



BRILL

JOURNAL OF PERSIANATE STUDIES 14 (2021) 152–177

JPS

brill.com/jps

# Visitation and Awakening: Cross-Cultural and Functional Parallelisms between the Zoroastrian Srōš and Christian St. Sergius

*Gianfilippo Terribili* | ORCID: 0000-0002-6322-4023

Department of Science of Antiquities; Sapienza University of Rome, Italy  
*gianfilippo.terribili@uniroma1.it*

## Abstract

Similarities between the two celestial entities, the Zoroastrian Srōš (or Sraoša) and the Christian St. Sergius, have occasionally been mentioned in studies on late-antique and medieval Iran. Comparing the Zoroastrian and Syriac Christian traditions, the study will deal with evidence describing a phenomenological complex that includes the manifestation of celestial entities through a revelatory dream or vision and the consequent awakening of the individual consciousness. The parallelisms will be viewed in the perspective of historical and cultural dynamics that characterized the socio-political horizon of the late Sasanian Empire, especially during the reign of Khosrow II Parviz (Husraw II Parvēz). The heterogeneous society of the frontier zone between Rome and Iran determined the development of trans-cultural elements fostering dialogue among different components of the population. This phenomenon, along with the increasing integration of the Christian community in late Sasanian society, favored processes of assimilation and hybridization of narrative motifs connected to the representation of salvific and protective figures extremely popular at that time.

## Keywords

Zoroastrianism – Eastern Christianity – late Antiquity – Sasanian culture – religious narrative – numinous manifestation

## The Historical and Cultural Context

The present paper aims to bring out the importance of investigating, following a comparative perspective, some specific aspects of the late antique religious scenario in areas of contact between the Iranian, Semitic, and Græco-Roman worlds. Identifying common traits in the culture of the numinous and in its forms of expression can reveal sophisticated historical processes that include both the political agenda of the dominant élites and the pervasiveness of shared imageries that went beyond physical, ethnic, or religious barriers. The geographical horizon of the Roman-Sasanian *limes* was characterized by cultural permeability and a fluid frontier-society in which the different components interacted with imperial strategies that were much concerned with territorial defence and political affirmation. The dynamics that marked the late Sasanian Empire, especially in its confrontation with its Western competitor, also determined the need to identify cross-cultural elements that promoted mediation with the growing Christian community, even beyond the frontiers of the Iranian kingdom. These phenomena favored sophisticated processes of acculturation, often conveyed through narrative motifs or devotional practices which found a fertile point of intersection in the representation of supernatural and intermediary figures between the human and divine world.

The present case study will focus on some aspects related to the divine intervention and manifestation, taking into examination a range of heterogeneous sources that introduce the spheres of action of two particularly prominent celestial figures in the late-Sasanian religious environment, the Christian St. Sergius and the Zoroastrian Srōš.<sup>1</sup> The latter is of very remote origin and went through a multi-layered development embedded in the Avesta tradition.<sup>2</sup> The Avestan Sraoša embodied the deification of the attentive capacity in receiving the divine message by listening to the ritual recitation and the consequent inclination or inspiration to conform to those sacred words (*i.e.*, *mąnšra*).<sup>3</sup>

1 Parallelisms between these two entities had already been pointed out by Scarcia 2003. On the Iranian influence regarding the name of Sergius and the presence of elements related to the phenomenology of light in the tradition of this saint, see Cristoforetti. See also the considerations by Russell on a possible connection between the Armenian monastery of St. George at Mokr' (south of Lake Van) and the diety (*yazata*) Srōš. St. George himself is a figure that in many aspects overlaps with that of St. Sergius. On the cultural intersections between the figure of St. Sergius and Iranian beliefs and religious imagery, see extensively Scarcia 2000.

2 On the figure of Sraoša/Srōš within the Zoroastrian tradition, see extensively Kreyenbroek and more succinctly Malandra.

3 The Avestan Sraoša shares with Mithra the epithet *tanu.mąšra*- ("embodiment of the sacred-ritual word") (Kreyenbroek, 3). The association with hearkening made of Sraoša/Srōš an entity who aptly receives the prayers of the devotees.

Consequently, this Avestan deity (*yazata*) fosters correct communications and contact with a higher truth, excluding, at the same time, the interference caused by evil deceptions. This conceptual core fuelled the development of protective and warlike features associated with such a figure,<sup>4</sup> which largely contributed to its prominent role within the Zoroastrian tradition and its common perception. Conceived as the tutelary genius of all material creation and the community of the faithful, Sraoša/Srōš figures as able to face and repulse insidious demonic forces successfully.

Along with other military saints from the Anatolian-Syrian area, the martyr soldier Sergius shared apotropaic and thaumaturgical functions.<sup>5</sup> From the mid-fourth century onwards, his cult spread rapidly from the sanctuary where his relics were preserved in the city of Rusafa/Sergiopolis in Roman Euphratensia in Syria. Situated on caravan routes that connected the Mediterranean shores to the Iranian East, the shrine exploited its favorable and strategic location. During the reigns of Anastasius and Justinian, imperial patronage associated the cult of this martyr with forms of display of favor and divine protection, thus projecting his cult into a political dimension. Furthermore, as aptly evidenced by Fowden, the cross-border cult of Sergius also took root within the Christian communities of Sasanian Mesopotamia (Fowden, 101ff.),<sup>6</sup> to the extent that the historian Theophylact Simocatta (*fl.* early seventh century) describes (1986, 5.14.3; Fowden, 120) him as the most effective saint in the Persian kingdom. In the same period, the strategies of the Sasanians<sup>7</sup> sought to challenge the monopoly of the cult of saints and their relics (Fowden, 59), also

4 Youth, vigor, and handsomeness (*huraōda-*) are qualities which connoted the Avestan Sraoša. Likewise he is the strongest, bravest, swiftest, fleetest, and most dreaded by far of youths (*aojišta, tancišta, θβaxšišta, parō.katarštama yūnqm*) (see Kreyenbroek, 174). Thus, some concepts related to manliness and warrior prowess seem to merge at an early stage with the nature of this *yazata*. Similarly, in the Pahlavi sources, Srōš is defined by the term *tagīgtar*, “most vigorous” (*Supplement to the Šāyast-nē-šāyast* 23.3; Kreyenbroek, 137). As stated in the *Srōš-šnayēnidārīh*, Srōš protects with his quality both the body and soul of men (*Srōšahlay kē tan ud ruwān ī mardōm pānag hē*; Kreyenbroek, 112). These ideas could easily have fostered forms of popular devotion. On the other hand, youthful and “athletic” qualities characterize St. Sergius as well.

5 On St. Sergius and his cult, see the fundamental study by Fowden with references.

6 From the end of the sixth century, the Church of Persia enhanced the cult of St. Sergius and the Holy Cross. In Sasanian Mesopotamia, the dedication of churches to St. Sergius started with the reign of Khosrow I Anushirvān (*r.* 531–79). Cultic foundations in influential centers of power, such as Ctesiphon and Dastgird (Fowden, 121), must also be seen in the broader framework of imperial policy. These places, their cult practices, and patrons played a role of mediation between the Christian and Iranian religious cultures (see also Fiey; Wiessner, 146–48).

7 The Sasanian interest in St. Sergius—attested from Khosrow I onward—has caught the attention of various scholars; see, for example, Labourt, 208–36; Peeters; Fiey, 104, 113; Wiessner; Fowden; Schilling, 154–58.

substantiating universalist messages that could fit with the frontier society. Such circumstances must have contributed to prompting closer cross-cultural interactions and assimilations.

More consistently, it was Khosrow II Parviz (Husraw II Parvēz, *r.* 590–628) who promoted a personal association with St. Sergius, showing himself to be the recipient of the Rusafa martyr's grace. The relationship of Khosrow II with the cultic centre of Rusafa apparently began during the troubled vicissitudes that saw him ascend to the throne after a fierce struggle against the usurper Bahrām Chōbin (or Chubin, d. 591). After having taken refuge in Roman territory, the young Khosrow spent his exile in the region of Euphratensia, where he came into contact with figures who mediated with the veneration of the holy Sergius, such as Anastasius, the metropolitan of Antioch, and the Iranian Saint Gulanducht.<sup>8</sup> Tangible expression of the relationship and sacred bonds between the Sasanian king and St. Sergius lies in the texts accompanying two *ex-votos* dedicated by Khosrow to the martyr in his first year of reign and reported by Theophylact Simocatta and Evagrius Scholasticus without significant variations (*ibid.*, 137–39, with references). The first votive offering by Khosrow II in 591 recalls the plea to St. Sergius and his consequent intercession against the followers of Bahrām. On this occasion, the figure of St. Sergius features as a heavenly protector of the Iranian kingdom and its legitimate sovereign against insidious usurpers, who are defined in the Greek text with terms and concepts strongly reminiscent of the Iranian tradition.<sup>9</sup> This offers an initial framework within which identify concordances with the functions of Srōš, who appears in Pahlavi literature as the defender and master of the material world on behalf of the creator Ohrmazd.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, by sharing primary

8 On Khosrow II's exile, see Schilling, 235ff. On the other hand, Khosrow II's consort queen, the Christian Shirin, also played a remarkable role in mediating between the cult of St. Sergius and the Iranian context (see Scarcia 2000, 172).

