

# The Origin of the Legend of Zoroaster in Mabug

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**Abstract:** The Silk Road, as the most famous trade route in the ancient world, has always attracted considerable attention from researchers. Economics and commerce are the main subjects of most research on the Silk Road. However, along this long route, not only were goods and wealth exchanged, but culture, language, and even religion among different peoples also interacted and influenced each other. In the third volume of *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Mary Boyce and Franz Grenet refer to the myth of Zoroaster among the priests of the Temple of Atargatis at Mabug. According to this legend, Zoroaster, with the help of a Thracian magician named Orpheus, succeeds in repelling an evil and annoying spirit that lives in the forests around Mabug. While Boyce and Grenet trace the origins of this legend to the period of Achaemenid rule in Syria, the most important document in this regard is *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton* from the sixth or seventh century AD; that is, almost a thousand years after the fall of the Achaemenids. In addition, another source that can be considered the influence of Zoroastrian beliefs in Mabug is *De Dea Syria* by Lucian of Samosata, which was written in the second century AD, almost five hundred years after the fall of the Achaemenids. This time gap seriously challenges Boyce and Grenet's view. On the other hand, considering that the Silk Road flourished and passed through Mabug at the time when both sources were composed, and also due to the proximity of this city to the Iranian border, the present study shows that the origin of this legend should be traced via the Silk Road.

**Keywords:** Silk Road, Zoroaster, Syria, Mabug, Atargatis

## Introduction

From ancient times, and particularly from the third century BC onward, the image of Zoroaster in the Greco-Roman world was different from the Iranian one. While Zoroaster was known to the Iranians merely as a prophet, to the Greeks and Romans he was a philosopher, astronomer, predictor, and sometimes even a magician. This view was also common among other peoples living in the Hellenistic and later Roman world. Therefore, it is no wonder that some Coptic, Syriac, and Aramaic texts about Zoroaster also have parallels with the Classical ones (Kiperwasser and Ruzer 2012, 198). The subject of the current study is one of the legends of Zoroaster that was common among the priests of the temple of Atargatis in the city of Mabug.

Our main source for the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug is *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton*, whose only extant manuscript is in Syriac and belongs to the seventh or eighth century AD (Otto 1872, 385). In the text, the author is introduced as Melito the Philosopher, and accordingly some have identified him as Melito of Sardis; however, it has been proven that this identification is incorrect (Donaldson 1866, 234). The main importance of *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton* lies in its introduction of non-Christian sects in the Roman Near East. In this context, a pagan sect in the city of Mabug in northern Syria is mentioned that had a statue of Zoroaster in its glorious temple. Then, a very brief story about Zoroaster is related, which is the focus of this study.

After *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton*, *De Dea Syria* by Lucian of Samosata is the most important source. There are approximately eighty extant works attributed to Lucian of Samosata (Russell 1986, 654), which include a wide range of different subjects, and of course, some of these attributions appear to be incorrect. Nevertheless, *De Dea Syria* is one of the most important and well-known works of this prolific author. The book discusses the religious sects in the city of Hierapolis, or Mabug. Most of the content of this book is irrelevant to the subject of this study; however, some of its passages, which describe the statues and offerings dedicated to the temple of Mabug, are worthy of attention due to their similarity to *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton*.

The discovery of the Derveni Papyrus in 1962 opened a new window in Classical studies. This document, which is the oldest extant manuscript in European history, contains a brief passage that is helpful in tracing the origins of the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug.

