

Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm

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This article presents a detailed reconsideration of the well-established and canonized theory of “Sasanian iconoclasm” postulated by Mary Boyce in 1975. The Sasanians did not develop any prohibition against anthropomorphic representations of the gods, and in the surviving Zoroastrian literature and inscriptions there is no evidence of either theological disputes over idols or of a deliberate eradication of them by the Persian kings. Sasanian cult was aniconic, but the historical and archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates that Sasanian visual culture was anything but iconoclastic. It seems that the Persian iconoclastic identity was constructed in the early Sasanian period as a response to the challenges posed by Christianity. By joining the common monotheistic discourse against idolatry, the Zoroastrian clergy adopted the conventions of the world in which they lived. Attacks against “idols” and “idolatry” should be understood in the context of internal and external polemical discourse against beliefs deemed to be erroneous by the Zoroastrian priesthood.

INTRODUCTION

“Iconoclasm” (literally “the destruction of icons”) was originally a distinctly Christian term commonly applied to a number of religious and political movements, both ancient and modern, that actively and aggressively rejected visual representations of the divine. In a recent study, iconoclasm was more broadly defined as “a motivated phenomenon of annihilation of any presence or power realized by an icon through the annihilation of that icon.”¹ In the pre-modern world, “iconoclasm” was perhaps most famously associated with the complex debates waged over icons that took place in the Byzantine Empire in the eighth-ninth centuries C.E. However, the earliest attestation of the term “iconoclasm” itself appears to be surprisingly late, dating only to the middle of the sixteenth century.²

The iconoclastic movements that appeared in the Abrahamic religions during certain historical periods, profoundly shaping their theology and cultic practices, have been extensively studied.³ In the present article, I intend to discuss—and subsequently dismiss—the evidence for an iconoclastic movement in Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest and historically most significant revelation religions in Eurasia.

The existence of a militant, intentional iconoclasm in the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian period was postulated by Mary Boyce in a groundbreaking article published in 1975,⁴ and has since been accepted almost without reservations by both Iranists and the wider scholarly community. Perhaps nothing illustrates this universal approval better than the following

It gives me pleasure to thank Shaul Shaked, Frantz Grenet, Samra Azarnouche, and Yana Tchekhanovets for their comments, which greatly helped to improve this paper.

1. May 2012: 6.
2. Brubacker 2012: 4. But the word “iconoclast” (the “destroyer of icons”) is attested already in the early 720s in a letter of Germanos, the patriarch of Constantinople. On the terminology, see Bremmer 2008.
3. For instance, see Besançon 2000.
4. Boyce 1975.

quote from a recent article by Frantz Grenet, the leading authority on ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian religious iconography:

Now, nearly forty years after her proposal of this historical model [“Sasanian iconoclasm”], one can say that it remains exemplary to archaeologists and art historians working on the central regions of the successive Iranian empires. It certainly provides a convincing explanation for the restricted and unimaginative religious iconography of the Sasanians, in sharp contrast with their rich secular imagery.⁵

This article will present a detailed reconsideration of this well-established and canonized theory by re-evaluating the evidence and arguments offered by Boyce and by situating the discussion in the wider context of Sasanian and Iranian visual culture. The picture that emerges from the examination will be compared with the much better-known iconoclastic movements of the Abrahamic religions. Furthermore, it will address the apparent “sharp contrast” between religious and secular iconography in Sasanian art and question the validity of this division in Sasanian visual culture.

AN ANICONIC FAITH?

It is a widely known fact that modern Zoroastrian worship is aniconic, with fire serving as the only icon of the divine.⁶ At the same time, contemporary followers of Zoroaster are not iconophobic and their fire-temples and community centers in Iran, India, and in the Diaspora often contain full-length portraits of the prophet⁷ and of the semi-anthropomorphic “Figure in the Winged Disk.”⁸ However, these never serve as focal objects of the Zoroastrian cult, which is directed solely towards the sacred, constantly sustained fire.

But was the Zoroastrian faith aniconic from its very beginning, going back some 3000 years? Or can the history of the faith not be described, alternatively, as nuanced, characterized by a variety of iconic and aniconic cultic practices in different regions and periods? Some scholars at the beginning of the last century were quick to draw an undisturbed, coherent, and static picture of an aniconic Iranian religion that abhors idols:

From the earliest antiquity the Persians had no idols in the sense of a representation of the godhead set up as an object of worship. Such allusions to the practice as are found are always in the way of condemning it as an abhorrent custom employed by foreigners and unbelievers. Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Irān, makes no reference to idol-worship, even though his vision saw graphic pictures of the hosts of heaven. These vivid images, however, which might easily have been given a plastic form, remained, with the seer and with his people, simply a visualization of the ideal. Throughout the history of the religion of Irān, idolatry played no part.⁹

5. Grenet 2012: 33. Yet he notes that, as far as the other regions of the Iranian world are concerned, “[o]ne came to realize over time, however, that this model did not have the pan-Zoroastrian validity of Mary Boyce’s intention. It proves inadequate for entire regions of the Zoroastrian world in the pre-Islamic period, some located beyond the Sasanian Empire, some having a border status.”

6. On aniconism in the Iranian world, see Shenkar 2012.

7. Which is, in fact, a modern construct, based on an erroneous interpretation of the image of Mithra from the Sasanian relief at Tāq-i Bustān.

8. This Achaemenian symbol most probably represents the highest Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazdā. Scholarly attempts to argue that it depicts *xʾarənah* “the divine glory” (Shahbazi 1974, 1980) are untenable and may have been inspired by the modern Zoroastrian attitude, which tends to regard Ahura Mazdā as an abstract, transcendental Supreme Being with no anthropomorphic shape. This view is a development of the Islamic period and was further influenced by nineteenth-century contacts with Christianity. For a discussion of the “Figure in the Winged Disk,” see Lecoq 1984 and Shenkar forthcoming.

9. Jackson 1915: 151.

Indeed, the Avesta and the Old Persian inscriptions, our earliest documents in the Iranian languages, do not contain any term for the veneration of idols; in addition, no traces of a negative or hostile Achaemenid approach toward man-made images is attested from any external sources. However, while it is undeniable that the world of the Avestan people was free from divine representations, the situation with the Achaemenids, who created the largest Empire until their time, appears more complex.

The Achaemenid Persians ruled over heterogeneous populations who worshipped different gods, often representing them anthropomorphically. Furthermore, as the study of the religious material from the Persepolis tablets demonstrates, deities of Elamite origin featured prominently in the “Persepolis pantheon” and were probably understood as genuine “Persian” gods by the population of Achaemenid Pars.¹⁰ The statues of these and other, local, divinities might have been respected and honored by the Achaemenids, as can also be deduced from the seal found at Gorgippia depicting a Persian king venerating the great Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar.¹¹

There is also literary evidence: The Babylonian priest Berossus, writing in Greek in the Hellenistic period, recorded that the Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II introduced statues of the goddess Anāhitā to the sanctuaries of several major cities throughout the Empire.¹² Unfortunately, the Persepolis texts contain no allusions to the existence of any statues and no sanctuaries that could contain them have been excavated in Pars dated from the Achaemenid period. Therefore, despite Berossus’s information, it seems that anthropomorphic cultic statuary was never part of the Achaemenid royal cult, since such statues are attested archaeologically in the Iranian world only from the Hellenistic period.¹³ The aniconism of the Persians, which is a common *topos* among Greek and Latin classical and Late Antique authors,¹⁴ probably correctly reflects the aniconic nature of the “official” Achaemenid worship¹⁵—although it is likely that when the Persian kings paid homage to the gods of the Babylonians, for instance, this involved veneration of cultic statues. It is also important to keep in mind that the basic perception of the divine among the ancient Iranians was clearly anthropomorphic, both in Avestan society and in the Achaemenid and later periods.¹⁶

For in the Parthian period, finds of sculpture in the round become more numerous,¹⁷ but only a few of them, such as the bronze statue of Heracles-*Vərəθraγna* from Mesene, can be confidently shown to represent an Iranian divinity.¹⁸ Regretably, there are almost no genuine Iranian textual sources from this period, and we are in impenetrable darkness regarding not only the practical use of statues in the Parthian period but also regarding the religious

10. Henkelman 2008.

11. Boardman 1970: no. 878.

12. Clem. Al. *Protr.* 5.65.3. See also Jacobs 2001.

13. The earliest such attestations are the fragments of a monumental acrolithic statue from the “Temple with Indented Niches” at Ai Khanoum, Bactria (Bernard 1969: 338–41; Pichikyan 1991: 245–46; Shenkar 2011) and the fragments of a marble statue that were uncovered by Iranian archaeologists in recent excavations in the “Fratataka Temple” in Persepolis: Callieri 2007: 61–62.

14. De Jong 1997: 29, 304, 413.

15. I do not share Mark Garrison’s belief that the “Achaemenid religious sanctuaries, when they are targeted for systematic excavation and research, may reveal a wealth of visual images” (Garrison 2000: 120). No covered Achaemenid sanctuaries at all have been identified in western Iran, and the few temples known from eastern Iran have not produced any religious imagery.

16. See Shenkar 2012.

17. The general discussion of Parthian sculpture is found in Colledge 1977, Colledge 1986, Kawami 1987, and Mathiesen 1993.

18. Bernard 1990.

situation in general. However, based on the archaeological evidence briefly outlined above, one may suppose that in the Hellenistic and the Parthian periods cultic images become acceptable and were commonly encountered in the Iranian sanctuaries.

In fact, it is in Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature—a corpus of mainly theological texts containing a compendium of Zoroastrian religious conceptions and knowledge, composed in, or at least assembled and edited no earlier than, the Islamic period (chiefly in the ninth-tenth centuries C.E.)—that we find not only numerous references to idols (MP *uzdēs*¹⁹ and *but*²⁰) and an explicit prohibition against idol-worship (*uzdēs-parastīh*, *uzdēs-parastīšnīh*, *uzdēs-paristīšnīh*, *uzdēs-paristagīh*),²¹ but also their strict condemnation.

According to the *Dēnkard*, it was the mythical evil dragon Dahāk, whose activities Middle Persian literature places in Babylon, who incited peoples to idolatry.²² The *Dēnkard* states that “Wahrām fire represents goodness” and is “the adversary of the idols” (*ātaxš ī warahrān wehīh ud uzdēs petyārag*).²³ In *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* idol worship is called the “eighth-worst sin,”²⁴ and the text also contains an explicit prohibition against idol worship:

az uzdēs-paristīšnīh ud dēw-ēzagīh dūr pahrēz, ce paydāg ku agar kay-husraw uzdēszār ī pad war ī čēčīst ne kand hād, andar ēn sē-hazārag ī hušēdar ud hušēdarmāh ud sōšāns ke jud-jud pad harw hazārag sar az awēšān ek āyēd ke harw kār ī gēhān abāz wirāyēd ud mihrōdrujān ud uzdēs-paristān ī andar kišwar be zanēd, ēg petyārag ēdōn stahmag-tar būd hād ku rist-āxēz ud tan ī pasēn kardan ne šāyist hād.

Abstain from idol-worship and demon-veneration, because it is obvious that if Kay Husraw has not destroyed the idol-temple on Lake Čēčīst, during these three millenniums of Ušēdar and Ušēdarmāh and Sōšāns (each of) whom comes separately at the end of each millennium to rearrange the affairs of the world and to smite oath-breakers and idol-worshippers of the land, the adversary would have become stronger, that resurrection and the final embodiment would not be possible.²⁵

The story in which Kay Khosrow destroyed an idol-temple (*uzdēszār*) at Lake Čēčīst and established a fire-cult in its place is also encountered in the *Bundahišn* and other Middle Persian texts.²⁶ Lake Čēčīst is usually identified with Lake Urmia and the temple built by Kay Khosrow with Ādur Gušnasp.

From the following passage of the apocalyptic text *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, it is clear that the idol-temple (*uzdēszār*) was considered an abode of the Evil Spirit and his demons:

frāz rawēd pišōtan ī wištāspān pad ham-ayārīh ī ādur farrbay, ud ādur gušnasp, ud ādur ī burzēnmīhr ō uzdēszār ī wuzurg, nišēmag ī druwand gannāg mēnōg. xēšm ī xurdruš, ud hamāg dēwān, ud druzān, ud wad-tōhmagān, ud jādūgān ō ān ī zofāyotom dušox rasēnd. be kanēnd ān uzdēszār pad ham-kōxšīšnīh ī pišōtan ī bāmīg.

19. Av. *daēs* (Skt. *diś*), ‘form, shape’: Horn 1893: 295; Boyce 1975: 96 n. 15.

20. The etymology of MP *but* is unclear. It is very rarely attested in the sense of ‘idol’, *uzdēs* being a commonly used term. In Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian *but/butt* has the double meaning, ‘Buddha’ and ‘idol’: Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 118. In New Persian poetry, *but* appears from the very beginning both in the meaning of ‘idol’ and as a metaphor for ideal human beauty.

21. Some of these references were collected by Jackson 1914.

22. *Dēnkard* 7.4.72, ed. and tr. by Molé 1967: 56.

23. *DkM* 551.13–15.

24. *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 35, ed. and tr. by Chunakova 1997.

25. *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 2.93–95, ed. and tr. by Chunakova 1997 with slight modifications by the *Middle Persian Dictionary Project*.

26. *Iranian Bundahišn* 18.12; *Indian Bundahišn* 17.7; *DkM* 599.1–2; *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 2.95; *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 48.42.

Forth will go Pišōtan son of Wištāsp, in cooperation with Ādur Farrbay and Ādur Gušnasp and Ādur Burzēnmīhr, to the great idol-temple, abode of evil Gannāg Mēnōg. Xēšm with the bloody club, all the *dēws* and demons, those of evil stock and the sorcerers will reach the deepest hell. They will destroy that idol-temple struggling together with the glorious Pišōtan.²⁷

In the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* the idol-temple appears to be an antithesis of the good religion:

ud wāng kunēd mihr ī frāx-gōyōd ō pišōtan ī bāmīg ku, be kan, be zan ān uzdēs-zār ī dēwān nišēmag. raw ō ēn ērān dehān ī man ohrmazd dād abāz wirāy gāh ī dēn ud xwadāyih. . . ud abar rasēd pišōtan ī bāmīg ud ādur ī farrbay, ud ādur ī gušnasp, ud ādur ī burzēnmīhr ī pērōzgar be zanēd ān druz ī was-ōz, be kanēd ān uzdēs-zār ku nišēmag ī dēwān.

And Mihr of the wide pastures will cry to the glorious Pišōtan, “Raze, smite that idol-temple, abode of the *dēws*. Go to these Ērānian lands which I, Ohrmazd, have created (and) restore the status (of) religion and sovereignty. . . And the glorious Pišōtan, the victorious Ādur Farrbay, Ādur Gušnasp, and Ādur Burzēnmīhr will arrive and smite those powerful demons, they will raze that idol-temple which is the abode of the *dēws*.”²⁸

In the *Mādayān ī Hāzar Dādestān (Book of Thousand Laws)* we find traces of legal persecution against idol-temples:

ēk ān ī ham pusānweh guft ku 1000 ādurōg ī mard ka dādwar pad gyāk ku uzdēs-kadag būd uzdēs az-eš kand nišāst ka-š sardār xvēšāvand ī pad nāmčīšt ne paydāg būd mard ī pad warahrānih ō dādgāh nišāst pad sardār dāstan.

The same Pusānweh has also said the following: if a man sets up 1000 altars in the (very) place where there was an idol shrine—the idols having been destroyed (“dug out”) of there by a judge—without appointing a particular person from among his agnates as the guardian over these altars, then the man who has set up a Warahrān Fire should be considered the guardian of these altars.²⁹

ud ān ī guft ku abar awe bay husraw ī kawādān mard-ē dandān nām būd mard-ē ādurtōxm nām būd pad zamīg hāwand pad uzdēs-cār dāšt ceōn pad framān ud dastwarīh ī mowbedān uzdēs az-eš kand (ud) ādurōg-ē pad-eš nišāst.

It is also said, (that) under (our) late sovereign Husraw son of Kawād, one man named Dandān and another named Ādurtōxm held equal (lots) of land under an idol-shrine, when the temple of the idols was dug up from the place (“from there”) by the order and with the sanction of the mowbeds, and a fire-altar was set up there instead.³⁰

The short, curious text *Shā-Wahrām*, composed in the Islamic period, expresses messianic hopes for the coming of a ruler from the line of the Kavis who would free Iran from the Arab yoke, restore the Zoroastrian religion, and allow the Zoroastrians to wreak their vengeance upon the Muslims: “We shall let the mosques fall down, we shall establish fires, we shall raze the idol-temples” (*mazgūtīhā frōd hilēm, be nišānēm ātaxšān, uzdēs-zārīhā bē kanēm*).³¹

CONSTRUCTING “SASANIAN ICONOCLASM”

Thus, idols are completely absent from the Avesta and the Old Persian inscriptions, while Middle Persian literature vigorously condemns them and their adherents. Why is this so and what happened in between? According to the theory eloquently formulated by Boyce, this

27. *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 7.26, ed. and tr. by Cereti 1995.

28. *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 7.36–37.

29. *The Book of a Thousand Judgements (A Sasanian Law-Book)*, 94.4, ed. and tr. by Perikhanian 1997.

30. *The Book of a Thousand Judgements (A Sasanian Law-Book)*, A 37.1–5; Macuch 1981: 220–21.

31. *Shā-Wahrām* 2, ed. by Jamasp-Asana 1992.

was due to an “iconoclastic movement” that emerged in the Sasanian period to “purify” the Zoroastrian cult from these alien abominations.

It may be useful to sum up briefly her main arguments: Boyce has suggested that the first cultic statues of Anāhitā, introduced into Iran by the Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II, provoked a counter-reaction from the originally aniconic Iranians in the form of establishing a separate aniconic “fire-cult” to be conducted in the special “fire-temples,” free from man-made images. The influx of an Hellenic, iconocentric culture in the Seleucid and Parthian periods must have further encouraged the use of idols, but only until the rise of the Sasanians—vigorous champions of the “protestant” tradition, who inaugurated a major iconoclastic “revanche” orchestrated by the combined powers of the state and the church, suppressing the image-sanctuaries and destroying idols and their worshippers all over Iran.³²

Later, Boyce amended her view, stating that after the initial iconic impulse in the Achaemenid period, both image-worship and the veneration of the sacred fire often coexisted in the same community and perhaps even in the same temple.³³ However, the main postulates of her theory did not undergo any significant alterations.

To my knowledge, this sequence of events, and the very existence of the “Sasanian iconoclasm” formulated by Boyce, have seldom been questioned, let alone systematically examined and critically analyzed. One notable exception is by the Italian Iranist Gherardo Gnoli, who in his book *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland* summarized her arguments and observed that this theory “has more than a few weak points, as it was with the Sasanians in particular that there was a great development of the ‘free-standing,’ anthropomorphic image of the deity . . .”³⁴

Indeed, it is hard to understand how an actively iconoclastic culture could be responsible for producing fully human-shaped divine images for the first time in Western Iran. To be sure, Boyce was aware of this difficulty and wrote, anticipating Gnoli’s remarks, that the images of the gods on rock-reliefs and coins

. . . evidently did not offend Zoroastrian iconoclasts as did free-standing images. Presumably, not being fully-fashioned forms or objects of cult, they were not regarded as potential homes for *dēvs*, nor yet presumptuous imitations of the works of God.³⁵ . . . In general it was sculpture in the round which roused the wrath of iconoclasts; but whereas the Zoroastrians showed toleration for religious carvings in high relief, Christians after them were opposed to these also.³⁶

Boyce maintained that the crucial distinction is that the Sasanians did not have cultic statues in the round but merely two-dimensional anthropomorphic representations (rock-reliefs), which were not themselves a focus of worship and were therefore tolerated.³⁷ One should note however that the programmatic iconoclastic movements (as they are known from Abrahamic religions) were aimed at the repudiation and destruction of *all* images; they were opposed not only to cultic images in the round, but to *any* anthropomorphic image of the divine. In fact, there are no known examples of iconoclasm that are directed explicitly

32. She writes that the “orthodox” Zoroastrians were able to “. . . cast statues out of their places of worship, returning thus to an earlier purity of belief and practice which had probably never been wholly abandoned”: Boyce 1982: 242.

33. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 66 n. 71. Her views, however, were not always entirely consistent. In Boyce 1982: 116, she wrote that “it seems that in the iconography of Darius’ reign the prohibition was maintained against making a representation of any divine being . . .”

34. Gnoli 1980: 222.

35. Boyce 1975: 104.

36. Boyce 1975: 111 n. 86.

37. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 66 n. 71.

against human-shaped divine representations in one artistic medium, while tolerating and even creating them in other media.

It is hard to imagine that enthusiastic destruction and programmatic prohibition of cultic statues can coexist with the creation of an array of fully human-shaped images of deities and the active promotion and employment of these images in court art for propagandistic and commemorative purposes. Seemingly, the coexistence of such mutually exclusive notions can hardly be admitted within the religious worldview of the same person or people. I find it wholly inconceivable that Ardašīr I, for instance, would destroy statues of Ahura Mazdā in temples while ordering the carvings of the reliefs showing him inaugurated to kingship by the highest Zoroastrian god. And this is not to mention the fact that the Sasanian rock-reliefs can hardly be considered purely secular images devoid of any religious significance and meaning.³⁸ Simply put, Sasanian kings who ordered images of their representations receiving the diadem from the hands of an anthropomorphic deity could not have been active iconoclasts.

Let us now examine the evidence for this “Sasanian iconoclasm,” which Boyce claims to be “fairly abundant, from diverse sources.”³⁹ According to the Armenian historian Movses Xorenac‘i, after the victory over the Armenian Arsacids Ardašīr I destroyed the statues of the Armenian gods at Artashat, while keeping the “fire of Ormizd” burning:

He [Ardašīr] increased the cults of the temples and ordered the fire of Ormizd, which was on the altar at Bagavan, to be kept perpetually burning. But the statues that Vaļarshak had set up as the images of his ancestors with those of the sun and the moon at Armavir, and which had been transferred from Armavir to Bagaran and then brought to Artashat, these Artashir broke up.⁴⁰

These actions, however, were not motivated by iconoclasm, since according to the *Letter of Tansar*,⁴¹ Ardašīr also extinguished fires from the fire-temples:

Next to what you said, that the King of Kings has taken away fires from the fire-temples, extinguished them and blotted them out, and that no one has ever before presumed so far against religion; know that the case is not so grievous, but has been wrongly reported to you. The truth is that after Darius each of the “kings of the peoples” built his own fire-temple. This was pure innovation, introduced by them without the authority of kings of old. The King of Kings has razed the temples, and confiscated the endowments, and had the fires carried back to their places of origin.⁴²

These acts of Ardašīr are better understood as efforts towards centralization and unification of the cult by suppressing *any* public religious activities, sacred fires and cultic statues alike, associated with the previous dynasties and rulers that were overthrown by the founder of the Sasanian Empire.⁴³ While in some cases the fires could be appropriated and integrated into the new royal cult, the statues had no place in the aniconic Sasanian cult and were therefore destroyed. The “fire of Ormizd” at Bagavan was thus simply rededicated to the new ruler, Ardašīr, and kept burning. This was not a religiously motivated iconoclasm. Instead, Ardašīr’s actions follow a traditional Near Eastern pattern, which was always politically motivated and directed against images from other cultures. It is only after the advent of

38. See below.

39. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 66 n. 71.

40. Movsēs Xorenac‘i 2.77, ed. and tr. by Thomson 1980: 225.

41. This “Letter” is a curious document that survived only in the thirteenth-century New Persian translation but was perhaps written in the early Sasanian period and edited under Xusrō II. For the English translation, see Boyce 1968.

42. Boyce 1968: 47.

43. See also De Jong 2006: 234–35.

the monotheistic religions that theologically based iconoclasm became possible. But “in the epoch before the second commandment no destruction of the images of one’s own culture, such as Byzantine iconoclasm, the breaking of *jahilliyya* idols by Muhammad, or *Bildersturm* of the Reformation was possible.”⁴⁴

The king’s second motivation was probably purely materialistic and economic. Plundering the treasures assembled in these sanctuaries provided him with huge amounts of money.⁴⁵ Ravaging and raiding the temples in order to seize the enormous wealth they had accumulated was a common ancient Near Eastern practice. Therefore, Ardašīr’s assault against the Armenian sanctuaries was part of a larger offensive program directed against temples in formerly Parthian domains in order to subdue and take over the cult throughout his newly established empire.

Additional important evidence put forward by Boyce to support her theory is supplied by the historians of the Islamic period, chiefly al-Mas‘ūdī (896–956 C.E.) and al-Shahrestānī (1086–1153 C.E.), who preserve a tradition that some fire-temples in western Iran were converted from idol-shrines. The former writes that the great fire-temple of Eṣṭaqr had originally housed idols. These were later removed and the building was turned into a fire-temple during the reign of queen Homāy.⁴⁶ When al-Mas‘ūdī visited the ruins of the sanctuary, he found it surrounded by a large temenos wall decorated with skillfully carved anthropomorphic reliefs, which were interpreted by the locals as the “images of prophets.”⁴⁷ However, the ruins described by the Muslim historian likely belong not to the Sasanian fire-temple, but to the Achaemenid platform of Persepolis, as can be deduced from his descriptions of typical Persepolitan columns and the “anthropomorphic reliefs” that seem to refer to the famous processions of tributary peoples from the *apadana*.

Another “image-temple” was located near Isfahan on the top of a mountain called Mārbīn. Al-Mas‘ūdī records that when the king Vištāsp embraced Zoroastrianism he removed the idols and converted it into a fire-temple.⁴⁸ The famous Sasanian sanctuary of Ādur Gušnasp (Taḳt-e Solaymān) was also transformed, according to al-Mas‘ūdī, from an idol-temple to a fire-temple by Xusrō I Anōšīravān.⁴⁹ He also tells us about a fire-temple called *dj.rīsh* in Qūmis, Gurgān.⁵⁰ Al-Mas‘ūdī reports that this was formerly the place of the great ancient city which housed a magnificent idol-temple. The city was destroyed and replaced with the fire-temple. When Alexander of Macedon captured this temple, he kept the eternal fire burning and did not extinguish it.

Al-Shahrestānī in his book on religions and sects writes of an enmity between “idol-worshippers” and “fire-worshippers” and states that some idol-sanctuaries were transformed by the latter into fire-temples.⁵¹

The same *topos* of replacing idol-temples with fire-temples is also found in the *Shāh-nāma*. Esfandiār, commissioned by his father Goštāsp to spread the Zoroastrian faith, managed to convince many to burn their idols and to kindle fire in their place.⁵² It is also interesting to

44. May 2012: 12.

45. De Jong 2006: 232–33.

46. Mas‘ūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, vol. 2, 1403. See also Schippmann 1971: 200–203.

47. Mas‘ūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, vol. 2, 1403.

48. Mas‘ūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, vol. 2, 1373. The same story is reported also by Shahrestānī, *Livre des religions et des sects*, vol. 2, 1224.

49. Mas‘ūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, vol. 2, 1400.

50. Mas‘ūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, vol. 2, 1401. For this temple and the remains of the Sasanian building excavated at the site, which might be identified with it, see Schippmann 1971: 8–11.

