

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AV. ČIΘRA,
OP. ČIČA, MP. ČIHR, AND NP. ČEHR,
FOR THE IRANIAN COSMOGONY OF LIGHT***

BY

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1. Introduction

In trying to explain the relevancy of the ubiquitous Sāsānian “*ke čīhr az yazadān*” idiom in Iranian kingship theories, and to refute the claim of divine status for Sāsānian kings, I had previously relied on the “common” knowledge that in Middle Persian, *čīhr* had two sets of meanings (1 — face and appearance, 2 — seed and origin), and the choice of the second set for *čīhr*, over the first, was dictated by Greek translations.¹ While my suggestion there — that the legend rather implied that the king’s radiance (in power and glory) reflected those of the gods — has already raised many eyebrows, further research on the etymology of the word *čīhr* and the evolution of its meaning over time, now prompts me to espouse an even more radical position, and to question the very validity of this second set of meaning, not only in Middle Persian, but also in Avestic, Old Persian and New Persian. It is most unfortunate that in all of these, in addition to the well-founded meaning of “appearance/brilliance,” other meanings such as seed, origin, and nature, have been

* As a result of earlier studies in kingship theory, I have been — unwittingly — pushed into a restricted domain, accessible only to the practitioners of the high-art of philology. For lack of knowledge in this domain, I had to solicit the help of many scholars who, despite their many engagements, patiently replied my numerous e-mails, phone calls, and letters. In particular, I am indebted to Touraj Daryaei, Jean Kellens, Pierre Lecoq, Malek-Iraj Mochiri, Shaul Shaked, Chlodwig Werba, and Nicholas Sims-Williams, who gave me relevant information and useful advice. Most importantly, I am forever indebted to Xavier Tremblay who provided me — in writing — a long dissertation on the Avestan and Old Persian use of *čīθra* and *čīča* and pointed out the pitfalls of past approaches. It goes without saying that errors in judgment, and weaknesses in arguments, are all mine and cannot be imputed to the aforementioned scholars who accepted to help me but did not necessarily agree with my point of view.

¹ Soudavar 2003, pp. 41-48.

gradually adopted with rather dire consequences for our comprehension of historical documents — textual as well as visual.

To be sure, the task of refuting the validity of these additional meanings is not an easy one, since a number of unfortunate circumstances:

- from Bailey, Bartholomae, and Pisani’s tentative attempts to find a second etymology for the Avestan *čiθra*²,
- to the *Bundahišn* imagery that seems to provide a justification for translating *čiθra* as seed (of the bull) in the Avestan qualification of the moon as *gao-čiθra* (see 4.1),
- to the “*ariya čiça*” of Achaemenid royal inscriptions that seems to easily translate into: “of Aryan origin” (see sec. 5.1),
- to some Greek and Syriac translations of “*ke čihr az yazadān*” that insinuate divine descent for Sāsānian kings, and thus validate the “seed/origin” meaning for *čihr* (see sec. 3.6),
- to an inscription on the coinage of the Sāsānian queen Burān (r. 629-31), thought to justify the claim of divinity for Sāsānian kings (see sec. 6.1),
- to the Persian dictionary *Borhān-e Qāte’*, which mentions a second meaning for NP *čehr* as “nature” (see sec. 2),

have all contributed to the acceptability of meanings beyond those naturally derived from the Proto-Indo-European root *cit* (to appear/to shine) — which constitute the primary set of meanings for *čiθra* and its progenies³. Moreover, the mere number of — mostly independent — support cases for a second set of meanings, seems to vouch against any effort to negate it. Yet, the ultimate arbiter for the acceptance of any meaning should be its contextual relevancy. If in every encountered situation one can prove that the second set leads to a non-sense, or provides a weaker meaning than that provided by the first set, said set loses its relevancy and should be discarded. And that is what we shall try to achieve in this study.

² Bailey proposes an etymology based on **kei* (to go, to move forward) leading to **ki-trō-m*; Bailey 1979, p. 102. Bartholomae simply admits the existence of the two aforementioned sets of meaning; Bartholomae 1961, pp. 586-57. Pisani proposes a combination *či-tra* similar to Sanscrit *ku-tra* (who are you?) that would define lineage; Pisani 1933, p. 86.

³ Monier-Williams 1988, pp. 395b-396a; Werba 1997, p. 184.

Philologists may be surprised to see an almost total absence of philological considerations in my approach⁴. It is however hoped that the contextual argument, complemented by parallel historical considerations, will bring to light such a coherent use of the word *čehr* and its antecedents that it will ultimately overshadow all other concerns. Moreover, it is hoped that my conclusions about the similarity in the Sasanians' and Achaemenids' formulation of kingly power — that will emerge at the end of this study — will further justify my efforts for unifying the disparate meanings of this family of words.

2. New Persian context

My belief in a single set of meaning for NP *čehr* and its antecedents was fostered by the fact that nowadays, *čehr* only evokes one set of meanings. Indeed, every single example cited for *čehr* in the comprehensive *Dehxodā* dictionary, pertains to the first set, and projects a meaning of appearance and radiance, for instance⁵:

- *šāh-e xoršid-čehr*: a king with a sun-face or radiant like the sun
- *kiān-čehr, manučehr-čehr*: with Kiānid/Manučehr radiance and glory
- *tārik-čehr*: dark-face, a face that has no glow
- *rošan šodi zu šab-e tireh-čehr*: he caused the dark-faced night to brighten up

Of all the citations squeezed into the two and half pages of small script of that dictionary, none convey a meaning of seed or origin. At the very end of the relevant entry however, we find a reference to a meaning of “nature” proposed by the *Borhān-e Qāte‘* (the problem of which I shall address further below)⁶, and a meaning of “seed” and “origin” adopted by Pourdavoud in his Avestan endeavors. Neither of the two assertions rests on an example, nor on a citation⁷. They simply repeat oft quoted meanings

⁴ As the constructed etymologies by Bailey and others are all tentative and inconclusive (because none has prevailed, see note 2 supra), they can only gain acceptance if they can yield a meaning in context. Since I cannot find any, I do not see the necessity in discussing non-justifiable reconstructions.

⁵ Dehxodā 1994, V:7351.

⁶ Same is adopted in Faravashi 1381, p. 120; and MacKenzie 1971, p. 22.

⁷ Dehxodā 1994, V:7351

for earlier stages in the evolution of *čehr*, namely, the Middle Persian *čihr* and the Avestan *čiθra*.

The obvious question then is: if *čihr* and *čiθra*, each in their own context, really conveyed a meaning of seed or origin, how can it be that there is no trace of it in Persian literature? For after all, the use of the “*ke čihr az yazadān*” legend was not confined to rural inscriptions alone, but prominently figured on coins of mass-circulation, and the *Avesta* was not only an omnipresent feature of Iranian culture in the pre-Islamic period, but remained as one of its points of reference for centuries after the Arab conquest. If a meaning of seed/origin did really exist in the Avestan context or in the legends struck on coins of mass-circulation, surely some trace of it was to be found in Persian literature. Its very absence today, invites closer scrutiny for earlier periods.

3. Middle Persian context

One can never claim to have addressed every possible situation, but the examples below cover most, if not all, variations in meaning of the Middle Persian *čihr*:

3.1. The radiance of *čihr*

A passage of the *Dēnkard* is most interesting for the purpose of this study, since it provides a definition of the word *čihr*, and an insight into its function as a source of energy. I shall rely on the latest edition of this passage by Taffazoli and Amouzegar, which provides an excellent transcription of its text but needs rectification in regards to its translation:⁸

“(24.29) *ud tan-iz ud griw wirāyišn pad ān čihr ī nē rōz rōz abāg paristārih ōwōn wardišnig būd sazāgihā bē brēh ī wehīh ud xwarrah ī xwēškārih ud hu-xradih ī sūdōmand ud dānišn ī frārōn ud xwāstag ī wēš frayādišnig ud abārīg-iz nēkih ī pahlom mehmānīh pad yazdān-paristagān*”

«(24.29) il est convenable de s’adapter, corps et âme, à la nature qui, elle, ne change pas tellement chaque jour selon le service (qu’on lui

⁸ *Dēnkard*, p. 102.

demande); mais le destin de la bonté, la gloire — à savoir la fonction — la bonne sagesse profitable, la bonne connaissance, les biens qui sont très secourable et d'autres excellentes qualités résident ainsi davantage chez les adorateurs des dieux.»

