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INDO-IRANIAN RELIGION

INDO-IRANIAN RELIGION. Indo-Iranian comparative studies enable us to distinguish a fund of religious concepts, beliefs, and practices that are common to ancient Iran and ancient India. It is methodologically possible to reconstruct some elements of an Indo-Iranian religion by using the surviving evidence of ideas and practices that seem to be unrelated to the Zoroastrian tradition in Iran and to the later developments of religious thought in ancient India and yet, at the same time, have something in common. These elements are connected with rituals, the pantheon, myth and epos, concepts of death and afterlife, cosmography—that is to say, several different aspects of a religion, though not ones that enable us to reconstruct an organic system from the standpoint either of doctrine or of ritual or as regards individual or collective behavior.

The highly ritualistic nature of the Vedic religion and of the religious world in which, by way of reaction and deliberate opposition, Zoroaster's message established itself, features a number of common points. These include the ritual and symbolism of fire (Ātar in Iran; Agni in India), the main theophany in Zoroastrianism, where there are three distinct ritual fires (of priests, warriors, and farmers) and five natural fires (in men, animals, plants, clouds, and the earth), according to a conception that is of Indo-Iranian origin (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1961, pp. 36-37); the cult of **sauma* (see HAOMA), Av. *haoma*-/Skt. *soma*; the purificatory rites involving the use of animal urine (see GŌMĒZ); some aspects of the more archaic funeral ceremony (Gonda, 1962, pp. 49-50); and some cosmographic, cosmogonic, and cosmological concepts

(Boyce, 1975, p. 130 ff.).

As for the cult of *haoma* in Iran and *soma* in India, several studies have long since pointed out the features that help trace it back to a common origin (Hillebrandt; Henry), notwithstanding the specificity of its different developments in the two branches of the Indo-Iranians and in the relative ritual and sacrificial performances (*yasna* in Iran, *yajña* in India). Haoma or Soma is not only the name of a plant, or a mushroom (Wasson; Brough; Gershevitch, 1975; Flattery and Schwartz), but it is also the name of a deity or "one worthy of worship" (*yazata* in the Zoroastrian tradition) in the Avesta and in the Vedas, a divine priest (Boyce, 1975, p. 160).

There are also some precise Indo-Iranian parallels between the "Son of the Waters" (Apąm Napāt in the Avesta; Apąm Napāt in the Vedas; Boyce, 1975, pp. 44-52) and the Avestan Nairyō.saŋha ("of manly utterance"; cf. Vedic *narāśaṃsa*; Gray, pp. 152-54; Gershevitch, 1959, pp. 205 f.). The same can also be said for the Waters (Āpas) and the other figures connected with ritual practice, sacrifice, and libations (Av. *zaoθra*; Skt. *hotrá*).

The Indo-Iranian term for "god" is Vedic *deva*, Avestan *daēva*, that derives, like the Latin *deus*, from an Indo-European root meaning "shine, be bright." After Zoroaster had condemned the polytheism of the past, this term came to denote in Iran, even in the Achaemenian inscriptions (Old Pers. *daiva*), false gods and demons (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1962, pp. 189 ff.), while in India it was also used for some deities that were opposed to others designated by the term *asura* (Av. *ahura*) "lord" (Kuiper, 1985). The original meaning of *daēva* or *daiva* in Iran can be deduced, amongst other things, from the Avestan expression *daēva*/*mašya*, similar to the Vedic *deva*/*martya*, which have their parallel in the Greek *theoi*/*andres* (*anthrōpoi*) and the Latin *dii*/*homines*, all of which mean "gods and men" (Benveniste). As for the term *ahura* or *asura*, which was used in Iran and India alike for gods or men, in the Zoroastrian tradition it referred especially to the supreme god, Ahura Mazdā, to Miθra, and to Apąm Napāt, who are regarded by some as being the Three Lords of the Indo-Iranian pantheon (Boyce, 1975, p. 48), while in the Veda, as well as meaning divine beings in general, it often referred in particular to Dyaus Pitar "Father Sky" (ibid., p. 23).