9 For Theophylact's original text, see Simocatta 1887.

10 See, for example, the description in the *Bundahišn*:

*Srōš gētīg pad pānaḡih-kardārīh az Ohrmazd dārēd. Ēdōn čyōn Ohrmazd pad mēnōg [ud gētīg] sālār, Srōš pad gētīg sālār. Čyōn ḡowēd Ohrmazd mēnōg ī ruwān-pānaḡ ud Srōš pad gētīg tan-pānaḡ.*

Srōš preserves the material creation through the protective action of Ohrmazd. Just as Ohrmazd is the leader of the spiritual and corporeal worlds, Srōš is the leader of the material world. As it says: Ohrmazd is the protector of the soul in the spiritual world, and Srōš of the body in the material creation.

(*BUNDAHIŠN* 26.49–51; ed. PAKZAD, I, 301; tr. AGOSTINI AND THROPE, 135).

Or the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 27.6, which records: "because the defence and protection of worldly creatures is the proper function of righteous Srōš by the Creator's command (*az ān čyōn pāsbānīh ud pānaḡih ī gētīgān az dadār-frāmān Srōšahlāy xwēškārīh*)"

functions with the sovereign, Srōš supports good kingship in protecting humanity and especially the community of the faithful.<sup>11</sup> In fact, both the entities appear suitable for encoding and conveying political discourses focused on numinous favor.

However, the text of the second votive offering in 593, in which king Khosrow thanks the saint for fulfilment of a private request, is more consistent with a more intimist view of numinous vision and prediction. We can fully appreciate the essential features related to the intervention of the tutelary entity in the passage cited by Theophylact:

I petitioned of you, holy one, to come to my aid and that Seirem conceive in her womb ... you appeared to me in a dream at night and thrice declared to me that Seirem had conceived in her womb. And in the dream itself, I thrice answered you in return and said, "Thank you, thank you" ... from that day Seirem did not know what is customary for women ... from this I recognized the power of the vision and the truth of what you had spoken.

SIMOCATTA 1887, 5.14 §2–11; IT. FOWDEN, 137

Dream manifestation, dialogic interaction, and the threefold predictive message with an equal number of answers uttered by the supplicant, distinguishes the above-mentioned Khosrow II's night visitation. Indeed, this specific description of St. Sergius' apparition and its ternary progression offer a key point of comparison with the forms through which such supernatural interventions are conceived and described in contexts informed by Iranian religious sensibility.

### Srōš's Triple Mode of Action

As a matter of fact, an analogous ternary progression frequently occurs in the phenomenology of Srōš himself. As early as the hymn dedicated to him

---

(Jaafari-Dehaghi, 88–89). Similarly, in the *Rivāyat Pahlavi* 56.3, Srōš is named ruler of the world (*dahibed ī gēhān*) (Williams, II, 92). On the lordship of Srōš on the corporeal existence as lieutenant of Ohrmazd, see also Kreyenbroek, 110.

- 11 Quite explicitly in the *Srōš-šnayēnidārīh* it is said that "throughout the entire world, the arrangement of kingship (is) through your miraculous work, *xwarrah*, power, and efficacy, o Srōšahlāy (*pad hamāg gēhān winnarišn ī xwadāyīh pad warz ud xwarrah ud ōz ud nērōg ī tō Srōšahlāy*)" (Kreyenbroek, 112). In the case of *Dēnkard* 9.8.34, 13–15, these same powers of Srōš are also exercised against historical heretics (*ibid.*, 124; Darvishi, 178–79).

in *Yasna* 57, Srōš is characterized by a triple movement while protecting the *Xwanirah*, the central and inhabited clime, and descending three times a day and as many by night (Kreyenbroek, 54–57). Here, following the Avestan text quite faithfully, the Middle-Persian *zand* (commentary-cum-translation) states:

... *kē tā 3 bār andar ham rōz ud  
andar ham šab ō ēn kišwar wazēd  
ī xwanirāh ī bāmīg; sneh pad dast  
dārēd ī burāgtēz ī hu-wēxtār pad  
kamal bar dēwān.*

... who [*i.e.*, Srōš], as much as three times in the same day and same night, moves towards this continent Xwanirah, the splendid; he has a weapon in his hand, sharp-edged, good to thrust against the evil heads of the demons.

PAHLAVI YASNA 57.31; tr. KREYENBROEK, 56–57

Srōš displays his protective function mainly by night, opposing darkness and becoming a sort of night watchman of humankind.<sup>12</sup> Assisted by the Sacred Fire (*wahrām ātaxš*), Srōš watches over the sleepers.<sup>13</sup> In this light, particularly interesting is a passage from the *Bundahišn* that combines the features of Srōš connected to his night manifestation, triple visitation of men, and fighting against devilish forces:

*harw šab ō harw mardōm 3 jār  
pad hamāg šab \*āyōzēd abāg  
māzaniqān dēwān.*

[Srōš] every night, all night long, he chases Māzan demons away from every person three times.

BUNDAHIŠN 26.52; ed. PAKZAD, I, 301; tr. AGOSTINI and THROPE, 135<sup>14</sup>

This threefold progression is confirmed by other Pahlavi sources (Kreyenbroek, 115–16) that ultimately draw on the Sasanian-era exegesis of the *Vahištōišti Gāthā* (Y.53), as is highlighted by the ninth book of *Dēnkard* in its summary of the twenty-first *fragard* from the *Sūdgar Nask* (see also Kreyenbroek, 166 n. 31):

12 More specifically, Srōš, together with the *yazata* Rašn, guards the *ušain-gāh*, the period lasting from midnight to dawn, see *Bundahišn* 3.25 (Pakzad, 51; tr. Agostini and Thrope, 26; see also Kreyenbroek, 117).

13 According to the *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram* 3.83, “(Wahrām Fire’s) proper function (is) to defend the sleepers during the night and be an aid together with Srošahlāy (*pad šab xuftagān pāsbānēnīdan abāg Srošahlāy ayār būdan xwēškārīh*)” (Kreyenbroek, 119; Gignoux and Tafazzoli, 54–55).

14 See also Kreyenbroek, 116.

*Srōšahlay sē ud dahmān āfrīn  
čahār pad frāy-dahišnīh ud  
wālišn-dahišnīh.*

Srōšahlay three (times) and  
Dahmān Āfrīn four (come) for  
the sake of producing abundance  
and growth.<sup>15</sup>

DĒNKARD 9.22.1; tr. VEVAINA, 480

Cultivated in priestly circles, the image of the threefold descent of Srōš in the material world went beyond the sphere of theological speculation, finding expression in forms of representation closer to popular religiosity. This image was in fact long recurrent, reflected in common beliefs of the Zoroastrian community. The *Saddar Bundahišn*, a Neo-Persian text that found widespread circulation in pre-modern Zoroastrianism, presents the same concepts attuned to the sensibility of the ordinary faithful:

The function of the pious and victorious Soroush is this, that he protects the whole world from thieves, calamities and trouble. Every night he goes to the world three times like a sentinel who keeps watch.

SADDAR BUNDAHIŠN 3.34–35; tr. DHABHAR, 507

On the other hand, the practices and beliefs related to the funerary context contributed transversally to conveying a well-defined and constant representation of this divine entity within the Zoroastrian social body. This mode of action, in fact, distinguishes the deeds of Srōš also in the post-mortem scenario, where for three days and nights after death the *yazata* protects the soul of the righteous believer:

15 These two incremental powers fit well with the request and aftermath of Khosrow's second *ex-voto*. Likewise, *Bundahišn* 35.45 offers a captivating term of comparison within the specific matters of procreation and prosperity (Pakzad, 400–1; tr. Agostini and Thrope, 187). The passage states that legendary kings from eastern Iran praised Srōš and Ardwašīst for their royal offspring and that, for this reason, they enjoyed all sorts of abundance.

*ān ī ruwān 3 rōz ud šāb mēnōg-waxših gāh andar gētīg pānagihēd pad ān ī srōš pādārīh ud āmārīhēd pad-iz ān ī Srōš āmārīh pad-iz ān čim 3 rōz ud šab yazišn ī Srōš kardan paydāg čim.*

The soul is protected by the guardianship of Srōš during the three days and nights, the period of spiritual transition in the material world; and he (*i.e.*, the soul) is reckoned by the Srōš's act of reckoning; and therefore, the reason for performing worship of Srōš for three days and nights (is) manifest.

