



**EVOLUTION AND PRACTICE OF ZOROASTRIANISM
DURING THE ACHAEMENIAN AND PARTHIAN DYNASTIES**

Paper presented by Cawas Desai at:

The NAMC Seminar on May 19, 2007 in Marlton, NJ

The NAMC Seminar on February 25, 2012 in Houston, TX

The NAMC Seminar on April 7, 2012 in Toronto, ON



In order to fully understand and appreciate the development, evolution and practice of the Zoroastrian religion during the Achaemenian Dynasty, it is first necessary to establish a time-line of that Dynasty in relation to that of the religion and consider it in the proper perspective of the time and place of the establishment of Zoroastrianism.

The Achaemenian Dynasty takes its name from Achaemenes (Avestan Hakhamanish) the patriarch of the Median tribe into which Cyrus the Great was born. In 558 BC, Cyrus II (The Younger, also known to history as The Great), overthrew his maternal grandfather, Astyages, and established the Achaemenian Dynasty which lasted for 228 years, till 330 BC.

The date when Zarathushtra lived and preached is one of great speculationⁱ. However, we must establish some criteria to establish a time-line to compare it with the founding of the Achaemenian Dynasty in 558 BC. The ancient Greek historians, particularly Xanthus of Lydiaⁱⁱ, Plato, Pliny and Plutarch place Zarathushtra in eras varying from 7,000 BC (6,000 years before the Trojan War) to 2,000 BC. The Vedic Sanskrit scholars place Him before 3,500 BCⁱⁱⁱ. Others claim a date of 1,000 BC would be more acceptable^{iv}. Some 19th century scholars, contending that a date of 7,000 BC would place Zarathushtra in the Stone Age, and relying on the “so-called Parsi tradition” of 258 years before Alexander^v, assigned a date of about 600 BC. Some western scholars, confusing the Kayanian King Gushtasp, the royal patron of Zarathushtra, with The Achaemenian Hystaspes, the father of Darius I, also accepted a date of 600 BC^{vi}. Most modern scholars now believe that Zarathushtra could not have lived any later than 1,800 BC.

The “so called Parsi traditional date” of 588 BC as the birth date of Zarathushtra, (258 years before the defeat of Darius III in 330 BC), would make Zarathushtra a contemporary of Cyrus the Great, and place the establishment of Zoroastrianism in the Achaemenian Dynasty rather than the Kayanian Dynasty. Therefore, one of the key questions regarding the Achaemenian Dynasty, “Was Cyrus the Great a Zoroastrian?” becomes moot. A date of 588 BC would also make Zarathushtra contemporaneous with the establishment of Buddhism. As Chatterjee puts it, “To seek to make Dharmaraj Zarathushtra more or less a contemporary of Gautama Budha is the height of frivolity”^{vii}.

If the date of Zarathushtra is open to debate, so too is His birth place and the place of His first ministry. There is a tradition that Zarathushtra was born in Raga, mediaeval Rayy, near Teheran. The Avesta contains several place names, but there is no mention of any place west of Rayy^{viii}. Most scholars, therefore, agree that the Zoroastrian religion not only began, but also developed, in Eastern Iran and that Zarathushtra lived and taught in the eastern reaches of the Iranian Empire, specifically in the Herat area with connections south to Seistan, east to Bactria or Balkh and north to Merv^{ix}.



Linguistically also, Gathic Avesta appears to be a language of the communities of the Inner Asian Steppes^x. The transition of Gathic Avesta, the language spoken by Zarathushtra, to the Avesta of the Yashts and then to the “Younger Avesta” the forerunner of the “Old Persian” language of the Achaeminids, would have taken several centuries^{xi}.

Even if as late a date of 1,800 BC is accepted as the Prophet’s time of birth, twelve centuries passed before Zoroastrianism first entered western recorded history. As the gospel of Zarathushtra traveled westward from its original homeland (the Airyan Vej of the Kayanian Dynasty), the language and practice of the religion was bound to change. Through the legendary Huafritan and Kudurvand Dynasties^{xii}, of which all traces are lost, nothing is known about the then practice of Zoroastrianism.

