Michael Shenkar


This remarkable monograph is the revised version of the author’s Ph.D. dissertation submitted in 2013 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. That an iconographical study is published in a series devoted to late-antique “magical and religious literature” can thus be explained (one of Shenkar’s supervisors, Shaul Shaked, is an editor of the series, which hitherto focused on Syriac and Jewish-Aramaic so-called incantation bowls and curse texts). But it is also something of an oddity, which might signal to the field that the two once pioneering enterprises *Iconography of Religions* (ed. T. P. van Baaren) and *Visible Religion* (ed. H. G. Kippenberg) have never been completed nor replaced (see Uehlinger 2015: 390–392). Today a senior lecturer in Pre-Islamic Iranian Studies at the Hebrew University, the author further acknowledges encouragement by Frantz Grenet, Jean Kellens, and others; his thesis moves to the very front of contemporary research on Iranian and Central Asian pre-Islamic cultural history.

Chapter 1, “Introduction” (pp. 1–10), exposes the book’s central concerns and aims, situates the research topic geographically and historically within the “Iranian world,” and explains why Zoroastrian texts should not have a lead in interpreting pre-Islamic Iranian iconography. There is the danger of retrojecting Zoroastrian developments and concepts that occurred only later and of considering Zoroastrianism the privileged cultural mold of ancient Iran. It is understandable that modern scholars with Irano-Zoroastrian sympathies favor such an approach, but there was definitely more variety and fluidity to pre-Islamic Iranian religion both west and east than what our big containers (Zoroastrian, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, etc.) allow for. I would add that from the critical historian’s point of view, there is little point in looking for “genuine Iranian” religious deities or concepts in isolation (but Shenkar...
wants to limit his discussion to “Iranian” deities and divine images; p. 2). One should always start (as Shenkar generally does) from contexts and assemblages and avoid anachronism (and anatopism) as far as possible. Chapter 2, “Written Sources” (pp. 11–46), offers a survey of relevant textual materials, among which the Avesta and Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature have a significant share but need to be supplemented by pre-Islamic inscriptions (especially Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian), pre-Christian Greek and Latin sources, Christian historiography (among which Armenian and Georgian histories deserve special attention), Manichaean and Chinese sources, and Arabic and Persian treatises written by Muslim historians and doxographers.

Chapter 3, “Iconographic Pantheon” (pp. 47–174), is the main corpus of the book, and in it Shenkar lists deities in alphabetical order whose iconography from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian period or beyond he discusses in virtually exhaustive detail and depth, consistently distinguishing between data from Western versus Eastern Iran. Twenty-eight deities are positively identified in visual representations; depending on the nature of the evidence, arguments for attribution vary from unambiguous epigraphic identification (deities are often named on Kushan coins) to circumstantial considerations. A final section deals with deities attested by a peculiar iconography (e.g., on sealings from the Persepolis archives or on Sogdian ossuaries) whom scholars cannot yet firmly identify by name. The longest discussions concern Ahura Mazda (see also Shenkar 2015a), Aŋahitā, Mithra, Nana, Xvərənəh, and Vayu, not necessarily because these were easy to identify or better attested than others but, rather, because they have been subject to intense scholarly debates, duly reviewed by the author. Picking out one attribution demonstrating Shenkar’s originality, the image on a seal that was found in 1882 on the site of ancient Gorgippia on the northern shore of the Black Sea has become the emblematic icon of Aŋahitā for scholars and laymen alike. It shows a goddess standing on a lion and facing a royal worshipper; her body is surrounded by rays projecting outward, an iconographic convention of Mesopotamian origin generally understood in terms of a halo of light. Shenkar questions the communis opinio identification with Aŋahitā and considers Nana a more probable alternative; but the figure might as well be another goddess related to the Mesopotamian Ishtar tradition, whose iconography spread far beyond Mesopotamia. Note that this chapter’s title is slightly misleading, since the more than twenty-eight deities and the visual representations assigned to them respectively belong to many different contexts in space and time; hence, they never formed a consistent “pantheon” until they were united as members of a class in Shenkar’s dissertation. As the author himself acknowledges in his conclusions, “we are in fact dealing with independent or semi-independent pantheons and cultural