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## The Deity of Mithra/Mehr and Its Relationship with Sasanian Zoroastrianism: A Look at Some Seals with the Image of Mithrah/Mehr

Shahsavari, M.<sup>1</sup>; Mousavi Kouhpar, S. M.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanity, University of Jiroft, Jiroft, Iran (Corresponding Author).

**Email:** shahsavar2891@gmail.com

2. Professor Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanity, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

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### Abstract

The role and position of the deity of Mithra/Mehr in Zoroastrianism or the official Zoroastrian religion of the Sassanian era, as well as its relationship with Roman Mithraism, has always been ambiguous and the subject for a great deal of debate and discussion. This deity (Izad) was one of the most important and popular deities (Izadān) of the Sassanian era, but despite this, there are not many material works related to this deity. In the excavations of Ak-Depe in the south of Turkmenistan, a collection of Sassanian bullae was found which the excavator assigned one of them to the deity of Mithra. According to the inscription of this bulla, it belongs to a Magi, so it becomes more important because of its direct connection with the Zoroastrian. The motif of this bullae, which is not very clear, probably shows a person riding in a chariot carried by two horses. In this article, the deity Mithra has been considered from a different view and while discussing the above-mentioned bullae, other cultural materials such as architectural evidence and pictorial evidence attributed to this deity have been analyzed. This research has used the iconography approach. This essay has shown that: a) the imprinted picture belongs to the deity of Mithra; b) the worship of Mithra was part of the Zoroastrian religion in the Sassanian period and was not considered as a separate religion or sect. And c) There can be no further connection between Roman Mithraism and the worship of Mehr or Mithra in Iran, except for general similarities.

**Keywords:** Mithra, Zoroastrianism, Sassanian seals, Mithraism.

## Introduction

Apart from Mehr Yasht<sup>1</sup> and the inscriptions of Achaemenid Ardashir II in Susa A2Sa-d, Hamadan A<sup>2</sup>Ha-b and Ardashir III in Persepolis A<sup>3</sup>Pa, there is no other written document related to the Mithra belonging to the pre-Sasanian era<sup>2</sup> and these documents are only indicative. During the Sassanian era, in Bundahishn and other Pahlavi writings, there are references to this deity that do not go beyond the name. This is why “researching about it is not easy. After being worshiped and praised for thousands of years, this Avesta and Vedic deity is no longer a simple incarnation but has become a powerful deity with a multitude of manifestations” (Boyce, 2007: 48).

As a result, Mithra is both the deity of covenant<sup>3</sup> and the deity of war (Boyce, 2007: 51. Malandra, 2005) and the deity of the sun (Pourshariati, 2008: 356). To all of these, Boyce added several other things: The guardian of all aspects of Asha<sup>4</sup>, the protector of the act of sacrifice, the judge<sup>5</sup>, the punisher of covenant breakers<sup>6</sup> (Boyce, 2010: 48), the watcher (Hinnells, 2010: 74) and even the deity of fire (Lydus, 2017: 84).

To show the unknown extent of Mithra and the very small amount of our knowledge about him, as an example, a short discussion about one of his most important vocations is presented, which is based on his being one with the sun. Perhaps, the main reason for the idea that these two are the same is to refer to some Greek sources; otherwise, such an attribution is not seen in any of the Iranian sources (see: Pourdavoud, 1929: 307 and 407); however, in the meantime, Count Curtis (Curtis, 1971:281) has brought Mithra and the sun separately<sup>7</sup>. The most important Greek historians who pointed out that these two deities are one are Xenophon (1997: 401), related to the Achaemenid period and Strabo in the middle of the Parthian period. Strabo also equated Mithra with Helios in Geography, Book 15, Part III (1932:175)<sup>8</sup>. According to Boyce (2006: 46), in order to counter the Akadian deity of Shamash, the magus had created Mithra, who was very similar to him in the first millennium BC. Although it is clearly mentioned in Bundahishn that “Mehr has the duty of the world’s judgment towards goodness... and every day until noon<sup>9</sup> it is like this with the sun” (Franbakh Dādagī, 2016: 113). On the other hand, the sun is the deity of separation and has a separate Yasht (Khorshid Yasht, 2006; and Khurshid Niayesh in Khurde Avesta, 2015); but, Pourshariati (2008: 356) is inclined to identify the two as one and considers this event to be a late phenomenon related to the Parthian and Sasanian times. After paying attention to the related position of sun and the Sun Deity based on Christian sources and listing

some of the actions that are accepted as valid in Mehr prayer, Christensen (1994: 168) also wrote: "In fact, if the magus of the Sassanid era worshipped the sun they worship the Mehr, and this Mehr is the same Mithra that was mentioned in the ancient Yashts, and it is the one that the Babylonians equated with Shams, their Sun Deity. With all these contradictory statements, it is difficult to accept the sameness of Mithra and the sun, and it does not seem that this happened in any period (Salimi, 2014: 333); Most likely, the root of this identification should be found in Vedic thoughts and Brahman literature; because in some Vedic texts, Mithra is considered the same as the sun and has the nature of the sun (Dani, 2016: 121).

It seems that Mithra had a high position and great importance in Iranian beliefs, and according to Shenkar, he was "perhaps the most popular deity in the Sasanian period" (Shenkar, 2014: 103). Bahar has explained how the deity of Mehr - who is not named in Gahan<sup>10</sup>- gained strength during the Achaemenid period of Ardashir II and during the Parthian period and turned it into one of the most powerful deities, albeit in the shadow of Hormazd (Bahar, 1998: 174-181).

