

A Contribution on Mithra's Role in the Armenian, Iranian and the Roman World¹

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Oath taking and swearing by god(s) to uphold contracts has a long tradition in the ancient Near East. The method of swearing an oath and the names of the deities mentioned naturally differ and depend on the people involved in the treaty. When we first come across the meeting ground of the Indo-European and Mesopotamian people in the second millennium BCE, the Mittani treaty is our earliest and best kept evidence. In that treaty the deities Indra, Nāsatya, Mithr, and Varuna invoked are all Indo-Aryan². One of these deities, (Sanskrit) Mitra / (Avestan) Mithra holds a special position in antiquity in that he was invoked and venerated not only in the Indo-Iranian tradition, but also among the non-Indo-European people. In Rome, Mithras came to represent a savior god and was identified as the 'Invincible Sun' (*Sol Invictus*).³ In the Indo-Iranian world Mitra / Mithra played the role of the judge who punishes falsehood.⁴ Mithra's primary function seems to have been the personification of "covenant," "contract," and treaty," and later on in the Indic world he came to be considered as the personification of "friendship," which originally could have been derived from the concept of "alliance."⁵

In this article in honor of my late friend, Hamid Mahamedy I would like to explore some of the themes relating to oath and treaty and its breakage which may have led to war between Rome and Persia over Armenia in the third century CE. Specifically I would like to discuss what it meant ethically when kings and people

1. Hamid Mahamedy was both a teacher and a friend whom I lived with during my stay at Berkeley. I would like to thank my student Warren Soward as well as Khodadad Rezakhani for reading this article and making constructive remarks.

2. P. Thieme, "The 'Aryan' Gods of the Mitanni Treaties," Thieme, P. 1960, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1960, vol. 80, p. 303.

3. J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, Harvard Iranian Series, volume 5, Cambridge, 1987, p. 268.

4. I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, p. 7.

5. Gershevitch, p. 26; H.-P. Schmidt, "Indo-Iranian Mitra Studies: the State of the Central Problem," *Études Mithriaques*, Tehran, Liège, 1978, pp. 345-393. Further comments on Mithra see W.W. Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion*, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 55-58.

took an oath and / or agreed to a treaty in the Armenian and the Iranian world by swearing to Mithra. It will be demonstrated that not only the ritual and political function of swearing was relevant, but also that its religious and moral implications in the Armeno-Iranian world were very important, an issue that has been overlooked in historical studies. The importance of the topic under discussion becomes manifest in the third century CE with Šābuhr's Ka'be-ye Zardošt inscription in relation to Roman aggression towards Armenia.

It is well-known that in the third century CE the great kingdom of Armenia was a scene of warfare between the Sasanian and Roman empires. The reason for the sudden chaos and war was that in the second century CE the Romans under the rule of Severus had made further inroads into Mesopotamia. The Sasanians who came to power in the third century attempted to counter this move and conquer what was previously part of the Parthian Empire. Earlier, during the time of Nero, it had been agreed that the Armenian king would be from the Parthian family but that he would be crowned by the Roman emperor.¹ But with the coming of the Sasanians things had changed and not only had Armenia become a difficult place to be allowed to be independent, but Roman aggressions in Mesopotamia also mandated that Ardaxšīr and his son Šābuhr I retaliate and take the offensive. The reasoning for this only becomes evident when we understand the ancient Iranian worldview, where an oath taken, even with an enemy, must be kept and its breakage / violation, even by an enemy, would lead to chaos and conflict.

In 243 CE, the Roman emperor Gordian invaded Mesopotamia to retrieve what had been taken by Ardaxšīr and Šābuhr I after Alexander Severus' death. Šābuhr I, in his inscription, tells us that he was able to kill Gordian at Misiḱhe in 244 CE, close to the Euphrates river, which he later called Pērōz-Šābuhr (Victorious is Šābuhr).² It is now known that Gordian had probably died in Zaitha in northern Mesopotamia in 244 CE at a time when warfare between the two sides seems unlikely.³ Thus, it is suggested that the Roman forces, after the defeat at the hand of the Persians, murdered Gordian while in retreat at Zaitha.⁴ According to Šābuhr I's inscription (ŠKZ), Gordian had come with a force composed of "Goths and Germans" (ŠKZ Pa4/37 *gwt w grm'ny*), and they were defeated in a frontal battle. Philip the Arab was forced to sign a treaty which ceded much territory and a large

1. D.S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay (AD 180-395)*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 237.