51. Shahrestānī, *Livre des religions et des sects*, vol. 2, 1224.

52. Ferdowsī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988/2008, vol. 5, 154, b. 842.

note that al-Bīrūnī writes that, before the appearance of Zoroaster, almost the entire Iranian world from Khurasan to Iraq followed the religion of Shamaniyya (Buddhism), which he and other Islamic authors strongly associate with idolatry.⁵³

It would be reasonable to suppose that this narrative of conversion of idol-temples into fire-temples, found in Pahlavi literature, Islamic historians, and the *Shāh-nāma*, ultimately derives from the same Sasanian source (*Xwadāy-nāmag?*). Interestingly, these reports for the most part ascribe this “iconoclastic activity” not to the historical Sasanian kings, but to Iranian mythical figures. I suggest that these accounts, rather than preserving a kernel of historical truth, reflect the aspirations of the late Sasanians to place themselves in the camp of battlers against idols in order to appropriate the Abrahamic, monotheistic *topos* of “idolatry” for themselves.⁵⁴

The narrative of Zoroastrianism as the replacement and active opponent of idol worship was enthusiastically adopted and further developed by early Muslim authors, since it suited perfectly the Islamic idea of *jāhiliyya*, the pre-Islamic state of ignorance and idolatry that preceded the revelation of Islam. It was naturally accepted that, just as Islam originated in an environment in which idolatry and lack of faith prevailed, so too Zoroastrianism was formed against a similar background. Of course, the Islamic tradition itself made use of characteristically monotheistic literary themes describing the idolatry of pre-Islamic Arabia.⁵⁵

KARTĪR AND THE “IDOLS”

As we have already seen, the Middle Persian literature contains explicit prohibitions against idol-worship (*uzdēs*, *but*). However, these terms are never defined, and nowhere is it explained just what cultic practices and objects, and the icons of which religious communities, were considered *uzdēs* and *but*. Did this term refer only to the divine statues venerated by the Babylonian pagans, Buddhists, Hindus, Manichaeans, and Sogdians? Did it also refer to Christians or adherents of other Iranian religions in which statues were worshiped as embodiments of the divine? Only once, in the short Middle Persian text *Shā-Wahrām*, are idol-temples mentioned together with other sacred buildings, namely mosques.

The word *uzdēs* is already employed in the era before the codification of the Pahlavi texts, although it does not predate the Sasanian period. The Old Iranian word **uzdaēsa*, reconstructed by Boyce as the early form of the Middle Persian *uzdēs*,⁵⁶ is not actually found in the Old Persian lexicon. In fact, the earliest certain attestation of *uzdēs* is encountered in the inscription of the eminent Zoroastrian priest Kartīr, who played a major role in the religious and political administration of the Sasanian Empire in the second half of the third century C.E.⁵⁷ Proudly enumerating his achievements, Kartīr proclaimed that, through his actions, Jews (*yahūd*), Buddhists (*šaman*), Hindus (*brahman*), Christians (*kristiyān*), Nazoreans (*nāzarā*), Baptists? (*magdag*), and Manicheans (*zandīg*) were “struck down” (*zad*)⁵⁸ and

uzdēs gugānīh ud gilistag ī dēwān wišōbīh ud yazdān gāh ud nišēm āgīriy.

idols were destroyed and the dwellings of the demons demolished and the places (thrones) and the seats of the gods were established (§11).⁵⁹

53. See Crone 2012.

54. See below.

55. See the study by Hawting 1999.

56. Boyce 1975: 96.

57. On Kartīr, see now Skjærvø 2011a. For the French edition of Kartīr’s inscriptions, see Gignoux 1991.

58. For a recent discussion of the *nāzarā* and *magdag*, whose exact meaning is problematic, see De Blois 2002: 5–16.

59. I am following the division of the passages given in Skjærvø 2011a.

It is not clear what exactly “striking down” means here and what in fact happened to the members of these religious minorities as a result of Kartīr’s actions. It seems safe to exclude large-scale, violent persecutions, since these are not documented by any external source, although there are some traces in the Christian accounts and in the Talmudic literature of possible religious tensions and anxiety in the Sasanian Empire of this period.⁶⁰

Kartīr’s inscriptions are very complex documents obscured by various contextual problems, and at times they are very difficult to understand because of their uniqueness. They are rife with explicit religious terminology and were not intended to be read as annals commemorating actual historical events. What is significant for our enquiry is that Kartīr makes clear the association between “striking down” non-Zoroastrians and the destruction of idols. However, it remains ambiguous whether these *uzdēs* were worshipped by the adherents of the abovementioned non-Zoroastrian cults or by some other people, not named in the inscriptions.

The destruction of the idols is followed in Kartīr’s inscription by the demolition of certain “dwellings of demons” (*gīlistag ī dēwān*). Nothing in the Avesta appears to suggest that demons are to be associated with actual deities venerated by other people, whether non-Iranians or Iranians whose religious views differed from the Avestan doctrine. In fact, the first clear proclamation that *dēws* are foreign gods of (unspecified) gentile people is the famous “*daiva* inscription” of the Achaemenid king Xerxes.⁶¹ It might not be wrong to suggest that Kartīr gives this term a similar meaning. But are the demons to which Kartīr refers to be identified with the gods of the Jews, Buddhists, and others whose cult was also characterized by the worship of idols? This was obviously apparent to Kartīr himself and his contemporaries, but unfortunately it is no longer so to us. I propose to try to answer this question by examining the prevalence of pictorial representations of the divine in each of the communities said to be “struck down” through the actions of the Sasanian high priest.

Judaism is of course most famous for its rigorous *Bilderverbot*.⁶² It is undisputed that throughout their history Jews have had a great disdain for the religious imagery associated with gentiles. However, in Late Antiquity, especially from the fourth century C.E. on, they often tolerated and made use of figural imagery, particularly, but not only, of specifically Jewish character.⁶³ The lavish and extravagant anthropomorphic imagery of the Dura Europos synagogue, which is dated to the early stages of Kartīr’s career, indicates that other synagogues in Mesopotamia and Iran (which are unfortunately completely unknown archaeologically) may have been decorated in a similar fashion.⁶⁴ However, Jewish worship was certainly not centered on these or other figural representations.

The Buddha was probably sporadically represented anthropomorphically at quite an early date (first century B.C.E.—first century C.E.), and there is ample evidence that human-shaped images existed from the late second century C.E., becoming more widespread and acceptable by the third century C.E.⁶⁵ By Kartīr’s time, Buddhists had already made use of anthropomorphic divine imagery, but definitely not to the same extent as in later centuries.

60. Herman 2012: 42–43.

61. See Briant 2002: 550–53.

62. The literature on this subject is immense. For the Israelite and the First Temple periods, see Mettinger 1995. For the Second Temple period Fine 2005: 69–81 and Levine 2012: 64–65, who argues for the “total ban” on figural art.

63. Levine 2012: 69.

64. For a detailed description of the iconographic program of the Dura Europos synagogue, see Hachlili 1998: 96–198. For recent discussion, see also Levine 2012: 70–79 and 97–118.

65. See Karlsson 2000; Mkrtychev 2002: 48–56; Seckel 2004.

Like the Avestan cult, Vedic ritual was also aniconic. Figural depictions of the Hindu gods only gradually developed in the Kushan period, and the earliest archaeological evidence for the existence of Hindu divine images made of stone is only from the second-third centuries C.E.⁶⁶ Therefore, in the third century C.E., the practice of idolatry among Hindus was probably considerably less widespread than in later periods.

The Christians had already developed a quite rich symbolic language of artistic expression before Constantine.⁶⁷ Portraits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various saints were certainly in existence from at least the fourth century. Especially noteworthy is the house-church at Dura Europos, which, like the synagogue in the same city, was decorated with figurative paintings.⁶⁸ However, some recent studies claim that references to such portraits are infrequent until as late as the seventh century, and only those images that were also associated with relics were held to possess divine powers.⁶⁹ Although the veneration of images was never as significant in the Church of the East as it was in Byzantium, the Syriac Christians were not aniconic.⁷⁰

Images were traditionally revered by the Church of the East, although the first literary evidence for their veneration is only from the sixth century.⁷¹ The Armenian Church was also never actively and programmatically opposed to images, although the Armenians tended to revere the cross more than images, in contrast to the Byzantines and Georgians.⁷² Therefore, in Kartīr's era, the churches of various Christian denominations were most likely devoid of statues or "icons" that were believed to possess miraculous powers and thus subject to veneration, but these structures may have contained a wealth of painted figural representations that were not, however, in the center of the cultic activities.

In Manichaeism, sacred images of the religion's founder, Mani, and probably of other divine characters as well, were certainly known. However, evidence for their integration into the Manichaean cult is inadequate and for the most part late.⁷³ It appears safe to assume that during the lifetime of Kartīr, who was a contemporary of Mani, in Manichaeism this practice was probably nonexistent or, at most, in its infancy.

Summing up this brief survey, although some of the religious communities in the late third century C.E. made restricted use of figural divine iconography, especially paintings, the employment of free-standing cultic statues (*uzdēs* as defined by Boyce) or any other cultic pictorial representation of the divine was quite limited or even non-existent. In fact, the Sasanian armies and delegates had a far greater likelihood of encountering idols and anthropomorphic imagery focal to the cult among cultures and peoples *not* mentioned in Kartīr's list. These were, primarily, the Bactrians, among whom the Kushan tradition of image-worship and erecting statues of divinities in temples was undoubtedly sustained in the Kushano-Sasanian period; the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking population of Mesopotamia, who continued to worship the ancient Mesopotamian and Greek gods; and the inhabitants of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, where the majority of the population still kept to

66. Davis 2001: 108.

67. See the categorization of early Christian pictorial representations, with extensive bibliography, in Snyder 2003.

68. Snyder 2003: 128–34.

69. Brubacker and Haldon 2011: 36.

70. Dalmais 1987; Parry 1996: 144.

71. Teule 2007: 346.

72. Der Nersessian 1946.

73. Klimkeit 2001. Mani is credited with creating a book called *Ārzhang* (*Eikōn*), which contained colorful illustrations of his doctrine. Those, however, did not serve as cultic images.

their polytheistic, iconocentric cults. It is noteworthy therefore that these peoples are entirely missing from Kartīr's list, which instead seems to concentrate on adherents of monotheistic and dualistic traditions (with the notable exception of the Hindu).

Thus there are two possible understandings of the *uzdēs* in Kartīr's inscription. The first is to attribute the word to those religious denominations and communities *not* specifically mentioned, who in the third century C.E. indeed made active use of cultic imagery and, most notably, of statues. Such an interpretation implies that *uzdēs* necessarily refers to statues and that Kartīr made a theological distinction between adherents of different religions according to whether or not their religious practice was centered on the veneration of idols. This interpretation, while having its advantages, seems rather far-fetched.

Instead, since "striking down" various religious communities probably reflects Kartīr's triumphs in theological disputes rather than violent persecutions,⁷⁴ it is perhaps better to assume that *uzdēs* is employed here as a generic, polemical, derogatory name for religious opponents, just as it is employed in Pahlavi literature. According to Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, who discussed the concept of "idolatry" in Jewish thought, and to Jan Assmann, who studied the biblical idol-ban, "idolatry" is a term denoting a false religion, involving erroneous notions of the god. This provided a recognizable way to separate false religions from the true (Israelite) religion, thus shaping its distinctiveness against the gentiles.⁷⁵ Assmann further suggested naming this the "Mosaic Distinction," since biblical tradition attributes it to Moses.⁷⁶ Within the framework of this distinction, idolatry "does not merely denote a certain religious attitude based on the worship of 'idols' or images," but is "a polemical term which expresses a strong cultural/religious abomination and anxiety." He proceeds to conclude that "idolatry is the umbrella term for what must be warded off by all means." It is an ultimate religious watershed between "right" and "wrong,"⁷⁷ and a "thick wall that separates the non-pagans from pagans."⁷⁸

I believe that *uzdēs* is invoked by Kartīr with exactly the same purpose and meaning. The term was probably coined in the early Sasanian period as a part of the response that Zoroastrianism had to formulate against the challenge of the monotheistic religions, the first of these being various Christian sects and the Manichaean faith referred to in Kartīr's inscription. The concept of "idolatry" as the embodiment of evil and false religion probably entered the Zoroastrian vocabulary via Christianity. The Christians saw themselves as the "True Israel" and, in a sense, the worthy heirs of the Israelite "Mosaic Distinction." The adoption of this concept may have assisted the Sasanian clergy in opposing the exclusiveness and the attraction of Christianity, puncturing the Christian polarization of the world between "us" and "them" and depriving Christian missionaries of one of their powerful arguments. The adoption of this notion of "idolatry" was intended to convince Persians subject to enthusiastic Christian and Manichaean proselytizing that the Zoroastrian faith is actually on the "good side" and

74. As suggested by Skjærvø 2011b.

75. Halbertal and Margalit 1992; Assmann 1997.

76. Assmann 1997: 1. Before this "Mosaic Distinction," "different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship" (Assmann 1997: 3). Unfortunately, Iranian data (especially Xerxes's anti-daevic inscription), which despite its historical and philological problematic might call this thesis into question, is absent from Assmann's discussion. For a critical evaluation of Assmann's reading of the biblical text and his interpretation of the image of Egypt in the Bible as the quintessence of idolatry, which however does not concern us here, see Tugenhaft 2012.

77. Assmann 1997: 42. See also Assmann 2011.

78. Halbertal and Margalit 1992: 236.

is also an adversary of “idolatry.”⁷⁹ This rendered the “Mosaic Distinction,” and hence the Christian polemics, ineffective.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the Pahlavi expression *uzdēs-parastih* (“idol-worship”), which appears for the first time in the Middle Persian literature, is a translation of the Greek εἰδωλολατρεία, which has exactly the same meaning and is the origin of the English “idolatry.” As we have already seen, this expression—especially its negative connotations—was alien to the Avestan, Achaemenid, and Parthian worldview and also made little sense within the framework of Graeco-Roman culture. Aside from criticism occasionally voiced by philosophers and intellectuals against divine representations, a real iconoclastic movement never evolved in the Graeco-Roman world. Εἰδωλολατρεία belongs to the vocabulary of explicitly Christian terminology and is encountered for the first time in the New Testament.⁸⁰ Therefore, it is plausible that the Pahlavi *uzdēs-parastih* might be a calque of the Christian term. The Sasanian theologians may have adopted this term from the Syriac-speaking Christians, who called it *ptakrūtā*, *pūlhānā da-ptakre*, *dehlat ptakre*, and *segdat šalme*.

In a similar manner to Kartīr’s inscriptions, the Middle Persian texts also make “idol-worship” synonymous with “demon worship” (*dēwēzagih*).⁸¹ This latter term is never actually defined,⁸² and neither are such epithets as *ag-dēn* and *duš-dēn* (“bad/evil religion”) that are commonly used in the Zoroastrian writings. All of these terms could probably “be applied quite freely to opponents within or without the official boundaries of Zoroastrianism.”⁸³

Most of the derogatory terminology employed in the Zoroastrian texts against their religious adversaries, such as the *ag-dēn* and *duš-dēn* mentioned above, as well as *an-ēr* (“non-Iranian”), *dēwēs* (“demon-worshipper”), *jādūg* (“sorcerer”), and *ahlomoy* (“heretic/apostate”), are drawn from the Avesta.⁸⁴ *Uzdēs* clearly stands apart from this list, as it is completely absent from the Avestan texts. This serves as another argument for the borrowing of this term from an external (Christian) source.

As noted by Albert de Jong, the Zoroastrian polemics that label every non-Zoroastrian as a demon-worshipper arose in reaction to the threat of missionary religions (most notably, Christianity and Manichaeism) that made efforts to convert Iranians to their creed.⁸⁵ Calling adherents of these religions “idol-worshippers,” which undoubtedly served a similar purpose, was to turn their own weapon against them.⁸⁶

In summary, “idol-worship,” “demon worship,” and “bad/evil religion” appear to be undefined polemical terms that could be applied to any religious tradition deemed alien by the Zoroastrian priesthood. All these categories and sub-categories were intended mostly for “Zoroastrian self-definition *per negationem*,” through the idea of what is excluded.⁸⁷ While “demon worship” and “bad/evil religion” were rooted in the Avestan texts, “idol” and “idol-worship” were adopted in the Sasanian period from Christian vocabulary, as a reaction against Christian missionary activity.

79. See the already cited passage from *DkM* 551.13–15.

80. Ep.Gal.5.20; 1Ep.Cor.10.14. Besançon 2000: 65.

81. Boyce 1975: 97–98.

82. De Jong 2010: 87.

83. Shaked 2008: 112.

84. De Jong 2004: 61.

85. De Jong 2003: 26.

86. In Shaked’s words (1998: 85): “A polemical situation is one in which one strives to speak to the opponent in a language which he will not only understand, but accept, and consequently perhaps concede defeat.”

87. De Jong 2003: 22.

IDOL-TEMPLES

De Jong finds in Kartīr's inscription "valuable indications of a state-wide program of closing temples dedicated to named deities other than Ahura-Mazda, possibly containing images of these gods . . ."88 In my opinion, the first part of this statement does not follow from the inscription itself, and the second part is contradicted by Kartīr's proclamation that at the apogee of his career he was appointed by Wahrām II, the *ēwēnbed* ("master of manners/protocol") of the fire-temple of "Lady Anāhītā" at Eṣṭakr, of which Sasanians were the hereditary custodians.⁸⁹

Although we have the attestation of *uzdēs* in Kartīr's inscription, the word *uzdēszār* ("idol-temple") is not encountered outside Middle Persian literature. It has been suggested that Iranian temples containing cultic imagery, which were in this way distinct from the aniconic fire-temples, were labeled by the terms derived from Proto-Iranian **bagina*, "(place) belonging to god."⁹⁰ Until recently, **bagina* was reconstructed based on Armenian *bagin*, Bactrian **baγan*, Sogdian *vaγn* (βγn-), and a place in Aria called Τριβαζίνα mentioned in the second century C.E. by Claudius Ptolemy in his *Geography* (7.17.8).⁹¹ In addition, the Parthian inscription engraved on the bronze statue of Hercules (Vərəθraγna) found in 1984 at Seleucia on the Tigris and dated to 151 C.E. tells us that it was dedicated to the temple (*bagin*) of Tīr.⁹² Important new evidence comes from one of the recently published fourth-century-B.C.E. Aramaic documents from Bactria, which makes mention of the "libation for the temple (*bagina*), to Bel" (*zwtr* 'l bgn' lbyl).⁹³ This constitutes the earliest attestation of **bagina*, probably a loanword from Old Persian.

It was further argued that the words derived from **bagina* in different Iranian languages are explicitly associated with temples containing divine images; thus they are usually translated as "idol-temples" or "image-temples."⁹⁴ *De facto*, this is undoubtedly true in Armenian, Bactrian, Sogdian, and perhaps also in Parthian cases, as their sanctuaries certainly contained cultic images. However, the use of this terminology in the translation carries negative connotations that are appropriate only for the context of the Pahlavi books, as they speak towards a category of "idolatry" that only makes any sense from a hostile, monotheistic perspective. It is only for the outside observer, who considers himself anti-idolic and negatively predisposed towards images, that the sanctuaries of Armenians, Bactrians, and Sogdians would be "idol-temples." For the Armenians, Bactrians, and Sogdians themselves, this term in their own languages probably meant nothing more than simply "temple."

Furthermore, even the all-encompassing translation of **bagina* as "temple" may not always be correct. Since no cultic buildings or structures existed in Indo-Iranian religion and none are attested in the Avesta or Rig Veda, it could equally denote a sacred precinct dedicated to the divine, where rites, rituals, and sacrifices were carried out under the open sky. After the appearance of temples among some Iranians, the terms derived from **bagina* were probably applied to closed buildings as well,⁹⁵ but it is just as probable that among

88. De Jong 2012: 19.

89. Gignoux 1991: 49, 69 n. 132.

90. Boyce 1975: 99; Boyce 1982: 227; Grenet 1988;

91. See Weber 1988: 493–94.

92. Bernard 1990.

93. Naveh and Shaked 2012: C1:37.

94. Boyce 1975: 99; Boyce 1982: 227; Grenet 1988; Grenet and Azarnouche 2012: 160.

95. The earliest dated Iranian temple was excavated at the Median site of Tepe Nush-i Jan. See Stronach and Roaf 2007. On the genesis and evolution of Iranian temples, see Shenkar 2007 and 2011.

certain Iranian peoples and in certain periods it continued to designate an outdoor place sacred to the gods.

In Armenian, *bagin* was used interchangeably with other terms for temple (for instance *mehean*) and was also frequently found merely with the meaning “altar.”⁹⁶ In Bactrian and Sogdian, **βaγan* and *vayn* (*βγn-*) never carry any negative connotations and are never juxtaposed with other forms of sanctuaries.

The association of **bagina* with “idol-temple” presupposes a contrast with the “fire-temple,” which probably never existed in eastern Iran. It is only from the perspective of aniconic Sasanian Zoroastrianism that we can call **bagina* an “idol-temple”—that is, “idol-temple” only makes sense as an opposition to a “fire-temple.” Therefore, the translation of **bagina* in these languages as “the abodes of idols” is only legitimate for the Sasanian Zoroastrian texts.

Intriguingly, the word deriving from **bagina* (Middle Persian *bašn*) is almost absent from Middle Persian literature and is never found in the texts dealing specifically with theology or with religious or ritual prescriptions, which comprise the overwhelming majority of the entire corpus of Middle Persian literature. The “Sasanian iconoclasm” and the suppression of any forms of cult different from aniconic fire-worship have been considered responsible for this absence.⁹⁷ In fact, *bašn* is attested twice in the Middle Persian texts. The first attestation comes from a fragment of the Manichaen polemical text M 219 V, in which we find *bašnbedān* (“*bašn* priests”) in charge of the *uzdēs-zār* (“idol-temple”). As with the *uzdēs-zār* of the Zoroastrian texts, it is not clear with which religion the sanctuary being referred to is affiliated. The *bašnbedān*, in this context, can denote anyone whom the Manichaen polemicists deemed “idol-worshippers”—that is, simply devotees of the wrong gods, such as the adherents of the “traditional” Sogdian religion.

The second attestation of *bašn*, one often overlooked, is found in the Middle Persian geographical treatise *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* 7:

pas gīzistag frāsiyāk ī tūr harw ēk nišēmag ī dēwān ud uzdēs-zār-ēw ud bašn pad-eš kard.

Then the accursed Frāsiyāk, the Tūrānian, made seats for each of the demons, and an idol-temple (*uzdēs-zār*) and a *bašn*.

Touraj Daryaee in his edition of this text translates *bašn* as “a heathen temple.”⁹⁸ It is important to note that here, too, *bašn* is mentioned alongside *uzdēs-zār*, and both these sanctuaries were situated in eastern Iran, probably in Sogdiana, which was mentioned in the previous passage.

Thus, although *bašn* exists in Middle Persian, it is extremely rare and it is undoubtedly significant that neither of the two texts in which it is found belongs to the genre of Zoroastrian theological, liturgical, or ritual literature. *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* is a geographical text with numerous mythological allusions and M 219 V belongs to the Manichaean faith. Therefore, it is quite clear that *bašn* was not employed by the Zoroastrian priesthood in religious texts—although it is hard to tell why. They could have effectively put this term to use as an insulting designation of their religious opponents, just as they did with *uzdēs-zār*. If we suppose that they deliberately avoided *bašn* and replaced it with *uzdēs-zār*, we still cannot give a reasonable answer as to why this happened, since in the two above-mentioned fragments the words appear to be synonymous.

96. Russell 1987: 504. It is also found in Georgian with the meaning “house of prayer,” “altar.” It is noteworthy that, in the Life of St. Nino, the synagogue of the Jews in Mc’xet’a is called *bagini*. See Lerner 2004: 183.

97. Boyce 1975: 99; Grenet 1988.

98. Although other readings have also been suggested; see Daryaee 2002: 34.

As we have seen, both attestations of *bašn* in the Middle Persian are associated with eastern Iran. But did anything called *bagina* ever exist in western Iran too? The Parthian and the Armenian *bagin* seem to provide a positive answer. There is also some additional indirect evidence that apparently supports this. First, we find the *bagina* of Bel in the Bactrian Aramaic documents, which most probably borrowed the word from the Old Persian language. We know that the Achaemenids called their gods *baga*, and since the royal, “representative” Achaemenid cult was normally conducted in special places in the open air, and not in enclosed temples, they might have called some of these sacred precincts **bagina* or, alternatively, **bagadāna*.⁹⁹ This latter word—which, like **bagina*, is derived from *baga-* (god)—is attested in Bactrian (βαγολαγγο <* bagadāna-ka) “temple”¹⁰⁰ and in Aramaic magic texts, where it came to mean a certain category of demons.¹⁰¹

De Jong has suggested (confusing **bagadāna* and **bagina*) that this is how the temples supposedly destroyed by Ardašīr were referred to.¹⁰² Besides *bagin*, the Parthians also employed *āyazan* (Old Persian *āyadana*), attested in the four documents from Nisa.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, on the basis of the available evidence we are not in a position to tell whether different words used also implied differences in cult or in type of structure.

Therefore, it is entirely plausible that sanctuaries called *bagin* existed in western Iran during the Parthian period, although no toponyms in this region seem to contain this word.¹⁰⁴ In the Middle Persian language, it might have been used as a specific reference to Sogdian and perhaps also to Bactrian temples, which were certainly viewed by the Sasanians as essentially different from their own fire-temples. The fact that the only two attestations of *bašn* relate to the eastern Iranian world may indicate that the absence of *bašn* in the main corpus of Pahlavi literature is due to the fact that it is not concerned with Bactria and Sogdiana.

SASANIAN VISUAL CULTURE

As we have seen, there is no literary evidence for any theologically motivated, “iconoclastic” activity of the Sasanians, nor do we find any debates against idols and their use in the Middle Persian books. At the same time, it is indisputable that Zoroastrianism as formulated and understood by these sources clearly appears as a *de facto* aniconic religion, devoid of anthropomorphic statues.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Muslim authors, who always specifically emphasized idols captured during campaigns in Transoxiana, did not mention even one idol taken in western Iran. In cases in which statues are mentioned by the Muslim historians, they in all probability refer to secular, non-divine images. For instance, according to al-Ṭabarī, when the Muslims conquered Ctesiphon they captured a statue embellished with precious stones.¹⁰⁶ In the Great Hall of the palace of the Sasanian kings (Ṭāq-e Kesrā) the Arabs found plaster

99. (Other?) sacred places were also called *āyadana*, mentioned once in the Behestūn inscription of Darius I (DB 1.63f).

100. In the Surkh Kotal and Rabatak (lines 8, 5, 20) inscriptions: Henning 1956; Sims-Williams and Cribb 1996.

101. Shaked 1985: 514–20.

102. De Jong 2006: 237.

103. Livshits 2010: 117.

104. This is in sharp contrast with the Sogdian evidence, where a number of toponyms preserve the word *βγn*. Smirnova 1971 lists thirty toponyms containing *βγn* and *βγ*. See also Lurje 2004: 212–13.

105. Although Olga Chunakova thinks that the phrase *pēš Mihr ēst* (“stand before Mithra”), from *Andarz-i Ādurbād-i Mahrspandān* 134, ed. and tr. Chunakova 1991: 45, 81, testifies to the existence of the statues of Mithra in Sasanian Iran.

106. Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 13, 39–40, ed. and tr. Juynboll 1989.

statues of men and horses, which they did not destroy but rather left as they were. Even later, when it had been converted into a prayer hall, the statues still remained standing there.¹⁰⁷ Additional statuettes of equestrians made of silver and gold and embellished with precious stones, which were attached to the Sasanian royal crown, were also captured by the Arabs.¹⁰⁸ This information, while indirectly confirming the aniconic nature of the late Sasanian cult, indicates that figural representations existed and were exhibited in public.

Let us now turn to the archaeological and artistic evidence. Analyzing the role of figural representations in the Sasanian cultural space is a complex and multifaceted problem hampered by the paucity of sources. However, it is beyond doubt that sculpture in the round was clearly part of both the public and private domains in Sasanian Iran. Notable examples are the colossus of Šāpūr I in the cave near Bīšāpūr and another statue of Šāpūr I that once stood at the main intersection of the same city.¹⁰⁹

In contrast with some early Islamic or Christian sanctuaries, no Sasanian temple has been preserved with its original decoration still intact. Furthermore, dispiritingly few Sasanian fire-temples have been subjected to systematic archaeological investigations and none of these has produced any figural ornamentation *in situ*. Archaeologically, the best-known site is Taḳt-e Solaymān in Iranian Azerbaijan. The site is identified with Ādur Gušnasp, one of the three principal sanctuaries of Late Sasanian Iran.¹¹⁰ The German team that conducted the excavations of the site uncovered fragments of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic stucco reliefs in the fill under the floors of the last Sasanian phase of the temple.¹¹¹ According to the excavator, these demonstrated that the sanctuary, the palace, and even the altar room itself carried figural stucco decorations.¹¹² There can be little doubt that these fragments indeed belonged to the previous level of the temple, which was probably destroyed by the troops of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 624 C.E.

