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SIMORḠ

SIMORḠ (Persian), Sēnmurw (Pahlavi), Sīna-Mrū (Pāzand), a fabulous, mythical bird. The name derives from Avestan *mərəγō saēnō* 'the bird Saēna', originally a raptor, either eagle or falcon, as can be deduced from the etymologically identical Sanskrit *śyená*. Saēna is also attested as a personal name which is derived from the bird name.

In the Avestan Yašt 14.41 Vərəθraγna, the deity of victory, wraps *xᵛarnah*, fortune, round the house of the worshipper, for wealth in cattle, like the great bird Saēna, and as the watery clouds cover the great mountains, which means that Saēna will bring rain. In Yašt 12.17 Saēna's tree stands in the middle of the sea Vourukaša, it has good and potent medicine, is called all-healing, and the seeds of all plants are deposited on it. This scanty information is supplemented by the Pahlavi texts. In the *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (ed. Anklesaria, 61.37-41) the Sēnmurw's nest is on the "tree without evil and of many seeds." When the bird rises, a thousand shoots grow from the tree, and when he (or she) alights, he breaks a thousand shoots and lets the seeds drop from them. The bird Cīnāmrōš (Camrōš) collects the seeds and disperses them where Tištar (Sirius) will seize the water with the seeds and rain them down on the earth. While here the bird breaks the branches with his weight, in *Bundahišn* 16.4 (tr. Anklesaria) he makes the tree wither, which seems to connect him with the scorching sun. An abbreviated form of this description is found in Zādspram 3.39; a gloss on the Pahlavi translation of Yašt 14.41 confuses the tree of many seeds with the tree of the White Hōm. Two birds are involved in the scattering of the seeds also in the New Persian *Rivāyat* of Dārāb Hormazyār (tr. Dhabhar,

p. 99), here called Amrōš and Camrōš, Amrōš taking the place of Sēnmurw; these names derive from Avestan *amru* and *camru*, personal names taken from bird names.

The seasonal activity of the Sēnmurw in conjunction with Camrōš and Tištar can be interpreted consistently in astronomical terms. The identity of Tištar with Sirius, the brightest star of the constellation Canis Major (the Great Dog), is well established, and it can be assumed that Sēnmurw and Camrōš are stars, too. For Sēnmurw the constellation Aquila (Eagle), or its most prominent star, Altair (Ar. *al-ṭayr* 'the bird'), is the most likely candidate. The heliacal rise of Sirius in July corresponds to the setting of Aquila. Camrōš may be identified with Cygnus (Swan), which sets some time after Aquila. The influence of Greek astronomy and astrology is well attested in Sasanian Iran, but itself goes back to Babylonian sources, and it is quite possible that the Avestan source was dependent on them (contra Schmidt, p. 10). The assumption that the rise of Tištar signals the beginning of the rains, as it does in Egypt, and must therefore be a direct borrowing, is not compatible with the climate of most of Iran. The rise of Tištar will rather signal the beginning of his fight with Apaoša, the demon of drought. In the torrid summer months Tištar gains in strength, and it is with the defeat of Apaoša that the rains begin in late fall (cf. Forssman, p. 57 n. 9; Panaino, p. 18ff.).

In the Pahlavi *Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (ed. Dhabhar, 31c8) the Sēnmurw makes his/her nest in the forest at the time of the resurrection when the earth becomes flat and the waters stand still. As Williams (II, p. 185) rightly remarks, this means that the Sēnmurw will retire from his/her task to distribute the seeds of the plants. In the *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* (Jamasp-Asa I, 12.3) Zarēr's horse is called *sēn-i murwag*, possibly because of its strength and swiftness.

The Sēnmurw has an evil counterpart in the bird Kamak, who is one of the monsters killed by Karšāsp (*Mēnōg-ī Xrad* 27.50). The *SaddarBundahišn* (20.37-43; tr. Dhabhar, p. 518) gives a description of its activities which are the exact opposite of those of the Sēnmurw: When Kamak appeared he spread his wings over the whole world, all the rain fell on his wings and back into the sea, drought struck the earth, men died, springs, rivers and wells dried up. Kamak devoured men and animals as a bird pecks grain. Karšāsp showers arrows on him day and night like rain till he succumbs. In killing men Kamak is the opposite of Camrōš, who pecks up the enemies of Iran like grain (*Bundahišn* 24.24).