Let us see if we can part the mists of time and get a glimpse at some of the changes which occurred in the religions westward migration.

Greek historians^{xiii} indicate that Zarathushtra composed some two million words of verse. Unfortunately, a large portion of Zarathushtra’s own words have been lost to us and to history. Unfortunately also, shortly after Zarathushtra’s time, elements of the old polytheistic beliefs began to creep back into Zoroastrianism as can be seen from the content of the Yashts.

Although the content of the Yashts is clearly considered to be pre-Zoroastrian, the language of the Yashts, except for the Yasna Haptanghaiti, is post-gathic Avestan^{xiv}. Today, every scholar agrees that all of the Yashts, except for the Yasna Haptanghaiti, were composed and written centuries after the time of Zarathushtra. The Yasna Haptanghaiti is composed in gathic-Avestan, the language of the Gathas. The striking difference between the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti is that the Gathas are composed in metrical verse form and are to be sung, whereas the Haptanghaiti is composed in prose. There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the authorship of the Haptanghaiti. Mary Boyce contends that some parts of the Yasna appear to be composed by Zarathushtra himself, while Robert Zaehner unequivocally contends that the Yasna was composed by Zarathushtra’s disciples shortly after His death and not by the Prophet himself.

Be that as it may, the names of Indra, Varuna and Mithra are mentioned in the Haptanghaiti, and there is absolutely no question but that these are pre-Zoroastrian divinities, which today continue to hold prominent positions in the Vedas. Indra evolved into Verethragna or Behram Yazata, Mithra evolved into Meher Yazata and Varuna, in the female form of Varunani evolved into Avan Ardisur Yazad, more commonly known as Anahita^{xv}. The names of these and other pre-Zoroastrian divinities subsequently evolved into the Yazatas whose names are incorporated as the days of the month in the Zoroastrian calendar. The fact that these pre-Zoroastrian divinities now occupy and hold important positions in our liturgy, points to the fact that these are later additions to the religion introduced after Zarathushtra’s life time. Clearly, these portions of the



Avesta conflict with the strict and unambiguous monotheism preached by the Prophet Himself.

According to Ghirshman^{xvi}, the event which dominated the history of Western Asia during the second millennium BC was the appearance of elements of Indo-European origin in this part of the ancient world. At first, the new-comers, who left their homeland, which in all probability lay in the Eurasian plains of southern Russia, played a relatively small part on the scene. In the course of their migration they apparently split into two groups. One, the western branch, rounded the Black sea, and after crossing the Balkans and the Bosphorus, penetrated into Asia Minor. Settling among Asiatic peoples who appear to have been the original inhabitants of the country, they rapidly became the dominant element in the population, and formed the Hittite confederation. The Eastern branch, known as the Indo-Iranians, which apparently consisted of the warrior element, moved eastward around the Caspian Sea, crossed the Caucasus and pushed as far as the great bend of the Euphrates. There they settled among the indigenous Hurrians, another people of Asiatic origin and after some time formed the kingdom of the Mitanni, ruling over northern Mesopotamia and the valleys of the Zagros and keeping the expansionist Assyrians at bay. In approximately 1,450 BC, a treaty concluded between a king of the Hittites and a ruler of the Mitanni mentions Mithra, Varuna and Indra.

Since history has never been able to establish any Indian influence in the Middle East, it seems reasonable to assume that these names were in common use among the Aryan tribes which settled on and around the Iranian Plateau.

The Zoroastrian religion, at the time of its establishment first flourished in Bactria. Several millennia later, a tribe of Zoroastrians, misnamed “Medes” by Berosus, conquered Chaldea in 2,458 BC. History makes no further mention of Zoroastrians till we come to the 9th century BC, when we find Zoroastrianism flourishing in the Medean Kingdom^{xvii}.

About the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first millennium BC, the Persians from Southern Iran moved eastwards and conquered a tribe known as the Elamites, becoming the rulers of the Kingdom of Anshan (near Pars, north of modern day Shiraz), ruling as vassals of the Medes for over a century. Also in this same time period, Zoroastrianism heavily influenced the Indo-Iranians who had moved eastwards around the Caspian Sea and settled in the valleys of the Zagros Mountains. These included the five Median tribes, one of which was the Magoi (Magi), a sacerdotal tribe, who are believed to have been literate and provided the priesthood for the Medes and Western Persians.

