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Mithra

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Mithra.

By James R. Russell,
Harvard University.

I want to take you to the ancient city of Dura Europos. Dura, whose Aramaic name means something like "fortified place" was a populous, cosmopolitan walled city on a hill looking over the Euphrates frontier of the Roman Empire with the realms of the Arsacid Parthians, near modern-day Deir ez-Zor in Syria. The Seleucid successors of Alexander made what had been a fort into a town, appending its second, Greek name. Dura Europos was destroyed, never again to be inhabited, during a sudden, swift Sasanian attack in AD 256: devastating for the inhabitants but good for archeology. The French occupying forces discovered the ruins in 1918; and over the succeeding two decades a team of archeologists excavated it and for generations art historians and textual scholars have pored over the finds: great scholars such as Franz Cumont, father of Mithraic studies, and Mikhail Rostovtzeff, historian of the Hellenistic era, worked there. My lecture has to do with the Iranian divine being called Mithra in Avestan, Mihr in Pahlavi, Mehr in modern Persian, and Mher in Armenian. He was called Mithras in Greek and Latin, and is the only divinity of pre-Islamic Iran that became the focus of a very widespread mystery religion of Roman antiquity. Dura, on the very edge of the lands from which Mithra came, is the site of the easternmost temple of Roman Mithraism. Dura Europos is a place of ancient ghosts and modern ones too— for it stands mute over the great, dry emptiness in which the death marches of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 out of the Anatolian highlands reached their terminus and hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, terrorized and starved over their horrendous journey, finally perished. One can still find the fragments of their human bones in the sand. New ghosts are joining the clamor of unquiet souls; for today the murderous barbarians of Da'esh, the Islamic State, control the area. They have already destroyed much of the caravan metropolis of Palmyra, or Tadmor, not far away: its graceful columns had towered over the plain for twenty centuries undisturbed, the walls of its temples glowed in the sun, and till but a few months ago one might imagine the Greek strophes of the actors and the murmur of the audience in its perfectly preserved theater. As we speak here, the Da'esh army of crime crucifies Christians, beheads innocent hostages, and rapes women. Many of those women are Yazidis, the Kurdish-speaking adherents of a complex religion that blends together Sufi, Mithraic, and other elements. Palmyra is no more; and just as the world stood by as the Ottoman forerunners of the Nazis exterminated the Armenians— about whose precious ancient culture I will have a lot more to say— so it has witnessed the final death of Palmyra in ignoble silence. The fate of what is left of Dura itself is uncertain. But given what Pope Francis has rightly called the globalization of indifference, there is scant reason to be hopeful. But I believe those of us of good will who are committed to the authentic teaching and practice of our faiths and cultures must hope against hope, and thereby endure with God's help and build a new Middle East of *mehr*— of love!— all together.

But let us cast our minds back to what now seems the calmer and more civilized second century. Imagine for a while that the man speaking to you this evening is not an old

Harvard professor but an Aramaic-speaking Palmyrene cavalry officer, fairly prosperous, probably in early middle age, serving in a Roman legion stationed at Dura Europos. I want to let him paint a different picture of the Zoroastrian and Mithraic religions than the cleaned-up (in academese, essentialist) one of modern scholarly treatises. The pigments for this picture come from the palette of Armenian texts about Iranian religion, of the so-called Hellenistic romances, of the bits and fragments and survivals of folk religion from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan. So Ethpeni speaks. I've been here at Dura for a few years; my wife and children live across the desert in Palmyra. There is a Christian church here: the Christian holy book is the strangest since it consists of the same story told in four different ways. But the *Diatessaron* of Tatian, makes it a unified narrative and it is popular here. (James interjects: Persian Christians were still reading it in early modern times but the fragment from Dura is the earliest manuscript.) There is a synagogue, all four inner walls of which are covered with frescoes of scenes from the Hebrew Bible in the Parthian style, making Mordechai from their popular Esther story (they have fun Purim parties) look like an Arsacid king from across the border. And there are drawings and graffiti in the Parthian language, which is a close enough relative of Middle Persian or Pahlavi that if you know one it is easy to learn the other. (James interrupts again: These unique pictures bear testimony to a nearly vanished Jewish art of manuscript painting, and thanks to Dura we now can begin to reconstruct the source of Christian art and iconography itself in the older tradition from which it sprang.) There are nearly twenty sacred buildings in Dura dedicated to the gods of Greece, Rome, Syria, some of them, like Azzanathkona, long pensioned off, others still employed in heaven or on mount Olympus.

