



The Role of Allegory in the Persian Epic

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For the student of Iranian history, there exists a persistent puzzle. There are found two different traditions in the study of Iranian history, but at first sight there appears to exist almost no contact between them. On the one hand, there is the tradition pursued chiefly by western research, based on the surviving evidence of Greek and Roman historians, on inscriptions in several languages and scripts both within and outside of Iran, including Greek, cuneiform Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian, Aramaic, Parthian, Pahlavi, and in recent times, as we shall see, also Bactrian. To these is added the evidence of coins, which today provide an impressive structure of documentation.

On the other hand, we have to think of the so-called "traditional" history of Iran, enshrined in much of the most celebrated Persian literature, and forming, even today, an important field of national education. No doubt the fullest and most celebrated source of this material is provided by the *Shāhnāma* of Firdausi, that voluminous and often inspired epic purporting to narrate the story of the land from the Creation to the extinction of the Sasanian dynasty in A.D. 652. Other indigenous histories, both in Arabic and Persian, offer only slightly differing versions of the same narrative. Many of the details are further substantiated by allusions, often summary, in the Zoroastrian religious books.

Indeed, the later part of this saga, covering the epoch of the Sasanian dynasty from A.D. 223, agrees in broad outline with the evidence of the external sources. For some periods, notably for the reign of the proverbially "Just King," Khusrow I Anushirvan, with its richness of detail, the *Shāhnāma* emerges almost as the preferred source. The earlier portion, however, covering the reigns of the "prehistoric" dynasties, the so-called Pishdadians and Kayanians, could almost

be taken for the history of an entirely different land. Not only are the names of the protagonists at first sight entirely different from any known to history. The chronological scheme and sequence of events can hardly be related to the offerings of western research.

The concrete results of western analyses, based on Classical authors, and on material evidence—though room may remain for debating the details—can hardly be dismissed as spurious. The quantity of the material evidence is just too substantial to support this conclusion.

How then are we to account for the absence in the traditional record of the names of almost all the historical personalities mentioned by Classical sources? Only Dara and his son of a similar name, a memory focussed on Darius II and on Darius III, the opponent of Alexander, recalls the Achaemenid rulers of this name. Other prominent figures, such as Cyrus the Great, Darius the First, and so on, are missing or unrecognizable. This dilemma may of course be approached in different ways. It is scarcely a solution to suggest that much of the Iranian tradition is fictional, since we have still to account for the origin of so elaborate and widely credited a structure. What could have inspired the creation of so many personalities, and the dramatic incidents in which they take part. One approach is to categorize the bulk of the material as "mythical." That is to say, a catalogue of events which never happened, but were devised to describe supernatural beings, or account for natural phenomena.

Another approach, quite prevalent in current scholarship, is to project unknown rulers and events back into prehistoric times, thereby explaining the unknown by invoking the less known. Certain episodes may have to be explained in this way, since obviously events such as the Creation, for example, would not be found

in any recorded history. I personally, however, consider this method involves a logical error. Its adoption, by removing events from the historical scene, precludes the discovery of any historical context that might possibly exist. My own preference is to assume that "legendary" narratives, however distorted or confused in transmission, should ultimately derive from a real historical memory. If this historic basis is known to us, it should eventually be recognizable.

In the *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, pt. 1, E. Yarshater¹ has given a comprehensive account of the manner in which this traditional history was compiled. Towards the end of the Sasanian period, an effort was made to collect all the current material, largely no doubt oral, bearing on the history and antiquities of Iran. An attempt was made at that time to integrate these narratives into a continuous history, known as the *Khwadāy-nāmag*. It was recorded no doubt in Pahlavi, and though lost today, is known to us now from literary allusions. This was no doubt the principal, though by no means the only, source of the traditional history, translated into Arabic, and later New Persian, to provide a basis for later compilations.

The Parthian and Sasanian writing-systems were distinctly cumbersome, and their use largely confined to the priesthood and the secretariat. As noticed below, Mary Boyce² has emphasized the role of the minstrel, known in Parthian as the *gōsān*, travelling from court to court, and entertaining the aristocratic audiences with versified narratives set to music. Indeed these minstrels performed a role very parallel with that of the European minstrels of the Middle Ages. Their tales, whether in prose, verse, or music, would have been recited from memory, and passed on orally to subsequent generations. In the early literature of modern Persian, there are many descriptions of the songs and sagas recited by the *gōsāns*, many telling of events during the period of the Sasanians, and of even earlier dynasties. It was from this mosaic of shorter poems and legends that the compilers of late Sasanian times worked to assemble their massive epic.

