

# Achaemenid History Derailed by Avestology

## Assessing *La religion des Achéménides: confrontation des sources*

(a conference held at the Collège de France, Paris, Nov. 7-8, 2013)

### I. Introduction

A two-day conference, organized by Prof. Jean Kellens of the Collège de France, on the religion of the Achaemenids was supposed to shed more light on the issue, but could hardly do so since Kellens's keynote speech immediately set it on the wrong track. He insisted once more that the Avesta was an ancient text that got fixated a couple of centuries before the Achaemenids. It thus placed "Achaemenid Religion" under the aegis of a supposed pre-existing religious ideology that had to be used as a constant point of reference for explaining Achaemenid policies and behavior.

Kellens's own paper, delivered later in the day, provided a blatant example of such an approach. He picked three convoluted sentences of the Avesta to claim somehow that Darius, his father Vishtāspa, and Achaemenes had been named in reference to these sentences. By way of example, I shall cite only one of his proposals: that Darius's name (*dārayavau*) was inspired/derived from an Avestan stanza (Y31.7: *dāraiaṣ vahišṭam (manō)*, which he translated as "(that) best thought supports." It was not the first time he was proposing it; he had already presented it in his course work, and in a recently published article (Kellens 2013, 556). As usual, he had kindly sent me a copy of the latter article, upon receipt of which I jokingly wrote back that, by this methodology, one can say that if a parent named his son **Tristan** it's because he was inspired by Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*! Or if the Prophet **Mohammad** was named as such, it's because his parents saw repeatedly in the Koran (!) the expression *al-hamd lellāh* (praised be Allāh). People did not have to wait for the Koran, to create the name Mohammad (the praised) from the root word "praise" (*hamd*). It was created in the normal course of language development. Neither did the Koran exist when "Mohammad" was adopted as a name, nor was the Avesta as yet assembled when Darayavauš became a name. And as Alberto Cantera pointed out in criticism of Kellens's approach, there is no precedence for such a name derivation from a sentence.

### II. The ZRTŠTRŠ seal: the question of authenticity

As it happened, though, Alberto Cantera unwittingly brought to light in his exposé an important seal that to my mind seals the discussion on the dating of the Avesta (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The seal in question is from the Cabinet des Médailles of the BNF (Bordreuil 1986, p. 104). In confirmation of a criticism raised in some of my previous publications about forgery allegations reaching epidemic proportions (see for instance [Chaos in Methodology](#)), no sooner was a discussion engaged on this seal that forgery was alleged, especially after I suggested comparison with the coinage of the rebellious satrap of Cappadocia, Datames (d. 362 BC). As chairman of the session, Pierre Briant imparted his doubts to Mark Garrison who, in response, emitted more doubts about the authenticity of the seal. A voice from the row of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Alberto Cantera for sending me a reproduction of the seal and its reference.

conference speakers (Jan Tavernier, I believe) reinforced this idea by contending that it was odd to have an inscription so much in the “corner” of a seal (objection A). Garrison raised three more objections in later discussions with me: B) it was unusual to have so much open space; C) there were vertical “lines” that seemed to be indicative of a modern mechanical operation; D) the winged disk had “unusual antennas.” These were objections that clearly showed a lack of comprehension of what a cylinder seal was and could easily be brushed off on the basis of the reproduction alone. Nevertheless, a physical examination of the seal seemed imperative, and I am thankful to Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet of the BNF for allowing me to inspect the object and take photos.



Fig.1 – Reproduction from Bordreuil 1986, p. 104



Fig.2 – New seal imprint of BNF seal 1972.1343 S



Fig.3 – British Museum seal 89528



Fig.4 - another view of BNF seal 1972.1343 S

Answers to objections:

A) there is no “corner” for a cylinder seal; the seal imprint is a continuous roll!

B) if the “open space” seems large it’s because the imprint was not centered. The new imprint at the BNF actually diminishes that perception (fig.2). In any case, there are seals with much larger “open space” (fig.3). It is more difficult to engrave a small cylinder than a larger one; and since the material is not expensive or rare, larger stones were usually chosen to facilitate the carving process

C) vertical lines can appear on the clay or wax of the imprint, as pressure is exercised or diminished while rolling the seal. In order to convince the doubters, I have included images that show a perfectly smooth surface, especially on the “open space” (figs. 2, 4). The handling of the actual object gives an impression that is neither visible, nor palpable, through images. The seal is as genuine as one can get,

with normal signs of tear and wear. Not a single sign of modern tool mark could be detected under 10x magnification.

D) Finally, the spray of antennas above the winged disk of the seal has a parallel in the coinage of Datames. They appear on five different types of coins, of which three have a pair of side antennas (figs. 5, 6, 7), and two don't (figs. 9, 10). In every Near-Eastern civilization, from the Hittites to the Assyrians, Babylonians, Urartuans and Persians, the winged disk was a symbol of power and victory. It came in various shapes and with different antennas and ribbons, and they all conveyed regal power and/or victory.<sup>2</sup> A few decorative antennas less, or more, did not alter the basic symbolism of the motif.

E) One last consideration: the seal came from the collection of Henri Seyrig (1895- 1973) who was an archeologist, numismatist, and historian of antiquity. He was the general director of antiquities of Syria and Lebanon since 1929 and director of the Institute of archaeology of Beirut for more than twenty years. As a government functionary, he did not have the means to spend extravagant sums on forgeries; his knowledge though, which was certainly more than those who consider A, B and C above as valid objections, allowed him to buy judiciously. It's as good a provenance as one can hope for.

In sum, this is a genuine seal; if there are still doubters, it is proper that they keep their doubts to themselves, or find concrete arguments in favor of forgery. What's more, it is a highly important seal as it ties in perfectly with the modifications that the Zoroastrian priesthood introduced in the Avestan texts, and ancient hymns, in order to empower themselves at the expense of kingship.

### III. The ZRTŠTRŠ seal: historical relevance

Quoting the Bordreuil's catalogue, Cantera provided a 4<sup>th</sup> century AD dating for the seal. It couldn't be; and one of the reasons of my trip to the BNF was to question its dating. Most unexpectedly, Bordreuil had passed away the night before and was no longer available for questions. But I discovered that the author of the entry was actually Frantz Grenet who saw it as an Achaemenid seal, and confirmed to me that he had actually proposed a date of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>3</sup> The BC indicator had been left out.

Iconographically, the seal follows the Achaemenid style and conventions, but as I shall explain, historical considerations favor a post Achaemenid production, probably late 4<sup>th</sup> century, or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

The importance of the seal stems from the fact that it's the earliest representation of a Zoroastrian priest (on the right) performing the ritual of "sacrifice" to the fire. Grenet qualifies it as the *ābzohr* ritual, and observes that the engraver has astutely placed a circle at the end of the stick held by the priest, in order to depict the spoon holding the holy liquid that had to be offered to the fire (fig. 1). Cantera also argued that the scene correctly depicted the "sacrifice" ritual as prescribed by the *Neyrangestān*, and that such a proper depiction clearly militated for the authenticity of the seal.

