



MICHAEL AXWORTHY

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EMPIRE OF THE MIND

A HISTORY FROM ZOROASTER
TO THE PRESENT DAY



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IRAN: EMPIRE OF THE MIND

Michael Axworthy was head of the Iran section in the British Foreign Office from 1998–2000. He has written on contemporary Iran and other subjects for *Prospect* magazine, has debated Iranian affairs on BBC World and is now a lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. His first book was the highly praised *Sword of Persia*.

To my wife Sally

Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan

MICHAEL AXWORTHY

Iran:
Empire of the Mind

**A HISTORY
FROM ZOROASTER
TO THE PRESENT DAY**



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The title of this book, if not the idea of it altogether, is unusual in that it originated at a public event—a panel discussion in front of an invited audience, arranged to inaugurate the *Forgotten Empire* exhibition at the British Museum in the autumn of 2005. The panel was chaired by the journalist Jon Snow and included the Iranian ambassador, Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Adeli (recalled to Tehran shortly afterwards), Haleh Afshar, Ali Ansari and Christopher de Bellaigue. Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British Museum, made an introductory presentation. The discussion ranged widely but centred on the question of continuity in Iranian history, and on the enduring power of the idea of Iran, the influence of its literary and court culture on the other powers and linguistic cultures of the region, and its resilience over millennia despite war, invasion, religious change and revolution. Then Jon Snow asked the audience to put questions to the panel. I put a question toward the end, to the effect that if, as members of the panel had suggested, the centre of Iranian culture had moved at different times from Fars in southern Iran to Mesopotamia, to Khorasan in the north-east and Central Asia, and to what is now called Azerbaijan in the north-west; and given its strong influence far beyond the land of Iran itself, into Abbasid Baghdad and Ottoman Turkey for example on the one side and into Central Asia and Moghul India on the other, and beyond; then perhaps we should set aside our usual categories of nationhood and imperial culture and think instead of Iran as an Empire of the Mind? The panel seemed to like this suggestion, and someone in the audience called out that it would make a good book. So here it is.

I have benefited greatly from the generous help and advice of a number of people, especially Baqer Moin, Ali Ansari, Willem Floor, Sajjad Rizvi, Lenny Lewisohn, Hashem Ahmadzadeh, Chris Rundle, Touraj Daryaee, Michael Grenfell, Peter Melville, Duncan Head, Haideh Sahim and Mahdi Dasht-Bozorgi, and one anonymous reviewer, who all read all or part of it in advance of publication; but also my father Ifor Axworthy and my sister Janet Axworthy, Peter Avery Frances Cloud and Gordon Nechvatal, Paul Luft, and Paul Auchterlonie, and as well as the other staff at the University Library in Exeter, and at the London Library.

I should also thank my other friends and colleagues in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in Exeter for their help and support, especially Tim Niblock, Rasheed El-Enany Gareth Stansfield, James Onley and Rob Gleave, as well as Michael Dwyer (simply the best editor it has been my good fortune to encounter), Maria Petalidou and their colleagues at Hurst; my agent Georgina Capel; and (not just last but not least this time) my wife Sally for her unfailing cheerfulness and encouragement.