For the development of the Zoroastrian religion in the west, we have to rely on the inscriptions of the Achaemenian kings and the Greek accounts of the Persian religion, particularly by Herodotus^{xviii}. Two of the most vexing problems in the study of Zoroastrianism are that of the religion of the Achaemenian kings and the part played by the Magi in the development of the religion.



None of the Achaemenian inscriptions include the name of Zarathushtra. Also, the Greek historians, in describing the religious customs of the Achaemenids do not mention any rituals with which the Zoroastrians of today are familiar. These are the prime reasons why scholars debate whether the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians or not. However, the name of Ahura Mazda constantly appears in the inscriptions and it must be remembered that this was the name given by Zarathushtra to His God.

The oldest Achaemenian object yet discovered is a gold tablet engraved in cuneiform and in Old Persian, giving the titles of Ariaramnes (Old Persian, Aryaramna, meaning Peace of the Aryans c. 640 to 590 BC), probably the son of Ctespes and a brother of Cyrus I (the Elder)^{xix}. “This land of the Persians which I possess, provided with fine horses and good men, it is the Great God Ahuramazda who has given it to me. I am the King of this land”^{xxx}.

As mentioned previously, the Achaemenian Dynasty was founded by Cyrus II (the Great) in 558 BC, when he revolted against his maternal grandfather Astyages. The “Nabonidus Cylinder” discovered in Babylon says of Astyages, “His troops he collected, and against Cyrus, king of Anshan.....he marched. As for Astyages, his troops revolted against him, and he was seized and delivered up to Cyrus. Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods and substances of Ecbatana he seized, and to the land of Anshan he took the goods and substance that were gotten”^{xxxi}. Cyrus united the kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians and after wresting Babylon from Nebuchadnezzar, went on to conquer most of Central Asia and the Mediterranean colonies of Greece.

Little is known about the religion followed by Cyrus himself. After the conquest of Babylon, in a political move, he accepted all the Babylonian Gods to forestall any opposition from the Babylonian priests and gain the acceptance of the conquered population. However, from his actions and decrees, in which he epitomized the religious creed of Zarathushtra, one can have no doubt that he was a Zoroastrian.

Cyrus will be remembered for his forbearance against the rulers and the populations of all the nations he conquered, from Lydia to Sardis and the Greek colonies of Phrygia, Mycenae and Ionia. It is common knowledge that Cyrus’ decree on the rights of peoples forms the basis of the Charter of the United Nations. But history’s greatest remembrance of Cyrus will always be the freeing of the Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity by the “Edict of Cyrus” in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to take the gold and silver vessels, captured by Nebuchadnezzar, back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. This act is forever immortalized in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron, and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name”^{xxii}.



This freeing of the Jews from the Babylonian exile was the start of five centuries of close contact between Judaism and Zoroastrianism, and the influence of the religion of Zarathushtra on the religion of Moses.

Prior to the Babylonian captivity, pre-Exilic Judaism had no concept of heaven or hell. According to the religion of Moses, souls stayed in a dreary place called “Sheol” for eternity^{xxiii}. There are even questions about just how monotheistic Judaism really was^{xxiv}. These concepts dramatically changed in post-Exilic Judaism.

As Boyce puts it, “Isaiah celebrates Yahweh for the first time in Jewish literature as Creator, as Ahura Mazda had been celebrated by Zarathushtra: “I, Yahweh, who created all things...I made the earth and created man on it...Let the skies rain down justice...I Yahweh have created it.” The parallels with Zoroastrian doctrine and scripture are so striking that these verses have been taken to represent the first imprint of that influence which Zoroastrianism was to exert so powerfully on post-Exilic Judaism”^{xxv}.