While there is no specificity pertaining to the priest on the right, the dignified status of the left figure is emphasized through a number of visual devices and conventions. First and foremost are two indicators—an inscription and a winged symbol—crammed together and placed above the head of the

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<sup>2</sup> One only needs to look at the sampling Bivar reproduced from the British Museum seals to understand that the winged disk came with a variety of ornaments according to the taste and ability of the engraver (Bivar 1969, 116).

<sup>3</sup> Grenet later told to me that he had delivered his entry to Bordreuil without being able to check the final draft.

left figure. They are visibly meant to reveal his identity. Of the two, the more significant one is the winged symbol, which was a universally-recognized regal emblem, and a symbol of the *khvarenah* in the Iranian context. In all of the Zoroastrian literature, the only religious personality said to be endowed with the *khvarenah* is Zoroaster himself. Not even the megalomaniac Sasanian high priest Kerdir ever pretended to be blessed with the *khvarenah*, let alone the Aryan *khvarenah*, the most important source of regal power. The latter was *permanently* allocated to Zoroaster in two stanzas of the Avesta (Yt 5:42, Yt 19:57-60). It was coupled with other attempts to portray Zoroaster as a universal ruler and super king, as in Y 19.18 where he is placed on top of a pyramid of rulership, above tribal chiefs and above nation chiefs.

		
<p>Fig. 5 – Coin of Datames, BM</p>	<p>Fig. 6 – Coin of Datames, BM</p>	<p>Fig. 7 – Coin of Datames, BNF</p>
		
<p>Fig. 8 – Seal of ZRTŠTRŠ (detail), BNF</p>	<p>Fig. 9- Coin of Datames, BM</p>	<p>Fig. 10 Coin of Datames, Private Coll.</p>

The left side of the BNF seal is in fact a vivid rendering of Zoroaster as universal ruler, for not only the priest named ZRTŠTRŠ is endowed with the winged symbol of the *khvarenah*, but he also has a regal attire. Indeed, the overcoat he dons is associated with rulership. The rebel satrap Datames wears it, while seated on a throne and holding a bow and arrow as a sign of his sovereignty (figs. 5-7, 9, 10). This overcoat is also worn by the elderly ruler in Qizqapan who holds a bow next to the fire altar (fig. 11); and by Xerxes and Darius as ancestors of Antiochos in Nemrud Dagh (fig. 12).<sup>4</sup> As for the *barsom* that the left figure holds in his hand, it does not indicate actual participation in the ceremony, but was an insignia for the authority under whose aegis the fire ceremony was conducted. If Mithra holds the *barsom* in Tāq-e

<sup>4</sup> None of the priestly figures in Persepolis wear a long coat.



Bostān, it is not to show him as a performing fire priest, but as the nominal figurehead of fire ceremonies in addition to his role as the purveyor of *khvarenah* (fig. 13).

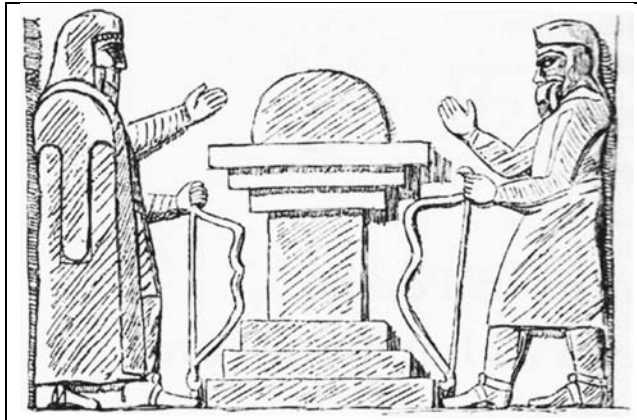


Fig. 11- King as warrior-priest wearing an overcoat -Qizqapan



Fig.12- Darius in Nimrud Dagh.



Fig.13- Mithra at Tāq-e Bostān

What needs to be emphasized, however, is the fact that the engraver of the seal did not use the winged symbol as a mere decorative device, but in full recognition of its significance. Same is true for Datames who claimed sovereignty by using the symbol of the *khvarenah* after two consecutive victories over Persian troops sent to quell his rebellion. No vassal or subject of the Great King could have such a pretense; it was at odds with Achaemenid kingly ideology, and Datames had to be eliminated. Since it could not be done on the battlefield, Artaxerxes had him assassinated. And it's precisely for this reason that I submitted to Kellens that: neither could last Datames as a sovereign within the Achaemenid empire, nor could survive a holy text that gave the Aryan *khvarenah* to a person other than the Great King.

#### IV. An evasive response

In response, Kellens proclaimed: (a) there is no evidence that the Achaemenids ever valued the *khvarenah*, as they never mention it in their inscriptions; (b) the word "king" does not appear in the Avesta and therefore, Zoroaster could have not been considered as a king or super king.

He is wrong on both scores, and his answer conveniently ignores the evidence that is in contradiction to his dogmatic view on the Avesta. To wit, there are three basic problems with his answer (a):

1- One needs to have a consistent approach. If Kellens believes that the Avesta so dominated Darius's homeland that his name as well as his father's were derived from sentences therein, then a fortiori, the *khvarenah* must have been prevalent in Darius's ideology; especially since there is such an emphasis on linking it to Ahura Mazdā. I happen to believe the opposite: the *khvarenah* was incorporated into the Avesta because it was perceived as the main source of authority. They claimed that Ahura Mazdā was its creator, and repeated *ad nauseam* the "Mazdā-created" label for the *khvarenah* (Soudavar 2010a, 120-23).

2- Kingly ideology was expressed through both inscriptions and iconography. Of the two, the latter was certainly more important since the majority of people were illiterate, but could intuitively understand

iconography. The *khvarenah* is a dominant feature of Achaemenid iconography whether Kellens wants to acknowledge it or not (Soudavar 2003; Soudavar 2010a, 121-25; Soudavar 2010b).

3- As for the non-inclusion of the *khvarenah* in Achaemenid inscriptions, it's an illusion that philologists maintain for lack of sensitivity to the *redundancy* problem in translating Achaemenid kingly slogans. One needs to have a sense of ridicule in order to understand that a claim of "Persian (*pārsa*) son of Persian (*pārsa*)" or "Aryan of Aryan origin (*chisa*)" is a *ridiculous* statement for an Achaemenid king. It's as if Richard the Lion Heart would have insisted that he was Norman son of a Norman, which implied that there existed Normans of Saxon descent! Such a redundant claim would have been ridiculous, whether in the English context or the Iranian one. Neither Richard, nor his father Henry Plantagenet, would have uttered such a statement. Ethnicity differs from citizenship. Rome could confer citizenship and as such, a Celt could have said I am Roman son of Roman, but never Celt son of Celt. Similarly, "Aryan, and of Aryan origin" incorporates an unacceptable redundancy. No tribal person whether Kurd, Goth, Visigoth, Franc or other, would say for instance I am a Kurd *and of Kurdish stock*. If one says he is a Kurd, he has said it all; there is no need to emphasize his DNA.

