

# Relocating the Prophet's Image: Narrative Motifs and Local Appropriation of the Zarathustra Legend in Pre- and Early Islamic Iran (Part II - North-West Iran)\*

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## Abstract

From the very beginning of Iranian disciplinary studies, the material concerning Zarathustra's biography has been analysed in depth, firstly to identify the homeland of the Prophet and then to discuss the historical reality of this authoritative figure. Despite the divergences of opinion, emphasis has always been placed on the reconstruction of the figure of Zarathustra and much less on the socio-cultural context in which the image of the Prophet was cultivated. The present paper represents the second part of a larger work (see Terribili 2020) that aims to reverse this perspective and emphasize those data, which link up narrative variations and extensions with local identities. In fact, variations in geographical setting reveal processes of acculturation through which social groups reinvented the influential image of the Prophet within a familiar horizon. In this respect, the Sasanian period proved pivotal in the formation of both Zoroastrian and Iranian communal identities. In the wake of the first work, this second paper approaches aspects connected to the North-West Iran and Ādurbādagān tradition.

## Keywords

Zarathustra, Zoroastrianism, Sasanian and Early Islamic Iran, Religious Narrative, Mnemohistory, Ādurbādagān

Within the Zoroastrian tradition, the topography of Wištāsp's Conversion is counterbalanced by a geography linked to the Prophet's origin and his revelation. The East-West polarization, resulting from transposition of these key moments in Zarathustra's life to a real scenario, is fully recog-

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\* For the First Part, see *Iran and the Caucasus* 24.1: 1-16.

nized even by early Islamic authors who almost unequivocally agree on Zarathustra's journey from Ādurbādagān to Wištāsp's court at Balk.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Pahlavi texts attest to a transposition of the concept of *ērānwēz* (Av. *airyanəm vaējō*), the mythic land of primeval times and the cosmological centre of the world, with the north-western region of the Sasanian Iran (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 69-82 with references).<sup>2</sup> Evidently, in historical times this area and its religious centres played a pivotal role in the development of Zoroastrianism (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 74). As a matter of fact, according to the sources at our disposal references of Zarathustra's presence dots the territory of Ādurbādagān, indicating both a chronological stratification and the number of claims by different groups in associating their landscape with this authoritative figure. Among the places in northern Iran most often associated with Zarathustra's birth and his family figure prominently Šiz/Ādur-Gušnasp and both the cities of Ray<sup>3</sup> and Orumieh. Though not attested in Pahlavi books, associations with the city and lake of Orumieh are particularly frequent in the early-Islamic period, since the note by Ibn Kordadābeh (9th century A.D.).<sup>4</sup> Hypothetically this trans-

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<sup>1</sup> Supposedly this alternation draws on late-Sasanian imagery, though the references to Wištāsp's seat in the Pahlavi books are scarce and not univocal. In this case, for the Islamic authors inclined to compose a universal view of the history, a parallel source of information may derive from Western works where Bactra/Balk figures prominently associated with Zoroaster, see Bidez/Cumont 1938. The *Šāhnāma* itself places Zarathustra's assassination, along with that of Wištāsp's father Kay Lohrāsp, in this city (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988-2008 V: 183, v.1114-1119; Warner 1905-1925 5: 92). Possibly in the wake of the very same tradition, *The Persian Rivāyat of Darab Hormuzdyār* adds that Zarathustra's body was buried in Balk (Dhabhar 1932: 424).

<sup>2</sup> Zarathustra's place in NW Iran appears well-established and of long date—factors that induced pioneering scholars to consider Ādurbādagān the region of Zarathustra's birth, see, e.g., Jackson 1898. The shifts of the Ādur-Gušnasp seat recorded in historical times (Schippmann 1971: 354; Boyce/Grenet 1991: 75) certainly contributed to an overlap of memories and new configurations of the symbolic value of the territories involved in the process.

<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the city of Ray, identified by Zoroastrian exegetical tradition with the Avestan *rayā ōrizantu*, was considered either the Prophet's birthplace or the land of his matrilineal family, see, e.g., *Pahlavi Widēwdād* 1.15 (Moazami 2014: 38-39), *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 10.15 (Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 68-69), Šahrastani (Gottheil 1894: 48; Jackson 1898: 192), *Zarātoštrāna* (Rosenberg 1904: 3), *The Persian Rivāyat of Darab Hormuzdyār* (Dhabhar 1932: 424).

<sup>4</sup> See the list compiled by A. V. W. Jackson (1898: 198).

position could correspond to the rise of Orumieh as a prominent centre in the region. Occurring in the same period, the progressive decline of the traditional Zoroastrian centres of Ādurbādagān, above all of the sanctuary of Šiz/Ādur-Gušnasp, may have given the opportunity to the Mazdean and Iranian elites of Orumieh to manipulate Zarathustra's origins.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the Islamic sources reporting Orumieh as Zarathustra's birthplace are univocal in attributing the information to the Magians or native population,<sup>6</sup> clarifications that seem to indicate the local and Mazdean origin of this claim.

Curiously, a very late Zoroastrian work, the *Dabistān* (17th century) shows a further step in the shift of Zarathustra's birthplace within the boundary of Ādurbādagān. Mentioning this region as the Prophet's homeland, it specifies that he was born in the city of Tabriz (Shea/Troyer 1843 I: 263; Jackson 1898: 202), by that time the regional metropolis. Supposedly, in this latter case the author of *Dabistān* automatically placed the cosmological-key figure of Zarathustra in the political and cultural centre of coeval Azerbaijan, thus in some way updating the Prophet's biography. Be that as it may, these kinds of shifts may depend on manifold factors, but all of them follow historical dynamics of ascent and decline involving the main centres of that territory and its social groups.

