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A PERSIAN VIEW OF THE STEPPE IRANIANS¹

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By the turn of the second to first millennium BCE, the Iranian-speaking tribes of the Steppe Bronze Cultures had parted into two main groups: those who migrated south eventually into the plateau which bears their name to this date, and those who expanded their domain within the steppes, westward into the Volga and Pontic regions and beyond, and southward well into the Caucasus and Central Asia. These two main branches of the same people evolved in the very different ways, characteristic to other societies living in the southern and northern Eurasia.

Nevertheless, as South and North Iranians – even if separated by deserts and mountains – were often immediate neighbors, they kept influencing each other as long as the Iranian pastoralist riders ruled the Eurasian Steppes. After all, many of the vicissitudes undergone by Persia since the dawn of her history have been related to the Steppe warriors, and, on the other side of the coin, much of what we know today about the history of the Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans are due to their interactions with the Iranian civilization in Western Asia.

In addition to these two groups, which I shall call South and North Iranians for simplicity, we may yet identify a third group: those of Central Asia, whom are usually referred to as Eastern Iranians in scholarly literature. These consist of the settled Chorasmians, Sogdians, and Bactrians, among others, who were the immediate southern neighbors of the nomadic Sacae, Massagetae, Dahae,

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and Chionites of the area from the river Jaxartes up to the Kazakh Steppe. The proximity to the plains of Central Asia made the region a frequent prey to nomadic invasions, and kingdoms were made and unmade as a result.

1. Historical Perspective

It is a well-known fact that the history of Eurasian continent, that is much of the Old World, is marked by the recurring mass movements of peoples from Inner Eurasia southward into the warmer lands of the agriculturalist civilizations, whose realm fits into the fundamental definition of “history.” Ever since a great warlike and nomadic civilization, chiefly consisting of the peoples speaking Iranian languages, completed its formation of an independent lifestyle on the Steppes towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, it began to stand in contradistinction to the sedentary civilizations in the south, i.e. the states formed in China, India, the Iranian Plateau, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world, with the general tendency of invasions and migrations in the direction from north to south. The success of the northern nomads was a function of a number of variables, including how united they were, how weak were the central states, and who had the superior technology. This historical pattern discontinued only after the Russian Empire established its hegemony over the Steppes, followed by its industrialization and engagement in Western Civilization.

What repercussion this longstanding interaction between North and South had in Iran? The central regimes that ruled over the Iranian Plateau had established their capital cities in Mesopotamia and Elam/Khūzistān, the fertile plains Iranians had inherited their civilization from. Notwithstanding the socioeconomic gravitation towards the southwestern borders of their empire, these dynasties endeavored, with only partial success, to dominate Central Asia to stem the threat of nomadic raids and invasions on their northern and eastern frontiers. The Achaemenids, the Seleucids, the Parthians, and the Sasanians’ policy of stabilizing and securing of their northern borders was manifested through either (1) military solution, i.e. waging wars, establishing garrisons, and building physical barriers along the northern frontiers; and (2) by establishing or supporting buffer states in Central Asia. In fact, the city-states of Central Asia interacted with the Persian civilization on the one hand and with their nomadic neighbors on the other. These city-states had to deal with the mighty nomadic confederations of the Scythians and Sarmatian tribes who dominated the Steppes at the same time when the Achaemenids, the Arsacids, and the Sasanians ruled the Plateau. Table 1 is a rough synchronization of the rulers of the Iranian Plateau, Central Asia, and the Pontic Steppes and the Caucasus.

Let us now brake down the interactions among these regions into the stages of history, and try to highlight the historic events, without succumbing into the detail—for our aim is to identify the patterns rather than narrating specific events.

Table 1. Approximate chronology of the rulers of Iranian-speaking lands

Centuries	Western Steppes	Iranian Plateau	Central Asia
8–6 BCE	Cimmerians?	Medes	Massagetae
6–3 BCE	Scythians	Achaemenids	Sakas
3 BCE–3 CE	Sarmatians	Arsacids	Sakas
3–7 CE	Alans	Sasanians	Chionites, Hephthalites, Turks

1.1. The Medes and the Achaemenids

Iranians of the Plateau and those of the Steppes made their decisive appearance in history almost simultaneously, in the seventh century BCE, in their movements towards Mesopotamia from two different directions. The Medes established minor kingdoms in the northwest of the Iranian Plateau for more than a century, but their rule was largely passive. On the other hand, the Cimmerians and Scythians, having invaded the Near East via the Caucasus, found there an opportunity to practice their profession as warriors. They made alternate alliance with the Medes and Assyrians, and in 653, the Scythians stormed Media and ruled there for twenty-eight years. Only the ascent of Cyaxares led to the rise of Median kingdom by putting an end to the Scythian dominance and pushing many of them across the Caucasus range back to the Steppes. Nevertheless, some Scythians became devoted partners of the Medes and the Persians. Herodotus (1.73) informs us that Cyaxares hired a group of Scythians to teach the art of the bow and their speech to elite Median youths. Moreover, the fall the Assyrian Empire (ca. 614–612), which opened the way to the hegemony of the South Iranians in the Near East, was realized with Scythian alliance. The Ziwiya treasure, with many objects bearing the Scythian style, excavated near Saqqiz (meaning “Scythian”) in Persian Kurdistan, is characteristic to this period.²

The state of affairs changed dramatically after the Persians established their empire in 550 BCE. Contrary to their former partnership with the Medes, under the Achaemenids the Scythians were hardly allies of the Persians and Medes in rule of the empire. Tolerance for unruliness had grown thin for the various Saka groups who caused problems both for Cyrus and Darius, not to mention other Achaemenid rulers down to the invasion of Alexander the Great.

