūmi*'s *Śrāvakabhūmi* (Shukla 1973: 123.5 = *Śrāvakabhūmi* Study Group 1998: 192.3 = T. 1579 [XXX] 415c25 [*juan* 24]; Shukla 1973: 256.20 = 435a28 [*juan* 27]; 268.15–6 = 436c13 [*juan* 28]; 346.11–2 = 448a18 [*juan* 29]; 394.17 = 456b26 [*juan* 31]) and *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Wogihara 1936b: 94.7 = Dutt 1966: 66.11 = T. 1579 [XXX] 500a26 [*juan* 38]; Wogihara 1936b: 167.7 = Dutt 1966: 114.18 = T. 1579 [XXX] 517c5 [*juan* 41]).

In the *Yiqiejing yinyi* 一切經音義 of Huilin 慧琳 (783–807), the term is defined as follows (T. 2128 [LIV] 641b21 [*juan* 50]):

母邑：梵語摩怛*理，此云母。伽羅摩，此云村。今以邑代村，故云母邑。謂母人之流類，故以名焉也。

* Taishō appears to misprint 怛.

In Sanskrit, **mātr* is mother, **grāma* is village (*cūn* 村). These days we use *yī* 邑 instead of *cūn* 村, so we say *mūyī* 母邑. Mother (*mū* 母) is a word in common use, so we employ it here.

10 So I understand *yībàn* 已辦. The term is attested as a translation of *kṛta* in the *Yogācārabhūmi* and elsewhere: Shukla 1973: 267.3 *kṛtakṛtya* = T. 1579 (XXX) 436b24 (*juan* 28) 所作已辦 (and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Kern and Nanjio 1908–1912: 197.12 [VIII vs. 104] [*arhantabhūmau*] *kṛtakṛtya* = T. 262 (IX) 27a27 [*juan* 3] 所作皆已辦); Wogihara 1936b: 24.2 = Dutt 1966: 16.17 *svakṛtārtha* = T. 1579 (XXX) 483a19 (*juan* 35) 自事已辦. The term *kṛtānna* is well attested in the sense of prepared or cooked food.

11 I take *jiētī* 階梯, literally “stairs”, as intended here for *tīrtha*, although I confess I cannot cite any clear instance of such an equivalence. The Chinese term is found as a rendering of *pariśaṇḍa* (“flight of steps”, according to Edgerton 1953 s.v.) in *Mahāvvyutpatti* 9072, but this example is very late. The only other attestation I know is as *sopāna* in the *Dharmasamuccaya* 32.24 (2302), Lin 1973: 464 = T. 728 (XVII) 511a23 (*juan* 10), likewise a late Chinese translation. (John Strong of Bates College, in a private communication, wonders whether it might not render *ghaṭṭa*, another word for “bathing spot”, or “landing”, that is, a synonym for *tīrtha*. What is most interesting about this suggestion is that the phonetics of *jiētī* in Late Middle Chinese (Pulleyblank 1991) could possibly be understood as a transcription of this word: kja:j-t^hiaj.)

these in common, and therefore there is no sin in behaving lustily towards them.

This image persists in Buddhist scholastic literature. In a very similar passage in a philosophical text from centuries later, the *Tarkajvālā* (Blaze of Reasoning – preserved only in Tibetan), the author Bhā(va)viveka¹² criticizes the Maga and others of perverse behaviour (*viparyastavrata), including in this category Persians (*par sig*) and attributing to them the following view:¹³

In the same way: since all women are similar to a wooden mortar, a flower, fruit, cooked food, bathing steps, a road and so on, it is not good to claim that it is not proper to approach sexually a mother, sister, daughter and so on.

These passages are of interest for us in the first place as evidence that the author of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*, self-consciously, intentionally, and clearly ironically, took over and inverted a common formulation, putting it to work within his dramatic frame as a justification or persuasion, rather than as a calumny. The rhetorical power of the mother's speech comes from the audience's awareness of the usual form in which these examples appear, and the consequent appreciation of the inverted use to which they are here being put. But there is more going on here. From an ethnographic point of view, it is of interest that where the *Dharmarucy-avadāna* is abstract, speaking only of "a bordering country", these passages are precise, speaking of Maga-Brahmins. Who are these Maga-Brahmins, and what is their connection to the Persians with whom they are associated by the *Tarkajvālā*?

The term Maga-Brahmin refers fundamentally to Sun worshippers of (North) Western India, a real community whose most famous member was the sixth-century astronomer and polymath Varāhamihira, author of the encyclopaedic *Brhatsamhitā*. The term Maga itself, however, clearly refers in the first place to Persian Magi, the historical connection between the Indian Maga and the Persian Magi being that the ancestors of the Indian Maga were in fact Persian Zoroastrians. No doubt at least in part since the Persian Magi were understood to have been solar priests in their own right,

12 On the difficult question of the identity and date (sixth/seventh/eighth century?) of the author of the *Tarkajvālā*, see Ruegg 1990. Whether the name of this author is properly to be Bhavya, Bhāvaviveka or, as seems increasingly likely, Bhāviveka, and whether all these forms indeed refer to the same individual, are questions we need not address here. For the sake of convenience and familiarity only, I use the heretofore generally adopted form Bhāvaviveka, hedging somewhat by parenthesizing (va).

13 Cited (and also translated) in Lindtner 1988: 439, n. 18, and Kawasaki 1975: 1102, n. 2 = 1992: 514, n. 2 = Derge Tanjur 3856, *dbu ma, dza*, 281b3: *de bzhin du bud med thams cad ni gtun dang | me tog dang 'bras bu dang g-yos zin pa'i zas dang | khros bya ba'i 'bab stegs dang | lam zhes bya ba la sogs pa dang 'dra ba yin pas ma dang | sring mo dang | bu mo la sogs pa la bgrod par bya ba ma yin no || zhes zer ba ni legs pa ma yin no ||*.

Indian texts classify the Magas as Brahmins.¹⁴ As we will see, many sources conflate the Persian Magi with Persians in general, a connection which in its turn may have provoked the even less justified confusion of the Indian Maga with Persians. In the present case in particular, however, there is good reason to question whether, from an ethnographic point of view, one should associate the practices of these Indian Magas with the alleged perverse practices of certain Persians.¹⁵ We may note here, incidentally, that the specification in both the *Karmaprajñāpti* and the *Vibhāṣā* that the Maga-Brahmins reside in “the West” suggests once again a possible conflation of the Indian Maga-Brahmins and the non-Indian Persians. While the Indian Maga-Brahmins resided in an area located, it is true, to the (north-)west from the perspective of the bulk of the Indian subcontinent, from the geographical perspective of at least some important Buddhist authors including many Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma scholars, who themselves resided in the north-west in Gandhāra and Kashmir, the Maga-Brahmins would had to have been located not west of them but rather to their south, while it was Persia itself that lay to their west.