In the chapter on the classification of animals of the *Bundahišn* the three-fingered Sēn is called the largest of the birds (13.10), and also the Sēnmurw is of the species of birds (13.22); they are obviously identical. The three-fingered Sēn was created first among the birds, but is not the chief, a position held by the Karšipt (according to the Indian *Bundahišn* 24.11 a *carg*, falcon or hawk), the bird that brought the religion to the enclosure (*var*) of Jamšēd (cf. *Vd.* 2.42) (17.11). In 13.34-35 the Sēnmurw has come to the sea Frāxkard (Vourukaša) before all the other birds. In Zādspram 23.2 the Karšipt and the Sēnmurw are singled out among the birds to attend the conference with Ōhrmazd on the animals, the creatures protected by Wahman. *Bundahišn* 13 contains serious contradictions. While in 10 and 22 the Sēnmurw is a bird, in 23 it is one of the species of bats: they are of the genera of the dog, the bird, and the muskrat because they fly like a bird, have teeth like a dog and a cave for dwelling like the muskrat. Zādspram 3.65 does not make the bats a separate genus, but counts them and the Sēnmurw among the birds, though they are of a different nature, having teeth and feeding their young with milk from their breasts. *Bundahišn* 13.23 contradicts not only 10 and 22 but also 15.13, where the Sēnmurw is counted among the oviparous birds. From this stare of affairs it can be inferred that there was an older version, in which the Sēnmurw was a bird pure and simple as in the Avesta, and a later one, in which she was a bat, and that the compiler of the *Bundahišn* has confused them. With the change to a bat the Sēnmurw changed gender from male to female.

An identification of the original Sēnmurw with a known bird is difficult. The Sēn's being called three-fingered is puzzling, since most birds have four claws. Herzfeld (1930, pp. 142-43) suggested the ostrich, which has only three claws, but this is impossible because the ostrich is an African flightless bird. The epithet may then be based on the observation of the bird when perching on the branch of a tree when only three claws are visible. The Sēnmurw in representative art also has only three claws but, contrary to my earlier opinion (Schmidt, p. 59), it is hardly the source of the description. The three-fingered Sēn is the largest bird (*Bundahišn* 13.10) mentioned among the large birds, side by side with the eagle (*āluh*) and the lammergeier (*dālman*); this excludes the falcon, which is much smaller than either of them. In size and habitat the closest possibility would be the black vulture (*Aigypius monachus*), which nests mostly in trees, but as a scavenger does not hunt live prey. Therefore I would suggest the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), particularly if the identification with the constellation Aquila is correct. That the Simorḡ was not known solely as a mythological being, but also as a real bird, can be

inferred from the fact that in Judeo-Persian the word translates the Hebrew *näšär* ‘eagle’ (cf. Asmussen).

In post-Sasanian times the Simorḡ occurs in the epic, folktales, and mystical literature (cf. PLATE I, a medieval representation [see IL-KHANIDS iii. BOOK ILLUSTRATION). In Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma* Simorḡ is the savior, tutor and guardian of Zāl-e zar. This motif is attested first in Iran for Achaemenes, who was reared by an eagle according to Aelian (*De natura animalium* XII, 2). Because Zāl was born an albino, his father Sām considered him to be of demonic origin and exposed him in the Alburz mountains. The female bird Simorḡ found the child when she was searching for food for her young. God gave the bird the feeling of love (*mehr*) for the child. Seeing that the child was crying for milk, she took him to her nest to rear him with her own young, which also showed love for the boy. She chose the most tender meat for him so that he could suck the blood as a substitute for the milk he lacked. When Zāl was grown up, Sām had a dream that made him repent his sin, and set out in search of his son. He found him with the Simorḡ, who returned the young man to his father. Before letting him go, she gave him one of her feathers: by burning it he would be able to call her for help (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Mohl, I, p. 217ff.). The first time she was called for assistance was at the birth of Zāl’s son, Rostam. The bird suggested they anaesthetize the mother with wine before opening up her side and also prescribed the herbs for healing the wound; the healing was completed by touching the wound with the bird’s feather (I, p. 351ff.). For the second and last time the Simorḡ was called when Rostam and his horse Raḵš were wounded by the arrows of Esfandiār; she extracted the arrows and healed the wounds. Knowing the secrets of fate (*rāz-e sepehr*) she warned that whoever killed Esfandiār would be damned in this and the next world. Finally, however, she took Rostam in a single night to the tamarisk tree from which the fatal arrow was cut (IV, p. 665ff.). Zāl called the wings of the Simorḡ fortune and grace (*farr*), and she offered him the feather with the words: “be always in the shadow of my fortune and grace (*sāya-ye farr-e man*)” (I, p. 226 lines 175, 181). Metaphorically this conveys the sense of protection and the granting of boons and powers. It is similar to the wrapping of fortune round the house in Yašt 14.41. When coming down from the mountain, the Simorḡ is compared to a cloud, a comparison also implied in the Yašt. She presses Zāl’s body against her breast and thereby fills the world with the smell of musk. This may be a reflex of the muskrat nature of the Sēnmurw in the *Bundahišn* .

