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BABYLONIA II. BABYLONIAN INFLUENCES ON IRAN

ii. Babylonian Influences on Iran

Introduction. We can distinguish three periods in the influence of Mesopotamian civilization on pre-Islamic Iran: (1) the pre-Achaemenid period: before the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great; (2) the Achaemenid period: before the conquest of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great; and (3) the Seleucid-Parthian-Sasanian period.

The first period was characterized by an influence on the Medes and the Persians that was often indirect and at times mediated by the Elamite world, with no more than a tendency towards eclecticism and syncretism (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 30ff., 141). The second period was one of direct contact probably favored by the presence of Iranian Magi in Babylon and of the elaboration of a religious syncretism which spread beyond Mesopotamia and Iran to reach Israel and Asia Minor. In this period, the influence of Babylonia was strong in the fields of the arts, science, religion, and religious policies, even affecting the concept of kingship (see G. Gnoli, “Politica religiosa e concezione della regalità sotto gli Achemenidi,” in *Gururājamañjarikā. Studi in onore di Giuseppe Tucci*, Napoli, 1974, pp. 23-88). The third and longest period was distinguished by an influence that was both Mesopotamian and Semitic and Hellenistic. During this period the syncretistic features in all fields were still clearer and more obvious and the cultural influence in the broad sense

was still more accentuated, especially under the Parthians (see G. Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit*, Cologne and Opladen, 1960), whereas influence on political concepts and, in particular, on the concept of kingship was weaker.

General. From the era of the supremacy of the Medes to the end of the Sasanian period, Mesopotamian civilization never ceased to influence the development in the Iranian world in religion, science, the arts, writing, political and administrative organization, and law, and with the conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C., Cyrus II became the head of an immense empire with traditions in these fields dating back over a thousand years.

Babylonian or Mesopotamian influence on Iranian art from the most ancient times is immediately obvious both in monumental art and sculpture, though these were also subject to Greek and Egyptian influences in the Achaemenid era (see A. Farkas, *Achaemenid Sculpture*, Istanbul, 1974; H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1956, chap. 12; E. Porada, "Classic Achaemenian Architecture and Sculpture," in *Camb. Hist. Iran* II, 1985, pp. 793-831; M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*, Acta Iranica 19, Leiden, 1979).

Babylonian influence on the religious thought and the actual practices of worship in ancient Iran proved fertile in the meeting between the Iranian Magi and the Chaldeans, especially in Achaemenid Babylonia. References to this meeting are to be found in classical Greek and Latin sources (see G. Messina, *Der Ursprung der Magier und die zarathuštrische Religion*, Rome, 1930, pp. 48ff.; J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés*, Paris, 1938, I, pp. 34ff.) and an analysis of all the available sources enables us to reconstruct a fairly exhaustive picture of the influence of Mesopotamian religious thought on the doctrines of the Magi (see M. Boyce, op. cit., pp. 28ff., 66ff., 196ff., 201ff.).

The astral character of the Babylonian religion, in which the stars were considered divine entities to be worshipped, was increasingly accentuated in the course of the first millennium B.C. (see J. Bottero, *La religion babylonienne*, Paris, 1952, pp. 142ff., and, more generally, B. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien* II, Heidelberg, 1925, chap. 18) and even penetrated the other religions of the ancient Orient, the Iranian included. The characteristics and names of the stars were attributed to the gods and there was a growing conviction that their dominion over the world and over mankind was that of the astral forces themselves. Later, the mysterious, invincible, and all-pervading force called

the *Heimarmene*, which had developed with particular vigor in the Hellenistic era, underwent a process of divinization and was placed at the center of the astral ideology's vision of the world and of life.

In Babylonian politics the Persians found a model which they used to further develop their own political structures.

It is a remarkable fact, however, that in spite of this strong cultural pressure Iran never lost its own originality or identity and developed autonomous structures with their own characteristics (see A. Bausani, *L'Iran e la sua tradizione millenaria*, Rome, 1971, pp. 9, 38).

In view of these facts it is obviously historically misleading to see the development of Iranian civilization solely in an Indo-European perspective, as has sometimes been done.

