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Ἐραξša's self-sacrifice: Tradition or Innovation?

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Abstract: *The reconstruction the heroic cycle of Ἐραξša is one of the main targets of our investigations. The present cycle cannot be studied just as an isolated fragment of an archaic epos, but that it must be framed into a larger theme, that of the bow and the arrow, which among the Indo-European tribes of the East, mostly Indo-Iranians and Hittites, assumed a remarkable importance.*

Key words: Iranian mythology; *Tištar Yašt*; Avestan cycle; Ἐραξša; Āraš; the archer; the self-sacrifice

The heroic cycle of Ἐραξša is an example of the richness ascribable to ancient Iranian mythology, and at the same time the demonstration of the enormous gap we must observe in the preservation of its epic cultural heritage. Actually, the reconstruction this oral intangible patrimony, whose complexity can be only in part inferred thanks to later sources still preserving hints of an older folklore, is one of the main targets of our investigations. In order to introduce the analysis of the text and the myth hidden behind the Avestan stanzas dedicated to this heroic protagonist of the Iranian epic, I would like to call readers' attention on the fact that the present cycle cannot be studied just as an isolated fragment of an archaic *epos*, but that it must be framed into a larger theme, that of the bow and the arrow, which among the Indo-European tribes of the East, mostly Indo-Iranians and Hittites, assumed a remarkable importance. There, arrow and bow became weapons of prestige, distinguishing kings, gods and warriors of aristocratic blood;¹ their possess and use was a sign of high honor and prestige. The same ideological pattern was shared, *mutatis mutandis*, also by a number of Eastern ancient non-Indo-European peoples, such as Assyrians and Babylonians, Elamites and Egyptians, etc., whose example created an interesting ideological mixture in the Achaemenid symbolic language of power, whose legacy played its seminal impact also on Parthian and Sasanian traditions. On the contrary, in Western countries, the bow was only a weapon of inferior status, basically unworthy of a true warrior or of a superior god, so that when we find the presence of this motif

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¹ See in particular the remarkable presentation of the problem by SERGENT (1991), and the notes below.

within a myth or an epic cycle, we can easily guess an Oriental origin or an earlier eastern background. Thus, it is in the framework of this general scenario that we will move on in the present investigation.

The image of the Iranian archer-hero we are going to study was not simply a warrior as another one, but a very special person, charged with royal and extraordinary implications.

As known, the Iranian myth of Ǝrəxša is attested only once in Young Avestan literature in the *Tištār Yašt*, where two short but dense textual blocks preserve a significant textual tradition referring to his story. We must remark that, despite the close similarities of the two *kardags*, the first section does not mention the conclusion of the flight of the arrow shot by Ǝrəxša, while the second makes explicit reference to the successful action, although it does not refer to the destiny of the archer:²

Kardag 4

Yt. 8, 6: *tīštrīm stārəm raēuuauṇtəm*

xʷarənaṇhuṇtəm yazamaide

*yō auuauuaṭ **xšuuāēβō vazaitē***

auui zraiiō vourukašəm

yaθa tiyriš mainiiuuasā

*yim ʰaǵhaṭ **ərxšō xšuiβi.išuš***

xšuiβi.išuuatəmō airiianəm

ʰairiiō.šiθaṭ haca garōiṭ

(or *airiiō.xšuθaṭ*)

xʷanuuauṇtəm auui gairīm.

Kardag 9

Yt. 8, 37: *tīštrīm stārəm raēuuauṇtəm*

xʷarənaṇhuṇtəm yazamaide

*āsu.**xšuuāēβəm xšuiβi.vāzəm***

*yō auuauuaṭ **xšuuāēβō vazaitē***

auui zraiiō vourukašəm

yaθa tiyriš mainiiuuasā

*yim ʰaǵhaṭ **ərxšō xšuiβi.išuš***

xšuiβi.išuuatəmō airiianəm

ʰairiiō.šiθaṭ haca garōiṭ

(or *airiiō.xšuθaṭ*)

xʷanuuauṇtəm auui gairīm.

² PANAINO, 1990: 32-33 (*Kardag 4*) and 61-62 (*Kardag 9*); GELDNER, 1889: 107, 114; KELLENS, 2016: 85; LECOQ, 2016: 387-388, 398-399. For a philological commentary of these stanzas, see again PANAINO, 1990: 96-97 and 127-128. A brief appendix of linguistic and philological comments to these stanzas is appended at the end of this article. N.B. With the underlined normal script within the Avestan stanzas I want to call reader's attention on the repetition of the pertinent sequence of *xšuuāēβ-* and *xšuiβ-* in the verse-lines. As stated in this study, the verse-line *āsu.xšuuāēβəm xšuiβi.vāzəm* played the role of marking the starting point for an oral *intermezzo* dedicated to the archer-hero. The Avestan text here edited presents some words or syllables in bold script in order to emphasize their stylistic recurrence.

Yt. 8,7: *taḍa dim ahurō mazdā̎ auuq̄n dāta*
taṭ̄ āpō uruuarā̎sca pairi.šē
vouru.gaoiiaoitiš hē miθrō
frāḍaiiaṭ̄ paṇtq̄m

ahe raiia [...] tā̎scā yazamaide.

Yt. 8,6: We worship the bright
xʷarənah-endowed star Tištriia

who flies with such a sparkle
towards the Sea Vourukaša
as (did) the arrow as fast as the thought³
which the vibrant-arrowed Ǝrəxša
the most vibrant-arrowed (archer)
among the Aryans shot
from Mount Airiiō.xšuθa/.šiθa
to Mount Xʷanuuat̄.

Yt. 8, 38: *auui dim ahurō mazdā̎ auuq̄n*
aməšā̎ spəṇta

vouru.gaoiiaoitiš miθrō
pouru.pantq̄m fracāēšaētəm
ā dim paskāṭ̄ anumarəzatəm
ašišca vaṇʷhi bərazaiti
pārəṇdica raoraθa
vīspəm.ā ahmāṭ̄ yaṭ̄ aēm
paiti.apaiiaṭ̄ vazəmnō
xʷanuuat̄əm auui gairīm
xʷanuuata paiti niraṭ̄

ahe raiia [...] tā̎scā yazamaide.

Yt. 8, 37: We worship the bright
xʷarənah-endowed star Tištriia

flying with rapid-pulsation (and) twinkling-
flight

who flies with such a sparkle
towards the Sea Vourukaša
as (did) the arrow as fast as the thought
which the vibrant-arrowed Ǝrəxša
the most vibrant-arrowed (archer)
among the Aryans shot
from Mount Airiiō.xšuθa/.šiθa
to Mount Xʷanuuat̄.

³ See FORSSMAN, 1995; cf. PANAINO, 2012: 177-178.

Yt. 8, 7: Then Ahura Mazdā,
gave it help (?),
then the waters and the plants.
Around it grass-land magnate Miθra
*showed the way.

On account of his richness [...].

Yt. 8, 38: For it Ahura Mazdā
[the Amaša Spəntas came dawn]
(misplaced ???)

(and) grass-land magnate Miθra
(and Ahura?) prepared the path faraway.⁴
Behind it swept touching (it)
the good lofty Aši
and Pārəndi on (her) swift chariot,⁵
until in its flight it reached
Mount X^vanuuənt
(and) on Mount X^vanuuənt fell.

On account of his richness [...].

From the point of view of the structure and composition of the Ǝrəxša's fragments we must remark that these two sections clearly belong to a common *Vorlage*, which we may imagine as larger and more detailed. Actually, the initial stanzas of both parts (*Yt.* 8, 6 and *Yt.* 8, 37) reveal only a difference in the respective absence/presence of a single verse-line:

āsu.xšuuəēβəm xšuuīβi.vāzəm

referred to Tištriia (in accusative, of course), and whose absence in § 6 could be just due to a *lapsus calami* occurred in an earlier *recensio* of the text. We may suppose that in the oral framework the introduction of these two compounds (for a total of eight syllables) playing with the verbal root⁶ *xšuuīβ-* had the rhetoric function of marking the starting point for the beginning of an expected celebration dedicated to Ǝrəxša. Probably this is a good example of oral technique, surviving in a written transmission, in which an anticipation of a rare lexical form was the mnemonic mark for the beginning of the performance of a special textual portion. Thus, the omission

⁴ Can we suppose, as suggested also by LECOQ (2016: 399, n. 38), the presence of an elliptic dual (*fracəzšaētəm*) with reference to Miθra and Ahura?

