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Zoroastrianism and the Greeks

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NOTES

1. This feature is lacking in the altar at the so-called fire temple at the older Median site of Tepe Nush-i Jan. On the Pasargadae fire-holders see D. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978, pp.51-52.
2. D. Stronach, "Urartian and Achaemenian Tower Temples", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 26, 1967, p.287.
3. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, pp.53-54.
4. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, pp.54-57.
5. The brief inscriptions at Pasargadae in Cyrus' name are thought to have been made after that king's death.
6. Naqsh-i Rostam a, 1- 4.
7. Behistun V, 18-20.
8. Behistun IV, 61-66.
9. Excellent photographs and descriptions of them all are given by E.Schmidt, *Persepolis*, vol.III, Chicago, 1971.
10. S. Dalley, "The god Salmu and the winged disk", *Iraq*, vol.48, 1986, pp.85-101.
11. This explanation of the Zoroastrian symbol was first put forward by I. Taraporewala in the *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, 1928, vol.2, pp.16 n.l, 25 n.21, and advances in knowledge have since confirmed it as correct. See especially the articles by A. Sh. Shahbazi, "An Achaemenid symbol I", *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, vol.7, 1974, pp.135-144; "An Achaemenid symbol II", *AMI*, vol.13, 1980, pp.119-147. P. Calmeyer, "Zur Genese altiranischer Motive : V Synarchie", *AMI*, vol.10, 1977, pp.191-195. The symbol is more generally regarded by Parsis as representing the *fravashi*, which is traditionally conceived as winged.
12. Xerxes, Persepolis h 35-41.
13. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol.II, Leiden 1982, p.204 with n.37.
14. Herodotus, *Book III*.16.
15. The oldest excavated temple with clear evidence of the presence of sacred fire is that at Takht-i Sangin on the Amu-Darya (ancient Oxus), in former Bactria, attributed to the late 4th century BCE. See, with references to Soviet scholars' reports, F.Grenet in Boyce-Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol.III, Leiden, 1991, pp.173-179 with plan. The temple as a whole appears to have been an image-shrine.
16. Plutarch, *Of Isis and Osiris*, chs.191-193.
17. See M.Boyce, *The Parthians: Defenders of the Land and Faith*, in this volume.
18. Kerdir's inscription on the Ka'ba-yi Zardusht, line 7.
19. R.Naumann, *Die Ruinen von Tacht-e Suleiman und Zendan-e Suleiman*, Berlin, 1977; D.Huff, "Takht-i Suleiman," *Bild der Wissenschaft*, Vol.7, 1982, p.30 ff.; K. Schippmann, *Die iranischen Feuerheiligtümer*, Berlin-New York, 1971, pp.309-357.
20. For the excavated buildings on the mountain-side (probably a large temple complex) see K. Schippmann, *Die iranischen Feuerheiligtümer*, pp.60-70; S. Ghanimati, "New Perspectives on the chronological and functional horizons of Kuh-e Khwaja in Sistan," *Iran*, vol. XXXVIII, 2000.
21. B. Marshak, "Les fouilles de Pendjikent", *Comptes-rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1990, pp.307-309 with fig.16; Guitty Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, University of California Press, 1981, pp.29-30 with fig.5.



Obverse
Bust of king in profile
wearing an elaborate tiara.



Reverse
Seated archer, Greek
inscription describes the king
as "Arsaces, the great King of
kings..."

Silver drachm of the Parthian King Mithradates II
(c. 123-88 BCE).



Zoroastrianism and the Greeks

Albert de Jong

Early Greek culture showed a great receptivity for ideas, traditions, goods, and customs from the ancient Near East. Contacts between the Greeks and the peoples of the Near East predate the earliest written Greek sources for the subject considerably. Archaeological evidence strongly suggests a long history of trade, war and coexistence between the Greeks and the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Assyrians and the peoples of other nations in the Near East. These contacts are also evidenced by the presence, in Greek, of loanwords from the languages spoken by these peoples. This receptivity is further evident in the field of religion and literature. It is clear, for instance, that several myths found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, a poetic genealogy of the gods from the eighth century BCE, conform to patterns and ideas found in much earlier Mesopotamian sources such as the famous Babylonian epic of creation *Enuma Elish* of second millennium BCE.

The Greek myths of the generations of the gods, culminating in the clash between the Titans and the Olympian deities (resulting in the dominance of the latter) are remarkably close to similar stories found in Hurrian, Hittite, and Mesopotamian literature,¹ such as the Hurrian-Hittite song of Ullikummi from the early second millennium BCE. In other areas of religion, such as cultic institutions, sacrificial proceedings, wandering priests, extispicy, astrology, and magic; similar parallels have been established.² Although the persistence of religious ideas and practices from the Indo-European past is not in doubt, it is clear that Greek religion absorbed not only traditions from the "original" inhabitants of the regions where they settled (sometimes called the "Helladic" peoples), but also from the ancient Near Eastern peoples with whom they had established intimate contact.

1
Obverse of Seleucus I, Syria,
Portrait of Alexander with
lion headress.
Hellenistic, Seleucid, silver
tetradrachm.
Collection and copyright:
British Museum, UK.





3 Lesser Podium Frieze displays a seated Persian satrap, receiving tributes from an embassy of elders. He is seated shaded by a parasol with his feet raised from the ground by a foot stool typical of the form adopted by Persian kings, as evident in the many Achaemenian bas-reliefs in Iran. A young soldier stands guard behind him. The frieze could be a historical episode from the life of the dynast buried in the tomb. Nereid monuments, Lykian tombs, Southwest Turkey, Xanthos, c.390–380 BCE. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



4 Architrave Frieze depicting a banquet scene showing a Persian satrap reclining on a draped cushioned couch, holding a stylized Persian drinking vessel, a rhyton and a libation bowl (*phiale*). He is surrounded by attendants and one of them leans forward to whisper in his ear. The figure of the dynast is carved larger than the other figures to indicate his superior status. Nereid monuments, Lykian tombs, Southwest Turkey, Xanthos, c.390–380 BCE. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



2

The Nereid monuments, named after the Nereids, daughters of the sea god Nereus, reflect the extent of Greek and Persian influence on Lykian culture. This is the first known example of a temple-tomb. Lykian nobles were buried in these tombs which had the appearance of a Greek temple. The Persians led by General Harpagos defeated the Lykians at Xanthos in 546–545 BCE. The Lykians under Persian suzerainty were ruled by local satraps whose tombs reflect their noble lineage and are representative of their importance in society. The Lykian monuments were discovered by Charles Fellows between 1838–1844 CE. The Architrave Frieze depicts a procession of figures marked by their Persian dress, bringing tributes of cloth, and a horse, as gifts for the satrap, buried in the tomb. Southwest Turkey, Xanthos, c. 390–380 BCE. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.

