



APAM NAPĀT

APAM NAPĀT (Son of the Waters), Zoroastrian divinity of mysterious character whose true identity, like that of his Vedic counterpart, Apām Napāt, has been much debated. Both the Avestan texts and Zoroastrian cult suggest that he is a great divinity, who has become partly overshadowed. No hymn survives in his honor, but he is mentioned in hymns devoted to other divinities of water. Thus there is an obscure reference to him in *Yašt* 5 (v. 72), a hymn addressed to the river-goddess, Arədvī Sūrā; and in *Yašt* 8, which is devoted to the rain-bringer, Tištrya, it is said in one verse (v. 34): “Apām Napāt distributes to the material world those waters assigned to dwelling places,” while in another (v. 4) worshippers offer veneration to Tištrya “from whom, the lofty one, is fame, from Apām Napāt is (his) nature.”

Elsewhere Apām Napāt is given the title of Ahura (Lord) which otherwise is accorded only to Ahura Mazdā himself and to Mithra; and in two passages he is shown as acting with Mithra to maintain good order in human society: “Mithra of wide pastures will further all ruling councils of the lands, and pacify (the lands) that are in turmoil. Henceforth mighty Apām Napāt will further all ruling councils of the lands, and restrain (the lands) that are in turmoil” (*Yt.* 13.95; on this verse see I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, repr. 1967, pp. 27-29, 59-60. In *Yt.* 19.35f. a myth is related which shows these two Ahuras striving together to protect divine *x^varənah* (Pahl. *xwarrah*, NPers. *farr[ah]*), by which legitimate rule is maintained among the Iranian peoples. In the beginning *x^varənah*, it is said, dwelt with Yima, the first king; but when he allowed a “lying, untrue word”



into his thoughts, it fled from him, to be protected by Mithra and fire. Then threatened again by evil, it took refuge in the sea Vourukaša, where Apam Napāt laid hold of it “at the bottom of profound bays.” (There are evident interpolations in the ancient text [vv. 36-46] which obscure this chain of events and the close partnership of the two divinities.) There follows a magnificent verse in honor of Apam Napāt himself (*Yt.* 19.52): “We worship the High Lord (*bərəzantəm ahurəm*), kingly, shining, Son of the Waters, who has swift horses, the hero who gives help when called upon. (It is) he who created men, he who shaped men, the god amid the waters, who being prayed to is swiftest of all to hear.” This verse has echoes in a hymn in honor of the Vedic Apām Napāt, who is hailed there as one “who has created all beings through his power as Asura” (*Rigveda* 2.35.2). The opening words of the Avestan verse are used in all Zoroastrian invocations of Apam Napāt, and he is accordingly also known, since Sasanian times at least, as Borz or Borj, a reduction of Avestan *bərəzant-*, the “High One,” a title which is glossed in one Pahlavi text (*Zātspram* 3.18) as Borz ī Ābānnāf “The High One who is Son of the Waters.”

In the Pahlavi texts Apam Napāt is again presented as a divinity of water and a mighty being who watches over *Xwarrah*. “The abode of the *yazad* Borz is there where are Ardvīsūr and the undefiled waters. And his chief duty is to distribute water from the sea to all regions. This task too is his, that he saves creatures from high surges in crossing the sea, and watches always over *Xwarrah* (*Bundahišn* 26.91). His care for the *Xvarənah* of the Iranian peoples is celebrated also in the following strange myth: “Every third year many from non-Iranian lands gather together upon the summit of Mount Harborz (Alborz), in order to go into Iranian lands to cause harm and bring destruction to the world. Then the *yazad* Borz comes up from the depths of the water Arang and arouses, on 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 (*Bundahišn* 24.24).

