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One nation under god? The early Sasanians as guardians and destroyers of holy sites

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

REINHARD G. KRATZ und HERMANN SPIECKERMANN Einleitung	IX
--	----

Ägyptische Religion

FRIEDRICH JUNGE „Unser Land ist der Tempel der ganzen Welt“ Über die Religion der Ägypter und ihre Struktur	3
HEIKE STERNBERG-EL HOTABI „Die Erde entsteht auf deinen Wink“ Der naturphilosophische Monotheismus des Echnaton	45
SUSANNE BICKEL Die Verknüpfung von Weltbild und Staatsbild Aspekte von Politik und Religion in Ägypten.....	79

Religionen in Mesopotamien

ANNETTE ZGOLL Vielfalt der Götter und Einheit des Reiches Konstanten und Krisen im Spannungsfeld politischer Aktion und theologischer Reflexion in der mesopotamischen Geschichte	103
BRIGITTE GRONEBERG Aspekte der „Göttlichkeit“ in Mesopotamien Zur Klassifizierung von Göttern und Zwischenwesen.....	131
ASTRID NUNN Kulttopographie und Kultabläufe in mesopotamischen Tempeln: drei Beispiele	167

Zoroastrische Religion

- PHILIP G. KREYENBROEK
Theological Questions in an Oral Tradition:
the Case of Zoroastrianism..... 199

- ALBERT DE JONG
One Nation under God?
The Early Sasanians as Guardians and Destroyers of Holy Sites 223

Religionen in Kleinasien und Syrien-Palästina

- DANIEL SCHWEMER
Das hethitische Reichspantheon
Überlegungen zu Struktur und Genese 241

- ASTRID NUNN
Aspekte der syrischen Religion im 2. Jahrtausend v.Chr. 267

- HERMANN SPIECKERMANN
„Des Herrn ist die Erde“
Ein Kapitel altsyrisch-kanaanäischer Religionsgeschichte..... 283

- HERBERT NIEHR
Die phönizischen Stadtpanthea des Libanon und ihre Beziehung zum
Königtum in vorhellenistischer Zeit 303

- ERIK AURELIUS
„Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott“
Israel und sein Gott zwischen Katastrophe und Neuanfang..... 325

- REINHARD G. KRATZ
„Denn dein ist das Reich“
Das Judentum in persischer und hellenistisch-römischer Zeit 347

- Autorenverzeichnis 375

- Sachregister 377

One Nation under God?

The Early Sasanians as Guardians and Destroyers of Holy Sites

ALBERT DE JONG

It has always been immensely satisfying for historians of religions, how scholars of the Ancient Near East and of the Greek world have been successful in fleshing out the various ways in which the world of the gods mirrors the world of human life. In the long development of these and related disciplines, attractive suggestions have been made to take ancient mythology economically,¹ to see the Syro-Palestinian pantheon as mirroring state bureaucracy² and to observe all sorts of patterns of social and family organisation mirrored in ancient views of the relations between the gods.³

It is not surprising, therefore, that several attempts have been made to use these approaches for the analysis of Zoroastrian traditions. This, it must be said, has not been very successful so far. The limits of this approach can be illustrated briefly with the example of women and gender roles.⁴

It is no exaggeration to say that alongside the purity laws, Zoroastrian family law forms the heart of the Zoroastrian tradition. A very substantial part of Zoroastrian literature is devoted to these subjects, and to discussions of, for example, different types of marriage.⁵ Eventually, this

¹ SILVER, M., *Taking Ancient Mythology Economically*, Leiden 1992.

² HANDY, L.K., *Among the Host of Heaven. The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy*, Winona Lake 1994.

³ SLATER, P.E., *The Glory of Hera. Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton 1992 (original ed. 1968.) is the classical example for Greek religion.

⁴ See DE JONG, A., *Jeh the Primal Whore? Observations on Zoroastrian Misogyny*, in: KLOPPENBORG, R./HANEGRAAFF, W.J. (eds.), *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions* (Numen Book Series 66), Leiden 1995, 15–41; idem, *Women and Ritual in Medieval Zoroastrianism*, in: CERETI, C.G./VAJIFDAR, F. (eds.), *Ātaš-e Dorūn. The Fire Within*. Jamshid Sorous Soroushian Memorial Volume II, n.p. 2003, 147–161. A wholly different perspective is given in CHOKSY, J.K., *Evil, Good, and Gender. Facets of the Feminine in Zoroastrian Religious History* (Toronto Studies in Religion 28), New York 2002.

⁵ Important legal evidence comes from the late Sasanian law book *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (Macuch, M., *Rechtskasuistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran. Die Rechtssammlung des Farrohmard ī Wahrāmān* [Iranica 1],

led to a legal system in which women were, in every stage of their lives, under the authority of a man, be it their father, the leader of the family, or their husband.⁶ Women's bodies were the focus of great concern and the purity laws weighed much more heavily on women's lives than they did on men's.⁷

Not a single aspect of these social and ritual requirements is reflected in Zoroastrian traditions about the gods.⁸ Although the Zoroastrian pantheon is divided into male and female deities, these divine beings seem to lead no social life whatsoever. They certainly do not marry, nor produce children, even though they can all be referred to, metaphorically, as the children of Ahura Mazda, the supreme god, and therefore as brothers and sisters. There is only one passage in the whole corpus of the Avesta (Yt. 17.16), where the goddess Spentā Ārmaitī is said to be the mother of the gods.⁹ It is important to notice, moreover, that the female deities are in no way subservient to the male deities, nor under their guardianship. All lesser deities are equal; all are governed by the supreme deity Ahura Mazda.