The position of this deity in the section 1, paragraph 1 of Mehr Yasht is very long, as it is equal to Ahura Mazda himself: "Know that when I gave existence to Mithra of Wide Pastures, I created him in the merit of praise and prayer to me, Ahura Mazda" (Mehr Yasht, 2006: 353). It is probably for this reason that he is one of the three deities, along with Ahuramazda and Anahita<sup>11</sup> among the many deities of Zoroastrianism who have been depicted (Ghaderi, 2012: 184)<sup>12</sup>.

One of the most important issues regarding this deity is his contribution and role, or more correctly, the relation of him with official Zoroastrianism. The official religion<sup>13</sup>, or orthodox religion, is a religion approved by the Zoroastrian clergy of the Sasanian era although the quality of this religion is not very clear and it is the subject of many disputes (Frye, 2012: 500; Shaked, 2013: 137)<sup>14</sup>. In order to enter into this discussion and to know the deity of Mithra in general, here are several seals attributed to this deity in addition to the texts and prominent paintings, some of which have been introduced and discussed so far. These seals do not provide much information but they raise important issues that are extremely significant in Iranian studies. One of the most important of these is a seal - a seal impression on a bullae- which was obtained from Ak-Depe, Turkmenistan and is very important due to its inscription. In this article, an attempt was made to look at the concept of Mithra and its place in Zoroastrianism from

another angle. Of course, this does not mean that it is possible to answer all the questions raised in this article only by referring to this one work of the seal; but, this seal is considered as a key to re-enter this very important discussion.

## Methodology

In order to achieve the goals of this article, the method of iconology - iconography - was considered, which required three stages for interpretation, including pre-iconography description, which examines each of the details of the motifs, iconography analysis, and iconology analysis (Mousavi Kouhpar, 2004: 19; Abdi, 2011: 49-32-33); iconography analysis to get to know the content of the work through written sources (Abdi, 2011: 54) so that “the result of the work is not worthless and invalid like fictional stories” (Flannery and Marcus, 2009: 111); and iconology or iconographic interpretation, aiming at identifying hidden symbolic values in works of art (Abdi, 2011: 33). This analysis was done in the cultural, religious, and artistic context of Iran, especially Eastern Iran (Shenkar, 2014: 4). Because the seal in this article belongs to this section. Eastern Iran refers to the areas located in the eastern part of present-day Iran, including Central Asia, Afghanistan and western Pakistan.

## Seals and seal impression attributed to Mithra

Dealing with the seals attributed to Mithra, the seal obtained from the AK-Depe area will be examined more closely in this section. So far, four seals attributed to this deity have been introduced, and the AK-Depe seal is the fifth example of them:

A seal held in the British Museum (Fig. 1: 1) shows a standing man with a semicircular halo, with a ray, circling his head - albeit at a distance from the head - holding something in each hand and standing on or inside a trapezoidal object, which Gignoux and Gyselen considered it to be a bench and Callieri suggested it to be a chariot (Callieri, 2011: 58); but, it seems the latter is more correct because there are circles like wheels under it and from its two ends, the person inside is completely seen. On the body of this round-shaped vehicle and in the middle of it, a lion head is engraved. On this seal, which has no inscription, there are two ribbon-like patterns outside the halo. In the second seal (Fig. 1: 2), a man is standing on a ridge and has something in both his hands [in front of him is another person standing]. The face of the standing man on the rock is shown in a



Fig. 1: Seals attributed to Deity of Mehr (Callieri, 2010: 58) ►

three-faced form and a circular halo with spaced rays is placed around his head with two ribbons fluttering on the person's shoulders within the halo. This seal also has no inscription. On the third seal (Fig. 1: 3), which is kept in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, there is a man's torso, without a beard, shaped from the front, surrounded by a semi-circular halo with a ray, spaced from his head, and at the bottom of it, two winged horses standing on two legs are facing both sides. This seal, which does not have a ribbon, has an inscription from which the name of Mithra<sup>15</sup> can be found. The fourth seal (Fig. 1: 4), which is kept in the National Library of Paris, is a full-faced bust without the afore-mentioned aura with rays attached to the hat. His hair is shown in two piles under the hat and near the ears. This seal is very important because of its inscription, which Gignoux called "Deity of Mithra" (Callieri, 2010: 58). The person depicted on this seal also has no ribbons.

The seal impression mentioned in this article (Fig. 1:5) is one of the three seal impressions on a bullae, which was obtained from the ancient site of AK-Depe, located in Kaahkha<sup>16</sup> [Kaka] district, Akhal Province in the southern Turkmenistan. This site was explored in 1963-68 by E. J. Gubaev. With an area of about 9000 square meters, AK-Depe is located in the northern part of an ancient settlement with an area of about 40 hectares. In the center of this area, there is a small hill which was probably

the remaining of a fire temple that belongs to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Gubaev et al, 1993: 71). About 100 bullae have been obtained from this place but only 39 of them have been introduced. There is no information about the fate of the rest of these works (Ibid:).

