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Persian Mythology



ANCIENT PERSIA PROVIDES a mine of folk and myth as rich as its mighty civilisation. The oldest myths were concerned with storm and rain, with the gods of the ancient rituals and the legends of dragons. Zoroastrianism incorporated these traditions and interpreted them in light of its characteristic dualistic teaching on the cosmic battle between God (Ahura Mazda) and the Evil One (Angra Mainyu), between good and evil, light and dark. For over 1,100 years Zoroastrianism was the state religion of successive empires ruling over an area from north India to the Mediterranean, making it one of the great religions of history, and influencing Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

This book is concerned with a whole range of Persian myths, from ancient and Zoroastrian times, with the Zurvanite heresy, the Roman cult of Mithras which proclaimed its Persian origins and the place of myth in political, ritual and personal life.

Although Zoroastrianism was first preached over 3,000 years ago on the Persian steppes, it is still a living religion practised by small communities in Iran by the Parsis, in India, in the East and the West.

LIBRARY OF THE WORLD'S MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Myths and legends are found the world over, and their origin and purpose form a special part of the story of the development of the human race. Some of these myths embody people's early explanations of the world they lived in, the forces governing their lives and the need to provide some account for the good and evil that befell them. Many of these forces were personified – given names and personalities – the first step to the formalisation of belief in ritual and in religion. A galaxy of gods, devils, heroes and monsters emerged, as varied as the societies from which they sprang and the appeal of their actions. Mythology has served as the foundation of the loftiest and most abstract thought in art and religion.

The Library of the World's Myths and Legends is an authoritative series on the major mythologies of the world's history. Written by a team of well-known scholars, including archaeologists, linguists and students of comparative religion, each book in the library combines an attractive account of the myths of a culture with the world view that these stories reveal and the art forms they have inspired. The text is fully illustrated with artefacts and paintings related to the myths, and, where appropriate, ethnological material showing the role of myth in everyday life.

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JOHN R HINNELL



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Half title page. Bull-head from column, the palace of Persepolis. (See page 93.)

Frontispiece. A gold plaque from the Oxus treasure showing a priest, magus, carrying the barsom – the sacred twigs associated with priesthood. This, rather than the kings of later Christian legend, is how the magi looked. The Oxus treasure, found by local peasants in 1877, appears to consist of votive offerings to a temple. It dates from Achaemenid times (sixth to fourth centuries B.C.).

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Dedication

To my parents.

'I can no other answer
make but thanks,
And thanks, and ever
thanks.'

Shakespeare

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Introduction

Persia is a land of great contrasts: a land of deserts and jungle, of snowy mountains and luxuriant valleys; a place where apples and date palms grow within miles of each other; a land of oil wells and nomads.

Three mountain ranges form a triangle around the land – mountains which rise to a height of 18,000 feet (5,486 metres). At the heart of Persia lie two vast salt deserts. Within the mountain ranges are valleys, some as much as sixty miles (97 kilometres) long and twelve miles (19 kilometres) wide, with a climate like that of the Mediterranean countries. To the north, bordering the Caspian sea, lies dense tropical jungle. Rainfall varies from sixty inches (152 centimetres) a year in some parts to none in others. Although Persia has vast natural resources, it is only in recent times that they have been exploited, and apart from the famed 'Persian market place', agriculture is the traditional occupation.

Geography inevitably affects culture, and it is not surprising that in Persia there are a number of different cultures – cultures which in their turn have produced different mythologies. People in western Persia have always been open to influence from such centres as Greece and Rome, whereas those in the east have been influenced more by India and the Orient. Persia forms both a historical and a geographical bridge between East and West.

Our subject is that rich mine of poetry, folklore and myth which constituted much of the faith of ancient Persia. After a brief look at the history of Persia, the nature of our sources and the character of myth, we shall turn first to the ancient picture



of the universe, the 'pagan' myths and the stories of the godly heroes fighting horrific dragons. Then we shall look at the highly ethical teaching of Zoroastrianism with its profound interpretation of traditional mythology. Once the national faith of Persia, Zoroastrianism is still devoutly practised by small communities in Persia (now part of Iran), and also by the Parsis in India, in the East and in the West.



