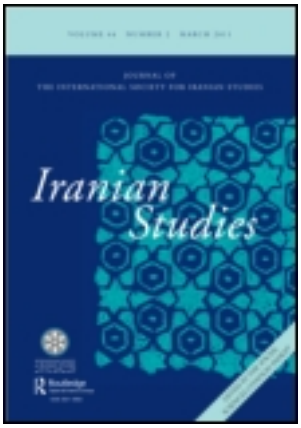
This article was downloaded by: [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes]
On: 05 March 2012, At: 01:13
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Iranian Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cist20

Transformations of the Indo-Iranian Snake-man: Myth, Language, Ethnoarcheology, and Iranian Identity

Martin Schwartz

Available online: 28 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Martin Schwartz (2012): Transformations of the Indo-Iranian Snake-man: Myth, Language, Ethnoarcheology, and Iranian Identity, Iranian Studies, 45:2, 275-279

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2011.617165

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Iranian Studies, volume 45, number 2, March 2012

Martin Schwartz

Transformations of the Indo-Iranian Snake-man: Myth, Language, Ethnoarcheology, and Iranian Identity

This article sets forth a history (with literary-textual focus) of the Iranian mythological Snake-man, from the earliest Vedic and Avestan evidence, down to Ferdowsi. The continuous development of the myth in Iran is accompanied by changes in the monster's name, which show linguistic reassociations, while a constant in all of this is the figure's representation as an inimical outsider. The Vedic name of the brute's fortification, the background of which in etymology and realia will be shown to be the pre-Aryan Bactria-Margiana Archeological Complex, finds a clear but hitherto unobserved correlation in Pahlavi. This illuminates the Indo-Iranian antiquity of the myth in terms of prehistoric inter-ethnic rivalries.

Downloaded by [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes] at 01:13 05 March 2012

This paper addresses aspects of the myth of the monster who is known in Avestan as Aži Dahāka, a myth whose development in effect extends from Indo-Iranian times to Classical Persian, for which remarkable evidence will be presented at the conclusion. The continuous transformation of this myth is indexed by changes and reassociations in the name of the monster. Alongside these modifications there is the constant representation of the figure as the Other, the Alien opposed to Iranian interests. As Russell notes: "Aži Dahāka is always a foreign tyrant—either a Mede or a Mesopotamian—to Persian and Armenian writers."[1]

In the Avesta, Aži Dahāka, where *aži-* indicates his serpentine nature, is a three-headed horror, "the worst which the Evil Spirit created,"[2] associated with the land of Baβri (= Babylon, or so later interpreted), where he sacrifices to Anahita,[3] as well as with the "inaccessible Kuiriṇta" where he sacrifices to Vaiiu, in each instance

Martin Schwartz is a Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on pre-Islamic languages, literature and religion of Iran and Central Asia. His recent research has included applications of Iranian linguistic and textual studies to broader problems of cultural history. Currently his most important area of investigation is the study of the compositional structures and esoteric stylistics of the Gathas of Zarathushtra. This article is the written version of an oral invitational presentation entitled "Transformations of the Snake-man: Myth, Language, and Iranian Identity," which was delivered at the Idea of Iran Symposium (6: Traditions and Innovations in Early Islamic Persia), Middle East Institute, SOAS, Brunei Gallery Theatre, London, 24 January 2009.

[1]James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 43.
[2]*Yasna* 9.8.
[3]*Yašt* 5.29.

ISSN 0021-0862 print/ISSN 1475-4819 online/12/020275–5
©2012 The International Society for Iranian Studies
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2011.617165

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

petitioning in vain for the depopulation of the world.[4] For the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene (Movsēs Xorenac'i) he is Aždahak, which, the Chorenian indicates, in Armenian means "dragon" (*višap*), whence he explains Ašdahak's (*sic*) offspring as descendants of the *višap*. This attests Armenian *Aždahak* as a loanword from the Parthian, found in Manichaean texts as *aždahāg* (dragon). Aždahak for Moses of Chorene represents the inimical Mede, via a conflation with Astyages of Eusebius' list of Median kings.[5] As Russell mentions, the conflation is attributable to both the phonic similarity between *Aždahak* and *Astuag-*, and an imagined connection between Armenian *mar-k'* (Medes) and Middle Iranian (i.e., Middle Persian) *mār* (snake), which, it may be added, glosses Pahlavi *až* = Avestan *aži-*. In the ninth century CE Pahlavi texts, Dahāg (< Dahāka) is represented as being of Arab ancestry (*tāz tōhm*), and from him Abraham, "*dastūr* of the Jews," is said to have received the evil commandments (created in opposition to the ten good commandments of Jamšēd), and to give them to Moses. Dahāk's name is accordingly etymologized as *dah āk* (ten evils) in a number of texts of the early Islamic period.[6]