It may be well to repeat what Dr. Lawrence Mills, Professor of Philology at the University of Oxford has to say: “If God was anywhere present in any human event, He was active at the taking of Babylon. Had Cyrus failed there, where would our post-exilic Judaism and pre-Christianity have been now. Cyrus and his successors not only saved the Jewish national existence, but restored Jewish worship with its very Temple. To ignore what Persia did under the hand of God for the Jews and for ourselves would be more than ingratitude – to deny it would be sacrilege, impugning either Divine omnipotence or benevolence in one of its most glorious manifestations”^{xxvi}.

The last reported words of Cyrus were “God is the protector of this lasting and unchanging organization of the universe. His majesty and grandeur are beyond description”^{xxvii}. Except for the inscriptions on his tomb, “Adam Kurush Kshayathiya Hakhamanishya” (“I am Cyrus the King, the Achaemenian”)^{xxviii}, Cyrus the Great left no other inscriptions behind. According to Plutarch, the tomb was desecrated by Polymachus after the invasion of Alexander. Pliny the Elder is quoted by Professor A.V.W. Jackson that “The Magi hold the fortress of Pasargadae in which is the tomb of Cyrus and that the Magians were hereditary guardians of the tomb, dwelling near it, and offering a sheep a day, and a horse each month, as sacrifice”^{xxix}.

With Cyrus’ successor, Darius I (The Great), we come to the truly Persian succession of the Achaemenian Dynasty. In one of his inscriptions, “King Darius says, my fathers name was Vishtasp, Vishtasp’s father was Arsham, Arsham’s father was Aryaraman, Aryaraman’s father was Chispash, and his father was Hakhamanish. For this reason we are called Achaemenian; we have come down from a very remote antiquity; from the ancient times our family is a royal one. Before me eight kings have flourished who were of my family; I am the ninth one”^{xxx}.

At this point, it may be worthwhile to give the genealogy of the Achaemenian Dynasty^{xxxi}:



1. Hakhamanish (Achaemenes, after whom the dynasty is named);
2. Chishpish (Teispes);
3. Kambujiya (Cambyses I);
4. Kurush (Cyrus I);
5. Kambujiya (Cambyses II);

6. Kurush (Cyrus II, founder of the Achaemenian Dynasty, 559-530);
7. Kambujiya (Cambyses III, 530-522);
8. Bardiya (Smerdis or Gaumata the Magian, 522);
9. Darayawush (Darius I, 522-486);
10. Khshayarsha (Xerxes I, 486-465);
11. Artakhshatra (Artaxerxes I Longimanus, 465-424);
12. Khshayarsha (Xerxes II, 424-423);
13. Darayawush (Darius II Nothus, 423-404);
14. Artakhshatra (Artaxerxes II Mnemon, 404-359);
15. Artakhshatra (Artaxerxes III, Ochus, 359-338);
16. Arsha (Arses, 338-336);
17. Darayawush (Darius III Codomanus, 336-330).

Starting with Darius I, the Achaemenids left some 47 inscriptions, the most famous of which are at Behistun, Naksh-i-Rustum, Persepolis, and Susa. Let us start with Darius' inscription at Naksh-i-Rustum: "Martiya hya Auramazdaha framan hauvatiya gasta ma thadaya, pathim tyam rastim ma avarada, ma starava". "O man do not go contrary to the precept of Ahura Mazda, do not leave the path of truth, do not sin"^{xxxii}.

At Susa, one of Darius' inscriptions says "A great God is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth who created that heaven, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius King, the one King of many, the one Commander of many. I am Darius the King, the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of countries having all kinds of human beings, the King in this great earth far and wide, the son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, the son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan lineage"^{xxxiii}. It should be noted that in the original language of the inscription, the words are, "....Parsua paarsahya puthra ariya ariyachithra", a Parsua, son of a Parsua, an Aryan of Aryan lineage. In the late 19th and early 20th century, some Parsi translators, deliberately translated this word as "....Parsi, son of a Parsi", to establish that the word "Parsi" was in usage in ancient Iran, rather than it being used for the first time after the migration to India, most probably during the Mogul era.

It is interesting to note that the earliest inscriptions of Darius the Great refer only to Ahura Mazda and His will:

- "By the will of Ahura Mazda I am King";
- "By the will of Ahura Mazda these nations have become my slaves and my



tributaries”;

- “That which has been done, I did it all by the will of Ahura Mazda”,

clearly indicating that everything depended absolutely on divine will^{xxxiv}.