2. Roman sources are divided as to the cause of death of Gordian. *Oracula Sibyllina* XIII, 13-20 predicts Gordian's downfall as a betrayal; Aurelius Victor, *liber de Caesaribus* 27, 7-8: 7 states that he was a victim of intrigues of his Praetorian Prefect, Marcus Philippus; Festus, *Breviarium* 22 mentions that Gordian was returning, victorious from his war against the Persians when he was murdered by Philip. For all these sources see M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A Documentary History*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, pp. 36-45.

3. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

4. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

sum of gold as war reparations, amounting to 500,000 denarii.¹ The territories which now the Sasanians were able to hold were most of Mesopotamia and Armenia.²

In 252 CE, however, there was a second campaign against a Roman force of 60,000 at Barbalissus, which ended in total defeat of the Romans.³ The reason for this campaign by Šābuhr I is explained by the following phrase which draws our attention (ŠKZ 9):

W kysr TWB MK[DB]Wt OL 'rmny wyns OBDt
ud Kēsar did *druxt* ō Armin winās kerd
"and Caesar again lied (and) did harm to Armenia"⁴

What does this phrase mean in the context of the pre-Christian Armenian and Pre-Islamic Iranian worldview? I would like to suggest that the phrase inscribed by the order of Šābuhr I had two functions, one of which was the expression of the Sasanian Persians' moral cause for the second war with the Roman Empire. The first reason for war was centered on a treaty signed after the death of Gordian, between Philip and Šābuhr I, ceding the control of Armenia to the Sasanians. The second reason for going to war was the oath taken in the Armeno-Iranian world which was sworn to Mithra, the deity of oath and contract, which mandated that Šābuhr I take the offensive, because of the other emperor's reneging / breaking of contract, thus becoming a *mihr-druj*.

The Armenian and Iranian Ethical and Contractual Worldview:

In the first century CE the Parthians and the Romans had come to an agreement over Armenia, in which the king of Armenia was picked by the former and crowned by the latter. We have a vivid description of King Tirdates' coronation by the emperor Nero from Dio (Book LXII) which was beautifully retold by the nineteenth century Orientalist George Rawlinson.⁵ The Armenian king Tirdates, unlike any other king who came before the Roman emperor, came forth with his sword, which must have had important symbolic meaning for both sides, and met Nero in Naples. There he made the following oath (Dio LXII):

"Master, I am the descendant of Arsaces, brother of the kings of kings
Vologaesús and Pacorus, and thy slave. And I have come to thee, my
god (θεός), to worship thee as I do Mithras (Μίθρας)..."

Here Tirdates was promising loyalty, and by mentioning Mithra he was most probably saying that he was bound through the deity of covenant to Nero. Going against such an oath would have made Tirdates a *mihr-druj* which was punishable not

1. ŠKZ 5/4/9.

2. Zonaras XII, 19; Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 7 which talks only about Armenia, see Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

3. ŠKZ 12/9/11.

4. Ph. Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt* (ŠKZ), Band I, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, London, 1999, Passage 9, p. 28.

5. G. Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of Parthia*, New York, 1872, pp. 281-283.

only politically, but also as a religious and ethical sin. Why was Tirdates bound by an oath (Armenian *uxr*) to Mithra? This is because Mithra (Armenian Mher / Mihr) along with Ahuramazdā (Armenian Aramazd / Ohrmazd) and Anahita (Armenian Anahit / Anāhīd) were the great deities of pre-Christian Armenia.¹ The authority on pre-Christian Armenia, James R. Russell, has shown the importance of these deities which, although similar in origin to those in the Iranian world, were also separated from them by native influences. The very word for temple in pre-Christian Armenia is *mehean* from Old Iranian **mithrayana-*. The temple dedicated to Mher / Mihr in Armenia once stood at Bagayarič² and was intact at least until the fourth century CE. It is only then that, on the behest of Saint Gregory, king Tirdates began to destroy "the former ancestral deities of his forefathers, falsely called gods."³ Agathangelos provides us with a detailed finale of the temple at Bagayarič:

"He (Tirdates) came to the temple of Mihr, called the son of Aramazd, to the village called Bagayarič in the Parthian tongue. Then he destroyed it down to its foundations."⁴