In Ferdowsī's *Shāhnāmeh*, our villain is a tyrant from each of whose shoulders a snake arises; the two snakes are fed human beings. The villain's Arab genealogy is reasserted, and he is called Ḍaḥḥāk ضحاك, son of Mardās,[7] Ḍahhāk being earlier attested elsewhere (like Mardās) as an Arabic name. What makes this Arabic form as a name for Dahāk (Dahāg) interesting is the fact that if it is pronounced according to the Persian equivalents of the Arabic letters, one has *Zahhāk*, as is heard in Iran today, but when the name is pronounced in the Arabic manner, one has an approximation of *Dahāk*, with suggestion, to Persian ears, of a "guttural" Arabic accent. Thus the renaming yielded a phonetically iconic realization of the villain as the inimical Arab Other. That the name's meaning "laugher" can also be understood as "mocker" renders the appellation especially fitting for the demonic tyrant.

Let us return to the Indo-Iranian backgrounds. We have already seen that *aži-* in Aži Dahāka means "serpent, snake." The word survives in this meaning in East Iranian reflexes (e.g. in Khwarezmian and Yidgha), and, more relevantly for what follows, has the Vedic cognate *áhi-* (snake, serpent). The more difficult problem is the meaning of *dahāka-*. I have already addressed this issue, where I analyzed the word as "snake-man," seeing in *-āka-* the same pejorative suffix as in Avestan *maṣiiāka-* vis-à-vis *maṣiia* (mortal, man), and compared the first part of the word with Khotanese Saka *daha-* (of which derived forms mean "virility, bravery"), Wakhi *δə̆i* (man, male

[4]*Yašt* 15.19.

[5]Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, 44–45, 63nn40, 42, 43.

[6]See James R. Russell, "Our Father Abraham and the Magi," *Journal of the Cama Oriental Institute*, 54 (1987): 61–62, reprinted in James R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 219–39, and see, complementarily, P. O. Skjærvø, "Aždahā: i. Old and Middle Iranian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 3: 195a.

[7]For this name in an Arabic text, with reference to one of the demons controlled by Solomon, see Martin Schwartz, "Qumran, Turfan, Arabic Magic and Noah's Name," *Charmes et sortilèges: Magie et magiciens*, ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette, 2002), 236n26. I now withdraw the Iranian etymology offered there for the name.

Downloaded by [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes] at 01:13 05 March 2012

Downloaded by [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes] at 01:13 05 March 2012

person, human being), proposing historical semantics whereby I also tried to explain Vedic *dāsá-*, *dā́sa-*, and *dasyú-*, inter alia.[8]

I now proceed from Proto-Indo-European **dn̥só-* (Latin *densus*, etc.; thick, compact), whereby Proto-Indo-Iranian had **dasá-* (strong [in muscle], macho, tough). The positive aspect of this meaning is found in martial Iranian nomadic culture; hence the Saka forms Khotanese *daha-*, Wakhi *δǎi* (man), and the self-designating Saka ethnonym Avestan *Dā̊ŋha-*, fem. *Dāhī-*, Old Persian *Daha-*, Middle Persian *Dahestān*, cf. Latin *Dahae*, etc. Avestan has *dahaka-* (tough, brutal) in a series with words *varšna-* (macho) and *mūra-* (dumb, stupid); also *dahakā* (tough), with Old Avestan nom. as adj. of the god Vaiiu. Compare further *dahīg* (rude, impolite) and Armenian *dahič* (executioner, police enforcer). Skjærvø[9] suggests that *dahāka-* is the source of Pashto *lōy* (big, huge). The latter form could alternatively be from **dāhāka-* or **dāhaka-* as well, and while an etymological connection of the Pashto word with a base **dǎh-* accords with the underlying meaning *"thick" which I propose, it does not justify translating Aži Dahāka as "big dragon," as Skjærvø seems to do.[10]