This redundancy problem is similar to the one associated with *chihr* in the Sasanian slogan of for instance Shāpur I, which was for long translated as:

"I am the Mazdean Lord Shāpur,... whose seeds (*chihr*) is from the gods, son of the Mazdean Lord Ardashir, ..., whose seeds (*chihr*) is from the gods."<sup>5</sup>

If the father was from the "seeds of the gods," so was the son; there was no need for repetition. In 2003, in my *Aura of Kings*, I was the first to point out the problem. Through an analysis of Greek sources, Antonio Panaino also came to the conclusion that *chihr* could not mean seed or origin in this context. And since then, many have dropped the idea that Sasanians had pharaonic pretenses, without connecting *chihr* to the word *chisa* that Darius used in his inscriptions. P.O. Skjaervo even developed an amnesia theory by which Iranians had forgotten the original meaning of *chisa* and reinvented a new one for *chihr*!<sup>6</sup>


Philologists have come to accept Pierre Lecoq's explanation that *pārsa* originally referred to "those on the side" by which "frontier people" were meant (Lecoq 1997, 146). He arrived to this conclusion by observing that *pārsava* and *parthava* were the Median and Persian dialectal pronunciations of the same notion, which eventually produced MP *pahlav* and NP *pahlu* (side). It is based on a wonderful insight, but reaches a conclusion that suffers from two inconsistencies: a) NP *pahlu* refers to the near side, and not to the far side where frontier people would be; b) in following the evolution of this word, he observes a bifurcation at the top (into *pārsava* and *parthava*) and then goes down only on one side (along the *parthava* branch) to reach NP *pahlu*, while neglecting the other.

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<sup>5</sup> Skjaervo 1985, 594.

<sup>6</sup> I have criticized Skjaervo's amnesia theory on this matter (Skjaervo 2007, 34-37) in Soudavar 2009, 442-43. This lack of understanding of continuity in Iranian history and kingly ideology, as well as the lack of familiarity with Persian literatures plagues the entire field of Achaemenid studies.

But there is an NP word *pārsā* (i.e., religious) that can be directly connected to the left side of this bifurcation (see table). A philologist has a duty to explore both avenues. That is what I have done (without being a philologist), to conclude that *pārsa* referred to a warrior-priest presiding over fire ceremonies as a fire-keeper. It's a meaning that can be derived from a synthesis of NP *pahlu* (side), NP *pārsā* (religious), MP *pahlav* (commander) and the Achaemenid royal iconography in which the king stands bow in hand (as a warrior) on the *side* of a *fire* altar (fig. 14).<sup>7</sup> It is this *pārsa* function that Zoroaster qualifies as *kavi* in the context of the archaic Indo-European language that he was using (Soudavar 2012, 71).

<p>(Soudavar) <i>pārsava</i> ===== (Lecoq) <i>parthava</i></p> <p>NP <i>pārsā</i> (non-Islamic priest)<sup>8</sup> → NP <i>pārsā</i> (religious)</p> <p>MP <i>pahlav</i> (commander) → NP <i>pahlu</i> (side)</p>		
<p>Paikuli F 11,01, Pahlavi (30) : ... <i>p'lrswm y</i></p> <p><i>pahlom</i> = <i>pārsa-om</i> i.e., closest (to the fire) = excellent</p>	<p>Paikuli F 11,01, Parthian (7): ... <i>prtr</i></p> <p><i>pahlom</i> = <i>part-tar</i><sup>9</sup> i.e., more close (to the fire) = excellent</p>	

Moreover, both sides of the equation have produced the word *pahlom* that establishes excellence through proximity with fire. In Middle Persian, *pahlom* is spelled as *p'lrswm*, i.e., *pārsa* + the ordinal suffix *-om*, and in Parthian, *pahlom* is spelled as *prtr*, i.e., *parth* + the ordinal suffix *-tar*. It clearly ties the two branches together, as *pahlom*'s spelling in Middle Persian is similar to the original *pārsava*, while in Parthian, its spelling is akin to *parthava*.<sup>10</sup>

Such a conclusion is of course **anathema** to many:

i- to the proponents of the “Liar Darius” theory: because it explains Darius’s legitimacy as a descendant of the *pārsa* line of the Achaemenids,

<sup>7</sup> See my [Pārsā, Pārsi, pahlom: Defining Status Through Proximity with Fire](#)

<sup>8</sup> Mostowfi 1983, 148-49.

<sup>9</sup> The word *part* is colloquially used today as an adjective that means “to be off track,” i.e., to pass by “the side” of a subject rather than addressing it head on (see Dehkhoda dictionary for expressions such as *part budan*, *part shodan* etc. )

<sup>10</sup> In private conversation with Shaul Shaked, he had no problem with my suggestion about the *pārs* and *pahlav* of the Paikuli inscriptions being translated as “fire-priests and commanders.” He did object though to *pahlom* being derived from *pārsa*, until I showed him the double spelling of the word in MP and Parthian of Paikiuli. At that point he thought that he had to recheck his sources and come back to me. I am still waiting.

ii- to the believers in the Antiquity of Avesta, and those who see Zoroaster as belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC: because it equates *kavi* with *pārsa*, and shows why Darius's father, Vishtāspa—who never ruled—was rightly called *kavi* by Zoroaster (Soudavar 2012, 71)

iii- and to those who are now feverishly trying to make an Anshanite out of Cyrus with no connection to Darius: because it shows why Achaemenes—as the head of the *pārsa* dynasty—was a figure that both Cyrus and Darius would have been proud to show their affiliation with (Soudavar 2012).

As for Kellens's contention (b), it's true but wrongly interpreted. In fact, it's the late Xavier Tremblay who first raised this issue, not as a basis to contend that the Avesta didn't believe in kingship, but as an *anomaly* that needed an explanation. It was an issue that had bothered him for a while, and he brought it up after I explained to him how the Zoroastrian priesthood had tampered with the list of kings. In his words: "despite the fact that the word 'king' is derived, in all Iranian languages, from either the root *xšā* (NP *Shāh*) or *rāz* (Old Ind. *Rājā*), no such word exists in the Avesta; we have instead the odd title of *daiṅhu.paiti* or nation chief."<sup>11</sup> He also added that "unlike all other priests of the Iranian world, which are called *magu*, the Avestan priest is called *aθravan*." The explanations to these oddities, I provided in Soudavar 2012, but shall further expand on it here below.

#### V. Avestan affront to Achaemenid kingly ideology

It is not that the Avesta is oblivious to temporal hierarchy, to the contrary, in Y 19.18 it considers all types of leadership beginning with a village chief (at level 1) and ending with the *daiṅhu.paiti* or nation chief that Tremblay had mentioned (at level 4), on top of which Zoroaster was placed (level 5).

Y19.18 "(Question) who are the leaders? (Answer) They are the masters/guides of the house, of the village, of the tribe, of the nation, and Zarathushtra is the fifth"

Zoroaster was therefore positioned above all other positions, as a super king but without a title. I have criticized elsewhere Kellens for his most erroneous translation of Y 19 in general, and Y 19.18 in particular.<sup>12</sup> The hierarchy of Y 19.18, however, was not a novel concept but one that also appeared in Yt 10.115, where Mithra is hailed as "master/guide of the house, of the village, of the tribe, of the nation, of the *zarathushtrat*."<sup>13</sup> As we can see, the polity above nation is named *zarathushtrat*, or Zoroaster's domain. It's the same polity that Zoroaster is implicitly ruling in Y 19.18, where he is designated as a super king and above all nation-chiefs. The question that then comes to mind is: Who copied whom and which one came first?