⁵ About these two goddesses, see PANAINO, 1990: 128; PANAINO, 1995: 91; LECOQ, 2016: 399, n. 38. Cf. *Yt.* 10,66.

⁶ See already KELLENS, 1977.

of this verse-line can be easily explained as due to its erroneous inclusion in the textual block of the standard recurring formula dedicated to the god of the Star Sirius in this hymn (i.e. *tištrīm stārəm raēuuantəm / x'arənaḡhuḡtəm yazamaide*), which was, as usually, abbreviated in the manuscript transmission. In my opinion, a mistake of this kind seems to be better explicable in force of a *lapsus calami*, thus occurred in the process of the written transmission of the text than in the course of its oral repetition. Anyway, its presence was correctly restored in *Yt.* 8, 37, so that we can reasonably suggest its theoretical re-introduction also in § 6, where we should equally expect it. Other textual problems will be discussed again in a final appendix.

It is a pity that the rest of the oral transmission of the myth suffered certain damages. Actually, the comparison between *Yt.* 8, 7 and *Yt.* 8, 38, shows that the textual sequence was strongly disturbed, and that the original narration was cut and resumed playing the role of a quotation, like a rhetorical simile, which had the function of emphasizing some aspects of the myth of Sirius, and in particular the ‘twinkling’⁷ quality of the star Sirius in its functional similarity⁸ with the arrow-head shot by *Ḙrəxša*. But a second aspect must be considered, i.e. that of the intrinsic link between *Tištiriia* and *Ḙrəxša*. In fact, as the god of this star is *Ahura Mazda*’s champion against *Apaoša* and the *Pairikā Dužiiriiriā*, so *Ḙrəxša* is the archer-hero from whose shot the territorial wideness of the Iranian lands depends, and it is not by chance that the two references to *Ḙrəxša*’s story are placed before the introduction of the two different duels fought by this astral divinity, embedded exactly after two stanzas in which (*Yt.* 8, 5) humans and animals long for the arrival of the star, and (*Yt.* 8, 36) princes (*ahura*-s), savage animals and the Aryan countries in general await for Sirius’ rising. The place attributed to *Ḙrəxša* is part of a narrative strategy, in which the heroism of the ancestral archer and his tremendous shot were evoked as a demonstration of the force and of the inevitable success of the Aryan stock. While the anticipated mention of the myth of *Ḙrəxša* works as an apotropaic strategy, the omission of the final death of the hero presents us with a problem, which needs an explanation. We will try to advance some solutions in the conclusions of the present study, although we need to focus on some textual problems as a preliminary matter to be assessed before we can continue our investigation.

⁷ Cf. again KELLENS, 1977.

⁸ I do not insist in this place on the complex relation between the name of the star *Tištiriia*, its etymology, and its simile with an arrow in the framework of the astral mythology on the ancient East, a subject on which the reader will find a great number of studies of mine, among which I just recall PANAINO, 1990 and 1995. Very important also the article by FORSSMAN, 1968.

Few Preliminary Textual Problems

One problem concerns the use and value of *taṭ* in *taṭ āpō uruuarāśca pairi.šē* [...]. Should we take into consideration Hertel's suggestion⁹ about a reading like *taṭ.āpō uruuarāśca*? This would imply the presence of the compound *taṭ.āp-* "having flowing waters", attested also in *Yt.* 13, 43-44 (with reference to the star Satauaaēsa)¹⁰ and in *Yt.* 10, 61 (attributed to Miθra).¹¹ But this solution, in my opinion, remains highly improbable, because we should presume here a substantivized use of *taṭ.āp-* never attested otherwise or admit that this reference was given only to "plants having waters flowing down", a very implausible solution.

With regard to Hertel's emendation¹² regarding the reading ⁺*airiīō.šiθaṭ haca garōiṭ* instead of *airiīō.xšuθaṭ haca garōiṭ* (as in Geldner's *Aufgabe*),¹³ a proposal which I followed in my previous edition of this hymn, I must observe that Kellens¹⁴ has later given a good etymological explanation for the apparently peculiar stem *xšuθa-*, interpreting it as "the sneeze (of the Iranians)" (Kellens: "éternuement de l'Iranien / où l'Iranien éternue"),¹⁵ but that in absence of any other supportive source about the earlier geography of this myth,¹⁶ one solution or the other are not implausible at all. In fact, ⁺*šiθaṭ* is not the fruit of a simple divination, but it appears well preserved in the stanza 37 in F1, Pt1 E1 K16 L18 P13. If it is true that a simplification from *xš-* > *š-* results theoretically simpler, the exchange in the opposite direction appears quite possible too, especially after a sequence like *xšuiβi.išuš xšuiβi.išuatamō*. My perplexities, then, are due to the fact that the transmission of §§ 37-38 seems to have been more conservative than that of §§ 6-7, although seriously disturbed, so that this alternative reading must be taken at least into consideration as worth of consideration. I would like

⁹ HERTEL, 1931: 211-214.

¹⁰ MALANDRA, 1971: 76, 77, 121-122, 189; cf. KELLENS, 1975: 18.

¹¹ GERSHEVITCH, 1959: 102-103.

¹² HERTEL, 1931: 211, n. 1; cf. also DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, 1936: 125.

¹³ GELDNER, 1889: 114; PANAINO, 1995: 61-62.

¹⁴ KELLENS, 2016: 85, n. 22; but cf. also FORSSMAN (1995: 25, n. 3), who does not exclude a connection between **xšuθa-* and the verbal root **ksu* "to sharpen" in Vedic *kṣurá-*, m., "razor".

¹⁵ The etymological key for this interpretation is given by the Vedic verb *kṣu* : *kṣuvánti*. The Iranian languages allow the reconstruction of a root **xsnauš* "to sneeze", of which the present one would be the only attestation in Old Iranian (see CHEUNG, 2007: 458).

¹⁶ MINORSKY (1946: 760) suggested that *airiīō.xšuθa-* could be tentatively identified with the mount Homāvan, mentioned in *Šāhnāme* and in the *Vīs o Rāmīn*, probably located in north-eastern Xorasān. But in the *Dādistān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 27, 44 (Anklesaria, 1913: 90), Manuščihr would have re-conquered the Iranian territory from Padišwār-gar [Pāz. *padašx'ārgar*] (in Ṭabarestān) to Bun ī Gōzag (between Gōzgān and the Oxus [but the reading *Padišwār-gar* is unclear; see MARKWART, 1938: 14-15, in note), as also remarked by Tafažžolī (1986), who listed a number of further geographic interpretations according to Arabic and Persian sources. On this aspect (in particular in Ṭa'ālebī's account) and on the importance of the border from the ideological point of view, see DARYAEE, 2017: 393; With close regard to the present cycle, see also the pertinent contributions given by BENVENISTE (1932 and 1932-33) about the captivity of Manuščihr in Patašxvārgar and the marriage of Afrāsiyāb with Esfandārmaz.

also to emphasize the importance of the division in *kardag*, because the fact that in this hymn the two textual portions specifically belonging to a related, but probably independent, cycle, that of Ǝrəxša, are reproduced according to a deliberate *recensio* of an oral¹⁷ and, later written, *Vorlage*, which would suggest the existence of other hymnic compositions, among which ones we may suppose that of a *Yašt* to the Aryan archer and his enterprises.

