

On the Concept of Aši in Ancient Iran's Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the place of Aši in thoughts and beliefs of the ancient Iran. The concept of Aši goes back to pre-zoroastrian, pagan times where she was “the spirit of reward”. Aši is attested in both Gāthās and post-Avesta. In gāthās Aši is an abstract noun meaning share, recompense and portion but in the post-Avesta, Aši is the goddess of fortune and abundance who gives her companions glory and prosperity. Aši appears in Middle Persian as Ard and Art and together with her epithet vañuhī as Ahrišvang, Aršišvang and Ašišvang. It seems that there was a time when her cult was prevalent in the east and the west of Iran.

KEYWORDS: Aši, Goddess, Gāthās, Yašt, Post-Avesta, Middle Persian.

INTRODUCTION

There are many Gods in old Persia. Some of them were belonged to Aryan old religion obviously. This means that they had divinity feature before Zoroaster. But this feature and originality can't be attributed to some of them definitely. Some of gods are symbol of natural phenomena like Tištar which is the symbol of rain. And some of abstract concepts are embodied as gods such as Wahrām as sign of victory. Some of these divinities are related to religious rituals for example Ādur, the God of fire. Zoroaster denied these Gods in his religion, because for him there is no God but Ahura Mazdā who is creator and protector of the world. Old beliefs and views of Iranians again were emerged in Zoroastrian religion after Zoroaster. Therefore Iranian ancient divinities which apparently were denied by Zoroaster entered into the religion and came to power again. One of these Gods which perceived as feminine is Aši. It is an Avestan¹ feminine abstract noun which etymologically derived from a two parts composition ar- (a root word) and -ti (a suffix) from the Old Iranian * artai-. There is no consensus about meaning of ar- between scholars of Avesta. Bartholomae suggested the meaning of “giving and granting” for the root word (Bar. 1976:241). Baily thinks that Aši is derived from *rti- (in Old Iranian) and from the root ar- which according to him means “to acquire” (Baily, 1971:4). Kellens paid his attention to the root ar- in meaning of “to move” (Kellens, 1999:475). And Insler suggested that meaning of “to deserve” is proper for the root word (Insler, 1975:131). Contrary to most of Gods, Zoroaster speaks about Aši in his Gāthās². It is worthy to say that in Gāthās, Aši is used in abstract meaning mostly and referred to concepts such as share, part and wage. Aši is personalized in the Younger Avesta again and turned to fortune and abundance goddess and she is praised and prayed in a relatively long Yašt³ named as Ard Yašt. Often Aši's epithet is Vañuhi which means “the good one”. This characteristic is attached to Aši in Middle Persian texts and is remained in forms of Ahrišvang, Aršišvang and Ašišvang. Twenty fifth day of month in Zoroastrian calendar is called Aši, and this means that Aši is responsible for guarding this day (Pourdavoud, 1988:182).

There is no substitute in Vedas⁴ for Aši. But some scholars like Dumezil and Widengren compared it with Bhaga. Bhaga means share and portion, i.e of the good things of this world, hence ‘luck’ (Boyce, 1987:76).

Bhaga means someone who grants blessing, gift and abundance, and in Rig-Veda sometimes it means asset and fortune and sometime it means distributer (Vidhartā) and generous (Vibhaktā) (Shaygan, 2004:76). Widengren believed that Mitra in Vedas is accompanied by two Gods, Aryaman (protector of Aryans) and Bhaga “destiny who distributes chance and fortune”, and according to Mihr Yašt, Miθra is accompanied with Sraoša and Aši which are matched with companions of Indian Mitra (Widengren, 1988:34).

