

SASANIAN IRAN: INTELLECTUAL LIFE*

A. Tafazzoli and A. L. Khromov

Contents

Written works	82
Secular literature	82
Royal <i>Res Gestae</i>	86
Religious literature	88
Philosophy and theology	90
Visionary and apocalyptic texts	90
<i>Andarz</i> (wisdom literature)	91
Languages and scripts	91
LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND RELIGION	94
Borrowings and influences	94
Science and philosophy	96
Court chronicles and epic histories	99
Religious life	102
Religion and the law	105

* See [Map 2](#).

Part One

Written works

(A. Tafazzoli)

Literary works extant from the Sasanian period may be divided into two groups, religious and secular. As the secular literature was written within the framework of Zoroastrian religious beliefs, however, it also manifests religious overtones. Translations of, and commentaries upon, the *Avesta* (the sacred book of the Zoroastrians) in Middle Persian (also known as Pahlavi), as well as books written on the basis of oral traditions of Avestan material, constitute the most important of the religious works. Literature of the Sasanian era bears the characteristics of oral literatures.

Secular literature

The interest in oral literature in pre-Islamic Iran¹ meant that, apart from state or commercial records and documents and, on rare occasions, religious works, nothing was written down until the Sasanian period. Secular literature was preserved orally by *gōsān* (poet-minstrels) or *khunyāgar*² (story-tellers). When Middle Persian had become obsolete and the religion, rituals and customs of the Iranians had undergone changes, the originals of many literary works of this type were lost. Thus our information, especially on the secular literature of this period, is based on secondary sources.

EPIC POETRY

The core of Iranian epic stories belonged to the Avestan people of eastern Iran. We find references in the *Avesta* to its heroes, especially the Kayanian princes who were the ancestors of Gushtasp (an Iranian king and the patron of Zoroaster). These stories, which recounted the deeds of military commanders and heroes of old, were gradually transformed in the

¹ On the oral tradition, see Bailey, 1943, pp. 149 et seq; Boyce, 1968b, pp. 32 et seq.

² Boyce, 1957, pp. 10–45; Tafazzoli, 1968, pp. 410–11.

minds of the people into marvellous feats, accumulated a wealth of detail, and were handed down orally – frequently in versified form – to later generations. There are three cycles of traditions concerning heroic tales in the Iranian national epic: the Kayanian, the Saka and the Parthian cycles.

Epic stories, frequently in verse, remained an oral form until the Sasanian period and some were used in the compilation of the *Khwādāy-nāmag* [Book of Lords] (see page 84) in Pahlavi. The only extant work of this type is the versified *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* [Memoirs of Zarer's Family]. This work was originally in the Parthian language and found its final redaction in a summarized, written form, probably towards the end of the Sasanian era. It concerns the wars between the Iranians and the Turanians after the conversion to Zoroastrianism of Gushtasp, the Iranian king. Zarer, the king's brother, was slain during these wars. The Parthian words appearing in the text betray its Parthian origin. Its poetic language is clear. A more detailed version of the story of Zarer appears in the tenth-century *Shāh-nāme* [Book of Kings] of Firdausi, who quotes it from Daqiqi.³

Titles of other epic stories, which probably existed independently of the *Khwādāy-nāmag* and were later translated into Arabic, are mentioned in Islamic sources. Examples are: *The Story of Rostam and Isfandiyār*;⁴ the *Sagēsarān* [Leaders of the Sakas];⁵ and the book of *Paykār* on the battles of Isfandiyar.⁶ Short pieces of lyrical, panegyric or other types of poetry are also found in Persian and Arabic books from the early Islamic era.⁷

TALES AND LEGENDS

Towards the end of the Sasanian period, especially during the reign of Khusrau I (531–579) and later, increasing attention was paid to the task of collecting legends. The original versions in Pahlavi have been lost, but on the basis of their Arabic and Persian translations, as well as references made to them in Islamic sources, the books of stories of the Sasanians appear to fall into two groups: Iranian tales; and tales adapted or translated from other languages into Middle Persian.

The most important collection of Iranian tales was the *Hazār afsān* [The Thousand Tales], mentioned by both Ibn al-Nadim⁸ and al-Mas'udi.⁹ This work was translated into Arabic, enjoyed widespread fame among Muslims, and was used as the basis for the

³ Benveniste, 1932; Utas, 1975.

⁴ Ibn al-Nadim, 1973, p. 364.

⁵ Al-Mas'udi, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 267; Christensen, 1932, pp. 142 et seq.

⁶ Al-Mas'udi, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 229; Hamza, 1967, p. 94; Christensen, 1932, pp. 143 et seq.

⁷ Tafazzoli, 1974, pp. 338, 347–9.

⁸ Ibn al-Nadim, 1973, p. 363.

⁹ Al-Mas'udi, 1965, Vol. 2, p. 406.

compilation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The present Arabic version, dating back to the fourteenth century, contains, in addition to Persian stories, others which were prevalent in Baghdad and Egypt at various periods. In addition to the *Hazār afsān*, Ibn al-Nadim mentions a book entitled the *Hazār dāstān*¹⁰ [The Thousand Stories].

The most famous collection of tales translated into Pahlavi was the *Kalilag u Dimnag* [Kalila and Dimna], the original source for which was the Indian *Panchatantra*, probably its Prakrit version.¹¹ This work, which is now lost, was translated into Pahlavi in the middle of the sixth century by the physician Burzoe for Khusrau I (see also page 94). Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and ^cAbdallah Ahwazi then translated it into Arabic. A Syriac translation of the Pahlavi text, dating from 570, is also extant. The *Kalilag u Dimnag* was also translated into Latin and Greek, and from Arabic into Persian on several occasions. The earliest of these Persian translations, dating back to the first half of the tenth century, has been lost; the most famous is the twelfth-century version by Abu al-Ma^cali Nasrallah Munshi.

Another work of Indian origin which was compiled in Iran is the *Sindbād-nāmag* [Book of Sindbad], which probably dates back to the time of Khusrau I. Like the *Kalilag u Dimnag*, this work was also translated into Arabic, probably by the ninth-century translator Musa b. ^cIsa al-Kisrawi. According to Ibn al-Nadim,¹² two prose versions existed in Arabic. The *Sindbād-nāmag* was then translated into Persian in the tenth century and was later versified. Neither version has survived; the only available translation in Persian dates from the twelfth to the thirteenth century. It owes its fame in Europe to the Greek and Latin translations.

The *Bilauhar u Būdāsāf* is another story of Indian origin which was translated into Pahlavi during the Sasanian period, and thence into Arabic in the Islamic era. This work, which is basically an account of the Buddha's life, is not a translation of a specific Indian text but, rather, a collection of the legends surrounding the life of the Buddha. Its earliest translation into Arabic dates back to the eighth century; a tenth-century translation is also extant. Parts of the *Bilauhar u Būdāsāf* in classical Persian verse, written in Manichaean script, have been found amongst the Turfan fragments belonging to the followers of Mani.¹³ The work was translated in the eleventh century into Georgian, Greek and Latin and, later, into other European languages. Many traces of the *Bilauhar u Būdāsāf* are found in Persian and Arabic books of manners and ethics.¹⁴ The *Tūtī-nāmag*, a translation of and

¹⁰ Ibn al-Nadim, 1973, p. 364.

¹¹ Mojtabayi, 1984.