The Myth

After the discussion of these minor textual problems we can reflect on the problem of the myth in itself, which is the main subject I would like to touch in this contribution. We know from later Iranian and Arabic sources that the brilliant performance realized by Ǝrəxša (in Pahlavi known as Ēraš, in New Persian and Arabic sometimes still as Ēraš or Āraš, but equally spelt with some minor variants)¹⁸ took place during the fight between Manuščihr and Afrāsiyāb. According to these later stories, mostly in Arabic and New Persian, after a substantial defeat of Manuščihr by his antagonist, the two kings finally made an agreement according to which it was established that the Aryans would have obtained as their own territory only the space covered by an arrow-shot. Thanks to the superhuman performance made by the hero Āraš, the Iranians had back most of their homeland, previously lost in battle. The largest part of the attested versions contain a number of variants, but in particular do not mention the strange death occurred to the archer-hero: i.e. his being physically destroyed and scattered in pieces, as narrated by al-Bīrūnī in his *Chronology of the Ancient Nations* in a passage that we must quote *in extenso* following the basic translation given by Sachau:¹⁹

[...] On the 13th, or Tīr-Rōz, there is a feast Tīragān, so called on account of the identity of the name of the month and the day. Of the two causes to which it is traced back, one is this, that Afrāsiāb after having subdued Erānšahr, and while besieging Minōcihr in Ṭabaristān, asked him some favour. Minōcihr

¹⁷ DAVIDSON (1994) has well shown how the epic oral tradition was preserved in the Iranian framework, particularly in the *Šāhnāme*, and for this reason the absence of any special attention dedicated to Āraš is suspect. On this problem, see GAZERANI (2014), and PANAINO (2018).

¹⁸ See TAFĀZZOLĪ, 1986; on the various spellings, cf. also MARQUART, 1895: 633-635. Cf. STACKELBERG, 1904 and NÖLDEKE, 1881. Very interesting the brief account about Āraš in Ṭabarī (*Tarīkh*, 992-993): “[...] and Bahrām killed Shābad with an arrow shot at him. It is said that, in the realm of the Persians, supreme skills in archery was attributed to three men: ‘r.sh.sh.yāṭ.y.n’s shot in the war between Manūshihir and Afrāsiyāb (text, ‘Firāsiyāt’); Sūkrā’s shot in the war against the Turks; and this shot of Bahrām’s.” Translation according to BOSWORTH, 1999: 302 (see also the note 708; cf. already NÖLDEKE, 1879: 271). For other heroic Avestan tradition concerning the use of weapons, see PIRAS, 2000; 2010.

¹⁹ SACHAU, 1879: 205-206 (= Ātār, 220). Cf. CRISTOFORETTI, 2006-07: 147-148.

complied with his wish, on the condition that he (Afrāsiāb) should restore to him a part of Erānšahr as long and as broad as an arrow-shot. On that occasion there was a genius present, called Isfandārmadh; he ordered to be brought a bow and an arrow of such a size as he himself had indicated to the arrow-maker, in conformity with that which is manifest in the Avastā. Then he sent for Āraš, a noble, pious, and wise man, and ordered him to take the bow and to shoot the arrow. Āraš stepped forward, took off his clothes, and said: «king, and ye others, look at my body. I am free from any wound or disease. I know that when I shoot with this bow and arrow I shall fall to pieces and my life will be gone, but I have determined to sacrifice it for you». Then he applied himself to the work, and bent the bow with all the power God had given him; then he shot, and fell asunder into pieces. By order of God the wind bore the arrow away from the mountain of Rūyān and brought it to the utmost frontier of Khurāsan between Farghāna and Ṭabaristān; there it hit the trunk of a nut-tree that was so large that there had never been a tree like it in the world. The distance between the place where the arrow was shot and that where it fell was 1,000 Farsakh. Afrāsiāb and Minōcihr made a treaty on the basis of this shot that was shot on this day. In consequence people made it a feast-day. During this siege Minōcihr and the people of Erānšahr had been suffering from want, not being able to grind the wheat and to bake the bread because the wheat was late in ripening; finally they took the wheat and the fruits, unripe as they were, ground them and ate them. Thence it has become a rule for this day to cook wheat and fruits. According to another report, the arrow was shot on this day, i.e. Tīr-Rōz, and the festival of this day is the small Tīragān; on the other hand the 14th, or Gōš-Rōz, is the great Tīragān, that day on which the news arrived that the arrow had fallen. On Tīr-Rōz people break their cooking-vessels and fire-grates, since on this day they were liberated from Afrāsiāb and everybody was free to go to his work.

It is not my interest to enter in details the problem of the choice of the date for the occurrence of this heroic event, which according to al-Bīrūnī was linked to the Tīragān, while, after the Pahlavi text known as *Māh ī Frawardīn Rōz ī Xurdād* 22,²⁰ Manūšcihr and Ēraš *šēbāg-tīyr*, i.e. “the swift-arrowed” (here the epithet *šēbāg-tīyr* clearly continues Av. *xšuuīβi.išuš*)²¹ re-conquered the Iranian lands from Afrāsiāb the Turanian exactly on the auspicious 6th day of Frawardīn. Probably, a pseudo-etymological speculative association between the arrow shot by Ēraš/Āraš and

²⁰ See the new edition by GRENET, 2009: 163-164.

²¹ See already NÖLDEKE, 1881: 445; DARMESTETER, 1883, II: 220-221; JUSTI, 1892: 88-89. In the *Moǰmal*, p. 90 the variant *Āraš-e Šewātīr* is attested (see TAFAZZOLĪ, 1986).

the festival of Tīr, whose name now had become similar to that of the ‘arrow’ itself (*tīr* < *tiyr* < Av. *tiyri*-; cf. Av. *tiyra*- “sharp”; O.P. *tigra*-, “pointed”)²² played its role, although a very complex net of relations among the star Sirius, the arrow shot by Ǝrəxša, the ancient (Mesopotamian) Constellation of the Arrow and the Bow, etc., played their own influences on this final result.²³ But, as stated before, my focus will be dedicated to a more particular problem, i.e., if the peculiar death of Ǝrəxša, especially his physis *disintegration*, was just a later narrative invention, or if it belongs to the original Avestan cycle, so that we should postulate its omission in the framework of the *Tištār Yašt* as a deliberate narrative choice and in any case as a phenomenon for which an explanation is necessary. In this discussion the witness of another Mediaeval scholar (10th c.) as Ʀa‘ālebī is important, because it gives additional statements about the conditions in which Ǝraš/Āraš’ shot his arrow and then suddenly died. The only peculiarity in the story as presented in Ʀa‘ālebī’s *Gorar* is that it was framed during the reign of king Zaw and not in that of Manuščihhr:

After an uninterrupted exchange of ambassadors and of letters, it was agreed that Afrāsiyāb would abandon an expanse of the Ǝrānšahr equal to the shot of an arrow thrown by the archer Āraš. Zaw had the idea of order an arrow, whose wood should be taken in a particular forest, the feather from a eagle of a particular mountain, and the arrow-head of an iron coming from a special mine. He ordered Āraš to shoot this arrow. Āraš, who was of a very advanced age and at the extreme limit of his life, was preserved in life just for that shot. He ascended a mountain, in Ʀabaristān, in presence of Afrāsiyāb, and shot from his bow an arrow to which Afrāsiyāb himself had impressed a special mark, and then he died. This happened at sunrise. The arrow flew from Ʀabaristān till Bādhgīs. At the moment in which it was falling down, an angel, as it is narrated, on god’s order, gave it a new run-up, so that it arrived till the territory of Khulm, in the province of Balkh. There, it fell down in a place named Kūzīn, when the sun was just vanishing. When this very arrow was brought back from Khulm to Ʀabaristān, where Afrāsiyāb was, he himself,

²² See SCHMITT, 2014: 254-255.

