



# ALBORZ II. IN MYTH AND LEGEND

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## ALBORZ

### ii. In Myth and Legend

The most ancient layer of belief about the mythical “high Harā” appears to be that it was a huge mountain rising in the middle of the world, around whose peak (Av. *taēra-*, Pahl. *tērag*) “revolve the stars, moon, and sun” (*Yt.* 12.25), thus creating night and day. Each morning the “sun goes forth to cross high Harā in its flight” (*Yt.* 10.118); and Mithra, who goes before it, has his abode on the lofty, shining mountain, “where there is neither night nor darkness, neither cold wind nor hot . . . neither do mists rise from high Harā” (*Yt.* 10.50). Further, “just as light comes in from Harborz . . . water too comes in from Harborz” (*Bd.* 11.6); for the mythical river Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā was held to pour down from the mountain’s peak into the ocean Vourukaša (*Yt.* 5.3; cf. *Bd.* 10.5-6), being thus the source of all the waters of the world. In *Vendidad* 21 an incantation links together light and the waters, high Harā and the ocean Vourukaša. In the *yasna* liturgy (*Y.* 42.3) the worshipers offer sacrifice to sky and earth, wind and the “Peak of Harā.” The peak is also called Mount Hukairya (Pahl. Hukar), “Of good activity” (*Yt.* 10.88); and worshipers of Arədvī Sūrā praise “Mount Hukairya the verdant, which deserves all praise” (*Yt.* 5.96), while in the *Bundahišn* “the lofty Hukar, through which springs the water of Ardvīsūr,” is called “the chief of summits” (*Bd.* 11.9; cf. *Pahl.Rivayat* 15.4).



The “abode and dwelling of the clouds” is on Harborz (*Mēnōg ī xrad* 44.16); and there the Baga set the sacred plant *haoma* to grow. There too the *yazata* Haoma, as priest of the gods, offers sacrifice, specifically to Mithra (*Yt.* 10.89) and to Sraoša (*Y.* 57.19). Figures of ancient Iranian myth, namely Haošyaṇha (Hōšang) and Yima (Jamšēd) are also said to have offered sacrifice on the mountain, to the divinities Arədvī Sūrā, Druvāspā, and Vayu (*Yt.* 5.21, 25; 9.3, 8; 15.7, 15).

The Iranian concept of the great central world mountain has its parallel in the Indian one of the Mount Mēru or Sumēru; and when in course of time the Khotanese Sakas adopted Buddhism, they used the name “Peak of Harā” (*ttaira haraysā*) to render Sanskrit Sumēru (see H. W. Bailey, *Khotanese Texts* IV, Cambridge, 1961, p. 12). Already in ancient times, however, Iranian thinkers enlarged this concept of Harā; according to their speculative cosmogony the earth was originally a round plane, from whose flat surface the mountains grew up as if they were plants, having “roots” going deep into the ground and joined to the root of Harā. This name was now given also to a great chain of mountains held to encircle the earth’s round rim. “As the first mountain there stood upon this earth high Harā, which encircles entirely the eastern lands and the western lands” (*Yt.* 19.1). “Mount Harborz encircles the world. The sun revolves above Mount Harborz, around (its) Peak (Tērag). . . . Harborz was growing until the completion of 800 years: for 200 years up to the star station, for 200 years up to the moon station, for 200 years up to the sun station, and for 200 years up to the summit of the sky” (*Bd.* 5b.1, 9.1-2). “As Harborz grew up, all the mountains were moving, for all have grown up from the roots of Harborz. . . . Their roots passed in that way from one to another and they are established in mutual connection” (*Indian Bundahišn* 8.2-3). The concept of an encircling mountain range again has a parallel in the Indian *lōkālōka*, a ring of mountains encompassing all the continents of the earth (see W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder nach den Quellen dargestellt*, Bonn and Leipzig, 1920); but the special development whereby this range was given the same name as the single central peak, with all other mountains held to be linked to them both, appears part of the general tendency of ancient Iranian thinkers to seek unity behind apparent diversity (a tendency which seems to have prepared the way for Zarathuštra’s monotheism). Attempts were made to limit resulting ambiguities by referring fairly regularly to the central mountain by the synonyms of Taēra (Tērag) and Hukairya (Hukar), while the encircling range is sometimes distinguished as the Harborz *var* or “enclosure” (*Dādestān ī dēnīg, pursišn* 20.2; *Indian Bundahišn* 5.3).



Yet another name in Pahlavi for the Peak of Harborz is Čagād ī dāidīg, the “Lawful Summit;” for, as explained in the *Bundahišn* (9.9), “the Čagād ī dāidīg is that which is in the middle of the world . . . on which is the Činvat Bridge. Souls are judged at that place.” (cf. *Vd.* 19.98, which refers in this connection simply to “high Harā” and the Činvat Bridge.) One end of the Bridge, it is said, rests on the Čagād ī dāidīg, the other on the Harborz enclosure (*Dādestān ī dēnīg, pursišn* 20.2). The latter end rests evidently on the northern side of the encircling Harborz range, because the Bridge passes above the gaping mouth of hell (*Dēnkard* 9.20.3; cf. *Ardā Vīrāz nāmag* 53.1).

