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Book review "Intangible spirits and graven images : the iconography of deities in the pre-Islamic Iranian world, written by Michael Shenkar"

Uehlinger, Christoph

Michael Shenkar

Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World. (Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity, 4). Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. xxii + 392 pp. (235–366: 189 b/w figures; 367–392: 32 color plates). ISBN 9789004281486 (hbk.)

This remarkable monograph is the revised version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation submitted in 2013 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. That an iconographical study is published in a series devoted to late-antique "magical and religious literature" can thus be explained (one of Shenkar's supervisors, Shaul Shaked, is an editor of the series, which hitherto focused on Syriac and Jewish-Aramaic so-called incantation bowls and curse texts). But it is also something of an oddity, which might signal to the field that the two once pioneering enterprises *Iconography of Religions* (ed. T. P. van Baaren) and *Visible Religion* (ed. H. G. Kippenberg) have never been completed nor replaced (see Uehlinger 2015: 390–392). Today a senior lecturer in Pre-Islamic Iranian Studies at HUJ, the author further acknowledges encouragement by Frantz Grenet, Jean Kellens and others; his thesis moves to the very front of contemporary research on Iranian and Central Asian pre-Islamic cultural history.

Chapter 1, "Introduction" (pp. 1–10), exposes the book's central concerns and aims, situates the research topic geographically and historically within the "Iranian world," and explains why Zoroastrian texts should not have a lead in interpreting pre-Islamic Iranian iconography. There is the danger of retrojecting Zoroastrian developments and concepts that occurred only later and of considering Zoroastrianism the privileged cultural mold of ancient Iran. It is understandable that modern scholars with Irano-Zoroastrian sympathies favor such an approach, but there was definitely more variety and fluidity to pre-Islamic Iranian religion both west and east than what our big containers (Zoroastrian, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, etc.) allow for. I would add that from the critical historian's point of view, there is little point in looking for "genuine Iranian" religious deities or concepts in isolation (but Shenkar wants to limit his discussion to "Iranian" deities and divine images; p. 2). One should always start (as Shenkar generally does) from contexts and assemblages and avoid anachronism (and anatopism) as far as possible. Chapter 2, "Written Sources" (pp. 11–46), offers a survey of relevant textual materials, among which the Avesta and Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature have a significant share but need to be supplemented by pre-Islamic inscriptions (especially Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian), pre-Christian Greek and Latin sources, Christian historiography (among which Armenian and Georgian histories deserve special attention), Manichaean and Chinese sources, and Arabic and Persian treatises written by Muslim historians and doxographers.

In chapter 3, "Iconographic Pantheon" (pp. 47–174), the main corpus of the book, Shenkar lists deities in alphabetical order whose iconography from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian period or beyond he discusses in virtually exhaustive detail and depth, consistently distinguishing between data from Western versus Eastern Iran. Twenty-eight deities are positively identified in visual representations; depending on the nature of the evidence, arguments for attribution vary from unambiguous epigraphic identification (deities are often named on Kushan coins) to circumstantial considerations. A final section deals with deities attested by a peculiar iconography (e.g., on seal-

ings from the Persepolis archives or on Sogdian ossuaries) whom scholars cannot yet firmly identify by name. The longest discussions concern Ahura Mazdā (see also Shenkar 2015a), Anāhitā, Mithra, Nana, X^{v}arənah, and Vayu, not necessarily because these were easy to identify or better attested than others but, rather, because they have been subject to intense scholarly debates, duly reviewed by the author. Picking out one attribution demonstrating Shenkar's originality, the image on a seal that was found in 1882 on the site of ancient Gorgippia on the northern shore of the Black Sea has become the emblematic icon of Anāhitā for scholars and laymen alike. It shows a goddess standing on a lion and facing a royal worshipper; her body is surrounded by rays projecting outward, an iconographic convention of Mesopotamian origin generally understood in terms of a halo of light. Shenkar questions the *communis opinio* identification with Anāhitā and considers Nana a more probable alternative; but the figure might as well be another goddess related to the Mesopotamian Ishtar tradition, whose iconography spread far beyond Mesopotamia. Note that this chapter's title is slightly misleading, since the more than twenty-eight deities and the visual representations assigned to them respectively belong to many different contexts in space and time; hence, they never formed a consistent "pantheon" until they were united as members of a class in Shenkar's dissertation. As the author himself acknowledges in his conclusions, "we are in fact dealing with independent or semi-independent pantheons and cultural traditions sharing the same background and with very complex interconnections among them" (p. 191).

