

Was the Persian Goddess Anahita the Pre-Christian Virgin Mother of Mithra?

By D.M. Murdock

"The Persian counterpart of the great virginal-wanton-motherly-warrior goddess was Anahita."

Dr. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (137)

"The basic Zoroastrian belief in a virgin-born Savior of the world must have become widely known throughout the Near East in the Achaemenid period, i.e., from the 6th century B.C. onward, when almost all the eastern Mediterranean lands were under Persian rule; and it appears to have exerted some influence on Judeo-Christian thought."

Dr. Mary Boyce, "Astvat-Ereta: The Avestan name of the Saošyant, the Future Savior of Zoroastrianism"

"According to some sources, Mithra's partner and virgin mother is the angel-goddess Anahita...."

Dr. Payam Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief that Shaped the Christian World* (97)

Summary

This paper will provide evidence that the pre-Christian Persian, Armenian and Asian Minor goddess Anahita was considered both a virgin and a mother, at some point viewed as having given birth parthenogenetically to the Perso-Armenian god Mithra.

For evidence I draw upon ancient texts and traditions, often preceding the common era by centuries to millennia, as well as the opinions of credentialed modern authorities. The thesis presented here also demonstrates that certain motifs and traditions found within Christianity in reality predate that faith and possibly served as a source thereof.

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Introduction

The ancient Persian and Near Eastern goddess Anahita, also known as Anahid, Nahid or, in Greek, Anaitis, is of significant antiquity, dating back at least to the first millennium before the common era and enjoying "widespread popularity" around Asia Minor for many centuries. Indeed, Anahita has been called "the best known divinity of the Persians" in that region, such as by Dr. Albert de Jong:

There can be little doubt that in Asia Minor the best known divinity of the Persians was Anāhitā. She is, moreover, the only Iranian divinity whose cult gained widespread popularity in various regions of Asia Minor and who lent herself to Hellenisation and syncretistic alliances with other Graeco-Anatolian gods and goddesses....¹

While the Persian name "Anahita" may not have been applied to the goddess concept until 3,000 or so years ago, the divine feminine idea itself extends back much farther, such as the potential origin of the Egyptian goddess Neith some 5,000 or more years ago, as well as what are commonly accepted as "goddess figurines," including the Venus of Laussel, which dates to around 25,000 years ago.

Regarding the ancient goddess concept and Anahita, Dr. Claas Jouco Bleeker states:

On the Iranian plateaus also a mother-goddess of the well-known archaic type was venerated in prehistoric times. Female figurines have been found, apparently representing the goddess of fertility. This goddess presumably is the precursor of the great goddess Anāhitā, who is celebrated in the fifth Yasht. However, by her pronounced virginal nature Anāhitā shows a signature of her own. Her full name reads: Ardvi Sūrā Anāhitā, [which] means the moist, the strong, the undefiled. ...from this name it can be concluded that she was a river-goddess. In Western Iran she was mostly called Anāhitā.... Being [a] river-goddess, Anāhitā confers fecundity and prosperity. In the fifth Yasht, it is said in her honour that she prepares the seed in all male beings, that she makes the fruit grow in all female beings, that she alleviates childbirth...²

Bleeker goes on to explain that Anahita is clearly an intrusion into fanatically monotheistic Zoroastrianism, which probably reluctantly adopted the deity in order to incorporate her widespread followers, the result of her antiquity as a river goddess. In this regard, discussing the sacred ancient Persian prayer in honor of Anahita, the "Hymn to the Waters" or "Aban Yasht," as it is called in modern Persian or Farsi, Bleeker further remarks:

...the fifth Yasht tells [us] that Ahura Mazda rendered homage to Anāhitā and asked for her assistance in order to win Zarathustra as champion of the new faith. This proves that Anāhitā was a too strong and autochthonous figure to be eliminated. She must have been inserted in the religion of Zarathustra at an early age....³

The Yashts were composed in the Avestan language, and, while they are attributed to the "historical" Zoroaster, who may have lived sometime between the 18th to 10th centuries BCE, the "Younger Avestan" hymns such as that of Anahita evidently date to the Achaemenid Empire (559–330 BCE). This particular yasht contains a detailed depiction of Anahita's character by that time:

¹ de Jong, 268-9.

² Bleeker 1963, 98-9.

³ Bleeker 1963, 99.

A clear and nice description of Anāhitā is to be found in the fifth Yasht. This hymn praises her as a beautiful young lady, with a handsome and tall stature, high-born and of noble appearance. Her feet are clad in shining shoes with golden laces. She wears a dress of beaver-fur and a cloak richly embroidered with golden thread. Jewels embellish her beautiful neck. A golden head-gear with a hundred stars crowns her hair. She drives a carriage with four stallions created for her by Ahura Mazda; these horses are the wind, the rain, the snow and the hail. Her relation to Ahura Mazda is double-sided. On the one hand it is said that she originated from him. On the other side Ahura Mazda worships her... In conclusion one can say that Anāhitā is the goddess of fertility, of prosperity, of the "kingly glory" and of the victory in the struggle for the truth. It can be duly stated that she explicitly was the Divine Lady.⁴

In this same regard, Dr. Payam Nabarz states:

In Persian mythology, Anahita is the goddess of all the waters upon the earth and the source of the cosmic ocean; she drives a chariot pulled by four horses: wind, rain, cloud and sleet; her symbol is the eight-rayed star. She is regarded as the source of life... Before calling on Mithra (fiery sun), a prayer was offered to the sea goddess Anahita....⁵

