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Zoroastrian Communism

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According to Xanthus of Lydia, who wrote in the fifth century B.C., the Magi considered it right to have intercourse with their mothers, daughters, and sisters and also to hold women in common.¹ The first half of this claim is perfectly correct: Xanthus is here referring to the Zoroastrian institution of close-kin marriage (*khwēdōdāh*), the existence of which is not (or no longer) in doubt.² But his belief that the Magi held women in common undoubtedly rests on a misunderstanding, possibly of easy divorce laws and more probably of the institution of wife lending.³ In the fifth century A.D., however, we once more hear of Persians who deemed it right to have women in common; and this time the claim is less easy to brush aside. The Persians in question were heretics, not orthodox Zoroastrians or their priests; their heresy was to the effect that both land and women should be held in common, not just women (though the first attempt to implement it did apparently concern itself with women alone); and the heretics are described, not just by Greeks, let alone a single observer, but also by Syriac authors and the Persians themselves as preserved in Zoroastrian sources and the Islamic tradition. What then are we to make of the claim the second time round?⁴

This essay was originally presented as a paper at the conference on pre-modern communism held by John Hall and myself at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1992. I should like to thank Gonville and Caius College for academic hospitality and the participants, especially John Hall, for discussions in the light of which the paper has been revised, if not necessarily to their satisfaction.

¹ Xanthus, cited by Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 3, 11, 1, in F. Jacoby, ed., *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, vol. 3, C2 (Leiden, 1958), no. 765 [pp. 757f].

² Cf. B. Spooner, "Iranian Kinship and Marriage," *Iran*, IV (1966), and the literature cited there.

³ Compare *Pauly's Realencyclopädie*, 2nd series, vol. 9A (2) (Stuttgart 1967), s.v., "Xanthos (der Lyder)," where easy divorce laws are singled out. For the institution of wife lending, see below.

⁴ The most important works are Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabari* (Leiden, 1879), a translation with invaluable comments; A. Christensen, *Le Règne de Kawādh I et le communisme mazdakite* (Copenhagen, 1925), summarized in *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*² (Copenhagen, 1944), ch. 7; O. Klíma, *Mazdak, Geschichte einer sozialen Bewegung im sassanidischen Persien* (Prague, 1957); *idem*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Mazdakismus* (Prague, 1977); E. Yarshater, "Mazdakism," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III: 2 (Cambridge, 1983); and the articles by Molé and Shaki cited below in note 20). The present study is based on P. Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran*, xxix (1991), to which the reader is referred for further details and proper documentation.

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THE HISTORY OF THE SECT

We may start by tracing the history of the sect to which communist beliefs are imputed. It was founded by one Zarādusht (Zoroaster) son of Khrōsāk or Khurrak, a contemporary of Mani (d. 276), who came from Fasā, a town in Fars, though he may have been active in Iraq. There is no reason to suspect him of being a doublet of the founder of Zoroastrianism, but his name should conceivably be understood as a title. If so, he was a Zoroastrian priest. No contemporary source refers to him, and his sect might easily have gone unrecorded.⁵

The sect catapulted to public notoriety, however, some two hundred years after Zarādusht's death, when the heresy was taken up by the Sasanian emperor Kavād, who came to the throne in 488. According to Joshua the Stylite, a contemporary Syriac chronicler, Kavād "revived the abominable Zoroastrian heresy known as that of Zarādusht which teaches that women should be in common and that every one should have intercourse with whom he pleases."⁶ Greek historians make the same observation but without awareness that Kavād's ideas were religious. According to Procopius, who accompanied the Byzantine army to Persia in 527–31, Kavād "introduced innovations into [the] constitution, among which was a law which he promulgated providing that Persians should have communal intercourse with their women."⁷ According to Agathias (d. 582), "it is said that he actually made a law according to which women were to be available to men in common. . . . These sins were being committed frequently, with full legality."⁸ So indeed they seem to have been, for according to a late Christian–Arabic source, Kavād built shrines and inns where people could meet and engage in incontinence.⁹ That he made women available to everyone (*abāḥa 'l-nisā'*) is also a commonplace in the Islamic tradition. No contemporary source, however, credits Kavād with communist policies in respect of property; and the Islamic tradition only does so because it conflates his policies with those of Mazdak, a communist rebel who was crushed by Khusraw, Kavād's son and successor. The communist activities of Kavād and Mazdak are also conflated in the secondary literature but should undoubtedly be dissociated: The episodes were consecutive, not contemporary.¹⁰ If Kavād was a communist in respect of property, his convictions were not reflected in his policies. But he was a pacifist, which did show in his policies, and also a vegetarian, which he kept a private matter.¹¹ His pacifism must have annoyed the Iranian aristocracy, but contemporary and later sources

⁵ Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 24 and notes 63–75 thereto.

⁶ Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, W. Wright, ed. and tr. (Cambridge, 1882), §20.

⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, H. B. Dewing, ed. and tr. vol. 1 (London, 1914), I, 5, 1ff; cf. A. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985), 8, 152ff.

⁸ A. Cameron, ed. and tr., "Agathias on the Sassanians," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxiii–xxiv (1969–70), pp. 128f through 129f.

⁹ A. Scher, ed. and tr. "Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)," part I: 1, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, R. Graffin and F. Nau, eds. vol. vii (Paris, 1911), 125.

¹⁰ Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 21ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26 and notes 118–20 thereto.

agree that it was his outrageous policies regarding women that led to his downfall. “The Persian grandees plotted in secret to slay Kavād, on account of his impure morals and perverse laws,” Joshua the Stylite says¹²; Kavād’s laws “by no means pleased the common people (*plēthos*)” who rose against him, according to Procopius¹³; “the leading men showed their displeasure openly, for they thought the disgrace unendurable,” Agathias observes¹⁴; and numerous Muslim sources also state that his heresy led to his deposition.¹⁵ Kavād was dethroned and imprisoned in 496 but managed to escape to the Hephtalites in Transoxania and to reconquer his kingdom with Hephtalite help in 498. By then he had sobered up. Restored to orthodoxy, he ruled with full aristocratic and ecclesiastical support from then onwards until his death in 531.

This might have been the end of the story. But about the time of Kavād’s death the heresy was taken up for altogether different use by Mazdak, after whom it is generally known as Mazdakism. Neither Mazdak nor the massive revolt he raised is mentioned in Greek or Syriac sources, but he looms large in the Islamic and (to a less extent) Zoroastrian tradition, where he is identified as the son of one Bāmdād and as a Zoroastrian priest (*mōbad*). His place of origin is variously given, but he was almost certainly active in Iraq.¹⁶ Mazdak is explicitly said to have owed his views to Zarādusht but, unlike Kavād, did not limit his communism to women. He argued that women and wealth are the fundamental sources of human discord and that concord would prevail if both were equally available to all. God (that is, Ahura Mazda, the good deity) had created all men alike and placed the means of procreation and sustenance on earth “so that mankind might divide them equally among themselves”¹⁷; women and property should be held in partnership like water, fire, and pasture;¹⁸ nobody was allowed to monopolize them, sharing was a religious duty.¹⁹ Sharing wives and property would diminish the power of Āz, concupiscence, a force through which Ahriman (the evil deity) worked on mankind. Āz thrived on both excess and deprivation, but fulfilment in the right measure was the remedy against it.²⁰ Like Kavād, