

GOLDEN YEARS:
THE IRANIAN ROOTS OF ORPHIC *DODECAETERIS*

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Abstract

The Orphic *Dodecaeteris* represents a link between the Greek world and religion. One of the surviving fragments transmits an Apocalyptic vision that we find in a series of prophetic documents of the Late Hellenistic period. The likely source of these prophecies is a passage of *Zādspram*, a Pahlavi anthology which transcribes archaic mythological material. In them, the creator Ohrmazd appears in the night sky riding a fiery horse, an image that we find also in the *Book of Revelation*. This peculiar doctrine should be attributed to an Iranian astrological tradition ultimately depending on an old astrological doctrine of Greco-Babylonian origin. We find a direct reference to this unorthodox teaching, (from the point of view of Zoroastrian faith), in the subdivision of the stars into Ahurian and Ahrimanic. The origin and development of the idea of a Zodiacal circle have been much debated, but now there is a general consensus that a kind of Zodiacal belt must have been defined by Babylonian astronomers as early as 700 BCE. Thus, the history of the Iranian Astrological lore begins with the basic Mazdaean scheme of the great cosmic (and mythological) period of 12,000 years, with the simple scheme of the 12 Zodiacal constellations, which were originally linked with the 12 months of the year. The Astrological power (*chronocratoria*) exerted by the 12 signs over the 12 millennia of the cosmic year was probably introduced later, with the basic corpus of the Hellenistic Astrology.

A *corpus* of Astrological works was ascribed to Orpheus¹: this mantic material is the source used by Anceus, a member of the Argonautic expedition, accustomed to the “ways of the stars of heaven and the orbits of the planets, who foretold for men the present and the future” (*Arg. Orph.* 207-209). According to Kern (pp. 267-268), it was composed of seven parts: *Dodecaeteris*, *Ephemerides*, *Agriculture*, *On fugitives*, *On earthquakes*, *About the attacks* and *On the beginnings*.²

Among this documentation, what most attracts our attention is the *Dodecaeteris*.³ The name is derived, as Censorinus showed (*De die nat.* 18, 6-7

¹ Cfr. Tzetz. *Chiliad.* 12, 399, 140 ss. (KIESSLING, p. 444); Tzetz. *In Iliad.* 27, 11 (HERMANN); Schol. *Lycophr. Alex.* 3, 29 (SCHEER II).

² See also J. HEEG, *Die angeblichen orphischen "Εργα και 'Ημέραι*, Diss. Würzburg 1906, München 1907, pp. 35 ss.

³ Cfr. CH.A. LOBECK, *Aglaophamus sive de theologiae mysticae Graecorum causis*, I, Königsberg 1829 (repr. Darmstadt 1961), pp. 424 ss.

[JAHN, p. 53, 5]), from the period of twelve years, called “Chaldaean Year”, marked by the alternation of “storms, periods of abundance and famine, disease and prosperity”.⁴ According to Orpheus, the “Great Year” would be composed of one hundred and twenty common years. In fact, the “Great Year” in its “Chaldaean” meaning, namely the Babylonian, has a cycle of twelve years, a period which should have the course of the so-called “Precession of the Equinoxes”.

In Astromantic literature this ancient wisdom is ascribed to Zoroaster and his lost *Περὶ φύσεως*.⁵ It was probably a large section reserved for the Chaldaean *Dodecaeteris*,⁶ residues of which emerge in the *Geoponica* of Cassianus Bassus (1, 12)⁷ and other astrological lore spread across manuscript sources.⁸ According to these *prognostica*, the scanning time begins in the year devoted to Aries and ends in the year of Pisces. Vestiges of this chronology even remain today in the Chinese calendar, which consists of years of individual animals or fantasy figures.