But I, Ethpeni, have just placed an inscription in the temple of the Iranian god Mithras, of which I am an official. Temples need to be repaired and renovated from time to time and responsible members of the congregation are expected to contribute. So my name is etched in stone, with my military rank, in Palmyrene Aramaic, up near the shrine enclosing the bas-relief of the tauroctony, as the Latin-speaking troops call the image of Mithras slaying a bull. Every Mithraeum has one. Many centuries in the future— James assures me— all this will be in a special, climate-controlled hall of the Yale art museum, with sandals and wicker-work shields carried by the last defenders of Dura and preserved in the Syrian sands. But for now it is where I go to worship at night by the light of the flames the two torchbearers, whom we call by the sacred names Cautes and Cautopates, carry. It's dark and cool and empty inside in the daytime, with the lingering aroma of incense from south Arabia. Outdoors it's hot and bright and you can smell donkeys, camels, horses, men, basil leaf, hyssop, date honey, olive oil, baking bread. Much of Mithraism is a secret religion— something more to be experienced and kept within the soul than talked about outside— but I can tell you this much about it.

At the beginning there was the darkness. Infinite time, Zurvan, who creates, brings to manhood, enfeebles, and kills, was in the boundless, unchanging space. And he thought, I will have a son. This is Ahura Mazda in the Persian holy book, the Avesta: Persians here say Ormizd; Armenians, Aramazd; the Greek philosophers, Oromazes. He is the lord of wisdom. He will create life. Zurvan took in his hands a bundle of rods that the Persians call the barsom; and the Romans, the fasces— and for a thousand years he offered sacrifices. He began to doubt; and of the doubt a dark spot was engendered in his womb,

a twin to Ormizd. This was a dark, deceitful, foul-smelling being named Ahreman, or Haramani, or Areimanios. Ormizd told his brother, The one of us who comes first from the womb, him our father Zurvan will make king. Then, like Jacob grabbing hold of Esau's heel in the stories of the Jews and Christians, Ahreman clawed his way out and Zurvan, though he understood the wrong, had to keep to his word. Keeping your word, making and respecting a covenant, that is what the word *mithra* means in the hymns of Zaratas, or Zradasht, or Zoroastres, or Zarathushtra. There is a painting of him all in the pure white garments of purity, here in our temple: he holds an ebony staff and a scroll: the staff is for magic; on the scroll are inscribed his songs. There is another clothed in white to the other side: him we call Ostanes, the first of Zoroaster's priests, the Magi, and the inventor of magic.

So Ahreman was to have dominion for a fixed time, then he and Ormizd were to battle each other for a world age; but when the stars came round again the forces of light would be victorious. There is a being, a son of Ormizd and of a human woman, say some of the Persians, who is the covenant, the tie of friendship, the urge of love, the light of justice, embodied. This is Mithra, whom the Romans call Mithras; the Parthians and Armenians, Mihr or Mher. He is the witness to this pact and the judge of the living and the dead, who showers the righteous with his light with the sun, driving his swift four-horsed chariot across the sky. But there was no light yet; Ormizd did not know how to create it. Then a demon, Mahmi, whose name may mean "the one in the middle", broke with the company of Ahreman. He went over to the side of the good and taught Ormizd the secret of fire, as the Greek god Prometheus did for mankind. When Ormizd created the living world, Ahreman attacked it, murdering the first cattle. But Ormizd was wiser than the evil spirit, who is ever blinded by his own adviser Asmodeus, who is anger incarnate. Ahreman did not know the stratagem of which he was to be an instrument: out of the mortal wound of the bull came the cornucopia of abundance; out of death, new life. We depict Mithras killing the bull himself: he was a witness and intermediary to the first cosmic treaty but he stands at the head of the armies of good. So he demonstrates how Ormizd brought life out of the primal catastrophe of Ahreman's invasion and the bull's death. And at the end of time Mithra will take part in the final sacrifice that will raise the dead and bring immortality to the living; so the tauroctony shows that, too. It telescopes the events of first and last into one mystic symbol. This final sacrifice will happen on the first day of spring, 21 March, or Nisan as we say in Syria, in the sign of Aries, the Ram, just as the first invasion happened exactly then. This is the new-year festival that the Parthians and Armenians call Navasard; the Persians, No Ruz. That is why over the scene that combines both the first and the last dying bull we portray the zodiac, with Aries at the zenith, right above Mithra. The zodiac symbolizes the passage of time, the meaning of time, the certainty of the return of time in its great circling to its starting point. It is a tool of learning but also the emblem of our hope.

