

# Classica et Orientalia

Herausgegeben von  
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Band 16

2017

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Persian Religion  
in the Achaemenid Period

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La religion perse  
à l'époque achéménide

Edited by  
Wouter F. M. Henkelman and Céline Redard

2017

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Cover Illustration: Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great, 1796, oil on canvas.

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Publication of this book was supported by a grant of the Collège de France.



COLLÈGE  
DE FRANCE  
— 1530 —

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen  
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet  
über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet  
at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

For further information about our publishing program consult our  
website <http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de>

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.  
Printing and binding: Hubert & Co., Göttingen  
Printed in Germany

ISSN 2190-3638

ISBN 978-3-447-10647-4

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## Preface

*širini nappi ak sunki huttukni*

The international colloquium on Achaemenid religion, held at the Collège de France on November 17-18, 2013 on the initiative of Jean Kellens, bore the subtitle *confrontation des sources*. Intended to provoke a fundamental debate on the evidential basis, the call was both timely and appropriate in view of new archaeological and textual sources, not to mention recent progress in the analysis of the Avestan tradition. Nevertheless, the proceedings published hereafter do not so much represent a systematic comparison of corpora of sources, or opposing views as to which of these should have preference, but rather the search for common ground and the development of a synthetic model. The acceptance of a basic tenet – that the Achaemenid Iranian religious landscape was even more diverse than previously assumed – plays no small role in the discussions. Given this background, the editors have opted to baptise the present volume *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, hence devoted to the religious beliefs of the Achaemenid Persians and of those with whom they had close cultural ties. The title explicitly defines the volume's focus as separate from the question of Achaemenid religious policy or that of local religions within the Achaemenid empire.

Jean Kellens' opening contribution sets the stage for studying Achaemenid religion within the wider frame of ancient Iranian religions, in particular with reference to the Avestan tradition. Stressing, not for the first time, the need to move away from the reductive binary question ('were the Achaemenids Zoroastrians?') and from the perception of ancient Zoroastrianism as a creedal faith, he proposes refocusing the debate on ritual behaviour. Alberto Cantera, in his contribution, places the long liturgy at the centre of the debate. He latter offers a detailed and critical survey of possible elements relating the Achaemenid and Avestan traditions. Both Kellens and Cantera undertake the comparison on the assumption that the Achaemenid form of mazdaism was shaped by its local cultural context. Antonio Panaino's rich study on the date and especially the impact of calendric reforms similarly recognizes the importance of this setting. It argues for an understanding of the imperial framework as non-incidentally to the creation and spread of the new calendar. Though Jan Tavernier offers a sobering note by calling into question the day names recently identified by Shaul Shaked in the fourth-century Bactrian Aramaic texts (as well as some purported Zoroastrian names and ritual terms), he simultaneously points

out that the ‘Bēl’ mentioned in the corpus may simply be Bēl, hence evidencing empire-wide cultural contacts and heralding the post-Achaemenid Bactrian pantheon.

Even if Bactrian ‘Bēl’ referred to Auramazdā, the substitution of the name would in itself be meaningful, in the same way that the replacement of ‘Auramazdā’ by ‘Bēl’ in the Babylonian display copy of the Bīsotūn inscription is significant. Especially the latter would have been difficult without a conception of Auramazdā as a royal god according to a model well-documented in Elam, Babylonia and particularly Assyria. Salvatore Gaspa charts the strong potential of this evidence for understanding Auramazdā’s role in the royal inscriptions. Wouter Henkelman offers a matching contribution from the perspective of the Persepolis Fortification archive. New textual evidence reveals that the so-called *lan* sacrifice could be performed for Napiriša, thereby confirming doubts on its (exclusive) connection to Auramazdā. The latter deity has a relatively modest position in terms of frequency or aggregate volume of his sacrifices, but does occur in institutional contexts that underline his closeness to the king and role in royal ideology. Mark Garrison’s treatment of the religious landscape of Achaemenid Pārsa, as reflected in the glyptic evidence from the same archive, shows a dazzling variety of divine and numinous figures and symbols which, as he concludes, is remarkably in synch with the evidence from the Elamite tablets. Furthermore, what Garrison prudently calls the winged symbol (with or without anthropomorphic figure set into it) forbids a straightforward reading as ‘Auramazdā’. At the same time, Garrison underlines the strong royal associations of the symbol. Bruno Jacobs offers an alternative but not necessarily contrastive treatment, focussing on the wilful physical similarity of the figure in the winged disk and the Persian king in Achaemenid royal art postdating Bīsotūn. His idea that it portrays Auramazdā as an ancestral or clan deity could help to explain why the deity was, on the one hand, of relatively modest importance in terms of sacrifices and, on the other, chosen as royal god and emblem of the empire.

The rich cultural pallet that contributed to Achaemenid Persian religion is addressed in four final contributions. Gian Pietro Basello points to the Elamite gods in the Acropole Archive from Neo-Elamite Susa and to divine elements in the Persepolis Bronze Plaque, hence to religious systems that existed in southwestern Iran just a few generations before the emergence of empire. Pierfrancesco Callieri’s succinct survey of (purported) Achaemenid religious architecture and sacred places refers to the crucial new evidence from the cave sanctuary of Vešnavēh, which suggests long-term continui-

ty of water-related sacrifices across a range of cultural boundaries. It also includes a synoptic description (with Alireza Askari Chaverdi) of the site of Tol-e Ājori, where a full-scale copy of the Babylonian Ištar Gate is currently being excavated: perhaps not a religious building in narrow sense, the structure with its bull and *mušḫušu* friezes is certainly a reminder of Achaemenid perceptivity to Mesopotamian tradition and potentially an indicator of royal ritual inspired by Babylonian models. The volume's penultimate contribution, by Claude Rapin, surveys the archaeological evidence from Achaemenid Sogdian sites. The platforms of Koktepe and the temples of Sangir Tepe and Kindyk Tepe, Rapin argues, belong to a mazdaic tradition that was instrumental in uniting various tribal groups. It is as yet unclear how this relates to Achaemenid heartland religion, though the hypothesised role of Auramazdā as ancestral deity (Jacobs) may be recalled here. At any rate, the dual use of open-air sanctuaries and built temples also existed in Pārsa, undoubtedly as a function of the complex of underlying traditions (Henkelman, Callieri, Garrison). From this perspective, it cannot surprise that Adriano Rossi, in a contribution on cultural diversity among the 'Medes', ends by pointing out the simultaneous occurrence of natural and built cultic environments.

Publication of this volume has met with a number of difficulties, all of which we overcame by the grace of Auramazdā, by the generous support of the Collège de France, by the intercession of Jean Kellens and Bruno Jacobs, and by the efforts of our copy-editor, Marius König; to all we extend our warmest gratitude.

Paris, November 2016,  
WH and CR