It is likely that the serial semantic development "macho, male, man" was already Proto-Indo-Iranian, as reflected in Vedic: *Ṛgveda* (*RV*) 6.21.11 has Dása (with shift from adjectival to nominal stress) as the ancestor of Manu (*man). With the semantic generalization "man" = "human" (cf. Avestan *nar-* [male, man] > *nāirī*, *nairikā* [woman]), Proto-Indo-Iranian had **dasyú-* (population group), the meaning retained in Old Iranian *dahyu-*, whereas Vedic *dasyú-* was colored by the associations of the etymon with brutality, whereby the meaning "rough, brutal" which is reflected in *dasyú-* (inimical population group or its representative), and in the essentially synonymous adj. *dāsá-*, noun *dāsa-*. From "brutal" the word lent itself to development "monstrous, monster." As Watkins writes, "In *RV* 1.32.11 the personalized 'dragon' Vṛtra is referred to both as *áhi-* and as *dāsá-*."[11] The passage describes the pent-up waters as *dāsapatnīr áhigopāḥ* (having the *dāsá-* as husband, the Serpent as guardian). Watkins further comments that the meaning of *dāsá-* "is 'hostile demon', 'enemy', but also on the human plane, by opposition to *árya-*, 'non-āryan, barbarian', and finally, 'slave'" (the latter development is paralleled by Parthian *dāhift* [slavery], Persian *dāh* [slave]). The equation of *dāsá-* and *áhi-* is also found, as Watkins notes, in *RV* 2.11.2, and at *RV* 2.11.18 the monster is called *dasyú-*, which in the next verse, *RV* 2.11.19, refers to the "hostile non-āryan strangers."

Watkins further observes that "the terms *dāsá-*, *dā́sa-* and *dasi̯ú-*, with *dása-* (*RV* 6.2.11, legendary ancestor of the *dāsás*) and other forms are related as Indo-Iranian **dāsá-*, **dási̯u-* 'enemy, stranger,' **dasi̯ú-* 'land (orig. of the enemy)', [and] Avestan *daxiuu-*, *daŋ̊hu-*,"[12] which accords with my above analysis (apart from the diachronic

[8]Martin Schwartz, review of *Iranisches Personennamenbuch*, vol. 1, by Manfred Mayrhofer, *Orientalia*, 49, no. 1 (1980): 123–26.

[9]"Aždahā: i.," 194a.

[10]Ibid., 194b.

[11]Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford, 1995), 311.

[12]Ibid., 311–12.

details of Iranian *dahyu-*, and further Watkins' comparison of *dāsá-* [captured enemy] with Greek **dohelo-*, δοῦλος [slave], which would take the development of this meaning back to Proto-Indo-European). His further reconstruction of a common Indo-Iranian **ažhi- dāsa-* behind Vedic *áhi- dāsá-* and Avestan *aži- dahāka-* (whether or not the latter is from **dāhāka-*) is strengthened by further mythological and formulaic agreements set forth in his next chapter.[13] Among these many agreements, we may cite the detailed comparison of *RV* 10.99.6, the vanquishing of the six-eyed, three-headed *dā́sa-,* with *Yasna* 9.8, the slaying of the three-headed six-eyed Aži Dahāka.

Two further citations of Watkins will bring us to our final and most important observation. In illustration of adversaries having the "same system of sobriquets as Vṛtra," Watkins notes that Śambara is an *áhi-* (*RV* 2.12.11), a *dā́sa-* (*RV* 6.26.5) and a *dásyu-* (*RV* 6.31.4).[14] In the context of *RV* 5.34.6 "Indra ... the Ārya leads the Dāsa where he will," *RV* 5.34.4 indicates that Indra (slayer of Dāsa/Vṛtra and his kin) does not shy away from any *kílbiṣam*. Watkins sees in this first appearance of *kílbiṣam* a "Dāsic" borrowing, similar to words in English drawn from erstwhile German and Japanese enemies.[15] The phonetic shape of *kílbiṣa-*, with *-l-* and *-b-*, agrees with other Vedic words noted by Parpola[16] as showing non-Aryan phonology; here Parpola cites Watkins' explanation of *kílbiṣa-*. Elsewhere,[17] Parpola notes Indic *ś/s* in etyma connected with the Dāsa. It is clear then that *kílbiṣa-* phonically belongs with such conspicuously non-Aryan Dāsa words and names as *ṛ́bīsa-*, *Balbūthá-*, *Ilībíśa-*, and *Śṛ́binda-* as mentioned by Parpola,[18] to which *Śambára-* should also belong.