The above translation has been rendered meaningless, by the adoption of “nature” for the meaning of *čīhr*, which in turn, has caused the wrong translation of the word *rōz*, as “day” rather than “luminosity.”⁹ Furthermore, in order to squeeze some meaning out of this double-error, the translators saw in the two successive “*rōz*”s, an indication of a continuous and recurring phenomenon (something akin to “day by day”)¹⁰. It is obvious however, that the “*ezāfeh*” *ī* after *čīhr* cannot stick to the negative article *nē* alone, but relates to a *nē-rōz* combination that acts as a qualifying adjective for *čīhr*.

By considering the original meaning of *čīhr* as appearance/radiance, it immediately follows that *čīhr ī nē-rōz* refers to a radiance that has lost its luminosity, and that the second *rōz* sits at the beginning of a new sentence which explains how to restore that lost luminosity. Such an interpretation is fully supported by what follows in that section: the lost *rōz* can be restored by the sparkle (*brāh/brēh*) of goodness, and the aura (“*xwarrah*”)¹¹ that is associated with a number of qualities that God-worshippers should normally have.

Moreover, the above passage comes in response to one of the challenging questions that the Christian Bōxt-Mārē puts before Ādur-Farrobay in the *Dēnkard*:

Question: “And why is it that in the body and soul of God-worshippers, the sparkle, and aura, and wisdom, and learning, and richness, and other kinds of goodness are not more manifest than among the demon-worshippers?”¹²

⁹ As I had previously argued in the case of the NP *ruz-afzun* combination, the primary meaning of *ruz* in there is “light and luminosity”; see Soudavar 2003, pp. 16-19.

¹⁰ This new version of text is clearly more meaningful than the one edited by Pešotan Dastur Behramjee Sanjana in 1900, and in which, the two successive “*rōz*”s are similarly understood as “day by day”; see www.avesta.org.

¹¹ For the *xvarnah*'s solar symbols, see for instance Soudavar 2003, pp. 7-9, 16-19, 37-40.

¹² *Dēnkard*, pp. 76-77; www.avesta.org/denkard/dk5s.html (30.32).

By structuring the question in this order, its author recognizes “sparkle” and “aura” as the two most important qualities that the soul and body of a believer should have. It is therefore quite natural that in response, Ādur-Farrobay would address the case of those who have lost their radiance, and would propose a remedy for it. The answer should therefore read:

Answer: And [in the matter of] the body and soul adorned with a radiance that has lost its luminosity, [said] luminosity can be suitably restored by the sparkle [generated by] goodness, the aura [generated by] being dutiful [in religious tasks], and the beneficial good wisdom, and the straightforward learning, and the desire (*xwāstag*) to help more others (*wēš frayādišnig*), and other excellent blessings that are best suited to reside with God-worshippers.

Even though the text of the *Dēnkard* was written in the 9th century, its spirit is rooted in the *Avesta*; particularly in the *Farvardin Yašt* where Ahura-Mazdā repeatedly attributes his creative powers to the “*rayi* and glory (*xvarnah*)” of the *fravašis* of the Righteous people (*ašāvans*)¹³. Most scholars consider the word *rayi* therein as a derivative of the root *raē-* (wealth), and in order to fit it into that context, translate it as “brightness/splendor,” presumably equating wealth with glittering jewelry. Malandra however, translates it as “insight” and considers it to be derived from a homonym, *rāy*-¹⁴, the one that has given us NP *rāy*¹⁵. The latter is often described by adjectives such as bright or obscure, and even likened to bright stars such as Jupiter at night¹⁶. Such descriptions rest on the ancient belief that vision was made possible by the inner light of the eye. To this day, a loss of vision is equated with a loss of “light”, and the eye is qualified as *kam-su* (low-light), and a dear one is called *nur-e čašm* (the light of my eye). A more appropriate meaning for *rayi* would therefore be “point of view,” or more simply “viewing capacity.”¹⁷

¹³ Malandra 1983, pp. 105-17.

¹⁴ Malandra 1983, p. 103; as signaled to me by Xavier Tremblay, Malandra’s interpretation seems to have been based on arguments previously developed by Lentz 1962, p. 134, and Gropp 1968, p. 38.

¹⁵ NP *rāy* is described to be derived from MP *rāy/rād*; Nyberg 1974, p. 164; Faravashi 1381, p. 473.

¹⁶ Dehxodā 1994, VII:10424-25

¹⁷ Despite philological difficulties, one suspects that this radiance (*rād*) may be an off-spring of the same Indo-European root that provided “ray” and “radiance” in English.

The Malandra interpretation, not only leads us to a better justification for recognizing *rayi* as radiance and light, but functionally, brings it into harmony with the *xvarnah* that is coupled with it. Indeed, an important characteristic of the *xvarnah* is its variability: it can be strong, weak or non-existent¹⁸. Unlike the wealth-related *raē*-combination that must necessarily be translated by a word that defines a continuously exalted — therefore non-variable — state, the “radiance” translation for *rayi* gives it the same variable characteristic as *xvarnah*. If “brightness” or “splendor” can also be used for its translation, it’s only because the strength of the *rayi* that Ahura-Mazdā relies upon for creation (or other feats) is due, in the *Farvardin Yašt*, to its emanation from the *ašavans*. Without such an association, the *rayi* may not necessarily be bright and cannot be translated by “splendor.”

In either case, whether derived from *raē*- or a homonym, *rayi* seems to be light in substance, and together with the *xvarnah*, which is often projected in a radiating form¹⁹, becomes a source of energy that the *fravašis* of the Righteous people carried and that Ahura-Mazdā could exploit. Similarly, the *čihr* that Ādur-Farrobay saw as a necessary attribute of God-worshippers (i.e., righteous people), must be considered as a radiance that acted as a source of power and energy.

3.2. The apparent nature of *čihr*

Since one’s appearance is very much tied to one’s nature, it is not surprising that dictionaries such as the *Borhān-e Qāte’*, translate *čehr* as nature²⁰. But the following example from the previously mentioned edition of the *Dēnkard*, clearly shows that even when “nature” provides an adequate translation, “apparent nature” better describes that situation:

“(22a) ud čim ī ān yōjdahgarīh nē zan bē mard kardan ēk wēš amāwandīh ī nar ī ahlaw ud wēš-samīhā sijdīh ī dēwān aziš ud nāriḡān ōy-iz petyārag ī sarādag ō čīhr abyoxt ēstēd narrīh-iz ī awēšān drūzān rāy az mādagān kam tarsēd ud pad-iz abārīḡ kār ī nē ōwōn mādagig mard az zan weh šāyēd ...”

¹⁸ Soudavar 2003, p. 14.

¹⁹ See for instance Soudavar 2003, pp. 146, 149, and 153.

²⁰ Tabrizi 1362, II:674. One should note that since the *Borhān* has also given us hundreds of spurious words known as the *Dasātiris*, its reliability is not beyond doubt.

«(22a) une des raisons pour laquelle la purification n'est pas exécutée par une femme, mais par un homme, c'est qu'un homme juste possède plus de force (qu'une femme) et que les démons le fuient avec plus de peur. Cet antagoniste de l'espèce des femmes s'est attaché lui aussi à leur nature. Et parce que ces *druzs* sont mâles, ils ont peu peur des femmes; et même dans d'autres affaires qui ne sont pas aussi essentielles (que celle-ci), les hommes sont plus aptes (à le faire) que les femmes ...»²¹

From the first sentence of the above passage, it is clear that the purifier's job is not to get entangled with demons, nor to physically fight them, but to function as a scare-crow, and make them run away *at sight*. And since demons are male creatures and know that they are stronger than women, should a woman stand as a purifier, her inherent weakness will be divulged by her appearance (i.e. pronounced breasts, hairless face, etc...), and thus, the demons will not be scared away. The underlined sentence is therefore better translated as:

...and any antagonistic posture of women is undermined by their [physical] appearance...

Hence, appearance better describes what was conveniently translated as nature.

3.3. *The force of čihr*

A heading from the Middle Persian text *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, which reads as:

“hu-dēnān ī ēd pursīdārān: az stāyišnīg nērōg ī čihr ud zōr ī gōhr ud daxšag ī xrad ud nišān ī hunar ...”

has recently been translated as:

“To those of Good Religion, who are asking these things about the praiseworthy strength of nature, and the power of nature, and the signs of wisdom and proof of ability ...”²²

²¹ *Dēnkard* 200, p. 96.

²² *Dādestān ī Denīg* 1998, p. 30.