This article argues that the Mabug legend should not be understood as a solely Iranian or Syrian tradition, but rather as a result of religious exchanges along the Silk Road. In the current study, first, the significance of the city of Mabug in Syria is explained. The fact that Syria always had a major role in ancient international commerce, and that the city of Mabug was located along the Silk Road, is of crucial importance for the final result of this study. In the second step, the mysterious cult of Atargatis in Mabug is introduced. Understanding this sect is important because its priests promulgated one of the strangest myths about Zoroaster. Then, the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug is presented, and in

addition to the main narrative of *The Apology of Pseudo-Meliton*, the view of Boyce and Grenet regarding the origins of this legend is analyzed. The next two parts of the paper are dedicated to comparing the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug with other Classical and Iranian narratives, respectively. Accordingly, it first becomes clear that the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug does not have much in common with Classical sources, and then its similarities with Iranian narratives are discussed. Finally, the article returns to its main question, namely the origin of the legend of Zoroaster in the city of Mabug, and an explanation different from that of Boyce and Grenet will be presented.

### **The Status of the City of Mabug in Syria and along the Silk Road**

Syria has always been a bridge between Asia and Egypt. On the other hand, as the exchange of goods, culture, and ideas in the Mediterranean world took place through sea routes, Syria was an international actor that played an important role in various ancient empires (Montgomery 1919, 106). Continental trade routes were always prosperous in Syria, and the cities of Aleppo and Antioch in the north and Palmyra in its center played an important role in international commerce (Montgomery 1919, 106).

Syria, especially in the Hellenistic era, became a bridge between east and west. In the meantime, some of its cities gained crucial importance due to their location along the Silk Road. The city of Hierapolis, or Mabug, was one of them. This city was located east of Aleppo along the main road to Mesopotamia; its Syrian name was Mabug, and it was called Hierapolis during the reign of Seleucus I Nicator, yet it has retained its ancient name until today and is now called Manbij (Harmon 1961, 338). Pliny the Elder (d. 79 AD) explains the name of this city as “Bambyx, the other name of which is Hierapolis, but by the Syrians called Mabug” (Pliny, *The Natural History* 5.19.23). The ancient geographer Claudius Ptolemy highlighted the role of Mabug in international trade, especially its link to the Parthian Empire (Ptolemy, *Geographia* 1.12.5).

Trade routes, whether from the Persian Gulf or the Iranian plateau, usually formed in the fertile and verdurous regions of northern Syria. With good reason, it can be said that these trade routes were thriving during Roman rule. The Silk Road must have passed through cities such as Zeugma or Hierapolis, cities that in Roman times were the only known caravan routes to China (Meyer 2016, 23). According to David George Hogarth, who visited Manbij in 1908, even in his time caravans used the road of Manbij to travel from Aleppo to Mosul and Urfa (Hogarth 1907/1908, 184). Strabo confuses the cities of Edessa and Mabug in an interesting passage, though he mentions that Hierapolis, the city of the cult of Atargatis, was located on the main road from Syria to Mesopotamia (Strabo, *Geography*, 16.1.27). More importantly, the city seems to have been located on the main route of the Silk Road that went to China through the Arsacid Empire (Ellerbrock 2021, 158; Hartmann 2018, 455). Thus, the city was directly linked to the Arsacid royal road (Olbrycht 2024, 191). The importance of the city in trade was such that some historians

equate it with the city of Yuluo mentioned in Chinese sources such as the *Hou Hanshu* and *Wei-lüe* (Schuol 2000, 395).

It is obvious that due to the geographical status of Syria, it was also politically important. Especially some of its cities, which were located along the caravan routes, had greater political, military, and economic importance. The Seleucids turned Mabug into their most important foothold on the main road from Antioch to Seleucia. Many ancient Syrian temples were rebuilt in the Hellenistic era by the Seleucids and took Greek names; the temple of Atargatis in Mabug was one of them (Rostovtzeff 1941, 511). This temple was rebuilt by Stratonice, the wife of Seleucus I Nicator, in a completely Hellenistic style, and the statues of several deities adorned it (Rostovtzeff 1941, 438). Therefore, Mabug was important both from a religious and a trading point of view, and this dual nature was similar to the status of the city of Hatra in the Parthian Empire (Olbrycht 2024, 218).