Obviously a task of this kind involved serious difficulties. An oral tradition can seldom be exact in matters of chronology. Moreover, the epic jigsaw had to be adjusted to conform with the chronological schemes adopted by the priest-

hood, by which human and divine history were divided into epochs. Thus a total duration of 12,000 years (the astral "Great Year") was allotted to creation. Periods each of 3,000 years were ascribed to the respective phases of preparation, of the domination of Ahriman the spirit of evil, a mixed domination, and of the eventual triumph of Ahuramazda deity of the good. Additionally much ingenuity was devoted to calculating the point of the cycle reached at any commentator's viewpoint. Such preconceptions naturally distorted the framework of historical events.

I shall turn therefore to the microcosm of separate episodes which go to make up the corpus of the epic narrative. One personage prominent in the epic tradition is the figure of Azidahāka, or, as he is named in the New Persian and Arabic narratives, Zāhhāk. He is represented, on the one hand, as a monstrous tyrant, who after dethroning the legendary Jamshed, then king of Iran, executed him by having him sawn in half, and then imposed his tyranny on Iran for no less than a thousand years. Through the action of Ahriman, spirit of evil, serpents grew from his shoulders, to feed which he was obliged to levy from his compatriots a tribute of youths, whose brains provided food for the reptiles. It is likely enough that the motif of the serpents was inspired by sculptural images of the Semitic Underworld-God, as for example in the well-known panel from Hatra in Iraq.³ Such images could have been visible to travellers in the Sasanian period.

Despite his horrific nature, Azidahāka in this aspect is represented as a human ruler, like his peers offering sacrifice to the goddess Anahita to attain the sovereignty of Iran. At the same time, other passages describe him rather as a serpent, three-headed and six-eyed, and of course the name itself means "dragon." Yet it is clear that in sober factual terms, he could not have been both a human sovereign and a serpent. Finally, we have to take note of a third aspect of Azidahāka: in *Yasna* 9.24-25 he is represented as a principal agent of Ahriman, the spirit of evil, in terms of the dualistic cosmology associated with Zoroastrianism. This separate personality could have resulted from an astral concept, since star maps featured a huge cosmic dragon stretched across the universe and moving as a planet, its head and tail being responsible for

solar and lunar eclipses. According to the heresiarch Mani, the divine ruler of this planet was Ahriman.⁴

It was a suggestion several years ago by Prof. Carsten Colpe that set me on the path to an understanding of the contradictory character of Azidahāka. He suggested that the etymology of the name Azidahāka should be explained by its interpretation as "The Serpent of the Dahae." This very straightforward explanation points the way to a solution.

In a paper published in 1988⁵ I contended that the explanation lay in interpreting the whole legend as an allegory. It was not hard to see, even without specific evidence, that the malicious king Azidahāka referred originally to the historical Astyages, last king of the Median Empire of Northern Iran, defeated by Cyrus the Great in 550 B.C. The names (not etymologically identical) are sufficiently similar to suggest an identification. Herodotus (1.119) represents the sinister character of the Median king, who served his commander's son at a banquet. The categorization as a serpent provides an allegorical description, of a type known to be fashionable (as we shall see) in the early minstrel literature of Iran. In connection with the word "dragon" (Gk. δράκων) one should bear in mind that all the early Classical references to dragons describe a serpent, and are probably inspired by the Indian king cobra. Only later, after contact with China, was the dragon envisaged as a complex creature with four legs, a concept probably inspired by dinosaur skeletons in the Gobi desert.

At the time of my paper I understood the allegorical description of "the Serpent of the Dahae" to refer to the Caspian sturgeon. Basking sturgeon are one of the phenomena commonly mistaken for the legendary "great sea-serpent." These fish breed along the south-eastern corner of the Caspian, and the fry run up the rivers of Mazandaran to mature in fresh water, before returning to the sea to spawn. According to an account of the Arab historian al-Mas'ūdi, the sturgeon were definitely known as *azhdahā* in his time, and probably indeed earlier. Huge specimens were no doubt feared by fishermen in small boats, and since they matured in the rivers of northern Iran, could convey an allegorical allusion to the Median king whose territories were in the same region.