Cyrus the Great (r. 559–530), the founding father of the Persian Empire, extended his realm well into Transoxiana. An interesting indication of the ex-

² For details, see Frye 1984, 71.

tent of his conquest into Sogdiana is the city of Kyreskhata or Cyropolis, which was eventually stormed and destroyed by Alexander. The name is explained as the “city of Cyrus” and identified with a village Kurkath³ (Old Pers. *kuru-* “Cyrus” + East Ir. *kaθ* “town”) near the present Uroteppa in northern Tajikistan.⁴ This toponym would presuppose the establishment of a garrison in a town founded by Cyrus to secure the northeastern frontier of his empire against the warlike nomads. It was the defense of this very same frontier that cost Cyrus his life. According to Herodotus’ (1.201–14) account of Cyrus’ campaign against the Massagetae east of the Caspian Sea, Cyrus was defeated and killed fighting the Massaget army led by Queen Tomyris circa 530. This account is supported by other Classical authors, such as Berossus and Ctesias, who suppose the fighting nomadic tribes were Dahae, Derbices, or other Saka groups.⁵ The destruction of the Achaemenid army by the Massagetae was the opening act in the continuous challenge on the part of the rulers of the Plateau to manage the settled populace of Transoxiana and to control the incursions of new groups from the Steppes.

The best known of the Persian confrontations with the northern nomads is Darius’ (r. 522/521 – 486) campaign against the Scythians in 519. According to the fascinating account of Herodotus (4.83ff.), the Persian army, accompanied by a navy, having penetrated deep into Scythia in eastern Europe, had to return after suffering a great loss. At great variation with Herodotus’ account is that of Darius:

Afterwards with an army I went against Scythia; after that the pointed-capped Scythians [*Sakā tigraxaudā*] against me, when I had come down to the sea [*draya*]. By means of a tree-trunk with the whole army I crossed it. Afterwards I defeated those Scythians; another (part of them) were captured and led to me in fetters. Their chief, Skunxa by name, was captured and led to me in fetters. There I made another (man their) chief, as was my desire. After that the country became mine... Those Scythians were disloyal, and Ahura Mazda was not worshipped by them. I (however) worshipped Ahura Mazda. By the favor of Ahura Mazda, as (was) my desire, so I treated them (Bisotun Inscription, V.21–33).⁶

In addition to differing on the outcome of the war, Darius’ account suggests a different location for the war than that of Herodotus: *Sakā tigraxaudā* are otherwise listed in Achaemenid inscriptions together with *Sakā haumavargā*⁷ as tribes and satrapies of Central Asia; it is *Sakā (tayaiy) paradraya* “Sakas beyond the sea or river” who are identified with the Scythians of the Pontic Steppes, in the same context as Skudra (Thrace). The conjecture that the

³ Minorsky 1937, 115, 354.

⁴ Benveniste 1945, 163.

⁵ Frye 1963, 82–83.

⁶ Cf. Schmitt 1991, 76.

⁷ The “*haoma*(-consuming) Sakas”, corresponding perhaps to the Greek Σκόθαι Ἀμύργιοι.

Sakā tigraxaudā “Sakas with pointed hat”⁸ belonged to Central Asia is supported by the fact that the graves of the nomad rulers who wore pointed hats have been found in Central Asia, much similar to the tall pointed hat the captive Skunxa, depicted in the Bisotun relief, has on his head.⁹ Considering the profound discrepancy between the Greek and Persian accounts, one should not rule out the possibility that there might have been two distinct wars between Darius and the Scythians.

The Bisotun relief betrays also the different cultural traditions to which Darius and Skunxa belonged. Comparing their outfits, the long, loose costume of the former, characteristic of the Near Eastern civilization, stands in sharp contrast against Skunxa’s short tunic, with a broad belt and narrow trousers typical of the Steppe nomads—an indication how the South Iranians had drifted away from their prehistoric Steppe material culture. Furthermore, the fact that the Scythians did not share with Darius in worshipping Ahura Mazda implies divergence in spiritual culture.

Notwithstanding the differences, since the Scythians were skilled fighters, we may infer that some of the defeated Scythians would have joined the ranks of the Achaemenid army, or as troops of the king or his satraps; these would have risen from rank and files of the Scythians who would be drafted into the Persian army and served in the expedition of the great kings.¹⁰ Indeed, Darius’ military included contingents drawn from the Iranian nomadic tribes of Central Asia and sedentary peoples of Eastern Iran: Parthians, Chorasmians, Arians (from Herat region), Sogdians, Bactrians, Drangians, Sakas of the plains, and Sakas of the marshes. Other than military, however, it is unlikely that they attained high offices in the bureaucracy and rule of the empire, as many non-Persian Iranians did.¹¹

Whatever the definite military outcome of the war (or wars) between Darius and the Scythians may have been, it had significant implications for both sides. On the one hand, Scythians became known as a formidable military force, and their internal unity was strengthened.¹² On the other hand, these confrontations put an end to the Scythian invasions of the Persian Empire as long as the heirs of Darius the Great continued to rule the Plateau. It was some decades after the downfall of the Achaemenid Empire (330 BCE) that the Steppe nomads could breach the borders, make their way into the Iranian Plateau and establish the Arsacid dynasty.