By translating *čihr* as “nature,” we face a redundancy in this title that even 19th century Qājār literary figures, who so cherished repetition, would have avoided. The title obviously enumerates varied questions that people had, and therefore, since *nērōg* and *zōr* are equivalent and both mean strength and power, *čihr* must represent something other than *gōhr* (NP *gohar*, Ar. *jowhar*, meaning “substance/nature”). This deduction is further strengthened by a passage that enumerates the faculties that the Creator endows man with, among which we have *čihr ī xwad bizešk* translated as “self-healing nature”:

“2.13 For when the most beneficent and perfect Creator achieved the creation of the Lord in the wholly wonderful way, with the attack of the Evil Spirit, (he changed) the static existence into a dynamic spiritual +world. As a conspicuous example, (he changed) the invisible (and) unmingled spirit into a visible one. He placed the growing spirit of the +soul as a virtuous lord in the body so that it may move in the material world. He announced and adorned the +animating life and the preserving *frawahr*, and +acquisitive memory and the protective intelligence, and the discerning wisdom, and the ±self-healing nature [*čihr ī xwad bizešk*], (and) the organizing power, (he announced and adorned) the eye to see the ear to hear, the nose to smell, the mouth to recognize flavors, the body to +feel a +touch, the +heart to think the tongue to speak, the hand to practice, the foot to walk. These (faculties) which cause the improvement of the soul and +increase of the flow of the blood (?), these which are elated to the body...”²³

Except for the supposed “self-healing nature” description, every other enumerated faculty in this passage is describing a certain aspect of man’s nature. It does seem odd therefore, to have the nature of man qualified — as a whole — within a list enumerating only *particular* aspects of it. Moreover, if the nature of man was really self-healing, Ahriman and the Druj (the Lie) could never harm it. For, whatever went wrong, man’s nature had the capacity to rectify it. The “*xwad bizešk*” faculty, rather than “self-healing,” should be understood as one that acts as a man’s own doctor (*bizešk*), i.e., one that could see and understand man’s own illnesses

²³ *Dādestān ī Denīg* 1998, pp. 44-45.

but, like any other physician, was not necessarily able to cure them. Since *čih*r essentially sheds light on one's problem, it is better described as a source of light rather than "nature."

In any event, by alluding to the power (*nērog*) of *čih*r, the initial title provides a further justification for my conclusion in section 3.1: that *čih*r was a source of power, similar to the *xvarnah*.

3.4. *Čih*r as visage and appearance

The Manichaean text, *Šāpuragān*, brings out yet another meaning of *čih*r: It states that in the final phase of the world and on the Day of Judgment, the Great Fire ascends to the heavens in the *čih*r of Ohrmazd-bagh (the Primordial Man)²⁴. This of course provides the closest meaning to NP *čehr*, and is synonymous with NP *čehreh*, i.e., visage and appearance.

3.5. *The input from iconography*

As already mentioned, I had concluded in a previous study that, in respect to Sāsānian stone-reliefs, the "*ke čih*r *az yazadān*" idiom indicated that gods and kings were meant to reflect each other in appearance and Glory. Consequently, I was able to describe the stone-reliefs of Barm-e Delak, Tāq-e Bostān and Naqš-e Rostam, as a coherent expression of kingly power sanctioned by deities such as Ahura-Mazdā, Anāhitā, Apām-Napāt and Miθra²⁵.

Conversely, the very fact that the intriguing composition of these stone-reliefs could not be otherwise explained, gives credence to my interpretation of said idiom. To my knowledge, no satisfactory solution has ever been advanced to adequately explain for instance, the following problems: if the male figures of the *Investiture of Narseh* at Naqš-e Rostam (fig. 1) are non-deities, then why is it that they so accurately reflect the king, especially in the parallelism of their limbs, rippled trousers, and multitude of flying ribbon, rather than depicting a subordinate in a position of respect? and who is the boy? Unless a more plausible explanation is presented, the *čih*r of this Sāsānian idiom should be understood as referring to a similarity in appearance and glory.

²⁴ *Šāpuragān*, p. 40; also Soudavar 2003, pp. 44-45.

²⁵ Soudavar 2003, pp. 49-72.



Fig. 1. Sketch of Narseh's investiture at Naqš-e Rostam; he is sanctioned by Anāhitā, Apām-Napāt, Ahura-Mazdā, and Miθra. (G. Herrmann, "Naqsh-I Rustam 5 and 8" in *Iranische Denkmäler*, Berlin, 1977, fig. 2)

3.6. Čihr in translation

The major support for *čihr*'s second set of meanings has always been the contemporary translations, particularly the one carved next to the investiture scene of Šāpur I at Naqš-e Rostam, which qualifies the king and his father to belong to "the family (*γενουσ*) of gods" and suggests a meaning of "seed/origin" for *čihr*²⁶.

I had previously raised two major objections for this interpretation:

- Redundancy: if Ardašir I (r. 224-241) was truly from the seeds of gods, his son would have been as well. There would be no need to emphasize it twice (i.e., for both father and son)²⁷.

²⁶ See, for instance, MacKenzie 1981, p. 17.

²⁷ Soudavar 2003, p. 43.

- Not all Greek translations deified the king, and letters from Xosrow II (r. 590-628) to Heraclius, and from Xosrow I (r. 531-72) to Justinian, rather support the contention that kings and gods were meant to reflect each other in glory and power²⁸.

Translators did not always adhere to the principle of strict equivalence²⁹, and in the Greco-Roman context, in which, even the lover-boy of Hadrian (r. 117-38) was deified, it made sense for a translator to elevate the rank of the Iranian king to that of the Romans. This purpose was facilitated by the use of the epithet *baγ* for Sāsānian kings in regal inscriptions. In Achaemenid times, the word *baγa* unequivocally meant god, but followed the path of degeneracy to become later on an honorific epithet. The question then is: what did it mean in Sāsānian times?

Fortunately, the Sāsānian era is included in a time-bracket for which one can demonstrate that *baγ* was used as a regal title at both ends. On the late end, we have the passage of *baγ* into Turkic languages as *bäg/beyg*, clearly a title with no divine or religious connotations.³⁰ Since *bäg* first appears in the Orkhon inscriptions of the 8th century, we are at least assured that by the end of the Sāsānian era, its antecedent *baγ*, had gained full temporal status.



Fig. 2. Coin of Šāpur and his father Pāpak.

(Dr. Busso Peus Nachf. Münzhandlung, Catalog no. 368, lot 364)

On the early end, we have the coinage of Ardašir I's brother and predecessor, Šāpur, with his effigy on the obverse and his father on the reverse, with the following legends respectively: *bgγ šhpwry MLK'*, *BRH bgγ p'pky MLK'* (*baγ* Šāpur Šāh, son of *baγ* Pāpak Šāh) (fig. 2). According to Tabari, when Pāpak killed the local ruler of Estaxr, he requested from the Parthian Ardavān IV (r. 216-224), the crown of Estaxr for his son Šāpur. When Ardavān refused, Pāpak proceeded without permission and placed Šāpur on the throne of Estaxr³¹.

²⁸ Kellens 1994, p. 81; and Soudavar 2003, pp. 42-45, where a letter of Arsaces (originally in Armenian) is also mentioned in favor of the reflective image thesis.

²⁹ See, for instance, Lecoq 1995, pp. 183-86, Sims-Williams 2001, p. 62.

³⁰ Bazin 1960, I:1193.

³¹ Tabari suggests that Šāpur was crowned in lieu of his father; Tabari 1375, II:580-82.

Clearly, even after defying the authority of their Parthian overlord, Pāpak and his son were in no position to claim divine status. Deities simply do not ask permission.

Thus, like the English word “lord” and the French “seigneur,” by Sāsānian times, *baγ* had acquired a temporal meaning. As a regal epithet, it meant “lord, majesty” with no divine connotations whatsoever³². In Iranian literature, no king ever claimed divine power, except Jamšid. And when the latter did that, he immediately lost his kingship!³³

But to further complicate the issue, instead of the normal Pahlavi spelling, occasionally, *baγ* was written as an ideogram (“ALHA”)³⁴. For a Syriac translator dealing with a Semitic language (as opposed to Greek), this spelling naturally evoked “god,” and suggested divine claim. It was thus used — in a negative way — by the author of an account on Christian martyrdom under Šāpur II, who clearly had an ideological incentive to deride the Sāsānian king, and accuse him of blasphemy³⁵.

In sum, the translation argument is not as solid as it seems.

3.6. *Precedents*

Two possible precedents may reinforce the interpretation of our Sāsānian idiom as an indicator of god-sanctioned authority for the king (rather than divine origin). The first is the inscription on coins from Persis under the generic formula: [*king's name*] *prtrk' zy 'lhy'* ([*king's name*] *prataraka* of

³² Alram uses the translation “divine” for *baγ* (Alram 1999, p. 67), supposedly on a hint by Skjaervo, even though the latter translates it as “Lord” elsewhere; see, for instance, Skjaervo 1985, p. 594. In a recent publication, Skjaervo is again ambivalent about *baγ*: he translates it as “the divine” on coins, but at the same time, points out that in the Paikuli inscriptions it appeared as “Your Majesty”; Skjaervo 2002, p. 49. One should also note that in the *Bondaheš*, it is said that after the Arab invasions, and after the raids of the Turkic tribes, a certain Kay-Bahrām who was “from the lineage of the *bays*,” came to save Erānšahr. The “*bays*” in there obviously refer to the Sāsānians; Dādagi 1369, p. 141.

