MAGI

MAGI (OPers. *magu-*, Baby. *maguš*, Gr. *mágos* [*μάγος*], Lat. *magus*), the only recorded designation of priests of all western Iranians during the Median, Achaemenid, Parthian (*mgw*), and Sasanian periods. During Sasanian times the superior priest bore the title *mowbed* (<**magu-pati-* "chief of the Magi"; Arm. *magpet*). Šāpur I, in his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam calls his priests *mgwGBRʾ* (in both Pahlavi and Parthian; Gr. *anthropois magois* [*ανθρωποις μαγοις*]; see Back, p. 229). Under the Parthians and Sasanians this term was used for Zoroastrian priests.

DURING THE EARLY PERIOD OF IRANIAN HISTORY

The word "Magus" is attested in Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian, Aramaic, Parthian, and Sasanian documents as well as in texts of classical antiquity. Its earliest mention is in the Bisotun inscription of Darius I the Great (see DARIUS iii), according to which, in 522 BCE, a Magus (*magu-*) by the name Gaumāta claimed to be Bardiya, son of the predecessor king, Cyrus II the Great (see CYRUS iii), and usurped the royal power (DB I 35-70; Schmitt, p. 51, col. I, lines 35-43, etc.). In the Babylonian version of the same inscription, he is called "a Mede … the Maguš" (von Voigtlander, p. 14, line 15: *ma-da-a-a … ma-gu-šu*). In the Elamite version of the same text he is designated as *ma-ku-iš* (see Grillot-Susini et al., col. I, line 38). Thus it seems that Elamite and Babylonian scribes could not find any equivalent in their own languages to render Gaumāta's title. Herodotus (3.61, etc.) also mentions this individual under the name Smerdis, calling him a *magos*. According to him, King Cambyses had installed him as steward of his household. Later, when Cambyses was in Egypt, this Smerdis impersonated Cyrus's son who bore the same name Smerdis but had already been murdered secretly by the order of his brother Cambyses. Thus he usurped the throne of the Persian kings.

According to Herodotus (1.101), Magi were one of six Median tribes and formed the hereditary priestly clan. He adds that they occupied an influential position at the Median court as dream interpreters and soothsayers (1.107). Following Herodotus, many classical authors also considered the Magi to be a Median tribe, but no satisfactory Indo-European etymology of the word *magu-* has been suggested, and therefore some scholars suppose that it was "an aboriginal addition to Median society" (Frye, 1972, p. 87). However, according to Émile Benveniste, the term *magu-* signified a member of a particular social class in the proto-Iranian language and preserved such a meaning also in the Avesta (Benveniste, 1938, pp. 13, 18-20; see also Gershevitch, 1964, pp. 29, 36, according to whom the Magi became the priestly class in Media; cf. the term *magavan-*, which in Avesta denoted liturgical purity; for references see Duchesne-Guillemin, 1972, p. 72; Gnoli, 1980, p. 194). The preserved portions of the Avesta, however, do not contain indisputable references to the Magi, and, besides, the term for priests used there is *āθravan-*.

Not only in Media, but also in Persia the Magi were the only groups of priests, although in the Elamite regions of Iran naturally priests of ancient local cults also functioned. It is possible that, during the supremacy of the Medes over Iranian domains, the Median Magi also exercised sacerdotal functions.

MAGI

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The Magi (*makuš*, the Elamite transcription of the OPers. *magu-*) are frequently referred to in Elamite documents from Persepolis (the Persepolis Fortification [PF] tablets), mostly as recipients of rations of barley and wine. But in several of these documents the title “magus” occurs as a proper name of a grain-handler. For instance, a certain Makuš, who was a grain-handler, together with his delivery man, supplied 1,163 *bar* (1 bar was approximately 10 quarts, in which 1 quart = 1.14 liter) during one year at the place Matezikaš for various state expenses (see Hallock, 1969, p. 723, s.v. *makuš* for all references). The proper names of the Magi in these documents are Iranian.