This culture of receptivity seems to have come to an end around the sixth or fifth century BCE, the beginning of what is often called the “classical” period, 500–300 BCE dominated by Athens and Athenian institutions. The threat posed by the Persians, their attack on the Greeks, and the crushing defeats suffered by the Persians in the “Persian Wars”, 500–449 BCE, are important factors in the genesis of Greek cultural and political identity.³

The Greeks went into the Persian Wars as a loose collection of city-states and small autonomous regions and islands, with little awareness of what they had in common. They came out of the Persian Wars with a strong sense of a shared culture, defined by the language they spoke and the customs they cherished. This perhaps overstates and certainly simplifies the matter, but as a pattern it is useful to bear in mind.

A secondary consequence of the Persian attacks on the Greeks, with very important implications for the interpretation of the available sources, was the rise of Athens as the dominant political and cultural factor in the Greek speaking world. Athens’ new status was expressed partly in tragedies, comedies, and other works of literature, which explored what it meant to be Greek by giving a caricature of what it meant to be “barbarian.” The opposites between the two groups are well known and have frequently been explored. The Greeks were lovers of freedom, masters of eloquence and rationality, as well as models of moderation, austerity, and self-restraint. The Persians, for a while the “barbarians” *par excellence*, were the opposite of all these things: they were slave-like servants of the King of kings, oppressed and used by the ruling classes, who indulged in luxury and lasciviousness. This polarising view of the barbarian Persians was moulded into a Greek historiography of the Persian empire: glorious in its early days, under Cyrus and Darius, but weak and decadent after Xerxes.

This image of the Persians and their culture has been extremely tenacious in Greek literature. It is probably best seen as an “Athenian bias” in Greek texts and its ideological foundations have only been laid bare in recent decades. The fact is that the image of Persian hating Greeks is contradicted by a wealth of evidence. There were, of course, large areas of the ancient world where the Persians and the Greeks cohabited for centuries in the cities and rural areas of Asia Minor. There were Greek artisans

and diplomats employed in Persepolis, as there were expatriate Persians in Greece and on the Greek isles.⁴ A literary echo of the presence and importance of non-Iranians at the Persian court can be found in the biblical story of Esther which features the Jewish wife of the Persian king, her uncle Mordechai and their opponent Haman, known as the Agagite, a reference to his being a foreigner (from the Israelite perspective) and an enemy of Israelites. The common image of the Athenian hatred of everything Persian has been effectively demolished recently in a brilliant study of the artistic and archaeological evidence for Persian influences in Greek, more specifically Athenian, material culture,⁵ (fig.2). Evidence for this Athenian receptivity for Persian material culture is found, for instance, in new, Persian, shapes for bowls and dishes and representations of servants attending members of the aristocracy with fly whisks, parasols and fans, which are strongly reminiscent of the sculptural reliefs from Persepolis (figs.3,4). Such influences are comparatively easy to detect. Cultural exchange in the ancient world seems to have been easiest in those areas, which did not require too much knowledge of foreign languages: art, architecture, cooking, and music.⁶ With regard to more verbal disciplines, such as literature, philosophy, and religion, the question of cultural interaction is much more complex. There has been a tendency in older scholarly literature, for instance, to compare ideas found in the works of Greek philosophers with ideas found in Zoroastrian texts and (almost invariably) to suggest an influence from Zoroastrianism on these Greek philosophers.⁷ Such suggestions have been rejected in an almost casual manner by the majority of specialists in ancient Greek philosophy, in spite of the existence of a number of balanced, well-argued cases.⁸ The field is clearly in need of a renewed substantial treatment of the subject. In order to introduce the readers to the variety of questions in this field, it is essential to first give an overview of Graeco-Iranian cultural contacts, then look at the information Greek literature has to offer on Zoroastrianism, briefly study an example of possible interaction (be it on paper) in the philosophy of Plutarch and turn to what is possibly the most fascinating subject in the field, the various Graeco-Iranian cults in Asia Minor. In conclusion, some ideas on the possibilities of mutual influences will be outlined.



5
Map of Asia Minor, Syria
and Lower Egypt.
Collection: Firoza Punthakey
Mistree.

Greeks and Iranians: an Overview

The chronology and spread of Graeco-Iranian contacts are well known. The earliest large-scale contacts between the Iranians and the Greeks were marked by the attempt of the Persian armies to conquer the lands inhabited by the Greeks. These resulted in the defeat of the Persians, whose expansion to the west came to a halt.⁹ An important number of Greeks, however, remained as subjects of the Persians: those who lived in Asia Minor and on some of the Greek isles¹⁰ (fig.5). Moreover, there was a flurry of activity between the Persians and the Greeks in the Achaemenian period, 550–331 BCE, which resulted in diplomatic, commercial, and artistic exchanges.¹¹ These are reflected in documentary, literary, and artistic sources, but since nothing survives of the indigenous Iranian historical traditions, we cannot know what the Persians thought of the Greeks. This changes with the next dramatic event in the relations between Greeks and Iranians, the conquests of Alexander (fig.6). Just as the burning of the Athenian Acropolis by Xerxes in 480 BCE, was seen by many Greeks as one of the most dramatic events in their history, Alexander's conquest of the entire Achaemenian Empire and his destruction of its capital Persepolis, in 330 BCE, were remembered in Iranian traditions as the greatest blow ever to have been suffered by

the religion. Virtually alone among all non-Zoroastrians, Alexander was remembered in Zoroastrian traditions, as *gizistag* a destructive accursed ally of the Evil Spirit, who tried to ruin the religion, stole or burned its texts, killed its priests and quenched its fires. Many Greeks and Macedonians also saw Alexander as a traitor, but for different reasons: his attempts to fuse Greek and Persian culture, evident from the 'forced' mass marriages of himself and his men with Iranian women, were seen as completely misguided by the majority of his followers. Alexander's policy of retaining local government structures and individuals ran counter to the expectations many of his men had of the rewards to be gained from their conquests. When Alexander died in 323 BCE, most of his men divorced their Iranian wives and a long battle of succession ensued, resulting in the partition of Alexander's empire.¹²

Of the main contenders in this battle of the successors Ptolemy managed to secure Egypt and others established various small kingdoms in Asia Minor. The Near East almost in its totality was usurped by Seleucus, one of Alexander's most important generals, who built an empire, through conquest and through dynastic allegiances with local aristocratic families (eg. the Bactrian princess, Apamea), that stretched from the Euphrates to the banks of the Oxus and all the way to India (figs.1,7).

6
A marble sculpture of Alexander of Macedon. Conscious of the far reaching effects of propaganda, Alexander is said to have been personally involved in the careful selection of sculptures to project his desired image of spirited strength and eternal youthfulness. Alexandria, 2nd–1st centuries BCE. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.