Persia has been the home of a number of religious traditions. We shall examine the mythology of two of them: Zurvanism and Mithraism. Finally we shall consider the part mythology has played in the ritual, history and court of the land of the shahs. Most important of all, we shall try to understand the place of myth in the personal faith of the believer. This book, then, is concerned with both ancient and modern times, with

history and with a living faith, albeit a small and sadly decreasing one. Space will not, unfortunately, permit us to examine all the different faiths which have moved into Persia, such as the Mandeans, Manicheans or Muslims.

Outline of Persian History

No nation's religion or mythology can be understood in isolation from its historical setting; some knowledge is needed of the cultural develop-

The Zagros mountains to the west of Persia. These and other mountains to the north and east formed a triangular barrier around the country which made invasion by foreigners, such as the Romans, very difficult.



ments and the various influences that were at work. Thus we must turn first to the history of Persia.

In the distant past the peoples now inhabiting Europe, Persia and India were all part of one group of tribes now referred to as the Indo-Europeans. Living perhaps in Central Europe, they gradually splintered off to form nations of their own. The Aryans, part of this complex of peoples, travelled south east, and in the second and first millennia B.C. invaded India and Persia. We must not imagine one vast organised army, but rather small tribal groups settling down independently until, after centuries, they became so numerous that they dominated the land.

The peoples who settled in India and Persia are known as the Indo-Iranians. Their religion is preserved in the collection of ancient Hindu hymns, the *Rig Veda*, and the ancient Persian hymns, the *Yashts*. Their religion reflected their way of life as nomads and warriors. They delighted in the beauty of nature, yet stood in fear of its venom and apparent malice; hymns dwell on the beauty of the dawn, and the terror of the drought. Their gods are either personifications of such ideals as Truth, or of natural phenomena such as the storm, or they are swash-buckling heroes who destroy the monsters which threaten men, Indra and Keresaspa for example (see p. 40).



Although both India and Persia have adapted and developed their beliefs far beyond this heritage, it is remarkable how much it still dominates their myth and ritual. Because the settlement of the Indo-Iranians was such a gradual affair, and archaeological remains are naturally so few, it is difficult to date with any precision their conquest of the land; however, by 800 B.C. they appear to have been dominant.

Zoroaster (the name is the Greek form of the Persian Zarathushtra) was the great prophet of Persia. Western scholars have until recently dated his life as 628-551 B.C., but further research suggests that he lived much earlier, somewhere between 1400 and 1200 B.C. This is important because it makes him the first of the prophets of the world's major religions, older than Moses, Buddha or Confucius. It is generally agreed that he lived on the Central Asian steppes north and east of Persia.

His teachings have come down to us in the form of seventeen hymns

known as the *Gathas*. These are very difficult to translate because they are the only known examples of the language. As hymns they were produced to evoke known ideas to believers – to inspire, rather than to explain, beliefs to outsiders. There is a great diversity of scholarly opinion regarding the details of Zoroaster's teaching – especially with regard to the myths he believed in. As a trained priest Zoroaster was heir to a rich tradition; as a creative religious genius he reformed much of what he inherited. Rather like modern preachers Zoroaster tended to allude to the story of a myth and, without elaborating on it, drew out what he considered to be the significant moral or personal lesson, so that the myth might be made meaningful to his followers. What hints there are in the *Gathas* show that there was a substantial degree of continuity between his predecessors, the prophet and the later Zoroastrian tradition.

Zoroaster's originality lay not in the creation of new myths, but in the

This motif appears at the palace of Persepolis and thereafter in most forms of Zoroastrian Persian art down to the present day. The wings and central ring were based on Egyptian and Mesopotamian prototypes. Western scholars have usually interpreted this as a symbol of Ahura Mazda holding the ring of cosmic sovereignty with his hand raised in the traditional gesture of blessing. Parsis and some recent scholars doubt if this symbolises God himself, but rather the divine grace men seek and, on royal reliefs, the glory and power particularly associated with the divinely appointed monarch.

Opposite A winged figure from a doorway at Cyrus' palace at Pasargadae. It has been suggested that this depicts Cyrus himself, but it is more likely that it represents a protective spirit or genius of the royal palace. The crown is similar to that associated with apotropaic figures in the ancient Near East.

Right, top A lion's head from the top of a column at Persepolis. The lion is a traditional symbol of power.

