

A. D. H. BIVAR

### THE ALLEGORY OF ASTYAGES

The legendary being known as Aždahāka offers a paradox for students of the Iranian tradition. He is conceived on the one hand as a huge and dangerous serpent. On the other, as a sinister monarch of Iran<sup>1</sup>. There is even a third conception of his nature (cf. Yasna 9:24-5), by which Aždahāka is viewed as no less than the principal agent of Ahriman, supernatural source and origin of the forces of darkness, in terms of the dualistic cosmology associated with Zoroastrianism. So changeable an image may be nothing extraordinary if the topic is regarded simply as an ideological parable. Yet for the critic who, like the present writer, sustains the thesis that elements in mythology should be traceable to historical or physical fact (however exaggerated or distorted), so protean an image cannot be taken at face value. When the chips are down, what rational critic could imagine that even in the prehistoric past, an actual serpent (assuming such a creature existed), could ever have been enthroned as king of Iran? Some confusion of ideas must therefore be involved, susceptible of clarification by reasonable analysis.

A key to this puzzle was, for the present writer, provided by a conversation some years ago in London with Professor Carsten Colpe, who mentioned, in a conversation about general matters, an old etymology of the name Aždahāka as «the Serpent of the Dahae», propounded in a 19th century commentary on the Avesta<sup>2</sup>. The Dahae (OP Dahan-

<sup>1</sup> The clearest account of the Avestan evidence concerning Aždahāka is that of A. Christensen, *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne*, Copenhagen 1941, 20-24. The paradox was already evident to Wilhelm Geiger, *Ostiranische Kultur*, 193, (English translation as "Eastern Iranian civilization in ancient times", in: *The collected works of the late Dastur Darab Peshotan Sanjana*, Bombay 1932, 141: "If this view of the saga of Dahaka be correct, we have in it a peculiar commingling of legendary and purely mythological elements. If on the one hand it contains an historical nucleus, on the other it is certain that 'the dragon' signifies by natural symbolism the serpent of the clouds, and is identical with the *Ahi* of the Rig-Weda ...".) See further below, p. 513.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, despite considerable search, neither of us has been able to retrieve the reference by the time this paper went to press. However, the semantic argument proposed here may have sufficient force to stand, even in the absence of etymological justification. On the etymology of Dahāka, see Sir Harold Bailey's "Iranian *ARYA*- and *DAHA*-", in: *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1959, 71-115; and especially p. 109, where *Dahāka* is linked with "A people called by the ethnic name Iran. *daha*-"; though on p. 111 it is noted that "a pejorative word *dahāka* is used in the Avesta of the *Aži*- 'serpent, dragon',

were the nomadic Iranian tribe who inhabited in antiquity the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. The district still retained their name in the Middle Ages as Dihistān<sup>3</sup>. Yet how (assuming this etymology to be correct) could a tradition have arisen that the habitat of a monstrous serpent lay in that vicinity?

In fact, a persistent tradition does exist which associates the Caspian Sea with aquatic monsters. The Arab encyclopaedist al-Mas'ūdī, who had himself sailed upon the Caspian, from the vanished city of Ābaskūn at its south-east corner to 'Ayn al-Hum, the harbour of Amul, and beyond, describes the Caspian as "prolific in sea-monsters" (*kathīr al-tanānīn*)<sup>4</sup>, creatures which, he declares, were also found in the Mediterranean near the Syrian Tripoli and Latakia. He reports a tradition that the sea-monster (*al-tanīn*) was in fact "a black wind nurtured in the depths of the sea, which ascends to the zephyrs"<sup>5</sup>. No doubt this is a passable description of the dangerous waterspouts seen, as he says, along the Syrian and Lebanese coast<sup>6</sup>, and perhaps also of alarming squalls experienced on the Caspian. Other sources he reports as ascribing the phenomena to monsters existing in the sea, and "warring against its wild-life, against which (monsters) God sends the clouds, and also his angels". These creatures were alleged to have the form of black serpents, and to possess glitter and brilliance (*wa-lahā barīq wa-baṣīṣ*; the first word could also perhaps refer to "lightning"), while a blow from their tails would ruin buildings, trees and mountains, and even their breath tear up trees and hurl them into the sky. Here, besides other manifestations, the effects of the earthquakes not uncommon in both areas are evidently being described.