*DĀDESTĀN Ī DĒNĪG* 27.6; tr. JAAFARI-DEHAGHI, 88–89<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, the cult of Srōš achieved a specific relevance in this timeframe, finding articulation in a funerary orthopraxis equally divided into a tripartite partition.<sup>17</sup> Summing up, while the ternary progression finds expression in different levels of Zoroastrian religious experience,<sup>18</sup> it consistently qualifies Srōš's modalities of operation, eventually defining a figure that in many ways coincides with the personification of the oral-aural aspect of the Avestan ritual itself.<sup>19</sup>

16 I have slightly modified the translation.

17 Cf. the statement in the Supplement to the *Šāyast nē Šāyast*: “during the three [post-mortem] days one should perform all acts of worship for Srōš, because for the three days, Srōš can save his soul from the clutches of the demons (*andar 3 rōz hamāg yazišn ī Srōš abāyēd kardan ēd rāy čē ruwān ī ōy az dast ī dēwān 3 rōz Srōš be tuwān bōxtan*)” (*Supplement to the Šāyast nē Šāyast* 17.3; Kreyenbroek, 133); see also *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 27 (Jaafari-Dehagi, 88–89).

18 The number three is ubiquitous in the Zoroastrian tradition and Iranian epic narrative, while its presence might ultimately derive from an archaic Indo-European legacy (Dumézil). However, in the limited scope of this paper, attention focuses on the association between this number and the discrete phenomenology of spiritual visions/intercessions, within a circumscribed timeframe.

19 Cf. the first chapter of *Bundahišn*, where a threefold process develops the increasing effect produced by recitation of the *Ahunvar* formula and the vision thus evoked. The efficacy of the ritual recitation and reception of it is thus transposed into the cosmogonic myth and may account for the qualities attributed to Srōš as embodiment of the divine message. Furthermore, the tripartite manifestation of Sraoša/Srōš in the “visual-narrative” culture could also have drawn some inspiration from the ritual performance as well. In fact, the incipit of what is known as the *Great Hymn to Sraoša*, a text incorporated into the *Yasna* liturgy, involves a threefold recitation of the *Ašəm vohū* sacred formula (Kreyenbroek, 34–35).



### Narrative Schemes and the Implications of Otherworldly Salvation

Returning to the phenomenology of heavenly manifestations, comparison with St. Gulanducht's ecstatic rapture proves particularly revealing in identifying both shared forms in describing the visitations and historical mediators that favored cross-cultural exchanges between the Iranian and Christian world at the turn of the Sasanian era. The saint, of Zoroastrian origin and married to an influential man charged with military duties in the Sasanian army, appears to have been involved in the cult of St. Sergius and promoting it in the frontier society (Wiessner, 146; Fowden, 135).<sup>20</sup> The account of her passion<sup>21</sup> portrays the conversion of the holy woman as characterized by the appearance of a divine messenger and fashioned through a ternary progression of the phenomenon. The following passage aptly summarizes the essence of Gulanducht's ecstatic experiences:<sup>22</sup>

A third time the angel of the Lord manifested himself to the saint and said: "here I have appeared to you three times after the manifestation you have seen, so that you may be baptized."

*GULANDUCHT PASSION* 4.5; tr. GARITTE, 428<sup>23</sup>

Thus, three visitations articulate a process of awakening of the conscience that involves a woman fully receptive to that heavenly message.

The fact that this Georgian version of Gulanducht's life may quite faithfully reflect the original edition of the Passion composed by Stephen of Hierapolis shortly after her death in 591 CE—some traces of which also remain in other authors—may suggest that this version of the events draws on first-hand accounts, possibly reported by the saint herself or composed by individuals in her entourage.<sup>24</sup> This circumstance would give more credit to the hypothesis

20 After being detained in the Fortress of Oblivion for a long period, and thanks to a miraculous intervention, Gulanducht escaped, finding shelter in Roman Euphratensia. This is the place where she meets Khosrow II during his exile. The saint seems credited with some predictory gifts since Khosrow questioned her about his future on the throne of Iran (*Gulanducht Passion* 17.8–12; Garitte, 415). Eventually, the body of Gulanducht was buried in a church dedicated to St. Sergius in a place near the frontier-fortress of Dara to protect that area and its inhabitants (*Gulanducht Passion* 20.2; Garitte, 418).

21 It is still preserved in a Georgian version (see Garitte). The Georgian *Vita* is thought to be a faithful redaction of the first *Vita* (probably Syriac), originally composed by Bishop Stephen of Hierapolis (*ibid.*, 421–22; Fowden, 135 n. 19).

22 For more, see *Gulanducht Passion* 3.4, 4.1, 3; Garitte, 427–28.

23 I have translated the Latin text of Garitte's translation.

24 See references in n. 21.

of hybridizations between Iranian and Christian forms of expression, favored in this case by a figure whose cultural background and religious vision were firmly embedded in both traditions.

A further element for comparison of these cross-cultural echoes is offered by the Syriac passion of the Persian martyr Gregory, born Pīrāngušnasp and belonging to the aristocratic clan of Mehrān, composed around the late sixth century and set in north-western Iran (Becker; Hoffmann, 78–86).<sup>25</sup> Here, the process of awakening of the conscience and conversion encompasses three visitations, the first of which occurred on the eve of the Zoroastrian festival of Frawardīgān dedicated to the souls of the dead. The second occurred the following morning, while, of the last, it is said that in the middle of the third night, Pīrāngušnasp awoke from his sleep and saw “a joyous and pleasing light, which was illuminating the whole house and encircling it (or, him) on all sides, and a man who was dressed in white and radiant apparel and standing in the middle of that light” (Becker, 327–28). When the day appeared, the governor Pīrāngušnasp—now aware of his new vocation—refuted to celebrate the atavic ceremonies of the new year festival (Now-Ruz) (Becker, 328–29; Hoffmann, 80).

An indication of the intense contact between the two cultures is even more evident in the *Legend of Mar Qardagh* (Walker; see also Fowden, 40, 120; Payne 2015, 127–63). Composed in Sasanian Adiabene between the late sixth and early seventh centuries, this hagiography is a specimen of the cultural synthesis between Christian and Iranian patterns, especially as regards the portraits of the protagonist hero and champion of the faith, Qardagh.<sup>26</sup> The text attests to a moment in which the Eastern Christian narrative assimilates and reinvents distinctive features of the Iranian tradition, reflecting the cultural *milieu* with which these works were in dialogue.<sup>27</sup> In this work, St. Sergius appears several times while, from a phenomenological point of view, his spectrum of actions unfolds through a sequence of dreams, visions, spiritual instructions,

25 The military aspects of the martyr Gregory and his deeds apparently recall St. Sergius and Mar Qardagh's narrative patterns (see Becker, 308 and below). Moreover, Wiessner observed (150) that hagiographies from Adiabene and neighbouring areas (*e.g.*, those of Behnām of Āthōr, Gufrasnasp from Adiabene, Abai of Qullet, Pethion) share some parallelisms in portraying a sort of *Heiligentyp* modelled on Mar Qardagh's *Legend* and attuned to the Iranian cultural *milieu* (see also Walker).

26 The acts and functions of Mar Qardagh often follow the protective attributes credited to his holy counterpart St. Sergius, especially concerning the defence of the community, its territory, and borders against enemies and brigands.

27 See also the interesting considerations by Wiessner, 149–53.

and awakenings, recalling motifs discussed in the pages above.<sup>28</sup> In this hagiography, the relation between St. Sergius and the martyr Qardagh appears once again through a manifestation of the celestial being in three stages. The first visitation (Walker, 23–24) takes place in Melqi, near the city of Arbela, where Qardagh is building his fortified residence and a fire temple.<sup>29</sup> The account of this event proves particularly evocative since the saint manifests himself in a dream by night with the appearance of a young knight in armor. Revealing to his protégé the glorious fate of martyrdom, Sergius intimates the awakening of spiritual awareness.

One night while he [*i.e.*, Qardagh] was sleeping, he saw in his dream a certain young knight, standing over him, clad and girded with armor, and mounted upon a horse. And the knight stabbed him in his side with the tip of his spear and said to him, “Qardagh.” He replied, “It is I.” And he said to him, “Know very well, that in front of this fortress you will die in martyrdom on behalf of Christ.” And Qardagh said to him, “Who are you that you can predict these things about me?” And the blessed one said to him, “I am Sergius, the servant of Christ. But it is not by augury, as you suppose, that I make this prediction about you, but I have come ahead to inform you of what will be, just as my lord Christ has announced it to me.” When Qardagh awoke from his sleep, he was very frightened.

