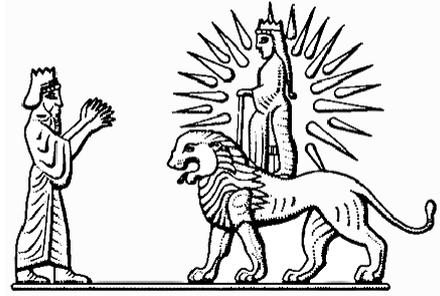


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***“Preliminary Remarks on Melammu Database. The Continuity of Mesopotamian Culture showed by Iranological evidences.”***

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## Preliminary Remarks on MELAMMU Database: the Continuity of Mesopotamian Culture showed by Iranological Evidences\*

The result of these recent months in making a first inquiry about the intellectual relationship between the Mesopotamian culture and the Iranian one can be considered, without doubt, successful and very promising as a work in progress which should greatly enlarge in the future. The vitality and novelty of this new methodological approach has increased our orientalist studies thanks to a special gaze directed towards a huge bibliographical documentation, searching for any items and clues related to this particular aim of the MELAMMU Project. Even if the cultural relationship between the Mesopotamian and Iranian culture is a matter of fact since a very long time – and my emphasis on this point could sound, linguistically speaking, as a redundancy – it is worth noticing that this synchronical outlook into the different periods of the Iranian history, from the Achaemenian through the Seleucid and the Arsacid to the Sassanians could deeply enrich our vision of Near Eastern

heritage in Iranism, with a composite and multishaped frame in the milieu of art, architecture, glyptic, royal ideology, religious syncretism, exact sciences, astrology, mantic and divination, bureaucracy and administration. Another important subject, as I am going to explain in further considerations, is the persistence of this Near Eastern heritage in the different levels of Iranian philology and history, and more in its Middle-Iranian phase than in the Old Iranian one, namely the Old Persian Inscriptions and the Avesta: the scarce hints we can recognize in this Old Iranian literature is greatly surpassed by the Middle Iranian data which, thanks to the medium of Aramaic, show a noteworthy presence of Semitic components in literary formulas (greetings, self-deprecatory and auspicious style) and in specific cultural continuity in the realm of different aspects like astrology, astronomy, divination, wisdom literature and so on.

### General references to Assyria and Babylonia

By reading the Old Persian texts, i.e. the Achaemenid inscriptions, we find some references about Assyria (*Aθurā*) in

Darius and Xerxes and as an adjective to the “Assyrian people” (*aθuriya kāra*) related to the workmen charged with

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bringing the cedar timber from Lebanon to Babylon (*DSf*); in the same inscription we have the mention of Babylonia (*Bāb-iru*) and of “Babylonian people” (*bābiru-viya kāra*) employed as craftsmen and workmen (bricklayers) in the building of Darius’ palace.

Mesopotamian geography in Darius’ inscription of Bisitun, in which is reported the name of Tigris (*Tigrā*), the Euphrates (*Ufrātu*), the Babylonian district of Dubāla, the Assyrian city of Arbela (*Arbairā*) and the Assyrian district of Izala.

In the Avestan texts is reported the name of Babylon in its form Baβri (*Yašt* 5. 29) as the land of the three-mouthed dragon Aži Dahāka: a recent statement of P. O. Skjærvø (1988: 194) rightly pointed out that “it is understandable that the Iranians, after they came into contact with Near-Eastern, especially semitic culture, located Aži Dahāka, the big dragon, in Babylon, which must have been notorious for its dragons, in literature and artistic representations.” Babylonia as a country of magic, and especially of evil magic, is also mentioned in the Zoroastrian Book *Dēnkard* VII. 4. 42, always as the region of the wicked sorcerer Dahāka.