³³ This account appears in certain versions of the *Šāhnāmeḥ*; see Ferdowsi 1988, I:45, note 9.

³⁴ For “ALHA” in ŠKZ see, for instance, Skjaervo 1985, p. 594; for same in the inscriptions of šāpur III, see Fukai et al., 1984, appendix I.

³⁵ The sentence “*men zar'a d-alāhē*” (from the seed of gods), which is said to describe Šāpur II in that text, has been taken at face value by Sundermann, and accepted as proof of a claim of divinity; Sundermann 1988, pp. 338-40 (I am indebted to N. Sims-Williams for sending me a copy of this article).

gods), that is datable to the beginning of the Arsacid era³⁶. *Prataraka* has hitherto not been defined in the Iranian context, but “in the official Aramaic documents it seems to mean something like prefect, superintendent or foreman.”³⁷ Thus, following the departure of the Seleucids, the kings of Persis (present day Fārs and home of the later Sāsānians) altered the divine connotations of the Greek regal slogans by introducing a word that should probably be translated here as “deputy.” The king of Persis is then characterized as “deputy of god on earth,” similar to the Islamic formula: *zill-ollāh* (shadow of god on earth), and very much in line with the ancient notion of a king reflecting the gods’ power and authority³⁸.

A second possibility is offered by a passage in the *Tir Yašt* in which the star Tištrya is said to have received his *čithra* from Apām-Napāt³⁹. Structurally, it provides a close parallel to the Sāsānian idiom, for here again one entity derives its *čithra/čihr* from another. Since we shall argue in the following section that *čithra* can only mean “brilliance” in this passage, we can conclude here that *čihr* — as a progeny of *čithra* — was used to indicate reflective radiance, and that such a concept was ingrained in ancient Iranian cosmogony, and that the radiance of *čihr* was indeed a source of power and energy from which kings and rulers derived their authority (or more precisely, through which they projected authority).

4. The Avestan context

A summary look at the *Avesta* had suggested to me that the translation of *čithra* as “seed” in many passages didn’t seem right. Fortunately, Jean Kellens not only confirmed this suspicion, but also expressed his belief that in the whole of the *Avesta*, *čithra* only meant “appearance” or “brilliance,” and that *gao-čithra*, as a description of the moon, should simply be understood as the same term would be in New Persian: i.e., that “it appears as a bull.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Sellwood 1985, pp. 300-302, 317. One should note that since ‘*lhy*’ appears here at the end of the sentence, it cannot be considered as a royal epithet similar to the one mentioned in the previous section, and really meant “god” in this context.

³⁷ Personal communication by Shaul Shaked.

³⁸ Sims-Williams 2001, pp. 61-62.

³⁹ Yt 8:4, www.avesta.org.

⁴⁰ Private conversation. Kellens’ view on *gao-čithra* is also expressed in Kellens 1996, p. 86.

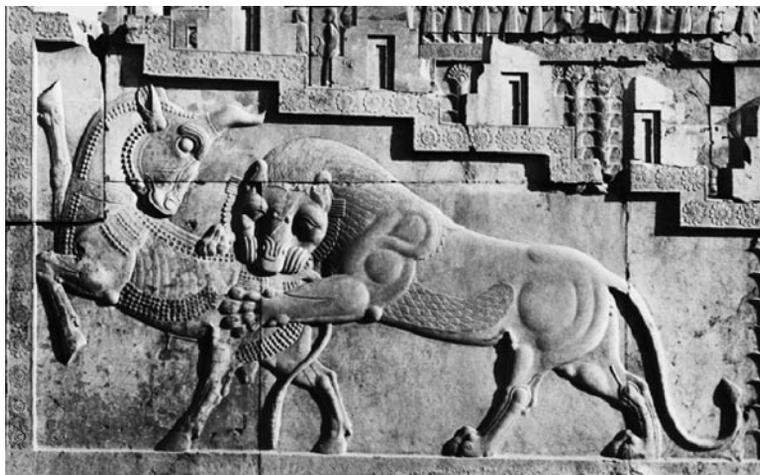


Fig. 3. The lion and bull icon at Persepolis.
(Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, Chicago. Photo no. P 480)

4.1. *Gao-čiθra*

The latter remark ties well with my own conclusion that the bull of the Achaemenid lion-bull icon (fig. 3), stood for the moon, in an emblem that represented day-night perpetuity as well as the *xvarnah* bestowed by the lords of the day and the night, i.e., the *ahuras* Miθra and Apām-Napāt⁴¹.

This conclusion is now further strengthened by the recent publication of a seal from Sardis which depicts the lion and bull engaging battle, with a sun and a moon carved above them (fig. 4)⁴².



Fig. 4. Lion and bull design
surmounted by sun and moon motifs.
Seal from Sardis
(Dusinberre, *Aspects*, 278)

This point of view obviously offers a much simpler explanation than the conventional — but incongruent — conception that the “moon carries the seed of the bull;”⁴³ a conception that is mostly based on the *Bundahišn* imagery. In the *Bundahišn* however, the seed/semen of

⁴¹ Soudavar 2003, pp. 114-18.

⁴² Seal 4523 of the Istanbul Archeological Museum (Dusinberre 2002, p. 278).

⁴³ See Yt 7:0-7, for instance in *Avesta*, I:325-27.

the bull is taken to the moon for purification only. There is absolutely no indication that the semen remained there. To the contrary, the purification was immediately followed by the creation of species, explained in the following terms: “first a pair of bovines — a cow and a bull — then, from every other specie, a pair *on earth*, in Erān-vēj.”⁴⁴ The sequence leaves no room for the semen to reside on the moon.

Moreover, according to Biruni, the sixteenth of the month of Dey was celebrated by Iranians as the day that young Fereydun rode a bull, and on that night, each year the image of a bull appears in the sky with golden horns and silver hoofs, which pulls the cart of the moon. For the same night, Biruni also reports another popular belief according to which a bull appears in the sky and augurs a year of abundance or drought, according to the number of sounds it utters⁴⁵. Thus the idea of a bull appearing in the sky, and associated with the moon, was rather widespread.

In what follows, I shall test Kellens’ theory for the instances in which the second set of meaning has enticed many other scholars to adopt it.

4.2. *Afš-čithra*

Tištrya’s description as *afš-čithra* (Yt 8:4), is generally translated as “containing the seed of water,”⁴⁶ presumably on the account of its similarity with *gao-čithra*, and the fact that Tištrya is somehow involved in the movement of water on earth. His involvement though, is not for bringing water to earth but to make the water of lake Vouru.kaša surge and flow (Yt 8:8, 30). In none of his avatars is he said to carry water to earth, nor make use of his presumed seeds of water. His source of water is lake Vouru.kaša and therefore, on earth.

More importantly, in the *Yašts*, *afš-čithra* is not an exclusive quality of Tištrya but seems to apply to all stars (Yt 12:39); and in the Vendidad, in an invocation addressed to the “*afš-čithra*” stars, they are requested to shed light on earth (21.13). It makes a lot more sense to request bright stars to produce light, than stars which “contain the seeds of water” or “are of watery nature.”⁴⁷ The context favors a meaning of brilliance, i.e.,

⁴⁴ Dādagi 1369, p. 98.

⁴⁵ Biruni 1377, p. 346.

⁴⁶ See for instance, Malandra 1983, p. 143.

⁴⁷ Oddly, Malandra uses both expressions to explain *afš-čithra*; Malandra 1983, pp. 141 and 143.

one of the two original meanings of *čīθra*. Stars are therefore characterized with an *afš*-brilliance quality. The question then is: what does exactly *afš* mean in this combination?

Afš is a derivative of *ap* (water). It has also provided the NP verb *afšāndan* (to spray), which is primarily used for water, perfume and other liquids, and by extension for granules such as gold⁴⁸. We may thus surmise that *afš* implied water in a raindrop form. *Afš-čīθra* would then mean “glittery as raindrops,” a very appropriate term for stars which often scintillate in the sky⁴⁹.

