

buildings are named some of which known as fire temple; others have turned into Imamzadeh, mosque, or tombs of religious grandees. Some places are Zoroastrian house of worships named as the tomb of Sassanid dynasty (Fig.7).

### Conclusion

The Mithraism have been accepted widely among the Aryan people. Some of these beliefs even was continued during the Zoroaster and even Islam. The Mehr places of worship were turned to the fire temples and later on to the mosques and Imamzadeh Shrines. Accordingly while nowadays there are lots of sacred places which are respected among the Zoroastrian and Muslim communities, the buildings roots turn back to the ancient time and Mithraism era.

### Endnote

1. According to Mithraism, there were seven sacred statuses and levels. To enter each step, a typical ablution was required as referenced in the Christianity baptism.
2. Singing and playing were along with praying. They kneeled down; the grandees said pray on loafs of bread and a cup of drinking and gave to the followers.

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Fig. 7. Sardab or underground of Qazvin mosque, Shabestan to the pool and the old tree. source: Amir Mansouri. (2014).

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constructed underground to be darker like real caves. Tekye is still used for religious ceremonies and associations (Moghaddam, 1964: 50).

### Sacred places with Mithraism background

Islamic and sometimes Zoroastrian holy places, present today, have survived from the age of Mithraism in accordance with the new beliefs. Many of Imamzadehs and some ancient Persian mosques were someday the house of worshipping Mitra and Anahita that have changed into Islamic holy places. Obviously, by accepting the new religion, the buildings have undergone some adjustments and gradually decorated with Islamic era ornaments. However, there are lots of signs that may track how the ancient holy places have changed into the new status. It is necessary to mention on Chartaqi, cave, or buildings inside mountains, or at the vicinity of waters and old trees that these temples may sometimes be assigned to the Mehr deity and sometimes to Anahita, deity of waters. As Mehr and Anahita were simultaneously worshiped, some Persian considered Mehr as Anahita descendent. Hence, their temples have been built next to together in the vicinity of saint waters. Both religions venerated water as a holy object (Fig.5 & 6).

According to narrations, Mitra threw an arrow over rocks; and then, a fountain spring. Ablution in the holy fountain was of Mithraism rituals prior worship. Most Mithraism temples in Iran and around the world benefits sacred well and fountain some of which can now be seen in the churches (former Mehrabe) like Basilica of Saint Clement, Rome; Geghard monastery, Armenia.

The temples related to Anahita were also associated with water as she was the goddess of pure waters and the symbol of fertility. Bahar asserts that deities of Anahita and Mitra may never be separated as can be seen in Avesta's inscriptions and doors. Therefore, they share some similar mysteries as they are complementary. Mitra (Mehr) is the god of rain augmenting waters; and Anahita is the goddess of purified water powerfully spreading bless. Honoring water, sun, and moon symbolizing Anahita and Mitra are significant, for two

reasons, in agriculture livelihood: first, for the elements or deities thanksgiving; and second, for the climate conditions, droughts, and concerning of losing them (Bahar, 1998: 36). Mithraism temples were built along running waters or on reservoir; there was built a large reserve next to the temples for ablution before entering (Bahar, 1998: 97-98).

Persian Mithraism places (current sacred places and shrines).At this section, some ritual sacred



Fig.5. Imamzade Hamzeh, Abaali Road. source: Shohreh Javadi (2012).



Fig. 6. Nashlaj village, Niyasar Kashan. source: Shohreh Javadi (2011).

as Mehrabe (altars) in Iran some of which have remained untouched; while, the majority become Islamic sacred places. The altars are three linked corridors where the middle is wider; and the two side halls are narrower with shorter ceilings. There are some pillars built among halls. The halls and columns are covered with arches. A starry night sky has been painted under the ceiling (Hami, 195: 63). The light and brightness may enter the altar through tiny hatches on the ceiling, walls' narrow window, or both. The interior was almost dark. The altar door was narrow and small toward to the east.

The altar was built toward east where the statue of Mitra and sacred bull sacrifice scene were located. Mehrabes have been built small to resemble the cave and Mithraists soon feel close and support each other. Therefore, it could only contain not exceeding 100 people. Another altar built whenever the number of Mithraists exceeded (Hami, 1956: 63). 'Abe' in the term Mehrabe refers to the deep cave like location like Sardabe (crypt) and Garmabe (bath) not associated with the term 'water'; rather, high standing Catholic priests were titled 'Abe'. In addition, it is a type of monastery. In French, it is called Abbe originating from 'Abe' in Mithraism (Ibid: 99).