The fame of Babylon is also connected with the foundation of exact sciences or of astrology: the Pahlavi geographical text on the “provincial capitals of Iranian empire” (*Šahrestānīhā ī Ērān*) reports that “The capital of Bābīl was built by Bābīl in the reign of Yam. He bound there also the planet Tīr (Mercury, Nabū) and he pointed out the computation of the 7 and the 12 of the zodiacal signs and the planets, and as the eight (that of) the fate through sorcery to Mithra (the Sun) and those below (the mankind)” (Markwart-Messina 1931: § 24).

Babylonia is the birthplace of the

prophet Mani, the founder of an important syncretistic and gnostic religion (Manichaeism). According to his own words, in the Parthian Manichaean text M4a (Klimkeit 1993: 148) he says “A thankful pupil am I (Mani), I have come from the land of Babylon and I am posted at the door of Truth. I am a young pupil, come forth from the land of Babylon. I have come forth from the land of Babylon so that I might shout a call into the world.” See the expression “door of Truth” that presupposes the notion of Babylon as the “door of God”: on the contrary, in the opinion of Mary Boyce (1975: 162, n.21), “Babylon symbolises the materialism which Mani rejected.”

Babylonia is also recorded in the Middle Persian translation of the Bible, *Psalms* 136. 1, where the Iranian form *bb<yl>y* is the rendering of the Syriac *bbl*, in the well-known incipit of Psalm 136 “super flumina Babylonis” (*abar rōdistān ī bb<yl>y*) (Andreas-Barr 1933: 28).

And as a pleasant statement, concerning the everyday life of Sassanian court, we should remember the Pahlavi text “Cosroe and his Page” (*Xusraw ud Rēdag* § 57): in this courtly dialogue between the king and the page we read “Which wine is the best and the finest?,” asked Cosroe; “With the Babylonian wine (*mad ī āsūrīg*), and the Basarangian must, no wine can compete” answered the page. For other Mesopotamian references in Pahlavi literature, see for example the riddle-text *Draxt ī Asūrīg*, “The Babylonian tree” (a contest-dialogue over precedence between a date-palm, growing in Asūr, and a goat, in which both state their claims to be more useful than the other to mankind) which according to Brunner (1980) is comparable with the Mesopotamian text “Ewe and grapewine” and the Sumerian “Enkidu and Dumuzi.”

A Mesopotamian literary influence, from the Akkadian-Aramaic “Ahīqar’s wisdom,” is also recognizable in the Pahlavi

didactic book “The admonition of Ādur-bād” (de Blois 1984).

## Royal ideology, imagery and iconography

The Achaemenian side of Near Eastern continuity reveals a great deal of cultural re-making in Persian shape of a Semitic background in the field of art, architecture, royal ideology and religious politics, religious syncretism. The standard reference on this subject is Gnoli’s recent analysis (1988) in the second paragraph (“Babylonian influences on Iran”), of the entry “Babylonia,” in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, and his article “Politica religiosa e concezione della regalità sotto gli Achemenidi” published in the *Festschrift Giuseppe Tucci*, Naples 1974.

Assyrian and Babylonian artistic background: of the Achaemenid Royal gardens, i.e. “Paradeisos” and of the Apadana, the audience hall of Persepolis whose origins are to be sought in the elevated locations of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian building practice (Stro-nach 1986). According to Szemerény’s (1980) opinion the Old Persian *ap(p)a-dān(a)-* can be compared with Assyrian *bīt appāti* “house with window.” It is also possible to recognize Babylonian mathematical criteria in Achaemenid art: Darius’ statue at Susa reveals a proportional scheme in which the relationship between the face and the body is based on the ratio of 1 to 9, a feature borrowed from the Babylonian and Elamite systems of measurement (Azarpay 1987).

An Assyrian literary model is recognizable in the Old Persian inscription of Bisitun and the model of Assyrian royal autobiography and dynastic apology was inherited by the Achaemenid. The Cyrus Cylinder (Harmatta 1974) shows a closer

parallelism to Assurbanipal’s inscription rather than to the Neo-Babylonian one: a fact motivated by the religious politics of Marduk’s priest, concerned with their privileges and then sustaining the Persian propaganda of Cyrus, considered as a restorer of Marduk’s cult against Nabonidus’ opposition.