¹² Ibn al-Nadim, 1973, pp. 186, 364. On the *Sindbād-nāmag*, see Minovi, 1968, pp. 169 et seq.

¹³ Henning, 1962, pp. 91 et seq.

¹⁴ Gimaret, 1971; Sundermann, 1982, pp. 101 et seq.

adaptation from the Indian *Śukasaptati* [Seventy Tales of the Parrot], several Persian versions of which exist, was probably translated into Pahlavi in the Sasanian period.

Among the romantic tales in Pahlavi, the most important is the *Vīs u Rāmīn*, which is of Parthian origin and was translated into Pahlavi towards the end of the Sasanian period and into Persian in the Islamic era. (Both the Parthian original and the Pahlavi translation are lost.) Fakhr al-Din As^cad Gurgani turned it into Persian poetry early in the eleventh century. The work contains important information on the life, manners and customs of the Parthians.¹⁵

The *Vāmīq u ^cAdhrā* is a romantic story of Greek origin which is said to have been translated into Pahlavi at the time of Khusrau I.¹⁶ It was later translated from Pahlavi into Arabic (both these versions are lost). A Persian translation was made (probably from the Arabic) which was then turned by ^cUnsuri (eleventh century) into poetry – some verses are extant. Part of it is also quoted in the *Dārāb-nāme*,¹⁷ a Persian tale by the twelfth-century writer Tarsusi.

The *Alexander Romance* by pseudo-Callisthenes may have been translated into Pahlavi towards the end of the Sasanian period, probably from the Greek. It appears that a Syriac translation was later made by Christians living in Iran and using oral as well as written sources. Arabic translations were made from the Pahlavi and Syriac versions of the *Iskandar-nāme*. Versions of this romance also exist in Persian, the earliest belonging to some time between the twelfth and the fourteenth century¹⁸ – in addition to the Arabic text, the authors used oral traditions.

The *Kārnāmag-ī Ardašīr-ī Pābagān* [Book of the Deeds of Ardashir Papakan], in Pahlavi, belongs to the epic genre (see also page 96). Its present version dates back to the Late Sasanian period and contains certain reworkings from Islamic times. The biography of Ardashir I (226–241) is narrated in this work through a mixture of legend and historical fact.

HANDBOOKS ON ETIQUETTE

There were several handbooks in Pahlavi dealing with institutions, court manners and ceremonies, the duties of the various social classes, the rules of battle, the arts of warfare (horsemanship and shooting), and games and entertainments (such as polo, chess and

¹⁵ Minorsky, 1964.

¹⁶ On the *Vāmīq u ^cAdhrā*, see Shafi^c's edition, 1967, Introduction.

¹⁷ Safa, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 209.

¹⁸ Afshar, 1964, Introduction, pp. 9–37.

backgammon). The originals of these *Āyēn Ēwēn-nāmag* are lost, but some were translated into Arabic, parts of which, or references to them, are available in Islamic sources.¹⁹

LAW, EDUCATION AND GEOGRAPHY

The *Mādīgān-ī hazār dādestān* [Book of a Thousand Judicial Decisions] (see also pages 101–2), compiled by Farrukhmard, the son of Bahram, is the most important collection of legal texts of the Sasanian period. This work, which contains a number of legal cases concerning marriage, inheritance, ownership, endowments, and so on, was probably compiled at the time of Khusrau II, but its final redaction belongs to the ninth century.²⁰ Zoroastrian religious laws are also collected in other works.²¹ In the field of education, a short extant treatise entitled the *Khwēškārīh-ī Rēdagān* [The Duties of Children] contains instructions concerning children's obligations towards their parents and teachers.²²

The sole surviving Pahlavi work on geography is the *Šahrīhā-ī Ērān*, a treatise containing a list of the major cities and fire-temples of Iran. Although it was written in the ninth century, its contents are mostly mythical and relate to ancient times.²³

Royal Res Gestae

Important events of the reign of each of the Sasanian kings were written down and preserved in the imperial archives, a practice that probably dates from the very beginning of Sasanian rule. Shapur I (241–271) left a description of his deeds in a trilingual inscription on the wall of the Ka'be of Zoroaster. Narseh (293–303) left an account of his accession to the throne in a bilingual inscription at Paikuli (situated in the Zagros mountains in present-day Iraq). Copies of such works were probably preserved in the imperial archives. Through his learned Syrian friend Sergius, the sixth-century Greek historian Agathias gained access to the official written documents of the time of Khusrau I which were kept in the imperial archives. References in the *Shāh-nāme* of Firdausi suggest that when Hormizd IV (579–590) was imprisoned by his general Bahram Chobin and the nobility in c. 590, he expressed the desire for someone to come with a book and read the stories of the past kings

¹⁹ Christensen, 1944, pp. 61–2; Tafazzoli, 1976, p. 266; 1985, p. 692.

²⁰ Perikhanyan, 1973; Macuch, 1981.

²¹ Tavadia, 1930; 1956; Kotwal, 1969; Safa-Isfehiani, 1980; Anklesaria, 1960; Jamaspasa and Humbach, 1971.

²² Junker, 1912a; Freiman, 1918.

²³ Markwart, 1931.

to him.²⁴ Islamic sources mention the existence in the Sasanian period of official registers in which the events of each king's reign were registered along with his portrait.²⁵

THE KHWĀDĀY-NĀMAG

The idea of compiling a written national history for the Iranians appeared towards the end of the Sasanian period, especially at the time of Khusrau I, during whose reign books were either written in Pahlavi or translated from other languages, such as Syriac, the Indian languages and Greek. The *Khwādāy-nāmag* was probably completed during the reign of Yazdgird III, the last of the Sasanian kings, who assumed power towards the end of 631 or the early part of 632.²⁶ The work detailed events from the creation of the world up to the end of the reign of Khusrau II (590–628) and conformed to the viewpoint of the Zoroastrian clergy.

The Pahlavi original of this history was lost, but Arabic translations were made in Islamic times. The translators did not limit themselves to a literal translation of the original. The oldest translation is that of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c (c. 720–756).²⁷ Although none of these Arabic translations has survived intact, they served as the basis for the history of the pre-Islamic period in the works of the Muslim historiographers. The *Khwādāy-nāmag* was turned into Persian prose and verse in the tenth century. Among the prose versions, the most famous is the *Shāh-nāme* of Abu Mansur, completed in 957. Both the Arabic translations and the Pahlavi sources were used in the compilation of this *Shāh-nāme*, which, in turn, was used along with other oral and written sources by Firdausi in the creation of his epic.

Religious traditions as they existed in the *Avesta* of the Sasanian period, as well as its translations and the *zand* (commentaries upon it), naturally formed the basis of the *Khwādāy-nāmag*. According to Zoroastrian beliefs, the duration of the material world (*gumēkhtagīh*, or 'mixture') is 6,000 years, divided into 6 periods each lasting 1,000 years. All the events and reigns of the kings were placed within this framework. As may be seen in the case of the *Kārnamagī Ardašīr-ī Pābagān*, the history of the fifth dynasty (i.e. the Sasanians), though partly based on court archives, was nevertheless influenced by legend.

²⁴ Nöldeke, 1920, §12.

²⁵ Christensen, 1932, pp. 66–7.

²⁶ Nöldeke, 1920, §13.

²⁷ On the Arabic translations of the *Khwādāy-nāmag*, see Christensen, 1925, pp. 23 et seq.; 1934, pp. 81 et seq.; Osmanov, 1975, pp. 287 et seq.

