



# BAHRĀM (VƏRƏΘRAΓNA) I. IN OLD AND MIDDLE IRANIAN TEXTS

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## i. In Old and Middle Iranian Texts

BAHRĀM, original meaning “smiting of resistance;” not found in Old Persian; Middle Persian Warahrān, frequently used in the proper names of persons of the male sex, the hypostasis of “victory” and one of the principal figures in the Zoroastrian pantheon. His alter ego in the Avesta is *Dāmōiš Upamana* (*Yt.* 10.9), which I. Gershevitch (*The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, p. 169) interprets as “Likeness of Ahura’s creature,” a probable synonym of \**ahuraδātahe upamana-*. Together with Čistā, he is one of the principal companions of Miθra (*Yt.* 10.70).

Bahrām is the great warrior god of Zoroastrianism, but his figure also contains a wealth of archaic, pre-Zoroastrian elements which clearly point to an Indo-Iranian era (P. Thieme, “The “Aryan” Gods of the Mitanni Treaties,” *JAOS* 80, 1960, pp. 312-14). His Avestan epithets are: *amavant-* “strong, endowed with attacking might,” *ahuraδāta-* “created by Ahura,” *barō.xvarəna-* “bearing *xvarənah-*,” *hvāxšta-* “possessing good peace,” *hvāyaona-* “possessing a good place,” *aršō.kara-* “conferring virility,” *maršō.kara-* “rendering decrepit,” *frašō.kara-* “making wonderful.” The epithets *hvāxšta-* and *hvāyaona-* associate him with Čistā (É. Benveniste and L. Renou, *Vrtra et Vrθragna. Étude*



*de mythologie indo-iraniennne*, Paris, 1934, pp. 58ff.) while *aršō.kara-*, *maršō.kara-*, and *frašō.kara-* relate him to Zurwān (H. S. Nyberg, “Questions de cosmogonie et de cosmologie mazdéennes,” *JA* 219, 1931, pp. 86ff.).

In the Avesta, Vārəθrayna has all the characteristics of an ancient warrior god, the personification of a force that shatters and overcomes any resistance or defense, an irresistible offensive force which displays its strength in attack. For this reason he is associated with *Vanaintī Uparatāt* “Conquering Superiority” (*Yt.* 14.0, 64) and is venerated as *yazatanəm zayō.təmō* “the most highly armed of the gods” (*Yt.* 14.1), *amavastəmō* “the most endowed with attacking might” (*Yt.* 14.3), *x<sup>v</sup>arənaṇuhastəmō* “the most endowed with *x<sup>v</sup>arənah-*” (*Yt.* 14.3). He is represented as being in constant battle against his enemies, men and demons (*daēvas*), wizards (*yātus*) and *pairikās*, *kavis* and *karapans* (*Yt.* 14.4, 62).

*Bahrām yašt* (*Yt.* 14), dedicated to Vārəθrayna, belongs to the most ancient sections of the Younger Avesta or, at least, contains many archaic elements (A. Christensen, *Études sur le zoroastrisme de la Perse antique*, Copenhagen, 1928, pp. 7-8; M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 63). *Bahrām yašt* is not one of the better preserved *yašts*, yet it gives us a vivid and exhaustive picture of the divinity. It first enumerates the ten incarnations, in both animal and human form, of Vārəθrayna. These recall, although exact correspondences are lacking, the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu in Purāṇic literature, or the ten incarnations of Indra (J. Charpentier, *Kleine Beiträge zur indoiranischen Mythologie*, Uppsala, 1911, pp. 25-68): an impetuous wind (*Yt.* 14.2-5); a bull with horns of gold (v. 7); a white horse with ears and muzzle of gold (v. 9); a camel in heat (vv. 11-13); a boar (v. 15); a youth at the ideal age of fifteen (v. 17); a falcon or bird of prey, *vārəyna-* (vv. 19-21); a ram (v. 23); a wild goat (v. 25); and an armed warrior (v. 27). It is interesting to note that the Avesta also attributed some of these metamorphoses to Tištrya (*Yt.* 8.13, 16, 20): the youth of fifteen, the bull with the horns of gold and the white horse; to X<sup>v</sup>arənah (*Yt.* 19.35): the bird *vārəyna-*, and to Vayu: the camel (*Dēnkard*, ed. Sanjana, IX, 23.2-3; Benveniste and Renou, pp. 35f.). The first metamorphosis, the impetuous wind, also links the god of victory to Vāta (Vayu), another divinity endowed with warlike virtues in Iranian mythology (H. S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran*, Leipzig, 1938, p. 75; S. Wikander, *Vayu* I, Lund, 1942; G. Widengren, *Les religions de l’Iran*, Paris, 1968, pp. 33ff.).

