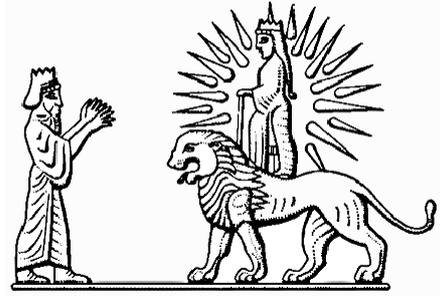


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“Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage and Pre-Islamic Iran”

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Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage and Pre-Islamic Iran*

The Mesopotamian heritage of the Achaemenid culture is a well established fact that deserves no particular mention in a foreword or introductory remarks. Nevertheless, the legacy of such a cultural background is sometimes curious with regard to some aspects which developed contrastive evolutions inside the Iranian milieu. A specimen of this trend is surely the cultural pattern of the sacred marriage, composed of a mythical scenario and a ritual drama creating a deep impression on the mind and feelings, with ideological consequences in the sacral legitimation of the Mesopotamian kingship.

The recent contribution of Martti Nisinen (2001) is the better updated essay about the Mesopotamian sacred marriage (or *hieros gamos*) and its rich and flourishing literature – describing the sacred union between two divinities (mythology) as well as between human and divine beings (ritual) performed by a priestess and a god, or by the king and a goddess. This religious phenomenon has Sumerian origins and dates back to the late third and early second millennium B.C. and later attested in the cultural history of Mesopotamia and of the Babylonian and Assyrian periods during more than half a millennium, from the 8th through the 2nd century B.C.

In spite of the possibility of a strong impact and scenography we have to admit

a curious lack of evidence of this cultural pattern with regard to the Pre-Islamic Iranian royal ideology: as a matter of fact, no Iranian text – Avesta, Achaemenid inscriptions (6th-4th B.C.), Sasanian inscriptions (3th-4th A.D.) – records any hint comparable to the Mesopotamian literary tradition of hymns and prayers focused on the encounter (and not necessarily ‘intercourse’) between the goddess and the king; and we can affirm the same for the Middle Persian literature of the Pahlavi texts – of late composition (9th A.D.) even if dating back to a more ancient period of conception. Probably all this depends on the priestly authorship (as we shall see below) pertaining this kind of religious texts – i.e. the Avesta and the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts – but we can also recognize a similar trend of oblivion in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, secular and ideological documents par excellence characterized by a multishaped literary framework, with a degree of zoroastrianization mixed with different cultural levels related to the Indo-Iranian heritage (and backwards, to the Indo-Europaeen one, in some cases) and Near Eastern acculturations (Skjærvø 1999: 14). It sounds very strange that in spite of the massive influence played by the Mesopotamian culture in the development of the Persian civilization – in religion, arts, science, writing, architecture, law, political and administrative

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organizations – this impressionistic and theatrical cult of the sacred marriage, so deeply interlaced with the glorification of the kingship, with a lot of dramatic performances, failed to grasp the Achaemenid agenda of the royal ideology and propaganda.¹ Furthermore, the possible involvement of population in some collective phases of such a ritual could certainly have been a not negligible factor – and especially in Babylon, where the couple Marduk-Zarpanitu (in the temple of Esagila) or Šamaš-Aya (in the temple of Ebabbar) were at their own home – to guarantee and increase the popular ‘audience’ and consensus, as in the case of Cyrus’ Cylinder and the Nabonidus Chronicle. These two important cuneiform documents drew a clear picture of the Achaemenid religio-political strategy of cultural absorption concerning the Mesopotamian traditions, and showing (Nabonidus Chronicle) the adoption of epitheta like *bibil libbi* “beloved one,” one expression of typical Mesopotamian taste,² connected to the emotional relationship between the god and the king (Oppenheim 1981: 537, 546) and also to the cheerful mood of the people, welcoming Cyrus’ entry with benedictions (*karābu*) and shouts of joy (*samāru*), praising him as the one who had saved their lives.

