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Original Research Article

Renaming Mithraism Shrines to Solomon-Attributed Monuments (Case Study: Persepolis and Masjed-Soleyman)

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Abstract

Problem statement: The long ancient history of Iranian culture and civilization has witnessed the transformation of pre-Islamic holy figures and places associated with Mithraism, which later turned into sacred places and figures in new beliefs. Many historical Iranian monuments have remained from the Islamic era, associated with Solomon or other Jewish saints and prophets. The question is “what are the historical factors and similarities among these myths that associate these memorials to Jamshid, the mythical Persian king, and Jewish saints such as Solomon, the prophet?”

Research objective: The present research attempts to study why Mithraism shrines have been renamed to monuments attributed to Solomon following the Arab conquest of Sassanid.

Research method: This descriptive and analytical qualitative research is applied research. The study was conducted using bibliographic search and examining historical references. Mythology-based approach was used to analyze two case studies of Persepolis and a historical shrine in Masjed-Soleyman.

Conclusion: After the conquest of Iran by Arabs and forcing Iranians to join and obey the new religion, pre-Islamic Iranian ideological foundations trembled. Survival of ancient Iranian beliefs relied upon the legitimacy that could only be attained through connecting Iranian theology to the saints cited in Islamic traditions and holy books. Hence, the Iranian intelligent mind effectively tried to keep its own cultural identity and protect them from the flood of destruction by attributing its religious temples to the Jewish prophets (also honored by Muslims). This tremendous intellectual movement and historical ingenuity have led Persian myths associated with sacredness such as the Prophet Solomon. Given this analysis, the reason why many ancient Iranian monuments have been attributed to Solomon, his mother, or other Jewish prophets was uncovered.

Keywords: *Izad Mehr (Mitra), Jamshid, Solomon, Persepolis, Masjed-Soleiman.*

Introduction and statement of the problem

Mythology relies on one primary maxim: myths

are not static and motionless; instead, they take on new forms over time and appear in epic stories. As a result of this revolution, some transformations

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occur in the narration (see also Aydenlou, 2006, 25). Mehr or Mithra is an ancient Iranian myth that, like all other myths, has evolved and even transformed over time. She has lived over several historical, geographical, and intellectual periods relying on the norms of inhabitants and has finally taken its particular form. Surpassing many changes in Iran, the goddess has finally taken on a new form and image. The present paper investigates the evolution and transformation of Mithra in the epic face of Jamshid and how and why Jamshid has turned into Solomon.

Research background

Much research has been conducted on Iranian Mithraism, which is irrelevant to the present research background. The literature is categorized into two classes for convenience:

The first class refers to studies investigating the evolution and transformation of Mithra in Iran over time.

The second class deals with studies exploring the similarities of Solomon with some Iranian mythical figures like Jamshid.

Respecting studies examining the evolution and transformation of Mithra in Iran, Javadi demonstrating the transformation course of Mithraism temples revealed that Mithraism temples have become chapels for Muslims and Zoroastrians in Islamic Iran (Javadi, 2018). In addition, Nikouei also differentiated the bullfighting scene of Mithra in the western and Iranian Mithraism and underlined that different geography might change beliefs and symbols. However, Western and Iranian Mithraism share the exact origins (Nikouei, 2018). Javadi, in another study, analyzed the water and tree sanctity in the religious beliefs of ancient Iranians (especially Mithraism beliefs) and then, based on abundant pieces of evidence, considered the saintliness of water and tree in Islamic holy places of Iran as the transformation signs of Mithraism (Javadi, 2013).

Some studies have investigated the similarities of Solomon with Iranian mythical figures like Jamshid,

Kharazmi, in a paper, answered this question: how does Mehr in mythology change over time, what form will it take on with the emergence of the goddess epic. He analyzed the goddess transformation in Jamshid, relying on Iranian epic literature (Kharazmi, 2020). Moreover, Ghaemi (2015) also explored two different origins of linking Jewish prophets to Persian mythology, focusing on the similarities between the Solomon and some Iranian myths, and analyzed the Solomon status in the development of Iranian epic literature (Ghaemi, 2015). Modaressi (2006) also studied the differences between Jamshid, an Iranian mythical character, and Yama in Avesta. He inferred that the interweaved ties of Semitic peoples in Persian Literature have caused Jamshid to take the works of Solomon; further, Jamshid and Solomon are primarily similar in Persian literature (Modaressi, 2006).

