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Presidents Message:

I would personally like to wish Happy New Year to all our members and their families as we enter 2016. .

NAMC's 2016 AGM will be hosted by the Zoroastrian Association of Pennsylvania and New Jersey (ZAPANJ) from May 14 to May 15/2016.

You are requested to send your \$25 NAMC membership fees to our treasurer Tehemton Mirza.

Ervad Kobad Zarolia

THE RISE OF THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY
And
THE RENAISSANCE OF ZOROASTRIANISM

Talk given by Cawas Desai
ZAPANJ Religion Class on February 14, 2015

In 330 BC, Alexander the Macedonian brought down the curtain on the greatest land empire that the world had seen, exceeded only by that of Genghis Khan in the mid- twelfth century, some 1,500 years after the Achaemenians. At its height, the Achaemenian Empire encompassed the Greek Islands, Libya, Egypt and Sudan, all the lands east of the Danube (corrupted from the Persian "Danae Aab", the Waters of the Danae), in Hungary to those west of the Indus River in Pakistan, and to the lands

west of Mongolia, including Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. The administration of so vast an empire was not equaled until the British established their empire some 2,000 years later.

Alexander attempted to destroy Persian culture through the forcible mass marriages of Persian women to Greek soldiers, but it is the attempted destruction of the Zoroastrian religion, its clergy and its writings that earned him the sobriquet, "The Accursed", and ranked him as the third of the three arch-enemies of Iran, following Zohak the Tazi and Afrasiab the Turanian.

Alexander's burning of the royal palace at Persepolis symbolized the passing of the old order and the introduction of Greek civilization into western Asia. Greek and Macedonian soldiers settled in large numbers in Mesopotamia and Iran. Alexander encouraged intermarriage and fostered Greek culture, but was forced to retain a large part of the Achaemenian administrative structure.

Alexander was also confronted by two human factors that were of the greatest importance for the future of his empire. The first of these was the powerful local aristocracy of this part of the Achaemenian Empire, which held enormous properties and dominated the indigenous population.

Alexander was not unaware that various measures were needed to ensure his control of these vast territories. He founded many new cities, or refounded some that were already in existence. Many of these were placed strategically along the northern frontiers as protection. Almost half of these new cities were located in the high (eastern) satrapies. This policy of Alexander's would later be abandoned by the Seleucids, whose efforts at city planning were mostly confined to their western possessions.

The second of the human factors were the nomads who inhabited the immense territories beyond the northern frontiers and for centuries had wandered along the northern and northeastern frontiers of Iran. They fought constantly with the settled populations but could nevertheless occasionally ally with them in the face of necessity. When Alexander arrived on the banks of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) River, it marked the limit of the "civilized" world as the Greeks knew it; beyond stretched the Eurasian wilderness. The Roman historian Quintus Curtius recounts Alexander's meeting with a delegation of Scythians who gave him a warning. They told him, "Just cross the Tanais [properly the Jaxartes] and you will see how far Scythia stretches. You will never conquer the Scythians. Our poverty makes us quicker than your army, which bears plunder from so many nations. Just when you think we are far away, then will you see us in your camp. We know how to pursue and how to flee with the same swiftness"¹.

After the death of Alexander in 323 BC there was a falling out among his generals. Ultimately, the conflict was settled at the Battle of Ipsus in Phrygia in 301 BC. Alexander's empire was first divided into five major portions: Cassander ruled in Macedon, Lysimachus in Thrace, Seleucus in Mesopotamia and Persia, and Ptolemy in the Levant and Egypt. Antigonus, who ruled for a while in Anatolia and Syria, was eventually defeated by the other generals at Ipsus. Control over Indian Territory passed to Chandragupta Maurya. By 270 BC, the Hellenistic states were consolidated, with:

- The Antigonid Empire in Macedonia and Greece;
- The Seleucid Empire in Mesopotamia and Persia; and
- The Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, Palestine and Cyrenaica.

Seleucus and his son, Antiochus I Soter, established a government with two capitals: Antioch on the Orontes River in Syria and Seleucia on the Tigris River in Babylonia.

In contrast with Alexander, the Seleucids were unable to maintain the good rapport with the eastern Iranian nobility that Alexander had believed essential. And this deficiency, a result of the Seleucids' "pro-Macedonian" policies, was one of the principal causes for the progressive decline of the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucid Empire soon overextended itself. After the death of Seleucus in 281 BC, his successors faced invasions to the west, diminishing their control over the Eastern portions of the Empire. The antipathy the Seleucids bore against the nomads and the Eastern Iranian nobility were the two dominant factors in the decline of the Seleucid kingdom and the events they provoked were some of the principal causes for the exhaustion and eventual fall of that state. Between 260 and 250 BC, various provinces simultaneously asserted their independence, such as Bactria under Diodotus, Parthia under Arsaces, and Cappadocia under Ariarathes III.

