



AŽDAHĀ III. IN IRANIAN FOLKTALES

iii. In Iranian Folktales

The dragon is a well-attested motif in the lore of the Indo-European peoples (see Hartland; Róheim, 1912; Smith; Fontenrose; and Lutz). In Persian folklore, the dragon (*aždahā*) appears mostly in tales of magic and in legends. It is curiously missing in myths which are narratives concerned with creation (see Bascom). (In the following all motif numbers refer to Thompson, 1955).

The *aždahā* of the Persian folktales is a fantastic animal of serpentine variety, usually of enormous size (Thompson, B11.2.12; and see, e.g., Anjavī, 1975, p. 80; 1979, pp. 147, 205, 221, etc.), and fire-breathing (B11.2.11; Anjavī, 1979, p. 216; 1975, p. 170; 1984, p. 85, etc.), which resides in or near water (e.g., at the bottom of the sea; motif B11.3.1; in a lake: B11.3.1.1, etc.) Sometimes the *aždahā* resides in an underground cavern (B11.3.5; Anjavī, 1984, p. 85) or in a mountain (Anjavī, 1984, pp. 7, 199-200). It is endowed with powers of magical invisibility (B11.5.2; Anjavī, 1975, p. 80), and speech (N11.4.5; Anjavī, 1974, p. 17; 1979, pp. 20-23; Šakūr-zāda, 1967, pp. 304-07; Behrangī, 1965, pp. 35-36). It usually guards a treasure (B11.6.2; Anjavī, 1974, pp. 252-54), or a magical tree or object (D950.0.1; H133.6; Anjavī, 1979, p. 205). In many folktales, it controls the water-supply of a town or a country (B11.7.1; Anjavī, 1974, p. 87; 1975, p. 139; 1979, pp. 147, 177; Eškevarī, 1973, pp. 101-05; Šobhī, 1946, pp. 104-05; Behrangī, 1978, pp. 281-92) forcing the inhabitants to sacrifice a maiden or a



princess, by offering her as food to the *aždahā* in order to find access to water.

The tale types 300-303 (Aarne and Thompson; Marzolph), i.e., “The dragon slayer,” which demonstrate the dragon-fight motif (B11.11ff.; see Róheim, 1940) are quite common in Persian folk narratives. In these tales the protagonist slays the *aždahā* in order to rescue the princess or maiden about to be sacrificed to the beast (R111.1.3). Such episodes may betray the sexual nature of the dragon-fight because from the standpoint of nutritive value, plump matrons would make more sense than fair maidens (Lutz, p. 208). In the course of the fight with the *aždahā*, the hero is sometimes overcome by the poisonous fumes of the slain beast’s venomous blood (B11.2.13.1; Anjavī, 1979, p. 147). *Ādahā* is often used as a metaphor for evil in folk legends (B11.9; Anjavī, 1975, p. 160). In these legends, the saint/hero metaphorically overcomes evil by slaying a dragon (cf. Saint George in Christian tradition; see Aufhauser and Panzer).

In some folktales, the *aždahā* appears as a grateful animal (B350). In a version of the tale type 1165, “The evil woman thrown into the pit” (Anjavī, 1979, pp. 20-23) for instance, an *aždahā* helps its rescuer to marry a princess. In another story, it devours threatening wild animals on behalf of the protagonist (Anjavī, 1974, p. 268). In a version of the tale type 563, “The table, the ass, and the stick,” the stick is magically turned into an *aždahā*, by the help of which the hero recovers his stolen magical objects (Anjavī, 1974, p. 299). Sometimes the grateful *aždahā* is itself the bestower of magical gifts (Anjavī, 1975, p. 362).

The most common allomotifs (see Dundes) for the *aždahā* in Persian folklore are snakes (Anjavī, 1975, pp. 360-66; 1979, pp. 7-23, 363), lions (Anjavī, 1974, p. 99), and fish (Anjavī, 1974, p. 180). Some folk legends in Iran speak of an aquatic beast which bears a feline name but also has all of the typical draconic features (cf. Omidšalar).

For collections of Persian folktales in western languages see Christensen, 1958; Elwell-Sutton, 1950; and Boulvin, 1975.

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