To the Arsacids, Syria was important for two reasons. First, it was the political center of the Seleucids, who would wage military campaigns against them. Second, it was the source of international trade routes that connected Asia to both Africa and Europe. All in all, it seems that Arsacid policy toward Syria was in line with their policy toward Armenia (Wolski 1993, 117). After the fall of the Seleucids and the rise of the Romans, Syria still retained its military importance for both the Parthian and Roman empires. According to Plutarch, one of the mistakes of Crassus during his Parthian campaign was that he did not secure his position in Syria and instead preferred to plunder its rich temples, such as that of Atargatis in Hierapolis. The same author also reports that many people attributed the defeat of Crassus to the anger of the goddess Atargatis (Plutarch, *Lives, Crassus* 17). Years later, the famous Roman emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus made Hierapolis the rendezvous of Roman forces. In fact, he started his military campaign against the Sasanian Empire from this city by crossing the Euphrates (Gardner 1895, 392). Therefore, the city of Mabug, or Hierapolis, due to its geographical status and proximity to the Euphrates, the natural border between Iran and Rome, was important for both empires. Also, because of its location along the Silk Road, it had commercial importance. Naturally, in times of war and conflict between the two empires, Silk Road trade decreased in front-line regions such as Syria and Mesopotamia. However, in general, this route does not seem to have lost its prosperity even in turbulent times (Gawlikowski 2016, 19).

### **The Cult of Atargatis**

The most important source for studying the cult of Atargatis is *De Dea Syria* by Lucian of Samosata. Furthermore, archaeological excavations in Manbij, and especially the coins of Hierapolis, have shed some light on this mysterious cult (Per 1990, 151–187). There have been many studies on the origin of this cult: some, such as Lewis Bayles Paton, attribute the origin of the worship of Atargatis to the mother goddesses of the ancient Semitic peoples (Paton 1910, 26), while others, such as John Garstang, believe that it is related to

Cybele, the mother goddess of the ancient Hittites (see Strong 2013, 1). Of course, given the geographical location of Mabug and its proximity to Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and other Syrian cities, its religion was influenced by those regions, and Greek features also penetrated this cult in the Hellenistic era. It is noteworthy that when Lucian, in the second century AD, was describing the cult of Atargatis, it was a local cult; however, as scholars have shown, this religion was much more widespread in earlier times, and in addition to Syria, it had followers in many regions of Asia Minor (Strong 2013, 15).

There is greater consensus on the origin of the name Atargatis. It seems that this name has its roots in the ancient Semitic mother goddess tradition. A powerful mother goddess has long been present in the religion of various Semitic peoples, the most famous of which is Ishtar in Assyria and Babylonia. Therefore, we find Athtar in southern Arabia, Astar in Ethiopia, Ashtar in Moab, Ashtart in Phoenicia, and Attar in ancient Syria (Paton 1910, 28).

Atargatis must have been a powerful goddess, because despite major political changes that occurred over more than a millennium, she was able to retain her popularity. During this time, Mabug experienced the rule of the Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Archaeological evidence shows that Atargatis preserved her main features from 2700 BC to AD 200 (Strong 2013, 15). She was initially the goddess of love and fertility, but eventually became the principal deity of her followers. Another Semitic god, named Hadad, was usually worshiped alongside her and was considered Atargatis' husband (Strong 2013, 21). Hadad, who is the Babylonian and Assyrian Adad, was originally the god of rain, thunder, and storms. Hadad and Atargatis were usually worshiped together, although Atargatis was more important. From ancient times, the worship of mother goddesses alongside their male counterparts—sometimes their brothers, husbands, or sons—was common among various Semitic peoples (Paton 1910, 27).

### **The legend of Zoroaster in Mabug**

*The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* (§9) relates a fascinating legend about Zoroaster's Magian rituals in Mabug:

But touching Nebo, which is in Mabug, why should I write to you? For, lo! all the priests who are in Mabug know that it is the image of Orpheus, a Thracian Magus. And Hadran is the image of Zaradusht [Zoroaster], a Persian Magus, because both of these Magi practised Magism at a well which is in a wood in Mabug, in which there was an unclean spirit; and it committed violence and attacked the passage of everyone who was passing by in all that place in which now the fortress of Mabug is located. And these same Magi charged Simi, the daughter of Hadad, that she should draw water from the sea and cast it into the well, in order that the spirit should not come up and commit injury, according to that which was a mystery in their Magism. (*The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* §9).