Persian literature scholars have studied the relationship between Solomon and ancient Iranian mythology from literary perspectives. The present research studies the relationship between Solomon and Iranian mythology in terms of effectiveness, relying on historical attitude and mythology.

Transformation of Mithra in Jamshid

With the spread of Mithraism in the cultural geography of ancient Iran, the goddess' evolution and transformation have penetrated in all manifestations and, in particular, in epic works in the form of heroes. According to ancient Iranian mythology, Jamshid as the fifth king of the Pishdadian dynasty and the first human being holds some functionality, and respecting his similarities with Mithra, Jamshid can be taken into account as the transformed form of Mehr or Mithra. Mehrdad Bahar claims that the duties of the goddess are of two types: Mithra burdens the celestial cosmetic parts while Jamshid the terrestrial and earthy tasks. Relying upon the analogy of the actions and conduct of Jamshid and Mithra, Jamshid must be taken as a king and father of the first man who is the terrestrial embodiment of Mithra enriched with the functions

of spirituality, fertilization, blessing, and warfare (see also Bahar, 1973, 133; Bahar, 1985, 177).

According to Avesta (Avesta, 2012, 25), and given that “Jam,” the son of “Vivahvant,” became a sinner because he first taught people to eat meat. Plus, since Zoroaster seriously tried to underestimate the early Aryan gods and heroes, Jam, who was the transformed image of Mithra, was undervalued. Therefore, with all the serious attempts of Zoroaster, Mithra was only placed among the less important gods than Amesha Spenta. According to Avesta, the father of Jam (Vivahvant) was the first one who touched the saint Haoma and was blessed to have a son. Jamshid implies the owner of a good herd, the most glorious and honorable being among all creatures. Based on Yasna (the Avestan name of Zoroastrianism’s principal act of worship), the sun protects and guards Jamshid; the Shah that over his kingdom no drought occurs and no living beings including vegetation, animals, and humans would lead to death (see Yasna, 2001, 160). Such characteristics in Yasna are similar to Mihr Yašt (paragraph 65 of section 16th) describing Mithra “we praise Mehr, goddess of vast plains; . . . the giver of herds and flocks; the merciful donor of the kingdom, sons, and living; the benefactor of happiness; and the generous endower of existence.” The aforementioned from Yasna refers to the relation of Sun and Jam, and the power of creatures’ eternalization reminds us of the principle of his godhood. Zāmyād Yašt also adored Farr-e Kiyāni in Jamshid, the very Farr accompanied Jamshid for a long time and made him the Shah (king) of the seven countries (Yašt, 1998, 2). If Farr is treated equally to sunlight, it may get closer to the unity of Mehr and Jamshid as Aryans thought of the sun as the celestial fire (Afifi, 2004, 569). The Denkard, Book 7, asserts that in the eternity “Farr” was firstly bestowed on the sun; from there, it went to the moon and then to the stars; and from stars to a blazing fire in Zoroaster’s mother’s house (see also Zādspram, 1987, 101).

All the above mentioned reveals the interwoven relationship between Farr-e Izadi and Mithra, sun,

and fire. Even Islamic texts make repeated references to Jamshid’s semantic association with light and the sun. Jamshid in Isfahani history is defined as follows: “Shid means illumination, and the name of the sun is also rooted in the Shid. It is claimed that he was named Jamshid as he spread out light.” In addition, Tarikh-i Bal’ami or Tārīkh-nāma defines Jamshid as “he is named Jam Shid as he shed light everywhere” (Bal’ami, 2006, 87). The Remaining Signs of Past Centuries (Kitāb al-āthār al-bāqiyah) by Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni, also elucidated that “Jamshid identified and destroyed the devil’s home; and then, after his great victory, he returned to the world like a sunrise lightening all creatures. He was so similar to the sun that all were amazed by two suns in the sky” (see Al-Biruni, 1983, 330). Motahr Ibn Taher-e Moghaddasi, the Islamic geographer and historian, traveled throughout the Islamic realm from India to Andalusia and reported his objective observations on the narration of Jamshid in the Book of Creation and History. He referred to a chariot driven by Jamshid and rising like a shining sun on the first day of Farvardin (see Moghaddasi, 1995, 406). Abul-Qāsem Ferdowsi Tusi, in Shahnameh, also pointed to this chariot (Fig. 1) (Ferdowsi, 2010, 44).

