CHAPTER TWO

THE PRE-ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION OF THE MEDES AND PERSIANS

The evidence

The close parallels between the beliefs and observances of the Avestan and Vedic peoples show how strong and tenacious was the religious tradition evolved by the proto-Indo-Iranians in remote prehistory.\(^1\) The western Iranians were equally heirs to this tradition, and so might reasonably be expected to have had the same beliefs and observances in their pre-Zoroastrian days. The difficulty has long been to gather any substantial amount of evidence to establish this as fact; but thanks largely to the work of archaeologists, there has been a considerable increase in data in recent decades. The greatest access has been in the number of theophoric names. These have been extracted in meagre quantity from Assyrian cuneiform texts of the ninth to seventh centuries B.C.; and more abundantly from Elamite cuneiform tablets at Persepolis, and from Babylonian cuneiform records and Aramaic writings. Much of this material belongs to the late sixth and first half of the fifth centuries—to a period, that is, when Zoroastrianism was evidently making strong headway in western Iran; but the tendency to maintain family traditions in name-giving makes it possible to use it, with caution, to throw light on the beliefs of previous generations.\(^2\) A complication for its analysis, however, is the uncertainty which attends the reconstruction of Iranian names recorded by non-Iranian scribes in cuneiform scripts. Doubtful reconstructed forms are marked therefore below with an asterisk.

Some further material is provided by the Persian royal inscriptions of the sixth century, in so far as these preserve older traditions through the month-names of the calendar. Other valuable evidence has been provided by excavations of Median dwelling sites and burial grounds; and Mesopotamian texts and sculptures yield useful background data.

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\(^1\) See HZ I, passim.

\(^2\) The fortification tablets from Persepolis have been dated to 509-494, and those from the treasury to 492-458. See R. Hallock, Persepolis Fortification Tablets, and G. G. Cameron, Persepolis Treasury Tablets. On the names in them see E. Benveniste, Titres et noms propres, 75-97; I. Gershevitch, 'Amber at Persepolis'; 'Iranian nouns and names in Elamite garb', TPS 1969, 165-200; and 'Island-Bay and the Lion', BSOAS XXXIII, 1970, 82-91. The material in these four publications was indexed, with additional matter, by M. Mayrhofer, Onomastica Persepolitana, (OnP). Add since W. Hinz, Neue Wege in Altpersischen, 105-18.
The gods

The Vedic-Avestan evidence suggests that the three moral beings venerated in Iran as the Ahuras—Ahura Mazda, Mithra and *Varuna—were a dominant group in the ancient pantheon; and that their chief task was to uphold the principle of order, truth and justice called in Avestan ‘aša’, in Medo-Persian ‘arta’. The word ‘arta’ appears to be attested as the first element in two Median personal names recorded in Assyrian cuneiform of the ninth century: *Artasir(u) and *Irta-žāt(i); 3 while the actual name of the greatest of the Ahuras is held to be preserved, as as-sa-ra ma-za-aš, in a list of gods in a text of the eighth or seventh century. 4 In the earliest Achaemenian inscriptions of the late sixth century his name and title appear fused into one, as Ahuramazda, a usage which testifies to the devotion paid to him by the Persians, and the frequency of his invocation among them. He is also honoured through various theophoric names: *Maźdakk(u) in an eighth-century Assyrian tablet, 5 and *Mazdaka in an Elamite one, 6 as well as, on other Elamite tablets, Mazdāfarnah ‘Having fortune through Mazdā’ 7 and Mazdādāta ‘Given by Mazdā’, 8 both attested also in Aramaic. The Persepolis and Aramaic texts also yield Mazdayazna, ‘He whose worship is of Mazda’. 9

No Mithra-names appear among the few Iranian ones preserved in the Assyrian records, but this Ahura is amply honoured in the Persepolitan nomenclature, his name appearing there both as ‘Mithra’, and in the Persian dialect form ‘Miṣa’. An element of doubt attaches to some of the reconstructed forms, because of the lack of distinction between ‘m’ and ‘v’ in the Elamite texts; but among the seemingly certain ones are Mithrapāta/Miṣapāta ‘Protected by Mithra’, Mithrabarzana ‘Exalting Mithra’, and Dātamiṣa ‘Given by Mithra’. 10

The reluctance to utter the name of the third Ahura, Varuna, appears

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4 See with references Dandamaev, Persien, 216-7.


6 OnP 8.1020.

7 OnP 8.1011 (?); RT no. 18:3 et pass.

8 OnP 8.1018; RT no. 54:2; 21:2 (?).