According to its inscription, the seal of interest belongs to a magus who had the profession of a scribe at the same time. This work, which can be seen on two bullae in this collection (Gubaev et al, 1996, pl. XIV. 1.3 & pl. XI. 9), is of prominent importance in terms of the pattern, inscription, and the clarity of the exploration site that happened during the archeological excavations. The inscription on this seal indicates that this work belongs to a magus, whose father's name "Frayen"<sup>17</sup> can just be read, and his own name is confused. The inscription is as follows: "scribe and magus, (son of) Frayen". About this seal pattern, its explorer stated that: "Considering the rays around his head, who is riding a chariot, it is difficult to doubt his belonging to the deities. This pattern is very similar to the famous seal of Mithra's chariot, which is in the Berlin collection. His father's name is common in Sasanian seal inscriptions" and then, described its image as follows: "Mithra is riding a chariot drawn by two horses"<sup>18</sup> (Ibid: 56). Although this pattern is not the only one in Sasanian seals and Callieri (2011: 58-58) and Grenet (2006) have studied the relief images of two other similar seals while introducing images and icons attributed to the Mehr Deity, including images on coins<sup>19</sup> and wall paintings, it is unique since it has an inscription that indicates its belonging to the magus and priests, which is very important in the Zoroastrian studies.

Apart from the introduction of this seal by the explorer, it has been discussed only once despite its great importance (Shenkar, 2014: 106). This seal image has a lower quality than the previous four seals in every aspect and the image on it is not very clear. It seems that a person is depicted from the front but it is not clear whether what is seen is only his head or his head and torso. Because, it is possible that the rectangular shape under the head is a part of a chariot that has two wheel-like objects below. If these two connected circles can be called a wheel, both of the aforementioned situations can be considered correct. But, the authors believe that this is a torso placed on a wheel. In addition to two wheels, two animals like horses on both sides, engraved in a vertical inclined state because of the lack of space, strengthen the existence of this chariot. The details of the face are not clear and the face is carved in the shape of a semi-oval, which leads to an almond-shaped hat at the top. The brim of the hat is engraved with

sharp point frills, which gives it a haloed appearance - or without a halo with rays attached to the hat. In the explorer's report, it is not mentioned that the reason for this erasure is wear and tear, or that it has been in this state since the beginning of the seal. In both cases, the proportion is not observed and the final shape is very abnormal; however, looking at the evidence of iconology, as mentioned earlier, the researcher has no doubt in attributing it to the Mithra.

## Discussion

During the Sassanid era, the Deity of Mehr was highly praised by all Iranian classes (Bahar, 2008: 173).<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, from one hand, in Bundahishn, Izad Mehr is the fourteenth heavenly creation of Hormozd (Franbakh Dādagī, 2016: 37), which doesn't seem to be at a very high position; on the other hand, the name of Mithra or Mehr<sup>21</sup> can be found in many Zoroastrian names and even in the names of the magus and priests, such as Mehr Ador, Mehr Ormazd, Mehرداد, Mehrgashnasab, Ador Mehr, and etc. which probably shows the popularity and importance of this deity. In this section, two questions are raised and an attempt is made to discuss Mithra during the Sasanian and Zoroastrian eras while addressing them: 1) Does the seal pattern in question belong to the Mithra as believed by its explorer? 2) If this attribution is confirmed, what does it mean that this seal belongs to a Zoroastrian magus?

In order to address the first question, we must refer to the archaeological evidence, including reliefs, seals, architectural work, and etc.

A) Architectural evidence: In his investigation of the monuments inside the Plateau of Iran, called Mehr Kadeh (i.e. house of Mehr) by some Iranian researchers, or the temples attributed to the Deity of Mehr in Iran, Mehdi Rahbar challenged and rejected their being Mehrabeh, except for two cases in Borazjan's works<sup>22</sup> (Rahbar, 2016: 28-41). Due to the lack of sufficient evidence, the authors doubt the authenticity of Borazjan's works being Mehri and emphasize that if the explorer's opinion is accepted, these structures should be considered related to the Roman Mithraism, not the worship of Mehr in Iranian beliefs. Of course, accepting this opinion is also a bigger challenge because no evidence of Roman Mithraism has been found in the borders of Iran so far - at least in the current territory<sup>23</sup>. In the Zoroastrian literature, there is a term that is worthy of reflection: Dar Mehr or Dar-e-Mehr<sup>24</sup>. At first glance, it seems that this term - which cannot be commented on the age - is related to the Deity of Mehr; but, it does not

actually help to clarify the issue. Because, it seems that Dar Mehr or Dar-e-Mehr was the name of other Zoroastrian fire temples (Pourdavoud, 1929: 392; Frye, 2006: 252; Boyce, 2007: 148). In fact, according to Boyce, the prayers and worships that were performed in the fire temples were all under the protection of this deity (Boyce, 2007: 148)<sup>25</sup>. Without introducing a specific place or structure, Pourshariati considered Dar Mehr to be a place where the oath-taking ceremony took place in the presence of Mithra and Rashnu (Pourshariati, 2008: 357)<sup>26</sup>. In the writings of Zoroastrians, many Dar Mehr have been mentioned; but, in all of them (e.g. Dar Mehri of Kerman<sup>27</sup>: Shahmardan, 1981: 405-406. Oshidari, 2001: 55-56), the fire temple is meant, and its connection with the Deity of Mehr and its ritual of worship or prayer is unclear. Finally, despite the fact that Bahar considers Dar Mehr means to be Mehri shrines and mentions Barzin Mehr<sup>28</sup> Fire Temple, the central fire temple of the peasants in connection with the blessing of this deity (Bahar, 2011: 69-70), as a proof of his claim, it seems that these Dar or Mehri temples are nothing but fire temples. Also, some believes that “the common word for a fire temple in pre-Christian Armenia is Mehean, which is derived from the old Iranian Mithrayana and was built until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD” (Daryaei, 2000: 99; Russel, 1987: 262. Shenkar, 2014: 104) but nothing has been provided about the descriptions of this temple and the rituals that took place in it<sup>29</sup>.