Of the Hellenistic age, Mary Boyce says, "Every inch of territory conquered by the Macedonian Alexander had been held before him by the Achaemenians, so that wherever Hellenistic culture established itself in his wake, it was on soil where Persians had been living, as members of the ruling people, for generations, and where accordingly their religion had long been represented." She further states that, "The respect felt for Zarathushtra by certain Greeks, notably those of the Platonic school, and the keen interest in the study of the heavens in Hellenistic times, combined to make Zarathushtra a much revered figure"ⁱⁱ.

The religion of the Seleucids shows definite influences of Zoroastrianism. Even after the ascent of the Arsacids in Iran, we see Zoroastrian influences in Eastern Turkey. At Nimrud Dagh, the Seleucid king, Mithradates Callinicus and his son, Antiochus of Commagene proclaimed their descent from the great Darius in a series of colossal ancestor statues and inscriptions. In one relief, Zeus is identified with a Semitic Bel and an Iranian "Religion of the Mazdayasnians" perhaps a euphemism for Ahura Mazda. There are also statues and inscriptions dedicated to "Mithras Apollo" at Nimrud and "Anahita-Nanai" in Armenia.

After the decline of the Seleucids, a reaction began to set in against the penetration of Hellenism. Various powers began to emerge on the world stage, the Iranians and the Kushans in the east, and in the west, Carthage and Rome. These powers were on the fringes of the Hellenistic world and were, to a great extent, affected by Hellenism

The Greek Interregnum of Iran lasted for some 60 years. The Seleucid Empire itself lasted from 323 BC to 64 BC. However, the Seleucids lost control of northern Iran to the "Parni" a nomadic Zoroastrian group which had settled in the satrapy of Parthia in 247 BC, when Arsaces I revolted against the Seleucids and established the Arsacid (or Parthian) Dynasty which ruled over Iran for 455 years till it in turn succumbed to the Sassanians in 208 AD.

Mithridates I greatly expanded the empire by seizing Media and Mesopotamia from the Seleucids. These military victories gave Parthia control of the overland trade routes between east and west (the Silk Road and the Persian Royal Road). This control of trade became the foundation of Parthia's wealth and power and was jealously guarded by the Parthians, who attempted to maintain direct control over the lands through which the major trade routes passed. The empire, located on the Silk Road trade route between the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean Basin and the Han Empire of

China, became a center of trade and commerce. At its height, the Parthian Empire stretched from the northern reaches of the Euphrates, in what is now central-eastern Turkey, to eastern Iran.

The Parthians largely adopted the art, architecture, religious beliefs, and royal insignias of their culturally heterogeneous empire, which encompassed Persian, Hellenistic, and regional cultures. As the heirs to the Achaemenid Empire, the Arsacid rulers titled themselves the "King of Kings."

During the later Achaemenian dynasty, throughout the Seleucid era and well into the Parthian period, a dynasty of Zoroastrian kings ruled over an area known as Pontus. During the reign of Artaxerxes II (Mnemon), Mithradata, a former satrap, was allowed to set up a vassal kingdom known as the Kingdom of Pontus, situated on the southern coast of the Pontus Euxinus (now known as the Black Sea). The kingdom formed a part of Cappadocia (currently a part of Turkey) and was known as Pontic Cappadocia, i.e. Cappadocia on the Black Sea.

The kingdom of Pontus was founded by Mithradata I in 387 BC. This dynasty reigned from 387 BC to 47 BC, and included six kings bearing the name of Mithradata meaning "created by Mithra". The Greeks misnamed these kings as Mithradates, which should not be confused with the Parthian kings named Mithradat, meaning "friends of Mithra" also misnamed by the Greeks as Mithradates.

Probably the most well-known of the kings of Pontus was Mithradates VI Eupator, meaning the well fathered, who ruled from 132 to 63 BC. It is said that "His frame was gigantic and no Roman was big enough to fill his armour. He could ride a hundred and twenty miles in a single day. He could drive a team of no less than sixteen horses. He was the finest archer in Pontus. He could drink the hardest toper in his kingdom under the table. He could speak fluently all the twenty-two languages current in his dominions. To these gifts, that he inherited from his Persian forefathers, he added others, derived no doubt from his mother's Greek ancestors".