The purity laws obviously do not govern the lives of the gods. Human bodies are the most important battle ground in the war that is being waged

Wiesbaden 1993) and its supplementary texts (Macuch, M., *Das sasanidische Rechtsbuch "Mātakdān ī Hazār Dāstān"* [Teil II] [Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 45.1], Wiesbaden 1981). An English translation of these texts can be found in Perikhanian 1997, but Maria Macuch's interpretation of the texts seems much more reliable. See also HJERRILD, B., *Studies in Zoroastrian Family Law: A Comparative Analysis* (Carsten Niebuhr Institute Publications 28), Copenhagen 2003, for an attempt at a comprehensive study, including references to family law in later priestly writings. It is especially from these later texts (the Rivāyat of Ēmēd son of Ašawahišt (Safa-Isfahani 1980) and the Rivāyat of Ādur-Farrōbay son of Farrōbay-Srōš (Anklesaria 1969), that the crucial importance of the subject for Zoroastrian religion and culture becomes evident.

⁶ DE JONG, Women, 149–151. See also DE JONG, A., *Purification in absentia*. On the Development of Zoroastrian Ritual Practice, in: ASSMANN, J./STROUMSA, G.G. (eds.), *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (Numen Book Series 83), Leiden 1997, 301–329; 319–328, for the underlying system.

⁷ See CHOKSY, J.K., *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism. Triumph over Evil*, Austin 1989 and Boyce, M., *Cleansing*, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 5 (1992) 673–700, for an overview of purity rules.

⁸ DE JONG, A., *Jeh*, 18–23.

⁹ Being the guardian of the earth, Ārmaitī is often referred to as the nourisher or producer of all that is, together with Ahura Mazda himself. The ancient myth of the union between heaven and earth (Ahura Mazda and Ārmaitī) can be traced in Avestan texts referring to this goddess (SKJAERVØ, P.O., Ahura Mazda and Ārmaiti, Heaven and Earth, in the Old Avesta, *JAOS* 122 [2002] 399–410), but this does not affect the fact that Ārmaitī is not generally seen as Ahura Mazda's "wife". This special position is granted her only in a few medieval Zoroastrian texts (WILLIAMS, A.V., *The Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 2, Copenhagen 1990, 132–133).

between good and evil.¹⁰ Purity is an essential requirement for human assistance in the battle against evil. The gods are actively engaged in this struggle, but they cannot make themselves impure. They can be made impure, in a secondary sense, only by humans, who defile the elements of the created world of which they are the guardians. This is graphically illustrated, for instance, in the Persian Zoroastrian text *Sad dar-e bondaheš* 77 (roughly from the thirteenth or fourteenth century CE).¹¹ This text is part of a small didactic cluster of chapters illustrating the rules humans should observe to act as guardians of the elements of creation.¹² When discussing the earth, the text mentions the fact that the earth shivers when humans put corpses in it, and that it feels to her as it would feel to any human when someone puts a scorpion in his pyjamas.

The lives of the gods in early texts, therefore, are quite unlike the lives of mortals, and in the two most crucial areas of human life, the divine reality does not mirror earthly existence.

A second example of the failure to correlate the Zoroastrian organisation of the pantheon to social patterns of organisation among the Iranians is more directly related to the subject of the present contribution. It concerns kingship. The pre-Islamic Iranian cultures we know best are the Iranian empires, ruled by great kings. Kingship, however, is largely absent from the Avestan corpus. This is an important reason to doubt the attempts that pop up in scholarly discussions every now and then, to date the composition of parts of the Avesta in the Achaemenian or even Parthian periods.¹³ In light of the supremely important position of the king in those empires, one would at least expect that the office of king would be referred to, but this is not the case.

¹⁰ WILLIAMS, A.V., Zoroastrian and Judaic Purity Laws. Reflections on the Viability of a Sociological Interpretation, in: SHAKED, S./NETZER, A. (eds.), *Irano-Judaica III*, Jerusalem 1994, 72–89; idem, Zoroastrianism and the Body, in: COAKLEY, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge 1997, 155–166.

¹¹ The text was edited by DHABHAR, B.N., *Saddar Nasr and Saddar Bundelesh*, Bombay 1909. A translation can be found in DHABHAR, B.N., *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and Others. Their Version with Introduction and Notes*, Bombay 1932.

¹² This is a popular subject in Persian Zoroastrian texts. For a parallel version in poetry, see the slightly earlier *Zarātoštnāmeḥ* of Kay-Kā'ūs b. Kay-Xusraw of Rayy, verses 633–708 (ed. ROSENBERG, F., *Le livre de Zoroastre [Zarātusht Nāma] de Zartusht-i Bahrām ben Pajdū*, St.-Petersbourg 1904).

¹³ See HINTZE, A., *The Avesta in the Parthian Period*, in: WIESEHÖFER, J. (ed.), *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse. The Arsacid Empire: Sources and Documentation (Historia Einzelschrift 122)*, Stuttgart 1998, 147–161 for a balanced discussion.

We do see several key figures from Avestan mythology developing into kings in the later formulation of the tradition. A good example, for instance, is Zarathustra's patron Vištāspa, who begins his career, in the Avesta, as a *kauui-*, a word of disputed meaning, indicating a kind of priest and perhaps also some sort of a lord or ruler, but has grown into the prime example of the just king in the Zoroastrian tradition. There are, of course, important heroes who rule the world or rule parts of the world in the legendary history of the Iranians, but kingship has been inserted frequently into the translations of these texts, while the texts themselves do not give us a coherent vision of the office. Yima, the first king in our translations, probably comes closest to an Avestan ideal of rulership: he makes the earth and the people on it thrive and he protects them from disease, old age, winters and other types of hardship, but he does it all by himself, not with the support of a recognisable court organisation.¹⁴

This is undoubtedly connected with the types of social organisation that were current among the Iranians in the time the Avestan corpus was composed.¹⁵ We can only reconstruct these societies by reading the texts and they seem to represent small-scale social organisations with a tribal character, in which family bonds and lineages are of considerable importance, under the leadership of a ruler.