One account of these happenings is ascribed by al-Mas'ūdī to ('Abdallāh) b. al-'Abbās, the contemporary of the Prophet, who had in fact campaigned in the Caspian Province of Ṭabaristān during the year 30/650-1. From other narrators he received the account that the creatures were actually:

conceived later as a mythical king called *Dahāk*". The "pejorative" term, "hostile" or the like, could perhaps have been primarily applied to the tribe. I am grateful to Dr N. Sims-Williams for his note of this reference.

<sup>3</sup> G. Le Strange, *Lands of the eastern Caliphate*, 1905, reprinted 1930, 379.

<sup>4</sup> *Murūj al-dhahab* I, 263. For his own journey see I, 274: *wa-qad-rakabtu fīhi min Abaskūn wa-huwa sāhil Jurjān ilā bilād Ṭabaristān wa-ghayrihā* ....

<sup>5</sup> *Murūj* I, 266. These passages of al-Mas'ūdī were of course known to J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta* I, Paris 1892 (reprinted 1960), 97, n. 20, where *Murūj* I, 268 is cited, but are interpreted as evidence of nature myths: "L'histoire de Dahaka est un débris de l'ancienne mythologie naturaliste, évhémériste au cours des temps".

<sup>6</sup> Where I recall viewing them in 1949.

“black serpents existing in the plains and mountains, in which places there are floods and rainstorms, carrying them down into the sea, where they feed upon the sea-creatures so that their bodies attain great size, and their age is extended, and in the end some of them achieve the age of 500 years, and become the lords of the sea. These stories are by no means denied by the Persians, who assert that the monsters have seven heads, and are called *Ajdahā*” [i.e. *Aždahāka*].

With regard to their legendary possession of seven heads, one can detect here the influence of Classical representations of the seven-headed Lernaean hydra; and indeed figures of this kind are represented in Sasanian glyptic, though more probably depicting the other legendary dragon of ancient Iran, the horned serpent *Sruvara*<sup>7</sup>. The Avestan tradition is indeed that the monster *Aždahāka* had three, not seven, heads<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the attribution to serpents of responsibility for cloudbursts and tempests may suggest the influence of Hindu folklore, current for example in pre-Muslim Afghanistan, concerning those supernatural serpents, the *Nāgas*<sup>9</sup>, who were thought responsible for disastrous storms.

In passing, note may be taken of two other pieces of evidence concerning serpents in the Caspian region. *Al-Masʿūdī* was not the first author to discuss the subject, for Strabo (XI, 7,4 = C 510) reports the statement of Polycleitus, that the Caspian Sea “nurtured serpents, and was slightly less salt than other seas”. The citation is an extremely brief

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the examples in Sasanian glyptic usually depict a serpent with six heads. cf. British Museum, *Catalogue of stamp seals. II. The Sassanian dynasty*, London 1969, nos. BL 3, BL 4; Ph. Gignoux, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sasanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre. II. Les sceaux et bulles inscrits*, Paris 1978, 54, no. 6.6; idem, *Sceaux sasanides de diverses collections privées*, Leuven 1982, 58, nos. 14.1-14.3. On the examples where the horseman appears to hold a cross, R. Göbl, *Der Sasanidische Siegelkanon*, 38, no. 6e, is probably right in understanding him as representing St. George. In these and some other cases the weapon is a lance, but where it is definitely a club, one may perhaps interpret the combat as that of Garshāsp and *Sruvara*, since in later narratives the weapon of the former is a club or mace. The identification with Garshāsp was suggested in *Iranica Antiqua* 15, 1981, 143; but the evidence for an illustrated *Garshāspnāma* current in Sasanian times and even earlier is a matter that needs to be examined at greater length.

<sup>8</sup> M. Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism* I, 91: cf. Yt. 9:14 (Gosh or Druvasp Yasht); Yt. 15:19 (Ram Yasht); Yt. 19:37 (Zamyad Yasht).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Przyluski, “Le nord-ouest de l’Inde dans le Vinaya des Mūla-Sarvāstivādin et les textes apparentés”, in: *Journal Asiatique*, 1914, 510.

one, but one supposes the serpents may have had greater prominence in the original account. It is clear that the report here is not concerned with terrestrial serpents, for though a few snakes are certainly found along the Caspian littoral, they are no more prominent than in other parts of Iran, and could hardly be cited as evidence for the hydrography of the Caspian. The second indication is provided by the representation on Parthian seals from Nisa of a strange monster of sinuous form, with wings and four legs, which might be taken as a concept of the Caspian "dragon", though elsewhere it has indeed been explained as a rendering of a griffon<sup>10</sup>. That this strange creature could reflect beliefs in a Caspian sea-serpent seems quite conceivable.