Right, bottom A griffin's head from one of the columns at Persepolis. A number of motifs at Persepolis appear to have been taken from Babylonian art. It may be that some of the underlying ideology associated with royalty and cosmic powers was also incorporated into Persian traditions.

Opposite A bull's head which decorated the top of a column in the great hall at Persepolis (*in situ*). The bull is a widespread symbol of vitality and fertility.





interpretation he placed on old ones. Perhaps what characterised his teaching more than anything else was the emphasis on the personal side of religion. He believed he had seen Lord Mazda in visions, that he had been called and set apart from the beginning for his mission. All men, he taught, must choose for themselves between the forces of good and evil. Ahura Mazda, he preached, was wholly good. Everything in life which is evil emanates from Mazdā's opposing spirit, his twin power in the universe, Angra Mainyu, the Destructive Spirit. Life in this world is caught up in the cosmic battle between them. Mankind has free will to choose between them, but by supporting good men will hasten the time when, on

the day of judgment, with the aid of the saviours to come, evil will be overthrown and good will triumph. Then Mazda's rule will be established throughout creation. Individual choice, individual commitment, personal responsibility and personal judgment are the keynotes of the prophet's teaching. Because of the enormous difficulty of reconstructing the myths behind the dynamic but elusive poetry of Zoroaster's hymns, it was decided that in this book the Zoroastrian myths would be related from the later texts because, on the whole, they are more clear and full, but as the exposition proceeds it will become clear how faithful the later writers were to the preaching of their prophet.

Right The tomb of Cyrus the Great (near the palace at Pasargadae) is raised above the plain and visible from a great distance. Probably the setting was originally laid out as a royal park (paradise). Greek and Roman authors comment on the gold couch, table, vessels and coffin used within. Raiders (almost certainly non-Persians) have robbed the founder of the Empire of these possessions. Some scholars have suggested that tomb burial shows Cyrus was not a Zoroastrian since his funeral evidently did not involve exposure to carrion-eating creatures (see pages 128ff), but because the corpse is lifted up and separated from the earth by the stone plinths it does in fact conform to Zoroastrian purity laws.

Opposite left The mighty Persian king of kings is regularly depicted as larger than his fellow men to express the idea of his might. Here he is shown with attendants holding the royal emblems of fly whisk and umbrella over him and beneath the winged symbol (see page 9) on a relief depicting a procession at Persepolis.

Opposite, right Two views of a silver drachma showing Ardashir I the founder of the Sasanian empire. The fire altar on the reverse is somewhat like those of the exterior of the Achaemenid royal tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam (see pages 101–102) with its column and plinths, except this also shows claw-shaped feet.