⁸ Corresponding to the Σκόθαι Ὀρθοκορυβάριοι of the Greek authors.

⁹ See Harmatta 1979; Frye 1983, 95, 103; Shahbazi 1982; Dandamaev 1994, 44; Briant 2002, 141–146.

¹⁰ See Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.8.3, 3.11.3. Cf. Frye 1998, 172.

¹¹ Bivar 1983, 181; Vogelsang 1992, 96ff., 130–132, 304–315.

¹² Melyukova 1990, 97–117.

1.2. The Arsacids

This eventful period in terms of Steppe-Plateau contacts begins some eighty years after Alexander conquered the Persian Empire. In his drive towards the northeastern frontiers Alexander faced a strong and stubborn resistance of the natives, nomads included, necessitating the establishment of garrisons, which contributed in the future strengthening of defensive capabilities of the settled people in Central Asia. His successors, the Seleucids, managed to control frontiers of their kingdom for almost a century. It was the loss of the territorial integrity in the east, i.e. secession of Bactria and Parthia from the Seleucid kingdom, that instigated the incursion of the nomads who changed the course of history in this part of the world.

The Arsacids belonged to the confederation of Parni or Aparni, a tribe of the larger nomadic Dahi confederation (Strabo 11.508, 515), itself a Saka group in the broad sense of the ethnonym. The newcomers adopted the language of the settled inhabitants of Parthia and spread it beyond its original confines; in their drive westwards, the Arsacids gradually pushed Alexander's successors out of the Iranian homeland and revived the national sovereignty and traditions. It took nearly a century before the Arsacids seized Seleucia on the Tigris (141 BCE) and become the chief rulers of the Plateau. In spite of their apparent Hellenistic liking, their Saka origins with a tribal structure and behavior remained with the Arsacids in their long rule of nearly half a millennium (ca. 238 BCE–224 CE).

It did not take long before the Parni Arsacids were immersed into the native culture of Parthia/Khorasan – that is becoming Parthian ethnically and linguistically. As such, the Arsacids demonstrate *par excellence* a dynasty with an original Steppe identity who adopted themselves to the milieu of a sedentary civilization; this pattern was to continue down into the Islamic era, and repeated in a remarkably similar manner by the Turkic Saljuqs, who followed similar patterns of movements, battles, victories, and imperial rule over Persia. As the rulers of Iran, the Parthians were now in charge of sealing the northern frontiers against infringement of the Sakas. They did so by building a cavalry far superior to the Scythian horse warfare, equipped with a new breed of “Fergana” horse,¹³ highly prized and designated as “heavenly” by the Chinese. By that time, China had been united and had built the Great Wall under the first emperor of the Ch'in dynasty, replaced by equally powerful Han in 202 BCE. Seeing that China and Iran successfully sealed their northern frontiers, the nomads rerouted themselves to the Western Steppes towards the Roman Empire.

Towards the end of the long rule of Mithradates I (ca. 171–132 BCE) the Parthian empire was consolidated across the Iranian Plateau. The traumatic situation

¹³ See Borjjan and Borjjan 2001.

in the Steppes, however, was beyond the Parthian control. The clash of Hsiung-nu with the Yue-zhi had initiated a series of nomadic movements of “billiard-ball” type in Central Asia that eventually changed the political arrangement of the region by the end of the second century BCE. The Sakas, apparently still the most numerous tribes in Central Asia, were major players in these invasions. Pushing southward, they formed the Indo-Scythian (120 BCE) and Indo-Parthian dynasties (1st century CE),¹⁴ possibly parallel with the establishment of the Saka kingdom of Khotan, a southern oasis in Xinjiang, where the Buddhist documents in the Iranian language of Khotan Saka are excavated. The Greco-Bactrian kingdom collapsed under these invasions, and the Yue-zhi established a state north of the Oxus and then in the first century of Common Era spread to the south under the tribe that gave its name to the Kushan Empire.¹⁵

The Saka invasions of Central Asia along the eastern borders of Parthia were bound to affect the Arsacids as well, with dire consequences. It was in battles against the nomadic bands that Mithradates’ successor Phraates II was defeated and killed by the Sakas, as did his successor and uncle Artabanus I four years later, in 123 BCE. It was only under the invincible command of Mithradates II, the Great (r. 123–87) that the Parthian authority was restored in the east. The ground was now paved for the two great powers of Asia, the Arsacids in Iran and the Han dynasty in China, to establish the commercial route that is known today as the Silk Road.

The tensions with the eastern frontiers’ nomads were somewhat relieved by their displacement, a scenario seen recurrently in the history of Eastern Iran. The Sakas were migrated and resettled in Arachosia and Drangiana, the territory in the Helmand basin, which was thus renamed Sacastena (Isidorus Characenus, *Stathmoi* 18), that is Sakastān “land of the Sakas,” corresponding to Middle Persian Sagastān or Sagistān, whence Arabic Sijistān, and the present Sistān, the land shared between the modern states of Afghanistan and Iran. The Plateau is indeed dotted with many more toponyms bearing the “Saka” element (with the linguistic development Old Pers. *Saka-* > Mid. Pers. *Sag*), such as the several Sagzī “of or related to the Saka,” as well as Sagzābād, Sagān, and the aforementioned Saqqiz. The history behind these toponyms remains to be established for each locality.

