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"Thus Spake the Fire": The Persistent Roots of a Zoroastrian Motif Between Socrates Scholasticus and Niẓām al-Mulk

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Abstract

Two unrelated "court tales" such as the mission of bishop Marutha to Yazdgerd I in the *Ecclesiastical history* by the Greek historian Socrates (5th c. CE), and the account of the Zoroastrian heretic Mazdak preserved in the *Siyāsatnāma* by the Seljuk vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (11th c.), share a common narrative: an impostor contrives to make the sacred fire speak, but is ultimately exposed. By tracing this literary motif back to the prophetic biography of Zarathustra, this paper explores how the theme was transmitted, enriched, and re-functionalized, through the lens of the *Book of Daniel*, in various Eurasian traditions: through case study we point out the prospects and challenges involved when researching the emergence of ancient Iranian patterns across different literary corpora.

Keywords

Zoroastrian Fire – Mazdak – Marutha – Literary motif – Persian court tales

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1 Two Stories[1]

During the reigns of Arcadius (r. 383–408) and Theodosius II (r. 408–450), the Syriac bishop Marutha of Maypherkat, a polyglot and physician, was sent at least twice to the court of the Sasanian King of Kings Yazdgerd I (r. 399–420) in order to strengthen the *entente cordiale* that was going then prevailing between Rome and Persia.[2] The adventures of Marutha, his missionary activities, and his personal ties with Yazdgerd, soon gained legendary status of legend in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic literature.[3] The first witness, deriving from a lost Syriac source, is the account preserved in the Greek *Ecclesiastical history* (Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ἱστορία) by Socrates of Constantinople (mid 5th c.). Socrates recounts how Marutha first obtained Yazdgerd's favour by healing the king's chronic headache; but fearing the king might abandon Zoroastrianism, the Zoroastrian priests – the Magi (Gr. μάγοι; MP *moγ*) – plotted against the imperial legate:

> Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical history*, VII 8.7–13, pp. 36–41 Hansen, Perichon, Maraval: The Magi accordingly contrived a treacherous plan (ἀπάτη). As the Persians worship fire (τὸ πῦρ σέβουσιν), and as the king was accustomed to pay homage (προσκυνεῖν), in a certain shrine, to the continually burning fire (τὸ διηνεκῶς καιόμενον πῦρ), they hid a certain fellow under the ground, and instructed him to cry out, at such a time as the king came to pray, that the king must be cast out because he had been impious in believing the Christian priest to be inspired by God. When Isdegerd (Ἰσδιγέρδης [MP Yazdgerd]) – this was the king's name – heard this, although he held Marutha (Μαρουθᾶς) in reverence, nevertheless he decided to dismiss him. But Marutha, being a truly God-inspired man, gave himself up to prayer, and by this means discovered the trick (δόλος) of the Magi; and he said to the king, "Do not be deceived, O king. If thou

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the online conference "'Così parlò il fuoco': il viaggio di un motivo letterario tra Zaraθuštra, Mārūṯā e Mazdak", Marco Polo Encounters on Iran and the Persianate World – Side Event, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 18.05.21.

2 On the historical context, see now Greatrex, Geoffrey, Amanatidis-Saadé, George, "Les relations romano-perses sous Yazdgird Ier et Wahrām V," in (ed.) Jullien, Christelle, *Discourse, Power Issues, and Images: Transversal Studies on the Reigns of Yazdgird I and Wahram V* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2023): pp. 5–28.

3 Marcus, Ralph, "The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat," in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 25 (1932): pp. 47–71 See also Brock, Sebastian, "A Fragment from a Syriac Life of Marutha of Martyropolis," in *Analecta Bollandiana*, 128 (2010): pp. 306–11; Jullien, Christelle, "Les affaires de pyrees sous Yazdgird I. Motif hagiographique et modèles littéraires," in (ed.) Jullien, Christelle, *Discourse, Power Issues, and Images: Transversal Studies on the Reigns of Yazdgird I and Wahram V* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2023): 144–5.

> go back to the place whence thou heardst the voice, and dig there, thou will discover the trick, for it was not the fire that cried out, but the machinations of men that effected this (οὐ γὰρ τὸ πῦρ φθέγγεται, ἀλλὰ ἀνθρώπων κατασκευὴ τοῦτο ποιεῖ)." The Persian king believed Marutha and again entered the temple where the perpetual fire (τὸ ἄσβεστον πῦρ) burned; and when he again heard the same voice, he commanded the earth in that place to be dug up; whereupon he who had uttered the supposedly divine voice (τὴν νομισθεῖσαν θεοῦ φωνὴν) was discovered. The king then became very wrathful, and decimated the order of Magi (τὸ τῶν μάγων γένος ἀπεδεκάτωσε) (tr. Marcus, Ralph, "The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat," in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 25 (1932): p. 50, with slight modifications).

On later embassies, we read in Socrates (VII 8.13–19), the Magi again tried to discredit Marutha, fabricating other deceits (that will be commented below;), only to be exposed again. Yazdgerd died before he could convert to Christianity, and the friendly relationship with the Romans soured with the enthronement of his son Wahrām V.

A few decades later, during the turbulent reigns of Kawād I (r. 488–496, 498/499–531), Persia witnessed the appearance of an egalitarian religious movement, initially supported by Kawād, but then violently repressed when, probably around 516, it radicalized into a social revolt led by Mazdak son of Bāmdād.[4] The eventual killing of Mazdak in 528 (or 531) and the demise of his followers eventually consigned the movement to hostile press in the complex

4 For innovative treatments of the source material and the chronology, see de Blois, François, "A New Look at Mazdak," in (eds.) Bernheimer, Teresa, Silverstein, Adam, *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives. From the Sasanians to Early Islam* (Exeter: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012): pp. 1–24; de Blois, François, "Mazdak the Ancient and Mazdak the Last. Further Remarks on the History and Religious Typology of Mazdakism," in (ed.) Jullien, Christelle, *Husraw Ier, reconstructions d'un règne: sources et documents* (Paris Leuven: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes Peeters, 2015): pp. 141–54; Börm, Henning, "Malalas und die Perser. Manichäer und Mazdakiten in römischer Perspektive," in (eds.) Gengler, Olivier, Meier, Mischa, *Johannes Malalas: der Chronist als Zeithistoriker* (presented at the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2022): pp. 131–52. Standard accounts are Crone, Patricia, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," in *Iran*, 29 (1991): pp. 21–42; Gariboldi, Andrea, *Il regno di Xusraw dall'anima immortale: riforme economiche e rivolte sociali nell'Iran sasanide del VI secolo* (Milano: Mimesis, 2006): pp. 89–151. Older references and discussion in Gnoli, Gherardo, "Nuovi studi sul Mazdakismo," in *La Persia e Bisanzio: convegno internazionale* (*Roma, 14–18 ottobre 2002*) (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2004): pp. 439–56; Eichenberger, Linda, "Kommunist, Häretiker, Rebell: Mazdak und die Religionsgeschichtsschreibung," in *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*, 28 (2020): pp. 237–58.

