

## Mithra and the Sun vs. Mithra as the Sun. How did Mithra become the Sun god?<sup>1</sup>

J. LAHE<sup>2</sup>, V. SAZONOV<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract.** *In current article, we examine the relationship between Iranian god Miθra and the Sun through Iranian religious history and try to show how these two initially different deities became one and how the figure of Miθra changed as a consequence of being equated to the Sun. We will consider the earliest mentions of the name of Miθra in different sources and we will explain his identification with the Sun by a Mesopotamian influence Šamaš - god of Sun and Justice).*

**Rezumat.** *În articolul de față, examinăm relația dintre zeul iranian Miθra și zeul Soarelui de-a lungul istoriei religioase iraniene și încercăm să arătăm cum aceste două zeități inițial diferite au devenit una și cum figura lui Miθra s-a schimbat ca urmare a echivalării cu zeul Soarelui. Vom lua în considerare cele mai timpurii mențiuni ale numelui lui Miθra în diferite surse și vom explica identificarea sa cu zeul Soare printr-o influență mesopotamiană Šamaš - zeul Soare și al Justiției).*

**Keywords:** Mithra, Sun, Šamaš, god, cult, Mesopotamia, Iran, Persian, Assyria, Babylonia, influences.

### 1. Introduction

The god Miθra/Mihr (Mithra) has played an important role in the religious history of different Iranian peoples from Persians to Bactrians<sup>4</sup>. This is one of the most important deities of various Iranian pantheons. On the one hand, the figure of Miθra is very complicated and has many different functions, but, on the other hand, one of his outstanding traits is his solarly. From a Yašt, Miθra has been connected to the Sun, but scholars today continue to discuss how to understand his relationship with the Sun in this hymn. Some scholars equate Miθra with the Sun<sup>5</sup>, but the overwhelming majority see a difference between the two. For example, the latter

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<sup>2</sup> PhD, Professor of Religious Studies, The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church /Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Tartu University/Tallinn University, [jaan.lahe@eelk.ee](mailto:jaan.lahe@eelk.ee).

<sup>3</sup> PhD, Associate Professor in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of Tartu, Research-Professor at Estonian Military Academy and Visiting Professor and Visiting Professor at The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, [vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee](mailto:vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee).

<sup>4</sup> See MEILLET 1907; MacDOWALL 1975; MacDOWALL 1978; BOYCE 1975; HUMBACH 1975; GERSHEVITCH 1975; DÖRNER 1978; GNOLI 1979; SCHMIDT 2006; GORDON 2012; LAHE 2015.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that in both the Ṛgveda and the Yašts, the god Miθra was not directly associated with the sun. In

opinion is supported by Greco-Roman authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarchos, Arrianos and Curtius Rufus. We can trace that since the Parthian period these two gods have been more and more closely equated. In the paper, we will show that this comparison is confirmed by Strabo, inscriptions and reliefs from Asia Minor, and coins from the Kuṣāṇa Empire. Miθra (Mihr) was also equated with the Sun during the Sasanian period. The main claim of this paper is that it has been suggested that this comparison could have been influenced by Mesopotamian sources – Miθra was equated with the son-god Šamaš who was also the god of justice, like Miθra.

Hence, in this article, we look at the relationship between Miθra and the Sun through Iranian religious history and try to show how these two initially different deities became one and how the figure of Miθra changed as a consequence of being equated to the Sun. In Section 2, we will consider the earliest mentions of the name of Miθra and in Section 3, we will explain his identification with the Sun by a Mesopotamian influence.

## 2. The earliest occurrences of the name Miθra

Herodotus is the first Greek author to mention Miθra when describing Persian beliefs in the first book of *Historia*. In addition to Miθra, he names among the Persian deities the Sky, the Sun, the Moon, the earth, fire, water and the winds (*Hist* I, 131). The Sun and the Moon have been considered as divine beings in Iranian sources too, to which the sixth and Greek on these coins, and later as Miθra in Bactrian with different spellings: Μιθρο, Μιρο, Μιορο, Μιυρο<sup>6</sup>, and his head is always surrounded by a halo with rays. Based on these sources, it seems like Miθra was identified with the Sun around the era that coincides with the Arsacid dynasty in Iranian history (250 BC – 224 AD). This follows historical linguistics data stating that the word *mihr* meaning “sun” was added during the Parthian period.<sup>7</sup> But the question remains as to why and how Miθra was identified with the Sun.