We must consider now what could have been the factual basis for the stories of al-Mas'ūdī and his Classical predecessors. It is commonly said that there are three marine phenomena which give rise to belief in sea-serpents. The first is the tentacle of a giant squid seen above the surface of the water; the second is the impression created by a shoal of dolphins leaping in unison through the waves. Neither of these sights could be present in the Caspian. The third possible cause is however more likely. That is the spectacle of a giant sturgeon basking on the surface of the sea. That sturgeon are found in the waters of the Caspian, and especially near its south-east corner, where there are important fisheries in modern times, is well known. Indeed, as a description of these fish al-Mas'ūdī's account is sufficiently plausible. Standard references confirm that the Beluga sturgeon can grow to a length of 24 feet, and is sometimes said to attain an age of 200-300 years. While the Arab encyclopaedist's claim that they could live to 500 years may thus be exaggerated, the description is far from unrecognizable, and leaves no doubt which fish is being described. With the large-scale commercial fishing of modern times, it is natural that sturgeon of such huge dimensions are nowadays rare, perhaps unknown; but they must have been far more common in Antiquity, and indeed a well-known sight. Young sturgeon enter the rivers in spring, and later return to salt water. In ancient times they were no doubt seen in large numbers, and their appearance must have been a spectacular event for the former inhabitants of the Caspian coast. This obviously provides the kernel of truth behind the other details of al-Mas'ūdī's description.

A dominant implication of the myth is that these huge fish were malicious. In fact the sturgeon seem to be comparatively inoffensive,

<sup>10</sup> M. Colledge, *Parthian art*, London 1977, 102, Fig. 42 j.

feeding on small bottom-dwelling creatures, and certainly most unlikely to attack man. Yet they would have seemed fearsome adversaries to the ancient fisherman, going to sea in primitive and unstable craft, and liable to capsize in the sudden Caspian squalls, quite apart from his encounters with the sturgeon. No doubt when large specimens were attacked and speared on the surface, they must have plunged and flailed. Light craft could easily have been broken and upset. In such encounters lives would possibly have been lost, and relatives on shore may have remained uncertain whether the damage had been due to the struggles of the fish, or the hazards of the weather. The occasional even more spectacular earthquake damage, to which al-Mas'ūdī seems to allude when he speaks of the destruction of buildings and mountains, and which was no doubt accompanied by alarming waves, could no less easily have been laid to the account of the inoffensive sturgeon. For a superstitious and apprehensive population the great fish, however undeservedly, could have seemed as malevolent a creature as the celebrated, and in reality no less inoffensive whale, *Moby Dick*. It is fully understandable that a demoniac nature and powers could have been ascribed in the same way to the innocuous sturgeon.

We contend, therefore, that the formidable Zoroastrian legend of Aždahāka, "the serpent of the Dahae", arose initially from the reality of the Caspian sturgeon. Its reputation for malevolence may have been due to fatalities arising from several causes, of which the struggles of the fish itself may have been one of the least important. So far, however, we have been concerned only with those Avestan passages which describe a giant serpent, specifically a sea-serpent, and with the associated questions of zoology. A different origin must be sought for the legend, prominent especially in the version given in the *Shāhnāma*, of an Aždahāka who was king of Iran.