Persian Mehrabes are classified into two cave and Chartaqie hosue of worships: natural or man-made caves over hills, mountains, or hillside. Cave temples in form of Chartaqi: Chartaqi refers to dome-shaped cave and east-oriented altar. At both cave and Chartaqi temples, water was usually present as fountain, pool, well or Qanat (Fig. 4).

According to Herodotus, Persian worshiped outdoors rather than temples. Furthermore, evidences of extant places around Iran show that sacred water and tree were honored and venerated as the symbols of Mehr and Anahita prior Chartaqi establishment. In ancient Iran, many fountains, trees, and temples have been assigned to the deities of Mitra and Anahita; most natural places and landscapes have been named after the deities. Some names have changed by the advent of the new religion, but some have survived (Javadi, 2013: 44). "Over the history

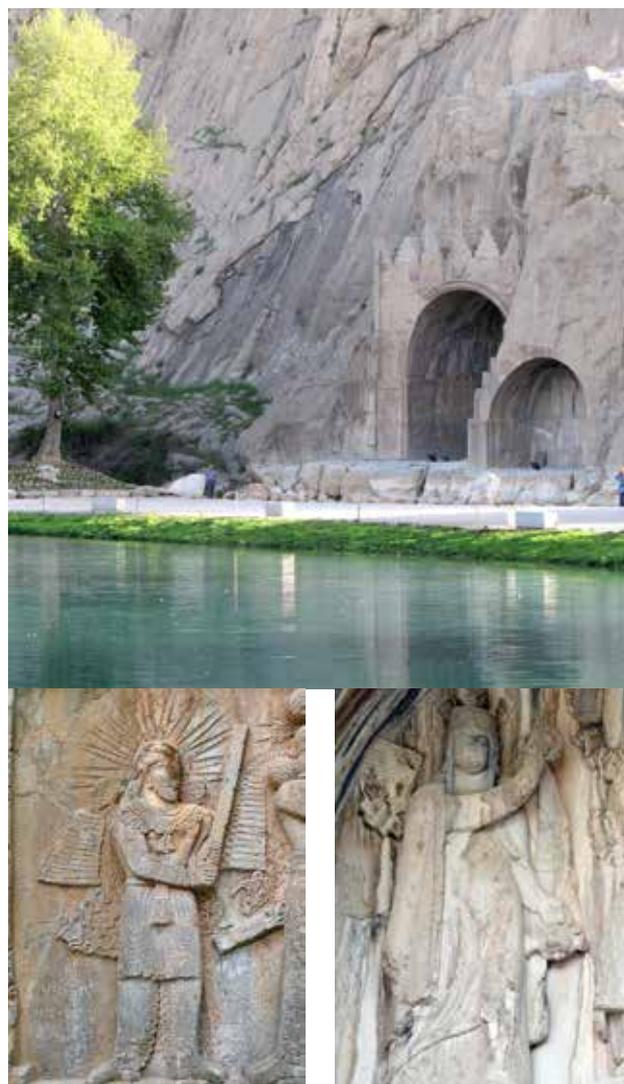


Fig. 4. Taq-e Bostan caves and landscape. Kermanshah, fountain, old tree, and Mitra and Anahita reliefs. source: Amir Mansouri. (2008).

of religions, it has never seen that a cosmic or terrestrial subject is worshiped for the sake of the subject. The sacred subject at any form or essence may emanate from the sacred deity unveiling the highest reality" (Al-Yade, 1993: 49).

Scholars have so far identified and introduced several places and buildings around Iran as Mithraism house of worship. Moghaddam, in a paper named Mehrabe or Mithraism house of worship, expresses that "Mithraists built cave-like temples in cities where no natural caves could be find using arches and arcades. Whenever possible, the arches or bases were