This passage is not only extraordinary because of the legend of Zoroaster, but also because of the other divine names and identifications that it presents. Therefore, it differs from other common narratives in the Roman Near East in many respects. For instance, the identification of Nebo (the god of writing in Assyria and Babylon) with Orpheus (the ancient Greek god of poetry and music) is odd, because the official Greek identity of Nebo was Apollo (Lightfoot 2007, 76). Furthermore, the description of Orpheus as “a Thracian Magus” is debatable. The equation of Zoroaster and Hadran is even stranger than the previous identifications. There were several narratives about Zoroaster in the Hellenistic era, most of which had non-Iranian origins. Later, this tradition concerning Zoroaster was transmitted to Christian authors of the Roman Empire (Kiperwasser and Ruzer 2012, 199).

Based on a note by Austin Morris Harmon in the fourth volume of *The Works of Lucian* (Harmon 1961, 354), Boyce and Grenet describe the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug as follows: “the priests of Atargatis identified one of the many images in their temple as that of the Iranian prophet; and claimed that a lonely place in the forest which then surrounded the city was where he had withdrawn to seek solitude. They thus vied, apparently, with Atropatene and other places within Iran itself in trying to attach the legend of Zoroaster to their own neighbourhood” (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 356). But what exactly do Boyce and Grenet mean by “the legend of Zoroaster”?

Mary Boyce, in the first two volumes of *A History of Zoroastrianism*, together with Frantz Grenet in the third volume, explains a wide range of narratives about Zoroaster. She categorizes each of these narratives as “the legend of Zoroaster.” Thus, the legend of Zoroaster includes all narratives concerning his birthplace, how he became a prophet, and his extraordinary deeds. The point, however, is that there was not one legend of Zoroaster, but many. Mary Boyce justifies this diversity by referring to Zoroastrian priests from different parts of Iran who tried to attribute the birthplace and extraordinary deeds of Zoroaster to their own homelands. The reason that Boyce and Grenet compare the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug with that of Atropatene is that the Zoroastrian priests of Atropatene were very successful in fabricating a legend of Zoroaster for their region (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 69–74). In fact, according to Boyce and Grenet, the priests of Atargatis in the city of Mabug, like the Zoroastrian priests of Atropatene, sought to construct a Zoroastrian legend for their city.

### **Comparison of the Legend of Zoroaster in Mabug with Classical Narratives**

The legend of Zoroaster related in *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* is different from other Classical narratives in so many ways that it would not be an exaggeration to call it unique. Here, Zoroaster is not a prophet; there is no sign of any revelation, no connection between him and fire is seen, no holy book is attributed to him, and he is not presented as an astronomer or predictor. Although hunting an evil spirit can be considered a supernatural ritual, it is nevertheless different from other paranormal actions attributed to Zoroaster in

Classical sources. The only similarity between this story and some Classical narratives is that it takes place in a forest. According to Ammianus Marcellinus: “When Zoroaster had boldly made his way into the unknown regions of Upper India, he reached a wooded wilderness, whose calm silence the lofty intellects of the Brahmins control...” (Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.33).

The Derveni Papyrus, probably composed in the fourth or fifth century AD, also sheds some light on the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug (Lightfoot 2007, 102). There is a passage in this text that describes the performance of the Magi in a ritual:

...prayers and sacrifices placate souls. An incantation by *magoi* can dislodge *daimons* that become a hindrance; *daimons* that are a hindrance are vengeful souls. For this reason, *magoi* perform the sacrifice as if they are paying a blood-price. Onto the offerings they make libations of water and milk, with both of which they also make the drink-offerings. They sacrifice cakes that are countless and many-humped, because these souls too are countless. Initiates make a first sacrifice to (the) Eumenides in the same way as *magoi* do; for the Eumenides are souls. Hence a person who intends to sacrifice to (the) gods first (sacrifices) a bird ..., so that even the ..., but they are souls ... this, but as many (souls) as ... of ..., but they wear ...” (Janko 2001, 1–32).