and contradictory literary tradition that survives. One branch of it has been preserved in the *Siyar al-mulūk* ("Manners of the Kings") or *Siyāsatnāma* ("The Book of Government") written by the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) for the Seljuk ruler Malikšāh (1073–1092).[5] The final chapters of this "mirror for princes" contain a historical gallery on "the sectarians who are enemies of the realm and of Islam" (*badmaẕhabān ki dušman-i mulk va islām-and*), with Mazdak – the only pre-Islamic figure described in this section – as its first subject (XLIV, pp. 257–278 Darke). Niẓām al-Mulk presents Mazdak as a Zoroastrian high priest (*mūbadān mūbad*), skilled in astrology, highly favoured at the court, so proudly convinced of his prophethood (*payġambarī*) that he seeks to prove it by staging a miracle at court:

> A. ʿAlī Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāma* XLIV, pp. 258–259 Darke: What he did was to tell his minions (غلامان خویش) to make a tunnel (نقب) in a certain place; they gradually bored a hole so that the end of it came up in the fire-temple (میان آتشگاه), just at the spot where the fire (آتش) was made; it was only a small opening. Then he began to state his claim to be a prophet (پیغمبری), and said, "I have been sent to renew the faith of Zoroaster (دین زردشت تازه گردانم) because people have forgotten the meaning of the Avesta and Zand, and have ceased to obey the commands of The Good One as Zoroaster laid down[…]." These words reached the ears of King Kawād. […] Kawād said, "What is your miraculous proof?" (معجزه تو چیست) He said, "My miracle is this, that I will make the fire speak – the fire which you regard as your *qibla* and sanctuary (آتش را که قبله و محراب شماست بسخن آرم); and I will ask God (to Him be power and glory) to command the fire to bear witness to my prophethood (بر پیغامبری من گواهی دهد), so that the king and everyone with him may hear (چنانك ملك و جماعت او آواز بشنوند)." […] The priests said, "[…] But as for his saying that he will give voice to this fire which is the object of our worship – this is a marvel which is not within the power of a man

5 This line of the tradition was once thought to derive from a lost Middle Persian *Mazdak-nāmag* ("Book of Mazdak"): Christensen, Arthur, *Le règne du roi Kawādh I et le communisme mazdakite* (København: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri, 1925): pp. 60–70; Christensen, Arthur, "Two Versions of the History of Mazdak," in *Papers on Indo-Iranian and other subjects: written by several Scholars, in Honour of Shams-ul-Ulama Dr. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi* (Bombay: Printed at the Fort Printing Press, 1930): p. 327. This view was rightly challenged by Tafazzoli, Ahmad, "Observations sur le soi-disant Mazdak-Nāmag," in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata* (Leiden: Brill, 1984): pp. 507–10 (cf. Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko, *Khwadāynāmag: the Middle Persian Book of kings* (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2018): pp. 35–6).

(این شگفت و در قدرت آدمی نیست)". [...] So Kawād and the nobles and priests went to the fire-temple. Mazdak was called; he went and stood beside the fire, and called upon The Good One with a loud voice and blessed Zoroaster, and was silent. From out of the fire there came a voice (از میان آتش آواز آمد) saying the phrase we related before (بر آن جمله که یاد کردیم), so that the king and all the nobles heard it and were amazed (شگفت ماندند) (tr. Darke 190–191, with slight modifications)

Differently than the Magi's plot in Socrates, the exposure of Mazdak's fraud has a longer development. In this account, Kawād and the Zoroastrian authorities, impressed by the fire miracle, accept Mazdak's claims and impose religious reforms. The prince Nuširvān (later to become Khusro I, r. 531–576), however, denounces him as an impostor and, with the help of an old priest from Fārs and a bribed servant, uncovers the secret tunnel; feigning reconciliation, he persuades Mazdak to list all his followers (12,000 in total) and invites them to a royal banquet, during which they are buried head-down in pits in the garden – much like the "twelve" unfortunate victims of the "mad" Cambyses (r. 530–522 BCE) according to Herodotus (III 35).[6] Mazdak himself is eventually executed; Nuširvān seizes power and restores order (*Siyāsatnāma*: XLIV, pp. 257–278 Darke).

Both tales have enjoyed, in the past, a certain popularity. The story of Marutha and the Magi was rendered into Latin by Cassiodorus in the 6th century, and resurfaces in Medieval Christian literature in Syriac (the *Chronicle of 1234*) and Arabic (*Kitāb al-Miǰdal*, "Book of the tower").[7] This courtly setting of the confrontation between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, moreover, fascinated early modern European writers on Persia such as Pietro Bizzarri (1525–1586) or Henry Lord (fl. 1624–1630).[8] The legend of Mazdak's fraud – which possibly

6 This parallel – showing, again, the *longue durée* of Iranian literary motifs – has seemingly never been put forward. For similar accounts of Achaemenid punishments, cf. Ctesias, *FGrHist* F14 §44: F15 §56, Lenfant, Dominique ed., *Ctesias. La Perse, l'Inde, autres fragments* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2004). This gruesome end of the Mazdakite is featured also in Firdawsi's *Šāhnāma*, ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh/Khatibi: VI: vv. 242–254, pp. 69–70.

7 Cassidorus, *Historia ecclesiastica tripartite*, pp. 635–8 Hanslik/Jacob. *Liber turris* ed Giannazza/Sako/Raphael: pp. 284–285 (I owe this reference to Michael David Ethington); *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, ch. XXXIX: pp. 174–175 Chabot (tr. pp. 137–138 Chabot) (on whose sources, cf. Debié, Muriel, *L'Écriture de l'histoire en Syriaque: transmissions interculturelles et constructions identitaires entre hellénisme et islam: avec des répertoires des textes historiographiques en annexe* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015): pp. 326–32).

8 Bizzarri, Pietro, *Persicarum rerum historia in 12. libros descripta, totius gentis initia, mores, instituta, et rerum domi forisque gestarum veram atque dilucidam enarrationem continens.*

left a poetic trace in the "fire of Mazdak" (NP *nār-i mazdak*) alluded to in a verse by the 12th c. Persian poet Aṭīr al-Dīn Aḫsīkatī – was likewise revived, in the early 13th-c. Delhi Sultanate, in ʿAwfī's encyclopaedic *Javāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmiʿ al-rivāyāt* ("Collections of Stories and Illustrations of Histories").[9] Eventually, the 15th-c. Timurid historian Mīrḫᵛānd secured its canonical status by including it in his influential universal history *Rawżat al-ṣafā* ("The Gardens of Purity"), whence it later entered early European Orientalist discourse on Mazdakism.[10] Even a "Zoroastrianized" version of the story appears in the *Dāstān-i Mazdak va Šāh Nušīrvān-i ʿādil* ("The Tale of Mazdak and King Nuširvān the Just"), a verse *qiṣṣa* composed in 1617 (AY 985) by the high priest (*dastur*) Nuširvān Marzbān Kirmānī and transmitted in the collection of Zoroastrian *Rivāyat* assembled by Bahman Isfandiyār.[11]

Auctore Petro Bizaro Sentinate (ex officina Christophori Plantini, 1583): pp. 168–9; Lord, Henry, *A Display of Two Forraigne Sects in the East Indies vizt: the Sect of the Banians the Ancient Natives of India and the Sect of the Persees the Ancient Inhabitants of Persia Together with the Religion and Maners of each Sect Collected into Two Books* (1630) (in the dedicatory inscription). Socrates' text is quoted also in sourcebooks on ancient Zoroastrianism such as Clemen, Carl, *Fontes historiae religionis persicae* (Bonnae: In aedibus A. Marci et E. Weberi, 1920): pp. 89–90.