POLITICAL TRACTS

Several works discussed government policies and ways and means of governing the kingdom. Among them is the *Nāme-ī Tansar* [Letter of Tansar], written by Tansar (or, in the correct form, Tosar), the Zoroastrian *mōbad* (high priest) at the time of Ardashir I, in response to Gushnasp, king of Tabaristan. Although the original probably belonged to the time of Ardashir, changes were made to it in later periods, particularly during the reign of Khusrau I. The Arabic translation by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c is also lost and what survives is an early thirteenth-century re-translation into Persian from Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's version. This version is by Ibn Isfandiyar, who includes it in his *History of Tabaristan*.²⁸

The ^c*Ahd Ardašir* is another tract that bears a striking resemblance to the *Nāme-ī Tansar*. The original in Pahlavi is lost and it survives in an Arabic translation.²⁹ The *Kārnāmag-ī Anōšīrvān* [Book of the Deeds of Anushirvan, i.e. Khusrau I] (see also pages 96–7), an account of the work undertaken during Khusrau's reign together with methods of administering the affairs of state, is also extant only in an Arabic translation.³⁰

Religious literature

AVESTAN TRANSLATIONS AND COMMENTARIES

The *Avesta* was preserved orally until towards the end of the Sasanian period, probably during the reign of Khusrau I, when it was compiled in 21 sections. To transcribe it, a script was invented from the consisting of about 46 characters. An attempt was made to record the Avestan words exactly as they were pronounced at the time.³¹ Although the *Avesta* was now written down, because of the importance attached to the oral tradition, manuscripts of the work were rare and the recorded text was consulted infrequently. The oldest extant manuscript of the *Avesta* dates back to 1258 or 1278. In the Sasanian period, Avestan was considered a dead language. So that the contents of the *Avesta* could be understood, it was translated into Pahlavi and the *zand* (commentaries) were written upon it. Oral traditions, as well as the sciences of the time – known to Iranians through the Greeks, Romans, Syrians and Indians – were also used in writing these commentaries. Today, translations of early works such as the *Gathas*, *Yasnas*, *Vendīdād*, *Nērangestān*, *Niyāyish*, *Āfrīnagān*, *Hērbadestān* and some parts of the *Yašt*s are extant, but the translation of, and commentary upon, the complete *Avesta* certainly existed during the Sasanian period.

²⁸ Minovi, 1975; Boyce, 1968c.

²⁹ ^c*Ahd Ardašir*, 1967; Grignaschi, 1967.

³⁰ Grignaschi, 1967, pp. 16–45.

³¹ Bailey, 1943, pp. 149–94.

Based on the *Avesta* and its translations, many books and treatises were written on various subjects some of which, like the *Dēnkard*, constitute a religious encyclopaedia. The contents of this book, which is essentially a compilation, belong to different periods. The final redaction took place in the ninth century and we know the names of two of its compilers: Adurfarnbag, son of Farrukhzad, and Adurbad, son of Emed. Adurfarnbag was the *mōbad* of the Zoroastrians of Fars in this period. The *Dēnkard* was originally in nine books of which the first, second and part of the third were lost. The third book is nevertheless the largest; it deals with Zoroastrian religious principles, at times in a philosophical language, and at others in one mixed with mythical elements. The seventh book is a legendary biography of Zoroaster, based on a section of the *Avesta* called the *Spand nask*. The contents of the Sasanian *Avesta* in a condensed form constitute the eighth book. Since both the original and the Pahlavi translation of most of these parts are lost, these summaries are of great importance. The ninth book contains a commentary on three parts of the Sasanian *Avesta* which is particularly significant for its mythical contents.³²

The *Bundahišn* [The Original Creation], an important work in Pahlavi, is also known as the *Zand-āgāhīh*. Its subject-matter ranges from cosmology, astronomy and eschatology to lists of rivers, mountains and plants. Although the final redaction belongs to the ninth century, it was probably compiled in the Late Sasanian period. Two forms are available: the more detailed is called the *Great Bundahišn*; and the shorter, the *Indian Bundahišn*.³³

The *Vīzīdāgīhā-ī Zādspāram* [The Selections of Zādspāram] is another important work that is similar to the *Bundahišn* in content and whose author has apparently used the same sources. Its compiler, Zādspāram, was a priest who lived in the ninth century. The book consists of four parts and deals with creation, cosmology and resurrection. It contains a section on the life of Zoroaster which is similar to the seventh book of the *Dēnkard* and uses the same sources.³⁴

A book and three letters written by Manuchihr, leader of the Zoroastrians of Fars and Kerman, are extant. The book, entitled the *Dādestān-ī dēnīg* [Religious Judgments], contains 92 questions posed in written form by a Zoroastrian; it deals with a variety of topics such as the principles of Zoroastrian belief, cosmology, mythology and religious laws.³⁵

The *Pahlavi Rivāyat* is a collection of miscellaneous material probably compiled by a tenth-century author. The work is particularly significant as it contains certain myths which are not mentioned elsewhere or are mentioned in passing, as well as providing information on religious rituals and ceremonies and popular beliefs. The practice of collecting *rivāyat*

³² See Menasce, de, 1958; 1973, Introduction.

³³ Anklesaria, 1908; West, 1880, Introduction.

³⁴ Anklesaria, 1964, Introduction; Gignoux and Tafazzoli, 1993, Introduction.

³⁵ West, 1882, Introduction; Dhabhar, 1912, Introduction.

(traditions) continued among the Zoroastrians for many centuries, a collection also being extant in Persian.³⁶

Philosophy and theology

Iranians were familiar with Greek philosophy from the Achaemenid period. This acquaintance was deepened in Sasanian times, leading to the influence of Greek philosophy on Zoroastrian religious works. Although no philosophical works in Pahlavi are available from the Sasanian period, those written in the ninth and tenth centuries on philosophy and theology show that they are based on an older tradition. The third and fourth books of the *Dēnkard*, mentioned above, are among the principal philosophical and theological works. Another important example is the *Škand gumānīk wizār* [The Doubt-crushing Explanation], written by Mardan Farrokh, son of Ohrmazd-dad, towards the end of the ninth or early tenth century.³⁷ The *Pus-ī dānišn-kāmag*³⁸ is a short treatise containing arguments similar to those found in the *Škand gumānīk wizār*. Another dialectical treatise is the *Gujastag Abāliš* [The Cursed Abalish]. It concerns a debate conducted in the presence of the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Maʿmun (813–833) between Abalish, a Zoroastrian converted to Islam, and Adurfarnbag, one of the compilers of the *Dēnkard*. The treatise appears in question-and answer form.³⁹

Visionary and apocalyptic texts

Visionary and apocalyptic literature goes back to the *Avesta*, but the oldest extant Pahlavi text in this genre is the Kartir (Kirder) inscription at Sar Mashhad, in part of which Kartir describes his ascension to the other world. Unfortunately, this text is fragmentary and damaged. Several Pahlavi texts are extant in this field, the most important being the *Ardavīrāz-nāmag* [Book of Ardawiraz]. It concerns the ascension of Viraz (Viraza in Avestan) who, according to some scholars, is identified in the work with Vehshapur, a famous priest of the time of Khusrau I. Having taken an intoxicating substance, he travels to the other world, sees paradise, hell, purgatory, the rewards accorded to the pious and the punishments meted out to evil-doers, all of which he describes upon his return. Though the essential core of the book's contents is very old, the extant version dates from the tenth century or even a little

³⁶ Dhabhar, 1913, Introduction; Williams, 1990, Introduction.

