



MAGOPHONIA

MAGOPHONIA (slaughter of the Magi). According to Herodotus (3.79: τα μαγοφόνια; see also Ctesias, frag. 15: μαγοφονί α), when Darius [I] (see [DARIUS iii](#)) and his noble companions in 522 BCE murdered the impostor Smerdis (called “Gaumāta the Magus” in DB 1.36; see [GAUMĀTA](#)), who with the help of his brother had usurped the throne, the Persian conspirators cut off the heads of these Magi and showed them in the streets to other Persians, who then drew their daggers and killed the Magi wherever they could find them. Herodotus adds that, in commemoration of this event, the Persians used to hold the great feast called the “Magophonia,” and that during this feast all the Magi stayed home in order not to be killed. Ctesias also mentions the annual celebration of the day of the killing of the Magus, whom he calls Sphendadates. The slaughter (ἀνάίρεσις) of the Magi is also mentioned by Flavius Josephus (*Antiquitates judaicae* 11.3.1).

An appropriate Iranian word for magophonia is the Sogdian *mwγzt-* (killing of the Magi), which is attested in a Manichean text (TM 393), and, according to Walter B. Henning, who published it, is “the exact replica” of an Old Iranian **magu-žati-* (Henning, 1944, pp. 135-36, 144, l. 27). Henning states that it is difficult to decide if *mwγzt-* is a genuine Sogdian word or a transliteration from Parthian or Middle Persian. In the above-mentioned Sogdian text, the murder of the Magi is a crime ascribed to Alexander the Great. According to Henning, through this interpretation the Magi tried to let fall into oblivion the true origin of the magophonia. The same author also assumes that the Persians established a national festival during which the Magi were molested



to remind them of their humiliation (Henning, 1977, p. 139).

Joseph Marquart assumed that Herodotus in his story about the Magophonia was misled by the coincidence of the date of Gaumāta's murder with the feast devoted in all probability to the adoration of the god Mithra, which was celebrated in the seventh month of the Old Persian calendar (*Bāgayādiš*) and was known in later times under the name Mehrgān (see Marquart, II, pp. 135-36). Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh assumed that there may have been two feast days, namely *Bāga-yādi and Mehrgān, which on the day of Gaumāta's death during the autumnal equinox might have fallen on the same day (Taqizadeh, 1938, pp. 39, 44). Mary Boyce also considered incredible the statement of classical authors that on one day in every year the Magi were insulted and confined. She was inclined to assume that Darius established an annual feast for celebration of his grasping of power and the killing of the Magus Gaumāta, but not of the Magi generally, and that the Persians continued to observe this festival under all the Achaemenid kings (Boyce, 1982, pp. 87-88).

As is known, the Magi acted as court priests until the end of the Achaemenid dynasty.

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