²³ PANAINO, 1995: 47-85. I must recall that the Av. stem *tištriia*-, as that of the Vedic astral-archer Tišya (although with a different sequence), derives from an Indo-Iranian adjectival from **tri-stṛ-ja-* < PIE. **tri-stṛ-jo-*, a stem in its turn built on the designation of the Orion’s Belt as **tri-stṛ-o-m* “(group of) three stars”, as explained by FORSSMAN (1995). In Vedic mythology, the astral archer Tišya, usually associated also with Rudra and Kršānu, shot an arrow named *iṣus trikāṇḍa* “the arrow with three knots”, exactly corresponding to the Orion’s Belt (δ ε ζ Orionis). While we can state that the relation between the star Tištriia and the arrow is clear, and in particular the inclusion in the *Tištār Yašt* of this textual reference to the myth of Ǝrəxša is particularly significant, we cannot say more about the pertinence and the permanence of the (presumable earlier) role of Tištriia as archer (i.e. just like Tišya). Although a far memory of this earlier legend might be presumed, we do not have sufficient elements for any strong assumption (and worse for any radical conclusion) based on such a supposition.

recognizing his mark on it, after his men of confidence had attested that it had actually fallen down on that place, was astonished for the great distance of its travel. He was taken by fear and did not dare to withdraw his promises, recognizing that this result was due to a divine decision to which it was necessary to obey. [...] He abandoned to Zaw the territory comprised between the point of departure of the arrow and the place where it had fallen.²⁴

Recently, a Persian scholar, Saghi Gazerani,²⁵ has tried to analyze two main problems: that of the strictest discretion about Āraš' cycle in the *Šāhnāme*, and that of the origin of the final disintegration of the archer-hero. These questions actually need a definitive solution. From the general point of view Gazerani refreshed a theory, originally advanced by A. von Gutschmid,²⁶ and later supported by Lukonin,²⁷ according to which Āraš would have been considered the ancestral eponymous hero of the Parthian tribes, corresponding to the divinized founder of the Parthian kingdom, Aršak. This hypothesis, although not explicitly attested in any literary cycle surviving in Parthian or at least supported by any other Late Antiquity source, could be otherwise taken into serious consideration after an independent analysis of the iconography of the archer-hero engraved on the reverse of Parthian coins. This archer, despite some changing elements and a number of Achaemenid and Seleucid similar features, can actually continue the memory of the 'best archer of the Aryans', as recently shown with many additional arguments by J. D. Lerner.²⁸ Furthermore, even Ferdowsi mentioned Āraš²⁹ in close relation with the Parthian dynasty, but without entering in details or presenting his cycle. This discretion cannot be ascribed to Ferdowsi's ignorance, but it seems due to the fact that for "other" reasons, probably dependent from the status of some earlier Middle-Persian sources, the paramount Persian poet did not find useful any particular amplification of this particular heroic cycle. A reason behind this embarrassment seems to be due to the fact that Arsakes I, the founder of the Parthian dynasty, had been directly associated with Ērəxša, as presumed by von Gutschmid.³⁰ Furthermore, the open pretension expressed by Wahrām Čōbin³¹ to be a direct descendant of Ēraš would have definitively compromised the political neutrality of this (innocent) ancestral Iranian hero. Ēraš/Āraš, as the archer shooting an arrow from dawn to sunset in Tā'ālebī's account, presumably assumed solar

²⁴ ZOTENBERG, 1900: 132-134.

²⁵ GAZERANI, 2014: 50-52, *passim*. I must thank Dr. Alessia Zubani who called my attention on this relevant study.

²⁶ von GUTSCHMIDT, 1880: 743.

²⁷ LUKONIN, 1983: 686.

²⁸ LERNER (2017) gives a very large and detailed conspectus of the history of the scholarly debate and of the contrasting numismatic interpretations, which cannot be analytically discussed here.

²⁹ Cf. the list of the relatively few occurrences in WOLFF, 1935: 10.

³⁰ von GUTSCHMIDT, 1880: 743.

³¹ See YARSHATER, 1983: 373, 406, 444, 475; JUSTI, 1895: 89.

and then even Miθraic characters, which emphasized the royal aspects of this declaration.³² Thus, we must seriously suspect that the present epic cycle would have been ‘softened’ already in the framework of the Sasanian redaction of the *Xwadāy Nāmag*, because of the ideological involvement of Ēraš/Āraš in the Parthian dynastic myth of foundation. This hypothesis, of course, should be developed with prudence, because the Sasanian counter-propaganda did not completely censure the old Zoroastrian cycle, but certainly did not like to emphasize it. In fact, if we cannot conclude that the exploits of the archer were totally covered by a sort of “political taboo” in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi tradition, we observe that all the Pahlavi sources in which we expect to find a larger description of this story are silent or too discrete about it. So something happened!

I must shortly recall, although this subject has been already discussed in another study,³³ that from the strictly linguistic point of view a direct derivation of the eponymous naming of the North-Iranian dynasty from the proper name of the ancient Iranian hero is not impossible at all, albeit it has been generally considered as formally less probable. As Vedic *ṛkṣa-* (see also the patronymic *ārṛkṣá-* in *RV*, *ārṛkṣa-* in epic literature),³⁴ *araxša-* seems to mean “Bear, Ursus”, a name perfectly fitting for the strongest archer of the Aryans, despite the negative assumption suggested without any further reason by Mayrhofer in *EWA*.³⁵ The only formal problem lies in the fact that in Young Avestan we would expect a simple *-š-* < Indo-Iranian *-xš-*, like in Young Avestan *arša-* (*Aog.* 79) “bear”,³⁶ while in the present case we must admit

³² On these aspects, see POURSHARIATI (2008: 336-337, 339) with special reference to Ta‘ālebī’s *Gorar* (see the edition by ZOTENBERG, 1900: 133-134), but also to the *Tarīx-i Ṭabaristān*, in which the collaboration of Kāren and Āraš with Manučihr was presented in details. These two Iranian heroes became the legendary and presumed progenitor of the Karen family and the Mihrān one. For this reason, Wahrām Čōbin’s propaganda put an enormous importance on them. Cf. DARYAEE, 2017: 393-394. In particular, we can recall the motion of Miθra’s chariot, which, as explained by GERSHEVITCH (1959: 39-40) “travels West by day, and returns overnight to the East”, so that this celestial path gave room for a further association of this god with the Sun himself.

³³ PANAINO, 2019.

³⁴ MAYRHOFER, 2003: 16, 22; MAYRHOFER, 1979: I/38.

³⁵ MAYRHOFER, 1956, I: 118-119; 1992: I: 247-248; Mayrhofer (*ibidem*) analyzed also the possible connection between YAv. *araxša-* and Ved. *ṛkṣá-* “kahl”, but with a later secondary meaning as “glänzend”, already advanced by Bartholomae, rightly considering it as *unbeweisbar*; but cf. MAYRHOFER, 1956, I: 119. More prudent results the suggestion advanced by SCHERER (1953: 32, 42, 134), who assumed that *ṛkṣāh*, “Bärensterne”, was associated to *ārcati* “to shine”, *arká-*, m., “ray, sun”, *arcīš-*, n., “ray of light”, for a popular etymology, and then considered as the “Stählenden” *par excellence*. HERTEL’s attempt (1931: 216-217) of connecting this Avestan name with the denomination of the “Seven stars” (of the Big Dipper or Ursa Major) in Vedic (*ṛkṣá-*), attributing it with the meaning of “der Himmelslicht strahlende” is unacceptable. About Vedic *ṛkṣá-*, adj., “bare”, see HOFFMANN, 1983 (= 1992). It seems reasonable to presume that the similar association of the most important circumpolar constellation with a Bear, masculine in Vedic, feminine in Greek (ἡ Ἄρκτος), was due to a common heritage (cf. again SCHERER, 1953: 131-141, *passim*).