From at least the time of Darius I onwards, the Magi were the official priests of the Achaemenid kings and played an important role at the royal court and enjoyed a great influence. Along with their religious functions (in particular, performing cultic libations to rivers and mountains, as well as making sacrifices of livestock), they were also engaged in administrative and economic activities. In their role as the official priests they appear not only in Persepolis itself, but also throughout all of southwestern Iran, where ten of the PF texts refer to them (Hallock, PF nos. 757, 758, 759, 769, 1798, 1951, 1955, 1957, 2036). From the royal warehouses they received grain, flour, rams, wine, beer, and fruit destined for the requirements of the cult and personal provision. The name of one of them goes back to the Zoroastrian term *yazata* (deity), while another magus by the name Irdazana bears the title *pirramasda*, derived from the Old Pers. **framazdā* (Gr. *mnemon*), which might mean “outstanding memorizer.” In all probability, this title designated the Magi who knew religious hymns by heart (Gershevitch, 1969a, p. 181). The Magus Ukpiš was issued twelve measures of grain, three for cultic libations and three each for the worship of Mithra, as well as for one mountain and for a river (Hallock, PF no. 1955). Such libations are designated as the ceremony *lan*, the nature of which remains unknown. This is apparently an Elamite word the etymology of which remains hermetic (on this ceremony see Razmjou, pp. 103-17). In the same document (line 26) Ukpiš (in all probability, the same person as in no. 1955) is referred to as *haturmakša*, who was issuing grain from a royal storehouse for various purposes. It is noteworthy that the name of this Magus can be translated “(one who) makes good treatment” (Gershevitch, 1969b, p. 243).

The title *haturmakša* is referred to also in a number of other documents from the same archive and designating an official engaged in disbursement of grain (Hallock, p. 695). As Richard Hallock notes, this title had a religious function, since in many documents it is accompanied by the divine determinative and thus apparently designated a kind of priest (Hallock, p. 58). George Cameron (pp. 6-7), Ilya Gershevitch (1969a, p. 170), and Walther Hinz (p. 429) explain this word as the Elamite transcription of the Old-Iranian **ātar-vahšā* (Gr. *puraithos*, i.e., “fire-watcher”; Av. *ātrə-vaxš-*, the priest who kindles the fire, i.e., “fire-fanner”). In the same texts there is attested one more title of an official with religious functions. This is *hatarmabattiš/attrubattiš*, which Gershevitch interpreted as **aθarva-pati-* “fire chief, a kind of priest” (Hallock, p. 694; Gershevitch, 1969a, p. 170); but, according to Hinz (p. 429), it designated “the supreme priest.” In one document, in 499 BCE Pharnaces, the manager of the royal household, orders the issuing of flour as salary for two months to the Magus by the name Limepirda, who was to receive 1.5 liters per day (Hallock, PF no. 1798). In the Persepolis Fortification tablets, the Elamite word *šatin* (priest) is used alongside the term *makuš* and occurs much more frequently than the latter (in 26 tablets). But these priests usually have Iranian names and serve Iranian gods (for instance, Ahura Mazdā), although in some cases they serve the supreme Elamite god Humban as well (Hallock, p. 755). So it is possible that these terms were partly equivalent in significance.

The presence of Magi in Persepolis during the Achaemenid period is attested also in Aramaic texts from there (see Bowman, p. 31). In particular, one Aramaic docket in a Fortification tablet (Hallock, PF no. 1798) mentions the word *mgwšʾ* (the Magus). Finally, in the Persepolis Elamite tablets the word *makuš* is attested not only as the title for designation of priests but also as a personal name (Hallock, p. 723).