In the tradition of the later *Avesta*<sup>11</sup>, Aždahāka is described (Yt. 5:29; Yt. 9:14) as possessing three mouths, three heads, six eyes, and a thousand senses, terms apparently descriptive of a serpentine monster. But in other respects his behaviour is that of a human sovereign. He sacrifices in anticipation of victory to several deities: to Anāhitā (Yt. 5:29 and 33); to Vayu (Yt. 15:19) at the inaccessible stronghold of Kvirinta, which was explained by Bartholomae as Karind in Media. Here the ceremony was performed on a golden throne, on a golden platform, on a golden carpet, with the *barəsmān* bundle and overflowing

<sup>11</sup> For a brief version, see Reuben Levy (tr.), *The Epic of the Kings*, London 1967, 11-16.

libations. His two wives, Saṅhavaḥ and Arenavaḥ, the most beautiful of women, were liberated by his conqueror Thraetaona (Yt 5:34; Yt. 9:14)<sup>12</sup>. The statement that AžiDAHĀKA offered his sacrifice “dans le pays de Bawri”<sup>13</sup> has been variously interpreted. To Darmesteter, (*Le Zend Avesta*, II, 375, n. 39), influenced by the epic tradition, Bawri signified Babylon. To Nyberg<sup>14</sup> it designated the “Land of the Beavers”.

In the *Shāhnāma* account<sup>15</sup>, Zāḥḥāk is a human youth who falls under the influence of Iblīs [the Devil]. The latter first persuades him to murder his father and replace him as king of the Arabs, and then, impersonating a cook, prevails upon him to eat animal flesh when humanity of those days had previously been content with a vegetable diet. Zāḥḥāk next seduces the nobles of Iran from their loyalty to Jamshīd, their former king, whom he drives out and finally executes by having him sawn in two. Having been kissed on the shoulders by Iblīs, Zāḥḥāk sprouts from them two black serpents, who have to be propitiated by feeding with the brains of human youths sacrificed for the purpose. After having ruled in Iran for one thousand years (a pattern of longevity which may owe something to the example of the Caspian sturgeon, but is ascribed also to other rulers in the *Shāhnāma*), the tyrant awakens the wrath of the blacksmith Kāva, of whose sons seventeen have already been sacrificed, while the eighteenth is threatened. Despite the fact that the last son is spared in response to his pleas, Kāva storms out of the audience chamber and arouses the populace to rebellion, joining forces with the princely Farīdūn, who is destined, as Zāḥḥāk himself knows, to overthrow the tyrant and restore justice by himself ascending the throne of Iran. Zāḥḥāk is in the narrative designated as a “dragon-king”, a character further indicated by his growth of serpents, but otherwise throughout the narrative behaves and is described consistently as a human king.

Some years ago, before noticing the ancient evidence supporting the view, the present writer had perceived that the tale of Zāḥḥāk in the *Shāhnāma* contained allegorical allusions to the historical account of the Median king Astyages, as narrated by Herodotus (I, 107-119; 129). That the name AžiDAHĀKA (Zāḥḥāk) has a superficial resemblance to that of Astyages is obvious. Whatever the correct form and etymology of the

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Darmesteter, “Saṅhavaḥ et Erenavaḥ, ou deux héroïnes oubliées, *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique* 5, 1882, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Yt. 5:29.

<sup>14</sup> H. S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran*, Leipzig 1938, 292.

<sup>15</sup> Levi, *The Epic of the Kings*, 15.

latter name<sup>16</sup>, there is naturally no *etymological* connection between the two, and such a connection would indeed defeat the purpose of the allegory, which is partially to conceal, except from those informed, the implication of a parallel between an historical and a fanciful name.

In important details, the historical Astyages has traits in common with Zāhḥāk of the epic. He is generally cruel, and in particular connived at cannibalism in both versions, although the explanation of this in the two accounts is very different. While Herodotus offers a highly circumstantial explanation that might appeal to a Greek audience, that the purpose of the cannibal meal was to punish Harpagus for his disobedience, the Persian epic explains the topic in supernatural terms. Nevertheless, the downfall of the tyrant in both accounts is ascribed to the revenge of the bereaved father. A further common feature is that the evil king, after his overthrow, is confined, and not immediately put to death (cf. Hdt. I, 130); though in a variant tradition (Yt. 19:37), to which we shall return, Aždahāka is said to have been *slain* by Thraetaona. Moreover, in the *Shāhnāma* version it is not entirely clear why Faridūn is endowed with royal glory, while he lives in hiding and is sought by Zāhḥāk. If the allegorical identification is admitted with Cyrus the Great, who in the Herodotean account was exposed as an infant, and providentially reared by a countryman, then a reason for this becomes evident.