The Parni/Arsacid as well as the subsequent nomadic Saka incursions and migrations southwards might be regarded in both ethnic and cultural senses as re-Iranization of the Plateau, and Parthian conquests against the Seleucids may be considered as a pan-Iranian cause opposing Hellenism. Notwithstanding the title *Philhellēn* on the coins of Arsacid kings, particularly those minted in the

¹⁴ Bivar 1983; Senior 2005; Fröhlich 2004.

¹⁵ Frye 1996, 131ff.

towns with a Greek base population, we may distinguish two contradicting groups among the Parthian aristocracy: one consisted of those who had settled in Mesopotamia and were supported by the Greek colonial metropolises therein; the second group was the nobility of the purely Iranian provinces in the east, tightly bound to their Steppe heritage and linked with the Iranian-speaking nomadic tribes of Central Asia.¹⁶ The struggle between these two groups had a profound influence on the course of Arsacid dynastic rule, with reflexes in Iranian historical tradition, i.e. the epic cycles depicting the legacy of the Arsacid kings and princes of Eastern Iran (see §2 below).

The association between the northeast and Iranization has more paradigms in Iranian history: Zoroastrianism began to spread from the east; and after two centuries of the Arab rule, the national independence and cultural Iranian renaissance originated in Transoxiana and Khorasan, where the New Persian literary language was formed vis-à-vis Arabic. The northeast was indeed a recurrent source where of Iranian traditions stemmed and strengthened against the process of “Westernization” of the Iranians who were constantly being absorbed into the matured and still potent civilizations of the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia, and more generally of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world.

1.3. The Sasanians

The Inner Asia witnessed in the fourth century of Common Era the Great Movement of Peoples, which marks the transformation from the “Scythic” to Hunic age in the Eurasian Steppes. By the end of the century, the steppes of Central Asia saw the expansion from the east of the Altaic-speaking peoples, under whose pressure the Iranian-speaking nomads moved south and west, although it is likely that some were ruled or absorbed by Altaic nomads.¹⁷ What were the consequences of such historic events for Iran?

Having replaced the Parthians in 224–226 CE, the Sasanians were destined to rule Persia until the Arab invasion of 651. During these four-plus centuries, the Sasanians had their challenges both in the west and the east. In the west, Roman Empire and its successor Byzantine remained the main adversary of the Persian kings. In the east the Sasanian rule faced two challenges: the Kushans and the new waves of the nomadic invaders. The Kushan kingdom constituted the greatest power in Eastern Iran, at least for a century, ruling vast areas that extended from Central Asia to India. They were defeated and eliminated by the rising Sasanian power in the third century. The nomadic challenge to Sasanians came from the Chionites, the Hephthalites, and finally the Turks, in succession.

¹⁶ See Olbrycht 2003, 69–109.

¹⁷ See, *i.a.*, McGovern 1939, 399ff.

The ethnicity of the Chionites or the Hephthalites is not quite certain. There is indeed little evidence that these two were different peoples. They possibly originated in the steppes of Central Asia and were called in the sources by different names. The Hephthalites might have simply been mere continuation of the Chionites or else a prominent tribe or clan of it. Little is known also about their association with the Huns. Richard Frye surmises that the Chionites and the Hephthalites were the last Iranian-speaking nomads of the Steppes, mixed with the Altaic speakers who were called Huns, or the hordes consisted of essentially Iranian common folk ruled by Altaic chieftains. Striking, however, is the name Chion (Mid. Pers. *Xyōn*), which can either be a variant pronunciation of “Hun,” or a developed form of the Avestan *Hyaona*, or else a combination of both.¹⁸ Whatever the case may be, assimilation should be taken as an important factor in this age of ethnic transformation in the Steppes.

The fourth century saw the invasion of Central Asia by the Chionites. They subdued Sogdiana and Bactria, the regions which were at least loosely controlled, perhaps jointly, by Sasanians and Kushans. As the Chionites reached the eastern borders of Persia proper, history repeated itself: similar to the way Cyrus and Darius, the greatest of the Achaemenid kings, challenged the Massagetae and Scythians, and as Mithradates II, the greatest of the Arsacid kings, confronted the Sakas, much the same way, Šāpur II (r. 309–79), the greatest of the Sasanian kings, had to resist the Chionites. After a period of wars and alliances, the Chionites finally brought an end to the Persian rule in Central Asia. In later times, only raids and temporary incursions were made by the Sasanians, such as the invasion Bahrām V (r. 420–438) of Bukhara.

Although the name *Xyōn* persisted throughout the Sasanian political literature as the eastern adversaries of the Persians, as of the mid-fifth century the nomadic invaders of Central Asia appear with the new name of Hephthalites. These were to succeed the Kushans kingdom, wielding great power in Eastern Iran for a century. Comparable with the bitter experience the Arsacids had with the Sakas some centuries earlier, the Sasanians suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the Hephthalites; in a battle with them King Pērōz (r. 459–84) lost his life in 484, and his son Kawād I (r. 488–96, 499–531) solicited the Hephthalites to help him regain the throne. It was only under Chosroes I (r. 531–579), whose rule marks the zenith of the Sasanian rule, that the Hephthalites could be defeated for good: in alliance with the Western Turks, who were beginning to make their appearance on the Iranian borders in Central Asia, Persians destroyed the Hephthalite Empire circa 558. The invaded territory was divided between the victors with the Oxus River as the frontier.