Royal ideology: the royal titulature of the Persian “Great King” *xšayaθiya xšayaθiyānām* is shaped on the Urartean title *šar šarrani* (Gnoli 1974); the Assyrian *labān appi* as prototype of the Achaemenid *proskynesis*, was a custom well attested in Mesopotamia, especially on Assyrian monuments, that was taken over from the Assyrian by the Median court (Widengren 1959: 243-248).

Achaemenid thron-names (Schmitt 1982): the ancient Near Eastern widespread custom of taking another name – established by Darius I and guaranteed in the period from Artaxerxes I to Darius III – is witnessed in Classical authors and the Late Babylonian material preserved in the astronomical texts edited by Sachs.

Babylonian and Assyrian royal gesture in Achaemenian and Sassanian art (Frye 1972): Persepolis reliefs, showing an officier with his hand raised to his mouth, palm toward the face, standing in front of the Great King, are similar to Hammurabi’s stele where the king is standing before a seated god. The Sassanian gesture of the bent finger is a well-known symbol in the ancient Near East, especially used by the Assyrian as a sign of adoration before a deity.

The iconographic antecedent of the

Iranian royal investiture is in the rock-relief of Sar-i Pul, where the king Anubaini pays homage to the goddess Ininna Ištar: this pattern of investiture is reproduced in many variants of royal reliefs, from the Achaemenian period (Bisitun) to Sassanian one (Vanden Berghe 1988).

Patterns of crown and diadem: the diadem, a band wrapped around the head, with either the crenellated crown or the tiara, was worn by the Neo-Assyrian kings (9th-7th centuries BCE) and the Achaemenid may have borrowed this practice from them. Alexander also adopted the diadem as a Persian royal feature (Calmeyer 1993: 408). Parthian headdresses of royal women: a type of crown with battlements is depicted on a carved marble femal head found in Susa (1st century BCE): its triple-stepped crenellations recall Achaemenid prototypes, perhaps originally derived from mural crowns worn by Neo-Elamite and Assyrian queens in the 9th-5th centuries

## Religious syncretism

The influence of Babylonian culture in the assimilation of the alien and associated cults of Nabu and Ištar was probably due to a profound respect awoken in the Persian Magi by the learning of the ancient Near East, and this was exemplified both in the use of writing and in exact recorded observations of the stars (Boyce 1982: 33).

Near Eastern influences in the iconography of Heracles-*Vərəθraϥna*: the great diffusion of its imagery – after the Macedonian conquest until the early Sasanian era – was motivated by a syncretism between Iranian, Mesopotamian and Greek components in a mixage of various interpretations → Heracles plus the evil-killers *Vərəθraϥna* plus the typical Near

BCE (Peck 1993: 412).

Mesopotamian eagle-symbol in Seleucid rock-relief of Nemrud Dagħ (Harmatta 1979): Semitic and Iranian syncretism in the solar motive of the eagle-symbol, a mark of Iranian royal ideology with implications dealing with beliefs concerning immortality. The origin of this iconography and symbolism goes back to the mythical Mesopotamian bird Anzu, probably mixed with Indo-Iranian conceptions of the “eagle’s tree.”

Samples of terminology from Iranian to Akkadian: Late Babylonian *ambaru* from Old Persian *\*hambara* (“storehouse”) (Dandamayev 1984-1985). Many administrative, economic, military and juridical Akkadian terms borrowed from Old Persian (Eilers 1940): *ahšadara-pannu* (satrap), *arazapanatašu* (vineyard-keeper), *aštabarru* (lance bearer), *dāta* (law), *dātabara* (judge), *ganzabara* (treasurer), *pardešu* (paradise), *iprasakku* (investigator), *bāra* (tax).