I have learned subsequently, however, that east of the Caspian Sea, in the territory of the Dahae, there existed another even more dangerous serpent. On a visit to Turkmenistan I heard of the desert cobra (*Naja Oxiana*), a formidable and venomous reptile widely feared in the region. The other legendary serpent of the Avesta, Sruvara, refers no doubt to the Indian cobra, the range of which extends as far west as the Logar valley in Afghanistan, site of "the mountain of Sagavand" (Sakavandeh-Kuh), where it is located in Asadī Tūsi's *Garshāsp-nāma*. Similarly Azidahāka "the Serpent of the Dahae" must originally have designated the desert cobra of Turkmenistan. Whether it was this creature, or the Caspian sturgeon that was likened to the sinister king Astyages is debatable, but I still think the sturgeon provides the more apposite allegory.

Confirmation of my belief that the figure of Azidahāka was an allegory for the Median king Astyages, and was so understood in mediaeval and ancient times, is provided by a passage of the Armenian history of "Moses of Choren," purporting to transmit a report of the earlier historian Mar Apas Catina. We read, in the French translation of Langlois:⁶

Ceci est confirmé par les chants métriques que conservent avec passion, comme je l'ai appris, les habitants de Koghten, canton fertile en vin, dans lesquels sont mentionnés Ardaschès et ses fils, et d'une manière allégorique les descendants d'Astyage, sous le nom de descendants du dragon, car Ajtahag, dans notre idiome, veut dire "dragon."

It is true that the alleged history of Moses of Choren is currently believed not to date, as it purports, from the fifth century A.D., but to belong to an author of the eighth century. Moreover, there is no independent authority for the authenticity of a work by Mar Apas Catina. None the less this report is evidence for the local currency of the Iranian legends before the circulation of Firdausi's *Shāhnāma*. A similar indication is provided by the same author's mention of the feats attributed to Rostam of Sistan.⁷ Thus we may accept that the allegorical interpretation of Azidahāka as an allusion to Astyages was generally understood in medieval times. The legendary narrative of Azidahāka and Thraconta (Frédün) thus relates to the defeat, as related by Herodotus, of Astyages by

Cyrus the Great. In the *Shāhnāma* tradition, as in the best historical accounts, the life of the defeated tyrant was said to have been spared—since he was, of course, the father-in-law of the victor—but he was incarcerated for life, a situation represented in the legend by his being left chained on the mountain of Damavand.

It then becomes clear that afterwards the allegorical names used in this minstrel material become increasingly stereotyped. In Arab history, categorical names such as Qaisār "Caesar," for the Roman emperor, Najāshī "Negus," for the emperor of Ethiopia, Faghūr for Central Asian or Chinese rulers, and Zumbīl for the Hephthalite king in southern Afghanistan, are used as recurrent personal names for such princes in succeeding generations. Similarly the name Azidahāka is applied to the ruler of Media in successive anecdotes, and must have been so understood by the original audiences.

Another episode associated with Azidahāka in the epic relates to the rescue by Frēdūn from the tyrant's harem of the two ladies Sanhavak and Arenavak,⁸ daughters of the earlier ruler Jamshēd, whom he then married himself. This rather unusual situation was in fact paralleled, after the overthrow by Darius the Great of the Magian usurpers. Darius (Hdt. 3.88) then married Atossa, daughter of Cyrus the Great, who had been confined in the Magian harem, together with Phaedime, another ex-wife of the Magus. He also married Artystone, another daughter of Cyrus, who became his favourite wife, though in this case it is not reported that she had been an inmate of the Magian's harem. In the legend, these last two individuals seem to have been combined.

One may understand that so piquant a situation could have been a favourite topic for the minstrel sagas, but that it would have been wise for the narrators to screen their topical allusions with an allegory, changing critical names, and perhaps slightly remodelling the story. Here the allegorical name of Azidahāka refers again to the ruler of Media, but in this case the Magian usurper Gaumāta has taken the place of the original Astyages.