In Darius’ later inscriptions, we see the introduction of the “Other Gods”, “The Gods of the Clans” and “Mithra and Anahita”. In an inscription at Behistun, Darius says “Ahura Mazda came to my aid – as well as the other Gods”. At Persepolis, Darius says “May Ahura Mazda and the Gods of the Clans come to my assistance”. As the Reverend Casartelli puts it, “This co-existence of subordinate divinities who are local deities belonging to the clans, has nothing analogous to it in the Avesta. It probably indicates a prudent policy on the part of the Great King in reconciling certain of the subject tribes to his religious reform by taking over, in the capacity of inferior deities, their local gods”^{xxxv}.

By the time of Artaxerxes II (Mnemon) and Artaxerxes III (Ochus) we find Mithra and Anahita named alongside Ahura Mazda. At Susa, an inscription of Artaxerxes II (Mnemon) reads “By the will of Ahura Mazda, I have raised a temple to Anahita and to Mithra” adding “May Ahura Mazda, Anahita and Mithra protect me”. In an inscription of Artaxerxes III (Ochus) at Persepolis we find Mithra alone in association with Ahura Mazda, and treated as a God, “May Ahura Mazda and the God Mithra protect me, myself, this land and all that I have done”^{xxxvi}.

It is accepted that Cyrus and Darius acknowledged other gods out of political expediency and that Xerxes and the later monarchs were influenced by the interaction of Greek religious ideas in having anthropomorphic gods. In any event, the practice of Zoroastrianism began to change during the later Achaemenian Dynasty, most probably under the influence of the Magi, who became the hereditary guardians of the religion and were entrusted with the performance of all religious rituals and the safeguarding of all religious practices. They became the advisors to the Achaemenian Emperors and were in the forefront of the Iranian armies as they went into battle^{xxxvii}.

The Babylonian scholar-priest Berosus, writing some 70 years after the reign of Artaxerxes II (Mnemon), records that the emperor was the first to make cult statues of divinities and had them placed in temples in many of the major cities of the empire^{xxxviii}. Berosus also substantiated Herodotus when the latter says the Persians knew of no images of gods until Artaxerxes II erected those images. On the means of sacrifice, Herodotus adds “they raise no altar, light no fire, pour no libations”^{xxxix}. What altars there were, were in the open, mostly on hill tops, and placing them within the confines of temples came in the late Achaemenian era. Altars with wood-burning fires and the Yasna service at which libations are poured are clearly identifiable with modern Zoroastrian rituals, but were apparently practices that had not yet fully developed in the 5th century BC.



Herodotus emphasizes three things which every Persian male above the age of five was taught: to ride a horse, to become adept in the use of the bow and to speak the truth. To speak the truth was a highly required virtue and to tell a lie was considered a cardinal sin^{xl}. Speaking of the Magi, Herodotus observed that "no prayer or offering can be made without a magus present". Although the unequivocal identification of the Magi with Zoroastrianism came later during the Sassanid era, it is from Herodotus' Magi of the mid-5th century BC that Zoroastrianism became subject to doctrinal modifications that are today considered to be revocations of the original teachings of the prophet. Some of the ritual practices described in the Vendidad, particularly the exposure of the dead, were already practiced by the Magi of Herodotus' time. To prevent the exposed corpse from being dragged away by carion, stones were used to anchor the hair and limbs, a practice that was the forerunner of "tying the tanna" which became an essential ritual in the construction of the towers of silence we know today. Although Herodotus describes the Persian religion and practices in some detail, it is interesting to note that nowhere in his works does he describe the Navjote ceremony or even that a sacred thread was worn around the waste by the Zoroastrians of the time.

It is during the later Achaemenian empire that we see the introduction of the cults of Anahita, which was subsequently embraced by the Greeks as Artemis or Aphrodite and the Romans as Venus or Diana, and Tishtrya, the divinity associated with the bringing of rain. It is also at this time that the cult of Mithra had its beginnings, which would reach its height during the Roman Empire.