The Simorḡ, protector of Zāl and Rostam, has an evil counterpart called by the same name. She lives on a mountain and looks like a mountain or a black cloud; she can carry off crocodiles, panthers and elephants. She has two young ones as big as herself. This Simorḡ is one of the adversaries Esfandiār kills in the course of his seven exploits on the way to the castle of Arjāsp. To overcome the huge monster Esfandiār constructs a large chariot spiked all over with swords which cut the bird to pieces (IV, p. 509f.). It is not impossible that both birds are originally identical and the Simorḡ is ambivalent. Her benevolent behavior towards Zāl was due to God's intervention, and went against her nature as a raptor. In the contemptuous description of Zāl's origin it is said that the Simorḡ spared the child because she could not stomach him (IV, p. 612).

Trever (pp. 20-21) quotes two Kurdish folktales about a bird called Sīmīr, the Kurdish reflex of Simorḡ. In one of them the hero rescues the young of the birds by killing a snake that is crawling up the tree to devour them. As a reward Sīmīr gives him three of her feathers; by burning them he can call her for help. Later he calls her, and she carries him to a distant land. In the other tale she carries the hero out of the netherworld; here she feeds her young with her teats, a trait which agrees with the description of the Sēnmurw by Zādspram. The bird also feeds the hero on the journey while he feeds her with pieces of sheep's fat and water. Similar is an Armenian folktale (Trever, p. 21-22) in which the hero is lost in the netherworld and only the bird Sīnam can carry him out. The young of Sīnam are regularly eaten by the serpent Višap. The hero kills the snake and goes to sleep under the tree. The returning bird spreads her wings to shield him from the sun. As reward she takes him to the world of light. He must feed her with sheep's fat and wine. When the fat is eaten up the hero cuts a piece of flesh from his leg and gives it to the bird. She recognizes that it is human flesh and does not swallow it, but restores it to the hero's leg at the end of the journey, a deed consonant with the curative powers of the Simorḡ. These versions obviously go back to the common stock of Iranian Simorḡ stories (see Marzolph, Types 301, 301E*, 449, 550(8), 707(1)). Similar tales are widely attested in Eurasian folklore (cf. Ruben, pp. 511ff.).

In classical and modern Persian literature the Simorḡ is frequently mentioned, particularly as a metaphor for God in Sufi mysticism. In this context the bird is probably understood as male. The most famous example is Farid-al-Din ʿAṭṭār's *Manṭeq al-ṭayr* 'The parliament of the birds' (cf. Ritter, p. 11ff., Bürgel, pp. 5-6). The Simorḡ is the king of the birds; he is close to them, but they are far from

him, he lives behind the mountains called Kāf, his dwelling is inaccessible, no tongue can utter his name. Before him hang a hundred thousand veils of light and darkness. “Once, Simorḡ unveiled his face like the sun and cast his shadow over the earth…Every garment covering the fields is a shadow of the beautiful Simorḡ.” Fauth (p. 128) sees in this a memory of the Sēnmurw dispersing the seeds. Thirty birds (*si morḡ*) that have survived the hard and perilous quest for their king reach his palace. Coming face to face with the sun of his majesty they realize that they, the thirty birds of the outer world, are one with the Simorḡ of the inner world. Finally the birds lose themselves forever in the Simorḡ they, the shadows, are lost in him, the sun.