Well known Parsee scholar, Neryosang in late of twelfth century, in his interpretation of Yasna 1, verse 14, regarded the Aši equal with Lakṣmi (Pourdaoud, 1987, 180). Lakṣmi is goddess of fortune, representation of love, beauty, fertility and wealth in religion of Hindu. In Hindu art she is illustrated among lotuses, in jewelry ornamented red dress and queen make up. She grants money and other blessings to her prayers often (Hinnells, 2007:558). There are more goddesses in Vedas such as Dhiṣanā and Rākā, but we can't select each of them as equal to Aši confidently. But it is reliable that this idea was existed in Indian and Iranian thought that there is a God who gives

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rewards and distributes wealth and fortune, and Aši is raised from this idea. For better understanding of Aši, this paper tries to study the concept of Aši in pre-Zoroastrian thoughts at first. Then, application and the role of Aši in Gāthās, Younger Avesta, and texts of Middle Persian will be considered. Finally, it tries to emphasize on development of her ritual by introducing of Parthian, Scythianan, and Kushan coins which her picture is illustrated on them.

Aši in Pre-Zoroastrian Thought

It is necessary to study the ways of thinking of Indo- Iranians at first for understanding of Aši's position in Pre-Zoroastrian thought. Boyce believed that "The most fundamental way of apprehending the world among Indo- Iranians is animatism-the reasoning by which man ,conscious himself of being alive, attributes conscious life to all other things, whether static or like him capable of motion. the supposed cognitive force in each entity was called by the proto-Indo-Iranians *manyu-,a word derived from the root man- "think"...A mainyu was attributed by the Avestan people to all phenomena, even in their smallest manifestations like mainyus of peace and prosperity ,of strife and famine. There were also mainyus of qualities and emotions, such as courage and joy, jealousy, greed and the like. There were perceived , that is, neither as abstractions nor as parts of man's own psychological make-up, but as active independent forces ,which could be entreated or placed by him,and which if he permitted them ,would enter his being and affect him for better or worse" (Boyce,1992:53).

Now question is that what concept was Aši about and she was the Mainyu of what? Considering etymology of the word, Aši must be known as Mainyu of reward. Aši was empty of ethical feature in Pre-Zoroastrian pagan times. In this period, Aši appeared to represent the good fortune which any man might experience through luck (Boyce, 1996:66). Therefore, Aši can be considered as goddess of fortune and chance. It is probably as a pagan goddess of Fortune that Aši received her characteristic epithet of 'great-gifted' or 'treasure-laden' {mažā.rayi} (Boyce,1996:66).

One epithet used of her by Zoroaster, 'great-gifted' {mažā.rayi} (Yasna43/12), richly suggests the pagan concept. But in the ethical Gāthās the common noun aši is used in the sense of reward (for good or ill),rather than for unmerited acquisition, and the divinity similarly becomes the personification of due recompense , rather than of capricious luck. As such she is regularly spoken of in the Zoroastrian scriptures as the "good Aši"(Aši vañuhi), in distinction presumably to the amoral pagan concept.(Boyce,1996:225-26)

Aši in Gāthās

Aši is attested in Gāthās nineteen times. Examining application of the word Aši in Gāthās this result will obtain that this word has a concept beyond of reward. Indeed Aši in Gāthās means a thing which acquires through person's act, especially in final judgment (Bar. 1976:241). Hence Aši is share, part and what to be distributed, well or bad:

"I shall realize that you are firm and holy, O Mazdā,when the superiority of good thought comes to me from that hand which you hold the ašis(portions) which you assign to the deceitful one and to the truthful one by the heat of your fire strong through truth".(Yasna43/4)

Or

"I realize that you are holy,O Mazdā Ahura ,when I see you the Primal one, at the procreation of existence when you make actions reward-bearing as well as utterances,(assigning) evil to the evil one , but a good aši (portion) to the good one,by your skill, at the final turning point of the creation".(Yasna 43/5).

Therefore Aši in Gāthās is representative of the rewards which will belong to virtuous persons and also punishment of wrongdoers. Hence most precise meaning for Aši is share and part as Humbach and Dumezil suggested. Humbach used the word "Anteil" (share) continuously, and Dumezil also used it as "part" that is equivalent to Vedic meaning of Bhaga (Kellens, 2007:18). In fact, Aši is related to person's acts and any one can "rule at will over his portion(=aši)" (Yasna 50/9).

Although there is an abstract meaning in the word aši, but still we can find traces of personification in Gāthās (Ibid: 17). This is clear in Yasna 31/4 where we read:

"when mazdā and the other Ahuras are present , as well as truth worthy of invocation , along with Aši and Ārmaiti ,then with good thought I hope to gain for myself strong power through the increase of which we may defeat deceit".

Also in Yasna 43/ 12 Aši is used both as an abstract noun and as a goddess who is the agent of reward and punishment (Pourdavoud, 1998:181) :

"And when you tell me,with foresight you reach truth ,then you give me orders not to be disobeyed.let me arise before attention comes to me, followed by wealth-granting Aši ,which will distribute the ašis(portions) according to the balance at the assignment of benefits".

Aši in the Younger Avesta

After Zoroaster and perhaps in his era, many of Iranian's and Indo-Iranian's old beliefs which were reflected in prayers and rituals of old gods, together with myths and legends of those gods and also religious rituals that were belong to Pre-Zoroaster times, blended with the prophet's beliefs and then the Younger Avesta emerged (Tafazzoli, 1987:93). Yašts are a part of the Younger Avesta, although old Yašts are younger than Gāthās considering their language, but represent the beliefs and thoughts that belong to the times earlier than Gāthās. Yašt 17, Ard Yašt, which is one of oldest ones, have been written to praise Aši. We can't decide about the time that this Yašt is composed. After examination and analysis of long Yašts, Christensen found that Ard Yašt is composed in 4th century B.C. in the Achaemenian period (Christensen, 2003:84).

Aši is personalized in this Yašt and becomes the goddess of abundance, blessing, fortune and chance. She is a beautiful, benefit-granting, wise and healer goddess who has an attractive body. She is driving on a noisy chariot. Aši has mythical overview in this Yašt:

“Your father Ahura Mazdā, the greatest of Yazatas, the best of Yazatas, mother Spnta Ārmaiti, brother the good and pious Sraoša⁷, the high and powerful Rašnav⁸ as well as Miθra⁹ who has wide pastures, ten thousand eyes and ten thousand ears, sister the Mazdayasna Daēnā¹⁰ (verse 16).

She gives wealth, gift, glory and greatness to her companions, friends, and worshipers. This greatness and glory is described in verses 3-14 beautifully. There is a list of heroes, in verses 23-52, who sacrifice to the goddess and ask her a gift. This list can be seen in other Yašts such as Ābān Yašt, Tir Yašt, Zāmyād Yašt and so on. Hōšang Pēšdād, Jamšēd, Frēdōn, Hōm the hero, and Khusraw are mythical heroes who sacrifice to Aši and ask her help. Aši accepts their offerings and help them.

Aši is also the goddess of fertility, therefore barren men, impure women, young boys, not married girls don't accept in her rituals and can't attend her practices. She has influence on women and those women whom Aši favors will be happy and fortunate (Amouzgar, 2007:30).

At the end of 17th Yašt, moral principles and the importance of family are emphasized where Aši complains about three groups to Ahura Mazdā: first about impure women who can't be pregnant, second about impure women who betray their husband, and third, about cruel men who kidnap girls, rape and leave them pregnant.

Aši and Her Companions

Aši is related to the Mihr, the God. Her original connection with Miθra is presumably that of Fortune waiting on the god of war; and Cumont identified her with the Fortune of Mithraic monuments (Boyce, 1996: 65)

In the tenth Yašt of Avesta -Mihr Yašt- Aši jointed to Mihr as its charioteer. She is assistance of Mihr and is expert in wealth disturbance. It is said in the second verse of Ard Yašt:

“One that praises Aši by Zōhrs¹¹, praises Mihr by Zōhrs”.

On the other hand, from the time of Gāthās, Aši has relation with Sraoša. Sraoša and Vohumanah, in Gathas, went towards virtuous persons and in time of reward and punishment is beside Aši. Ašiuuant- is one of the epithets of Sraoša, which means possessing Aši, because obedience of Ahura Mazdā leads to great reward. Obedience and well practice are result of good thought, and then Aši, Sraoša and Vohumanah are related to each others in many texts (Skjaervo, 1987: 750). Another characteristic of Sraoša is Ašiiā- which means jointed to Aši. This epithet emphasizes on their close relationship. Sraoša is called Aši's brother in 17th Yašt.

Pārendi is another companion of Aši. Their name is beside of each other often and their duties are similar. Pārendi is an abstract name also, same as Aši, and means plenty, abundance and blessing, and sometimes is specific name of a goddess who is protector of treasure and wealth.

Aši in Middle Persian Texts

Her name in middle Persian texts is Art and Ard and along with her epithet -Vaṇuhi- is in forms of Aršišvang, Ahrišvang, Aršvang and Ašišvang. It is stated in Bundahishn¹³ that: “Ard together with Ābān, Māraspand, Dēn, and Anāhīd help Spandarmad who is spiritual creature of Ahura Mazdā” (Chapter 4). Elsewhere, it is written that: “Ard is Mainyu of piousness and belongingness to paradise. Truly, she can be called as good Ahrišvang and Ašišvang. Increasing of glory and magnificence of family is because of her. Since, everything is given by to deserving persons, more and more will back to home by her. She is guard of righteous persons' wealth. As she is guarding the paradise which is same as a home, ornamented by jewelry” (Chapter 11). It is interpreted in Pahlavi translation of Yasn 60, part 4 that:

”Aši means richness which is raised from righteousness and piousness {tuvānīgīh az frārōnīh} (Pourdavoud, 1998:179).

In a Manichean Persian text, the goddess appears as Bay-ard (written by'rd), the guardian spirit of the border Hurāsān (hwr's'n wymndb'n). In Sogdian texts 'rdk, Khwarazmian 'rjwky (i.e., artsūxī), last two from * Rti-wahwī. (Skjaervo1987:751)

Aši in Historical Documents

Aši is the goddess who isn't frequently considered in historical studies. The name Aši isn't found on any inscription, and there is no engraved illustration of her, and no temple is devoted to her. Maybe it is because of popularity of Anāhitā, the goddess of water and fertility, who overshadows other goddesses. Aši lost her fame gradually against Anāhitā and wasn't known outside of priesthood environment properly.

In works of Greek historians, just in Ploutarxos's narration of Iranian religion, where he referred to a god as "creator of wealth", we can find a reference to Aši (Benvenist, 1988:56).

In times of Parthians and from reign of Mehrdad I, according to Hellenic tradition, Kings engraved the illustration of Gods on coins. A goddess named Nike¹⁴, who according to Mary Boyce is representative of Aši just like Zeus, Apollo, Demeter who are representative of Ahura mazdā, Mithra and Spēta Ārmaiti respectively (Boyce, 2007:111). Nike's illustration was carved on coins by King such as Mehrdad I, II and III. The illustration of a goddess wearing a robe and a goat's horn in hand as symbol of abundance can be seen on Scythian coins together with Gods such as Vād, Mazd, and Miro. The goddess's name is appeared as Ardvaxš and it is adopted with the Avestan goddess of fortune, Aši Vanuhi, definitely. In excavations by French researchers in Afghanistan a small statue of a goddess sitting on a bed was found that maybe is a ritual statue and some believed that this statue belongs to Ardvaxš (Widengrene 1998:46). It is stated that Aši vanuhi and Miθra had high popularity for Kushans (Duchesne-Guillemain, 1996:259). Illustration of a woman is seen on a Kushanian coin and the word of Ardoxsho is written under it. Some think that she is Ashi-oxsho or Mainyu of destiny or reward (Hinnells, 2000:73). These coins show that goddess of Aši was very important sometime in East, in a way that her picture was engraved on coins by kings.