9 See Pellò, Stefano, *Muḥammad ʿAwfī. Le gemme della memoria: antologia del Jawāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt wa lawāmiʿ al-riwāyāt* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019): pp. 216–28 and below. The verse by Athīr al-Dīn Aḫsīkatī is quoted by Sharīʿat, Muḥammad Javād,Ḫabūšānī, Maryam al-Sādāt, "Sīmā-yi adabī: Zardušt, Mānī wa Mazdak dar āṯār-i manẓūm-i fārsī [The Literary Image of Zoroaster, Mani, and Mazdak in Persian Poetic Works]," *Nīmsālnāma-yi taḳaṣṣuṣī-yi pažūhišnāma-yi adyān* [*Biannual Journal of Religious Studies*], 5 (2011): p. 21.

10 Tr. Arbuthnot, Forster Fitzgerald, Rehatsek, Edward (eds.), *Muḥammad ibn Khāvandshāh Mīr Khvānd. The Rauzat-us-safa ; or, Garden of purity. Part 1. Volume second* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1892): 369. For ancient treatments of Mazdak based on Mīrḫvānd, see for instance Silvestre de Sacy, Antoine Isaac, *Mémoires sur diverses antiquités de la Perse et sur les médailles des rois de la dynastie des Sassanides; suivis de l'histoire de cette dynastie* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1793): p. 354; Rawlinson, George, *The seventh great Oriental monarchy : or The geography, history, and antiquities of the Sassanian or new Persian empire* (London: Longmans, 1876): p. 344; Spiegel, Friedrich, *Erânische Alterthumskunde.* II. *Religion, Geschichte bis zum Tode Aleksanders des Grossen* (Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1873): p. 333.

11 *Dârâb Hormazyâr's Rivâyat*, II 214–230 ed. Unvâlâ/Modi, tr. Dhabhar, Bamanajī Nasarvanji, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others*: their version with introduction and notes (Bombay: Published by the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1932): 582–5. See Vitalone, Mario, "Khosrow of the Immortal Soul in the New Persian Zoroastrian Literary Tradition," in (eds.) Cereti, Carlo G. et al., *Religious themes and texts of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: studies in honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli on the occasion of his 65th birthday on 6th December 2002* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2003): 4. While Christensen, *Two Versions of the History of Mazdak believed that the Rivāyat preserves a more ancient branch of the Mazdak-nāmag* (see n. 5), Molé, Marijan, "Le problème des sectes zoroastriennes

Modern readers of these texts, however, would not find any comments on the common narrative features of these stories, nor would they be aware of the existence of their *Doppelgänger* – although the parallel between Socrates and Niẓām al-Mulk had been identified in specialized scholarship on Mazdakism, notably by Arthur Christensen (1875–1945) and Marijan Molé (1924–1963).[12] How can the reemergence of similar motifs in texts so unrelated culturally, geographically and chronologically be explained?

2 The Fraud: *Bel and the Serpent*

At first glance, the two stories represent variations of a widespread deception narrative (Letter K in Thompson's *Motif-index of Folk Literature*), revolving around a trickster, its victim, and its denouncer. In Socrates, they are respectively the Magi, Yazdgerd, and Marutha, while in Niẓām al-Mulk, they are embodied by Mazdak, Kawād, and Khusro More specifically, this pattern is typical of the ancient Near-Eastern and Achaemenid "court tale", a genre widely popular in Aramaic, Egyptian, Iranian, and Greek traditions, fictionalizing the intrigues and adventures of a gifted courtier within a royal court, who outwits his opponents thanks to his cunning.[13] From this plot outline, Socrates and

dans les livres pehlevis," in *Oriens*, 13–14 (1960): p. 22 thought it more plausible that the *Rivāyat* took inspiration in Niẓām al-Mulk's account.

12 Christensen, *Le règne du roi Kawādh*, p. 67: "un trait caractéristique de la relation de Niẓām-el-mulk est le truc, par lequel Mazdak fait parler le feu sacré. Ce motif légendaire a été connu en Perse longtemps avant le temps de Mazdak. Dans l'Histoire ecclésiastique de Socrate, qui vivait dans la première moitié de notre ère, une histoire analogue est raconté". Molé, *Le problème des sectes zorastriennes*, p. 67 (quoted below). Other passing remarks in Klíma, Otakar, *Mazdak: Geschichte Einer Sozialen Bewegung im Sassanidischen Persien* (Praha: Nakladatelstvi Ceskoslovenske Akademie Ved, 1957): p. 303; Klíma, Otakar, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Mazdakismus* (Prag: Verlag der Tschechoslowakischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977): pp. 55, 69 n. 17. Oddly enough, Nau, François, "Étude historique sur la transmission de l'Avesta et sur l'époque probable de sa dernière rédaction," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 95 (1927): p. 172 believed in the historicity of Marutha's story, but not of Mazdak's, since "il est invraisemblable que la même supercherie ait encore pu réussir moins d'un siècle plus tard"!

13 Definition taken from Konstantakos, Ioannis M., "The Biblical Book of Daniel and the Religious Transformation of the Court Novella," in *Επιθεώρηση Συγκριτικής Λογοτεχνίας* (2024): pp. 50–1 with references. In fact, Carolla, Pia, "La minoranza mazdea e l'imperatore Leone I. Considerazioni sulla politica bizantina in margine alla monografia di Siebigs," *Mediterraneo Antico*, XVI (2013): p. 869 finds a Herodotean flavour in Socrates' tale. Eunapius' story of the Magi's intrigues during the philosopher Eustathius's diplomatic mission (c. 358 CE) at the court of Šābuhr II, falls as well into this literary genre: Bernard, Alberto, "Il Filosofo, lo Šāh e i Magi: l'ambasceria di Eustazio di Cappadocia a Šābuhr II

Niẓām al-Mulk develop a story of a religious scam of the kind that one finds across ancient and modern literature, from satire to apologetics, dealing with the thin line that separate miracle from fraud, and faith from credulity.[14]

In fact, the closest parallel to the Magi and Mazdak's plot recounted by Socrates and Niẓām al-Mulk – hitherto gone unnoticed except for a passing remark by Oktar Klíma[15] – is the first tale of *Bel and the Dragon* (1–22), the deuterocanonical narrative embedded in the Greek translation of the *Book of Daniel*. In Theodotion's version (2nd c. CE), Daniel is a highly honoured courtier of king Cyrus the Persian (*Bel* 1–2). While the Babylonian priests (ἱερεῖς) and the king worship (προσκυνεῖν) the idol Bel, by daily offers of food and wine, Daniel adores only the living God (3–5). When the king insists that Bel eats and drinks, Daniel laughs and exposes the idol's lifelessness (6–7). The priests, accused of deceit, propose a test: the king seals the temple after setting out the offerings (8–11), but the priests secretly enter by night through a hidden passage (κεκρυμμένη εἴσοδος) and consume everything (12–15). At dawn the food is gone, and the king praises Bel, until Daniel shows him the footprints of the priests and their families, discovering their fraud (δόλος) (16–19). The king, furious (ὀργισθείς), executes the deceivers, and allows Daniel to destroy the temple of Bel (20–22).[16]

The detective story of Marutha in Socrates is clearly modelled, to the point of lexical coincidence, on this tale – the Armenian *Life of Marutha* (p. 64) even specifies that the Magi used "deceit in the same manner as the Babylonians did toward Daniel in the reign of Darius".[17] The Mazdak episode is different and narratively more elaborate, but his eventual unmasking as a "charlatan" (*muḥtāl* محتال), once the right "proof" (*ḥujjat* حجت) of his fraud is found, is very similar. We should add incidentally that these coincidences with a Biblical literary model make the historicity of these incidents highly doubtful.