LEGEND OF MAR QARDAGH §7–8; tr. WALKER, 23–24

The narrative scheme follows a pattern in which vision, call and response, predictive message, question, and identity revelation succeed one another. As for the features that define St. Sergius in this first event, it is worth noting that the representation of the armored knight must have had a transversal impact in the Upper Mesopotamian society of that time. The image reflects the iconography of the saint soldiers on horseback, widespread in the coeval Christian East.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, it is also familiar in the Iranian context, where the cataphract knight was the quintessence of aristocratic identity, as well as a form of representation of divine beings. Particularly interesting, because

28 In comparison with other Syriac hagiography, the motif of numinous apparitions in this work proves prominent (Walker, 24 n. 24).

29 Qardagh's martyrdom would take place in the same spot and, later, a Christian church preserving the martyr's relics would be built here. The *Legend*, which has the air of a foundation myth, revolves around this cultic place and the related commemoration of Qardagh's passion. On the shrine and its location, see Walker, 271; Payne 2011, 107; Payne 2015, 126–28.

30 On the horseman-like iconography of St. Sergius and its origins, see Fowden, 29ff.

associated with the vision of the afterlife, the establishment of firm faith and the manifestation of an armoured celestial knight, is a comparison with the inscription of the third-century Zoroastrian high priest Kerdir (or Kartir). Describing the journey of Kerdir's *Doppelgänger* in the afterlife, the text starts with the encounter with the first guardian entity beyond the threshold separating life and death. Unfortunately, the identity of this knight-like spirit is not specified and the description of him is interrupted by a large gap.

<i>aswār-ēw šahryār wēnēm</i>	We see a horseman prince, radi-
<i>spēdagān ud abar asp-ēw agrā</i>	ant, and he is mounted on a noble
<i>nišīnēd, u-š drafš-ēw pad dast</i>	horse, and a banner in hand
[... lac ...]	[... lac ...].

KNRM 58–59; KSM 34; TL MACKENZIE, 55–56, 59; GIGNOUX, 95–96

The passage reveals that in the mid-third century, the image of a supernatural knight admitting the soul of the pious man to the path to salvation was already part of Zoroastrian visual culture.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, in a broader perspective we can appreciate the cross-cultural dimension of the “military holiness” widespread in the late-Antique world through a multifaceted range of forms (see, for example, Orselli; Magistro).

The other two manifestations of St. Sergius in Mar Qardagh's *Legend* are rather less defined from the descriptive point of view. The second (Walker, 37) takes place in the spot where the martyr rests on his journey to the hermitage of his master-initiator Abdišo, who retired to a cave in Mount Beth Bgāsh.<sup>32</sup> In this case, the saint encourages the young man to fight for the faith by offering

31 Although very late, the *Zaratoštnāma* (second half of the thirteenth century) gives us relevant data about the image of heavenly knights associated with the extra-sensorial vision of the other world. Four heavenly visitors in the guise of armed knights and clad with green robes appear before King Wištāsp/Goshtāsp (Rosenberg, 57–58). The entities, namely Bahman, Ardibehisht, Āzar Khurād, and Āzar Gošasp, are God's messengers and provoke the sovereign's extra-corporeal experience of the soul. The ecstatic voyage marks the final awakening of the king's conscience and consequent acceptance of the Good Religion. The *Zaratoštnāma* version of the royal conversion presents variations in comparison with the Pahlavi sources, especially regarding the representation of the celestial entities as green knights, a feature which can reflect interactions with both the Christian and Islamic traditions. On the manifestation of a single green knight, see also below. In any case, in the preface to his work, the *Zaratoštnāma*'s author tells us that he had received in a dream a visit by Srōš/Sorush, who called him to pious duty and awakening (Rosenberg, 3).

32 Judging by the references in the *Legend of Mar Qardagh* and the *Book of the Governors* by Thomas of Marga, this mountain east of Arbela was not only a place of hermitage but also epicentre of supernatural phenomena and epiphanies.

him the support of his supernatural help.<sup>33</sup> On both the first and second occasion, the appearance of St. Sergius to Qardagh is followed by parallel visitations of an angel of the Lord to Abdišo. Abdišo, in turn, appears in a dream to Qardagh as well as St. Sergius himself to Abdišo, in an interweaving of supernatural visions that replicate a functional pattern and characterize the narrative.<sup>34</sup> The third and final nocturnal manifestation occurs during the martyr's detention and torture. Here St. Sergius appears in a triad alongside the master Abdišo and the anchorite Beri,<sup>35</sup> with the aim of strengthening the faith of Qardagh, who, through martyrdom, will eventually triumph over death and the enemies of the faith. As a matter of fact, Qardagh represents in an exemplary form the righteous individual who received, listened to, and cultivated the message transmitted to him by divine will through a heavenly intermediary. Summing up, through the sequence of three apparitions, St. Sergius, featuring as the bearer of a divine message and a kind of tutelary entity, instigates Qardagh's enterprise, leading him along a path of initiation, victory, and otherworldly reward. Meanwhile, on the evidence of a heterogeneous set of sources, it seems possible to identify a tripartite connotation of the forms of representation related to St. Sergius and other intermediary entities in Sasanian Iran,<sup>36</sup> an aspect that in the same context finds phenomenological parallels with the Zoroastrian Srōš, as well.

33 The saint says: "Qardagh, my brother, you have begun well. Struggle bravely that you may become my brother for eternity. Behold, I have come to aid you until you achieve perfection and take the crown of martyrdom" (*Legend* §30; ed. Walker, 37).

34 Protected by the angels of the Lord, Abdišo has the task of converting Qardagh. Thus, he comes to Arbela, where he is imprisoned. However, an angel lets him escape miraculously, carrying him back to the mountain (*Legend* §25; ed. Walker, 33). The event shakes Qardagh's conscience. Three days after his liberation, Abdišo appears in a dream to Qardagh, inviting him to his hermitage (*Legend* §28; ed. Walker, 35). At the dawn of the sixth day, St. Sergius himself appears to Abdišo, admonishing him not to delay in spurring Qardagh to accomplish his mission (*Legend* §34; ed. Walker, 42). This latter manifestation underlines the key role of St. Sergius in the process of passage of the individual to a new existential condition.

35 This latter is a sort of sage of the mountain dwelling in a cave in Mount Beth Bgāsh.

36 See also the intriguing—though very intricate—considerations by Scarcia (2000) on "trimorphism" and its connections with "Zurvanite" conceptions involving calendar and winter solstice festival, with which both St. Sergius and the three Wise Men seem associated in the Christian tradition. See, for example, Scarcia (2000, 224) on an Armenian account of the threefold vision of Christ experienced by the three Wise Men. On the other hand, the *bas-relief* cycle of the Gagik Artsruni's early tenth-century palatine church of the Holy Cross at Aght'amar (Lake of Van), includes the representation of St. Sergius within a triad composed by St. Theodore and St. George (Jones, 121–22). The three military saints are on horseback piercing different enemies with their spears in a sort of triplication of the same act. This representation is part of the sophisticated royal message

More specifically, the Zoroastrian tradition also offers possibilities of comparison regarding the topic of transmitting superior knowledge and marking the path of self-awareness leading to eternal bliss. Even in this case, the functions associated with Srōš in his role as messenger of the divine word and personification of the Zoroastrian *pietas* (obedience) appear crucial. As embodiment of the “readiness to listen” established by the ritual act, Srōš opens a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds by giving access to the beneficial rewards of the spiritual sphere.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, the Pahlavi *zand* of the *Gāthā* is meaningful, since it departs from the original Avestan text and shows us an exegetical interpretation that reflects religious perspectives of the Sasanian era. Here Srōš is depicted as the one who indicates and opens the way to the empyrean abode of Ohrmazd.<sup>38</sup> More generally speaking, Srōš’s support allows the soul of the departed to reach the condition of *ahlaw*, “blessed.” The liminal characteristic of Srōš and his ability to pass through the different existential levels is apparent in his role as a psychopomp and funerary entity.<sup>39</sup> Along with other spiritual entities, Srōš strengthens and guides the soul (*ruwān*) of the righteous (*ahlaw*) to salvation, tracing a safe path in the dangerous transition to the afterlife. According to the Zoroastrian tradition, the post-mortem viaticum is defined through a series of trials that mark an increasing awareness in the soul, a process of self-awakening that ends with recognition of the pious merits and access to a blissful condition.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that, in the Pahlavi Book of Wirāz (*Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*), Srōš, along with Ādur-yazad, accompanies and instructs Wirāz’s soul on his extracorporeal journey in the other world. As he enters the afterlife,

---

conveyed by the church’s symbolic program and expresses an explicit apotropaic function. Although the Armenian St. Sergius has an independent tradition, he shares many aspects and functions with his Syriac homonymous. The words the saint addresses to God before his martyrion in the Armenian version of the legend evidences these analogies:

Grant to all those who believe in you and invoke my name for intercession, the remission of their sins, and save their souls and bodies from all dangers and the persecutions of the demons; grant health to the sick, victory to those who are in battle, release to those who are in captivity and prison, freedom to those who are in bondage.