Zarathushtra speaks of two primeval forces, opposed to and at war with each other, "Spenta Mainyu", the giver of life, and "Angra Mainyu", the harbinger of non-life. These two forces, principles, powers or spirits, do not emanate from Ahura Mazda and do not exist independently, but each in relation to the other, they meet in the higher unity of Ahura Mazda. These two forces existed before the beginning of the world as we know it and are eternally in conflict with each other. The Magians re-interpreted this concept of two opposing powers, as "Ohrmazd" (good) and "Ahriman (evil) and introduced the concept that God is not yet omnipotent and all powerful. They posited that at the end of time, good will defeat evil and at that time God will become omnipotent. This concept gave rise to the premise that Zoroastrianism is not a monotheistic religion but is based on dualism. This same concept, later gave rise to Zurvanism, one of the so-called Zoroastrian heresies, which had its beginnings during the Seleucid era in Iran's history and reached its zenith during the Sassanian Dynasty.

The calendar followed by the Achaemenians consisted of 12 months of 30 days each. An intercalation, to bring the calendar back into phase with the seasons, took place every 6 years by adding an additional month to the year. At the time, different Zoroastrian tribes celebrated different first months of the year, although, in all cases, the year started with the first day of spring. It must be remembered that at the height of the Achaemenian Empire, the Empire stretched from Greece in the west to the Indus River in the east, and from the Steppes of Central Russia in the north to Egypt and Sudan in the south. According to Rawlinson, "The Zoroastrian tribes, (among whom were included the



Persians proper, the Medes, the Bactrians, the Sogdians, the Cappadoceans, the Chorasmians, the Parthians, and others), scattered over so large an area, could not have agreed with one another in all points of religion. In fact, when Ardashir Babakan took in hand the Reformation of the Religion, there were seventy different sects in existence. The religious calendar was likely one of the points on which they differed^{xli}.

During the Achaemenian period, the month of Fravardin officially became the first month of the year. Also, following the Egyptian custom, one of the Achaemenian Emperors, probably Cambyses II, after his conquest of Egypt, introduced the intercalation of 5 days after the last month, bringing about a 365 day year. The Egyptians tacked on 5 holidays celebrating the birthdays of Osiris, Isis, Horus, Nephthys and Set after the last month of the year^{xlii}. Following the Indo-Aryan custom of reverence for the dead, the Achaemenians tacked on the 5 Gatha days as part of the days of remembrance. However, it fell to the Sassanians to finally intercalate one month every 120 years to account for the correct solar calendar.

It is an interesting historical side line that after the French Revolution, the short lived French Revolutionary Calendar adopted the exact same concept of 12 months of 30 days each, with 5 intercalatory days at the end of the 12th month^{xliii}.

It remains an open fact that Zarathushtra's religion was distorted and reinterpreted in many respects by the Magi after they took over the reigns of the religion during the sovereignty of the Achaemenians. The reintroduction of pre-Zoroastrian divinities, the concept of dualism, the timeline of creation, the coming of the Saoshyant, and the consecration of fire can all be attributed to the Magian leadership. After the defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Accursed, the Magi, except for some sporadic appearances, seem to have faded from history until they are seen again at the birth of Christ.

History will always remember the enlightened rule of the Achaemenids, who welcomed men of science and learning to their courts. Pythagoras of Samos was a prisoner of war under Nebuchadnezzar and was given his freedom when Cyrus liberated Babylon. Upon gaining his freedom, Pythagoras chose to live in Persia for some 20 years. Seeing the Persian system of underground "ghanats" or water channels, he studied geometry and formulated what we know today as Pythagoras' Theorem. It is worthy of note that the majority of the so-called Greek Scholars were either born or lived outside Athens, away from Greek influence, and most of them lived in the Persian Empire. Socrates, and his students, Plato, Antristhenes, Euclides and Xenophon all lived in the Persian Empire and were welcomed, from time to time, at the court of Persepolis. When it came to the spread of knowledge, the Persians knew no boundaries, since they believed that with the spread of knowledge and the change in the way of thinking, the world would be a better place for everyone to live^{xliv}.

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.