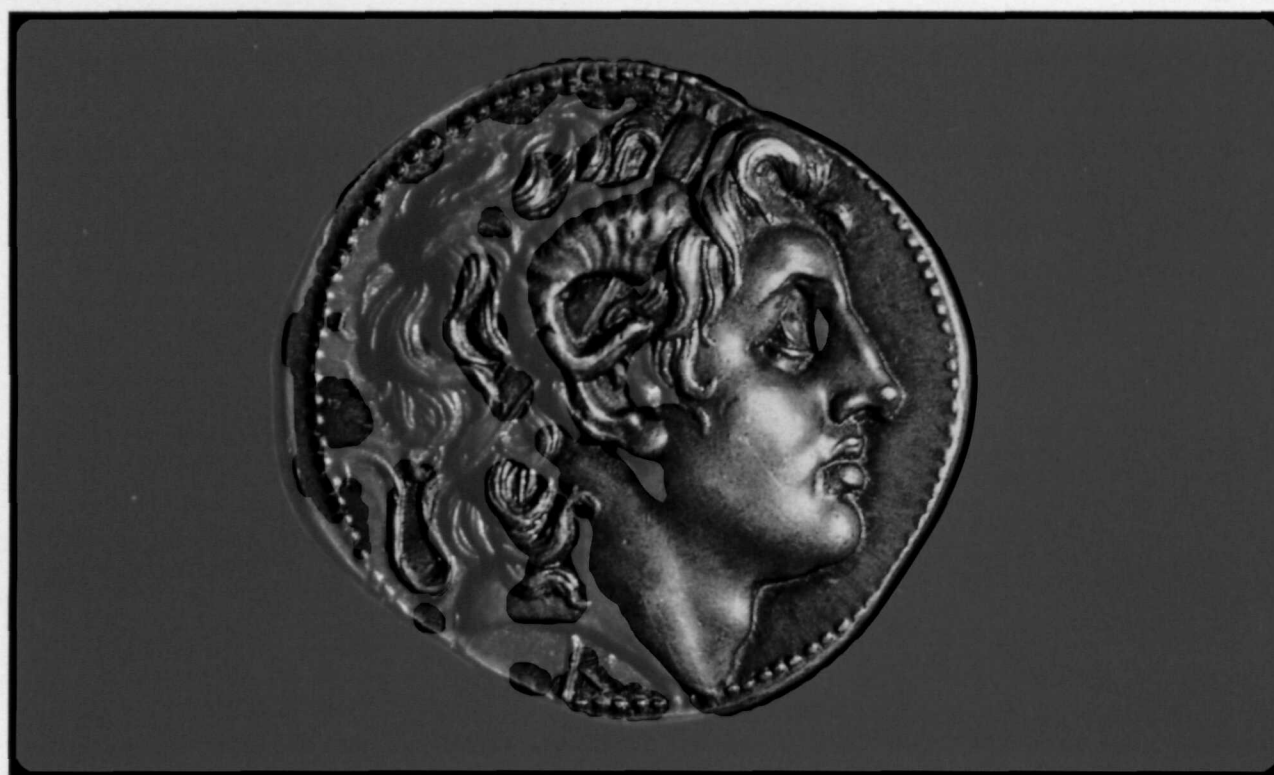
Thus, the regions where most Zoroastrians lived came under the rule of Seleucus I and his family. The Seleucid Empire, 312–216 BCE, had its centre in Babylonia and seems to have followed the earlier tradition of a high level of religious autonomy for the subject peoples. The practical organisation of the empire changed in the sense that a substantial number of cities were founded from which the regions were administered. These cities were Greek in organisation and spirit and Hellenic in population,¹³ (figs. 8, 9a, 9b). The presence of typically Greek institutions such as theatres, gymnasia, games, and city councils in the Near East has led scholars of previous generations to interpret the Hellenistic period (the period between the rise and decline of Alexander's empire and the rise of imperial Rome) as a period of cultural interaction between the Greeks and the "Orientals". This was often interpreted as a missionary movement: the subject peoples of the east were confronted with and enriched by the treasures of Greek culture. This idea has been much opposed in recent times and for good reasons. It is not just that the peoples of the Near East showed no recognisable interest in these aspects of Greek culture,¹⁴ the Greeks themselves had no wish to share their culture with the subject peoples.¹⁵ Although on personal and regional levels¹⁶ cross fertilisation did take place and commercial relations persisted and thrived,¹⁷ the overall picture that emerges is one of side-by-side

coexistence coupled with cultural indifference. This may be due to the fact that the majority of our sources come from the cultural centres and not from the marginal areas, such as Cappadocia, Eastern Anatolia, and parts of Bactria where the level of interaction must have been higher (figs. 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b).

The Seleucid Empire was weakened by repeated attempts at breaking free from its centre. This resulted in semi-autonomous principalities such as the Frataraka "dynasty" in Pars¹⁸ and eventually led to the emergence of a new Iranian empire: the Parthian Arsacid Empire. Contrary to the earlier principalities and resistance movements, the Parthians turned west when they had taken a firm hold on the Iranian central lands.¹⁹ They eventually took over a large part of the Seleucid Empire and, in the course of centuries, found themselves rulers of many nations, including many Greek principalities. The structure of their empire, modelled on that of the Seleucids, delegated regional government to several local semi-autonomous dynasties. In the Parthian period, there is much evidence of intercultural contacts. Although scholars continue to debate the extent of the Parthian contribution to the formation of the distinctive art of the cities of Syria and Mesopotamia, the personal interest of the Parthian kings in the culture of the Western peoples, including the Greeks is not in doubt.



7 Reverse, King Seleucus I of Syria seated on a throne with an eagle perched on his right hand. Hellenistic, Seleucid, Silver tetradrachm. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



8 Portrait of Alexander on a coin of Lysimachus. Hellenistic, Seleucid, Silver tetradrachm, wt. 17.25 gms. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



9a, 9b

Obverse of a coin depicting helmeted portrait of Seleucus excavated from Pasargadae. Reverse portrays the satrap with a winged figure holding fire in her hand. Hellenistic, Seleucid, Silver tetradrachm. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



10a, 10b

Obverse of Sogdian coin depicting Alexander. Reverse shows a seated satrap with bird in hand. Silver drachm, wt.4.19 gms. Courtesy: India Office Library, London. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



11a, 11b

Obverse of Graeco-Bactrian coin of Demetrius I wearing an elephant headdress. Reverse of Greco-Bactrian coin showing standing figure. Silver tetradrachm. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



A striking example of Parthian receptivity to Greek culture is their use of the Greek language and Greek religious iconography on the coins they minted together with the frequency of the epithet "Philhellene", "Lover of Greek(s)", which they added to their names and titles. Between the Greeks in the West and the Parthians in the East were many semi-autonomous regions in Asia Minor, where local dynasts managed to actually create a Graeco-Iranian cultural synthesis: the Mithradatids in Pontus who claimed Achaemenian ancestry and had many Zoroastrians among their subjects. But there were many more, and the dynasty of Commagene are only the best known of these (fig.12). Some of the most important descriptions of Zoroastrianism in Greek literature are from this period.

The Parthians eventually faced a new enemy: imperial Rome. The regions between the wholly Greek and the wholly Iranian cultural realms, Asia Minor, Armenia, Syro-Mesopotamia, turned into battlefields for centuries, with little advance for either side. Many Roman emperors claimed a *Victoria Parthica* (victory over the Parthians) and added *Parthicus* to their names to indicate the fact that they had defeated the enemies they feared most. These purported victories never succeeded in significantly changing the balance of power for a longer period.