(Eunapio, Vite dei filosofi e sofisti, VI, 5, 1–10)," *Bizantinistica. Rivista di studi Bizantini e Slavi*, XIX (2018): pp. 85–117.

14 See some examples in Nock, Arthur Darby, "Paul and the magus," in (eds.) Lake, Kirsopp, Cadbury, Henry J., *The Beginning of Christianity*. V. *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan, 1933): pp. 187–8 n. 107. A similar anecdote can be found in 16th-c. Jesuit missionary reports about the Tupì *karaíba* ("thaumaturges"), who allegedly performed ceremonies involving a human-shaped pumpkin and staged a prophetic voice making promises of abundance and renewal (episode quoted in Puech, Henri Charles, *Storia delle religioni. 7: Colonialismo e neocolonialismo* (Roma Bari: Laterza, 1978): p. 73).

15 Klíma, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Mazdakismus*, p. 69 n. 17: "über Kniffe und Streiche listiger Priesterkaste vgl. auch den deuterokanonischen Abschnitt des Buches Daniel 14,1–21".

16 Ziegler, Joseph, Munnich, Olivier, Fraenkel, Detlef (eds.), *Septuaginta*. 16,2: *Susanna, Daniel, Bel et Draco* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999): pp. 215–9.

17 Marcus, *The Armenian Life*, p. 64.

While the *Book of Daniel* and its apocryphal insertions provide the literary framework for the story, the "speaking fire" is the trait that makes it specific. A Greek and Roman reader, knowledgeable in Classical "Persianism", could interpret the miracle staged by the Magi as a form of (manipulated) oracular consultation,[18] while to a Jewish, Christian and Muslim readership, the story of Mazdak could evoke a fake counterpart to the theophany witnessed by Moses in the burning bush (*Exodus* 3.2–4; *Deuteronomy* 4.11–12; cf. *Qur'ān* XX:10–14: XXVII:7–9; XXVIII:29–30).[19] Yet neither universal folk motifs, nor Biblical models suffice to explain *why* this medium is chosen by the Magi and Mazdak for their purposes. To understand it, one must turn to Zoroastrian lore.

3 The "Speaking Fire" in Myth and Ritual: Zarathustra's Legend and its Diffusion

In an article devoted to the problem of "sects" in Ancient Zoroastrianism, Marijan Molé, provided the right key to understand the staging of this fire miracle.[20] Regardless of the fraud, Molé argued, this miracle must be taken as a reproduction of a central episode of the "prophetic biography" of Zarathustra (Av. Zaraθuštra, MP Zarduxšt; Gr. Ζωροάστηρ), namely the final conversion of Wištāsp (Av. Kauui Vištāspa; NP Kay Goštāsp): To obtain it, the Amahrspand

18 Procopius (*Wars* II 24,2), mentioning a "great fire temple (μέγα πυρεῖον)" in Media Atropatene (Gr. Ἀδαρβιγάνων, MP Ādurbādagān), probably alluding to the sanctuary of Ādur Gušnasp (see Bernard, Alberto, "Heraclius's Destruction of Ādur Gušnasp, the 'Imposture of the Coals', and Sasanian Kingship" (forthcoming)), says that "Magi tend the unquenched fire (τὸ πῦρ ἄσβεστον) there and scrupulously perform the other rites, and use it as an oracle for the most important matters (μαντείῳ ἐς τῶν πραγμάτων τὰ μέγιστα χρῶνται)", followed by Agathias (*Histories* II 25); cf. Cameron, Averil, "Agathias on the Sassanians," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 23/24 (1969): p. 99.

19 In the Mazdak story, references to a Mosaic antecedent are explicit: Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāma* XLIV, p. 270: "Everybody spoke in turn, and the priest of Pars said, 'What amazes me is the fire speaking.' Mazdak said, 'There should not be amazement at the mighty works of God. Do you not remember how Moses (upon him be peace) made a serpent out of a piece of wood, and caused twelve springs of water to flow from one piece of stone; how he said, "I will drown Pharaoh with all his host", and he did so" (tr. Darke, p. 200). Note also that the "fire of the Sinai" is a well-known topos in Persian poetry: e.g. Ḥāfiẓ ġ. 37, v. 2: "Where is the fire of Sinai (آتش طور)? Where is the meeting place?" (Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān-i Ḥāfiẓ*, P.N. Ḫānlarī (ed.), 2nd ed., 2 vols, (Tehran: Khwārizmī, 1362/1983–4): p. 70).

20 Molé, *Le problème des sectes zorastriennes*, pp. 22–3. On Molé's fundamental contributions, see now Azarnouche, Samra, *A la recherche de la continuité iranienne: de la tradition zoroastrienne à la mystique islamique. Recueil de textes autour de l'oeuvre de Marijan Molé (1924–1963)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022).

("Bountiful Immortal", Av. Aməṣa Spəntā) Wahman, Ašawahišt, and the Life-giving Fire, were sent to the court of the king Wištāsp by the god Ohrmazd (Av. Ahura Mazdā), and the Fire spoke with a human voice urging him to accept the Good Religion taught by Zarathustra.

The earliest account of this epiphany appears in the seventh book of the *Dēnkard*, a 9th-century Pahlavi encyclopaedic compilation drawing on older Zoroastrian lore:[21]

> *Dēnkard* VII 4.74, 77, 78–79, pp. 639–641 Madan: (74) In order to convince (*abē-gumānēnīdan*) King Wištāsp and the learned men with him of the truth of the Tradition (*pad rāstīh ī dēn*), Ohrmazd the Creator sent Wahman, Ašawahišt, and the Life-giving Fire (*Ātaxš ī abzōnīg*) to Wištāsp to convey the message that Zarathustra was the one true bringer of the Word (*abar rāst-waxšwarīh ī Zarduxšt*) and that Ohrmazd wished Wištāsp would receive the Mazdean Tradition (*pad padīruftan ī Wištāsp dēn mazdēsn*) and send it forth in the world (*rawāgēnīdan ī andar gēhān*). [...] (77) The Fire of Ohrmazd spoke with the speech of men (*u-š guft pad ān ī wīrān gōwišnīh Ātaxš ī Ohrmazd*): "Do not fear, exalted Kay Wištāsp, for there is nothing to fear[22] [...] (78) Be aware and know this well! (79) If clairvoyance follows you," i.e. you have the knowledge needed, "then praise the good Mazdayasnian Tradition, which spreads in pure fashion by memorization, which is that of Zarathustra of the Spitāmas (*stāy weh dēn ī mazdēsnān kē abēzagīhā pad ōšmurišn rawēd kē Spitāmān Zarduxšt*)"[23]

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21 The standard edition and study is by the same Molé, Marijan, *La Légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevis* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1967); cf. also Molé, Marijan, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien: le problème zoroastrien et la tradition mazdéenne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963): pp. 272–385. See now Vassalli, Massimiliano, *Zarathustra nella letteratura pahlavi: il libro VII del Denkard* (Torino: Paideia, 2024) (*non vidimus*), and for a brief assesment of Zarathustra's biographical traditon, Stausberg, Michael, *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*. Band 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002): pp. 42–54; Cereti, Carlo G., "Myths, Legends, Eschatologies," in Stausberg, Michael, Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): pp. 264–9.