Yet another occurrence of the allegorical name appears in connection with a still later episode. According to a story reported by M. Shokoohy from the anonymous *Mujmal al-tawārīkh wa al-qīṣaṣ*, "In Dayr-i Gachin, between Ray and

Isfahan, Bahman was swallowed by a dragon [*azhdahā*], and he gave his kingdom to his daughter Cihrazād, who was known as Humay." This region of Iran, close to the Salt Lake of Qumm, has a claim to be the scene of events in the celebrated campaign between the Eumenes and Antigonos the One-Eyed, successors of Alexander, as reported by Diodorus (19.44) in 317 B.C.

The name Bahman coincides etymologically, of course, with the Greek Eumenes. Episodes ascribed to him seem to confuse events involving Eumenes and perhaps those concerning the Achaemenid king Artaxerxes I. Antigonos in this war was based at Hamadan, thereby qualifying for the allegorical designation Azidahāka. So far as one can localize the narrative in Diodorus, Antigonos attempted to surprise his opponent, based on Gabae (Isfahan), by a long encircling movement to the north and east, passing across the desert country south of Veramin. However the bitter cold of the desert night compelled his soldiers to light fires, which were observed by sympathisers of Eumenes. The latter's forces were not yet assembled, but by lighting fires in his turn on the escarpment near the present-day 'Aliabad, overlooking the desert plain, he persuaded Antigonos that his army too was concentrated, and ready to oppose him, so inducing Antigonos to withdraw. Eventually Antigonos advanced by a different route, defeating Eumenes (who like his ally Peucestas was always the more popular with the Iranians) near Dodchak, and summarily executing him, an episode neatly allegorised by the statement that Bahman "was swallowed by the dragon [*azhdahā*]."

A small hoard of Alexander-coinage found several years ago on the escarpment close to 'Aliabad, and now in the Tehran Museum, has probably some relation to the foregoing events, but requires a close analysis to reveal its relevance. As for Humay, the legendary daughter of Bahman, nothing is known historically today of a daughter of the Greek Eumenes. Humay is today generally identified with a daughter of Vishtaspa mentioned in the *Yashts*,⁹ and her association with Bahman would result from contamination of different legends.

Another personage of the epic tradition whose role allows an allegorical interpretation is the "Turanian" leader Afrāsiyāb. He appears repeat-

edly as an opponent of Iran in successive epochs, so that his name, like that of Azidahāka, becomes a geographical stereotype. While the latter is constantly associated with Hamadan and Media, Afrāsiyāb appears as a ruler of Central Asian nomads, though the original territory of Turan to which he is ascribed lay in fact in Baluchistan. Nevertheless, in its later appearances the kingdom of Afrāsiyāb is constantly located among the Turks. We shall suggest, however, a different interpretation for certain appearances.

In two passages of the *Yashts*,¹⁰ Franrasiyān (Afrāsiyāb) was seeking to win the royal glory of Iran (*xvarnah*) in the neighbourhood of Lake Čačāsta (in later times identified with Lake Urmia). The nomad chief attempts to seize the royal glory, which flees from him and takes refuge in the lake. In the sequel he is overthrown by the Iranian king Kay Khusrow, who in the *Shāhnāma* is assisted by the hermit Hūm, evidently a representation of the Zoroastrian yazata of the religious elixir, Haoma. It requires little imagination to notice the parallel with the narrative in Herodotus (1.106), where the Scythians had invaded Azerbaijan, and overthrown the Medes, establishing a tyrannical rule for twenty-eight years. "At length, Cyaxares and the Medes invited the greater part of them to a banquet, and made them drunk with wine, after which they were all massacred." The intervention of the god Haoma is easily understood as an allegorical description of this event, not the only one of its kind mentioned in Iranian history. Scythian opponents of Cyrus the Great were likewise ensnared by such a stratagem (Hdt. 1.121), practised again in the nineteenth century on the Tsarist commander who sought to occupy a post in Mazandaran.

The resemblance between the names Kay Khusrow and Cyaxares is obviously close. Even if they are not etymologically identical, the parallel is obvious. Can we however suggest a source for the name Afrāsiyāb? Herodotus tells us that the Scythian chief who invaded Azarbaijan was named Madyes, son of Protothyas. While the first name lacks parallels in the Persian epic, one could suggest that the second provides an almost exact derivation for Afrāsiyāb. An epenthetic vowel to precede grouped consonants opening a Persian word is routine. One may think of names such as Isfahan and Istakhr. The intervocalic -t- might pass to a -d- and be

eventually elided. The Greek θ in certain Old Persian words, as also in Thamanaiōi (later Saman), might pass to -s- in other dialects. Thus we could arrive at a form Afrosiyā, close to Afrāsiyāb. In this case the allegory, if such we may call it, is not very obscure.