This situation did not change with the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, but by that time, in the early third century CE, the religious map of the world was changing rapidly. Although there can be no doubt that the traditional religion of the Greeks continued to be an important factor in the cultural make up of the Near East, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism were all growing. Zoroastrianism was firmly backed by the Sasanian dynasty, and the religion, in fact, became one of the pillars of the Sasanian Empire.²⁰ Religion and politics, however, rarely follow the same agenda and the religious politics of the Sasanian kings left considerable room for the preservation of religious identities among the non-Iranian inhabitants of the empire.

By the end of the fourth century CE, Christianity had become the state religion of the Eastern Roman Empire. Parts of the Roman Empire were still inhabited by Zoroastrians, just as many Christians lived in the Sasanian Empire. The fact that the Sasanian Empire was not a Christian



12
Silver coin of Evagoros II of
Salamis, rider on a horse,
brandishing a spear.
Collection and copyright:
British Museum, UK.



empire and did not interfere with the development of Christian doctrines, made the Persian Empire an attractive place for those Christians whose theologies came to be rejected and persecuted by the majority of theologians and church leaders in the west. The Sasanian Empire therefore more or less sponsored the development of "Nestorian and Monophysite" theologies and often supported attempts at establishing autonomous church organisations in their realm. The balance of power between the Sasanian and Roman empires, in this respect, ensured the survival of these communities. After the fifth century, however, there is no record of the Zoroastrians as a community surviving outside the empire. The last significant event in the contacts between non-Christian Greeks and Iranians was the coming of "pagan" philosophers, the most famous of whom were Damascius and Priscianus to the court of the Sasanians during the reign of Justinian, 527–565 CE,²¹ when the latter had closed the Academy of Athens (fig. 13). The advent of Islam coincided with the final disappearance of traditional Greek religion and the gradual erosion of Zoroastrianism as one of the main constituent components of Iranian culture and religious life.

Zoroastrianism in Greek Literature

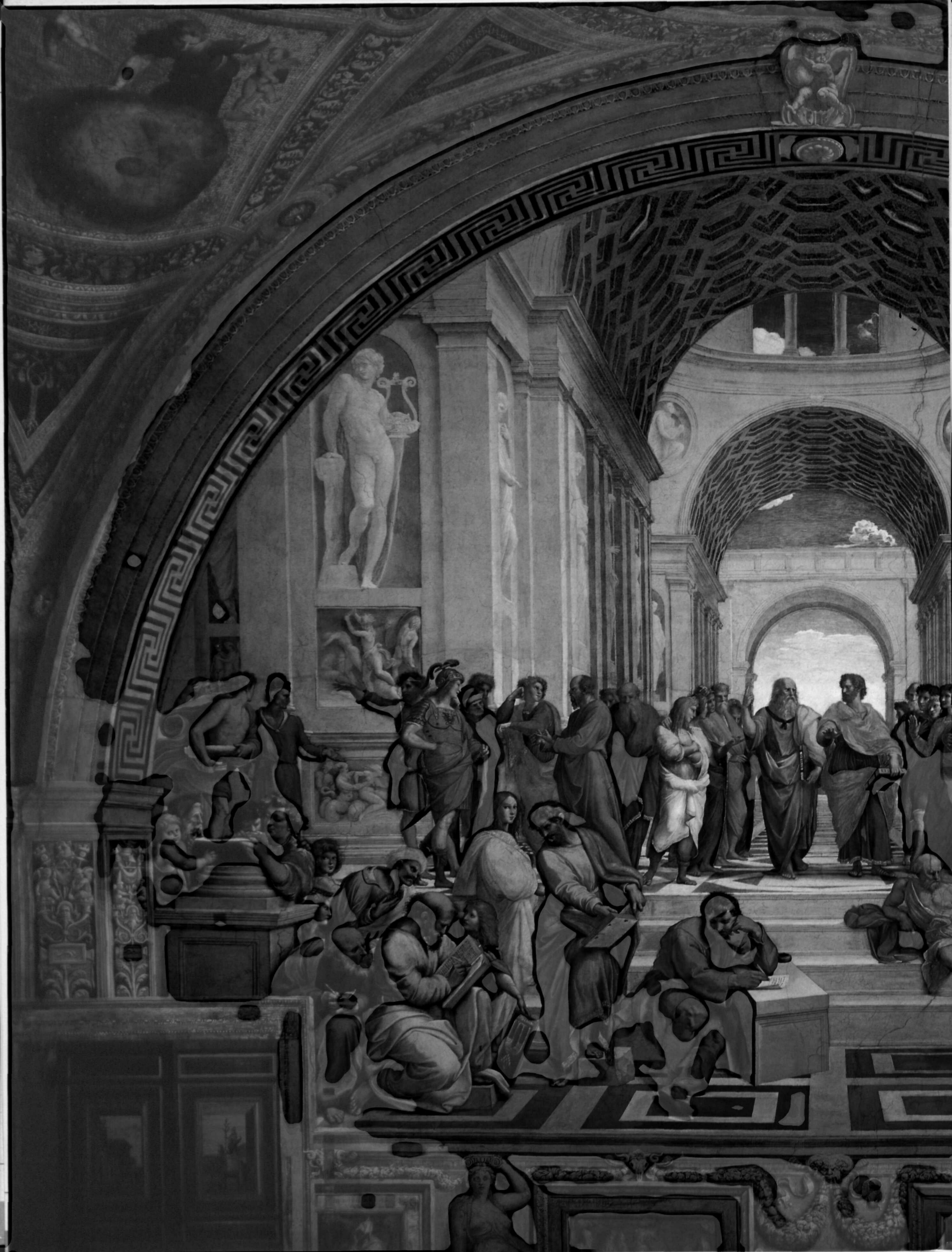
The long history of contact between the Iranians and the Greeks, from the early Achaemenians to the coming of Islam, is reflected in a steady flow of information on the culture of the Persians in Greek literature.²² The religion of the Persians was not the dominant interest in these texts, but is fairly well represented. The fact that the texts can be dated with considerable confidence has ensured in all discussions of Zoroastrian history²³ a prominent position for the information found in Greek literature. One of the earliest authors to have written on the subject must have been Xanthus the Lydian, early fifth century BCE, but almost nothing of his written works has survived. The earliest discussion of the religion of the Persians is to be found in Herodotus, *Histories* 1.131–132. In these chapters, and elsewhere in his descriptions of Persian daily life, Herodotus paints a credible, but unfortunately very fragmentary, picture of the religion of the Persians, who sacrificed animals on mountain tops and joined together in the consumption of its meat. Their priests, the magi, are said to expose

