



# GREECE III. PERSIAN INFLUENCE ON GREEK THOUGHT

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#### IRAN AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The idea of oriental, and especially Iranian, origins of Greek philosophy was endowed by antiquity with a legendary aura, either by declaring that Pythagoras had been Zoroaster's pupil in Babylon (a city where neither of them had probably ever been), or by writing, as did Clement of Alexandria (Clement of Alexandria, 5.9.4), that Heraclitus had drawn on "the barbarian philosophy," an expression by which, in view of the proximity of Ephesus to the Persian empire, he must have meant primarily the Iranian doctrines.

The problem, studied seriously since the beginning of the 19th century, has



often been negatively solved by the great historians of Greek philosophy; but it seems, nevertheless, repeatedly to rise anew like the Phoenix from its ashes, as though the temptation to compare the two traditions and discover a bond of interdependence between them periodically became irresistible.

Pherecydes of Syros was one of the first Greek prose writers and may be considered, as the author of a theogony-cosmogony, to have been a precursor of the Ionian philosophers. He told of the marriage of Zās and Chthoniē. Zās, genitive Zantos, is a conflation of Zeus with the Luvian god Šanta, which points to a region in western Asia Minor from which Pherecydes' father Babys or Babis originated (West, p. 243). A third god in Pherecydes's narrative was said to have produced from his own seed, fire, wind, and water; he is called in some sources Kronos, in others Chronos. Both gods were later identified, but we do not know which of the two Pherecydes meant. If he meant Chronos, the question arises of a borrowing from Iran. Zurvan, mentioned as a minor deity in the Avesta (see Zaehner, p. 57; Gray, *Foundations*, p. 124), was ignored by Zarathushtra, perhaps on purpose, as Mithra was also omitted. Anyhow, Zurvan is attested in Elamite tablets (509-494 B.C.E.) in the name Izrutukma (i.e., \*Zru[va]taukma "descended from Zurvan"; see Schwartz, p. 687). The myth of his giving birth to Ohrmazd and Ahriman as recounted by Eznik Kołb in the 5th century (q.v.; see Zaehner, pp. 60-61) and not attested, indirectly before Eudemus of Rhodes (4th century) may, however, have had Indo-Iranian roots, for in India Prajāpati, connected with time, offered sacrifice, like Zurvan in Iran, in order to get a progeny and, just like him, doubted once about the efficacy of his ritual. Pherecydes may therefore, if he wrote about Chronos, have borrowed him from the Magi who, perhaps under the threat of Cyrus, had emigrated to Asia Minor.

Anaximander, according to Hippolytus' evidence (*Refutatio omnium haeresium* 1.6), taught that the spheres of the heavenly bodies followed one another in this order, starting from the earth: the stars, the moon, and the sun. The Avesta (*Hādoxt nask* 2.15; *Yt.* 12.9 ff.) teaches that the souls of the dead reach paradise through three intermediate stages: *humata* (good thoughts), *huxta* (good words), and *huuaršta* (good deeds). Now, according to the Pahlavi books (e.g., *Mēnōg ī xrad* 57.13), each of these stages is respectively identified with the place of the stars, the moon, and the sun. It is obvious that the stars, the



moon, and the sun follow each other in the order of increasing light, and this progression is completed in a fourth and final stage, which is the destination point of the soul's journey; one of the Pahlavi names of Paradise is, in fact, *anayrān* "beginningless (lights)" (*Frahang ī pahlavik* 28). To each stage there corresponds a category of living beings: to the stars, the plants; to the moon, the animals; to the sun, man; to the beginningless lights, the gods or God. The hierarchy between these beings is obvious. So we can explain, through Iran and by means of an organic body of beliefs, Anaximander's doctrine on the spheres of the stars, the moon, and the sun (see also Panaino, pp. 205-26).

Everything that exists comes, according to Anaximenes (Diels, I, p. 22) from a single substance, *aēr*, which notably means wind. In Iran it is said in the *Dēnkart* (278.14) that "He who quickens the world and is the life of living things is Wāy, etc." The existence of a great god Vayu, already Indo-Iranian, is warranted by similar testimonies in the Rig Veda (4.46 etc.).

Anaximenes' explanation of eclipses as being caused by dark bodies has its counterpart in *Dāmād nask*, in *Šāyest nē šāyest* (12.5). These dark sun and dark moon are not mentioned in the Avesta, but, as writes West (p. 108), "One would not expect to find a theory of eclipses in the Avesta," at least not in the extant, liturgical part of it.

The question of an Iranian origin of Heraclitus's doctrines was raised by Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, whose work as well as that of his successors Friedrich Creuzer, August Gladisch, etc., have been reviewed by Martin Lutchfield West (pp. 166 ff.). There are several fragments which expound Heraclitus's reflections on fire. "This cosmic order, which is the same for all, was not made by any of the gods or of mankind, but was ever and is and shall be ever-living fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure" (Fr. 29); "the transformations of fire: first sea, and of sea, half is earth, half fiery water spout" (Fr. 32); "all things are counterparts of fire, and fire of all things, as goods of gold and gold of goods" (Fr. 28). According to Heraclitus, "fire lives the death of the earth, and air lives the death of fire, water lives the death of air, and earth that of water" (Fr. 76). Another fragment names lightning: "The



thunder-bolt steers all things” (Fr. 64). And another one says that fire is to judge all things at the end of the world (Fr. 72).