But before this event, which signaled the beginning of the breakdown of the shared religious tradition between Armenia and Iran, Mithra was quite important. In fact we see time and time again that the Armenians feel bound to their oath, which was taken to Mithra, to the Iranian or Roman rulers. In the fourth century when the Iranian king wrote to his Armenian counterpart, the very idea of oath conjured up only Mithra. A good example of such a tradition is found in Moses Khorenats'i where Šābuhr II in a letter tells king Tiran:

"The most valiant of the Mazdeans (*Mazdeants' k'aj*), the equal of the sun (*bardzakits' aregakan*), Shapuh, king of kings, in our bounty have remembered our dear brother Tiran, king of Armenia, and send many greetings... And we shall in no way harm your kingdom, we swear by the great god Mihr..."⁵

Khorenats'i tells us that the reason for which Tiran trusted Šābuhr II was that "he lost his senses," but a more probable supposition is that the Iranian king had sworn to Mithra to not harm him, and Tiran felt assured of his safety because he understood the importance of swearing to Mithra. This means that an Armenian writer in a Christian milieu could not, or intentionally did not, clearly understand the socio-religious implication of this oath to Mithra that binds the two people. In the late sixth century CE when Wahrām Čōbin had taken flight to Azerbaijan, he was surprised that he was not aided in his campaign against Xūsro II by the Armenians. According to Sebēos to persuade the Armenians he wrote a letter which stated:

1. J.R. Russell, "Pre-Christian Armenian Religion," in *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 374.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

3. Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary by R.W. Thomson, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1976, 778.

4. Agathangelos, 790.

5. Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary on the Literary Sources by R.W. Thomson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1978, 17.

“If I shall be victorious, I swear by the great god Aramazd,
by the lord Sun and the Moon, by fire and water by Mihr
and all the gods, that I will give you the kingdom of Armenia,
and whoever you wish you may make king for yourselves.”¹

The oath taken by Wahrām Čōbin is repeated by Thomas Artsruni.² Now Wahrām Čōbin would not invoke these deities if they were not understood in the Armenian world, even in the late sixth century CE. This becomes clear when we remember that these deities were the “ancestral deities of his (king Tirdates) forefathers, falsely called gods.”³ The mention of worship of such a deity as Mithra in Armenia is again clear from Elishē’s testimony. When Mihr-Narseh made the proclamation that Armenians must revert to Zoroastrianism, the Christian Armenians respond to his letter by stating that “we no longer believe in fables,” suggesting that they once did believe in these “fables,”⁴ and the “fable” discussed has to do with Mithra / Mihr.⁵

Conclusion

The Zoroastrian priests speaking in the fifth century CE to the Armenians say that Mithra is evenhanded and impartial and that he has no deceit.⁶ In the Zoroastrian world, Mithra resides over contract, but also over Order, not only in the material world (Middle Persian *gētīg*) but also the spiritual realm (Middle Persian *mēnōg*).⁷ In a sense Mithra / Mihr upholds Order (*Aša / Arta*),⁸ and Truth. Thus, those who disrupt this order are in violation of cosmic Order and represent Chaos. Oktor Skjærvø has observed that as God ensured peace and prosperity and Order in the cosmic world, the king mirrored his function in the corporeal world.⁹ I suggest this idea was very much in existence in the Sasanian period. Šābuhr I most probably couched the conflict with the Roman emperor in such a worldview. In this context the Roman emperor is a *mihr-druj* “breaker of oath” and thus an instigator of Chaos. Then the Iranian king, on behalf of his Armenian brothers who are also Zoroastrian and who uphold the tents of Mithra / Mihr, has to go to battle because wrong has been done to Armenia. Returning to the Ka’be-ye Zardošt inscription, thus, *droxt* used by Šābuhr I belongs to the Zoroastrian moral terminology, where to deceive or

1. *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, translated, with notes, by R.W. Thomson, Historical commentary by J. Howard-Johnston, Assistance from T. Greenwood, Part I, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1999, 78-79, p. 21.

2. Thomas Artsruni, *History of the House of the Artsrunik*, Translation and Commentary by R.W. Thomson, Detroit, 1985, Book II, p. 153.

3. Agathangelos, 778.

4. Elishē, p. 35.

5. The discussion in regard to Mithra being born of a mortal mother and being born of noble gods which evokes a Christian tradition in regard to Jesus, Elishē, p. 35.

6. Elishē, p. 165.

7. This idea invokes the early *Mitra-Varuna* pair whose association was certain with *tar* “Order.”

8. Gershevitch, *op. cit.*, p. 2; J. Amouzegar, “Paymān,” *The Spirit of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli*, eds. T. Daryæe and M. Omidzadeh, Costa Mesa, 2004, pp. 34-35.