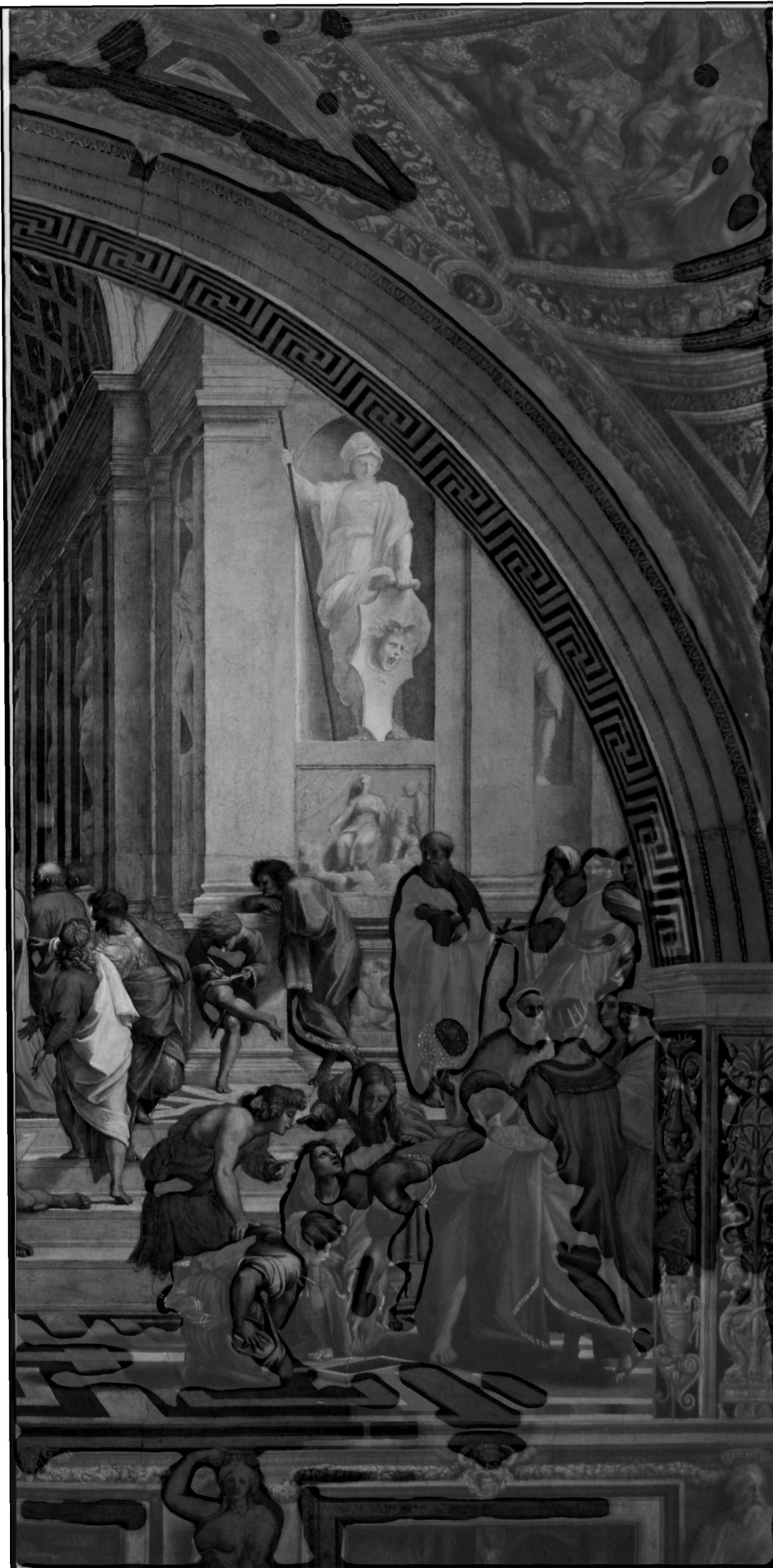
the corpse of the dead rather than bury them and to kill all sorts of creeping and flying animals. Further characteristic aspects of the religion of the Persians in Herodotus are certain purity rules, forbidding, for instance, the pollution of rivers and sources of water. The tantalising descriptions of royal rituals in the works of Herodotus and other Greek authors such as Xenophon are difficult to interpret in view of the absence of corroborative materials (fig. 14).

From Herodotus up to Byzantine literature, there is a steady flow of information on Zoroastrianism in Greek literature, though much of it is repetitive. The majority of authors describe observable facts and some names: rituals, gestures, divinities, Zoroaster, the priesthood, the magi, temples, as well as funerary practices. Many of these descriptions contain elements from Zoroastrianism that are immediately recognisable as such: the exposure of corpses to vultures and dogs, the close relations between Mithra and the sun, the prophethood of Zoroaster, who is seen as the founder of the class of the magi and the reverential attitude to fire. Many descriptions contain elements that are not easily recognisable as Zoroastrian traditions; these include a carnivalesque festival called the *Sacaean*, a god of silence, and the idea that Ahura Mazda tripled in size at an early stage of creation. It is frequently very difficult to interpret such descriptions but they must be taken seriously if we want to understand the history of Zoroastrianism prior to the Sasanian period.

It is only rarely that more in-depth information on Zoroastrian theology can be found. This is caused partly by language barriers and general problems of "understanding" alien cultures, and by the fact that Zoroastrian literature would lead us to expect that priests would be uninterested in contact with non-Zoroastrians.

A more exciting factor in this area is the possibility that the Greek texts describe Zoroastrianism as lived and understood by the majority of its followers: the laity. Characteristic in this respect is the almost total absence of the Amesha Spentas in descriptions of the religion of the Persians. Many interpretations of Zoroastrianism consider this doctrine of the Heptad to be the backbone of Zoroastrian theology, but the evidence from Greek literature suggests that it may not have been as prominent for lay Zoroastrians as Zoroastrian literature indicates.