Eastern motive of the lion strangler (Carter 1995).

Tištrya-Sirius, **mulKAK-SI-SÁ**: Mesopotamian astral speculation is to be found in the mythology of Iranian Tištrya, a god related to the calendar, the fertility feasts of the Adonis-Tammuz cycle and astrological speculation. The same process of an interpretatio iranico-mesopotamica is revealed by the Iranian Tīr and the Akkadian Nabū, two divinities associated with the planet Mercury in a sort of syncretistic trend which started in the Achaemenid period and which could have been catalyzed by the themes of fertility and astrological beliefs (Panaino 1995: 50-51; 76).

Identification between Miθra and

Šamaš: even if the Iranians had their own solar deity Hvar Khšaēta, the radiant Sun, the encounter with Šamaš strengthened Miθra, who was matched by the Magi with this Akkadian god, the two being very similar divinities in the first millennium B.C. (Boyce 1982: 28). Other similarities: Šamaš' birth from the mountain is equated to Miθra's rising out of the rocks in the Mithraic Mysteries (Gnoli 1974: 37).

The most important feature of the Irano-Mesopotamian syncretistic trend is surely the assimilation between Anāhitā (Greek Anaitis) of the Avestan texts, i. e. Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā, and the Near Eastern typology of the Great Goddess (Boyce 1985), for example Ištar and Nana in their warlike components, or in the assimilation between Anaitis and Ištar on the ground of astronomical lore linked with fertility and with the mythological heritage of a river goddess. A further link between Ištar and Anāhitā is recognizable in the title "Lady," *bānū* (Parthian): the goddess Anāhīd is called "the Lady" just as Ištar was known among the Babylonians and Assyrians as Bēltum, Bēlit, or Bēltī ("my Lady") (Eilers 1988).

Nana. The fortune of Nana outside the Achaemenian countries is worth noticing and is a very important witness of the continuity of Mesopotamian beliefs in different cultures of Eastern Iranian countries. To start with the Bactrian one, the goddess Nana (*νανα*) is recorded in coins and inscriptions of the Kushan period: in the Rabatak inscription we can see the persistence of her role as a royal goddess bestowing the divine legitimation of kingship to the Kushan King Kanishka, who "has obtained the kingship from Nana and from all the gods" (Sims-Williams & Cribb 1995/96: 78). And again, Nana as the major goddess of

Sogdiana, called "The Lady (of) Piandjikent" (*pn̄cy n̄nδβ'mpn̄h*) and also often attested in onomatopoey: *n̄ny m'n̄ch* ("resembling Nana"), *n̄ny šyrh* ("having Nana as her friend"), *n̄ny δ'yh* ("slave-girl of Nana") (Henning 1940: 7). See also in the Parthian Ostraca from Nisa the theophoric name *naneḫarnak* and the presence in the Parthian Margiana (Turkmenistan) of a temple for the Nana's worship (*nanēstāwakān*). (Bader 1996: 271-272).

Nana is represented on the mural pictorial scene of a sanctuary dedicated to a native funerary cult in the town of Piandjikent (Azarpay 1976) and from an artistic point of view she shows a mixage between Mesopotamian elements (as the goddess seated on a lion throne, or astride a lion) and Indian ones, especially in her four-armed iconography.

In the Sogdian Manichaean fragment M549 the "Lady Nana" (*n̄nδβ'mbn*) appears in a funerary scene of mourning upon the bridge: this scene has been interpreted by Henning (1965: 265, n. 67) as a Central Asiatic parallel to Nana's mourning for the death of Adonis-Tammuz.