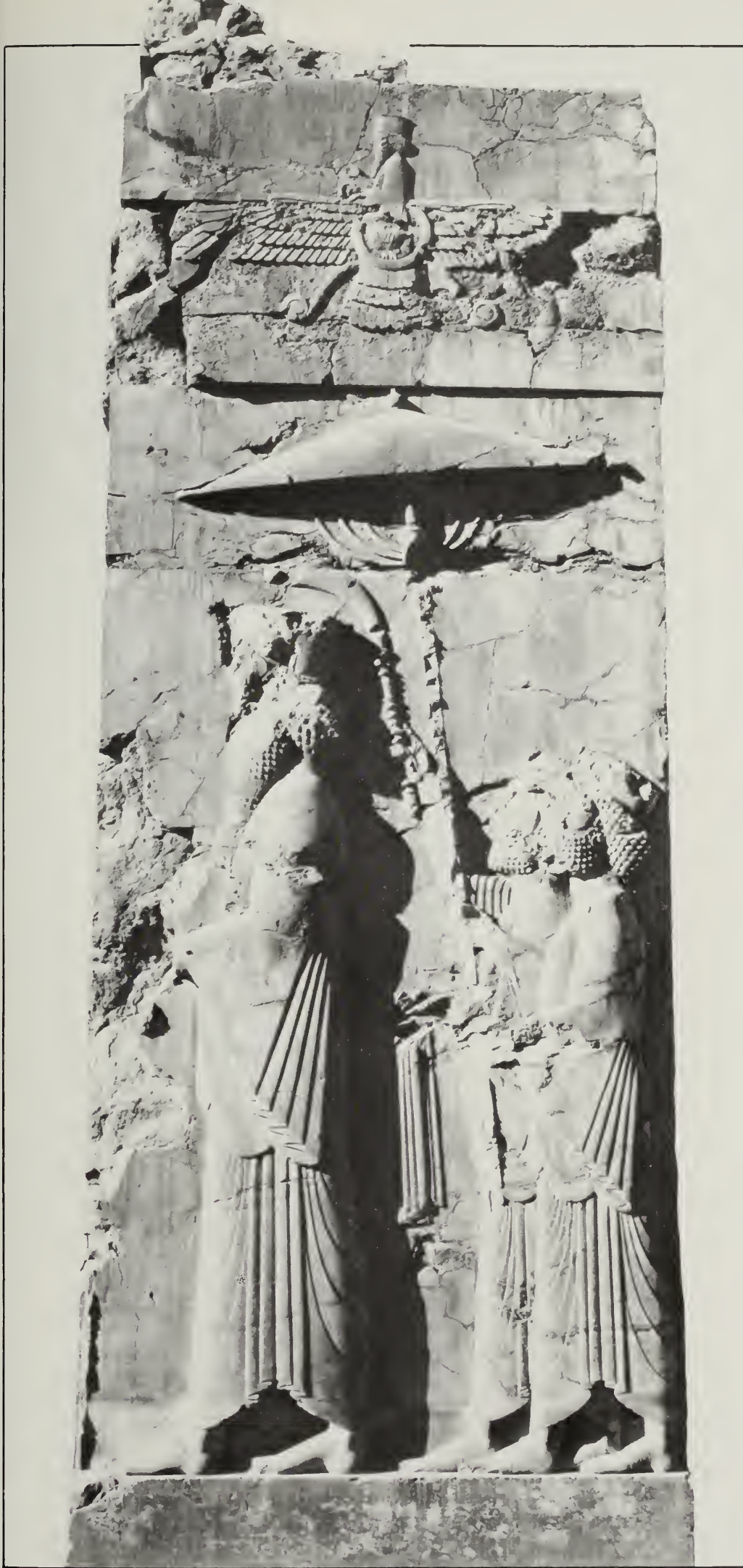
The teaching of Zoroaster at first aroused great opposition, but when he succeeded in converting a local chieftain, Vishtaspa, Zoroastrianism began to spread. When it became the religion of the court of the King of Kings we do not know. The great Persian empire of the Achaemenids was founded by Cyrus the Great, who began as ruler of a small kingdom, Anshan, in south-west Persia. After invading Egypt and Lydia in Asia Minor and marching east into India, he turned his attention to the mighty empire of Babylon which, divided and demoralised, opened up its gates to the conqueror without offering any resistance. United for the first time, Persia was transformed by one man into one of the greatest empires the world has ever known. The policy of Cyrus and his successors towards the subject peoples was one of tolerance. They were given a remarkable degree of autonomy and were allowed to follow their own religions.

Although Cyrus was the founder of the Achaemenid empire, its great designer was Darius (521–486 B.C.). It may be that he was a usurper – we cannot be sure – but he was certainly a great military leader and administrator. A fervent disciple of truth and justice, he drew up a law code for the empire. As well as leaving for posterity the great palace at Persepolis, Darius has also left us many inscriptions which expound his understanding of

his position as king. He refers constantly to the fact that it is by the grace of Ahura Mazda that he is king, and that it is he who gives success to Darius. All who oppose the king are of the 'Lie'. These inscriptions have been taken by many to show that by the time of Darius Zoroaster's teaching had permeated the empire and converted the King of Kings himself. Although the inscriptions make no reference to some of the central Zoroastrian teachings (to the Bounteous Immortals for example), they do suggest a religious belief similar to that of the great prophet. It is generally agreed that Zoroastrianism became the state religion of the Achaemenid empire, making it perhaps the most powerful religion of the then known world.

It was under Darius and his successor, Xerxes, that the famed invasions of Greece were attempted and the first 'marathon' was run. Towards the end of Xerxes' reign (d. 465 B.C.) Persia's military power began to decline, but it was not for another hundred years – until the rise of the mighty Alexander the Great – that she fell. The empire of the King of Kings was apparently drowned in the tide of Hellenism, yet Persia had no small influence on her conquerors.

