Artaxerxes II and Anahita: A Discussion of Transformations

Abigail Tan

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Abstract

The identification of deities attested in various ancient sources with each other is often the subject of much "language and speculation". This article provides a broad discussion of the relationship between several variants on the goddess Anahita, centred in the context of the middle Achaemenid period, and emphasises the extent to which many arguments that detail the evolution of the goddess over time may rest heavily on an absence of inconsistency. The historical and onomastic evidence for connecting Artaxerxes II's worship of Anahita with the outcome of the Battle of Cunaxa is also re-examined. This highlights the extent to which purely linguistic evidence can be used to draw conclusions, and demonstrates the importance of more holistic investigations.

The reign of Artaxerxes II saw the introduction of two new deities, Anahita and Mithra, to the Achaemenid royal inscriptions[1]. This is a notable change from how earlier inscriptions either only mentioned the supreme god Ahuramazda, or mention other deities without naming them explicitly; for instance, Darius I's Behistun inscription mentions how he was brought help by Ahuramazda and "the other gods who are" (Old Persian *aniyāha bagāha tayaiy hatiy*)[2]. This raises the question of what such a change means for Persian religious policy. Restricting the scope to Anahita, a useful place to start is by considering the nature of similar deities and working out how they can be identified with each other, or syncretised. The goal of using this method is to gain a greater understanding of the cultural influences that contributed to the Achaemenid religious programme, leading to being able to place the decisions made by the king to raise the status of certain deities in a more general context. We start by broadly outlining some of the Classical sources that are relevant to Artaxerxes II's veneration of

[1] Binder 2021, p. 463.
[2] DB column iv, lines 62-63.

specific deities. This is followed by a discussion of the characteristics of the name of Anahita as attested in the Old Persian royal inscriptions, which serves as useful groundwork for comparing the names between different languages. It is not necessarily obvious that different goddesses with superficially similar names can be directly equated; even in the case that they cannot, it remains interesting to investigate the relationship between the attested goddesses in Avestan, Old Persian, Middle Persian and Greek, as well as how they reflect potential old Iranian forms of the name. After this, we discuss the general reasoning behind the identification of Anahita with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, and continue to fill in gaps in an existing proposed argument for the process by which this influence occurred.

Firstly, we give a very brief overview of multiple Classical sources that attest to Artaxerxes II's apparent elevation of a deity that may be identified with Anahita. Berossus, quoted by Clement of Alexandria, describes how Artaxerxes was "the first to have a statue of Aphrodite Anaitis erected in Babylon, Susa and Ecbatana, and to order the Persians, the Bactrians, Damascus and Sardis to worship"[3]. The same account also mentions how Artaxerxes had indeed "introduced" the practice of worshipping "statues in human form" to the Persians, who had previously only venerated "fire and water"[4]. A similar idea also appears in Herodotus, who claims that it was "not [the Persians'] custom to make and set up statues and temples and altars"[5]. This statement is possibly an attempt to contrast the customs of the Persians with those of the Greeks, and the same account expands further on how the Greeks "learned later to sacrifice to the 'heavenly' (Οὐρανίῃ) Aphrodite from the Assyrians and Arabians [...] called by the Assyrians Mylitta (Μύλιττα), by the Arabians Alilat (Ἀλιλάτ), by the Persians Mitra (Μίτραν)"[6]. One further account, given in Plutarch's Life of Artaxerxes, describes the involvement of a "warlike goddess" in the investiture ceremony of the Persian king, who is instead identified with Athena[7]. A face-value reading of this selection of sources does not make clear the exact relationship, if any, between these attested deities. We begin by analysing the linguistic aspects of the name of Anahita before discussing the historical sources and the Mesopotamian evidence.

[3] Qaderi 2018, p. 177.
[4] FGrH 680 F11.
[5] Herodotus 1.131.
[6] Herodotus 1.131.
[7] Plutarch, Life of Artaxerxes 3.1-2.