¹⁸ Cf. Frye 1998, 171; Frye 1963, 216–217. On the various forms of “Hun,” see Bailey 1954. See also Felix 1991; Bivar 2003.

Under Chosroes I, the frontiers of Ērānšahr were reinforced against further nomadic invasions by building defense walls in the steppes of Gurgān, southeast of the Caspian Sea, and in Darband, connecting the Caspian shore to the eastern toe of the Great Caucasus chain. These preventive measures may have contributed to the extension of Pax Sasanica for a century or so. The integrity of the Iranian lands and its defense against the northern nomads was so important an issue that it constituted the main theme of the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, a compilation of Iranian historical traditions most likely completed in the reign of Chosroes I.¹⁹ *Xwadāy-nāmag* aimed to bolster the nationalistic outlook of the Iranians by placing them vis-à-vis the legendary Turanians, who were identified then with the Chionites and Hephthalites, the nomadic menace of the time. Some half a millennium later, when the same work was versified by Firdawsi into its final redaction, the *Shahnama* (see §2, below), the Turanians could only be identified with the Turks who had reached the Oxus and were about to conquer the entire Plateau and beyond.

By the time of the Muslim Arab invasion of Iran, the Iranian peoples of the Central Asian Steppes had been largely absorbed by the Turks. The Turkic expansion²⁰ southward into the oases of Central Asia took place in the earlier Islamic centuries. Samanids, the last Iranian dynasty to rule in Transoxiana, were succeeded in the eleventh century by Turkic dynasties. At this time the Plateau was partitioned into petty kingdoms that were in vassalage relations with the Caliphs of Baghdad. With no imperial power to seal the northeastern frontiers, a Turkmen tribe of the Ghuzz led by the Saljuq clan crossed the Oxus River, and soon after founded the first Turkic empire on the Plateau. As mentioned above (§1.2), the migration routes and the strategies leading to the dynastic rule of the Saljuqs were strikingly similar to those of the Arsacids some fourteen centuries earlier. The nomadic invasions and migrations from the north continued after the Saljuqs, not only from the northeast but also from the Caucasian passes of Darband and Darial, through which the Alanic intermittent incursions and raids, which had begun in the first century of Common Era,²¹ lasted until the destruction of the Alans by the Mongol horde in the thirteenth century.²²

2. Iranian National History and the Steppe Nomads

Prior to the introduction of factual history, reconstructed in modern times based on historical and archeological evidence, Iranian peoples had their own interpretation of their past, which was a blend of historical facts and myths and

¹⁹ Yarshater 1983.

²⁰ For the expansion of the Turks, see Barthold 1945.

²¹ Sulimirski 1970, 142.

²² Borjian 2000.

legends—a radically different perception of the antiquity from modern scholarship. Steppe Iranians have left a profound imprint on these traditions. After all, it was the age-old confrontations with the Steppe nomads as well as with the Greco-Roman civilization that encouraged the late Sasanians to boost the nationalistic feelings of their own people through compilation of the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, the *Book of Kings*.

The contents of the *Book of Kings* survive in several Pahlavi, Arabic, and Persian works compiled in earlier Islamic era, but the most elaborate narration belongs to Firdawsi's *Shahnama*, versified in the late tenth century. The epic consists of a sequence of fifty kings within four dynasties: (1) the Pišdadids ("created first"): world kings from Gayōmart through Frēdōn and Iranian kings from Manōčīhr to Zaw, followed by (2) the Kayanid kings from Kay Kawād through Kay Xusraw and then from Kay Luhrāsp through Dārā, who lost his crown to Iskandar, i.e. Alexander the Great, (3) the Arsacids, with only a brief mention (a result of the efforts of the early Sasanians to obliterate the glorious history of the Parthians, in order to give legitimacy to their own dynasty), and (4) the Sasanians, which constitute the historical half of the *Shahnama*. Thus, there is no place for the Medes and Achaemenids in the traditional history. This loss of collective memory on the part of Persians came about along with the spread of Zoroastrianism from the northeast to the rest of the Iranian Plateau. The Zoroastrian progression carried the myths and legends originated from the Avestan people, outlined in their holy scriptures, and developed in the course of oral transmissions.²³ The Avestan tradition in its early form knew little about the history of Western Iranians and the experiences they had with the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean civilizations.

The challenge we face here is to explain how some figures and events of the *Avesta* had profoundly been amplified vis-à-vis confrontations with the Northern Iranians by the time they reached the *Shahnama*.

