The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus

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Derveni is a pass about 12 km NW of Salonika, northern Greece. In January 1962, archaeologists excavated several tombs there which contained opulent grave-offerings, though there is no major ancient city known to have existed in the vicinity.

One of the tombs contained weapons, and it has been suggested for this reason that its occupant might have been a soldier. Outside his tomb, in the ashes of the funeral pyre, was found a charred papyrus roll that was, evidently, to have been burnt with him. It is the first papyrus found in Greece, and one of the oldest Greek papyri known. The text was probably composed around 500 B.C., in Ionic Greek—thus, perhaps, in one of the Greek cities of Asia Minor under Persian rule—and the papyrus, probably from the later years of the fourth century, shows signs of a copyist who was a speaker of the Attic dialect. From the large proportion of the text that survives, it is plain that P. Derveni is an allegorical interpretation of an Orphic poem, combining a discussion of cosmology and the physical nature of this world with mythological and the next world; life after death. Cult and initiation in connection with knowledge of the fate of the soul are a unifying theme, and there is a doctrine of metempsychosis of the Pythagorean type (that is, involving both human and animal bodies).

Men have supernatural beings (daïmones) allotted to them, who are the servants of the gods; these daïmones live beneath the earth and watch us. But, the author laments, men are too mired in sin and devoted to pleasure to pay due attention to dreams and other signs of the perils of life after death, and they even disbelieve in
the horrors of Hades. Initiates ought to make libations (khoai) and sacrifices (especially, as it seems, of poultry) to the Eryxies or Eumenides, who, the author insists, are souls. The author’s point of view bears the particularly strong imprint of the teachings of the Presocratic philosopher Heracleitus of Ephesus; but much of Plato, notably the Phaedo, reflects the same range of seemingly disparate concerns, united by interest in the immortal soul and its progress. (As we shall see presently, the same connected interests animate Persian Zoroastrians of the same period.)

All these subjects are central to Orphic teachings. In the later Orphic Argonautica, Orpheus congratulates Apollo: “And you have learned the ways of divination by beasts and birds, and what is the order of events, and what is presaged in their dream-taught paths by souls of mortals overcome in sleep; answers to signs and portents, the stars’ courses, the purification rites, the great blessing to men, placations of gods, and gifts poured out for the dead.”

It is no longer a matter of dispute that Greek beliefs about the underworld and priest-sages who went there and returned owe much to Thracian and Scythian (i.e., North Iranian) shamansm. Empedocles, for example, told his disciple, “You will be able to fetch (ekeine) from Hades the life-force (ménex) of a man who has died.” He promises him healing powers, too, and control of wind and rain. All this is plainly shamansmic, with its closest parallel in the Mesopotamia, where the shaman able to conduct one to Hades and back is a Zoroastrian mage of the Persian period named Mithrobarzanes. Xenophon of Lydia, a contemporary of Empedocles, is the first to refer to him in surviving Greek literature, and he is mentioned in the context of a discussion of the Persian mages. The shaman in the course of his initiation undergoes ritual disembowelment, and virtually every scholar of Orphism concurs in some way or another with Linforth’s view that the myth of the disembowelment of Orpheus by the Titans is “peculiarly Orphic, the very core of Orphic religion.”

Orphism is not out of place in fourth-century Macedonia: Plutarch (Alex. 2) mentions that Olympias, the mother of Alexander (“the Great”), to Greeks and latins, “the Accursed,” to Zoroastrians, b. 356 B.C., participated in the Macedonian Bacchandria, which, he calls Orphic. Such beliefs existed far beyond the Bosporus, too, at Euxinithes (Olbia), on the estuary of the river Bug, on the northern coast of the Black Sea. There, Herodotus reports (Hist., 4.79), the Scythian king Skytes had been initiated into the cult of Dionysus Bakchos; and then bone plates of the 5th cent. B.C. found at Olbia have Orphic inscriptions in Greek, Ionia, Northern Greece and the cities around the Black Sea were ruled.
invaded; and visited by Persians throughout the fifth century B.C.; so the Orphic religion in these regions flourished alongside Zoroastrianism and its priests, the magoi; and what did the Magi of Achaemenian Iran actually teach?

Zoroastrians believed, then as now, in an afterworld of heaven and hell, of rewards and punishments. The physical world is a place of mixture and combat of forces of good and evil. Knowing this is important, since physics is morality: by leading a righteous life, in which one seeks the purification of all creation, one enters heaven, not hell, after death. Zarathushtra, and the Magi after him, travel to that world in dreams and ecstatics, and bring back accounts of it that strengthen the faith, of the perplexed in times of trouble—Vishnu’s war against the Hyaona demon-worshippers, or, later, the times of trouble after Alexander’s conquest of Iran, and Karth and the struggle against the heresiarch Mith. As is well known, the Zoroastrians also believe that man has an immortal aspect, a protective spirit, called the frawali. These spirits of the dead receive offerings; and the last day of the year, hama-spahma-moudaya of feervand-gidin (Armenian hroat-le’), is dedicated to them. Spirits of the dead are feared, as well as revered— as is the case in most human communities —so after dark, for instance, the frawalis are abroad, and one ought not to draw water, which they like especially to inhabit, till midnight, when the protective Sun begins its return. As in other cultures, the cock-crow that heralds dawn is believed to banish nocturnal evils; but Zoroastrians also believe the cock to be a bird of Shadda, the yazata who hears prayer and acts as a psychopompus. None of these Zoroastrian beliefs and customs would have seemed very strange to followers of Orphism; and it is indeed likely that the Persian faith would have been an important source of their own beliefs. This is not to say that Zoroastrianism was the splendidly isolated Aryan Kulturzüge, bringing metaphysical enlightenment to lesser breeds without the law. As seems to have been the case with Irano-Jewish interaction, the Persian religious system acted as a catalyst for the elaboration of ideas that already existed. Also, as Barmart has shown, itinerant priests in Greece practicing rites of purification and exorcism in the century after Homer show the closest affinities, not to Iran, but to Semitic Assyria— and the cultural transfer from the Semitic world, in religion, literature, and philosophy as well as the alphabet and other aspects of material culture, was massive. Column six of the Deveni papyrus reads as follows:

εγκαταλειπε για θυσία δυστοιχου τας ψυχισις, επιδεικνυ μεγαν δυναμα διατονη μεθισχοντος, εμποδιου εις ψυχισις εκκενθιον την

θυσιαν θεου θεσαλε ποτιστικοι την ιοι μαγων την επιστημηναι επιθετην την ψυχισιν. (66)
For penalty, another valid rendering, and polyomphala can be understood as "pasty-klobied" also (the omnipha can be a bump or an indentation). "Poultry" may be too specific for orithies; better, unless one is certain from context that a cock or chicken must be meant, "a bird of prey". There are Greek parallels for some usages here: Persephone accepts from some people poinas palaiou pentheus; Clement (Protev. 22.4, p. 17.4 Stahlin) mentions popana polyomphala amongst the paraphernalia of the Greek Mysteries, and inscriptions in temples of Asklepios mention cakes (popana) with nine and twelve omphala. This does not mean the penalty paid to those below, or the intended omphala, were Greek in origin, only that idea and thing enjoyed popularity widely. But does the term "omphalos" in the Derveni papyrus mean a Zoroastrian priest, and if so a description of an identifiable Zoroastian ritual practice - or are we dealing here with a magician generally, even a sorcerer?

The term magos in fifth- and sixth-century Greece reigned, at first, a Persian priest, with either a positive or negative sense (able to do amazing things - or else alien and dangerous); but it seems quickly to have acquired the alternate or additional, decidedly negative connotation of a magician, a wizard or sorcerer. Heracleitus (DK 12 B 14) is supposed to have addressed his prophecies against "seizers / men of the night (nyktipoi)is); magoi, hukhtazes, maenads, mythetes. Zoroastrian priests perform the appropriate watches (gah) and the office of the Vahyata at night; but this would scarcely qualify them as nyktipoi, midnight ramblers after a fashion, since their principal rite, the yazna, must be
solemned in the morning. (Plutarch, in his work on Isis and Osiris and the other Oriental mystery cults, including Mithraism, describes a kind of Persian black mass in which everything normal is reversed — so the rite is performed at night, rather than by day.) In the Oresteia of Euripides, L.1493 ff., a Persian slave insists felen. Disappeared suddenly, either from the effects of drugs or from the tricks of a magus or carried off by the gods. It all sounds like a shamans trip; and who can tell whether the magos is just a wizard, or meant specifically as a Persian priest, added for orientalizing effect to the bit part of a "barbaric" Anatolian?

There is less ambiguity in Oedipus Tyrannus, where the Theban king castigates Teiresias as a "magos hatchet of plots, craftly beggar!" In the first Alcibiades, the majia of Zoroaster is praised as "worship of the gods"; and in the Helenistic, ptolemaic-Aristotelian Magika, the author protests "the magos do not know or practice sorcery", which means enough people thought that they did. The Romans, similarly, were to use magus and magia to mean official Persian priests, and later the meaning degenerated. Catullus (Carmina 90) knew enough about Iranian mores to ridicule the Magi for their incest (Av. xvaq'vadathax). Pliny (Nat. Hist. 30.1) tries to reconcile the two meanings: Zoroastrism and sorcery; and suggests that the magiae vanitiae began in Persia, and combine three arts: medicine, religion, and astrology. In the fourth century, the use of the term in Greek was sufficiently flexible that magic could have meant either an Iranian priest, or a sorcerer. West, indeed, argued that the magos of the Derveni text might have been neither Iranians nor Greeks, but Babylonian religious practitioners who had acquired the apellation magos because Persia ruled Mesopotamia. But Professor West's suggestion seems mistaken. Xerxes had burnt the temple of Marduk at Babylon and severely persecuted worshippers of the demons and destroyed their temples (daivadina). It is worthwhile to note that in the inscription he left at Persepolis describing this policy, Xerxes asserts that if a man worships Ahura Mazdah according to Truth and with ritual, then he will be happy when alive and accounted righteous (aradvā) after death — that is, his soul will go to Heaven: he displays the same concern, mutatis mutandis, for earthly arrangements and their otherworldly consequences, as does the author of the Derveni text. In the heart of Persia, the Elamite priests who performed their rites at Persepolis did not have Iranian ecclesiastical titles; nor does it seem likely that any non-Zoroastrian would have been called a member of the hereditary caste of the priesthood of a religion that was the creed of the Achaemenid kings, and that condemned adherents of other faiths as followers of the anti-cosmic Lie. In Iranian
lands, magos or its equivalent was not a term to be bandied about with cosmopolitan flexibility; particularly, one would think, in the Babylonian religion that Xerxes had persecuted; nor is there any reason to suppose an itinerant Babylonian would not have used his native title with pride. It is more simple and likely, just a shade with Occam's razor, to suppose the Magi of the Derveni papyrus were Persian Mags.

The Magian rites described are funerary; and the details of Zoroastrian funerary rituals have always impressed foreigners, from Herodotus in the west to the Chinese and Japanese in the far east. Probable this is in part because of the beliefs surrounding them—the immaterial soul, its judgement and the journey to heaven or hell, the efficacy of prayer and the belief in the future. Certain aspects of the Zoroastrian rituals, performed in reverence for the fraztis of the departed (arkafiravad) are of particular interest here: Zoroastrian priests solemnize a meal in honor of the dead, Satim, which is accompanied by a prayer called in P. Guj: satim no kardo, i.e., "the chapter of staoim" (Av. "I praise-Yasna 26")-hence its name. In the Pāzand dīwān, or exordium, the worshipper says, "May my good thoughts, words, and deeds go to delight the fraztis of the holy." This is striking, because this mantra of the three virtues seems to have been employed by Karīr to ensure his immortalistic Himmelsreise der Seele; the three virtues ensure salvation, according to the prayer Padar-Humata; and here they—or their mātra—are linked explicitly to a food offering for the soul of the dead as bringing them benefit. The Satim is solemnized on the vakštron, on the anniversary (P. Guj. roi) of death, and in Fravardigan on the eve of the New Year. Fravardigan or Hamaspāstamdaya is now called by the Parsis Mokšid, from Indo mukšadām, "liberated soul" (i.e., deceased). In the morning watch (hāvan galb), Parsis offer milk or tea, fruit, flowers, and a sweet dish such as bakra (a hard cookie made of wheat flour, sugar, and grated almonds or raisins). In mid-morning, around 11:30 A.M., the second Satim features a dish of rice with curry or dal (boiled lentils). If the Satim falls on New Year's day, then this meal would consist of the Parsi delicacy dhandar pāzū, with rice, salad, a side dish, and a chapati. For the late-afternoon mokšadām (safras galb) Satam, a vegetable or meat dish without rice, water, and a chapati are offered. Priests recite the Satim no kardo, mentioning all members of the family, and then consume the meal. Assistants to the priests, or ladies called in P. Guj: goraits, cook the Satim food. None of it corresponds to the polyphalous cakes offered by the Magi of the Derveni papyrus, unless the bakrū of the Hāvan galb is a replacement for a cake like the drm. Gorants, too, prepare this; it is a round cake
of unleavened—wheat flour and water; with nine cuts (conica omphala?) used in the Buddhist, Aryan, and other high rituals. No bija can be solemnized without the dhāra, including that of Muktādr; and sometimes, the dhāra is used in the Satīm, as well.14

The Derveni papyrus mentions that innumerable cakes are offered; since the souls are likewise innumerable. This somewhat odd observation may derive from observation of a Fravardigēn Satīm. In the summer of 1985 I spent a few days with a Parsi Zoroastrian family in Navsari, Gujarat, India, where there is a great Araidahāt fire. My hosts showed me a silver vase used to contain flowers for the Muktādr Satīm, engraved with the name of a deceased (marhān) relative; during that commemoration of all the souls, they told me, the huge prayer-hall of the great fire temple is entirely filled with trays of such offerings, with labelled vases—so many, perhaps, as to seem innumerable, or at least to impress upon the philosophically-minded observer the infinity of the souls.15

Other details of the section on the Magi in the Derveni papyrus also may be explained with reference to Zoroastrianism. The rooster is the bird of Sīrō, who guides the soul on its journey (cf. the Parsi Zor. Sīrō na patru service after death); hence, perhaps, the omission of the offering, though of course Zoroastrians will never kill or eat a cock. The offerings of the Magi were a “penalty” or “debt” (poin); Zoroastrians make monetary or ritual restitution for sins deemed tām-pārta (Av., “subject to forfeiture of the body”), of which there are a vast number, described in the Yazdavīkt and other texts. The second part of the Avestan compound enters Armenian as a loan with extreme religious prominence. Christians ask our Father in Heaven... in the great prayer Christ Himself composed, to forgive our debts (e-parti, acc.pl.-Gr. opbeīmatas) as we forgive our debtors (partapan-ac’., dat.pl.). In Armenian, a sinless or righteous man—one who is saved—is an-parti,”without debt.” The first Armenian to print a book dressed himself, burnishly; Yakob mel-part, Jacob the Sinner (lit. “sin-indebted”). And so on.

