



“The Mazdakites, the ‘Ayyārs and the Mithraists”

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**Abstract**

No revolutionary movement in Iranian Late Antiquity has attracted as much attention as the fascinating and enigmatic Mazdakite uprising of the late fifth century. The scholarly consensus about these has it that 1) they engaged in *ibāḥat al-nisā*, sharing of wives; 2) advocated the sharing of property and 3) that their past time was wine imbibing and merrymaking. I shall argue here that, as Shaki correctly suspected but did not pursue the topic, the description of the Mazdakite in our primary sources (the Letter of Tansar, Ibn Qutayba, Ṭabarī, Dīnkard, Shahrestānī), actually follows the praxis of the ‘*ayyārs*, chivalrous men and women who practiced celibacy, lived together in communes of men and women, usually in underground cities, and drank wine as part of their sacral ritual. The detractors of the Mazdakites heaped on these accusations that distorted their realities, realities that on a populist level, and in times of crisis of the late fifth century might have in fact devolved into a distortion of the praxis of genuine Mithraists as well. That they continued, appropriate to their praxis, in the form of Khurramdīn movements is also part of their story. That they were launched as collaborators of the Parthian Mehrānids (notice the name), against the Parthian Kārenids who were suffocating the young Kavād during the last decade of the fifth century is also part of their fascinating history.

**Keywords:** Mazdakites, Ayyars, Mithraists



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## چکیده

در دوران متاخر باستانی ایرانی هیچ جنبش انقلابی‌ای به اندازه جنبش جالب توجه و در عین حال مبهم مزدک در قرن پنجم میلادی بحث برانگیز نبوده است. جمله دانشوران بر این یافته‌ها متفق‌اند که: ۱. مزدکیان به اباحه‌النساء یعنی اشتراک زنان معتقد بودند؛ ۲. مروج اشتراک ملک بودند ۳. و اوقات فراغتشان را در عیش و نوش سپری می‌کردند. در این پژوهش بیان می‌دارم توصیفاتی که از مزدکیان در مآخذ دسته اول (نامه تنسر، ابن قتیبه، طبری، دینکرد، شهرستانی) یافت می‌شود، در واقع آداب و رسوم عیاران را بیان می‌کند، چنان‌که شکی نیز به درستی دریافت بود، اما کار را ادامه نداد. عیاران زنان و مردان دلیری بودند که ازدواج نمی‌کردند و در کنار هم در جامعه‌ای متشکل از زنان و مردان، عموماً در مکان‌های زیر زمینی، می‌زیستند و شراب را به عنوان بخشی از مناسک خود می‌نوشیدند. این اتهامات را منتقدین مزدکیان گردآوری کرده‌اند که از واقعیت بسیار دور است، زیرا این واقعیات در سطحی پوپولیستی و در زمان بحران‌های قرن پنجم میلادی شاید اصلاً تحریفی از مناسک مهرپرستان نیز باشد. هم‌چنین درباره آن‌ها گفته شده است که در ادامه حیات خود، جنبش‌های خرم‌دین را رقم زده‌اند. نیز گفته‌اند که این جنبش‌ها در وهله نخست برای کمک به خاندان پارتی مهران (به نامشان دقت شود) علیه خاندان پارتی کارن پا گرفتند، خاندانی که کواد جوان را در آخرین دهه قرن پنجم میلادی در تنگنا قرار داده بود.

کلیدواژه‌ها: مزدکیان، عیاران، مهرپرستان

The Mazdakite uprising has been the subject of extensive research throughout the past century. The literature is vast, making it impossible to cover it comprehensively in this introductory note on the topic.<sup>1</sup> What follows, therefore, is yet another perspective on the so-called “Mazdakite” uprising, a devastating rebellion that was ostensibly led by one Mazdak-e Bāmdādān, against the Sasanian King, Kavād (488–496, 498/9–531).<sup>2</sup> In all probability the uprising began in the first part of Kavād’s reign, during 488 to 496, that is. What perhaps makes this proposal justifiable is the novel prism that it offers. It argues that the uprising should be put in the context of the Parthian dynasties’ relationship with the Sasanian Kings Pīrūz (459–484) and Kavād. The Parthian dynastic families in question, the Mehrāns<sup>3</sup> and the Kārens, were only the prominent players in this relationship,<sup>4</sup> for as at the inception of the Sasanian rise to power, so too at its demise, these Parthian dynasties were always major players in the affairs of the country,<sup>5</sup> frequently bringing the very Sasanian Kings to power or destroying these.<sup>6</sup> Our focus then is on the last decades of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. There are three parts to my thesis:

First, I argue that the Mazdakite uprising had a very specific political context: it was an uprising initially launched by the Mehrānid Parthian dynastic family and their dynast, Shāpūr Rāzī, against the Parthian Kārenids, Sukhrā and his agnatic family. During the first rule of Kavād (488–496), the Kārens were for all practical purposes ruling the Sasanian Empire. There is very little doubt about this suffocating power of the Parthian Kārenids over the Sasanian King. The sources are unanimous in confirming it.<sup>7</sup> Second, I argue that that the revolution was in fact an *‘ayyār* uprising initially instigated by Shāpūr Mehrān Rāzī. Third, I contend, as I had already argued elsewhere, that these *‘ayyārs* were Mithraists.<sup>8</sup>

So, what was the story and what were the political and social conditions of Iran at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century? The second half of the fifth century were horrid times for the population of Western Asia. Draughts had decimated lands, vegetation, and cattle alike. Earthquakes had erupted in Iran and the rest of Western Asia. For the population of the Sasanian Empire, as for the Eastern Romans, these were woeful times! Hunger, thirst, and disease had afflicted the territories. Among other matters, draught had led to migration movements not only towards the Sasanian Empire, but also towards Eastern Rome (Byzantium). The Germanic migrations had already created havoc for what had become the western and eastern Roman Empire in 395 CE. On the northeastern corners of the Sasanian Empire, the Kidarites, Hephthalites, and other eastern Iranian people, were gathering, and wars of the Sasanians<sup>9</sup> against these were also in full swing. Turks were soon to appear to see the end of the Hephthalites. Sources pertaining to this period of Sasanian history blamed the Sasanian King Pīrūz for all these calamities.

Most of our literary histories<sup>10</sup> pertaining to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Iran, considered the draught and other calamities of the times a sign of the injustices perpetrated by the Sasanian King, Pīrūz. We are told that when they put the King on the throne, rain stopped, rivers dried up and a drought devastated the land. For seven

years continuously, we are told, the land was stricken by famine. “Streams, *qanāts*, and springs dried up, trees and reed beds became desiccated ... Dearth, hunger, hardship, and various calamities became general for the people of his realm.”<sup>11</sup> But how were the young Kings’ hands involved in this?