The same process may throw some light on a discordant voice in the scenario of Zarathustra's birthplace. According to the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (§.59, Daryae 2002: 23, 28) the Caspian city of Āmol is described as the homeland of Zarathustra; a rather peripheral location in comparison with all the other information we possess. In order to explain such an oddity in a text that should in fact reflect much of late-Sasanian secular lore, we have to consider that the same work bears clear traces of

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<sup>5</sup> As already noted, the association with Orumieh can also be seen in relation to the analogy between the city name and the Arabic form of Prophet Jeremiah's name (Armiah), who, according to some Islamic authors, is linked to Zarathustra's apprenticeship in Palestine, see Gottheil 1894: 30, n.2; Jackson 1898: 197; Bidez/Cumont 1938 I: 49. Meanwhile, 'Abbasid astrologers cultivated a tradition, according to which Zarathustra went from Ādurbādagān to Ḥarrān for accomplishing his apprenticeship (Cottrell 2009; Cottrell/Ross 2019: 99-102).

<sup>6</sup> See Balāḍurī (Gottheil 1894: 33; Jackson 1898: 198), Ibn Ḳordadāḍbeh and Ibn al-Faqīh (Schippmann 1971: 319-20), Yāqūt (Gottheil 1894: 42; Jackson 1898: 201).

its last redaction in the 'Abbasid era, even mentioning the city of Baghdad (§.60), which immediately follows the description of Āmol itself in the list. Evidence that such information on Āmol also depends on the variation/interpretation of a later redactor may derive from both philological and historical reasoning. The passage is somewhat corrupt and elements could have been omitted (Daryaee 2002: 73-74); it is preceded by paragraphs dedicated to cities of NW Iran, while on the other hand closer places are described in other sections of the text (e.g., Gurgān §.17; Padišxwārgar/Damāwand §.28-29). Such discordance could mean that, in the place where we expected reference to Zarathustra's homeland—i.e., possibly Ray, which quite surprisingly does not appear in the *Šahre-stānīhā*—the original name was omitted or simply adjusted to fit a new context. From an historical point of view, in the early 'Abbasid period Āmol achieved a prominent status among the urban centres of the Trans-Elburz area (Daryaee 2002: 73-74). On the other hand, in Ṭabarestān and adjacent regions local rulers and dynasties long preserved the pre-Islamic heritage (Madelung 1975; Bosworth 2009). Thus, in a period when other Zoroastrian communities were gradually decreasing in numbers and influence, the Ṭabarestān might have aroused the expectations of Zoroastrian circles, possibly achieving a new position within the milieu of this community.

Regarding sacred places and their tradition, the importance of the Ādur-Gušnasp fire-temple during the Sasanian period enormously contributed to fostering prophetic and pious narratives,<sup>7</sup> which must also have accompanied devotional practices and pilgrimages to the shrine (Schippmann 1971: 319-321; Boyce 1983 with references), as in the case of the Burzēn Mihr fire in Khorāsān (see, Terribili 2020). The descriptions of the royal pilgrimage to the Ādur-Gušnasp certainly offer a solemn model for practices transversally shared within the Sasanian society. Describing ablutions, the contrite approach to the sacred fire, supplicants dressed in white robes, pious donations and the like, Ferdowsī's narrative (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988-2008 IV: 311-12, v. 2204-2219; Warner 1905-1925 4: 258-59) seems to project into a mythical past devotional act addressed to the his-

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., the foundation legend of this fire-temple, linked to the mythic lake Čēčast and the capture of the tyrant Afrāsīāb by Kay Husraw (Boyce 1983 with references).

torical Ādur-Gušnasp (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 76). Thus, while extolling the effectiveness of this sacred fire, the paradigmatic tale of its foundation instructed the believers in the modality of approach and gratitude toward it. This custom reached its peak in specific occurrences as well as during the great seasonal festivals of the Zoroastrian calendar. In this regard it is worth noting that Ferdowsī mentions rooms for the *Sadeh* and *Nowrūz* celebrations in the complex of Ādur-Gušnasp (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988-2008 VI: 536, v. 1606-1607; Warner 1905-1925 7: 94).<sup>8</sup> It was on these occasions, which included major collective feasts, that the pilgrims had the opportunity to experience full immersion in a sacred time and sacralised space enriched with rituals and evocative stories, which defined and enhanced their religious affiliation. On these occasions, social bonds were tied again, while local elites asserted their rank and the prestige of the sacred places they controlled.

A similar scheme can be applied to interpretation of some textual extensions introduced by the *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* (WZ), a text that in many cases shows innovative traits. In the description of Zarathustra's deeds *Zādspram* differs from other Pahlavi texts, adding to the narrative with a number of geographical and calendar references. The setting of Zarathustra's deeds is here repeatedly associated not only with the Ādur-bādagān but also with a more detailed network of regional localities (see also Molé 1963: 338-339).<sup>9</sup> In the narration of Zarathustra's conversation (MP. *hampursagih*) with the Amahraspands (chap. 21-23) (Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 78-83)<sup>10</sup> all seven places where these events occurred are specified. Although the geographical identification proves uncertain in some cases, it can presumably be argued that the text consistently refers to a north-eastern Ādurbādagān landscape, roughly reflecting the hydro-

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<sup>8</sup> For the possible allusion of similar spaces in the Burzēn Mihr fire-temple, see Terribili 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., with the *Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (§. 47, Williams 1990 II: 76) where in connection to Zarathustra's revelation, it is only generically mentioned the mythic land of *Ērānwēz* in the region of Ādurbādagān. In the later *Zarātošt-nāma* (chap. 16) the account of the revelation begins with a similar description about the journey of Zarathustra toward the *Ērānwēz* (Rosenberg 1904: 22-23).