How was the Avestan tradition, formed in a primitive economy and limited geography of the Steppes (reflected in the *Gathas*) and Eastern Iran (in the *Younger Avesta*) refined and reinterpreted under the Arsacids and Sasanians to accord with the long imperial status the Iranians had acquired in West Asia? Comparing the *Avesta* and related Pahlavi works against the legendary part of the *Shahnama*, we find the main figures, together with their lineages and associations, as well as order of the events, are retained with striking accuracy – an expected loyalty to sacred traditions. Thus the originally mythological figures, often traceable to the Indo-Iranian epoch, such as Gayōmarta, Haošīianḡha (> Hōšang), Taxma Urupi (Tahmōrat), Yima (Jam), Aži Dahāka (Dahāk), and Ōraētaona (Frēdōn) find their place in the national history as the first world

²³ Nöldeke 1920; Yarshater 1971.

kings associated with early inventions and spread of civilization.²⁴ The Kayanid kings of the *Shahnama*, namely Kay Kawād, Kay Kā'ūs, Kay Xusraw, Kay Luhrāsp, and Kay Guštāsp (< Kauui Vištāspa), correspond to the Kavi family of rulers of the *Avesta*.²⁵ Other protagonists of the *Shahnama*, such as Sīāwaš, Jāmāsp, Isfandīār, Zarēr, and Humāy, just to name a few, as well as the Turanian archenemies, Afrāsiāb and Arjāsp, have more or less similar standings in the Avestan tradition. The profound difference between the two traditions is the geographic domain within which the events take place, and the consequent metamorphosis of the Avestan clans, who then had little ethnic distinction, into the countries and “nations” of the late antiquity Near East.

An Avestan notion heavily invested upon in the national history is *Tūra-*, originally an ethnonym for the fierce nomadic riders who robbed, stole, and killed the cattle from their righteous sedentary neighbors, i.e. the Avestan people.²⁶ Even though the contents of the *Avesta* was adopted by historical Iranians without necessarily understanding the underlying facts, the identification of *Tūra-* with the nomadic tribes of Central Asia (initially Iranian-, and then Turkic-speakers, with whom the kingdoms on the Plateau had some of their most remarkable encounters) was indeed a relevant one.²⁷ Thus, the blend of the legendary *Tūra-* with the northeastern nomads, with whom Persians had numerous historical encounters, gave way to the significant notion of the Turanians in the national history. The most colorful events in the heroic part of the *Shahnama* are the series of wars between Iran and Turan, and, in fact, an essential part of the Iranian national character was built on the definition of an *other* who was the Turanians, reflecting the perennial disparity between the sedentary, agricultural economy practiced on the Plateau and the nomadic way of life of the Steppes.

Besides the Steppe nomads, the historical Iranians had another lasting rival: the Roman Empire and its successor the Byzantine on the west, against which a good part of the Parthian and Sasanian political history had been formed by the time when the *Xwadāy-nāmag* was in its concluding stages of compilation. In order to meet with this reality, on which the Avestan tradition had nothing to offer, the historical Iranians had to introduce a new legend into their history: that

²⁴ See Christensen 1934.

²⁵ Christensen 1931; Skjærvø 2013.

²⁶ Boyce 1987.

²⁷ The possibility that the Avestan *Tūra-* corresponded to the Scythians of the Steppes already in the Avestan epoch, as implied from their possession of swift horses (*Yašt* 17.55–56) among other descriptions of them in the *Avesta*, will depend on which of the hypotheses concerning the time and place of composition of the Avestan texts is considered tenable. For two divergent views, see Boyce 1987; Gnoli 1987.

of the division of the realm of Frēdōn, the last of the world great kings, among his three sons: Ērēč/Ēraj, Tūč/Tūr, and Sarm, the eponymous ancestors of Iranians, Turanians, and Romans, respectively.²⁸ At this stage the national history unfolds a new geographical domain consisting of three distinct countries: Ēran (Iran or Persia, including the Arabian Peninsula), Tūran (Transoxiana and the Asian Steppes, and, by extension, China), and (H)rōm (Rome, i.e. Anatolia and the Mediterranean, as well as the eastern Europe). Thus the legendary bipartite division (Avestan people vs. their nomadic enemies, the *Tūra-*) grew into a tripartite one, commensurate with the development of the geopolitics of Ērānšahr throughout the antiquity.²⁹

As the *Avesta* lacks such a triad, one may be tempted to seek the origins of the Iranian tradition in the Biblical story of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (*Genesis* 10), or even more tenably in the parallel traditions among the Indo-Europeans. Ancient Germans had a similar legend, according to which Mannus, the ancestor of the German people, divided his realm among his three sons, from whom sprang the three main German tribes (Tacitus, *Germania* 2.2). Moreover, as transmitted by Herodotus (IV.5–7), the Pontic Scythians had the legend of Targitau and his three sons, Lipoxais, Arpoxais, and Colaxais; each son became the ancestor of a main Scythian tribe; the Royal Scythians descended from Colaxais, who had become the supreme ruler of all Scythia. The analogy between the Scythian and Persian sagas become even more attractive when we learn about the surname of the Royal Scythians, Paralatae (< proto-Iranian *para-dāta*), which is shared by Frēdōn and his kin, Pīšdād. The motif of the legend, however, could be as old as Frēdōn himself, for his very name, Av. *Θraētaona-* (<*θri-* “three”) bears the notion of trinity, comparable to the Indian mythical character *Trita-*, and is traceable to the proto-Indo-European social stratification.³⁰

* * *

Let us now turn to Sarm (or Salm, in the *Shahnama*) and his association in Iranian national history with the western neighbors of Persia. Unlike Tūr's offspring, the Turanians, who play the antagonist role in the national history, we find little mention of the progenies of Sarm. Throughout the *Shahnama* we find the association between Sarm and the Romans only in passing.³¹ This imbalance

²⁸ Molé 1952–53.

²⁹ See Borjjan and Borjjan 2011.

³⁰ See Gnoli 1980, 115–119.

