

PART II:

**THE HEROES AND COUNTRIES
OF THE *ŠĀHNĀME* AND THE LEGEND OF CYRUS**

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ZOHĀK

Just as, according to Geiger¹, Afrāsyāb is the incarnation of all possible evil which afflicted the "nation of the Avesta", due to their neighbours from the desert at the Caspian shore, so, according to O. Klima²: "It is very probable that a legendary monster mentioned in the Avesta, the king of the dragons Aži Dahāka, was the symbol of a hostile power which, having sprung from Akkad, reached in the east the territories beyond the borders of Media."

Acc. to the Avesta, when Yima lost xvarena because of his sin, Aži Dahāka overthrew him, came to power and ruled for a thousand years.³

Aži Dahāka was the "dragon" of the storm-cloud, an equivalent to the Vedic Ahi, i.e. Vritra. Originally, his struggle with Yima Xšaēta had a pure mythological character. When Yima became the earthly king, Aži underwent the same transformation.⁴

Acc. to the Avesta, Aži Dahāka, in the same way as Afrāsyāb, vainly attempts to snatch xvarena.⁵

Acc. to the *Šāhnāme* Zohāk kills Feridun's father Ābtin, like Afrāsyāb orders to kill Seyāvuš, the father of Key Xosrow.⁶

Thraētaōna from the Āthwiya line (in his translation, Darmesteter several times speaks of Āthwya clan, so it is not necessarily "the son of Āthwiya" which Darmesteter maintains in his note) defeated Aži Dahāka and chained him to the Demāvend mountain where he was to remain till the end of the world, when Keresāspa was to free and kill him.⁷

In the view of Darmesteter⁸ the usurper Aži is identified with Chaldea, the secular enemy of Iran. The name of Babylon mirrors a vague historical image of a past Assyrian oppression, later overthrown and forgotten, and the expression of an intense national antipathy towards the Non-Iranian Chaldeans.

"At the time when the Avesta took its definitive form, Chaldea was inhabited by Arabic tribes, it was already a sort of Irāq Arabī. To the writer of the Avesta, Babylon, (Bawri) is the residence of Aži Dahāka, and Aži Dahāka represents the Arab race."⁹

¹ *Civilization of the Eastern Iranians*, I, p. 32 (cf., J. C. Coyagee, *Studies in the Shahnameh*, p. 144).

² *Avest. Ancient Persian Inscriptions. Middle Persian Literature*, p. 16.

³ Cf., *Av*, D, O, II, p. 60, n. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Yt* XIX; 46—50.

⁶ *Zohāk*, v. 120; *Dāstān-e Seyāvuš*, v. 2341.

⁷ *Av*, D, O, II, p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60, n. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. XLIX.

Acc. to E. W. West, Aži Dahāk was “the Arab usurper or usurping dynasty that conquered Yim in his old age.”¹⁰

Elsewhere West writes that “Aži Dahāk, the Av. Aži Dahāka, [was- a] ‘destructive serpent’ (...). A name applied to a foreign dynasty (probably Semitic) personified as a single king, which conquered the dominions of Yim.”¹¹

Acc. to Tabari, Iraq was his native land.¹²

وحدث عن هشام بن محمد قال ملك الضحاك بعد جم فيما يزعمون والله اعلم
الف سنة ونزل السواد في قرية يقال لها درس في ناحية طريق الكوفة وملك الارض
كلها وسار بالجور والعسف وبسط يده في القتل وكان اول من سن الصلب والقطع
واول من وضع العشور و ضرب الدراهم

“They also say, after Hisām ibn Muhammad, that Zohāk succeeded Ğam, as they say, but God knows better, and ruled for a thousand of years and his seat was in the very heart [of Iran], in the town called Nars (situated) by the road to Kufa; his kingdom was the whole earth and he was an oppressor and tyrant, he raised his killing hand and he was the first to introduce the custom of hanging and beheading, and he was the first to collect tithes and to mint dirhams (...).”