However, we must also entertain the possibility that the soil used for the fill was brought from elsewhere at the site, and in such a case it would be impossible to verify where exactly the reliefs were originally set up. The most plausible such origin would be the ornamental program of the palace or of the main tetrastyle hall. In any case, they certainly do not originate from the altar room, where the sacred, ever-burning fire was constantly sustained. The walls in these rooms in fire-temples would inevitably become sooty and were therefore probably never decorated.

Accounts of Heraclius' campaign against the Sasanians present a curious description of the figural paintings that the Byzantine Emperor encountered at Taḳt-e Solaymān. Cedrenus, based on the account of Theophanes, writes:

And after the conquest of the town of Gaznaca, where the fire-temple, treasure of Craesus king of the Lydes, and the false veneration of charcoal were located, when he entered there, (Heraclius) found the abominable image of Cosroes, his figure in the domed chamber of the palace, as though he were enthroned in heaven and around it the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars, to which ones (the Persian king) was paying a superstitious fear as he were serving the gods, and placed round angels bearing scepters to him. He (i.e., Cosroes), fighting against God, had arranged a machine which from that place let drops of rain fall and produced sounds like that of thunders.¹¹³

107. Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 13, 23. For the stucco decorations from Ṭāq-e Kesrā, see Kröger 1982: 13–18.

108. Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 13, 28. See also Shalem 1994: 78.

109. Callieri 2009: 52.

110. Huff 1978, 2002, 2011.

111. See Kröger 1982: 141–48.

112. Huff 2002.

113. Panaino 2004: 563–64.

Nikephoros also reports on the same episode:

In one of these (temples of fire) it was discovered that Xosroes, making himself into a god, had put up his own picture on the ceiling, as if he were seated in heaven, and had fabricated the stars, the sun and the moon, and angels standing round him, and a mechanism for producing thunder and rain whenever he so wished.¹¹⁴

From these descriptions, it can be deduced that the painting in question was probably situated in the palatial and not in the sacral part of the temple.

Another Sasanian edifice that may also have had a religious function is the large complex located at the northern limits of Bišāpūr, where the famous mosaics with Dionysiac scenes were excavated.¹¹⁵ However, which activities took place in the rooms decorated with mosaics is unknown, and they too probably did not belong to the spaces where religious ceremonies involving the sacred fire were performed.¹¹⁶

Most interesting and relevant for our enquiry are a set of eight Sasanian column capitals with figural representations that were gathered from different locations but clearly form a single typological group. Six of them are currently kept in a park adjacent to the Ṭāq-i Bustān monument, one is at Čehel Sotun Palace in Isfahan, and the last is at the Irān-e bāstān Museum in Tehran.¹¹⁷ They are carved with a similar motif of various deities extending a diadem. On the opposite side, the capitals are decorated with the representation of a Sasanian king stretching out his arm (for the diadem), or with a floral ornament. Unfortunately, they do not have an archaeological context and one can only guess at whether they originate from temples or from palatial complexes. We therefore currently have no reliable data for the ornamental program of the “sacral” rooms of the Sasanian temples where the actual rituals were performed. Figural imagery was definitely present in the sanctuary complexes, but concerning whether it was limited to the “secular” spaces (as in the Umayyad princely establishments, regarding which see below) or was also present in the ceremonial or cultic areas, there is no certainty.

In secular architecture, both public and private edifices reveal a wealth of figural stucco decorations.¹¹⁸ Several examples are especially noteworthy: the anthropomorphic stucco and sculptures uncovered in the manor house at Hājīābād;¹¹⁹ the Sasanian building at Kiš, which was embellished with zoomorphic and human-shaped images, including royal busts; and the walls of the central tetrastyle hall at the recently excavated Sasanian complex at Bandiān in northern Khorasan, which were covered with stucco reliefs depicting cultic and ritual compositions and scenes of hunt, banquet, and battle.¹²⁰ This last was dated by the excavator, Mehdi Rahbar, to the fifth century and interpreted as a fire-temple.¹²¹ However, Philippe Gignoux has convincingly demonstrated that Bandiān was probably a residence of the local *marzbān*, with a private “chapel” where the small fire-altar was sustained.¹²² Among other important public buildings, we should also mention the enclosure walls of

114. Panaino 2004: 564.

115. Callieri 2009: 54; 2011.

116. They could have served for the celebration of a feast, as convincingly argued by Callieri 2011.

117. Compareti 2006.

118. See Kröger 1982, who has assembled and studied stucco fragments from several Sasanian sites; see especially 248–55.

119. Azarnoush 1994.

120. Rahbar 1998, 2004, 2007, 2011.

121. Rahbar 2007: 455.

122. Gignoux 2008.

Palais B at Bīšāpūr, which were decorated with blocks bearing reliefs of charging equestrians and standing figures.¹²³

None of the Sasanian statues, stucco decorations, or reliefs surveyed above can be shown to represent a divinity. However, architecture is not the only medium of Sasanian artistic expression. Coins, seals, silverware, and textiles, too, are exceptionally rich in figurative representations, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. Furthermore, some of the images on Sasanian seals and coins undoubtedly depict Iranian deities.¹²⁴ However, the most dramatic and imposing pictorial representations of the Zoroastrian gods were reserved for the special medium of Sasanian art—monumental rock-reliefs.¹²⁵ Although they are not located within a temple, it is hard to imagine that these elaborate scenes of divine investiture by fully anthropomorphic Ahura Mazdā, Anāhitā, and Mithra are “secular” art entirely deprived of any cultic significance. Moreover, the very distinction between “secular” and “religious” in ancient art may not be as unambiguous as it appears at first glance.

Unfortunately, textual sources are completely silent about the role of rock-reliefs in Sasanian society. Nor do they provide any clue as to how the rock-reliefs were perceived by those who ordered them or had the opportunity to observe them. It is therefore only possible to approach their meaning by examining the phenomenon of rock-reliefs in Iran over a longer, historical perspective. The Sasanian rock-reliefs, of course, were not a Persian invention, but a continuation of a millennia-old Mesopotamian and Elamite tradition. The Elamite rock-reliefs (Kūrāngūn, Kūl-e Farah, Šekaft-e Salmān, and Naqš-e Rūstam) were integral parts of the open-air sanctuaries in which elaborate rituals were performed.¹²⁶ Three of them (Kūl-e Farah, Šekaft-e Salmān, and Naqš-e Rūstam) were situated near water sources,¹²⁷ and it can hardly be accidental that the majority of the Sasanian rock-reliefs were also located near streams.¹²⁸ Water occupied a prominent place in Iranian cult and theology,¹²⁹ and this placement could therefore allude to certain rituals that were performed in front or in the immediate vicinity of the reliefs, whose images of the great Iranian gods would undoubtedly have been easily recognizable even by wayfarers.¹³⁰ When it is excavated, the area within the Sasanian enclosure at Naqš-e Rūstam, which includes several Sasanian reliefs and the enigmatic Achaemenid tower called Ka’ba-ye Zardošt, might in fact reveal a Sasanian sacred precinct. And it is quite possible that at least some of the other reliefs were also part of open-air sanctuaries and other venues of religious activity.

Nevertheless, the Sasanian reliefs probably constituted a specific phenomenon, separated from the urban space and intended to serve different purposes. Georgina Herrmann may well

123. Bier 2009.

124. There are several definite representations of Mithra (Ghirshman 1962: 243; Callieri 1990: 80–81; Gignoux and Gyselen 1982: no. 10.9; 1993: no. 20.G.4; Gubaev, Loginov, and Nikitin 1996: sealing no. 1.3; Gyselen 2010: 78, fig. 16; Cazzoli and Cereti 2005: 153–54) and of Anāhitā (Choksy 1989: pl. 10.1,5,7 and pl. 10.6; Gyselen 2010: 78, fig. 17), one of Māh (Harper 1978: no. 74), possible images of Ātar (Gignoux and Gyselen 1982: no. 20.79; Gyselen 1993: no. 20.I.8, no. 10.B.16; 2000: fig. 15), and the depiction of a bust in a chariot drawn by birds closely resembling roosters (Frye 1971: no. 68.) that might be an image of Sraoša and several possible unidentified divine images.

125. For an introductory overview, see Herrmann 2000; Herrmann and Curtis 2002; Canepa 2013.

126. Henkelman 2011: 121–33. This cultic practice was apparently continued in the Parthian period in Elymais, and it is probable that the site of Tang-e Sarvak, where four huge boulders covered with Parthian-era reliefs are located, was an open-air sanctuary: Kawami 2013: 761.