(*SELECTED LIVES OF THE SAINTS*, II, 296–7; tr. JONES, 132 n. 91, with references)

St. Sergius’s petition sums up miraculous qualities associated to him, highlighting the effectiveness of his name’s invocation. The latter is an element that matches with both the tradition of the Syriac Sergius and the insistence of the Khosrow’s *ex-votos* on his “most holy name” (see Fowden, 128; 137–38).

37 This concept had already been introduced in the *Gāthās* (Skjærvø, 64).

38 See Pahlavi *Yāsna* 28.5 and 33.5 (Kreyenbroek, 30–31).

39 A similar role is also reflected by the Manichæan *interpretatio* of Srōš, where Middle Persian texts identify this figure with the “Column of Glory,” *i.e.*, the divine entity and viaticum through which particles of light ascend to the sky (Kreyenbroek, 142).

these two entities welcome Wirāz as *ahlaw/ardā* and lead him to the bridge of the souls.<sup>40</sup> This revelatory encounter is described through a narrative that finds various analogies with the dream apparitions and ecstatic raptures previously mentioned. On the evidence offered by Zoroastrian and Pahlavi literature, we can see that the functions of Srōš and St. Sergius in Mar Qardag's *Legend* share some points of contact in that respect. Both the entities oversee an initiatory path, "informing" and fostering a cognitive process that brings blessedness and other-worldly salvation to the individual soul.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the same function is shared by the celestial entities visiting St. Gulanducht and the martyr Gregory; their calls made in three stages urge individuals to adopt an active/militant behaviour and reveal to them access to a heavenly existence.

### Awakening and Empowering: Srōš's Association with Epic Heroes

Consistent with this scenario of contact between the two entities is the role that Srōš plays in visiting, awakening, and empowering heroes of the Iranian epos

40 The text states (with slight modifications of the translation on my part):

*ān ī fradom šab man ō padīrag be mad  
Srōš-ahlaw ud Ādur-yazad u-š ō man  
namāz burd hēnd ud guft kū drust  
āmad hē tō ardā Wirāz ka-tahan-iz āmad  
zamān nē bud man guft paygāmbār  
ham ud pas pērōzgar Srōš-ahlaw ud  
Ādur-yazad ān ī man dast frāz grift  
fradom gām pad humat ud dudīgar  
gām pad hūxt ud sidīgar gām pad  
huwaršt frāz ō činwad puhl mad ham ...  
man pad abāgih ī Srōš-ahlaw ud Ādur-  
yazad pad činwad puhl xwārthā ud  
fraxwihā ud nēw-dilērthā ud pērōzgarthā  
be widard ham*

(*ARDĀ WIRĀZ NĀMAG* 7–8, 10; ed. and tr. VAHMAN, 89, 91, 95, 194–95)

On the first night Srōš-ahlaw and Ādur-yazad came to meet me and they paid homage to me and said: 'Be welcome, you righteous Wirāz, even if it was not yet time for you to come.' I said: 'I am a messenger.' Then victorious Srōš-ahlaw and Ādur-yazad took hold of my hand, the first step with good thought, the second step with good words, the third step with good actions, and I came to the Činwad bridge ... I passed with the assistance of Srōš-ahlaw and Ādur-yazad over the Činwad bridge, blissfully, prosperously, bravely and victoriously.

On the term *ašawān/ahlaw* and its post-mortem implications, see Gnoli.

41 Because of their geographical frame, the resonances in the later Yezidi tradition highlighted by Spät (285–346) and related to cross-cultural ideas from late Antiquity concerning "calls of awakening" and their narrative patterns from the sleep of self-awareness to its awakening, prove extremely interesting. In fact, the contribution of the Gnostic and Manichæan traditions to a culture of the sacred involving divine visitation deserves a great deal of attention, while analysis of these trajectories must also include the Zoroastrian viewpoint as a term of comparison.

expected to accomplish salvific exploits connected to eschatological events.<sup>42</sup> According to the Pahlavi apocalyptic texts, the divine message brought to the earth by Srōš sounds like a call that awakens “dormant” heroes of the legendary past and drives them to undertake new enterprises in the context of the future events. In fulfilling this task, Srōš is assisted by the *yazata* Nēryōsang as described by the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*:<sup>43</sup>

*ud man dādār Ohrmazd frēstēm  
Nēryōsang yazd ud Srōšahlāy  
be Kangdiz ... be Čīhrōmēhān  
ī Wištāspān ī kayān-xwarrah ī  
dēn-rāst-wirāstār, kū ēd Pēšōtan ī  
bāmīg, frāz raw ō ēn ērān-dehān ...  
ud rawēnd Nēryōsang yazd ud  
Srōšahlāy az weh Čagād ī Dāytī ō  
Kangdiz ... aziš wāng kunēnd kū  
frāz raw ō Pēšōtan ... frāz raw ō  
ēn ērān-dehān ... Abāz wirāy gāh  
ī dēn ud xwadāyih.*

And I, the Creator Ohrmazd, will send Nēryōsang-yazd and Srōšahlāy to Kangdiz ... [to say] to Čīhrōmēhān son of Wištāsp, of Kayanid *xwarrah*, true restorer of the Revelation, this: “Go ahead, glorious Pēšōtan, toward these Iranian lands! ...” Thus, Nēryōsang-yazd and Srōšahlāy will go from the good *Čagād ī Dāytī* to Kangdiz ... from there they will cry: “Go ahead glorious Pēšōtan ... go forth to these Iranian lands ... restore the time of Revelation and sovereignty!”

ZWY 7.19–21; tr. KREYENBROEK, 131; tr. CERETI, 143, 163–64<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, in the same text God the Creator orders the two *yazatas* to resurrect one of the most famous heroes of Iranian epic lore, namely Kiršāsp/Garjasp, whose relationship with the Zoroastrian religion, however, appears somewhat controversial in other sources:

42 Due to the constraints of this study, the connections between the two entities and the rooster are not explored here (see Kreyenbroek, 118; Russell; Scarcia 2003, 359; Subtelny 2011; 2015, 110–13). In this case, the animal symbolically embodied the victory of the daylight over darkness and the awakening of the spirit.

43 A “twin-like” aspect also characterizes the tradition of St. Sergius and his companion St. Bacchus.

44 I have modified slightly the translations. (Cf. *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* 16.51; tr. Kreyenbroek, 131; Agostini, 113).



*pas man Ohrmazd ī dādār ō Srōš  
ud Nēryōsang yazd gōwēm kū tan  
ī Sāmān Kiršāsp be jumbānēnēd  
tā abar āxēzēd. Ud pas Srōš ud  
Nēryōsang yazd ō Kiršāsp šawēnd,  
3 bār wāng kunēnd ud cahārom  
bār abāg pērōzgarīh Sām abar  
āxēzēd.*

And then I, the Creator Ohrmazd, will say to Srōš and Nēryōsang-yazd: “Shake the body of the Sāmanid Kiršāsp so that he will rise up.” And then Srōš and Nēryōsang-yazd will go to Kiršāsp and thrice they will cry out. At the fourth time, victoriously, the Sāmanid will rise up.<sup>45</sup>

ZWY 9.20–22; tr. KREYENBROEK, 131; tr. CERETI, 146, 168<sup>46</sup>

Correspondingly, the *Ayādgar ī Jāmāspīg*, tells us that these two entities will awaken for the last cosmic battle a series of legendary heroes belonging to the Kayanid cycle of Kay Khosrow, a figure who has remarkable eschatological implications within the Zoroastrian tradition.<sup>47</sup>

The connection between Srōš and the legendary heroes of the Iranian epos is self-evident in Ferdowsi’s *Shāh-nāma* as well, where Srōš/Sorush is the only divine entity of Zoroastrian origin to be explicitly mentioned. The epic tradition undoubtedly constitutes crucial evidence in reflecting the representation of this entity within Iranian beliefs and imagery between late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Among the manifold manifestations of Sorush in the *Shāh-nāma*,<sup>48</sup> his presence in the Kay Khosrow cycle is striking since it is

45 Since, in this case, the hero is deceased, the process of awakening reflects precise funerary conceptions according to which the soul definitively detaches itself from the body and the earthly world on the fourth day after death, starting on its path towards the abode in the afterlife.