Though the allegorical explanation appears fairly self-evident, its support depends on more than subjective impressions. The link between Astyages and Ajtahag “the dragon” is stressed by the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene, in a passage quoted from an admittedly rather problematic source, the history of Mar Apas Catina:<sup>17</sup>

“Ceci est confirmé par les chants  
métriques que conservèrent 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 (my  
itals.) les descendants d’Astyage, sous le

<sup>16</sup> In the Babylonian cuneiform of the Nabunaid inscription *Ištumegu*, explained by E. Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and his world* I, Princeton 1947, 90, as \**ršti-vaiga* “brandishing a lance”, which is perhaps debatable. Further bibliography in R. N. Frye, *The history of ancient Iran*, München 1984, 82, n. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Carolus Muller (ed.), *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, Vol. V, Pars Altera, *Historicorum Graecorum et Syriorum reliquiae in Armeniorum scriptis servatae*, edited by Victor Langlois, Paris, 39.

nom de descendants du dragon, car Ajtahag,  
dans notre idiome, veut dire 'dragon'."

The chronological context of this observation is confused, since Artaxias of Armenia ("Ardaschès") was not a contemporary of the original Astyages; yet its inspiration could well be derived from popular poetry and songs of the Parthian period. In any event the material cannot be later than the time of Moses of Chorene, by whom it is reported, and it could be earlier as he contends. That legends of Ažidahāka were indeed current appears to be confirmed by the fact that similar legendary material relating to a king Zāḥḥāk survives in the extant *Shāhnāma*. Langlois, in his discussion of the passage, stresses another word-play influential in the Armenian context: that the word *mār*, meaning in Armenian "Mede", has in Persian the significance of "serpent". This again would tend to confirm the allegorical connexion between the Median king Astyages, and the legendary Zāḥḥāk.

It may also be the case in certain later contexts that the name Ažidahāka, or Zāḥḥāk, is occasionally used as a generic term for later rulers of Media resident in Hamadan. In this connection it is instructive to notice a passage quoted recently by M. Shokoohy from the anonymous Persian *Mujmal al-tawārīkh wal-qīṣaṣ*<sup>18</sup>. "In Dayr-i Gachīn, between Ray and Isfahan, Bahman was swallowed by a dragon (*azdahā*), and he gave his kingdom to his daughter Chihrazād, who was known as Humāy". The region of Iran near the caravansarai of Dayr-i Gachīn, close to the Salt Lake near Qumm, and the tract stretching thence southwards towards Delijān and Dūdehak, have a claim to be the terrain over which was fought the celebrated campaign between Eumenes and Antigonos, the successors of Alexander, as reported by Diodorus (XIX, 44), in 317 B.C. That in this context the name Bahman (*whwmn*) could refer to the etymologically cognate Greek name Eumenes, is fairly obvious. In the *Shāhnāma* Bahman was not swallowed by a dragon but died of illness, so in the *Mujmal* the reference to *azdahā* could indeed mask an allusion to Antigonos, who then based at Hamadan, was pursuing his campaign against Eumenes who was operating from Gabae (Jāy-Isfahan). In the event, Eumenes was captured and executed by his antagonist after a grandiose battle.

It is also possible to suspect, on the same lines, that certain details of the traditional story of Ažidahāka-Zāḥḥāk could allude not to the

<sup>18</sup> "The Sasanian caravansarai of Dayr-i Gachīn, south of Ray, Iran", in: *BSOAS* 46, 3, 1983, 448.



historical Astyages, but rather to his even more notorious successor, the Magian Gaumata, who with the help of his brother is said to have usurped the throne in Iran during the synchronous reigns of Cambyses and Bardiya-Smerdis.

In particular, our attention is caught by the detail that the victorious Thraetaona-Farīdūn rescued, and himself married, two daughters of the earlier ruler Jamshīd who had been incarcerated in the harem of the tyrant (above, p. 514). This detail has some prominence in the *Shāhnāma* version, but might seem an unexpected happening in real life. Such an event, however, did in fact take place in the case of Atossa, daughter of Cyrus the Great, whom Darius married after her release from the harem of the usurper (Hdt. III, 88). In the Herodotean version, Darius also married Phaedime, another ex-wife of the Magus, besides Artystone, a second daughter of Cyrus. Since these were two different persons, the situation does not exactly correspond to that featured in the epic and in the Avesta<sup>19</sup>. Yet the general similarity of the events is sufficiently striking. One can hardly doubt that the vicissitudes of these exalted ladies would have been a much discussed topic at the time, though since they became the queens of a stern and inflexible ruler, popular discussion of their experiences would need to have been screened by allegory. Indeed, the episode in which Thraetaona-Farīdūn enters the stronghold of Zahhāk and strikes him down, has much in common with the coup of Darius, even though the survival of the antagonist in this case suggests conflation with the tale of Astyages. As we have seen, in a variant tradition, Aždahāka is actually slain by his adversary, which conforms to the historical case in the time of Darius.