In Yt 8:4, Tištrya is described as opulent, glorious, *afš-čīθra* (glittery), and with a series of other qualities followed by the sentences:

“*yahmāt hača berezāt haosravanghem apām nafəδrat hača čīθrəm*”

Malandra translates the above as:

“the exalted one from whom (comes) renown — from Apām-Napāt (comes his?) lineage.”⁵⁰

The translation seems confusing and ill-defined. However, with two corrections we may obtain a more intelligible result. The first is to acknowledge that Apām-Napāt’s name should have been repeated at the end of the stanza but is not, because of the traditional Avestic pattern of repetition avoidance. He was thus the source of both renown and *čīθra* for Tištrya (i.e., the star Sirius)⁵¹. The second is to translate *čīθra* as brilliance, because the main qualities of that star are all of luminous nature (Yt 8:2: white, shining, seen afar, ... piercing from afar with its shining undefiled rays), and befit Sirius, the brightest star in the sky at nighttime. As the Lord of the night and seas, Apām-Napāt was the appropriate *ahurā* to have

⁴⁸ Dehxodā 1994, II:2633-35.

⁴⁹ In Yt 12:30-31, in addition to the moon that is qualified as *gao-čīθra* and Tištriya as *afš-čīθra*, other stars are qualified as *zemas-čīθra* (earth-*čīθra*) and *urvanō-čīθra* (plant-*čīθra*). The non-applicability of seed to the former two, eliminates a major argument for translating the latter two as “seed.” Describing a star to be “of earthly appearance/radiance” is certainly a valid characterization, and to describe a star (or a constellation of stars) as a plant is no more far fetched than to believe the moon appears as a bull. In either case, it is certainly less incongruent than the “contains the seed of” translation.

⁵⁰ Malandra 1983, p. 143.

⁵¹ The second correction is independent from the first one.

bestowed Tištrya with the qualities that so distinguished him at nighttime. To talk about lineage here is to confuse the Iranian pantheon with the Greek one, where deities were actively procreating⁵².

4.3. *Raēva.čiθra*

In the ābān Yašt, Anāhitā approaches a certain boatman, in disguise:

“64. Arədvi Sūrā Anāhitā flowed up to (him) in the form of a beautiful, very strong maiden, well built, high girdled, erect, noble in respect to (her) illustrious lineage, in shoes worn to the ankle with bright golden laces.”⁵³

To pass as a maiden, all that mattered was her look. It did not matter whether the jewelry that she wore was inherited or recently acquired, whether she was an aristocrat or a nouveau-riche. Lineage is not necessarily an apparent trait. Along with the rest of the description, “*raēvat.čiθram āzātayā*” (which has been translated by the underlined sentence above) should describe what was visible *at first sight*. Since the first word is generally understood as “wealthy” and the last means “noble,” a more appropriate translation would be: “with the rich look of the nobles,” i.e., she appeared nobly splendid. Once again, the primary meaning of *čiθra* better fits the context.

4.4. *Aša-čiθra*

In his translation of Yt 19:12, Malandra has opted to translate *čiθra* as family:

“...The Lie shall retreat to wherever it was whence it came in order to destroy the righteous man, him and (his) family and his being.”⁵⁴

⁵² Even though Kellens muses that “Ahura-Mazdā ne se débrouille pas mal sexuellement” (Kellens, “Le pantheon,” 81), and quotes Y47.2 and 3, in which Ahura-Mazdā is addressed as “father” of Aša and Spenta ārmaiti, one cannot take the “father” therein at face value, for it is used in the sense of “creator,” as one would say in English, so and so is the “father” of an invention. In Yt 17:16, Aši is said to have Ahura-Mazdā as father, Spenta Ārmaiti as mother, and the Mazdean Religion as her sister (!).

⁵³ Malandra 1983, p. 125; Chlodwig Werba translates it as “(her) lineage (being) rich/wealthy,” (private communication).

⁵⁴ Malandra 1983, p. 89.

In the case of the Sāsānian idiom though, we saw that despite a Greek translation as “family,” only “seed” or “origin” were adopted to define *čīhr*. Malandra’s choice here is, in fact, symptomatic of the difficulties caused by the introduction of the second set of meaning in general. He had to extrapolate “seed/origin/lineage” one step further, into “family,” in order to get a somehow more meaningful sentence. The shorter extrapolation, i.e., “lineage,” would have resulted in a non-sense, because the rest of the family would have still been alive and able to continue the lineage.

Moreover, righteousness is not hereditary. The progenies of an *ašāvan* do not become automatically *ašāvans*, and the Lie certainly nurtured hopes of converting every newborn to his cause. Therefore, he had no incentive to destroy potential recruits for his own army.

What the passage in fact recounts is that the Lie had come to destroy the righteous man, the *ašāvan*, and that destruction is explained as one involving both his *čīθra* and his being. The concept that I alluded to in 3.1 is relevant here, for we saw that even when the *ašāvan* was dead, his “lights” (i.e., his *rayi* and glory) remained, and acted as a source of energy for Ahura-Mazdā, and that the *čīθra* of the righteous man was very much the same. His annihilation therefore, involved not only the destruction of his “being” but also of his *čīθra*, i.e., his radiance.

By the same token, we can assume that for the term *aša-čīθra*, a translation such as “of just appearance” or “he who radiates justice” is more appropriate than the incongruous description: “containing the seed or principle of Aša.”

Finally, there is a further consideration for the choice involving the two meanings. A religious text, like a political slogan, seeks maximum effect through relevancy and actuality. “Seed” implies a future potential; radiance and appearance evoke immediacy. The latter is therefore more relevant, more dramatic, and therefore more potent.

4.5. *Arya-čīθra*

In Yt 13.87, *čīθra* again has been understood as seed:

“We worship the Frawaši of righteous Gaya Maretan, who first listened to the thoughts and teachings of Ahura Mazdā, from whom (Mazdā) fashioned forth families of the Aryan people, the seed (*čīθra*) of Aryan peoples.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Malandra 1983, p. 114.

There are two inherent problems to this interpretation. If Ahura-Mazdā fashioned the “seed” of the Aryan people, he obviously fashioned that nation as a whole in that seed, including Aryan families. “Family” adds no precision to the information conveyed by “seed.” Moreover, if “seed” was the correct translation, logically, the order of the two entities should have been reversed: seed obviously must come before any offshoot.

Here again we are in the presence of the same concept as the one discussed in the previous section: similar to the *čithra* of the *ašavans*, there was a light or radiance attributed to the Aryans that provided victory and success to its members. My analysis further below of a similar concept, enunciated in similar terms, in royal Achaemenid inscriptions (see 5.1 below)⁵⁶, shall provide added support for my suggestion here.

4.6. A new trend

In his recent analysis of Y 32 and its relevance to the Daēvas and their followers, Antonio Panaino clearly senses that the traditional translation of *čithra* as “seed” is inadequate and opts instead for “manifestation” to define the *čithra* of Bad Thought. Nevertheless, he pays a lip-service to the traditional interpretation by including “seed” in a parenthesis and presenting it as another possibility⁵⁷. It is perhaps time to follow the lead of Kellens and abandon “seed” and “origin” all together.

5. Old Persian context

Čithra’s Old Persian counterpart is *čiça*. It appears in royal Achaemenid inscriptions in two capacities: as qualifier of the word “Aryan,” and as part of a name (e.g., *čiçāntaxma*). In both capacities, it has been translated as origin and lineage. Having argued that in Avestic, Middle Persian and New Persian, the *čithra*-family of words did not evoke lineage, it would seem rather odd to have the contrary in Old Persian.

5.1. Aryan *čiça*

In three Achaemenid inscriptions, *čiça* appears within sentences that define the king’s affiliations. Darius (r. 521-485BC) declares to be:

⁵⁶ I am indebted to Xavier Tremblay to have pointed out this analogy to me.

⁵⁷ Panaino 2001, p. 102.

(1) *Vištāspahyā puça, Haxāmanišiya*, (2) *Pārsa, Pārsahyā puça*,
 (3) *Ariya, Ariya čiça*

i.e., (1) son of Vištāspa, an Achaemenid, (2) Pārsa, son of Pārsa, (3) Aryan, and with Aryan *čiça*. As for Xerxes (r. 485-465BC), he declares to be the son of Darius and then repeats 1, 2 and 3 verbatim⁵⁸. Although all three inscriptions are trilingual, the corresponding Babylonian versions of 1, 2 and 3 are missing, and the Elamite versions read as the OP versions⁵⁹. We are therefore left to rely solely on context for deciphering the meaning of *čiça*.

The three-partite inscriptions were meant to define the king's affiliations from the smallest relevant social entity to the largest. The second clauses of parts 2 and 3 obviously don't define new groupings, but provide additional information for their first clause. There is a tangible difference between the groups defined in 1 and 2: the name of the latter group is repeated while the name of the first group is not. One pertains to an inheritable trait, and the other to a transient state. If Darius's father is an Achaemenid, so is he. That is why Xerxes who qualifies his own father as Achaemenid, does not repeat it for himself, nor does Darius repeat it for himself in his own inscription⁶⁰. Therefore, if Pārsa is repeated for father and son, it must indicate a non-permanent and a non-hereditary state⁶¹.