46 Here, too, I have modified slightly the translation.

47 The *Pazand* passage runs: “Then Nēryōsang and Srōš will leave and will resurrect Kay Khosrow, son of Syāwaxš, Tūs, son of Nōdar, Gēw, son of Gōdarz and others with (their) thousand treasures and chieftains (*pas nairiōsəng u sarōš bəšvəṭ kaixvusrubi siiāvxšən tūs naodarə gīv gōdariiqni āvāni ōi hazār gaṇja u sālār agəzīnanṭ*)” (*Pazand* 17.10; Agostini, 88, 115).

48 For example, Sorush appears twice before the first king Kayumarth/Gayōmard (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, I, 22 vv. 25–27, 24 vv. 43–46; tr. 1905–25, I, 119–20). The role of this entity in conditioning one of the most famous exploits of the Iranian epos is likewise interesting. Starting his expedition against the tyrant Dahāg (Zahhāk) on the day of Now-Ruz, the hero Fereydun is visited by Sorush during the first night of his journey. The spiritual entity reveals to him the secrets of magic laces and spells, which prove to be essential for the success of the enterprise (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, I, 72 v. 277 n. 12; tr. 1905–25, I, 159; see also *idem* 1877–84, 50). Although Khaleghi-Motlagh emends this passage by omitting the name of Sorush in his edition, the continuation of the account itself reveals the actual involvement of this entity in the exploit. In a subsequent passage (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, I, 82

attuned with the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*. In fact, Sorush's interventions accompany the life of this sovereign from beginning to end. Visiting the hero Gōdarz in a dream, Sorush reveals the identity of Kay Khosrow and the role he will play in delivering the Iranian kingdom from the oppression of the Turanian enemies.<sup>49</sup> The message also contains instructions to find the young prince, who was at the time in "concealment." The hero Gēv, Gōdarz's son, is entrusted to accomplish this task.<sup>50</sup> In the continuation of the Kay Khosrow story, Sorush helps the Iranian king in his pursuit of the evil Afrāsyāb, revealing by night to the wise Hōm the cave in which the Turanian tyrant had hidden (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, IV, 319 vv. 2309–14; tr. 1905–25, IV, 265).<sup>51</sup> Eventually, after a period of prayer and pious devotion, Kay Khosrow receives the visit of Sorush, who assures him of fulfilment of those supplications and predicts the ascent of his soul to heaven (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, IV, 336–37 vv. 2584–2606; tr. 1905–25, IV, 280–81). At the time of his departure and retirement, Kay Khosrow claims in front of his people that Sorush will be his guide on this last journey to the mountain, accompanying him in his passing away (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, IV, 362 v. 2970, 366 v. 3042; tr. 1905–25, IV, 303, 308),<sup>52</sup> thus reflecting the remarkable psychopomp function Srōš had in the Zoroastrian tradition, as we have seen.

---

vv. 445–47; tr. 1905–25, I, 168) Sorush prevents Fereyduṅ from killing Dahāg, ordering him to bind the enemy and imprison him in a mountain gorge. See also further on (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, I, 84, vv. 477–78; tr. 1905–25, I, 169), where Sorush indicates Mount Damāvand as the suitable place for Dahāg's imprisonment. Furthermore, there is a connection between the manifestation of an unnamed knight and members of the hero Garjasp/Kiršāsp's clan. According to the *Shāh-nāma* (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, I, 168 v. 93; tr. 1905–25, I, 243), the hero Sām dreamt of a man mounted on an Arab steed riding in from India (*i.e.*, from the sunrise in the East) and informing him about a grown-up son—namely Zāl, who had previously been abandoned on the mountain by order of Sām himself.

- 49 During a severe drought, Gōdarz dreams of a cloud full of rain flying over Iran and with Sorush sitting upon it (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, II, 213 vv. 441–52; tr. 1905–25, II, 363–364).
- 50 See also the description of the young Khosrow at Gēv's discovery (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, II, 422, vv. 43ff.; tr. 1905–25, II, 370–71).
- 51 The episode evokes many elements of Fereyduṅ's account. Moreover, as in the case of the incipit of Fereyduṅ's deed, also the exploit of Kay Khosrow is associated with the first day of the year in the Pahlavi text *Māh ī Frawardīn rōz ī Hordād* (§20–21; Grenet, 163), according to which, on this very same day, Kay Khosrow kills the Turanian Afrāsyāb/Frāsiyāg and then ascends to heaven. In both *Shāh-nāma* and Pahlavi sources, the account of Kay Khosrow and Afrāsyāb appears to be closely connected to the sacred fire Ādur-Gušnasp and its myth of foundation.
- 52 Already in *Yasna* 57:21, a mountain (Mount Harā) figures as the abode of Sraoša (Kreyenbroek, 48–49). The Zoroastrian funerary practices, linked to exposure of the corpse in high, rocky, and isolated places, may have enhanced the connections between this specific *yazata* and the mountains.

The evidence collected in this and the previous sections shows the association of this kind of entity with initiation and processes of salvation whose aftermaths have both individual and collective implications. In these circumstances, the protagonist of the narrative, be it an epic hero, a pious believer, or a martyr, becomes an exemplary and mediating figure in which the two aspects of individual and community redemption converge.

### Conclusion: Back Again to Khosrow II

However, it is perhaps the *Shāh-nāma* episode describing Soroush's intervention to save the Sasanian emperor Khosrow II (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, VIII, 144–45 vv. 1902–13; tr. 1905–25, VIII, 299)<sup>53</sup> that, in form and meaning, completes the full circle of these interconnections between the Eastern Christian and Iranian world with regard to numinous manifestations and their manifold meanings.<sup>54</sup> The tale is a reinvention, in epic-legendary terms, of the historical events of the struggle between Khosrow II and the usurper Bahrām Chōbin. Therefore, it is a scenario that brings us back to the framework of those *ex-votos* dedicated by the Sasanian shah to St. Sergius and explored at the beginning of this paper. In a desperate situation and trapped on the mountain, Khosrow prays and turns to God. Soroush then appears cloaked in a green robe and mounted on

53 Tabari transmits the same episode, albeit in a concise form: “The Zoroastrians (*al-Majūs*) assert that Abarwīz [Khosrow II Parviz] got trapped in a defile and Bahrām pursued him thither, but when Bahrām was sure that he had Abarwīz in his power, something that could not be comprehended (i.e., some supernatural power) took the latter up to the top of the mountain” (*idem* 1879–1901, 1000; tr. 1999, 313–14; see also Scarcia 2003, 357).

54 Scarcia hypothesizes (2003, 357) that Ferdowsi, while often drawing elements from the Judaic and Christian tradition, had in this case re-modelled the heavenly being in Iranian guise, thus conflating the identity of St. Sergius with the name of Soroush. However, given the frequent and coherent presence of Soroush in the *Shāh-nāma*, attributable to an authentic Iranian tradition, it can be assumed here that some hybridization between the two celestial figures took place before Ferdowsi's work. Moreover, the passage introduces the heavenly entity as *farrokh*-Soroush (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, VIII, 144 v. 1902)—“the blessed Soroush”—which appears to be a further element of independent Zoroastrian derivation. On the other hand, some traces of the circulation of Christian “royal” legends linked to St. Sergius are attested in East Iran at the time of Ferdowsi. A letter from Abdišo, the Metropolitan of Merw (c.1009), addressed to the Nestorian patriarch, contains an account of the conversion of a Turkic ruler to Christianity. The pagan king is said to have embraced the new faith because St. Sergius saved him during a hunt with a miraculous flight. A variation of the same account and letter tells us that the sovereign was hunting in the mountains when a blizzard caught him; only the intervention of an anonymous Christian saint saved the king's life (Mingana, 308–11; Fowden, 123).

a grey-white steed;<sup>55</sup> the heavenly knight takes the sovereign by his hand and leads him to a safe place. When asked about his identity, Sorush reveals himself and predicts the royal destiny that awaits the young Khosrow.<sup>56</sup> At the sight of that miraculous flight, Bahrām is seized with sudden trembling, which is comparable to the panic and perturbation aroused by such numinous epiphanies in other narratives. It is thanks to this supernatural intervention that Khosrow will regain control of and confidence in himself for a third and decisive duel with Bahrām. With its functional and visual references, the story highlights the links between the two celestial entities, Sorush and Sergius. In this case, too, the essential message revolves around the protection of the predestined hero, revelation of destiny, and activation of the hero's potential qualities. In order to shape this process, the narrative relies on motifs and attributes connected to the figure of divine intercessor, which certainly exercised a remarkable grip on the recipients' imagination.<sup>57</sup>

In conclusion, this study has sought to explore some phenomenological traits common to the visual culture of the visitation and framed in an area of interaction between various religious traditions during late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In the religious experience of the world between Roman, Syriac, Arab, and Iranian cultures, the ubiquity of the "protector-mediator" heavenly entity generated specific motifs that circulated broadly throughout the frontier society, also becoming part of the language with which political-religious

55 The color *khangī* used in this passage (Ferdowsi 1987–2009, VIII, 144 v. 1903) is also used in Persian language to describe the quadruped upon which Mohammad ascended to heaven during his *me'raj* (Steingass, 477). For other associations of the green horseman with the popular figure in the Islamic lore known as Khezr (Ar. "verdure"), see Krasnowolska.