Mithradates Eupator died in 63 BC from self-inflicted wounds after his defeat by the Roman General Pompey. The Roman Historian Appian of Alexandria describes Mithradates' passing, "So died at the age of sixty-eight or sixty-nine and in the fifty-seventh year of his reign, one of the most remarkable men, who ever lived. His Royal Persian origin made him beloved by the former subjects of the Achaemenian kings. His Greek blood and Greek culture made him attractive to the Hellenes both of Asia Minor and Greece. With the help of Hellene officers and Persian administrators, he created a mighty kingdom out of a petty state and for forty years he fought Rome with equal fortune. Beaten often, he yet won victories over experienced Roman generals, Fimbria, Murena, Cotta and Triarus. He was repeatedly wounded, but his courage and his soldierly talents increased rather than diminished with age. His death was regarded by the Romans as an occasion for national thanksgiving and they celebrated it by a public festival in Rome. The messengers, who carried the news to the Roman camp at Jericho, entered it crowned with laurel. When some time later Pompey celebrated his triumph, the object that drew all eyes was a picture of Mithradates dying on the dead bodies of his daughters. The joy of his enemy over his self-inflicted death was the noblest tribute to the greatness of the hero-king of Pontus".

Although this remarkable king is forgotten, Russian archaeologists have noted that his memory is preserved in the name of one of the mountains on the north coast of the Black Sea near the ancient city of Panticapaeum, the leading city in the province of Bosphorus

The last century BC and the first century AD witnessed the greatest expansion of the Iranian world since the Achaemenians. Under the Parthian kings, Iranians again advanced to the frontiers of Egypt, the Kushans occupied the whole of North India, Russian Turkistan and part of Chinese Turkistan, the Iranian-Sarmatians, who swarmed over the Eurasian Steppes, became masters of a great part of the northern shore of the Black Sea, reached the shores of the Danube and spread into Central Asia. The Iranians took their revenge on the Macedonians by attacking its two eastern outposts. The Greco-Bactrian kingdom disappeared under the onslaught of the later Kushans, and the Greek settlements on the Black Sea coast were over-run by the Sarmatians. Iran maintained its pressure against the Romans when the latter appeared in Asia. The wars of the Pontic King, Mithradates Eupator represent the resistance of the easterners under Iranian leadership against western Roman expansionismⁱⁱⁱ. It is said that Mithradates Eupator was the most implacable enemy of Rome except for Hannibal Barca. In the titanic duel between Iran and Rome, Iran under the Parthian emperors emerged victorious over the Romans. At the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, the Parthian forces, particularly the mounted bowmen, dealt the Romans under Crassus a stunning defeat.

Referring to the Parthians, Rawlinson observes, "They (the Parthians) were a check and a counterpoise to Rome, preserving a balance of power, and preventing the absorption of all other nations into the Tyrant Empire. They afforded a refuge to those whom Rome would fain have hunted down, allowed a freedom to their subjects which no Roman emperor ever permitted, excelled the Romans in toleration and in a liberal treatment of foreigners, and gave the East a protection from foreign foes, and a government well suited to its needs, for a period of nearly four centuries"^{iv}.

The first signs of a new Iranian renaissance appeared under Vologeses I (Valaksh I, AD 51 to 80), whose coinage depicted a fire altar with a sacrificing priest on the reverse. For the first time, Iranian money bore letters in the Pahlavi alphabet. According to later tradition, the text of the scattered Avesta began to be gathered and compiled in his reign. Tradition also holds that the contents of the Dinkart began to be gathered and assembled during the same period, although it was finally written centuries later.

Regarding the province of Pars or Persis, during the Parthian period, Unvala remarks, "This Hellenic polytheism and even Hellenism in general could not take root in Persis during the sovereignty of the Macedonians, where it suddenly disappeared after its fall, because the traditions and the religion of Zoroaster were supreme in it. There is hardly any doubt that in those times the true form of Zoroastrianism and the sacred books of the Avesta were preserved in Persis, whereas everywhere, in Parthia, in the kingdom of the Indo-Scyths of the East, in Armenia, in Cappadocia, in Pontus and throughout north-western Asia Minor, where Zoroastrianism developed into Mithraism, it was degenerated and mixed with other cults and other ideas. Thus it was in Persis that the renaissance of Zoroastrianism commenced"^v.