The classification of the Sēnmurw as a bat belonging to three genera in the *Bundahišn* has led Camilla Trever to identify a composite animal in Sasanian art as the Sēnmurw. This animal has the head of a dog, the wings and—in most examples—the tail of a peacock. It has precursors in Scythian art of a millennium earlier, one example of which shows a striking resemblance to the Sasanian representation (Schmidt, fig. 2); it cannot be established what they were called nor can a historical connection be made, because composite animals of similar type are found in the Near East, Central Asia, and China. Various forerunners have been claimed as a model, such as the lion-griffin of Mesopotamia (Harper, 1961, pp. 95-101) and the Hellenistic hippocampus (Herzfeld, 1920, p. 134), but it is unlikely that one single source can be identified. In Sasanian art the image is clearly attested in the 6th-7th century, the most famous examples being those shown on the garments of King Ḵosrow II Parvēz (r. 591-628) on the rock reliefs of Ṭāq-e Bustān (Schmidt, figs. 4 and 5). The animal is depicted with the head of a snarling dog. The two paws, one raised above the other in a posture of attack, are those of a beast of prey with only three claws. The wing feathers, which rise from a circular base, are curled towards the front. The long, raised, oval-shaped, curved tail is that of a peacock, not showing individual feathers but a highly stylized foliage pattern. The other examples agree to a large extent; many, however, show individual tail feathers. The Sēnmurw is attested in reliefs, metalware and textiles (representative examples can be seen in Schmidt, plates VI, VII, X, XI). It spread all over Eurasia with other motifs of Sasanian art and was used for many centuries after the fall of the Persian Empire. In early Islamic art it is found in Iran at Čāl Tarḵān Ashkhabad (Harper, 1978, p. 118), in Syria at Qaṣr al-Ḵayr al-Ḡarbi (Schlumberger, p. 355), in Jordan at Mshatta (Creswell, 1932, p. 404 with pl. 66), and at Ḵerbat al-Mafjar (Hamilton, figs. 118a, 253). It is also found in a Christian context in Georgia, Armenia and Byzantium (cf., e.g.,

Grabar pls. XV 2, XX 3, XXII 1, XXIII 3, XXVII 1, XXVIII 2; Trever, fig. 7; Chubinashvili, pls. 23, 26, 27).

The canine heads on headdresses of the queen and a prince on coins of Warahrān II (r. 276-293) have been interpreted as Sēnmurw, but this is a matter of debate (Schmidt, p. 24ff.). The Sēnmurw is very prominent on the coinage of the Hephthalites in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. It is distinguished from the standard Sasanian form by having rather a cock's than a peacock's tail and also frequently showing reptilian features, which are rare in the Sasanian form. Its head occurs as a crown-emblem in several issues (nos. 208-10, 241-243, 246, 254-255 in Göbl I, cf. the drawings in IV, pls. 6-7); in one issue (no. 259) the whole animal appears on the top of the crown. The head and neck, or the complete animal, are also used as countermarks (KM 102, 106, 107, 101, 106, 107, 101, 105, 3a-d, 11A-K, 1, 10 in Göbl II, 141ff., IV pl. 10). When carrying a pearl necklace in its mouth (Issue 255.1), the Sēnmurw is probably the conveyer of the investiture (Göbl, p. 156), whether the necklace can be identified with the *xᵛarnah* or not. Göbl also sees a proof for the Sēnmurw's association with the *xᵛarnah* in the fact that the countermark is in all cases stamped at least approximately on the inscription *GDH ʾpzwtʾ* "[may] farrah [be] increased" or on the Sēnmurw of the coin; this, however, remains doubtful.

Nevertheless, the relation of the Sēnmurw to the *xᵛarnah* is undeniable. It is already present in the Avesta, and it is so in the *Šāh-nāma*. The feather is offered to Zāl as a token of the Simorḡ's *farr*: since in Ṭāq-e Bustān the Sēnmurw does not occur in the investiture scene, it was probably not an exclusively royal symbol, but a more general one of good fortune.

We do not know how Ferdowsi, ʿAṭṭār and other Islamic authors visualized the Simorḡ. In the much later manuscript illustrations he/she is not a composite animal, but a fantastic bird (cf., e.g., Welch, pp. 125, 127).

It is rather obvious that the classification of the Sēnmurw as a bat is a rationalization, as Trever (p. 17) has pointed out, and that it derives from the representation in art. Once this image was adopted there arose the desire to find a model for it in nature, and the bat offered itself because of its resemblance to a dog and a bird. However, the images do not show the wings of a bat, but those of a feathered bird, and the peacock-tail does not fit either. We may speculate about the elements of this rationalization as follows.

The dispersal of the seeds of plants is characteristic of the fruit-bats (cf. van der Pijl), indigenous to the south of Iran: they carry the fruits some distances from the trees, chew them up and spit out the seeds. They generally live in trees, but one species, Rousettus, dwells in caves like the more common insectivorous bats (Slaughter and Walton, p. 163). Some species of bats have scent glands (Yalden and Morris, p. 200), which may have led to the connection of the Sēnmurw with the muskrat.

The dog component could be interpreted by the Sēnmurw's close relationship to the "Dog star" Sirius, i.e., Tištar, the brightest star of the constellation Canis Major, assuming that the Latin name was known. In support of this may be quoted the *Rivāyat* of Hormazyar Framarz (Dhabhar, p. 259) where the dog Zarrīngōš 'Yellow-Ear', who is obviously identical with the dawn-yellow-haired chief of the dog species (*Bundahišn* XVII 9), chases away demons and is the guardian of the body of Gayōmard. He keeps watch near the bridge of Činvat that leads to paradise. He who feeds dogs will be protected by Zarrīngōš from the demons even if he is otherwise fit for hell. The demons will not punish him, out of fear of Haftōrang, Ursa Major (the Great Bear), who guards souls fit for hell. Thus the whole scene is projected to the firmament, and Zarrīngōš will represent Canis Major. The source is late (17th century), but the function of Haftōrang is attested much earlier (Mēnōg-ī Xrad 48.15), and the whole may well represent an old tradition. On a Sasanian stamp we possibly have Gayōmard=Orion with a dog=Canis Major (Brunner apud Noveck, no. 61). When the Simorḡ carries her protégé to the netherworld and back, this is related to the well-known function of the dog as psychopompos.

The peacock, a bird native to India, not only lends itself to expressing beauty and splendor but is auspicious (Nair, 1977, p. 71) and a harbinger of the rainy season (pp. 13, 26, 40, 77, 91ff., 103), a characteristic it shares with the Sēnmurw. In the Indus Civilization the peacock seems to have been a psychopompos (Vats, 1940: I, p. 207f., II, pl. LVII 2). In the Buddhist *Mora Jataka* a king wants to eat the flesh of the golden peacock because it confers youth and immortality (Nair, pp. 210-11). Peacock and Simorḡ have closely related functions in the *Tāriḵ-e moʿjam* of Fażl-Allāh al-Ḥosayni, a fourteenth-century text that amalgamates the Old Iranian religion and its legends with Islamic Persian mysticism: When King Siyāmak is killed, Ṭāʾus (the peacock) carries his spirit (*ruḥ*) and Simorḡ his soul (*ravān*) to the height of the eight paradises (Hartman, 168, XXXIX).

Dog and peacock have a common connection with the rainy season, a feature

which the Sēnmurw has had since its earliest attestation in the Avesta. It seems possible that this feature was one of the reasons behind the creation of the composite representation. The composite animals of earlier art will have contributed to the creation of the Sēnmurw image. If the above interpretations are correct, the astral connection was the decisive motive. It then follows that the Sasanian Sēnmurw was a conscious creation. The identification as a bat in the *Bundahišn* and in Zādspram was an afterthought.

In Armenia and the Caucasus the Simorḡ has a counterpart in Paskuč (and related forms of the name). This same name occurs in Manichaean Middle Persian (Henning, II, p. 274), where the spirit of fever, called Idra, has three forms and wings like a *pšqwc* and settles in the bones and skull of humans. In the Mēnōg-ī Xrad (26. 49-50) Sām Keršāsp is said to have slain the horned serpent and the grey-blue wolf called *pašgunǰ*; the wolf may be a winged one. The Armenian *paskuc* and the Georgian *p'asgunǰi* both translate the Greek *gryps* 'gryphon, griffin' in the Septuagint (Marr, p. 2083). It is also glossed as 'bone-swallower' (ossifrage, osprey) (Marr, p. 2087 n. 2), but also mentioned as a kind of eagle native to India. In Modern Armenian *paskuč* is the griffin vulture (*Gyps fulvus*). In Georgian sources a *p'asgunǰi* is described as having a body like that of a lion, head, beak, wings and feet like those of an eagle, and covered in down; some have four legs, some two; it carries off elephants and injures horses; others are like a very large eagle (Marr, p. 2083). In late mediaeval Georgian translations of the *Šāh-nāma*, Georgian *p'asgunǰi* renders the Persian *simorḡ* (Marr, p. 2085f.). In a Georgian parallel to the Armenian and Kurdish tales quoted earlier, the bird there called Sīnam and Sīmīr is replaced by *p'asgunǰi* (Levin-Schenkowitz, p. 1ff.). In a Talmudic tale a giant bird *pwšqnṣ'* swallows the giant serpent that has swallowed a giant toad and settles on a very strong tree; Daniel Gershenson (personal communication) interprets this as a metaphor for the coming of the rainy season: the frog represents water, the snake drought, and the Pušqanṣā the rainy season. The tale is thus a reworking of the Sēnmurw story. Talmudic commentators identify the bird as a gigantic raven. In an illustration in the Gerona manuscript of Beatus's commentary on the Book of Revelation, the picture of the Sēnmurw opposite that of an eagle is found with the subscript *coreus* (read *corvus*) *et aquila in venatione* "raven and eagle on the hunt" (Grabar, pl. XXVIII fig. 2). This evidence shows that the Sēnmurw took different shapes in different cultures and that the same name was used for real birds and fabulous composites as well as for benevolent and malevolent beasts.

The Simorḡ's equivalent in Arabic sources is the ʿAnqāʾ. The ambivalent nature of this bird is attested in the Hadith: the bird was created by God with all perfections, but became a plague, and a prophet put an end to the havoc it wrought by exterminating the species (Pellat, p. 509). In the Sumerian Lugalbanda Epic the mythical bird Anzu is a benevolent being. The hero frees the young of the bird, which in return blesses him. In the Sumerian Lugal-e and the Akkadian Anzu Epic the bird represents demonic powers and is vanquished by the god Ninurta. In the Akkadian Etana Epic the hero is carried by the eagle to the heaven of Anu. The correspondence of these motifs with the Simorḡ stories in the *Šāhnāma* and the Kurdish folktales is obvious, showing that they are of common Near Eastern heritage (Aro, p. 25ff.). In an illustration of a manuscript of the *Thousand and One Nights* the Simorḡ is identified with the monstrous bird Roḵ (cf. Casartellli, p. 82f.).

The Sēnmurw has many traits in common with the Indian Garuḍa, the steed of the god Viṣṇu (cf. Reuben, pp. 489ff., 495, 506f., 510, 515, 517). It is of particular interest that the comparison was made already in Sasanian times. In the first book of the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* (the cognate of *Kalila and Dimna*) is a story of the birds of the shore who complain to their king Garuḍa. In Sogdian, *synmrγ* is used to translate *garuḍa* (see Utz, p. 14); and in the old Syriac translation of the Middle Persian original of *Kalila and Dimna*, Garuḍa is rendered by Simorḡ (cf. de Blois). Fauth (p. 125ff.) has argued that all the mythical giant birds—such as Simorḡ, Phoenix, Garuḍa, the Tibetan Khyuṅ, and also the Melek Ṭāʾus of the Yezidis—are offshoots of an archaic, primordial bird that created the world. Thus Simorḡ as God in Persian mysticism would, curiously, represent a return to the original meaning.

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