127. Henkelman 2011: 132.

128. Callieri 2006.

129. De Jong 1997: 305, 416–17.

130. According to Callieri, water was in fact taken as indicating the presence of the goddess Anāhitā: Callieri 2006: 344.

be correct in her suggestion that access to many reliefs was restricted and that their message was not intended for the general public.¹³¹ Most of them were clearly not carved with propagandistic aspirations and it appears that there was no intention of reaching a wide public, as is often assumed. It is true that the invention of the human-shaped Ahura Mazdā by the first Sasanian monarch served the purpose of elevating the king to a semi-divine status and of presenting him like the god.¹³² However, royal glorification and propaganda were not the only purposes of Sasanian reliefs. To achieve such goals it would have been far more effective to erect such pictorial representations and statues in cities and palaces. By carving these reliefs in a prominent location that had cultural and religious significance, the Sasanian kings were continuing in the ancient tradition of their Mesopotamian, Elamite, and Achaemenid predecessors. Their primary aims were not so much to impress contemporaries, but rather to show their reverence and gratitude to the gods and ancestors, to leave a monument for eternity, and to immortalize their deeds for future generations. It is not accidental that the *Leitmotiv* of the overwhelming majority of Sasanian reliefs is divine investiture. The aspiration of the Sasanian kings to preserve their message, *res gestae*, and legacy is evident from the inscription of Šāpūr I at Naqš-e Rostam, which concludes with the following passage:

Now, in the same manner that We exerted Ourselves in the matters and services of the gods and are the property of the gods, so that, with the help of the gods, We sought and held all these lands and obtained great fame, in the same manner, let him who comes after us and is fortunate also exert himself in the matters and services of the gods, so that the gods may help him, too, and make him their property!¹³³

In summary, the historical and archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates that Sasanian visual culture was anything but iconoclastic. None of the Sasanian cities is in any way comparable, for instance, to first-century-C.E. Jerusalem, with its absence of statuary and sculpture in the public and private spheres and its generally aniconic urban environment.¹³⁴ However, as discussed above, images of gods in Sasanian culture were mostly limited to rock-reliefs, coins, and seals, and seem to have been excluded from the urban landscape, temples, and palatial complexes.

How can we explain this phenomenon? Why were divine representations deemed acceptable by Sasanian society in only these three media? The choice of the subject of a seal was the personal initiative of the individual who ordered or purchased it, which demonstrates that, as individuals, the Sasanians tolerated images of the Iranian gods. In contrast, reliefs and coins were an expression of official royal art, approved and supervised by the Sasanian court. The former were probably considered an exceptional phenomenon, while the placing of at least some divine images on coins was likely inspired by contemporary Roman coinage, as has recently been convincingly demonstrated by Rika Gyselen.¹³⁵

131. Herrmann 2000: 41.

132. Tallay Ornan, who has analyzed the unexpected appearance of anthropomorphic gods on the rock-reliefs of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, which is exceptional in the Assyrian monumental art of the period, argued that “the adoption of the anthropomorphic rendering of deities was to bring together divine and royal images in order to increase the status of the king by demonstrating his physical proximity to the gods and, more importantly, his likeness to the divine.” Ornan 2007: 165. I believe that this is undoubtedly correct in the case of Ardašīr as well, and provides a convenient explanation for the adoption of the anthropomorphic image of Ahura Mazdā by the founder of the Sasanian dynasty.

133. Skjærvø 2011a: 233.

134. On Jerusalem, see von Ehrenkrook 2011: 20–30.

135. Gyselen 2010.

In the opening paragraph of her article, Boyce linked “Sasanian iconoclasm” with some known iconoclastic movements in antiquity in Christianity and Islam: “. . . Zoroastrianism . . . had an iconoclastic movement which preceded both, and which may well have played a part in inspiring them.”¹³⁶ I have attempted to demonstrate that no real iconoclastic movement ever existed in Sasanian Zoroastrianism. Nevertheless, it might still be useful to emphasize the essential differences between such movements in the Abrahamic religions and the situation in Sasanian Iran.

The Christian iconoclastic controversy derived ultimately from quarrels over biblical exegesis, with both iconoclasts and iconodules supporting their positions with the authority of relevant biblical passages. The first attestation for a Christian movement that actively rejected icons and representations of the divine and might be labeled “iconoclastic” comes from early seventh-century Armenia and Caucasian Albania.¹³⁷ This sect seems to have advocated militant iconoclasm and the destruction of icons, but it is unclear whether it had any relation to the famous “Byzantine iconoclasm” of the eighth-ninth century C.E. The discussion of this complex historical and cultural process goes far beyond the scope and the goals of this paper, but some recent studies claim that it was far less destructive and significant than previously believed.¹³⁸

As we have seen, no traces are encountered in Pahlavi literature of explicit polemics against idolatry, or of theological dilemmas or discussions about the legitimacy of fabricating representations of the divine. Indeed, nothing in these texts leads us to think that there was ever a dispute about images in Iran comparable in any way to those in the Graeco-Roman tradition or in Christianity.¹³⁹ The Avesta contains nothing even approximately equivalent to the Second Commandment, since the former was composed by an aniconic society in a cultural environment deprived of cultic imagery. Sasanian Zoroastrianism lacked the independent theological and textual foundations that might have led to the development of the original iconoclastic movement.

In fact, what we find in Sasanian Iran might better be compared to the Islamic attitude towards images as reflected in the earliest Muslim sources. The Qur’an contains no prohibition against representations of living beings,¹⁴⁰ and according to the observation of Oleg Grabar “terms like iconoclasm or *Bilderverbot* are inappropriate to define any part of the message of the Qur’an . . . the term aniconism . . . is more accurate.”¹⁴¹ It is only in the *hadith*, the corpus of traditions related to the acts and sayings of Muhammad and reflecting the attitudes of a later period, that we find explicit offences directed against figural representations and those who make images and pictures.¹⁴² Antagonism towards representations—the identifying mark of Islam in the eyes of many—seems to have evolved in the Islamic tradition only around the middle of the eighth century.¹⁴³

Early Islamic art exhibits an unambiguous dichotomy between religious and secular architecture and art. For instance, while the private residences of the Umayyad rulers were abundantly decorated with anthropomorphic reliefs, paintings, and even sculptures in the round,

136. Boyce 1975: 93.

137. See Der Nersessian 1946; Alexander 1955; Brubacker and Haldon 2011: 66–68.

138. On Byzantine iconoclasm, see most recently Brubacker 2009; Noble 2009; Brubacker and Haldon 2011; Brubacker 2012; Cormack 2012.

139. For a discussion of these debates in Classical and Christian sources, see Barasch 1992 and Besançon 2000.

140. Grabar 1987: 72.

141. Grabar 2005: 92–93.

142. Grabar 1987: 81–83. On the subject of idols in the Qur’an, see also Hawting 1999; Crone 2010: 169–72.

143. Grabar 1987: 83. See also Natif 2011.

the earliest Islamic religious structures were ornamented exclusively with non-figural, floral, architectural, and geometric motifs.¹⁴⁴ This deliberate separation was apparently maintained very strictly, as can be observed in the unfinished Umayyad palace at Mshatta in Jordan, where only the eastern part of the façade of the palace—which also forms the outer wall of the interior of the mosque—was left free of figural decoration.¹⁴⁵ This scheme forms a striking parallel to the guiding principles of Sasanian art, and I would like to suggest that the ideological stance of allowing anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations in secular art while *de facto* refraining from them in sanctuaries might have been observed by the Arabs in Sasanian Iran, inspiring both the figural abundance of Umayyad residences and the aniconism of their mosques. Thus, the famous Islamic iconophobia may be a combination of the “Mosaic Distinction” inherited from Judaism and Christianity and the realities of the aniconic Sasanian fire-cult encountered in Iran.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that the Persian iconoclastic identity was constructed in the early Sasanian period as a response to the challenges posed by Christianity. By joining the common monotheistic discourse against idolatry, the Zoroastrian clergy adopted the conventions of the world in which they lived. Attacks against “idols” and “idolatry” should be understood in the context of inter- and inner-polemical discourse against beliefs deemed to be erroneous by the Zoroastrian priesthood.

Labeling a group “idol-worshippers” does not necessarily imply that they actually worshipped statues or other representations made of wood, stone, or precious metals—or even that they were polytheistic.¹⁴⁶ In fact, the label could be applied quite freely to Christians, Jews, Manichaeans, Buddhists, or even religious opponents within Zoroastrianism whose views were considered different and inappropriate.

The Sasanians did not develop any prohibition against anthropomorphic representations of the gods, and in the surviving Zoroastrian literature and inscriptions there is no evidence of either theological disputes over idols or of a deliberate eradication of them by the Persian kings. This is not surprising, since the Zoroastrians did not and could not regard their own gods as “idols” and themselves as “idol-worshippers.”

It seems that, following the Islamic conquest and under Muslim influence, this iconoclastic identity was further consolidated and amplified to show that not only was Zoroastrian worship free from the veneration of images, but that it was actually “anti-idolic” and had a long and celebrated history of struggling against idolatry.

The Sasanian cult was aniconic, probably following a tradition maintained in the region of Pars from the Achaemenid period, and Sasanian temples were free of figural imagery. However, as is well known from Near Eastern cultures, the temple usually required a cultic statue or a divine symbol that would serve as the embodiment of the presence of a deity in his “house.” The fire was an aniconic divine symbol that answered this need in the Sasanian cult, and the formation of the fire-temples as they exist today should probably be attributed to the Sasanian period.

Aniconism is not necessarily accompanied by iconoclasm, and Sasanian culture was indeed not iconoclastic. In fact, the Sasanians were responsible for the creation of monumental rock-reliefs, the first fully anthropomorphic images of the Iranian gods in western Iran,

144. Welch 1977: 68–69; Flood 2002: 643–45.

145. Grabar 1987: 89; Flood 2002: 645; Talgam 2004: 14.

146. On the polemical use of “idolatry” in monotheistic discourse, see Hawting 1999: 67–88.

and they also put these images on their coins. However, they refrained from creating divine representations in other artistic media, although private individuals employed them on seals.

Another feature that characterized the early Sasanian kings was religious zeal and an aspiration for the unification and exclusiveness of the royal cult as part of their perception of imperial authority. These facts and the desire to lay hold of the valuables kept in temples should be held responsible for their destruction of sanctuaries that they called “idol-shrines” and the suppression of the practices that were labeled by them as “idol-worship.”

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