The Pantheon has in mind salvation in the next world, as in this— and did not the Parthian prince, St. Gregory the Illuminator, explain to Tiridates the Great, that the Redeemer is “hekapet gegovaremem,” i.e., “shaharit” of Gārd:zandvar Elīte vardapet, in his History of the War of Varaz Māmikonean, mentions that a fifth-century Sassanian Magus was called hamlakēn, “(known) of all the Religion,” because he was versed in the amparul, biyokai, palantes, and pordanār schools (k’estk); E. Benveniste explained the first as “a treatment on penalties,” from Ofr. *hamparta-skaiša.*16 If this is correct, then precise knowledge of debts and the manner of their restitution, in this world and the next, will have been a
category of expertise of the ancient Iranian Magus on a par with mastery of Persian and Parthian regional lands. To conclude, the simplest explanation of the section on the Magi in the Derwani papyrus is that it is in a fairly detailed and abridged description—strongly flavored with Orphism—by not surprisingly, by a learned observer in Achaemenian Ionia of the Zoroastrian Satan service. If so, it is the oldest physical documentation of any rite of the Good Religion, in any language.

Notes
1. Probably the fire would have conveyed the contents of the scroll—the ethereal body, as it were—with its owner into the world to come, where, like the Tibetan or Egyptian books of the dead, it would be an essential guide and source of knowledge. A painting on a Greek amphora of c.325 B.C. shows an old man seated in a building—his tomb—holding a book roll; Orpheus stands beside him, playing a kithara. A scholion on Virgil cites an Orphic book, called The Lyre, which says souls need the kithara to ascend (West 1983, pp. 25 with pl. 1, p. 30). It may be that the painting shows how the soul after death needs its Orphic book of the dead to ascend with Orpheus.
2. See on the find of the scroll and the general contents and affiliations of the text West 1983, pp. 75-81; O’Donnell, SDS, p. 39; and Farnell, SDS, pp. 54-55.
4. For a concise explanation and defense of the term in a Greek context, see West 1983, pp. 5-6. I argued in “Kraft und Macht, a Shamanistic Concept of their Conflict,” Festschrift Ehsan Yarshater, that the paradigm of the “shaman’s Himmelsreise” is the best way to understand the ritual virtuosity the third-century Sassanian high priest used to discredit the “shamanic component” of Manichaeism. This shamanic component goes back in the beginnings of Zoroastrianism; and it remains also in the Iranian epic; as I have shown in “A Parthian Bluebird: Gau and its Ethics,” in the Festschrift for Nina G. Garsoian most recently. Resistance to the idea that there was an Iranian- and Zoroastrian- form of shamanism persists, however, on the wholly indefensible grounds that shamanism are “Turkic” or “primitive” or even practitioners of witchcraft. The ultimate sub-text of all this is the ideology of Atavism sophistication, philosophical sobriety, and, ultimately, supremacy, though, present-day opponents of the use of the term in an Iranian context may no longer be aware of themselves as the forerunners of their ancestry.
6. Kahn, SDS, p. 57, citing also Rohde, Guthrie and Nilsson.
7. West 1983, p. 17. The culture of the Greek cities on the northern coast of the Black Sea reflects a fusion of Hellenic and North Iranian elements - to be expected, when one considers that the Royal Edict of Herodotos (Paradise, cf. Avestan paradita, Neues, pzdad) lived "directly" to the north. Little terracottas of the Near-Eastern kind are
that: Miltonism has to come here from Persia some centuries before it reached the Roman Empire in full force. The later Byzantinistics of Dio Chrysostom resembles somewhat a Platonic work: the philosopher goes, for a walk; in the country, meets a handsome boy; gets lauched upon a discourse—but the boy looks like Milton, on a horseback, in sentences, with a Sylvian cape; and the dialogue introduces images from Iranian religion.

8. See Bartlett 1983; and now West 1997. Gone are the days when Astour’s masterpiece, *Hellennomosmos,* was a voice crying in the wilderness. During the intertestamental period, we witness a flood of Zoroastrian themes into the religion of Israel—increased interest in the problem of theology and the nature of the devil, the demon Amuratis, (i.e., *Av. anî vistas,* wrath); the demon *par excellence*; the bomb *helt'-var* in Georgian means “demon” generally, and Ezizik of Kolb calls Armenian demon-worshippers Am*urtâ *parati,* and stories such as Esther, Tobit and Daniel which belong to the genre of the Persian romances. It is not as though Jews before than had not thought about divine justice, or the problem of evil, or love stories. Persia gave an impetus to what had already existed: the emphasis remains permanent in Christianity, which was born when Persian prestige in Israel was at its zenith. In normative, Rabbinic Judaism, with roots in a tradition that had already been old before the Persians came, it all subsides.


10. West, SDFP, p. 87 and n. 3.

11. For refs., see Gref 1997, p. 26 f.

12. West, SDFP.

13. A set of Chinese tomb panels of the sixth century A.D., now in the Shumou Museum in Japan, portrays scenes from the Central Asian silk road, including a Zoroastrian rite which I explained as a depiction of the soul service solemnized on the fourth morning (Shabberum) after a person’s death. A priest in a zardš, or face-mask, is shown teaching the litany, and perhaps the offering-spices (Persi-Gujratic *shau)* to a blazing fire-chalice (P. Gaj. *qargan)*. There is a vase, for milk or wine; a tray of pomegranates and other foods; and a third vessel, perhaps containing sandwad. A dog waits expectantly for its portion of the offerings. See Russell 1997, pp. 17-19, and P.1.11.d. A poem addressed to the seventh-century Japanese emperor Yemmu, apparently written by a Zoroastrian woman named Dātā-gād, has been tentatively interpreted by Prof. Gilskö Ito as follows: “Even a blazing fire, / *mandūra*-shau/ (*mēn-veda*-do-khām)* / Snatches and wraps and puts in a bag / Do they not say so?/May the cloud looking / Like a ladder ascend higher / That is hanging over the north mountain range, / Passing the stars, / Reaching the highest heaven” (Ito 1994). He understood this as a description of the soul’s ascent to the Zoroastrian heaven. There was an influx of noble, educated Iranians into East Asia, at the time of the Muslim conquest of the Sassanian Empire, and great interest in things Iranian. The poem, if I read it rightly, might have
The Magi in the Deveni Papyrus


The purpose of this article is to examine once more a question of whether or not any memory of the Adharvans had been preserved in the early Sassanian period. The Middle Persian incantation *Khandgah Mevtser* (*Padeh* History of Ahdarvan Age of Tiran) is a little composition dating from the sixth century and containing some of the rules of Adharvan, both natural and religious, and the early days of Alexander I. Two of the social work is found from the *Khandgah* to be evidence from the opening sentences: "The following is written in the Ahdarvan and Ahdarvan age of Tiran," the introduction to the work inferred, that is, "since the death of Alexander the Roman, there was no priest, but the Empire of Persis, 240 Petty Kings (Kings of) 240 (Kings of) Alexander II as a result of the Ahdarvan age, 240 Petty Kings (Kings of) Alexander II as a result of the Ahdarvan age, 240 (Kings of) Paldas, Persis, and the surrounding regions were the most prominent. The story then recounts the rise of Adharvan whose father Sheta descended from Dick son of Diler, the vassal prince of Ahdarvan. As the rightful inheritor of the ancient Persian kings, Adharvan sought to restore their throne and empire. When translating this romance in 1879, Theodore Scheler commented in the translation "Alexander the Kushan" as follows:

I have no doubt that the Indians had not kept any memory of them even from Alexander. All Indian sources of him (Sabha, etchmiadzin, etc.) are derived from the Greek (Alexander) Roman. In his *Khandgah* and *Khandgah* in Paldas, Persis, and the surrounding regions he has neither the "the Kushans." Therefore, the name of Alexander has become treasure in the