It is certain that Miθra is already connected with the Sun in Avesta<sup>8</sup>, but this does not yet explain the identification of the two deities. According to a hypothesis put forward by F. Cumont, Miθra’s identification with the Sun took place in the Mesopotamian religion—Miθra

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the Ṛgveda Miθra usually appears in pairs with Varuṇa as *mitrāvaruṇa* (e.g. 1.15.6, 1.71.9) and with the god Ahura Mazdā (e.g. *Tištār Yašt* 38; *Mihr Yašt* 1) and both are the subject of prayers: "Here for you, O Mitra-Varuṇa, soma has been squeezed out by men, squeezed out for drinking" *ayaṃ vām mitrāvaruṇā ṛṛbhiḥ sutaḥ soma ā pītaye sutaḥ* (Ṛgveda 1.112.3) and "who hears prayers [*yasna*]" (*Mihr Yašt* 57). In the Ṛgveda, Varuṇa and Miθra can be regarded as the supreme gods in the Vedic pantheon. In the *Yašts*, Miθra is the most important deity after god Ahura Mazdā. In the Ṛgveda and the *Yašts*, the two main attributes of Miθra are as follows: (1) having wide pastures: "having spacious dwellings [*uruḥṣaya*]" (Ṛgveda 1.2.9) and "the Lord of wide pastures [*miθrahe vouru-gayaotōiṣ*]" (*Mihr Yašt* 1); (2) who keeping covenants: "whose covenants are strong [*dhṛtavrata*]" (Ṛgveda 1.15.6) and "who does not deceive [*baroiṣ anādruxto*]" (*Mihr Yašt* 23). We are grateful to Prof. Andrew Schumann for this note.

<sup>6</sup> There are various datings to Kaniška’s reign (see SAGAR 2016, 1659–1664), however it should most likely be around 130–170 CE. The datings for all of the Kuṣāṇa rulers’ reigning periods tend to vary significantly (see: *ibid.*).

<sup>7</sup> FRYE 2015, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> GERSHEVITCH 1967.

was identified with the Sun god Šamaš who was not only a sun god but also the god of justice, like Miθra.<sup>9</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries many scholars, including Gh. Gnoli and A. Panaino, supported this hypothesis.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Syncretism of Miθra and the Sun in Mesopotamia

The question is when Miθra was associated with Mesopotamian sun-god Šamaš. This most probably happens in late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. Let us look at the available evidence and try to analyse it to draw conclusions. Firstly, we should start to discuss the Iranian and Mesopotamian context. It is remarkable that Iranian personal names appeared in Neo-Assyrian texts from Ashurnasirpal II's (883-859 BC) reign.<sup>11</sup>

Ashurnasirpal II's son king Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) possibly mentioned Persians in 843 BCE in his inscription RIMA 3: A.0.102.6 URU. *pár-su-a* – city Parsua; and in the inscription RIMA 3: A.102.10 KUR.*pár-su-a* – land of Parsua.<sup>12</sup> One of the first possible pieces of evidence of Assyro-Persian/Iranian we can find in royal inscriptions (Black Obelisk) comes from Shalmaneser III: *ma-da-tū sá 27 MAN-MEŠ-ni / šá KUR pá-r-su-a at-ta-ḥa* – “I received tribute from twenty-seven kings of the land Parsua”.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the situation is more problematic as it cannot be said with any certainty that the “kings” mentioned are the ancestors of the later Persians. As the land Parsua mentioned in the text is most probably located near modern Kermanshah in north-western Iran and is not the later settlement of Persians in the modern province of Fars (Pārsa) in the south-west, the Parsuans could be the Persians who later moved southwards, or even a splinter group of the same people who moved west while the main body moved on to the south.<sup>14</sup> The Parsua in the north are also mentioned during the reign of king Sargon II. Still, it would appear that the Iranian peoples had direct contact with Assyria and Babylonia at least from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This contact was mostly based on Assyria's newly-gained military might and more aggressive foreign policies that had the primary goal of expanding the Assyrian empire both to the east and to the west. It is also known from the reign of Shalmaneser III that the western Iranian tribes were already in the habit of paying tribute to Neo-Assyrian kings. According to the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and annals from the rule of Shalmaneser III until Ashurbanipal, Neo-Assyrian kings received tributes from various Iranian tribes. From the period of Sennacherib, there appears a similar toponym “Parsuaš” in the south-western region of Iran (modern Fārs).<sup>15</sup> There is also evidence of the use of the title *king of Parsumaš*; it appears in the

<sup>9</sup> CUMONT 1975, 11, note 1.

<sup>10</sup> GNOLI 1987, 579; PANAINO 2015, 246.

<sup>11</sup> SCHMITT 2009, 7.

<sup>12</sup> RIMA 3, A.0.102.6, iv 3.

<sup>13</sup> RIMA 3, A.0.102.14, ll. 19–20.

<sup>14</sup> SAZONOV, JOHANDI 2015, 330.

<sup>15</sup> RINAP 3/1, Sennacherib 22 v 43; 23 v 35; 34 44; 35 rev. 40'.

annals of Assurbanipal (prism H) where *Cyrus, king of Parsumaš*, was mentioned as paying tribute to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (669-631 BC) around the 640s BC<sup>16</sup>:

*vi 7'-13') Cyrus, the king of the land Parsumaš, heard about the might[y] victories that, with the support of the gods Aššur, Bēl (Marduk), and Nabû – the great gods, my lords – I had achieved over the land Elam (and that) I had flattened the land Elam, all of it, like the Deluge, and he sent to Nineveh, my capital city, Arukku, his eldest son, with his payment, to do obeisance, and he made an appeal to my lordly majesty.*<sup>17</sup>

Another important turning point are Persian/Iranian/Median contracts with the Neo-Babylonian kingdom and the following Teispid-Achaemenid<sup>18</sup> period when Babylonia became a part of the Persian Empire, after Cyrus II (559–530 BC) conquered Mesopotamia in 539 BC. Kr. Jakubiak and A. Soltysiak highlighted that “when the priests of Marduk opened the gates of Babylon to Cyrus the Great and his troops in 539 BC, the Mesopotamian lowland became a part of the Achaemenid Empire. Cyrus entered the temple of Marduk<sup>19</sup> and grasped the hands of the main Babylonian deity. That gesture had not only symbolic implication but also became an element of legitimization of Persian authority over Babylonia. With that gesture Cyrus symbolically took possession of the whole Babylonian tradition and lore. Since that time this part of the Middle East became one of the most important satrapies in the Persian Empire.”<sup>20</sup> Jakubiak and Soltysiak accentuate that “the Mesopotamian tradition was very attractive to the Iranians and had strong influence on almost all aspects of Persian life. It may be expected that also in respect to sky-watching – so important in the Mesopotamian tradition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BCE ... – Persia owed a lot to the western neighbours.”<sup>21</sup>

R. Zadok highlighted that the personal theophoric name <sup>d</sup>*Mi-it-ri-AD-u-a* on a statue of a bull (Defenneh in Egypt) is hybrid or Irano-semitic. <sup>d</sup>*Mi-it-ri-abu-u-a* is a hybrid Irano-Akkadian name (“Mitra is my father”), “whereas the Greek name to which it was compared by Michaelidis was borne by a person who appears elsewhere as Miqrodaoī. The latter can be interpreted as a purely Iranian name. In addition, since there are no hybrid (Irano-Akkadian) personal names in Akkadian or other sources, it cannot be ruled out that this inscription is a forgery.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> BORGER 1996, 191–192; SAZONOV, JOHANDI 2015, 330.

<sup>17</sup> RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 12 VI 7'-13'.

<sup>18</sup> See ROLLINGER 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Cyrus II used Babylonia's supreme god Marduk as a justification for conquering Babylonia. Because of the “improper” deeds of Babylonian king Nabonid (mainly cultic misdeeds, Babylonian gods became angry and the main god Marduk abandoned Babylon). King Cyrus II shows himself as a good and very positive and legitimate king who was chosen by Marduk and called by Babylonian main god Marduk to join him on the way into Babylon. Cyrus's cylinder is also a good example of Cyrus' propaganda created with the aim of justifying the annexation of Babylonia and the usurpation of power in Babylon by Cyrus II who was actually an aggressor (van der SPEK 2014, 260; SAZONOV & JOHANDI 2015, 331).

<sup>20</sup> JAKUBIAK, SOLTYSIAK 2006, 51.

<sup>21</sup> *IBID.*, 51–52.