Contrary to, in the Achaemenid pantheon there is no trace of such a divine

couple.³ In the Achaemenid inscriptions the foremost role of divine entities is played by Ahura Mazdā, with some scarce references to “other gods,” an elliptical usage of literary expressions dealing with a rhetorical device of cumulative definition of the pantheon, with Ahura Mazdā at the top, followed by “the other gods who are” (*aniyāha bagāha tayai hanti* [DB IV 61]). With the exception of the supreme god Ahura Mazdā, and a part of the above mentioned elliptical statement, we can recognize a more articulated and threefold *équipe* in the Artaxerxes’ inscriptions (404-359 B.C.), in which the two other major gods of the Iranian peoples are mentioned, Miθra and Anāhitā, together with Ahura Mazdā: “by the favour of Ahuramazda Anāhitā and Miθra this palace I built; May Ahuramazda, Anāhitā and Miθra protect me from all evil, and that which I have built may they not shatter nor harm” (Artaxerxes II, Susa A; Kent 1953: 134).

In taking into consideration the development of the cult of Anāhitā during the reign of Artaxerxes II – even though her promotion dated back to the former time of Artaxerxes’ parents Darius II and Parysatis, according to Boyce (1982: 201-204) – it is worth noticing to quote the Plutarch’s Greek source of *Vita Artaxerxis* 3, which is very late and far from Achaemenid times but really interesting

¹ The episode of Antiochus IV Epiphanes – quoted by the Second Book of Maccabees (1, 13-17) – who entered the temple of Nanay in ‘Persia’ (= Susa), and under the pretext of one marriage with the goddess tried to take away the treasure of her temple, is a story that underlines the persistence of the hierogamy in the Iranian area after the Achaemenid period. But it increases the interrogative about the silence and the lack of evidences in the Iranian sources.

² In the Sumerian hymns the king is identified with Tammuz and they are both the beloved of Ištar: *šalim šarrumma šalim dumuzi šudat ištar* “the king is safe, Dumuzi is safe, the beloved of Ištar” (Nissinen 2001: 117).

³ Outside the Achaemenid inscriptions, we are told

about a hierogamical situation by the Imperial Aramaic inscription (nr. 264 in Donner-Röllig 1971: 51; 1973: 311) of Arebsun – ancient Arabissos, Cappadocia – dated on paleographic grounds to the fifth/fourth century B.C. and providing evidence for an Iranian-Semitic coalescence in the name of Ahura Mazdā (**whrmzd*) called Bēl. But this inscription does not concern in a real scenario of royal initiation although it is a very important witness for the debate on the Zoroastrian custom of the next-of-kind-marriage, a kind of sacred marriage which probably has been influenced by some mystical aspects of Mesopotamian hierogamy (Gnoli 1974: 33) and which I shall deal with it in further researches.

about our subject. Moreover, it is the unique document which can justify the researcher in this way of study, in attempting to reconstruct a likely outlook of a hierogamical situation by collecting different items. By this text we are told about a “warlike goddess” (θέα πολεμική) compared by Plutarch to Athena. But let Plutarch speak about the important topic of a ritual scenario connected with the enthronement of the second Artaxerxes (Artaxerxes Μνημων), the longest-reigning Achaemenid:

The new king made an expedition to Pasargadae, that he might receive the royal initiation at the hands of the Persian priest (Πέρσαις ιερέων). Here there is a sanctuary of a warlike goddess (ἔστι δὲ θεᾶς πολεμικῆς ἱερὸν) assumed to be Athena. Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must go, and after laying aside his own proper robe, must put on what Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king; then he must eat a fig-cake, chew some turpentine-wood, and drink a cup of sour milk.

Unfortunately, this is the unique source recording a Persian and Achaemenid custom of royal initiation which mentions the presence of a goddess, and there are not further hints to hypothesize other forms of close relationship between these “warlike goddess” and king Artaxerxes. Indeed, we have to suppose that according to the royal ideology of legitimation nothing but the presence of the gods was necessary to grant the divine charisma to the king, in a scenario very similar to the Sasanian rock reliefs, where the triade of gods is carved: Ahura Mazdā, Miθra and Anāhitā, surround the king giving him the insignia of royal power.⁴

Truly speaking, in order to understand

the expression ‘sacred marriage,’ or ‘hierogamy’ in a broader sense, it is not always necessary to imagine a real union but rather a symbolic one: the ‘reality’ of the cultic scenography is created by the *dramatis personae* acting as the human and the divine counterpart (sometimes in the shape of a statue) of one interplay between earth and heaven, in which the mundane component find a support, a legitimation, through the favour of the supernatural realm.