In the third century B.C. the fight for independence began, and by 150 B.C. the Parthian empire emerged under Mithradates. The Parthians



Overleaf, bottom These winged creatures on the gateway of Persepolis are almost certainly taken from Babylonian ideas of supernatural beings who guard the entrances to religiously important places – such as a royal dwelling. If the Persians took over such art forms, did they also take over something of the concept of kingship (see page 99).



Above and above left Five Achaemenid kings had their tombs cut high in a rock face at Naqsh-i Rostam (4 miles or 6 km from Persepolis). This was an ancient Elamite sacred site. All the tombs followed the same pattern, one made by Darius (not the one on page 12). In the horizontal bar, palace-like doorways and columns were carved with the entrance to the tomb in the centre. Above this the king was shown standing on a platform carried on the shoulders of his subjects. With a bow in one hand, he raises the other in prayer (or blessing) and stands before a sacred fire burning on an altar. Behind the fire the sun and moon are carved. On the face of the reliefs royal inscriptions were carved in Old Persian (cuneiform). These tombs observe Zoroastrian purity laws by keeping the defiling corpse away from the good earth.



Opposite This series of coins illustrates something of the development in coinage from Achaemenid to Sasanian times. The first coin, a fifth-century Achaemenid gold daric, shows a warrior not unlike the archers at Susa. The second, an early Parthian silver drachma, is thought to show the head of king Mithradates I (c 171–138 B.C.). He is clean-shaven, following Hellenic fashion. The third coin is from the reign of Mithradates II (128–88 B.C.), showing the king bearded in Persian fashion. The reverse of the coin shows Arsaces, the deified ancestor of the Parthians. On the last two coins (a drachma of Shapur I, A.D. 241–272), and a gold denarius of Khusrau II, A.D. 590–628) the kings are shown wearing the ornate crowns of the Sasanian period. The modelling of the hair is similar in style to that on some of the Sasanian reliefs. Khusrau wears a crown with wings resembling the symbol for the god Verethraghna and the symbol of the moon god, Mah. He is also set against the background of the sun and moon, for the king is a cosmic figure. It is, then, not only the style but also the thought that has developed from the simplicity of the Achaemenid coin. American Numismatic Society.





came from north-eastern Iran, not from Persia proper. In the early stages of their rule they made great use of Hellenic technical resources in their architecture, coinage and art, but as they gained experience and skill their national heritage emerged more and more clearly.

The Sasanians, with their base in Persia proper, overthrew the Parthians in A.D. 224. Under Shapur I (ruled c. 240–272) Persian armies invaded east through the Hindu Kush into India and the Kushan kingdom and westwards to Antioch in Syria and Cappadocia. There was an enormous problem in uniting such an empire, containing as it did so many

different religious groups in the homeland itself: Zoroastrians, Zurvanites, Manicheans, Hindus, Buddhists, Greeks, Jews, Christians and pagans. The Christians in particular were a politically suspect group after the conversion of the ruler of Persia's greatest enemy, Constantine, to Christianity. Manicheism, a syncretistic cult, seemed to offer a possible solution to the problem, but largely as a result of the efforts of Kartir, a particularly vigorous defender of the Zoroastrian faith and a great power behind the throne, Zoroastrianism was confirmed as the state religion.

The political and economic history of Sasanian Persia resembles a swinging pendulum. In the fifth century Persia was torn internally by the rise of Mazdakism, an abortive form of communism, and in 484 the country was invaded from the east by the Ephthalites. In 531, Khusrau I, perhaps the country's greatest ruler, came to the throne. He defeated the Ephthalites and invaded Syria, but his greatest achievements were in the field of internal reform. He re-established the power of the monarchy, introduced fiscal, agricultural, social and military reform, the state control of education and a vast building programme. The stability which he achieved within the society was so great that it led eventually to the stagnation and decay of the state. The king himself was so revered by his people that the legend grew up that he had passed deathless into the hereafter and that he would return at the end of the world with an army to defeat the demons who would attack Persia.

In 610 Sasanian Persia gave to the world her swansong. Her armies swept westwards to the Bosphorus, Constantinople, Damascus, Jerusalem, Gaza and Egypt, all within the space of six years (610–616). But despite this outstanding military success, which gave Persia the appearance of a world-conquering power for centuries to come, she fell before the Islamic invasion in 651. Torn by internal strife, corrupt and divided, Persia could not withstand the