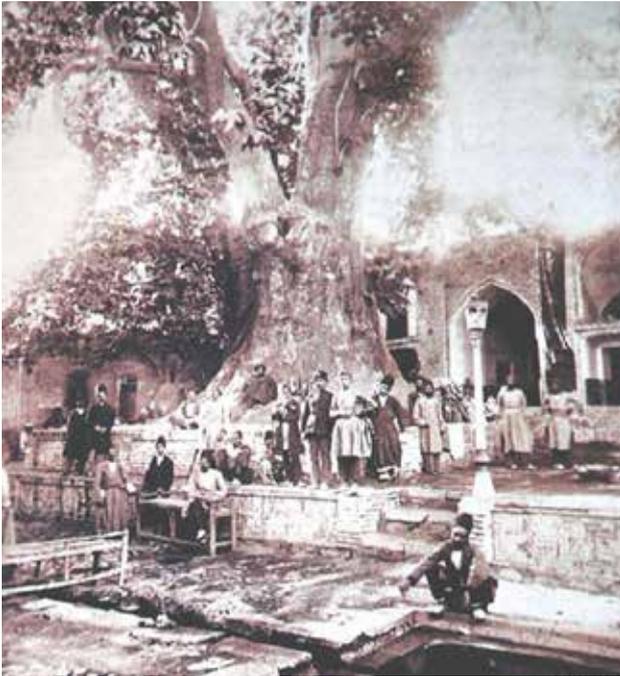


Fig. 3. Imamzadeh Saleh, Tajrish. Shemiranat. source: Nazar research center

In Rigveda, an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns, Mitra is referred along other universe powers such as wind, sky, and fire. This unveils that Indian, prior separation from Iran, have honored Mithraism. Thus, it is inferred that this ancestral religion has deeply rooted in Persia. Mithraism scholars almost consensually agreed upon these words. *Shahname* by Ferdowsi is the sound of Persian history referring the origins of this religion i.e. at the times of ‘Fereyudoun’ in Persia, ‘Trite he’ in India, and perhaps ‘Siegfried’ in Germany fighting with the dragon (Joneydi, 2006: 30).

According to Ferdowsi, it is clearly inferred that Mithraism removed all evils and malevolence that have been already common from Iran. Moreover, it also encourages happy life, productivity, and a typical life style with well-being and less cruelty (Joneydi, 2006: 5).

According to European sources, Mithraists had to pass seven steps to achieve the ‘Great’ status undergoing abundant trials and difficulties. All devotees could not achieve the highest levels. The seven steps in Persian culture resembled the seven tasks of Rostam, the hero. It was shown

that the hero had to successfully fulfilled his tasks passing darkness, thirstiness, and hungriness, killing the dragon to finally overcome the last demon. The seven tasks can also be seen in Islamic mysticism like the story of phoenix in *The Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq-ut-Tayr*) (Joneydi, 2006: 8).

According to Pythagoras itinerary on Mithraism, “I went to a dark cave in the suburb. I was wondering they were holding the ceremony of the most luminous stars at such a dark place. I went in to see what is happening; I cannot exactly remember what I have witnessed. The secret holders were washing bodies in the running water asking deities the purification and wisdom<sup>1</sup>. Zoroaster was the religious leader crossing an immortal sign on audiences. They have achieved such an honor; have a piece of bread and drinking, which were the signs of giving birth to a new life as the sun was opening the New Year door to the universe. They sang and said prayers<sup>2</sup>. This tradition has also continued to the Christianity. A cleric called Holy Crow presented them a tiara hanging from the thorn. They rejected and typically expressed that ‘Mehr is my tiara’. I saw a brave handsome young man as Mehr delegate sitting on a bull at the end of the weird hole holding Aris sword implying a typical creation. The king resembled a lion holding a bee in his mouth; the courtiers were moving behind as eagle, hawk, dog, and vulture. The king’s paramours, then, entered in face of hyena. All passed the hard trial; reluctantly moved the dark meandrous road, walking barefoot on man-made snow and ice lands; they were whipped by sun or Mitra lashes on naked shoulders ” (Pythagoras: 66-72).

“Once the sun sheds light on any, all put right hands on the mouth and keep silence. This is the sun worshipping custom; Magi try to get the newly ripped fruits on behalf of people. Families share some parts with Magi to meet the needs of the glory sun” (Ibid: 147-148).

### Mitra’s place of worship

There have been several different places introduced

have been taken to analyze origins of Mithraism and sacred Mithraism temples since 1999. Years of discussing on Mithraism with Sarvestani-leading archeologist, Avarzamani- the historian, archeologist, and Sassanid scholar, and Joneydi- the linguist and Shahname scholar, along with theses and papers of architecture and art research students have led to useful conclusions.

The present ongoing research has utilized old sources, and case studies and related documents have been gradually supplemented.

