



## DRAXT Ī ĀSŪRĪG

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**DRAXT Ī ĀSŪRĪG** (The Babylonian tree), a versified contest over precedence between a goat and a palm tree, composed in the Parthian language, written in Book Pahlavi script, and consisting of about 120 verses. Probably in ancient times the Iranians adopted this literary genre, which has the characteristics of oral literature from Mesopotamia; examples are found in Sumerian and Akkadian texts (Asmussen, 1973, pp. 51-59; Brunner, pp. 194-202). The text has been edited and published from Codex MK, with collations from other manuscripts (*Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, II, pp. 109-14).

*Draxt ī āsūrīg* begins with a riddle, posed by the poet, in which a brief description of a tree is given without specific identification (par. 1), though the reader or listener understands that it is a palm tree. Then the tree itself enumerates (1-20) for the goat the benefits it provides: fruits and useful objects made from its wood, leaves, and fibers. In the next section (21-53) the goat rises to the challenge, first ridiculing the palm tree, then enumerating the benefits it offers; foods made from its milk, milk for Zoroastrian religious ceremonies, and objects fashioned from its skin, wool, and gut. Finally, the poet proclaims the goat victorious (54). At the end there are prayers for the person who has recited, written down, or otherwise brought this poem into his possession and curses for his enemies (55-60).

According to some scholars, the contest represents the opposition between two faiths, with the goat representing Zoroastrianism and the palm tree representing the pagan religions of Assyria and Babylonia, in which the cult of the tree formed an important part (Smith). Others have better understood it as



a manifestation of the contrast between pastoral life, symbolized by the goat, and the agricultural life, symbolized by the palm tree (Rūḥ-al-Amīnī, pp. 323-36).

Christian Bartholomae (pp. 23-28) was the first scholar to identify the language of the text as Parthian. His identification is confirmed by the presence of words and grammatical constructions that are exclusively Parthian: *ās-* “to come” (par. 49; Man. Parth. ’s-, ’s-), *awišt-* “to stand, to be” (20; Man. Parth. ’wyšt-; see Henning, 1950, p. 643 n. 6), *bid* “again” (45, 46, 48; Man. Parth. *byd*), *burz* “high, tall” (22; Man. Parth. *bwrz*), *darg/γ* “long” (54; Man. Parth. *dry*), *hā/āmhirz* “attendant” (36; Man. Parth. *h’mhyrz*), *hawiž/hōyiž* “he, that too” (32, 44; Man. Parth. *hwyc*); *hirz-* “let” (19, Man. Parth. *hyrz-*), *kar-* “do, make” (6-8, 11-13, 16, 31, 34, etc.; Man. Parth. *kr-*), *kēž* “somebody” (31; Man. Parth. *kyc*; see Henning, 1950, p. 643 n. 12), *naxšag* “fine, good” (40; Man. Parth. *nxšg*), *šāx* “horn” (22, in *dēw šāx*; Tafazzolī, 1990), *wasnād* “for, for the sake of” (2, 8, 17, 28, 35, 38, 42, 47; Man. Parth. *wsn’d*), *wāxt*, *wāž-* “tell, say” (20, 27, 51; Man. Parth. *w’xt*, *w’c-*), *wirāz-* “arrange” (6, 37, 38; Man. Parth. *wyr’z-*), *yaδ o* “until” (20, 25, 28, 30; Man. Parth. *yd (’w)*; see Henning, 1950, p. 643 n. 7), *ahēm* “I am” (29; Man. Parth. ’hym/’hyym), *a’i/ay* “thou art” (29, 53; Man. Parth. ’yy), *čē* used as a particle in *ežāfa* (28, 43; Man. Parth. *cy*).

In the course of oral transmission by speakers of Middle Persian, the Parthian text came to include many words or constructions influenced by this language, for example, *āšyān* “nest” (instead of *āhyān(ag)*, par. 18), *buland* “high, tall” (instead of *burzend*, 2, 22, 25, 30), *ēwēn(ag)* “manner, way” (instead of *aβdēn*, 28, 41, 54), *morwārīd* “pearl” (instead of *moryārīd*, 34, 51), *pērōz* “victory” (instead of *paryōž*, 54), *pēš* “before” (instead of *parwān*, 51), *šīr* “milk” (instead of *šift*, 44), *šīrēn* “sweet” (instead of *šiftēn*, 1), *xurmāg* “date” (instead of *amrāw*, 54), the abstract suffix *-īh* (instead of *-īf(t)*, e.g., *bundahišnīh* “original creation”), and frequent use of the particle *ī* in *ežāfa*.

In the manuscripts of *Draxt (ī) āsūrīg* the text is written in prose form; Émile Benveniste was the first to recognize it as poetry. From examination of certain sections of the text he concluded that some verses contain six syllables (pp. 194, 195, 204). His conclusion about the syllabic meter of the poem was criticized by W. B. Henning (1950), who argued that the meter of this poem is accentual, like those of other Middle Persian and Parthian poems. He established the versification of certain lines and the correct readings of certain words. The poem probably conforms to the principles and rules of Parthian poetic meter (e.g., return of the ictus at regular intervals, quantity of syllables)



as described by Gilbert Lazard. But, owing to alterations in the course of oral transmission, redaction in Pahlavi script, and copying, as well as to the presence of unknown words, it has not yet been possible to establish the versification of the entire text. The effort by Māhyār Nawwābī to do so must be considered tentative.