The “warlike goddess” of Plutarch shows one of the main features related to Anāhitā, probably borrowed by the bellicose typology of some Near Eastern goddesses (Gnoli 1974: 33-36) and continued until the Sasanian times, in the dynastic cult of Fārs (Chaumont 1958, 1965), where Anāhitā the ‘Lady’ (*bānū*) shared with Ištar (*bēltum*, *bēlit* ‘lady’) this honourific epithet (Eilers 1988: 715). According to the scheme traced by Carsten Colpe (1983: 845-6), the many functions of Anāhitā can be scheduled in some features: one aspect of the legitimation of the sovereignty, providing the king with charisma, and enthronement (especially in later times, under the Sasanians); a general Hellenistic aspect (Syria, Philadelphia, Lydia, Cappadocia); an ethnic Iranian aspect as a personified symbol of flowing water, and a cultural Iranian aspect, mythologically related to other gods.

From the Zoroastrian point of view, this classification includes all these aspects with the exception of the Hellenistic ones: in fact some Hellenistic marks developed in Asia Minor were surely unthinkable in a true Zoroastrian mentality: especially the custom of hieroduly,

⁴ See Vanden Berghe (1988) for the iconographic antecedent of the Iranian royal investiture and the continuity of Mesopotamian artistic models in the Achaemenid and Sasanian times: the pattern of the

investiture scene seems to have been the rock-relief of Sar-i Pul in which the king Anubani, because of his victory, pays homage to Inanna/Ištar holding the power ring and giving it to the king.

connected with Anaitis (the Hellenistic portrait of Anāhitā in Asia Minor), as we can see by reading the Anatolian inscription of Ortaköy (ancient Cappadocia) dedicated to the great goddess Anaitis Barzochara⁵ (ΘΕΑ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΗ ΑΝΑΕΙΤΙΑΙ ΒΑΡΖΟΧΑΡΑ) by her temple-servants:

Let the temple-servant (ιεροδοῦλος) Photis and Theon and Prima, also called Garse, be unscathed in all things, together with their children, throughout life.

The ambiguous label of ‘hieroduly,’ together with ‘sacred prostitution’ as well, are both difficult words to treat, and this is the same for the ‘hierogamy,’ usually classified in the range of ‘sexual rites’ (Bleeker 1975: 216-217) and so being often arbitrary evaluated only under the explicit and real sexual point of view – the most prominent item but not the unique one: the symbolic and the metaphorical side of the question should always be considered in reading the texts. A more strict criticism of the texts can show a reassessment of prejudicial component: in the case of a condemnation attested in Biblical sources towards fertility components of Cananean origins and New Year celebration (Asmussen 1957: 170-171). Most confusion may also arise from a misreading of the common Biblical metaphors of sexual misconduct to signify idolatry; but the understanding

of femal cultic personnel of Mesopotamia really excludes any hint of prostitution or sexual promiscuity for categories like the *nadītum* (hierodule), *SU.GE-tum* (lay priestess) and *qadištu* (holy one) and all these types of woman seem to have been highly respected (Fisher 1976: 236)

Probably Wikander (1946: 89) was right in arguing that the polemic directed against the “whore” (*jahī*) in various Avestan passages was in fact directed against certain current forms of Anāhitā / Anaitis’ ritual admitting this usage, but we have to understand the reality of such a phenomenon in a true manner: as a self-offering to the goddess,⁶ a votary behaviour, and self-oblation to the divinity about which we are informed again by Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 27.4), recording the story of the Achaemenian noble woman Aspasia who became “the priestess of the Artemis of Ecbatana, who bears the name of Anaitis, in order that she might remain chaste for the rest of her life.” It is not easy to understand this statement and to know whether all priestess of Anāhitā were required at Artaxerxes II epoch to be chaste for life; even if “celibacy is not in general a state respected by Zoroastrians, or regarded by them as meritorius” (Boyce 1982: 220) we cannot absolutely deny it in the social milieu of pre-Islamic Iran, given the heterogeneous composition of the Zoroastrian religion⁷ through