<sup>10</sup> Based on the *Uštavaitī Gāthā* and its exegesis (Molé 1963: 316), the story of Zarathustra's encounters with spiritual beings marks a turning point in his sacred legend.

logical and orographic systems of the area surrounding the Mount Sabalān, near Ardabīl, and the plain stretching from it toward the Aras River.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the first encounter (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 21.10), traditionally set along the banks of the Avestan Dāitiā River (MP. *Weh Dāiti*), the spot is specified to be in the province of Mōgān (MP. *kustag ī Mōgān*). The other encounters occurred in the following places (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 23.2-7). 2. Mt. Usind.<sup>12</sup> 3. Tōjan [*twc'n*] River.<sup>13</sup> 4. The district of Srāy in Mōgān, to be identified with modern Sarāb (Sarāv), on the route between Tabriz and Ardabīl (Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 164). 5. Lake Sadwēs, said to lie alongside the Araxes/Aras River (*Ēras rōd*) and to be fed by a source running from Mt. Asnavand to the Dāiti River.<sup>14</sup> 6. Mt. Asnavand itself. 7. The swift Darjēn [*dlc'n*] skirting the Dāiti River, for which A. V. W. Jackson (1898: 194-195) proposed identification with modern-day Daryai rūd/Qara su, flowing from the Mt. Sabalān up to the Aras River.<sup>15</sup> As a

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, the area roughly corresponds to the historical Mōgān/Mogān province, named three times within the same text and two in the *hampursagih* list (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 10,15; 21.10; 23,4); for the spelling of these occurrences see Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 162. In the first passage, Zarathustra's mother and father's villages, Rāg and Nōdar, are situated in the region of Mōgān [*mgwg'n*], about fifty parasangs from Lake Čēst (i.e., Ččāst). Interestingly, this passage does not include the common overlap Avestan Raya—historical Ray, while the reported distance fits well with that dividing lake Orumieh from Mt. Sabalān.

<sup>12</sup> The reading 𐬰𐬀𐬎𐬎 (see Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 244) is not univocal, and the name could be a MP rendering of the mythical Mount Av. *Us.həndauua* (Boyce 1975: 136, n. 51)—cf. with Usindām in *Bundahišn* 9.3, 8 (Pakzad 2005: 127-129; Agostini/Thrope 2020: 58)—, or otherwise a misspelling for Mt. Asnavand (𐬰𐬀𐬎𐬎), a name repeatedly mentioned in *Zādspram*. Gignoux and Tafazzoli (1993: 163) seem to confuse this reading with forms of the name Asnavand occurring in *Bundahišn* mss. (Pakzad 2005: 134, n.187).

<sup>13</sup> Its identification is rather problematic; identification with the modern Tajen/Teğen River in Khorāsān has been proposed (Markwart 1938: 4-7, 9) or with the Tajan River in Māzandarān (Jackson 1898: 47). Within the Ādurbādagān geographical context, the Middle Persian form of the name Tōjan [*twc'n*] can be compared with the later place name ٲٲٲ (طوج) reported by Yāqūt (Barbier de Meynard 1861: 394) and described as a small town by the northern shores of lake Orumieh and irrigated by streams descending from Mt. Sahand.

<sup>14</sup> According to the same text (3.85) the mythic Mt. Asnavand is in Ādurbādagān (Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993: 54-55). The same connection occurs in *Bundahišn* 9.29 (Pakzad 2005: 134; Agostini/Thrope 2020: 59); meanwhile in *Bundahišn* 18.8 this mountain is the seat of Fire Gušnasp (Pakzad 2005: 231-232; Agostini/Thrope 2020: 97).

<sup>15</sup> On the sources of the Qara su and the Savalan göli, see Radde 1886: 175.

whole, the list frames mythical places in a set of localities referred to actual, historical geography structuring a consistent itinerary, a sort of circuit whose origin and endpoint is the mythical Dāitī River.

At the beginning of the same narrative on Zarathustra's conversations with the spiritual beings, the mention of the day *Day pad Mihr*, month of *Ardwahišt*, explicitly connects the sacred account with the first of the *Gāhānbār* festivals (Av. *Maiδiiōi.zarəmaīia*), positioning the re-evocation of the events and the relevant itinerary within the context of a major celebration, which, during the Sasanian period, involved the entire Mazdean community. Within Zādspram's composition, this specific calendar framing must be seen in relation to the date given by the text on the occasion of the beginning of Zarathustra's mission (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 20.1-4), reported to have taken place on the day of *Anagrān*, month of *Spandarmad*.<sup>16</sup> In this case the date is associated with the end of the year and the beginning of the 6th and last *Gāhānbār* (Av. *Hamaspəθmaēδaiia*).<sup>17</sup> In other words, the text structures the development of Zarathustra's prophetic mission on symbolic and cosmological moments of the year, connecting it with two major religious feasts and evidencing a close connection between ritual calendar, collective festivals, religious narratives and sacred itineraries.<sup>18</sup> Thus, linked to such a performative sphere, the com-

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<sup>16</sup> In a gloss this passage also mentions the *Wahārbudāg* and *Nowrūz* festivals (Boyce 1970: 525). See also *Zarātoštnāma*, chap.17 (Rosenberg 1904: 23), where the very same date appears.