There is a Middle Eastern tradition which maintains that Alexander was the natural son of Artaxerxes II. According to this tradition, Olympia (Alexander’s mother) was part of the tribute paid to the Persians by the previously conquered Greek City States. Artaxerxes, like Philip of Macedon after him, did not care for some of Olympia’s more exotic practices, and returned her to Greece. When Olympia married Philip, she was already carrying Artaxerxes’ child. Alexander’s subsequent claim of Divine descent and the conquest of Persia were not to avenge the Greek defeats at the hands of Xerxes a century and a half earlier, but to claim what he considered was his birthright.

There is another tradition and belief that the contents of the Royal Library at Persepolis were, in their entirety, systematically removed to Greece and Egypt and that the torching of the library, instigated by Thaïs, a courtesan and camp follower of the Greeks, was a cover up for an already empty library. It is said that Alexander looted some 2,500 tons of gold and silver from the Treasury in Persepolis. 3,000 camel loads of treasure were taken to cities more firmly under the control of the Greeks, mostly in Egypt. Credence to this tradition is given by the fact that the “Hellenistic Age” of Greek culture began after Alexander’s conquests and flourished after his death. Flush with the plundered wealth of the Persian Empire, Ptolemy II of Egypt established a library in Alexandria, which supposedly contained the wisdom of the ages, and became a centre of learning in the Hellenistic world. Western scholars are silent on the point of where all the manuscripts in the library originated, but Iranian tradition holds that they came from the plundered library of Persepolis.

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.

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”^{xiv}.



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^{xlvi}. 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. A tentative list of the kings of Pontus is:

1. Mithradates I (387 - 362 BC);
2. Ariobarzanes I (362 – 337 BC);
3. Mithradates II (337 – 302 BC);
4. Mithradates III (302 – 266 BC);
5. Ariobarzanes II (266 – 249 BC);
6. Mithradates IV (249 – 190 BC);
7. Pharnaces I (190 – 169 BC);
8. Mithradates V (169 – 132 BC);
9. Mithradates VI Eupator, the Great (132 – 63 BC);
10. Pharnaces II (63 – 47 BC).

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”^{xlvii}.

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.

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^{xlviii}.**

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^{xlix}. There are also statues and inscriptions dedicated to “Mithras Apollo” at Nimrud and “Anahita-Nanai” in Armenia.

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. At this point, it may be worthwhile to give a tentative List and Dates of the Arsacid kings:

- 1. Arshak (Arsaces I, 247 - 211 BC);**



2. Aratpan (Arsaces II, 211 - 191, called Artabanus by early scholars);
3. Prypta (Phriapatius, 191 - 176);
4. Paradh (Phraates I, 176 - 171);
5. Mithradat (Mithridates I, 171 - 138);
6. Paradh (Phraates II, 138 - 128);
7. Aratpan (Artabanus II, 128 - 123);
8. Mithradat (Mithridates II, 123 - 91);
9. Gowtarz (Gotarzes I, 91 - 87);
10. Arwand (Orodes I, 87 - 77);
11. Unknown (77 - 69);
12. Paradh (Phraates III, 69 - 57);
13. Mithradat (Mithridates III, 57 - 55);
14. Arwand (Orodes II, 55 - 37);
15. Paradh (Phraates IV, 37 - 2 BC);
16. Paradh (Phraates V (Phraataces), 2 BC - 4AD);
17. Arwand (Orodes III, AD 4 - 7);
18. Wahawanam (Vonones I, 7- 12);
19. Aratpan (Artabanus III, 12 - 38);
20. Gowtarz (Gotarzes II, 38 - 51);
21. Wahawanam (Vonones II, 51);
22. Valaksh (or Valkash), (Vologeses I, 51-80);
23. Aratpan (Artabanus IV, 80 - 81);
24. Pakwer (Pakores, 81 - 105);
25. Valaksh (Vologeses II, 105 - 128);
26. Mithradat (Mithradates IV, 128 - 147);
27. Valaksh (Vologeses III, 147 - 192);
28. Valaksh (Vologeses IV, 192 - 207);
29. Valaksh (Vologeses V, 208 - 213);]
30. Aratpan (Artabanus V, 213 - 224);] as vassals of the Sassanids.
31. Unknown (224 - 226);]
32. Aratwazd (Artavasdes, 226 - 227);]

It should be noted that the dates are tentative, since records are incomplete, that the order of the kings is also tentative, since there were a number of sons and brothers (and in one case a mother) as co-rulers, and finally it is believed that the rulers after 208 AD ruled over small territories until the Sassanians consolidated their power.