Well for one thing, Pīrūz had engaged in a civil war against his brother Hormozd III (r. 457–459). Some sources maintain that recognizing the desperate conditions of his “flock”, Pīrūz then implored his Lord to bestow his mercy on him and his subjects and to send down His rain. So, God aided him by causing it to rain ... Pīrūz’s land once more had a profusion of water ... and the trees were restored to a flourishing state.”<sup>12</sup> The King, we are later informed, began to act with justice. He suspended land and capitation taxation, abolished corvées, forbade hoarding of grain and other foodstuffs, and ordered the rich to share their wealth with the poor. “In this way,” we are informed, “Pīrūz ordered the affairs of his subjects during that period of dearth and hunger so that no one perished of starvation except for one man[!].” Once Pīrūz’s land was prosperous again, however, he stumbled, once more, by attacking the King of the Hephthalites, Akhshūnwār.

Now, Pīrūz owed his throne to the Parthian dynasty of the Mehrāns and one of their scions, Rahām.<sup>13</sup> “Upon the death of Yazdgird II, when the army of Aryans had become divided in two,” according to Elishē, “*the Parthian Mehrānid Rahām was in command of one of the armies of the realm* [my italics]. Rahām defeated and massacred the army of the “king’s elder son [Hormozd III] ... and capturing the king’s son ordered him to be put to death on the spot... The surviving troops he brought into submission, unifying the whole army of the Aryans.” Rahām then “crowned his own protégé Peroz.”<sup>14</sup> To be noted here is the fact that the Mehrāns had the control of *one* of the two armies of the realm at the time.

The significant part played by the house of Mehrān during Pīrūz’s reign is corroborated by Armenian historians. In fact, Pīrūz seems to have established what the Armenian historians term foster relationships with the house of Mehrān. According to Łazar P’arpec’i, at the inception of Pīrūz’s reign his foster brother (*dayeakordi*, son of one’s tutor) was a certain Y’ezatvšnasp (Īzad Gushnasp) “whom he loved very dearly.” This Īzad Gushnasp was the son of Aštāt from the Mehrān family. Father and son played a prominent part in the significant revolt of the Armenians in 451–452, and, together with other, seemingly more significant members of the Mehrān family, also in the course of Pīrūz’s reign. Łazar P’arpec’i goes into the details of the Pīrūz/Mehrānid relationship as do Procopius and Ibn Isfandiyār.<sup>15</sup> The Mehrāns were indeed no strangers to the functioning of the Sasanian Kingship. At a number of junctures in Sasanian history, they assumed center stage side by side of the Kings!

Pīrūz undertook three wars against the Hephthalites. When one of these wars proved inconclusive,<sup>16</sup> Pīrūz sued for peace. In exchange, Akhshūnwār made him swear “*with an oath and agreement sworn before God*, that he would never in the future mount raids against him.”<sup>17</sup> Pīrūz agreed. Once back in Iran, however, he

decided to renew hostilities. He broke his oath against the wishes of “*his viziers and close advisors*, who argued that commencing war *would involve breaking the agreement.*”<sup>18</sup> Having marched out, Pīrūz was confronted with Akhshūnwār, who “publicly adduced before Fayrūz the document with the agreement he had written ... and *warned him about his oath* and his undertaking.” Pīrūz’s army and his followers “*were, however, in a weakened and defeatist state because of the agreement that had existed between them and the Hephthalites.*” It was in his last war against the Hephthalites that the Sasanian forces underwent a heavy defeat. The King himself was killed. His young son, Kavād and the rest of his family fell into captivity. The same with his treasury!

While the Parthian Mehrānid were co-rulers of the Sasanian King Pīrūz and would come to play crucial roles in subsequent Sasanian and post-Sasanian history,<sup>19</sup> another ancient Parthian dynastic family, the Kārens,<sup>20</sup> had once again begun their own rise to power during the rule of the King.<sup>21</sup> Upon hearing about the King’s death at the hand of the Hephthalites in 484, sources tell us, the chief dynast of the Kāren house, Sukhrā, takes over the administration of the Sasanian Empire. The Kārenid Sukhrā puts Valāsh (484-488) on the throne,<sup>22</sup> amasses a strong army and embarks on a heroic mission against the Hephthalites in order to avenge King Pīrūz and retrieve the royal family. In Ferdowsī and other sources, after avenging the death of Pīrūz and returning to the capital in the company of Kavād, the Kārenid Sukhrā becomes the true ruler of the Sasanian realm. Sukhrā gets the lion’s share of Ferdowsī’s attention in this account. He is the hero responsible for restoring kingship. All the other grandees of the empire are at his command, all the affairs of the country under his control.<sup>23</sup> With a juvenile King on the throne, Sukhrā rules the Empire. It is as if Kavād is not King. None have access to the King except Sukhrā, and even the clergy are not under Kavād’s authority. Sukhrā is “in charge of government of the kingdom and the management of affairs... [T]he people come to Sukhrā and undertake all their dealings with him, treating Kavād as a person of no importance and regard his commands with contempt.”<sup>24</sup> Rumor has it that the king rules only in name, for neither the treasury nor the army are under his control.<sup>25</sup> No one heeds his orders. Those privy to Kavād enquire into the reasons behind his complacency. The King retorts that he had no army to speak of. For the military is under Sukhrā’s control.<sup>26</sup> It is he who solicits the armies of other Parthian dynasties for war.

In short, during the initial part of Kavād’s rule (488-496 CE), any action attributed to the Sasanian King Kavād should be credited to the Parthian Kārenid Sukhrā, his family, and his dynasty. All sources, foreign and native, including the *Khwādāy Nāmeḥ* traditions found in Arabic or Persian, attest to this, providing detailed evidence of the Kārenids’ influence.

Two issues need to be kept in mind as far as the Parthian dynasts were concerned.<sup>27</sup> First, the Parthian dynasts each had a kingdom of their own—namely the extensive lands which they owned and through which they garnered substantial

wealth. They naturally had their own palaces, “oral historians,” namely the *gūsāns*, bureaucracies, and most importantly their militaries. As the Sasanians never had a substantial standing army of their own, the upper echelons of the Parthian dynasties, their princes and nobility of rank, came to form the cavalry of the army that the Parthian dynasties normally provided for the Sasanian Kings.<sup>28</sup> Their peasantry came to form the infantry of the Sasanian army. A second characteristic of the Pahlav dynasts and an extension of the first, therefore, was their control of independent sources of manpower. The names of these primary dynasts, these kings of the King of Kings, all rendered differently in various linguistic traditions, also fill the roster of leaders of Sasanian engagements with the enemy.