<sup>17</sup> On the connections of this date with the *Gāhānbār* and Nowruz festivals, see also Molé 1963: 316-17 and Boyce 1970: 524-525. According to a tradition preserved only in very late sources (Molé 1963: 384; Molé 1967: 132-133; Dhabhar 1932: 338) Wištāsp's initiation itself occurred on the day of *Maraspand*, month of *Spandarmad* (i.e., the 29th day of the month, substantially equivalent to the 30th day of the same month claimed by Zādspram and the *Zarātoštnāma* as the incipit of Zarathustra's mission). If we connect these three moments marking the climax of Zarathustra's ministry, we obtain an annual cycle that highlights the analogies between the paradigmatic initiations of Zarathustra and Wištāsp, and metaphorically represents the completion of a sacred cycle and the beginning of a new era.

<sup>18</sup> See also *Zarātoštnāma* (chap.17-19; Rosenberg 1904: 23-25) where the journey of Zarathustra and his companions to the *Erānwēz* to participate in a communal feast is described including a premonitory dream and the subsequent arrival on the eve of the celebrations. The text also specifies (chap.17) that the notables of the country participated in large numbers, gathering in the spot where the great feast took place.

position suggests that the hierophanic capital of actual spaces was also involved and activated in topical periods of the year through a complex of celebrations and remembrance practices.

The overall impression is that for his account on Zarathustra's life, the Zoroastrian high-priest from Siragān (Sīrjān) in Fārs<sup>19</sup> drew from a source, either written or oral, close to elite circles from north-eastern Ādurbādagān; a priestly environment, which re-adapted material from the *Spand Nask* and *Gāthā Uštavaiti* commentary (Molé 1963: 349)<sup>20</sup> to its own social and geographical context. The Syriac *History* of Mār Abā and the Pahlavi *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* may provide further hints in this direction. In describing the exile of the catholicos of the Church of the East under the custody of the Mazdean authorities (after 542/543 CE),<sup>21</sup> the Syriac text mentions a district (**prhrwr**) and a village (**srš**) in Ādurbādagān said to be the birthplace of Magianism (Monneret de Villard 1952: 142; Jullien 2007: 82, 96-97; Payne 2015: 99-100). Here, Magians from the whole kingdom gathered to recite and learn the teaching of Zarathustra. Thus, the text identifies the spot as a trans-regional centre disseminating the liturgic and doctrinal memory attributed to Zarathustra. The choice of Mār Abā's custody place depended on the importance of the religious institution and school placed there, and above all on the influence of Dādohrmazd, the *mowbedān mowbed* (i.e., the highest religious authority of the kingdom) and initiator of the prosecution against the catholicos (Braun 1915: 204). On the other hand, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (ZWY 2.2-4) refers that Husraw I summoned a college of Mazdean high-priests for re-organizing the sacred textual tradition (*Yasna* and *Zand*) after the Mazdakite up-

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<sup>19</sup> Zādspram belonged to the family of the *Pēšōbāy*, i.e., the recognized leader of the Zoroastrian community in the 'Abbasid period residing in Baghdad (see Terribili 2017: 402, 409-415 with references). This may have given Zādspram access to a remarkable and diversified number of sources.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the text makes only brief mention of the episode of Wištāsp's conversion, which instead has many connections with the Khorāsān tradition (Terribili 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Abā was an aristocrat convert from Zoroastrianism who became a leading reformer and catholicos of the Church of the East (540-552). Legal aspects of Mār Abā's case are investigated by Macuch 2014.



heavals.<sup>22</sup> Here the mention of Wehšābuhr son of Dādohrmazd, *dastūr* of Ādurbādagān, may suggest the identification of Wehšābuhr's father with the coeval *mowbedān mowbed* struggling against Mār Abā.<sup>23</sup> Be that as it may, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* confirms the prestige of the region priestly authorities in matters of doctrine, disputes, and supervision of the sacred canon.

The name place srš in the Syriac text has been tentatively identified as the town of Serāh, also named by Islamic geographers as Sarāh, Sarāv, Sarab, Sarāb, Sarāt (Braun 1915: 204, n.20; Monneret de Villard 1952: 142-143).<sup>24</sup> Thus, if this hypothesis is correct, there would be a correspondence between the district of Srāy in Mōgān mentioned in Zādspram's account of Zarathustra's revelation (*Wizīdaqihā ī Zādspram* 23.4) and the outstanding religious centre of the late Sasanian period described by Mār Abā's *History*. This would in fact make the Zoroastrian Srāy, laid at the piedmont of Mt. Sabalān, a reliable point of origin for the tradition taken up by the high-priest Zādspram.

Such an assimilation of Zarathustra's image to the specific landscape of north-eastern Ādurbādagān must have gained some popular consent. As a matter of fact, Tha'ālibī's *Ghorar* refers to Zarathustra's origin from Mōgān;<sup>25</sup> likewise, more conspicuously, different Islamic authors place his

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<sup>22</sup> Cereti 1995: 134, 150; Cantera 2004: 218-220. The priests' names participating in the summit pose some philological issues due to mss. inconsistencies (Cereti 1995: 80; see also Zeini 2020: 290, n.12).