In the *Gāthās* the role of fire is fundamental. Twice Zarathushtra calls upon “the fire of Ahura Mazdā,” either to make offerings to it (Y. 43.9) or to acknowledge its protection (Y. 46.7). In all the other passages, fire is an instrument of ordeal. Ordeal is found only once in the *Gāthās* (Y. 32.7) as an actual practice, but several times there is reference to a future ordeal which is to be made by means of fire to separate the good from the wicked. Here fire is the instrument of truth or justice (*aša*, q.v.), from which it derives its power (hence the epithet *aša-aojah*). This connection of fire with *aša* is constant, e.g., “I wish to think, insofar as I am able, of making unto thy fire (O Ahura Mazdā!) the offering of veneration for Aša” (Y. 43). And when each of the elements are placed under the protection of the Aməša Spəntas, who surround Ahura Mazdā (qq.v.), Aša is the patron of fire.

There was also a doctrine of cosmic fire. Fire penetrated all the six stages of creation. Although this is not attested before Zādspram’s *Wīzīdagīhā* (1.25), its antiquity is proven by the appearance, both in Iran and in India, of two equivalent classifications, one in three fires, one in five.

Parallel to the relationship of fire with Aša is Heraclitus’s doctrine that fire is ruled by Dikē “Justice” (not by the Logos as is the case in the Stoic interpretation of Heraclitus). As West writes (p. 137), “the sun’s measures are maintained, through the Erinyes, by Dikē, and since the sun’s measures cannot be isolated from the measures of the world at large, it must be possible to say that Dikē governs the whole process.”

Heraclitus’s god watches men the whole time, not only by day. Ahura Mazdā sees all that men do (Y. 31.13) and is not to be deceived (Y. 45.4). He is never asleep and never dulled by narcotics (Vd 19.20). “Heraclitus’ conception of the soul’s history is, from a Greek point of view, novel. It has a deep ‘account’ that increases it-self . . . According to the Pahlavi books [e.g., *Mēnōg ī xrad* 2.118 ff.],



at death, the soul's good and bad deeds are counted up, and determine its fate" (West, p. 184).

The *fravašis* (q.v.) are parallel to Heraclitus's hero-spirits and to the immortals "that live the death of mortals." "Heraclitus' novel emphasis on the function of Eris or Polemos in determining the apportionment of the natural world, his conviction that opposition is the essence of the universe has long seemed to comparativists a counterpart of the Zoroastrian doctrine of an eternal war between Ahura Mazdā and Anra Mainiiu. Heraclitus strikes a prophetic note that has reminded more than one reader of Zoroaster" (West, p. 186).

Pausanias attributed to the Chaldaeans and the Magi an influence on Plato's teachings. And Aristotle at one time considered Plato the founder of a religion of the Good and therefore a continuator of the work of the ancient prophet (Jaeger, pp. 13 ff.). In the myth of Er, the souls must choose between two paths: on the left is the way to descend from heaven to hell, on the right is the ascent of the souls who rise from the Tartarus up to the stars (Replica 614 CD). The very idea of this ascension was quite new in Greece and must have come from the Zoroastrian belief in the primeval choice and in the *Činuatō Pərətu* (see ČINWAD PUHL) separating the good from the wicked. Plato may have heard of it through Eudoxus of Cnidus, who was well aware of the doctrines of the Magi. In the myth of the *Politic*, Plato envisaged the idea of an alternate predominance of a good god and an evil god, an idea he may have learned from the Magi. But he decidedly refused it. In the *Timaeus* time is given as the mobile image of immobile eternity, maybe a Platonic transposition of the Iranian distinction between "time long autonomous" and "time infinite" (Av. *zurvan darəγō.x<sup>v</sup>aδāta-* and *zurvan akarana-*; see *Air Wb.*, cols. 46-696). The *Timaeus* owed much to Democritus, whose relationship with the teachings of the Magi is well attested. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato, with reference to Hippocrates, views man as an image of the world, a microcosm, an idea propounded in the *Dāmdāt nask*, a lost part of the Avesta summarized in the *Bundahišn* and whose antiquity is proved by the Indo-Iranian myth of a primeval man sacrificed and dismembered to form the different parts of the world (Duchesne Guillemin, 1958, pp. 72 ff.).



Empedocles already shared the microcosm idea, which governed the conception of medicine he had inherited from the Cnidian school, influenced by Iran. He also declared that “the general law is widely extended through the ether of the vast dominion and the immense brightness of the sky,” (Fr. 38), which harks back to Heraclitus and, through him, to Zarathushtra proclaiming the coincidence of Aša with the light (Y. 31.7).

The Chaldaic Oracles, despite their fire-cult, probably owe nothing to Iran (contra: des Places, p. 13). Greek *mágos*, *magikós*, *magía* come from Old Persian *maguš*, but how to trace Iranian elements in Greek magic? The Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha were not written by Hellenized Magi, who may never have existed (R. Beck apud Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 491-565).

Three kinds of medicine were distinguished, through spells, the knife, or herbs, both in Iran (*Vd.* 7.44) and in Greece (Pindar, 3.47-55), not elsewhere; borrowing seems, therefore, plausible, either way (Dumézil, pp. 20 ff.).

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