³⁶ See JAMASPASA, 1982: 43-44, 76, 100, 118; Av. *aršō* is here translated with Pāz. *xars* (cf. Pahl. *xirs*); BARTHOLOMAE, 1904: 203.

the survival of an earlier outcome in which that kind of cluster was still preserved, as already supposed by Bartholomae himself.³⁷ However, I would like to insist on the fact that if here we have to do with the name of a very dangerous animal as the bear (but also extremely important in the imaginary of ancient peoples),³⁸ the potential influence of a ‘linguistic taboo’ behind this apparent archaism could not be ruled out.³⁹ Now, it is certain that the hypocoristic Old Persian name *a-r-s-k-*, i.e. *Ṛšaka-*, Parthian *Aršak* [’ršk],⁴⁰ Greek *Ἀρσάκης*, all derive from **ṛša-ka-*, although it is not possible to establish a priori whether the first compositional element derived from **ṛšan-* ‘hero, virile man’ or, contrariwise, from **ṛša-* ‘bear’.⁴¹ The common point of view prefers the first solution after the consideration that all the names in which *°aršā-* appears certainly derive from *ṛšan-* (see *Xšayāršā*, *Ariyāršā*, while *Ṛšāma*, attested as father’s name of a certain *Ariyāršā*, should presumably contain a direct reference to the same stem occurring in his ancestor’s denomination).⁴² On the other hand, and this is very important, we cannot deny that an association between the two names (that of the Parthian king and that of the Aryan hero) might be established a posteriori thanks to their apparent similarity on the semantic and formal levels. In this case, both *significant* and *signifié*, although belonging to two potentially different stems, resulted very close, if not, in certain conditions, identical.

Thus, the first problem seems to have been clarified, and we can conclude that the cycle of the archer-hero, although prestigious and religiously significant for the Old Iranian epos, was politically embarrassing in the Sasanian ambience,⁴³ a condition which did not favor its full recognition.

³⁷ BARTHOLOMAE (1904: 349) hesitated about the etymology, but in the *Grundriss* (1895-1901, I: 1, 22) he assumed that *-š-* instead of *-s-* was an older outcome; MAYRHOFER, 1979: I/38, number 114.

³⁸ See PASTOUREAU, 2007.

³⁹ This despite the theory advanced by ALINEI (1996: 568-570), who gives a number of chronological reasons for the different distribution of the names of the “bear”, and criticizes the old approach to the problem given by MEILLET (1906 = 1921). In fact, a taboo works in any case with regard to names of animals or things that make fear or that are considered dangerous or ominous. The taboo on the name of the bear and on its figure can be seen also outside of the Indo-European area (see, for instance, PETROV, 1989), although the semantic distribution in its determination can reflect different reasons (EMENAU, 1948). On the problem cf. also KIENLE, 1932; GUIRAUD, 1987; SMAL-STOCKI, 1950; YOUNG, 1991.

⁴⁰ See SCHMITT, 2016: 44, number 37. Cf. JUSTI, 1895: 27-30.

⁴¹ Cf. BARTHOLOMAE, 1904: 203, in note, on the contrary, gave both possibilities (**arša-* or *aršan-*) for the etymology of O.P. *Aršaka-*. Cf. again PANAINO, 2019.

⁴² SCHMITT, 1978: 23-24.

⁴³ As I have already remarked in PANAINO (2019), the Sasanians with the exception of the inscription of Hājiābād (and its replicas; see MacKENZIE, 1978; cf. also KLÍMA, 1968; 1971) did not emphasize the role of the king as archer. For instance, they never use the image of the archer on coins, breaking a sort of iconographic continuity with the Achaemenids, the Seleucids and the Parthians. Although the image of the hunting king, frequent on Sasanian silver plates, cannot be properly considered as a private document, mostly targeted foreign kinglets in provincial areas, where this pattern was probably favoured. The hunting archer, apparently a royal figure, but without crown, who appears on the right and left walls of the arch of Taq-e Bostan, has not been clearly identified, although the monumental complex is commonly attributed

But Gazerani⁴⁴ has also suggested that the myth of Āraš' disintegration, which occurs in few Arabic and Persian sources, would have been only a later invention, not belonging to the earlier Aryan background. On the contrary, it would have been just created by the Parthians after the sudden death in battle of two kings of them, Phraates II (139/8-127/ BC) and Artabanus I (127-124/3 BC), both fallen fighting against the Sakas. Thus, their death would have been transferred within the mythical cycle of the ancient Aryan archer-hero Āraš. So, we are dealing with the second general serious problem concerning this mythical cycle.

I immediately want to remark that, while Gazerani's previous remarks about the *Šāhnāme* result sound, this second solution appears extremely weak. If the Parthians really knew the mythical cycle of Ērəxša since old times – as we unanimously admit –, there was no reason to charge a so glorious event like that with these two tremendous military blunders. As far as we know, the two Parthian kings, who were defeated and killed, fell on the battlefield without any particular merit that might glorify their fall. In the myth of Ērəxša, on the contrary, we have an archer-hero who fully triumphs, offering his life in exchange for the territorial protection and salvation of his own people and country, and in this respect I cannot see any simile with the Parthian (double) defeat. Furthermore, if we consider that Aršaka, as eponymous founder of the Parthian dynasty, was already connected (directly or indirectly) with Ērəxša, why he should have been later “polluted” with a diminishing reference to two inferior, defeated, successors of him. This solution seems to me ungrounded and far-fetched: myths must glorify a defeat not diminish a bloody victory with a couple of inglorious defeats.

Furthermore, there are other reasons to consider.

We must observe few, but very pertinent, points in which al-Bīrūnī's and Ta'ālebī's reports show clearly to be a reflex of an archaic, i.e. probably Avestan, account:

1) it is al-Bīrūnī himself to mention the Avestan background, a fact that is relevant *per se*.

2) The role attributed to the wind in al-Bīrūnī is not directly confirmed by the four stanzas of the *Tištār Yašt*, but Vāta is certainly one of the collaborators (*hamkarān*) of Tištriia/Tištār; in any case Ahura Mazdā, the Aməša Spəntas and other divinities such as Aši and Pārəndi supported the flight of the arrow till it reached Mount X^vanuuaṇt and fell there (*Yt.* 8, 38), while the text of al-Bīrūnī states that, by explicit

to Xusraw II. M. Compareti does not exclude that these images could represent a rebel of Parthian background, such as Wahram Čobin; another identification would be that of Xusraw's maternal uncle, Wistahm. In any case, the social function of these images is debated, because they appear in the framework of a paradise and their political relevance is uncertain. See now the contribution by TERRIBILI, 2019.

⁴⁴ GAZERANI, 2014: 49-55, *passim*.

order of God, the wind gave an additional strong impulse to the flight of the arrow. The presence of a divine support is strongly emphasized also by Ta‘ālebī, who expressly mentioned the role of an angel, a *yazata* (or *yazad*) presumably, supporting the flight of the arrow.

3) The mention of Isfandārmadh (i.e. Av. Spəntā Ārmaiti, Pahl. Spandārmadh) in al-Bīrūnī as the genius connected with the earth is another element supportive of an earlier mythological background. In *Yt.* 8, 38, there is a peculiar reference to the Aməša Spəntas in the plural, followed by another one to Miθra, both apparently governing a verb at the dual. The passage is patently disturbed, but we can assume that this unclear mention of the *aməša spənta* (probably attracted or fallen in that point because of other rhetorical Avestan parallels), would be due to a narrative background, in which these “entities”, or at least some of them, should have played a certain role helping the flight of the arrow. I would like to call attention on the fact that in the parallel stanza of *Yt.* 8, 7, “waters and plants” are mentioned, and that they functionally corresponded to two of the Aməša Spəntas, while the evocation also of the third most clearly recognizable feminine entity, i.e. Spəntā Ārmaiti, in her direct relation with the earth, would be not improbable at all in the Avestan background. Al-Bīrūnī’s statement about her role so results very intriguing, because the earth was the element on which Ērəxša must stay, from which he shot the arrow and for whose conquest and protection he was offering himself in sacrifice.

It has never been noted that the way in which al-Bīrūnī presents the ceremony is extraordinarily interesting. Although it is peculiar that al-Bīrūnī ignores that this ‘genius’ – as he defines Isfandārmadh –,⁴⁵ was feminine, the Choresmian scholar remarked that it was Isfandārmadh who assumed an essential role in this event. Unfortunately, the Arabic text itself is ambiguous and it is not really clear if it was Isfandārmadh to instruct Manuščihr about how to prepare a bow and an arrow of a particular size (so that the king might have ordered it to the arrow-maker, in conformity with the Avestan tradition), and then this arrow was finally given to Āraš, or, contrariwise, whether Isfandārmadh herself gave instructions and also ordered to the artisan the preparation of the bow without any role by the king. In any case, the archer accomplished his ‘ordeal’ in front of the king, some people and, of course, Isfandārmadh herself.⁴⁶ Then, in al-Bīrūnī’s version, the role attributed to Spəntā Ārmaiti, although completely escaping in its deepest symbolic meaning to the Medieval scholar who preserved it, assumes a particular relevance, which would be interesting to compare with what we find in the *Odyssey* with special regard for the

⁴⁵ Precisely in the Arabic text al-Bīrūnī wrote: “one of the angels whose name is [...]”, but all the pertinent grammatical references are in masculine. I must thank Dr. Alessia Zubani who has kindly checked for me the original Arabic text.