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TRANSLITERATION

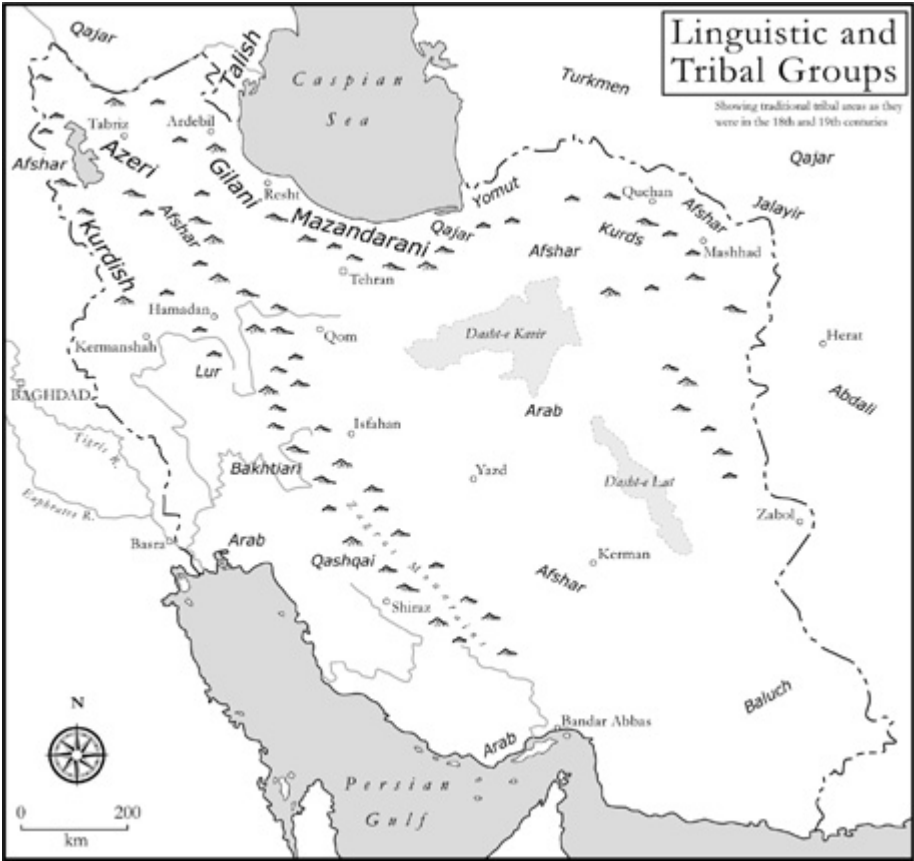
The transliteration of names and other terms from Persian into English is an awkward problem, and it is not possible to be fully consistent without producing text that will sometimes look odd. As with my previous book, on Nader Shah, I have used a transliteration scheme that leans toward modern Iranian pronunciation, because I did not want to write a book on Iranian history in which the names and places would read oddly to Iranians. But there are inconsistencies, notably over the transliteration of names that have had a life of their own in western writing: Isfahan, Fatima, Sultan, mullah, for example. Other, less justifiable inconsistencies, of which there will doubtless be some, are in all cases my fault rather than that of those who tried to advise me on the manuscript in its different stages of completion.

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... However, when I began to consider the reasons for these opinions, all these reasons given for the magnificence of human nature failed to convince me: that man is the intermediary between creatures, close to the gods, master of all the lower creatures, with the sharpness of his senses, the acuity of his reason, and the brilliance of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the nodal point between eternity and time, and, as the Persians say, the intimate bond or marriage song of the world, just a little lower than angels, as David tells us. I concede these are magnificent reasons, but they do not seem to go to the heart of the matter...

... Euanthes the Persian... writes that man has no inborn, proper form, but that many things that humans resemble are outside and foreign to them: "Man is multitudinous, varied, and ever changing." Why do I emphasize this? Considering that we are born with this condition, that is, that we can become whatever we choose to become, we need to understand that we must take earnest care about this, so that it will never be said to our disadvantage that we were born to a privileged position but failed to realize it and became animals and senseless beasts... Above all, we should not make that freedom of choice God gave us into something harmful, for it was intended to be to our advantage. Let a holy ambition enter into our souls; let us not be content with mediocrity,

*but rather strive after the highest and expend all
our strength in achieving it.*

Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*
(translated by Richard Hooker)

PREFACE

THE REMARKABLE RESILIENCE OF

THE IDEA OF IRAN

*Har kas ke bedanad va bedanad ke bedanad
Asb-e kherad az gombad-e gardun bejahanad
Har kas ke nadanad va bedanad ke nadanad
Langan kharak-e khish be manzel beresanad
Har kas ke nadanad va nadanad ke nadanad
Dar jahl-e morakkab 'abad od-dahr bemanad*