b) Pictorial evidence: In this section, pictorial evidence means images on the seals, coins, and reliefs. Ghaderi raised a discussion about the patterns attributed to the Mithra and concluded that only two figures can be considered as Mithra, one on the left side of the Taq Bostan<sup>30</sup> and the other on the seal of the Berlin Museum, which has been discussed in this article (Fig. 1, seal No.3) (Ghaderi, 2015: 168-178; Shenkar, 2014: 104). Of course, apart from this seal, there are three other seals that will be discussed further. Grenet has mentioned a coin belonging to Hormuz I as the only official depiction of the Mehr in the Sassanid period (Grenet, 2011: 41; Lukonin, 1971: 278; Shenkar, 2014: 103).

As mentioned earlier, so far, five seals attributed to Mithra have been introduced whose elements include halo, waving bands or ribbons, full face, chariot, and horse. Apart from the halo and full face, which is common to all these seals, other elements can be seen in some of them. The aura also does not have the same shape in all the seals and it consists of the rays around<sup>31</sup> that are either attached to the hat<sup>32</sup> and actually to the person's head or are with the distance from it, depicted in the form of a semi-circle



in three cases and a full circle in one case (for the rays attributed to the Mithra and its background, see: Shenkar, 2014: 102).

Regarding the recent attributions, there is an important point that should be considered; Although Callieri (2011: 56) considers the presence of the three characteristics of the aura around the head, riding a chariot, and having a house on the heights sufficient to prove his claim that the inscription on the seal of the British Museum (seal No. 2) is Mithraic, it should be noted that some of these three characteristics are not exclusive to the Deity of Mehr and Anahita, Deity of Soroush, and Deity of Bahram also have such characteristics. It is said about Anahita in paragraph 2 of Aban Yasht that: “She is the mighty one who fell from Mount Hoker over the wide sea of Carat” (Aban Yasht, 2006: 298); and in paragraph 11, it is also said that: “She is the one who sits on the chariot with the reins in her hand and turns around the chariot” (Ibid: 299). It is also stated in paragraph 13 that: “She is the one who will overcome the enmity of all enemies with four big white horses from the same race” (Ibid: 300). About Soroush, in paragraph 21 of the 9<sup>th</sup> section of Yasna Hat 57, the following is said: “We worship the Soroush, the pious and victorious, the one whose hundred-pillared house has been erected on the highest ridge of Alborz Mountain... (Ibid: 25); and in the 27<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the section 11 of the same Yasna: Four bright, white, alert, and shadowless horses pull his chariot in the heavens with the horned golden hooves (Ibid: 226). Referring to the sun-like rays surrounding Sasan’s head in Babak’s dream, Koyaji (2004, 244) considers the halo around the head to be a symbol of the glory and states that “the bodies of all the deities and deitydresses are shown with a halo around the head which is a symbol of the glory”. However, there are several reasons for attributing these seals to the Mithra as follows: The presence of inscriptions on some of these seals, not attributing any of the known patterns to the Deity of Soroush, the special iconography of Anahita and her gender, the description of Mehrgan’s actions by Biruni (see the rest of the article), and also the background of the depiction of the Deity of Mithra in Central Asia. The best example for this is the image of Apollo on the coins of King Plato (Fig. 2)<sup>33</sup>, depicted with a halo of light riding a chariot<sup>34</sup> by four horses (Tarn, 1966: 210-211; Boyce and Grenet, 1997: 210; Dani, 2007: 122; Shenkar, 2014: 106), concerning the “Greek interpretation” (Harmata et al., 1998: 104) in Eastern Iran, where Apollo and Helios were matched with Mithra (Ibid). Of course, the scene of interest was engraved on the



◀ Fig. 2. Gold coin, Kanishka (127-150 AD) minted in Balkh (Bracey, 2016: Fig 20).

Western [Bactrian] and Kushani coins only once and after that, this image was apparently not used, and the image of Mithra was used on the Western and Kushani coins<sup>35</sup> with a not-so-different image but without the four-horse chariot (Fig. 3) (about Mithra on Kushani coins, see: Mc Dowell, 2005). Due to the fact that the scene on the coins of King Plato includes all the aforementioned elements, including the full face, halo around the head, chariot, horses, and waving bands, we can consider this scene as the background and model of the seals despite a time gap of seven hundred years.



◀ Fig. 3: Coin of King Plato (145-140 BC) (<http://coinindia.com/galleries-plato.html>).

It is impossible to answer these questions with certainty. However, there are two important issues that may be effective in finding answers: The first is the seal impression obtained from AK-Depe, and the second is the Mehrgan festival and its related rituals.

