

Anahita: Ancient Persian Goddess and Zoroastrian Yazata, [Payam Nabarz](#) (ed.)

Anahita and Mithra in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions

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It is increasingly difficult to argue, as it has been sustained by Iranian historiography, the monotheistic character of Zoroastrianism practiced by the Achaemenid kings, since there exist a lot of direct and indirect evidences that suggest the presence and maintenance of the worship of a considerable number of Iranian traditional deities. Darius I firstly used the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, usually written in cuneiform and Persian, Elamite and Aramaic, as his official propaganda and they were the main vehicle to venerate Ahura-Mazda as the principal god, and the One that provides the kings his protection and acknowledgement. However, at the end of V century BC, with the arrival of Artaxerxes II (405-359), later succeeded by Artaxerxes III (359-338), an interesting change occurs: although these kings also maintained an important propaganda work through the royal inscriptions, the novelty is that Ahura-Mazda is no longer the only deity invoked by name; he appears accompanied by two other gods, Mithra and Anahita, forming a divine triad that act together as the main gods among the Persians.

The importance of Mithra in Iranian religiosity is well known¹. The goddess Anahita² is related to the path of the goddess-mothers characteristics of the Middle East. The importance of this goddess in this period should be taken into detailed consideration, because Anahita is firmly present in the Avesta. This Goddess received a popular support, especially in the western region of Iran. This could explain her role within the Zoroastrian religion, adopting new forms of worship, such as an anthropomorphic representation, and its connection to royalty. An edict of Artaxerxes II quoted by Berosus (Clement of Alexandria, FRG 680 F11) ordered to erect a statue in honor of this goddess:

¹ Campos, I. *El dios Mitra en la Persia Antigua*. Las Palmas de G.C., 2006; Ries, J. "Le Culte de Mithra en Iran", *ANRW* II. 18.4, (1985), New York, 2728-2775; Frye, R. "Mithra in Iranian History", in Hinnells, J. *Mithraic Studies I*, Manchester, 1975, 62-69.

² About the origins of Anahita, different theories have been provided. While the goddess appears at the text of the Avesta a little blurred and clearly in the background, previous evidence suggests an important role before the Zoroastrian reform. Her origin could come from the regions of Armenia and western Iran (which were called Anahit). She plays the role of guarantor of fertility, in line with the cult of the Great Goddess of the Middle East. In this sense, the connections with Ishtar and Nanai are accepted. Her cult could be also associated with the planet Venus (Anahiti in Iranian), which also would have conferred her authority on love and health. Boyce has suggested the hypothesis on the origin of Anahita and its connection with the planet Venus. Boyce, M. "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrism", *BSOAS* 33 (1970). Pp. 22-38. For an overall view on Anahita, see De Jong, A., *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*. Leiden, 1997. pp.103-106.

Then, however, after several years, began to worship statues in human form ... Artaxerxes, the son of Darius, the son of Oco, introduced this practice. He was the first who raised an image of Aphrodite Anaite in Babylon and retained their worship by Susiana, Ecbatana, Persian, Bactrian, and Damascus and Sardis.

The royal inscriptions of these kings found in Hamadan (A2Ha, A2Hb), in Susa (A2Sa, A2Sd) and Persepolis (A3Pa) repeat the traditional formula of invoking the protection of Ahura-Mazda for the Achaemenid monarchy, but with the novelty that the last sentences also introduced the two new gods to confirm that authority. The most significant example is the commemoration of the restoration of the Audience Hall (Apadana) at Susa Palace (A2Sa):

Artaxerxes, the great king, the king of kings, the king of all nations, the king of this world, the son of king Darius [II Nothus], Darius the son of king Artaxerxes [I Makrocheir], Artaxerxes the son of king Xerxes, Xerxes the son of king Darius, Darius the son of Hystaspes, the Achaemenid, says: My ancestor Darius [I the Great] made this audience hall [apadana], but during the reign of my grandfather Artaxerxes, it was burnt down; but, by the grace of Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra, I reconstructed this audience hall.

May Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra protect me against all evil, and may they never destroy nor damage what I have built.

Or to remember the construction of part of that same palace (A2Sd):

I am Artaxerxes, the great king, the kings' king, king of all nations, king of this world, the son of king Darius, the Achaemenid. King Artaxerxes says: By the grace of Ahuramazda, I built this palace, which I have built in my lifetime as a pleasant retreat [paradise]. May Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra protect me and my building against evil.