That is what we wait for. The Christians believe similarly that the son of their God, whom they call the Sun of Righteousness, will return and raise the dead. He died and rose in springtime, too, during the Passover feast when his people, the Jews, celebrate their freedom from slavery. We see Mithra as a savior, but as a liberator as well: that is one reason he wears the red felt headdress of a Phrygian shepherd. It is the Roman sign of a slave who has been manumitted, set free. (James interrupts that the image of Bactrian

Mihir on the "Kanishka reliquary" has a Phrygian cap, too; the only other place in the Iranian world where he wears one is at Nemrut Dagh and Arsameia on the Nymphaios, in Commagene to the southwest of Armenia proper. But in other respects the specific iconography of Mithra is both more consistent and more abundantly and anciently attested than for any other identifiable deity of the ancient Iranian pantheon.) And soldiers love Mithra, for we live by our vows and our valor and honor. The people of Iran, just across the river there, call the first day of every month after Ahura Mazda; the 16th, just in the middle, after Mithra. On Mithrakana, the festival the Armenians call Mehekan or Meheki, they sacrifice a bull. Mithra is young, strong, and beautiful, with a star-spangled cape and the rays of the Sun coruscating around his handsome face and long, flowing hair. The Persians call the Sun by his name sometimes and the first downy peach fuzz on the cheek of a young man they call "Mithra's grass", for he gives his name also to love.

In the home region of the Parthians that the Persians call simply Khorasan, the East, there is a temple, Adur Burzen Mihr, the Fire of Mithra in the Highest; and nearby at Kishmar is a graceful and ancient cypress tree. The evergreen cypress signifies death and rebirth; so in the temple here at Dura the Parthian painter we hired— his firm did a very good job on the synagogue up the road— has painted a repeating pattern of fire altars and cypresses. After all, even though there are *spelaea*, "cave" temples of Mithras everywhere in the empire, from Rome to the valleys of the Danube and the Rhine, and north upon the wall of Hadrian itself, this one is closest to Iran. But wherever our caves are, you will find a few Iranian words spoken, like *nama*, "praise", or *nabarzes*, which I think means "the great man". And one of our ranks is that of the "Persian". But most Mithraists do not know Persian, any more than the Greeks who call themselves God-fearers, followers of Jesus the Nazarene, know Hebrew when they say "Amen".

What do we Mithraists do? Each temple has a congregation of no more than fifteen or twenty men. There are no women, and some people tell a scurrilous myth that Mithras hated women so much he spilled his seed on a rock on the banks of the Araxes river up in the vast, rich, populous kingdom of Armenia— the river the Romans say "tolerates no bridges" since the Armenians will never fully accept Roman domination. They fight the Parthians all the time, too, but that's a family quarrel. There are some Jews and Christians in Armenia but most of them follow the teachings of Zoroaster just the same as the Iranians. Their kings invoke Aramazd, Anahit, and Vahagn (which is their Parthian name for Herakles-Artagnes, the god of strength who is Mithra's friend and companion) instead of Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra as the Persians used to. But that is because for the Armenians Vahagn is a special hero, a dragon slayer they used to call Teisheba when their country was called Urartu (or Ararat, as the Jews still call it). They revere Mithra just as much as everybody else: their word for any temple, *mehyan*, just means "place of Mithra". And they name their kids Mithridates and Mehrevandak— given by Mithra, and Mithra's servant— and make little terracotta statues of Mithra on horseback that you can keep at a household shrine, just like the Parthians do. Anyway, Mithra, the story goes, spilled his seed on a rock and a monster named Diorphos was born of it. That is just a slander: it was Mithra who was born, we say, of a rock, which is why we call him *petrogenes* or *saxigenus*. The legend comes from Anatolia but I think some Iranians believe it too. (James points out that a seal of the Sasanian peiod, probably from Eastern

Iran, depicts Mihr rising from what Michael Shenkar describes as "a pyramid of round rocks"— if this were the axial world mountain Hara Berezaiti, "the tall", as Prof. Shenkar suggests, would not Mithra be more likely to be standing on it rather than to seem to be rising from inside it? This may reflect a belief in the rock-birth of the god.)

The reason only men join our Mithraic lodges is because even good family men like me sometimes like to spend an evening with the boys; and in the legions friendship is the difference between life and death when you're shoulder to shoulder in battle with another man. The only women we meet far from home are not the kind you want to take into a temple with you, unless they are already working for one as prostitutes. We have seven grades, like rungs of a ladder going up through the planets to God, or, some might say, like the seven adjutant archangels of Ahura Mazda, the guardians of the creations. The first and lowest is called in Latin *corax*, the Raven; and at our collations (which resemble the *agape*s, or love-feasts, of the Christians) the boy Raven usually wears a bird's head mask. This black bird, which the Iranians call *karshiptar*; and the Armenians, *agrrav*— is the messenger between the world of the gods and the world of mortals (this one, which the Greek philosopher Plato says is like a dark cave of shadows compared to the luminous real world of the divine good). So it is the first, the one who brings word, who leads the way. The most important degree of initiation, though, is the fourth, called Leo, the lion. In this one the candidate is stripped naked and hoodwinked with the entrails of a chicken; he is met on the point of a spear pressed to his breast, and then led past a statue of the Deus Areimanios, a lion-headed man with wings, a key, and a snake curling about him to represent the evil of death and the destructive power of time. (When we portray Mithra on his horse, hunting, we show a black snake moving alongside, to signify that this power is his.) We blast fire through the statue's open mouth lightly to scald our brother, making him undergo a symbolic death.

But then we pour honey— that liquid fire of lions, over him. The Jews mention honey and lions in their version of our story— the one about the shaggy young hero and liberator Samson, whose name has in it *shemesh*, their word for the Sun. The Christians, who tend to be grumpy about the idea of any savior other than their own, say the Antichrist will come out of Samson's tribe of Dan. We raise the man in a certain way and invest him, as he is dripping with honey, glazed by fire, and awed by his experience, with the *syndexios*, the handshake that signifies the pact, brotherhood. And he is called *renatus*, "reborn", to the light. Most of our teachings are passed on by word of mouth, or illustrated allegorically in the symbols and scenes of our cave-like temples. But some have been written down in Greek on papyri, in Egypt; and the magicians there, who like to borrow sacred names and bits of ritual from all over, have used Mithraic words and images in one of their texts, to give it the charisma of Persian religion, which is wise, powerful, and exotic— it was Zoroaster's Magi who invented magic, and, as the Christians claim, visited Jesus at His birth, too. There is also a Persian story retold in Armenia, that of Faredun (whom the Armenians call Hruden) and Shahrnaz, which my fellow Syrian Iamblichus, writing in Greek, has crafted into the romance of Rhodanes and Sinonis, in his *Babyloniaka*, a popular book here in the east of the empire. He must be a Mithraist, since he has studded the story of the imperiled lovers with details of Mithraic imagery. James interrupts me here to observe that fifteen centuries from now Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is to do something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, by weaving

symbols from the initiatory rites and teachings of the mystery religion he belonged to, Freemasonry, into his opera about two Persian lovers and their wise mentor Sarastro in his temple of wisdom and of Isis and Osiris. Mithraism, he argues, is one remote ancestor of the Masonic order.

Why is Mithra so important to us? The religion of the Persians speaks of the contest between good and evil, of the innate goodness of every human being and of the critical role of humanity in deciding the outcome of this cosmic war. Their faith is humane in a way others are not— the Sabaeans in Harran and the Mandaeans to the south in Babylon consider creation a mistake or the act of an evil being, and say the true god has nothing to do with the world at all. Some philosophers agree and consider everything to be meaningless matter and random chance. But Zoroaster respected mankind; and Mithra is the most human of the Persian gods. Some Persians even say he was born of a human woman. He is the divinity closest to our concerns, our passions, our fears and hopes. (James: The Armenian priests, after scoffing at the notion Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu were both born to a father but had no mother, add in their rude retort to the Persians [Ełišē vardapet, *Vasn Vardanay ew Hayocʻ paterazmin*, pp. 32, 35: *Ew mews ews ayn cařragoyn kʻan zayd, Mihr astuac i knoǰē cnani, etʻē okʻ ənd iwrum cnoł̌in ankcʻi* "And another thing even more ridiculous than that: the god Mihr is born from a woman, if one fall into bed with one's own parent;" *Zor ew jer omn kʻaǰ yimastnocʻn asacʻ, etʻē Mihrn astuac mayracin ēr i mardkanē, ew tʻagawor astuacazawak ē, ew hamharz kʻaǰ ewtʻnerordacʻ astuacocʻ* "One of your wisest men said that the god Mihr was born of a mother, from amongst mankind, and the king is a child of god and adjutant of the great heptad of gods." The first passage suggests Mithra practiced consanguineal marriage with his mother; the second enables us, *inter alia*, to understand once and for all that when the Sasanians use the formula *ke čihr az yazdān* of a king they mean specifically that he is of divine seed, not merely of divine character or appearance. Agathangelos, para. 790, mentions *Mrhakan meheann anuaneal ordwoyn Aramazday, i giwłn zor Bagayařičn kočʻen əst partʻewerēn lezuin* "The temple named after Mirh, the son of Aramazd, in the village they call according to the Parthian tongue Bagayařič [i.e. village of the god, *bag*; the Armenian equivalent is di-*kʻ*]."]

How did the mysteries of Mithra come to the Romans? During the reign of the old Persian kings, the great ancient ones whom they remember now only as Darius son of Darius, Zoroaster's teachings spread throughout Anatolia; and there the local people— Cilicians, Lycians, Armenians— and the Greeks learned of them and sometimes blended them with customs of their own. Later on, Roman armies engaged in a sporadic coastal war against what our commanders called pirates, though the pirates would not have called themselves that, learned the rites of Mithra that they practiced on their mountains overlooking the sea; and when the legions marched into Armenia, a place some even think to be the homeland of Zoroaster, they learned still more. The center of the rites we practice is in Rome, where the worship of Mithra is becoming ever more popular, along with the mysteries of Cybele and Attis, of Isis and Osiris, of the moon god Men, of Sabazios, of the Jews and the Christians. Some even study the teachings of the Indians, called the naked philosophers, there. But the mysteries exist where there are no sculptures of the tauroctony, no carved arches of the Zodiac, no dedicatory inscriptions of *renatus* this and *nama* that— where the stories are simply told, and faith endures.

Where did Mithraism endure, and in what form? Here I must part from my ancient friend Ethpeni to speak in my own voice, telling a story that is, though, I hope no less romantic and thrilling. After writing a general work on the Zoroastrian religion in pre-Christian Armenia, I found myself working in detail on many different facets of that topic, and in the meantime translating and analyzing medieval Armenian poetry, traveling to India and writing on the ethnography and customs of the Parsis, and so on. When Columbia University closed its century-old program in Ancient Iranian studies and I moved to Harvard to take up my present chair in Armenian, my friends and teachers Michael Stone and Nina Garsoian suggested I make Armenian epic literature the focus of my next major project of research; and over several decades one went on to publish numerous studies in that field. Certain themes suggested themselves from the outset. Over time their unifying pattern has become clearer; and now I hope to have perceived a historical context that explains not merely the how, but the why, of their presence.

In 1874, an Armenian bishop from Constantinople, Garegin Srvandzteants, dispatched to study and report on the conditions of Armenians living in the mountainous fastnesses of their historical homeland, in what is now eastern Turkey, made a curious discovery: he recorded several recitations of an oral epic of evidently wide diffusion with roots in profound antiquity, whose events take place in the region of Lake Van and the mountains of Sasun to the southwest. The epic in its finished form had crystallized around the historical events of the ninth and tenth centuries, when leaders of the Armenian Artsruni and Bagratuni noble clans, throwing off the yoke of the Arab Caliphate, established principalities of their own. But episodes culled from the real life of Christian Armenia on the threshold of the Middle Ages take place, through the prism of the minstrel, in a pre-Christian mythological otherworld of larger-than-life heroes brooding in immortality in caves, of dragons, gods and goddesses of the sea, witches, flying horses, talking birds, flaming swords, and curses pronounced from the grave.

The story begins with the princess Tsovinar, Lady of the Lake, walking along the shores of the deep inner sea of Van on a hot, dry day. Thirsty, she strips off her clothes and wades towards a great stone pillar that rears out of the waters. She drinks of the milk welling from it, and in time has two sons, twins born of the rock— *petrogeneis*, *saxigeni* — who are called Sanasar and Baghdasar. These are the founders of the house of the wild men of Sasun, a race of heroes. Sanasar, the greater, dives to the depths of Lake Van and acquires the implements of the supernatural warrior or ancient Iranian epic hero. His flying steed speaks, like Rostam's Rakhsh; the blade of his sword, T'ur Ketsaki, bursts into lightning-like flame, like Dhu'l Faqr; and the Battle Cross that strengthens his right arm is like the *bazuband* of the mighty, elephant-bodied Saka champion of the *Shah-nameh*. He marries a woman with magical powers named Forty Goldilocks; and they have a son, Mher, that is, Mithra. The latter acquires the honorific epithet *arriudzdzev*, "lion-formed", or, "he who tears a lion in two", since Armenian *dzev* can mean both a shape and the cutting apart one does to make one. In one episode of valor Mher pulls a lion apart, Samson-like, by its jaws. But after committing adultery he breaks a vow to stay apart for a specified time from his wife and both die after she bears a son, the third hero of the race of Sasun. Now one recalls that the Mithraic initiate passes between the twin torchbearers, perhaps echoed by Sanasar and Baghdasar, and dies and is reborn

when the lion-headed man of the mysteries, emblematic of the power of death, breathes fire on him. So this would seem to be the Mithra of the fourth degree.

The son of Lion-tearing Mher is the greatest of the heroes of Sasun, Davit‘— that is, David. The Bagratunis, after the baptism of the Armenians, traced their descent from the young hero-king and Psalmist of Israel, one of whose earthly descendants was Jesus Christ. Now Davit‘ and his wife bore the fourth and last of the heroes of Sasun, P‘ok‘r, of Younger, Mher. This Mithra the Younger resembles somewhat Rostam’s son Sohrab; after an altercation with his dead father Davit‘, Mher is guided by a raven to a cave at Van where he sits on his horse, holding the Zodiac in his hands, till the end of time, when he will emerge and apocalyptic events will take place. Rock birth, twins, lion, zodiac, cave, and waiting for the millennium, all interwoven with romances, heroic battles, and the *longue durée* of a cosmic myth: here is a *tableau vivant* of the Mithraic mysteries, expressed in genres of composition and recitation that would not have been alien to a Parthian, or to a Syrian Mithraist legionary stationed at Dura Europos. As I studied the epic of Sasun the pieces came together, and one was looking at what Northrop Frye called in another context a secular scripture— a narrative of cultural importance and spiritual content expressed in a genre attuned to collective, not individual, reception and surrounded by the sanction accorded tradition, yet all of it apart from, alongside, sometimes even in opposition to canonical religious scripture. Armenians expressed and preserved a four-part tale founded in an archaic form of religious belief that clearly enshrines fidelity to one’s word, the warrior ethic of a hero, a teaching about death, and a hope of rebirth and eschatological salvation. And although each generation of the wild men (Armenian, *dzrrer*) of Sasun take wives, this is, like the Mithraic fraternity, a boys’ club. There was no room in the written literature of the country, dominated by the Christian clergy and defined by Biblical types, for a Mithraic narrative: folk epic provided the space. And this is very nearly a literal metaphor, since Armenians heard the Divine Liturgy in church but gathered of a winter’s night in the large space of a barn, warmed by the quietly sleeping animals, to listen to an itinerant bard, the distant descendant of the *gusan*-minstrels of the Parthian Arsacid royal court, play a stringed instrument and chant the lays of Sasun.