Given the not uncommon association, or even identification, in a variety of sources, of Persians with Magi, it is not surprising to find Indian Buddhist sources which attribute to Persians in general the very same practices attributed elsewhere to Indian Magas, and it is here that we begin to approach the truth of the matter. For while there seems to be no evidence that Maga-Brahmins held the views attributed to them in the passages cited above, others certainly did. The encyclopaedic *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu, extant in Sanskrit, knows who some of these advocates were:¹⁶

[Illicit love is] produced by delusion, as with the Persians who consort with their mothers and other women, and in the [Vedic] Gosava

14 See Humbach 1978: 230, n. 3, 234–5, n. 17, and Weber 1880: 454–6.

15 From the substantial literature, see Ashikaga 1953, Srivastava 1969, Chenet 1993, and Panaino 1996.

16 *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* ad IV.68d (Pradhan 1975: 241.9–11): *mohajo yathā pārasikānām mātrādigamanam gosave ca yajñe | yathoktam brāhmaṇo gosaveneṣṭyā samvatsaragovratī bhavati | upahā udakam cūṣati tṛṇāni cchinatti upaiti mātāram upa svasāram upa sagotrām iti | ye cāhur udūkhalapuṣpaphalapakvānmatīrthamārgaprahyo mātrgrāma iti* |. The Chinese translation of Xuanzang is found in Saeki 1887: 685 (16.9a5–9), T. 1558 (XXIX) 85c14–19, corresponding to Paramārtha’s T. 1559 (XXIX) 241b11–15; see La Vallée Poussin 1923–31: iii.147–8 (which here follows the Tibetan rather than the Chinese text, which is discussed in the notes). The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* passage is quoted in Saṅghabhadra’s **Nyāyānusāra* T. 1562 (XXIX) 577a10–15, as noted by Kasugai 1954: 303. A slightly shorter but almost identical passage to that in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (including the citation of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, for which see the next note) is found in the *Abhidharmadīpa* iv.3, ad verse 191 (Jaini 1977: 154.12–14). Obviously related, if not directly derivative, is the discussion in Atiśa’s *Karmavibhaṅga* §37, for which see Sherburne 2000: 506–7.

In his note on this *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* passage on p. 148, n. 1, La Vallée Poussin refers to the *Divyāvadāna* passage with which we began this discussion.

sacrifice¹⁷ ... And [so too are] those who say “The female sex resembles a wooden mortar used to pound rice, a flower, fruit, cooked food, a bathing spot, and a road”.¹⁸

Yaśomitra’s commentary on this passage, also available in Sanskrit, makes the connection which once again links us to the rhetoric of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*.¹⁹

- 17 The same example is given in the *Tarkajvālā*, Kawasaki 1975: 1101, 1099–1098 = 1992. For detailed references to the Gosava rite, see La Vallée Poussin 1923–1931: iii.148, n. 1, Thite 1972, and Mylius 1976, especially p. 49, where the locus classicus in the *Jaiminī-ya Brāhmaṇa* ii.113 is quoted as follows: *tasya vratam upa mātaram iyād upa svasāram upa sagotrām upāvahāyodakam ācāmed upāvahāya trṇāny āchindydāt yatra yatrānam viṣṭhā vindet tat tad vitiṣṭheta*, and translated: “Nach dessen Ritual beschleife er die Mutter, die Schwester und eine andere Frau aus demselben Geschlecht. Sich bückend schlürfe er Wasser, sich bückend rupfe er Grashalme ab. Wo auch immer ihn die Notduft ankommt, dort möge er austreten”.

In his *Prajñāpradīpa* Bhā(va)viveka writes the following (Derge Tanjur 3853, *dbu ma*, *tsha* 215b4–5 and van der Kuijp 2006: 196): *rig byed ni byed pa po tshul khrims 'chal bas byas par shes par bya ste | 'tshe ba dang | bgrod par bya ba ma yin par 'gro ba dang | chang 'thung ba chos su ston pa'i phyir | dper na par sig la sogs pa'i bstan bcos bzhin no ||*, “One should know that the Veda was composed by an immoral author, because it teaches as right (**dharma*) violence [= blood sacrifice], sexual relations with forbidden women (**agamyāgamana*) and drinking liquor, just like the treatises of the Persians and others”. This is paralleled in the Chinese translation as follows (T. 1566 [XXX] 119c15–17 [*juan* 13]): 又復、韋陀是破戒惡人所作說。殺生祀天、親處邪行、飲酒等故。譬如波西目伽論外人言。 (My translation of the Tibetan is indebted to that of van der Kuijp.)

In Avalokitavratā’s commentary to the *Prajñāpradīpa*, his *Prajñāpradīpaṭikā*, the second item is discussed as follows (Derge Tanjur 3859, *dbu ma*, *za*, 203a2–4; van der Kuijp 2006: 198): *go sa be zhes bya ba'i mchod sbyin byed pa'i tshe ma dang bu sring la sogs pa dang lhan cig tu gcer bur phyung te | phyugs bzhin du rkang lag bzhi sa la btsugs shing rtswa za ba ltar bcos te mngal gyi sgor lces 'dag pa dang | bshang pa'i lam du snom pa dang | 'khrig pa lhag par spyod pa la sogs pa dang | bu med pa la mtho ris su 'gro ba med do zhes zer zhing rang gi dbang po dul bar bya ba dang | mtho ris su 'gro ba'i lam ni bu yod par bya ba yin no zhes phyugs bzhin du ma sring la sogs pa dang 'chol bar spyod pa la sogs pas bsgröd par bya ba ma yin par 'gro ba dang*. “[As with the Persian treatises, the Veda teaches] sexual relations with forbidden women (**agamyāgamana*) by stating that: when one performs the Gosava sacrifice, one must strip naked together with one’s mother, sister and so on and, like cattle, set one’s four limbs on the ground and pretend to eat grass, perform cunnilingus, smell the anus, have intercourse, etc. [It also teaches] immoral behaviour consisting of acting like a cow with one’s mother, sister etc., given that they claim there is no way to heaven without a son, and thus one must ‘tame one’s [sexual] organ [with a close relative]’, and by this means must have a son, the road to heaven.” (My translation is again indebted to that of van der Kuijp.)

- 18 Here Paramārtha has: 又如頻那柯外道說。女人如白花菓熟食水渚道路等, “The *pinnākē* heretics say: ‘Women are like’” What *pinnākē* 頻那柯 (Pulleyblank 1991 *bjin-na'-ka*) indicates I do not know, but it seems to point to a particular name for those non-Buddhists (*wàidào* 外道 ≈ heretics) who hold this view or repeat this aphorism. If it is meant to stand for Indic **bhinnaka*, I am not certain in what meaning this should be taken (perhaps following one etymological possibility: “schismatic”? According to Böhtlingk and Roth 1855–1875: 5.289, the dictionary *Trikāṇḍaśeṣa* 3.1.22 defines the term as “ein buddhistischer Bettler”, which, however, can hardly be applicable here).
- 19 *Vyākhyā* (Shastri 1971: II.681,6–7; Wogihara 1936a: 403.16–18): *udūkhalādītulyo mātṛgrāmaḥ | yathodūkhalādayaḥ sādharmaṇā upabhogyāḥ evaṁ strījanāḥ | tasmān na doṣo 'sty abhigacchatām iti |*.

The female sex is equivalent to a wooden mortar used to pound rice, and so forth. As a wooden mortar used to pound rice and so on, women are objects to be enjoyed universally, and therefore there is no sin for those who sexually approach [any woman].

There appear, then, to be two basic forms of reference to Persian sexual immorality. One associates it with this set of similes of universal sexual accessibility, from which the possibility of close-kin sexual relations is made to follow as a logical correlate, the pattern reflected (backwards and inverted, as it were) in the *Dharmarucy-avadānā*. The other approach is simply to refer to the acceptability of incestuous relations, without connecting this position to the aforementioned logic. As an example of a text which simply asserts the stand, we may cite another Indian Buddhist abhidharmic text, the so-called **Satyasiddhi* or **Tattvasiddhi* (Perfection of Reality), preserved only in Chinese. In a discussion of the role of intentionality in the morality of action, this text says:²⁰

If someone with good intention were to have illicit sexual relations with his teacher's wife or kill a Brahmin, could this be meritorious? Those who dwell in frontier regions such as Anxi 安息 (Parthia/Persia/Bukhārā?)²¹ have illicit sexual relations with their mothers, sisters and so on, with the idea that this produces merit and felicity; is this, again, meritorious? [No,] therefore one realizes that merit and felicity arise from meritorious conditions, and not merely from one's mental state.