The ascent to the throne of Artaxerxes II is accompanied by an armed confrontation with his brother Cyrus the Younger, ("War of the two brothers", 404-401 BC)³, which greatly convulsed the whole empire and even led to the involvement of foreign forces, as is the issue of the ten thousand Greek mercenaries, among whom was Xenophon. Greek authors endorsed the efforts of both contenders by launching propaganda campaigns in order to consolidate the legitimacy of their respective positions:

[2] Accordingly, Cyrus relied quite as much upon the people of the interior as upon those of his own province and command, when he began the war. He also wrote to the Lacedaemonians, inviting them to aid him and send him men, and promising that he would give to those who came, if they were footmen, horses; if they were horsemen, chariots and pairs; if they had farms, he would give them villages; if they had villages, cities; and the pay of the soldiers should not be counted, but measured out. [3] Moreover, along with much high-sounding talk about himself, he said he carried a sturdier heart than his brother, was more of a philosopher, better versed in the

³ Briant, P., *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire*. Winona Lake, 2002. pp. 615-30.

wisdom of the Magi, and could drink and carry more wine than he. His brother, he said, was too effeminate and cowardly either to sit his horse in a hunt or his throne in a time of peril. The Lacedaemonians, accordingly, sent a dispatch-roll to Clearchus ordering him to give Cyrus every assistance. (Plutarch, Art. VI.2-3)

In this context, I think that Artaxerxes had to direct his attention not only to the war front, but also to obtain loyalty from the people who made up the Empire. The mithrathoric names that have been identified both in the classical sources, inscriptions and coins⁴ (Mitriya, Mithrapates, Mithradates, Umithra, etc.), are related to members of the upper classes, linked in many cases with Persian aristocracy that occupied significant positions in the imperial administration. Hence, it can be considered that the devotion to this deity would enjoy a particular acceptance among certain influential Iranian nobility. In the same way, looking for the composition dates of the Avestan hymn dedicated to Mithra (Mihir Yasht), many scholars⁵ have made different proposals about the last years of the V century BC, the dates corresponding to these two kings. Something very similar happens in relation with the worship of Anahita⁶. The Achaemenids' devotion to this goddess evidently survived their conversion to Zoroastrianism, and they appear to have used royal influence to have her adopted by the Zoroastrian pantheon.

Taking all these elements into consideration, I propose that the incorporation of Mithra and Anahita into the royal inscriptions of Artaxerxes II, may be the written expression of a new royal commitment (as Darius had done in his reign) to widen the ideological and religious bases that supported his own monarchy. The difficulties experienced by the implementation of Ahura Mazda⁷ as supreme deity were evidenced in the *Daiva* inscription that has been studied from different perspectives by several scholars⁸. The official recognition of these two

⁴ The presence of these Mithraic Theophorus has been considered by different authors as a strong testimony of the continuity of the cult of this deity, although it cannot serve to clarify the extent of depth of that devotion. In this sense, Frye, R. "Mithra in Iranian history" in Hinnells, R. (ed.), *Mithraic Studies I*. 1975. Manchester. pp. 62-69. The further study on this issue is that of R. Schmitt, "Die mit Theophoren Eigennamen Altiranisch * Mitra." *Acta Iranica*. Vol IV. (1978). Pp 395-455. In this issue we have also devoted our attention on I. Campos, (2006) and Campos, I. "The god Mithra in the personal names during the Persian Achaemenid dynasty" *Aula Orientalis* (2006), 24.2, 165-176.

⁵ I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959 (reimp. 1967), pp. 23-25; H. Lommel, *Die Yast's des Avesta*, Göttingen, 1927, pp. 62-63; R. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, Madrid, 1975, pp. 150-1.

⁶ Atousa, A. "The evidences for the prominence of the goddess Anahita during the reign of Artaxerxes II (358-405 B.C.)" *Pazhuhesh-Nameh Farhang-o-Adab*, (Fall 2007-Winter 2008), 3(5), pp. 139-148.