This research had its uncannily dramatic moments, the kind of thing that reminds a scholar that life’s career is more dynamic than Sitzfleisch. I had gone to Van and was standing with some American Armenian pilgrims on the shore, wondering aloud what had happened to the lightning sword when Mher the Younger followed the raven to his cave (it is a great blind portal carven by the Urarteans, and we were standing in front of it). He is not described as holding it. Oh that, said a man from California whose mother had come from Shahbaghi, a Van neighborhood. My mother, he continued, used to say that whenever there was a sudden storm— these are very common at Van— it was Mher throwing his sword into the lake. This piece completed a few puzzles: the Armenian epic cycles long ago influenced the *Nart* epic of the Ossetes or Alans, an Iranian nation living northeast of Armenia who are the last living survivors of the ancient Scythian peoples. I had figured out that a character named Argwana in a Circassian version of the Narts was Armeno-Parthian Argawan, the courtier of king Artashes in an epic cycle of the 2^{nd}-1^{st} centuries BC who seems to have broken in Artashes’ rebellious young bride, the Alan

princess Sat‘enik. (Satana is the mother of all the 101 Narts, a word meaning “manly men”, in the Ossetic cycle.) The Alans probably took their stories north to Britain as Roman cavalrymen, contributing to the Celtic tales that became the great Arthurian romances the episodes of the sword in the stone, the lady of the lake, and the return of the sword Excalibur to the waters. In Tsovinar I had a lady of the lake. The sword in the stone I found in a series of linked epic legends about St. Gregory the illuminator and king Tiridates of Armenia. And now I had Excalibur in my hands, or at any rate splashing securely into Lake Van, which is almost as good. I have mentioned Samson; you need only open your Bibles to recall that Scripture is all about storytelling. But why Mithra, why the moment when king Senek‘erim Artsruni was building his palace and its richly adorned church on the island of Aght‘amar in Lake Van?

Part of the answer is in the epic of Sasun itself: all four generations of the heroes battle the kings of a place called Msr, that is, the name of Egypt that was commonly applied to the Arab Caliphate at Baghdad. The Armenians were fighting the Muslim Arabs and wanted warlike exemplars to emulate. But they already had them from the Bible: the walls of the church at Aght‘amar teem with them. Three mounted warrior saints, Theodore, Sergius, and George, lance dragons and devils. Little David revs up his slingshot to lay low Goliath the *aylazgi*, “alien”— the standard word for a Muslim. Samson tussles with his lion. And Armenian written texts are full of allusions to the Maccabees, the doughty, faithful heroes of little Israel confronting the bloated evil empire of the Seleucid Greek infidels. Christians have generally honored in the breach Christ’s admonition to turn the other cheek: the Hebrew Bible and Christian lore provide adequate ammunition for a holy war. How did Mithra join the party? For that we must look outside Armenia, and not only, as Armenologists tend to do, only westwards towards yet more Christians.

The ninth century was a turning point, the demographic watershed, when it became clear everywhere that Islam was not only here to stay but was becoming for much of the Near East the majority religion. It was a moment, as the late Patricia Crone argued in the last of her magnificently original books, when non-Arabs who had become nominally Muslim rose up to assert their separate cultural and proto-national identity, their claim to political sovereignty. This is the moment the Persian *shu‘ubiya* expand from a disaffected cultural elite to an armed resistance, when in addition to the Qur’an we have Daqiqi, the Ferdousi, writing down the secular scripture of epic. In Armenia the epic is fixed, but not written. But Professor Crone looked farther afield: in Central Asia, Iranian Buddhists forge the image of a savior divinity to come at the end of time, as the repository of their hopes for redemption. This is Maitreya, the bodhisattva figure modelled, it can be argued, largely on the Zoroastrian conception of Mithra (rather than his Vedic counterpart, Mitra). We know that the cult of Maitreya could be associated with armed resistance: a great bas-relief of the bodhisattva stands on the road into Ladakh at Mulbekh at the place where Tibetans stopped the Muslim invaders dead in their tracks. So the reason why Mher the Lion and Mher the Young should appear in an Armenian epic of the ninth century now becomes clear: it was the westernmost manifestation of a popular revival with the sunny hero god, liberator and savior at its center, that swept Asia. The core of Mithra’s worship had always been a band of young male warriors; and so it remained, with the tightly knit clan of Sasun. And thereafter, as the *javanmardan* “young men” and *futuwwa* “youths” of

Iran and Turkey, the Armenian *ktrchvorats miutiunk'* "unions of the brave", and the Kurdish *Ahl-e Haqq* and *Yaresan* formed their associations to defend neighborhoods, helped their communities, foregathered to study sacred books and philosophies, enacted secret initiatory rituals, and of course wrestled and chanted epic poems, perhaps something of the Mithraic spirit survived down to these latter days, in the lands of its birth.

And a final reflection. The ninth century was a time, not just of apocalyptic movements, revivals, and rebellions, but one when Near Eastern peoples used the strategy of written history and genealogy, partly rediscovering, partly reinventing their pasts to forge an identity that might endure in the Islamicate world, that new and forever changed landscape. Thus the growth of New Persian literature; but also the lesser known *Nabataean Agriculture* of Ibn Wahshiyya, with its celebration of the intellectual glories of the past of the "Nabati", the Aramaic-speakers of Syria and the Mesopotamian plain who kept the name of Assyria alive. One senses something of this renewal and assertion of identity also in the *History of the Armenians* of Movses Khorenats'i, whom Armenians revere as the patmahayr, the father of history. And so he was; but given the very numerous anachronisms of his text it is likely that he lived, not in the fifth century— when St. Mesrop Mashtots invented an alphabet, gathered around him a school, and ushered in the *voskedar*, the "golden age"— but in that crucial turning moment, the ninth century. At one point his patron, a Bagratuni prince, asks him to tell about the ancient heroes, and Movses does something no writer of the fifth century ever thought of doing— for the pagan past pressed too closely then upon a Christian polity and culture still in formation. Movses reproduces an entire pre-Christian sacral poem, the only one in all Armenian literature, on the fiery birth of the mighty god Vahagn, that is, the Avestan Verethraghna or Pahlavi Bahram. This is the act of a writer exalting the past, not just acknowledging it. And just as important is the narrator's comment afterwards, that he heard it performed on the *p'andirrn*, a kind of stringed instrument, with his own ears. As Shane Butler points out in his recent book *The Ancient Phonograph*, ancient writers lived in a vocal environment, in cultures of recitation, of declamation, of performance, of sound. Their writing was meant to be heard and to reproduce the experience of hearing. Movses is helping Smbat Bagratuni to hear the *p'andirrn* (the same stringed instrument Ossete reciters of the Narts call the *faendyr*— and by happy coincidence more recent bards farther west also plug in Fenders) behind the sung strophes of the sacred hymn. It is a past conjured back to life, with the purpose of affirming that the Armenians, though a small people, have yet great deeds that are worthy to be set down in a book. So I see as related phenomena the astonishing composite work of Movses, a written monument employing oral strategies, that was subsequently valued with a veneration verging on sacrality; and the oral secular scripture of the epic of Sasun standing just outside the sphere of the written, but structured with the order of a Mithraic ritual and cosmic teaching. These ninth-century works of the imagination, of spiritual striving, of social commitment, exert their power in part because they creatively encounter the reality of change while asserting the right to be oneself, to be different: the epics of Sasun and of Ferdousi thus reflect both a very old and a very new Iran and Armenia. And Mithra, the star-studded actor in the cosmic drama, the luminous charioteer of heaven, shines through both. And then, Mithra's name comes to mean love. That is a whole other story; and I think it will be a good one. Pick up your Fender and stay tuned.