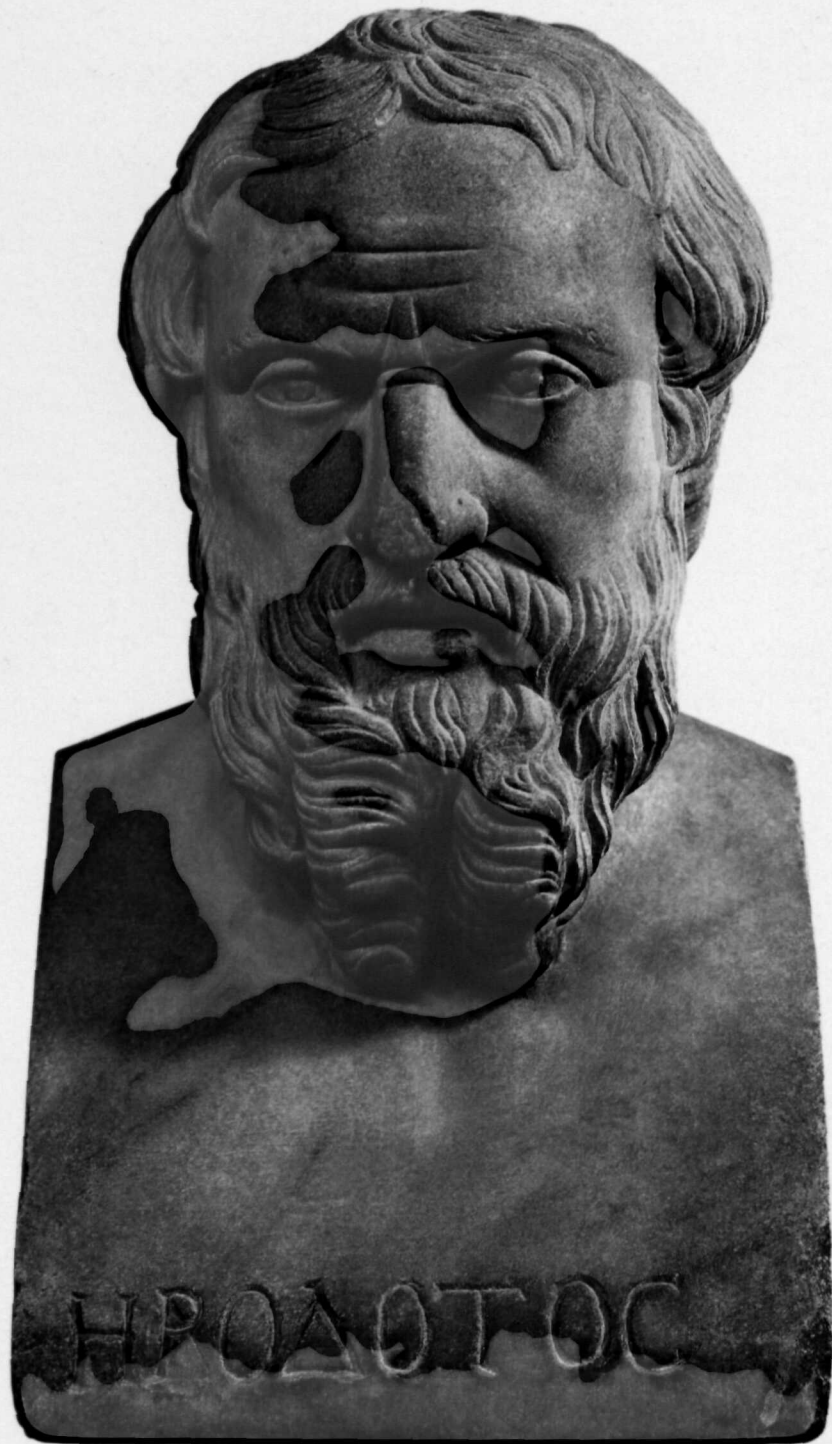


13
Painting of the School of
Athens by Raphael showing
some of the Greek
Philosophers as well as
Zoroaster, on the right holding
an effervescent globe.
Collection and copyright:
Monumenti Musei E Gallerie
Pontificie, Vatican Museum,
Vatican City, Europe.



One could make a distinction between texts focusing on the religious ideas and practices of Zoroastrians that could be observed by travellers and by Greeks living together with expatriate Zoroastrians and texts discussing the theology, philosophy and traditions of the Zoroastrian priests. The descriptions of the religion of the Persians in the writings of Herodotus or of Cappadocian Zoroastrian rituals in the *Geography* of Strabo (15.3.13-15, Strabo lived approximately 63 BCE to 23 CE) are good illustrations of the former category. Strabo writes the following: But in Cappadocia – for there the tribe of the magi is large; they are also called fire-kindlers (*puraitoi*); and there are many sanctuaries of the Persian gods – they do not even sacrifice with a knife, but they beat (the animal to death) with a piece of wood as with a cudgel. And there are fire sanctuaries, noteworthy enclosures; in the midst of these is an altar, on which there is a large quantity of ashes, and (where) the magi keep the fire ever burning. And every day they enter and sing invocations for approximately an hour, holding the bundle of wands (these have been described earlier by Strabo as a small bundle of slender tamarisk sticks evidently the barsom), before the fire, wearing felt tiaras which fall down on both sides over the cheeks to cover the lips. The same customs are observed in the sanctuaries of Anaitis and Omanos; these also have enclosures and the image of Omanos is carried around in a procession.

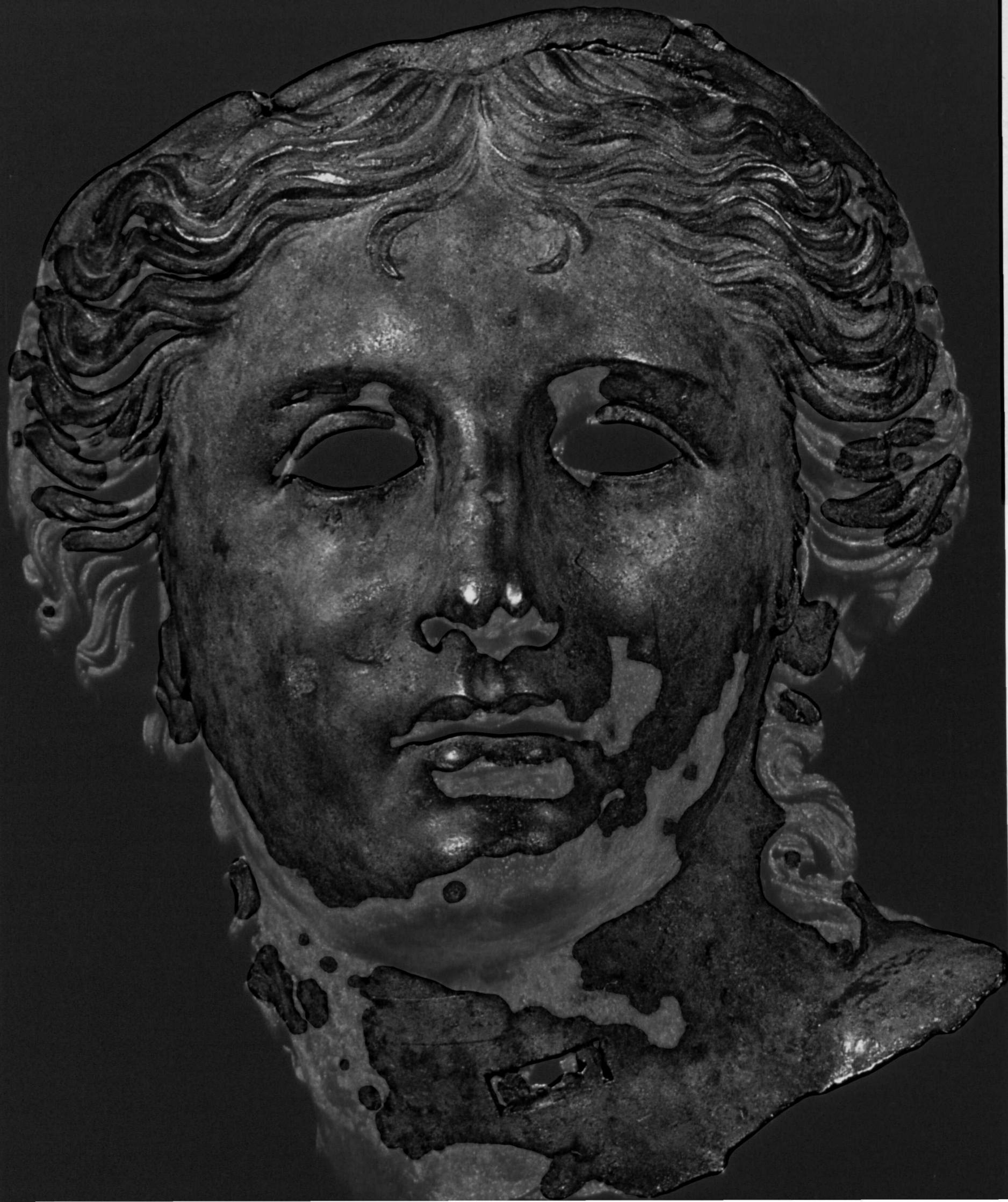
The latter category must have been particularly well represented in the works of a number of philosophers associated with the Platonic Academy and the Aristotelian Peripatos in Athens in the fourth and third centuries BCE. Unfortunately, nothing of these texts has survived, although we do possess a brief discussion with a tantalising list of titles, such as the book on the magi by Hermippus, in the work of the historian of philosophy Diogenes Laertius (1.6-9; Diogenes is to be dated in the third century CE). Diogenes records in the “Lives of Eminent Philosophers” (1:8) Aristotle’s position on Zoroastrian dualism as practised by the magi and he also alludes to Aristotle’s belief that the magian tribes were perhaps more ancient than the Egyptians and gives various references to the works in other Greek texts. Further evidence for the existence of the great interest in these matters among Platonic and Aristotelian philosophers is found in the most detailed description of Zoroastrian theology in Greek literature: Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 46-47.