⁷ Kellens points "la prééminence rituelle d'Ahura Mazda semble avoir subsisté jusqu'à la fin du règne d'Artaxerxès Ier, non sans susciter quelques conflits". Cfr. J. Kellens, *Le panthéon de l'Avesta ancien*, Wiesbaden, 1994. p. 126.

⁸ R.G. Kent, *Old Persian. Grammar. Texts. Lexicon*, New Haven, 1953. pp. 150-1. G. Cameron, "The 'Daiva' Inscription of Xerxes: in Elamite", *Die Welt des Orients*, 2(1959), Göttingen, pp. 470-6. R. Schmitt, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Part. I. Inscriptions of Ancient Iran. Vol. I. Old Persian Inscriptions. T. II. The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis*, London, 2000. Lecoq, P., *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*, Paris, 1997. pp. 256-8.

traditional Iranian gods was made in the dual spheres of politics and religious thought. In the field of religious practices we can see that from this moment, Mithra and Anahita play a role in the Avestan literature, which challenges the interpretations that have tried to explain both the Zoroastrian reform the religion practiced by the Achaemenid from a rigid monotheism.

With regard to these royal inscriptions it is important to understand the context of many interesting variations. Firstly, although we have already said that the name of Mithra and Anahita is mentioned together with Ahura-Mazda, this triad is explicitly named only in three inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (A2Sa, A2Ha and A2Sd); while in the preserved ones from his successor Artaxerxes III (A3Pa), Anahita's name disappears, and even there is the case of inscriptions in which only reappears Ahura-Mazda (A2Hc and A2Sc) or, more significantly, only Mithra (A2Hb). These variations are not determined by place of occurrence of registrations, so I can assume that the process of incorporation should be neither uniform nor definitive. On the contrary, it could have been the result of successive concessions and responses to the pressure exerted by the monarch, as the final expression of a dispute that was being resolved elsewhere.

The ellipses of Anahita in several inscriptions did not necessarily mean that the kings's recognition had been let down very soon,. Taking into consideration the above quoted information provided by Berossus about an edict of Artaxerxes II erecting a statue of Aphrodite Anaitis, it is possible to confirm that there was a definite intention to present Anathita as a monarchy divinity. Basirov argues that particular devotion by the goddess Anahita could be due to the influence exercised by the Queen Mother Parysatis, who had been promoting the syncretic cult of Anahita-Ishtar within the royal family⁹. Strabo (XI.14.16; XII.3.37) described many centuries later the existence of places of worship of Anahita promoted in Asia Minor by the Persians.

The Persians raised a mound of earth in the form of a hill over a rock in the plain, (where this occurred,) and fortified it. They erected there a temple to Anaitis [Anahit] and the gods Omanus and Anadatus, Persian deities who have a common altar. They also instituted an annual festival, (in memory of the event,) the Sacaea, which the occupiers of Zela, for this is the name of the place, celebrate to this day. It is a small city chiefly appropriated to the sacred attendants. Pompey added to it a considerable tract of territory, the inhabitants of which he collected within the walls. It was one of the cities which he settled after the overthrow of Mithridates. (Strab. Geo. XI.8.4)

The presence of Mithra alone into an inscription is a sign of special preference for this god as compared with the other two. However, it is difficult to separate these testimonies from what is happening in the process of redefinition of

⁹ Basirov, O., "Evolution of the Zoroastrian Iconography and Temple Cults" ANES, 38 (2001), pp. 173-4.

the Zoroastrian religious message. Hence, I argue that the only inscription preserved of Artaxerxes III, which refers exclusively to Ahura-Mazda and Mithra, could have a direct connection with the finding in the Avestan hymns of the *dvanda* Mithra-Ahura.

In fact, what these inscriptions reflect is how the religious daily life in the Achaemenid Empire was often conditioned or influenced by political circumstances. The adoption of Zoroastrianism by the re-founder of the empire Darius I, has been considered as an act of political propaganda in order to give legitimacy to his dark ascension to the throne and that offers an innovative project that brings unity to Persian people after the parenthesis of the reign of Bardiya. I consider that a similar example, but in lesser scale, is provided by the incorporation of Mithra and Anahita to the level of deities who openly support the monarchy, expressed through these inscriptions studied. This is also a deliberate political act, which, while not excluding the legitimate religious sentiment that could have both monarchs to these gods, cannot escape from the context of instability and the subsequent need of additional political and popular support.

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