قال وبلغنا ان الضحاك هو نمرود وان ابراهيم خليل الرحمان صلى الله عليه ولد
في زمانه وانه صاحبه الذي اراد احراقه

“They say — continues Tabari¹³ — we have heard that Zohāk was the same Nemrod at whose times Ibrahim was born (...) and that he was the man who wished to burn Ibrahim.”

Acc. to Tha‘ālibi¹⁴, “Dahhāk le Himyarite qui, en persan, est appelé Bewarāsp, du pays Yemen, marcha contre lui (Ğam) avec des troupes nombreuses et une force formidable et fondit sur lui comme l’aigle sur lièvre. Ğam s’enfuit sous un déguisement et Dahhāk s’empara de son empire (...).”

Ferdinand Justi writes about Zohāk in *Die iranische Religion*, unfortunately without giving any proofs that:

“Der Sitz seiner Herrschaft ist Babylon, wo sich sein Palast und seine Citadelle befand.”¹⁵

E. Herzfeld recalls some opinions which suggest that the origins of Zohāk should be traced in Babylon:

“In Yt. V, 28—35, quotation from Thrētona myth of the epic, the place of the adversary, Aži Dahāka, is called bawroiš, in which Darmesteter already recognized Babylon. Meillet calls this equation “evident” (...).¹⁶

¹⁰ *Dk*, VII, 26, n. 2, *PT*, V, p. 10.

¹¹ *Bd*, XXXI, VI, n. 8, *PT*, I, p. 131.

¹² *Tab*, *Tar*, I, p. 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁴ *Tha*, *Hist*, p. 16—17.

¹⁵ *GIP*, II, p. 664.

¹⁶ *Hfd*, *Zor*, II, p. 518.

D. Monchi-Zadeh maintains that the Babylonian origins of Zohāk emerged from a later tradition:

“Die Burg des Dahāk war in Bāvīr (av. Bawri, Nyberg, *Religionen*, besonders 465) eigentlich Biberland, darunter hat die Tradition später Babylon verstanden. Vgl. Wikander, *Vayu* 55). Sie ähnelte einem Kranich (kulang).”¹⁷

Acc. to the same author: “Firdansīs Duž-hūxt-Kang(...) bedeutete (das Haus) des Verfluchten (d.e. des Dahhāk).”¹⁸

“(In) Yt. XV, 19 — writes Darmesteter¹⁹ — Aži is described as offering up a sacrifice to Vayu in the unaccessible Kvirinṭa. We know from Hamza (p. 32) that this was the name of a palace (the Kulang palace, the fortress of the Stork) which Aži Dahāka had built in Babylon.”

“The inhabitants called it Dis Het (دیس حت). Kuleng Dis was in Zend Kvirinta daeza and Dis Het is nothing else than Dužita. One may doubt whether Kvirinṭa is the name of a place or the Zend form of Kuleng, a stork: in any case it was a palace in Bawri (Babylon). In the Shāh Nāmeḥ it is called Dižukht (...).”²⁰

“One cannot infer from “Babylon” that this was the primary habitat of the dragon, but one can infer that at the time of the immigration the fights with Babylonians and Assyrians were told after the pattern of the primeval dragon myth, and that this became located in the West.

Aži Dahāka has a second palace in Yt. 15, 19, viz. Kurinta dužita, a name which can only have been introduced when the Iranians had advanced so far west, in the eighth century, because it is El. karintaš (about 1700 B.C., from Kass. karaindaš), in Isidorus Char. Kárina (= karind), still today Kírind, a place situated in a most impressive gorge, above the natural frontier between Iran and ‘Irāq, the Taq i Gírrā pass.”²¹

PT. IV, p. 27, Dinkārd, VIII, 8:

“A report of the ill-informed evil ruler of the seven regions, Dahāk; his lineage back to Tāz, the brother of Hōshāng and father of the Tāziks (*Arabs*) (...).”

What was the native land of Zohāk? Was it Babylonia? On the basis of etymological studies, I. M. Diakonov²² arrives at the conclusion that it was Babylonia.

The name Aži Dahāka itself, however, has the Iranian origin. This is what Herzfeld²³ writes about it:

“Herodotus calls the founder of the Median empire Deiokes, i.e. Daiaukku of the annals of Sargon II, 1. 76 (*Display inscr.* 49) mentioned in 715—713 B.C. (...)