22 This reassurance formula is a trope of Near Eastern royal oracles (see Nissinen, Martti, "Fear Not: A Study on an Ancient Near Eastern Phrase," in (eds.) Ben Zvi, Ehud, Sweeney, Marvin A., *The Changing Faces of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): pp. 122–61) and Biblical epiphanies: *Genesis* 15.1; *Daniel* 10.12; *Luke* 1.13, 1.30; 2.10.

23 Tr. by Skjærvø, Prods Oktor, *The spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011): pp. 151–2, with minor modifications; cf. Molé, *La Légende de Zoroastre*: p. 57, 186–187.

The inference Molé drew is that the "human voice" coming out of a sacred fire was perceived by Mazdak and his contemporaries, based on Zarathustra's precedent, of Zarathustra, as the ultimate validation of a prophetic mission. "Le récit", Molé concludes, "prouve seulement que l'autorité décisive d'une voix sortant du feu sacré était reconnue en Iran sassanide et que c'était là un argument dont on se prévalait dans la discussion. Ce n'est pas un motif légendaire mais une arme empruntée à la doctrine zoroastrienne. En l'utilisant, Mazdak se place consciemment dans la tradition de Zoroastre".[24]

Before advancing in the analysis of what *is*, in our opinion, a wide circulating "legendary motif", a chronological detour is necessary. We know other retellings of the conversion of Wištāsp in Medieval Pahlavi literature – in the same *Dēnkard* (V 2.9; VIII 11.2–3), in the so-called *Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (47.16), in the *Selections of Zādspram* (24.6) – and in the 13th-century New Persian *Zarātuštnāma* (vv. 1130–1150, p. 57 Rosenberg); all these narratives feature the divine delegation of the Amahrspand before the king, although the Life-giving fire (*Ātaxš ī abzōnīg*) is often substituted with some of the individual "Great Fires" such Ādur Burzēn-Mihr, Ādur Farrbay (or Ādur Khordād) and Ādur Gušnasp (NP Āẕar Gušasp).[25] Divine epiphanies accompanying Wištāsp's conversion are known also to some Islamic writers, such as Ibn al-Faqīh (10th c.),[26] and 17th-c. Persian Zoroastrian *Rivāyat* still mention them.[27] But when did this story originate? Is it plausible that it influenced texts that were written far earlier?

24 Molé, *Le problème des sectes zorastriennes*: p. 23. Cf. Rezania, Kianoosh, "Mazdakism and the Canonisation of Pahlavi Translations of the Avestan Texts," in Cantera, Alberto (ed.), *The Transmission of the Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012): p. 482 n. 13, using this passage as evidence for Mazdak being a Zoroastrian high priest.

25 See Jackson, Abraham Valentine Williams, *Zoroaster, the prophet of ancient Iran* (New York: New York : Macmillan, 1899): pp. 65–6; Williams, Alan, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of sciences and letters, 1990): pp. 212–26 (commentary).

26 *Kitāb al-buldān*: p. 246 de Goeje, tr. Gottheil, Richard, "References to Zoroaster in Syriac and Arabic Literature," in *Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1894): p. 45: "with Zarduhusht was an angel, who certified to Kushtāsp that he (Z.) was a messenger (of God). Then he (angel) became fire again (?)".

27 Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others*, p. 72; Jackson, *Zoroaster*: pp. 59–60. Interestingly, these elements do not feature in Daqīqī's *Dāstān-i Guštāsp*, encapsulated into Firdawsī's *Šāhnāma*: see Dahlen, A.P., "He addressed the Kayānian king: 'I am a Prophet!' – The Image of Zoroaster in the *Dāstān-e Goshtāsp*," in *Orientalia Suecana*, LX (2011): pp. 117–39 and Terribili, Gianfilippo, "Relocating the Prophet's Image: Narrative Motifs and Local Appropriation of the Zarathustra Legend in Pre- and Early Islamic Iran (Part I – East Iran)," in *Iran and the Caucasus*, XXIV (2020): pp. 3–4.

Fortunately, a few elements of the legend of Zarathustra, later developed in Pahlavi and New Persian hagiography, can be traced back at least to the Parthian period (2nd BCE–3rd CE): Pliny the Elder (VIII 16.27) mentions Zoroaster's laughter at birth (cf. *Dēnkard* VII 3.2; V 2.5; *Selections of Zādspram* XIV 12, 16), while Diodorus of Sicily (I 94.2) recounts that Zathraustēs (Ζαθραύστης) encountered the "Good Spirit" (ἀγαθὸς δαίμων) and received from him the "laws" he was to promulgate – an allusion to the first of his seven encounters with the Amahrspand, the one with Wahman (Av. Vohu Manah, cf. *Dēnkard* VII 3.55–57).[28] Fire-related miracles, a major theme of Zarathustra's prophetic narrative, figure as well in this early transmission: Dio of Prusa (1st–2nd century CE), in his *Borysthenitic Discourse* (*Oration* XXXVI 40–41) recounts how Zoroaster (Ζωροάστηρ) survived the celestial flame that fell on the mountain on which he was dwelling, thus acquiring a Persian "king" and his retinue as his early followers, later to become the "Magi" (μάγοι).[29] This king, moreover, was soon identified, also in the Greek, Syriac, and Manichaean tradition, with the ancient Iranian hero Kay Vištāspa (Gr. Ὑστάσπης), a figure who likewise enjoyed an early "memetic" circulation across various cultural and literary contexts.[30] Taken together, these elements make it likely that tales on Wištāsp's meeting with Zarathustra, his conversion, and the miracles surrounding it, were circulating, if not before, at least in the first centuries of our era.

A further clue that supports a "diffusionist" hypothesis is the presence, in the tales on Mazdak and Marutha, of other specific Zoroastrian markers. The

28 Jackson, *Zoroaster*, p. 27 n. 5; Bidez, Joseph, Cumont, Franz, *Les Mages hellénisés : Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*. Tome I. *Introduction* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938): pp. 24–5; de Jong, Albert, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997): p. 267.

29 Jackson, *Zoroaster*, p. 34; Tommasi, Chiara Ombretta, "Le chant sacré des Mages (D. Chr. 36, 39–60) : croyances iraniennes en tenue grecque," in Amato, Eugenio et al. (eds.), *Dion de Pruse: l'homme, son œuvre et sa postérité: actes du Colloque international de Nantes (21–23 Mai 2015)* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2016): pp. 147–76 with references; cf. also Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien*: pp. 332–3. In other Greek accounts, Zoroaster died by incineration, see Bernard, *The Imposture of the Coals*.

30 Cf. Shahbazi, A. Shapur, "Goštāsp," in *EIr*, 9 (2002): pp. 171–6 and Skjærvø, Prods Oktor, "Kayāniān ix. Kauui Vištāspa, Kay Wištāsp, Kay Beštāsb/Goštāsb," in *EIr* (2013), https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-ix/. Wištāsp's conversion is mentioned in Manichaean sources, both in the Parthian version of the *Book of Giants* (M 4990, ll. 2–6) and in the Coptic *Kephalaia* (1 Ke 7, 27–33; 12, 16–19; cf. *Homiliae* 70, 2–15); a scholion to the Ps.-Platonic *Greater Alcibiades* (112e) possibly alludes to him as the "king" to whom Zarathustra expounded whole his "philosophy" (ἐξηγήσασθαι τῆς ὅλης φιλοσοφίας). Memetic: Stausberg, Michael, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmission and Appropriations," in Hinnells, John R., Alan Williams (eds.), *Parsis in India and the diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2007): pp. 236–54.