<sup>22</sup> ZADOK 2004, 9. See also MICHAELIDIS 1943.

But there are other theophoric names which consist of the element Miθra later in several Hellenistic documents from the early Seleucid era or even earlier from the Teispid-Achaemenids era, like Mitrā<sup>23</sup> which was found in one Hellenistic document in Babylon. We also find the name *Mi-ut-ra* – a retrenched theophoric name of Miθra – In an Elamite text from Persepolis<sup>24</sup> and Mirtabazana (MTRBZN) which was mentioned in an Aramaic text found in Babylon from the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC).<sup>25</sup> There are also Mitradāta and in Akkadian *Mi-it-ra-da-a-tū*<sup>26</sup> in a document from 429 BC from Nippur<sup>27</sup>, and also <sup>d</sup>Mit(it)-ri-da-ata (TMH 2/3, 147: 24), mentioned as son of Baga'zuštu, the steward of the prince Dadaršu (Achaemenid prince), mentioned in rental payment document in 420 BC, in Enlil-ašabši-iqbi near Nippur.<sup>28</sup>

Even much earlier theophoric names in Babylonia are mentioned, such as *Mi-it-ra-ata*, whose son with the Akkadian name “Nidintu witnessed a private contract from the archive of Egibi business house drafted in Babylon in 502 B.C.”<sup>29</sup> 511 BC a person *Mi-it-re/ri-na-a'* was mentioned in a marriage contract in Babylon; his patronymic has been only partially preserved (*Ú[...]-<sup>d</sup>Šin*) and it is a Babylonian theophoric name.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, we can conclude that theophoric names with the name Mithra (Miθra) in various analyzed written sources show a high syncretism in the veneration of Miθra, when he could actually begin to be identified with one of the most important gods of ancient Mesopotamia, namely Sun god Šamaš. This, in turn, influenced very probably the development of cult of god Miθra with his identification with the Sun among the Iranian people themselves.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

As we can see, the God Miθra /Mihir could have been associated with the Sun in the 1<sup>st</sup> mil BC, but it is difficult to determine the exact period. It could have been true during the early Achaemenid period when we already see hybrid (Irano-Akkadian) personal names such as <sup>d</sup>Mit(it)-ri-da-ata and others in Mesopotamian sources during Artaxerxes I's reign and later. However, when the real identification of god Miθra with god Šamaš took place, and when Miθra also became a solar god, is difficult to ascertain. This probably took place in the Teispid-Achaemenid period and not in the later Hellenistic or Parthian periods.

The evolution of god Miθra from an independent deity in the ancient Iranian religious system (pantheon and cult) to a figure associated with the Sun and Sun god was influenced by Persian and other Iranian tribes' interactions with Assyro-Babylonian cultural space. This

<sup>23</sup> DANDAMAEV 1992, 100.

<sup>24</sup> IBID., 100.

<sup>25</sup> IBID., 100.

<sup>26</sup> BE 9, 48 = TMH 2/3 144, 1, ibid, line 14; *Mit-ra-da-ati*, line 33a.

<sup>27</sup> DANDAMAEV 1992, 100.

<sup>28</sup> IBID., 100.

<sup>29</sup> IBID., 101

<sup>30</sup> IBID., 101.

transformation highlights how the depiction of Miθra wasn't solely shaped within Iranian cultural boundaries but was influenced by broader connections within the ancient world-system, namely Mesopotamian (among them Assyrian, Babylonian, Hurrian-Mitannian etc.). It illustrates well that indigenous gods could adapt and alter their roles under the impact of foreign cultures. This demonstrates that religious beliefs, cults and practices, even those of distinct people, are subject to several or even many external influences and do not develop in isolation, in particular area.

### Abbreviations

RIMA 3 = Grayson, A. K. 1996. *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858-745 BC). The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods*, Vol. 3, Toronto-Buffalo-London.

RINAP 3/1 = Grayson, A. K.; Novotny, J. 2012. *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704-681 BC). The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period. Vol 3, Part 1*. Winona Lake.

RINAP 5/1 = Novotny, J.; Jeffers, J. 2018. *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BC), Aššur-etel-ilāni (630-627) and Sîn-šarra-iškun (626-612 BC), Kings of Assyria. The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period. Vol 5., Part 1*. Eisenbrauns: University Park, Pennsylvania.

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