¹⁷ M-Z, *THS*, p. 238.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Av.D.O*, I, p. XLIX. n. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 253—254, n. 3.

²¹ *Hfd, Zor*, II, pp. 714—715.

²² Diakonov, *Istoriya Midii*, p. 43.

²³ *Hfd, Zor*, I, p. 89.

It was a mistake of W. König (...) repeated by Nyberg (...) to doubt the Iranian character of the name Daiaukku. In the memorial document of *Yt.* 13 there are several names formed with dahyu, ĵara.dahyu, ātar.dahyu and dahyu.frāḏah, dahyu.sruta, and — ukku is an Iranian dimin. suffix, especially common in high antiquity, e.g. Assyrian annals.”

Some other facts (disregarding these which were mentioned in the chapters, “The childhood and youth of Cyrus” and “The war for the Persian liberation”) also suggest that Astyages could have been one of the two legendary protoplasts of Zohāk.

“The name of the last Median king — writes Herzfeld²⁴ — is Astiágēs in Herodotus, better Astyígās in Ctesias, Akk. ištuwēgu, i.e. “Med. ršti.vēga, brandishing the lance (...)”

It is possible that genealogy of Zohāk presented in the *Šāhnāme* is a legendary allusion to this name. *Ĝamšid*, v. 75:

“In those times a man lived in the desert of the horsemen wielding lances.”

As to deliver people from perdition prepared for them by Zohāk’s snakes, which were fed on human brains, two honourable young men — Armāil and Garmāil agreed to work as the king’s cooks. From among the lads who were destined for death every day, they killed only one and mixed his brain with the ewe’s brain, whereas the second one was told to find a shelter in the mountains. *Zohāk*, v. 37:

کنون کرد از آن تخمه دارد نژاد که زآباد ناید بدل برش یاد

“Now the Kurd is their seed and he does not mean to settle in one place.”

So whose descendant was Zohāk? This is what Ferdousi writes about his father (*Ĝamšid*, v. 77, 82—84):

که مرداس نام گرانمایه بود بداد و دهش برترین پایه بود
پسر بد مراین پاک دلرا یکی کش از مهر بهره نبود اندکی
جهانجوی را نام ضحاک بود دلیر و سبکسار و ناپاک بود

“This powerful man called Mardas and he raised himself above generosity and justice. (...)”

This honest-hearted man had a son, whom he loved more than life. That one, avid of the world, was named Zohāk; he was audacious, stupid and unchaste.”

Iblis prompted Zohāk to kill his father (*Ibid.*, v. 94—97):

چه باید پدر کش پسر چون تو بود یکی پندت از من نباید شنود
زمانه برین خواجه سالخورد همی دیر ماند تو اندر نورد
بگیر این سر مایه و رجاء او ترا زبید اندر جهان گاه او
برین گفته من چو داری وفا جهاندار باشی یکی پادشا

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90; cf., also *Olmst.*, p. 34.

“He told him:

— Why a second lord in this palace beside you? The days of this old man may last very long and you will stay under his shadow. Seize his boundless power and might. Thou are entitled to replace him in the world. If you trust my words, you will become a powerful king”.

Ibid., v. 105—111, 115—119:

یکی بوستان بود بس دلگشای
 زهر پرستش بیاراستی
 پرستنده با او ببردی چراغ
 یکی ژرف چاهی بره بریکند
 بخاشاک پوشید وبسترده راه
 شب آمد سوی باغ بنهاد روی
 شد آن نیک دل مرد یزدان پرست
 زدانا شنیدم من این داستان
 بخون پدر هم نباشد دلیر
 پژوهنده راراز با مادرست
 بدین چاره بگرفت جای پدر
 بریشان ببخشید سود وزیان

مر آن پادشارادر اندر سرای
 گرانمایه شبگیر برخاستی
 سروتن بشستی نهفته بیاغ
 بیاورد وارونه ابلیس بند
 پس ابلیس وارونه آن ژرف چاه
 سر تازیان مهتر نامجوی
 بچاه اندر افتاد و بشکست پست
 بخون پدر گشت همداستان
 که فرزند بد گر شود نره شیر
 مگر در نهانش سخن دیگرست
 فرومایه ضحاک بیدادگر
 بسر بر نهاد افسر تازیان

“This king had a splendid garden in the palace which gave him joy. The noble man used to wake up at the break of the dawn to say his prayers. He washed his head and body hidden in the garden and only his servant followed him with a torch.