This chariot can be attributed to the Swastika in Mithraism (Booth, 1996, 582). The analogy of Jamshid’s citadel named Var-e Jamkard (Var Jamkard) and Mithraeum might indicate another sign of Izad Mehr’s transfiguration into Jamshid. The Mithraeum on the top of Alborz Mountain is the typical divine model of Jamshid’s Var-e Jamkard in the mythological Airyanem Vaejah land (Hamidi Tehrani, Safari & Karimi, 2019, 131).

Evidently, Jamshid is Yama or Yam in Sanskrit, also named Yima xšaēta in Avesta. Yama has been primarily extended in the ancient mythology of the Orient, from India and Iran to Tibet and Japan. Even its name has been placed in the oriental beliefs with minor alteration and revision. There are several images of Indian, Tibetan, and Japanese Yama sitting on a cow (Fig. 2), bringing to the mind the portrait



Fig. 1. Carrying Jamshid's throne by demons Illustration of a manuscript copy of Shahnameh, Shiraz, Safavid period, the second half of the 16th century. Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com>.

of bullfighting in western Mithraism or the eastern example of bullfighting in Persepolis or Zahhak Castle (Fig. 3). According to those mentioned earlier, it can be deduced that Izad Mehr (Mithra) and Jamshid are so tightly interwoven in the belief of ancient Iranians that then inhabitants could hardly separate these two figures.

Transmutation of Jamshid character in Solomon

Following the death of Muhammad Ibn Abdollah (570-632), the prophet, Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Muslims (573-634), dispatched an army of Muslims to the south of the Euphrates River and Al-Hirah in the west of the Sassanid kingdom (what is now Iraq). Muslims conquered and captured the city; later, the town was reclaimed and reoccupied by Arabs and Iranians. At the age of Omar, the second caliph of Muslims (586-644), the military of the Sasanian Empire controlled by Rostam Farrokhzad rushed to war with Muslim Arabs in the Battle of al-

Qadisiyyah (16- 19 November, 636). However, the Iranian army was defeated. After the conquest of Ctesiphon, the capital of Iran, the city was besieged for a while, then entrapped and looted. Consequently, Arabs occupied Iraq in the Battle of Jalula. The last robust defiance of Iranians during the Sassanid era occurred in the Battle of Nahavand (February 14, 642), where Muslims conquered the bloody war. Yazdegerd III, the last Sassanid King of the Kings of Iran, fled, and finally was killed in 651 by a miller in Merv.

With the death of Yazdegerd III and the victory of Muslims, intellectual clashes and contrasts between the conquered Iranians and the conquering Muslims were accelerated. However, conflicts between Islamic beliefs and Iranian culture started before the conquest. Indeed, linking mythological figures with holy Muslim personalities is initially rooted in such confrontations and disputes. "Nadr ibn al-Harith Alqamah" is an example of one of the oldest documents of such cultural conflicts at the beginning of Islam. He was the narrator of Persian myths and traditions for Qureshian, "Muhammad narrates the story of the Thamūd and Ād, and I recount from Rostam, Esfand Yar, and Okasra (plural form of kasrā, the title of Sassanid kings)"; "People also listened to his stories ignoring verses of the Quran" (Tabarsi, 1971, 4-311).

In Tafsir Qomi, an exegesis on the Quran by Ali Ibn Ibrahim Qomi, one cause of the revelation of the sixth verse of Luqman Sura is attributed to this merchant. "Among the people is he who buys diversionary talk so that he may lead [people] astray from Allah's way without any knowledge, and he takes it in derision. For such there is a humiliating punishment" (Qomi, 1991, 161-2). Abdoljalil Razi Ghazvini, the jurisconsult (in Mohammedan law), in "Al-Naghz," noted abuses of Umayyad and the Marwanids from the unauthenticated stories (in his wrong belief) of the magus (Zoroastrians) such as Rostam Sohrab, Esfand Yar, Kavous, Zal, and the like to keep people away from listening to the virtue and merit of Imam Ali and the martyrdom of Imam



Fig. 2. Left: A fresco of Mithra in Marino, Italy (3rd century). Source: Nikouei, 2018, 24; Middle: Yam riding on a cow in India. Source: wikipedia.org/wiki/Yam. Right: Yam riding on a cow in Japan in the 13th century. Source: wikipedia.org/wiki/Yam.