In passing, it is worth noticing another Avestan episode (*Yasna* 11:7; *Yt.* 9:18), which, though unrelated in this case to Astyages, also immediately suggests an historical allegory. This is the episode in which Fraŋrasiyān (Afrasiyāb) seeks to win the royal glory of Iran (*x'arnah*) in the neighbourhood of Lake Caecasta, in later times identified with Lake Urmīya. In the event he is overthrown by the Iranian king Kay Khusru, who is assisted by the hermit Hūm, i.e. the god Haoma. It requires little imagination to notice the parallel between this narrative and that of Herodotus (I, 106): the Scythians had invaded Azarbaijan and overthrown the Medes, establishing a tyrannical rule for 28 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

<sup>19</sup> *Yt.* 9:14; *Yt.* 19:37. See further n. 12 above.

massacred". The "intervention of the god Haoma" can readily be seen as an allegorical description of this event, not the only one of its kind mentioned in Iranian history. Scythian opponents of Cyrus were also ensnared by such a stratagem (Hdt. I, 211), later practised again upon the 19th century Tsarist commander who occupied a post in Mazandaran.

To return now to the Astyages in Moses of Chorene, possibly the confused chronology of the latter's narrative, and his association of a certain Ažidahāka with Tigranes of Armenia (who was certainly no contemporary of the historical Astyages), arises from the incorporation of popular verse material where the name of Ažidahāka is used in this generic way. We may wonder whether allegories of this kind might indeed have been regularly used, in the minstrel poetry that provided the basis of Persian epic, to screen well-known historical personages and events. Such allegory would not, these examples suggest, have been too difficult for informed listeners to appreciate.

That in the history of Iran important political names were often dissimulated in casual conversation is shown in recent times by Robert Byron's well-known use of the name "Marjoribanks", when referring in English to Reza Shah during his travels in Iran<sup>20</sup>. One may be sure that it was not the only instance. Mary Boyce has drawn attention to occurrences of allegory in ancient Iranian poetry<sup>21</sup>. She cites from Athenaeus (XIII, 35, 575) the report of Dinon, that the Median minstrel Angares had been invited to a feast by Astyages, and sang how "a mighty beast had been let loose in a swamp, bolder than a wild boar; which beast, if it got mastery of the regions round it, would soon contend against a multitude without difficulty". The beast was Cyrus the Great, who had rebelled against the Median king, and of whom Angares was now guardedly warning his royal master. Allegory indeed must have been an important, in fact indispensable feature of ancient Iranian popular poetry, of which a further example comes from the originally Parthian poem *Vīs u Rāmīn*<sup>22</sup>.

If then an allegory of Cyrus was recited, at the time of his rebellion, in the court of Astyages, it is just as probable that allegories of Astyages were, at the same time, recited in Persis for the benefit of Cyrus. To stiffen the resolve of the Persian hearers the Median king's cruelty must have been stressed, and emphasis laid on the truly diabolical inspiration

<sup>20</sup> *The road to Oxiana*, London 1937, 41, 47, 175, 191, 203 and *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> "The Parthian *gōsān* and the Iranian minstrel tradition", in: *JRAS* 1957, 19-20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