Comparing the variations on the name Anahita that are attested in different languages allows for the reconstruction of earlier names of the goddess, and can provide insight into whether, for instance, earlier forms of Anahita had diverged to become identifiable as distinct deities. This is in turn useful for determining what factors influenced the nature of the goddess under Achaemenid patronage. Along with Ahuramazda (as was standard) and Mithra (whose mention was also newly introduced), one of Artaxerxes II's inscriptions at Susa (A^2Sa) invokes Anahita to protect him "against all harm" (Old Persian *hacā vi[spā] gastā*). This inscription gives the goddess' name as *Anahata*, whose direct transliteration is <*a-na-ha-ta*>, written with those four corresponding signs in cuneiform[8]. The name is written the same way in an inscription from Ecbatana (A^2Ha)[9]. In another inscription of Artaxerxes (A^2Sd), the name is given as *Anahita*, or <*a-na-ha-i-ta*>, written with five corresponding signs in cuneiform[10]. It should be noted that spelling variants or grammatical errors are somewhat common in the later Old Persian inscriptions from the fourth century BCE[11]. In fact, R. G. Kent's grammar notes how when the combination <*ha-i*> was used within Old Persian words, it was the case that "in representing *hi* [...] the *i* was normally omitted in writing"[12]. If we use this to interpret the way that Anahita's name was written, then the difference in spelling may not necessarily indicate an actual scribal error, in the case that the fifth letter was merely omitted. Regardless of the reason for the difference, however, it is clear that neither attested Old Persian form features a long final vowel; in both names, a long *ā* ending is absent. This observation will be useful when evaluating how the name may have changed over time.

W. W. Malandra has already presented a discussion of how the attested versions of Anahita's name reflect its original Iranian form. That analysis proceeds via considering the relationship between the Greek *Anaitis* and the reconstructed name **Anāhiti*, and further noting how this Iranian name is not necessarily inconsistent with either the Avestan or Old Persian forms. In addition, the apparent divergence of *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd* in Middle Persian texts leads to Malandra's conclusion that in thinking about Anahita, "one may have to

[8] A^2Sa.
[9] A^2Ha, line 6.
[10] A^2Sd, lines 3-4.
[11] Ware and Kent 1924, p. 52.
[12] Kent 1953, p. 14.

reckon with two distinct goddesses who have been united in the Avesta"[13]. In the following few paragraphs, we fill in the logical steps in Malandra's argument, providing some historical reasoning for identifying different versions of the goddess with each other.

In Berossus' account of the goddess who is generally identified as Anahita, the name is given as Ἀφροδίτης Ἀναίτιδος (*Aphroditēs Anaitidos*)[14] in the genitive. This corresponds to the name Ἀναΐτις (*Anaitis*) in the nominative; indeed, this is is the "only" name by which the goddess is known in Greek[15], and Malandra's summary judges this to be a rendering of the Iranian name **Anāhiti*[16]. We then turn to consider the Old Persian form of the name. As has already been seen, both the attested written Old Persian forms, *Anahita* and *Anahata*, do not feature long final vowels. It is known that moving from Old Persian towards Middle Persian, a process occurs whereby "nominal stems ending in short vowels lose their final vowels"[17]. Malandra suggests that Old Persian *Anahita* may potentially still be consistent with Old Iranian **Anāhiti* if the "identity of the original vowel [had] been forgotten"[18] by the time the Old Persian form came to be written down. This suggests that we may identify Anahita in the Achaemenid inscriptions with the deity known in later Middle Persian texts as *Anāhīd*. Such a conclusion is arrived at on the basis of two things. Firstly, going from Old Persian *Anahita* to Middle Persian *Anāhīd* is consistent with the loss of short final vowels going from one language to the other. Secondly, Old Persian *Anahita* is identifiable with Greek *Anaitis* simply because it is reasonable to connect the goddess whose worship Artaxerxes II promulgated according to the Greek sources with the one that is explicitly named on his inscriptions. In light of this, we can use historical grounds to establish a connection going from Iranian **Anāhiti* to Old Persian *Anahita* to Middle Persian *Anāhīd*.

We move on to consider the Avestan forms. The fifth Yasht, written in Young Avestan and commonly known by the Middle Persian title of the "Ābān Yasht", concerns a deity whose name is frequently given in transliteration as *Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā*[19]. It should first be noted that care must be taken when drawing conclusions from the vowel lengths in Avestan

[13] Malandra 1983, pp. 117-118.
[14] FGrH 680 F11.
[15] Malandra 1983, p. 117.
[16] Malandra 1983, p. 118.
[17] Malandra 1983, p. 118.
[18] Malandra 1983, p. 118.
[19] Boyce 2014, pp. 60-61.