The analogy with 15th century Turkaman practices is quite revealing. Uzun Hasan (r. 1453-78), the Aq-qoyunlu ruler of western Iran, took pride in being a member of the Bāyandor clan, named after his ancestor, Bāyandor Khān. Like the "Achaemenid" affiliation, Bāyandor clanship was a permanent trait and thus hereditary. The Aq-qoyunlu affiliation however, was not. It indicated membership in a confederacy that could change in time. A Turkaman could join the Aq-qoyunlus, or the rival Qara-qoyunlu confederacy, and move in and out. A Turkaman could

⁵⁸ DNa, DSe, XPh in Sharp 1971, pp. 82, 90, 116 and 130; Lecoq 1997, pp. 219, 232, 257.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, and confirmed by Ch. Werba (personal communication).

⁶⁰ Similarly, in A2Hc, Artaxerxes II (r. 404-358BC) gives his lineage as son of Darius II, son of Artaxerxes I, son of Xerxes, son of Darius, son of Vištāspa, and only qualifies the latter as "Achaemenid"; Lecoq 1997, p. 270.

⁶¹ The pre-dynastic coins of the Sāsānians (such as the coin in fig. 2) which bear the name and effigy of Šāpur and Pāpak, according to a "baḡa X son of baḡa Y" formula, may be in fact a reflection of the "Pārsa son of Pārsa" concept of the Achaemenid inscriptions.

settle near Mosul and become a Mosul-lu, or settle near Šām (Damascus) and become a Šām-lu⁶². By the same token, we may surmise that Pārsā represented a confederacy, or a location-related affiliation similar to say Mosul-lu, or a mixture of both. Whatever it was, it did not represent a permanent characteristic⁶³.

More relevant to our study however, is the Turkaman affiliation, which was permanent. Once a Turkaman, always a Turkaman, and for generations to come. The term defined a nation in the ethnic sense of it. Similarly, the term “Aryan” defined a nation, i.e., an ethnic characteristic that embraced one generation after another. We thus see that the classical translation of the third part of the above-mentioned inscriptions has an inherent problem: its second clause is redundant and adds nothing to the meaning of the first clause (“Aryan”) that it didn’t already have. To be an Aryan meant to be of Aryan lineage, and to be a Turkaman meant to be of Turkaman stock. To repeat it in a royal lapidary inscription would have looked ridiculous to any member of those congregations.

The better alternative to “lineage” is once again the primary meaning of *čiθra*, i.e., brilliance; a brilliance that could lose its luminosity and become *nē-rōz* as in 3.1, or be all powerful. Within a cosmogony in which power was derived from light, the legitimacy of Darius necessitated for him to possess the strongest light among the Aryans. As I shall argue here below, by claiming to have the Aryan *čiça*, Darius was in fact claiming to possess the Aryan *xvarnah*.

5.2. Tribal good fortune

The key to the understanding of the Achaemenid concept of dynastic legitimacy is to acknowledge that similar to the Aq-qoyunlus, their mode of thinking was still very much rooted in a tribal framework. After all, the Aq-qoyunlu nomad-to-emperor timeframe was not much different than the Achaemenid one⁶⁴.

Among the nomadic tribes of the central Asian steppes, divine interventions notwithstanding, the most potent force to project authority was a

⁶² For information on the Aq-qoyunlus, see Woods 1999.

⁶³ Unlike Lecoq who relies on a clan-tribe-people classification (Lecoq 1997, p. 170), I believe that in lieu of “tribe,” “confederacy” may better explain the situation at hand.

⁶⁴ Both fit in a 2-3 centuries timeframe.

good fortune tied to a group or class of people (as opposed to that of a leader). Thus, in a stately edict of Uzun-Hasan, which — despite the renowned religious orthodoxy of the Aq-qoyunlu regime — combines Islamic concepts with tribal ones, we can see that in addition to the powers of God, the “Good Fortune of the Bāyandor Clan (*dowlat-ol-Bāyandoriyyeh*)” is invoked⁶⁵. The Il-Xān Ġāzān (r. 1295-1304), on the other hand, relied on a group larger than a clan, and would begin his edicts with the *invocatio*: “by the might of God and the auspiciousness of the Mohammedan nation (*mellat-e Mohammadiyyeh*).”⁶⁶ It is however, in a Uyğur edict of the Il-Xān Abu-Sa‘id (r. 1317-1335) that we can see this tribal concept given full rein. After invoking the power of the Mongol sky-god Tengri, the edict invokes the power of: “the nation of the Apostle Mohammad (*Muqamad baiyambar-un omat-dur*).”⁶⁷ Less hampered by Islamic orthodoxy in the Uyğur context, Abu-Sa‘id transformed what was known as the *ommat-e mosalmān* (the Moslem community) into a clan/tribe grouping led by a successful leader, the apostle Mohammad. In all three examples we see reliance on a group-related auspicious power, next to god-sanctioned authority.

Because the Avesta refers to the Aryan *xvarnah*, it is undeniable that the Iranians who also came from the central Asian steppes, believed in a group-related auspiciousness similar to the Mongols and the Turkamans. The question then is: was this ever reflected in Iranian kingly ideology or iconography? The answer is yes, at the very least in Sāsānian times.

5.3. *The dastār as symbol of the Aryan xvarnah*

In my previous study, I had argued that the omnipresent flying ribbons of the Sāsānian regal paraphernalia was a symbol of *xvarnah* (MP *xarrah*, NP *farr*), and was probably named *dastār* to emphasize its function as conveyor of victory (*dast*)⁶⁸. Two additional arguments, unknown to me then, may reinforce those conclusions:

⁶⁵ Soudavar (forthcoming); Woods 1999, pp. 104, 259.

⁶⁶ Rašid-Od-Din 1957, III:430.

⁶⁷ See Soudavar (forthcoming) in which the readings of Pelliot and Cleaves have been rectified; Cleaves 1953, pp. 27-33; Pelliot 1936, pp. 37-44.

⁶⁸ Soudavar 2003, pp. 13-16.

- the writing of “*xarrah*” and “*dast*” are the same in Pahlavi⁶⁹;
- in describing the signets of Xosrow II, Mas’udi supposedly mentions that one of them bore the sign of “*xarrah* and *xorram*.”⁷⁰ Since it’s very hard to represent the second term (which means “cheerful” or “lush scenery”) on a tiny signet, and because it has no affinity with the first term, I suggest that Mas’udi, or a later scribe, mistook *xorram* for *gorm*⁷¹. The latter is the term that Ferdowsi uses in reference to the ram that chased Ardašir as a symbol of his *xarrah*, when about to defeat the last of the Parthians, Arda-vān⁷². Moreover, a ram with a *dastār* tied around its neck and a pair of wings — also a symbol of the *xarrah* — was frequently used as an auspicious symbol (fig. 5)⁷³. The *xarrah* of Mas’udi therefore most probably referred to a *dastār* tied around the neck of the ram on the signet.



Fig. 5. Stucco plaque. Ctesiphon 6th century. (The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Inv. 228840)

In depicting the Parthians as Ahrimanic⁷⁴, Ardašir had to change the main symbol of their sovereignty, namely the Greek-type diadem called *dēdēm* (NP *dayhim*), which was tied to the head⁷⁵. Thus, the cord-like *dēdēm* was replaced by the thicker and more amplified *dastār*, and was interpreted as a symbol of *xarrah*. But besides changes in dimensions, the *dastār* had one additional feature (mostly after Šāpur I, r. 241-272): rather than having hanging tails, it was depicted almost horizontally and

⁶⁹ MacKenzie 1971, p. 202.

⁷⁰ Mas’udi 1962, I:243. The corrupted text in Mas’udi reads: *نقشه حره وحزم، اي بهجة وسعادة* and is repeated in Gardizi 1989, p. 98.

⁷¹ As evident from the preceding note, both *xarrah* and *xorram* were tentative reconstructions. The writing of *gorm* and *xorram* are very similar in Persian: *غرم / خرم*. The latter should generally be written with a *tašdid* sign on the “r”, but does not seem to have been in the manuscripts.

⁷² Soudavar 2003, pp. 20, 22.

⁷³ Soudavar 2003, pp. 20-22.

⁷⁴ Soudavar 2003, p. 33.