Magi's second plot to discredit Marutha, in Socrates (*Ecclesiastical history* VII, 15–17), is by making a "stench" (δυσωδία) arise wherever the king Yazdgerd goes, and accusing the Christians of having caused it. The ludicrous nature of the episode hides a more serious concern from a Zoroastrian standpoint, as filth and stench, like all physical manifestation of death and corruption, are weapons of Ahriman (Av. Aŋra Mainyu), the "Foul Spirit" (MP *Gannāg Mēnōy*, from OIr. **gasta-*, past part. of **gant-* "to stink", YAv. *gainti-*);[31] this would make Yazdgerd and Marutha, by extension, dangerous agents of pollution. What is significant is that this trope is another unrecognized echo of Zarathustra's legend: before Wištāsp's full acceptance of the religion, hostile court priests slander the prophet, hiding impure objects (dead matter, hair, nails) in his lodging to frame him for sorcery (*Zarātuštnāma* vv. 874–890, p. 47; cf. *Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī dēnīg* 47.5). In sum, the paradigmatic nature of the prophetic narrative of Zarathustra, and its influence on later imitators and parodists, can confidently be presupposed and exploited as an analytic tool.[32]

Now we can turn back to the study of the mytheme the stories of Zarathustra, Marutha, and Mazdak share: the presence, real or faked, of a "speaking fire". Its primary function is one of *authority*, to endorse a prophetic mission through a miracle (MP *warz*; NP < Ar. *muʿjiza*). Two other passages attest how the association between a Zoroastrian sacred fire and a divine epiphany was re-used in literature. In the *Cave of Treasures* (27.12–16), a 6th-c. Syriac Jewish-Christian text, a priest named Idešer (resembling Ardaxšīr, the first Sasanian king) met a demon near "the fire that ascended from the earth" and, tricked by him, he

31 In Old Persian, the very concept of evil (*gasta-*) is linked to the semantic field of stink; the word appears in formulaic wishes in Achaemenid inscriptions (*e.g.* DNa 51–55: "Let Ahuramazdā protect me from evil [*hacā gastā*], as well as my house (*viϑam*) and this land (*imām*)"). Cf. Panaino, Antonio, "'Smell', 'Good Smell', 'Stench' and 'Stinking' in Avestan. Some reflections on a Semantic area," in Gyselen, Rika (ed.), *Parfums d'Orient* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1998): pp. 167–75. Those who put "cow-dung" (βόλβιτον) on the sacred fire, according to Strabo (*Geography* XV 3.14), were put to death, cf. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*: pp. 137–8.

32 See *e.g.* the story of the 8th-c. Perisan "heretic" Bihāfarīd (Crone, Patricia, *The nativist prophets of early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): pp. 144–51): "Bihāfrīd utilise également un procédé connu de la légende de Zoroastre: il monte sur le toit et se dit descendu du ciel (…). A comparer ici la version de la légende transmise par les auteurs islamiques comme Qazvīnī et le *Vičīrkart-i Dēnīk* selon laquelle Zoroastre serait descendu du ciel à travers le toit du palais de Vištasp" (Molé, *Le problème des sectes zorastriennes*: p. 23). This story is, in fact, already reported in ʿAwfī, *Javāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmiʿ al-rivāyāt*, p. 199 Amīr Bānū Muṣaffā (Karīmī): "Alcune autorità zoroastriane riportano invece che egli discese nella corte di Gushtāsp a Balkh calandosi dal tetto quando il sole raggiunse lo zenit dell'equatore, come scendendo dal cielo" (tr. Pellò, *Le gemme della memoria*: p. 211).

establishes the Iranian practice of consanguineous marriage (MP *xwēdōdāh*).[33] In al-Yaʿqūbī's *Kitāb al-buldān* (9th-c) it is Nimrod who, finding a fire "coming forth from the earth", approaches it, "and Satan spoke to him from it" (*wa-kallamahu minhu aš-šayṭān*), leading him to build a temple over it, and inaugurate fire cult.[34] This narrative represents a polemical inversion, again, of the Zarathustra legend, with the Amahrspand servant (the spirit of the "life-giving fire") becoming a daemonic figure, validating religious innovation – as in the case of Mazdak.

The framework of the Amahrspand intervention, however, does not easily account for the Magi's plot in the Marutha tale, where fire is used to incriminate Yazdgerd, nor does it explain the fire's assent to Mazdak's attempted murder of Kawād. The setting here is judiciary rather then theological, with the requests to and the answers from the "speaking fire" that resemble those of an *ordeal* set for Mazdak and Kawād:

> A. ʿAlī Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāma* XLIV, pp. 267–8 Darke: Whenever Mazdak intended to go to the fire-temple, he instructed his minion beforehand what to say from under the hole. So having told the minion what to say, he himself went to the temple. He said to the priest, "You ask the fire to speak to you". The priest put some questions to the fire, but he got no reply. Then Mazdak said to the fire, "*Judge* between us (حکمی بکن), and bear *witness* that I am right (براستی من گواهی ده)." From the midst of the fire the voice came, "Since yesterday I have become weak; first *strengthen* me with the *heart* and *liver* of Kawād (دل و جگر), so that I may *tell you what to do* (چه باید کرد). Mazdak is your guide to everlasting happiness." Then Mazdak said, "Strengthen the fire!" Those two men drew their swords and assaulted Kawād. The priest said to Nushirvan, "Rescue him!" (tr. Darke, *The book of government*: p. 198, italics ours)

33 Cf. Gottheil, *References to Zoroaster in Syriac and Arabic Literature*, p. 25; Boyce, Mary, Grenet, Frantz, *A history of Zoroastrianism. 3. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1991): pp. 437–8; Minov, Sergey, *Memory and identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures: rewriting the Bible in Sasanian Iran* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021): p. 163. See the remark by Bidez, Joseph, Cumont, Franz, *Les Mages hellénisés : Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*. Tome II. *Les textes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938): p. 122: "L'hérésiarque Mazdak (fin du V· siècle) prétendait aussi, s'il faut en croire Mirkhond, faire converser le roi de Perse avec le feu sacré.".

34 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*: p. 23.3–4 quoted by Schilling, Alexander Markus, *Die Anbetung der Magier und die Taufe der Sāsāniden: zur Geistesgeschichte des iranischen Christentums in der Spätantike* (Lovanii: Peeters, 2008): pp. 151–2 n. 98.