There came this infamous servant of Iblis, dug a deep hole in the path. And then the ignoble Iblis covered this hole with dry twigs and smoothed the path.

The lord of the Arabs, this famous noble man, went to his garden at night. He fell into the hole and broke his spine. This is how this good and godfearing man died.

Once a sage has told me a parable that a bad son, even if he were a bold lion, should never dare to kill his father. But maybe some other reason is hidden here? His mother should be asked about it.

In that manner, the despicable and unjust Zohāk seized his father's throne. He put on his head the crown of the Arabs and ruled his people for good and bad.”

Obviously Mardas brings to mind Marduk. According to Saggs²⁵, in his first, Sumerian shape, Marduk (etymologically Amar-utu-k, i.e. “young bull the sun”) was a chtonic aspect of the god of the sun. In the Neo-Babylonian times, this patron of the town of Babylon achieved the highest place in the Babylonian pantheon.²⁶

Nabu, the god of Borsippa, was a son of Marduk and they both played an important role in the New Year's celebration in Babylon. Nabu — according to

²⁵ P. 300.

²⁶ Ibid.

Saggs²⁷ — in the times when the Babylonian civilization finally fell under the pressure of new ideas coming from Persia, Greece and Palestine, very nearly replaced Marduk.

Nabunaid, the last ruler of the independent Babylonia (it is possible that also his name was associated with the fall of Marduk in the legend) estranged himself from the priests of the same Marduk, since primarily he was involved in the cult of Sin, the god of the moon. This fact precipitated his fall.²⁸

In fact, “another truth” may be hidden here. Nabunaid did not kill his own father.

Let us, however, examine it from another point of view. In the *Šāhnāme*, Zohāk is presented as a man with a monstrous face from whose arms two voracious snakes were rising which was due to the treacherous kisses of Iblis. Their hunger — as we know — could be appeased only by the mixture of human brains. Zohāk ruled Iran for a thousand of years and when at last he was defeated by Feridun, he did not die but he was chained to the rock on the mountains Demāvend,²⁹ where, according to the *Avesta*, he was to wait for the end of the world when Keresāspa would set him free and kill him.³⁰

His immortality, monstrous face and the snakes rising from his arms seem to suggest his affiliation to the world of myths. Which god then — Babylonian or Median — had the snakes rising from his arms? This question may be elucidated by an effigy on one of the steles of the code of Hammurabi. It depicts Šamaš, the Babylonian god of the sun. Either three snakes or three flames rise from each of his arms. Both were related to the sun symbolism as well as to the notion of time closely connected with the sun.³¹

On this relief, Šamaš, a bearded man, handles a stick and a ring to the Babylonian ruler — the symbols of justice. But the Persians, having been slaves for a long time, must have regarded them as the symbols of oppression. Especially Šamaš must have impressed them, since he was one of the first gods among those who had been offered oblation — bread and cattle.³²

Not only Babylonia worshipped the god of sun:

“The different songs to Mithra — writes Herzfeld³³ — collected in the *Mihr Yasht*, belong to the Median epoch, have the Median empire as their horizon, and show Mithra as one of the great Median gods. The Bagastāna mountain, with the monument of Darius, was a Median sanctuary of the baga Mithra, a mithraeum. There, holy white horses from the near Nisaya stood saddled for the god to ride. In this case we can trace the sanctuary back to the older periods. Ctesias attributes the monument to Semiramis.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

²⁸ Cf., Olmst., pp. 38, 45, 49—53; also G. Buchanan-Gray, *The Foundation and Extension of the Persian Empire*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Zohāk*, v. 429—470.

³⁰ *Av.*, D., O., II, p. 61.