⁵ See Harper (1967); according to Schmitt (1970: 210) the epithet Βαρζο-χαρά is a Greek rendering of a genuine Iranian form, **byzi-harā* “von der hohen Harā stammend,” related to the mythical mountain of Anāhitā, the Harā Bərəzaiti (*Yašt* 5.21). For a different explanation of such a compound (Βαρζο- < *varācah-* “strength, energy”; -χαρά < *x^varr-* / *farnah-* “glory”) see Wikander (1972)

⁶ Even during the reign of Artaxerxes II, the Greek inscription of Sardis is particularly reliable in showing a certain attitude of Zoroastrian censorship, in order to stop the mixture of Persian cults with those of the people of western Asia Minor, interdicting the servants of the cult of Zeus Baradates from taking

part in the celebration of the mysteries of Sabazios, including an improper use of fire (Sokolowski 1979). Furthermore, in Sardis was attested a local aspect of Anaitis, i.e. Σαρδιανή Ἄρτεμις.

⁷ The institution of hieroduly, in the meaning of a sacred service offered to the temple, is attested during the Sasanian period (Perikhanian 1983: 640-641), but the ‘slave of the temple’ (*ātaxš bandag*) did not constitute a social category and his task was a somewhat honorary dedication to the shrine activities, and not slavery. For the Talmudic expression ‘*bd’ dnwr*’ ‘servant of fire’ and the relationship between Jews and Sasanian legal conceptions, see recently Macuch 2002.

the centuries of its cultural history, recorded in different sources and in various and multi-shaped mythological and iconographic *interpretationes*, switching from Iranian traits to Semitic ones and then fashioned in Greek and Hellenistic garb.

The ‘prostitute’ is a word belonging to the sphere of human behaviour harshly condemned by Zoroastrianism: in the Avestan text *Ard Yašt*, Aši complains to Ahura Mazdā about the “prostitute” with a barren womb, the prostitute who brings to her husband a child by another man and about the powerful man who lets the young women go unmarried (*Yt.* 17. 54, 57, 58). Apart from that, the “prostitute” (Avestan *jahikā* or *jahī*) is a somewhat term used to designate any bad or immoral women and especially a kind of border-figure connected with sorcerers and warlike societies (Männerbünde: see Wikander 1938: 64-65, 84) performing obscure cults and immoral practices (of violence, drunkenness, ecstasy and sexual licentiousness) denounced by Zoroastrian priestly tradition. The prostitute-witch (*jahi yātumaiti* in the Avestan texts of *Yt.* 3.9, 12, 16) is a kind of woman belonging to this dark-side milieu of magic attitude and sorcery; in a similar way, even if without moral proscription, the Babylonian *qadištu*, a consecrated woman with peculiar status, is often counted among sorceress and witches, probably because of her involvement in exorcistic rituals (Westenholz 1989: 253). In this condemnation of a female function the Zoroastrianism recalls certain features of Judaism: in the Bible the metaphor for idolatry (Is 1:121. Jer 2:20, 3:14. Ezk 16, 23; Hos 1.3) and breaking up of the covenant bond between Yahweh and the

people is symbolised by harlotry (*zōnā*), even if *zōnā* and *q^edēšā* (holy one) are different terms (Fisher 1976: 232-233) and the condemnation of sacred prostitution seems to have been a merely prohibition of a particular class of temple personnel connected with foreign cults. But the Zoroastrianism was very strict in this case and showed a scanty degree of nuance, without semantic distinctions of terminology, in banishing the so-called ‘whore’ (*jahī*) and her licentious misbehaviour⁸ (see Panaino 1997).

Further probable hints of a hierogamical symbolism are matter of speculation, and we can deduce them from the Iranian sources like the Avesta. The priestly code of Zoroastrian holy writings is a reliable witness of many cultural levels developed by the Zoroastrian religion during the centuries of his religious history, from the past of the eastern origin of Zarathustra and down to the westwards migration of his spiritual teachings, under the care of sages and priests known as “Magi,” very skilled in one syncretistic intellectual attitude, in getting in touch with alien faiths and beliefs. With regard to the methodology of Melammu Project, the most relevant task is concerning to the analysis of different literary strata of Ancient Iranian texts, in order to distinguish the Iranian component from the Indo-Iranian heritage and then to stress the Near Eastern contribution in this multifarious shaping of the Iranian cultural identity

Although I will not discuss here the Indoeuropean methodology, focused on the so called ‘threefold structure’ of Georges Dumézil, I would like to remember that from the point of view of