A) The seal impression obtained from Ak-Depe: As mentioned in the previous section, the attribution of the mentioned seal impression to the Deity of Mehr is acceptable. Due to the fact that according to the inscription of this seal, it belongs to a magus<sup>36</sup>, it seems unlikely that a Zoroastrian

priest would engrave the image of a deity other than the Zoroastrian deities on his seal. As a result, even if Mithra had certain ceremonies and rituals, these rituals had been considered parts of Zoroastrianism. Although such a big claim cannot be made with just one seal and more evidence is needed, at least, it is likely and can be proposed. Of course, before this, it should be specified whether by the magus on the seal impression, a Zoroastrian magus is meant or a Mehr worshiper (Hindu magus). There have been many studies about Hindu magus, the most critical of which is Helmut Humbach (2015) (also, see: Tojo, 2010); but, the reasons for the seal of interest belonging to Zoroastrianism are: a) the name of the father of the seal owner, which is completely Iranian; b) the Pahlavi inscription engraved on the surface of the seal and c) the archaeological site of the seal, which was a fire temple according to the explorer.

Another important difficulty in this field is the connection between this deity and Roman Mithraism. Malekzadeh has considered the followers of Mehr as Divisna according to “the iconography of the Mehr religion as we know it in Rome” (Malekzadeh, 2010: 31-34)<sup>37</sup>. Discussing the identity of the Deity of Mithra in Iran with the Roman Mithras, there are many things that cannot be covered in this article. The authors agree with Frye (2006) and Hinnells (2015: 11) that basically, a difference should be made between Roman Mithraism or Mithraism and the worship of the Mehr in Zoroastrianism; then, it is better to study Roman Mithraism in the social structure of the same society. Of course, there are difficulties in this field, including the presence of a lion on one of the seals attributed to the deity of Mithra. On seal number 1 in Figure 1, a lion bust is seen, which is questionable. Because, the lion belongs to the group of Khrafstras, and its placement on an image attributed to the great Zoroastrian deity with all those important vocations is amazing. Although in a thoughtful comment, Bivar considers the lion to be an animal symbol of Mithra (Bivar, 2005: 347)<sup>38</sup>, generally, “the theory that the iconography specific to Mithraic<sup>39</sup> monuments - the oldest of which belongs to the 2nd century AD- can be justified by referring directly to the Iranian religion, is now rejected”<sup>40</sup> (Boyce and Gerner, 1996: 575).

b) Mehrgan: In this context, one important feature of Zoroastrianism should be mentioned, in which there are no special rituals for gods and goddesses; “Festivals that were named after them were not actually in honor of them and belonged to all deities and were seasonal festivals with a practical nature” (Boyce, 2016: 41).



◀ Fig. 4: Coin of King Plato (145-140 BC) (Gardner, 1880: Pl. VI. II).

For example, according to Purdawood (1929:173), “the meaning of the Nahid temple [Anahita] is not that Nahid was independently religious and had a special place of worship. She was one of the deities of Mazdaism and was praised in worship and religious ceremonies like the angels of other religions” (see also: Chaumont, 2002: 138). There are some debates about whether Mehrگان festival also had such a situation and was a seasonal festival or had a religious character. It seems that the roots of this festival should be traced back to a much older era than the Sassanid era (Taghizadeh, 2002: 87). But, at least from the Achaemenid period, there are evidences in this field. While following Henning, Boyce (1996: 41) rejects the connection between the Bagayadi month and the Deity of Mithra<sup>41</sup>, Razmjou (2019: 21), Bailey et al. (1988) suggest this month a combination of two words of “Bagha”, meaning Deity, and “Yaddish”, meaning worship. So, according to them, “Bag”<sup>42</sup> specifically means “Mithra” (Razmjou, 2003: 22).

There is little information about the prayers related to the Mehr or rituals held for this deity in Greek, Islamic and Syrian sources. Quoting Ctesias, Cumont mentioned the festival of Mithrakan or Mehrگان, in which luxurious sacrifices were made and the king performed a sacred dance (Cumont, 1910: 9; Vermaseren, 2007: 25)<sup>43</sup>. Strabo wrote that the satrapy of Armenia had to send twenty thousand foals to the king of Persia every year on the day of Mitrakana (Strabo, 1928: 331). In the *Asar-al-Baghiyeh*, Abu Rayhan Biruni wrote about the actions of Mehrگان<sup>44</sup>: “This holiday is for the general public and they say that Mehr is the name of the sun; since the sun appeared on this day for the people of the world, they call this day Mehrگان; and the reason for this statement is that based on the tradition of the Sasanians on this day, they wore a crown with the sun’s face on it, and the sun was riding on its wheel in that crown” (Biruni, 2017: 337: 22).<sup>45</sup>

To the above, we can add the mention of Vandidad in the first paragraph, the first part of the third chapter, in which Ahuramazda, in response to Zoroaster's question about where is the first place where the earth (Sepandarmas) becomes happy, says: It is the place where Ashavani performs the rituals with pure firewood, mortar, and offering milk in the hand and pray for the Mehr in a loud voice (Vandidad, 2006: 675). Based on this, the prayer of the Mehr was not separate from the main rituals of Zoroastrianism.