*Anyone who knows, and knows that he knows,
Makes the steed of intelligence leap over the vault of heaven.
Anyone who does not know, but knows that he does not know,
Can bring his lame little donkey to the destination nonetheless.
Anyone who does not know, and does not know that he does not
know
Is stuck for ever in double ignorance*

(Anonymous, attributed to Naser od-Din Tusi (1201-74);
anticipating Donald Rumsfeld by perhaps seven centuries.)

Iranian history is full of violence and drama: invasions, conquerors, battles and revolutions. Because Iran has a longer history than most countries, and is bigger than many, there is more of this drama. But there is more to Iranian history than that—there are religions, there are

influences, intellectual movements and ideas that have changed things within Iran but also outside Iran and around the world. Today Iran demands attention again, and the new situation poses questions—is Iran an aggressive power, or a victim? Is Iran traditionally expansionist, or traditionally passive and defensive? Is the Shi‘ism of Iran quietist, or violent, revolutionary, millenarian? Only history can suggest answers to those questions. Iran is one of the world’s oldest civilisations, and has been one of the world’s most thoughtful and complex civilisations from the very beginning. There are aspects of Iranian civilisation that, in one way or another, have touched almost every human being in the world. But the way that happened, and the full significance of those influences, is often unknown and forgotten.

Iran is replete with many paradoxes, contradictions and exceptions. Most non-Iranians think of it as a country of hot deserts, but it is ringed with high, cold mountains, has rich agricultural provinces, others full of lush sub-tropical forest, and reflecting the climatic variations, a diverse and colourful range of flora and fauna. Between Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia and the Persian Gulf, the Iranians speak an Indo-European language in the midst of the Arabic-speaking Middle East. Iran is commonly thought of as a homogeneous nation, with a strong national culture, but minorities like the Azeris, Kurds, Gilakis, Baluchis, Turkmen and others make up nearly half of the population. Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian women are subject to one of the most restrictive dress codes in the Islamic world, yet partly in consequence Iranian families have released their daughters to study and work in unprecedented numbers, such that over 60 per cent of university students now are female and many women (even married women) have professional jobs. Iran has preserved some of the most stunning Islamic architecture in the world, as well as traditions of artisan metalworking, rug-making, and bazaar trading; a complex and sophisticated urban culture—yet its capital, Tehran, has slowly smothered itself in concrete, traffic congestion and pollution. Iranians glory in their literary heritage and above all in their poetry, to a degree one finds in few other countries, with the possible exception of Russia. Many ordinary Iranians can recite from memory lengthy passages from their favourite poems, and phrases from the great poets are common in everyday speech. It is poetry that insistently dwells on the joys of life—themes of wine, beauty, flowers and sexual love, yet Iran has also an intense popular tradition of Shi‘ism

which in the mourning month of Moharram emerges in religious processions dominated by a mood of gloom, and a powerful sense of betrayal and injustice (within which the oral delivery of religious poetry also plays an important part); and Iran's religious culture also encompasses the most forbidding, censorious and dogmatic Shi'a Muslim clerics. It is a country with an ancient tradition of monarchical splendour, now an Islamic republic; but one where only 1.4 per cent of the population attend Friday prayers.

One thing is best explained at the start—another apparent paradox. Iran and Persia are the same country. The image conjured up by Persia is one of romance: roses and nightingales in elegant gardens, fast horses, mysterious, flirtatious women, sharp sabres, carpets with colours glowing like jewels, poetry and melodious music. In the cliché of western media presentation Iran has a rather different image: frowning mullahs, black oil, women's blanched faces peering, not to their best advantage, from under black chadors; grim crowds burning flags, chanting 'death to...'