⁷⁵ See Boyce 1954 (p. 102) where it is repeatedly mentioned that the Parthian diadem (*dēdēm*) is tied to the head (I am indebted to Judith Josephson for this reference).

with ripples, in order to produce a windblown effect. The latter characteristic identified the *dastār* as the symbol of not any *xvarnah*, but of the Aryan *xvarnah*. Indeed, the stanzas Yt 18:2-5 depict the Aryan *xvarnah* as a most powerful force that “vanquishes the non-Aryan nations” and is accompanied by “the Strong Wind made by Mazdā,” as well as the “glorious star Tištrya.” It is followed by Yt 18:7 where all three are praised together:

“Hail to the bright and glorious star Tištrya. Hail to the Strong Wind, made by Mazdā! Hail to the Glory of the Aryas!”⁷⁶

As evidenced by his inscriptions, the victories of Šāpur I over the Romans brought a change in his titulature: in addition to “King of Erān,” he was named “King of an-Erān,” i.e., of “non-Aryan nations.”⁷⁷ Simultaneously, the windblown effect was incorporated into the *dastār*, to visually emphasize this new concept.



Fig. 6. Moon and star on the obverse and reverse of Xosrow II coins⁷⁸

We can then surmise that the star which appears on late Sāsānian coinage is Tištrya who is auspicious on two accounts. Firstly, as seen above, it is a companion of the Aryan *xvarnah* and its presence therefore vouches for the presence of the latter as well. Secondly, when paired with the moon (as in fig. 6), the two represent the brightest celestial bodies of nighttime. In a cosmogony where light is a primordial source of power, the king had to benefit from both daytime and nighttime radiance. On coins, the dotted rings represented solar radiance⁷⁹, and the star and crescent symbolized the Tištrya-Moon radiance⁸⁰.

⁷⁶ www.Avesta.org

⁷⁷ Gyselen, 2002, p. 187.

⁷⁸ From Soudavar 2003, figs. 16 and 41.

⁷⁹ Soudavar 2003, p. 17.

⁸⁰ I had previously argued that a star/sunburst without a circle around it, represented a star and not the sun, and in combination with the moon, it was referred to as *axtar-mah* (star-moon); Soudavar 2003, 61-62. The combination first appears on the reverse of the coins of Kavad I who lost his throne once and regained it with the help of Hephtalites.

5.4. *Aryan xvarnah or Aryan čiča?*

So far we have established that: central Asian nomads who founded new empires clung to a concept of clan or tribal auspiciousness, that Iranians were no exception since they believed in the Aryan *xvarnah*, and that the Sāsānians invoked it in their regal iconography. Logic dictates that the Persian Achaemenids who were closer to their nomadic past than the Sāsānians should have done it as well. Since we saw that *čiča* meant brilliance, and we know that the primary symbolism of *xvarnah* is solar radiance, we can surmise that “Aryan *čiča*” was very much equivalent to “Aryan *xvarnah*,” and was used in the same capacity.

The question then is: why didn’t Darius use the more familiar term of the Avesta which was certainly known to him, one way or another? We must first observe that in the Avestan context, there are two parallel sources of energy, the *rayi* and *xvarnah*. Even though derived from a tribal concept of good fortune, the *xvarnah* acquired a solar symbolism through punning and phonetic similarity with *xvar* (sun).⁸¹ The *rayi* on the other hand, was light in essence and manifested itself through a brilliance that was referred to as *čiθra*. Since they both acted as sources of energy and could be symbolized by light, they had the potential to become interchangeable.

As I have previously argued, while Achaemenid imagery was replete with *xvarnah* symbolism, the royal inscriptions systematically avoided mentioning that word⁸². Indeed, since the *xvarnah* had Miθraic connotations, it clashed with the image of an all powerful Ahura-Mazdā that Darius wished to promote⁸³. On the other hand, Cyrus II (r. 550-530BC)

⁸¹ Elfenbein 2001, p. 492; Soudavar 2003, p. 123. Even though it has been recently suggested that *xvarnah* comes from Scythian *farnah*-, corresponding to Sanskrit *parṇa* (feather) (See Parpola 2002, pp. 309-10, quoting Lubotsky), the wordplay between *xvarnah* and *xvar* that Elfenbein has suggested remains valid, despite the fact that he believes *xvarnah* to derive from a Indo-European root **(s)p(h)el-*. For further ties between feathers and *xvarnah* symbolism, see Soudavar 2003, pp. 19-26. The latter connection, in combination with the notion of a tribal “good fortune,” certainly vouches for a tribal origin of the *xvarnah*.

⁸² Soudavar 2003, pp. 104-106. I had also given the example of the Saljuqs whose written legends differed from the iconography of their coinage, but had unfortunately cited a wrong reference in print. Footnote 259 therein must be corrected to: Bulliet 1074, p. 295.

⁸³ Names such as OP *ciça-farnah* (Gr. Tissaphernes: with radiant glory) may have facilitated the switch from *xvarnah* to *čiča*.

and Cambyses' (r. 530-521BC) victories over the non-Aryan nations had certainly given them an aura of glory, namely the Aryan *xvarnah*, which Darius needed to reclaim for himself if he were to be accepted as their legitimate successor. By promoting *čiça* in lieu of *xvarnah*, Darius was wrapping a popular ideology in a shiny new robe that, perhaps, aspired to be more universal than a strictly Aryan concept.

In the religious context, as Elfenbein has noted, *xvarnah* "resurfaced with a vengeance" (in the Younger Avesta).⁸⁴ Same is true for royal iconography⁸⁵. In kingly phraseology however, the example of the Sāsānians show that the Achaemenid precedence of using *čiça* instead of *xvarnah* became standard practice, and lead to the incorporation of the word *čihr* instead of *xarrah* in regal slogans.

5.4. Čiçantaxma

Among the rebels that Darius mentions to have vanquished in his Bisotun inscriptions, is one *čiçāntaxma*, whose name has been translated: "brave by descent" or "of brave lineage."⁸⁶ I am not sure if this translation has any parallels in the Iranian context. The usual structure to convey lineage is through a "son of" or "born of" qualification; and if lineage had to be conveyed beyond father and son relationship, the clan name would be mentioned.

The *taxma* of this name is akin to the first part of Rostam's nickname, *tahm-tan* (strong-body). Čiçāntaxma seems to be better translated as one who "radiates strength," or is "of strong appearance."

6. The coinage of Queen Buran

Since a major tenet of my arguments is that Iranian kingly ideology never allowed for a king to claim divine powers, a counter-example in this respect would make a serious dent in my overall thesis. If recent readings of the legends on the coins of Burān, daughter of Xosrow II, are to be trusted then such a counter-example exists. The fact though is that the readings are incorrect and they do not provide a valid counter-example.

⁸⁴ Elfenbein 2001, p. 492.

⁸⁵ Soudavar 2003, pp. 104-106.

⁸⁶ Lecoq 1997, p. 292.

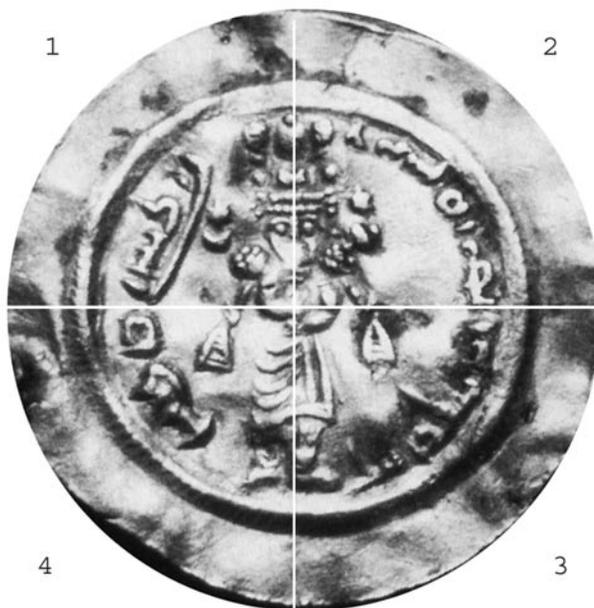


Fig. 7. Coin of Queen of Burān
(Daryae, “Coinage of Queen Bōrān”, 78)

6.1. Past interpretations of the legends

The problematic legend occurs on the reverse of the coin of Burān (fig. 7); its reading has been the subject of many controversies all summarized by T. Daryae in a recent article to which he added his own interpretation⁸⁷:

- a) Kuntz and Warden: ...*GDH new bwlt'l* (“Good bearer of glory”)
- b) R. Göbl: *gyh'n MN GDH new kt'l* (“she who makes the earth strong with her (royal) splendor”)
- c) V. Curtis and H.M. Malek: *Gyh'nt GDH new bwlt'l* (“your world (is the) bringer of brave glory”)
- d) M.I. Mochiri: *bwl'n tlwyn ZY yzd'n twhmk W gwhrt'l* (“Bōrān victorieuse, de race divine et resplendissante”)
- e) T. Daryae: *bwl'n ZY yzd'n twhm wyn't'l* (“Bōrān, restorer of the race of Gods”)

⁸⁷ Daryae 1999, pp. 77-81.