After the description of the incarnations of the god, the *Bahrām yašt* goes on to list the favors and gifts bestowed by Vārəθrayna on Zaraθuštra and on those



who worship him according to the cult. These gifts are victory in thought, in word, and in action, as well as in declamatory speech and in retort, in conformity with a conception dating back to the Indo-Iranian practice of verbal contest (F. B. J. Kuiper, “The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest,” *IJ* 4, 1960, pp. 243, 246). This evident Zoroastrianization of the cult of Vərəθraϥna, which is reflected in *Yt.* 14.28-33, is coupled with a more popular image of the god, one in which he is more closely linked to magical elements and practices of exorcism which find parallels in India (B. Geiger, *Die Aməša Spəntas. Ihr Wesen und ihre ursprüngliche Bedeutung*, Vienna, 1916, pp. 66ff.; H. Lommel, *Die Yāšt's des Awesta*, Göttingen, 1927, pp. 134-35; Benveniste and Renou, pp. 30-31). These were principally a matter of the so-called “magic of the feather,” i.e., oracles based on the falling or flying of a falcon’s feather, and so on (vv. 34-46). The rest of the *yašt* (vv. 47-64) is a hymn of praise to the god. The power of the god and the strength which this transmits to the Airyas are such as to confound all their enemies. On the other hand, the Vyāmburas (an unknown people), whom the *Bahrām yašt* describes as those who shed blood, burn prohibited wood, and make forbidden animal sacrifices (see Benveniste and Renou, pp. 37-38) follow other ritual practices in the cult of the god, which the faithful worshippers of Mazdā must stay away from (vv. 54-56).

The *Bahrām yašt* appears to be something of a patchwork, and in many passages recalls other Avestan texts. Christensen (pp. 7-8) notes these passages, comparing *Yt.* 14.15 with *Yt.* 10.70, *Yt.* 14.28-33 with *Yt.* 16.6-13, and *Yt.* 14.48-53 with *Yt.* 8.56-61, and prudently declares his inability to decide whether the passages in question belonged originally to one *yašt* or the other. In some cases, however, it is possible to say that *Yt.* 14 has borrowed from other *yašts* (in the case of *Yt.* 14.62 and *Yt.* 10.35-36 for example) while in others the opposite seems to be true (as in the case of *Yt.* 8.56-61 and *Yt.* 14.48-53; Benveniste and Renou, p. 38).

*Evolution of Bahrām.* Our knowledge of Vərəθraϥna indicates that the god’s functions were not limited to war and physical or military victory. He has other epithets and other characteristics which make him a more complex figure, one connected also with virility and sexual potency as well as health and physical integrity. He is defined as the one who gives man the “spring of the testicles,” *ərəzōiš xā* (*Yt.* 14.29) and as the one who is *baēšazyō.təmō*, “the most gifted with healing” or healing powers (*Yt.* 14.3). In modern times, Bahrām is particularly worshipped as a divinity protecting those who undertake journeys (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 62 and n. 267). In fact, the



Zoroastrian reform must have had a great influence on the evolution of this divine figure. This can also be inferred from the roles of Warahrān and Bahrām in later religious writings, from the Pahlavi texts of the ninth century to those of Parsism (see below). The principal evolution of Vārəθrayna in Zoroastrianism is without doubt to his role as the god of victory over the forces of evil in an intellectual and moral sense. The evolution of Vārəθrayna/Warahrān/Bahrām can not be understood outside the context of a radical revolution in traditional ethical and religious values. This has been pointed out by G. Dumézil, among others, (*Heur et malheur du guerrier*, Paris, 1985<sup>2</sup>, pp. 179ff.).