In the south of Iran there is a province called Fars. Its capital is Shiraz and it contains Iran's most ancient and impressive archaeological sites: Persepolis and Pasargadae (along with Susa, in neighbouring Khuzestan). In ancient times the province was called Pars, after the people who had settled there—the Persians. When those people created an empire that dominated the whole region, the Greeks called it the Persian empire, and the term 'Persia' was applied by them, the Romans and other Europeans subsequently to all the dynastic states that followed that empire in the territory that is Iran today—Sassanid Persia in the centuries before the Islamic conquest, Safavid Persia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Qajar Persia in the nineteenth century. But all through that time the people of those empires called themselves Iranians, and called their land Iran. The word derives from the very earliest times, apparently meaning 'noble'. It is cognate both with a similar word in Sanskrit, and with the term 'Aryan,' that was used and abused in the racial ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries¹. In 1935 Reza Shah, wanting to distance his state from the decadent, ineffectual Qajar government he had displaced, instructed his embassies overseas to require foreign governments henceforth to call the country Iran in official communications. But many people, including some Iranians outside Iran writing in English, still prefer the term Persia,

because it retains the ancient, often happier, connotations. It is not unusual for foreigners to have a name for a country that is different from the one used by its inhabitants: what the English call Germany is called *Allemagne* by the French and *Deutschland* by Germans. The Persian word for Britain is *Inglistan*, which some Scots might resent. Iranians themselves call their language *Farsi*, because it originated in the Iranian dialect spoken in Fars province (the language is now spoken not just in Iran but also extensively in Tajikistan; as the Dari dialect, in Afghanistan; and has had a strong influence on the Urdu spoken in Pakistan and northern India). My practice is to use both terms, but with a preference for Iran when dealing with the period after 1935, and for Persia for the preceding centuries, when it was the normal word used for the country by English-speakers. In the earlier chapters the term Iranian is used also to cover the non-Persian peoples and languages of the wider region, like the Parthians, Sogdians, and Medes.

There are many books available on contemporary Iran, and on earlier periods of Iranian history, and several that cover the whole history of Iran from the earliest times—notably the monumental seven volume *Cambridge History of Iran*, and the huge project of the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, incomplete but nonetheless incomparable for the range and depth of knowledge of Iranian history it pulls together (and much more than history). This book does not attempt to compete with those, but tries rather to present an introduction to the history of Iran for a general readership, assuming little or no prior knowledge. In addition it aims to explain some of the paradoxes and contradictions through the history—probably the only way that they can be properly understood. And beyond that—especially in [Chapter 3](#), which explores some of the treasury of classical Persian poetry—it attempts to give the beginnings of an insight into the way in which the intellectual and literary culture of Iran developed, and has had a wider influence, not just in the Middle East, Central Asia and India, but throughout the world.

ORIGINS: ZOROASTER, THE ACHAEMENIDS, AND THE GREEKS

O Cyrus...Your subjects, the Persians, are a poor people with a proud spirit

(King Croesus of Lydia, according to Herodotus)

The history of Iran starts with a question. Who are the Iranians? Where did they come from? The question concerns not just the origins of Iran, but recurs in the history of the country and its people down to the present day, in one form or another.

The classic answer was that the Iranians were one branch of the Indo-European family of peoples that moved out of what are today the Russian steppes to settle in Europe, Iran, Central Asia and northern India in a series of migrations and invasions in the latter part of the second millennium BCE.