That it was often safest, in discussing the history of Iran, to dissemble in conversation important political names can be shown from the usage of Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana* (London, 1937). Here the travellers agreed to use the name "Marjoribanks" when referring in English conversation to Reza Shah. Mary Boyce has discussed cases of allegory in ancient Persian poetry.¹¹ One might claim, indeed, that allegory was almost a required exercise in the Persian minstrel poetry, irrespective of political risk in any particular case.

The next appearance of Afrāsiyāb is evidently in a later context, where his association as an opponent with the Parthian prince Gotarzes suggests that we have entered the Arsacid period. Once more, as in the case of Azidahāka, the generic title Afrāsiyāb serves in succeeding epochs to replace a personal name. In the *Shāhnāma* little space is devoted to the period of the Arsacids, sworn enemies of the Sasanians under whom the corpus was compiled, but this epoch was clearly the heyday of the minstrel sagas. Several rousing Parthian legends thus make their appearance, relegated to the archaic Kayanian dynasty, and to the reign of the legendary Kay Khusrow.

On his accession, this king is represented as sending his general Godarz to oppose Afrāsiyāb on the North-East frontier of Khurasan. Embittered combats take place between the rival armies, and eventually the Iranian force is encircled on the mountain of Hamāvan—probably northwards of Tūs—and in danger of destruction. It seems clear that we are here in the period of the Indo-Scythian and Tocharian/Kushan onslaughts on the eastern Iranian borders. The Indo-Scythians or Sacae, having overrun the Greek kingdoms of Bactria around 130 B.C., soon collided with the Parthian eastern frontier. At first Saca mercenaries were recruited by the Parthian king Phraates II for his war against the Seleucid Antiochus VII Sidetes. Having unexpectedly surprised and killed the Seleucid king, Phraates was able to dismiss his new levies, we are told unpaid, and was soon at war in turn

with the Sacae. His pressed Greek soldiers found an occasion to desert, and the Parthians were defeated, Phraates himself being killed (128 B.C.).

Subsequently the Sacae passed southward to the east of the present Iranian border, and occupied Drangiana, thenceforth to be known from their incursion as Sacastan, afterwards Seistan. They were apparently driven out of Bactria by the Tocharians, who next clashed with the Parthians. The succeeding Arsacid king, Artabanus II, engaged the Tocharians, to be killed in his turn. It was only under Mithridates II (123–88 B.C.) that the Parthians succeeded in stabilizing their eastern frontier. His crown-prince Gotarzes must have been engaged with the nomads, and provided the basis for the epic narratives of campaigns against Afrāsiyāb.

According to the version of the *Shāhnāma*, Godarz was at last relieved from his encirclement, after sustaining heavy losses, by a fresh army brought up by Rustam, legendary Iranian hero of Seistan. We must now turn to the equally intriguing question of the character of the Seistan epics, a separate but equally prominent branch of poetic tradition.

Just as the Sasanian compilation of the *Khudāy-nāma* provided the pre-Muslim formulation of the epic in western Iran, so we have reports of similar, but independent, collections of sagas to the east, in the region of Seistan. The historian Mas'ūdī tells of a book,¹² not extant today, entitled *Sakisarān*, apparently meaning "The Saca chiefs," which contained the legends of the early heroes of the region. The earliest of these to figure in the tradition of the Avesta was Keresaspa, MP. Karshasp, celebrated already in the Zoroastrian *Yasna* and the *Vendidad*.