For (a), (b), (c) and (e) the left-side reads as *bwl'n TLYN* (Burān, two), i.e., it reiterates the name of the queen already struck on the obverse, plus the regnal year “two.” In terms of approach, the main difference between them is that (a), (b), and (c) consider the right-hand side inscription as separate from the opposite side, while (d) and (e) consider the two sections as part of a continuous legend; Daryaee however, sets aside the number two and includes the other half of the left-side, that which contains the name of “Burān.”

The diversity in reading clearly points out to the difficulty in deciphering unfamiliar legends written in the usually corrupted Pahlavi script of coins. The acceptance of any reading must therefore rest on external factors; and since the *yazdān toxmag* (from the seeds of gods) part of (d) and (e) concurs with the Greek translation of the “*ke čīhr az yazadān*” idiom of earlier Sāsānian coinage, these two readings have gained favor. At the same time, they provide added comfort to those who fervently believe in the validity of the Greek translations.

The assumption of the continuity of the two texts, adopted by (d) and (e) however, is contrary to standard epigraphic rules that if separated sections are part of the same legend, there should be some indication to that effect: e.g., they are written in a circular form (as in the coinage of Asdashir), or if a motif must intrude into the legend, the two sections on each side should butt against that motif. Most importantly, there must be some uniformity in style and character. Here, one can readily see that the characters of the left inscription are larger than those from the right, and there is no indication to suggest connectivity. We therefore have two separate legends. It means that the one on the right cannot start with the “*ezafé*” ZY (= *i*), and whatever the starting letter is, it must be incorporated into the next word. There is simply no *yazdān* in the legend.

At this point I can rest my case since Burān’s coin no more constitutes a valid counter-example. If one deconstructs a previously accepted interpretation however, one has the duty to offer a more plausible one in its stead.

6.2. *New interpretation*

Traditionally, the reverse of the coin is where the information about regnal year and mint was struck (usually on opposite sides of the same circle). It was such an important tradition, that no new designer dared to completely abandon it, especially in uncertain times. Therefore, if the

word *TLYN*=2 appears on one side, the mint name must somehow be incorporated on the opposite side of the standing figure. Trying to conform to this tradition, and also include additional slogans in order to enhance the legitimacy of a ruler whose reign was not unanimously accepted⁸⁸, the designer devised a new layout: he divided the reverse of the coin into four quadrants created by an imaginary cross (fig. 7). This four-partite division is suggested by the fact that the horizontal axis goes through on the one hand, right between the two words *bwl'n* and *TALYN* in quadrants 1 and 2, and on the other, because the size of the letters changes from quadrant 3 to 4 (those in 4 are slightly larger than those in 3).

As there is a quasi unanimous agreement on the reading of quadrants 1 and 2, I shall concentrate on 3 and 4 alone. The following possibilities are suggested:

Quadrant 3

- A. *whšytk GDE* (*waxšitag*⁸⁹ *xarrah* = blazing aura). Mochiri has suggested that the name *Burān* must have meant “abundant red-hair (*bur*).”⁹⁰ For a person of Byzantine descent, this was indeed a possible feature. In addition, it would justify my reading, since the “abundant red-hair” could well be equated with a blazing aura. Moreover, in his listing of Sāsānian rulers, Biruni adds the qualification *sa'ida* (the auspicious) for *Burān*⁹¹, derived from the same term *sa'āda* (auspiciousness) that Mas'udi had used for *xarrah* in describing the signets of Xosrow II⁹². This qualification obviously concords with a person whose coinage may have described her as the one with a blazing *xarrah*.
- B. *gwhl'n twhmk* (*gohrān toxmag* = of multiple noble lineage). It emphasizes noble birth, and befits a ruler who claimed descent from the kings of both Iran and Byzantium⁹³. Furthermore, Ferdowsi

⁸⁸ Dinavari, for instance, scornfully remarks in his *Al-axbār -ot-tawāl*, that Iranians had no man left to rule (quoted in Malāyeri 1379, I:298).

⁸⁹ In some dictionaries, this word is spelled as *waxšendag*, but since it derives from the verb *waxšitan* (*whš-ytn'*), my spelling seems to be justified as well.

⁹⁰ Personal communication.

⁹¹ Biruni 1377, p. 165.

⁹² See note 70 supra.

⁹³ Even though Byzantine chronicles do not acknowledge that Maryam, the mother of *Burān*, was a daughter of the emperor Maurice (Garsoïan 1985, p. 579), what matters here is that the official Iranian version recognized her as such; Biruni 1377, p. 165; Ebn-e Balxi 1968, pp. 25, 107.

mentions that she received many *gohars* upon her ascent to the throne⁹⁴. He uses the term in the sense of jewelry, but one wanders if it was not related to a possible mention of *gohrān* on her coinage.

In addition, there is a distinct possibility that our clever designer intended to get a double-meaning from the same inscription. Puns and wordplays were very much a trade-tool of the scribes and functionaries who designed official inscriptions. The number “two” which is stated after Burān’s name on the left-side may be in fact an indicator that the rest of the legend is doubly layered.

Quadrant 4

As already mentioned, the mint name was traditionally placed opposite the regnal year. In the instant case therefore, it should be in the fourth quadrant. In addition, there is a curious gap between the second and third letter from the end, which needs to be justified.

- C. *nywkkl[t]’l (nēk-kard[]ār, good-doer)*. It’s a legend that serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it conforms to the description provided by the *Fārsnāma* that she suspended various levies and had a *sirat-e neku* (good-demeanor)⁹⁵; and on the other, the incorporated gap [] serves to isolate the two last letters in order to post the mint name as AR (probably Armenia). Politically it made sense to emphasize that Armenia was still part of Iran at a time when the Holy Cross was returned, or about to be returned, and the truce with Byzantium was finalized. The ending pattern here may have been inspired by the legend on late issues of Xosrow II, read as *erān abebim kard-ar*⁹⁶. It should be noted that the same expression, without the ending two letters, appears in the *Bundahišn* in regards to the deeds of Xursow I (but the context and the numismatic evidence vouch for the remark to pertain to Xusrow II)⁹⁷. That sentence is

⁹⁴ Ferdowsi 1370, p. 2268.

⁹⁵ Ebn-e Balxi 1968, p. 25. One senses that the choice of words in Persian texts is not fortuitous but was somehow related to legends that had circulated for instance on coins, and was preserved in historical accounts and even folkloric tails.

⁹⁶ Göbl 1971, pl. 14, nos. 220, 221.

⁹⁷ I am grateful to T. Daryaei, to have pointed out this to me, as well as a related reference in Klima 1970, p. 141.

certainly more meaningful without the last two letters (*ar*). Their addition to the coinage of Xosrow II, as in here, was most probably to indicate the mint name as well.

7. Conclusion

At the very least, the above discussion shows that many of the accepted interpretations for the use of *čiθra* and its progenies need to be revised. But if one can find comfort in the present analysis, and accept only one set of meanings for this series of words, a more interesting conclusion would be its relevance to a pervasive light symbolism that continuously shaped Iranian religious and political ideology.

Through their radiance, various sources of power and energy were often invoked by mortals as well as deities. The *xvarnah* for instance, had a pivotal role in the concept of kingly authority. It was an individual — as well as a tribal — source of power that acquired a solar symbolism, partially through wordplay. Otherwise, it mainly manifested itself through rams, falcons, feathers⁹⁸, etc... Another source of energy, the *rayi*, was only light in essence and manifested itself through its luminosity and brilliance, its *čiθra*. The former had its roots in the primitive tribal beliefs of the central Asian steppes, the latter may have been conceived as part of a new Zoroastrian cosmogony.

The parallel utilization of the two concepts probably caused each to adopt the attributes of the other. The most important factor in the rapprochement between the two concepts however, is Darius' decision to claim the Aryan *xvarnah* that his predecessors had acquired through their conquests of non-Aryan nations, while minimizing its connection to the deities that they had venerated. The supremacy of Ahura-Mazdā for Darius, entailed tailoring old concepts in a new garb. The brilliance of *čiça* thus came to supplant the glory of *xvarnah* in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. Centuries later, religious orthodoxy may have pushed the Sasanians to do as the Achaemenids once did: they used *čihr* in their inscriptions, but used the symbols of *xarrah* in their iconography.

⁹⁸ See Soudavar 2003, pp. 19-26; and note 81 *supra*.

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