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**Manya Saadi-nejad, Anāhitā. A History and Reception  
of the Iranian Water Goddess,  
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Recently published book of Manya Saadi-nejad is an attempt to build consistent picture of one of the greatly disputed personages of ancient Iranian mythology, or religion, the goddess Anāhitā. The ambitious task of great importance not only for the study of ancient Iranian beliefs but culture and art as there is probably not a single female depiction in ancient Persian iconography which was not attempted to be interpreted as depiction of this particular goddess. In its nature such study is complicated and requires references to enormous material both in terms source texts and methodological order. The challenge was replied by the Author who re-edited her doctoral dissertation into the book under review.

The book consists of eight chapters, preceded by the Introduction and followed by the Conclusions. First two chapters discuss, or rather introduce, selected goddesses from prehistory, Mesopotamia and some Indo-European female deities chosen because of their relation with the rivers with some accent placed on the Celtic and Indian comparisons. Chapter three deals with depiction of Anāhitā in Avesta and chapter four compare her with the other Iranian goddesses. Chapter five “Anāhitā: A Composite Goddess” is an actual analyse of the nature of the goddess, her origins and actual position in Iranian religion. This chapter presents Author’s view, not only, of Anāhitā but general development of Iranian system of beliefs, placing them in evolutionary scheme. Following two chapters describe the manifestations of the goddess in “Historical Period” and her presence in Pahlavi texts. The last, eighth, chapter discusses the detected traces of Anāhitā in Iranian culture of Islamic period.

Manya Saadi-nejad presents Anāhitā in the light of development of Iranian religious culture, as a deity of composite character whose core consists of old Indo-

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European female river deity, who, in course of migrations, intercultural exchange and other historical processes, included the features of Mesopotamian origin and became one of the deities commonly worshipped by the Iranians prior the reform of Zarathuštra. Under her patronage was healing and victory in battle. In fact, one might conclude that she represents pre-zaratushtrian deity of Iranian “paganism” who grew too important to be reduced to mere demoniac in “zoroastrian” reformed religion.<sup>1</sup> The Author rightly points the ambiguity of the goddess who described as worshipped by evil characters, and was even being addressed ad dev at some stage (p. 62). Interesting notion of the word “anāhitā” as an epithet rather than actual name was made (p. 45-50, esp. 45). Not being able to reduce her, zoroastrian clergy accepted her into official pantheon, however “pagan” traits can be detected throughout history and retained in Islamic period, when her identification with the planet Venus resulted with incorporating her into cosmological-astrological speculations. Such picture of Anāhitā of a dynamic idea, being gradually developed in historical process is great value of the book, however such approach to Iranian deities can hardly be found novel, as Gershevitch’s study of Mithra illustrate. Nevertheless, this model of perception of “divine evolution” has not been directly applied to Anāhitā so far.

The extraordinary rich material which the Author operates confirms the words of Prof. Llewellyn-Jones quoted on the back cover stating that Manya Saadi-nejad “draws together key texts and images to enlight our understanding of a cosmically significant deity”. The book contains several faults and inconsistencies which should be addressed and could be divided into structural, methodological and factual, with some seemingly overlapping between these categories.

*Structure.* It is clear that the original structure of the dissertation was modified in order to create the book. This is revealed by the quite common errors in quoting the chapters within the book.<sup>2</sup> Current structure of the book starts with the brief presentation of some goddesses of the “Ancient World”, starting with superficial cover of the Palaeolithic “Venus” figurines which do not have any impact on later considerations. Even if introduction of “Paleolithic Venus” type figurines found in the territory of Iran, might be of some interest to European readers, unaware of the local, eastern types of the type, Manya Saadi-nejad does not dedicate any place to either compare the figurines of European and Iranian stone age, or explain the influence of the finds on later times, when the territory of nowadays Islamic Republic of Iran was populated by Iranian-speaking invaders from the North (p. 7-9). Following goes an introduction of Pre-Iranian goddesses in the Iranian lands which

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<sup>1</sup> Using the terms created by Ilya Gershevitch (*The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press, 1967), which are useful approximation, however without adoption of his time-frame of the processes.

<sup>2</sup> Manya Saadi-nejad 2021: p. 36 addresses earlier linguistic discussion which was introduced on p. 41, 45-50; p. 43 reference to chapter eleven which does not exist (!); p. 103 reference to chapter four but in fact it is chapter one; p. 120 reference to chapter three while it should read chapter 1; p. 121, reference to chapter five while actually it is chapter 3, pp. 46-47; p. 125 should be chapter 1 instead of chapter 4.

includes not only Elam but also refers to Čatal Huyuk and includes Mesopotamian Sumerians (p. 9-12). Description of two goddesses of Mesopotamia in Semitic, post-Sumerian era is justified as they appear in later argumentation, but the introduction is so brief that it cannot be of any use for a reader unacquainted with the topic. Also, mentioning Kušan, Sogdian and Khwarasmian Nana in this place does not serve the purpose of illustration of specific Iranian ideological-religious syncretism postulated later and her function within Iranian imagery is explained only further when discussing Spandarmad (p. 79). Author just jumped to a topic of Sogdian religion almost directly from Paleolit and early Mesopotamia, leaving at the same time multitude of myths or mythological personages of possible importance for later narration (Ereškigal, but specifically Tiamat who clearly relates to the dragon-slayer motifs discussed by the Author later; p. 110-117).

Laconic list of the goddesses of the Scythian pantheon, based on single fragment from Herodotus (p. 16-17) which might be of crucial importance for further study, is abbreviated beyond minimum while the accounts of Herodotus provide actual comparison for study of pre “Zarathushtrian” and pre “Zoroastrian” phases of Iranian religions. Reliance on just one part of the Herodotean Scythian fragment (IV.58-59) reveals lack of familiarity with actual text, especially in light of further exploration of Indo-European river, and other, goddesses.

Listing of the Celtic goddesses is excused by their semantic connection with the rivers, which is to correspond with the idea of Anāhitā being originally a river goddess, however material from the Indo-European group remotely related with Iranians, taken from the peoples speaking languages of centum group, further from satem group which should be of primary source, requires explanation. Author lists the Celtic deities, than Slavic and non-Indo-European, to go to Armenian (which is directly dependant from Iranian if separable at all at this early stage) and only then going to Indian examples.

At the same time the goddesses to whom Anāhitā is being compared in the Western sources are simply omitted, leaving no space for consideration of the nature of such identifications.

*Methodology.* Author describes herself as “a student of mythology” (p. 44) but clearly does not identify that with any of the schools of the religious studies. When it comes to methodological models, Manya Saadi-nejad quotes one book of Mircea Eliade and few of Georges Dumézil, but is unable to place her thoughts towards any of the greater theories of religion. This, in itself, is fully acceptable, however the lack of wider perspective in studying religion harms the content of the book which often seems random in selection of material. Manya Saadi-nejad managed to miss the concept of the Great Goddess, which seems impossible in a study of a particular goddess within multiplicity of comparative material. The concept might be misleading or outdated however would provide good methodological ground to refer, instead of attempts to reinvent the wheel by collecting material without the methodological frame. It would

be perfectly understandable to decline employment of such artificial and anachronistic concept, as long as there is an alternative conceptual structure in place which allows proper comparisons. Neither is Manya Saadi-nejad's work an expression of personal theology like Rudolph Otto's "Dionysos".<sup>3</sup> She perceives Anāhitā, in scientific manner, as a cultural and historical phenomenon, topos rather than true person, so claim to be a modern mythographer would require knowledge of comparative religious studies. The book belongs rather to Iranian literature studies but even as such, it operates in methodological vacuum.

The book reveals deep and thorough knowledge of Iranian texts but superficial reading of other sources. The best example is the treatment of the Scythian fragment of Herodotus "Histories". The fragment separated from the chapter "Indo-European Water Goddesses" ignores the earlier passages (IV.5.9-10) which state that the Scythians were to derive from the "daughter of the Borysthenes river" and/or divine/demoniac creature with snake legs who could be easily identified with the former, but both clearly associate the origin of the Scythian royal house with female deity related to a river. It is important to state that the head-cult or head hunting was an element of various cultures, including Scythian. The female divine beings holding severed heads appear in the Scythian iconography. Strangely Manya Saadi-nejad fails to observe that the employment of severed heads in Anāhitā's cult contradicts all zoroastrian taboos against impurity of the corpse and their very existence among the Sasanians reveals greater religious diversity among the Iranians. At the same time Manya Saadi-nejad fails to note that Arthurian cycle provides an example of female water deity associated with the royal power (like later Anāhitā for the Sasanians) in person of Lady of the Lake. This, however should be confronted with the hypothesis linking Arthurian cycle with the Sarmatians. In enumeration of the Celtic goddesses Author refers to the opinions not otherwise presented, connecting Anāhitā with Epona through horses (p. 28). On the other hand, suggested connection between Roman mithraea in Britain with apparent connection of Mithra and Anāhitā in Iranian religion (p. 22-23, 28, 42) reveals lack of understanding of Roman Mithraism and lack of knowledge of basic problems with its interpretation. It is a loose observation without any elaboration.

Also, identification of Anāhitā once with water as an element, and in other places with river(-s) makes the picture blurry. The element of water in history of religion could not be limited to the rivers, and could not be limited to beneficial aspects. It must be stated that Manya Saadi-nejad failed to mention in her Mesopotamian excursus the female deities associated with rain like Ninhursang, Tiamat, Ningizimua, Bilulu and other goddesses of the type from Kanaan, Hittite

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<sup>3</sup> Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995.

state, but attested among the Aryans, Germans and Greeks.<sup>4</sup> Important omission is Tiamat who, as per intuitively applied mythological structure, acts in Sumerian myth both as a dragon and female deity which, in connection with Echidna(dragon)-like personage from Herodotus and connection of Iranian dragons with water as illustrated by Manya Saadi-nejad (p. 105-115), creates important conceptual complex which was missed because focus placed solely on Iranian material.

Identification of any water with Anāhitā ends up with *argumentum ad absurdum* when the very act of drinking might refer to the goddess (p. 152).

It seems that the lack of definition of the problems to be considered results in kind of structural mess. The situation improves when the text gets to the Avestan material.

Missing historical structure is another weakness of the book. The Author skilfully uses Avestan, Old-and Middle-Persian material but the general framework which she employs is obscure. The Reader can figure the idea of development of Iranian religion but the timeframes remain obscure. It is clear that Manya Saadi-nejad has a defined view on evolution of Iranian religions, sees them as syncretic to certain extent but at the same time she uses generic phrases like “in Iranian religion” (p. 150) which does not specify the time, phase or which of the ancient Iranian religions she has in mind.

As mentioned earlier, lack of presentation of the deities of Greek and Roman religions, who were referred to when Ancient Western authors wrote about Anāhitā disables examination of the actual associations and the similarities which led to them. At Authors disposal are left superficial connections from general knowledge, missing important link between Armenian Nanē and Astlik specifically with Aphrodite Urania through the epithet “little star”. This trait, linking to Scythian Argipasa, might be far more important for understanding Anāhitā’s connection with Urania than generic reference to “sensual love” and “fertility” (p. 65-66). Especially considering goddess’ preserved astrological function in Islamic times and the fact that Nanē was identified with Athena. Strangely, Author noticed Anāhitā’s diadem “studded with one hundred stars” but associated it only with Elamite and Mesopotamian influence (p. 103). Similarly, theology, or mythography of Athena vastly exceeds reference to a “warrior goddess” (p. 122) and, at the same time a question can be asked if Artemis could be treated as a “warrior goddess” (p. 123), or rather sister of Apollo, whose indirect connection with the sun reminds that of Mithra.

Attempts to identify Sudābeh and Rudābeh specifically with Anāhitā (p. 165-174) are far fetched and ignore the eclectic nature of Firdawsi’s poem and any reference to water cannot evidence relation to the goddess, like that of Iranian fairies or pairikās (p. 179-180).

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<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Freedom with which Author identifies the mythical personages cannot be accepted. If Inanna is later North Iranian Nana, than it is unlikely to represent Anāhitā at the same time. Association of all literary female personages and all references to humidity with one goddess does not lead to proper identification which can be achieved through creation of semantic boundaries.

*Facts.* Direct errors occasionally appear in the book. In description of Slavic water goddesses the Author mentions Mokosh, whom she introduces as a patroness of horses, while the deity is enigmatic and not well-researched, rather associated with moist or humidity than running water. Slavic lore is, on the other hand full of demonic creatures connected to water, like rusalki or utopce. The groups of the warriors, priests and women worshipping Anāhitā, do not reflect Indo-Iranian triad of Dumézil (p. 51, 74). Sargon who was found in the basket was the Akkadian not the Assyrian (p. 158). One can read about a “druid mother” of Sargon II (p. 168). It is also very clear that the sanctuary of Antiochus which contains syncretic depictions of the deities with identifications between Hellenic and Iranian pantheons, is Nimrud Dagh which was raised by Antiochus I of Commagene and not the Seleucid Antiochus, as the Author states (p. 124).

The book *Anahita. A History and Reception of the Iranian Water Goddess*, Manya Saadi-nejad must have lost much of the original content of the dissertation. From at least eleven chapters (mentioned by error) only eight remained, and that also affected badly the structure of the work. Despite that the general idea of the Author is still visible, however the text itself seems to reveal ambition to create an erudite work which did not succeed. The parts which concern directly Iranian material are well-elaborated and bring huge value to our knowledge of ancient Iranian religion.

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