Zurvanism and dualism. The origin and development of the religious tendency which goes by the name of Zurvanism were in all probability inspired by the astral ideology of Babylonia (see Bidez and Cumont, op. cit., I, p. 64; G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980, pp. 210ff., and *De Zoroastre à Mani*, Paris, 1985, pp. 71ff.). As it appears certain that Zurvanism was developed in the Achaemenid period and since it is quite likely that the religious tradition of Babylonia was at the heart of the syncretism which characterized the cultural history of the Near East in the first millennium B.C., even before the advent of Hellenism, we are led to recognize in the Iranian Zurwān (Avestan *Zrvan*; Pahlavi *Zurwān* and *Zamān* "Time") an influence from this ideology. The alternative hypothesis, that Zurvanism was an autonomous Iranian religion professed by the Median Magi and independent of Mazdaism, is less probable (see, e.g., G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart, 1965, pp. 149ff., 214ff.). Even less convincing are the attempts that have been made to trace its origins back to a Phoenician god of time supposed to be not only the source of the Chronos of Pherecides (mid-6th century B.C.) but also of the Indian Kāla (see Boyce, op. cit., pp. 150ff.).

It has been conjectured that Mesopotamian religion influenced Iranian dualism (G. Furlani, *Miti babilonesi e assiri*, Florence, 1958, p. 24 n. 2). This may certainly be true in the case of the particular role played in Mesopotamia and in Iran by demonology. The divine or extra-human world was seen as the scene of a struggle between contending powers that was reproduced and reflected on earth. However, Iranian dualism must be seen in a much broader

historical perspective and it is necessary to distinguish clearly between different times and places.

In fact, Iranian dualism does not present a single body of doctrines remaining unchanged throughout the course of time. While the dualism of the *Gāθās* is expressed in the formula "Angra Mainyu versus Spənta Mainyu overshadowed by the figure of Ahura Mazdā, the god and creator of all things," the so-called Zurvanite dualism is characterized by the formula "Ahriman versus Ōhrmazd, overshadowed by Zurwān ī akanārag "Boundless Time"." While in the Zoroastrian teachings the two opposing spirits are represented as twins, in the myth and doctrine of Zurvanism, Ahriman and Ōhrmazd himself are twin brothers.

It is quite probable that this profound transformation of Iranian dualism came about in the Achaemenid era through Mesopotamian influence. The formula "Oromasdes versus Areimanios," which is well documented in the most ancient Greek sources such as the *Peri philosophias* of Aristotle, Eudemus of Rhodes in Damascius, and *De Iside et Osiride* of Plutarch, most probably presupposes the presence of a dominating entity such as Zurwan (G. Gnoli, "L'évolution du dualisme iranien et le problème zurvanite," *RHR* 201, 1984, pp. 130ff.).

Astrology. It is generally acknowledged that Babylonian astrology was at the root of the spreading of astrology in ancient Iran, even though only one planet, Saturn, has preserved a Semitic name, Kaywān; the others are named after Iranian divinities: Ōhrmazd (Jupiter), Warahrān (Mars), Anāhīd (Venus), and Tīr (Mercury). The order of the planets, reproduced by Zādspram (30.12; cf. H. W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books*, Oxford, 1943, p. 211), reflects the order given them by the Greeks (see J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 1962, p. 247). In Mazdean cosmology the planets were turned into devils, but probably only at a relatively late period, as is shown by the fact that they still bear the names of the greatest divine entities (cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford, 1955, pp. 152, 160ff.). This contradiction between the divine names and the diabolic nature of the planets may be one of the reflections in Iran of the astral religious thought of Babylonia.

The spreading of Chaldean astrology in Iran is generally dated to the Hellenistic or Parthian era because of the Greek influence evident in that period (see D. N. MacKenzie, "Zoroastrian Astrology in the *Bundahišn*," *BSOAS*

27, 1964, pp. 513-29) and, more particularly, in the astronomical notions that appear in the Pahlavi texts (see W. B. Henning, "An Astronomical Chapter of the Bundahišn," *JRAS*, 1942, pp. 229-48). We can not, however, exclude an earlier period for this event and, in fact, certain aspects of the astronomy of the second chapter of the *Bundahišn* date back to a pre-Achaemenid era (Henning, loc. cit., p. 230) while other aspects—the ecliptic, the zodiacal signs, and the planets—reveal an early Babylonian influence but also a relatively late (mid-Sasanian era) Greek influence, especially as regards the system of the lunar mansions. At any rate, the renaming of the planets—e.g., Ōhrmazd for Marduk-Jupiter, Warahrān for Nergal-Mars, Anāhīd for Ištar-Venus, and Tīr for Nabû-Mercury—dates back to the Achaemenid era. In fact, the Achaemenid Iranian-Mesopotamian religious syncretism was only one, though perhaps the most important, aspect of a much vaster and more general phenomenon which affected the Western Semitic world, including Israel and Asia Minor. This syncretism finally made an indirect contribution to the religion of the Mysteries of Mithra (see F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, 2nd ed., Brussels, 1902, p. 24, and G. Gnoli, "Sol Persice Mithra," in *Mysteria Mithrae*, ed. U. Bianchi, Leiden, 1979, pp. 725-40.)