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"¹. It is only now, with new research, that this dynasty is being given the recognition it so richly deserves.



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 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 expansionismⁱⁱ. 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”ⁱⁱⁱ.

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^{liii}.

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^{liv}.”

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^{lv}.”

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^{vi}. 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.

It is an accepted fact that the religion of Zarathushtra has had a profound impact and influence on every other major religion. Starting with the Cult of Fire and ending with individual accountability leading to the judgment of the soul and the after-life, Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hinnels, in his treatise on Zoroastrianism, says “To Hinduism and Buddhism it is said to have given the belief of a savior to come. But it is Judaism, Christianity and Islam which owe the most to Zoroastrianism. Beliefs in a devil, heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment, all these are thought to have developed in Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought as a result of Zoroastrian influence. Perhaps no other religion has influenced so many people in so many continents over so many centuries”^{lvii}.

We have come a long way since James Darmesteter wrote over a century ago that “As the Parsis are the ruins of a people, so are their sacred books the ruins of a religion”^{lviii}. Western scholars continue to shed light on the religion of Zarathushtra and acknowledge the debt owed to Zoroastrianism by every other major religion. Unfortunately, our own community perversely continues to languish in ignorance of our own religion. I would say in conclusion, therefore, that it is up to us to ensure that our own co-religionists, especially the younger generation, get to know the glory, and truly appreciate the grandeur, of our religion, our history and culture. We must strive and endeavor to enlighten the western societies in which we have made our homes, about who and what we are, so that the religion of Zarathushtra can become better known and once again reclaim its rightful place as the oldest revealed monotheistic faith in the pantheon and history of world religions.

ⁱ A.V.W. Jackson, “Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran”.

ⁱⁱ Xanthus of Lydia (fifth century BC).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jatinchandra Mohan Chatterjee, “Atharvan Zarathushtra, the Foremost Prophet”.

^{iv} Richard Frye, “The Heritage of Persia”, Maneckji N. Dhalla, “History of Zoroastrianism”.

^v Dinkard, edited by Peshotun Dastoor Behramjee Sanjana translated by Ratanshah E. Kohiyar; Iranian (Greater) Bundahishn, translation of Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria; al-Biruni, “Athar-ul-Bakiya”.



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- vi A.V.W. Jackson, “Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran”.
- vii Jatinchandra Mohan Chatterjee, “Atharvan Zarathushtra, the Foremost Prophet”.
- viii Richard Frye, “The Heritage of Persia”.
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- x Mary Boyce, “Zoroastrianism, It’s Antiquity and Constant Vigour”.
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- xxv Mary Boyce, article in FEZANA Journal, Winter 2004.
- xxvi Lawrence Mills, “Our Own Religion in Ancient Persia”.
- xxvii Ardeshir Jehanian, “The Religion of the Achaemenians”.
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- xlix Rostovtzeff, “Social and Economic History” quoted by Richard Frye in “Heritage of Persia”.
- ¹ Richard Frye, “Heritage of Persia”.



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- ^{li} Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,
Article edited by Shapour Suren-Pahlav.
- ^{lii} George Rawlinson, “Parthia”.
- ^{liii} Jamshedji Maneckji Unvala “Observations on the Religion of the Parthians”.
- ^{liv} Mary Boyce “Some Remarks on the Transmission of the Kayanian Heroic Cycle”, quoted by Richard Frye,
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- ^{lv} R.C. Zaehner, “The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism”.
- ^{lvi} Duchesne-Guillemin, “Zoroastrian Religion”.
- ^{lvii} Hinnels, “Zoroastrianism and the Parsis”.
- ^{lviii} “Sacred Books of the East” 1988 Introduction to volume 4 page xi.