⁸ Further inquiries should take into consideration one interesting parallel between Iranian and Mesopotamian topics: e.g. the Avestan text (*Vd.* 13.48) match-

ing the dog with the prostitute, which recalls the identification of the male-prostitution with the dog (Akkadian *assinmu*, Kornfeld 1972: 130).

the comparison of an ‘Indoeuropean poetical language’ (Indogermanische Dichtersprache) we can restore a lot of parallels and literary statements which are very useful to delucidate a certain degree of common heritage. The Indo-Iranian perspective is also very promising for drawing a sketch of comparative topics, shared by both the Ancient Indian culture and the Ancient Iranian one, and recognizable in looking up the Indo-Iranian texts like the Veda and the Avesta, with their stereotyped formulas addressed to the gods, or related to cultic prescriptions and ritual performances. But this way of thinking for the analysis of such a common store of stereotyped expressions and rhetorical employment could be more enriched by an historical approach blending in one creative mixture all these different methodological devices, in order to find further hints that a comparative and Indo-Iranian approach could not explain in full, without the multishaped heritage created by historical contacts and alien components borrowed by the Iranian people from the Mesopotamian culture.⁹ In a very similar way, the historical understanding of Indian culture can by no means be limited to the Aryan and Rigvedic component: on the contrary, the flourishing of the Indian mythology of Hinduism, of the great epic of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and the formation of Tantra cults was the result of a fertile dynamic of interrelationship between the Indo-Aryan and pre-Aryan peoples.

In order to exemplify this different approach to the study of Iranian texts, such as the Avesta, with a possible Mesopotamian outlook, or influence, we can

choose some narrative materials out of the *Yašts*, the hymns centered upon a single divinity. The *Yašts* dedicated to Aši or to Anāhitā are the most instructive for showing a possible Near Eastern model at the base of their composition. These two important goddess could also explain some traits of beauty and sensuality, sharing some reliable features with other mythological typologies of Near Eastern divinities.

As a matter of fact, the literary descriptions of these Avestan texts can display some portraits of goddesses within the Mesopotamian cultural frame: for example, Anāhitā is invoked as a magnificent being in her Avestan Hymn (*Yašt* 5), richly arrayed in high-girt robe and with a rayed crown that immediately recalls that of Ištar (Panaino 2000: 38), while the luxury of her clothing and gold ornaments are comparable with the descriptions of the Ištar of Lagaba (Boyce 1982: 203)

In the *Yašt* dedicated to Aši (*Yašt* 17) we have a sort of composition which incorporates materials reaching back to pre-Zoroastrian Iran but that were later adapted to the teachings of Zarathustra, and blended with a more recent and western stratum. In comparison with other ancient *Yašt*, this hymn to Aši is quite unusual for its literary qualities, especially in its sensual description of the homes of Aši’s favorites and their wives: who lie awaiting their men’s return from battle on sumptuously decorated couches, and in the concern in marital values expressed in this worldly and fashionable text recording beautiful girls, wearing wonderfully precious jewelry (Skjærvø 1986). Arthur Christensen

⁹ As a demonstration, the website of the Melammu Database just installed (<www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/>) with the entries, done by myself, dedi-

cated to the Iranian-Mesopotamian contacts, can give a presentation of textual evidences. See as well Piras 2002.

(1928: 9) remarked that this description tunes very well with the refined civilization of the Achaemenid empire and with the luxurious magnificence of the Persian court, even if it is not certain that this section of *Ard Yašt* was composed so late.¹⁰ Just in pre-Zoroastrian times, Aši must have been an important goddess of fertility and matrimony; she is especially linked to Miθra in the *Yašt* dedicated to Miθra (*Mihr Yašt*), where she looks as his charioteer and for this reason she is linked to Dawn and the primeval light. As the goddess of recompense she is the personification of fortune or capricious luck transformed by Zarathustra into “recompense for good deeds.” She is beautiful, tall, strong, profit-bringing, with healing powers and much intelligence. Nevertheless, her divine protection is refused to three categories of individuals who shall not receive a share in Aši’s offerings. These are the men whose semen has dried up, the “prostitute” (*jahikā-*) who is past the age of fertility, and young men and women who have not yet reached puberty.