This answer at the same time explains the close relationship between the Persian language and the other Indo-European languages: particularly Sanskrit and Latin for example, but modern languages like Hindi, German and English too. Any speaker of a European language learning Persian soon encounters a series of familiar words, like distant friends, just a few of which include *pedar* (father, Latin *pater*), *dokhtar* (daughter, girl, German *tochter*), *mordan* (to die, Latin *mortuus*, French *mourir*, *le mort*), *nam* (name) *dar* (door), *moush* (mouse), *robudan* (to rob) *setare* (star), *tarik* (dark), *tondar* (thunder), and perhaps the most basic of all, the first person present singular of the verb to be, in Persian the suffix *-am* (I am—as in the sentence ‘I am an Iranian’—*Irani-am*). An English-speaker who has attempted to learn German will find Persian grammar both familiar and blessedly simple by comparison (no genders or grammatical cases for nouns, for example). Persian (like English) has evolved since ancient times into a simplified form, dropping the previous, heavily inflected grammar of old Persian. It has no structural

relationship with Arabic or the other Semitic languages of the ancient Middle East, like Aramaic (though it took in many Arab words after the Arab conquest).

Long before the migrants speaking Iranian languages arrived from the north, there were other people living in what later became the land of Iran (*Iran zamin*). There were human beings living on the Iranian plateau as early as 100,000 BCE, in what is called the Old Stone Age, and by 6-5,000 BCE agricultural settlements were flourishing in and around the Zagros mountains, in the area to the east of the great Sumerian civilisation of Mesopotamia. Excavation of one of these settlements (at Hajji Feroz Tepe) has produced the remains of the world's oldest wine jar, complete with grape residue and traces of resin (used as a flavouring and preservative), indicating that the wine would have tasted something like Greek retsina¹. Peoples like the Gutians and the Mannaeans are mainly known from their contacts with Mesopotamia. Before and during the period of the Iranian migrations, an empire flourished in the area that later became Khuzestan and Fars—the empire of Elam, based on the cities of Susa and Anshan. The Elamites spoke a language that was neither Mesopotamian nor Iranian, though they were influenced (and sometimes conquered) by the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians, and transmitted elements of their culture on to the later Iranian dynasties. Elamite influence spread beyond the area usually associated with their empire, an example being Tepe Sialk (just south of modern Kashan), which with its ziggurat and other characteristics shows all the forms of an Elamite settlement. The ziggurat at Tepe Sialk has been dated to around 2900 BCE.

DNA-based research in other countries in recent years has tended to emphasise the relative stability of the genetic pool over time, despite conquests, migrations and what look from historical accounts to be mass settlements or even genocides. It is likely that the Iranian settlers or conquerors were relatively few in number compared to the pre-existing peoples who later adopted their language and intermarried with them. And probably ever since that time, down to the present day, the rulers of Iran have ruled over at least some non-Iranian peoples. So from the very beginning the Idea of Iran was as much about culture and language, in complex patterns, as about race or territory.

From the very beginning there was always a division (albeit a fuzzy one) between nomadic or semi-nomadic, pastoralist inhabitants and the settled, crop-growing agriculturalists. Iran is a land of great contrasts in climate and geography, from the dense, humid forests of Mazandaran in the north to the arid, hot Persian Gulf coast; from the high, cold mountains of the Alborz, the Zagros and the Caucasus to the deserts of the Dasht-e Lut and the Dasht-e Kavir; and in addition to areas of productive agricultural land (expanded by ingenious use of irrigation from groundwater) there have always been more extensive areas of rugged mountain and semi-desert, worthless for crops but suitable for grazing, albeit perhaps only for a limited period each year. Over these lands the nomads moved their herds. The early Iranians seem to have herded cattle in particular.

In the pre-modern world pastoralist nomads had many advantages over settled peasant farmers. Their wealth was their livestock, which meant their wealth was movable and they could escape from threats of violence with little loss. Other nomads might attack them but they could raid peasant settlements with relative impunity. Peasant farmers were always much more vulnerable: if threatened with violence at harvest-time they stood to lose the accumulated value of a full year's work and be rendered destitute. In peaceful times nomads would be happy to trade meat and wool with the peasants in exchange for grain and other crops, but the nomads always had the option to add direct coercion to purely economic bargaining. The nomads tended to have the upper hand and this remained the case from when the Indo-European pastoralist Iranians entered the Iranian plateau for the first time, right down to the twentieth century.