<sup>23</sup> In his epistles, Manuščihr (1.4.17) considers Wehšābuhr as the leading figure of the council and *nasks* selection, while the *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (MHD 35.14-16) mentions a *mowbedān mowbed* bearing the same name (Cantera 2004: 219). Prudently, A. Cantera (2004: 31, n.131; 218-220) notes that names occurring in the ZWY list agree with those of *zand* commentators (Māhwindād, Wehšābuhr and Baxtāfrīd). Also the name Dādohrmazd appears in Middle Persian comments of *Yasna* (Y 10.18, Y 11.7; titus.fkidg1.unifrankfurt.de). Interestingly in both the occurrences, Dādohrmazd is mentioned after opinions delivered by Māhwindād. Despite the possibility of homonymy, this fact supports Cantera's (2004) arguments in attempting identifications.

<sup>24</sup> For the interpretation of the district name **prhrwr** as deriving from an Iranian *Farrōxādūr*, see Peeters 1946: 96. See also Graeco-Roman sources dealing with Media Atropatene and mentioning the city of Phraata/Phraaspa with the fortress of Vara (i.e., < Mr. war, "fortified place") (Schippmann 1971: 31-314).

<sup>25</sup> For this information Tha'ālibī quotes the authority of Ibn Ḳoradādbeh (Zotenberg 1979 [rep. 1900]: 257). The latter, however, in his work on geography considers Orumieh to

spiritual revelation on Mt. Sabalān/Silān.<sup>26</sup> The tradition regarding Zarathustra's hermitage on the Sabalān/Silān appeared quite early in the literary milieu of the Islamic world, possibly deriving from authentic Zoroastrian sources. Ibn al-Jawzī (12th century A.D.), for instance, in his *Talbīs Iblīs*, attributes the information to al-Jāhīz's *al-Ḥayawān* (9th century A.D.) (see van Gelder 2005: 73, with references). The fact that this tradition already circulated in the 'Abbasid context is confirmed by the 9th-century Christian polemist 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī (Muir 1882: 43). Similar accounts also appear in later authors as Aḥmad of Ṭūs (Schippmann 1971: 324), Qazvīnī (Gottheil 1894: 40; Jackson 1898: 195) and Mīrkvānd (Shea 1832: 286), who adds that Zarathustra received the *Zand* and *Pazand* in an abode on that mountain.

It is possible that the Mazdean priests already equated this massive mountain in Ādurbādagān with the sacred Mt. Asnavand of the Avestan canon,<sup>27</sup> traditionally associated with mythic lakes (i.e., lakes Čēčast and Kay Husraw), the seat of the Ādur-Gušnasp fire (Boyce 1983) and episodes of Zarathustra's life, including the descent of his *fravaši* into a prodigious tree (*Dēnkard VII*, 2.22-35)<sup>28</sup> and the above-mentioned initiatory revelation.

There is in fact considerable evidence that Iranian populations considered the Sabalān as a sacred mountain reputed to be the locus of prodigious trees, miraculous springs, epiphanies of light, prophecies and the

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be the homeland of the Iranian Prophet (de Goeje 1889: 91; Jackson 1898: 198). Moḡān and Mt. Sabalān in association with Zarathustra also appear in a passage by Bīrūnī's *Āthār* not included in E. Sachau's edition (1879), see Taqizadeh 1937.

<sup>26</sup> The association between Zarathustra's revelation and mountains is ancient and frequently attested in Zoroastrian as well as non-Zoroastrian sources, see, e.g., Gnoli 1989: 46. About Zarathustra's hermitage in a mountain cave in Ādurbādagān also speaks the so-called Arabic *Book of Nativities* (Cottrell 2009: 181).

<sup>27</sup> For Mt. Asnavand occurrences in the Avesta, see Bartholomae 1904: 220. Pioneering scholars tried to identify it with the two highest mountains of Ādurbādagān, i.e., the Sabalān and the Sahand, see, e.g., Spiegel 1871 I: 624, and Herzfeld 1930: 72.

<sup>28</sup> The passage however does not specify the region where the mountain stands (Molé 1963: 284 ff.; Darrow 1987: 117-118, 131). Cf. with the tradition gathered by the Islamic polemist Šahrestānī (Gimaret/Monnot 1986 I: 642) who also adds the story of the child Zarathustra fed with the milk of a cow that grazed a prodigious plant on a mountain in Ādurbādagān (Gimaret/Monnot 1986 I: 643). The legend of Zarathustra's soul and the tree reappears in the *Dabistān* (Shea/Troyer 1843: 213) and Mīrkvānd (Shea 1832: 286).

like.<sup>29</sup> As pointed out by J. Russell (1987: 190-193), the antiquity of such a sacredness can be traced back at least to Arsacid times. According to the Armenian historian Grigor Magistros (11th century), the hero Spandyād (NP. Esfandyār), whose saga preserves many traits of the Parthian epic tradition, was entrapped on Mt. Sabalān, where a venerated cedar tree was also associated with him and the origin of three local towns (*Letters* 84, K 36 and 15, K 76, see Chalathiantz 1896: 221, 224; Tchukasizian 1964: 323-325; Russell 1987: 190). The passage indicates that native communities symbolically linked the narrative of their origins to this revered place and to a hero that played an outstanding role in the construction of Arsacid-Sasanian identity (Yarshater 1998, see also Boyce 1955: 473).<sup>30</sup> Evidently, throughout the period, Mazdean priests took up the popular traditions of that area, reinvented the local sacred landscape and shaped their own ritualized landscape through transposition onto this specific mountain of remarkable events concerning Zarathustra.