As mentioned previously, in the absence of an extensive written literature, oral literature and tradition flourished under the Parthians. According to Richard Frye, "There is evidence that the Parthians gave the Iranian national epic the basic form in which the Sassanians recorded it and passed it on to Firdausi. Parthian poet-musicians not only created many of the heroic-feudal characteristics of the epic, but they probably preserved the old legends of the Kavis of eastern Iran, the Kayanians of the epic who were the ancestors of Vishtaspa, the patron of Zoroaster"^{vi}.

It seems that under the Parthians, the religion of Zarathushtra which was the official state religion under the Median and Achaemenian Dynasties retained its hold on the populace and it was the "semi-

official” religion during their rule. Certainly, four of the Arsacid kings used the prefix “Mithra” in their names. As with the Achaemenians, the Parthians worshipped Anahita and Mithra. Anahita, enjoyed great popularity beyond the western frontiers of Iran, with her cult spreading to Lydia (where she was called “the Lady of Bactria”), and further west to Pontus, Cappadocia and Armenia.

But Mithra, proved even more popular than Anahita. One of the important features of Parthian history is the spread of Mithraism in Europe. In the Avesta, Mithra is the Yazata presiding over sun-light, truth, justice and virtue and Mithra multiplies the victory of his worshippers. When the Romans came in contact with the Iranians, the Roman soldiers were attracted by the martial qualities of Mithra and they and the Iranian prisoners captured by Pompey took the cult to Rome. Eventually, in 245 AD the Emperor Diocletian would proclaim Mithra as the Protector of the Roman Armies and the First Deity of the Roman Empire. From Rome, the Roman armies carried Mithraism as far as the Rhine and the Danube and on to Brittany and then to Great Britain.

The earliest references to Zurvanism, (the Zoroastrian heresy which gained full ascendancy under the Sassanids), can be traced to its beginnings during the Parthian dynasty. Eudemus of Rhodes, a disciple of Aristotle and the Magi wrote, “call the whole intelligible and unitary universe either Space or Time from which a good god and an evil demon were separated out or, according to others, light and darkness before these. Both parties, however, suppose that this dual constitution of the higher powers is subsequent to and differentiated out of an undifferentiated being. One of these higher powers is ruled by Ohrmazd, the other by Ahriman”^{vii}.

Although the Parthian Dynasty lasted far longer than the Achaemenian one, history seems to have passed it by, probably due to the fact that there are very few written records by the Parthians themselves. According to Richard Frye, “In Mesopotamia Semitic languages were in use, and as we know from the documents of Nisa and Avroman, Parthian was written heterographically with Aramaic words as well as letters. From this awkward way of writing one would not expect an extensive written literature in Parthian, but there was a flourishing oral literature at the courts of nobles and rulers in Parthian times”. It is only now, with new research, that this dynasty is being given the recognition it so richly deserves.

History records that during the five centuries of Parthian rule there were a variety of religious sects and practices concerning the worship of several deities with Greco-Iranian features and nomenclature, most famous being Verethragna-Heracles, Tir-Apollo, and Anahita- Athena^{viii}. The early Parthians followed a policy of tolerance toward all sects and creeds, including Paganism, Judaism and Christianity, and the religious customs of their citizens. This policy of religious tolerance eventually pitted the Zoroastrian clergy against the growing power of a proselytizing Byzantine Christian Church, which culminated in the eventual loss of Armenia, a loss which would play a leading part in the weakening of the Iranian Empire under the Sassanids, contributing to its overthrow by the Islamic Arabs. Gradually however, in the first two centuries AD, there is a noticeable change on the part of the Parthian monarchy in favoring the Zoroastrian religion. In any event, long before the Parthian Dynasty gave way to the Sassanians, in fact, at the time of the birth of Christ, Zoroastrianism, in one form or another, was the most prevalent religion in the then known world. Had Constantine not opted to convert to Christianity rather than embrace Zoroastrianism on his death bed in 337 AD, Zoroastrianism would not be the forgotten religion that it is today.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹ Mary Boyce, article in FEZANA Journal, Winter 2004.

¹ Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,

Article edited by Shapour Suren-Pahlav.

¹ George Rawlinson, "Parthia".

¹ Jamshedji Maneckji Unvala "Observations on the Religion of the Parthians".

¹ Mary Boyce "Some Remarks on the Transmission of the Kayanian Heroic Cycle", quoted by Richard Frye,

"The Heritage of Persia".

¹ R.C. Zaehner, "The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism".

¹ Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion".

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