³⁷ Menasce, de, 1945.

³⁸ Junker, 1959.

³⁹ Tafazzoli, 1985, p. 58.

later.⁴⁰ Similar works in which the events of the world are foretold are the *Zand-ī Vahman yašt*⁴¹ and the *Jāmāsp-nāmag*, or *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg*.⁴²

Andarz (wisdom literature)

An important section of Pahlavi literature consists of the *andarz* (wisdom) collections, which are of two types: religious advice and pragmatic wisdom. The subject-matter of most of the *andarz* pieces of the second type may be found in the literature of other nations too, and translations of this group later found their way into the books of *adab* (literature) and ethics in Persian and Arabic. For those items which belong to the realm of oral literature, it is impossible to establish an author or a date. In Pahlavi, most such pieces are attributed to great and learned men in general – the *Andarz-ī dānagān u Mazdaēsnān* is one example. However, some items are attributed to specific kings, dignitaries or religious personalities. In the third book of the *Dēnkard*, the mythical Jamshid, the Peshdadian king, is credited with the authorship of a number of these. A collection is also recorded in the name of Khusrau I. *Andarz* collections may also contain pieces of poetry; some items are in metrical prose while others are merely endowed with a poetic quality. The most extensive of the *andarz* collections is the sixth book of the *Dēnkard*.⁴³

Languages and scripts

The most widespread languages during the Sasanian era were Middle Persian (or Pahlavi), Parthian, Sogdian, Khwarizmian, Khotanese Saka and Bactrian; various texts in these languages are extant.

MIDDLE PERSIAN (PAHLAVI)

This is the development of Old Persian, or of one of its dialects, which used to be the language of the region of Fars. The evolution of Old Persian into Middle Persian probably began during the fourth century B.C., but the oldest extant documents in the latter language belong to the third century A.D. Middle Persian lacks gender and the dual form. With rare exceptions, the declensional forms of nouns and pronouns have disappeared. Among the items extant in Middle Persian are coins of the local kings of Persia (from about the middle of the third century B.C.), inscriptions by the Sasanian kings and dignitaries (mostly from

⁴⁰ Gignoux, 1984; Vahman, 1986.

⁴¹ Anklesaria, 1957.

⁴² Modi, 1903; Messina, 1939.

⁴³ Shaked, 1987, pp. 11–16.

the third and fourth centuries A.D.), Sasanian coins and seals, Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts, an excerpt from the Psalms and Manichaean writings. Except for the last-mentioned, they are all written in different variants of Pahlavi script.

Since the Pahlavi script was difficult, lists of words were prepared to be memorized by the scribes. The *Frahang-ī Pahlawīg* is one such work in which words with different spellings, as well as heterograms (incorrect spellings), were arranged systematically to make them easier to learn.⁴⁴ In this treatise, words are grouped under subject headings. An alphabetical version of the *Frahang-ī Pahlawīg* is extant in an eighteenth-century copy.⁴⁵ A sheet from a Pahlavi glossary of the ninth or tenth century, containing seven Pahlavi verbs in the form of heterograms, was found amongst the Manichaean fragments discovered in Turfan.⁴⁶ An Avestan-Pahlavi glossary, entitled the *Frahang-ī Ōim Ēwak*, is extant; it is of special importance as it contains Avestan words used in the Sasanian period but subsequently lost.⁴⁷

The Pahlavi script is divided into two main forms, the lapidary and the cursive, both of which derive from the Aramaic. In these scripts, written from right to left like the Aramaic prototype, the vowels are not usually represented. The lapidary script is generally used in inscriptions, coins and seals – though a variant of the cursive called *kastaj* or *kashtaj* (from the Pahlavi *gaštāg*) by writers of the Islamic era⁴⁸ is also sometimes used for these purposes. Unlike the cursive, the lapidary script includes 19 characters which cannot be joined. Middle Persian royal and private inscriptions of the Sasanian epoch are written in the lapidary script, the oldest being the short inscription of Ardashir I at Naqsh-e Rostam. Other important inscriptions are that of Shapur I on the wall of the Kacbe of Zoroaster (in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek) and that of Narseh (dating from 293–294) at Paikuli.⁴⁹ Of the private inscriptions the most important are four by Kartir, all of which are located in Fars.⁵⁰ The latest inscription of this type is that of Mihrnarseh at Firuzabad in Fars, which belongs to the first half of the fifth century.⁵¹

The Pahlavi cursive or book script contains 13 characters and was mostly used in writing Zoroastrian works in Pahlavi. In this script, one character often represents several sounds; moreover, a ligature may be read in different ways, so that the script could be ambiguous.

⁴⁴ Junker, 1912b; Nyberg, 1988.

⁴⁵ Nyberg, 1970, pp. 343 et seq.

⁴⁶ Barr, 1936.

⁴⁷ Kligenschmitt, 1968.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Nadim, 1973, p. 15; Hamza, 1967, p. 65.

⁴⁹ Humbach and Skjaervø, 1978–83, p. 83.

⁵⁰ For the inscriptions of Kartir, see Gignoux, 1973; 1991.

⁵¹ For the bibliography of the Pahlavi inscriptions, see Gignoux, 1972, Introduction, pp. 9–14.

The oldest extant text in Pahlavi cursive was copied in 1323.⁵² Cursive script was also used for writing on parchment, papyri, ostraca, stones and gems and it is found on tomb and funerary inscriptions like the Istanbul inscription.⁵³ Others of this type, and belonging to the Late Sasanian period, have been discovered in Fars.⁵⁴ The most recent funerary inscription, written vertically, is a ninth-century inscription found in China.⁵⁵ Commemorative inscriptions include those at Darband (in the Caucasus) from the sixth century,⁵⁶ the inscriptions on Shapur I's horse at Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur, as well as the two discovered at Maqsudabad and Tang-e Khushk and which include a statement explaining the ownership of the estate and its improvements. Finally, in cursive script, there are the tomb inscriptions of the rulers of Mazandaran (ninth–eleventh centuries).⁵⁷ A fragment of the translation of the Pahlavi Psalter, found in Central Asia, is in a variant of the cursive script. Its compilation dates back to the sixth century or earlier, but it was written down between the seventh and the eighth centuries or even later.⁵⁸

THE MANICHAEAN SCRIPT

Manichaean works are written in a script which is a variant of the Syriac script and is peculiar to the Manichaeans (see also pages 99–101). Twenty-two letters were adopted from the Semitic alphabet and a newly evolved letter – *j* – was added to it. This script underwent little evolution from the third century until it was abandoned, probably in the thirteenth century.⁵⁹ Manichaean works in Iranian languages – Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and, later, Persian – were generally written in this script. In contrast to other systems, each character in the Manichaean script represents a single sound, and there are almost no historical or pseudo-historical spellings, nor are there heterograms.

PARTHIAN (PAHLAVANĪG)

The Parthian language was spoken in the south-western areas of Central Asia and in Khurasan during the Arsacid period (third century B.C. – third century A.D.). It was a living language until some time in the Sasanian period. The main differences between Middle

⁵² Henning, 1958, pp. 46–7; Boyce, 1968b, p. 65.

⁵³ Menasce, de, 1967; Harmatta, 1969, pp. 255–76.

