

The Iranian Dragon-slaying Myth: Dragons, the Avestan *saošiiant*, and Possible Connections to the Iranian Water Goddess

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Abstract: The myth of an archetypal hero, either divine or human, slaying a dragon-serpent that often blocks access to a body of water is very ancient. Various water-related rituals and their attendant myths arose out of the vital dependence of the prehistoric Indo-European peoples on rivers to maintain their way of life. “Killing a dragon” symbolized the ‘freeing of the waters’ and also exerting control over the potentially chaotic vicissitudes of flowing water. By performing this task, the dragon-slaying hero ensured fertility and thus the continued survival of his community. In light of the mythological connection between dragons and water, this paper explores whether dragon-slaying myths can be further connected to the Iranian water goddess, Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā and the Avestan *saošiiant*.

Keywords: Dragons, Water Goddess, Anāhitā, Saošiiant

Introduction

The Dragon-slaying myth is a recurring motif found in numerous cultures throughout history. The origins of the Dragon-slaying myth can be traced back to ancient civilizations.

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The dragon-slaying myths place a wide range of Indo-European deities, who were perhaps once heroic or royal ancestors that became deified over time in the popular imagination, into the recurring role of the hero who slays the dragon. Based on its prominence in the myths of many Indo-European peoples – including those of Iran, India, Greece, and Rome, with parallels among the Balts, the Slavs, the Armenians, and the Hittites – the dragon-slaying myths would strongly seem to date back to the proto-Indo-European period or even earlier.¹

The myth of dragon-slaying often depicts a hero engaging in a battle with a dragon, defeating the powerful creature, and thus securing the safety of the society or obtaining a valuable reward. These myths establish dragons as malevolent entities associated with chaos, destruction, or untamed natural forces. The symbolism of the dragon is multi-dimensional, embodying various archetypal meanings across cultures. For instance, in some societies, dragons were connected to water, and were considered the controllers of water sources. By defeating the dragon, the hero asserts the supremacy of humanity over challenges, re-establishing order.

Perhaps because the waters were so vital and sacred, the dragon-slaying heroes who released them could thereby attain immortality. The dragon would symbolize the harmful forms a river could take, whether drying up (the water “imprisoned”) which caused drought, or overflowing its banks, which caused destructive floods. Most of the various Indo-European peoples were utterly dependent on rivers, upon the banks of which they built their settlements and eventually their civilizations. These rivers were ambivalent neighbors; they could ensure fertility and enable life, or wash it away in a torrent. It may be that the association of dragons with rivers arose from the rivers’ serpentine shape. It should also be noted that in agricultural societies, rivers played an ambivalent role: on the one hand, they brought fertility, the most necessary factor of life, but at the same time (in their dragon shape), rivers could also cause massive destruction through floods. Moreover, they might dry up and abandon humans altogether if there was a lack of rain.

For purposes of our discussion, it is essential to examine the relationship between the dragon, which is often depicted as withholding the waters and frequently capturing a maiden captive, and women, who symbolize fertility, in the Indo-Iranian version of the myth of dragon-slaying. In Indo-Iranian mythology dragons were also associated with natural phenomena such as drought and chaos. They imprisoned the “good waters” (personified either as women or cows) or were the carriers of the “destructive and furious waters” (i.e., uncontrolled water, such as rivers in flood). The good waters could not be released until the dragon was slain by a deity or hero. This symbolic act of killing the dragon represents the triumph of cosmic truth and order (Avestan *aša*; Vedic *ṛta*) over chaos.

¹ This theme has been exhaustively treated by Watkins (1995).

In the Vedic version of the myth, it is the god Indra who slays the dragon Vṛtra, a symbol of chaos, who lurks at the foot of the mountain where he holds back the heavenly waters (RV II.11.5. Vṛtra is also called Dānava). By slaying the dragon with his special scepter *vájra* and cutting off its three heads, Indra frees the seven rivers (RV X.8.8-9). The waters rush out in the shape of cows (representing fertility), running to the sea. The battle represents an Indo-Iranian creation myth. As Kuiper noted, the action “accomplished by men is clearly a re-enactment, a reiteration of the Creation itself” (Kuiper 1960, 251).