Important information on the activities of Magi is preserved also in Mesopotamian documents of the Achaemenid period. These Magi probably came to Babylonia to perform religious rituals for the Persians and Medes who stayed in that country as royal officials and

soldiers. The names of these Magi, when they are mentioned, are Iranian. But Babylonian texts mention Magi only in connection with their administrative tasks, as well as witnesses in legal and economic documents along with Babylonians. For instance, a letter from the archives of the Eanna temple in Uruk records that a Magus was to check on the flour storage which apparently belonged to this temple (Clay, no. 66). In one case a Magus and a scribe of the same temple were assigned to supervise some workmen (Keiser, ed., *Babylonian Inscriptions*, no. 40). In one document from Babylon drafted in 496 BCE, provisions are mentioned, which were destined for certain Magi as well as for the workmen for the royal household (*gardu-*, an Iranian word) and some palace officials (*Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler*, no. 138/139). During the reign of Darius I, a Magus named Zattumēšu owned a field located near the city of Kiš (McEwan, ed., *Late Babylonian Texts*, no. 163). This field was adjacent to lands belonging to the temple of Marduk, the supreme state god of Babylonia, and to a private man from the same city. The etymology of the name Zattumēšu is "a servant of the tribe" (*Zantuvaisa-; see Dandamayev and Livshits, p. 458). In a promissory note from the same city drafted in 469 BCE, a Magus, whose name is lost, is listed among the witnesses of a business deal (McEwan, ed., *Late Babylonian Texts*, no. 182). Several documents from the archive of the Murašû business firm mention a place named "Settlement of reed huts of the Magus," which was located in the Nippur region near some fiefs belonging to "Cimmerians," that is, Scythians (Hilprecht and Clay, eds., *The Babylonian Expedition*, nos. 88, etc.).

Finally, during the Achaemenid period Magi appeared also in Egypt. Thus the term Magus (*mgwšj*) is referred to in an Aramaic document drafted in 434 BCE at Elephantine, where a military colony was established by the Persian administration. In this text, a certain Mithrasarah Magus, whose name is Iranian, is listed among the witnesses of a private legal document in which a Jewish colonist gives his wife half of his house. Among the witnesses in the same document, mention is also made of one more Magus by the name Tatt, the etymology of which is not quite clear (Kraeling, no. 4:24).

The earliest references to the Magi in Greek literature are in the *Persae* (Persians) of Aeschylus (line 318), where he mentions a Magus called Arabus who perished during the battle of Salamis (480 BCE), as well as in a fragment of Heraclitus written ca. 500 BCE (see Papathcophances, p. 101). But our chief source about the Magi during the Achaemenid period is the *Histories* by Herodotus. He states that Xerxes did not undertake any important decisions without preliminary advice of the Magi. They interpreted his dreams and gave him prophecies; they also accompanied the Persian army on campaigns with the sacred fire (see, e.g., Hdt., 7.19, 37). Upon orders of Xerxes, they also performed libations to the sea in the Hellespont, brought 1,000 oxen as an offering to the "heroes," and sacrificed white horses to the Scamander River for good omens (7.43, 7.113). Herodotus adds that no sacrifices could be offered by the Persians without the presence of a Magus who performed the appropriate rites and chanted hymns of the birth of the gods, but the act of the sacrifice was performed by a layman himself (1.132). As seen from the *Persian Wars* of Ammianus Marcellinus, who lived in 330-95 CE, such a practice continued for many centuries (see Bickerman and Tadmor, p. 255, with references). Herodotus also narrates that the Magi did not bury a dead male until his body had been torn by a bird of prey or a dog, and they killed everything that crawls and flies (1.140).

Xanthus, a Hellenized Lydian who possibly was a contemporary of Herodotus, in his work *Lydiaca* also mentions the Magi, but its surviving fragments do not contain any important information. Xenophon, in his *Cyropaedia* (Education of Cyrus) and other books, provides reliable information about the Magi. He writes that they were priests at the court of the Persian kings, who put in their hands the ceremonies of libations, incantations, and sacrifices. The kings also followed their instructions in religious matters. Besides, the Magi were not only expert performers of worship rites but also tutors and teachers of the sons of the Persian kings and took part in the coronation ceremonies of each new king (see, e.g., Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 4.5.14 and 8.3.11-12). It is known from Curtius Rufus that Persian soldiers carried the sacred flame on silver altars in front of the troops, and the Magi proceeded behind them singing ancient hymns (*Historiae* 3.3.9). It is also known from Arrian that the Magi were designated to guard the tomb of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae,

and they sacrificed there a horse monthly (*Anabasis of Alexander* 6.29.4-11). About the dualistic nature of the teaching of the Magi, Diogenes Laertius gives a citation from Aristotle's book "On Philosophy," in which he says that, according to these priests, there are a good spirit designated Zeus or Oromasdes and an evil spirit which is Hades or Arimanus (Diogenes Laertius, 1.8).