It seems rather self-evident that in a hymn dedicated to a divinity such as Mithra, his field of action should not be confined to a domain ascribed to the mere mortal that was Zoroaster. Therefore, the designation "master/guide of *zarathushtrat*" must be replacing an older title of Mithra, one that Bivar argues to have been *khshathra-pati*.<sup>14</sup> He does it by relying on the Xanthos inscriptions, but also by analogy with a pentad of divinities in Mānī's *Shāpurgān*, which are obviously modelled after the Y 19.18

<sup>11</sup> This is a language that I had checked with him, as I was quoting him, and he had approved off.

<sup>12</sup> FROM THE AVESTA TO SUFI TREATISES: A STANDARD LITERARY TECHNIQUE

<sup>13</sup> Yt 10.115 "...*nmāniia ratuuō vīsiia zaṅtuma daxiiuma zaraθuštrōtama*"

<sup>14</sup> Bivar 2005, 344; see also Boyce: [www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra\\_khsathrapati\\_ahura.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/mithra_khsathrapati_ahura.php)



and Yt 10.115 hierarchy. They are listed as: 1- *mānbed* (house-chief), 2- *visbed* (village-chief), 3- *zanbed* (tribe-chief), 4- *dehbed* (nation-chief), 5- "*pahragbed*." Bivar who translated the 5<sup>th</sup> position as "lord of the frontier-post," sees it as "out of place" in a "sequence of widening territorial responsibilities." But if this 5<sup>th</sup> position is corrected to *pahlav-bed* (the *w* and *g* are almost identical in written MP), it would refer to a super-*pahlav* (i.e., a super commander) of the calibre of the original *khshathrapati*, or its substitute in Yt 10.115, i.e., "master of Zarathushtrot." To sever any link with Zoroastrianism in the Manichean context, the title of the ultimate Manichean leader was changed to *pahlav-bed*, or "commander in chief,"<sup>15</sup> whereas in Zoroastrianism, the title *khshathra-pati* (empire-chief) was replaced by "master of Zarathushtrot." We thus see that this 5-level hierarchy was based on an archetype that probably originated with the ancient hymn to Mithra, and was subsequently used by whoever wanted to empower his prophet. All he had to do was to change the definition of the top level (level 5) by substituting one to his liking.

The whole world had thus become the appanage of Zoroaster; he was declared in essence a super king, or "King of All Lands," as Cyrus, and before him, the Assyrian kings had claimed to be. Such a role for Zoroaster is nowhere mentioned in Achaemenid inscriptions, nor does Zoroaster—or any other Zoroastrian priest—ever appear in Achaemenid iconography.

What the above misappropriations reveal is a deliberate attempt to tilt the balance of power from kingship to religion. While kings were driven down, Zoroaster was pushed up to become a universal leader. The more Zoroaster was made powerful, the more his priesthood would have benefitted from his prestige. It is no different from other religions; the more a prophet was elevated, the more his clergy went up with him.

If the Avesta was as ancient as Kellens wants us to believe, it would have been already canonized by the Achaemenid era. Zoroastrian priests had a daily obligation to recite them and to orally transmit them to their disciples. Imagine priests regularly chanting in Darius's empire that Zoroaster was a super king. It was incompatible with the Achaemenids' claim to be *khshāyathiya khshāyathiyānām* (King of Kings). Darius would have cut their tongues, noses, and ears as he did with those who had challenged his supremacy in Bisotun.

Even worse, imagine he was told that it was actually Zoroaster who possessed the Aryan *khvarenah*, and therefore, he could no longer use "*Arya chisa*" in his titulature. The claim of *khvarenah* and sovereignty for any other person but the king was an affront that could not be tolerated. And that is why Zoroaster's exalted position in Y 19.18 could have not been derived from an earlier tradition, for, it would have never been able to pass through, and survive, the Achaemenid era. It was neither recitable nor transmittable in the Achaemenid era.

The attempt to empower the priesthood, at the expense of kingship, could have only happened in the chaotic environment following Alexander's conquest; probably in the Seleucid era when Iran was ruled by Hellenic rulers who neither understood the *Avesta*, nor cared about how the Iranians reinterpreted

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<sup>15</sup> This Manichean substitution confirms once more the importance of the *pahlav* in the Sasanian era, one akin to a local ruler or army commander.

ancient hymns. Such a supposition is strengthened by the fact that a similar power shift occurred in the chaotic situation that appeared in Iran after the fall of the Safavids and under the Afghan occupation. It provided the Shi'ite clergy with the opportunity to develop theories that gave them power at the expense of kingship, the ultimate manifestation of which is the theory of *Velāyat-e Faqih*, the theory that gave rise to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## VI- Comparing Zoroaster to Iranian heroes endowed with the *khvarenah*

What is important to grasp is the subtlety with which the Zoroastrian priesthood studied the Avesta with various allusions to Zoroaster's possession of the *khvarenah*, and how his power was compared to other kings. We have already noticed how he was placed on top of the pyramid of world rulership, and how he was allocated the Aryan *khvarenah*. A more subtle approach, however, was the intercalation that they created within the *khvarenah* cycle.

The Zamyad Yasht explains that when Jamshid lost his *khvarenah*, it was taken by a falcon bird named *vareyna* to Mithra (Yt 19.35). This ties well with what the Avesta divulges elsewhere: that Mithra bestows the *khvarenah* and takes it back (Yt 10.16 & 27). But afterwards, the *vareyna* inexplicably takes the *khvarenah* to two mortals, Fereydun (Thraetona) and Garshāsb (Kereshaspa), en route to Fire (Yt 19.36-44). These mortals are described as heroes with fantastic deeds, and are presented as the most victorious and powerful of men "second only to Zoroaster." Consequently, not only Mithra is equated with mortals and his hold on the *khvarenah* is diluted, but Zoroaster is simultaneously presented as more powerful than two of the most victorious heroes of Iranian mythology. The artifice was only meant to reemphasize Zoroaster's possession of the Aryan *khvarenah*, since nothing is disclosed as to what happened at each of these stations, and what was the role of the two mortals. Moreover, Garshāsb and Fereydun appear in the list of kings, far away from Jamshid; Fereydun is ten generations removed from Jamshid (*Bondaresh* 31.7), and Garshāsb's reign comes several generations after Fereydun.<sup>16</sup> The episode is highly anachronistic and has the same problems as when the Aryan *khvarenah* was given to Zoroaster by Afrāsiyāb.<sup>17</sup> It clearly shows that the introduction of the names of these two heroes was solely to emphasize the power of Zoroaster. He was compared with two *khvarenah*-endowed ancient Iranian heroes, and presented as more powerful than both. The problem though is that as possessors of the *khvarenah*, they both figure in the list of kings as transmitted by the Zoroastrian priesthood; but Zoroaster nowhere appears in that list of kings.