In this text, *magoi* probably refers to clerics of the Iranian religion, whether Zoroastrian or not (Burkert 1985, 117–123). However, some scholars believe that here the Greek word μάγοι (*magus*) merely refers to any cleric or magician, and that they may not necessarily be Iranian (Betegh 2004, 78–83). Nevertheless, the arguments presented by those who consider them Iranian clerics, or at least Greeks who followed an Iranian religion, seem more convincing (Lightfoot 2007, 103). The interesting aspect of the Derveni Papyrus narrative is that it bears no resemblance to other Classical narratives and is unique of its kind. In fact, the most similar narrative to this text is the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug. There are three fundamental similarities between these two narratives:

- 1) In both of them the Magi (Zoroaster and Orpheus in *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* and the Magi in *The Derveni Papyrus*) are introduced as masters of religious rituals.
- 2) In both texts the Magi are hunting evil spirits or demons.
- 3) In both narratives pouring water plays an important role in the ritual. Zoroaster and Orpheus hunt the demon by pouring sea water into the well and the Magi in *The Derveni Papyrus*, pour milk and water on their offerings to restrain evil spirits.

Despite these similarities, there are also important differences:

- 1) In the Derveni Papyrus, sacrifice and donations to the gods play a crucial role, as if this were the only way to restrain evil spirits. One part of this passage is particularly noteworthy: “For this reason, *magoi* perform the sacrifice as if they are paying a blood-price.” This shows that the only way to restrain evil spirits was to appease them with sacrifices. There are no sacrifices or donations in the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug; it seems that the seawater itself has a property that prevents the demon from leaving the well. Although *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* is silent about the reason behind this pouring of

seawater, could this mystery be related to the pouring of water and milk in the Derveni Papyrus?

2) Unlike the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug, prayers and incantations play an important role in the Derveni Papyrus narrative. One may, however, consider the persuasion of Simi, the daughter of Hadad, by Zoroaster and Orpheus as a kind of prayer or incantation; nevertheless, the text itself is silent about how they persuaded her.

3) The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus pour water and milk simultaneously on their offerings, whereas Zoroaster and Orpheus use only seawater.

4) The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus perform all the actions themselves, while in the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug, Simi carries out the act, and the two Magi play only an intermediary role.

Considering the similarities, differences, and the geographical and temporal distance between the two texts, it is difficult to find any direct connection between these narratives. Furthermore, the Derveni Papyrus is written in Greek, whereas *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* is in Syriac, and there is no evidence for a Greek translation of the latter (Nöldeke 1887, 345–346). This means that the similarities between these two narratives are either coincidental—which is highly unlikely—or that they are based on a third tradition that somehow influenced both texts.

### **Comparison of the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug with the Iranian tradition**

The differences between the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug and other Classical and Syriac sources leave us with only two alternatives: I) this narrative is merely a local legend of Mabug and had nothing to do with the outside world; II) this legend has its roots in the Iranian tradition of Zoroaster. In the first case, if we did not have the Derveni Papyrus, we could speak with more confidence about the locality of this legend. However, the similarities between the Derveni Papyrus and *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* are so fundamental that they cannot be coincidental. On the other hand, their differences are also so great that it cannot be assumed that one influenced the other. Therefore, it is likely that both narratives are partly based on a third source and, obviously, on their respective local characteristics. But as Lightfoot has rightly pointed out the similarities between the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug and Iranian narratives (Lightfoot 2007, 100–103), this third source must have been the Iranian tradition.

1) The first resemblance is that Zoroaster in *The Apology of PS.-Meliton* (as the Magi in *The Derveni Papyrus*) is introduced as a master of religious rituals which is consistent with the Iranian tradition.