The role of the Magi as priests is also known from their representations where they are engaged in ritual acts. For instance, a fire altar with two attending Magi is depicted on a relief from the 5th century BCE found in Daskyleion (see DASCYLIUM), the capital of Phrygia, in Asia Minor, where they appear dressed in tunic and trousers, covering noses and mouths (for literature, see Boyce, 1982, pp. 117-18; see also Duchesne-Guillemin, 1962, p. 202). There have also been preserved a few representations of Magi carved in stone from the Seleucid and Arsacid periods (Boyce, 1979, p. 85).

Images of the Magi are attested also on seal impressions on several clay tablets from Persepolis. These seals show two persons, under Ahura Mazdā's emblem in the form of the sun-disk, holding a mortar and pestle before a fire altar (Schmidt, p. 55 and pl. 7, seal no. 20).

PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN MAGI

The extension of the activities of the Magi to Chorasmia, Bactria, and other regions of Central Asia during the Parthian period is known from Pseudo-Lucian (Boyce, 1979, p. 98). According to Strabo (15.3.15), the fire cult of the Magi was widespread in Cappadocia. He writes that their fire altars were located in sacred places inside enclosures where the Magi kept the fire ever burning. During the service they held before the fire bundles of rods and wore high turbans over their heads.

On Parthian gems and amulets, the term Magus is rendered as *mgw* (see Gignoux, p. 65, no. 8:2; Bivar, pp. 518-25, fig. 1; Livshits, p. 176, no. 41). As seen from the economic documents of the first century BCE from Nisa, in Parthia the Magi could be employed in operations connected with acceptance and deliveries of wine to the state stores. One text records the acceptance of a large quantity of wine (6351 *mari*, or ca. 64 000 liters) by two scribes and the Magus (MGWŠH; cf. the imperial Aramaic MGWŠ') Mihrdāt (MTRDT) by name in 72 BCE (Diakonoff and Livshits, p. 165, no. 2577:5). A Magus, together with a scribe, is also referred to, in broken context, in a document from 102 BCE of the same archive (no. 2675).

During the Sasanian period, the priesthood of the Magi constituted a powerful estate of the society which supported the royal authority. They were exempt from paying the head tax. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (23.6.27-32), Magi had their own lands in Media.

In the last quarter of the 3rd century CE, the famous religious leader Kartīr became powerful and was granted the title of the chief priest (*mowbed*). He tried to establish militant Zoroastrian orthodoxy as the state church of Iran and spread it also among the hellenized Magi in Asia Minor. He also struggled against other religious doctrines. The reflection of this struggle is found in four inscriptions of him, which were written on rock reliefs between 276 and 293 CE.

RELATIONSHIP WITH ZOROASTIANISM

Classical authors such as Herodotus, Strabo, Pompeius Trogus, Apuleius, and Ammianus Marcellinus have provided significant information on the religion of the Magi. According to the statements of some of them, the Magi were disciples and followers of Zoroaster. The Iranian tradition, represented in Middle Persian literature, considers them experts on rituals and keepers of the cultural and religious customs of a number of Iranian tribes. Contradictory opinions have been expressed in modern scholarly works concerning the religion of the Magi. But almost nothing is known about the western Iranian Magi during the pre-Zoroastrian period. Some scholars consider that the Magi were Zoroastrians,