14
Portrait bust of Herodotus. The earliest discussion on the religion and daily life of the Persians is to be found in Herodotus’ *Histories*. Marble, Roman copy. Collection and copyright: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891, (91.8), New York.

15
The bust of Plutarch. The platonic philosopher (50–125 CE) was an historian from Chaeronea of Boeotia and a priest of Apollo in the Sanctuary of Delphi for many years. The epigram on the pillar records that, the citizens of Chaeronea offered this statue of Plutarch obeying the orders of the Amphictyonia. Plutarch’s mention of Zoroastrian dualism, cosmogony, and eschatology illustrates the range of knowledge found in Greek literary sources at the time. Hermaic stele, 2nd century CE. Collection: Delphi Museum, Athens, Greece. Copyright: Photo Archives Archaeological Receipts Fund, Athens, Greece.







Plutarch (45 – ± 125 CE), priest of Apollo and Platonic philosopher living in Chaeronea half-way between Athens and Delphi, never met any living Zoroastrian (fig.15). At least, such an encounter is nowhere described in his voluminous works. His discussion of Zoroastrian dualism, framed in a discussion of other dualist philosophies and adapted to his particular variety of Platonism, is therefore not only important because he mentions the fundamentals of Zoroastrian cosmogony and eschatology: the two primal beings, the state of mixture, and the final battle, but even more so because his work illustrates the range of knowledge he could have found in his Greek literary sources.

Plutarch's handling of his information is instructive for the ways in which Zoroastrian theology was probably studied by his predecessors. He does not simply report on ideas found among Zoroastrian priests, but uses the available information as supporting evidence and as sources of inspiration for his own philosophical interests. Plutarch's philosophy, part of the evolved Platonic tradition, is markedly dualistic in recognising a wholly good and an evil principle, but he adds to this a third nature, intermediate, not evil in itself but drawn towards it. In his discussion of Zoroastrian dualism, this intermediate principle also appears: he identifies it with Mithra. Zoroastrian theology according to Plutarch recognises a wholly good being, called Oromazes (Ahura Mazda), a wholly evil being, called Areimanios (Angra Mainyu) and a "mediator" called Mithras. Since for Plutarch, the existence of a third, intermediate principle was pivotal to his philosophical ideas, the most likely explanation of this information is not that he reports on lost or forgotten Zoroastrian theology, nor that he failed to understand the information he had, but that he forced his information on the Persians into his system and thus created a Platonising Zoroastrianism.

Graeco-Iranian Cults in Asia Minor

The region which holds the greatest promise for Graeco-Iranian contacts is Asia Minor, because it was there that the Greeks and the Iranians lived together for centuries. Some of the most important descriptions of Zoroastrianism in Greek literature relate to the persistence of that religion in Asia Minor.²⁴ The most fascinating information on Persian and Graeco-Persian cults, however,

comes from Greek epigraphy. A number of inscriptions in Greek, and some in Aramaic, are evidence for certain developments in the religion of the Persians in Asia Minor that raise important questions. Generally, it is thought that Zoroastrianism subscribed to a closed system because this is how it most often appears in Zoroastrian texts. Zoroastrian literature, of course, bears evidence of the absorption of Greek and Indian ideas, but the evidence mostly suggests that Zoroastrians disregarded or opposed divinities and rituals deriving from other peoples. This picture must be modified in light of the evidence from Zoroastrianism in Armenia, the pantheon of which included a fair number of non-Iranian deities,²⁵ and from Central Asia, Bactria in particular.

The evidence from Asia Minor also shows signs of the fact that Zoroastrianism in that part of the world was not a closed system. The Greek inscriptions, for instance, mention "Zeus of the Persians" (evidently Ahura Mazda) together with Greek and Anatolian deities, and show how Anahita (in one of her many Greek guises) was worshipped together with the Anatolian gods Sabazios and Men²⁶ (fig.16). The most extensive documentation of the interaction between Iranian and Greek religious traditions comes from the region of Commagene.²⁷ Like other regions of Anatolia, such as Pontus and Cappadocia, Commagene was ruled for a while by a family that traced its descent to Iranian and Graeco-Macedonian aristocracy. Its best known monarch, Antiochus I (ruled 69 – ± 31 BCE), dotted the landscape of his little kingdom with sanctuaries and sacred sites dedicated to Greek and Iranian gods, most often in combination [the gods in question are called Zeus-Oromasdes, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes and Artagnes-Heracles-Ares (i.e. Verethraghna)]. The most spectacular of these is his own tomb, which was constructed on the top of the highest mountain of the region, the Nemrud Dagh. His burial chamber is located in the centre and is surrounded by two ritual platforms with huge statues of the gods and the king, galleries of his ancestors, a famous horoscope and lengthy Greek inscriptions which give details of the cultic institutions he founded. This is not a Zoroastrian sanctuary, but the private religion of this particular dynast is part of the history of Zoroastrianism and gives perhaps one of the most dramatic examples of the ways in which Greek and Iranian traditions could interlock.

16

Head from a cult statue of Aredvi Sura Anahita in the guise of Aphrodite. The goddess Anahita was a much loved water divinity popular with the Persians as well as the Greeks. Bronze head, Northeast Asia Minor – Armenia, Satala, 200–100 BCE. Collection and copyright: British Museum, UK.