³¹ In the reign of the Sasanian king Xusraw Parvīz: ... *abā Qaysar-i yakdīl u yaknihād /// kujā Salm būd-aš nīā-yi kahun* (*Shahnama*, VIII, 103) “with the strong-minded Csesar, to whom Salm

between the Turanians and Sarm is hardly surprising, since the Avestan tradition offers little on the Sarm nation to be amplified upon.

As to the name, it is widely accepted that Sarm is a linguistically related to *Sairima*,³² mentioned only once in the extant *Avesta*, where praise is offered to the *fravašis* of the just men and women of Airyas, Tūryas, Sairimas, Sāinus, and Dāhis (*Yašt* 13.143–144). The sequence of the names Airyas, Tūryas, and Sairimas in this authoritarian passage of the *Avesta* leaves little doubt about their corresponding association with Ēraj, Tūr, and Sarm of the national history. The reason why Sairima – and not any other peoples and tribes stated in the *Yašts* – are selected to be identified with the western adversaries of historical Iranians in the traditions leading to the national history may very well lie in the name resemblance Sairima had with historical Sauromatae/Sarmatians of the Eurasian Steppes. Actually, *Sarm* is a singular form of *Sarm-at* in certain East Iranian languages, and the association between Sairima-/Sarm on the one hand and the Sarmatians on the other is supported by many Iranists.³³ In all likelihood, the Middle Iranian “Sarm” appears to have been linguistically adjusted itself to “Sarmat” (Sarmatians); had this adjustment not been taken place, the natural development of the Avestan *Sairima*- would lead to the form **Sērim* (with the long vowel) in Parthian and Middle Persian languages.

What historical contacts did make Sarmatians so well known to Iranians? We find several encounters between Iranians of the Plateau and those of the Steppes in the Arsacid period, when the warlike Sarmatians had their days of glory in the Western Steppes and would make periodic alliances with the Parthians, Romans or local powers of the Caucasus. A notable event of this nature is recorded by Tacitus (*Annals*, Book VI, events of 35–6 CE): two groups of Sarmatians, not simply mercenary groups but substantial military forces, “engaged themselves in conflicting interests”. One group was allied with the Iberians who were helping the Roman Empire, while another group fought for the Arsacid king Artabanus II (r. 8/9–39/40 CE). The Iberians, having managed to block the pro-Arsacid Sarmatians to swarm into South Caucasus, inflicted a decisive defeat on the Parthian army.³⁴ By the late Sasanian period, when the Sarmatians had long been replaced by the Alans in the north Caucasus, the

was the great ancestor”; *nuxust andar āyad zi Salm-i buzurg // zi Iskandar ān kinadār-i suturg* (*Shahnama*, VIII, 257) “the original [disaster] comes from the great Salm – from Alexander, that enormous avenger”. The *Bundahišn* (15.29) defines the Sarm people as those dwelling in Hrōm, i.e. “Rome,” the Byzantine territory, most particularly, Anatolia.

³² Justi 1895, 289, s.v. “Sairima.”

³³ For a bibliography of discussions, see Gnoli 1980, 60–61, note 8.

³⁴ See also Olbrycht 1998, 146–147.

latter continued to contribute in the Persian-Byzantine wars.³⁵ We also find in the *Shahnama* an association between the Alans and Salm, who defended their fortress.³⁶

The Parthian affairs with the Sarmatians strongly suggest that the legend of Frēdōn's three sons must have been conceived sometime during the Arsacid dynastic rule. There is, however, a more convincing reason to support such chronology: such a legend should have been formed when the Western Iranians were in the process of growing from a people into a nation, that is to say when the designation "Iran" developed from the name of a people into the name of a country. Because there is little evidence as to how the Arsacids themselves would have called their empire, we may resort to the preceding and succeeding Persian dynasties. The Achaemenids used the term *Arya* "Aryan, Iranian" only as an ethnonym.³⁷ Centuries later, by the time of Adašīr Pābakān, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, we will find the idea of Iran as a political entity looming large. One may therefore find it logical to attribute the initiation of the idea of Iran as a country to the long rule of the Parthians. As mentioned above, the geopolitical reality of Iran as a country and the endeavors to defend its sovereignty against two strong powers, the Roman Empire in the west and the Central Asian nomads in the east, necessitated the initiation of the legend of Frēdōn's three sons, which was further elaborated in the course of oral transmissions.³⁸

Identifying Sarm with the Sarmatians and Tūr with the Iranian-speaking nomads of the Asian Steppes has yet another implication: the three sons of Frēdōn were all speakers of Iranian languages. Selection of the Sarmatians as offspring of Sarm might have to do with their recognition on the part of Iranian-speakers of the Plateau as an ethnically kin people. If not intelligible to the early Middle Western Iranian dialects, the Sarmatian language could still be identifiably close enough to the East Iranian languages (whose speakers, the Chorasmians, Sogdians, and Bactrians, could well be considered brethren to the Persian and Parthians of the antiquity) that some kind of ethno-linguistic affinity with the Sarmatians would be assumed. Classical sources allude to affinity between the languages spoken on the Iranian Plateau and those of Scytho-Sarmatians; e.g.

³⁵ For the sources, see Alemany 2000, 359.