Chapter 4, "Intangible Spirits: Iranian Aniconism" (pp. 175–180), is obviously informed by recent studies on aniconism in the southern Levantine and biblical worlds (on which see now Doak 2015; cf. Gaifman 2012 on Greek aniconism). Following Hebrew Bible scholar T. N. D. Mettinger, who distinguished between "material aniconism" (denoting various kinds of objects and symbols) and "empty-space aniconism" (empty thrones and other devices pointing to a place to be taken by an invisible deity), Shenkar finds correspondences for both in pre-Islamic Iranian religion. He adds "elemental aniconism" (fire, water, wind, astral bodies, and the sky), and, less felicitous and in my view unnecessary, "semi-aniconic representations" (e.g., divine chariots, which perfectly fit "material aniconism," or "empty-space aniconism" when … empty). Iranian aniconism should, in Shenkar's view, not only be traced to some "nomadic heritage," since aniconic cults are also well-attested in sedentary societies west of Iran, including Mesopotamia, which could well have influenced Iranian practices. Shenkar is right in stressing that aniconic ritual does in no way preclude *per se* an anthropomorphic conception of the deities so worshipped.

Chapter 5, "Graven Images: Iranian Anthropomorphism" (pp. 181–190), evaluates the significance of anthropomorphism both in material visual culture (in terms of cultic statuary, "idols" and "idol houses") and in mental representation. Regarding the former, he draws a clear distinction between Western and Eastern Iran: to date, "no closed temples that could house … statues and serve as the 'House of God' have been uncovered in Achaemenian Western Iran" (p. 181), although "at least some of the anthropomorphic deities portrayed on seals and tablets from the Persepolis Fortification Archive may indeed represent cultic statues" (p. 182). Cult statues may occasionally have been in use during the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, "but any archaeological evidence as to their existence is yet to appear" (p. 182; note Hellenistic-period statuary from the so-called "Frataraka temple" at Persepolis). Sasanian visual culture was anything but aniconic, as shown most notably by the well-known Sasanian rock reliefs; however, one should not take these as evidence for Sasanian anthropomorphic cult

statues. If Sasanian Zoroastrians never developed an explicit prohibition against anthropomorphic representations of gods (in ritual or otherwise), this may well be because statues and other cult images were not a regular feature in Western Iranian cults of their time. Shenkar also argues convincingly that an iconoclastic movement never existed within Sasanian Zoroastrianism (*pace* M. Boyce; now extended in Shenkar 2015b). The situation was different in Armenian, Bactrian, Sogdian, and perhaps also Parthian shrines, from the Hellenistic period onwards. Two Bactrian temples at Ai Khanum and Takht-i Sangin "provide the first direct archaeological evidence for cultic statues, found *in situ*" (p. 184), but only the Kushan kings and the Sogdian rulers produced "the final anthropomorphization of most Iranian deities" (p. 184), roughly at the time when the first anthropomorphic images of Buddha, Śiva, and other Indian deities were created (p. 184 n. 37 refers to Giuliano 2004, misplaced in the bibliography on p. 207, and to Seckel 2004, which is missing in the bibliography; see reference below). The Sogdians, among whom Zoroastrianism competed with Buddhism and Manichaeism, went furthest "in combining Hellenistic and Kushan legacies with Sasanian and Indian influences, creating the Iranian world's most complete series of divine personages" (p. 185). As for "mental notions of the divine," Shenkar, in line with Shaked and others, points to the important Zoroastrian distinction of *mēnōg* and *gētīg*: the former denotes the non-material sphere in which the deities exist in anthropomorphic form, but this form cannot be adequately sensed by humans (except religious virtuosi such as Zoroaster and other visionaries), whereas the latter stands for the sensible material world in which deities may embody themselves (in natural phenomena, animals, etc.). Anthropomorphic cult statues would deny or subvert this fundamental division and were therefore no option for (Western) Zoroastrian priests.

In chapter 6, "Conclusion" (pp. 191–194), Shenkar summarizes his main results. Instead of repeating what he wrote in the previous chapters, the author offers a number of new groupings (notably, according to period or region) and syntheses. He confirms A. de Jong's intuition that there is little overlap of even Sasanian (let alone Achaemenid, Parthian, or Kushan) iconography of deities with the specifically Zoroastrian tradition and notes a long-standing influence and persistence in Iranian iconography of originally Mesopotamian features. According to Shenkar, "it was contact with Mesopotamian divine imagery that probably provided the originally aniconic Iranians [*sic*] with the initial impulse for the visual anthropomorphization of their gods … In the Hellenistic period, the iconocentric Greek cult … undoubtedly contributed to the visual anthropomorphization of Iranian gods and to the expansion of anthropomorphic imagery in Iran. It is in this period that the first evidence of cultic statuary appears in the archaeological record" (p. 193). Yet Shenkar also observes "a sharp divide in the nature of the cult between Western and Eastern Iran": whereas in the West, Achaemenids and Sasanians alike "adopted anthropomorphic representations of the divine for their official and proclamatory uses … their sanctuaries and sacred precincts were free from statues of the divine in human form" (p. 193). In contrast, "Eastern Iranian people, like the Kushans and the Sogdians, not only made unprecedented use (by Western Iranian standards) of portrayals of their gods in human form, but also venerated their man-made [*sic*] representations in temples" (p. 193). Shenkar thus postulates "both aniconic and iconic potential" in Proto-Iranian religion, which developed differently in various regions according to endogenous preferences and/or contact and interaction with exogenous influences (Greek, Roman, and Indian in the case of Sogdian iconography).

Whether readers are interested in matters of religious and cultural history, pre-Islamic Iranian religious iconography and visual culture, or more general debates on the

visual representation of deities and spiritual beings, anthropomorphism versus alternative forms of representation, iconism versus aniconism, adoption versus rejection of cult images, iconoclasm (on which see further Shenkar 2015b), etc., they will be well served by a book that is a mine of information and insights, both in terms of primary data and conversation with previous scholarship, for any of these issues. It is virtually impossible to summarize the book as a whole nor to do justice to all the topics discussed, but readers should know that Shenkar has produced a hitherto indispensable *vademecum* for anyone concerned with pre-Islamic Iranian religion. Books of this kind demonstrate that iconography is an essential tool for historians of ancient religion, especially (but not exclusively) when they are dealing with societies, strata of ritual practice, and traditions that have left only a limited mark in writing and thus need to be studied on the basis of their material and visual record. Shenkar deserves praise for having produced such a well-documented and well-organized resource monograph, which scholars will be lucky to peruse in the future. The Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres had good reasons indeed to grant the book the Roman and Tania Ghirshman Award.

This very positive overall appreciation should not be mitigated by the following comments on matters of methodology, concepts, and terminology, issues that might be of interest also to readers of *Numen* who are less acquainted with pre-Islamic Iranian culture and religion. Speaking about methodology, Shenkar refers to Erwin Panofsky's well-known three-tier model of iconographical and iconological analysis, which I also consider of lasting usefulness provided it is freed from its idealistic premises (Uehlinger 2015: 394–399). One should be aware, however, that in Panofsky's model the identification of figures and scenes by name and textual reference occurs quite early in the analytical procedure, to the effect that specifically visual peculiarities are sometimes overlooked or considered less important than the proper identification. As it happens, Shenkar's main chapter, arranged alphabetically, that is, according to names, reads like a dictionary of sorts — which will have a certain effect on its use and reception. His procedure is of course valuable and well-established, but it might also distract scholars from other no less valuable possibilities of studying the primary data: one could have wished for a chapter where the material evidence is first presented according to time, space, and perhaps genre, a procedure that would have given more weight to assemblages and associations of deities in particular contexts. One could imagine yet another chapter operating along a strictly (should I say, genuinely) iconographical classification, which identifies particular types of deity representations based on features such as gender, dress, attitude and gesture, attributes, and association in groups whenever appropriate before even raising the issue of identification by name. My point is not that one of these procedures is more appropriate than others and should be preferred in isolation, but that methodological decisions set the track and produce a certain kind of result. Dealing with such a difficult subject matter as pre-Islamic religious history and aiming at relating iconography to contextualized religion, different procedures practiced in conversation might well complement each other, increase our critical tools, and produce even more substantial and far-reaching results.