56 Cf. the episode narrated by Tabari (1879–1901, 815; tr. 1999, 7) and Ebn al-Athir (Widengren, 764) regarding a premonitory dream of Ardašīr I (or Ardashir, r. 224–242), the founder of the Sasanian Empire. According to Tabari, "he saw in a dream an angel sitting by his head who told him that God was going to give him rulership over the lands, so he was to prepare for this. When he awoke, he rejoiced at this and felt within himself power and great strength such as he had never before known" (*idem* 1879–1901, 815; tr. 1999, 7). Nöldeke first identified the angel sitting by the prince's head with Srōš (Tabari 1879, 6 n. 1). Be that as it may, the account shares with the stories mentioned above some features and narrative functions, introducing Ardašīr's true identity, his destiny, and the beginning of his legendary exploits.

57 Bishop Thomas of Marga's *Historia monastica* (Book of Governors) offers a glimpse into these matters in the very same context. According to the vision of Mār Bābhai, the tutelary angel of the patriarchate of the Church of the East reveals himself as a horseman on a white steed holding a fiery sword in his hand. The entity is commanded by God to support the work of the patriarch (*idem*, 116). In the same text, the manifestation of the tutelary angel of the Arbela metropolitan seat appears in vision to Mār Māran-'Ammeh (*ibid.*, 319–23). The celestial interventions guide the acts of the metropolitan in his efforts for the evangelization of the Arbela hinterland.

authorities consolidated their prestige and structured their self-representation. Likewise, historical mediators played a substantial role in propagating these modes of expression between Iran and Upper Mesopotamia.<sup>58</sup> Both area and epoch were seminal for the development and transmission of the themes considered here. This fact is evidenced by two versions of a story drawn from an ancient and authoritative Islamic tradition, which tells of a further visitation experienced by Khosrow II. In this case, an unnamed angel of the Lord invites the Sasanian shah to accept the new revelation delivered by the Prophet Mohammad to the entire world (see also Scarcia 2003, 357).<sup>59</sup> The angel visits the sovereign three times, for three consecutive years, asking the same question thrice without getting an answer from the stubborn king. Thus, unlike the other narratives mentioned above, the aftermaths of these visitations are inverted here in order to bring out the moral: Khosrow's inability to receive and recognize the divine message will determine his inauspicious fate.

This last story sheds light on two crucial aspects of the present discussion. Firstly, it attests to a process of assimilation involving the forms of representation of a numinous epiphany. In this case, the nascent Islamic tradition functionally re-adapted motifs already embedded in the surrounding religious environment to fabricate explanatory narratives that could prove appealing to the coeval, cross-cultural audience.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, the Islamic tale of Khosrow II's

58 The Catholicos Sabrišo I, who played an important role at the Sasanian court, must certainly be accounted in the list of these figures. According to Christian narratives, he himself appeared in a dream to Khosrow II, urging the king to fight and predicting his victory against the rebel Wistahm/Bahrām (Payne 2015, 173; Wood, 190).

59 Tabari included the following report (*khbar*): Kistrā, son of Hurmuz, was asleep one night in his palace ... Suddenly, there appeared a man with a staff who walked up and stood at Kistrā's head and said, "O Kistrā, I'm God's messenger to you [with the message] that you should submit yourself [to Him]." He said this three times, while Kistrā lay prostrate, looking at him but returning no answer.... When it was the following year ... there was the angel with the staff standing at his head ... When the next year came round ... there was the angel again standing by his head and saying [the same message] ... This he repeated three times, while Kistrā was looking at him but returning no answer. (Tabari 1879, 1014–15; tr. 1999, 336–37).

60 Similarly, Biruni's description of Srōš/Serōš underlines the complexity and bidirectional orientation of these hybridizations. According to the Muslim polymath (1878, 219; tr. 1879, 204), the Persians believed that Serōš watches over the night while rising three times over the world, smiting the *jīns*; a description in tune with the Pahlavi sources mentioned above. In addition to that, Biruni's gloss specifies that Serōš was also said to be Gabriel (Ar. Jibrīl). The identification sounds appropriate since Gabriel figures traditionally as God's messenger who escorted Mohammad on his journey to heaven (*me'raj*) and instructed him on mysteries. Thus, the evidence illustrates an ongoing process, which involved the representation of spiritual intermediaries, soul's awakening, and salvation; for correlated themes, see n. 55; Subtelny 2011; 2015.

dreams highlights the centrality of the reign of this Sasanian sovereign in the cultivation and circulation of paradigmatic narratives in which well-defined acts of a divine intermediary open the way to political, material, or spiritual rewards.

Indeed, similar patterns in narrative composition continued to define legendary biographies after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty. A comparison of Syriac accounts on the life of John of Deylam (*fl.* second half of the seventh century) highlights many elements introduced by this paper. Different versions of John's deeds circulated extensively in both Eastern Christianity and Iran (Brock; Sims-Williams), evidently absorbing some elements of those cultural *milieux*. Topics like the spiritual initiation in a cave on Mount Beth Bgāsh (Brock, 129, 145, 154), the formulaic use of the number three in describing the miraculous deeds and spiritual achievements of this holy man, as well as the recurrent angelic visitations, are all crucial points in this respect. The typologies of the divine manifestation offer a clear example of the re-adaptation of the phenomenological patterns discussed above. Thus, on one occasion, the angel stays above the saint's head and invites him to fight against the pagans (*ibid.*, 161). In a subsequent vision, the angel indicates the spots where John establishes three monasteries, one of them dedicated to Saints Sergius and Bacchus (see esp. *ibid.*, 164–65). Eventually, the angel of death manifests himself thrice at the end of John's life (*ibid.*, 173).

Far from being mere coincidences, these analogies all point at an interconnected and porous religious imagery. Despite the differences separating community identities and literary scopes, the transitional period between late Antiquity and early Islam fostered an extensive exchange of rhetorical devices and narrative motifs that addressed recipients sharing a deal of “cognitive patterns.”

### Bibliography

- D. Agostini, *Ayādgar ī Jāmāspīg: Un texte eschatologique zoroastrien*, Biblica et orientalia 50, Rome, 2013.
- D. Agostini and S. Thrope, *The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation: A New Translation*, New York City/Oxford, 2020, DOI 10.1093/oso/9780190879044.001.0001.
- A. H. Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2.2 (Fall 2009), pp. 300–36, DOI 10.1353/jla.0.0045.

- Abu al-Rayhān Mohammad b. Ahmad **Biruni**, *Ketāb al-āthār al-baqīyya ‘an al-qorūn al-khālīyya*, ed. Eduard Sachau as *Chronologie orientalischer Völker von al-Bêrûnî*, Leipzig, 1878.
- Abu al-Rayhān Mohammad b. Ahmad **Biruni**, *Ketāb al-āthār al-baqīyya ‘an al-qorūn al-khālīyya*, tr. Eduard Sachau as *The Chronology of ancient nations*, London, 1879.
- S. P. **Brock**, “A Syriac Life of John of Dailam,” *Parole de l’Orient* 10 (1981), pp. 123–89.
- C. G. **Cereti**, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, Serie orientale Roma 75, Rome, 1995.
- S. **Cristoforetti**, “San Sergio a Perugia,” *Annali di Ca’ Foscari* 35.3 (1996), pp. 433–38.
- F. **Darvishi**, “A Comprehensive Survey in Dēnkard IX,” Ph.D. diss., Sapienza Università di Roma, 2019.
- E. B. N. **Dhabhar**, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and Others: Their versions with Introduction and Notes*, Mumbai, 1932.
- G. **Dumézil**, *L’idéologie tripartite des Indo-Européens*, Collection Latomus 31, Brussels, 1958.
- Abu’l-Qāsem **Ferdowsi**, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Johann August Vullers and Samuel Lanadauer, *Firdusī Liber regum qui inscribitur Schahname*, 3 vols., Leiden, 1877–84.
- Abu’l-Qāsem **Ferdowsi**, *Shāh-nāma*, tr. Ar. G. Warner and E. Warner, *The Shāhnāma of Firdausī*, 9 vols., London, 1905–1925.
- Abu’l-Qāsem **Ferdowsi**, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, M. Omidsalar, and A. Khatibi as *The Shahnameh (The Book of kings)*, Persian text series, n.s. 1, 8 vols., New York City, 1987–2009.
- J.-M. **Fiey**, “Le saints serge de l’Iraq,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 79 (1961), pp. 102–14, DOI 10.1484/J.ABOL.4.02474.
- E. K. **Fowden**, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 28, Berkeley, 1999.
- G. **Garitte**, “La Passion géorgienne de Sainte Golindouch,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 74 (1956), pp. 405–40, DOI 10.1484/J.ABOL.4.01146.
- Ph. **Gignoux**, *Les quatre inscriptions du Mage Kirdīr: Textes et concordances*, Studia Iranica 9, Paris, 1991.
- Ph. **Gignoux** and A. **Tafazzoli**, *Anthologie de Zādspram: Édition critique du texte pehlevi*, Studia Iranica 13, Paris, 1993.
- Gh. **Gnoli**, “Ašavan,” in *Elr.*, London/New York City, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 705–6; online (2011): <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/asavan-avestan> (accessed: 20 July 2021).
- F. **Grenet**, “The Pahlavi Text *Māh ī Frawardīn rōz ī Hordād*: A Source of Some Passages of Bīrūnī’s *Chronology*,” in W. Sundermann, A. Hintze, and F. de Blois, eds., *Exegisti monumenta: Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams*, Wiesbaden, 2009, pp. 161–70.
- G. **Hoffmann**, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 7.3, Leipzig, 1880.