Now, talking about Manichaeism and, generally speaking, about the Turfan Middle-Iranian texts belonging to the multi-shaped area of Christian, Manichaean and Buddhist religion, we can testify a very interesting level of Mesopotamian cultural heritage, not only concerning some specific items (like mythology, astronomy, astrology, omen-text) but also the transmission of literary patterns and stereotyped formulae in the epistolary style. See, for instance, Nicholas Sims-Williams (1996) who recognizes a formalized style in the Sogdian Ancient Letters, for address and greeting formulae, that can be traced back to the conventions of Middle Babylonian letters

(16th-11th cent. B.C.): i.e., the self-deprecatory use of the word “servant, slave” (Sogdian *βntk*, Middle Akk. *aradka* “your servant”); the motif of prostration at the feet of the lord; the use of *ŠLM* “peace” as ideogram for *’pryw(n)* “blessing” going back to Middle Babylonian *šulmu*, and continued also in Parthian and Middle-Persian, where *ŠLM/ŠRM* is the ideogram for *drōd* “health.” It can hardly be doubted that these Ancient Near Eastern features in Sogdian were transmitted by the way of Aramaic: from Mesopotamia to Gandhara the administrative language of Achaemenian empire provided the only connecting link between the Semitic Near East, the Iranian and Turkic languages of Transoxiana and Chinese Turkestan and the Prakrit of north-western India. It seems certain that all these formulae must have been used in Achaemenid Aramaic, in which some of them are well-attested: e.g. the deprecatory *’bdk* “your slave,” referring to sender, with the corresponding honorific *mr’y* or *’dwny* referring to the addressee.

Another interesting field examined by Sims-Williams (1995), in two articles dealing with the Sogdian Christian fragments of Olaf Hansen’s Nachlass, is the continuity of a prognostic scheme borrowed from the Mesopotamian tradition of omina-texts: the comparison between the Sogdian text and the Babylonian one (translation by R. Labat, *Un calendrier babylonien des travaux, des signes et de mois*, Paris 1965, p. 173) shows this common structure, inherited by the Sogdian Christian literature, translated from a Syriac original surely dependent on Mesopotamian models in form and content.

Samples of comparative omen texts:

Sogdian: “[In Nisan: if thunder should occur, that] year [the grain will not] ripen well [...] In the month Tamuz:

when thunder occurs, there will be much wheat and wine”;

Babylonian: “Si, au mois de Nisan, le tonnerre gronde: le règne changera; Adad de ses averses saccagera le blé [...] Si (c’est) au mois de Du’uzu: la moisson du pays sera prospère.”

With regard to the Manichaean omina-text we have also to bear in mind the recent study of Chistine Reck and Werner Sundermann (1997: 17), according to which the Middle Persian fragment M556 reports a mantic scheme focused on bird divination, borrowed from the Mesopotamian omen-series *šumma ālu ina mēlē šakin*. Another Sogdian text published by Sundermann (2002): the word lists *sar nāme* “the Book of the Head” and *andame nāme* “the Book of the Limbs” are Manichaean lists going back to ancient Mesopotamian patterns, derived from the Sumero-Akkadian bilingual lists *ħarra-ħubullu*, *ugu-mu* and *nabnītu*, which all enumerate parts of the body. Manichaean religion is another fertile milieu for inquiring into the continuity of Mesopotamian culture in this syncretistic religion: and the MELAMMU Project surely gives an opportunity to bring up to date Geo Widengren’s book *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism*, Uppsala 1946: see for example the mythology and iconography of Manichaean Dragons, in which a large number of elements from different sources, stemming from the Iranian and the Semitic traditions, still have to be investigated in detail (Skjærvø 1988).

About the vocabulary, cf. Henning (1942: 239, n. 1): Sogdian *suš* < Akk. *šuššu* (sixty, a unit of sixty); Middle Persian *šwd’b* < Akk. *šutapu* (“companion”); Middle Persian *m’p’h* < Akk. *malahu* (“sailor”); Sogdian *argawān* < Akk. *argamannu* (“purple”) and the name of Acquarius, Sogdian *dwl*.