Another remark concerns terminology: While I agree that it may under certain circumstances be useful to distinguish "aniconic" from "iconic" representations, one should be aware that this opposition construes a stiff dichotomy that hardly reflects the complexities of archaeological, visual, and textual data. As far as I can see, Shenkar does never define the terms "iconic" versus "aniconic", yet he tends to use the former for depictions of human, animal, and hybrid figures, and less so for man-made objects. But why should a throne, an altar, or a weapon (or their visual representation, for that mat-

ter) be less "iconic" than that of a human, animal, or vegetal item? I would argue that "iconic" and "aniconic" should better be regarded as two opposite poles delimiting a spectrum of representational options; the term "aniconic," on one end of the spectrum, should be reserved for non-crafted and inanimate objects such as a piece of wood or a standing stone (items in the Mesopotamian, Levantine or Mediterranean worlds that could "presentify" an absent deity or ancestor without however "representing" him or her). To be sure, the use of the term "aniconic" has become loose in recent scholarship. Scholars have started to employ it for any kind of non-anthropomorphic or non-theriomorphic cult symbol, and Mettinger's "empty-space aniconism" (which, for example, includes empty thrones flanked by winged sphinxes, that is, conspicuously iconic compositions) has added to the confusion. As a result, scholars dealing with "aniconism" often address distinctions regarding the *object* of representation (e.g., anthropomorphic versus non-anthropomorphic, or animated versus inanimate features) in a line with a different categorical distinction concerning the iconic versus aniconic character of a representation or its degree of iconicity. Turning from the adjective to the abstract noun, I am generally skeptical with the term "aniconism" unless it is meant to denote a programmatic or habitual opposition to any kind of iconic representation, that is, a consistent attitude and practice anchored in habitus and/or ideology. To speak of "aniconic cultures" as such is, in my view, an *abus de langage* that should be avoided. I should further mention the notorious difficulty, well-known to historians of religion but less problematized in neighboring disciplines, that much of our scholarly vocabulary has its roots in emic discourse, in the present case religious language, an *état de fait* which impedes rigorous analysis and produces theoretically ambiguous explanations and interpretations. Take the composite term "graven images" in Shenkar's title: this is the time-and-tradition-honored (King James Version) English equivalent of Hebrew *pesel*, the cult object prohibited by the biblical so-called Second Commandment. Consider the use of terms such as "idol" ("idol-temple," "idol-worship") or "idolatry" throughout Shenkar's study, words which ultimately go back to the Greek Septuagint and early Christian discourse. Shenkar expresses some astonishment that these lemmata are missing from the Encyclopaedia Iranica (p. 3); I would respond that it is rather fortunate that a modern encyclopaedia does not have such entries since these concepts are infested with a long history of religious prejudice. Although I do not want to insinuate for a second that Shenkar's discussion is biased by religious prejudice (he has a very convincing paragraph on religious polemics and "polemical terms that lack substance and definition" on p. 183, which is considerably extended and refined in Shenkar 2015b: his whole enterprise bespeaks his genuine historical and anthropological interest in religious visual culture), the fact that he himself uses terminology like "idolatry" and related terms throughout his book without properly defining them raises an epistemological problem. I admire the versatility with which he weaves textual sources from many different languages (Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Greek, Latin, Old and Middle Persian, Syriac, etc.) into his discussion; his command of modern scholarly languages (including Russian) seems to be equally versatile. That, when it comes to categorial English, things should boil down to "idols" and "idolatry" in an otherwise balanced, nuanced, and critical study produces unnecessary irritation and frustration. I should add, however, that Shenkar's 2015b piece demonstrates critical awareness of the problem.

The book is well-produced and well-written, and I have noted remarkably few typos or slips of the pen that could distract the reader's attention (in the bibliography and relevant footnotes, "Raede" should be corrected to "Reade" throughout, and on p.

180, the "Persepolis Foundation Archive" should read "Persepolis Fortification Archive," as elsewhere). It comes with an appendix listing Iranian dynasties and kings, a rich bibliography (pp. 197–223), two indices (general and deities) and more than two hundred illustrations, generally of high quality, which, needless to say, play an essential role in the iconographic argument. To sum up, Shenkar has achieved his aim to demonstrate, against the well-known *topos* of Iranian aniconism, "that pre-Islamic Iranians in fact possessed a rich, eclectic, complex, and fascinating religious iconography about which much can be said" (p. 3).

Christoph Uehlinger
University of Zurich
christoph.uehlinger@uzh.ch

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