- M. Jaafari-Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg: Part I, Transcription, Translation and Commentary*, *Studia Iranica* 20, Paris, 1998.
- L. Jones, *Between Islam and Byzantium: Aght'amar and the Visual Construction of Medieval Armenian Rulership*, Aldershot/Burlington, 2007.
- A. Krasnowolska, "Kezr," in *Elr.*, London/New York City, 2009; online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kezr-prophet> (accessed: 20 July 2021).
- Ph. G. Kreyenbroek, *Sraoša in the Zoroastrian Tradition*, *Orientalia Rheno-traiectina* 28, Leiden, 1985.
- J. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'Empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide (224–632)*, 2nd ed., Bibliothèque de l'enseignement de l'histoire ecclésiastique, Paris, 1904.
- D. N. MacKenzie, "Kerdir's inscription," in G. Herrmann and D. N. MacKenzie, eds. *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam: Naqsh-e Rostam 6, The Triumph of Shapur I (Together with an Account of the Representations of Kedar); Description and commentary*, *Iranische Denkmäler* 13.2, *Iranische Felsreliefs* 1, Berlin, 1989, pp. 35–72.
- M. R. Magistro, "Alcuni aspetti della glittica sacro-magico sassanide: il 'Cavaliere nimbato,'" *Studia Iranica* 29.2 (2000), pp. 167–194, DOI 10.2143/SI.29.2.565526.
- W. W. Malandra, "Sraoša," in *Elr.*, London/New York City, 2014; online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sraosa> (accessed: 20 July 2021).
- A. Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9.2 (1925), pp. 297–371, DOI 10.31826/9781463226930-001.
- A. M. Orselli, *Santità militare e culto dei santi nell'impero dei Romani (secoli VI–X)*, *Collana medievistica*, Bologna, 1993.
- F. Pakzad, *Bundahišn: Zoroastrische Kosmogonie und Kosmologie*, *Majmu'a-ye pezhuheshhā-ye Irān-e bāstān* 2, 2 vols., Tehran, 2005.
- R. E. Payne, "The Emergence of Martyrs' Shrines in Late Antique Iran: Conflict, Consensus, and Communal Institution," in P. Sarris, M. Dal Santo, and Ph. Booth, eds., *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict, and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, *Brill's Series on the Early Middle Ages* 20, Leiden/Boston, 2011, pp. 84–114, DOI 10.1163/9789004206595\_008.
- R. E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, *Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 56, Oakland, 2015.
- P. Peeters, "Le ex-voto de Khousrau Aparwez à Sergiopolis," *Analecta Bollandiana* 65 (1947), pp. 5–56, DOI 10.1484/J.ABOL.4.02337.
- F. Rosenberg, ed., *Le livre de Zoroastre (Zarātusht nâma)*, St. Petersburg, 1904.
- J. R. Russell, "Room at the Inn: Armenian P'ut'kavank' and Sraoša," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 26 (2002), pp. 205–15.
- G. Scarcia, "Cosroe secondo, San Sergio e il Sade," *Studi sull'Oriente cristiano* 4.2 (2000), pp. 171–227.



- G. Scarcia, "Sergio/Sorush in Firdusi?," in C. G. Cereti, M. Maggi, and E. Provasi, eds., *Religious Themes and Texts of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: Studies in Honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday on 6th December 2002*, Beiträge zur Iranistik 24, Wiesbaden, 2003, pp. 353–61.
- A. M. Schilling, *Die Anbetung der Magier und die Taufe der Sāsāniden: Zur Geistesgeschichte der iranischen Christentums in der Spätantike*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 621, Subsidia 120, Louvain, 2008.
- Theophylact Simocatta, *Theophylacti Simocattæ historiae*, ed. C. de Boor, Bibliotheca scriptorum Græcorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, Leipzig, 1887.
- Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiæ*, tr. M. Whitby and M. Whitby as *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, Oxford/New York City, 1986.
- N. Sims-Williams, "An early source for the life of John of Dailam: Reconstructing the Sogdian version," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 12.1–2 (2014), pp. 121–34.
- Pr. O. Skjærvø, "The *Gāthās* as Myth and Ritual," in M. Stausberg and Y. S.-D. Vevaina, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion, Malden/Oxford/Chichester, 2015, pp. 59–67, DOI 10.1002/9781118785539.ch3.
- E. Spät, *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition*, Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought 8, Piscataway, 2013, DOI 10.31826/9781463222024.
- F. J. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, including the Arabic Words and Phrases to be Met with in Persian Literature*, London, 1963.
- M. E. Subtelny, "Zoroastrian Elements in the Islamic Ascension Narrative: The Case of the Cosmic Cock," in M. Szuppe, A. Krasnowolska, and Cl. V. Pedersen, eds., *Medieval and Modern Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, held in Vienna on 18–22 September 2007 by the Societas Iranologica Europæa*, Studia Iranica 45, Paris, 2011, pp. 193–212.
- M. E. Subtelny, "The Islamic Ascension Narrative in the Context of Conversion in Medieval Iran: An Apocalypse at the Intersection of Orality and Textuality," in J. Rubanovich, ed., *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 19, Leiden/Boston, 2015, pp. 93–129, DOI 10.1163/9789004291973\_006.
- Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. Jarir Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rosul va-'l-moluk*, tr. Theodor Nöldeke as *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Leiden, 1879.
- Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. Jarir Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rosul va-'l-moluk*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje, et al., 15 vols., Leiden, 1879–1901.
- Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. Jarir Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rosul va-'l-moluk*, tr. C. E. Bosworth as *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, Bibliotheca Persica, Albany, 1999.
- Thomas, Bishop of Marga, *Historia monastica*, ed. and tr. E. A. W. Budge as *The Book of Governors: The Historia monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries*, 2 vols., London, 1893.

- F. **Vahman**, *Ardā wirāz nāmag: The Iranian "Divina Commedia,"* Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series 53, London, 1986.
- Y. S.-D. **Vevaina**, "Scripture versus Contemporary (Interpretive) Needs: Mapping the Hermeneutic Contours of Zoroastrianism," in S. Fine and S. Secunda, eds., *Shoshannat Yaaqov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman*, Brill Reference Library of Judaism 35, Leiden/Boston, 2012, pp. 465–85, 10.1163/9789004235458\_024.
- J. T. **Walker**, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 40, Berkley/Los Angeles/London, 2006, DOI 10.1525/california/9780520245785.001.0001.
- G. **Widengren**, "The Establishment of the Sasanian Dynasty in the Light of New Evidence," in *La Persia nel medioevo: Proceedings of the international conference (Rome, 31 March–05 April 1970)*, Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura 160, Rome, 1971, pp. 71–82.
- G. **Wiessner**, "Christlicher Heiligenkult im Umkreis eines sassanidischen Großkönigs," in W. Eilers, ed., *Festgabe deutscher Iranisten zur 2500 Jahrfeier Irans*, Stuttgart, 1971, pp. 141–55.
- A. V. **Williams**, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Historisk-filosofiske meddelelser 60.1–2, 2 vols., Copenhagen, 1990.
- Ph. **Wood**, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford, 2013, DOI 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199670673.001.0001.