Interestingly, a passage by Qazvīnī, related to the marvels of Ādur-bādagān, refers to the ongoing re-negotiation of Sabalān sacredness, in this case within the horizon of the then dominant culture (Gottheil 1894: 41-42; Jackson 1898: 195; Monneret de Villard 1952: 143-44). The text in fact cites a statement attributed to the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad himself, which describes some features characterizing that mountain environment, such as the presence of graves of no better specified prophets, a Jinns-dwelled pond, healing springs frequented by sick people and a portentous tree. Qazvīnī seems here to record a living tradition, not attested elsewhere, which charged that sacred landscape with new significance while maintaining its distinctive features and legitimating it in the context of an Islamic religious debate. The *longue durée* perspective on such a continuity is borne out by reports of modern travellers explicitly attesting that the devotion shown towards Sabalān sacred spaces has also

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<sup>29</sup> Monneret de Villard (1952: 143-145) made a penetrating analysis of the relation between the sacred-mountain typology and the Sabalān.

<sup>30</sup> The Spandyād-sacred tree nexus appears to be a persistent element of the native identity characterizing the self-conception of the aristocratic clans of that area, as attested by a folkloric case for the clan of the Bagratuni (von Stackelberg 1904: 875).

been shared in modern times by Shiite believers.<sup>31</sup> As in the case of Qazvīnī's account, the identity of the prophet/s buried on the mountain remains somewhat indistinct,<sup>32</sup> while these late sources state that the mountain was frequented by old hermits, as well as modern pilgrims (Khān Hedāyat in Tchukasizian 1964: 324, and Radde 1886: 179). Therefore, the folkloric data show how the memory of a founding figure and the healing-oracular cult associated with it was never eclipsed in the cultural framework of this area; indeed, the inhabitants unceasingly continued to structure collective identities, religious experiences and practices focusing on the sacredness of their mountain.

Returning once more to the overall scenario of Sasanian north-west Iran, we may suppose that the great fire of Ādur-Gušnasp and its clerical circle polarized and manipulated the image of Zarathustra, while other groups in the region were eager to take up that prestigious tradition, reinventing and appropriating some traits of the hagiographical legend. A similar pattern could have occurred with the north-eastern tradition associated with the Burzēn-Mihr fire and its neighbouring communalities as well. Such kinds of processes must have contributed to establishing a multifaceted network of sacralised localities that gravitated around the main religious complex promoting a sort of "extended" pilgrimage (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 76), which in the case of Mazdean Iran was defined by the memory of Zarathustra's miraculous deeds.

At its peak, the range of this circuit could have achieved a trans-regional dimension including places along the routes leading to the major shrines. Religious narratives could thus have enhanced the path of the pilgrims toward their goal; meanwhile, the same pious tales or motifs offered different communities the opportunity to graft onto the most authoritative tradition and develop collective memories connected with the

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<sup>31</sup> We may compare three different 19th-century passages on this topic: the journey reports by Morier 1818: 237-38 and Radde 1886: 179, and the entry *سولان* in Reżāqolī Khān Hedāyat's *Farhang-e anjomanārā-ye nāšeri* (1871; excerpt in Tchukasizian 1964: 324). See also Monneret de Villard 1952: 143-145 who associates the beliefs gravitating on Sabalān with the eastern-Christian legends on the so-called "Mons Victorialis".

<sup>32</sup> In both Morier (1818: 238) and Khān Hedāyat (Tchukasizian 1964: 324) Mt. Sabalān took its name from a homonymous and imaginary prophet. Local interlocutors gave the Iranian definition of *peyghember* (cf. MP. *paygāmbār*), as reported by Morier.

main-stream trend of the Sasanian kingdom. In this perspective, particularly meaningful is the anecdote reported by Šahrestānī about a blind man from Dīnavar in Media, miraculously healed by Zarathustra with a plant extract (Jackson 1898: 94-95; Gimaret/Monnot 1986 I: 645), which symbolically reflects the essential element of the Zoroastrian ritual, the sacred *hōm*.<sup>33</sup> The story is thus set in the district of Māh Dīnār, where Mazdean memories prove to have been embedded in the local identity and landscape.<sup>34</sup> According to Yāqūt, in fact, this district was previously named Dīn Zaradušt, being recognized for the enthusiasm with which the local population accepted the Zoroastrian revelation (Barbier de Meynard 1861: 514-515). On the other hand, though presented in a critical guise, Šahrestānī's anecdote sounds authentic, revealing its metaphorical meaning alluding to the spiritual and material benefits of adherence to the Good Religion (i.e., MP. *weh-dēn*) and its rituals could bring.<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, the folk tale emphasizes the relation with visual/visionary/prophetic dominion, which is repeatedly shown in the description of Zara-

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<sup>33</sup> In a far more sophisticated way, the *hōm*-Zarathustra nexus characterizes the compositional structure of the

Prophet's biography in different *Dēnkard VII* sections; see, e.g., Molé 1963: 285-287, 317-319.