In these descriptions of Anahita, we discover many solar motifs, including the references to "golden" items, as well as a starry crown and the quadriga chariot, with the four horses symbolizing weather, a solar creation in ancient mythology. The horses themselves are symbols of the sun, also denoting in other mythologies the four seasons, as well as the equinoxes and solstices. Another symbol of Anahita is the eight-rayed star, which is the same as a Buddhist dharma wheel, as well as representing the equinoxes, solstices and cross-quarter days. Moreover, both the goddess Ishtar and her alter ego the planet Venus were likewise represented in ancient times by the eight-rayed star or eight-spoked wheel, as we also see in Christian tradition.⁶

The Achaemenians

Although she is doubtlessly many centuries older, Anahita gained prominence within Zoroastrianism during the fourth century BCE, when the Persian Achaemenid king Artaxerxes/Ardeshir II elevated her cult in his kingdom.⁷ The intensity of Artaxerxes's reverence for Anahita is illustrated by her position and rank in the divine trinity:

...the devotion of the dynasty to Anāhitā is shown by the place Artaxerxes accords her in those of his inscriptions where her name appears directly after that of Ahuramazda and before great Mithra's.⁸

Anahita's popularity endured for centuries afterward, as her religion thrived in the Parthian (247 BCE–224 AD/CE) and Sasanian (224–651 AD/CE) Empires as well.⁹ Hence, there was continuous worship of this goddess for possibly 1,500 years.

⁴ Bleeker 1963, 98-101. For the full text of the Aban Yasht, see, e.g., James Darmester's translation in *The Zend-Avesta: The Sîrôzahs, Yasts and Nyâyis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883; or, William W. Malandra's *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

⁵ Nabarz, 97.

⁶ See, e.g., the "Ichthys" inscription from Ephesus, Turkey, in which the separate letters IXΘΥΣ are combined to create the wheel.

⁷ Bleeker 1963, 100.

⁸ Boyce 1982, 219.

⁹ Hansman, 240; "ANĀHĪD," www.iranica.com/articles/anahid

Goddess of Venus and the Moon

The earliest extant mention of Anahita is from the fifth century BCE, by the Greek historian Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.131), who discussed a Persian cult of a deity he compares to the Arabian goddess Alilat and the Assyrian goddess Mylitta. He then names this Persian goddess as "Mitra," which some have deemed an error, while others have theorized that Mithra was bigendered.¹⁰ Although he may have made a mistake, Herodotus's remark does show how closely Mithra was associated with Anahita centuries before the common era.

Herodotus and the Babylonian writer Berossus (3rd cent. BCE) both equate this Persian deity with Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love and procreation, while the bulk of the ancient reports identify her with the Greek virgin goddess Artemis.¹¹ Anahita is also identified with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, who is likewise equated with Aphrodite.¹² Like Aphrodite and others, Ishtar is identified with the planet Venus, the very name of which in Persian is *Anāhīd*¹³:

In Iran, the *yazata* Anāhitā seems to have absorbed many of the qualities of Ishtar; she is a goddess of fertility, and in Persian the planet Venus is called Nāhīd. Armenian Zoroastrians hailed Anahit as "the mother of all chastities." ...¹⁴

Regarding Anahita's depiction in her Avestan hymn, Dr. Bartel Leendert Waerden states: "It seems to me that the text of the Yasht is more easily understood if we identify Anāhitā with the planet Venus."¹⁵

Anahita is identified not only with Venus but also with the moon, a common development for goddesses. The evidence for the association of Anahita with the moon includes that in both "the Achaemenid and the Sasanian period, whenever there is a known reference to Anahita the symbol of the crescent seems also to be present."¹⁶

Regarding Anahita's lunar attributes, Dr. Gülru Necipoğlu remarks:

In the Avesta no mention is made of Anahita in the short *yasht* devoted to the moon, but there are certain similarities between the two deities. Anahita is the deity of water and a mother goddess, protector of mankind and responsible for the birth of human beings, the moon is the deity of the reproduction of animals, as well as responsible for the tides of the sea. The connection of the moon with the cult of the mother goddess may be even more deeply rooted in Near Eastern culture, and its manifestation in Christianity may be seen, for example, in the symbolism of the crescent in the iconography of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, together with her other attributes such as stars and the fountain of living water and her title *Stella Maris*.¹⁷

Thus, the moon has been associated with the Mother Goddess since antiquity, a motif also transferred to the Virgin Mary, the Christian version of the ancient parthenogenetic goddess. Like Anahita and other goddesses, Mary was also associated with water.

Demonstrating the commonality of ancient, syncretized mythical motifs and characters, in *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Dr. Leroy Campbell states:

¹⁰ See, e.g., de Jong, 107ff.

¹¹ de Jong, 269.

¹² de Jong, 270.

¹³ See, e.g., Steingass, 103.

¹⁴ Russell, 424-5.

¹⁵ Waerden, 193.

¹⁶ Necipoğlu, 70.

¹⁷ Necipoğlu, 70.

The association of the moon and bull was particularly Iranian. The fusion of the Moon goddess with that of the planet Venus-Aphrodite could easily have taken place in Syria and Anatolia, where the cults of Isis, Ishtar, Astarte, Cybele, Hekate and even Anahita exercised varying degrees of influence. The functions and characteristics of great divinities like these tended to overlap and gave rise to syncretism in identification. In the period when the mysteries of Mithra were in formation Isis was called the goddess of a thousand names, an illustration of the movements toward syncretistic monotheism.

The planet Venus, called by the ancient Sumarians [sic] Nanna and by the Babylonians Ishtar, was known to the Iranians as Anāhita and to the Greeks as Aphrodite. In the development of astrology this planet was said to have its exaltation or house in the sign of *Taurus*. The attribution of the Bull to Aphrodite therefore was due in large measure to planetary theology [i.e., *astrotheology*]. In ancient religious usage this sign marked the spring equinox, which was sooner or later regarded as the special period of Aphrodite.¹⁸

As Anahita is also identified with Venus, logically she too would be associated therefore with the vernal equinox, a fact that, when combined with the fact that Mithra is associated with the autumnal equinox,¹⁹ makes these two a strongly related pair. In this regard, Anahita is the "mother-goddess" in "her mountain heights" and the "spring-goddess of the year," the goddess who "caused the yearly rise of the Euphrates at the vernal equinox when the snows melt."²⁰

Cybele and Nana

Anahita is identified also with the "Mother of the Gods," a title often used to describe the popular Phrygian goddess Cybele, or vice versa, as the case may be.²¹ This title "Mother of the Gods" or Μητηρ (των) θεων in Greek dates back to the Mycenaean period at least, more than 3,000 years ago.²² Concerning Anahita and Cybele, Dr. John F. Hansman says:

...Classical authors attest the spread of the cult of Anaitis to Armenia, Cappadocia, Pontus and especially Lydia in Asia Minor. In Lydia Anahita-Anaitis was assimilated to Artemis Ephesia and to Cybele the great mother goddess of Anatolia...²³

Cybele is the virgin mother of her consort, Attis, as related by Bleeker, who says that the "archaic myth of Pessinus actually tells this: Attis is his own father, and Kybele is the virgin-mother."²⁴ Russell describes further the origin of the parthenogenetic creatrix or virgin mother, demonstrating the relationship of Cybele to Anahita:

A pagan goddess called the Queen of Heaven received in Israel in the seventh century B.C. a consecrated cake called in Hebrew Kawwān (Jeremiah 7:18, 44:19). It is she, or a goddess like her, who was later worshipped in the Hellenistic times as the Dea Syria. Patai identifies the Queen of Heaven with 'Anath, a goddess whose name is attested in ancient Israel. Her worship is well attested from Ugarit, where

¹⁸ Campbell, 72.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Boyce 1996, 172.

²⁰ Hewitt, 214.

²¹ In "The Ancient Mother of the Gods: A Missing Chapter in the History of Greek Religion," Noel Robertson evinces that the Mother of the Gods or Μητηρ (των) θεων is a very ancient goddess unto herself and that "Cybele" is one of her titles which, while popular with modern writers, is not as commonly found in antiquity. (Lane, 239-240)

²² Lane, 240.

²³ Hansman, 235.

²⁴ Bleeker 1963, 109.

she is connected at once with both fertility and chastity: she is "mother of nations" and "the virgin."...

In Western Iran and Anatolia, the goddess came to be known as Anahita or Anaitis, evidently absorbing the traits and legends, temple estates and rites of the Great Mother goddess of Anatolia, Cybele, whose worship seems to be as old as the archaeological record: a figurine from Chatal Hüyük depicts her as *potnia therōn*, "Lady of the Beasts." In Armenia, numerous terra-cotta figurines depict the goddess in the form of Isis *lactans*.²⁵

In the image he provides of the obese woman-goddess "Cybele" from the Turkish site of Çatal Hüyük, Russell dates the figurine to 6000 BCE.

The pre-Christian virgin-mother goddess motif can be found commonly throughout the Near East and elsewhere, as related by Bleeker:

There have always been religious people who did not conceive of the deity as the Lord or as the heavenly Father, but as the Great Mother or the Divine Lady. Not all female gods belong to this type.... Many times they may be counted in the category of the great Mother-Goddess. However, some of them are not only mothers, but at the same time virgins. Sometimes the virginal nature is even strongly or wholly predominant....

There is no danger of confounding the goddesses in question because all of them show individual features. Nevertheless they belong to the same category, i.e. that of the Divine Lady. She is an exalted goddess...Her nature is impenetrable. This is particularly manifest when she is called the Virgin-Mother. This term indicates the mystery of birth which she causes to take place. The heavenly Lord creates out of nothing. The Virgin-Mother brings forth without impregnation. Both occurrences are equally mysterious: the origin of the world and of life is a secret. The people of antiquity realized that woman is inscrutable by nature and virtually inaccessible. Even when she has become mother she remains virgin in a certain sense....²⁶

In a section in *The Rainbow* entitled, "The Virgin-Mother," Bleeker further writes:

The prehistoric figures of women occur in two forms, i.e. as a pregnant woman and as a slim young girl, a virgin. It is likely that they are amulets, but they can also be considered as forerunners of the Great Mother-Goddess who was so popular in antiquity. Sometimes this goddess is the virgin-mother: she is mother, because she bears new life, but she does not lose her virginity. She needs no partner to give birth. She creates by her own force and proves thereby that she is a divine being.²⁷

As we can see, the "partheno-creatix" or virgin-mother concept is ancient, dating to several thousand years prior to the common era and manifesting itself in many goddesses or epithets of the Divine Lady, such as Cybele in Anatolia. In addition, Cybele's son, Attis, has been identified with Mithra,²⁸ which would make of Anahita the latter's mother.

Although the Great Mother Goddess Cybele is said to be a virgin when she goes by the name "Nana,"²⁹ the word *nanā* itself means "mother" in Persian.³⁰ Naturally, we find Anahita

²⁵ Russell, 434-5.

²⁶ Bleeker 1963, 83-4. See also the works of Marguerite Rigoglioso, *The Cult of the Divine Birth in Ancient Greece and Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*.

²⁷ Bleeker 1975, 214-5.

²⁸ See, e.g., Lane, 109.

²⁹ Leeming (1998, 25): "Attis is the son of Cybele in her form as the virgin, Nana, who is impregnated by the divine force in the form of a pomegranate."

³⁰ Boyce 1982, 31.

intertwined with Nanaia or Nana, who is also a Babylonian and Elamite goddess.³¹ In this regard, Russell says "it is likely that some Zoroastrians at least worshipped Nana,"³² with whom Anahita is "closely associated."³³

Regarding Anahita and her connection to Nana, Russell further states:

The great goddess of ancient Armenia was Anahit, Av. Anahita, called Oksemayr, the Golden Mother, and Tikin, the Lady.... It is difficult to separate the cult of Anahit from that of Nanē [Nana] (who was worshipped also in Iranian lands, in Parthian times...), whose name, ultimately from Sumerian Inanna, "Lady of Heaven," in later ages must have been understood merely as a *Lallwort* ["nursery word"] for Mother.

Many mother-and-child terracotta figurines were found in Armenia, of the type elsewhere termed Isis lactans: they probably represent Nanē with Attis, the Anatolian dying and rising god. He was the Tammuz of the Semites, Aramaic-speaking residents of Armenia.... Zoroastrians probably called the dying and rising god Siyāvōš...³⁴

Like Attis, so too is the Sumero-Babylonian god Dumuzi/Tammuz the son of a virgin mother:

In the holy marriage Inanna is the sister, the bridge, or the wife of Tammuz. She can also function as his mother. Moreover, she is represented as a virgin. She is the Virgin-Mother, i.e. the goddess, who brings forth life spontaneously, out of herself.³⁵

We may thus expect to discover the same birth myth for Anahita as well, since she is identified with virgin-mother goddesses like Cybele-Nana and Inanna; hence, it would be logical to assert that Mithra was her virgin-born son.

Anahita, Immaculate Virgin and Mother of the Gods

As would be fitting for an incarnation of the virgin goddess, Anahita's very name means, "Spotless," "Clean," "Pure,"³⁶ "Unblemished,"³⁷ "Untainted" and "Immaculate." As Nabarz says, "Anahita, too, means virgin, literally not defiled."³⁸ Campbell calls Anahita the "great goddess of virgin purity,"³⁹ and Bleeker says, "In the Avestan religion she is the typical virgin."⁴⁰ Patai also states that Anahita is "unmistakably a virgin goddess, like her Sumerian, Akkadian and Canaanite counterparts."⁴¹

Regarding the virgin-mother motif and Anahita, Bleeker further remarks:

Though the accent falls on Athene's virginity, she was also conceived of as a motherly figure.

The same can be said of Anāhitā, the Persian goddess...⁴²

³¹ de Jong, 273.

³² Russell, 43-4.

³³ Russell, 119.

³⁴ Russell, 374.

³⁵ Bleeker 1963, 92.

³⁶ Boyce 1982, 29, 202.

³⁷ Russell, 144.

³⁸ Nabarz, 102.

³⁹ Campbell, 78.

⁴⁰ Bleeker 1963, 100.

⁴¹ Patai, 138.

⁴² Bleeker 1975, 215.

Like other deities, Anahita is not only virginal but also the goddess of motherhood; indeed, she too is essentially "mother of the gods":

The epithet..."Mother of the Gods" is not found in the old Armenian texts, but it suits Anahit well and may be ancient."⁴³

Anahita was also the "mother of all knowledge"⁴⁴ or "mother of all wisdom":

During the times of the Achaemenians (558-330 B.C.), Anahita was widely worshipped. She is the ancient Persian Great Mother... In Armenia, she was the Mother Goddess, known as the mother of all wisdom, the giver of life and the daughter of Ahura Mazda....⁴⁵

Badiozamani asserts that Mother Anahita's adoration was influential on the Mother Mary myth:

It has been recorded that the cult of Anahita was very popular in the Parthian period, and it was exported beyond the western frontiers of Iran. Anahita, exalted as the "Mother of the Lord," probably gave rise to the exaltation of Mary as "the Mother of God" and the naming of many churches after her.⁴⁶

Yet, for all her motherhood and procreation support, Anahit remains, pure, undefiled and virginal. These dichotomies come together in the epithet "mother of all chastities,"⁴⁷ a title that, once again, proves Anahita to have been perceived as *mother*.

In this regard, Dr. David Leeming adds:

Anahita was the Mother of Waters, a traditional spouse of the solar god whom she bore, loved, and swallowed up. She was identified with the Anatolian Great Goddess Ma. Mithra was naturally coupled with her...⁴⁸

Certainly, as "mother of the gods" Anahita would also be the mother of the god Mithra, her close companion. Moreover, Alexander the Great was named a "son of Nahid" or Anahita,⁴⁹ making it even more difficult to believe that Mithra was not likewise thus deemed.

Concerning Anahita and Mithra, one modern writer ("Mithraism and Christianity") asserts:

According to Persian mythology, Mithras was born of a virgin given the title "Mother of God."

The Parthian princes of Armenia were all priests of Mithras, and an entire district of this land was dedicated to the Virgin Mother Anahita. Many Mithraeums, or Mithraic temples, were built in Armenia, which remained one of the last strongholds of Mithraism. The largest near-eastern Mithraeum was built in western Persia at

⁴³ Russell, 144.

⁴⁴ Boyce, "ANĀHĪD," www.iranica.com/articles/anahid

⁴⁵ Turner, 50.

⁴⁶ Badiozamani, 97.

⁴⁷ Russell, 144.

⁴⁸ Leeming 1992, 198.

⁴⁹ Russell, 110.

Kangavar, dedicated to "Anahita, the Immaculate Virgin Mother of the Lord Mithras."⁵⁰

This latter contention is very interesting, as such an inscription if real and pre-Christian would represent concrete proof that Mithra was viewed in pre-Christian times as having been born of a the virgin mother Anahita.

Mithra's Mother?

To our knowledge at this time, Mithra was not openly depicted in the *Roman* cultus as having been birthed by a mortal woman or a goddess; hence, it is claimed that he was not "born of a virgin." As we have seen, however, a number of writers have asserted otherwise, including modern Persian, Armenian and other scholars who, from all the evidence previously provided, are apparently reflecting an ancient tradition from Near Eastern Mithraism. In this regard, Nabarz remarks:

Due to her popularity, another deity who retained a good deal of her importance in the new religion [of Zoroastrianism] was the water goddess Anahita, who is sometimes referred to as Mithra's virgin mother or as his partner.⁵¹

As another example, Badiozamani says that a "person" named "Mehr" or Mithra was "born of a virgin named Nahid Anahita ('immaculate')" and that "the worship of Mithra and Anahita, the virgin mother of Mithra, was well-known in the Achaemenian period [558-330 BCE]..."⁵² Likewise, Dr. Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi states: "Dans le mithraïsme, ainsi que le mazdéisme populaire, (A)Nāhīd, mère de Mithra/Mehr, est vierge"—"In Mithraism, as in popular Mazdaism, Anahid, the mother of Mithra, is a virgin."⁵³

Moreover, in the mythology of Asia Minor, Mithra is depicted as the son of Ahura Mazda or Ohrmazd,⁵⁴ representing another birth motif different from the rock-born scenario commonly found in, but not original to, later Roman Mithraism. This type of variation is precisely what we find with many myths worldwide developed over a period of thousands of years.

Regarding the different depictions of Mithra's birth, Dr. Maarten J. Vermaseren states:

...The scarce literary evidence as well as the abundant archaeological material give us different versions of the way in which Mithras came into the world, and it is hardly possible to reconcile the two.

In the Yasht 10, the hymn of the recent Avesta, in which Mithras is specially invoked, the Persian god of light appears resplendent in a golden colour on the top of the mountain *Hara bēřzaiti*, the present Elburz in Persia, from where he looks over the whole earth of the Aryan people.

This is not a description of a real birth, but this manifestation of the deity as the giver of light, pouring forth his largess every morning anew and, besides, the feminine name of the mountain were apt to lead to the conception of the birth of the god from a Mother-Goddess. Yet, the idea of Mithras as a son of Ahura-Mazda, the Knowing Lord, or as born naturally from a woman, though attested by some late

⁵⁰ This last contention concerning an inscription at Kangavar is cited elsewhere as coming from Moghdam, 37.

⁵¹ Nabarz, 4.

⁵² Badiozamani, 96.

⁵³ Amir-Moezzi, 78.

⁵⁴ Boettiger, 25.

Armenian writers, did not become traditional. Mithras' birth remained an obscure affair...⁵⁵

Although Vermaseren claims these concepts are irreconcilable, if we view them within the context of other myths and with an eye to solar mythology or what is called astrotheology, we *can* reconcile these various notions. In these paragraphs we find some interesting contentions concerning Mithra's birth and ancient mythology: To wit, Mithra is the sunlight streaming over the mountains at daybreak, dawn or sunrise, and this motif along with the feminine name of the mountain naturally gives the impression that, as was the case in other mythologies, the sun god was born of a goddess.

In consideration of the facts that the ancient "Mother of the gods" is also deemed "mountain Mother"⁵⁶ and that the name "Cybele" likewise means "rock" or "mountain,"⁵⁷ the perception of Mithra in this myth being born from a female is highly logical, especially if we factor in the motif of Anahita being the "mother goddess" in "her mountain heights."⁵⁸ In the rock-born scenario, then, we may have a depiction of the sun emanating between two mountains, as was represented in pictograms in remote antiquity.

The 'Rock-Born' and 'Mountain-Born'

Even if we ignore all the evidence of the pre-Christian parthenogenetic creatrix within Near Eastern Mithraism, we may find that the "rock-born" motif emphasized in imagery of the Roman period likewise represents a virgin birth, out of *matter*. The words "matter" or "material" are derived from the Latin *materia*, sharing the root *māter*, meaning "mother, source, origin." This etymological fact shows a perception in the Roman world that linked matter and mother, which also manifested itself in the "Mountain Mama" concept found elsewhere. Mithra's birth rock is also described as "world-stuff"⁵⁹ and the "World-Rock,"⁶⁰ whereas the earth has been perceived in many cultures as being female, such as the Greek goddess commonly known as Gaia. Thus, like Kore/Persephone, the rock-born or mountain-born Mithra is essentially generated from Mother Earth, who in other eras and cultures was perceived as *virginal*, as in "virgin rock."⁶¹

Comparing the rock birth with that of the virgin mother, Amir-Moezzi says:

...il y a donc analogie entre le rocher, symbole d'incorruptibilité, qui donne naissance au dieu iranien et la mère de celui-ci, Anāhīd, éternellement vierge et jeune.⁶²

...so there is analogy between the rock, a symbol of incorruptibility, giving birth to the Iranian god and the mother of that (same) one, Anahid, eternally virgin and young.

⁵⁵ Gerevich, 93.

⁵⁶ Lane, 239.

⁵⁷ Lane, 239.

⁵⁸ Hewitt, 214.

⁵⁹ Campbell, 364.

⁶⁰ Campbell, L., 380.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Rigoglioso 2010, 18ff: "...in Hesiodic theogony, Ge/Gaia, or the Earth Goddess, was also an autogenetically produced entity. According to this same tradition (*Theogony* 126-32), she had parthenogenetic capacity, as well, having borne starry Uranus, the god of the heavens, without a partner."

⁶² Amir-Moezzi, 79.

These various themes demonstrate an apparent parthenogenetic origin of Mithra in one sense or another.

The Zoroastrian Virgin-Born Savior

The concept of a virgin-born savior was already well known in Zoroastrian religion, centuries before the common era, as Zoroaster himself was "said to have had a miraculous birth: his mother, Dughdova, was a virgin who conceived him after being visited by a shaft of light."⁶³

Moreover, the future savior of Zoroastrianism is called the Saoshyant, Sōšyant or Saošyant, about whom Boyce says:

...gradually it came to be believed that he would be born of the seed of Zoroaster himself, miraculously preserved at the bottom of a lake... it is held [that] a virgin will bathe in this lake and become with child, and will bear a son, the Saošyant... His virgin mother too received a name..."She who brings fulfillment to the father"...

...It seems probable that the beliefs about the Saošyant's miraculous conception evolved in that region [Hāmūn lake in southeastern Iran], during the centuries which passed between the lifetime of Zoroaster (perhaps between 1400 and 1200 B.C.), and the adoption of his faith in western Iran (perhaps in the late 7th century B.C.).⁶⁴

In the same article, Boyce also states that this motif was "widely known throughout the Near East in the Achaemenid period."

If Zoroastrians had been expecting for centuries one or more virgin-born saviors, and Mithra has been considered by not a few to be a "savior" figure,⁶⁵ logic dictates that at some point in the history of his mythological development Mithra was perceived as this virgin-born savior, and Anahita would equally logically be the choice for his virgin mother.

The Epic of Sasun

The Zoroastrian virgin-birth story was so well known that it apparently made it into third cycle of the Armenian national epic, titled *David of Sasun* (or *Sassoun*, etc.), about which Dr. Martin Schwartz says:

Sanasar, father of the Great Mher [Mithra], and Sanasar's twin brother Baltasar, are born of a virgin [Lusik] who becomes pregnant from the water of the "Milky Fountain of Immortality"... Combining these data with the tradition found in Elišē [Vardapet] that Mithra was born of God through a human mother..., one may suggest a transference of the miraculous birth of the Sōšyants to Mithra. In some accounts of the epic the "Milky Fountain" gushes forth from a great rock; this may be due to a conflation of the lake engenderment and the rock birth legends.⁶⁶

This epic is estimated to be well over 1,000 years old, evidently incorporating elements much older, such as the Zoroastrian tradition of a virgin birth, the origin of which Boyce dates to possibly between 1,400 and 600 years ago BCE and which in and of itself proves the

⁶³ Nabarz, 2. See also Turner (524), regarding "Zoroaster": "Conceived by a ray of light that entered his mother's bosom, he was born of a virgin birth."

⁶⁴ Boyce, "Astvat-Ereta," www.iranica.com/articles/astvat-ereta-savior

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Campbell (263), who has a section titled, "Mithra Invictus, A Final Savior." See also Duchesne-Guillemin in "The Religion of Ancient Iran," where he refers to "the role of Mithra as saviour or mediator in the Mysteries..." (Bleeker 1988, 367)

⁶⁶ Hinnells, 418.

existence of this motif in pre- or non-Christian religion and mythology. In discussing the "principal sacred place of the Armenian folk epic of Sasun," Dr. Christine Allison, et al., say that the epic's "roots are extremely ancient."⁶⁷ Moreover, this conflated account appears to reconcile again the virgin-mother and rock-born motifs.

The History of Vartan

The legend of Mithra being born of a female shows up also in the works of Armenian writers towards the end of the Sasanian era in Persia, after Armenia had been significantly Christianized. In the *History of Vartan*, the Armenian historian Elišē or Elisaëus Vardapet or Vardabed (5th cent. AD/CE?) recorded Armenian Christian bishops as retorting the following to Mihr-Nerseh, the "perfidious and cruel"⁶⁸ minister of Persian king Yazdegerd II (fl. 437-458 AD/CE), evidently in response to the official's revulsion towards Christian doctrine:

.. you said that God was born of a woman; [yet] you do not have to feel horror or contempt. Indeed Ormizd and Ahriman were born of a father and not a mother; if you think about it, you cannot accept that. There is even something more unusual: the god Mihr [Mithra] born of a woman, as if anyone could have intercourse with his own mother.⁶⁹

Concerning this last sentence, Cumont notes that the translator Karabagy Garabed appears to have rendered the original better, when he writes:

Votre dieu Miher est non seulement né d'une femme mais ce qui est bien autrement ridicule il est né d'un commerce incestueux avec sa propre mère.⁷⁰

Your god Miher is not only born of a woman but, what is far more ridiculous, he is born of an incestuous intercourse with his own mother.

In this polemic, the Christians are apparently assailing as unsustainable the belief that the Zoroastrian God and Devil were born of a male, rather than a female, as is natural. They are likewise ridiculing the belief that Mithra's consort was also his mother. This consort or female companion was Anahita, who is thus identified also as his mother, reflecting an old mythical motif that the bishops certainly did not just fabricate on the spot at that time. Indeed, as we have seen from the stories of Inanna and Tammuz or Cybele and Attis, the virgin-mother consort is likewise a widespread theme that predated the common era by centuries.

Vardapet also says:

Un de vos plus anciens sages a dit que le dieu Mihr naquit d'une mère, laquelle était de race humaine; il n'en est pas moins roi, fils de Dieu et allié vaillant des sept dieux.⁷¹

One of your most ancient sages said that the god Mihr [Mithra] was born of a mother, who was of the human race; he is nonetheless king, son of God and valiant ally of the seven gods.

⁶⁷ Allison, 159.

⁶⁸ Langlois, 278.

⁶⁹ Cumont 1896, 5. The French translation of the original Armenian text is: "...tu as dit que Dieu était né d'une femme; tu ne dois en éprouver ni horreur, ni mépris. En effet Ormizd et Arimane naquirent d'un père et non d'une mère; si tu y réfléchis, tu ne peux accepter cela. Il est encore une chose plus singulière, le dieu Mihr naissant d'une femme, comme si quelqu'un pouvait avoir commerce avec sa propre mère."

⁷⁰ Cumont 1896, 5.

⁷¹ Langlois, 194.

The fact that this information comes from an Armenian is revealing, because it appears to be more of an old *Armenian*, rather than Roman or Persian, tradition that Mithra was born of the virgin mother goddess Anahita. Concerning the Armenian preference for Anahita, Russell relates:

In a famous passage, Strabo asserts that the Medes and Armenians honor the same sacred rites (*hiera*) as the Persians; but the Armenians in particular honor those of Anaitis...⁷²

Another Armenian writer of the fifth century AD/CE, Eznik or Eznig of Golp, relates the tale of the evil Zoroastrian god, Ahriman, criticizing the good god Ahura Mazda/Ormuzd:

...if he were wise, he would go unto his mother, and the Sun [Mihir] would be born (*lit.* would become) as his son; and he would have intercourse with his sister, and the Moon would be born.⁷³

Regarding the Zoroastrians of his day, Eznik remarks:

They say another thing, which is incredible, [namely that] at the time of the death of Ormazd, he threw his sperm into a source, and afterwards a virgin must give birth from this source. This virgin must give birth to a child who overcomes innumerable troops of Ahriman, and two other [children] who will be produced in the same way will fight the armies and exterminate them.⁷⁴

These various traditions may be summarized thus, as by Nabarz, when he relates:

According to the Zoroastrian tradition..., Mithra the Savior was born in 272 B.C.E. His birth and that of the Roman Mithras are both at the winter solstice. The Persian Mithra was born of the immaculate virgin Mother Goddess Anahita... Anahita (Anahid) was said to have conceived the Savior from the seed of Zoroaster, which, legend says, is preserved in the waters of Lake Hamun in Sistan, Iran. This birth took place in a cave or grotto, where shepherds attended him and presented him with gifts at the winter solstice. Mithra lived for sixty-four years and then ascended to heaven in 208 B.C.E.⁷⁵

Although it may have been believed in antiquity, the notion that Mithra had been a real person living in the third century BCE is obviously unsustainable, particularly in consideration of the fact of his being a Persian remake of the Vedic god Mitra and with his presence in the literary and archaeological record of the Achaemenian period.

Mitra, Born of the Virgin Aditi

Anahita is also known as Anahid and Anahiti, which sound similar to Aditi, mother of Mithra's Vedic predecessor, Mitra. Like her Babylonian, Egyptian and Anatolian counterparts, Aditi is the "mother of the gods" or *Deva-Matri*.⁷⁶ Yet, she is also the inviolable or *virgin* dawn, who gives birth to the sun god.

In the Indian text the Rig Veda (1.49), dating to possibly 3,000 to 3,700 years ago, the dawn goddess is Ushas, about whom Dr. Carl Olson says:

...Usas...is identified with the dawn. This virgin daughter of heaven is depicted as a young maiden who is pulled by a hundred chariots (RV 1.48). When she arrives each

⁷² Russell, 438.

⁷³ Zaehner, 438.

⁷⁴ Langlois, 381.

⁷⁵ Nabarz, 19.