*The name.* The interpretation of the god is one of the classic points for comparative analysis in the Indo-Iranian field and, at the same time, one of the most widely debated subjects. In the Avestan language we have, besides the name of the god, a neuter noun, *vārəθrayna*– “smiting of resistance,” and an adjective *vārəθrayan*– “victorious.” This adjective is applied to various divine entities, to the hero Ōraētaona and to the Zoroastrian *saošyants* and has a corresponding Vedic term, *vṛtrahán*, a well-known epithet of Indra, one of whose many feats was the slaying of the dragon *Vṛtra*. On this basis it has been thought that there existed in Indo-Iranian times an Indra *vṛtrahān*, warrior god and slayer of a dragon, echoes of whom, purified by the Zoroastrian reform, were to be found in Iran in Vārəθrayna, stripped of his dragon-slaying functions, and in the *daēva* Indra, demonized in the new religion. According to J. P. de Menasce (“La promotion de Vahrām,” *RHR* 133, 1947-48, pp. 5-18), Iran is also supposed to have conserved traces, only preserved in the Armenian *Vahagn*, of a myth of Vārəθrayna dragon slayer. However, this characteristic of Vahagn has been seen by others as secondary or due to local elements (Benveniste and Renou, p. 80). According to the supporters of another theory, there were originally both an Indo-Iranian god, *\*Vṛtraghan*, and a dragon-slaying hero: While Iran conserved the ancient divine figure, India is thought to have made an innovation, promoting Indra to the rank of god and attributing to him the characteristics and functions of *\*Vṛtraghan*. Of the two theories, the first is, in part at least, the more probable, as long as it is recognized that the principal function of the divinity was not necessarily to slay a dragon, but rather to destroy an obstacle, *vārəθra*-, such as that blocking the flow of the waters, in order to fulfill a cosmogonic task. In fact, what remains certainly valid in the theory of Benveniste and Renou is their demonstration of the secondary nature of the dragon/demon *Vṛtra* compared to the original Indo-Iranian source. However, it can not be denied



that Indra was a god right from the beginning, and not a hero. This is demonstrated by the mention of him in the famous Mitanni treaty of the fourteenth century b.c. (J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 1962, pp. 177f., and cf. Widengren, pp. 33f., 59f.).

Besides being frequently applied to gods or men, the adjective *vərəθrayan-* was probably also an epithet of fire. The *vərəθrayan ātar*, the “Victorious Fire,” is in all probability the ancestor of the *ādur ī warahrān* (q.v.) of the inscriptions of Kerdēr (3rd cent. a.d.) and of the *Ātaš Bahrām* of more modern times, later interpreted, after the Sasanian era, as the “Fire of Vərəθrayna” owing to a natural confusion of the adjective with the name of the god of victory (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 222ff.). The so-called “Fire of Bahrām” would therefore be a later creation and have no direct link with the ancient god: It would have become so in the minds of the faithful because of a natural misunderstanding, abetted in Islamic times by a progressive decay in Zoroastrian priestly teaching as regards the tradition of religious beliefs and practices.

*The cult.* Vərəθrayna was one of the principal gods of the ancient Iranian pantheon and his cult was spread throughout the Iranian and Iranianized world, probably from the beginning of the Achaemenid era. This was due both to the survival of an ancient pre-Zoroastrian cult and to the high position given to the god in the new religion. As the divinity of war and victory, he was the protector of his people in arms and accorded well with the bellicose character and expansionistic aims of the Iranian military aristocracy.

As regards the cult of Vərəθrayna among the peoples of the Iranian plateau, the prestige which Ares enjoyed with the Karmanians, who worshipped him as their only god, is noteworthy (Strabo, 15.2.14). In all probability, behind this piece of information, which probably goes back to Nearchus, there must in fact have been the cult of the great Iranian divinity of war and victory (Benveniste and Renou, p. 87). This type of divinity was, in any case, common to other Iranian peoples who were not from the plateau, such as the Scythians. Let it suffice to recall the particular cult which, according to Herodotus (4.59.62), they reserved for Ares (with regard to the Scythian Ares, cf. G. Dumézil, *Romans de Scythie et d'alentours*, Paris, 1978, pp. 19ff.).

In the Seleucid and Parthian era, i.e., under the influence of Hellenism, Vərəθrayna was interpreted in Greek fashion as Ares and as Herakles, who also passed on to him certain iconographical features. The traces of this



syncretism are widely attested to (cf. E. Bickerman, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, p. 14, and D. M. Lang, *ibid.*, pp. 532, 535), and the inscription of King Antiochus I of Commagene (1st cent. b.c.) in the famous sanctuary of Nimrud Dagħ provides explicit evidence of this in the sequence of the three divine names: Artagnes (Vārəθrayna), Herakles, Ares (cf. J. Duchesne-Guillemin, “Iran und Griechenland in der Kommagene,” *Xenia* 12, Constance, 1984).

The identification of Vārəθrayna with Ares was also echoed in astrology, which had been introduced into Iran through Greco-Babylonian influence. The Pahlavi texts give the planet Mars the name *Wahrām* (for the relevant passage of the *Bundahišn*, cf. D. N. MacKenzie, “Zoroastrian Astrology in the *Bundahišn*,” *BSOAS* 27, 1964, p. 513) so that we have the following correspondences for the names of the planets: Greek Ares, Babylonian Nergal, Iranian Vārəθrayna/Warahrān/Wahrām/Bahrām (for astrology in Zoroastrian Iran cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan. A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford, 1955, pp. 147ff.). The Greco-Babylonian-Iranian religious syncretism, which was also reflected by the spreading of astrological doctrines, something originally extraneous to Zoroastrianism, thus codified the correspondences Vārəθrayna-Nergal-Ares and transfused them into the great syncretistic phenomenon of the Mysteries of Mithra, in which the identification of Vārəθrayna with Herakles was also iconographically reflected (F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, Brussels, 1902<sup>2</sup>, pp. 18, 185; and, on the problems concerning the Iranian background of the religion of the Mithraic Mysteries, G. Widengren, “The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World with Special Regard to their Iranian Background,” in *La Persia e il mondo greco-romano*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1966, pp. 433-55).