⁵⁴ Gignoux, 1972; Gropp, 1969; 1970; Harmatta, 1973, pp. 68–79; Tafazzoli, 1991.

⁵⁵ Harmatta, 1971, pp. 113–14; Humbach and Wang, 1988.

⁵⁶ Gropp, 1975; Kasumova, 1987; Gignoux, 1992.

⁵⁷ Henning, 1958, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 73 et seq.

Persian and Parthian lie in their phonology and vocabulary, their verbal systems demonstrating remarkable similarity.

The principal remnants of the Parthian language include the ostraca (from between 100 and 29 B.C.) found at Nisa and other sites on the southern borders of Turkmenistan;⁶⁰ the first-century B.C. ostraca from Qumis in eastern Iran;⁶¹ the first-century A.D. parchment from Awroman in Kurdistan; inscriptions on the coins of the Arsacid kings of the first half of the first century A.D.; the bilingual inscription of Seleukia (150–151);⁶² the inscription of Ardavan V found in Susa (215); some third-century documents discovered in Dura-Europos; the inscriptions at Kal-i Jangal, near Birjand in eastern Khurasan (first half of the third century);⁶³ inscriptions of the Early Sasanian kings in Parthian; and the writings of the Manichaeans. The Parthian script and language began to be abandoned from the fourth century. With the exception of Manichaean literature, which appears in its own particular script (see above), all the above-mentioned items are in the Parthian script, which is an adaptation from the Aramaic with several variants. Harmatta has provided a table showing all of these.⁶⁴

Part Two

LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

(A. L. Khromov)

Borrowings and influences

The fact of Persia's extensive literary borrowings from India in the Sasanian period has been established for some time. A substantial part of those borrowings subsequently passed from Pahlavi to Arabic literature and thence to the West.⁶⁵ Iranian interest in Indian philosophy and science during the Sasanian period is demonstrated by translations into Middle

⁶⁰ Diakonoff and Livshits, 1976–79.

⁶¹ Bivar, 1970; 1972; 1981.

⁶² Morano, 1990.

⁶³ Henning, 1958, p. 40.

⁶⁴ Harmatta, 1958, p. 175.

⁶⁵ Ol'denburg, 1907, pp. 49–50.

Persian or Indian works on mathematics, astronomy and medicine, and of belles-lettres and didactic texts (see above).

During the Sasanian period much effort was devoted to the translation of Indian works on astrology that predicted the future and described natural phenomena, such as the flight of birds and the cries of animals, in terms of good or bad omens. Some Arab sources report that the Sasanian court was visited by sages from India who advised on future events according to the position of the planets, the signs of the zodiac and the configuration of the stars. Their predictions were written down, conveyed to the king and subsequently preserved in a secret depository. Tradition has it that over 100 doctors, including several from India, were employed at the court of Khusrau I (531–579). It may thus be assumed that Indian medical works were translated in Sasanian Iran.⁶⁶

The bulk of scientific literature in the Sasanian period, however, was translated from Syriac and Greek. To understand why this was so it is necessary to explain the position of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire. In the western part of the empire (in Mesopotamia), Zoroastrianism coexisted with Christianity and Judaism and with the worship of ancient Babylonian, Greek and Syrian gods, but Christianity gradually became the main rival of the Zoroastrian clergy and the Iranian administration which it controlled. The new religion spread throughout the vast territory of Sasanian Iran, and by the seventh century Christian communities were to be found in nearly every province of both western and eastern Iran.

At the beginning of the third century there were still ethnic and linguistic differences between Zoroastrians and Christians in Iran: most Zoroastrians were Iranians while the majority of Christians belonged to other ethnic groups (Syrian, Greek, Armenian). Between the fifth and the seventh centuries, however, the Christian communities in central and eastern Iran underwent a process of ‘Iranization’ and the Iranian ethnic component became dominant. Relations between Zoroastrians and Christians can be summed up as follows. The Sasanian secular administration showed an extremely pragmatic attitude towards the Christians, harsh repression coexisting with the presence of Christians at court and even their acceptance as marriage partners. The Zoroastrian clergy, on the other hand, were fiercely intolerant of Christians at all periods, and were restrained only by the political and economic interests of the Sasanian rulers and their circle. Zoroastrians did not accept the alien Christian teachings, although they did not express open hostility towards the adherents of other faiths.⁶⁷ Each or all of these factors operated at some period during the Sasanian Empire and determined the extent to which literature in translation was able to circulate in Iranian society.

⁶⁶ Inostrantsev, 1907, pp. 73–7.

⁶⁷ Kolesnikov, 1988, pp. 23–5.

The Syriac-Nestorian literature of the pre-Islamic period developed to a considerable extent alongside the literature of the official Sasanian religion from roughly the fifth century onwards. Its authors were mainly Iranians.⁶⁸ The principal Nestorian schools in Sasanian Iran were in Nisibis (Mesopotamia), Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital, and Gundeshapur (the Syriac *Bet Lapat*) in Khuzistan. The school in Nisibis was established following the closure in 489 of the Nestorian 'Persian school' in Edessa (founded in the fourth century by the Syrian, Ephraim), after which all the teachers and pupils moved to the territory of the Sasanian Empire. The Nisibis school, which was a theological academy enjoying special privileges, produced a number of Nestorian scholars who made an important contribution to the history of ideas in the East.⁶⁹ Its rector, Rabban, was also professor of biblical exegesis. His deputy, whose responsibilities included instruction in Bible reading and the liturgy, also taught philosophy. The school had a tutor and a secretary. When Nisibis was taken by the Arabs in the seventh century, the school had some 800 students.⁷⁰

The school of Gundeshapur was known less as a theological college than for its hospital (*bimāristān*) and the medical academy attached to it. The hospital was founded in the reign of Shapur I (241–271) but reached its maximum expansion in the sixth century under the patronage of Khusrau I. When the emperor Justinian closed the Academy in Athens in 529, the staff emigrated to Gundeshapur. The Nestorians who had been banished from Byzantium became energetic propagators of Greek education: it was to them that the school in Gundeshapur owed its world reputation. Students not only acquired a theoretical training based on the works of Galen but also participated in the medical work of the hospital.⁷¹ The hospital survived until the beginning of the ^cAbbasid period in the eighth century. Many famous doctors from the school of Gundeshapur subsequently worked in Baghdad.⁷²

Science and philosophy

Under the Sasanians, medicine was based on the spirit of the Zoroastrian religion but it was also influenced by Greek medicine. Great importance was attached to healing by the power of words, using magic formulae taken from sacred books. According to the *Dēnkard*, a doctor was required to have a good knowledge of anatomy, organic functions and the properties of medicine and also to be attentive to his patients. Since he was

⁶⁸ Baumstark, 1968, p. 100.

⁶⁹ Pigulevskaya, 1979, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Fück, 1981, p. 276.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Siassi, 1963, p. 370; Endress, 1987, pp. 407–8.

expected to visit the sick as many times a day as necessary, he had to be well fed, and provided with a good horse and a comfortable place to stay in the centre of the town. He should not be grasping: a good doctor was considered to be one who practised for religious reasons. There were, however, rules governing payment for medical care. The payment depended on the property and social position of the patient and on whether the whole body or only specific organs were treated. The doctor was required to provide the sick with regular and painstaking treatment; his refusal to examine a sick person was considered a crime. Doctors possessed a type of licence authorizing them to engage in medical practice. When an Iranian doctor was available, it was considered wrong to consult one of foreign origin; despite this, Sasanian kings often preferred to use Greek doctors or Syrian Christians.