Palatial interpretations of the world of the gods are easily produced in translations, but must be viewed with some suspicion. Several gods are represented in the Avestan texts as sitting on a *gātu-*, a word meaning "place." The moment a god sits on a *gātu-*, this is habitually translated "throne." This is at times appealing; especially the seat of Vohu Manah and the seats of the gods in heaven (Vd. 19.31–32), which are made of gold, conjure up the notion of heavenly thrones.¹⁶ The translation "throne," however, evokes the image of heaven as a royal audience hall, which may

¹⁴ See, *inter multos alios*, SHAKED, S., First Man, First King: Notes on Semitic-Iranian Syncretism and Iranian Mythological Transformations, in: SHAKED, S./SHULMAN, D./STROUMSA, G.G. (eds.), *Gilgul. Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions Dedicated to R.J. Zwi Werblowsky* (Numen Book Series 50), Leiden 1987, 238–256.

¹⁵ See BENVENISTE, E., *Les mages dans l'ancien Iran*, Paris 1938, 5–17; SCHWARTZ, M., The Old Eastern Iranian Worldview according to the Avesta, in: GERSHEVITCH, I. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran II: The Median and Achaemenian Periods*, Cambridge 1985, 640–663; SKJAERVØ, P.O., The Avesta as a Source for the Early History of the Iranians, in: ERDOSY, G. (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia. Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity* (Indian Philology and South Asian Studies 1), Berlin–New York 1996, 155–176.

¹⁶ See HULTGÅRD, A., Trône de Dieu et trône des justes dans les traditions de l'Iran ancien, in: PHILONENKO, M. (ed.), *Le trône de Dieu* (WUNT 69), Tübingen 1993, 1–18.

not have been the intended imagery of the authorities behind the text.¹⁷ Since the same word is also used to describe ordinary beds and sofas and also the place where dogs sleep, the notion of heavenly rest and enjoyment may also be understood in these descriptions of the heavenly seats.

We can, therefore, sum up the situation as follows: the social world of the Avesta, as it emerges from the legal parts of the texts, was a world of small-scale federations of men and women led by a ruler, without most of the trappings or institutions of the monarchies of, for instance, the Ancient Near East.¹⁸ In the Avestan *Yašts*, hymns celebrating various deities by presenting them as giving help to heroes who fight demons and dragons and save the world, etc., little attention is paid to establishing codes of rulership, but the focus is rather on martial and heroic qualities in the service of the world. As has been stressed in a publication on the image of women in these texts, the only goal they sacrifice for is a good husband.¹⁹

In a remarkable way, Zoroastrianism as we know it can be seen as a religion virtually without any mythology. Zoroastrian theology is obviously based on a long and complex story about the conflict between the two spirits, representing good and evil. This conflict encompasses the entire history of the world and is the framework of most Zoroastrian ideas.²⁰ There are some other myths about humans and their interactions with the gods, especially the legends surrounding Yima, but there is no

¹⁷ There can be no doubt that this *is* the intended imagery in Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, especially the chapters on heaven of the *Book of Ardā Wirāz* (GIGNOUX, P., *Le livre d'Ardā Virāz*. Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi, Paris 1984); see DE JONG, A., *Sub specie maiestatis: Reflections on Sasanian Court Rituals*, in: STAUSBERG, M. (ed.), *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context* (Numen Book Series 102), Leiden 2004, 345–365, 362–363.

¹⁸ Such a conclusion, incidentally, seems to be fatal for the attempts of PARPOLA, A., *The Originality of the Teachings of Zarathustra in the Light of Yasna 44*, in: COHEN, C./HURVITZ, A./PAUL, S.M. (eds.), *Sefer Moshe. The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, Winona Lake 2004, 373–383 to connect Zarathustra himself with the royal cultures of the Ancient Near East.

¹⁹ DE JONG, Jeh, 20–23.

²⁰ This has been stressed in a number of publications by Shaul Shaked: SHAKED, S., *Dualism in Transformation. Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 16), London 1994, 1–26; idem, *Cosmic Origins and Human Origins in the Iranian Cultural Milieu*, in: SHAKED, S. (ed.), *Genesis and Regeneration. Essays on Conceptions of Origins*, Jerusalem, 210–222; idem, *Zoroastrian Origins: Indian and Iranian Connections*, in: ARNASON, J.P./EISENSTADT, S.N./WITTRÖCK, B. (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 4), Leiden 2005, 183–200.

elaborate mythology that would focus on the interaction between the gods or between gods and mortals.²¹

As an illustration of this fact, one could perhaps best point at the cycle of Zoroastrian festivals known as the *Gāhāmbār*.²² These are the six major festivals that divided the year, participation in which was obligatory. With the exception of the greatest of these festivals, the New Year festival, they are never said to celebrate anything in particular. There are no early texts that give us myths associated with these festivals, nor are they often inscribed into the legendary history of the Iranians in early texts. It is only with the New Year festival, and chiefly in late texts about it, that the story of the creation and final dissolution of the world is connected to the festival.²³ In a charming and understudied Pahlavi text, *Māh Frawardīn rōz Ohrmazd* ("the day Ohrmazd of the month Frawardīn", which is the date of the Greater Nowrūz), in fact almost every important occasion of this history is said to have taken place on New Year's Day,²⁴ and in later Muslim traditions, this history is divided over Nowrūz and its autumn companion, Mihragān.²⁵

There are all sorts of theological, chronological and ritual characteristics of these *Gāhāmbār* festivals that would reward a closer study, especially the figure of Rapithwin, who resides under the earth half of the year and the other half of the year above the earth, giving it warmth and strengthening the crops.²⁶ Rapithwin is evidently connected with

²¹ Many of the legends from the so-called "epic cycles" (culminating in Firdawsī's *Šāhnāme* of approximately 1000 CE) can be connected with earlier texts from the Avesta and from the Sasanian period. Although it is seriously outdated, CHRISTENSEN, A., *Les types du premier homme et du premier roi dans l'histoire légendaire des iraniens*, Stockholm (2 vols.) 1917–1934 remains the standard work of reference.