Zoroastrian scholastics continued to suppose that the Peak of Harā intercepted the light of the heavenly bodies, which they thought had their orbits in planes parallel to the earth. The ancient Iranians used a 360-day calendar, and in Pahlavi texts (*Bd.* 56.3; *Pahl. Rivāyat* 65) it is said that there were 180 windows on the eastern side of the Peak, and 180 on the western side. Each morning the sun passed through one on the eastern side, and each evening it departed through one on the western side. There were likewise 135 windows on either side for the moon, and 90 for the stars; and Vanant, the “Conquering One,” chief star of the southern quarter, is said to be entrusted with guarding these apertures against demons, so that they may not block the passage of sun, moon, and stars (*Mēnōg ī xrad* 48.12-13). The addition of five extra days—the so-called “Gāthā” days—to the 360-day calendar at the first Sasanian calendar reform threatened the symmetry of this scheme, and the problem thus created could be regarded only as a mystery, as in the following gloss: “And on those five Gāthā days it [the sun] enters and leaves by the same window—a window which is not spoken of, for if it had been spoken of the demons would have known the secret, and harm would have been done” (*Bd.* 5b.4).

There was evidently a tendency from ancient times to attach legends to the great world mountain, which in one Pahlavi text is said to rise up from Ērānvēj (Av. Airyanəm Vaējah), the region which had come to be regarded as the mythical homeland of the Iranians (*Dādestān ī dēnīg, pursišn* 20.2). The following strange legend is preserved in *Bundahišn* 24.24: “Every third year many from non-Iranian lands gather together upon the summit of Mount Harborz, in order to go into the Iranian lands to cause harm and bring destruction on the world. Then the *yazad*Borz [i.e., Ahura bərəzant; see under Apam Napāt] comes up from the depths of the water Arang and arouses, upon the highest point of all that high mountain, the bird Čamrūš, which pecks up all those from non-Iranian lands as a bird pecks up grain.” Other legends



concerning the mountain, under the later form of its name, “Alborz,” are preserved in the *Šāh-nāma*. Thus the mother of Ferēdūn (Av. Thrāetaona) bears her infant son for safety to the “lofty mountain,” Alborz, which here, it seems, is thought to rise in “Hendūstān” (ed. Borūkīm, I, p. 46.145-47; tr. A. and E. Warner, London, 1905-12, I, p. 152). There the child is brought up by a holy recluse. More is told of the mountain itself in the legend of Zāl, for the Sīmorǧ is said to have her nest on “Alborz, nigh to the sun and far removed from men” (I, p. 132.83; tr. p. 241). It was at the foot of Alborz that the infant Zāl was exposed, because of its remoteness. Here again the mountain is said to be in India (I, pp. 135.111, 136.130; tr. I, pp. 243, 244). The Sīmorǧ swoops down and carries the child up to her nest on Alborz, “whose top was midst the Pleiades. Thou wouldst have said “It will obstruct the stars.”” No tracks, even of wild beasts, led up the precipitous slopes to the rocky peak (I, p. 137.145, 155; tr., I, pp. 244, 245). There Zāl grew up, and from there he was in the end brought down again by the great bird, since no man could scale that height (I, p. 142.246; tr., I, p. 250).

In a subsequent incident in the epic Rostam breaks through Afrāsīāb’s troops, at the borders of Iran, in order to reach Mount Alborz and find Kayqobād, who, like his forbear Ferēdūn, had grown up in safety on the mountain’s lower slopes, a “blest land” (I, pp. 291, 158ff., 293.195-96; tr., I, pp. 382ff., 384). Later Rostam speaks of having brought Kayqobād to the land of Iran from Mount Alborz (II, p. 467.536-37; tr., II, p. 144). In one or two other places in the epic it seems likely (though the passages are not wholly unambiguous) that Mount Alborz is conceived as being within Iran, i.e., is thought of as the great mountain range which now bears that name. Thus Nōḍar orders his women to be taken from Pārs to Mount Alborz to keep them safe from Afrāsīāb’s troops (I, p. 258.265-66; tr. I, p. 351); and it is on Mount Alborz that Kāōs, reigning in Iran, forces the *dīvs* to build him two palaces (II, p. 408.422ff.; tr., II, p. 101ff.). In both these incidents, however, the geographical Alborz seems to have been invested with something of the mythical mountain’s aura of mystery and sanctity; and it is evidently still the mythical mountain, so huge in size, which is the source of recurrent similes in the poem: thus a mighty warrior is said to be “Mount Alborz in mail” (IV, p. 881.200; tr., III, p. 120), and battle spoils are heaped “as high as Mount Alborz” (VIII, p. 2282.104; tr., VII, p. 177). Mount Damāvand is also the subject of two odes by M. T. Bahār, one of which has gained great popularity (*Dīvān* I, Tehran, 1335 Š./1956, pp. 327-28, 329-31). Further, Zoroastrian legends which have come to be attached to Damāvand, as the highest peak in the geographical Alborz range, clearly belong by origin to



the great world mountain. Thus it must once have been the mythical Harā bərəzaiti on which Thraētaona (Ferēdūn) fettered Ài Dahāka (Žaḥḥāk), there to await the Last Day (*Bd.* 29.9; *Zand ī Vahman Yašt*, ed. B. T. Anklesaria, 9.4); and the concept of the remote, impregnable world mountain evidently lies behind the modern beliefs of some Parsi theosophists, that the “hidden Masters” have their dwelling on Mount Damāvand, guarding there all the esoteric teachings of the faith.

See also [Damāvand](#).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Given in the text.