The medical community had its own hierarchy. The first distinction was drawn between doctors who ministered to the spirit and doctors who ministered to the body. The former belonged to the same caste as the priests. Above the *drustbadh* (the state's chief doctor) stood the *mōbadān mōbad* (the state's leading religious dignitary). The autobiography of Burzoe (a famous physician during the reign of Khusrau I) was included by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c in his preface to the Arabic translation of the *Kalilag u Dimnag*. Burzoe gives a description of the medical literature of his day which testifies to the influence exerted by Indian medicine on that of the Sasanian period. The third book of the *Dēnkard* contains a medical treatise compiled from sources going back to the Sasanian era.⁷³ The tolerant attitude of the Sasanian court towards religions under Khusrau I, and the benevolent attitude of this ruler towards Christian scholars, did much to encourage the translation of works written in other languages. The Middle Persian translation of the Old Testament Psalms, fragments of which have been found in East Turkestan, was produced during this period. The basis for the translation was the Syriac text.⁷⁴

It was Khusrau I, above all, who encouraged the development of the sciences in Iran and the use of Greek and Indian sources. Khusrau was extremely interested in philosophy and, in particular, the ideas of Aristotle and Plato. This interest was partly responsible for the appearance of a work by Paul of Persia, the *Prolegomena to Philosophy and Logic*, and the Commentaries on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* and *Analytica priore* which the same author dedicated to Khusrau I Anushirvan, '*Shahanshah, Benefactor of the People*'.⁷⁵ At the court of Khusrau II (590–628), Ava of Kashgar was renowned for his knowledge

⁷³ Christensen, 1944, pp. 414–20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 422.

⁷⁵ Christensen, 1944, pp. 422–3; Pigulevskaya, 1979, p. 147; Endress, 1987, p. 408.

of the Greek, Persian, Syriac and Hebrew languages and as a specialist in medicine and astronomy.⁷⁶

Greek sources on astrology were reworked on the basis of Indian theories; parameters and astronomical calculations were taken over from Indian works. Works on astronomy and astrology by Greek authors were translated into Middle Persian as early as the reign of Shapur I. The Persian historian Ma^cna, the Catholicos of Seleukia under Yazdgird I (399–420), translated Greek works into Syriac and then from Syriac into Persian. Catholicos Akakios (484–496), also from Seleukia, translated the Syriac work *Discourse on Faith*⁷⁷ for Kavad I (488–531), who adopted a tolerant attitude towards Christians.

Our knowledge of Middle Persian scientific literature is predominantly based on Arabic translations and on information and quotations culled from Arab sources. The surviving Arabic versions of Middle Persian texts are based on late adaptations and exhibit the combination of Greek and Indian components that are typical of astrology in the Sasanian period. One example is the collection of tables for use in mathematical astronomy compiled during the reign of Khusrau I and re-edited under Yazdgird III (632–651). The later version was used by the Arab scientists Masha^cllah and Abu Macshar, who compiled a work entitled the *Zīg aš-Šahriyār* [Astrological Tables of Shahriyar], in which the combination of Greek and Indian astronomical theories can be clearly traced. In Arabic, the word *zīg* became a term denoting a textbook on astronomy or astrology.⁷⁸

A work entitled the *Varz-nāmag*, which contained an account of basic agricultural practice, was also translated into Middle Persian from Greek.⁷⁹ It is assumed that the Middle Persian text of the *Aīn-nāmag*, which has come down to us in the Arabic translation and contains information on the military theory of the Sasanians, was composed under the influence of an anonymous Greek treatise and the *Strategikon* of Maurikios of Byzantium (c. 600).⁸⁰ The Syriac language was thus the link that enabled the Near and Middle East to assimilate the achievements of Greek science, which enjoyed a new period of creativity on Arab and Persian soil.⁸¹ Literature translated into Middle Persian during the Sasanian period played an important part in this process.

⁷⁶ Endress, 1987, p. 408.

⁷⁷ Krymskiy, 1905, p. 59.

⁷⁸ Endress, 1987, pp. 413–14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

⁸⁰ Inostrantsev, 1909, p. 65; Pigulevskaya, 1946, p. 33.

⁸¹ Pigulevskaya, 1979, p. 31.

Court chronicles and epic histories

The Sasanian period saw the revival of the ancient Iranian tradition of court chronicles, the essence of which was to interpret historical events in the light of the king's wishes. The content of historical chronicles was restricted to events which the king considered important for himself, his family and the state. They were composed under the king's supervision and were intended for his own personal use and that of his heirs.⁸² The historical works of the Sasanian period focus less on contemporary events than on the past and on predictions of the future. Their purpose was to describe and extol the religious and national ideals propagated by the Sasanian élite.

There was no clear dividing line in historical works between fact on the one hand, and myth and legend on the other. Such works were not impartial accounts of events but included fantasy and emotional declarations. Hyperbole and metaphor were essential elements of their style. In the works of the Sasanian period, historical figures were endowed with the characteristics of contemporaries. For example, all the pre-Sasanian kings acquire Sasanian features and deliver speeches from the throne, as was done in the Sasanian period. References are made to sites of the Sasanian period and the historical circumstances described are also contemporary.⁸³ At the same time, these chronicles were sources of ethical guidance for all Iranians. They contained sage reflections and exhortations as well as examples of wise decisions by monarchs and their courtiers.

The *Kārnāmag-ī Ardashīr-ī Pābagān* [Book of the Deeds of Ardashir Papakan] belongs to the epic cycle on the Sasanian kings. Although the text was initially drafted in the sixth century, the version which has survived dates from a later period. The main character in the *Kārnāmag* is Ardashir I (226–241), the founder of the Sasanian Empire. The work describes the childhood and youth of Ardashir, his struggle for power and his ascension to the throne; it also tells of his son Shapur I and grandson Hormizd I (271–272) and of Ardashir's conflict with the Parthian king Ardavan V (c. 213–224). Although the account of Ardashir's life given in this work is largely based on legend, it reflects some historical events and facts: information is provided about Ardashir's campaigns against nomadic tribes, the history and geography of Iran and the social structure and religious conceptions of Sasanian society.

Various versions of the history of Ardashir I are to be found in works by Arab authors of the eighth to the tenth century and in Firdausi's *Shāh-nāme*. These variants, which differ from the text of the *Kārnāmag*, go back to the Late Sasanian collection of histories of

⁸² Klima, 1977, pp. 41–3.

⁸³ Yarshater, 1983b, pp. 402–3.

the Iranian kings, the *Khwādāy-nāmag*, in which genuine historical facts are closely interwoven with legend. The royal chronicles were drawn on for descriptions of the events of the Late Sasanian period.⁸⁴

The *Khwādāy-nāmag* and other historical works were translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c (757). The *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim contains a lengthy list of Arabic translations of works of the Sasanian period. It is thanks to such translations and adaptations by authors of the Islamic period, and to references to them in the works of medieval Arabic- and Persian-speaking writers, that we have some idea of their content and nature. One of these works was the *Gāh-nāmag* which, according to the *Tanbīh* of al-Mas^cudi, contained a description of the boundaries of the Sasanian Empire. Another work, entitled the *Aīn-nāmag* [Book of Rules], describes the customs, morals and behaviour prescribed for kings, aristocrats and other high echelons of society. According to the information given in the Arabic and Persian sources, these works were of a rhetorical nature and were composed in the Iranian tradition. There were also a number of works on the administrative system and on individual kings and national heroes.

