## **New publications on Iran**

The Personalities of Mithra in Archaeology and Literature

by A. D. H. Bivar. Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series 1. New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1998, pp. xii + 140, 38 b. & w. ills., appendices, notes, select bibliography and abbreviations, *index locorum*. US\$28. Distributed by Eisenbrauns Inc., P. O. Box 275, Winona Lake IN 46590, U.S.A.

The *Persian Heritage Foundation* has established a new endowment for lectures to be delivered at UCLA in a "broad range of the field [to] yield fresh knowledge" in Iranian and Persian studies (p. v). David Bivar's monograph - regardless of the inevitable objections some will raise - successfully fulfills this purpose.

In four extremely readable chapters (pp. 1-65), the author reveals new insights into Irano-Roman Mithraism with persuasive details and examples in a conversational style that belies the pioneering albeit controversial nature of his research findings. The author makes the ingenious proposal - which he subsequently elaborates - that the ancient Helleno-Egyptian deity, Serapis, may be etymologically traced to Mid. Pers. \$\frac{8}{3}hrbed < Av. \tilde{X}signapati-"ruler of the world" as rendered in the Aramaic version of the Lycian inscription of Xanthos (p. 14), which M. Mayrhofer had identified as an epithet of the Indo-Iranian god \$Mitra (Av. Mi\theta a)\$ in the \$Brahmanas\$. As a corollary, Bivar then posits that since the phonology of \$\frac{3}{3}arapati-\text{ like that of Mi\theta as Median,}\$ the latter must have been the leading pre-Zoroastrian deity of Media, who was eventually absorbed into the reforms of Zoroaster by Magian priests when \$Ahura Mazd\overline{a}\$ superseded him in Achaemenid Iran (p. 22); however, the faithful in far-flung satrapies of the empire probably preserved their former beliefs and it is they who imaginatively fused the worship of \$\frac{3}{3}arapati-\text{ with provincial cults (p. 30)}.

Before proceeding further, a qualification on the nature of the study of Iranian religion is essential. That Zoroastrianism was but one aspect of the complex that we have come to define as Iranian religion is undisputed. It is equally accepted that Parseeism, for instance, or even the faith as practised in modern Iran has undergone permutations that would lead not only the general student of religions but even some Iranists - not entirely incorrectly - to refuse to associate it with the religion of the Persian seer. Hence, I suggest that the Achaemenid and Arsacid periods as examined in this volume (and for that matter other works) should be consistently regarded as marked by the cult (rather than creed) of Zoroaster and his Ahura Mazda. Any labeling of devotion during these epochs of socio-religious fermentation as "Zoroastrian religion" is dubious given the fragmentary and contentious nature of our available evidence, most of which is embedded in legendary lore. Furthermore, I believe it is only possible to speak of Zoroastrianism (or Mazdeism) as an organized, state religion during and after the Sasanid era. These ideas, in the main, are inspired by Sh. Shaked's brilliant discussion of Zoroastrian history, Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran (London: SOAS, 1994). One might also note that despite the establishment of orthodoxy in the Sasanid era, the eclectic practitioners of Mazdeism in the eastern Iran world largely ignored its western doctrinaires.

At any rate, Mithra must have retained an immensely important position in pagan Iran that accounts for his total assimilation into Zoroastrian devotion as evinced in the exclusive dedication to him of Yt. 10 and also the fact that he is described in Yt. 10. 54-5 as worshipped "without mention of his name" (p. 2). While Iranists may deduce the author utilizes qualifiers like "Zarathustrian" (p. 13) and "Zarathrustrianism [sic]" (p. 25) in a Gershevitchian sense, it would have been helpful if Bivar had spelt out his views on the historical evolution of Zoroaster's cult for the benefit of Classicists and specialists in Near Eastern religions. Equally contentious remains the dating of the Persian prophet though Bivar (somewhat cryptically) defends Henning's sixth-century

dating (p. 3) also upheld by I. Gershevitch, W. Malandra and, most recently, G. Gnoli. (Incidentally, Gnoli delivered the subsequent *Biennial Yarshater Lectures* in 1996 where he adduced fresh arguments for reviving the same.)

The spiritual as well as mystical importance imputed to the number seven is standard fare throughout the ancient world. Bivar's hypothesis that the planetary heptad was replaced by its angelic variant to meet the new requirements of Zoroastrian theology is accurately proven (pp. 26-8). I might point out that although the "sons of Mithra" were modified to suit Zoroastrian requirements, a mention of four heavens in Mazdean eschatology lists the second most important abode as that of the "sun station" (Mid. Pers. xwaršēd pāyag) for which see Louis Gray, "Zoroastrian Elements in Muhammadan Eschatology," Le Muséon, 3 (1902): 166. Moreover, in a recent assessment, A. Panaino has also convincingly demonstrated in "Visione della volta celeste e astrologie nel Manicheismo," Atti del Terzo Congresso Internazionale di Studi Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico (Louvain: Brepols, 1997), pp. 249-95, especially pp. 273-78, the historical demonization of planets in Manicheaean theology.

Other propositions rest on slim evidence, however. For instance, the connections between otherworld (shamanistic) sojourns by Magians and the Mithraic coup de grace as a sort of "departing from this world" (p. 38) warrant elaboration. Likewise with the conjecture of a seal impression from Ur depicting a female profile surmounted by a duck as that of Anāhitā (p. 43) and a Mithraic interpretation for the Bahrām Gur-Azāda episode in the Shāhnāmeh (p. 51). The purported explanation for the latter is too convoluted to be credible. I would point out that in contrast to her bizarre death in the epic, our hero simply abandons his favourite concubine in the Nihāyat'ul-irab fī akhbāri'l Furs wa'l-'Arab as discussed in E. Browne, "Some Account of the Arabic work...," JRAS (1900): 223. More convincing are the reasons delineated for discounting the astral symbolism of the Persepolis complex and the significance of zoomorphic leitmotifs in Near Eastern and Classical coinage and iconography (pp. 34ff.). While Bivar rightfully stresses the presence of a wild boar on Graeco-Persian seals and impressions as one of the ten avatars of Vereoragna (Mid. Pers.  $Va[r]hr\overline{a}m > NPBahr\overline{a}m$ ), surely the astonishingly similar features it shares with the ten avatars of Visnu in Vedic mythology merits a detailed study.

In a suidian incarnation (Sk.  $Var\bar{a}ha$ ), Viṣnu rushes to rescue the earth from demons ( $Var\bar{a}ha$   $Pur\bar{a}na$  I, 114.5-13; cf. Yt. 10.70 where a sharp-tusked Vere $\theta$ ragna rushes before Mithra too). Despite a little known study on Vahrām by the late J. de Menasce (p. 113, n. 2), an exhaustive edition of Yt. 14 and a study of its Indo-Iranian mythical parallels remains a *desideratum*. On p. 78 read  $m\bar{n}n\bar{o}$  instead of Mid. Pers. "menog" to maintain its equivalence with NP "gifi".

One looks forward to a paperback or, better still, revised edition where the author will doubtlessly expand his analyses. Like all seminal theorists, Bivar should be prepared to face detractors, both Classicists and Orientalists, who not necessarily for inadequate reasons will uphold their respective *communis opiniones*. But absence of evidence, needless to state, is not evidence of absence. That this watershed volume has opened new vistas for "initiates" in mysteries (Mithraic and Zoroastrian) is indisputable: it would be irresponsible to dismiss Bivar's intensive erudition in matters both occidental and oriental so imbued with modesty and earnestness.

(BW)