<sup>34</sup> In the same province stands Mt. Bisotūn, an outstanding place in the religious landscape of pre-Islamic Iran, which since the late 5th century also attracted the interest of the regional Christian communities, see Payne 2015: 59-92. More problematic remains the question of the imposing building at Kangāvar and its function (Kleiss 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Within the Zoroastrian tradition there are both etymological and conceptual intersections between the *daēnā/dēn* (individual or/and collective religion) and vision or visual perception; for further connections with metaphysical speculations and the concept of transcendental vision, see now Azarnouche/Ramble 2020. Moreover, the motive of the blind-man healing may have been cross-culturally influenced by Testamentary models. In the Dīnavar district, in fact, there lived an active Christian community that reinvented and challenged the religious significance of the local sacred landscape in the late Sasanian period (Payne 2015: 59-92). Within the context of Islamic Iran, the healing of the blind motive is frequently attested, for instance, in the hagiographies of Shiite Imāms (Amir-Moezzi 2007: 235). Such kinds of Shiite narratives draw on Biblical and New Testament patterns, also through the mediation of the Quranic tradition, and are firmly based on a doctrinal background in which the conceptions of inner vision and spiritual eye are particularly enrooted. More broadly speaking, in participating in late-antique and early-Islamic interfaith discourses, also, the Mazdean recipients were fairly attuned with narratives that presented religious authorities in terms of miraculous healers.

thustra's image in both Mazdean and non-Zoroastrian sources. The fact that similar anecdotic and magical accounts on Zarathustra circulated far and wide in the late antique and medieval contexts is confirmed by the Byzantine treatise *Geoponica* (XI,18,11, Rose 1933: 88-89; Bidez /Cumont 1938 II: 191; Albrile 2009: 15),<sup>36</sup> which associates roses with Zoroaster's healing-power for eye diseases.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, other external sources seem to exploit the same symbolic association, even if polemically inverting the meaning of these prerogatives. The Syriac theologian, Theodore bar Kōnay (8th-9th-century) tells us about two parallel anecdotes in which the Iranian Prophet is eventually blinded by his own companions (Benveniste 1932-1935: 174). Though drawing on folkloric imagery, all the above-mentioned motives focus on the analogical overlap between visual perception, spiritual vision and prophecy, a symbolic complex using recurrent pairings<sup>38</sup> and often connected with religious narrative, as well as sacred places.

An interesting link between the story of the blind man of Dīnavar, healed by Zarathustra, and the Ādur-Gušnasp fire-temple may be offered by a significant passage in the *Šaddar Bondaheš* (44.18, Dhabhar 1932: 536; see also Boyce 1983), which states: "when praying for the restoration of eyesight one should vow 'I shall make an eye of gold and send it to Ādhur Gošasp'". Evidently, the great fire temple, characterised by the spectacular spring-source surging in the midst of its precinct, was not only recognised as the locus of oracular practices and prophecies, as even Procopius (*History of the wars* II.24.1, see also Schippmann 1971: 315) and Syriac legends attest,<sup>39</sup> but was also the focus of interlaced beliefs particularly attuned

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<sup>36</sup> The thaumaturgic faculties of Zarathustra are praised in *Dēnkard VII* (5, 8-10), while Mas'ūdī's *Tanbih* (Carra de Vaux 1897: 134) only mentions that along with the sacred book attributed to him, the Persians had stories about Zarathustra's miracles.

<sup>37</sup> Compare with *Bundahišn* 16A.2 (Agostini/Thrope 2020: 90), where the *gul ī sad warg*, "the centfoil rose", (Pakzad 2005: 219) is associated with the *daena/dēn*, see above n.34. In modern times J. J. Modi (1894) describes amulets with Pazand charms for eye diseases used by the Parsis of Nowsaree and based on the properties attributed to the local *Jasminum pubescens*.

<sup>38</sup> Fitting in with this theme are pairings such as eye and soul or water-spring and mantric wisdom, see, e.g., Boyce 1975: 73; Russell 2008: 59.

<sup>39</sup> The Syriac tradition has many legends about Zarathustra's prophecy of the advent of Christ (see, e.g., Monneret de Villard 1952: 122-147; Boyce/Grenet 1991: 449-52; Gnoli 2000:

with the religious responsiveness of the Mazdaean community and based on the cluster sight-reflective surface-insight.<sup>49</sup> In terms of geographical network, these conceptual links between the Dīnavar anecdote and the great fire-temple are once more enhanced by Islamic authors (see e.g., Yāqūt, Barbier de Meynard 1861: 367; Ibn Kordadābeh, de Goje 1889: 91-93; Schippmann 1971: 319) who, in sketching roads and itineraries, often highlighted the interconnections between the Dīnavar district and both the Ādur-Gušnasp shrine (Šiz) and the Ādurbādagān region. When taken together, all this evidence suggests identifying the context in which Šahrestānī's story was cultivated. By exploiting the influential image of Zarathustra, the anecdote anticipated the healing properties characterizing the Ādur-Gušnasp shrine and qualified Dīnavar as a remarkable station along the main route leading to that great fire-temple.