His most famous feat was no doubt his killing, with his mighty club, the monstrous horned serpent or dragon Sruvara. Later texts, as we have seen, locate this event at Sakavand in the Logar valley of Afghanistan, the most westerly habitat of the cobra, and, probably enough, also of the king cobra. Other monsters killed by Karshasp were the more enigmatic "golden-heeled Gandarewa," the "horny-handed Snavidhka," the bird Kamak, and the wolf Kapud. Of human opponents he slew the nine sons of Pathanya, the sons of Nivika, the sons of Dastayani, Vaire'ava, and Pitaona, who was befriended by the "fairies" (*pairikas*). He also avenged the death

of his brother Urvasaya upon his slayer, Hitaspa "of the golden crown," whom he dragged behind his chariot. This episode is strangely reminiscent of Achilles' revenge on Hector in the *Iliad*, presumably a coincidental parallel. However, the other feats of Karshasp have been likened to the labours of the Greek Heracles.¹³

According to the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, there existed a written epic, the *Kitāb-i Garshasp*, in which his story was narrated at length. According to Bahar, the editor of the *Tārīkh*, this work was written by Abu al-Mu'ayyad al-Balkhi. However, there are indications that the epic of Garshasp [Karshasp] was one of the oldest of the Persian legends, since scenes apparently depicting Garshasp are found on a number of Sasanian seals.¹⁴ Thus the tale may have existed already in written form during Sasanian times.

To determine a historical period for Garshasp seems at present impossible, but his saga evidently belongs to the epic cycle of the Seistan heroes, providing the eventual lineage of the super-hero Rustam. His regular Avestan epithet is *naire.manah* "Of manly mind," a name which in the subsequent Islamic versions becomes instead that of his grandson, Nariman, an ancestor of Rustam. The latter's son, again, has the name of Sām, a surviving memory of the tribal name Thamaiaoi found in Herodotus, which we have seen before. The Greek rendering is formed from an Iranian plural of the name Sām, producing Sāmān, which then, passing through an Aramaic intermediary, has added the Aramaic plural ending -ayy, to which a Greek plural ending has been further added! Thus Sām, the alleged great-grandson of Karshasp, is known only by the ethnic title deriving from an elite community of Seistan.

Sām in turn is represented as the parent of Zāl, otherwise called Dastān, whose son was Rustam, the paramount hero of the Iranian epics. Rustam performs a spectacular role in the *Shāhnāma*. It was rightly noticed by Herzfeld long ago,¹⁵ and again more recently stressed by M. Maguire,¹⁶ that his attributes coincide by those ascribed by Plutarch (*Crassus* 21 and 24) to the Suren, commander of the Parthian forces at the battle of Carrhae against the Romans in 54 B.C. He is described as "in stature and physical beauty surpassing everyone" and "possessing the hereditary right to place the diadem on the head of the Parthian king at his accession." He was the

Parthian king's commander-in-chief, often personally leading attacks, as in the storming of Seleucia. Similarly in the *Shāhnāma* Rustam is distinguished by the epithets *pīltan* "elephant-bodied," *tājbakhs* "the bestower of the crown," and *jahān-pahlavān* "champion of the world." As Herzfeld rightly deduced, these were the traditional roles of the family of Suren, the highest ranking lineage of the Parthian aristocracy. While the head of the Suren family exercised these functions in the metropolitan Arsacid kingdom, in his personal domains won by conquest in the east, he reigned as an independent ruler, even emperor, issuing his own coinage and exercising complete authority. The Greek source, however, only gives us the family name of the Parthian general, and omits his personal name. This, as we know from the inscription of Shapur I at the *Ka'ba-i Zardusht* near Persepolis,¹⁷ normally preceded the family name in the listings, and was essential to identify the individual.

It may be that one day archaeological finds will enable us to discover the full name of the Suren of Carrhae. My personal perception—not however yet substantiated by any evidence—is that this Suren provides the prototype for the legendary figure of Rustam. Yet if we discover his name, this may not directly solve our problem. The reason for this is that there is now evidence members of the Suren lineage, besides their individual and family names, were known also by soubriquets. Herzfeld was surely correct to identify the heroes of Seistan with the House of Suren, and them in turn with the Indo-Parthian dynasty of Gondophares and his successors.

The House of Suren had been appointed to defend the Parthian eastern frontier against the invasions of the Saca and Tocharian tribes. Residing eventually in Seistan, they appear to have enlisted Saca mercenaries to oppose the hostile tribesmen, and to have succeeded in eventually driving them out of Seistan and of Arachosia, then pursuing them into the Punjab, where the Indo-Scythian empire of Azes II was eventually overthrown. The dominant Indo-Parthian chief in this operation was the one known to numismatists as Gondophares, the most eminent holder of this name—if there was more than one—being he who gained possession of Taxila in the Punjab in ca. A.D. 25, and was the personage associated with the Christian apostle Thomas.