Comparative studies of ancient Iran and Vedic India reveal various aspects of an ancient theology that goes back to a period we can define as Indo-Iranian. The information Herodotus (1.131) gives about the deities of the Persians

reveals an archaic situation, with a pantheon that is to some extent Indo-Iranian. The sun, the moon, the earth, fire, water, the atmosphere, and the winds, as well as the whole heavenly vault, have a number of nature gods corresponding to them both in India (Gonda, 1962, pp. 65 ff.) and in Iran, where there is plenty of evidence for them in the Avesta. Divine entities, heavenly or astral bodies, can be found there as deities of the heavens and more generally of nature, especially in the part containing the *Yašt*s. In Iran there are some particularly important beings worthy of worship that have, in various ways, an Indo-Iranian prehistory, such as Miθra (*Yašt* 10), Vərəθraγna (*Yašt* 14), Vayu (*Yašt* 15), Haoma (*Yasna* 9-11). For the purpose of Indo-Iranian comparative studies an important figure is the Iranian Vərəθraγna, a neuter noun meaning the "smiting of resistance," the personification of victory, that survived in Zoroastrianism (see BAHRĀM). In India the adjective (*vṛtrahan*) was especially used as an epithet of the god Indra (q.v.), who was demonized in Zoroastrian Iran together with Saurva, the Indian Śarva, the equivalent of the violent, warlike Rudra, and Nåŋhaiθya, the equivalent of Nāsatya in the Rigveda. These deities appear next to Varuṇa as Aryan gods of the Mitanni kingdom in tablets discovered at Boğazköi in Asia Minor (Thieme, 1960; Dumézil, 1961; Mayrhofer, 1966). In Indo-Iranian comparative studies admirable efforts have been devoted to Vərəθraγna and Indra, though the solutions reached are not univocal and give rise to some problems (Benveniste and Renou; Lommel, 1939; de Menasce; Burrow; Boyce, 1975, pp. 62-65).

As for the Indo-Iranian Mitra (Meillet), the Indian equivalent of the Iranian Miθra is evident, although the Indian Mitra is undoubtedly a much vaguer figure in the Vedic pantheon than is the divine entity (*yazata*) in *Yašt* 10, the god (*baga*) in the Achaemenian inscriptions, the Mihr in Pahlavi text theology, or the deity in Iranian-Anatolian and Mesopotamian circles, where the cult of the Mithraic mysteries came into being (Cumont; Vermaseren; Turcan).

As far as female deities are concerned, attempts have been made to reconstruct the figure of an Indo-Iranian goddess who was particularly connected with water, fecundity, and fertility, on the basis of a comparison between the Iranian Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā (see ANĀHĪD) and the Indian Sarasvatī "She who possesses waters" (Lommel, 1954), although we must bear in mind the influence of Mesopotamian and Semitic religious concepts on the Uranian Aphrodite of the Persians, according to the evidence given by Herodotus (1.131).

Without underestimating the occasional influence that a non-Aryan

substratum may have had on the religions of ancient Iran and India, we must bear in mind that an Indo-Iranian comparative study can give important results—for instance, by research into some fossilized remains in the religions of the Hindu Kush area, between Nūrestān and Dardestān, that can possibly be traced back to Indo-Iranian or ancient proto-Indo-Aryan origins (Jettmar, 1975; Tucci, 1977).

Other useful fields for the reconstruction of an Indo-Iranian religion are myth and epos. As well as the aforementioned Vṛtrahan, another highly significant example is that of the Iranian Yima, the son of Vīvaŋhvant, and the Indian Yama, the son of Vivasvant, king of the golden age in Iran (Christensen, 1917 and 1934) and ruler of an underground realm of the dead in India (Boyce, 1975, p. 92). No less meaningful are the examples of the first man, Gayō.marətan (see GAYŌMART) in Iran and Mārtāṇḍa in India (Hoffmann, 1957), and of other heroic figures, especially those belonging to the mythical dynasty of the Paraδātas or Pišdādians (Yarshater, 1983, pp. 420-36), before the Kavyān or Kayānian dynasty (Christensen, 1931; Yarshater, 1983, pp. 436-73): these heroes are connected with the *haoma*/*soma* sacrifice and the victorious fight against, respectively, the dragon Aži Dahāka (see AŽDAHĀ) and the dragon Viśvarūpa (Boyce, 1975, pp. 97-100).