9. P.O. Skjærvø, “Ahura Mazdā and Ārmaiti, Heaven and Earth, in the Old Avesta,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 122, no. 2, 2002, p. 400.

speaking falsehood, or to lie and, more specifically, to break a treaty make one evil, giving cause for retaliation.¹

In this conflict, then, there is a dualistic ethical worldview involved, where the Sasanians represent Order and the Romans represent Chaos by harming Armenia, where the cult of Mithra was in existence. One may suggest that the King of Kings was the representative of Ohrmazd / Armaz on earth, while the Roman emperor represented Ahreman / Arhmn. An earlier pictorial evidence for this worldview exists with Ardaxšīr I's rock relief at Naqš-e Rostam, showing that king having vanquished the Parthian ruler Ardawān / Artabanūs V. One may take this issue further and suggest that then *Ērānšahr* became the embodiment of Order while the Rome and the Romans represented the Lie and Chaos by breaking their oath about Armenia. In this way the Romans replaced the Parthians.

Something must be said of the Roman views on Mithra / Mithras. Indeed, we do not find much in the way of Romans swearing to this deity. Recent works on Mithraism have been mainly reactions against the influence of the Iranian traits,² which miss several points of influence even if one accepts that Armeno-Iranian Mithra was completely different from Roman Mithras.³ The difficulty in seeing the relation is mainly due to the different and varied nature of the sources in the East and the West, and furthermore the fact that Armenia acted as the conduit, where Mithraism was encountered by the Roman Legion XV Appolinaris.⁴

In relation to oath and Mithraism in the West the difficulty is that the concept of "mystery oath," which one swore with respect to a deity of his/her preference.⁵ Indeed there does not seem to have been the need for the Romans to publicly swear to Mithras, as in Roman Mithraism the process was a personal and communal ceremony in caves with a group of men. Thus, we can not detect to whom exactly oaths were taken and when, if ever, they were taken to Mithras. The Romans of the third century, however, should have known that they had broken their oath / treaty, but the Iranians had placed this breakage of covenant in a Zoroastrian worldview which was little, if at all, understood by their enemy. In *Mihr Yašt* (*Yašt* 10), Mithra carries the epithet *karšo.rāzah-* "Director of (boundary) lines," and the Romans certainly had crossed the boundary with Armenia as far as the Iranians were concerned.

1. For *droxt* see H.S. Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, Part II: Glossary, Wiesbaden, 1974, p. 67.

2. For the view that the Roman cult of Mithras was very much influenced by Iranian Mithra see G. Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World with special regard to their Iranian Background," *La Persia e il mondo Greco-Romano*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1966, pp. 433-455. For the reaction to such an idea and its denial see M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras, The God and His Mysteries*, Routledge, New York, 2001.

3. For these traits see J.R. Russell, "The Craft and Mithraism Reconsidered," in *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 308.

4. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, p. 268.

5. W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 50.

I believe the Avestan nature of Mithra still appears in some Roman reliefs, such as the one from Virunum in Noricum where Mithras and Sol (Sun) shake hands in the form of a pact of friendship.¹ The Avestan Mithra was also the all seen, like the Invincible Sun (*Sol Invictus*), traversing the sky to watch over oaths. How these correspondences would have been accidental is difficult to explain.² Whether the Romans understood the Armeno-Iranian oath to Mithra or not, the topoi of lying and doing wrong to Armenia in the inscription attempted to create a moral justification for Šābuhr I's "shock and awe" campaign against the Romans. For Šābuhr I, the Romans had lied and harmed Armenia, thus representing chaos which made it incumbent upon the Zoroastrian king to punish them and bring back order.

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1. M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras, The God and His Mysteries*, Routledge, New York, 2001, pp. 150-151.

2. MacDowall has observed that the cult of Mithras was hidden behind the figure of *Sol Invictus*, "Sol Invictus and Mithra: Some Evidence from the Mint of Rome," *Mysteria Mithrae*, Roma-Leiden, 1979, p. 568; Callieri suggests the same may hold true for Sasanian Iran as well, where Mithra's name abounds, but his image is rare, "On the Diffusion of Mithra Images in Sasanian Iran: New Evidence from a Seal in the British Museum," *East and West*, vol. 40, nos. 1-4, 1990, pp. 88-89.

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