²² For basic information, see STAUSBERG, M., *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale III*, Stuttgart 2004, 488–498.

²³ The Pahlavi exegetical translation (*Zand*) of the Avestan *Āfrīnagān ī gāhāmbār* (ed. DHABHAR 1927: 150–159, trl. DHABHAR, B.N., *Translation of Zand-i Khūrtak Avistāk*, Bombay 1963, 287–306) gives correspondences between the six festivals and the stages of creation (for which, see also M. Boyce, 'Gāhānbār', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 10 (2001) 254–256), but it is a very strange and probably rather late text; the Avestan *Āfrīnagān ī gāhāmbār* does not relate the festivals to any recognisable story.

²⁴ The text can be found in JAMASP-ASANA J.M., *Pahlavi Texts*, Bombay 1897–1913, 103–108.

²⁵ Materials relevant for the Zoroastrian festivals in the early Islamic gatherings are assembled and discussed by CRISTOFORETTI, S., *Il natale della luce. Il sada tra Baghdad e Bukhara tra il IX e XII secolo*, Milano 2002.

²⁶ For Rapithwin, see BOYCE, M., Rapithwin, Nō Rūz, and the Feast of Sade, in: HEESTERMAN, J.C./SCHOKKER, G.H./SUBRAMONIAM, V.I. (eds.), *Pratidānam. Indian, Iranian and Indo-European Studies Presented to Franciscus Bernardus Jacobus Kuiper on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Janua Linguarum, Series Major 34), The Hague – Paris 1968, 201–

summertime, but there do not seem to be many myths about him and he is a figure of much greater importance for priests, in regulating their ritual duties, than for most other Zoroastrians.

The impression is often given that the calendar of feasts is almost solely "about" time and had no stories attached to it.²⁷ This is difficult to believe and it is likely that the festivals *were* accompanied by stories that people would tell each other, presumably chiefly stories of local interest, varying from region to region.

Thanks to recent work done on the Persepolis Elamite tablets from the reign of Darius, magic bowls from Sasanian Babylonia, Bactrian documents from Afghanistan and other finds from Central Asia, we are only just beginning to realize how much Zoroastrianism was characterised by local diversity: virtually every text that emerges yields new gods, unknown from the Avesta, but evidently part of local Zoroastrian traditions.²⁸ This is, of course, something we should always have known or at least expected, but it still is far from being fully realised by the few scholars in the world active in this field.

In fact, there seems to be a fairly recent development that goes in the opposite direction and before we move to the Sasanians, we should discuss this briefly. It seems to be evident that when Cyrus the Great became king of Persia, he chose the monarchies he supplanted, those of the Elamites and the Assyrians, as the chief models for his new imperial organisation.²⁹ Most of the evidence for the Achaemenian period fits very well into cultural patterns with a long history in the Ancient Near East. This concerns court culture, scribal organisation, strategies of government, etc. There are, of course, some typically Iranian aspects to the ways in which these kings viewed the Empire and their role in it, but it would be unwise to treat the Achaemenian Empire as a substantially new phenomenon, invented from scratch.

215 and KRASNOWOLSKA, A., *Some Key Figures of Iranian Calendar Mythology*, Kraków 1998, 101–120.

²⁷ This was also stressed repeatedly in KRASNOWOLSKA, *Figures*.

²⁸ For the Elamite tablets see KOCH, H., *Die religiösen Verhältnisse der Dareios-Zeit. Untersuchungen an Hand der elamischen Persepolitistafelchen* (Göttinger Orientforschungen 3.4), Wiesbaden 1977; for the bowls from Babylonia, see SHAKED, S., *Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia*, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997) 103–117; for the Bactrian documents from Afghanistan SIMS-WILLIAMS, N., *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I. Legal and Economic Documents* (Studies in the Khalili Collection 3), Oxford 2000.

²⁹ See, for example, KIENAST, B., *Zur Herkunft der achämenidischen Königstitulatur*, in: HAARMANN, U./BACHMANN, P. (eds.), *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Beiruter Texte und Studien 22), Beirut 1979, 351–364 on royal titles; ROOT, M.C., *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art. Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Acta Iranica 19), Leiden 1979, on the iconography of kingship.

The religion of the Achaemenian kings has been the subject of a long and bitter scholarly debate. This debate has most often been fed by an image of Zoroastrianism as a tradition that can only be defined by the figure of Zarathustra and by the Avesta. The presence or absence of the prophet and the holy book were taken as indicators of the exact nature of the religion of the Achaemenian dynasts. On the basis of such questions, many scholars have felt confident to invent a religious tradition that was not (exactly) Zoroastrianism, but resembled Zoroastrianism in every minute detail, with the exception of Zarathustra and the Avesta.³⁰ Others felt equally confident to interpret every detail from the Achaemenian period as fully compatible with Zoroastrianism.³¹ By now, it seems that most scholars agree that the question "were they, or were they not, Zoroastrians?" is the wrong question, because it obfuscates the real problem: what do we mean when we say a king is "a Zoroastrian"?³²

In spite of this consensus, however, in recent years, several attempts have been made to relate words, notions and even passages from the Old Persian inscriptions to the text of the Avesta.³³ In a recent stimulating article on the political ideology of the Achaemenians, for example, Jean Kellens has suggested that the dynastic line of the Achaemenians, as Darius presents it in his great inscription at Bīsutūn, is based on the line of heroes from Yašt 19, and that Darius exploits the legendary history of these Avestan heroes to serve his own political purposes.³⁴ To be more precise, since the line in Yt. 19 ends with Vištāspa, the patron of Zarathustra, and the succession of the Achaemenians ends with Darius, Kellens believes that Darius wanted to present himself as the new Vištāspa. This is largely based on the fact that in both lines of succession, there are nine persons. That would be feeble enough as a basis, but the situation seems to be worse: this proposal ignores the crucial question "what" the Avesta was in the Achaemenian period. By focusing on the use of passages from the