⁴⁶ On these aspects of the archer’s cycle, see now also the fitting remarks suggested by POURSHARIATI (2008: 336-337, 339).

importance of the female role within a framework very close to the present one. There, in fact, it was Penelope to order the preparation of the ordeal by means of the bow and the axes, a ritual thanks to which Odysseus re-conquered his full royalty, the throne, the land, and, of course, his wife. The same pattern recurs in the *Mahābhārata* with Arjuna and Draupadī, or in the *Lalita-Vistara* with Buddha and Gopā, but the theme of the royal trial appears also in the *Rāmāyana* (with Rāma and Sītā) and other Indian sources.⁴⁷ In all these cases, women of high social rank perform a *svayamvara*-, i.e. “the practice of choosing an husband”, but the same procedure is enacted by Penelope too. In the story narrated by al-Bīrūnī, the trial presents a particular variation: the hero, in presence and for the sake of his king, must conquer the earth, to be associated with the divine female ‘genius’, albeit he cannot survive to his own definitive success.

The functional and symbolic relation between the Earth and the genius precisely mentioned, the role in the preparation of the weapon fittingly ascribed to Spəntā Ārmaiti, certainly suggest a subtle meaning, which cannot be the fruit of a later, Islamic, invention. We must also observe that in the later accounts dedicated to the cycle of Āraš the presence of a divine support is strictly connected with the final disintegration of the hero (Maqdisi, al-Bīrūnī and Juzjani).⁴⁸ This narrative element confirms that the idea of self-sacrifice was old, and that it represented the key of the problem. In al-Bīrūnī’s account, the archer-hero knows his destiny, and accepts it. The fact that he appears naked in the place established for his shot, and shows himself as a person without defects and wounds, transforms his action in a ritual self-sacrifice, like an ordeal. In particular, the public demonstration to be devoid of defects, as wounds or diseases, ritually marks and confirms his status of purity and reveals that he was perfectly fitting for a ceremonial self-sacrifice. In this case, Āraš behaves as whether he was following a special liturgy, according to modalities recalling those of the animal sacrifice, in which the sacrificial offering must be pure, sane and without deformations or improper colors. In the same way Āraš, appearing naked on the ground, openly showed his absolute fittingness for this sacrifice. At this proposal I must underline the fact that the nakedness of Āraš presents a problem in itself. In fact, while this kind of ritual context is much earlier as an Islamic framework, it was very common in ancient Indo-European rituals, for it corresponds to one of the main patterns of the initiation in the framework of ancient Indo-European manly rituals, especially in Greece, as well as and in the traditions attributed to the Indo-Iranian

⁴⁷ See JAMISON, 1999: 258-270; on the comparison between the cycle of Penelope and Odysseus, and that of Draupadī and Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*, or that of Buddha and Gopā in the *Lalita-Vistara*, see also GERMAIN, 1954: 18 and *passim*; PAGE, 1973: 93-113; GRESSETH, 1979; SCHWARZ, 1966; RUSSO, 2004.

⁴⁸ See GAZERANI, 2014: 62.

Männerbunde.⁴⁹ For instance, in central Greek local cults, both of Ionians and Dorians, especially of Apollo at Sparta,⁵⁰ nakedness was a symbol of passage through liminality and represented a major element of initiation. In particular, Martin West⁵¹ stated that “nakedness had once a ritual potency in connection with ploughing and sowing”, activities strictly connected with the earth, for which Āraš is ready to die. In his turn, Amir Ahmadi⁵² noted that “Nakedness is associated with the warlike state and virility: the warrior and the athlete alike take to the battlefield naked [...]”. He fittingly made references to Achilles⁵³ and to other pertinent examples, but also observed that “Stripping to reveal one’s manly body must have been a routine feature of tribal and puberty initiation and, stylized and enhanced with warlike behavior such as the war dance (e.g. the Koreutes clashing their weapons around the child-god’s cradle), it became part of warrior initiation”.⁵⁴

I wonder whether Āraš, consciously performing this kind of self-sacrifice, was not celebrating a sort of sacred wedding with the Earth, for whose conquest he is going to die. The fact that it was Spəntā Ārmaiti to establish how to prepare for him bow and arrow (as a woman performing a sort of *svayaṃvara*-),⁵⁵ and that she was an alter ego of the “earth”, results an interesting path for new investigations. Of course, a true marriage with a goddess becomes a spiritual union and opens the way to a comparison with the mythological theme of the meeting with the *daēnā*-, which gave access to a superior status in the afterlife. In this way Manuščihr, as a living and reigning king, remains the legitimate husband and lord of the earth, while Āraš, with his death can be given access to the heaven of Ohrmazd. Actually, we cannot imagine any other destiny for him in the Mazdean mythology.

These evidences impose a reflection and open new problems: the heroic death can be assimilated to or compared with a ritual sacrifice, so that we can presume that the Aryans offering their life for their tribes should have given full access to the union with their *daēnā*-, who, in this framework, seems to be symbolically connected with the image and the role of Spəntā Ārmaiti.

The relation between the king and the hero compels me to refresh some considerations already started by Jackson,⁵⁶ when he observed that, if some heroes are

⁴⁹ WIKANDER, 1938; HEESTERMAN, 1962; McCONE, 1984; McCONE, 1987: 114, 130; BOLLÉ, 1981; BREMMER, 1982.

⁵⁰ See BURKERT, 1975; PETTERSSON, 1992: 47-48, 76, 78, 125.

⁵¹ WEST, 2007: 183, n. 64. Cf. OSBORNE, 1997.

⁵² AHMADI, 2015: 282. About ambiguous nakedness, see BOLLÉ, 2006: 66-67, 93.

⁵³ Cf. also BREMMER, 1978: 7. Cf. again AHMADI, 2015: 295, n. 15.

⁵⁴ Rightly AHMADI, 2015: 282-283 (and 295-296, n. 16) enlarges the comparison to the Old Nordic habits assumed by the *berserker*, also with reference to WEST, 2007: 448-451.

⁵⁵ See again JAMISON, 1996; JAMISON, 1999; JAMISON, 2003.

⁵⁶ JACKSON, 1982; despite the limits of this work, discussed in a review by STÄBLEIN (1983), this study contained some useful reflections on the relation between the hero and the king, which deserve to be considered, and eventually better developed.

king-makers, a subject on which also Davidson has written some important considerations with direct reference to the Iranian epos,⁵⁷ their military success, at a certain stage essential for the salvation of the country and the kingdom in dramatic periods, can later represent a too difficult challenge for the designated king, whose power trembles as in danger because of the presence of a too brilliant (inevitably competing) champion. As we have seen, Āraš' performances have a royal profile as his superior ability in bowmanship. It is in the economy of a narrative dialectics between the superb archer-hero, saviour of the country, and his legitimate king, that we must frame the dramatic ineluctability of his death.

Furthermore, I would like to observe that the procedure developed by the archer immediately reminds us other ancient rituals as that of the *devotio* performed, according to Titus Livy (*Ab Urbe condita* VIII, 9), by Publius Decius Mus.⁵⁸ This Roman general offered his own life to the gods in exchange for the Roman victory on the superior forces of the Latins during the Battle of Vesuvio (340 BCE). After a long prayer, he was bound in a special way on his horse and, so prepared, he run against the enemy offering his own person (together with the bodies of his own sacrificers, i.e. the enemies who would soon kill him), as a sacrificial gift to the gods. In this respect the story of Āraš presents a very conservative and archaic shape and cannot be a later invention. On the contrary, it belongs in its basic patterns to one of the most archaic Indo-European traditions,⁵⁹ although its evolution belongs to the Iranian folklore.