Ritual of this goddess was common in western Iran and name of some of Iranian noble men such as Artimas, Artibarzanes and Artiboles can be stated as evidences for this claim¹⁵ (Benvenist, 1998:112).

Conclusion

Here I tried to explain the position of Aši in beliefs of ancient Iran. This study show that Aši is a goddess which belongs to Pre-Zoroastrian period and is Mainyu of reward in the old Aryan religion. In Pre-Zoroastrian paganism period, Aši isn't representative of moral concepts, but in Gāthās' period the word aši reflects some deep moral concepts. Aši sometimes is used as abstract name and sometimes it refers to the wealth granting Goddess. Totally, seventeen Yašt is composed for praising her. She, in this Yašt is a benefit-granting, healer and forethoughtful goddess. The glory of religious persons and happiness of women is because of her. Her name is appeared in sogdian, Khwarazmian, Manichean and Middle Persian texts. And her illustration is engraved on Parthian, Scythian, and Kushanian coins. These evidences demonstrated that praising rituals of Aši were common in ancient period of Eastern Iran.

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APPENDIX

- 1- Avestan is the language that Zoroastrian religious book is written with. The book of Avesta and works related to it, are only works available in Avestan language. The language of Avesta belongs to ancient period of Iranian languages. Most of scholars believed that this language belongs to Middle Asian regions.
- 2- Materials that are known as Avesta haven't uniform language. Some parts of Avesta have older style and its grammar is accord with correct grammatical principles of Avestan language more than other parts. But in some parts, grammatical principles didn't considered. In this respect, Avesta can be divided in to two parts, Old Avesta or Gāthās and the Younger Avesta or new Avesta.
- 3- Yašt in Persian is derived from Avestan word Yaštay- which means "worship and praise of Gods by reading the prayers and execution of sacrifice ceremonies". A part of Avesta is named Yašt. This part comprises of hymns which are composed in praising and homage of Old Iranian Gods. Seventeen Yašt is composed for description and praising of Aši, the goddess, and called as Ard Yašt.
- 4- Veda is oldest work of Indian in Sanskrit language. It is comprises four parts: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda.
- 5- Gāhān (or as common in Persian, Gāthās) texts included Yasna Haptañhāiti , and four prayers mentioned in Yasna 27. Gāthās are composed by Zoroaster himself, and included moral concepts and fundamental teachings of Zoroastrian religion.
- 6- Spənta Ārmaiti means holy loyalty and patience and she is daughter of Ahura Mazdā and is Goddess of earth.
- 7- Sraoša means obedience literally, and is one of the great Yazatas (gods) of Zoroastrian religion, which its main duty is protecting the material world.
- 8- Rašnav is a Yazata that undertakes judgment about people's acts in other world. Rašnav is described by trait of Sleepless in Bundahishn.
- 9- Mihr is a Yazata whose main duty is supervising on covenants. Mihr, Sraoša, and Rašnav are three judges who judge people's acts after life.
- 10- Dēn is a goddess that is symbol of conscience and gives power to people to follow Ahura's way.
- 11- There are two types of Zōhr, "Fire Zōhr and Water Zōhr". The Fire Zōhr is the fat of sheep's back which is added to holy fire in specific times. The water Zōhr also is a mixture of milk and extract from the plant of Haoma (Ephedra) which is dedicated in Yasna ceremony to water.
- 12- Bundahishn is a book in Middle Persian language and includes realistic and mythical history of Iran in Pēšdādian times until Arab's attacks.
- 13- Nike is the victory goddess in Greece. She is illustrated with wings.
- 14- The names of these Iranian noble men are mentioned in historical books and all belong to western Iran.