These types of contradictions are a testimony to the later manipulations of hymns. An artificial objective introduced in one place would inevitably generate a contradiction elsewhere. This episode also shows the desire to compare Zoroaster to renowned rulers with the aim of projecting him as more powerful than the most powerful rulers, i.e., as a super king. It clearly negates Kellens's objection (a).

## VII. No *magu* in the Avesta

Kellens mused that the Avesta seems to have advocated a "republican" system since it neither talked about kings nor *magi*. Humor is welcome in a rigid discipline but cannot overshadow the anomaly that

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<sup>16</sup> Garshāsb is not mentioned in the *Bondaresh*, and seems to belong to another tradition. According to Tabari (1996, II:369), he is 8 generations later than Fereydun.

<sup>17</sup> Soudavar 2010a, 130-31.

Tremblay had alluded to. The *magu* did not exist in the Avesta but was readopted by Zoroastrians in Sasanian times. At the very least, it shows that the Avesta was not that holy, otherwise Zoroastrians would have kept the Avestan term *athravan* in lieu of *magu*. More importantly, it is indicative of a problem that begs an explanation, and not one that can be glossed over with humor alone.

Essential to the understanding of this problem is the antagonism that erupted between two castes of priesthood, an event that Herodotus dubbed as Magophonia, and I have explained as the persecution of the Median magi by the caste of the *pārsas* (Soudavar 2012, 53-58). Kellens himself foresaw the possibility of such a crisis at the beginning of the Achaemenid era, but speculated on the wrong protagonists.<sup>18</sup> I shall come back to Kellens's analysis further below, but for the time being, suffice it to say that because the *pārsas* persecuted the Median magi, *magu* became a forbidden word, and since Zoroastrians did not belong to the caste of Achaemenid *pārsas*, they chose an equivalent term, the *athravan* or fire-keeper.

My explanations for the function of *pārsa* is corroborated by Greek sources. In his Cyropaedia, Xenophon asserts (8.1.23) that “for the first time the college of the magi was instituted” under Cyrus. This college of the magi was certainly Pasargadae (Gr. *Παρσαγάδαι*), since Pliny the Elder affirms (VI.29) that, in his days, Pasargadae was “held by the Magi.” Its name reflects OP *Pārsa-kadag* meaning “dwelling of the *pārsas*,” especially since, Pliny's contemporary, Quintus Curtius Rufus spells it as “Parsagada.”<sup>19</sup> The fourth-century BC Greek writer, Anaximenes of Lampsacus, who relates that Pasargadae meant “Persian camp,” provides only a half-truth because the suffix *kadag* implies residency.<sup>20</sup> Pasargadae was not an encampment for Persians to come and go, but was a dwelling where certain *pārsas* took residence. As I shall argue in my forthcoming book, Pasargadae was in fact the academy of the *pārsas*.

Finally, one should note that in the same way that Herodotus thought of the magi as a Median clan, he also asserts that the *Pasargadai* constituted the most prestigious of the Achaemenids clans (Her I, 125, 132). The *magi* and the *pārsa* were both seen as prestigious clans within their own tribal communities. One can neither understand the Avesta, nor Achaemenid history, if one turns a blind eye on the antagonism that existed between these two priestly clans.

### VIII. A dogmatic approach to Zoroastrianism

For years, many have tried to portray the Achaemenids as Zoroastrians. Apart from Ahura Mazdā who was revered by both, no other solid correlation was ever found; but that did not stop speculators to bend backward and find minute similarities as proof of Achaemenid Zoroastrianism. Two papers in the conference provided statistical data to put to rest further speculation on this issue. The most important one was Wouter Henckleman's. By producing statistics based on the Fortification and Treasury tablets,

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<sup>18</sup> Kellens 1998, 513: “Une crise religieuse a pu se nouer lors de la substitution du pouvoir perse au pouvoir mède.”

<sup>19</sup> “Quintus Curtius Rufus (5.6.10) : Accessere ad hanc pecuniae summam captis *Parsagadis* sex milia talentum. Cyrus *Parsagada* urbem condiderat: quam Alexandro praefectus eius Cobares tradidit.” See also Soudavar 2012, 57; Lecoq 1997: 146.

<sup>20</sup> For instance *ātash-kadeh* is where the fire resides, or is sheltered. Same for *dānesh-kadeh* (where knowledge resides).

he showed that in the festivities and ceremonial activities that depended on the king's largesse, the number of "Ahura Mazda" mentions in official ceremonies paled before that of other deities. What's more, most of the named deities therein did not belong to the Zoroastrian pantheon.<sup>21</sup> In other words, despite heavy promotion of Ahura Mazda at the top, government officials had to still cater to popular demand for past religious practices.

Mark Garrison's analysis of the iconography of the seals concurred with Henkelman's assessment. He could neither detect a Zoroastrian strain in the imagery, nor could he perceive an established religious or ideological trend. If anything, the iconographical evidence pointed towards a period of gestation and search for new formulae. This too militates in favour of a nascent Zoroastrianism that hadn't had time to develop its own iconographical canons.

The most poignant remark, however, was made by Clarisse Herrenschmidt who expressed astonishment at the fact that the long debate on the date of the Avesta had culminated in the year 2000, in a "remarkable" work by Gheraldo Gnoli (Gnoli 2000), which, instead of tilting the scholarly opinion towards its own position, or fostering more debates, had been relegated to oblivion. It was even more of a paradox since Gnoli had initially been a supporter of Avestan antiquity, and had switched sides by not only reversing himself on the issue, but finding decisive arguments in support of a 6<sup>th</sup>-century date for Zoroaster's activities.

Ignoring, or minimizing, a contrarian opinion is the favourite reaction of those who have a dogmatic view on matters. There were two brief rebuttals, one by Kreyenbroek and the other by Kellens, after which came total silence. Philip Kreyenbroek wrote an ill-argued review of Gnoli's book, which I countered in Soudavar 2010a (115-116). And Kellens dismissively presented one single argument against it: How can anyone base his arguments on a list of egregious regnal years that the *Bondahesh* proposes (Kellens 2001: 177)? If strangeness of a text is reason for its non-validity, then Kellens needs to be consistent and throw out all the Avesta, as it talks about three-headed monsters and stars that descend on earth in the form of stallions! My comment on Kellens's objection was that he asked the wrong question, because it implied that the compilers of these texts had no clue about what they were writing. To the contrary, these texts were written by extremely savvy authors who knew what they were doing, and had an objective in mind. It behoves anybody who wishes to understand the Avesta, and Zoroastrianism, to figure out the reasons and the purpose for such obviously unacceptable tabulations. I argued that the Zoroastrian priesthood had tampered the list of kings by eliminating those perceived as foes, and by inserting the name of "friendly" individuals who did or did not reign (Soudavar 2012, 64-66). Rather than offering grounds for dismissal, these numbers provide a pathway to the priestly mode of thinking that wished to elevate Zoroastrianism by eliminating adversaries, and pushing up Zoroaster and his supporters at the expense of those who actually reigned. And the 258 Axiom, which measured the time from the "coming of the religion to Alexander's conquest of Iran," played a major role in this respect, since it acted as an immutable time bracket that had to be filled with names.