This virtually all that is said of Apam Napāt in the Zoroastrian texts; but the cult presents him as a once great divinity. No day or month is named for him in the calendar; but in the divisions of the day (which are plainly much older than the calendar dedications) the morning is set under the protection of Mithra, the afternoon under that of Apam Napāt. It is probable that in pre-Zoroastrian times these were the only divisions of the daylight hours, so that the two lesser Ahuras were thus greatly and equally honored; and still today, when a Zoroastrian says the prayers proper to the Uzērīn Gāh, he has



necessarily to call upon the “Son of the Waters.” Further, in the *yasna* liturgy, whenever water is invoked (as it is repeatedly), Apām Napāt is invoked with it (Y. 1.5 and *passim*). He is thus daily venerated in the Zoroastrian cult; and though no act of worship is now offered to him alone, whenever one is dedicated to all the *yazatas*, Apām Napāt is regularly invoked (together with Haoma and Dahmān Āfrīn) after the divinities of the calendar dedications. (See further under calendar, Zoroastrian.)

The character and history of the Indian Apām Napāt also give cause for perplexity; but the Vedic usages at least bear out what could be suspected from the Iranian evidence, namely that Apām Napāt is a title, not a proper name. In the Vedas this title is most often used of Agni, a divinity unknown to the Iranian pantheon, and one who, as god of fire, it might seem singularly inappropriate to address as “Son of the Waters.” The title is also used occasionally of Savitr, who is linked with the sun; while in the hymn already cited (*Rigveda* 2.35) the divinity invoked as Apām Napāt is not otherwise identified, except as a water god and an Asura. Reflecting on these anomalies, H. Oldenberg, (*Die Religion des Veda*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1917, repr. 1970, pp. 100-01, 117-19) came to the conclusion that the original Apām Napāt had been an independent divinity, an Indo-Iranian “water-spirit,” who had become associated with and partly absorbed in Agni because to ancient Indian thinkers water held fire within itself (*ibid.*, pp. 113-14). The link of this “water-spirit” with Savitr could be similarly explained because the setting sun was thought to sink into the seas beneath the earth. In Indian rituals, as in Iranian ones, Apām Napāt’s connection remained solely with water. Oldenberg’s interpretation was accepted by L. H. Gray (“The Indo-Iranian deity Apām Napāt,” *ARW* 3, 1900, pp. 18-51); and subsequently M. Boyce (“On Varuṇa’s part in Zoroastrianism,” *Mélanges E. Benveniste*, ed. M. Moïnfar, Paris, 1975, pp. 57-66; *idem*, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 46f.) took the further step of proposing to see in “Apām Napāt” an Indo-Iranian title of great Varuṇa, whose apparent absence from the Iranian pantheon has always been a source of perplexity. At least two Rigvedic verses appear to support this hypothesis, in that they identify Agni on occasion with Varuṇa. In *Rigveda* 5.3.1 it is said: “You, Agni, are Varuṇa when you are born [i.e., when fire is kindled from sticks];” while in *Rigveda* 10.8.5, the poet, again addressing Agni, declares: “You become the eye and protector of great *ṛta* [= Avestan *aša*]—you become Varuṇa, since you enter on behalf of *ṛta*, you become Apām Napāt.” Further, with regard to Savitr, it is said in the *Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa* 18.9: “When the [sun] sinks in the water, it becomes Varuṇa.” Varuṇa is moreover addressed as “Child of the



Waters” (*apām sísur*, *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* 10.7, see H. Lüders, *Varuṇa*, Göttingen, 1951-59, I, pp. 50-51), and is regularly associated with water and regarded as a god of the sea (*ibid.*, p. 9).

The identification of Iranian Apām Napāt as Varuṇa remains controversial, but a reasoned refutation of the hypothesis has yet to be published. On the supposition that, for some reason, the Iranians never invoked Varuṇa by name, but only by title or cult-epithet, it has been further proposed to see Iranian *Baga*, Vedic Bhaga, “the Dispenser” as another epithet of his, which in India, through constant use, came to be regarded as the name of an independent divinity, closely associated with Varuṇa. By this interpretation one would then have Mithra and Varuṇa addressed by the Avestan peoples with the pair-compound *Miθra-Ahura bərəzant* (on which see F. Spiegel, *Die arische Periode und ihr Zustand*, Leipzig, 1887, pp. 187-88), and by the Old Persians with the compound *Miθra-Baga*, both parallel to the Vedic compound *Mitra-Varuṇa*; and it would be possible to interpret Zoroaster’s own phrase *mazdā ahurā’nhō* “Mazdā (and the other) Ahuras” as referring to a triad of Ahuras, namely Mazdā, Mithra and Varuṇa, and thus as parallel to the Old Persian invocation *auramazdā utā miθra baga* in the inscription of Artaxerxes III at Persepolis (A³ Pa 24-25; see Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 156).