⁷⁶ Turner, 15.

morning she drives away darkness (RV 6.64). She is also connected to the cosmic law (*ṛta*)...and like Aditi she is compared to a cow and called mother of cows (RV 3.58).⁷⁷

Thus, Ushas the dawn is both a virgin and a mother. From Dr. John Muir we discover further:

In R.V. i. 113, 19, Ushas (the dawn) is styled "the mother of the gods, and the manifestation of Aditi"; or, as Sâyana explains, the rival of Aditi, from her appearing to call all the gods into existence when they are worshipped in the morning, as Aditi really gave them birth. Compare i. 115, I.⁷⁸

Indologist Dr. Alain Daniélou says, "Dawn is the visage of the Primordial-Vastness (Aditi) (*Rg Veda* 1.15.3; 8.90.16; 10.11.1)."⁷⁹ Dawn is a manifestation of Aditi, who is likewise the "mother of the gods," including the Adityas, deemed "solar gods." As Dr. Wendy O'Flaherty states, "The sun is one of the children of Aditi (cf. 10.72), a group of solar gods called Adityas."⁸⁰ Mitra is one of the original Adityas, the "son of the self-formed goddess Aditi,"⁸¹ as well as the "guardian of day"⁸² and "friendly" aspect of the sun. Yet, Aditi is also the "Celestial Virgin,"⁸³ once again demonstrating the ancient virgin-mother myth.

Anahita has several points in common with the dawn goddess, not the least of which is that they both ride chariots drawn by horses, which is also a major attribute of a solar deity. That Anahita was likewise associated with the dawn is evident from the Aban Yasht (16.62), in which the goddess is invoked at dawn,⁸⁴ the Avestan word for which is *ushanghem*, like Ushas, the Vedic dawn goddess.

In this same regard, Mithra is the light—sunlight—streaming over the mountains at sunrise or dawn. He is also the sun itself, which is traditionally said to be the son of the goddess, whether the dawn, earth, moon, Venus or Virgo, etc.

Macho Mithraism

With all the evidence combined, it appears that the Persian Mithra did indeed possess the virgin-mother attribute, which seems to have been lost or deliberately severed in the all-male Roman Mithraism. As Nabarz remarks, "Although present in the Persian worship, Anahita and other goddesses are by and large absent from the Roman form of Mithraism."⁸⁵

Yet, the Mithraists could not stamp out all vestiges of the highly popular goddess:

Various female divinities were found [within Mithraism], especially in the Mithraea of Sidon... There were dedications to the Matronae and to the Goddesses of the crossroads...in the Friedburg Mithraeum...and there was a relief of Epona seated between her two horses in the First Heddernheim Mithraeum... The significance of

⁷⁷ Olson, 252.

⁷⁸ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1.64.

⁷⁹ Daniélou, 114. The French scholar also states: "Krsna being an incarnation of Visnu, his mother, Devaki, is a manifestation of Aditi."

⁸⁰ O'Flaherty, 190.

⁸¹ Turner, 325.

⁸² Turner, 15.

⁸³ Turner, 15.

⁸⁴ Malandra, 124.

⁸⁵ Nabarz, 12.

these multiple divinities may or may not be connected with that of the Mithraic Dea triformis...⁸⁶

There may likewise be vestiges of Anahita in Roman Mithraism as well. In this regard, Necipoğlu describes Zoroastrian symbolism:

On the tomb of Artaxerxes II or III, to the right of Ahura Mazda...is the bas relief of a crescent cradling a sphere.... In the case of this relief it seems that the sphere represents Mithra and the crescent Anahita.⁸⁷

These remarks remind one of the common Mithraic imagery in which the sun and moon are represented as flanking the figure of Mithras, who himself is identified with the sun. While it is commonly assumed to connote Selene or Luna, which are simply the Greek and Latin terms for the moon and the lunar goddess, the Roman Mithraic symbol of the moon could also represent Anahita. It may well be, therefore, that the moon in this imagery continued to symbolize Anahita in Roman Mithraism, as it did in the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian Empire at least up to the 3rd century AD/CE, but that this knowledge was a "mystery" or was otherwise hidden or lost in the massive destruction that followed.

Conclusion

Although it does not seem to be spelled out in any extant texts or inscriptions concerning *Roman* Mithraism, the tradition of Mithra being born of Anahita appears to be old, based on the relationships of the deities to whom they are compared, such as Nana and Attis or Ishtar and Tammuz. The claim that Mithra was perceived as having been born from Anahita may have been one of the ancient mysteries, rarely recorded and largely in places such as the cities in which the Anahita temples have long since been nearly completely destroyed, including in several parts of the Near East such as Iran and especially Armenia.

Indeed, this contention of Anahita as the virgin mother of Mithra seems to emanate mostly from Armenian Mithraism, as opposed to the Persian, but it is evidently influenced by Anatolian and Mediterranean religion as well. This assertion is understandable in consideration of the fact that the parthenogenetic creatrix or virgin-mother goddess concept goes back thousands of years before the common era throughout this very region.

In consideration of the widespread and enduring pre-Christian mythical motif of parthenogenesis, including its presence in the Vedic Mitra myth and in Zoroastrian religion along with its appearance in the Armenian national epic, as well as Mithra's "birth" from a female mountain and the mention of Mithra's mother many centuries later—a tradition which surely was not made up whole cloth at that time—we possess every good reason to conclude that in antiquity, in certain areas such as Armenia, Mithra was perceived to have been born of a virgin mother, the pure and undefiled goddess Anahita.

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⁸⁶ Campbell, 377.

⁸⁷ Necipoğlu, 68.

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