Noteworthy contributions to the study of the mythological and epical-legendary motifs of Iran and India have been made by G. Dumézil (1968-73) and S. Wikander (1959), with particular reference to the theory of the tripartite ideology of the Indo-Europeans, in which a common heritage of myths and legends of definite Indo-Iranian origin is highlighted, though at times controversially.

With regard to funeral ceremonies and beliefs concerning the afterlife, an Indo-Iranian comparative approach is still possible, and useful, for the purpose of reconstructing common elements. It is indeed most likely that the funerary customs, with the cremation of corpses in India and their exposition to vultures in Iran—and with the respective burials of the bones—became differentiated as independent, secondary developments, compared to an original practice of inhumation, of which traces can also be found in Iran (see ASTŌDĀN; BURIAL ii. and iii.; CORPSE), where the Avestan term *daxma*, which was later used in the Zoroastrian tradition to denote the towers of silence, is thought to be derived from a root meaning “to bury” (Hoffmann, 1965). Cremation and exposition, on the other hand, most probably both had the purpose of favoring a rapid detachment of the spirit from the body, so that it

could then ascend to heaven (Boyce, 1975, p. 113).

Some idea, at least an embryonic one, of a paradisiacal existence was not altogether unfamiliar to the primitive Iranian mind, although it cannot have been marked by strictly ethical values. A happy life after death must have been reserved for an elite of priests and warriors, while the background of individual eschatology must have been dominated by the belief in a grey, shadowy survival of the spirits of the dead in a nether region, which was approached along the paths trodden by deceased ancestors (Oldenberg, pp. 546 f.). There is an echo of a similar afterlife, which is neither good nor bad, in the Zoroastrian concept of an intermediate zone, halfway between heaven and hell, for those who have deserved neither too much nor too little in their life on earth (see HAMĒSTAGĀN), while those who succeed in possessing Truth (Av. *Aša*; Ved. *ṛta*) and who are therefore *ašavan* or *ṛtāvan* (see AŠA and AŠAVAN) are assured of a state of blessedness.

The very concept of *aša* and *ṛta* is a fundamental theme of Indo-Iranian comparative studies. The term, which can be translated “truth” (Lüders; Gershevitch, 1959), also has the meaning of “order” in the broad sense of the word: cosmic, ritual, social, and moral order. The possession of *aša/ṛta* is the sign of a spiritual fulfillment that enables the *ašavan/ṛtāvan* to enter into a new dimension of life which, in spite of its being characterized by a *post-mortem* state of blessedness, does not belong entirely to the afterlife; such a person is an initiate or a seer, one whose intimate bond with the other life, which eludes the physical senses, gives him access to the mysteries of earthly life (Gnoli, 1979). Zoroaster did not repudiate these concepts but gave them new ethical meanings that were coherent with his dualistic idea, and he used the language that was typical of the religious tradition in which he had been trained as an expert in the art of priesthood.

The idea of a sort of initiation for the purpose of acquiring the supreme wellbeing of *aša/ṛta* was therefore of Indo-Iranian origin. It formed the basis of an “Aryan mysticism” (Kuiper, 1964), whose characteristic signs were an experience of inner light and a vision that was seen by the “eye of the soul.”

With regard to cosmography, the idea of a cosmic mountain that rose at the earth’s center as an *Axis Mundi* is a common Indo-Iranian legacy (Boyce, 1975, p. 134; Schwartz, p. 644). Both the Iranians and the Indians alike believed that the world was divided into seven regions (*karšvar* in Iran; *dvīpa* in India) and that it was surrounded by a mountain range. The central region, which was

surrounded by the other six, was called Xᵛaniraθa in Iran and Jambūdvīpa in India. In the middle of this region there rose a lofty mountain, the Harā bərəzaitī, the "high Harā" (see ALBORZ), in Iran and mount Meru, or Sumeru, in India (Kirfel); and to the south of this mountain, in both cases, there stood a miraculous tree, the Iranian Tree of All Seeds or the Indian Jambū Tree (see COSMOGONY and COSMOLOGY i.). The peak (Av. Taēra; Pahl. Tērag) of Harā was also known by the Avestan name Hukairya "of good activity" (Pahl. Hukar) or the Pahlavi name Čagād ī dāidīg, the "lawful summit" (see ČAGĀD Ī DĀITĪ).

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