Fig. 3. Left: Cattle hunting by hawks, Zakhak Castle, East Azerbaijan. Source: Nikouei, 2018, 26; Right: Battle of lion and cattle, Persepolis. Source: Nikouei, 2018;

Hussein. In his term, “praising Gabr (Zoroastrians) in the company of Mustafa’s Ummah (nation) leadsthem astray” (Ghazvini Razi, 1952, 67).

With such a background, there has always been room for the ex-communication of ancient Iranian

mythology. Even after the spread of heroic and mythological narrations in history, the Book of Government within the Abbasid Caliphate era, and the eloquence of the Persian epic in eastern Iran since the 4th century, there were still stubborn opponents of national mythology. To the extent that Shaykh Abul Qasim Gurgani refused to say pray on the corpse of Ferdowsi apologizing that he was a poet of pagans” (Alishir Navaei, 1984, 343-344). Or the poet of “Ali nameh,” written a century later than Shahnameh, condemned reading Shahnameh as all for nothing (Rabi, 2010, 135).

In such a situation that the ancient Iranian heritage was underattack and assault, some Iranians attempted to make a connection between their antiquity and the history of Israelite prophecy. The oldest citations date back to Moghaddasi in “Al-baado Al-Tarikh”, where he noted the similarities betweenSolomon and Jamshid, Nimrod and Zakhak, Abraham and Fereydun, Joseph and Zuleikha with Siavash and Sudabeh (Sodaba), and Alexander and Dhu al-Qarnayn (Moghaddasi, 1995, 438-1, 503, 506). In addition to the comparative matching of Iranian and Semitic mythology, some fake unconvincing attributions were also assigned: according to Bal’ami, one of Jamshid’s sons,who isa descendantof Fereydun, was among the 80 passengers of Noah’s ark (Bal’ami, 1962, 345, 358), or Rostam was assumed to be Noah’s or Nimrod

offspring (Ibn Miskawayh, 1994, 132). Except for comparative similarities and unrealistic attributions, there was a third way to integrate Iranian mythology with Israelite mythology: they were considered contemporary, including the contemporaneous recording of Moses and Manoochehr cited in multiple historical references such as Tarikh al-Tabari (Tabari, 1973, 1-287), Tarikh al-Bal'ami (Bal'ami, 1962, 345, 358), Hamzeh Moghaddasi (Moghaddasi, 1970, 78/3, 151).

Biruni criticized the similarity of Iranian and Semitic mythologies and treated this event as an "obloquy." Also, in finding the origins of such forgeries, pointed out the critical point that "once bragging on who is superior began among Persian and Arabs, Arabs mostly boasted on Abraham who had a deep Islamic history. That is why Persian made a reciprocal action" (Al-Biruni, 1983, 507). In this regard, according to Masoudi, Iranians are Abraham's descendants "ancient Iranians, in honor of their ancestor Abraham, followed the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. And even the Zamzam Well etymology comes from the phrase "Zemzemeh," meaning "whispering prayers of Iranian over the well" (Masoudi, 1986, 236/1). Besides, Mobads (Zoroastrian clerics of particular ranks) and Iranians critically contributed to such forgeries to maintain their tradition and religion and confront the prevailing culture. For example, a Mobad named Azarpazhouh who was contemporaneous with Khosrow Anushirvan (501-579), in "the ancient Zoureh," quoted by Anushirvan "we have inherited a hadith from the Zoroaster Abraham, who was a Persian prophet . . ." (Azarpazhouh, 1997, 46, 50). Or "Abraham (Ebrahim) Diwan Mahast," a vizier of Goshtasb, was also referenced in "Yadgar-e Zariran" (1995, 46, 50).

Among the Israelite prophets, Solomon bore the most resemblance to Persian mythology due to the similarities between Solomon and, particularly, "Jamshid" (Ibn Hawqal, 1966, 47; Dinvari, 1985, 388/3). Like Jamshid, Solomon was also an exorcist, and his reign over Jewish was as prosperous as

Jamshid's sovereignty over Persia; both gained supremacy by overcoming latent and evident natural powers. Similar functions of Solomon and Jamshid such as judging, arbitration, and wisdom, were the Persian analogies of the two kingdoms ruling over winds and living creatures within the Islamic period (Nikoei, 2021, 25) (Fig. 4). Obviously, such an analogy was wrong and fallacious for the elites and historians. For instance, Dinvari (1985, 7) and Tha'ali (1949, 5) rejected this false claim, relying upon the 300 to 1000-year gap between the ages of Jamshid and Solomon. According to Tha'ali, the similarities come from their reign, lifestyle, and how they dominate elves (Jinn), human beings, and all other living creatures (ibid., 6).

Mithraea that was renamed Solomon and Jamshid

Following the transformation of Persian mythology in the religious Semitic mythology, monuments pertaining to Mithra (Izad Mehr) were reassigned to Solomon during Islamic periods. Two case studies are provided here.

• Persepolis (Pārsa/ Takht-e Jamshīd

"Pārsa" (Persepolis/ Takht-e Jamshīd, "Throne of Jamshid") (Fig. 5) is located in the plains of Marvdasht, Fars province, surrounded by the southern Zagros Mountains. Leaning upon ancient Persian inscriptions and Elamite clay tablets, it is now demonstrated that Persepolis was the ceremonial and ritual capital of the Achaemenid Empire and political capital hosting Mehregan (Jashn-e Mehr) and Nowruz. It questioned and weakened the political status of the ceremonial capital position of Takht-e Jamshid. So far, we know, Babylon, Shush, and Hamedan were three administrative, political, and economic capitals of the Achaemenid Empire, among which Babylon and Shush were the wintering places (Kishlak or qishlaq), and Hamedan was the summering place. However, it is worth noting that the Achaemenid Empire also possessed two other ceremonial capitals in Pasargadae and Pārsa, where the former was dedicated to the coronation and royal ceremonies, and the latter to other ceremonial occasions. Hence, it could be said that Pasargadae



Fig. 4. Left: Judgment of Solomon, painted by Sir George Clausen, 16th century, The Louvre Museum. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/Luca>; Right: Giordano (1634-1705), "God gives wisdom to Solomon," Source: Nikouei, 2020, 22.

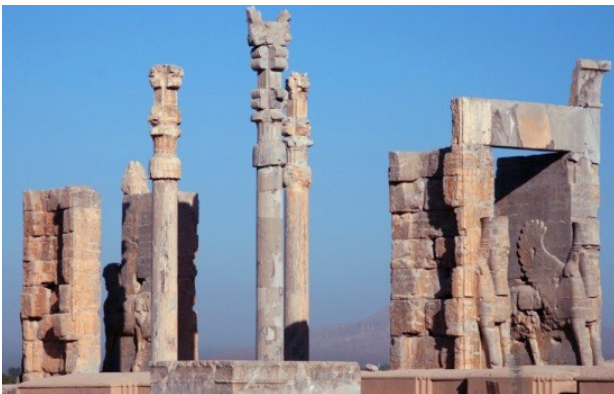


Fig. 5. Persepolis (Pārsa/ Takht-e Jamshīd), Gate of All Nations. Source: <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wik>.

and Pārsa were the "spiritual centers of the Achaemenid Empire in Iran" as they were the tombs of celebrated and names of distinction (Shahbazi, 1977, 22).

Mehrdad Bahar highlighted that Pārsa was a sacred Achaemenid temple and described that "those visiting Takht-e Jamshid would likely be encircled by symbolic trees(pillars) and astonished by the sacred and mesmerizing greatness. As seen in carved reliefs, they probably did not go there to offer negligible gifts to Shah (king); instead, they went there to have the king bless their goods" (Bahar, 1993, 24). Persepolis and Mithraeum's relationship becomes clearer when this monument is based on a rock situated on Mehr Mountain (the Mercy Mountain in Arabic) (Fig. 6). In Shiraznameh, Ahmad Ibn Abo-Alkhayr Zarkoub, written 700 years ago, three times cited Shaykh Mobarak Komhari. Moreover, Joneid Shirazi also referred to Ghothb

Al-din Komhar, cloistered at the Mercy Mountain (Esmailpour, 2004, 42). Another sign of the association of Persepolis and Mithraeum was the name Aeschylus- the first ancient Greek tragedian- assigned to this monument: Persepolis, the city of the goddess of war (see The Persians, an ancient Greek tragedy, Verse 65), and we all know that Mithra (Izad Mehr) was the goddess of wars and warriors. In post-Islamic periods, this construct was no more called by its original name, i.e., Pārsa; instead, it was an honored place attributed to Solomon and Jamshid (Shahbazi, 1977, 11). Today, it is known as Takht-e Jamshid. As evident, Pārsa, the ceremonial palace of the Achaemenid Empire, has historically undergone a naming process, including its association with Mithraeum and popularity as the Throne of Jamshid, and its assignment to Solomon.