While the ethnographic element of the reference here is clear and correct, as we will see, no explanation of the background logic is offered. A number of later examples in Buddhist texts likewise concentrate solely on the moral dimension of the trope. According to Christian Lindtner, "In later Buddhist philosophical texts the Pārasīka [that is, Persian, JAS] practice of marrying one's mother (*mātrivāha*) becomes a stock-example of immoral behavior".²² Lindtner refers to passages in the works of the later philosophers Dharmakīrti,²³

20 T. 1646 (XXXII) 293b2–5 (*juan* 7), section §100: 若以善心姪於師妻, 殺婆羅門, 可得福耶。安息等邊地人, 以福德心姪母姊等, 復有福耶。故知從福因緣有福德生非但心也。 See Sastri 1978: 205 for a slightly different translation.

21 Whether Anxi here, in a text translated by Kumārajīva in the fifth century and putatively authored by the third or fourth century Harivarman, might refer to Parthia, Persia or Bukhārā is a difficult question, the answer to which is, however, not directly relevant to our inquiry here.

22 Lindtner 1988: 440, n. 23.

23 See the autocommentary to the *Pramāṇavārttika* in Gnoli 1960: 170.20, ad k. 321: *pārasīkamātrīmithyācāravat*, and also 125.23, ad k. 245, in which Dharmakīrti uses the word *mātrivāha* as an example of *mlecchavyavahāra*, incest with the mother, as the behaviour of barbarians. Precisely the same is found in the mid-tenth-century Nyāya work *Nyāyabhūṣaṇa* of Bhāsarvajña, a commentary on the same author's *Nyāyasāra* (Yogīndrānanda 1968: 406.14). I owe my knowledge of this last passage to Halbfass 1991: 127, n. 103 (in his study "Vedic apologetics, ritual killing, and the foundations of ethics"). Note that Bhāsarvajña is intimately familiar with Dharmakīrti and other Buddhist philosophers.

Durvekamiśra²⁴ and Śāntarakṣita in this context, all extant in Sanskrit. According to Śāntarakṣita, for instance, “The Persians, who are stupefied by constant devotion to that practice, do not see any fault at all in sexual relations with the mother, and so on.”²⁵ Here the thrust of the message has shifted from one which links the universal accessibility of women with the acceptability of incest to a blanket attribution to the Persians of an irrational and inexplicable immorality.

As we will explore in greater detail below, such attributions do have a factual basis, and in contrast to the generally abstract and theoretical Indian Buddhist scholastic texts we have noticed so far, parallel references also appear in materials which have long been understood, and may well have been intended to present themselves, at least in part, as essentially ethnographic field reports. In the Chinese pilgrim-monk Xuanzang’s seventh-century record of his travels to India, *Datang xiyuji* 大唐西域記 (Great Tang Records of the Western Regions), in the section on Persia we read:²⁶ “Their marriage customs are merely promiscuous intercourse”. Despite the reputation of this work as a source for ethnographic data on Central and South Asia, we must remember that the great scholar Xuanzang would have been intimately familiar with references in Indian Buddhist texts such as those we have just noticed (several of which he himself translated into Chinese), as well as aware of the appearance of similar notations in Chinese historical accounts of Persia, as we will notice below. We must, therefore, recognize the possibility, if not the probability, that his remarks were here, as indeed sometimes elsewhere, based at least as much on traditional ideas as on information he was able to gather himself in his travels, through his ethnographic fieldwork, as it were. The same reservations might apply to our appreciation of the records of another Buddhist pilgrim who, however, much more clearly refers to Persian incest, explicitly distinguishing it from fraternal polyandry. In his *Wang Och’ōnjuguk chōn* 往五天竺國傳 (Account of Travels to the Five Countries of India), the eighth-century Korean Buddhist monk-traveller Hyech’o 慧超 writes of the “Hu 胡 countries”:²⁷ “One extremely bad

24 In Durvekamiśra’s eleventh-century sub-commentary to Dharmottara’s commentary to Dharmakīrti’s *Nyāyabindu* (Malvania 1971: 15.17–18), we read as follows: “according to Persian authorities, at the death of the father the eldest son must marry his mother at once”, *pārasīkaśāstreṇa hi mṛte pitari mātā prathamam agrajena putreṇa parīnetavyā*, the sense of which is, however, sociologically speaking, quite distinct from what we see elsewhere. Such “filial levirate” is also mentioned in Arabic sources, on which see below.

25 *Tattvasaṅgraha* 2446 (Shastri 1982: 811): *na hi mātṛvivāhādau doṣaḥ kaścid apīkṣyate | pārasīkādhībhir mūḍhais tadācāraparaiḥ sadā ||*. The commentary merely repeats this: *yathā pārasīkādhībhir mātṛvivāhādāv* iti na kiñcid āścaryam*. (* misprinted °ar). This passage was referred to already by Kawasaki 1975: 1097, n. 14.

26 T. 2087 (LI) 938a16 (*juan* 11, section 20) = Ji 1985: 938 = Beal 1906: II.278: 婚姻雜亂. This seems to me the most likely understanding, although Ghirshman 1948: 125, n. 4, apparently suspected this expression to refer rather to polyandry.

27 Text in Kuwayama 1992: 24 (ll. 179–80): 極惡風俗。婚姻交雜。納母及姊妹為妻。波斯國亦納母為妻, translated p. 43. I quote the English translation of Jan in Yang et al. 1984: 54.

custom is incestuous marriages, [which allow] one to take his own mother or sisters as his wives. The Persians also take their mothers as their wives". The next sentence in the text distinguishes this practice from that of fraternal polyandry.²⁸ In addition, as Ono Hiroshi points out, the text goes out of its way to note that Persians marry their mothers, which may be understood to imply that this was not necessarily the case in the other lands of Sogdiana referred to by the first, more general, remark. This agrees with what is said explicitly in the earlier Chinese *Suishu* (History of the Sui Dynasty), quoted below.²⁹

However these notions were generated and transmitted in the first place, and no matter how they were copied many times over by authors with no first-hand knowledge, the actual referent of such descriptions is not difficult to locate;³⁰ it is clearly and obviously the Zoroastrian practice of *x^aaētuuadaša*, so-called next-of-kin or close-kin marriage.³¹ This practice is known not only from reports of those outsiders whom it shocked or disgusted, as well as more concrete evidence of its existence,³² but from texts

28 "From the country of Tokhāristān through Kāpiša, Bāmiyān, and Zābulistān, ten, five, three or two brothers jointly marry one wife. They are not permitted to take a bride individually, since they fear that would destroy their domestic economy." Text in Kuwayama 1992: 24 (ll. 180–81): 其吐羅國, 乃至罽賓國, 犯引國, 謝肥國等, 兄弟十人五人三人兩人, 共娶一妻, 不許各娶一婦, 恐破家計, trans. p. 43. Cp. Jan in Yang et al. 1984: 54. (The point, incidentally, seems to be that such brothers fear a dissolution of the estate if, at each generation, it is necessarily divided among siblings. Fraternal polyandry, although no doubt it has its own problems, from one perspective solves the problem without creating the difficulties and hardships for younger siblings which result from primogeniture.)

29 See Ono Hiroshi 小野浩 in Kuwayama 1992: 171, and the whole of his detailed note on this passage, n. 176 on pp. 169–71, although he does not refer to the *Suishu* passage.

30 Although the passages cited above from the *Divyāvadāna* and the *Abhidharmakośa* were quoted, translated and discussed by Pradhan 1981: 133, he nevertheless wrote that "I inquired of many Persian scholars, and they could not throw any light on [the question of the objective referent of Persians sexually approaching the mother]". About two decades ago, as a graduate student I first inquired about the matter to Professor Gernot Windfuhr, an Iranist at the University of Michigan; before I could even finish explaining my question, he had begun to pull from his shelves copious references to the practice.