One epithet of Aši recalls the titulature of the Mesopotamian goddess Aya (Powell 1989: 447-455), the consort of Šamaš connected with early morning light, the beautiful Dawn goddess endowed with sex-appeal who is Mistress of Joy and Rejoicings, and “joyously radiant” (Sumerian *ninulšutag*). In a similar way, Aši blazes in the dawning (*Yt.* 17.6) and is “radiant of joy” (*bānumaiti šāiti*), showing a kind of sunny gladness related to the sexual beauty.

Is it possible that a Mesopotamian epithet might have been fixed in the oral transmission and codification of the later Avestan texts? This is only a matter of

speculation but given the multishaped and prismatic framework of the history of literary composition, and intertextuality, of the Avestan code – including ancient Iranian narrative materials, mixed with items taken up in the westward expansion of the Iranian culture, in the contact with other conceptions and traditions – there are well-grounded reasons for such a supposition, by the time that even the older sections of the Avesta, the *Gāthās*, can be compared with Assyrian texts for a better understanding of some rhetorical peculiarities (Gnoli 1999: 613). Then, it is very likely that inside the dynamic of continuity and change of the primeval Iranian tradition the encounter with the vivid, picturesque and poetical tradition of Semitic civilizations may have provided a stock of statement increasing the Iranian vocabulary with images of sensuality and beauty, so broadly attested in Near Eastern tradition.

Such an epithet of Aši “radiant of joy” can also be stressed by another reference to one atmosphere of earthly love feelings related to human beings protected by Aši herself, the divine mistress of worldly and blissful life, bestowing rewards and gifts to her own believers, who are rich and fortunate, like those strong men ruling with possessions and abundant stores of food, living in well established dwellings rich in cattle and abundantly stocked for long inhabiting; whose couches are well spread, well perfumed, well fashioned, provided with cushions; with wives assuredly sitting expectant on couches and thinking:

When will the master of dwelling come to us? When shall we rejoice joyously – (Avestan *kaḍa šāiti paiti.šāma*) – in his beloved person? (*Yt.* 17.10)

¹⁰ In contrast to the Greek customs, the women at the Persian court took part in important social events like

the feast, where they joined the king’s banquet (Brosius 1996: 97).

The experience of joy and happiness is a very characteristic topic of Zoroastrian religion and agrees perfectly with its positive attitude towards life: we read about this happiness and welfare peace on earth in the Old Persian inscriptions, where this happiness (*šiyāti-*) is a divine gift for the mankind or can denote a disposition of mind and one inner quality of Xerxes (*šiyāta-*) provided by his observance of Ahura Mazda's law and by his worship. In the Old Persian Achaemenid inscriptions and in the Avesta the frequency of the word and the verb is primarily concerning with the cult and its consequences in the human behaviour and feeling. In the Hymn to Aši, where this happiness is connected with her "radiant beauty" and it is also a mark of the human beings devoted to her, we can recognize a different nuance of this Zoroastrian quality of happiness with sensual implications. The same Persian name of Parysatis (Elamite *Ba-ru-ši-ia-ti-iš* = Παρύσατις) "with many happiness" can explain this reference of the gladness connected with the female onomastic.¹¹

Aši is not openly called "lady of sensuality" (*nin-ḫi-li*) like Nanaya but she seems to share with her some aspects of beauty and delight, and bestowing sensuality as in the case of the encounter with Zarathustra (*Yt.* 17: 21-22) in the Avestan passage translated by Skjærvø (1996: 599-600), who properly noticed this unusual aspect of the "extraordinary sensuality found in the descripton of Zarathustra and Aši":

The good Aši, the tall, spoke thus:
"Stand closer to me, o upright Spitama,
follower of Order! Lean against my
chariot!" – He stood closer to her, Zara-

thustra Spitama: he leaned against her chariot; she stroked him upward all around with the left hand and the right, with the right hand and the left, speaking thus with words: "You are beautiful, o Zarathustra, you are well-made, o Spitama. You have good calves, long arms. Glory has been placed in your body and long well-being (given) to (your) soul, as I foretold you."