The demonic dragon, Vṛtra, belongs to the group of Dānavas, the children of the goddess Dānu, of dragon-shaped appearance. Conceived as demonic, the Dānavas bind the cosmic waters, and are connected to cold, darkness and chaos. A passage in the Rig Veda (I.32.11) describes the “bound waters” as having Vṛtra-dragon as their husband-guardian. This reflects a widespread and presumably ancient myth of a dragon preventing access to a water source. The Vedic three-headed dragon Vṛtra is referred to both as *áhi*, “dragon” (similarly, *áži* is a three-headed dragon in the Avesta) and as *dāsá* (Av. *dahāka*), meaning he is man-like (Schwartz 2012, 275). In Indo-Iranian languages, the word *áhi/áži* means “snake/dragon”.² The word *aždahā/eždehā*, “dragon”, in New Persian, is derived from a combination of the two terms, *áži* and *dahāka*. The above-cited passage in the Rig Veda describes the “bound waters” (as having Vṛtra as their husband-guardian), thus linking the waters with an imprisoned maiden (RV I.32.11; see also Schwartz 2012, 275). After slaying Vṛtra, Indra receives the epithet *Vṛtra-hán* “slayer of Vṛtra”, whose Avestan equivalent is Vərəθraϥna, the Iranian war deity, whose name literally means “slayer of [the dragon] Vṛtra”.

In the Rig Veda, the dragon-slaying Indra is a warrior god associated with the divine class of *devas* who are the deities of the warrior group and thus seen positively. However, they are demoted to demonic status in the Avesta. On the other hand, in the Iranian version, the functions of Indra are divided between Miθra and Vərəθraϥna. Interestingly, in Iran the epithet became the name of the god himself (Vərəθraϥna; MP: Wahrām; NP: Bahrām). According to the *Bahrām Yašt*, an Avestan hymn devoted to Vərəθraϥna, if people do not sacrifice to him, or if they share his sacrifice with non-Zoroastrians, a huge flood (uncontrolled waters) will cover the Iranian lands (*Bahrām Yašt* 17.48-53). Initially, Vərəθraϥna only existed as an epithet and did not have an independent existence. However, in the Young Avestan passage, he emerges as mighty deity possessing warrior-like qualities. His ten forms, both human and animal, bear resemblance to the ten incarnations of Indra.

Furthermore, Vərəθraϥna existed in the Armenian pantheon as well. Indeed, he was one of the three principal deities, all of which had Iranian origins. Vahagn Vishapakagh (Վահագն Վիշապապահ), “Vahagn (or Vahagn) the reaper of dragons” was a warrior god

² The word is etymologically related to words in other Indo-European languages such as Latin *anguis*. See Skjærvø et al. 1987.

of fire and thunder, worshiped in ancient Armenia. The other two were Ahura Mazdā/Aramazd and Anāhitā/Anahit. Together, the three were referred to by the epithet *višapak'al/drakontopniktēs*, “the strangler of dragons” (Gnoli and Jamzadeh 1988). The Armenian triad formed by Aramazd, Anahit, and Vahagn are similar to the Iranian one composed of Ahura Mazdā, Anāhitā and Miθra. In ancient Armenia “the bravery” comes to people by Vahagn, emphasizing his warlike characteristic (see Russell 1987, 192). He had a sun-like appearance. The Hurrian and the Urartian’s weather-god, Tešub or Teišeba, also had a feature of slaying a dragon called Illuyankas, originally a Hittite common noun meaning “serpent” (Russell 1987, 210).

In Iranian tradition, not only Bahrām (Vərəθraγna), but a number of other divine heroes and historical characters are dragon-slayers, and thereby establish themselves as champions of freedom, women, water and fertility. These are Rostam, Sām, Frēdōn, (Garšāsp), Goštāsp, Esfandiār, Ardašir Bābakān, Bahrām Gōr, and Bahrām Čōbīn. In the Iranian version of the dragon-slaying myth there are women or clouds (cows, in the Indian version) that are imprisoned and are freed when the hero slays the dragon. In different versions of this myth, rain-clouds, cows and women have been alternately identified with the waters.³

Dragons are found throughout the Iranian Zoroastrian literature, such as the sea monster *gandarāba-/gandarāβa-* (MP: Gandarb/Gandarw), a monster with yellow heels (*Zairipāšna-*) who is fought and vanquished by Kərəsāspa (Yt. 5.38, 15.28, 19.41). Gandarw’s name is etymologically equivalent to the Vedic *gandharva*, who said to be surrounded by the heavenly waters, which flow down at his glance.

The Avesta also mentions the hero Kərəsāspa (Garšāsp) who slays the dragon Aži-Sruuara (also called Aži Zairita) a horned dragon who swallows horses and men (see Humbach and Ichaporia 1998, 117). Aži Raoiḍita, the red dragon (in contradistinction to the Aži Zairita “yellow dragon”), is, together with the “*daēuua*-created winter”, Anra Mainiiu’s counter-creation to Ahura Mazdā’s creation of *airiiana vaējah* (Vd. 1.2). In Zoroastrian tradition, these dragons are all created by Ahriman.

There is another dragon that is mentioned only in the *Nērangestān*, in the context of making an offering to water, whose name is Aži Višāpa (*Nērangestān* 48). One should take note of the fact that the last part of this dragon’s name has the suffix *āpa* “water”. Skjærvø suggests that the meaning of the dragon’s name is the dragon “of foul waters”, or the dragon “which fouls the waters” (Skjærvø et al. 1987). Russell notes in this regard that the Armenian form of the word, *višap*, is used of anything monstrous, and “in modern Armenia, the steles with snakes and other figures carved on them are called *višap* ‘dragon’ by the Armenians” (see Skjærvø et al. 1987).

³ There is some discussion about the Indo-Iranian word **dhainu* (Sanskrit *dhenu*), which is usually translated as “cow”. Lincoln, following Benveniste, stated that the word could mean “the one who gives milk”, in which case it may be used for any female. See Benveniste 1969, 22-23; Lincoln 1976, 42-65.

In the Vedic tradition, the dragon-slaying myth was symbolically connected with the New Year and the end of the season of drought (i.e., the coming of the monsoon in late spring). Skjærvø notes that in ancient Iran there is no trace of a connection between the killing of the dragon and Now-rūz (Skjærvø et al. 1987). However, in the story of Āzar Barzīnin in the *Bahman-nameh*, the hero recognizes black clouds as a dragon that comes out of a mountain every year during the springtime (see Skjærvø et al. 1987).⁴

In the *Bahman-nameh*, the dragon rapes the daughter of the local king – whose name, interestingly, is Bēvarasp, an epithet of Zahhāk (Avestan: Aži-Dahāka, the human-face dragon). Subsequently, the hero slays the dragon with arrows and then bathes in a spring. This story connects several symbolic elements with which we have been dealing: a dragon, clouds, an imprisoned/abused woman, and a spring (see Skjærvø et al. 1987). Similar tales of a hero slaying a dragon in order to rescue a girl (usually a princess) abound in Iranian folklore.

Indeed, the slaying of a dragon is found so frequently in heroic tales that it would almost appear to be an indispensable rite of passage defining one's heroic status. One can also see a direct relationship between the dragon that imprisons the water and creates drought, and the water itself which is personified as an "imprisoned" female needing to be rescued. In Armenian traditions, the višaps (dragons) grow at the bottom of a lake. When they are a thousand years old they are able to swallow all the water of the lake (Russell 1987, 209). In many Iranian folkloric tales, a dragon guards the river/spring/well and prevents people having access to the water they need; at the same time, the dragon holds a woman captive. In some cases, the dragon accepts a girl as a sacrifice in order to allow the people to have a little water. In most cases, however, the killing of the dragon by the hero results in the freedom of the captive girl. A more recent iconographic transformation can be seen in the Iranian appropriation of dragon imagery from China following the Mongol conquests in the 13th century AD. Ignoring the fact that in Chinese culture dragons are symbols of blessing and power, later Iranian paintings, such as Mirzā Ali's "Goshtasp Slays the Dragon of Mount Sakila", depict dragons in a Chinese visual style, but with an Iranian meaning which is the *opposite* of the Chinese (see Saadi-nejad 2009).

The Two Dragon-Root Figures: Aži-Dahāka and Fraṅrasiian

In light of the mythological connection between dragons and rivers, we may consider whether dragon-slaying myths can be further connected to the Iranian river goddess, Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā, and probably to the Avestan *saošiiant*. Similar to many Indo-European water goddesses, Anāhitā in her original role as a water goddess is primarily

⁴ Khaleghi-Motlagh accordingly suggests that "Another interpretation of the dragon-slaying by Indo-Iranian gods is that the god in question was a god of thunder and lightning, that the dragon was a black cloud, and that by slaying the dragon, the god released water impounded in its stomach to fall as rain" (Skjærvø et al. 1987). For *Bahman-nameh* see Hanaway 1988.

involved in fertility, support and healing. Over time, however, most likely through the influence of non-Indo-European goddesses, she acquired additional functions and characteristics which tied her to the warrior and priestly functions as well, giving her a uniquely important role in the emerging Iranian society. At the same time, it should be noted that not all of Anāhitā's supplicants are righteous. There are negative characters mentioned in the *Ābān Yašt* who ask for Anāhitā's support in pursuing their destructive activities.

In the Yašts, of all the Zoroastrian divinities only Anāhitā and Vāiiu are said to receive sacrifices from evildoers, referred to as *daēuuaiiasna*, i.e. those who sacrifice to *daēuuas*, the old gods rejected by Zaraθuštra and the Zoroastrian priests.

The fact that some infamous characters perform sacrifices to Anāhitā asking for her support is significant. However, the only named negative characters who sacrifice to Anāhitā asking for her support are Aži-Dahāka and Fraŋrasiian (later Afrāsīāb). The first component of the name Aži-Dahāka (MP: Azdahāg; NP: *aždahā/eždahā*), *aži-* (Ved. *ahi-*), is the most common name for a dragon-snake in Indo-Iranian. Thus, according to Schwartz (2012, 275), “Aži-Dahāka” may be understood as the “dragon with the human face (and body)”. Dahāka could have connection with Vedic *dāsa-* and *dasyu-*, meaning “enemies, strangers”, referring to the enemies of Indra, the most important god in Vedas who is one of the *devas*.

It is therefore worth looking more deeply into the details of these two characters (Aži/Ahi-Dahāka and Fraŋrasiian) and their possible connections to water and the water goddess. They both share dragon features: the first, Aži-Dahāka, is himself a dragon, and the second, Fraŋrasiian, *behaves* like a dragon by drying up the rivers in Sīstān. What can be inferred from this connection? They are “demonic” characters, created by Ahriman, whose sacrifices are rejected by Anāhitā. Based on the dragon-river relationship, we may note that they are also referred to as “foreign kings” in Middle Persian literature and the *Shahnameh*, which may connect them to the rejected group that worshipped the *daēuuas*. Might we surmise that Anāhitā too was worshipped by “*daēuua-worshippers*”, that is, people who did not follow the religious prescriptions of the Zoroastrian priests?

In the Avesta, Aži-Dahāka is a huge monster-dragon with three heads and six eyes, who wishes to bring drought and destruction. Skjærvø specifies that “it is not clear whether he was originally considered as a human in dragon-shape or a dragon in man-shape” (Skjærvø et al. 1987), but the same may be said for other dragons as well since they show both attributes. Aži-Dahāka is said to have sacrificed to Arduū Sūrā Anāhitā in the land of Baβri, and to Vāiiu in his inaccessible (*dužita*) castle, Kuuirinṭa. He prays to Arduū Sūrā Anāhitā and Vāiiu asking to have the power to empty the world of people. These two deities, Anāhitā and Vāiiu, are the only ones in the entire Avestan pantheon who count Fraŋrasiian and Aži-Dahāka among their devotees. It seems that both Baβri and Kuuirinṭa were located in Babylon (Skjærvø et al. 1987). Anāhitā does not accept the sacrifices

offered by these two negative characters; on the contrary she accepts Ōraētaona's supplication that he gains the power to slay the dragon Aži-Dahāka (*Aban Yašt* 9.33-35).

According to the *Zamyād Yašt* (37) it is Ōraētaona (Frēdōn), Aži-Dahāka's chief opponent, who slays the dragon. The verb that describes the act of killing a dragon is "jan-". In the *Ābān Yašt*, Ōraētaona sacrifices to Anāhitā, asking her to help him to defeat Aži-Dahāka and to obtain the dragon's two captured wives, Saṅhauuāci and Arənauuāci (*Ābān Yašt* 8.34). These two women are associated with fertility: both as natural phenomena and in terms of the seasonal waters. In later Iranian texts, Aži-Dahāka is not slain, but is imprisoned by Frēdōn on Mount Damavand.

Aži-Dahāka in the *Shahnameh* is Zahhāk, who appears as a foreign tyrant of Arab ancestry with snakes growing out of his shoulders.⁵ Reflecting the fact that in Zoroastrian texts snakes are considered demonic, he is under the influence of Ahriman.

Aži-Dahāka thus belongs to the demonic world, and is related to the *dēvs*. According to the *Shahnameh*, the *dēvs*, perhaps as part of his army, are members of his court. Zahhak imprisons two sisters⁶ of Jamšīd and marries them. Because of their captivity, the world becomes less fertile. As it was mentioned, Frēdōn (Avesta: Ōraētaona) frees the wives and chains Zahhāk to Mount Damavand.⁷

Skjærvø notes that Zahhāk is portrayed as the propagator of "bad religion", in opposition to the "good" Zoroastrian religion. He also believes that Zahhāk's destructive character may be connected to his Arab origin (Skjærvø et al. 1987). Moreover, Zahhāk is associated with a river. Indeed, in *Bundahišn* XI, he is said to have asked a favour from Ahriman and the demons by the river Sped in Azerbaijan (*Bundahišn* XI A.11a.18-19).

Fraṅrasiian-/Fraṅrasiia (in the *Shahnameh*: Afrāsīāb), is another demonic character in the Avesta, whose name's morphophonemics is not clear. However, the *-yras-* part of his name could be cognate with the old Indo-Iranian *sras-* which derives from **sṛṅk* "to strike" (Mayrhofer 1979, I/39-40, no. 123). Hence, his name could be translated as "to strike forth". This interpretation will be reasonable if we accept that he was originally a dragon who captured the water. Further discussion below will confirm this.

The epithet *mairiia-*, "deceitful, villainous", which serves both as an adjective and a noun, is a demonic term for man, specifically a young man. This is an antonym for the

⁵ In Middle Persian texts, he is often referred to as Bēwarasp, "with ten-thousand horses"; e.g. *Dēnkard* 9.21.7; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 7.29, 26.34, 35, 38; *Bundahišn* TD₁, 66.7-8; *Bundahišn* TD₂, 80.6-7. See Skjærvø et al. 1987. In the *Shahnameh*, Zahhak is granted by evil two serpents that grow from his shoulders, demanding human brains for sustenance. As his tyranny escalates, the land falls into a state of terror and despair. Guided by divine forces, Frēdōn musters the courage to confront Zahhak and liberates Iran from his oppressive reign.

⁶ In the Avesta, they are Jamšīd's daughters.

⁷ According to the *Shahnameh*, Zahhāk will be freed at the end of time. He will attempt to cause destruction, for instance, by devouring one third of the human population along with some other creatures of Ohrmazd, but eventually he will be killed by Garšāsp.

Ahuric word *nar*- “man, male”. Wikander showed that the word comes originally from an Indo-Iranian expression and referred to a group of warriors with “Aryan male fellowship” who sometimes disguised themselves as wolves.

These warriors highly revered “dragon slayers”, such as *Θraētaona*, in their rituals, and at the same time they did not accept the standard morality of their society but engaged in wild behavior and had promiscuous intercourse with women referred to as *jahī* or *jahikā* (Wikander 1938, 21-24, 58-60, 84-85). The term *jahikā*, which is often understood as “whore”, seems not to refer to actual prostitutes per se but was simply applied in a derogatory way to women who did not recognize the Avestan culture being promoted by the priestly authors of the Zoroastrian texts (Kellens 2012, 125). In Yt. 17.57-58, the word *jahikā* is used to describe (and by the goddess *Aši*, to criticize), women who either do not bear their husband a son or bear him the son of another man. Obviously, one can envision real-life situations in which such actions would not necessarily be blameworthy, and in any case the issue is not technically prostitution. *Widēwdād* 18.60 provides another case more directly connected to religious rituals, where the *jahī* is reproached for “mixing the sperm of those who are experts in the rite with those who are not, and those who offer the sacrifice to demons with those who do not, of those who are condemned and those who are not”. The problem here seems not to be the *jahī*'s sexuality as such, but rather the standard priestly aversion to mixing things that should not be mixed. In Y. 9.32, the issue again is not the *jahī*'s sexuality but rather her use of sorcery. Her fault, Kellens concludes, is not sexual licentiousness but simply lack of (or different?) culture (Kellens 2012, 125).

Ancient Indo-Iranian warrior rituals included orgiastic sacrificial feasts, and were characterized by a positive attitude towards what were called “the dark forces of life”; this apparently included the gods *Rudra* and *Indra* in India and the god *Vaiiu* in Iran (Wikander 1938, 94-96). It is reasonable to assume that these warriors also sacrificed to *Anāhitā*, since according to the Zoroastrian texts she and the god *Vaiiu* are the only deities who received (but did not accept) sacrifices from negative characters as it was mentioned before. Moreover, verses 94-95 clearly refer to the ceremonial sacrifices made to her by “*daēuuu*-worshippers” after sunset. All this evidence indicates that she was indeed connected to warriors and the warrior group of deities.

The new morality and ritual system promoted by the Mazdaean priests banished and rejected the *mairiias* and their rituals as well, yet the Avestan demonic word *mairiia* survived in Pahlavi as *mērag* meaning “husband,” showing that at least in some parts of Iran their memory was not conceived in negative terms.

The description of *Fraṅrasiian* in the *Ābān Yašt* as well as in a few other *Yašts*, as discussed previously, provides a possible connection between him and these warriors whose group, the *mairiias*, became his epithet. Later, in the *Shahnameh*, *Afrāsīāb* becomes Iran's most notorious enemy. The first question about this figure concerns his origin. He is said to be from *Turan*, portrayed as a non-Iranian region in the *Shahnameh*, although its inhabitants all seem to have Iranian names. *Turan* was located in the northeast, beyond

Khorasan and the Amu Darya (the Oxus River). The Amu Darya served as the traditional boundary between Iran and Turan.

In the *Yašt*s the “Danū-Turanians” are mentioned as enemies of the Iranians (for instance in *Yašt* 5.18, 73; *Yašt* 13.9, 37, 38). In fact, the Turanians were almost certainly of Iranian origin, possibly Sakas, who had different rituals and were condemned by the Zoroastrian priests, yet their Iranian roots were strong. Tellingly, even the demonically-created Afrāsīāb is said in the *Bundahišn* to be a seventh-generation descendant of Frēidūn, demonstrating his Iranian roots (*Bundahišn* XXXV.35.17).

As noted above, dragons can prevent the rivers from flowing and this is precisely the act committed by Afrāsīāb who dries up the rivers in Sistan (Bahar 1997, 312). In Iranian mythology, Afrāsīāb is mostly associated with the suppression of waters, draining of rivers, and bringing about drought (*Bundahišn* XXXIII.33.6). Additionally, along with Zāhhāk and Alexander, he is among the three most hated figures in the Zoroastrian texts (Yarshater 1984).⁸ His suppression of the waters clearly connects him with dragon behavior. Perhaps this connection explains his name change from Fraṅrasiian to Afrāsīāb, the latter containing the word *āb* “water”.

Elsewhere in the same text, there is further evidence connecting Afrāsīāb to the waters; he is said to have diverted a thousand springs, including the Hēlmand River, the source of the river Vataēnī, along with six navigable waters as far as the sea of kayānsē in Sistan (*Bundahišn* XI A.11.a32). In the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (52.3) his skill in constructing channels is also mentioned. It is somewhat strange to mention these things in the context of a demonic figure whom the *Shahnameh* considers Iran’s worst enemy. As Yarshater suggested, “It appears that either he was originally an adverse deity who like the Indian Vrtra withheld rain and personified the natural phenomenon of drought, or else he absorbed the features of such a deity” (Yarshater 1984).

It is clear that the motif of dragon-slaying gods and heroes played a significant role in the mythology of the Indo-European peoples. However, the Iranian and Indian cultures developed their own versions of the myth through the process of adaptation and exchange, adding or removing certain elements. In the Iranian variations, it is not the gods but instead the heroes who are responsible for slaying the dragons. Furthermore, the dragons themselves can take on different forms, ranging from dragon-like creatures such as Aži Zairita and Aži Dahāka, to black clouds, to historical figures such as Zāhhāk, or even to foreign adversaries such as Fraṅrasiian and Arjāsp.

Possible Connections between Anāhitā and the Avestan *saošiiant*

Let us begin with a linguistic analysis. The word *sōšyans*, which is the appellation of Pahlavi text’s final savior, has a different meaning from the Gathic Avestan *saošiiant-*

⁸ According to *Mēnōg ī xrad* (8.29-30) Ahriman created Afrāsīāb, Bēwarasp, and Alexander immortal, but Ahura Mazdā changed their status; see Yarshater 1984.

“benefactor.” The Gathic *saošiiant-* has a ritual function, or as Kellens states, “le sacrificiant”, “celui qui va qui veut prospérer,” who takes part in the exchange of gifts between gods and humans (Kellens 1974, 187-209). Hintze (1995), however, posits that the *saošiiants* were persons who played a central role in early Zoroastrianism, but not necessarily in the ritual inherited from the Indo-Iranian period. In a subsequent publication, Hintze explains that “in the oldest parts of the Avesta, the Gathas, *saošiiant-*, even when used in the singular, denotes a member of a group of people following Zoroāstra’s religion: the Saošyants fight evil during their lifetime and are characterized by an exemplary good “(religious) view” (Av. *daēnā-*)” (Hintze 1999, 76).

In at least one of the Gathic passages (Y 48.12), the *saošiiant* is someone who fights against enemies and thus could be construed as a “savior”. This aspect becomes very prominent in the Young Avesta, where the victorious *saošiiant* as a single person is called *astuuat.ərəta* and bears the epithet *vərəθra-jan-* “victorious” (Yt. 13.129 and Yt 19.89), which in fact is the Vedic epithet of Indra, *vṛtra-hán-*, as noted earlier. Applying the same epithet to Indra may link the Avestan *saošiiant* to our discussion. Furthermore, there is a possible connection between the Avestan word *saošiiant* “benefactor”, who also bears the epithet *vərəθra-jan-* (here, “breaking the defense”), with the myth of the hero slaying a dragon (Hintze 1995, 94). Moreover, in Zoroastrian eschatology there is a connection between the *saošiiants* and the river and lake belonging or connected to Anāhitā.

According to verse 89 of the *Zamyād Yašt*, the victorious *saošiiant* is a hero who will bring about the final defeat of Evil. He is expected to be born out of Lake Kašaoiia and will overcome the devil by removing falsehood from the world with a special weapon - similar to Indra, who slew the dragon with his special weapon. In order to accomplish this feat, and to bring about the renovation of the world (Av. *frašō.kərəti-*), the victorious *saošiiant* will have the power and the support of the *x^varənah*, that is, the mighty gleaming glory.

Additionally, the word *saošiiant-* contains the verbal root *sū-*, “to be strong (to swell)”, from the root *sū*. Thus, *saošiiant-* is the participle, and *sūra-* the noun. The Avestan noun *sūra*, from which the second of Anāhitā’s epithets derives, is the Indo-Iranian term for the hero who slays a dragon (Hintze 1995, 94). The meaning “to be strong” stems from “to be endowed with life-force”. It seems that the term functions as an adjective for “strong” in Anāhitā’s epithet, and as a masculine substantive when it means “hero”.

Hintze notes that in Indo-Iranian myths, *sūra* seems to refer to the hero who kills the dragon (Hintze 1999, 78). Since *sūra* means “strong” and also functions as a masculine substantive meaning “hero”, one may posit a connection between the dragon, that prevents access to water, and Anāhitā who is the divinity associated with the all sources of waters (lakes, springs, rivers). If we accept that the myth of slaying dragon is connected to the

warrior groups of deities (*daēuuas*) then Anāhitā's function could originally be connected to the *daēuuas*⁹ as well.

The relevant verses of the *Zamyād Yašt* (66-68, containing the detailed delineation of eschatological events in the Avesta), also provide the location of the Saošiiant as the future ruler, that is, the river Haētumant which flows to Lake Kašaoiia and where there is a mountain in the middle of the lake:

yaṭ upaṅhacaiti
yō auuadāṭ fraxšaiieite
yaṭa zraiiō yaṭ kṣaēm haētumatəm
yaṭa gairiš yō ušaḏā
yim aiβitō paoiriš āpō
ḥm gairišācō jasəntō (Zamyād Yašt IX.66)

“(The *x^varənah*), which belongs to (the one) who will rule from the area where Lake Kašaoiia is fed by the (river) Haētumant, where Mount Ušaḏā (is), where from (the mountains) around many water-sources come together and flow downwards”.

hacaiti dim aspāhe aojō
hacaiti uštrahe aojō
hacaiti vīrahe aojō
hacaiti kauuaēm x^varənō
astica ahmi ašāum zaraṭuštra
auuuuuuṭ kauuaēm x^varənō
+yaṭa yaṭ iḏa anairiiā daṅhuš
hakaṭ usca us.frāuuuuiiōiṭ (Zamyād Yašt IX.68)

“(The river Haētumant) is dedicated (with) the strength of a horse, the strength of a camel, the strength of a hero, and the *x^varənah* (the mighty gleaming glory) of the Kauui-dynasty is endowed to it. O Righteous Zaraṭuštra, in it (there) is so much *x^varənah* (the mighty gleaming glory) of the Kauui-dynasty that could completely sweep away all the non-Aryan lands at once”.