31 Note the corresponding Pahlavi *xwēdōdāh* and similar forms of the same term. For the Achaemenid period, see Boyce 1985: 75–7. An old but informative survey is found in Appendix 3 to West 1882: 389–430: "The Meaning of Khvētūk-das or Khvētūdād". For another early discussion, see Darmesteter 1891. See too Spooner 1966. The connection of the Buddhist *Abhidharmakośa* reference and the practice of *x^aaētuuadaša* was already made in English by Kasugai 1960: 112 (in Japanese already in 1954: 300) and in Kawasaki 1975: 1099. For a very detailed treatment of the practice, see Sidler 1971: 86–149. Frye 1985 has reviewed the entire issue and given a cogent summary of what is known. See also Herrenschildt 1994, Macuch 1991, Arx 2005, and Williams 1990 (see below). My ignorance of Italian has prevented me from making as much use as I would have wished of Bucci 1978.

32 Inscriptions from early first-century Dura-Europos, a Greek colony in Syria under direct or at least indirect Parthian domination, recording royal sibling marriages have been taken as clear evidence for the pervasion of this Zoroastrian custom even

which promote it as well. Confirming the statement of the **Satyasiddhi* that such relations are claimed to “produce merit and felicity”, some Pahlavi texts (6–9th centuries) indeed advocate the practice of next-of-kin marriage with mother, daughter or sister as superior in religious merit even to the ceremonial worship of Ahura Mazdā, for it was through this type of marriage that the religious community could continue itself in purity;³³ it appears that in practice brother–sister marriage was the most common form. Molé, who discusses next-of-kin marriage as a re-creation of three primal next-of-kin marriages, states that they are then advocated as the only means of completely expiating sin.³⁴ Moreover, according to some Zurvanite texts, Ahura Mazdā’s primal marriage was with his own mother.³⁵

These are far from the only examples, and while it would indeed be ideal to include in the present survey of foreign perceptions of Zoroastrian practices a careful appraisal of the factual Persian evidence, its context within Iranian family law and so on, this is beyond my area of competence. Instead, I would like to turn to a demonstration that the ideas we find in Indian Buddhist literature conform closely to the impressions we also see reflected in literatures of other neighbours of Persia. For the Persian practices are well reported in non-Buddhist Indian, Classical, Arabic and medieval Chinese sources, all of which share and echo what we find in our Buddhist sources, thereby emphasizing the even broader cultural context within which we may understand the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*’s rhetorical move.

Non-Buddhist Indian texts, to the best of my knowledge, do not frequently refer to the trope, but the tenth-century Jaina work *Yaśastilaka* (Ornament of Fame) of Somadeva Sūri, in discussing the disasters which come about through the dissoluteness of a king, reports *inter alia* on the Persians as follows:³⁶

beyond the borders of Persia itself; see Cumont 1924. Macuch 1991: 147–8 cites the evidence of the historian Eliše Vartabed of the mass fifth-century conversion of the Armenians, in which reference is made to Zoroastrian priests requiring close-kin marriages, probably of all classes of society.

33 Note, however, that in one passage from a tenth-century Zoroastrian legal text, the following opinion is offered (Hjerrild 2003: 197): “The performance of *x’ētōdah* with the three (mother, sister, daughter) at whatever age, is always a perfect, meritorious deed, so consequently even if no children are born of the union, the value of the meritorious deed of performing *x’ētōdah* will not be diminished”.

34 Molé 1963: 123. I thank Professor Windfuhr for directing me to Molé’s work. For other references to Persian works, see Slotkin 1947: 615–6. For a recent study of the practice in Sasanian and post-Sasanian legal texts, see Hjerrild 2003: 167–203. For a translation from an important text, with commentary, see Williams 1990: 10–17, 126–37; in particular see his long n. 1 on pp. 126–32.

35 Molé 1963: 131.

36 Śivadatta 1903: II.95–96: *śrūyate hi: vaṅgīmaṇḍale nṛpatidoṣād bhūdeveṣv āsavopayogaḥ pārasīkeṣu ca svasavitṛīsaṃyogaḥ siṃhaleṣu ca viśvāmītrasṛ-ṣṭiprayoga iti*. I owe my knowledge of this reference to Thite 1972: 200; it is noticed also in Handiqui 1968: 99, and Kane 1968–1977: III.859, n. 1665, the first edition of which (1946) may be Thite’s source.

Note too that Medhātithi, a ninth-century commentator on the law book of Manu, stated without geographical or cultural limitation that it is the duty of a king

It is said that in Bengal Brahmins consume alcoholic spirits thanks to the sinfulness of the king, and the Persians have sexual relations with their own mothers,³⁷ and the Ceylonese mix castes.³⁸

A thirteenth-century digest of Indian law, the *Smṛticandrikā* (Moonlight-like Illumination of the Legal Literature) of Devaṇṇabhaṭṭa also mentions that among the Persians one may observe the practice of sexual relations with one's mother.³⁹ Yet other references, while implying that only foreigners would do such things, do not specify the identity of the offenders, whom we of course then have no way of necessarily associating with Persia, although contextually such references may well have been understood in this way.⁴⁰

to prevent the practice of incest with one's mother – Thite 1972: 201, quoting *māṭṛvivāhādih sāvabhaumena nivāranīyaḥ* from the commentary to *Manu* VIII.41 (already cited, once again, by Kane 1968–77: III.859, n. 1665).

- 37 It appears that either the commentator, the scribe or the editor was a bit shy here. The commentary is generally extremely detailed, glossing every word, but after *svasavitṛisāmyogaḥ* we are given only a line of marks of ellipses
- 38 The commentary to the *Yasatilaka* explains the word *viśvāmitrasṛṣṭiprayoga* as *varṇasaṅkara*. I owe to the kindness of Mr Adheesh Sathaye (email, 22 February 2004) most of the following: The term *viśvāmitrasṛṣṭiprayoga* probably refers to the alternate creation engineered by the sage Viśvāmitra in his efforts to send into heaven in his own body the kṣatriya king Triśaṅku, who had been cursed to become a caṇḍāla (outcaste). In order to accomplish this, and against the opposition of Indra who refused to allow Triśaṅku into his heaven, Viśvāmitra created an alternate heaven into which he could place Triśaṅku. This narrative is best detailed in the Bālakāṇḍa of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.56–1.59, though it is also found in different versions in a number of Purāṇas, among which see the *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.10–14 and *Skanda* (Nagarakhaṇḍa) 6.2–8 (see Mani 1975: 794–5). This counter-creation is usually termed a *prati-sṛṣṭi* in modern accounts, but often just *sṛṣṭi* in epic and purāṇic texts. Viśvāmitra also serves in this literature as an icon of *varṇasaṅkara*, the mixing of castes, primarily due to his having changed his own caste from kṣatriya to brahmin (referred to in *Mahābhārata* 3.85.12). The term *viśvāmitrasṛṣṭiprayoga* probably alludes both to this notion of caste intermixture (that is, of kings becoming brahmins) and to Viśvāmitra's counter-creation, in which he likewise caused a mixture of castes by forcing a caṇḍāla into heaven.
- 39 The passage in the *Smṛticandrikā*, which is not given any specific attribution, is printed as follows (Srinivasacharya 1914: 26.9): *tathā bhrāṭṛvivāho'pi pārasīkeṣu drśyate*. According to Thite 1972: 200, however, who cites this verse from a different edition, as well as from another text in which it also appears, the *Smṛtimuktāphala*, which is not available to me, *māṭṛvivāho 'pi* is a variant for *bhrāṭṛvivāho'pi*. The latter, in fact, hardly makes sense, unless it intends to attribute to the Persians the practice of incestuous homosexual relations between brothers, which seems highly unlikely. (It is virtually impossible that the text would be saying here that sisters have incest with their brothers, since the male-centred standpoint is taken for granted.) I therefore interpret the verse with the reading *māṭṛvivāho 'pi* (and even wonder whether the reading *bhrāṭṛ*° might not be a mere scribal error, perhaps within the devanāgarī script, in which *ma* and *bha* are very similar). According to Thite, this verse is attributed to the *Brhaspatismṛti*, but at least in the edition of the *Smṛticandrikā* available to me, there is no mention of this. On the *Smṛticandrikā* and its author, see Kane 1968–77: I.2: 737–1. The passage in question was already cited by Kane 1968–77: III.859, n. 1665.
- 40 One example is a passage from the *Mahābhārata* (I.79.13), quoted and translated by Goldman (1978: 347, and 383, n. 157): “They shall rule over sinful barbarians