### Conclusion

Being aware of the complexity of the subject of Mehr worship, about which there are very few and scattered evidences, the authors tried to present a picture of the extent and status of our knowledge about a very important and effective part of Iranian studies. The purpose of this article is to explain how much Mithra is known according to the archaeological evidence and what place he had in Iranian beliefs. In line with the first goal, the second goal is to propose new issues about this deity, such as its relationship with Roman Mithraism, its position and its relationship with official Zoroastrianism, and how it was worshiped in Iran. According to the conducted research and reviewing the opinions of the experts, the views of the authors are presented as follows: a) The opinion of the explorer of AK-Depe is confirmed and the image of the seal impression obtained from this place is said to belong to the Deity of Mithra. This very important work with its inscription, related to a magus, is an important sign of mixing the worship of this deity with authentic Zoroastrianism. b) Through this seal impression, it was concluded that during the Sassanid period, the worship of this deity, with all its ups and downs, does not seem to be separate and opposed to Zoroastrianism in such a way it was resolved in Zoroastrianism with an unknown quality, c) Apart from the general similarities, no further connection can be established between Roman Mithraism and the worship of Mehr or Mithra in Iran and the elements used in the iconography of Mithraic monuments outside the current borders of Iran have no connection with the iconography and iconology of Iranian Mithra and Zoroastrianism.

### Endnote

1. Of course, here it was meant to assign a separate Yasht to this deity; otherwise, the name of this deity has been mentioned repeatedly in many other Yashts, including Niyayesh Mehr in Khorde Avesta (2006: 597-598) and has nothing new compared to Mehr yasht (regarding the state of Mehr in different

parts of Avesta, see: Ismaeilpour, 2004).

2. Only in Iranian texts within the limits of today's Iran. Because to these can be added the Boghazkoy inscription (Thime, 1960) and Brahman religious texts (Pourdavoud, 1938: 394).

3. Regarding the link between Mithra and covenants, see: Meyerhofer (2005) and Mariya (2010) and also the oath of Ardeshir II before Shapur II in the presence of Deity of Mehr in Taq-Bostan (Daryae, 2012: 71); for different opinions about the pattern of Ardeshir II in Taq Bostan, see: Mohammadifar & Amini, 2014: 236).

4. According to Boyce (1997: 48), ratta/asha is order in the broadest possible sense: Cosmic order, social order, and moral or truth order.

5. In the day of Mehr, if you have a complaint from someone, stand in front of Mehr, ask for the judgment of Mehr and make complaint to her "(Advice of Anoushe-Ravan Azarbard Marspandan, 2012: 83).

6. Plutarch (106: 1874) mentioned that Mithra was the mediator between Ahuramazda and Ahriman.

7. Of course, the translator of this text has given the name of Mithra, while in the original text - which is the appendix of this book - Mithra is mentioned Mithrem.

8. Referring to the Greek Interpretation Graeca means the matching of Greek deities with local deities by the Greeks (see Harmata et al., 1998: 104).

9. In the Greek lexicon written by Hesychius in the 6th and probably the 5th century AD, Mithra or Mithras was the name of the sun deity among Iranians (Schmitt, 2003).

10. Ugo Bianchi has discussed the reason for the absence of Mithra's name in Gahan in an article called Mehr and the issue of Iranian monotheism (Bianchi, 2006).

11. Ghaderi has argued that the goddess of Anahita is not an authentic Iranian goddess but a Mesopotamian goddess known as Anonitum, one of the manifestations of the goddess of Ishtar, who was introduced to the Iranian pantheon during the time of Achaemenid Ardeshir II (Ghaderi, 2017). He considers all the images attributed to the goddess of Anahita in the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods to be unsubstantiated and questionable (see: Ghaderi, 2016. Ibid: 2015. Ibid: 2011).

12. Of course, this lack of imagery is only within the limits of Western Iran; otherwise, some Iranian and Zoroastrian deities, such as the deities of Wind, Fire, Ordibehesht, Shahrivar, Bahman, Derovaspa, Faro (Far) and even Ahura Mazda himself with the name of Mazdako (Hinnells, 2010. Harmata et al., 1998. McDowell, 2006: 345; Bracey, 2016. Bivar, 2014), Asha in the coins of Khwarazmians (Vainberg, 2016) have been depicted in Eastern Iran by the Kushanians, who had achieved a degree of religious tolerance and matching (Bivar, 2014) (In this regard, see: the very good works of Shenkar, 2014)

13. Daryae and Malekzadeh considered the reason for removing the name of Kartir from the later Pahlavi texts to be the use of a shamanic method to go to ascension that was specific to the Mediterranean regions and they believe that this was a non-Zoroastrian and non-orthodox practice that was disgested by religious people and priests (2015: 286).

14. Bahar has tried to explain the characteristics of Zoroastrianism during the Sassanid period (2010: 55-60). Shahrestani has mentioned some of the sects of this religion to be Keimourathian and Zaranian (2011: 27-31).

15. Homiter means Hom Mehr (Christensen, 2018: 211).

16. Located in Akhal Province

17. The name of Ferayen is mentioned as the family of Frayen in paragraph 80 of Aban-Yasht (2006).

18. Mehr is sitting on a golden wheel that is made in a heavenly style and has long shining wheels, and four agile white horses are turning him around (Purdawood, 1929: 404).

19. According to Lukonin, for the first time in Sasanian art, the image of Mithras was depicted on the coins of Hormozd I before reaching the kingship, who extended the king ring to Hormozd (Lukonin, 1971: 166). Ghaderi has denied that this person is Mitraic and considered him Hormozd himself (Ghaderi, 2012: 171).

20. In the meantime, one should not ignore the sharp and stinging view of the traditional Zoroastrians, perhaps one can consider Noshervanji Dahala as a representative of a part of them - at least the contemporary Zoroastrians (1999: 111). They ascended to such spiritual levels that their status was thought to be higher than Amshaspands and they assigned the highest yachts to themselves. They were imagined the deities who helped people if they showed praise, need, and sacrifice and people can strengthen them by worshiping and demanding them and people should worship them with fear. He clearly mentioned Mehr, who turns into a monster when he is angry and punishes his victim in the most severe way if he does not pay the ransom (Ibid: 112-113).

21. Names like Mehrbukht or Zurvandad do not mean that their owners follow different religions, such as Mehr worship or Zurvanism, but they were only Zoroastrians (Frye, 2012: 529. For the names driven from the root of the name of Deity Mithra, see: Schmidt, 2016). Citing Gignoux, Shenkar pointed out that the names with the combination of Mithra were the second most popular names in the Sassanid period after the names with the combination of Azar or Atar (Shenkar, 2014: 103). Without referring to the details, Harmata and others have written that the Kushans may have become familiar with Mithra's prayer in Sogdia before the invasion of Balkh, because an Iranian Name Si-Si Mitra, meaning Mitra's devotee, provides the necessary evidence for the existence of the Mithra ritual in the lands located in the north of Jayhoun during the time of Alexander the Great (Harmata et al., 1998: 110. Also see: Bivar's reference to Mithraism in the Western Greek kingdom Bivar, 2005: 346). Grenet (2010: 42) has considered the Bamyan region as the focal point of Mehr Yasht according to the painting located under the Buddha arch in Bamyan [related to the 6th century AD], which he considers not a Buddhist element but related to Mehr although Callieri (2010: 61) does not comment on its belonging to the seal with this certainty and considers it similar to Mithra.

22. (See Yaghmaei, 2011).

23. At present, the easternmost known mihrab is Duraoropus Mihrab (see Beck, 2002).

24. Hinnells considered this word to be the correct word for the temple and wrote that all the religious rites were under the protection and guard of Mithra (2010: 76).

25. And on the other hand, in the book of the Roman months written by John Leidos [7th century historian and contemporary with Justin (Hooker, 2017: V)] (2017: 84) Mithra - or Mithras as it is mentioned in the text - is a deity born from the rock is considered to be the deity of fire.

26. Probably, equal to Var, which according to Boyce (1998: 57) is swearing or the place they swear.

27. And also, in the Dar-Mehr of Yazd, some of which have been registered in the list of national monuments of Iran, such as: Khorramshah seal with registration number 9268, Allahabad seal with registration number 9141, fire temple in Buyuk seal with number 9132 and etc. (Pazuki and Shadmehr, 2015: 469).

28. Azarbarzin Mehr or Azar Mehr very profitable (Bahar, 1998: 176).

29. With the utmost determination and caution, Boyce and Grenet consider one of the temples of Ai Khanum to belong to the deity of Mitra (Boyce and Grenet, 2016:218).

30. Jahangir Koyaji has strongly denied that this figure is Mithraic (Koyaji, 2003: 233-256) although he considered this relief to be of Ardeshir I, which is not acceptable.

31. In the book "The Love Life of Alexander" - which is a fictional and legendary story about the life of Alexander (Chaumont, 1990) - while mentioning that Darius was Mithra's companion - in the first book, paragraph 36 - (Nawotka, 2017:118), there is an interesting reference to the crown of Darius in the second book, paragraph 14 in the Syriac account of the meeting between Darius and Alexander that "Darius believed that Alexander was the deity of Mehr and that he had come to help the Iranians, and the crown that was on his head had rays of light and his robe was woven with fine threads of gold (Ibid: 171).

32. A very important example of the rays attached to the hat can be seen in Commagene (Dorner, 2015).

33. One of the Greek-Bactrian kings who had a short-lived government in the Bakhtar or Balkh region in the middle of the second century BC.

34. Roštotzov traces the origin of the four-horse wheel of the sun in the fourth century BC in southern Russia; but, whether its origin is Iranian or Greek and whether they are related to each other is still unclear (Tarn, 1966: 211).

35. The first images of Mithra in Eastern Iran are found on Sutramagas coins (Shenkar, 2014: 106-107).

36. The magus, who were at the lowest level in the class of clerics, performed various tasks, including monitoring economic transactions in cities, villages, and places of worship (Daryaei, 2014: 52), Wiesehöfer used two terms. Ordinary magus "who were the guardians of the more insignificant fire temples and magus men who were the higher-ranking guardians of Bahram fires in the states (Wiesehöfer, 2010: 218) and Göbl called the duty of magus "all kinds of limited applicable work in courts and all common administrative matters (Göbl, 2006: 160).

37. Malekzadeh believes that the common religion of the Medes before the spread of Mazdaism in Western Iran was Mehr worship (Malekzadeh, 2011:34); but, Nyberg considered the religion of the Medes magus to be Zurvanism before the arrival of Zoroastrianism (Neyberg, 1980: 388).

38. Bivar considers the presence of this animal to be related to Roman Mithraism and believes

that the lion along with the snake and the scorpion, which are common symbols of this religion or profession, are symbols of death (Bivar, 2011: 65). In any case, there are still many debates about this lion - which is depicted in the Mithraic motifs in their Mithraeums with a human-shaped body- which Beck (2002) collected and there is no consensus on it (For this man-lion, see: Hansman, 2015: 256-269).