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<sup>21</sup> O.P. Skjaervo had seized upon the appearance of the name of Spenta Armaiti in one of the tablets to claim that as one of the Amesha Spentas it constituted a proof of Zoroastrianism (Skjaervo 2005, 52-53). It's a position that I had criticized in Soudavar 2010a (114) because said deity was clearly invoked in a non-Zoroastrian context.

I had stumbled on this issue by chance, at the very end of my 2003 *Aura of the Kings* book. I had realized that stanzas *Yts* 13.94-95, which actually referred to Zoroaster's time of birth, concurred with the 258 Axiom of which I knew little at that time. But in a conversation with Francois de Blois, at the 2003 Ravenna SIE conference, he expressed his utter disbelief in this axiom. I therefore decided to double check the issue by following the trajectory of opinions on this matter, from Taqizādeh's detailed analysis of the Iranian calendars (Taqizādeh 1938), to Henning's view on the issue (Henning 1951), to Gershevitch's extensive arguments (Gershevitch), to Gnoli's study of Greek sources in support of this axiom (Gnoli 2000). What I found out was not only a host of indices in support of this theory, but also the firm belief that those who negate it have never taken the trouble to investigate it. Their insensitivity to the mountain of evidence that exists can only be due to a rejectionist attitude dictated by dogma. Since then, I have often seen Kellens orally rejecting the 258 Axiom, the latest being at the 2011 SIE conference in Krakow, without being able to advance a single valid argument in support of his contention.

The question then is: How can it be that a dogmatic view on "Zoroaster belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC" is so persistently affecting scholarly debates and publications. I can only see two reasons for this. First is the strategic position of the two staunchest supporters of this dogma, namely O.P. Skjaervo and J. Kellens, who have used the dominant prestige of their respective institutions, i.e. Harvard University and the Collège de France, to coerce others to follow suit. As talented as both are in terms of technical analysis of texts, their works suffer from a lack of historical vision, and a lack of understanding for Persian culture. Second is a chauvinistic attitude that has developed among certain Zoroastrians to claim that their Prophet was the first to present mankind with a monotheistic religion. I experienced this first hand when, after a presentation that I gave at the 2005 Achaemenid conference organized by the British Museum (subsequently published as Soudavar 2010a), an elder member of the Mumbai Zoroastrian community approached me to say that no reputed scholar believed anymore in the relevance of the 258 Axiom. I said that I begged to differ since Gnoli who was no lightweight in this field, and before him, Gershevitch had provided compelling proofs in this respect. His response was to disparage Gershevitch by remarking that "O, he's but a Jew." In further conversation it became clear to me that in addition to the scholarly anti-258 attacks, there was now a second front opened by elements of the Zoroastrian communities who had espoused the confrontational attitude that "my Prophet is older than yours."

### **IX. Two immediate consequences**

These misguided views on the Avesta inevitably affect research. At a recent conference on Cyrus held at UCLA (27-28<sup>th</sup> October 2013), Rahim Shayegan who is a disciple of Skjaervo, presented a rather interesting paper on the issue of religious tolerance as practiced by the Achaemenids. The gist of his thesis was that the acculturation process that had preceded the advent of Darius, had allowed the amalgamation of different beliefs and practices, especially those of the Elamites with that of the Medes and the Persians. It had created a process of harmonization that would inevitably affect the Achaemenids propensity to implement the same in their conquered territories. To buttress his theory, he then introduced a second factor into the equation: Since a similar amalgamation process could be seen in the Avesta—where cultic practices towards different deities had been harmonized into liturgical series—the Avesta too had fostered tolerance and must have positively conditioned Iranian thinking.



When two phenomena A and B display similarities, either of them could have affected the other. Therefore, as a matter of methodology, one must investigate whether A affected B or vice versa. But if one dogmatically believes that A preceded B, then the affectation is only perceived in one way, from A to B. Unfortunately, the dogmatic belief in the antiquity of the Avesta creates the perception that Persian behaviour was affected by it, without ever contemplating the reverse possibility: that the Avesta itself may be the result of this propensity for harmonization that Iranians in general, and Persians in particular, developed in the first half of 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The amalgamation of so many disparate deities with the Gathic core of the Avesta—which is so obviously monotheistic—is clearly symptomatic of this harmonization process. The goal of the Avesta was to attract as many Iranians as possible into the Zoroastrian fold; as a result, all major deities were brought in, and their differences ironed out, in order to make every believer feel comfortable with this all-new encompassing religion.<sup>22</sup> The Avesta should thus be looked upon as the *result* of the harmonization process that Shayegan was advocating, and not its *cause*.

A second victim of Kellens's view on the Avesta was Antonio Panaino's paper at the Collège de France conference, which I believe could have had a much better structure if it had been dissociated from the idea of a pre-Achaemenid compilation of the Avesta. For Panaino, it was not an easy thing to do, since his analysis rested on a previous paper by Kellens (1998). Because of the importance of Kellens's analysis, I shall first try to summarize his 1998 article and then show how it affected Panaino's reasoning.

#### X. Kellens's 1998 liturgical tabulations

Kellens's 1998 article presents a plausible amalgamation process of various hymns into liturgies, which consist of a string of hymns to be sequentially recited in the performance of religious rites. Zoroastrian liturgies are called Yasna in modern scholarship. The Avesta that we have inherited today is a grouping of liturgies, for which Kellens detects two early strains that he calls Proto-Yasna-A and Proto-Yasna-B. Proto-Yasna-A—a grouping put together for a liturgy leading to the pressing of the Haoma—refers to *Apam Napāt* and the *khvarenah*. Proto-Yasna-B, on the other hand, makes use of *Abān Yasht* (Yt 5) dedicated to Anāhitā.

The time span that he gives for the orally transmitted text is as follows:

(A)- 1200-1000BC for the composition of Old Avestan texts, and its canonisation circa 800-600BC.s

(B)- canonization of Proto-Yasna-A in Eastern Iran early 6<sup>th</sup> BC, followed by its importation in Western Iran by the end of 6<sup>th</sup> BC.

(C)- down to 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC for the canonization of his Proto-Yasna-B,

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<sup>22</sup> The only problematic deity was Apam Napāt whose creation powers clashed with those of Ahura Mazdā who was brandished as the all powerful creator, he is the only exception to the harmonization process, because he was basically squeezed out.

(D)- and a final canonization of the whole Avestan corpus in the 2nd half of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, after which nobody was supposedly able to compose in the Avestan language.

In presenting this evolutionary scheme, Kellens follows Skjaervo in allowing two different stages in the crystallization process of an orally transmitted text: “fixation,” followed by canonization. For Kellens, fixation comes much later than composition and is the result of the incorporation of a text in religious rites; canonization occurs when the text becomes so holy that no further alteration is permitted (492-93). But to bridge the long gap between the early composition date and the final canonization, Kellens introduces a sequence that goes from canonization to “decanonization,” to being dissected, and back to a newer canonization.