2) The second, and most important, similarity is that in some Zoroastrian religious texts, such as the Avesta, Zoroaster is depicted as a demon hunter or as one who restrains evil spirits. This bears undeniable similarity to both *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* and the narrative of the Derveni Papyrus. We read in *Zamyād Yašt* (12, 80–81): “Before that time,



the daēvas used to rush about openly, / lust pushed them forward openly, / openly they used to abduct / the wives from their husbands. / Thereupon, (notwithstanding) their crying and lamenting / about the abuse, the daēvas used to rape them. Yet one Ahuna Vairya / which truthful Zarathushtra recited / with breaks in between up to the fourth time, / each subsequent time with louder recitation, / drove down (all the daēvas), causing them to hide under the earth, / all the daēvas unworthy of being worshiped, unworthy of being praised” (Humbach and Ichaporia 1998, 54-55).

Another passage in *Vendīdād* (19, 46–47) is also noteworthy: “Righteous Zarathushtra is born in the house of Porušasp. How shall we find death for him? He is the weapon against the demons; he is the opponent of the demons. He restrains the destroyer from destroying [he will take away his oppression]; he \* puts down those who worship the demons [he will make them weak]. The she-demon of it, (and) the falsely spoken falsehood—that too he will make weak. They, the demons, shouted; they, the evil demons of evil knowledge ran to the bottom of the world of darkness, that is, the fearful hell [back to the constant smoke]” (Moazami 2014, 449, 451).

As mentioned above, in these Avestan passages Zoroaster is fighting against *dīvān* (demons, monsters, fiends), which closely resembles the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug. The most interesting point is that in the narrative of *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton*, as in the Avesta, the evil spirit ultimately hides in a deep well (under the ground). Furthermore, bringing water from the sea and pouring it into a well is not entirely unrelated to Zoroastrian customs such as the ritual of Āb-Zōhr (Lightfoot 2007, 102). It seems, however, that this element of the legend has its roots in local beliefs, as Lucian of Samosata also mentions the custom of bringing water from the sea and pouring it into a chasm in the temple of Atargatis (Strong 2013, 45).

### **The Origin of the Legend of Zoroaster in Mabug**

Now we turn back to the main question of this study, which is: “What is the origin of the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug?” Boyce and Grenet doubtfully trace the origin of this legend to the Achaemenid period (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 357), without sufficient evidence to support this. First of all, as both authors have admitted, researchers do not have much information about Iranian religious centers in Syria, although we are aware of the existence of Iranian communities in important cities such as Damascus (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 354). The evidence also shows that even after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire and during the Hellenistic era, Iranian communities still existed in some Syrian cities, such as Antioch (Feissel 1985, 96–99). Yet, there are no historical documents directly referring to the existence of Iranian communities in Mabug during the Achaemenid period.

It is noteworthy that all the direct evidence we have about the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug dates back to hundreds of years after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire, an era when the Silk Road was prosperous. As mentioned before, the city of Mabug was along the

Silk Road, and its proximity to the Iranian border strengthens the case for the presence of Iranian merchants and traders there. Actually, a passage in *De Dea Syria* seems to confirm this: “and gems of great price adorn her, some white, some sea-green, others wine-dark, others flashing like fire. Besides these there are many onyxes from Sardinia and the jacinth and emeralds, the offerings of the Egyptians and of the Indians, Ethiopians, Medes, Armenians, and Babylonians” (Strong 2013, 73). The Medes in this text may not refer precisely to the Medes of northwestern Iran, but to Iranians in general; in any case, it confirms the presence of Iranians in Mabug and their donations to the temple of Atargatis.

But how can the donations of others (Indians, Ethiopians, Armenians, and Babylonians) be explained? Current evidence leaves us only with two options:

- 1) Due to the location of Mabug along the Silk Road and the presence of people from different nations for commerce, the priests of Atargatis preached to them, so that their temple was also prominent among others.
- 2) The temple of Atargatis was sacred to all those people and therefore they offered to it.