39. Which is called Tauroctony (Olansi, 2001: 20). In this regard, see: (<http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=tauroctony>)

40. Mohammad Moghadam has a more strange opinion and writes: "The Mehris especially honored the mother of Deity and named many of their places of worship Nahid to honor her" (Moghadam, 2009: 51). He even called the building known as the Anahita Temple of Bishapur, Mihrabeh (Ibid: 143).

41. After confirming Hennig's opinion, Taghizadeh wrote: The name of the month Bagayadish has nothing to do with Bag (Taghizadeh, 2001: 76).

42. Noshirvan-ji Dahala (1999: 22) considered Bagh to mean provider and benefactor, a title for all Aryan deities; Alexander Dietz also came to such a conclusion and interpreted Bagh as "a common name for the Almighty Deity" in Soghd (Dits, 2006: 146).

43. In book 63, paragraph 5, Dio Cassius mentioned the worship of Mithras by Mithradates, the king of Armenia, when he went to the presence of Nero (Dio Cassius, 1925: 143).

44. Amoozgar mentioned the very important role of this deity in religious rituals without mentioning the rituals of Mehr and wrote that the festival of Mehrgan is a remnant of them, which is similar to Nowruz and had equal importance (Amoozgar, 1998: 19). "In Iran, even before accepting the new Avesta calendar [the new Avesta year was revised in 441 AD (Taghizadeh, 2003: 301)], there was a festival in the autumnal equinox and it was placed in the old Iranian month of Bagayadish, which may or may not have the name of Mithracan in ancient times" (Ibid: 76).

45. In Al-Tafhim, he called the occasion of this day the victory of Fereydoun over Zahhak (Biruni, 1938: 254). It is also the same in the Shahnameh: He ordered to light up the fire /and burn all the amber and saffron / worshipping the Mehrgan is his (Fereydoun 's) religion /eating and having fun are his manner (Ferdowsi, 2005: 47). Salimi considers the modern rites of palm-carrying, siavashan, coffin-carrying, and carpet-washing to be related to the deity of Mehr (2015: 293).

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## ایزد میترا/مهر و نسبتش با زرتشتی‌گری دوره ساسانی: نگاهی به چند مهر با نقش این ایزد

میثم شهسواری<sup>۱</sup>، سید مهدی موسوی کوهپیر<sup>II</sup>

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### چکیده

نقش، جایگاه و خویشکاری ایزد میترا/مهر در زرتشتی‌گری یا دین زرتشتی رسمی دوره ساسانی و نیز ارتباط آن با میترایسیم رومی همواره در پرده ابهام و محل گفتگوها و بحث‌های فراوان بوده است. این ایزد یکی از مهم‌ترین و محبوب‌ترین ایزدان دوره ساسانی بوده است، اما با این وجود آثار مادی چندانی که با این ایزد مربوط باشند در دست نیست. در کاوش‌های آق‌تپه واقع در جنوب ترکمنستان مجموعه‌ای از گِل‌مهرهای ساسانی به دست آمده که کاوشگر نقش یکی از آن‌ها را به میترا خدای ایرانی منتسب کرده است. این گِل‌مهر از آنجایی که طبق کتیبه‌اش از آن یک مغ بوده از اهمیت مضاعفی برخوردار است؛ زیرا ارتباط مستقیم با مذهب زرتشتی پیدا می‌کند. نقش این مهر، که چندان واضح نیست، احتمالاً شخصی را سوار بر ارابه‌ای نشان می‌دهد که دو اسب آن را می‌کشند. نقش ارابه و اسب‌ها به همراه کلاه اشعه دار مهم‌ترین دلایل انتساب، این نقش به میترا است، اما ملاحظاتی وجود دارد که بایستی مورد توجه قرار گیرند خاصه که نقش یاد شده وضوح چندانی ندارد. در این پژوهش به ایزد میترا از زاویه‌ای دیگر نگریسته شده و ضمن پرداختن به اثر مهر یادشده، دیگر مواد فرهنگی اعم از شواهد معماری و شواهد تصویری که به گونه‌ای این ایزد منتسب شده‌اند، مورد بررسی قرار گرفته و تحلیل گردیده است. در پژوهش پیش‌رو اطلاعات به شیوه کتابخانه‌ای و مراجعه به متون دست اول گردآوری شده و روش پژوهش توصیفی-تحلیلی از نوع «تحلیل محتوا» است. شایان ذکر است که در این تحلیل‌ها از رویکرد آیکونوگرافی و آیکونولوژی بهره گرفته شده است. این جستار نشان داده است: الف) نقش روی اثر مهر مورد نظر متعلق به ایزد میترا است و نظر کاوشگر تأیید می‌شود، ب) پرستش ایزد میترا در دوره ساسانی بخشی از زرتشتی‌گری بوده و به صورت یک دین یا فرقه جداگانه به شمار نمی‌رفته است.

**کلیدواژگان:** ایزد میترا، زرتشتی‌گری، مهرهای ساسانی، مغان.

I. استادیار گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه جیرفت، جیرفت، ایران. (نویسنده مسئول).

Email: shahsavar2891@gmail.com

II. استاد گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکده علوم انسانی، دانشگاه تربیت مدرس، تهران، ایران.

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فصلنامه علمی گروه باستان‌شناسی دانشکده هنر و معماری، دانشگاه بوعلی سینا، همدان، ایران.

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