³¹ Cf., J. P. Clébert, *Dictionnaire du symbolisme animal*, pp. 358—359.

³² Cf., Saggs, p. 327.

³³ *Hfd.*, *Zor*, I, pp. 372—373.

Ferdousi, in the above passage (*Ġamšid*, v. 77—84) mentions that Zohāk had a cognomen Bivarasp. Later on Ferdousi explains its meaning himself *Ġamšid*, v. 84—87:

چنين نام بر بهلوی رانددند بود بر زبان دری ده هزار ورا بود بیور که بردند نام زروی بزرگی نه از روی کین	کجا بیوراسیش همی خوانددند کجا بیور از پهلوانی شمار زاسپان تازی بزرین ستام شب وروز بودی دو بهره بزین
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“He was called Bivarasp, what in Pahlavi means “ten thousand horses”, since he had ten thousand Arabian horses with gold bridles. To satisfy his pride, he kept two third of them saddled up day and night, and not for the fight.”

It is possible that Herodotus meant such ritualistic horses when he wrote:

“Tritantaechmes the son of Artabazus, who held it (Babylon) from the king, received an *artaba* of silver every day (...) He also had as his personal property, in addition to war horses, eight hundred stallions and sixteen thousand mares (...)”³⁴

“La théologie savante et systématique des Chaldéens — writes F. Cumont³⁵ — s’imposa au mazdéisme primitif, qui était un ensemble de traditions plutôt qu’un corps de doctrines bien définies. Les légendes des deux religions furent reprochées, leurs divinités identifiées, et l’astrolatrie sémitique, fruit monstrueux de longues observations scientifiques, vint se superposer aux mythes naturalistes des iraniens. Ahura-Mazda fut confondu avec Bel, qui regne sur le ciel, Anahita fut assimilée à Ishtar, qui préside à la planète Vénus, et Mithra devint le Soleil, Shemash. Celui-ci est en Babilonie, comme Mithra en Perse, le dieu de la justice, comme lui il apparaît à l’Orient sur le sommet des montagnes, et accomplit sa course quotidienne (...)”

Rather this mythical meaning of Zohāk than his Median or Babylonian origin is related to a story concerning his descendant Mehrāb, the father of Rudābe and stepfather of Zāl (*Manučehr* v. 295, 298):

زبردست باگنج و گسترده کام بکابل همه بوم وبر داشتی	یکی پادشا بود مهراب نام زضحاک تازی گهر داشتی
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“A man called Mehrāb was the king there — he was haughty, wealthy and generous (...). He traced his armorial bearing back to the house of Zohāk and he ruled over the whole Kabul.”

We should agree with D. Monchi-Zadeh, that, “Der Ärger von Manūčīhr, (...) über diese Geschichte (Romanze zwischen Zāl un Rōdāba) aus politischen Gründen ist ursprünglich nur religiös bedingt und hängt mit der unzoroastrischen Haltung des Sāma-Geschlechtes.”³⁶ It is corroborated by a statement from Ferdousi (*Manučehr*, v. 864—865):

³⁴ Her, I, 192.

³⁵ *Les mystères de Mithra*, pp. 10—11.

³⁶ M-Z, *THS*, p. 109.

زمهراب و داستان سام سترگ
وزان ناهمالان گشته همال

پیش آگاهی آمد بشاه بزرگ
زیوند مهراب وز مهر زال

“The great king heard the news about the mighty Sām, about Mehrāb and Zāl, about the bounds with Mehrāb and love of Zāl, and about those unequal who became equal.”

This seems to indicate something more than a social inequality of Zāl and Mehrāb (Mehrāb was Zāl's vassal). The name Mehrāb probably did not originate from the word *mahārāja* what is postulated by Monchi-Zadeh³⁷, but from the word Mehr (Mithra). It was in Mithraism that Ahriman equalled Ahura Mazda.³⁸ For the followers of Zoroastrianism, this view was unacceptable.³⁹

The fact that either the clan of Sām and the clan of Mehrāb was regarded as heretical, is also corroborated by the words uttered in anger by Mehrāb to Rudābe, when Mehrāb learnt that his daughter wished to marry Zāl (*Manučehr*, v. 857—858):

ز پرگوهراں این کی اندر خورد
که مه تاج بادت مه انگشتری

بدو گفت ای شسته مغز از خرد
که با اهرمن جفت گردد پری

“He told her:

— Oh you, who despised wisdom! Who from among the noble men will give his consent to the marriage of peri with Ahriman?