Ferdowsī makes it abundantly clear that the King lacked the manpower with which to confront Sukhrā. In fact, Kavād shirked from the possibility of sending troops against Sukhrā, had he been able to, for this would have made Sukhrā an even more formidable enemy and would lead him to rebellion.<sup>29</sup> Ferdowsī and other sources<sup>30</sup> indicate that after *four or five* years of Sukhrā's "Kingship," the young Kavād matures and becomes unsettled about the Kāren's suffocating hold on his administration and his royal office.<sup>31</sup> If, in fact, Kavād was 16 years old when he ascended the throne,<sup>32</sup> as the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and Dīnawarī inform us, then five years into his reign would make him a young 20-21 year old King. The Mazdakite revolt then must have begun around 493 and took place before 502/503, when Kavād (read his Parthian dynasts) also began their wars against the Byzantines. Now when the young King complained to other grandees of his realm that he did not have an army, nor a commander in chief (*razmkhāh*), with whom to confront Sukhrā and his powerful army. Kavād, however, was reminded that he did in fact still possess loyal subjects who were powerful. Which then was this powerful “army” and who were its *razmkhāhs*? Well, this was our well-known and powerful Parthian Mehrān family and their chief dynast Shāpūr Rāzī. The sources are unanimous in calling the Mehrānid protagonist Shāpūr of Rayy, a clear reference to the Mehrānid power base in Ṭabaristān, of which Rayy was the chief important city. So, who did they recruit besides their regular armies? Shāpūr collected not only the armies of other discontented nobles, but also a large mercenary army. This last was an *‘ayyār* army, with which he sets out against Sukhrā, the powerful usurper of Kavād's kingship. It is at this point that I argue that the so-called Mazdakite rebellion begins. Specifically, the Mehrāns solicited the aid of the *‘ayyār* brother and sisterhoods, in undoing the Kāren's stranglehold on the Sasanian King; it were these *‘ayyār* bands that became the protagonists of the “Mazdakite revolution.”

Before proceeding it must be mentioned at the outset that governments soliciting *‘ayyār* help as mercenaries was to remain a practice under later dynasties in Iran. The Saffarids were themselves of *‘ayyār* stock. The conflict of the brothers Amīn and Ma‘mūn involved the *‘ayyār*s in Iraq<sup>33</sup>, and the Buyids who had their capital in Rayy, also used them as mercenaries. Popular literature about the *‘ayyār*s of the *Abū Muslim Nāmeḥ*s spread across Iran, Anatolia and the sub-continent in

Persian, Ottoman and Urdu languages, in the medieval and early modern period. The chief protagonist of the *Ḥamzeh Nāmeḥ* was likewise an *‘ayyār*. The *‘ayyārs* were part of the fabric of Iranian society from early on! At any rate, it were these *‘ayyārs* who certainly formed a substantial part of the forces that Shāpūr Rāzī brought to bear to the war arena against the Kārenid Sukhrā. The description of their activities bears a definite and uncanny resemblance to the description of the hostile sources of the Mazdakite uprising.

To go back to our narrative about Sukhrā, the Kārenid dynast is defeated and eventually killed. The Kārens lose their control over their ancestral domains in Media and Nihāvand. And Sukhrā's sons have to flee eastwards.

Our claim that the Mazdakites were in fact *‘ayyārs*, as we will further explicate here, might not be well-taken. But one cannot ignore the sources that also make such a claim. There are sources at our disposal that directly use the term *‘ayyār* for describing the participants in the Mazdakite uprising. Chronologically one of the earliest of these is the *Letter of Tansar*, as it appears in Ibn Isfandīyār's *Tārīkh-e Ṭabaristān*.<sup>34</sup> Now, there is very little doubt that the *Letter of Tansar* is predominantly a 6<sup>th</sup> century propaganda piece that describes the conditions under which a rebellion takes place. Clearly describing the Mazdakite uprising in a mercantile context in reference to the Pahlav lands, where populations were also heavily engaged in trade besides agriculture,<sup>35</sup> the Letter goes on to depict the conditions of the times. When “*greed* became manifest and corruption became rife and men ceased to submit to religion, reason, and the state,” Tansar explains to Jushnāsf (Gushnasp), then the “populace [*‘amma*], like demons, set at large, abandoned their tasks, and were scattered through the cities in theft and riot, roguery and evil pursuits, *until it came to this, that slaves (bandegān) ruffled it over their masters (khudāvandegān) and wives laid commands upon their husbands.*”<sup>36</sup> Significantly the term used for roguery is in fact *‘ayyārī*. Besides the *Letter of Tansar*, the *Denkard* is yet a second another source that refers to the Mazdakites as *‘ayyārs*.<sup>37</sup> In the excellent translations of the Pahlavi texts, one sees that *Denkard* 3.41 also actually *uses* the very term of *‘ayyārs* to refer to the demonic Mazdakites.

So, who were the *‘ayyārs* and why do some of our sources at least call the Mazdakites *‘ayyārs*? Well, as we stated in our second thesis, the praxis of the Mazdakites mimics those of the *‘ayyārs*. Therefore, part of the population that Shāpūr Rāzī brought into the war arena, the so-called Mazdakites, were in fact *‘ayyārs*.

Ṭabarī gives a rather similar depiction, as do other hostile sources on the Mazdakites.<sup>38</sup> “God has established daily sustenance on earth for His servants,” claim the Mazdakites as saying, “to divide out among themselves with equal shares, but men have oppressed each other regarding it ... [We are] going to take from the rich to give to the poor ... those who have an excessive amount of wealth, womenfolk and goods have no more rights to them than anyone else.” The lower ranks of the society “took advantage of this and banded together.”<sup>39</sup> “They held their possessions and families in common ... fornicators were able to indulge their lusts.”<sup>40</sup>

Ibn Nadīm gives yet another specimen of the genre. The Mazdakites, he maintains, believed that one had “to enjoy [life], be concupiscent, indulge in eating and drinking, be kind towards one another, sleep with one another ... and share their wives and families with one another ... In spite of all this they did not believe in killing and harassing people ... Balkhī has gathered all the information about their debauchery, lust, and their prayer ritual.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there is the *Ma‘ārif* of Ibn Qutayba’s depiction of the Mazdakites. The passage was examined by Shaki. Here is the passage. Ibn Qutayba gives us a set of information that he has heard orally.

“And they said that God has given the riches of the world to be shared equally by his worshipper, but the people did wrong to each other and some appropriated and some appropriated the property of others. And we divide them among the people and return to the poor what is theirs by right from the property of the rich and they began to take possession of lay hands on the house, women, and property of the people.”<sup>42</sup>

Significantly in this same tradition, Ibn Qutayba,<sup>43</sup> identifies Sukhrā and the Karins as the main target of the Mazdakite uprising, which in fact proves the point argued here. Now Shaki makes the following crucial observation<sup>44</sup> when assessing Ibn Qutayba’s depiction of the Mazdakites. The “egalitarian principle of the *javān-mardān* or *‘ayyārān* of the Islamic period seems to have been a continuation of this aspect of Mazdakism,” Shaki maintained. He is partly right in this! Ibn Qutayba was describing the *‘ayyārs* of the “Mazdakite” rebellion. And these *‘ayyārs* were indeed the *‘ayyārān* of the “Islamic period.” But the relation was in fact the reverse. Even the Mazdakite *‘ayyārs* had a far more ancient heritage than we are led to believe.