From these circumstances a system of tribute or what a Mafioso in another context would call protection could develop: the peasants would pay over a proportion of their harvest to be left alone. From another perspective, augmented with some presentational subtlety, tradition and perhaps charisma, it could be called taxation and government (just as in medieval Europe the distinction between robber baron and feudal lord could be a fine one). Most of the rulers of Iran through the centuries originated from among the nomadic tribes (including from among non-Iranian nomads that arrived in later waves of migration), and animosity between the nomads and the settled population also persisted down to modern times. The settled population (particularly later, when towns and

cities developed) regarded themselves as more civilised, less violent, less crude. The nomads saw them as soft and devious, themselves by contrast as hardy, tough, self-reliant, exemplifying a kind of rugged honesty. There would have been elements of truth in both caricatures, but the attitudes of the early Iranian élites partook especially of the latter.

Medes and Persians

The Iranian-speakers who migrated into the land of Iran and the surrounding area in the years before 1000 BCE were not one single tribe or group. In time some of their descendants became known as Medes and Persians, but there were Parthians, Sogdians and others too (and the people known to modern scholars as the Avestans, in whose language the earliest Zoroastrian liturgies were compiled), who only acquired the names known to us later in their history. And even the titles Mede and Persian were themselves simplifications, lumping together shifting alliances and confederacies of disparate tribes.

From the beginning the Medes and Persians are mentioned together in historical sources, suggesting a close relationship between them from the very earliest times. The very first such mention is in an Assyrian record of 836 BCE, an account of a military campaign by the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III, which he and several of his successors waged in the Zagros mountains and as far east as Mount Demavand, the high, extinct volcano in the Alborz range, to the east of modern Tehran. The accounts they left behind listed the Medes and Persians as tributaries. The heartlands of the Medes were in the north-west, in the modern provinces of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Hamadan and Tehran. In the region of the Zagros south of the territories occupied by the Medes, the Assyrians encountered the Persians in the region they called Parsuash, and which has been known ever since as Pars or Fars, in one form or another².

Appearing first as victims of the Assyrians and as tributaries, within a century or so the Medes and Persians were fighting back, attacking Assyrian territories. Later traditions recorded by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE mention early kings of the Medes called Deioces and Cyaxares, who appeared in the Assyrian accounts as Daiaukku and Uaksatar; and a king of the Persians called Achaemenes, who the Assyrians called Hakhamanish. By 700 BCE (with the help of Scythian

tribes) the Medes had established an independent state, which later grew to become the first Iranian Empire; and in 612 BCE the Medes destroyed the Assyrian capital, Nineveh (adjacent to modern Mosul, on the Tigris). At its height the Median Empire stretched from Asia Minor to the Hindu Kush, and south to the Persian Gulf, ruling the Persians as vassals as well as many other subject peoples.

The Prophet Who Laughed

But probably rather before the first mentions of the Iranians and their kings appear in the historical records, another important historical figure lived—Zoroaster or Zarathustra (modern Persian *Zardosht*). That is, he is a historical figure because it is generally accepted that he lived and was not just a man of myth or legend; but his dates are unknown and experts have disagreed radically about when he lived. Compared with Jesus, Mohammad or even Moses, Zoroaster is a much more indistinct figure and little is known for sure about his life (the best evidence suggests he lived in the north-east, in what later became Bactria and later still, Afghanistan—but another tradition has suggested he came from what is now Azerbaijan, around the river Araxes, and others have suggested a migration from the one locality to the other). As a key figure in the history of world religions and as a religious thinker, Zoroaster certainly ranks in importance with those other prophets. But it is also difficult to establish the precise import of his teaching, for the same reason that the details of his life are obscure—because the Zoroastrian religious texts that are the main source for both (notably the *Avesta*) were first written in the form they have come down to us more than a thousand years after he lived, around the end of the Sassanid era, in the sixth century AD.³

The stories about Zoroaster they contain are little more than fables (though some of them correspond with information from Classical Greek and Latin commentators, showing their genuine antiquity—for example the story that at birth the infant Zoroaster did not cry, but laughed), and the theology combines what are undoubtedly ancient elements with innovations that developed and were incorporated much later.