The surviving fragments of the Orphic *Dodecaeteris* do not make a reconstruction of a cohering text possible.⁹ According to the scholiast and mythographer John Tzetzes, a prelude is followed by a detailed prediction related to each year, and the *Dodecaeteris* end with a section on eschatology. It speaks of the destiny of the world at the end of the “Great Year”, in the days that came before the Great ἐκπύρωσις. A fragment is preserved in the *scholia* to Lycophron:

ἔστι δ' αὖ τις ἀνὴρ *ἦ κοίρανος* ἢ ἐτύραννος ἢ βασιλεύς, ὃς τῆμος εἰς οὐρανὸν ἴξεται αἰπύν.

“There is also another man, Lord, Tyrant or King, who at that time will be manifested in the high heaven”¹⁰.

This apocalyptic sequence of *Dodecaeteris* has a striking parallel in Zoroastrian eschatology, in the prophecy of *frašgird*, the Last Renovation:

čiyōn ān [ī] ardiḡ abar nawad rōz-šabān yazdān abāg dēwān čandīhā būd ān pad abdom āškārag paydāgīhā wēnīhēd šabān andar andarwāy ātaxš-kirb mard-+dēs mēnōgān-menīd ātaxšīg-+bārag asp homānāg <ud> škeft abēgumān bawēnd.

⁴ Cfr. F. BOLL, s.v. “Dodekaeteris”, in *PWRE*, V, Stuttgart 1903, coll. 1254-1255.

⁵ For criticism, cfr. M. STAUSBERG, “A name for all and no one: Zoroaster as a figure of authorization and a screen of ascription”, in J.R.LEWIS-O.HAMMER (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, Cambridge (UK) 2007, pp.187-189.

⁶ LOBECK, *Aglaophamus*, I, p. 425.

⁷ J. BIDEZ-F. CUMONT, *Les Mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*, II (Les Textes), Paris 1938 (repr. 1973), pp. 183-187 (text O 42).

⁸ *CCAG* II (*Codices Venetos* [Bruxelles 1900]), pp. 139 ss; V/1 (*Codicum Romanorum* [Bruxelles 1904]), pp. 171 ss.; VIII/3 (*Codicum Parisinorum* [Bruxelles 1912]), pp. 189-190.

⁹ KERN, pp. 268-274.

¹⁰ Schol. *Lycophr. Alex.* 189, 10 ss. (SCHEER II) = *Orph. fr.* 267 (KERN = 747 F [BERNABÉ II/2, p. 297]); cfr. LOBECK, *Aglaophamus*, I, p. 425.

“When, in ninety days and ninety nights, the gods will take the fight against the many demons, at the end of the night, in the air, appears distinctly a human figure, a form of fire; an immaterial being riding a fiery horse, [and the mankind] will be freed from doubt”¹¹.

The creator Ohrmazd is formed gradually, through the course of world history and in the *tan ī pasēn*, the Zoroastrian “Final Body”, which manifested itself fully in the very essence of fire.¹² The world, with the supremacy of “Truth”, of Aša, and the defeat of Adversary (Pahlavi *ēbgat* < Avestan *ai?i.gati-*), tends to the supreme shining manifestation of his God. An eschatological and cosmological view has points of contact with some passages of the *Apocalypse of John*. In detail, *Revelation* 19, 11-12 summarises all these motifs: Christ, the image and embodiment of truth, appears in the night sky riding a bright white steed, his eyes are like flames of fire, his head surrounded by flashing tiaras.

The Johannine apocalypse shares with other cultures of the Hellenistic Orient the Messianic expectation that spreads into a manifold of contemporary texts. The Sibyl announced in the third book (composed about 140 BC), a King sent by the Sun; in the same way the *Oracle of the Potter* (dating back to 145-116 BC)¹³ speaks of a King derived from the Sun and presents him as a Saviour (*Pap. Rainer*, lines 39-41 [KOENEN 1968]). The King, called for by Isis, is the benefactor that will come from the Sun bearing gifts that will benefit the whole of mankind.

The *Oracles of Hystaspe*, named after Wištāsp, disciple and patron of Zoroaster, are preserved in fragments by Lactantius, who admittedly only partially adapted them to the Christian message.¹⁴ In these writings the history of the world unfolds in six millennia dominated by Evil, which are followed by the Millennium of Christ. After this period the Evil will reveal itself for the last time: wars will corrupt the world, the mountains will collapse and the righteous who fled there will be besieged by the enemy, but the Savior will come to free them. Lactantius calls this Saviour *rex magnus de caelo* (*Div. inst.* 7, 17, 11), the spiritual principle that, just like the Zoroastrian Saošyant, events in the

¹¹ *Zādspram* II, 34, 54 (GIGNOUX-TAFAZZOLI [Paris 1993], p. 126); cfr. R.C. ZAEHNER, *Zurvān. A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford 1955 (repr. New York 1972), p. 133, n. 3; 347-348; 354; GH. GNOLI, “Un particolare aspetto del simbolismo della luce nel Mazdeismo e nel Manicheismo”, in *Annali dell’Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, N.S. 12 (1962), p. 119.

¹² About “form of fire”, on cap. 63 of *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, see M. SHAKI, “Some Basic Tenets of the Eclectic Metaphysics of the Dēnkard”, in *Archív Orientální*, 38 (1970), pp. 283-296; p. 512 (addenda).

¹³ Cfr. R. REITZENSTEIN, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen*, Leipzig-Berlin 1927³, pp. 40 ss.; L. KOENEN, “Die Prophezeiungen des ‘Töpfers’”, in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 2 (1968), p. 192.

¹⁴ Cfr. C. COLPE, s.v. “Hystaspes”, in *RAC*, XVI, Stuttgart 1994, coll. 1067-1068; gathered by H. WINDISCH, *Die Orakel des Hystaspes*, Amsterdam 1929.

world recur cyclically over the ages.¹⁵ Finally, Virgil's *Fourth Eglogue* combines these three themes: the return of the Golden Age, the solar Kingship and the Saviour child.

Let us now see how the Iranian tradition could have interfered in the writing of the Orphic *Dodecaeteris*. In Iran there is a very ancient god, Zurwān. We find vestiges of this God in the marvellous temple of Nemrud Dag, built by King Antiochus I of Commagene (mid first century BC) on the highest peak of the Taurus mountains, in the South-East of present day Turkey. In the famous inscription accompanying the cenotaph, the King mentions the "infinite time" (χρόνος ἄπειρος) and his homeland, the fruitful Commagene.¹⁶ Both the time and the land of his ancestors, the genetic space, are understood by Antiochus in the perspective of generations to come, according to the fate of each being (ἰδίᾳ βίου μοίρᾳ) upon the soil of Commagene and in the endless stream of time.¹⁷

The teaching of Zoroastrianism is endorsed by the Seleucid King and somehow "politicized": space and time are the places where the living materialise and act out their μοῖρα, their own destiny.¹⁸ This is also a theme found in the eighth chapter of the *Mēnōg ī xrad*, a Pahlavi text in part devoted to issues about the origins of human destiny¹⁹. It gives great importance to Zurwān, which in its infinity and eternity "approves" and "blesses" the demiurgic work of Ohrmazd.

The Neoplatonic Damascius fled to Ctesiphon for the court of Chosroes I, after the suppression of the School of Athens by Justinian in AD 529. Eudemus of Rhodes quotes a passage on the dualistic doctrine of the Magi "and all the Aryan people" (Μάγοι δέ καὶ πᾶν τὸ Ἄρειον γέ νος)²⁰ saying that it presupposes an undifferentiated principle, called "Time", "Space" or "Place", from which originate the Light and the Darkness, Ohrmazd and Ahriman.²¹

¹⁵ Cfr. G. WIDENGREN, *Les religions de l'Iran*, Paris 1968, pp. 233 ss.; J.R. HINNELLS, "The Zoroastrian Doctrine of Salvation in the Roman World: A Study of the Oracle of Hystaspes", in J.R. HINNELLS-E.J. SHARPE (eds.), *Man and his Salvation. Studies in memory of S.G.F. Brandon*, Manchester 1973, pp. 135-142.