*Armenia.* From the Iranian world proper, Vārəθrayna also spread to the Iranianized world, both east and west, or to the parts of the world most strongly influenced by Iranianism. Armenia is the most conspicuous example. In fact, in Armenia (H. Hübschmann, *Armen. Etymologie*, pp. 75-78, 508f.), which was profoundly influenced by Parthian Iranianism, Vārəθrayna, identified with Herakles, was one of the three principal divinities of Iranian origin (the other two were Ahura Mazdā-Aramazd and Anāhitā-Anahit “the strangler of dragons,” *višapak’al/drakontopniktés*). With him were associated two female divinities, Anahit herself and his concubine Astlik, identified with the Greek Aphrodite (M. L. Chaumont, *Recherches sur l’histoire d’Arménie de l’avènement des Sassanides à la conversion du royaume*, Paris, 1969, pp. 73, 151). The views held by certain scholars (Benveniste and Renou, pp. 75-80) on



the extra-Iranian origin of the Armenian Vahagn are without a doubt exaggerated and, for the most part, erroneous (G. Widengren, *Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte*, Leiden, 1955, pp. 38f.).

*Eastern Iran.* To the east of the Iranian world, Vərəθrayna, in the form ORLAGNO (A. Maricq, “La grande inscription de Kaniska et l’étéo-tokharien, l’ancienne langue de la Bactriane,” *JA* 246, 1958, p. 426), appears in the monetary pantheon of the Kushans, where the god is represented with a winged headdress, a characteristic motif in Iranian symbolism, which likens him to Xvarənah, i.e., to the FARRO of the Kushans (J. M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 95f.). The Avestan idea of the bird *vārəyna*– (see above), the incarnation both of Vərəθrayna and of Xvarənah, is likely to have been behind this symbolism (cf. F. Grenet, “Notes sur le panthéon iranien des Kouchans,” *Studia Iranica* 13, 1984, p. 256).

Also to the east of the Iranian world, the Sogdian pantheon contained a Wšyn, corresponding to the ancient divinity (W. B. Henning, “A Sogdian God,” *BSOAS* 28, 1965, p. 252), and Sogdian Manicheism gave the name Wšyn to the hero Adamas (E. Waldschmidt and W. Lentz, *Manichäische Dogmatik aus chinesischen und iranischen Texten*, SPAW, Phil.-hist. Kl., 1933, Berlin, 1933, pp. 510, 565). Without going outside eastern Iran, Bīrūnī has conserved the names of the days of the Sogdian and Choresmian calendars: the names of the twentieth day of the month have been explained by tracing them back to Vərəθrayna (Benveniste and Renou, pp. 83f.), the divinity to whom the same day was dedicated in the Avestan calendar (*Sīrōza* 1.20; 2.20).

*Middle Persian Wahrām.* In the Pahlavi texts Wahrām is especially associated with Mihr yazd, Rašn ī rēstag, Way ī weh, Aštād yazd, and Xwarrah ī dēn ī weh ī mazdēsnañ (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 5.3). During the first three days after death, until the fourth dawn of the deceased, he accompanies and guides the soul on its journey into the beyond (*Mēnōg ī xrad*, chap. 2) together with Srōš and Way ī weh. His association with Mihr, Rašn, and Srōš is a reflection of doctrines already present in the Avesta (cf. Gershevitch, *Avestan Hymn*, pp. 193f.). Furthermore, as has been noted by J. P. de Menasce (see above), Wahrām enjoyed a special “promotion” within the Zoroastrian pantheon, becoming the seventh of the Amahraspandān, the “victorious” (*pērōzgar*) because he had managed to drive Ahriman back into hell (cf. Dumézil, *Heur et malheur*, pp. 183ff.).



The popularity of Bahrām has always been great among the Zoroastrian communities, even after the Sasanian era. Bahrām has always, in fact, conserved his outstanding position, thanks both to the late association with *vərəθrayan-ātar*, the *ādūr ī warahrān* or the *Ātaš Bahrām* (see above) and to his role as the protector of wayfarers and travelers (M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London, 1979, pp. 89, 218).

See also [aždahā](#).

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