Last but not least, there is an additional narrative aspect, which appears dramatically interesting: that of the disintegration of the protagonist. This event corresponds to a symbolization of the maximum of efforts concentrated in such a single shot. A superb shot for the future life of the Iranians is a shot worth of the life of the best hero. This arrow, whose link with the star Tištriia was already known in the Avestan period, was preserved in Ta'ālebī's version, through the celestial motion from dawn to twilight, as that of the sun or simply of a star (to be implicitly associated with Tištar), which, in the Mazdean folklore, represented a strong divine power by itself.

It is for all these reasons that I cannot follow Gazerani in her conclusions concerning the interpretation of the myth of Āraš' disintegration, although she had the merit to have focused on the existence of some problems in the transmission of this myth. Her conclusion in this case is in my opinion unacceptable. Āraš' death⁶⁰

⁵⁷ DAVIDSON, 1994: 95-109, *passim*.

⁵⁸ SACCO, 2011.

⁵⁹ DUMÉZIL, 1969: 186-188; DUMÉZIL, 1974: 109-110; SACCO, 2011.

⁶⁰ I would like to call readers' attention on the comparative scenario, in which many heroes, distinguished for their ability in archery, although successful, are intended to die. This is the destiny of Aqhat, killed by eagles sent against him by the Goddess Anat, in Ugaritic literature, where his cycle is strictly connected with a fertility symbolism, but also in Greece, where Acteaon, the hunter and archer, is killed by his own

had nothing to do with a military blunder or with a defeat of any historic Parthian king. It represented the ritual cost of a victory, in which the liturgical dimension of the self-sacrifice (with its esoteric implications) followed a completely different pattern, which cannot be explained as the result of a process of de-historicization of a true military event. It is also incomprehensible why the Parthian *gōsān* should have associated a death in battle with a success of an ancestral Iranian hero, compromising a traditional lore with a series of disastrous military blunders; the logic of this presumed simile appears to me escaping.

Finally, we must also call the attention on the fact that two additional sources confirm the pattern of the disintegration: one is a Chinese report about Samarkand by Wei Jie in the 7th century AD, which concerns the rituals performed in occasion of the local celebrations for the end of the year. The text states that for seven days people on horseback had to shoot toward the heaven.⁶¹ This performance was followed by a celebration of a divine child, dead on the seventh month, and whose body (lit. “his bones”) has been dispersed. Rightly S. Cristoforetti⁶² has shown in details the direct connections of this story with the myth of *Āraš*, pointing out some further resonances with another story contained in the *Chronicle of Arbela*, already discussed by G. Messina and later by N. Pigulevskaja.⁶³ This story concerns two rituals (connected with the end of the year): the first one in which some people had to shoot arrows against the sky, and another one describing the killing of a boy, whose body should be cooked and boiled. Although this second event probably includes some Semitic traditions,⁶⁴ the myth of the physical destruction of the body of a boy and the contemporary presence of the act of shooting against the sky remain a witness of an earlier cycle, which cannot be ascribed and restricted to any Parthian later innovation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I think that the modalities of the self-sacrifice performed by *Ērəxša* belong to a religious and ideological model of great antiquity, which is not the fruit of later historical events, but a representation of an archaic pattern. The absence in the *Tištār Yašt* of the tragic sacrifice attributed to the archer-hero is probably due to the fact that the Avestan texts (as many Indo-Iranian liturgical sources in general) do not describe in detail ancient myths, which were considered a well-

dogs excited by Artemis. In comparison with these events, *Ērəxša*'s end does not seem so bad, although we have the suspect that his disintegration was the price not only for his triumph, but also for his loyalty with regard to his king.

⁶¹ CHAVANNES, 1903: 133; CRISTOFORETTI, 2006-07: 145-146.

⁶² CRISTOFORETTI, 2006-7.

⁶³ PIGULEVSKAJA, 1963: 241-244 (= 1956: 334-338). Cf. CRISTOFORETTI, 2006-07: 151.

⁶⁴ See already MESSINA, 1938: 243-244.

known matter for every person initiated into the early Mazdean ceremonies, but give just scattered hints of them, which were considered sufficient in an oral culture. In any case these cycles remained on the proscenium as common cultural heritage. The real focus of the Avestan quotation concerned the simile between the arrow shot by Ǝrəxša and the star Sirius, an association that probably opened the way for a further inclusion of the myth of the archer in the cycle of the liberation of the waters, and which also involved the role of Miθra to whose entourage both Tištriia and Ǝrəxša were connected. At this proposal, we may recall that according to the *Bundahišn* XXXIII, 5-6, Frāsyāb, the enemy of Manuščihr, produced famine and stopped rains (*ud wārān az Ǝrān-šahr abāz dāšt* “and he withheld rains from the *Ǝrān-šahr*”),⁶⁵ while the already mentioned *Chronicle of Arbela* stated that in Adiabene (in MP. Nodšēragān), during the Tīragān (also named there *šahr-āβ-āyām-vaδ* “the day consecrated to the feast of the waters in the district”, as fittingly explained by J. Markwart)⁶⁶ people used to shoot arrows against the sky.⁶⁷ In his turn, Miθra himself played the role of a divine archer, whose arrow made water flowing out from a stone, as in a number of Mithraic monuments (e.g. the bas-relief of Heddernheim⁶⁸ or many other Mithraic documents). The so-called ‘water-miracle’, as usually defined according to Vermaseren’s terminology,⁶⁹ was part of the mythical performances attributed to the Western Mithra, although its background cannot be completely separated from the earlier Iranian folklore; but this is another story worth of another work.

It is also important to observe that the motif of the direct comparison between a swift arrow and the astral motion was not forgotten in Pahlavi literature. In particular, in *Bundahišn* II, 20, we find the following statement:

The motion of the sun is like that of a giant three-feathered⁷⁰ arrow that a giant man shoots from a giant bow. The motion of the moon is like a medium sized three-feathered arrow that a medium sized man shoots from a medium sized bow. The motion of the stars is like a small three-feathered arrow that a small man shoots from a small bow.

rawišn ī xwaršēd čiyōn mahistar tigr ī sē-parrag ka ān ī mahīstar mard az ān ī mehtar kamān wihēd. māh rawišn ōwōn čiyōn sē-parrag tigr ī mayānag ka ān ī mayānag mard

⁶⁵ PAKZAD, 2005: 363.

⁶⁶ MESSINA (1938: 241) attributed the interpretation of this compound to Markwart, but without a precise reference. Probably Markwart gave this solution to Messina in the framework of a private communication. CRISTOFORRETTI, 2006-07: 149, n. 8.

⁶⁷ MESSINA, 1938: 149-150; cf. CRISTOFORRETTI, 2006-07: 149-150.

⁶⁸ CUMONT, 1913: 52, 138, 140, 207.

⁶⁹ VERMASEREN, 1956 (CIMRM): 1225; 1283; 1292; 1301; 1359; see also the other examples collected in the index under the entry <Mithras: water-miracle>.

⁷⁰ On the magical power of feathers, see also RUSSELL, 1986-87: 262 (2004 = 166).

az ān ī mayānag kamān wihēd. starān rawiṣṇ čiyōn sē-parrag tigr ī keh ka ān ī keh
mard az aṅ ī keh kamān wihēd.⁷¹

The simile between solar, lunar and stars' swiftness and a three-feathered arrow shot by a bow of proportional greatness continues an old pattern already attested in the cycle of Ǝrəxša, where the twinkling swiftness of the star Sirius was connected with the brilliant speediness of the arrow.