Two issues have been particularly vexing for our medieval sources depicting the Mazdakites, and the modern scholarship that has been based itself on these. The most outrageous ostensible practice of the Mazdakites for their medieval and modern observers alike, was surely the accusation that the Mazdakites practiced the sharing of wives,<sup>45</sup> *Ibāha al-Nisā’*. These promiscuous assault of the Mazdakites on the women of the “nobility,” ostensibly created a *lesser, bastard* class of nobility on the heels of the Mazdakite uprising! A second accusation thrown at the Mazdakites was that they inaugurated the first communist movement in history. Did they practice sharing of wealth and property? There is little doubt about this. Did they really practice *Ibāhat al-nisā*, however? Evidence turns this last assertion topsy turvy.

In search of evidence, before introducing the epic of *Samak-e ‘ayyār* in more detail and giving a sense of what it contains on Mithraism and *‘ayyārī*, it is appropriate to quote a passage from the *Samak-e ‘ayyār* and compare it with one of our sources on the Mazdakites (read *‘ayyārs*). We recall Ibn Qutayba’s depiction of the Mazdakites, the same one that smacked of *javanmardī* and *‘ayyārī* for Mansour Shaki:

“And they said that God has given the riches of the world to be shared equally by his worshipper, but the people did wrong to each other, and some appropriated the property of others. And we divide them among the people

and return to the poor what is theirs by right from the property of the rich and [we] began to take possession of lay hands on the house, women, and property of the people.<sup>46</sup>

We may compare this to the following passage in the epic of *Samak-e 'ayyār*: *Armanshāh has no brains!* "He does not know that the very foundation of the world has been set thus: no-one brings riches into this world, once given birth by a mother. All is procured through positions. It is usurped, stolen ... and devoured, until one is made king through the resources of the people. The wise know that this is the affair of the world."<sup>47</sup>

Here the *Samak-e 'ayyār* mimics the depiction of the Mazdakites, previously given by Ibn Qutayba almost verbatim. Now, what is this epic of *Samak-e 'ayyār*, that almost exactly duplicates the description of the Mazdakites and those of the *'ayyārs*, and to top it off, even, incredibly, explains a good deal of Roman Mithraism? And why does the author consider it to be one of the only literary grails, as of now, for understanding Roman and Iranian Mithraism, *'ayyārī*, and Mazdakism?

While the Roman Mithras cult, which likewise formed secret societies, has left substantial archeological relics, namely numerous temples built wherever the Roman army went, these have not lent themselves to a deeper understanding of the cult. At the end of the cave-like temples of the Roman Mithraist stood scenes of Tauroctony -- the depiction of Mithra slaying a bull, with various animals that are either consuming the blood or simply watching. The symbolism of the Roman Mithraic associations are varied. No two Mithraea contain all the symbolism of another in various regions that they find themselves. Still the mass of temples that were built where the Roman armies went from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries have one shortcoming. They defy understanding!<sup>48</sup>

The secret Iranian Mithraic societies left no such archeological relics behind. What the Iranian Mithraists did leave for posterity, however, were not any material cultural evidence, but fortunately, an extremely important and unique epic romance that is the holy grail that *not only explains the nature of Roman Mithraism*<sup>49</sup> perfectly, but also apprises us of the ideology and praxis of the Mithraist in general, east or west. This holy grail, as I have argued elsewhere, is the multi-volume epic romance of *Samak-e 'ayyār*. It was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, during the Turkic Seljuq period (1040-1157 C.E.) that the epic of *Samak-e 'ayyār* was finally and actually put to pen in Iran, at a time when Iran was far from majority Muslim, although the prevalence of Turkish side by side of the Persian clearly indicates acculturation in a Turkic political culture. This Seljuq chronology is the first diachronic reckoning that the text gives of itself. Yet this is clearly a flawed chronology. The romance of *Samak* is thoroughly and very clearly, non-Islamic, most definitely pertaining to the pre-Islamic period of Iranian history, more specifically to classical antiquity. No hint of an Islamic worldview, norms, and ethics, practically no trace of Islamic institutions can be found in it. In fact, in an epic narrative that spans more than 2000

pages, almost all names are *non-Islamic*, Persian, names, spanning the spectrum of significant subtexts for our purposes here. Some of the most significant names appearing in the epic, moreover, are highly emblematic: Khurshid Shah, the Sun King; his beloved, Māhparī (the Moon angel); Ātashak (the small fire); the semi-constant female ‘*ayyār* and companion to Samak, our hero, Rūzafzūn (she who adds to the brightness of the day); Sorkhvard (the red, as in color red, student); Razmyār (the friend of battle!); etc., etc. Even an onomastic study of Samak promises to bear significant results.

Without giving a proper explanation for it, the Iranian editor of the work, the late Khanlari, had already postulated, quite accurately, that the narrative of *Samak* probably belonged to the post-Alexandrian, Parthian period (247 B.C. – 228 C.E.) of Iranian history.<sup>50</sup> We have other epics or epic romances extant, such as *Vīs o Rāmīn*, the *Shāhnāmeh*<sup>51</sup> and many others non-extant, that hark back to the Parthian period, so this assertion is by no means an oddity. Reading *Samak* in fact confirms this hypothesis of Khanlari. For, in a number of places, the text gives a second chronology for its own production, claiming that it belongs to three hundred and seventy (370) years prior to the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, who, Islamic tradition maintains, was born in 570 CE. Thus, the epic itself dates itself to about 200 C. E, the late Parthian period of Iranian history (the birth of Muhammad, incidentally, is one of only few times that an Islamic indicator appears in the narrative). On numerous occasions, thus, the narrator positions us in a clearly defined chronological context that stops diachronic time *after* “Alexander the Roman,” and the inception of the story immediately afterwards, namely to the Parthian period.<sup>52</sup>

Being, as we will argue below, the account of a mystery cult where *secrecy* was one of its main tenants, we have only two copies of the manuscript extant, one in Persian and edited by the late Natil Khanlari, and significantly, one in Turkish. The very ethos of the Mithraist *ayyārs* and their conception of worldly existence is summed up in one of the segments of the epic. It is declared by one of the ‘*ayyārs* of the epic, namely Sorkh Kāfar (the red apostate of the epic), in a passage I already quoted above:

*Armanshāh has no brains!” He does not know that the very foundation of the world has been set thus: no-one brings riches into this world, once given birth by a mother. All is procured through positions. It is usurped, stolen ... and devoured, until one is made king through the resources of the people. The wise know that this is the affair of the world.*<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere, I have argued that there is no doubt that the *ayyārs* formed in fact secret Mithraic societies, secret societies that unlike their Roman counterparts, admitted women in their midst.<sup>54</sup> These ‘*ayyārs* were part therefore of secret Mithraic brother and *sisterhoods*, with a set of praxes and ideals that closely replicated the praxis of the Mazdakite revolutionaries. The following points are intended as a summary of my prior investigations into Mithraic/*ayyār* associations:

- 1) They lived communally, men and women together in one community.
- 2) But men and women lived together after taking oaths of celibacy. The 'ayyār women in *Samak* made *sīgheh-ye khāhar-o barādarī* with their male counterparts sister/brotherhoods. The pre-condition for chastity was thus ideally assured for 'ayyār women (*beh govāhī-ye yazdān marā beh barādarī-ye khod qabūl kardī*).<sup>55</sup>
- 3) In order to perpetually form a bond in their camaraderie and their pursuit of justice of justice, oaths became central to the ethos of the *ayyārs*. To begin with, oaths are either taken to the generic God (Yazdān) who has created the world (*yazdān-e dādār kerdegār*), or, significantly to the light, the fire, and Mithra, *nūr o nār o mihr*. Oaths are also taken to the bread and salt of men (*nūn o namak-i mardān*), to the lives of the virtuous (*bih jān-i pākān*), and finally and not least, to the cup of the men (*qadaḥ-i mardān*, *qadah*, incidentally being a derivative of the Latin *cadus*), are stock oaths in the epic, as are oaths to the Sun, the Moon, and popularly, to the "seven planets"!
- 4) The 'ayyār associations were secret associations, with underground lives, as detailed in the Letter of Tansar to Jushnasf, where before entering the community, one had to pledge that they would not divulge the secrets (*rāz*) of their beliefs (*sogand bekhōr keh rāz-e man āshkārā nakonī va marā dar naspārī va bā dūst-e man dūst bāshī o bā doshman-e man doshman*).<sup>56</sup> Shaki noticed this and declared that "... although our texts evince their Bāṭiniyya principle, they do not expressly mention the term "esoteric." For this, Shaki maintained, "we have to turn to the *Shāhnāmeḥ* which, as we have noticed, has preserved most faithfully the original "Pahlavi" formulation and phrasing." According to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Shaki declares, in reply to Kavād, "concerning the religious position of Xāsraī," Mazdak states: "He knowest not the hidden meaning (*nehānī*) of this true path, he does not hold our faith." Shaki then declares that "NP *nehānī* Pahl. *nehānīh* " (hidden meaning) in all likelihood, meant the "esoteric meanings of the Avesta." That this was in fact not the case and the secrecy referred to are the secrecy of Mithraic associations, is by now somewhat clearer, I hope.
- 5) They were popular associations who's ideal was the pursuit of justice.
- 6) They were not after riches, but only good name (*nāma*). They took from the rich only to give to the poor.
- 7) As Shaki correctly argues, there were grades in these Mithraic Associations. The higher one gets within this ranking of gnosis, the closer one becomes to the one who has attained almost complete gnosis. The only source of inequity

amongst the 'ayyārs therefore was the degree to which one had achieved gnosis of the secrets of the sect, making a seven-tier hierarchy in their association.

- 8) Wine held a central place in 'ayyār associations. So much so that the terminology for having entered into the association is couched in terms of it. I have drunk to your happiness "*shādī khordeh-ye to-am*" is an identification mark of the 'ayyārs who join Samak's camp. Nīyāl, a recently initiated 'ayyār, tells Samak, for example, that "I have drunk to your happiness for I have heard the renown of your manliness and 'ayyārī." (*man to rā shādī khordeh-am bedān sabab keh āvazeh-ye mardī o 'ayyārī-ye to shenīdeh-am*). Yārokh, another recently initiated 'ayyār, explains for a comrade that 400 men have recently drunk to the happiness of Samak. Oaths to the cup of men (cf., the crater of Roman Mithraists), "I swear on the crater of men" (*sogand mīkhoram be qadah-i mardān*) is, therefore, a stock oath in the initiation ceremonies of Iranian Mithraists. Samak himself was suckled on wine in his infancy, a circumstance that afflicted him with periodic stomach problems in his youth. The cup of (wine) of the men attains gnostic status when in the hands of the 'ayyārs. "To have drunk to the happiness of someone" (*shādī khordeh-i kesī shodan*) means to be bonded to other Mithraists. Both Rūzafzūn---one of the central female characters of the narrative -- and Samak, in fact indulge in immoderate drinking, Rūzafzūn claiming on one occasion that she has never left a gathering without having gotten drunk. Search for repute rather than riches is a fundamental trait of 'ayyārī ethics. In fact, worldly possession, and the pursuit of this, is categorically denied in their motto: *man mardī nādāsht-e 'ayyār pīsseh-am, agar nānī yābam bekhoram vagar na mīgardam va khedmat-e 'ayyārān va javānmardān mīkonam va kārī gar mīkonam ...barāy-e nāmān mīkonam na az barāy-e nān*. This is the *nāma* of Roman Mithraists, the meaning of which has been open to controversy. In sum, this was a joyous religion. One drank to the happiness of one another and if one became inebriated, so be it.

The Pahlavi commentary to Vend. 3.41, Nask 19 is another native source that specifically gives evidence of these "Mazdakite" 'ayyār associations and articulates this aspect of their beliefs and praxis. There are groups, the commentary maintains, who believe that "robbing the rich to give to the worthy poor was a pious deed" (*ē dānēd ku duzīh nē abāyēd kardan bē pad e dārēd ku ka az tuwānzgān duzom ud ā driyāšān dahom im kerbag*). Although the commentator of the Vendidād considers such a robbery excusable from branding by the Mazdean Religion, the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmeh* (AWn,) K 2 6, 5 1. 1-9, regards it as tyranny: *kē-š pad gētē zūrgugāyīhā kard xwāstag az wehān āwurd ud ā wadān dād* "he who acted in this world \*tyrannically,

brought the property of the good people and gave it to the wicked.” The fact that Mazdak’s ostensible “surname” was Bāmdādān is also very telling. Bāmdād, as we know means dawn (*saḥar*). In Middle Persian, we are told, it is rendered as *bāmīg*, meaning significantly, shining ... eastern. That is something that is shining and comes from the east before the sun? I.e. the rays of the sun.

So, the ideals of the Mazdakite were the same as those of the Mithraist. Ibn Qutayba was in fact right. The Mazdakites did indulge in communal life, men and women did live together, not on account of their promiscuity, but because they made oaths of celibacy. There was probably very little bastardization of the elite! Their detractors accused them of these. Thus also, probably there was no lesser nobility created as a result of the Mazdakite uprising! They did take from the rich and gave to the poor on account of their egalitarian principles habitually, but especially during their revolutionary upheaval at the end of the first phase of Kavād/Kārenid rule. They formed secret societies, where maintaining their secrets was an essential part of their creed. They did indulge in wine in their gatherings and wine held a central place in their initiation ceremonies, hence their later name of Khurramdīns. This was in peaceful times. But they rebelled against the oppressive Kārens in a world where there was no peace.

As we already discussed, these were times when draught had decimated the land. Earthquakes had erupted in Iran and the rest of Western Asia.: these were woeful times! As Ṭabarī puts it, during Pīrūz’s reign, “the land was struck by famine. Streams, *qanāts*, and springs had dried up, trees and reed beds had become desiccated ... Dearth, hunger, hardship, and various calamities became general for the people of his realm.” And thus, the ideals of Mithraic/Mazdakite societies were put in the context of desperate times for desperate people.

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## Notes

1. The author hopes to deal with these in a more extensive version of this article to be forthcoming. For now see, among others, Altheim, F. and Stiehl, R. “Mazdak und Porphyrios,” in *La nouvelle Clio* 5, 1953, pp. 356-76; De Blois, François, “Mazdak the Ancient and Mazdak the Last: Further Remarks on the History and Religious Typology of Mazdakism,” in *Cahier De Studia Iranica* 53, 2015, pp. 141-53; de Blois, François, ‘A New Look at Mazdak’, in Bernheimer, Teresa and Silverstein, Adam (eds.), *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives* (Exeter: E. J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012), pp. 13–24; Christensen, A. *Le Règne du Roi Kawadh I et le Communisme Mazdakite*, Copenhagen, 1925, pp. 79-82, 98-105; Crone, Patricia, Kavād’s Heresy and Mazdak’s Revolt, in *Iran* 29, 1991, p. 21–42; Crone, P., “Zoroastrian Communism”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 1994, pp. 447-462; Daryaei, Touraj, “Mazdak and Later Antique Socialism,” in G. Pugliese Carratelli, “Les doctrines sociales de Bundos et de Mazdak,” in *Acta Iranica* 2, Leiden and Tehran, 1974, pp. 285-90; H. Gaube: “Mazdak: Historical reality or invention?”

in *Studia Iranica* 11, 1982, pp. 111–122; Gil, Moshe, “King Qubādh and Mazdak,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (April 2012), pp. 75-90; Gnoli, R., “L’*évolution du dualisme iranien et le problème zurvanite,*” in *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 201 (1984): 115–130; Klima, O, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Mazdakismus*, Praha 1977; Klima, Oktar, Klima, *Tārīkh-e jonbesh-e mazkīyān*, Fekri Ershad, Janhangir translated, Tehran, 1382; Müller, Werner, “Mazdak and the Alphabet Mysticism of the East,” in *History of Religions*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1963, pp. 72-82; Rekaya, Mohamed, “Le Ḥurramdīn et les mouvements ḥurramites sous les ‘Abbāsides: Réapparition du Mazdakisme ou Manifestation des Gulāt-Musulmans Dans l’Ex-Empire Sassanide aux VIIIe et IXe Siècles,” in *Studia Iranica*, No. 60 (1984), pp. 5-57; Rezakhani, Khodadad, “Mazdakism, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism: In Search of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Late Antique Iran,” in *Iranian Studies*, Vo. 48, No.1 Special Issue: *Religious Trends in Late Ancient and Early Islamic Iran*, 2015, pp. 55-70; Noldeke, Th., *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden, aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabari*, Leiden 1879; Daryae, “Mazdak and Late Antique Socialism”, in *Cambridge History of Socialism*, Bd. 1, Cambridge 2022, 39–55; Shaki, M. “The Social Doctrine of Mazdak in the Light of Middle Persian Evidence,” *Archiv Orientalni* 46 (1978): 289–306; Idem, “The Cosmogonical and Cosmological Teachings of Mazdak,” in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce, Acta Iranica* 25, Leiden, 1985, pp. 527-43; Wiesehofer, Joseph, “Kawad I, Khusro I, and the Mazdakites: A New Proposal, in *Tresors D’orient: Melanges Offerts A Rika Gyselen*, edited by Philippe Gignoux, Christelle Jullien et Florence Jullien, Paris, 2009, pp. 391- Yarshater, E. “Mazdakism,” in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III/2, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge, 1983): 991–1024; Yarshater, E. “Iranian National History,” in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III/2, ed. E. Yarshater, pp. 359–477.

2. See the work of Gaub who denies the existence of a figure called Mazdak. The author leans towards Gaub’s perspective. Gaub, Heinz, “Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention?” in *Studia Iranica* 11, 1982, pp. 111-122.

3. For the Mehrāns, see Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 2008, PP. 70-75 and *passim.*; Katarzyna Maksymiuk, “The Pahlav-Mehrān Family Faithful Allies of Xusrō I Anōšīrvān,” in *Метаморфозы истории* 6, 2015, 163-179. Also, Nafisi N. “The Parthian Mehran Family, Key to the Collapse of Sassanid Empire,” *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 2013, No 3.3. P. 944–951.

4. Besides these important Parthian dynastic families, there were the equally powerful, Isbahbudhān, Kanārangīyān, and Süren families. Side by side of being an integral part of the Sasanian socio-political, and economic infra-structure and administration, the Parthian dynasties had a good deal of autonomy. The author asks her Iranian compatriots not to bring contemporary discussions into what is a scholarly piece. For though certainly affected by contemporary Weltanschauung, she was simply pursuing her research and naturally had no political agenda!

5. In the Paikuli Inscription of Narseh we are told that “Wahnām, son of Tatrūs, [through] his own falsehood and [(with) the help?] of Ahriman and the devils, attached the Diadem [to the head of Warahrān, King of Sakas?]” And he did not inform me of that matter. Nor [did he] inform the princes ... and grandees and nobles and *Persians and Parthians* were informed.” In the sigillographic and literary evidence of the sixth century likewise, the seals of the Erān Spahbad of Iran, the terms *Pārsīg and Pahlav* defined the two umbrella categories of the administration of the Sasanian Empire. The rise of the Sasanian was contingent on the Parthian dynasts’ agreement, and the decline and fall of the Empire was likewise precipitated

by the arrangements made between Parthian dynasts and the Arab conquerors. In spite of the evidence that the author has presented to date, some scholars continue to talk simply about the generic “elite” or “nobility” when referring to these Parthians. indication of the disjointed narratives that these same scholars advocated. I.e., with the rise of Ardashīr, the dynastic agnatic populations of the Parthian Empire were decimated and that the rise of the Sasanian established a new dawn in Iranian history! See, The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli, Helmut Humbach and Prods O. Skjærvø Part 3., restored text and translated by Prods Skjærvø; Gyselen, online at <https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/paikuli-inscription-npi/>; Rika, *The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence*, vol. 14 of *Conferenze*, Rome, 2001; P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*.

6. Even if, like the Ispahbudhān, they considered themselves, quite accurately, as “brothers [to] the Sasanians and their partners [in rule].” Dīnawarī, 1960, p. 102.