These developments in Asia Minor were dead-end streets in the sense that they did not seriously affect the development of Greek traditions or that of Zoroastrianism. It seems likely that Zoroastrianism also had more lasting contributions to make to the development of certain Greek ideas, but this, as noted above, is a subject that has not yet been treated in a satisfactory way. Nor have the contributions of Greek traditions to Zoroastrianism been treated extensively. There are many problems in this field, such as the unequal distribution of sources and the problem of dating developments in Zoroastrianism. One of the chief obstacles to a serious treatment, however, was the persistence of the idea that both traditions, Greek and Iranian, were unaware of, uninterested in or opposed to each other. The fact that the Greeks and the Iranians were in contact with each other for over a millennium would itself be sufficient reason to doubt that general principle. The evidence to the contrary, in Greek as well as in Iranian archaeological, literary, and epigraphic sources, is so voluminous and varied that we can only conclude that the field is in need of renewed extensive scholarly interest.

NOTES

1. For an overview, cf. C. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia. Parallels and Influences in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*, London/New York, 1994; The field has now been surveyed in a magnificent way by M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 1997.
2. These fields are explored by W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, Cambridge, MA, 1992.
3. E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, Oxford, 1989; P. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience. From the Archaic Period to the Age of Xenophon*, Baltimore/London, 1994.
4. For Greeks in Persia, cf. J. Hofstetter, "Die Griechen in Persien. Prosopographie der Griechen im persischen Reich vor Alexander", *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, Ergänzungsband*, vol. 5, Berlin, 1978.
5. M.C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century B.C. A Study in Cultural Receptivity*, Cambridge, 1997.
6. As brilliantly pointed out by P. Green, *Alexander to Actium. The Hellenistic Age*, Berkeley, 1990, p. 315; for cooking, cf. T. Long, *Barbarians in Greek Comedy*, Carbondale/Edwardsville, 1986, pp. 69-75; for music, a study by E. Csapo is announced by Miller, *Athens and Persia*, p. 258.
7. This is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the seriously misguided works of R. Afnan, *Zoroaster's Influence on Anaxagoras, the Greek Tragedians, and Socrates*, New York, 1969; *Zoroastrian Influence on Greek Thought*, New York, 1965. For more balanced treatments, cf. below.
8. Cf., for instance, W. Burkert, "Iranisches bei Anaximandros", *Rheinisches Museum*, vol. 106, 1963, pp. 97-134; P. Kingsley, "Meetings with Magi: Iranian Themes among the Greeks, from Xanthus of Lydia to Plato's Academy", *JRAS*, 1995, pp. 173-209; M.L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford 1971. Less successful attempts are C. Herrenschildt, "Entre Perses et Grecs I. Democrite et le mazdeisme. Religion, philosophie, science," *Transeuphratene*, vol. 11, 1996, pp. 115-143; M. Papatheophanes, "Heraclitus of Ephesus, the Magi, and the Achaemenids," *Iranica Antiqua*, vol. 20, 1985, pp. 101-161.
9. The bibliography on this subject is massive. Some important titles are: J.M. Balcer, *The Persian Conquest of the Greeks. 545-450 BC* (Xenia 38), Konstanz, 1995; A.R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks: The Defence of the West*, London, 1984; P. Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars*, Berkeley, 1996; C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, Oxford, 1963.
10. J.M. Balcer, *Sparda by the Bitter Sea. Imperial Interaction in Western Anatolia*, Chico, 1984.
11. For overviews, bibliographies and in-depth analyses of these contacts, cf. the monumental historical work of P. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire Perse. De Cyrus a Alexandre*, Paris, 1996.
12. For Alexander, cf. (among many others) P. Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 BC. A Historical Biography*, Berkeley, 1996; for Alexander and the East, cf. A.B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East. The Tragedy of Triumph*, Oxford, 1996; a good survey of different questions is found in J. Carlsen et al., eds. *Alexander the Great. Reality and Myth*, Roma 1993.
13. For the Seleucid Empire, cf. S. Sherwin-White & A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis. A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*, London, 1993. Epigraphic evidence for Graeco-Iranian contacts throughout history is presented by Ph. Huyse, "Die Begegnung zwischen Hellenen und Iranern. Griechische epigraphische Zeugnisse von Griechenland bis Pakistan," in C. Reck & P. Zieme eds., *Iran und Turfan. Beitrage Berliner Wissenschaftler Werner Sundermann zum 60. Geburtstag gewidmet*, Wiesbaden, 1995, pp. 99-126.
14. A survey can be found in S.K. Eddy, *The King is Dead. Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334-31 B.C.*, Lincoln, 1961.
15. Brilliantly studied by Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 312-335.
16. The case of Bactria, for instance, is different; cf. now F.L. Holt, *Thundering Zeus. The Making of Hellenistic Bactria*, Berkeley, 1999.
17. Sherwin-White & Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis*, pp. 65-71.
18. J. Wiesehofer, *Die "dunklen Jahrhunderte" der Persis. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Kultur von Fars in fruhhellenistischer Zeit (330-140 v.Chr.; Zetemata 90)*, Munchen, 1994.



19. For the Parthian Empire, cf. J. Wolski, "L'empire des Arsacides", *Acta Iranica*, vol.32, Louvain, 1993; J. Wiesehofer, ed., "Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse. The Arsacid Empire: Sources and Documentation," *Historia Einzelschriften*, vol. 122, Stuttgart, 1998.

20. A new study of the Sasanian Empire is long overdue. The fundamental study remains A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1944. For more recent work, cf. G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, 1993, pp.12-36; Gh. Gnoli, "The Idea of Iran. An Essay on its Origin", *Serie Orientale Roma*, 62, Roma, 1989, pp.129-174; B.A. Litvinsky, (ed.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia III: The Crossroads of Civilizations, A.D. 250 to 750*, Paris, 1996, pp.35-102.

21. As described by the Byzantine lawyer and historian Agathias, *Historiae* 2.30-31, translated and discussed by A. Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vols. 23-24, 1969-1970, pp.67-183, 166-169. It should be noted that many of these philosophers, though undoubtedly writing Greek, were not ethnic Greeks.

22. For this subject, cf. A. de Jong, "Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature", *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, Leiden, 1997, p. 133.

23. Fundamental to the subject is, of course, M.Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Leiden, 1975-1991 (3 vols. to date, the third in collaboration with F. Grenet).

24. Strabo, *Geography* 15.3.13.-15; Pausanias 5.27.5-6; Basilius, *Epistle* 258.4.

25. J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, Cambridge MA, 1987.

26. For these matters, cf. Boyce & Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* vol.III, pp. 197-253. The recent discussion of Anahita in Asia Minor by M. Brosius, "Artemis Persike and Artemis Anaitis," in M. Brosius & A. Kuhrt eds., *Studies in Persian History: Essays in Memory of David M. Lewis* (Achaemenid History 11), Leiden 1998, pp. 227-238, appears to be ill-founded.

27. Boyce & Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* vol.III, pp.309-352, is the best discussion; H. Waldmann, *Der kommagenische Mazdaismus*, Tubingen, 1991, should be used with caution.



Obverse
Bust of king in profile wearing a diadem.



Reverse
Seated archer, Greek inscription describes the king as "Arsaces, the King of kings..."

Silver drachm of the Parthian King Mithradates II (c. 123-88BCE).