While the detailed analysis is impressive, his conclusion suffers from a lack of understanding for history and its evolutionary processes. For starters, “decanonization” is an oxymoron. Within the same religious tradition, a *canonized* text is not subject to manipulation. If it becomes onerous or irrelevant, it can be marginalize or discarded all together, but not selectively. It must lose its sacredness before being dissected and recombined in a new fashion; and that can only happen outside that tradition, because of a major political upheaval and/or the advent of a new religion. Alexander’s conquest was one such an upheaval, and induced a paradigm shift that paved the way for rearrangements of texts.

Kellens though posits the opposite (491-92):

“It is reasonable to think that the fixation of the Avestan texts was the product of a period of national unity and the centralisation of politics, which saw the institution of the clergy as a necessary step towards the aim of integrating religion within a general ideology of authority.”

The only candidate for implementing national unity and centralized administration is Darius. And yet as Garrison and Henkelman clearly showed, neither sacrificial rituals nor administrative seals of that period were in tune with the heavy promotion of Ahura Mazda by Darius. There was no fixation at all. What’s more, in the official calendar that Darius used, the seventh month (*bayayadish*) was still referring to Mithra as *baya*, or the god *par excellence*. Coinage and calendar reform were usually part and parcel of a new regime’s propaganda. The Sasanian Ardashir I, for instance, reformed both the coinage and the calendar. Although many would argue that parallel calendars could exist, e.g., one as a religious calendar and another as an administrative one, it’s a bad argument, especially in view of the centralizing efforts of Darius. Any calendar that did not refer to Mithra as *baya*, was preferable, because the one in use clearly negated the supremacy of Darius’s Ahura Mazda. If Darius had another calendar he would have used it. Furthermore, not only there is no mention of Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism in Achaemenid texts, but no officiating priests is dressed as a Zoroastrian with a *padam* covering his nose. To the contrary, most of the officiating figures of the Oxus treasure are warrior priests



Fig. 14- Warrior priest with weapon and barsom. Oxus Treasure, 5-4<sup>th</sup> century BC

who, unlike Zoroastrians, carry a weapon in addition to the *barsom* they hold (fig. 14). As such they are either *pārsas* or members of a similar clan of fire-priests from Parthia.

As Kellens himself acknowledges, the Achaemenid calendar was in use at least until the year 459 in Persepolis, whereas the first inscription bearing traces of the new religious calendar is datable to the reign of the last of the Seleucids, Antiochus Soter (d. 261BC). This strengthens once more our argument that: only the post-Alexander period offered the priesthood the opportunity to manipulate religious hymns, and the calendar, in such a way as to give it a higher prestige than kingship.

By postulating an egregious beginning date for the Old Avestan texts in (A), Kellens had to create successive stages, all the way to the Alexander era, in order to justify his dogmatic view on the antiquity of these texts. While his Proto-Yasna-A and Proto-Yasna-B show the existence of two different liturgical strains, their dating (B) and (C) is as arbitrary as for (A). Ilya Gershevitch demonstrated that there is no philological method to measure the evolution speed of a language (Gershevitch 1995). One needs to peg texts to historical events in order to establish a date. Philology can only establish relativity in the evolution process, such as X->Y->Z, but cannot anchor them in time. Any pretense to the contrary is intellectually dishonest. And yet, to this date, the underlying assumption for Avestan dating is philologists' pretense at having such knowledge. Rather than providing arguments they want to establish it through repetition, as politicians do.

Unlike (A), which has never been pegged to a historical event, Kellens tries at least to establish a historical connection for (B) and (C). Unfortunately, neither is valid. For (B) he revisits the "Arachosian" theory that he had once rejected, because it allowed him to impute certain Avestan oddities to a "religious crisis" that occurred with the ascent of Darius to power. A crisis is defined by its antagonistic constituents, and Kellens relies on the Arachosian theory that Hoffman had proposed, and Narten had supported, to propose a confrontation between a supposed Eastern school and a Western one that had dominated the Persian administration prior to Darius's advent; its protagonists were the Western magi and "certain clans of the Achaemenids" who supposedly adopted the Eastern school (Kellens 1998, 513-14). It rested on three assumptions:

- 1) that the Persepolis tributary processions frequently show Arachosians alternating with Medes — it is blatantly false.

- 2) that the rebel Vahyazdāta had split his forces and sent one half to fight Darius and the other against Arachosia, therefore Arachosians must have had the same religion as Darius, or one that Darius later discovered and fell in love with! — But the Arachosian resistance to Vahyazdāta was of political nature and not a religious one; they recognized the legitimacy of Darius and not of Vahyazdāta. And why would Darius and "certain clans of the Achaemenids" suddenly espouse this supposed Arachosian religion?

- 3) the third observation seems to provide the main impetus for such an absurd theory: that the core of the Avestan language is based on an Eastern dialect — But as Kellens himself emphasized during the discussions at the conference, the Avestan dialect is basically Median, a proposition to which Cantera also subscribed. Why consider it as Eastern or Arachosian? As the French would say

*pourquoi chercher midi à quatorze heures?* There is a perfectly plausible explanation at 12 o'clock in Media proper, without the necessity to seek one at 2 or 3 o'clock in Arachosia.



Indeed, the author of Y19.18 not only situates Zoroaster and his clan in Raga, but clearly suggests that he was its ruler, since no other ruler existed there.

Y19.18. (Q) who are the leaders? (A.) They are the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, the nation-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fifth, except for the nation in which Zarathushtra reigns. Zarathushtra's Raga has four chiefs (only). (Q) Who are the chiefs there? (A) (They are) the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fourth

As I shall suggest in my forthcoming book, the Spitimaïd epithet for Zoroaster is clearly used in the same vein that "Achaemenid" was used for Darius; it designated the dynastic name of the local rulers of Raga. Zoroaster complains that he was driven out of his domain (Y 46.1). The logical thing for him to do was to take refuge with a sympathetic prince. The one he found was obviously Vishtāspa who like his forefathers worshipped Ahura Mazdā. Darius's father never ruled but was a *pārsa*, and that's why Zoroaster calls him a *kavi*, which designated officiating priests in his archaistic language. Like Vatican priests who compose their treatises in Latin instead of Italian, Zoroaster used a Median priestly language. It makes a lot more sense to say that Darius sided with the *pārsa* clan of the Achaemenids against the Median magi, rather than with a supposed Arachosian priesthood of which we have no sign of existence.

As for the dating of (C), it implicitly rests on the fact that Artaxerxes II invoked Anāhitā, whose *Yasht* is referred to in Proto-Yasna-B. But if Anāhitā became popular at that time, the fixation and canonization of its text must have occurred at a much later time, i.e., past Alexander and into the Seleucid era.