of his policies and beliefs. War propaganda in any period tends to run on these lines, but in the case of Astyages the Herodotean story shows that some genuinely sinister feature could have been present. Until more is known or can be deduced concerning the religion and social background of the Medes this aspect cannot be pursued, though some writers, including the present author, have sought to ascribe to the Medes a form of Mithraism. Is it then so unlikely that the name of the old serpent — or more properly giant sturgeon — Ažidahāka was attributed to Astyages? And that the tale of the serpent growths, and the tribute of youths, screens some adverse report similar to that narrated by Herodotus as the banquet of Harpagus. Herodotus and the epic agree that after his defeat, Astyages-Zaḥḥāk was not put to death, but merely confined. Thus, despite picturesque differences of detail, a clear parallellism exists between the two accounts. So far as the growth of serpents on the tyrant's shoulders is concerned, though this iconographic detail identifies him in Persian manuscript-illumination, it is found also in earlier art. A famous sculpture from Hatra of Heracles-Nergal-Ahriman shows the serpents, distinguishing in this case the deity of the underworld<sup>23</sup>. Here then may be a source emphasizing the association of Ažidahāka with the Patron of Evil himself.

We need to consider, however, whether the allegory of the giant sturgeon has another recognizable link with the figure of Astyages. Did its appropriateness lie only in the similarity of the names, or was there another connection? Although we know that the capital of Astyages lay at Hamadan, far enough indeed from the Caspian, the discovery in recent years at Marlik in the Elburz Range of a royal graveyard of unequalled splendour<sup>24</sup> leads us to consider once more the significance of that region. Though no categorical interpretation of the find seems yet to have appeared, a suggestion discussed informally in Tehran before 1976 has a certain persuasiveness: namely, that the site was that of a royal Median (or "proto-Median") graveyard. Such opulent finds can indeed hardly have had any less exalted source. Herodotus (IV, 127) tells us of the Scythians that the only real sanctum they acknowledged were their fathers' tombs. Perhaps for the newly-arrived Medes also, the tombs in the valley of the Shāh Rūd were regarded as sites of particular

<sup>23</sup> Harald Ingholt, "Parthian sculptures from Hatra", in: *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 12, July 1954, 16 and 33; R. Ghirshman, *Iran: Parthians and Sassanians*, London 1962, 87 and Pl. 98.

<sup>24</sup> Ezat O. Negahban, *A preliminary report on Marlik excavation: Gohar Rud expedition, Rudbar 1961-1962*, Tehran 1964.

sanctity. The Safīd Rūd and its tributary the Shāh Rūd, as is well known, was one of the favourite haunts of the Caspian sturgeon during the seasons of those creatures' visits to the rivers. Can we guess that the name Ažidahāka not only resembled that of Astyages in sound, but that his dynastic association with the region of the Shāh Rūd, haunt of the Caspian sturgeon, made this allegorical name doubly recognizable and appropriate?

Conjecture has evident limits, yet the foregoing reconstruction is not without plausibility. It is maintained that the name Ažidahāka, a notorious serpent of ancient Iran, refers initially to the Caspian sturgeon, and to fears it could inspire amongst the coastal fishermen. In its historical connection, when used for a king of Iran, the name both in a tradition associated with the Yashts and in the New Persian epic, is next explained as an allegorical allusion to the Median king Astyages; subsequently again, in a generic manner similar to that of the names Zunbīl, Qayṣar and so on in Islamic history, to several later rulers in Media, in particular Gaumata and Antigonos. Ultimately the term was applied by Zoroastrian sympathizers to refer to the Arab invaders of Iran, and indeed hostile governments of any description.

The example is above all interesting for the light it sheds on the formation-process of the Iranian epic. Some, at least, of the so-called "legendary", or non-historical, episodes may be thought to arise from the convention of allegory in ancient popular poetry, rather than from primitive myth, or forgotten events of prehistoric times. Allegories at first adopted to screen politically dangerous recitals, could later have become fixed in the tradition, and in the end come to be taken literally when the historical context from which they arose was lost to sight. Thus narratives could become established which had no known historical context, with an ensuing tendency, as in the well-known case of Rostam, to project them continually further and further back into an even less known past.

In more recent compositions, such, for example, as the *Ḥamza-nāma*, the presence and implication of allegorical features is more transparent: it is obvious there that Hārūn al-Rashīd was depicted as Khusrau Anūshīrvān, Ḥamza the Khārijite as the Prophet's uncle, and the Kūh-i Bārīz in Kirman Province as the Kūh-i Qāf (Caucasus). Similar processes would largely have been at work in the materials drawn on for the earlier sections of the *Shāhnāma*. If one day means becomes available to read these allegories with greater confidence, a new window could be opened on the ancient history of Iran.