³⁰ This religion is sometimes, confusingly, referred to as "Mazdaism" (see DE JONG, Purification, 43). For scholars who have proposed this interpretation, it is, of course, essential to postulate the pre-Zoroastrian existence of Ahura Mazdā, for which there is no evidence (see SHAKED, Man, 239). For recent examples of this usage, see LECOQ, P., *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*, Paris 1997, 154–164; LINCOLN, B., *À la recherche du paradis perdu*, *History of Religions* 43 (2003), 138–154.

³¹ BOYCE, M., *A History of Zoroastrianism II. Under the Achaemenians*, Leiden 1982, is the classic statement.

³² See DE JONG *forthc.*

³³ See already SKJAERVØ, P.O., *Avestan Quotations in Old Persian? Literary Sources of the Old Persian Inscriptions*, in: SHAKED, S./NETZER, A. (eds.), *Irano-Judaica IV*, Jerusalem 1999, 1–64.

³⁴ KELLENS, J., *L'idéologie religieuse des inscriptions achéménides*, *Journal Asiatique* 290 (2002), 417–464.

Avesta for purposes of propaganda, a cognitive role of the text for the authorities behind the inscription and their (imagined) intended audience is tacitly assumed. This new approach, which the present author considers deeply problematic, leads us, finally, to the Sasanians, because exactly the same thing has happened there.

Iranian history has a long tradition of fabricated lineages. In fact, the moment persons in positions of power begin to rewrite their family history usually heralds a period of profound cultural change. Most Iranian dynasties, from the Achaemenians to the present day seem to have felt it necessary to project an image of their own background and history that the rulers they replaced as well as foreign observers would consider extremely tenuous. This is, of course, not a specifically Iranian phenomenon, but it is certainly well attested in Iranian history.³⁵

We will, as a consequence, never know what "really" happened in Pārs in the first three decades of the third century, because all the information we have on the so-called "rise of the Sasanians" is suspect in one way or another: the literary texts because they clearly present us with dynastic legends,³⁶ but also the works of art, because we cannot find adequate ways of interpreting them or we have not yet found adequate questions to be answered by them.³⁷

With these *caveats* in mind, some firm pointers can still be given: The Sasanian dynasty arose from among a family of rulers in the service of the Parthian Great King, in Southwestern Iran, Persia proper.³⁸ This was a country full of ancient monuments, including the spectacular sites of Persepolis and the tombs of the Achaemenian kings at Naqsh-e Rostam. Several rulers of Persis in the second century BCE and again in the second

³⁵ For an instructive series of examples, see ADHAMI, S., A Question of Legitimacy: The Case of Ardašir I (Dēnkard IV), *Indo-Iranian Journal* 46 (2003) 223–230.

³⁶ See WIDENGREN, G., The Establishment of the Sasanian Dynasty in the Light of New Evidence, in: *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: La Persia nel medioevo*, Roma 1971, 711–782 for an overview.

³⁷ These works of art are chiefly a series of rock-reliefs (sometimes with an inscription), commemorating victories in battle and the investiture of the kings. For an overview of these reliefs, see HERRMANN, G./CURTIS, V.S., 'Sasanian Rock Reliefs' on the electronic pre-publication of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (<http://www.iranica.com/articlenavigation/index.html>, s.v. 'Sasanian Rock Reliefs').

³⁸ The best information on the pre-Sasanian rulers of Persis can be found in ALRAM, M., *Nomina propria iranica in nummis. Materialgrundlagen zu den iranischen Personennamen auf antiken Münzen* (Iranisches Personennamenbuch 4), Wien 1986 and WIESEHÖFER, J., *Die "dunklen Jahrhunderte" der Persis. Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Kultur von Fārs in frühhellenistischer Zeit (330–140 v.Chr.)* (Zetemata 90), München 1994.

and third centuries CE, struck their own coins.³⁹ Two of them are of importance to us now: first, a king named Shapur, son of Pabag and then a king named Ardashir son of Pabag.⁴⁰ The two were brothers and their father Pabag, was ruler before them, even though no coins from his reign have been found so far. Shapur, apparently, came first, and was succeeded by Ardashir the fifth, of Persis, who is better known as Ardashir I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty.⁴¹ About his personal history we are completely in the dark, but it is most likely that his father, Pabag, already attempted to wrest power from his Parthian overlords. This was a period when the Parthian Empire was weak, and it is likely that the family invoked local traditions, associated with the monuments of Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam, or perhaps their special honorary position as guardians of an important shrine in Staxr, to mobilise the people of Persis and to unite its many local rulers.⁴² Certainly, what we know of the history of the earliest Sasanians, however legendary most of it is, shows that there must have been many more of these local rulers. What gave Ardashir the edge over most of them, we do not know, but it is certain that Ardashir managed, early in his career, to acquire enormous sums of money.⁴³

The evidence for this largely comes from coins. Both in the number of coins struck, in silver and even in gold, in the silver content of the coins and in their constant weight, early Sasanian coins are much more impressive than the almost contemporary late Parthian coinage. This suggests that the Sasanians had considerable wealth and this impression is supported by a recent inscribed find from the pre-Sasanian kings of Persis.⁴⁴ The province of Pārs does not have silver, gold, or even copper

³⁹ ALRAM, *Nomina*, 162–186.