¹⁶ Cfr. K. HUMANN-O. PUCHSTEIN, *Reisen in Kleinasien und Nordsyrien*, Berlin 1890, pp. 259-282 (tav. XXII ss.).

¹⁷ HUMANN-PUCHSTEIN, *Reisen in Kleinasien*, p. 282.

¹⁸ Cfr. L. JALABERT-R. MOUTERDE, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, I: Commagene et Cyrrestique, Paris 1929, n. 1 (I A, 9 ss.).

¹⁹ *Mēnōg ī xrad* 8, 8-11 = Titus: *Mēnōg ī xrad*. Data entry D.N. MacKenzie (Göttingen 1993); corrections by Th. Jügel (Frankfurt a/M 2007-2008); Titus version by J. Gippert (Frankfurt a/M 1998-2008).

²⁰ GH. GNOLI, *The Idea of Iran. An Essay of its Origin* (Serie Orientale Roma LXII), IsMEO, Roma 1989, pp. 12 ss.

²¹ Damasc. *De princip.* 125 bis (WESTERINK-COMBÈS III, p. 165, 17-24; ROUELLE I, p. 322); see also BIDEZ-CUMONT II, pp. 69 ss.; and GH. GNOLI, "A Note on the Magi and Eudemus of Rhodes", in AA.VV., *A Green Leaf. Papers in Honor of Prof. Jes P. Asmussen* (Acta Iranica 28), Leiden-Téhéran-Liège 1988, pp. 283-288.

The importance of this testimony is clear,²² since it is recognised as one of the oldest sources giving evidence of an Iranian religion, the Zurvanism.²³ It should be dated back to Achaemenid era (VI-IV century BC.) and should not be considered as a late trend of Zoroastrianism.²⁴

It must be stressed, however, that Iranian texts and ancient Greek sources do not explicitly mention the myth of the birth of “twins” Ohrmazd and Ahri-man, generated by Zurwān. This myth is only told by some Christian writers who seem to refer to the lost *Περὶ τῆς ἐν Περσίδι μαγικῆς* of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Of these writers the most complete seems to be the Armenian Eznik of Kolb, Bishop of Pakrevant in the fifth century AD.²⁵

Hidden in the myth of Zurwān lies a manifold teaching, certainly influenced by the Astrological speculation of late Mesopotamian religion. Without doubt Zurvanism – whatever its genesis and interpretation – was the bearer of a cyclical time, the “Great Year” of 12,000 years, divided into four periods each of 3,000 years. Zoroastrian dualism, such as that shown in the *Gāthā*, was instead a carrier of a linear conception of time, a compendium of his soteriology and his eschatology.

Zurvanism, with its speculations about time, numerology and the idea of the “Great Year”, is the logical consequence of the meeting between Zoroastrianism and Babylonian culture²⁶. Its origins can be traced in the second half of the Achaemenid period. As an offshoot from the Zoroastrian church, Zurvanism differentiated itself in the first centuries of our era, and later theological controversies led to its abolition in favor of orthodox dualism. The Zurvanite writings were cleared out of Zoroastrian texts. However, a careful and continuous

²² See also G. CASADIO, “Eudemo di Rodi: un pioniere della storia delle religioni tra Oriente e Occidente”, in S. GRAZIANI (cur. e con la coll. di M.C. Casaburi e G. Lacerenza), *Studi sul Vicino Oriente Antico dedicati alla memoria di Luigi Cagni* (Istituto Universitario Orientale – Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici/Series Minor LXI), Napoli 2000, pp. 1355-1375.

²³ Cfr. GH. GNOLI, “L'évolution du dualisme iranien et le problème zurvanite”, in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 201 (1984), pp. 115-138; and M. BOYCE, “Some Reflections on Zurvanism”, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 19 (1957), pp. 404-416; ID., “Some Further Reflections on Zurvanism”, in AA.VV., *Papers in Honor of Prof. Ehsan Yarshater* (Acta Iranica 30), Leiden-Téhéran-Liège 1990, pp. 20-29; una revisione delle diverse ipotesi è in S. SHAKED, “The Myth of Zurvan: Cosmogony and Eschatology”, in I. GRUENWALD-S. SHAKED-G.G. STROUMSA (eds.), *Messiah and Christos. Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity Presented to David Flusser* (Texte und Studien zum Antike Judentum 32), Tübingen 1992, pp. 219-240.

²⁴ Cfr. GH. GNOLI, “Considerazioni sulla concezione del tempo e sul dualismo nell'Iran antico”, in D. VENTURELLI-L. CIRILLO (cur.), *Il Tempo e l'Uomo*, Atti della IX Settimana di Seminari Interdisciplinari (Arcavacata 11-14 giugno 1990), Cosenza 1992, p. 12; see also I. GERSHEVITCH, “Zoroaster's own Contribution”, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 23 (1964), pp. 12-38.

²⁵ ZAEHNER, *Zurwān*, pp. 419 ss.; Eznik of Kolb, *De Deo* II, 1 ss. (MARIÈS-MERCIER [PO 28, Paris 1959], pp.461 ss. [text]; 597 ss. [transl.]).

²⁶ Cfr. GH. GNOLI, s.v. “Babylonian Influences on Iran”, in YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, London-New York 1989, pp. 334 a-336 b.

reading of Pahlavi texts revealed many Zurvanite materials escaped the orthodox purge.²⁷

If we accept this interpretation²⁸ we can say that the concept of cyclical time spread in Iran, together with Zurvanite religious thought, and as a result of the meeting between Achaemenid Zoroastrianism and Mesopotamian civilisation.

It is in this sense that the Iranian materials may have interacted in the formation of an “Orphic apocalyptic” tradition. The very fact that they involve a conception of time radically different from those usually spread, should lead us to consider the scope of such a transformation into a mixed picture.

The development of Iranian dualism under the influence of Babylonian astronomy and astrology, and the astral religion of Mesopotamia in the middle of the first millennium BC, created a radical reversal of values.²⁹ While the dualism of the *Gāθā* placed the god Ahura Mazdā – who is the earthly and bodily symbol of man – above all, with the two opposing Spirits in their free choices, the new dualism arisen from Iranian-Babylonian and Zurvanite syncretisms, as we have seen, degraded Ahura Mazdā to the rank of Anjra Mainyu and elevated Time above all.

While the Gathic dualism glorified the role and value of the one God and of man’s ethical choice, Zurvanism inevitably played down the Creator God, subjecting man to the omnipotence of Time, from which the soul cannot escape: Time is more powerful than the two creations, Ohrmazd and that of the Adversary, the same Time “from which no mortal man saves himself” as we read in *Bundahišn*³⁰. No doubt these concepts are the foundations of a religious fatalism that has influenced the neighbouring cultures.³¹

To summarise what has been said, the spread of the theme found in the Orphic text put off to Aramaic-Mesopotamian, “Chaldaean”, a world where the late Babylonian Astrological speculations interfere with the Iranian idea of an endless, infinite Time prevailing over the cosmos. Indeed, we also find the topic in the Mandaean, successors of a Gnostic tradition that borrows from archaic Iranian and Mesopotamian models³².

²⁷ Cfr. H.S. NYBERG, “Questions de cosmogonie et cosmologie mazdéennes”, in *Journal Asiatique*, 214 (1929), pp. 192-310; *ivi*, 219 (1931), pp. 1-134 e 193-244; ZAEHNER, *Zurvān*, pp. 255 ss.; G. WIDENGREN, “Zervanitische Texte aus dem ‘Avesta’ in der Pahlavi-Überlieferung. Eine Untersuchung zu Zātspram und Bundahišn”, in G. WIESSNER (Hrsg.), *Festschrift für Wilhem Eilers*, Wiesbaden 1967, pp. 278-287; *id.*, “Philological Remarks on some Pahlavi Texts chiefly concerned with Zervanite Religion”, in AA.VV., *Sir J.J. Zarhosti Madressa Centenary Volume*, Bombay 1967, pp. 84-103.

²⁸ Cfr. W.B. HENNING, *Zoroaster. Politician or Witch-doctor?*, London 1951, pp. 49 ss.; and also GH. GNOLI, *Zoroaster in History*, New York 2000, pp. 62 ss.

²⁹ See also M. STAUSBERG, *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*, I, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln, pp. 162 ss. (where the Zurvanite themes are vanished).

³⁰ *Bund.* (Ir.) I, 25; cfr. GNOLI, “L’evoluzione du dualisme iranien”, p. 134 n. 35.

³¹ Cfr. H. RINGGREN, *Fatalism in Persian Epics* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 13), Uppsala-Wiesbaden 1952, pp. 72 ss.

³² G. WIDENGREN, “Die Mandäer”, in E. SPULER (Hrsg.), *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, VIII/2 (*Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen*), Leiden-Köln 1961, pp. 88 ss.

The Mandaeans devote an entire text to the Astromantic lore: the *Sfar Malvašia*, the “Book of the Zodiac”, a miscellany of manuscripts from various sources and dates. Astrology plays an important role in the life of the pious Mandaeans, as can be seen when reading the *Sfar Malvašia*: it collects a precise classification of psycho-physical qualities of people born under a certain constellation. But this is not all: in a long sequence we find the Mandaic version of the “Great Year”.³³

The text, in fact, is very old, and is probably a translation from another language on Mandaic. The archetype goes back to Sassanian times. Transcribed by Mandaean priests, the text has undergone a series of additions and glosses over the centuries, which have changed the original form. City names, characters and events reflect this multiple layering.³⁴ As in the Orphic *Dodecaeteris* (and before in the Chaldaean *Dodecaeteris*), the prophecies contained in the text start from the constellation of Aries (Mandaean *mbra* < Akkadian *immeru*)³⁵ and end up in the constellation of Pisces (Mandaean *nuna* < Akkadian *nūnu*)³⁶. Significantly, the “Great Year” begins with Aries in conjunction with Mars (*Nirig*), proof of the antiquity of the text.³⁷ This and other writings gathered in the “Book of the Zodiac” suggest, however, a deep lack in the Mandaean dualism, from which the absolute adversary of Darkness somehow comes to terms with them, taking possession of the Astromantic Babylonian omens.

From the review of the materials set out above, we can draw some conclusions. The formation of a so-called “Orphic apocalyptic” can be considered a reflection of a cultural background that swept the ancient Near East to the rise of Hellenism. The Babylonian teachings and prophecies about a “Great Year”, i.e. on a ternary cosmic cycle of 12, 120, 1,200 or 12,000 years, linked with Iranian speculations on Time and Dualism, are found in the Aramaic-Mesopotamian world. The same Aramaic-Mesopotamian background gave rise to such Salvation religions as Gnosticism, Mandaicism, Manichaeism and Christianity itself. This milieu brought forth the Chaldaean *Dodecaeteris*. The eschatological expectation of the Greeks gave the authority of Orpheus to this *prognostica*, rather than a Pythagoras, or an even more mystical Zoroaster. Thus, those with an interest in divination, clairvoyance and telepathy will also find a wide field of investigation in the teachings of “Chaldaean” Magi.

³³ Cfr. E.S. DROWER, *The Book of the Zodiac (Sfar Malvašia) D.C. 31* (Oriental Translation Fund, Vol. XXXVI), London 1949, pp. 110-119 (section XIV).

³⁴ DROWER, *The Book of the Zodiac*, p. 110.

³⁵ E.S. DROWER-R. MACUCH, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford 1963 p. 352 b.

³⁶ DROWER-MACUCH, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, p. 294 b.

³⁷ See also D.N. MACKENZIE, s.v. “Constellations”, in YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, VI, Costa Mesa 1993, pp. 147 b-150 b.