7. See our examination of a selective section of these further below.

8. For an introductory article on the ‘*ayyārs* and Mithra/Mehr worship in Iran, see Pourshariati, P., “The Ethics and Praxis of Mehr and Mithras and the Social Institution of the ‘*ayyārs* in the Epic Romance of *Samak-e ‘ayyār*, in *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 6 (2013) 15-38. A further piece of research on the topic was presented in the 9th European Conference of Iranian Studies, in Freie Universität Berlin, 2019. Recording can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkybmuAE5Do&t=7s>. Patricia Crone devoted a whole chapter to it, Crone, Patricia, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolts- and Local Zoroastrianism*, 2012, pp. 391-439.

9. The Sasanian King, Pīrūz, waged wars first against the Kidarites apparently, and subsequently, a number of wars against the Hephthalites. For Pīrūz see below.

10. Chief among these are Procopius, *The History of the Wars*, London, 1914, translated by H.B. Dewing, and Pseudo Joshua the Stylite, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, Liverpool University Press, 2000, translated with notes and introduction by Frank R. Trombley and John W. Watt.

11. Ṭabarī, 1999, pp. 111–112, de Goeje, 873-874.

12. Unless otherwise indicated, Ṭabarī 1999, p. 112; de Goeje, 874; Tha‘ālibī 1900, pp. 574–577; Tha‘ālibī 1989, pp. 370–371.

13. For the role of the Mehrāns in the accession of Pīrūz to power, see Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 70-75. Elishē, 1982, p. 193, Noldeke, 1979, p. 222. n. 6; Ṭabarī, 1999, p. 109; De Goeje, 872; Lazar P‘arpec‘i, 1999, pp. 133, 159; Procopius 1914, n. 18, 32, 22:3; Ibn Isfandīyār, 1941, pp. 62-71 and other sources cited in Pourshariati, *DF*.

14. Elishē 1982, p. 242. Also see Nöldeke 1979, p. 222, n. 6; Ṭabarī 1999, p. 109, de Goeje, 872.

15. Lazar P‘arpec‘i, p. 133, 159; Procopius 1914, n. 15:18, 32, 33, 22:3, 18. Cited also by Parpeci 1991, p. 205, n. 5; and Ibn Isfandīyār, Muḥammad b. Ḥasan, *Tārīkh-e Ṭabaristān*, Tehran, 1941, edited by ‘Abbas Iqbal, here p. 69.

16. Bosworth notes that at “the time of his first war with the powers of the eastern lands, Fīrūz’s enemies there were probably still the Kidarites, who controlled Balkh, as they were the Persian ruler’s foes in his second war of 467 ... It would thus have been natural for Fīrūz to have sought aid from the Kidarites’ enemies, soon to replace them as the dominant power in Transoxiana and Bactria, the Hephthalites, and equally natural that he should fall out with his erstwhile allies once the formidable power of the Hephthalites was firmly established just across his eastern frontiers.” Ṭabarī 1999, p. 110, n. 284, de Goeje, 873. For the wars of Pīrūz

- against the Hephthalites in the east and the Caucasus also see Joshua the Stylite 2000, pp. 10–21.
17. For the centrality and significance of oaths in Mithraic societies, see, Pourshariati, *DF*, pp. 357-400; Unless otherwise indicated, Ṭabarī 1999, pp. 113–116, and n. 294, de Goeje, 874–877.
18. Bosworth notes: “That is, bring upon Fīrūz the stipulated curse for his breaking the agreement he had made with Akhshūnwār.” Ṭabarī 1999, pp. 113–116, and n. 294, de Goeje, 874–877.
19. See Katarzyna Maksymiuk, “The Pahlav-Mehrān Family Faithful Allies of Xusrō I Anōšīrvān,” in *Метаморфозы истории* 6, 2015, 163-179; Nafisi N. “The Parthian Mehran Family, Key to the Collapse of Sassanid Empire,” *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 2013, No 3.3. p. 944–951.
20. For the Kārens see, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, and *ibid*, “Kārens,”
21. Ṭabarī 1999, p. 117; de Goeje, 877; Tha‘ālibī 1900, p. 582, Tha‘ālibī 1989, p. 374. His name is given as Shūkhar in Dīnawarī 1960, p. 60, Dīnawarī 1967, p. 63.
22. According to some narrative, Pīrūz himself had already done so before starting his eastern campaign.
23. Ferdowsī 1935, p. 2286–2287, Ferdowsī 1971, vol. VIII, pp. 27–28:
- |                               |                             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| از او گشته شاد و بدو داده رای | مهان را همه چشم بر سو فرای  |
| همی رفت زین گونه چهار سال     | بید سو فرای از جهان بی همال |
24. Ṭabarī 1999, p. 131, de Goeje, 885.
25. Ferdowsī 1971, vol. VIII, pp. 30-31, Ferdowsī 1935, pp. 2290–2291:
26. Ferdowsī 1971, vol. VIII, pp. 30-31, Ferdowsī 1935, pp. 2290–2291:
27. P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 2008, *passim*.
28. For the decline in this system by the 6th century and after the reforms of Khusrow, see, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*,
29. Dīnawarī 1960, p. 65, Dīnawarī 1967, p. 69; Ferdowsī 1971, vol. VIII, pp. 31–32, Ferdowsī 1935, pp. 2290–2291; Ya‘qūbī *Ta‘rīkh* I, p. 185.
30. Dīnawarī maintains that it was five years into the reign of Kavād when the King solicited the help of Shāpūr Rāzī, but that it was 10 years into his reign when Mazdak asked the king to “convert” to his creed. Some scholars have taken this last piece of information about Kavād’s conversion to Mazdakism at face value. In view of our explanation below, this seems quite unlikely. Dīnawarī, *Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, 1960, p. 65, Dīnawarī 1967, p. 69.
31. See Ṭabarī, Bosworth’s comments in *The Sasanid and Byzantines*, p. 131, n. 338.
32. Nikolaus Schindel maintains in his article on Kavād that according to John Malalas, “the King died at the age of 82; “According to the *Shānāmeḥ* he was then 80 years old. Procopius (1.4.2), to the contrary, states that Kawād was too young to participate in Pērōz’s disastrous campaign of 484; the Greek word he uses actually refers to an age of around 14 to 16 years. This would be perfectly in accord with a notice in Dinavari (p. 66) that Kawād ascended the throne at the age of 15.” Schindel further correctly observes that “most coins of his first reign show him with only short whiskers and without a moustache. This is a unique depiction since the usual convention is to show Sasanian Kings of Kings heavily bearded.” *Shānāmeḥ*, Ferdowsī VII, p. 82, vv. 368-69; John Malalas (p. 471/18.68); Procopius, *Perserkriege*, ed. And tr. By O. Veh, München, 1970; Abū Ḥanīfa Dīnawarī, *Akhbār al-ṭewāl*, ed. V. Guirgass,

Leiden, 1888; Dīnavarī 1960, p. 65, Dīnavarī 1967, Nikolaus Schindel, "Kavād", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kawad-i-reign>

33. G. E. Von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: A History (600-1258)*, translated by Cathrine Watson, 1996, New York, p. 104. [He] summoned the Muslims to arms against the Byzantines. A large number of the 'āmmah came forward with weapons, but instead of giving them officers and training, the commander kept them as a reserve for himself. They soon began fighting one another, however, and thus became the cause of serious disturbances. "Many ru'asa' appeared among them," Miskawayh tells us, "so that a number of ru'asa' of the 'ayyārūn developed in each quarter, protecting their quarter, collecting money from its inhabitants, and warring against those who were in neighboring quarters." Mottahedeh, Roy, *Loyalty and Leadership*, Princeton, 1980, p. 158. The ru'asā' were the upper echelons of the 'ayyārs who also appear in Bābak's narrative as well as the *Tārīkh-e Sīstān*.