⁴⁰ The chief evidence is a small number of coins that can be attributed to these two kings. For an overview, see ALRAM, M./GYSELEN, R., *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum*, Paris–Berlin–Wien I: Ardashir I. – Shapur I., Wien 2003, 22–23 and plate 40; see also ALRAM, *Nomina*, 185–186.

⁴¹ For a quick introduction, see J. WIESEHÖFER, Ardashir I. History, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* II (1987) 371–376.

⁴² This is mainly suggested by the ninth-century Muslim historian al-Tabarī, whose book on the Sasanians (part of the monumental *History of Prophets and Kings*) was translated, with a learned commentary, by C.E. Bosworth (BOSWORTH, C.E., *The History of al-Tabarī V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, Albany 1999), building on the awe-inspiring first study of Theodor Nöldeke (NÖLDEKE, T., *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Leiden 1879 [repr. Leiden 1973]).

⁴³ The evidence has been gathered by ALRAM, S., *The Beginning of Sasanian Coinage*, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 13 (1999) 67–76.

⁴⁴ SKJAERVØ, P.O., *The Joy of the Cup: A Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian Inscription on a Silver Bowl*, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 11 (1997), 93–104.

mines⁴⁵ and this raises the obvious question: where did this wealth come from?

To answer this question, all we have are narrative sources, but they all seem to agree on the matter: Along with taxation and tribute exacted from newly subjected local rulers,⁴⁶ Ardashīr gained enormous wealth from the destruction of sanctuaries and the confiscation of their treasuries. There are too many examples of these stories to discuss in detail, but the importance of the theme as well as the possible historical background of these activities seem to have been overlooked in scholarly discussions of the earliest Sasanians.⁴⁷

There are two main varieties of the theme: the first concerns Ardashīr's campaigns against what one could call "pagan" sanctuaries (meaning non-Zoroastrian local shrines, often described in derogatory terms), the second concerns his destruction of Zoroastrian fire-temples. Since this second theme has been dealt with admirably by Mary Boyce, we may perhaps begin with it. The chief witness is the *Letter of Tansar*, a document that has been preserved only in a Persian translation of a lost Arabic translation of a presumed Pahlavi original.⁴⁸ Many scholars believe that the text itself, which consists of objections raised by a local king named Gušnasp to the legitimacy of Ardashīr's claim to the throne of Iran and their answers by Ardashīr's priest Tansar, can only go back to late Sasanian times, but Mary

⁴⁵ HARRISON, J.V., J.V., Minerals, in: FISHER, W.B. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran I: The Land of Iran*, Cambridge 1968, 489–516; overviews of known sites for mining activity in ancient Iran can be found in STÖLLNER, T./SLOTTA, R./VATANDOUST, A., *Persiens Antike Pracht. Bergbau – Handwerk – Archäologie*, Bochum 2004.

⁴⁶ Taxation and tribute are problematic subjects for the early Sasanian period. It is possible that most of our information on Sasanian taxation is coloured by the tax reforms of Husraw I in the sixth century. See RUBIN, Z., *The Reform of Khusro Anūshirwān*, in: CAMERON, A. (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III. States, Resources and Armies*, Princeton 1995, 227–297 for an interpretation. For attempts at reconstructing the earlier history of taxation in the Sasanian Empire, see ALTHEIM, F./STIEHL, R., *Finanzgeschichte der Spätantike*, Frankfurt am Main 1957, 7–17.

⁴⁷ For the related subject of the plundering of temples in Elymais by Antiochus III and Antiochus IV, see BOYCE, M./GRENET, F., *A History of Zoroastrianism III. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Leiden 1991, 40–41 with references. It seems significant that the Graeco-Roman literary tradition of the inescapable punishment of temple-robbers, as witnessed by the stories of these two Seleucid kings, is not at all reflected in the stories surrounding Ardashir. For comparative materials, see STOKHOLM, N., *Zur Überlieferung von Heliodor, Kuturnahunte und anderen missglückten Tempelräubern*, *Studia Theologica* 22 (1968) 1–28; WEITZMAN, S., *Plotting Antiochus's Persecution*, *JBL* 123 (2004) 219–234.

⁴⁸ MINOVI, M., *Tansar's Epistle to Goshnasp*, Tehran 1932; BOYCE, M., *The Letter of Tansar* (Serie Orientale Roma 38), Roma 1968.

Boyce has argued persuasively that the theme of Ardašīr's destruction of fire-temples would be an unexpected invention of late Sasanian times.⁴⁹ By that time, the Ardašīr legend was firmly in place and portrayed him as a devout Zoroastrian, who could not lightly be accused of destroying fire-temples. The text says the following:

"Next for what you said, that the King of Kings has taken away fires from the fire-temples, extinguished them and blotted them out, and that no one has ever before presumed so far against religion; know that the case is not so grievous, but has been wrongly reported to you. The truth is that after Darius each of the "kings of the peoples" built his own fire-temple. This was pure innovation, introduced by them without the authority of kings of old. The King of kings has razed the temples, and confiscated the endowments, and had the fires carried back to their places of origin."⁵⁰

The background of the passage clearly is the question of the legitimacy of founding royal or dynastic fires. An important part of the propaganda machinery of the early Sasanians was in fact devoted to this thorny question of the legitimacy of Ardašīr. Several important strands or themes were woven together in a story that centred around the notions of "unity" versus "fragmentation." The Parthian heritage of Ardašīr's predecessors was presented as a long period of rule of a large number of so-called "petty kings." This rule was, therefore, characterised chiefly by the absence of a real King of Kings. Memory lingered evidently in Persia of a period in which there had been such a king. It is pointless to speculate on "who" the Persians thought these kings had been; many scholars believe that there was some historical memory of the Achaemenians, whereas others find this unlikely. This is begging the question, of course, what "historical memory" would mean in third century Pārs. Obviously, the monuments of Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam were the subject of stories.⁵¹ The sites themselves were places of pilgrimage.⁵² They continued to be the subject of stories and

⁴⁹ BOYCE, Letter, 16–17; see also DE JONG, A., *Vexillologica Sacra: Searching the Cultic Banner*, in: CERETI, C.G./MAGGI, M./PROVASI, E. (eds.), *Religious Themes and Texts of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia. Studies in Honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli* (Beiträge zur Iranistik 24), Wiesbaden 2003, 191–202.