What is indisputable with regard to the Iranian Apām Napāt is that this name represents a powerful divinity, an Ahura, a close partner of Mithra, who, though still daily honored through the Zoroastrian liturgies, has ceased to be popularly worshipped. Several possible reasons suggest themselves for the fading of his cult. The crucial verse *Yašt* 19.52 shows that in one of his aspects the ancient Apām Napāt was a mighty creator-god, “who created men, who shaped men” (*yō nərəuš da’a, yō nərəuš tataša*); but in Zoroastrianism Ahura Mazdā is venerated as supreme Creator, and Apām Napāt thus came to be robbed of this function. The process is strikingly demonstrated by words used of Ahura Mazdā in the relatively late *Yasna* 1.1., apparently in an echo of *Yašt* 19.52: “who created us, who shaped (us)” (*yō nō da’a, yō tataša*) (see F. Windischmann, *Zoroastrische Studien*, Berlin, 1863, p. 180). Losing this important activity (which is one that belongs to both the Indian Varuṇa and the Indian Apām Napāt), the Iranian Apām Napāt evidently became slowly more and more restricted to his aspect of water divinity.

Then Apām Napāt’s cult title of Ahura bərəzant, “High Lord,” and his ancient invocation also, it seems, simply as Ahura (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 49-51), led naturally in course of time to the transfer of praises originally



addressed to him to *Ahura Mazdā*, the Ahura of Zoroastrianism. This is strikingly illustrated in the ancient *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti*, which originally, it seems, accompanied the priestly offerings to fire and water, and was addressed accordingly to the two lesser Ahuras, Mithra and Apām Napāt. In the extant version this liturgy is explicitly devoted, in due orthodoxy, to Ahura Mazdā: but one of its archaic features is that there (Y. 38.3) the Waters are called “the Ahura’s wives” (*ahurāniš ahurahyā*), i.e., presumably the wives of Apām Napāt. (Cf. the Rigvedic usage whereby the Waters are called *varuṇāni*, “wives of Varuṇa” *Rigveda* 2.32.8; 7.34.22.) It was perhaps in order to lessen the confusion, or what may have been felt to be the impropriety, of speaking of Apām Napāt as Ahura that the usage developed of using only the epithet Bərəzant, i.e., “High One” instead of Ahura bərəzant, hence the standard Middle Persian name for him, Borz Yazad.

Another factor in the overshadowing of Apām Napāt was evidently the devotion of the Achaemenians to *Anāhiti, and the adoption of her worship into Zoroastrianism through her identification with *Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā*, whereby this stellar goddess became also a water divinity. In inscriptions of Artaxerxes II “Anāhita” replaces the third Ahura, for this king invokes *auramazda anāhita utā miθra* (e.g., A² Sd 3-4); and although inscriptions of his son Artaxerxes III (see above) show a reversion to a more traditional invocation, it was these three who became thereafter the most beloved of all Zoroastrian divinities, at least in western Iran. Anāhitā as “Lady of the Waters” thus gradually usurped the place of the “Son of the Waters” in popular as well as in royal worship. That this development did not at first go uncontested is suggested not only by Artaxerxes III’s inscriptions, but also by the fact that neither divinity received a calendar dedication, the efforts of their respective supporters presumably reaching deadlock in this respect; that priests were then among the chief upholders of Apām Napāt can be deduced from the fact that as Ahura bərəzant/Borz Yazad this divinity is still regularly worshipped with the “calendar gods” at the services devoted to them as a group (see above, and further Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 247-48).



BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also Avesta, tr. Darmesteter, II, pp. 317, 366, 384, n. 85, 423, 432, 630.

Gray, *Foundations*, pp. 131-36.

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