³⁶ *Hamē īn saxun Qāran andēša kard // ki bargāšt mar Salm rōy az nibard // Alānī diz-aš bāšad ārāmghāh // sazaḡ gar bar ō bar bigīrīm rāh (Shahnama, I, 145).*

³⁷ The introductory paragraph of the inscription of Darius I at Naqš-e rústam reads: *adam Dārayavahuš xšāyaθiya vžrka, xšāyaθiya xšāyaθiyānām, xšāyaθiya dahyūnām vispazanānām, xšāyaθiya ahyāyā būmiyā vžrkāyā dūraiapiy, Vištāspahyā puça, Haxāmanišiya, Pārsa, Pārsahyā puça, Ariya, Ariya čiça (Darius, Na, 8–15)* "I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kind of men, King in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage" (cf. Kent 1953, 138). See also Rezai Baghbidi 2009.

³⁸ Borjjan and Borjjan 2011.

Justinus (41.1.1) states that Parthian was somewhere between Median and Scythian.³⁹ In light of this view, the ethnic uniformity among the three sons of Frēdōn would be disturbed if, instead of Sarmatians, a non-Iranian people were selected to descend from the second son of Frēdōn.

* * *

To this point we have investigated how the core Avestan tradition was adopted by later Iranians with regards to historical realities, leading to the Sasanian rendition of the Iranian national history. But the Avestan elements constitute only the oldest substratum of the *Shahnama*. Therein we find two more layers, both from the heroic ages and traditions of Eastern Iran, which are anachronistically blended with the Avestan tradition to form the national epic.

One layer consists of the warriors such as Gēw, Gōdarz, Mīlād (Mihrdād), Farhād, and Bēžan, who often lead Iranian army in the long wars with Tūran. These names as well as the events connected with them can be identified with the Arsacid kings and princes of Eastern Iran (see §1.2, above), whose courageous exploits came down via oral transmissions of the minstrels and storytellers.⁴⁰ Therefore, the Arsacids, originally a Saka tribe, who brought about a heroic age onto the Plateau, found their share in the national history under the guise of noble warriors, even if the Arsacids as a dynasty as little as a few verses in the *Shahnama*.

The second superstratum in the *Shahnama* and parallel sources is the stories of Zāl and his redoubtable son Rustam, the arch hero of Iran in most encounters with Tūran. Their exploits, as vassal kings of Sistān, begin to unfold under Manōčihir, an offspring of Ēraj and the first king of Iran, and continues down to Kay Guštāsp, the last of the Kayanids proper; thus the lifespan of Zāl and Rustam combined runs throughout the reigns of some eight kings and constitutes the epical core of the *Shahnama*. It has been established⁴¹ that these characters are adopted from a heroic cycle of Sakastān in the Helmand basin; hence, it is not just by coincidence that Rustam is on occasion referred to as Sagzī, that is a Saka, a Scythian.

In fact Rustam has a true Scythian character. His many acts of valor and even his guise give a kind of Viking air to the saga – the style he is generally portrayed in the paintings accompanying modern editions of the *Shahnama*. Rustam is often mentioned together with his marvelous steed Raxš, who is instrumental in making the warrior triumphant in many battles. In Firdawsi's poet-

³⁹ I would like to thank Marek Olbrycht for making me aware of this source.

⁴⁰ Yarshater 1983.

⁴¹ Yarshater 1983.

ic narration we often find Raxš grazing in vast *mary(zār)s*, or steppes, particularly in the episodes of the *Haft x^(w)ān*, the Seven Adventures of Rustam in his long journey to rescue Kay Kā'ūs. Another reminiscent of a Scythian warrior can be observed in the death of Rustam: it happens when the hero, riding his Raxš, falls into a pit dug and implanted with blades and arrows by his envious brother Šayād,⁴² causing the demise of both the rider and his horse in their prearranged grave. This image of the warrior, horse, and blades and arrows all buried together reminds us of the Scythian barrows of the Russian Steppes, where the deceased warrior was buried along with his horses and weapons. We may even seek in Rustam the faithlessness the Scythians were accused of (see §1.1, above): the element of heresy in Rustam shows itself in his killing, though reluctantly, of Isfandīār, the prince of Iran who championed the spread of Zoroastrianism; shortly after this tragic combat Rustam faces his death and is bound to an ominous afterlife.⁴³ Lastly, mention should be made of Rustam's father, who was born white haired and thus named Zāl/Zarr "white, yellow, golden,"⁴⁴ recalling the Nordic-looking Scythians of the Eurasian Steppes.

* * *

To summarize, such outstanding elements in the national epic as the continuous wars between Iran and Tūran, the inclusion of Sarmatians in the triad notion of the ethnogenesis of Iranians, and the Saka heroic cycles of Zāl and Rustam, all mirror the long historical experience the Persians had with the Northern Iranian Peoples.

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⁴² A possible affinity of this name with "Saka" deserves attention.

⁴³ *Shahnama* V, 419, vv. 1455–1458.

⁴⁴ Note also Firdawsi's description of Zāl's face: *ču bussad lab u rux hamānand-i xōn* "lips like the sea star and the face bearing a resemblance to blood" (*Shahnama* I, 173).

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Abstract

The intention of this paper is to give a broad outline of the persistent presence of the Steppe Iranians in the Persian history and culture, by bringing together two fields that have often been treated independently. After an overview of the history of interactions between Persia and the Iranian-speaking Steppe nomads, we will extend our attention to the Iranian national history to offer some insights on myths and legends of the *Shahnama* that have been originated from or influenced by the mutual relations between the Steppe nomads and the dynasties who ruled on the Iranian Plateau.