Moreover, Kellens fails to consider the possibility of a parallelism between Proto-Yasna-A and Proto-Yasna-B, as two competing trends. What suggests this parallelism is precisely their contrasting views as to who the god of waters was. Proto-Yasna-A relies on *Yt* 19, which refers to Apam Napāt in a muted fashion, and Proto-Yasna-B invokes Anāhitā through *Yt* 5. The distinction is important and depends on how each construes the *khvarenah* cycle. After its flight from Jamshid, the *khvarenah* is kept under water; an aquatic deity is therefore needed to guard it, and more importantly, to release it. In the Achaemenid context, Apam Napāt's creative powers ("who created men, who shaped men," *Yt* 19:52) clashed with the creation powers of Ahura Mazdā, and had to be eliminated. For Artaxerxes II who had been severely challenged by his younger brother, the full backing of the main deities of the *khvarenah* cycle was necessary to re-establish his legitimacy. Since Apam Napāt was unacceptable, Anāhitā was probably introduced as a substitute aquatic deity, next to the solar god Mithra.

But in *Yt* 19, after the *khvarenah* falls into the guardianship of Apam Napāt (19.51), the hymn advocates sacrificing to him, and Apam Napāt is recognized as the "god who resides in the waters" (19.52). It is followed by a remark made by Ahura Mazdā to Zoroaster: that men should seek the *khvarenah* to achieve success (19.53-54). It describes the *khvarenah* as a source of power available to all men, but at the same time paves the way for a later episode in which Afrāsiyāb (Frangrasyan) declares that the ultimate *khvarenah*, i.e., the Aryan *Khvarenah* belongs forever to Zoroaster (19.57 & 60). It subtly attributes to Zoroaster the highest degree of power, a power that will ultimately reverberate on his priesthood as his successors. And as I previously argued, such a statement could have only been added in the post-Achaemenid period. The same utterance of Afrāsiyāb is also included in *Yt* 5.42. But unlike *Yt* 19, the control of the *khvarenah* is relegated to Anāhitā in *Yt* 5, and successive heroes sacrifice to her to seek her protection and help. Anāhitā is so exalted in *Yt* 5 that even Apam Napāt becomes an accessory in the sacrifice dedicated to her (5.72). In other words, there is both parallelism and subordination, but they all belong to a post-Achaemenid period.

I had elsewhere argued (Soudavar 2010a, 132) that, if passages pertaining to the Aryan *khvarenah* could be added in a later period, the priesthood had probably kept a good knowledge of the Avestan language, long after the composition of its core components. Kellens himself argues that stanzas 10.119-122 and 10.137-138 were later additions to the *Yt* 10, and were probably introduced when liturgies were being formulated; what's more, they were done in full harmony with the ancient texts, at times even respecting their archaic octo-syllabic meter (Kellens 1998, 502-504). But once one admits the possibility of later additions or alterations, one needs to forfeit the relevance of the archaic nature of the language to its dating. The archaic nature of the Avestan language offers no more proof of antiquity than the archaic aspect of papal treatises composed in Latin. It is rather ironic that with no tangible proof ever presented, philologists still claim that the Avesta predated the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.



## XI. Panaino's calendar considerations

Panaino's presentation at the conference revolved around the issue of the adoption of an Egyptian 365-day calendar and its impact on the practice of naming the days of the month after deities; he concludes: "Iranians weren't waiting for 'an Egyptian borrowing in order to establish the ritual of their own months and days.'"<sup>23</sup> While the conclusion seems quite reasonable, some of the intermediary steps depict a wrong image.

Panaino agrees with De Blois and Grenet that the 365-day calendar was of Egyptian origin and probably imported under Xerxes (r. 486-465 BC). Since it is hard to imagine a calendar unrelated to religious activities, he had to compare the evolution of the Persian calendar in conjunction with the development of religious rites. The only theory available to him was Kellens's "Proto-Yasna-A and B" and he therefore uses them as evolutionary milestones to guide his study.

The merit of his study is to establish two important points: 1) that there existed throughout the empire, from Armenia to Sogdiana, calendars with month names that were not Avestan; 2) that the prevailing calendar in these regions was based on 12 months of 30 days, which is also attested in the Vedic tradition. He then sees the unification process of the calendars as the work of an "Avestan school" that in the process also introduced "a full list of the name of the 30 days." The question that he then rightly asks is: What made this Avestan system so acceptable to the population in regions that previously had different calendars? How come they did not resist this new system?

His answer is that all of these calendars belonged to a "shared religious orientation" and that the system proposed by the Avestan school relied on a system attached to the existing 360-day calendar and not induced by the Egyptian 365-day one. I believe that the expression "shared religious orientation" is an unsubstantiated notion that allows him to finesse his way out of the straight jacket imposed by Kellens in presenting the texts of his Proto-Yasna-A as pre-Achaemenid. Darius for instance declares in Bisotun (DB V, 20-36) that the Scythians "were unruly and did not worship Ahura Mazda." Or Xerxes acknowledges that there were *daeua*-worshippers that he had to admonish. A calendar based on Mazdean or Zoroastrian rituals was not an easy thing to swallow for these people. If the Avestan calendar became acceptable in most of the empire it's because the Zoroastrian priests created an amalgam that could please almost everybody. They not only incorporated numerous deities into the Zoroastrian pantheon, but also adopted most of their rituals. Those rituals were tied to a calendar sequence that they had to incorporate as well. Perhaps these previous calendars only considered a few special days per month as related to gods. The Zoroastrian priests may have then expanded that system to all days of a month.

But most remarkable is the harmonizing effort they put into the amalgamation process, which ironed out conflicts and smoothed differences. Clearly, the seventh month of the early Achaemenid calendar belonged to Mithra and was named *bayayadish* in his honor. In the amalgamation process, however, the seventh month of the Avestan calendar could no longer be called *bayayadish* since it made Mithra the absolute *baya*. The seventh month was simply named Mehr/Mithra. It was an acceptable name because

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<sup>23</sup> As per his handouts.

it now referred to a deity who had been sanitized and incorporated into the Avestan fold; and it went hand in hand with the cleansing of the *Mehr Yasht* such as replacing the onerous reference *khshatrapati* with the more Zoroastrian friendly “master of the *zarathushtrot*.” Similarly, the *khvarenah* was labeled “Mazdā-created” while Mithra remained as its purveyor under the aegis of Ahura Mazdā. It was a clever way to incorporate the tribal concept of *khvarenah* into Zoroastrianism. Most importantly, fire, which was at the heart of every ancient Iranian religious ceremony, had to be brought into the fold as well. It was astutely qualified as “Son of Ahura Mazdā.”<sup>24</sup>

Panaino’s argument would have been better served if he had placed his “Avestan school” in the post Achaemenid period, rather than pre-Achaemenid that Kellens suggests.

## XII. Persian Sources

One final observation. In two days of conference at the Collège de France, not one speaker quoted a Persian source. At a conference held two weeks earlier at UCLA, Hanspeter Schaudig demonstrated how the formula used by Cyrus in his famous cylinder derived from a Mesopotamian tradition that almost went back two millenniums. If one can detect two millenniums of continuity backward, one must be able to detect some useful indices going forward, especially within the Persian tradition. But the predicament of ancient studies is that Persian sources are never consulted or understood. If they were, the 258 Axiom would have perhaps not been dismissed as summarily as it is nowadays.

*Abolala Soudavar*  
*Houston – Nov. 29, 2013*

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<sup>24</sup> See pp. 21-24 of my [FROM THE AVESTA TO SUFI TREATISES: A STANDARD LITERARY TECHNIQUE](#)

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