whereas others believe that they were enemies of the teaching of Zoroaster. It is possible that they constituted hereditary priesthood, like the Levites in ancient Israel, and formed the sacerdotal group in Media (see, e.g., Nyberg, p. 336). According to Giuseppe Messina's theory, the Magi were Zoroaster's disciples and a Persian estate, not a Median tribe (Messina, pp. 11-15, etc.). Likewise, Ernst Herzfeld (p. 301) wrote that the Magi were a class, not a tribe, and neither were they Zoroastrian. Duchesne-Guillemin assumes that it is highly unlikely that the Magi were followers of Zoroaster from the beginning and contends that they became Zoroastrians much later and that the supreme state god of the Medes was Mithra, not Ahura Mazdā (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1972, pp. 72-74; idem, 1974, p. 20). Johanes Hertel (pp. 5 ff.), Georg Hüsing (p. 30), and many other scholars expressed the opinion that, in contrast to the early Achaemenids, the Magi were not Zoroastrians.

According to Ilya Gershevitch (1964, pp. 22-29), at the beginning of their activities the Magi were not representatives of any particular religion but technical experts, professional priests who served the cult of any Iranian gods for pay. Thus they became principal authors of the religious syncretism that was Mazdaism. According to his opinion, the Magi adopted Zoroastrianism only at the end of the 4th century BCE and proclaimed Zoroaster to be their teacher. Thus he distinguishes between the Zoroastrian priests and the Magi during early Achaemenid times. Robert C. Zaehner (pp. 5 ff.) contends that the teaching of Zoroaster was altered by the Magi in order to adapt it to the notions that were widespread among the masses of the people of Iran. He also supposes that "the sacerdotal caste of the Magi was distinct from the Median tribe of the same name" (pp. 163 ff.). Igor Diakonoff assumed that the term "Magus" was an ethnicon and did not designate a caste or profession. According to him, the Magi supplied the Medes with court priests as early as, at least, under the last Median king Astyages, who was under some influence of the teaching of Zoroaster (Diakonoff, pp. 274-75, 392-400). In this connection, it can be mentioned that in the Babylonian version of the Bisotun inscription Gaumāta is designated as a Mede and Magus (see above). Bickerman and Tadmor stated that "there existed the hereditary Iranian priesthood outside the Median tribe of the Magi" (p. 253). According to Strabo (15.3.1), the Magi were a Persian tribe, and Pliny (*Natural history* 30.3-4) writes that many Persians preached Zoroastrianism and were called Magi. Finally, Benveniste (1929, p. 72) also underlined the differences between the Persian religion and Zoroastrianism in early Achaemenid times.

In Media and Persia there hardly existed any officially recognized groups of priests other than the Magi, but in the Elamite regions, where many of the Persepolis Fortification documents were drafted, there were naturally also priests of the ancient local cults. The great importance of the Magi in Persia is well known from the works of Greek and Latin authors, for instance, the information concerning the appointment of the Magi to care for the tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae (see above).

Elamite texts from Persepolis provide important information on the Magi and their position at the Achaemenid court as official priests not only in Persepolis, but also throughout all southwestern Iran. But it remains unknown whether, as early as the 6th century BCE, the Persians had their own priests whom they called "Magi," and if at the same time this term was also generally used to designate Medes who performed priestly functions, in which case the term would consequently carry no ethnic connotation (cf. Boyce, 1982, p. 19). Perhaps originally the word *maguš* was used to designate a member of the priestly tribe (Benveniste, 1938, pp. 10-11). R. C. Zaehner's assumption (pp. 163 ff.) that the Magi constituted a special caste which differed from the Median tribe of the same name seems rather far-fetched and improbable.

Beginning from the end of the 6th century BCE, the Magi functioned as official priests at state as well as at private services in Persia and several other countries of the Achaemenid empire. Under Xerxes the influence and role of the Magi was strengthened even further. They ministered to the altars of fire, performed cultic libations, offered blood sacrifices, and used the *haoma* juice for ritual purposes. It is, however, difficult to state when and to what degree they adopted Zoroastrianism, or, similarly, to answer the question of whether the Achamenid kings were Zoroastrians or not.