The *Kārnāmag-ī Anōšīrvān* [Book of the Deeds of Anushirvan], a series of fragments presenting the thoughts and utterances of Khusrau I, is reproduced in full in the Arabic work the *Tajārib al-umam* by Maskawaih. It describes the hostile intentions of political and religious sectarians towards the king and his efforts to preserve the traditional distinctions in society which divided warriors from peasants. The text contains information about the king's relations with other peoples, especially the Turkic Khazars to whom he extended his protection and dispatched Mazdakite missionaries. It also describes advances in legislation and cultural borrowings from Greece and India in spite of the religious differences.

The *Testament of Ardashir Papakan*, which has been preserved in the Istanbul manuscript,⁸⁵ belongs to the Late Sasanian period. It explains many aspects of royal power and touches on various questions involving the relationship between royal power and religion.⁸⁶

The literature of the Sasanian period, particularly the historical chronicles and the *andarz* (wisdom) literature, devotes much space to the image of the ideal king, which was first conceived under the Achaemenids. The basis for the idealization of royal power is the notion that the Persian kings are called on to embody the 'national Iranian idea', the essence of which is that all world history is to be seen as a struggle between two primary

⁸⁴ Chukanova, 1987, pp. 9, 11.

⁸⁵ Grignaschi, 1967, pp. 1–2.

⁸⁶ Menasce, de, 1983, p. 1, 183.

principles: good and evil, light and darkness. In this struggle, it is the king's role to be the supreme commander of the army of Ohrmazd (i.e. the good principle) in the war against the forces of Ahriman (i.e. the evil principle).⁸⁷ This also determines the king's position in society and his personal qualities: he is the focus of absolute power and controls history; he surpasses all other men in physical strength, looks, intelligence and eloquence; he is the lawgiver and creator of order. All kings are not only great military leaders but also talented politicians and thinkers. They are heroes in battle, the fount of prosperity, builders of cities, creators of all that is useful in the administrative structure of the state and, most important, energetic defenders of the Zoroastrian faith.

According to the *mōbad* Kartir, the 'ideal king' should be religious above all: he must be completely subservient to his religious mentor and act and think in accordance with the dogmas of the Zoroastrian religion.⁸⁸ The king's main occupations were the administration of justice, in consultation with the *mōbadān mōbad*, courtiers of high rank and wise counsellors; the resolution of problems relating to peace and war, and the appointment of military commanders; the enactment of measures to ensure the country's prosperity; and the settlement of questions relating to hunting, banquets and weddings.⁸⁹ As the people's spiritual leader, the king was responsible not only for the country's administration but also for the regulation of its ethical and social life. He was answerable for his own conduct and for that of the government.

The above qualities were reflected in the king's messages, testaments and pronouncements as well as in the messages of his ministers.⁹⁰ His first responsibility was to deliver a speech from the throne to his courtiers. Rendering thanks to God, he set out his plans, assuring the people of his desire to rule justly and asking for their support. The assembled courtiers approved the king's speech and his intentions and assured him of the people's obedience. The ceremony was conducted with great pomp. The king sent messages to regional governors, informing them of his ascension to the throne.

Among the Sasanians, Ardashir I, Shapur II (309–379) and Khusrau I were endowed with the traits of the ideal king. There are many written accounts in medieval Arab and Persian sources describing Khusrau I as a just and generous king. A typical story (based, in Christensen's view,⁹¹ on a reliable source) is included in the work by Nizam al-Mulk entitled the *Siyāsat-nāme*.⁹² In the story, Anushirvan the Just (i.e. Khusrau I) delivers one

⁸⁷ Knauth and Nadjmabadi, 1975, p. 202.

⁸⁸ Lukonin, 1969, p. 110.

⁸⁹ Yarshater, 1983b, pp. 406–7.

⁹⁰ Yarshater, 1983b, p. 399.

⁹¹ Christensen, 1944, p. 369.

⁹² *Siyāsat-nāme*, 1949, pp. 34–42.

of his speeches from the throne in which, addressing his courtiers, he instructs them to deal generously with ‘the people of God’, to lighten the burden of the people, not to offend the weak, to respect the wise and to be attentive to good people. The king threatens to punish those who disregard these commandments.⁹³

Religious life

ZOROASTRIANISM

In Sasanian Iran, religion played a central role in the life of society, regulating the entire spectrum of social and political life and official standards of behaviour. The Zoroastrian church was unified under the Sasanians and acquired considerable political power. Its privileged position greatly assisted the Sasanians’ rise to power. The Sasanians and the Zoroastrian church were united by the idea of centralization – the power of the *shahanshah* and of the *mōbadān mōbad* were two expressions of the same view. The inscriptions of Kartir testify to his power and influence.⁹⁴ In spite of a degree of rivalry and occasionally strained relations, church and state shared the same world view and the same aims. The state usually supported the church and often helped to eradicate heresy. The church in turn supported the structure of the state, the privileges of the élite, the divine right of the *shahanshah* and the belief in complete obedience to him. Young people were nurtured in the ideals of the monarchy, which was underpinned by and oriented towards the church.⁹⁵ Ardashir I issued the following admonition to his son Shapur I when the latter was preparing to ascend the throne:

O my son, Religion and the State are sisters. They cannot survive without each other. Religion is the buttress of the State and the State is its protector. And whatever is deprived of support crashes down and whatever is not defended is lost.⁹⁶

Zoroastrian temples in which the sacred flame was tended were to be found throughout the empire. One of the principal temples was located in Atropatene (in Azerbaijan), and in it was preserved the flame of the king and warriors. Another principal temple was situated in Fars (the flame of the priests) and a third in Khurasan (the flame of the farmers). A major role in the establishment of a unified state and church was played by the *mōbad* Kartir, whose career began under Shapur I and reached its zenith under Shapur’s successors in the years 273–293 when he was *mōbadān mōbad* and spiritual director of the king.⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 35–6.

⁹⁴ Yarshater, 1983a, p. xxxiv.

⁹⁵ Yarshater, 1983a, p. xviii.

⁹⁶ Klima, 1957, pp. 40–1.

⁹⁷ *Istoriya Irana*, 1977, p. 110.

MANICHAISM

In the course of the third century a new religion, Manichaeism, appeared in the Sasanian Empire (see [Chapter 17](#)). Its founder was Mani (216–276), who was descended from a notable of Iranian stock on his mother's side. Manichaeism, which expanded ancient Iranian conceptions of the eternal struggle between the kingdoms of light and darkness, also incorporated elements of Christianity, Gnosticism and Buddhism. According to the teaching of the Manichaeans, the world was a chaotic mixture of dark and light elements. In order to free themselves from the power of the devil, human beings had to cleanse themselves of evil and had therefore to escape from the power of the material principle.⁹⁸ Manichaeism, which spread widely throughout Mesopotamia, Iran, the Roman Empire and Central Asia, gradually came to resemble a kind of 'Protestantism', and to be an ideological weapon against evil in the world.⁹⁹ The Manichaeans (*Zandīks*) formed the principal heretical group in the Sasanian period and were frequently persecuted by the official church. Mani died a martyr's death on 20 March 276.¹⁰⁰

Mani chose Middle Persian as the vehicle for the dissemination of his religion in the Sasanian Empire. Appearing at the court of Shapur I, he presented the king with a book entitled the *Shābuhragān* [Book of Shapur], which contains a concise exposition of Manichaean doctrine. The work was originally written by Mani in Aramaic (his native tongue) and then translated into Middle Persian. Although all of Mani's canonical works were subsequently translated into Middle Persian, most of these translations have been lost.