So although Zoroastrian tradition places his birth at around 600 BCE (and associates him with an Achaemenian Persian prince, Vistaspa) most scholars now believe he lived earlier. It is still unclear just when, but it is reasonable to think it was around 1200 or 1000 BCE, at the time of or

shortly after the migrations of Iranian cattle-herders to the Iranian plateau. This view is based on the fact that the earliest texts (the *Gathas*, traditionally hymns first sung by Zoroaster himself) show significant differences with the later liturgical language associated with the period around 600 BCE; but also on the pastoral way of life reflected in the texts, and the absence in them of references to the Medes or Persians, or the names of kings or other people known from that time. It seems plausible that Zoroaster's revelation arose in the context of the changes, new demands and new influences associated with the migration; and the self-questioning of a culture faced with new neighbours and unfamiliar pressures. The religion was the result of an encounter with a new complexity. It was to some extent, a compromise with it, but also an attempt to govern it with new principles.

Other evidence supports the view that Zoroaster did not invent a religion from nothing, but reformed and simplified pre-existing religious practices (against some resistance from traditional priests), infusing them with a much more sophisticated philosophical theology and a greater emphasis on morality and justice, in this period of transition. One element to support this is an early tradition that writing was alien and demonic—suggesting that the Iranians associated it with the Semitic and other peoples among whom the migrants found themselves in the centuries after the migration⁴. Another telling indication is the fact that the Persian word *div*, cognate with both Latin and Sanskrit words for the gods, in the Zoroastrian context was used for a class of demons opposed to Zoroaster and his followers—suggesting that the reforming prophet reclassified at least some previous deities as evil spirits.⁵ The demons were associated with chaos and disorder—the antithesis of the principles of goodness and justice represented by the new religion. At the more mundane level they also lay behind diseases of people and animals, bad weather and other natural disasters.

At the centre of Zoroaster's theology was the opposition between Ahura Mazda, the creator-God of truth and light, and Ahriman, the embodiment of lies, darkness and evil (though in the earliest times Ahriman's direct opponent was *Spenta Mainyu*—Bounteous Spirit—rather than Ahura Mazda, who was represented as being above the conflict). This dualism became a persistent theme in Iranian thought for centuries: modern Zoroastrianism is much more strongly monotheistic, and to make this distinction (and others) more explicit many scholars

refer to the religion in this early stage as Mazdaism. Other pre-existing deities were incorporated into the Mazdaean religious structure as angels or archangels—notably Mithra, a sun god, and Anahita, a goddess of streams and rivers. Six Immortal archangels (the *Amesha Spenta*) embodied animal life, plant life, metals and minerals, earth, fire and water (the names of several of these archangels—for example Bahman, Ordibehesht, Khordad—survive as months in the modern Iranian calendar, even under the Islamic republic). Ahura Mazda himself personified air, and in origin paralleled the Greek Zeus, as a sky-god.

The modern Persian month Bahman is named after the Mazdaean archangel Vohu Manu—the second in rank after Ahura Mazda, characterised as Good Purpose and identified with the cattle who were the second class of beings to be created by Ahura Mazda after man himself. Part of the creation myth in Zoroastrianism is the story that, after all was created good by Ahura Mazda, the evil spirit Ahriman (accompanied by six evil spirits matching the six Immortals) assaulted creation, murdering the first man, killing the sacred bull Vohu Manu and polluting water and fire. The importance of cattle to the nomadic early Iranians is shown by the frequent appearance of bulls and cattle in sculpture and iconography from the Achaemenid period—but many of these images may have a more specific religious significance, referring to Vohu Manu.





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