As in some Indian literatures, in the much more thoroughly studied Classical sources too the references have a way of repeating themselves, while at the same time some authors do evidently base themselves upon direct knowledge. In fact, “Iranian marital customs are among the most frequently mentioned aspects of Iranian culture in Classical literature”.⁴¹ Apparently the first Classical author to have noticed the Persian custom in question was the fifth-century BCE Xanthus of Lydia, who said, according to Clement of Alexandria, that:⁴²

the Magi make love to their own mothers, and to their daughters and their sisters (so goes their custom); and the women belong to everyone in common, so that when a man wants to take another man’s wife as his own he does so without using force or secrecy but with mutual consent and approval.

Only slightly later, Herodotus, speaking of Cambyses, remarks that he took as wife his own sister, something remarkable because “before this, it had by no means been customary for Persians to marry their sisters”, implying, of

addicted to their guru’s wives, coupling with animals, behaving like beasts”, *gurudā-raprasakteṣu tiryagyonigateṣu ca | paśudharmeṣu pāpeṣu mleccheṣu prabhaviṣyati* ||. The expression of sex with the guru’s wife is the normal Indian way of referring to any incestuous relations with forbidden women, the mother included. Another example of the attribution of such objectionable practices to those who reside on the borders of the Indian world is seen in two interpolated verses in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (River of Kings) history of Kashmir, which Stein (1900: I.46, n. ad I.307) “attribute[s] to the ‘descendents of *Mlecchas*’ intercourse with their sisters, to the *Dāradas* illicit relations with their daughters-in-law, and to the *Bhāṭṭas* sale of their wives and licentiousness of their women-folk”. The word *mleccha* is usually a generic term for foreigner, while the *Dāradas* are Dards (on this problematic designation, however, see Mock, forthcoming), and the *Bhāṭṭas* a Tibetan people, perhaps Ladhakis, both barbarian groups from the point of view of Kashmiri Brahmins.

41 de Jong 1997: 424, and see 424–32; see earlier the short but valuable discussion in Bidez and Cumont 1938: 78–80. See also Gray 1908, and so too Frye 1985: 448–9. For Syriac and Arabic Christian texts, see Slotkin 1947: 614–15, and for Arabic histories p. 616, n. 32 (and see below). In my ignorance of Greek and Latin, for all sources in the following I am entirely dependent upon the scholarship of others.

42 The translation (of *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* F31, and *Stromata* 3.2.11.1) is that in Kingsley 1995: 179, whose article as a whole should be consulted on Xanthus. The passage is also found in Slotkin 1947: 612, 614, and Fox and Pemberton 1929: 2, whose work contains translations of the materials in Carl Clemen’s *Fontes historiae religionis Persicae* (1920). For similar references see among others also Diogenes of Laerte in Fox and Pemberton 1929: 80 and Slotkin 1947: 612, Theodoretus (early to mid fifth century), Fox and Pemberton 1929: 104, and the sixth-century Agathias, Fox and Pemberton 1929: 114 (and see the annotated translation of Cameron 1969–70: 81, 92).

Here too may belong a passage from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (10.331–3, Hill 1999: 56–7, whose translation I quote), from about the beginning of the Common Era: “They say that there are tribes / among whom mother is joined to son, and daughter / to father, so that piety may grow from doubled love”. In his extensive notes, Bömer 1980: 128 indeed associates this passage with others about Persians, although Walter Scheidel tells me this is not the only possible identification.

course, that later it was more regular.⁴³ These references indicate that already in the fifth century BCE the Greeks were familiar with this particular custom, which they attributed either narrowly to Magi, or more broadly to Persians in general. We see the same variation repeatedly as time goes on.

Some centuries after Herodotus, the poet Catullus (c. 84–54 BCE) writes that a Persian Magus ought to be born of a mother and her son,⁴⁴ while Curtius Rufus in the first century says in his *History of Alexander*:⁴⁵ “Among [the Persians] it is considered right for parents to have incestuous intercourse with their children”. Tatian, who wrote around 170 CE,⁴⁶ said that “The Greeks disapprove of the practice of having intercourse with one’s mother, but the Magians in Persia consider it perfectly honourable”. According to Pseudo-Clement (late fourth century?):⁴⁷ “It is the custom in Persia to take both sisters and daughters to wife, and in the whole of that region the Persians practice incestuous marriage”. A great many other such passages could be cited, from Greek and Latin writers both early and late.⁴⁸ Moreover, as evidence of the continuing hold the idea had on the European imagination through millennia, reference might also be made to the idea that Zoroastrians or “Magians” practised brother–sister marriage in Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* of 1721,⁴⁹ and a contemporary though

43 Herodotus III.31, translated in Godley 1938 (Loeb edition): 41. In light of this, I do not understand why de Jong 1997, who knows this passage, nevertheless speaks of “Herodotus’ unawareness of the occurrence of *xwēdōdah*-unions among the Persians”.

44 Catullus 90.3: *magus ex matre et gnato gignatur oportet*; I owe the reference to Hjerrild 2003: 168. The next line of the poem reads *si vera est Persarum impia religio*, something like “if the impious religion of the Persians is truly reported”. Calvert Watkins pointed out to me the pun: *mag[us]* comes from (*ex*) *matre* and (*et*) *gnato*. Note that about half a century afterwards the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria repeated that the offspring of mother–son marriages are considered superior – *De specialibus legibus* 3.13, quoted in de Jong 1997: 428.

45 Translated in Fox and Pemberton 1929: 43, and in Slotkin 1947: 613.

46 Translated in Fox and Pemberton 1929: 70, and in Slotkin 1947: 614. See also Sextus Empiricus (end of second century CE) in Fox and Pemberton 1929: 76.

47 Fox and Pemberton 1929: 91.

48 See the variety of sources translated in Slotkin 1947, as well as in Sidler 1971. For a study of the ways in which Classical and early Christian writers dealt with the issue of moral relativism, particularly with respect to incest and the Persian example, see Chadwick 1979, the core of which is a study of two late third- or early fourth-century edicts of Diocletian. We should note, of course, that a very great many of these references simply repeat the claims of earlier authors, sometimes explicitly. Thus for instance Tertullian in *Ad Nationes* 1.16.4 (see Schneider 1968: 101–02, and note on 277) cites as his authority the fourth-century BCE *Persica* of Ctesias Cnidus (for which see Slotkin 1947: 612). Further on the question of Persian influence and the reality of such marriage practices in the Roman world, see the interesting paper by Lee 1988.