This Gondophares was the issuer of a wide-spread coinage, minted no doubt in Taxila, in Arachosia probably at Kandahar, and in Sistan at Zaranj. An unusual type of his "good silver" drachma coinage attributable to the last mint had a remarkable Greek legend: after the words "Great King of Kings, Hyndopherres" there followed the formula "whose sobriquet is Sām." This reading, I have to say, is my own,¹⁸ and I must admit it is vigorously disputed. However, I stand by my reading. The alternative proposal, that the final word taken by me as Sām (Gk. Σαμ), should be read as Sah "King" I consider implausible. After designating himself "Great King of Kings" at the beginning of the legend, it is surely ridiculous that he should then add to the legend the words "whose sobriquet is King." If however we accept the reading Sām, we have a much needed link with the epic tradition.

Among the sand-buried ruins of Seistan, once the homeland of the Suren, very little is known of the metropolitan coinage of the dynasty, so familiar from its cruder forms in the Punjab and in Arachosia. The region has been throughout the last century effectively sealed from access by scientific archaeology. If more of this coinage were known, we might be able to say whether the name Gondophares, like that of Arsaces, was repeatedly used in the Indo-Parthian coinage.

Perhaps, as some specialists believe, there was a Gondophares I, II, and III, though for this I know no categorical proof. Perhaps the vague epithets Nariman and Sām were truly the soubriquets of rulers unknown to us in the interregnum between the Suren of Carrhae (Rustam) and Gondophares the Great. Perhaps there never existed at all personages bearing these names. They need have been no more than fabrications devised to fill this gap, as teasing for the compilers of the epics as they are for historians of our own day. Perhaps the chief heroic figure in this lineage was Gondophares the Great himself, out of whose certainly remarkable career could have been spun a whole dynasty of heroic warriors, known by a variety of epithets—Sām, Nariman, even Garshasp himself—all in reality simply designating Gondophares. To the problem of the epics, and the historical identification of their protagonists we must add, in Seistan, the problems arising from a still scantily-known metropolitan coinage. But no doubt we shall be

learning more about the details of this coinage as research proceeds.

Notes

1. Pp. 383-477.
2. "The Parthian *gōsān* and Iranian Minstrel Tradition," *JRAS* (1957), pp. 10-45.
3. E.g., in R. Ghirshman, *Iran: Parthians and Sasanians* (London, 1962), fig. 98.
4. W. Sundermann, "Namen von Göttern, Dämonen und Menschen in iranischen Versionen des manichäischen Mythos," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 6 (1979), p. 101; König der Finsternis, mazd. mp. Ahri-man; D. N. MacKenzie, "Zoroastrian Astrology in the Bundahīšn," *BSOAS* 27.3 (1964), pp. 511-29, esp. pp. 515 and 527.
5. "The Allegory of Astyages," in *A Green Leaf: Papers in Honour of Prof. Jes P. Asmussen*, Actir 28 (London, 1988,) pp. 509-20.
6. *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, vol. 5, 2, 39.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
8. *Yasht* 5.34; 9.143; 15.24.
9. *Yasht* 13.135; 9.29.
10. *Yasht* 9.14, 9:37.
11. "The Parthian *gōsān* and Iranian Minstrel Tradition," pp. 10 and 20.
12. *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. and trans. C. Barbier de Meynard and P. de Courteille (Paris, 1914), vol. 2, pp. 118-19.
13. J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta* (Paris, 1892-1893; repr. 1960), vol. 2, p. 626, n. 58, "L'Hercule et le Thésée de l'Iran, domptant les monstres comme l'un, les brigands comme l'autre."
14. Cf. "The Persian Eldorado," in *Proceedings of the First European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Turin, September 7th-11th by the Societas Iranologica Europaea*, pt. 1, *Old and Middle Iranian Studies* (Rome, 1990), p. 33.
15. *AMI* 4 (1932), p. 114.
16. "Rustam and Isfandiyar in the Shāhnāma," Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 1973; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1977) pp. 35-49.
17. P. Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt [SKZ] I*. CIIr, pt. 3, Texts 1, vol. 1, p. 55, para. 42; Sasan Suren, p. 58, para. 46: Ardasir [aus dem Hause] Surcn.
18. "Gondophares and the Shāhnāma," *IA* 16 (1981), pp. 141-50.