It is thus odd that Parpola does not assign *Śambara-* (later *Sambara-*) to the same non-Aryan source, but attributes it to Dāsas who were Aryans of a type continued by the inhabitants of Nuristan and the Iranian Sakas, although the latter two groups show no real linguistic affinities whatsoever, apart from their speaking Aryan languages. It may also be mentioned that the repeated Vedic references to the dark color of the Dāsas and Dasyus[19] make it unlikely that these people were (Indo-)Iranians or Nuristanis (the last being famous for their frequent fair skin and blonde hair). This is not the place to discuss the complex archaeological analyses Parpola offers in the service of his theories of early migrations of the Vedic vis-à-vis historically related peoples, Aryan and non-Aryan. What is relevant is Parpola's[20] elucidation of the meaning of *śambara-*.[21] Here I pass over Parpola's speculations that the word is

[13]Ibid., 313–20.

[14]Ibid., 312.

[15]Ibid., 398.

[16]Asko Parpola, "From the Dialects of Old-Indo-Aryan to Proto-Aryan and Proto-Iranian," *Indo-Iranian Languages and Peoples*, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams (Oxford, 2002), 93–94.

[17]Asko Parpola, "The Coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the Cultural and Ethnic Identity of the Dasas," *Studia Orientalia Fennica*, 64 (1988): 258–59, 262–63.

[18]Parpola, "From the Dialects of Old-Indo-Aryan to Proto-Aryan and Proto-Iranian," 93.

[19]Parpola, "The Coming of the Aryans to Iran and India," 208–10.

[20]Asko Parpola, "Pre-Proto-Iranians of Afghanistan as Initiates of Śākta Tantrism: On the Scythian/Saka Affiliation of the Dāsas, Nuristanis and Magadhans," *Iranica Antiqua*, 37 (2002): 258–80.

Downloaded by [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes] at 01:13 05 March 2012

connected with the ethnic tribal name Sabara/Śabara, and has as etymology **sam-vara-* (enclosure, protection; cf. Avestan *hąm.vərāiti-*, *hąm.varəti-* [valor]). Parpola[22] convincingly demonstrates that Śambara-, the Dāsa king, was associated with a large number of mountain castles, and in *RV* 1.59.6 as well as in 2.24.2 *śaṁbárāni*, neuter plural, must refer to "forts" breached by Indra.

Thus we see that *śaṁbára-* (*śambára-*) originally meant "a Dāsa fortress." A remarkable correlation, hitherto unnoticed, occurs in a Pahlavi datum on Dahāg: according to the mss. of the *Bundahišn* (details in Skjærvø), Dahāg built a residence or mansion in *Šambarān (written *y'mbl'n*).[23] As for the resultant equation Ir. *Šambarān*: OInd. *śaṁbarāni*, the background may have been the Proto-Iranian adaptation of the Proto-Indo-Aryan tale of warfare against the enemy Dāsa(s), the latter metaphorized in terms of tricephalic serpents or dragons; Proto-Iranians assimilated the tale to their own traditions of three-headed snakes/dragons, and equated the term *Dāsa-* with *dahāka-* or its antecedent, *"man-brute, man-monster." The Iranian *š-* would accordingly go back to an approximation of the Indo-Aryan palatal sibilant. If Parpola is right in associating *śambara-* with the archeological remains of Dashly-3 and other BMAC (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex) fortifications, whose analogs are apparently not evident for the ancient Indus Valley, the word would have belonged to the early BMAC language. While the details of the historical background of the correspondence in the term for "Dāsa fortress" are uncertain, we have here an important datum to add to the Indo-Iranian antiquity of Aži Dahāka, the snake-man/brute/barbarian who is counter to Iranian (*Aryan) interests.[24]

Downloaded by [T&F Internal Users], [carl heighes] at 01:13 05 March 2012

[21]Parpola, "The coming of the Aryans to Iran and India," 259–62.

[22]Esp. ibid., 261–62.

[23]I cannot find *Shāhnāmeh Šambarān*, mentioned by Skjærvø, "Aždahā: i.," 194b. I also consulted Dr. Mahmoud Omidsalar, an expert on *Shāhnāmeh*, who kindly searched for it to no avail.

[24]In Crimean Romany, Aždahas (pl. Aždahades) is a flying snake-dragon,"the most common character of Crimean Roma's folktales," Vadim Toropov, *Crimean Roma Language and Folklore* (Ivanovo, 2010), 325–26. The sing. and pl. endings here added to the stem Aždaha- reflect Byzantine/Modern Greek influence.