I would like to observe that the cycle of Ǝrəxša presents an embarrassing problem. The challenge endorsed by our hero is for many aspects a royal task. In particular, we cannot forget that during the Indian ceremony of royal investiture, the *Rājasūya*, the king receives a bow, and must shoot an arrow.⁷² This ritual presents a number of fitting correspondences, as already noted, with the procedures through which Odysseus not only chastised his enemies, but re-conquered also the full power and his legitimate wife, Penelope.⁷³ In this respect the strong link between archery and royalty is visible also in a frequently unnoticed Vedic myth, in which Indra is given with a bow, and shoots the boar Emuṣa through a stone (of a mountain [cf. *Ṛv.* I, 61, 7: *vīdhyad varāhām tiró ádrim ástā* “he pierced the boar through the stone – (he) the archer”]).⁷⁴ We cannot forget that Arjuna himself was a son of Indra, and that he was considered the best archer of the world after Kṛṣṇa, the left-handed archer. As everybody can observe, there is much room for further investigations.⁷⁵ For instance, we cannot avoid a short reference to the story reported by Herodotus (III, 30) about the first reason behind Cambyses' hate against his own full brother Smerdis. In fact, only Smerdis, when in Egypt, was able to draw a special bow (the one brought from the Ethiopians by the Fish-eaters or *Ichthyophágoi*) as far as two finger-breadths; in doing this Smerdis was alone among all of the Persians.⁷⁶ If we look at this episode from the point of view of our general conspectus of the mytheme of the bow and of the royal-archer or archer-hero, Cambyses' fury against his brother would find a subtler justification.⁷⁷ Smerdis' ability – or better – his superiority in archery – would have marked a true royal dignity. Thus, again we are in front of an event strictly connected with royalty and power. Already Asheri⁷⁸ in his comment to this and other

⁷¹ Cf. PAKZAD, 2005: 41.

⁷² See HEESTERMAN, 1957; JAMISON, 1999: 258-260, *passim*.

⁷³ See again GERMAIN, 1954: 18 and *passim*; PAGE, 1973: 93-113; GRESSETH, 1979; SCHWARTZ, 1966; RUSSO, 2004; JAMISON, 1999: 258-270.

⁷⁴ KUIPER, 1950; 1991: 161-163. Cf. JAMISON, 2007: 60-63; JAMISON & BRERETON, 2014, I: 40, 180. See also SERGENT, 1991: 226-227.

⁷⁵ The potential link of this cycle with the Old Persian and Iranian traditions has been focused on by KAIM, 1995, but this work is idiosyncratic in many respects, and the treatment of the problem quite inadequate.

⁷⁶ See SERGENT, 1991: 226, *passim*.

⁷⁷ This is the subject of another article presently in the press; see PANAINO (in the press).

⁷⁸ See ASHERI, 2000: 238, 247.

pertinent passages by Herodotus emphasized the Homeric background of the story (with reference to Odysseus), but he did not consider the larger problem of the ideological symbolism of the bow and the arrow in royal matters. The Achaemenian inscriptions fully confirm the importance attributed to royal ability in fighting with bow and spear, on horseback and afoot (DNb § 9, 40-45).⁷⁹ These stories, in a way or the other, close a circle, and show the inner coherence of an ideological tradition.

Philological Appendix

Despite the fact that I have discussed many textual problems in my previous edition of the *Tištār Yašt*, after some years I would like to make just few additional considerations, starting with the stanza 38, which appears very important. As remarked, a part from the doubtful *auuqn* (and *auuqn dāta* of 8, 7) on which I must inevitably return below, the sequence of a singular (*ahurō mazdā*), followed by a plural (*aməšā spənta*) and, again, by a singular (*miθrō*), all of them governed by a dual (*fracāēsaētəm*), presents serious difficulties. We have various options: 1) if *auuqn aməšā spənta* was mistakenly inserted because it recalled the sequence *auuāin aməšā spənta* (“the Aməša Spəntas came down”) of *Y.* 57, 23 and *Vd.* 19, 13 to the scribe, as Kellens already suggested,⁸⁰ this error entered the text in force of the parallel presence of *auuqn dāta* in *Yt.* 8, 7. With the expunction of the verse-line *auuqn aməšā spənta* the syntactical correctness would be restored, because *fracāēsaētəm* would agree with two singular subjects, such as *ahurō mazdā* and *miθrō*. Although Kellens already advanced this solution, I would like just to observe that the insertion of *auuqn aməšā spənta* could find a good reason, without assuming as a compelling fact a simple resonance due to *auuāin aməšā spənta*. Actually, if this correspondence seems evident, the reference to the Aməša Spəntas would have been embedded, because the role of these entities was part of the myth.⁸¹ We must remark that the parallel stanzas of *Yt.* 8, 7 and 38 show a clear, although secondary, correspondence between *āpō uruuarāscā* on the one hand and *aməšā spənta* on the second hand. Thus, we have a reference to “waters and plants”, which traditionally are connected with two of the standard group of the Aməša Spəntas (*Hauruuatāt* and *Aməratāt*), while the parallel presence of *vouru.gaoiiaoitīš hē miθrō* in both stanzas would eventually confirm the existence of a common *Vorlage*. Then, how can we justify the presence of this peculiar *aməšā spənta* in 8, 38? The problem can find different solutions,

⁷⁹ SCHMITT, 2009: 109; KENT, 1953: 139; LECOQ, 1997: 223. On some ideological problems connected with the image of the bow and the spear, see also PANAINO (in the press).

⁸⁰ KELLENS, 1984: 105, n. 2.

⁸¹ Cf. LECOQ, 2016: 398-399, n. 38.

which essentially differ with respect to the measure of the oral variations we admit for the original composition.

Thus, if we suppose that *Yt.* 8, 38 is a larger (and more conservative) *variatio* of stanza 7, then we may reasonably suppose that the reference to Ahura Mazdā, was followed in both stanzas indeed by *auuṣṇ dāta*: while *auuṣṇ* could be interpreted as an accusative plural of **auua-*, “help” (cf. Ved. *áva-*), *dāta*, as a verbal form, can be a regular injunctive middle reflexive of *dā-*, so that the whole sequence *auuṣṇ dāta* would literally mean: “(he) gave help(s)”. This solution does not present serious difficulties. In the transmission of stanza 38, *aməṣā spəṇta* occurs at the same level of “waters and plants” of stanza 7, and its insertion could be considered as a hypostasis of the two corresponding entities, to which we can add also the third feminine entity, i.e. *Spəṇtā Ārmaiti*. Her covered presence might be justified in consideration of the importance attributed to the “earth” in this myth, as better confirmed thanks to the explicit mention of Spandārmad in the framework of the story of Āraš as transmitted by al-Bīrūnī. In any case the text of *Yt.* 8, 38, seems to show the presence of a certain predilection for dual constructions, because it preserves a correct sentence as: *ā dim paskāṭ anumarəzatəm ašišca vaṇ^vhi bəṛəzaiti pāṛəṇḍica raoraθa*.

If a definitive solution cannot be established, because we ignore the level of potential varieties at disposal of the earlier composers and performers, the direct comparison of these two textual fragments of an earlier ballade of the archer shows how many could be the rhetoric alternatives at disposal of the active compositional competence of the poet(s) and singer(s). Furthermore, it is highly probable that the text was not only revised during the earliest process determining the written *recensio*, but that from this earlier written *Vorlage* later corrupted version(s) emerged. For these reasons I suggest that the comparative analysis of these two parallel passages confirm:

1) the existence of an older oral cycle dedicated to the hero Ērəxša;

2) the relatively good status of the second quotation, certainly better preserved in its beginning and, despite some confusions, one of which was probably due to a problem generated by the written transmission and connected with the standard invocation of Tištriia. In any case, the stanza of *Yt.* 8, 38, although it suffered a number of additional corruptions, patently preserves 7 verse-lines more than stanza 7, and this evidence is very important;

3) the presence of textual alternatives, not necessarily antagonist, so that if one would be correct, the latter should result inevitably wrong, but probably exchangeable according to the possible varieties of the composition (and or of the improvisation);

4) the adoption of a descending climax in the list of the helpers of the arrow (and then indirectly of the same Ērəxša): Ahura Mazdā, the insertion of the Aməṣa Spəṇtas, probably in a wrong place, Miθra, and finally Aši and Pāṛəṇḍi.

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