One of Mani's most important works is the *Evangelion* [Gospel], which in the Middle Persian version has this Greek title. It comprises 22 chapters, each of which begins with a different letter of the Aramaic alphabet. A fragment of the introduction to this work has been preserved in which Mani refers to himself as *Yishō^c Aryaman* (an apostle). The use of such an Iranian term indicates that the Manichaeans were concerned to make their teaching more accessible to Zoroastrians.¹⁰¹

The Middle Persian versions of Mani's other canonical works – the *Niyānī zīndagān* [Treasure of Life], the *Pragmateia* and the *Rāzān* [Mysteries] – have been lost. Fragments of the *Book of the Giants* exist in three languages: Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian. A collection entitled the *Epistles* has been preserved: it consists of letters written by Mani to various preachers of his community. In order to propagate their faith, the Manichaeans borrowed several stories and fables from India and China which subsequently reached the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Lukonin, 1969, p. 71.

¹⁰⁰ Klima, 1957, p. 41.

¹⁰¹ Boyce, 1983b, p. 1198.

West. They thus played an active role as intermediaries in the transmission to Europe of Eastern fables.¹⁰²

Most Iranian- language versions of Manichaean works have been preserved in Sogdian and only a small proportion in Middle Persian and Parthian. There are collections of prayers and two long psalms composed by Mani. The Parthian text of one of these psalms, entitled the *Vuzurgān Āfrīwān* [The Blessing of the Great], has survived in good condition. A few Sogdian and Middle Persian fragments of this psalm have also been preserved. The second psalm, which is called the *Qšūdagān Āfrīwān* [The Blessing of the Consecration] in Parthian, is similar to the first in structure and content.¹⁰³ Several Manichaean manuscripts possess good illustrations and it is believed that there was a text entitled the *Ārdhang* which contained commentaries on pictures. Iranian-language fragments of a text composed in the style of canonical tradition have also been preserved: it is known by the Greek title *Kephalaia*. The Middle Persian version of one text is a translation of a Christian apocryphal text entitled *The Shepherd of Hermes*, which was borrowed by the Manichaeans and used as an allegory of the life of man. There are also texts recounting Mani's last meeting with Bahram I (272–275)¹⁰⁴ and Mani's death¹⁰⁵ – both by eyewitnesses and dating from 274–276 or thereabouts. Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian fragments of texts have also been preserved which present the story of the Manichaean church and Mani's life, listing his works and recounting the early missions of his followers.¹⁰⁶

Some Manichaean prose works contain the rules of the Manichaean faith, fragments of homilies and exhortations in the form of questions and answers (a type of oral didactic literature encountered in Zoroastrian works). Certain works (mostly in Middle Persian) have a cosmogonic content. The fragment of a creed, works on astronomy and calendars are also extant.¹⁰⁷ A large number of Manichaean texts are hymns, poetic works performed to music. Two long cycles of Manichaean hymns in Middle Persian entitled the *Gowišn īg Griw Zīndag* and the *Gowišn īg Griw Rošn* are dedicated to the embodiment of the Manichaean deity: this is referred to as 'the living being itself' and, according to Manichaean beliefs, embodied all elements of light scattered throughout the world.

Middle Persian Manichaean literature is notable for the eclecticism of its content, structure and style. Manichaean hymns, which were influenced by the ancient Iranian tradition

¹⁰² Henning, 1945.

¹⁰³ Boyce, 1983b, p. 1200.

¹⁰⁴ Henning, 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Boyce, 1983b, p. 1201.

¹⁰⁶ Boyce, 1983b, pp. 1201–2; Sundermann, 1971a; 1971b; 1974.

¹⁰⁷ Henning, 1947; Boyce, 1983b, p. 1202.

(especially the Parthian texts), may be considered as something akin to poetry.¹⁰⁸ Art, poetry and language developed in all the areas to which Manichaeism spread, particularly where it became the state religion, if only for a limited period of time. But Manichaeism was a blatant heresy from the Zoroastrian viewpoint. It was also perceived as such by the other religions which, although alien to each other, united in the struggle against the Manichaeans.¹⁰⁹

Religion and the law

The history of religious struggles under the Sasanians throws light on the underlying causes of many events involving politics and ideology. The persecution of reformers and heretics – at times, intense; at others, less harsh – is an indication of the state religion's desire to maintain its supremacy. For Iranian Zoroastrians there was an intimate connection between law and religion. Evidence of this is provided by the *Mādīgān-ī hazār dādestān* [Book of a Thousand Judicial Decisions], which was written in Middle Persian in c. 620 and has survived in a single manuscript. Its author, Farrukhmard, from the town of Gur in the province of Ardashir-Khvarreh, was a contemporary of Khusrau II. As codified law did not exist in Sasanian Iran, the book cannot be considered a legal code. It is one of the collections that were compiled as manuals for the administration of justice. In addition to general information about the rights of specific state departments and officials, such manuals contained passages from official edicts and decrees. In the specialist literature, the *Mādīgān* has become known as the 'Sasanian Legal Code'. It has been established that some of the sources of this and similar codes of laws of the Sasanian period reflect statutes recorded in the legal *nasks* (precepts) of the *Avesta* and in the commentaries on those *nasks*, the so-called *chaštaqs*. The Code contains references to certain edicts of Kavad I (488–531) and Khusrau I; it also contains a remarkable instruction concerning the appropriation by the royal treasury of the property of the Manichaeans and their followers. In compiling the Code, Farrukhmard made use of legal records from the town of Gur as well as private legal documents.

It is possible to reconstitute practically the entire system of Iranian law on the basis of the mass of information contained in the Code. Its content also contributes to an understanding of other Pahlavi texts including the *Dēnkard*, the *Dādestān-ī dēnīg*, the *andarz* and *rivāyat* and a number of Middle Persian and Parthian epigraphic texts. The text of the Code is also important for the study of the *Ishobokht* [Code of Laws], which has survived

¹⁰⁸ Boyce, 1983b, pp. 1203–4.

¹⁰⁹ Bausani, 1965, pp. 50–1.

in a Syriac translation and contains legal norms of the Christian communities in Sasanian Iran; and for the study of the Babylonian Talmud, which describes the law of the Jewish communities of the Sasanian Empire.¹¹⁰

There were sizeable Jewish communities in the towns of Mesopotamia and Iran: that in Iran was self-governing and was generally not persecuted by the Sasanians.¹¹¹ The sage Samuel was a trusted adviser of Shapur I, and the mother of Shapur II lent her support to the Jewish rabbis. The only outbreak of persecution directed against the Jews occurred during the reign of Yazdgird II (438–457), particularly in Isfahan which was the centre of the Jewish community, but it was of short duration. Nevertheless some Jews subsequently emigrated to Arabia and India.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Perikhanyan, 1973, pp. xiii–xxiv.

¹¹¹ *Istoriya Irana*, 1977, p. 111.

¹¹² Klima, 1957, p. 44.