ZOROASTRIAN SOURCES ON BLACK PEOPLE*

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The purpose of this short note is to draw attention to Zoroastrian attitudes to the Black Africans. These attitudes can be seen in the traditional Zoroastrian literature in Middle Persian, which flourished more than a millenium ago.

As is well known, Zoroastrianism was the state-religion of the Iranian empire, ruled by the Sasanian dynasty (226-636 CE). The sacred texts of this religion exist in Avestan, an ancient Iranian language closely related to Sanskrit, but in fact, Sasanian Zoroastrianism was based on Middle Persian (or, Pahlavi) versions and re-workings of the Avestan texts.

Soon after the Sasanian Empire fell to the Muslim Arabs in the mid-7th century, Islamized Iranians began to play a highly prominent role in the formation of the new Islamic civilization, which is probably indebted to its Iranian pre-Islamic heritage no less than it is to its Arab legacy. In this respect, it should be interesting to examine Zoroastrian attitudes to the Black Africans, as reflected in the Pahlavi sources. It must however be stressed that we are not implying here that these attitudes determined the Muslim views on race and color.

Iranians of the Late Sasanian period (the 6th/mid-7th centuries CE) were well acquainted with East and North-East Africa, and so it seems, it was in their footsteps that the Muslims (Arabs and/or Iranians and others, too) were able to

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* To James R. Russell, who inspired this paper in more than one way.
1 Henceforth: Blacks, Black people.
2 On Zoroastrianism in general, see Boyce, *Zoroastrians*; on different aspects of the history of this religion, see Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*; Boyce & Grenet, *The History of Zoroastrianism*; cf. also Gershevitch and Yarshater, *The Cambridge History of Iran*.
3 The first date is that of the coronation of Ardašīr, the founder of the dynasty; the second is that of the seizure of the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon by the Muslim Arabs.
4 For representative samples of Zoroastrian literature in Avestan, Pahlavi and other languages in English, cf. Boyce, *Textual Sources*; on the Pahlavi literature, see Boyce, “Middle Persian Literature,” on the complex interaction between the Avestan originals and their Pahlavi versions, cf. Shapira, *Zoroastrian Exegesis*.
5 Cf. the Pahlavi composition *Ayādgār i Jāmāspīg* (edited: Messina, *Libro apocalittico*) [henceforth *AyJ*] 8.7: *Tāzīgān ud Barbarištān šahr garm ud hušk wiyābān, nēst bar ud āb tang ušān xarišn šīr ud xrafstarān ud mūš ud mār ud gurbag, ūbāb ud kaflār ud abārīg az ēn ērān, uzādī paristīnd ušān zīwīn az ušīr ud cahār-pād, any ĉī nest, “The land[s] of the Arabs and Berbers is a hot and dry desert, it has no fruit and water is scarce, and their food is milk
3. ka Frēdōn mad, awēšān az Ėrān-šahr dwārist hēnd, pad kanārag i drayāb nišanīd kard, nūn pad dwāristan ī Tāziġān, abāz o Ėrān-šahr dwārist hēnd.

1. The (Avestan text) says, too: “Yim,9 when his royal glory departed from him, took a female dēw to wife, and gave his sister Yamīg to a dēw to wife, because of his fear of the dēwes; the apes, the bears, the forest-inhabitants, the tailed ones, and other noxious “sorts” (species) arose from them; and his (Yim’s) lineage did not progress therefrom.”

2. Regarding the Black people, the (Avestan text) says: “During his sovereignty, Azī Dahāk10 let loose11 a dēw on a young girl and let loose a young man on a parīg, and they (the female counterparts) had sex with the visible image of the male (counterparts of each other); through this new way of the action the Black people appeared.”

3. When Frēdōn12 came, they (the Black people) rushed off13 from the Lands of Iran and settled on the coast of the sea. Now, after the Arab onslaught,14 they have again rushed to15 the Lands of Iran.

One might date this denigration of the Black people by assuming that it reflects real historical events. It might refer to the Zandj (or, Zindj) revolt of 868-883 CE in the marshes of southern Irāq under the guidance of al-Barqūṭī (“the veiled one”),16 during which Black rebels fiercely fought their white-Muslim former masters.

Our Zoroastrian source tells us, correctly, that the Blacks appeared on the Iranian borders, in southern Irāq, after the Muslim Arab invasion of Iran, which took place in the 30s-50s of the 7th century, thus clearly indicating the post-Sasanian date for (at least) Bd XIV.B.3. However, the same source mentions the sourjourn of the Blacks on the Iranian coast (apparently, of the Persian Gulf) in the mythical times of Frēdōn. This could be a vague reference to the existence of ancient dark-skinned populations in southern Iran, of which the Brahui people, perhaps related to the Dravidic peoples of southern India, is the only remnant.17

In another passage of the Bundahišn (Bd XIV.36-39) it is stated that all of humanity originated from one human couple.18 This includes fifteen sardags (“sorts,”

9 Yim, or Yima, or Jam, is the Zoroastrian First Man. Beside Yim and his twin-sister Yamig, or Yamī, the Zoroastrian tradition knows another first couple of twins, Mašyā and Mašyānāg; cf. n. 18 below.

10 The Zoroastrian arch-demon, Daḥḥāk of the Persian Epic Śahnāme.


12 A Zoroastrian mythical hero, redeemer of Iran.

13 The verb used here normally applies to movements of demonic creatures and Ahriman, the Zoroastrian “Devil.”

14 Cf. the previous note.

15 A variant: gumēxt hēnd, “mingled with the (people of) the Lands of Iran.”

16 Cf. Massingnon, “Zandj,” with the bibliography (e.g., Tabari, iii. 1742-1787, 1835-2103); cmp. also Walker, “A Rare Coin of the Zanj.”

17 In the Early Islamic times, Black people seen as descendants of Ḥam were attested in Azania (Zanj), Abyssinia, Nubia, Barbary, *Phazania (*wa*<Fazz>ān), and the maritime and [southern] region of Persia, cf. Martinez, “Gardizī’s two Chapters on the Turks,” p. 117.

18 The already mentioned Mašyā and Mašyānāg; cf. n. 9 above.