names, because non-monosyllabic originally-final vowels in Young Avestan were written as short, while they were written as long in Old Avestan, "regardless of the original quantity"[20]. Malandra states, without explicit justification, that the Avestan name should be **Anāhitā*, but that we actually have *Anāhita* instead[21]. Indeed, the name in the Yasht can be directly transliterated, with two short final vowels, as *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita*[22] (here substituting *uu* in place of *w* or *v* which varies between transliterations). This is attributable merely to the fact that the text is in Young Avestan, but Malandra states that the apparent shortening of the final vowel to give *Anāhita* (in the Yasht) is comparable to the change going from Old to Middle Persian where short final vowels are lost[23]. However, B. W. Fortson has noted that "it is usually thought that the length of Old Avestan final vowels is artificial and was introduced into the redactional tradition well after the Old Avestan period"[24]. It is therefore not so straightforward to draw such a parallel between the Old Persian to Middle Persian change and this apparent change in Avestan. Consequently, there is not enough evidence from the Avestan name in itself to make a direct connection with **Anāhiti* and its apparent descendants.

To make progress in the Avestan direction, it instead makes sense to look forward in time to the Middle Persian texts. Malandra has discussed the divergent roles of Middle Persian *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd*; he states that "the goddess is almost always referred to as simply Ardwīsūr", while *Anāhīd* occurs only "sporadically"[25]. The connecting steps in reaching his conclusion that two "distinct goddesses" may have existed very early on would be as follows: the name *Ardwīsūr* is directly traceable back only to the Avestan name *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita* and not to the Greek or Old Persian names. As a result, *Ardwīsūr* and *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita* are not linked directly to **Anāhiti* on a linguistic basis. Therefore they may originate, at least in part, from some different Old Iranian deity rather than **Anāhiti*. When considering if two such older deities might have become "united in the Avesta"[26], we must take care; as noted by Qaderi, the three components of the Avestan name have been translated

[20] Fortson 2009, p. 233.
[21] Malandra 1983, p. 118.
[22] Geldner 1896.
[23] Malandra 1983, p. 118.
[24] Fortson 2009, p. 233.
[25] Malandra 1983, p. 117.
[26] Malandra 1983, p. 118.

in several ways by different scholars[27]. These components are all adjectival and hold a similar standing to each other, so we cannot, for instance, separate the components *Arəduuī* and *Sūra* away from *Anāhita* just because they appear to line up with Middle Persian *Ardwīsūr*. Furthermore, the two names *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd* do occur together in the Middle Persian texts as well, and are definitely not completely distinct. M. Saadi-nejad has already discussed the importance of the Bundahishn as the "main source"[28] for comparing *Ardwīsūr Anāhīd* with the goddess of the fifth Yasht. Although the two names may have different roles when mentioned in isolation, as exemplified by *Anāhīd*'s association with the planet Venus[29], we still can see that the name *Ardwīsūr Anāhīd* bears a direct correspondence to that of *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita*. As a result, lines of reasoning that draw heavily upon a distinction between the roles (rather than the names themselves) of *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd* in the Middle Persian texts are questionable. If indeed we do take a union of Old Iranian goddesses to have had occurred in the Avestan texts, then this would suggest a closer connection between Middle Persian *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd* than otherwise expected. However, due to the temporal separation between the Middle Persian period and the fourth century BCE, we cannot easily extrapolate *Ardwīsūr* back to its Avestan equivalent and *Anāhīd* back to its Greek or Old Persian equivalent; doing so would be taking it for granted that these deity equivalents were directly comparable at the time that Artaxerxes II was promoting the worship of Anahita.

Various scholars have proposed a Mesopotamian origin for Anahita, and it is reasonable to draw parallels with the goddess Ishtar, primarily on the basis of the latter being a deity of "love, war and the planet Venus"[30]. The continuity of Babylonian religious practice throughout the Achaemenid period is very well-established. It is, somewhat unsurprisingly, notable that there is "no archeological evidence for any destruction in Babylon during Persian times"[31]. For instance, there was no noticeable break in continuity regarding the worship of Marduk (Bel) at the famous temple of Esagila[32] from the Achaemenid to the Hellenistic period. Connections between Anahita and Ishtar are also indicated in iconographic contexts;

[27] Qaderi 2018, pp. 172-173.
[28] Saadi-nejad 2019, p. 38.
[29] Malandra 1983, p. 117.
[30] Qaderi 2018, p. 180.
[31] Rollinger 2021, p. 508.
[32] Rollinger 2021, p. 508.