• Masjed Soleyman

Masjed Soleyman is a city in Khuzestan Province. In the ancient civilization of Elam, the city was named "Asak," which was a part of the Illam Simash area. But after the Aryan invasion and the defeat of Elamites, the name was changed to "Simash" (Alizadeh, 1979, 36). The name origins from a pre-Islamic religious Mithraeum and a fire temple, and it is called the "eternal fire temple," the "Anahita temple," or the "Sar-Masjed shrine." (Fig. 7). Based on the genesis of the city, the name of kings of the Pishdadian dynasty (like Jamshid) is again observed. Masjed Soleyman was the capital city for a while during the reigns of Keyumars, Tahmouress, Houshang, and Jamshid.



Fig. 6. Chamkan Mountain, the mount of Mehr or mercy. Source: <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki>.

The myth of fire genesis in Iran dates back to this city; it was the present Masjed Soleyman where Shah Houshang haphazardly ignited a fire on the accidental strike of two flints (Abbasi Shahni, 2004, 47). According to Ghirshman, Masjed Soleyman was historically named Sar-Masjed due to its ancient fire temples. At the time of the Arab invasion, when they tried to destroy the temple, Iranians falsely attributed the temple to Solomon, the prophet; hence, they refused to do so as he was highly valued before Arabs. In 1924, Reza Shah Pahlavi (Reza Khan) issued the order of renaming to “Masjed Solyeman” while visiting Sar-Masjed. Then, in 1926, it was approved by the national assembly (Ghirshman, 1965, 500). Masoudi, in a journey to “Estakhr City” (Masjed Solyeman) more than a one-thousand-year ago, conveyed that “Persians have a fire temple in Estakhr city highly honored and respected by Magus. It is an ancient historical fire temple appointed as fire and worship by Homa, daughter of Bahman, son of Esfandiyar. Later, the fire was transferred, and the place of worship was ruined.” Now, folks claim that “it is the mosque (Masjed) of Solomon, the prophet, son of David (Dāvud). I have been there. This strange and magnificent building with beautiful pillars is located one parasang away from Estakhr city. The capitals on columns are stunning stone sculptures of horses and other animals in an extended area surrounded by colossal stone ramparts and exotic carved reliefs. These figures are believed to be prophets nearby. The house is situated on a mountain slope where the wind and dust would stop neither night nor day. Muslims say, “Solomon,

the prophet, has imprisoned the wind here (Abbasi Shahni, 2004, 48). Again, the mythology of Jamshid and its attribution to Solomon is crystal clear in this Mithraeum.

Conclusion

All Persian pre-Islamic theologies have appeared in the celestial and terrestrial aspects. Analyzing ancient Persian ceremonies shows two different intellectual contexts, including the battle of good and evil in human dominance. Second, interpretations of this universal (cosmic) battle are observed in material characters such as kings and heroes. The association of Mehr and Jamshid in ancient times could be interpreted in this great Concept. Mithra or Izad Mehr is a celestial appearance with post-human functions became into Jamshid in its terrestrial aspect. This transformation of the divine face of Mehr (Mithra) into the half-divine figure of Jamshid explains why all ancient Persian Shahs declared their alliance to Mithra. Whereas, coronation and coming to the throne to be bestowed upon and blessed by the saint Farr. And, the king (Shah) would be acknowledged as a holy figure and gain imperial legitimacy.

The intellectual foundations of this concept were disturbed with the arrival of Muslims in Iran. In earlier centuries, a resurgence of Persian national identity occurred after several years of oppression by the Abbasid Caliphate. This specific movement was a response by Persians to raising Arabs in Iran. The people who started this movement were called Shu'ubiyya, who essentially attempted to wipe out what was known as polytheism in Islamic Jurisprudence from Persian mythology and legitimize national heroic elements, thoughts, and narrations. One prominent example of such great efforts was the transformation of Jamshid's character (Izad Mehr) into Solomon, the prophet. As a result, they succeeded in saving and maintaining a large part of Persian culture and mythology and even monuments associated with Mithra at the cost of being attributed to the Jewish prophets.



Fig. 7. The Anahita Temple, or the ancient Sar-Masjed fire temple. Source: <https://fa.wikipedia.org>.

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