This mythological episode of Zarathustra's entrance on the Aši's chariot is concerning a situation of heavenly ascension, since the goddess is the charioteer of Miθra. Another Avestan text (*Hādōxt Nask* 2) provides some interesting topics about a similar encounter, between the Soul (*urvan*) and its double, the Daēnā, who appears in the form of a beautiful, radiant, white-armed, strong, high-breasted, noble-born Maiden, of glorious lineage, as beautifully in form as the most beautiful creature. The erotic feature of this story has been pointed out, for instance, by the late Geo Widengren (1968: 126), but his suggestion could be further up-to-dated by quoting the visionary journey mentioned in the Sasanian inscriptions of Kirdīr (third century A.D.) which describes one ecstatic experience, the encounter between Kirdīr's spiritual double and his Dēn (= Daēnā): an otherworldly meeting very chaste but with a nuance of affection because of their putting head to head and taking each other the hands and then going along that "bright road" (*rāh ī rōšn*) towards the East, to the dawn and the gate to heavenly dwellings.

The favour of the goddess implies a body language with gestures of kindness and affection, confirming by the divine grace a legitimation of the human be-

¹¹ Kellens (1995: 36, n. 39) rightly pointed out the erotic implications of Parysatis' name. The role of Parysatis, the wife of Darius and mother of Artaxerxes, seems to have been very important for pro-

moting the devotions and the cult of Ištar / Anāhitā and to increase the foreign influences of Mesopotamian customs (Boyce 1982: 218).

haviour: Aši and Zarathustra, the soul and Daēnā, the double of Kirdīr and the Dēn. The situation of a *unio mystica* between different parts of consciousness and levels of soul can easily be expressed in the shape of one affective situation (or blandly sexual, or with a nuance of mild eroticism¹²) denoting the achievement of spiritual unity and completion, by putting together the male and female polarities.¹³

To sum up, talking about a transformation of hierogamical symbolism in Zoroastrian Iran we should consider that the encounter between Zoroastrianism and Mesopotamian culture has produced an influence, inherited from the Near Eastern poetical languages, in shaping such metaphors. I do not obviously want to deny the Indo-Iranian side of this picture: the Indian texts record descriptions of the same sort, with regard to the otherworldly journey and the encounter between the immortal self (*ātman*) and the heavenly maidens, the Apsaras (as in the *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* I, 4). But given the western and syncretistic history of Zoroastrianism and the fertile contacts with Mesopotamia, that has increased the Iranian mythology with Semitic (and Helle-

nistic) cultural remaking, I incline to stress the Near Eastern side of the question, with his imagery drawing from a high poetical tradition, even if in a mutual comparison with Indo-Iranian parallels and common *Dichtersprache*.

As a final example, if we compare the Sumerian great liturgy of Inanna and Iddin-Dagan with the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts, we can draw some interesting correspondences with some Near Eastern equipments of love ritual, as the cella (*paṗāhu*), the nuptial chamber (*hammūtu*) and the bed chamber (*bēt erši*). The Sumerian nuptial thalamus, adorned with the beautiful bedspread, and the embrace between the Lady and Iddin-Dagan could – in my opinion – find a parallel in the Zoroastrian *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Chapter 25: Williams 1990 II, p. 52) where the heavenly bliss of paradisiac existence of Renovated Life (*Frašegird*) is:

As easy as when a comely maiden of 15 years and a young man of 20 years come with one another to their house and sleep upon their soft quilts (*wastarag ī narm*), and the young man loves the girl with (all his) soul, and for them that (alone) is required “May night never become day!”

¹² In this sense I agree with Kellens’ statement (1999: 461) about Aši, who “en caressant Zarathushtra ne lui accorde pas une faveur érotique”: the Zoroastrianism has little to do with the explicit language of the Sumerian texts (Rubio 2001), even if in one case the ritual of the *Gāthās* implies a rough language (*Y.* 53. 7), showing in the ideology of the sacrifice (*yasna*) the deep connection between sexuality and states of consciousness (Gnoli 1965: 11)

¹³ The maternal symbolism of the reunion of different

polarities is another items that will need further investigations: the names of the Pahlavi onomastic like Mātōg (“having salvation through the Mother”), the dedications to Anaitis the Mother (Μητροῖ Ἀναεῖτι) in Asia Minor, the Armenian Anahit “Golden Mother” (*oskemayr*) and Anāhīd “father and mother of the waters” (*pid ud mād ī ābān*) in the Pahlavi texts, are all fragmentary hints that deserve a particular treatment, including Zervanite conceptions and Manichaean mythological figures (the Mother of Life).

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