49 See Richardson 1991. According to his note, in *lettre LXVII* Montesquieu narrates the “Histoire d’Aphéridon et d’Astarté” in which it is said that sibling marriage is permitted “selon l’ancien usage des Guèbres”, in which the latter term refers to Zoroastrians born in Persia under Islamic rule. The marriages are referred to as “alliances saintes, que notre religion [elsewhere termed “le culte des ces anciens Mages”] ordonne plutôt qu’elle ne permet, et qui sont des images si naïves et de l’union déjà formée par la Nature”.

slightly less direct reference in the famous work of Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733), *The Fable of the Bees*.⁵⁰

As is to be expected, since the Arabs are the closest neighbours of the Persians, and since, although not Arabs, as fellow Muslims the Persians were drawn deeply into the Islamic world, Arabic sources devote considerable attention to their habits, among which close-kin marriage finds a prominent place.⁵¹ These Arabic views tend to correspond closely to those of other peoples. This commonality extends to overall categories, such that, just as we saw in the case of the parallel Indian generalizations, “[s]ince in the Islamic period the [Arabic] term *majūs* was used indiscriminately for all adherents of Zoroastrianism, the custom [of close-kin marriage] was seen by the Arabs as an abomination of the Persians in general”.⁵² What is interesting, however, is that Islamic sources almost universally place these Persian abominations in the past, perhaps because Persians, having become Islamicized, cannot be imagined to have continued them. As the late ninth-century historian al-Ya‘qūbī wrote:⁵³ “The Persians ... used to marry mothers, sisters and daughters, maintaining that this is a boon to them and a charitable act to them, as well as a pious deed to God concerning them”. Some of the comments are explicitly placed in the context of comparing Arabs to Persians, as when the tenth-century Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī quotes the late seventh-century Daḡfāl ibn Ḥaṇṣala as saying that:⁵⁴ “the Arabs are superior to the Persians in three things: because we preserve our genealogies and they let them get lost; we are chaste regarding our female relations, while they marry their mothers and sisters; and we possess a natural disposition for eloquence and clear speech”. Other sources allege that the Persians were inspired by Satan to engage in sexual relations with mother or sister, or that “they consider it permissible to marry mothers. They say: a son is the one most fit to allay his mother’s lust; and when the husband dies, then his son is the one most entitled to the wife”, implying a sort of filial levirate.⁵⁵ Such examples could be multiplied many times over. It is also worth mentioning that Arab sources, like others, explicitly equate such relations with those of animals, with the difference that at least some authors go out of their way to

50 In Mandeville 1924: 330–31 the fascinating passage reads: “In the *East* formerly Sisters married Brothers, and it was meritorious for a Man to marry his Mother. Such Alliances are abominable; but it is certain that, whatever Horror we conceive at the Thoughts of them, there is nothing in Nature repugnant against them, but what is built upon Mode and Custom. A Religious Mahometan that has never tasted any Spirituous Liquor, and has often seen People Drunk, may receive as great an aversion against Wine, as another with us of the least Morality and Education may have against lying with his Sister, and both imagine that their Antipathy proceeds from Nature”. (I learned of the passage from Wolf 1995: 3.)

51 The following is based almost entirely on the very interesting study of van Gelder 2005, particularly pp. 36–77.

52 van Gelder 2005: 37.

53 From his *Tārīkh*, quoted from van Gelder 2005: 55.

54 From his *Baṣā’ir*, quoted from van Gelder 2005: 59.

55 See note 24 above. The examples here are taken from van Gelder 2005: 73.

emphasize that even animals will not willingly engage in incest with their own mothers.⁵⁶

References similar to those in Classical and Arabic works are likewise found in works of the literate culture lying far on the other side of the Persian empire, in the Chinese Dynastic Histories, nearly contemporaneous with the earliest Arabic texts.⁵⁷ The History of the Zhou dynasty (557–581), the *Zhoushu* 周書, was presented as a completed work only in 636, although compiled a few years earlier. There, in a passage on Persia, although without explicit specification of incest, the text avers:⁵⁸

In marriage, moreover, they make no distinction between noble and base, and are the lowliest of all the barbarians.

At almost precisely the same time, the *Suishu* 隋書 (History of the Sui Dynasty, covering the years 581–617), again presented in 636, more particularly remarks in its comments on Persia that individuals marry their sisters.⁵⁹ In its separate comments on what may correspond to Bukhārā (Anguo 安國),⁶⁰ however, the same text offers a characterization in terms which generally accord with the portrayal in Classical and Indian sources:⁶¹

The popular customs are the same as those in Sogdiana, but people marry their sisters, and mothers and sons behave just like beasts (that

56 See van Gelder 2005: 45 ff.

57 For similar but apparently unrelated passages in Chinese histories regarding other “barbarians”, see the “Additional note on other Central Asian incests in Chinese sources”.

58 See Miller 1959, who cites the text from the Bona 百衲 edition on p. 78 (16b: ef), and translates it on pp. 14–15. The passage reads: 婚合亦不擇尊卑，諸夷之中最為醜穢。The same (with the typical variants) is found in the *Tongdian* 通典 193 (1042b) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition v.5270), in the section on Persia (the translation in Wakeman 1990: 820, however, misunderstands the text). On this text, see below. For the dating of Chinese historical sources I have relied on Wilkinson 2000.

59 *Juan* 83, *liezhuan* 列傳 48 (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition vi.1856): 妻其姊妹。(The complete passage on Persia was translated by Parker 1903: 164–5.)

60 Historically, An(xi) 安息 refers to Parthia, the name being a transcription (Pulleyblank 1991 ?an-sik) corresponding to Arsak. I am indebted to Sanping Chen for pointing out to me that in the seventh century Anguo should be identified as Bukhārā (for some of the possibilities otherwise, see above in the citation of the **Satyasiddhi*). Further, Dr Chen writes:

My interpretation of this contrast between the An polity and the Sogdians is as follows: first, mother–son incest was perhaps the most “outrageous” part of the Zoroastrian/Magi heritage, as noted by many ancient Greek authors. Second, according to *Xin Tangshu* and other sources the Sogdians had a syncretic tradition, combining both Zoroastrian and Buddhist beliefs, while the state of An was a bastion of Zoroastrianism (see Chen 2003). Since in Buddhism mother–son incest, while not as strict a taboo subject as in Confucianism, is regarded as a grave sin nonetheless, the more outward-looking and partly Buddhist Sogdians thus likely no longer practised this extreme form of “next-of-kin marriage”.

61 *Juan* 83, *liezhuan* 列傳 48 (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition vi.1849): 風俗同於康國，唯妻與姊妹，及母子遞相禽獸，此為異也。The same is found in the *Tongdian*, *juan* 192 (1037a) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition v.5239), in its own passage on Parthia.

is, have sexual relations like beasts), which is different from the case [with the Sogdians].

This appears to be the only such Chinese passage which refers specifically to mother–son incest, and several years later, and when we find much the same thing once again being said in the section on Persia in the *Beishi* 北史 (History of the Northern Dynasties, covering the period 368–618), compiled between 630–650 and presented in 659, it is only sisters who are listed.⁶²

For the most part, they take their sisters, elder or younger, as wife or concubine, engage in other forms of marriage, and moreover make no distinction between noble and base; [thus] they are the lewdest of all the barbarians.

An additional comment of interest is found roughly a century and a half later in the *Tongdian* 通典 (Comprehensive History of Regulations), compiled in 801 by the high official Du You 杜佑 (735–812).⁶³ There he cites a passage from a subsequently lost work, the *Jingxing ji* 經行記 (Travel Record), composed upon his return to China by a fellow clansman, Du Huan 杜環, who had been held prisoner of war by the ‘Abbāsids, and who consequently had first-hand knowledge of Central and West Asia. In the quoted passage, in reference to the Xunxun 尋尋, Zoroastrians, Du Huan, putatively on the basis of his personal knowledge gathered during his captivity, stated that “The Zoroastrians are the most perverse among the many barbarians”.⁶⁴ Whether this should be taken as original information, or harkens back to something like what we find in the earlier *Zhoushu*, remains unclear.