34. The precise date of the *Letter of Tansar* had been the subject of debate. It is now the consensus that it belongs to the 6th century, to the rule of Khusrow I, even though the letter presents itself as having been written during the reign of Ardashīr I, at the inception of Sasanian rule. One of the primary criteria for attributing a sixth-century date to the letter, in fact, is its informational content: it refers to the post-reform period of Khusrow I's administration. The letter transposes the events that transpired during Khusrow I's reign onto the conditions that are presumed to have existed during the reign of Ardashīr I. Boyce argues that "the evidence for a 6th century date for the *Letter* is ... considerable." She also acknowledges that the "consensus of scholarly opinion has come to be that the treatise is in fact a literary forgery perpetrated for political purposes, the prestige of the founder of the dynasty and his great *herbad*, Tansar, being drawn on to help Xusrau to re-establish the authority of both state and church." Boyce, Mary, 1968, *Letter of Tansar*, vol. XXXVIII of *Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente*, p. 16; Tucci, *Letter of Tansar*, in *Royal Institute of Translation and Publication in Iran*, 1968. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. G, Cereti, C. G. (2004), "La Lettera di Tansar e il Testamento di Ardashīr", in *La Letteratura Pahlavi*, Milan, pp. 189f.

35. See Pourshariati, pp. 85-94.

36. Ibn Isfandīyār, *Tā rīkh-e Ṭabaristān*, p. 31.

چون بر این روزگار طمع ظاهر شد ادب از ما برخاست نزدیک تر به ما دشمن شدند و آنکه تبع ما بود متبوعی در سر گرفت آنکه خادم بود مخدومی، عامه همچو دیو که از بند بگشایند کارها فرو گذاشتند و به شهرها بدزدی و فتنه و عیاری و شغل‌های بد پراکنده شدند تا بدان رسید که بندگان بر خداوندگاران دلیر شدند و زنان بر شوهران فرمانفرمای

37. TEXT III DkM, 220.1-221.10; B fol. 172 ff.; de Menasce, Dk III, p. 212-213:71  
*abar gurgih ī dēhān ā wardag-tuxšāgihā rasēnī. dār wiš-ruwān bandag pad kāmag zadār gišnag xwadāyzh ī. duš-dēn druwand mar petyāragih ī ērān dēhān ān ī weh-dēn. yak frēštār ahlamāyi. g purr-zafar asar-āz andarān āštāb ud ānāftan ī gāhr-abarih ī. gētē xwadāyih ud xwāstag frāy hursandi. hā ī. š bē xēm ā bērān nihūftan nzmūdan. yak āham gurgih frēb ayyārīh anāftan ī xwadāyzh payrāg ud brāh ud bām ud māyag ud abrang ud niyābag.* TEXT III DkM, 220.1-221.10; B fol. 172 ff.; de Menasce, Dk III, p. 212-213 cited in Shaki, "The Social Doctrine," p. 295.

38. Ṭabarī, *The Sāsānīds, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, vol. V of *The History of Ṭabarī*, Albany, 1999, translated and annotated by C.E. Bosworth. p. 132.

39. Ṭabarī, *The Sasanians, the Byzantines ...*, p. 132.

40. Ṭabarī, *The Sasanians, the Byzantines ...*, p. 148.

41. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, Flugel, Gustav edited, 1872, p. 342; Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad b. Ishāq, *al-Fihrist*, Tehran, 1987, translated by Muhammad Reza Tajaddod, p. 611.
42. Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif*, Tharvat 'Okasha edited, 1969, p. 663.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif*, p. 663.
45. Patricia Crone has a whole chapter on this ostensible practice among the Mazdakites and their ilk. See P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*, 2012, pp. 391-439; also see Crone, "Zoroastrian Communism," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Jul. 1994, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), pp. 447-462.
46. Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif*, Tharvat 'Okasha edited, 1969, p. 663.
47. Farāmarz b. Khodādād b. 'Abdallāh al-Kātib al-Arajani, *Samak-e 'ayyār*, Natil Khanlari edited, vol. I:432.
48. As David Ulansey explained, from among the mystery religions "none is more intriguing than that of the ancient Roman religion known as the Mithraic mysteries." [Ulansey, 3] The mysteries have remained "intriguing" for a good reason, Ulansey explained, for as a cloud of secrecy cloaked the social institutions around which they formed, "the teachings of the cult were, as far as we know, never written down ... [leaving modern scholars] with practically NO LITERARY EVIDENCE relating to the cult which could help ... reconstruct its esoteric doctrines." [Ibid.] To be sure Roman Mithraism remains one of "the most archeologically well-documented phenomena of antiquity," [ibid.] Ulansey observed. In Mithraic temples, scattered with various degrees of concentration "... along the entire length of the Roman frontier" [Cumont, 43] "an incredibly rich iconography" has been preserved for us. [Ulansey, ibid.] "[i]n the absence of any explanations of its meaning," Ulansey argued, however, "Mithraic iconography has proven exceptionally difficult to decipher." [Ibid.] In short, the "legacy of [Roman] Mithraism," according to Ulansey, is a "vast quantity of unexplained artwork." David Ulansey wrote *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, 1990.
49. The author has given a talk on this, that is yet to see the light of readership. Hopefully also forthcoming!
50. *Samak-e 'ayyār*, 205 & 258. Khanlari, however, had already postulated another significant observation *a propos* the epic, namely that the associations of the *ayyars*, especially as they are depicted in the romance of Samak, might have the purview of Mihr (Mithra) worship.
51. See now P. Pourshariati, "The Parthians and the Production of the Canonical Shahnāmas: Of Pahlavi, Pahlavāni and the Pahlavi," in *Commutatio et contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East*. Wellem: Düsseldorf 2010.
52. *Samak-e 'ayyār*, 205 & 258.
53. *Samak-e 'ayyār*, vol. I., 261.
54. P. Pourshariati, "The Ethics and Praxis of Mehr", pp. 85-94.
55. *Samak-e 'ayyār*, vol. I:45
56. *Samak-e 'ayyār*, vol. I., 187.

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