The poetic diction of the text is simple and without embellishment, and the imagery is elementary, as in the likening of the shape of the [date-palm](#) leaf to that of the reed (*naδ*), the sweetness of the date to that of the grape (par. 1), the softness and whiteness of a maiden's breast and neck to the body (*\*handām*, Unvala, p. 661) of the goat (43), the body odor of a certain species of goat to the scent of a fragrant flower (*gul gētīg*, 43), and the immobility of the date palm to the nail of a loom (53). The expressions “casting pearls before swine” and “playing the harp before a mad camel” (51) were drawn from ancient Iranian proverbs (Widengren, pp. 36-37; Asmussen, 1968), and the idiom *kōy murdagān* “alley of the dead” (49) was probably a metaphor for cemetery (Henning, 1950, p. 645 n. 2).

*Draxt* (*tī*) *āsūrīg* is also a catalogue poem, that is, a poem containing lists of related words, the purpose of which was instruction and reinforcement of memory; in this aspect it also can be considered wisdom literature (Boyce, “Middle Persian Literature,” p. 55). Such lists include items of clothing (*mōy* “shoe,” par. 9, cf. Ar. lw. *mūq*; *\*nālēn* (?) “sandals,” 10; *kamar* “belt,” 34; *mōžag* “boot,” 35; *angustbān* “finger guard, finger stall,” 35; *xaz tuxārīg* “Tokharian marten furs,” 42; see Henning, 1950, p. 644 n. 11), food and drink (*sik* “vinegar,” 15 [Henning, 1950, p. 642 n. 8: *šīr* “milk,” but cf. Shaki, p. 67]; *angubēn* “honey,” l. 16; *nān* “bread,” 20, 42; *pist/pust* “browned flour,” 42; *panīr* “cheese,” 42, 46; *rōyn-xwardīg* “sweetmeats,” 42, Henning, 1950, p. 644 n. 10; *pēšpārag* “appetizer, hors-d’oeuvre,” 45, Henning, 1955, p. 603; *šīr* “milk,” 46; *dōx* “churned sour milk,” 46; *māst* “curds, sour milk,” 46; *kašk* “dried buttermilk,” 46; *afrušag* “beastings,” 46; *wašag* “beer,” 45, Henning, 1955; *hur*, an alcoholic drink, 45, Henning, 1955; *maδ* “wine,” 20), musical instruments (*čang* “harp,” 48, 51; *win* “vina, lute,” 48; *kannār*, a kind of lute, 48; *barbat* “lyre,” l. 48; *tambūr* “cittern, lute,” l. 48), perfumes (*kāpūr* “camphor,” 42; *mušk* “musk,” 42), arms and battle equipment (*drōn* “bow,” 40, Bailey, p. 472; *zīh* “bowstring,” 40; *skuz* “saddle strap,” 41, Tafazzolī, 1970; *zēn* “saddle,” 41; *\*pilaxxān* “sling,” 41, MacKenzie; *kaškanjīr* “ballista,” 41, Tafazzolī, 1966, idem, 1971; *meh pīl* “big elephant,” 41; *zand pīl* “large, furious elephant,” 41), objects of everyday and economic use (*gyāg-rōb* “broom,” 6; *yawāz* “oil press,” 7,



Tafazzolī, 1966; *damēnag* “fan,” 8; *rasan* “rope,” 11; *mēx* “peg,” 13; *tabangōg* “box, basket,” 17; *mašk* “skin bag,” 36; *maškīžag* “skin tablecloth,” 37; *bāryāmag* “saddle bag,” 33, Henning, 1950, p. 644 n. 2; *ambān* “skin bag,” 42; *makōg* “ship,” 4; *wādbān* “sail,” 5; *frasp* “mast,” 5), writing terms (*nāmag* “letter, book,” *frawardag* “epistle,” *dēwān* “register,” *daftar* “register, account book,” *pādixšīr* “treaty,” 39), and religious terms (*ǰīw* “(consecrated) milk,” 31; *hōm* “Haoma (juice),” 32; *gōšuru(n)* “soul of the cow,” 32; *yazišn* “sacrifice, *yasna* ceremony,” 32; *kustīg* “sacred girdle,” 43; \**padām*, as read by Unvala, p. 660, rather than *pašm*, as read by others, “sacred mouth mask,” 43; *taškanag* “sacred undershirt,” 43; *pādyāb* “ablution,” 47; *māzdēsna* “Mazdā worshippers,” 47).

“The story of the vine and the ewe” (*raz o miš*), a poem similar to *Draxt (ī) āsūrīg*, exists in Persian literature in two versions, one consisting of sixty-one distichs in Judeo-Persian (Asmussen, 1973, pp. 32 ff.), the other in forty-nine distichs in Persian (Qayšarī, pp. 363-78). Both versions are versified contests over precedence and have the characteristics of oral literature, but neither is as eloquent or as high in literary quality as *Draxt (ī) āsūrīg*.

**Figure 1.** Impression of cylinder seal, showing Darius I between two palm trees, the British Museum, London, no. 89132. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

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