62 *Beishi* 97, *liezhuan* 列傳 85 (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition 3223): 多以姊妹爲妻妾, 自餘婚合, 亦不擇尊卑, 諸夷之中最爲醜穢矣。The same passage is found in the *Weishu* 魏書, a text completed in 554 but later partly lost and subsequently supplemented sometime before 1061 with material from the *Beishi*, which it thus duplicates here (see Enoki 1955: 5). The *Weishu* passage was cited by Kasugai 1954: 300, without exact reference or notice of the *Beishi*, but in fact quoting *Weishu* 魏書 102, *liezhuan* 列傳 90: 多以姊妹爲妻妾, 自餘雜婚, 亦不擇尊卑, 諸夷之中最爲醜穢矣。I do not understand why Kasugai 1960: 112, whose translation of the first part I follow, understands the final expression as: “Not only that, but they have no aversion to marry their noble parents”, which seems to me quite impossible. (The passage was translated already by Parker 1903: 162 as follows: “Many of them take their sisters as wives or concubines, and, for the rest, in their marriage unions they make no choice of high or low degree, being in this respect the most revolting of all the barbarians”.)

63 I adopt Antonino Forte’s translation of the text’s title.

64 *Tongdian*, *juan* 193 (1041c) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition v.5266), in a comment attached to the section on the Daqin 大秦: 其尋尋蒸報, 於諸夷狄中最甚。I learned of this passage and its significance from Sanping Chen, who directed me to his remarks in Chen 1998: 79, n. 70. My comments on the passage are thoroughly indebted to his work, including the discovery that the term Xunxun refers to Zoroastrianism. It is worthwhile remarking, however, that the near literal identity of this observation with those found in histories from centuries earlier might cast some doubt on the originality and independence of this evidence.

There is some evidence, albeit controversial, that may point to an even later date for Zoroastrian next-of-kin marriage in China itself. A burial inscription of 874

It is difficult to know what, if any, connection should be assumed between such passages in seventh-century Chinese Dynastic Histories and similar works, which at least in origin refer to established ethnographic facts, and a Daoist criticism of Buddhism quoted significantly earlier in an early- to mid-fourth-century Buddhist refutation of such Daoist attacks, the *Zhengwu lun* 正誣論 (Rectification of Unjustified Criticism), a text which some consider to be the earliest Buddhist treatise composed in China. At the beginning of this text we find the Daoist critic maligning the Buddha by, initially, “grieving” over the bad character of the people among whom he was born, people we would imagine to be Indians, although the term used in the text itself is *húdi* 胡狄, which appears to have only the rather generic sense of “barbarian”.⁶⁵ The critic “grieved that among those barbarians father and son shared the same wife”, using an expression which alludes to a passage in one of the foundational works of Chinese literate culture, the *Liji* 禮記 (Rites), which emphasizes the bestiality of such an arrangement: “it is because the birds and wild beasts have no rites (*li* 禮 in the sense of morality, propriety) that (among them) father and son consort with the same female”.⁶⁶ In addition to recalling the *Suishu*’s characterization of the people of Anguo as behaving like beasts, it is not without

from Xian, with bilingual text in Chinese and Middle-Persian, refers to the deceased in Chinese as a wife, and in Middle-Persian as a daughter. If the individual whose wife she was and he whose daughter she was were the same person, this would point to the ongoing practice of next-of-kin marriage among Persian refugees in Tang China (where the husband was serving as a military officer, having fled at the Sasanian defeat at the hands of the Muslim invaders). Among the literature, see in Western languages Sundermann and Thilo 1966, Harmatta 1971, Ecsedy 1971, Lieu 1992: 232, 2000: 58–59, and Humbach 1988. Lieu seems thoroughly convinced that this is a case of incestuous marriage, while Humbach, if I understand him correctly, believes it is not.

65 The *dī* 狄 were originally a specific kind of *hú* 胡, that is a specific Central Asian people; through a common pattern of generalization, *húdi* apparently became a generic term. We notice that in the *Tongdian* passage cited in the previous note, barbarians are referred to with the closely related term *yidi* 夷狄 (which is unlikely to have here its “literal” sense of the *Yi* and *Di* barbarians).

66 The passage is found in the *Hongming ji* 弘明集, T. 2102 (LII) 7a24–5 (*juan* 1) = Makita 1973–75: I.28b: 愍彼胡狄父子聚麀 (v. 1. in Ming ed. 麀). It is translated into Japanese in Makita 1973–75: II. 61, and English in Zürcher 1959: 304, with 434, n. 87, and Link 1961: 139, with n. 19, whose article translates the entire *Zhengwu lun* (and Makita’s work is a complete Japanese rendering of the *Hongming ji*). The allusion to the *Liji* is specified in all these translations; the cited sentence reads: 夫性禽獸無禮，故父子聚麀。The complete *Liji* passage is translated by Legge 1885: 64 (he numbers it I.1.5 [21]) as follows:

The parrot can speak, and yet is nothing more than a bird; the ape can speak, and yet is nothing more than a beast. Here now is a man who observes no rules of propriety; is not his heart that of a beast? But if (men were as) beasts, and without (the principle of) propriety, father and son might have the same mate.

The same *Liji* expression is used in other texts to refer to the same idea. In the *Luoyang jialan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang; T. 2092 [LI] 1009b2–3 [*juan* 2]), with regard to Liu Xiulong’s incest with his mother he is said to have (Wang 1984: 115) “violated the principles governing human relationships, and acted no differently from birds and beasts”, 見逆人倫。禽獸不異。

interest to note here the remarks of the sixth-century Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in the Sasanian Empire, Mar Aba, who in reference to Persian next-of-kin marriage also speaks of “beast-like men (who) have confused marriage”, and equates those who “dare to approach the wives of their fathers” with “animals, which have no understanding”,⁶⁷ an interesting contrast with Arabic sources which, following Aristotle, believe even beasts to shy away from incest.⁶⁸ The distinction for the Christian Mar Aba, however, is not one between awareness or ignorance of ritual propriety, as it is in the Confucian *Liji*, but of rational man as opposed to irrational beast. To be sure, such practices were virtually if not entirely absent from India itself, and in any event were in no way socially sanctioned by Buddhists or most, if not all, other Indians. Still, in a Chinese text like the *Zhengwu lun*, in which the very identity of the hypothetical critic was completely confused,⁶⁹ it is hardly surprising that the alleged abhorrent practices of one group of western barbarians were confused with those of another, the more so if such a confusion would work to confirm a prejudice about the moral standards, or lack thereof, of the latter group. It is nevertheless ironic that, given the repeated Buddhist castigations of Persians for this behaviour in Indian texts, including some eventually translated into Chinese, they themselves were put on the receiving end of just such an accusation by some of their earliest Daoist critics in China.⁷⁰

The materials examined here illustrate the thoroughgoing Indian Buddhist participation in a set of moral value judgements found in the literatures of peoples from Greece to Korea, value judgements which see sexual relations between mother and son, siblings, and other close kin as the very height of moral depravity. What so exercises all these critics about the Persian case is not that some Persians engage in incest. Honest authors everywhere recognize that isolated cases of incest occur now and then. Leaving aside the certainly undeniable element of blind and undifferentiated prejudice against the Other, what those who have engaged in such invective find so very objectionable is (what they perceive to be) Persian cultural acceptance, or even active encouragement, of such incestuous unions as a matter of policy. Isolated cases are aberrations, and may be dismissed or ignored as such. They are, in almost a literal sense, the exceptions which prove the rule. Systemic patterns are a different matter, and in such a case present by their very existence a fundamental challenge to the universality and correctness of one's own system.⁷¹ Whether ordinary

67 Cited in Mitterauer 1994: 231.

68 See van Gelder 2005: 45 ff., as above.

69 See Zürcher 1959: 311 and Link 1961: 137 on the confusions.

70 I do not know just how familiar Daoists might have been with Buddhist literature at this time, but from a chronological point of view alone it is quite unlikely that these Daoist critics would have been aware of any such passages in Buddhist texts.