In verse 68 in referring to the river Haētumant the paragraph demonstrate a linguistically masculine feature (especially with the word *vīrahe*- which Humbach translated as “hero”; see Humbach and Ichaporia 1998, 50). Since the reference is to a river (specifically Haētumant), one might ask why the term is not feminine? In her study of the *Zamyād Yašt*, Hintze (1994, 32) has also translated it with masculine terms: “strength of a hero accompanied (him)”. While in verse 68, the pronoun *dim*- is ambiguous and could be

⁹ Like Anāhitā, the Vedic deity Indra also bears the epithet *śūra*- “heroic”. He is the “hero” who fights fearlessly with the drought-inducing dragon in order to release the water so that it may flow back to the world (RV II 11.5). Indra slays the dragon, Vṛtra, also known as Ahi, who imprisons the heavenly waters (RV IV 17.7) and the dragon's mother, the goddess Danu.

either masculine or feminine, in the preceding verse the pronoun is *təm-* which is masculine. One possible explanation is that both the *təm* of verse 67 and the *dim* of verse 68 refer to Lake Kāsaōiia mentioned in verse 66. If so, the masculine form would be used instead of the neuter, as *zraiiāh-* is a neuter noun. Alternatively, the pronouns could refer to *gairiṣyōusaδā* in verse 66. In that case, the pronouns would have the correct gender, as *gairi-* “mountain” is masculine.

At any rate, these verses describe the area full of power which seems to refer to the “water”, i.e. of the rivers which come from the mountain and flow to the lake. Thus, there is a lot of power in that water and in that area in general.

Verse 92 of the *Zamyād Yašt* shows how *Saošiiant* looks at the creation with wisdom (after rising from Lake Kāsaōiia):

yaṭ astuuat.ərətō fraxštāite
haca apaṭ kqsaōiitāṭ
aštō mazdā ahurahe
vīspa.tauruuairiiā puṭrō
vaēdām vaējō yim vārəṭraṇəm
yim baraṭ taxmō 9raētaonō
yaṭ ažiš dahākō jaini (Zamāyd Yašt XV.92)

“When Astuuat-ərəta (Saošiiant), Ahura Mazdā’s messenger, son of Vīspa.tauruuaiiā, shall rise up from Lake *kqsaōiia*, he will have a victorious mace, (the same mace that) the brave 9raētaona bore when the dragon Dahāka was slain” (after Hintze 1994, 39).

hō diḍāt xratəuš+dōi9rābiia
vīspa dāmṇ paiti.vaēnāt
+pascāišō dušci9raiiāiā
hō vīspəm ahum astuuantəm
ižaiiā vaēnāt dōi9rābiia
darəšca da9aṭ amarəxšiiantīm
vīspəm yṇm astuuaitīm gaē9ṇm (Zamāyd Yašt XV.94).

“He (Saošiiant) shall gaze upon all of the creatures with (his insightful) eyes of intelligence to the one with demon nature; then attack. He shall gaze with the eyes that render strength at the whole of material life, with eyes that shall deliver immortality to the material world” (after Hintze 1994, 39).

As we can see in verse 92, Saošiiant will rise up with a special weapon. A mace similar not only to the one which 9raētaona carried, but also similar to the one owned by Indra called *vājra*.

It would thus seem that by the Younger Avestan period the ancient myth of the deity/hero slaying a dragon had found a new interpretation. It may be speculated that perhaps the Zoroastrian priests of the time transferred the dragon-slaying role (which was retained as a key concept) to the *Saošiiant*, now the new hero, rising and stepping forth

from the lake (connecting him to the water goddess Anāhitā) and gaze upon all of the creation with a particular wisdom (*xratu-*). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that there seems to be a correlation between wisdom, as of Anāhitā's characteristics, and the same *xratu-*. Moreover, if we consider that Saošiiant rises from Lake Kašaoiia, and the first thing that he does is to gaze with his “insight eyes of intelligence” at creation, we may consider that wisdom is absorbed from Lake Kašaoiia, from whence he rises and thus may be linked with water and Anāhitā. His “insightful eyes of intelligence”, could be seen as a source of visionary insight and mental enlightenment. At the same time, in the final version of the myth, it is possible that the destructive dragon was transformed into Ahriman's creations, which the Saošiiant will destroy in the final battle between Good and Evil. Saošiiant, now a hero and a savior, comes out of the lake to eventually bring about the renovation of the world. Saošiiant, like the Vedic god Indra, bears the epithet *vərəθra-jan-*, “dragon slaying hero, a title never given to any other dragon-slaying heroes in Iranian mythology.

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