Briant has noted that syncretic symbolism on material objects such as seals or rings is exemplary of links between the goddesses[33]. The fact that Darius II and Parysatis, the father and mother of Artaxerxes II, were of half-Babylonian origin[34] is not in itself a sufficient reason for there being some widespread promulgation of Babylonian religion across the empire during the latter's reign. However, it is still a useful contextual backdrop in which to conceptualise the king's religious policy.

One theory for the origin of Anahita's veneration, proposed by A. Qaderi 2018, posits that the Anahita named in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II is none other than Annunitum. This goddess' major cult centre, the É-ulmash temple, was located at Sippar-Amnanum, which was very close to the site of the Battle of Cunaxa[35]. The name of Annunitum was originally an "epithet used to emphasize Ishtar's warlike aspect", and Annunitum later came to be "blessed with all Ishtar's characteristics"[36]. In following Qaderi's line of reasoning, we note firstly that the site of Cunaxa is located in the environs of Annunitum's sanctuary. As a result of Artaxerxes' victory in battle there against Cyrus the Younger, the local war goddess would have become incorporated under Artaxerxes' patronage, and subsequently added to his royal inscriptions, this time under the name Anahita[37]. The mechanism by which attributes of Ishtar are transferred to Anahita by this theory is as follows. The god Anu had seen a rise in popularity at the city of Uruk between roughly the late sixth and late fifth centuries BCE; this time period also saw the elevation of Anu's consort Antu, and the subsequent relegation of Ishtar proper to a "secondary position"[38]. Qaderi has discussed how in being elevated to such a prominent position in the Uruk pantheon, Antu would have absorbed most of the characteristics that were originally associated with Ishtar. Recall that Annunitum embodied the attributes of Ishtar very intrinsically. Since Antu was associated with Ishtar, and Ishtar was associated with Annunitum, it is possible to transitively associate Antu with Annunitum[39]. Through this chain of reasoning, the most intrinsic Mesopotamian attributes of Ishtar were transferred to a more localised deity who was venerated near Cunaxa. Such a

[33] Briant 2002, pp. 678-679.
[34] Briant 2002, p. 679.
[35] Qaderi 2018, p. 183.
[36] Qaderi 2018, p. 183.
[37] Qaderi 2018, p. 184.
[38] Qaderi 2018, p. 181.
[39] Qaderi 2018, p. 184.

transitive link may appear unnecessary since Annunitum was already associated very closely with Ishtar without the need for syncretism via Antu. To address this point, it is useful to look at the chronology of the elevation of Anu and Antu during the Achaemenid period.

It is worth examining a broader timespan in order to determine the process by which the veneration of Anu at Uruk changed over time. In a discussion of a Cilician coin naming "Tarkumawa" and (possibly) the god Anu, which has been linked by some to the satrap Datames on highly questionable grounds, P. Briant mentions the existence of a "notable enhancement"[40] of Anu's position at Uruk in the fourth century BCE, which supposedly occurred for unclear reasons. P. Beaulieu notes that the years from 433 to 366 constituted a period of "clear predominance" of usage of Anu in theophoric names[41]. However, such a rise in Anu's popularity was not at all confined to this period; in fact, two earlier Babylonian documents attest to how "patterns of name giving had already changed noticeably at Uruk not very long after the rebellions of the second year of Xerxes, indicating a trend towards a more dominant place for the god Anu"[42]. Beaulieu goes further to link these changes to a sense of "local pride and identity"[43] whereby the elites of the city of Uruk could maintain a local religious settlement that was somewhat independent from the influence of Babylon[44]. It is not immediately obvious how the rebellions of Bel-shimanni and Shamash-eriba early in Xerxes' reign (484) could lead directly to a rise in the prominence of Anu. Regardless, the aforementioned Babylonian documents, dating to around the same time as these rebellions, are exemplary of onomastic change[45] far earlier than Artaxerxes II.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this is how the fact the elevation of Anu (and correspondingly, Antu) dates to so far before Artaxerxes II provides plenty of time for the changes in prominence of different deities, and the syncretism between them, to become established. We recall again that Qaderi connects Antu with Ishtar and Ishtar with Annunitum, drawing a link between these pairings to connect Antu and Annunitum. Here, it is taken for granted that Ishtar and Annunitum are already inextricably linked. If the objective