Besides being a major theme of religious court tales such as the *Book of Daniel*, such as the *Book of Daniel*.[35] Zarathustra himself, like the Greek Zoroaster surviving the fire from heaven (see above), undergoes and survives many trials by fire to confirm the truth of his mission (cf. *Dēnkard*: VII 3.9–10; *Selections of Zādspram*: X 8; *Zarātuštnāma*: vv. 220–237, pp. 12–3 Rosenberg),[36] and in the Islamic traditions, his exploits were often compared with Abraham's (Ibrāhīm), to the point of merging the two characters.[37]

Pious deeds, however, could easily be reversed as pious frauds in the context of religious polemic. In ʿAwfī's *Javāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt*, Zarathustra himself is included in the gallery of "false prophets", before Mani and Mazdak; and to pass this famous ordeal by molten metal before king Wištāsp, he is said to have covered himself in a balsamic mixture of ingredients that would protect him from heat.[38] Most significantly, the same trick is attributed – this time to the

35 Stausberg, Michael, *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*. Band 3 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2004): pp. 128–9. On the ordeals by fire of the *Book of Daniel* and other court tales, see Jackson, *Zoroaster*, *e.g.* pp. 41, 62; Konstantakos, *Court Novella*, pp. 59–62 with references. Fire as an agent of Order (Av. *Aša-*) and truth: Boyce, Mary, *A history of Zoroastrianism*. 1. *The Early Period* (Leiden; New York; Koln: Brill, 1975): 212. Interestingly, Mazdakites were accused of rejecting the institution of the "oath" (MP *war*), see Macuch, Maria, "Legal Implications of Mazdakite Teaching according to the Dēnkard," in Jullien, Christelle (ed.), *Husraw Ier, reconstructions d'un règne: sources et documents* (Paris Leuven: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes Peeters, 2015): pp. 166–7.

36 Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien*, pp. 332–3. Successful and unsuccessful ordeals, with fire or molten metal acting as the material medium to obtain a truth validation, frequently appear in late antique Zoroastrian and anti-Zoroastrian literature: see the case of the Sasanian high priest Ādurbād son of Ādurbād, with Macuch, Maria, "Die Erwähnung der Ordalzeremonie des Ādurbād i Māraspandān im Ardā Wirāz Nāmag," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, 20 (1987): pp. 319–22, and the story of 6th c. Syriac Christin martyr Pethion, thrown onto a flaming altar by the Zoroastrian priests and surviving: Hoffmann, Georg, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1880): p. 63, with the remarks by Payne, Richard, *A state of mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian political culture in late Antiquity* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015): pp. 87–91 and Jullien, Christelle, "Peines et supplices dans les Actes des martyrs persans et droit sassanide: nouvelles prospections," in *StIr*, 33 (2004): pp. 257–8. Masʿūdī (*Murūj* I: §131, p. 55–56 Pellat) recounts that the semi-legendary pre-Islamic religious leader Khaled bin Sinan (6th c.) underwent a fire ordeal to impede the conversion of Arabs to Zoroastrianism: he plunged himself into the blaze declaring he would emerge with clothes wet with dew. References to this trope could be multiplied.

37 See Ġazanfarī, Kolsoum, "Zardušt va Ibrāhīm dar manābiʿ-e islāmī [Zoroaster and Abraham in Islamic Sources]," in *Pažūhišhā-ye adyān* [*Religious Studies*], III (2016): pp. 9–25.

38 ʿAwfī, *Javāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmiʿ al-rivāyāt*, p. 200 Amīr Bānū Muṣaffā (Karīmī): "Zoroastro aveva precedentemente fabbricato un unguento con fango, muschio d'acqua,

Magi – in the retelling of the Marutha story in the Arabic *Book of the Tower* (11th c.): the Magi's servant is hidden inside the fire altar not through a tunnel, as in Socrates or in Niẓām al-Mulk, but thanks to an "unguent" protecting him from the flame – a curious conflation of two motifs: the "speaking fire" and the ordeal by fire.[39]

In any case, the very idea of fire taking a human voice to judge or arbitrate, as in the tales of Marutha and Mazdak, is likely to have a distant origin in religious "foundation myths" of the ordeal institution: a particularly revealing and hitherto unnoticed parallel to this imagery occurs in a section of the eight book of the *Dēnkard* (VIII, 20.42) that describes the lost legal codes of the "Great Avesta" dealing with the legislation on oaths and ordeals (MP *war*): in this passage, the fire is described as "speaking in the words of men" (*pad ān ī wīrān gōwišn*; cf. the same phrasing in *Dēnkard* VII: 4.79 quoted above: *pad ān ī wīrān gōwišnīh*) before an ordeal:

> *Dēnkard* VIII: 20.42, p. 710 Madan *ud ēn-iz kū ka mard rāstīh ī xwēš āgāh ka-iz* +*anāgāh ātaxš pad ān ī wīrān gōwišn gōwēd kū ō man abar ma raw čē tōzam gyān andar šawišn*
>
> And this, too, that if a man is aware of his own righteousness or unaware of it, the Fire says in the words of men: "Do not come onto me, for I take (your) the soul as atonement". (Only then) he must enter (the ordeal space?).[40]

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polvere di tarme e altre sostanze, come sta scritto nei libri, e se ne era cosparso il corpo per affievolire e rendere sopportabile il bruciore. Il re, non sapendolo e vedendo che il metallo rovente non gli provocava danno, si infervorò per lui e accettò la sua religione, che si diffuse così tra i suoi sudditi" (tr. Pellò, *Le gemme della memoria*: p. 211). See also n. 32.

39 Marcus, *The Armenian Life*, p. 51. See now Gianazza, Gianmaria, Sako, Louis Raphaël (eds.), *ʿAmr Ibn Mattā al-Ṭirhānī* (*XIs*). *Notizie dei patriarchi della chiesa dell'Oriente dal libro "Al-Miğdal"*. Tomo I. *da Adday a Timoteo I* (*m.823*) (Bologna: Edizioni del Gruppo di Ricerca Arabo-Cristiana, 2022): pp. 284–5: ** (we owe this reference to Michael David Ethington).

40 After Naẓarī Fārsānī, Muḥsin (ed.), *Kitāb-i haštum-e Dīnkard* [*The eight book of the Dēnkard*] (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi farhangī-yi intišārātī-yi Furūhar, 1397): p. 89. The end of the line (*gyān andar šawišn* [or *aš andar šawišn*]) is not clear, cf. West, Edward William, *Pahlavi texts*. 4, *Contents of the Nasks* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892): p. 59. On the legal codes described in *Dēnkard* VIII, see Bernard, Alberto, "Priests and Judges in Dēnkard VIII: The *Rad*, the *Dadwar*, the *Mowbedān mowbed*," in Azarnouche, Samra, Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw (eds.), *"A Spark of the Glimmer of the Original Light": The Dēnkard as Literature, Theology and Scholasticism* (Paris: Brepols, forthcoming).

Besides myths and ordeals, this personification of fire has an important antecedent in Zoroastrian ritual and meta-ritual literature. Fire (Av. *Ātar-*) itself, through the recitation of the performing priest (Av. *zaōtar*), is made to speak during the night ceremony of the *Vidēvdād* (XVIII 18.–22), where he calls for wood to remain lit during the three parts of the night.[41] The "complaint" (*garzišn*) of the "spirit of the fire" (*ātaxšān mēnōy*), lamenting the treatment it suffers when entering the material world, is a pious *topos* of Pahlavi scholastic literature stemming from the exegesis of the Old Avestan liturgy of the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* (*Yasna* 36.1).[42] These kinds of ceremonial utterances, together with the Zoroastrian liturgy of the *ātaxš-zōhr* (the "offering to the fire"), seem to be the model for the Manichaean *Hymn of the Living Soul* (*Gōwišn ī grīw zindag*), where "fire" (MP *ādur*) takes a human voice, declares itself enthroned by Zarathustra, and asks for a good treatment:

> *Gōwišn ī grīw zīndag* 3.93–97: (93) I am the fire that Zardrušt set (*an hēm ādur ī čīd zardrušt*) and he ordered the righteous to set me. (94) Set me and do not make (me) [(?)] hungry and do not rob (me) completely like villains! (95) From seven sacrificial (lit. sacrificed) good smelling fires (collect me) and bring me to the holy fire-place! (96) Bring pure firewood (*ēmag ī pāk*) and a fresh and scented smell (*bōy īg narm ud bōyāg*)! (97) Light me with knowledge and give me a pure offering (*zōhr ī pāk*).[43]

This ritual background for the "speaking fire" explains other details of the Mazdak story: not only its request to be "fed" with the "heart and liver" of Kawād, in a sort of gruesome *ātaxš zōhr* (*Siyāsatnāma* p. 221, quoted above), but also its appearance, besides the "angel" Surūš (MP Srūš; Av. Sraoša-, the same deity who answers the fire's call in *Vidēvdād* XVIII 22–23) in the faked dream told by Khusro as part of his plans to expose Mazdak:

41 See Cantera, Alberto, "Avestan Texts in Context (2): The *Nērang ī Ātaxš Abrōxtan* and the 'Eternal Fire,'" in *Dabir*, 8 (2021): p. 16 and Kellens, Jean, Redard, Céline, *Introduction à l'Avesta : Le récitatif liturgique sacré des zoroastriens* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2021): p. 145, who call this section "une exégèse (un *zand*) narrative sur le début de la cérémonie *ušahina*".

42 *Dēnkard* IX 11–12: pp. 147–155 Vevaina, with commentary in Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw, *Zoroastrian Hermeneutics in Late Antiquity* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2024): pp. 179–92.

43 Tr. Sundermann, Werner, Durkin-Meisterernst, Desmond (eds.), *Die Rede der lebendigen Seele: ein manichäischer Hymnenzyklus in mittelpersischer und soghdischer Sprache* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012): p. 184. Cf. Boyce, Mary, "On the Sacred Fires of the Zoroastrians," *BSOAS*, XXXI (1968): p. 59.

> A. ʿAlī Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāma* XLIV, pp. 272–273 Darke: He said he had dreamed that a great fire (آتشی عظیم) was attacking him and that he was seeking refuge; a handsome person appeared before him and he asked him what the fire wanted from him; he said the fire was angry with him because he had called it a liar (دروغ زن); he asked him how he knew; he said that the angel (سروش) was aware of all things. Then he woke up. Now he is going to the fire-temple, and is taking much musk and ambergris and aloeswood (مشك و عود و عنبر میبرد) to throw on the fire. For three days he is going to do service to the fire and homage to The Good One (tr. Darke, pp. 201–2).

A final element that accounts for the diffusion of this mytheme both within and beyond the ancient Iranian world is iconography. On the reverse, the coinage of the Sasanian king Ohrmazd II (303–309 CE) presents, in the reverse, a fire altar surmounted by a male bust rising from the flames (see **Figure 1**). The identity of this figure has been variously interpreted – as Ohrmazd, the king, the *xwarrah*, or the deity Ādur ("Fire") – but significantly, this distinctive reverse type dominates Sasanian coin iconography until the reign of Wahrām IV (388–399), the brother of Yazdgerd I.[44] A comparable motif is attested in Sasanian glyptic, most notably on a clay seal impression preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (see Fig. 2), whose Middle Persian inscription probably indicates that the object's owner was a legal entity known as a "Fire" (MP *ātaxš*) – a Sasanian pious foundation partly analogous a few centuries later, to the Islamic institution of the *vaqf*.[45]

44 See now Alram, Michael, Gyselen, Rika, *Sylloge nummorum Sasanidarum*. Band II. *Ohrmazd I.–Ohrmazd II.* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012): 16, pp. 356, 362–6. Cf. Gyselen, Rika, "Un dieu nimbé de flammes d'époque sassanide: Avec une note additionnelle par Philippe Gignoux," in *Iranica Antiqua*, 35 (2000): p. 305. Foro ther representations of Ādur in glyptic, see Farridnejad, Shervin, *Die Sprache der Bilder: eine Studie zur ikonographischen Exegese der anthropomorphen Götterbilder im Zoroastrismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018): pp. 401–5 and Khosrowzadeh, Alireza et al., "Administrative Bullae from Tappe Bardnakoon, a Newly Found Late Sasanian Administrative Centre," in *Iranica Antiqua*, 55 (2020): pp. 181–2.

45 Gignoux, Philippe, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides de la Bibliothèque nationale et du Musée du Louvre*. II: *Les sceaux et bulles inscrits* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1978): pp. 25–6. For a new reading of the Middle Persian inscription, see Bernard, Alberto, *Le clergé zoroastrien aux époques sassanide et post-sassanide: sources, histoire, mémoire*, forthcoming. On Fires as juridical entities, see Ramble, Olivia, "Kerdīr's *bun-xānag* and Funding Foundations in Sasanian Iran," in *StIr*, 51 (2022): pp. 163–203.



FIGURE 1A/B Sasanian Drachm, AR/ gr. 3,81, 28mm. Hormizd II (303–9) British Museum 1862, 1004.39
COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM ©



FIGURE 2
Bust of Atar on a fire-altar, agate seal, Iran, 224–651 CE. Bibliothèque Nationale C 2971 (1849)
AFTER GYSELEN, R., *CATALOGUE DES SCEAUX, CAMÉES ET BULLES SASSANIDES DE LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE ET DU MUSÉE DU LOUVRE*. I. COLLECTION GÉNÉRALE [PARIS: BNF, 1993]: 20.I.8, P. 104, PL. XVI

In conclusion, the fires endowed with speech, agency, and revelatory power that figure in the tales of Marutha and Mazdak represent a literary motif – the "speaking fire" – the kernel of which ultimately derives from genuine Zoroastrian myths and rituals. Ordeals by fire, Zoroastrian ritual dramas, Zarathustra's prophetic narrative, and Sasanian visual art, seem all to have played a role in shaping this mytheme, that was subsequently subjected to new theological, polemical, and literary ends – be it to adapt the plot of *Bel and the Dragon* to a Zoroastrian, Iranian audience in the stories of Marutha and Mazdak, or to provide, in the accounts on Idešer and Nemrod, a new "daemonic" aetiology for Zoroastrian fire cult. The cultural specificity of this imagery, its appearance in court tales set in 5th–6th-century Sasanian Persia, and its dissemination in literary spaces that are spatially (late antique East-Roman Greek, Syriac, and Manichaean literature) or diachronically (Medieval Arabic and Persian literature) close to it, calls for a diffusionist rather than a purely

typological approach[46] This case study shows the prospects and challenges of researching the "karstic" emergence of ancient Iranian themes and motifs across different literary corpora.

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46 The principles set out by Vladimir Propp (1928) for the individuation of the "basic forms" of folktales provide a good synthesis: "1) If the same form occurs both in a religious monument and in a wondertale, the religious form is primary and the wondertale form is secondary (…). (2) If the same element has two variants, one of which derives from religious forms and the other from daily life, the religious formation is primary and the one drawn from daily life secondary (…) (3) A fantastic treatment of a wondertale component is older than its rational treatment. (…) (4) A heroic treatment of a wondertale is older than a humorous treatment (…). (5) A form used logically is older than a form used nonsensically. (6) An international form is older than a national one" (paraphrase given in the introduction to Propp, Vladimir Jakovlevič, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. lxv, cf. p. 86).

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