⁵⁰ BOYCE, *Women*, 47.

⁵¹ This is supported by the evidence of the Persepolis graffiti, both the imagery and the inscriptions. For an overview, see CALLIERI, P., *At the Roots of the Sasanian Royal Imagery: The Persepolis Graffiti*, in: *Ērān ud Anērān. Webfestschrift Boris Marshak* (<http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/callieri.html>)2003.

⁵² This is established for the early Sasanian period by two fourth-century inscriptions published by FRYE, R.N., *The Persepolis Middle Persian Inscriptions from the Time of Shapur II*, AO 30 (1966) 83–93.

we can see in later Sasanian times how they came to be attached to the great epic stories of the Avestan heroes;⁵³ in early Islamic Iran, legends of Biblical and Islamic background were attached to similar sites.⁵⁴ We do not know the stories about these sites that were current in the early third century or the legendary figures people associated with them.

From the moment Ardašīr defeated the last Parthian king and assumed the title of King of the Iranians and then King of Kings of the Iranians, he established a dynastic fire, the lighting of which was used to count his regnal years. Both in negotiations and in battle, he subdued the local kings of the districts surrounding him and then set out to conquer the rest of the Parthian Empire. One of the characteristic measures he took was the replacement of the client kings of the Parthians by members from his own family.⁵⁵ It seems that particular attention was paid to some semi-independent kingdoms and districts with strong Parthian cultural influence: Elymais, Hatra, Mesene, and perhaps Armenia. A further measure that seems to have been taken by Ardašīr and his son Šābuhr was a reorganisation of the religion, especially of its organisation. Thus, there is some evidence for calendar reforms, regulating the religious lives of all Zoroastrians, but most dramatically, there is the matter of the destruction and reorganisation of the temples and their priesthoods.

The reorganisation of the temples is evident from some positive references, although these are usually late, but especially from the legendary activities of Ardašīr against kings and queens who were represented as self-styled gods or demons, living in castles and sanctuaries amidst great treasure. The best known of these legends is the heroic fight of Ardašīr against the Worm, as related in the late Sasanian *Book of Deeds of Ardašīr son of Pābag*.⁵⁶ Here we meet a certain Haftowād, whose name may conceal an ancient title,⁵⁷ who is described as a monster-king who was worshipped by many people and was fed on blood. He was killed by Ardašīr and his castle

⁵³ The inscriptions mentioned in the preceding note establish the name of Persepolis as *sad stūn*, "hundred pillars." The site is currently known as *Taxt-e Jamšīd*, "the throne of Jamšīd" (the first king). Exactly how old this usage is, is not clear.

⁵⁴ The evidence for these developments is overwhelming for the modern period (with examples such as *Takht-e Soleymān*, "the throne of Solomon" and *Mādar-e Soleymān*, "the mother of Solomon." The history of these names urgently needs to be written.

⁵⁵ The evidence for this chiefly comes from the inscription of his son, the Sasanian king Šābuhr I, on the *Ka'be-ye Zardošt* in *Naqsh-e Rostam* (HUYSE, P., *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt* [ŠKZ], London 1999 [2 vols.]).

⁵⁶ GRENET, F., *La geste d' Ardashir fils de Pābag. Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān*, Die 2003.

⁵⁷ HENNING, W.B., *Ein persischer Titel im Reichsaramäischen*, in: BLACK, M./FOHRER, G. (eds.), *In Memoriam Paul Kahle* (BZAW 103), Berlin, pp. 138–145.

was destroyed; his treasure taken away and seven Bahrām fires were founded in its place.⁵⁸ There are various permutations of this story in later texts; Tabarī, for instance, mentions the fight against Haftānbukht, a different reading of the same name, who was “a king ... who was accorded divine attributes and worship. Ardashir marched against him, killed him by cutting him in half with his sword, put to death the members of his entourage, and brought forth from their subterranean store rooms extensive treasures that had been piled up there.”⁵⁹

But the story does not end there: Later in Tabarī’s account we read the following: “There was in a village called Alār, in the district of Kūjarān [...] a queen who was accorded the respect and worship of a divinity and who possessed wealth, treasures and soldiers. Ardashir made war on her priestly custodians, killed her, and seized as booty immense wealth and treasures belonging to her.”⁶⁰

Similar stories, but with less legendary detail, are told about Hatra and Armenia in particular.⁶¹ We could satisfy ourselves with an analysis of these stories as pieces of propaganda destined to do no more than project the image of Ardašir as a heroic fighter against demons and wrong types of religion. Although such a sober analysis is most often preferable, one fears that in this case we would lose more than we gain. To be more specific, such an analysis cannot explain why these stories are told only about Ardašir and Shāpūr, his son and successor, and why they consistently present the temples that were destroyed as places of idol-worship.

Mary Boyce has reconstructed an iconoclastic movement in early Sasanian Iran.⁶² Although this idea has not really been picked up in subsequent

⁵⁸ *Kārnāmag* 9.8–13 (GRENET, geste, 93–95).

⁵⁹ BOSWORTH, C.E., *The History of al-Tabarī V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, Albany 1999, 10.

⁶⁰ BOSWORTH, *History*, 16.