Sometime in the early first millennium BCE, Zoroaster carried out his reform, transforming Ahura Mazdā into the supreme god, rejecting some of the tribal deities and placing others below him. Later, Zoroastrianism began to spread to Media, Persia, and other Iranian countries. Around 520 BCE Darius I the Great assessed positively the advantages of Zoroaster's teaching as his official religion, but he did not reject the cults of the ancient gods, some of whom had been abolished by Zoroaster. For Darius and his successors Ahura Mazdā was "the greatest of the gods," as noted in their inscriptions. As recorded in Elamite documents drafted in 509-494 BCE, produce was supplied from the royal storehouses for the performance of the cults not only of Ahura Mazdā and other Iranian gods, but also of the Elamite god Humban and even of Mesopotamian Adad (see Hallock, PF nos. 345, 346, 350, 2029; on Adad, ibid., nos. 353, 587, 2073). Thus, during Achaemenid times, various religious concepts existed in Persia, and, in contrast to the cults of the sun god Mithra and fertility goddess Anāhitā (q.v.), the cult of the supreme god Ahura Mazdā did not gain considerable recognition among its population. It is important to have in view that in ancient polytheistic societies, there existed no dogmatic religions with firmly fixed norms, and as a result there emerged various modifications of the same religious conceptions. In polytheistic societies, where many deities were worshipped, any cult was considered to be valid, and new gods were always welcome. Therefore, it was natural that the Magi, along with Zoroastrian teaching, absorbed also other religious ideas and, owing to such a diffusion of various ideas, became creators of eclectic and syncretistic tendencies (Gnoli, 1980, p. 209). An important role expressing these tendencies was played by the occult crafts, the competent masters of which were the Magi.

Gershevitch (1964, p. 16) was inclined to assume that the Magi adopted Zoroaster as their prophet only in the first half of the 4th century BCE. One of the important parts of the Magi's religion was their dualistic doctrine. The main points of this doctrine were also known to some Greek scholars, including Aristotle. He wrote that, according to the teaching of the Magi, there existed two principles that were contradictory to each other, personifying the good spirit called Oromasdes and the evil one, namely Areimanios (Bidez and Cumont, II, p. 71). There have also been preserved some legends in which Pythagoras, Democritus, and several other philosophers are named as disciples of the Magi (Cumont, p. 138). For instance, Diogenes Laertius (9.34) writes that Democritus was acquainted with the teaching of the Iranian Magi. He also states (1.2) that Hermodoros, one of Plato's disciples, knew the names of several successors of Zoroaster. The latter himself was considered as one of the Magi by Xanthos of Lydia (see Frye, 1962, p. 75).

The teaching of Zoroaster and religion of the Magi became known to the Greeks and Romans mainly during the Hellenistic period and later. By that time, many colonies of believers of the Magi's theology were established, not only in Asia Minor, but also in some other countries, including even Egypt.

An integral part of the activities of the Magi was comprised of their ritual functions connected with astrology and magic (hence the Greek term *mageía* [μαγεία]; see Rose, p. 22). The seeming confusion in the use of the words "Magi" and "Chaldeans" in Greek literature can be explained by the fact that the activities of Babylonian priests and Iranian Magi were similar in some aspects. There has also been preserved some evidence about the stay of Magi in Athens during Plato's times (Gnoli, 2000, p. 57).

Beginning in the 4th century BCE, the use of the term *magus* became ambiguous and had a double significance. It often acquired contemptuous connation and was used to designate conjurers, sorcerers, and soothsayers (Bidez and Cumont, I, p. 174; Bickerman and Tadmor, p. 252; Papathcophances, p. 105). But the same word was also used for designating wise men—like those who arrived "from the East" (Matt. 2:1) with the offerings to the infant Jesus Christ (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1961, pp. 469-71) and so became an enduring part of Christian tradition.

See also MAGOPHONIA, MOWBED (pending), MOBAD (pending).