Curiously enough, comparatively early evidence of the function of Zarathustra's image in the sacralisation of the landscape and its role within religious narratives linked to cultic centres is provided by the tradition of a great shrine, which however stood outside both the geographical and cultural boundaries of late-antique Iran. According to the *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher* (2nd-3rd century A.D.) preserved in the Syriac tradition, in Atargatis' temple at Mabbug/Hieropolis, in northern Syria, a somewhat syncretistic story was told about the exploit performed by Zoroaster and Orpheus against a demon, eventually entrapped in a mill-water in a wood near the sanctuary (Cureton 1855: 44-45; Benveniste 1932-1935:

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179, n.138). Some of these texts refer that Zarathustra delivered this revelation by a spring in the region of Horin (*glōshā Hōrīn*) where a royal *hammām* stood, see texts in Gottheill 1894: 28-30; Monneret de Villard 1952: 129-134. Though the Syriac place name, as far as I know, is otherwise unknown, some hints may suggest that the spot indicated is to be identified as the Ādur-Gušnasp itself. The reference to a royal bath matches well with the Islamic descriptions of the imposing royal structures in Šiz, see Le Strange 1904: 224; Ducène 2009: 62-65. Likewise, legends of Christian tone on the foundation of the Ādur-Gušnasp fire-temple (Ducène 2009: 64) attest to the fame this complex achieved also in non-Zoroastrian communities. Christian narrative may thus reflect the extent of the prestige of this great fire-temple in the Sasanian-Mesopotamian milieu. In particular, the network of routes criss-crossing the north-western Zagros and joining Ādurbādagān to Adiabene surely played a major role in the dissemination of such cross-cultural motives.

<sup>49</sup> See recently Piras 2019 with references to the Manichaean and Zoroastrian traditions.

171-72; Bidez/Cumont 1938 I: 39; II: 94-95; Monneret de Villard 1952: 110-111; Boyce/Grenet 1991: 356-57).<sup>41</sup> In the same account it is also stated that this religious complex contained a “reinvented” sculpture of Zoroaster that was the object of reverence.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Lucian (2nd century A.D.) in his *Dea Syria* (§.32) includes Iranians among the donors of that temple, albeit in a rather rhetorical passage.<sup>43</sup> However, the city of Mabbug stood by the right banks of the River Euphrates, along a major route that led from the border of the Iranian kingdom towards Antioch and the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It is thus possible that either the local priestly circle appropriated the image of Zarathustra in order to attract and satisfy the expectations of Iranian tradesmen and travellers, or that Mazdean visitors developed pious stories connecting this remarkable sacred place to their religious horizon. Be that as it may, we can once again appreciate the interaction between the prophetic image, religious narratives, topographic features, devotional practices and socio-economic dynamics. All these constituents formed complex systems of living religion that had a huge impact on the cross-cultural milieu of late antique and medieval Iran and adjacent areas.

In conclusion, reconsideration of the variations, extensions or even external anecdotes concerning Zarathustra’s life in an integrated perspective casts light on the function of specific narrative motives within the context of the living tradition.

Taking into account geographical variations/additions may in fact provide some evidence on the way communities, priestly families or intel-

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<sup>41</sup> As mentioned in the first part of this work (Terribili 2020) and above (n.7), the motive of the “imprisoned” demon is frequent among the foundation narratives of sacred places. The deed of Orpheus and Zoroaster sounds like an etiological myth of a ritual with water associated with the goddess Simi (i.e., the daughter of Hadad) and performed in that sacred landscape; for a description of this kind of worship, see Luciano’s *Dea Syria* (§. 13). This water-pouring ritual possibly had a chthonic function, which would help understand the presence of the two figures as prototypes and cultic performers sharing confidence in the journey to the afterlife.

<sup>42</sup> The passage adds that a statue of the otherwise obscure god Hadran was then identified with the Iranian Prophet (Cureton 1855: 45).

<sup>43</sup> A later but fitting parallel can be made with the shrine of the Martyr St. Sergius at Sergiopolis/Rusafa on the same bank of the Euphrates River, which received lavish donations from the Sasanian Husraw II (Payne 2015: 172-174 with references).



lectual circles affiliated to cultic centres fabricated their own memory and awareness, intertwining their cultural and physical landscape with the shared language of a “National” religious history.

During the Sasanian period the reorganization of religious lore also involved the image of Zarathustra. In his codified legend we can see the effort to blend a variegated material into the framework of a consistent tale. At the same time, different groups and communities participated in the formation of an articulated, sacred and ritualized landscape, which concurred to define a polycentric image of the Prophet Zarathustra within the Mazdean network.

The focus on Khorāsān and Ādurbādagān traditions has brought out only some aspects of the complexity and stratification of this phenomenon. The great fire-temples in those regions were pivotal in concentrating and disseminating religious lore, sharing and possibly disputing key aspects of Zarathustra’s image. In this context, also other communities had the opportunity to take up or even challenge the dominant trends, filling intermediary gaps in the Prophetic biography and integrating them with stories that enriched the corpus of Zarathustra’s deeds as well as the sacred capital of the communal landscape. In fact, the space where, either individually or collectively, the believers experienced their relations with the spiritual dimension owes its sacredness to being conceived of as *lieux de mémoire* conflating stories of holy events and the rituals that perpetuated them.

However, a more comprehensive overview on the reinvention of Zarathustra’s image in accordance with late-antique Iran societies can be only achieved by extending similar approaches to the other major centres of Sasanian Mazdeism, such as, above all, Fārs, Sīstān and Āsōristān.

Eventually, the data and results could be fruitfully compared with the religious narratives of other near-eastern traditions and related to their authoritative figures, thus addressing a still neglected topic in our field, namely the transversal impact that this kind of sacred narratives exerted on living societies.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

AV. — Avestan

MP. — Middle Persian

NP. — New Persian

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