71 Leavitt (1990: 973) looks at the issue from another perspective: “Institutional cases of incest are theoretically and evidentially more important to the question of incest avoidance because, unlike individual cases (which are reported in statistical rates or case studies), institutional cases are culturally legitimated behaviors. As such, they would appear to more readily challenge the notion that genotype structures for incest avoidance are violated only by rare individuals and deviant cases”.

Persians ever systematically engaged in what Indians and others would have judged to be forms of next-of-kin or even close-kin incestuous marriage is a matter of debate.⁷² Nevertheless, as is so often the case, the perception here is sometimes more important than the reality and, as we have seen, the generalized reputation of the Persians as a nation of incestuous sinners pervaded the literate world throughout the first millennium of the common era, and well into the second. When Indian Buddhist texts invoke this example as a paradigm of immoral behaviour, they thereby demonstrate their participation in a pattern of cultural stereotyping with a rich pedigree indeed.

The author of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*, in common with some other Buddhist writers, links the practice of sanctioned incest with an ideology of the universal sexual accessibility of any female. This provides an implicit logic for the practice, thereby suggesting that it is not a chance aberration but a matter of cultural policy. For the authors who find such behaviours offensive, this serves to certify its inherent immorality. In the hands of the *Dharmarucy-avadāna*'s author, in a spectacular rhetorical move it is made to work as justification rather than calumny. The mother into whose mouth these words are put – “moreover, in a bordering country, just this is the normal way things are done” – is thereby identified for the audience as a partisan of the highest form of depravity, not only by her actions, although they would be enough to condemn her, but by her appeal to the cultural paradigm with which she aligns her behaviour. It is the ubiquity of the trope as the paradigm of immorality that makes its positive employment as a validation its own damnation.

An additional note on other Central Asian incests in Chinese sources

In addition to the passages from Chinese Dynastic histories referring to the marriage patterns of the Persians quoted in the main body of this paper, there are other examples of very similar expressions with regard to other “barbarian” peoples. The *Suishu* 隋書 (History of the Sui), completed in 636, has the following in its discussion of the Dangxiang 黨項:⁷³ “People are very obscene and perverted, in which there are no parallels among other barbarians”. The name Dangxiang 黨項 is generally understood to refer to the Tanguts, but these are not, of course, the Tanguts of the Tangut (Xixia

72 See Macuch 1991, cited above in n. 32, for some evidence that close-kin marriage was indeed widely practised in Zoroastrian society (noting that it would be incautious to term it “incest” under conditions in which it was socially sanctioned, and even formally and legally accepted, if not stipulated). One might also note the evidence for widespread close-kin marriage in Egypt across generations, although it is mentioned rather rarely even in Classical sources. See among a number of recent studies Scheidel 1996, 1997, 2002, 2005, with references to earlier literature.

73 Cited by Enoki 1959: 182, and n. 271. The text is in a passage on the Dangxiang 黨項 (Tangut) in book 83, *liezhuan* 列傳 48 (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition vi.1845): 其俗淫穢蒸報, 於諸夷中最爲甚. Enoki rendered “People are very obscene and brother and sister, and mother and son have sexual intercourse, in which there are no parallels among other barbarians”, which I do not well understand, and which may be due to a conflation of this with other similar passages elsewhere.

西夏) empire as such, since the latter existed only from 982–1227, centuries after the period in question. The name Dangxiang was in use from the sixth century in reference rather to certain Qiang 羌 tribes or tribal confederations to the west of China, the descendants of whom went on later to found the Tangut state.⁷⁴

A similar passage is found in the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old Tang History), compiled in 945:⁷⁵

They take as wife their father's concubine and wives of their father's brothers, their own elder brothers' wives, and the wives of their children. They engage in obscenities and defile themselves, the worst among all the barbarians. However, they do not marry within the same clan.

There are a number of interesting problems connected with such passages. One thing which emerges from the investigations of Enoki, and earlier of Shiratori, seems to be an apparent confusion, at least in some sources, between the acceptance of certain types of incestuous union on the one hand and the practice of polyandry on the other.⁷⁶ To be sure, we must remain aware that observers such as those upon whom the Chinese historians relied may well not have classified the world as we do, and the differential categorizations we impose on various forms of marital and sexual relations, such as incest on the one hand and polyandry on the other, may well have no direct correspondences in the classificatory world-view of these Chinese scholars. In order to discover answers to the kinds of questions we would like to ask, careful examination of Chinese sources regarded as relevant to these questions will nevertheless have to attempt to distinguish between the two modes of sexual relations.

In an attempt to clarify some of the materials which appeared to me confusing or conflicting, I sought the help of Victor Mair, who directed me to Sanping Chen, who has kindly written to me as follows:

The accusations of “Barbarians” marrying their mothers go back to the descriptions of the Xiongnu. But unlike that of the Zoroastrians, the

74 See Dunnell 1984: 81.

75 *Jiu Tangshu*, *juan* 198, *liezhuan* 列傳 148 (Dangxiang 黨項) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition 5291): 妻其庶母及伯叔母、嫂、子弟之婦, 淫穢蒸襲, 諸夷中最爲甚, 然不婚同姓. The same (with the typical variants) is found in the *Tongdian* 通典 190 (1022bc) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition v.5169), also in the section on the Tanguts (see the translation in Wakeman 1990: 269). Although two clauses are omitted, almost precisely the same passage is also found in the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (New Tang History), *juan* 221A 1b (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition 6214), *liezhuan* 列傳 146A (Dangxiang 黨項): 妻其庶母、伯叔母、兄嫂、子弟婦, 惟不娶同姓.

76 See Enoki 1959: 179–83, more dependent on Shiratori 1933: 147–8 (607–08) than is credited.

In a proper study it would be important to distinguish between practices such as sororal polygyny and fraternal polyandry, for instance. Whether the sources would permit this degree of specificity is another question.

mothers of concern here were not birthmothers but always stepmothers (particularly father's concubines, or *shumu* 庶母) as clearly stated from *Shiji* on down. This is clearly a generalized form of levirate, especially given the lack of generational delineation on the Steppe. There was little difference between a widowed sister-in-law and a widowed stepmother in this sense. Naturally, such acts invoked the strongest moral indignation of the Confucian literati, who regarded a (non-concubine) stepmother as an equivalent of a birth mother (at least in an idealist system of filiality). These Confucian moralists were oblivious to the fact that identical "incestuous" relations had abounded in China during the time of Confucius. Topping the later "Barbarians," there was even a recorded marriage between a grandson and a grandmother!

There was heavy intermingling between the Qiang/Tibetans and the Altaic-speaking Steppe tribes, exemplified by the long-lasting Tuyuhun regime in Northwest China.

In my view, the similarities shown by the dynastic histories' description of the marital mores of ancient Iranian and the Qiang groups are partially coincidental and partially driven by sinocentric moral indignation. By specifying *shumu* and leaving out sisters, the passages on the Qiang are not at all inaccurate.

That said, I venture to add that one may not ignore the pre-Islamic Iranian influence on the Steppe and in China either, which is one of the most understudied subjects. A case can be made that the Iranian incestuous marriage customs have had their fair share of impact during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, that in turn may have influenced the observations (or moral tones) of contemporary Chinese historians.

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