Great gods. The three great Iranian divinities Ahura Mazdā, Miθra, and Anāhitā appear in Achaemenid inscriptions starting from the reign of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.). As regards Anāhitā, we know from Berossus, quoted by Clement of Alexandria (C. Clemen, *Fontes historiae religionis persicae*, Bonn, 1920, p. 67), that it was Artaxerxes II himself who ordered images of Aphrodite Anaitis to be set up throughout his vast territories—in Babylon, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Bactra, Damascus, and Sardis—and who spread the worship of his new goddess. According to Herodotus (1.131) it was the "Assyrian" and "Arabian" influence which was supposed to have led to the spreading of the cult of Aphrodite Urania among the Persians. All this evidence points to Mesopotamian influence on the cult of Anāhitā, and it is probable that the Assyrian Ištar and the Elamite Nanā were forerunners of the Iranian goddess (cf. G. Gnoli, "Politica religiosa," pp. 31ff.) since her complex nature can not be explained from an Indo-Iranian viewpoint alone. It is for this reason that Boyce (op. cit., chaps. 2, 12, 13) proposes that we should recognize in this goddess as she appears in late-Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian times the result of an identification of a Western Iranian divinity *Anāhiti strongly influenced by the Elamite and Mesopotamian goddess, and the Avestan *Harahvaitī Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā. According to this hypothesis, the Babylonian influence would account for the strengthening of a cult which did

not conform to orthodox Zoroastrianism, for the anthropomorphism, and for the founding of temples with divine images which were later to be countered by the spreading of the temple-cult of fire (M. Boyce, “Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians,” in *Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. J. Neusner, Leiden, 1975, pp. 93-111).

Similarly Ahura Mazdā and Miθra were probably identified with Marduk, the principal god of Babylon, and Šamaš, the solar divinity, respectively (see Gnoli, “Politica religiosa,” pp. 29f., 37f., 44 and Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 28f.); in the Babylonian calendar the seventh month was dedicated to Šamaš, in the Iranian calendar it was dedicated to Miθra (see Gnoli, “Sol Persice,” pp. 734ff.).

Tīrī/Tīr (or perhaps *Tīriya, see M. Schwartz, “The Religion of Achaemenian Iran,” in *Camb. Hist. Iran* II, p. 673), the god of the planet Mercury, was assimilated to the Mesopotamian Nabû (see G. Gnoli, “La stella Sirio e l’influenza dell’astrologia caldea nell’Iran antico,” *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 34, 1963, pp. 237-45; Boyce, op. cit., pp. 31ff.).

Kingship. The special relationship that Ahura Mazdā, Miθra, and Anāhitā had with kingship is demonstrated by the appearance of their names in the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenids as well as by other evidence (see Gnoli, “Politica religiosa,” pp. 31-43). It is probable that this relationship reflected Mesopotamian beliefs and customs, especially in the case of Marduk and Ištar (and her various namesakes). Moreover, the formula used in the Old Persian inscriptions to express the idea of the divine investiture of the king of kings, *vašnā Ahuramazdāha* “by the will of Ahura Mazdā” is quite probably of Mesopotamian inspiration (cf. Gnoli, *De Zoroastre à Mani*, p. 63 and n. 39). In it is contained the idea of the sovereign being elected by the supreme god, an idea which is similar to the Assyro-Babylonian concept of kingship but unlike the Avestan idea of the *kavi* who ruled by virtue of his *xᵛarənah*. The Achaemenid concept had to be adapted to the reality of a universal empire and an absolute monarchy, while the Avestan one perpetuated traditions proper to an essentially tribal, patriarchal, and pastoral society (see Gnoli, “Politica religiosa,” pp. 72ff.). The Babylonian influence on the concept of kingship and on the royal ideology of ancient Iran also strongly affected institutional practice and court ceremonial, for instance, the adoption of co-regency and the introduction of elements of etiquette such as the *proskynesis* (see G. Widengren, “The Sacral Kingship of Iran,” in *The Sacral Kingship*, Leiden, 1959, pp. 247ff.; Gnoli, “Politica religiosa,” pp. 25, 62ff.).

Mesopotamian influence continued until the end of the Sasanian period. It played an important part in the formation of Manicheism, whose founder, Mani, called himself the Apostle of Babylon and which professed a dualism of Iranian origin (see G. Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism*, Uppsala, 1946).

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