Based on current evidence, the first case seems more probable, although the latter is not impossible. Boyce and Grenet also believe that the priests of Atargatis promulgated the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug to gain the support of Zoroastrian Iranians (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 356–357). It is obvious that in this way, with the offerings of Zoroastrians to the temple of Atargatis, this temple would become more prosperous. Similarly, it can be imagined that the priests of Atargatis fabricated myths and stories related to the religion of other nations, such as Armenians, Indians, Egyptians, and others, to benefit from their offerings and gifts. If so, it must be said that the priests of Atargatis were very successful in this, because according to Lucian, the temple of Atargatis was the largest and richest temple in Syria, whose glory would attract the attention of every spectator: “These are the old and great sanctuaries in Syria. But of them all, as I believe, none is greater than those in the Holy City, nor any other temple more blessed, nor any other land holier. Costly works are therein, and ancient offerings, and many marvels, and simulacra in likeness of gods” (Harmon 1961, 349).

Obviously, in order to attract the attention of different nations, the priests of Atargatis had to find a connection between their temple and the religion of those people, and this connection required similarities. For instance, in order to attract the attention of Zoroastrians, they could not simply fabricate any story or myth; their narrative had to be somewhat similar to Zoroastrianism or familiar to the Iranian audience. In this way, the reason for the similarities between the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug and the Iranian tradition becomes clear. If this was indeed the case, then where and how were the priests of Atargatis acquainted with the Iranian narratives about Zoroaster? In response, it should be said that due to the presence of Iranians in Mabug, they obtained this information from the Iranians themselves. Subsequently, another question arises: what were the Iranians doing

in Mabug? The answer could be the Silk Road. Mabug was located on the Silk Road near the Iranian border, so naturally many Iranians would visit the city for commerce.

We now turn to the second alternative (see above), which, while unlikely, is not impossible. This could only be true in two cases:

1) The Temple of Atargatis and its deities were sacred in the religions of all Iranians, Indians, Ethiopians, Armenians, and Babylonians.

2) Due to the magnificence of the Temple of Atargatis in Syria, it was considered by various people who came to Mabug and so many of them offered to it. In fact, this was more a matter of admiration rather than religious beliefs.

Regarding the first case, it should be said that there is no evidence, except the legend itself (which was fabricated by the priests of Atargatis), to show that this temple was sacred to Zoroastrians at any time. It is possible that, due to the close relations between Mesopotamia and Syria, Atargatis and its temple were truly sacred to the Babylonians, but this is improbable for the other nations listed by Lucian.

The second case may seem insignificant at first glance, but it should be noted that in the ancient world (especially before Christianity), there was no real religious conflict between different religions, and respect for the gods and sanctities of other religions was common among many ancient nations (van der Spek 2014, 235).

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated, first, that the Mabug legend reflects transregional religious dynamics rather than a purely local tradition. Second, it has shown that the Silk Road context provides the necessary framework for understanding the transmission and transformation of such religious traditions. The legend of Zoroaster in *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* has important resemblances to some Zoroastrian narratives, while it bears fundamental differences from other Classical and Syriac narrations. Also, due to the obvious similarities of this story with a passage from the Derveni Papyrus, the possibility that it is merely a local legend is ruled out. Thus, the priests of Atargatis were certainly influenced by Iranian religion and Zoroastrian traditions; otherwise, such similarities would not have been observed. Considering the long temporal distance between important texts such as *The Apology of Ps.-Meliton* and *De Dea Syria* from the Achaemenid period, this narrative probably entered the traditions of the temple of Atargatis after the fall of the Achaemenids. On the other hand, due to the near simultaneity of the mentioned sources with the flourishing period of the Silk Road, the location of the city of Mabug along this road, and its proximity to the Iranian border, it seems that the priests of Atargatis became acquainted with Zoroastrian traditions through Iranian merchants and therefore, in order to gain their support, fabricated the legend of Zoroaster in Mabug.

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