Hasan ibn Hani Abu Nuwās writes about Zohāk in one of his *casidas*: “They worshipped him, he was one of us.”⁴⁰ Quoting this line Tabari adds: “They thought that Zohāk was the Yemenite.”⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that Abu Nuwās thought Zohāk to be his countryman although he was not the Yemenite. His father was an Arab from Iraq, and his mother a Persian. Abu Nuwās himself was born in Ahvāz, but he considered Basra, where he studied, his native-town.⁴²

When Zohāk seized the power, Ferdousi says (*Zohāk*, v. 3—5):

“Deeds of wise men had to be concealed and only desires of madmen could be fulfilled. Virtue was disdained, witchcraft was praised, righteousness was hidden and ignominy was public. The hands of devils reached far beyond lawlessness, and the right words were whispered only in secret.”

Acc. to *Dinkārd*⁴³ “One *marvel* is several matters of evil deceit (...) which Dahāk had done in Bāpel through witchcraft, and mankind had come to idolworship through that seduction, and its increase was the destruction of the world (...).”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 110—111.

³⁸ Cf. e.g. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, p. 51.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Cf. Tab, *Tar*, I, p. 203.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Cf., R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 293.

⁴³ *Dk*, VII, 72, PT, V, pp. 66—67.

Such reputation was gained by Nabunaid in Babylon. H.W.F. Saggs inserted in his book a fragment from a composition written in Babylon against Nabunaid.⁴⁴ Among others, we can read there, that:

... He did justice to no one,
 ... he killed the weak with weapons,
 ... he closed the road for the merchants,
 ...
 ... the demon Shed changed him,
 ...
 ... he built a temple void of sanctity,
 ... he put (a heretical postument) on the plinth,
 ...
 ... he harassed the order determined by the gods.

In the *Book of Daniel* from the *Old Testament* supposedly related to the times of Nebuchadnezzar, but in fact reflecting the times of Nabunaid,⁴⁵ we read:

“And the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain (...).”⁴⁶

Daniel, the Jewish sage living in Babylon, explained twice⁴⁷ Nabunaid’s dreams and foretold his fall.⁴⁸

“The victory of the Persians — writes Dandamayev⁴⁹ — was considerably facilitated by Cyrus’ policy. While the Assyrian and Babylonian kings tended primarily to wring tributes out of the conquered nations and resorted to mass extermination or mass displacement of dissatisfied subjects, Cyrus carried on a more humanitarian policy. It can be partly found in his “charter”, published in Babylon in the Akkadian language. In the introduction Cyrus claims that his troops entered Babylon without fight and set free the nation from the oppression of the Babylonian king, Nabunaid. Also, he accused Nabunaid of violation of the worship due to the gods of his own country and of the faithlessness. According to the Babylonian sources, under Nabunaid’s rule the people resembled the corpses, whereas Cyrus guaranteed their personal immunity and peace.”

After Cyrus’ victory in Babylon, writes Olmstead,⁵⁰ “... for the illiterate, scribes prepared an account of Nabunaid’s reign in good Babylonian verse (...). Nabu-naid was an exceedingly wicked monarch; righteousness did not accompany him. The weak he smote by the sword. He blocked the road to the marchant. The peasant was deprived of his plow land; never did he raise the harvest shout of rejoicing. The irrigation system was allowed to fall into

⁴⁴ Saggs, pp. 139—140.

⁴⁵ Olmst., p. 55.

⁴⁶ *Daniel*, II, 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 31—45; IV, 19—27.

⁴⁸ Cf., pp. 33—47, the dreams of Zohāk and Afrāsyāb.

⁴⁹ *Axemenidskoye gosudarstvo i yego značeniye v istorii drevnego vostoka*, Iigk, p. 95—96.

⁵⁰ Olmst., p. 53.