## Scientific lore

Astronomy & Astrology. Names of planets (according to the series Iranian-Greek-Akkadian): Tīr, Mercury, Nabū; Anāhīd, Venus, Ištar; Ohrmazd, Jupiter, Marduk; Wahrām, Mars, Nergal. The Pahlavi name of the planet Saturn has an Akkadian origin too: Iranian *Kaywān* from Akkadian *kaiāw/mānu* (“the permanent”). For the calendars, it is worth mentioning the role of Sogdian Manichaeans who in the eighth century A.D. introduced into China the Mesopotamian notion of the planetary week together with the names of the seven days or planets, including Saturn (Sims-Williams 1996: 77).

Uranography. The comparison between the Iranian and Mesopotamian conception of the sky shows an influence of the threefold scheme attested in Mesopotamia in sources datable from the end of the II<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. The reliability of the Mesopotamian origin of the Iranian threefold sky is evident and com-

elling in the Avestan texts, where the lowest heaven is that of the stars (Panaino 1995a).

The *thema mundi* of the Zoroastrian Pahlavi book *Great Bundahišn* is basically the one known as Chaldean or Babylonian, according to which the planets were all in their astrological ypsomata, or exaltations, i. e. their position of greatest power (MacKenzie 1964: 523).

According to Pingree (1987: 858) the 21<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Pahlavi book *Šāyast nē šāyast* records a method of divination borrowed from Mesopotamian omnia literature related to gnomon-shadow: “I write of the indication of the midday shadow: may it be auspicious [...] (When) the sun (is) in Cancer (the shadow is) the sole of a man’s foot; at the 15<sup>th</sup> (degree) of cancer, (it is) one foot; (when) the sun (is) in Leo, (it is) one and a half feet” (Kotwal 1969: 86-89).

## Art history, architecture, glyptic

With regard to the artistic topics, apart the aforementioned and well-known Mesopotamian background in the architecture (Apadana, Royal gardens and so on) we should remember a very promising field of investigation in the iconography and glyptic: in the Central Asian countries of Margiana and Bactriana a series of amulets studied by Sarianidi (1988) show a noteworthy degree of similarities with Northern Mesopotamian glyptic in subject compositions with the portrayals of reptiles, as chthonic and fertility symbols, and of others animals like lion, buf-

falo and eagle or fantastic creatures like geniuses and dragons: another amulet with an image of a hero and some defeated bulls surrounded by snakes most closely resembles the subjects of Iranian and Mesopotamian glyptics connected with the cycle of tales about Gilgamesh.

And finally, thanks to a recent analysis on the chalcedony seal-amulet of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, studied by Prudence Oliver Harper and Prods Oktor Skjærvø (1992: 45), we can recognize an Irano-Semitic syncretism in magical iconography with an Iranian component (in

onomastic one and in Middle-Persian language) mixed with Near Eastern features going back to the iconographical typology of the Lamaštu-amulet. In fact this seal shows the motif of a spear binding the ankles of the demonic figure, according to the Lamaštu style; and another demonic mark of Akkadian origin

is the motif of the long disheveled hair. The study of Iranian demonology (Gnoli 1972: 76) is another important topic in which it is possible to recognize a Mesopotamian background in the structure of Zoroastrian pandaemonium, especially in the section of the Avesta called *Widēw-dād* (“The law against the demons”).

## ABBREVIATIONS

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| AAASH | <i>Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae</i>                           |
| AION  | <i>Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli</i> (sez. Orientale) |
| BAI   | <i>Bulletin of the Asia Institute</i>  |
| BSOAS | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>                  |
| IA    | <i>Iranica Antiqua</i>   |
| JANES | <i>Journal of the American Near Eastern Society</i>                            |
| JNES  | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>   |
| JAOS  | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>                                |
| JRAS  | <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>                                    |
| SPAW  | <i>Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften</i>           |
| ZAS   | <i>Zentralasiatische Studien.</i>  |

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