### A review on Mithraism

Mithraism is a traditional religion, but with no 'holy books' like other great religions. It has adapted with nations' culture. Mithraism followers were brave, truthful, and honest people, swearing on confidentiality, helping with desperate poor, and standing against cruelties. Accordingly, Ayyârân also swear on the great god, on the light and fire, Mehr, bread and salt, and chivalrous advice not to betray and not think of treachery (After Samaak Ayyar). Magnanimity relies upon three maxims including first, keep the promises; second, truthfulness in conduct and action; and the thirds, be patient" (Qabusname); (Hami, 1956: 49); (Fig.1)

Persian Mithraists thought that Mehr was born from an illuminated cave. It was believed that like a glow from striking two hard igneous rocks, Mehr came forth from a rock shedding the sun



Fig. 1. Imamzadeh Zobeydeh Khatoun, Naraq. source: Amir Mansouri. (2008).

light. It symbolized light of the sun in European and minor Asia altars carved on the rocks and stones (Fig. 2 & 3). Hence, Mitra was not born from stone; rather, from the shine coming to the world (Hami, 1956: 9-10).

Zoroastrian, which have called all other deities misleading and sinister excluding Ahuramazda, has failed to seize Mehr and Nahid from nations since the deities were deeply loved in nations' heart. Thus, they were placed following Ahuramazda and were given Yasht (Hami, 1956: 22).

In Mithraism, Mehr (Mitra) is the god who has created the universe (Joneydi, 2006: 11). Get familiar with Bogh Mehr, light deity, illumination deity, Shahcheragh, covenant guard, supporting foresters, truthful, and pious, head of Ayyaran, Ali Al-AHYan, David the dark blue horse rider, the companion and friend, zoorkhaneh(traditional gymnasium), the hero, and Louti, and be aware of the first greatest victory of Persian people (Hami, 1956; 1).



Fig. 2. Ghadamgah, Neyshabur. source: Amir Mansouri. (2008).

Persian translation of this paper entitled:

حضور نمادهای باستانی ایران (نمادهای مهری-میتراپی) در فرهنگ و هنر غرب و تداوم پایداری آن در دوران اسلامی  
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# Sacred places of Mithraism background

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## Abstract

According to most theorists and practitioners, rocks and natural the caves, Chartaghi, as well as underground chamber-like sites are assigned to Mithraism implying the birth of Mehr from rocks and mountains. That is why these places are highly venerated in Mithraism. In addition, they were also house of deities' worship.

**Keywords:** *Sacred place, Ritual and belief, Cave, Tree, Fountain, and well.*

## Introduction

Sacred places deeply rooted in Persian traditions and beliefs They have been associated with praying sun and moon late back to the age of Zoroastrian. With the advent of Islam and a new culture establishment, the beliefs have been evolved in a new way have been interwoven with Islamic-Persian traditions and survived up to the present. Ritual- religious places that were once place of worships for Mehr and Anahita have then shrines as well as the respectful wise and old Muslims changed into fire temple, mosques, Imamzadeh, tomb of Islamic elderly and grandees.

These houses of prayers have been mostly founded in the vicinity construction of, springs, and old trees. Long time before ritual and sacred buildings or Chartaqi, people resorted to holy trees, fountain, well, and caves. According to Herodotus, Persian used to pray outdoors instead of temples. Chartaqis holy trees, fountains, wells and caves used to obtain the same role have been established in the vicinity of rocks, caves, mountains, fountains, as well as trees, over time, which so far have been respected and appreciated.

## Preface

I have been introduced to the issue of Mithraism during travelling around Iran. I was interested in many almost similar places trying to discover the mysteries of the places respecting to the mountains, cave, old tree, spring, and holy well.

The first sparks of Mithraism have been flared in an informal meeting with Mashhadizade, the architect, urban engineer, and the head of cultural heritage in Niyasar, Kashan. Some hypotheses, visiting from Abbas abbad site in Behshahr along Dr. Mansouri-architect and landscape expert, were provided following discussions on selecting certain places to build palaces and kiosk by kings and courtiers, as well as effective presence of water and tree. In the meeting, Mashhadizade briefly referred to the issue of the sacred and ritual places, and suggested to take a look at Niyasar, city of mythology and tradition. I was totally obsessed with Mithraism so far I have visited Niyasar for the first time. Frequent visiting of Niyasar, Mashhad Ardahal followed by other places around Tehran particularly concentrating on ritual places at the presence of water, mountain, cave, spring, holy well, and the ancient saint tree have all led to a deeply widespread studying and tracking of Persian Mithraism. The efforts

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