⁶¹ For Hatra, see ZAKERI, M., *Arabic Reports on the Fall of Hatra to the Sasanids. History or Legend?*, in: LEDER, S. (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of non-fictional Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden 1998, 158–167 with references. The narrative of the Sasanian conquest of Armenia in Armenian literature is so intimately interwoven with the narrative of the conversion of Armenia to Christianity, the main subject of many early Armenian texts, that it is extremely difficult to separate fact from fiction here. For an overview, see RUSSELL, J.R., *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Harvard Iranian Series 5), Cambridge 1987, 121–140.

⁶² BOYCE, M., *Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians*, in: NEUSNER, J. (ed.), *Christianity, Judaism and other Greco-Roman Cults. Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, vol. 4, Leiden 1975, 93–111.

scholarship,⁶³ indicating perhaps that some scholars are skeptic about the historical reality of this movement, there are some details in these stories that only seem to make sense from precisely that context.

We do not know whether there really were temples in which statues were worshipped in South-Western Iran. No such structure has been excavated yet. What we do know, however, is that alongside fire-temples, there were temples dedicated to separate gods. These were known in Parthian as *baginas*, in Middle Persian probably as *bagdān*.⁶⁴ These must have been places of considerable local importance and may have housed many of the previously unknown gods that continue to appear in recent sources. Although their existence is, to some extent, hypothetical, accepting their existence makes it possible, first of all, to grasp something of the local varieties of Zoroastrianism and, perhaps more importantly, to understand a lot of the evidence presented in non-Zoroastrian sources from the Sasanian period, chiefly in Syriac and Armenian, which frequently seem to refer to this type of sanctuary.⁶⁵

Ardašīr's destruction of the idol-temples may, therefore, refer to a process of deligitimisation of this type of religious institution and it is easy to see why. Money was certainly a factor, in view of the stress on the treasures of the idol-temples, but more importantly, their potential for local pride and local resilience must have created difficulties for the Sasanians in their claim to restore unity in the Empire. This is expressed most clearly in the inscriptions of the priest Kerdīr, who mentions the fact that he showed great zeal in destroying the "idols" (*uzdēs*) and the dwelling-places of the demons.⁶⁶

In order to create the unity of the empire, we can see some positive measures: establishing family members in positions of power in sensitive parts of the Empire, and creating a hierarchical network of fire-temples and priesthoods, with a prescribed calendar throughout the realm. We can also reconstruct some negative measures in deligitimising the local temples and their priesthoods. It is not that they disappeared, for they are still in

⁶³ In the latest overview of the history of Zoroastrianism (STAUSBERG, M., *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale I*, Stuttgart 2002), the question of cult statues is not mentioned at all.

⁶⁴ BOYCE, *Iconoclasm*; for the word, see also SHAKED, S., *Bagdāna, King of the Demons, and other Iranian Terms in Babylonian Aramaic Magic*, in: *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce II* (*Acta Iranica* 25), Leiden 1985, 511–525.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, SHAKED, S., *A Persian House of Study, a King's Secretary: Irano-Aramaic Notes*, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 48 (1995) 171–186: 171–175 on the Talmudic evidence.

⁶⁶ For a synopsis of these passages, see GIGNOUX, P., *Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr. Textes et concordances* (*Studia Iranica, Cahier* 9), Paris 1991, 60.

existence in the sixth century,⁶⁷ but all state support seems to have been withdrawn from them, and they were seen and, in later times, treated as places of evil.

In recent scholarship, much attention has been paid to the manipulation of symbols by the early Sasanians and it has been suggested that the Sasanians, from the start, drew upon imagery from the Avesta and the legendary history of the Iranians to establish a new type of Zoroastrianism and a new type of royal ideology.⁶⁸ This interpretation, which focuses particularly on the Aryan or Iranian ideology of the Sasanians and on the concept of *xwarrah* or divine "glory," is seriously problematic.⁶⁹ It is based on the assumptions that the Avesta was a text that circulated widely, was understood by many and functioned as a source of legends and imagery. All these assumptions are seriously problematic for the early third century. Neither the inscriptions nor the rock reliefs of Ardašīr and Shāpūr, nor even the inscriptions of the priest Kerdīr, allude to imagery from the Avesta, let alone to the epic history that made such an appearance in later Sasanian times.⁷⁰ Instead, what we can reconstruct and understand of the symbolic languages of the earliest Sasanians alludes, first of all, to their enormous success and the failure of their Parthian former overlords and then to understandable themes with strong regional overtones: a unity of all Iranians under a Persian king appointed by Ohrmazd.

In the famous investiture relief of Ardašīr at Naqsh-e Rostam, the king and his god come face to face, mounted on their horses. The god hands the king the ring of sovereignty. Ardašīr's horse stands upon the body of the defeated Parthian king Ardabān; Ohrmazd's horse stands upon the body of a defeated male figure, in whose hair we find a coiling snake.⁷¹ By general consent, this is Ahreman, the Evil Spirit. There is not a single passage in the Avesta that puts Ahura Mazdā on a horse; there is not a single passage bold enough to state that Ahura Mazdā has already defeated Ahreman. But the image itself is easy enough to understand: just as there is one god capable of destroying the forces of evil in this world, there is to be only one king, chosen by his god, to rule over his people.

⁶⁷ The evidence for this comes from the law-book *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* 94.3–6. See MACUCH, *Rechtskasuistik*, 597.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, GNOLI, G., *The Idea of Iran. An Essay on its Origin* (Serie Orientale Roma 62), Roma 1989, 129–174.

⁶⁹ See, briefly, DE JONG, *specie*, 363–364.

⁷⁰ The only possible exception, a reference to the *Nask* (i.e. the Avesta in this case), has been restored in an inscription of Kerdīr by SKJAERVØ, P.O., *Kirdir's Vision. Translation and Analysis*, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 16 (1983) 269–306.

⁷¹ For this aspect of the relief, see HINZ, W., *Altiranische Funde und Forschungen*, Berlin 1969, 115–143, esp. pl. 64.