[40] Briant 2002, p. 667.
[41] Beaulieu 2018, p. 191.
[42] Beaulieu 2018, p. 192.
[43] Beaulieu 2018, p. 203.
[44] Beaulieu 2018, p. 205.
[45] Beaulieu 2018, p. 192.

is to demonstrate Mesopotamian influence on the Anahita of the Old Persian inscriptions, then it would only be necessary to involve Antu in the reasoning at all if it were the case that Ishtar had been demoted to such a secondary position of importance that her Annunitum attributes were too minor to be worth elevation along with Ahuramazda and Mithra. Regarding this, it is useful to consider the geography of the situation, since after all, it is in Uruk in particular that Ishtar (as explicitly named) had lost prominence to Antu. If we indeed grant that the coinage of "Tarkumawa", which was minted as far from Babylonia as Cilicia, has a connection to the increased prominence of Anu at Uruk, then it is certainly plausible that the comparatively-much-closer sanctuary of Sippar-Amnanum was influenced by the increased prominence of Antu at Uruk. The evidence linking Tarkumawa's coinage to the god Anu is still somewhat unclear. However, it is certainly no less conceivable that the sanctuary of Sippar-Amnanum could have received such influence from elsewhere in Babylonia.

If we are to attribute Artaxerxes II's patronage of Anahita to an association of the goddess with victory in war, then an interesting point of comparison in the Classical sources is Plutarch's account of Artaxerxes' royal initiation. As we have already briefly outlined in the overview of some of the Greek sources, Plutarch claims that Pasargadae is home to a sanctuary of a "warlike goddess" (θεᾶς πολεμικῆς) "whom one might conjecture to be Athena"[46]. Purely on the basis of the "warlike" attributes, this goddess may tentatively be linked to such an Ishtar-influenced Anahita of the nature that has already been discussed. The Greek association of that goddess with Athena should not be interpreted as holding much weight, especially in light of Plutarch's uncertain identification. The more obvious reason for comparison is that Qaderi has already pointed out that the rebellion of Cyrus the Younger was *the* major political event of Artaxerxes' reign, to the extent that the rest of his long rule is poorly attested in comparison[47]. After describing the initiation rite of the Persian king, Plutarch goes on to discuss accusations laid against Cyrus surrounding how he may have attempted to kill Artaxerxes in a sanctuary[48]. Both Artaxerxes' victory at the Battle of Cunaxa and such an incident in the sanctuary, as described, are indicative of connections between a warlike goddess and triumph for Artaxerxes. Therefore, if the theory around Annunitum is to

[46] Plutarch, Life of Artaxerxes 3.1.
[47] Qaderi 2018, p. 182.
[48] Plutarch, Life of Artaxerxes 3.3-5.

be accepted, then such an identification by Plutarch would corroborate the possible motivation Artaxerxes may have had for promulgating the worship of Anahita.

It is very difficult to draw convincing conclusions solely from the linguistic evidence. We have already seen that by using a combination of historical deduction and arguments that rest on the absence of inconsistency, it is possible, for instance, to link certain earlier versions of the goddess to Middle Persian *Anāhīd*. The names *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita* and *Ardwīsūr Anāhīd* may well point to the unification of two previously-separate deities in the Zoroastrian texts, but this provides insufficient reason to be able to directly compare the potential predecessors of *Ardwīsūr* and *Anāhīd* in Avestan or Old Persian. Overall, an investigation into the names reveals that much care should be taken when drawing equivalences between Anahita-like goddesses in the Zoroastrian texts and goddesses who may be posited to derive from Old Iranian **Anāhiti*. More certain connections would only be formulable from other analysis, such as of the way the deities are described in the sources, rather than of the names themselves. We have also discussed the plausibility of attributing Artaxerxes II's elevation of Anahita to the outcome of the Battle of Cunaxa, and its relation to the cult centre at Sippar-Amnanum. The rise in prominence of the god Anu, and correspondingly of his consort, is attested by a combination of "onomastic" and "institutional" evidence[49]. These case studies exemplify the sorts of methods, revolving around analysis of names, that can be used to understand the conception of the goddess Anahita during Achaemenid rule, while making clear the nature of such methods' limitations.

[49] Beaulieu 2018, pp. 190-192.

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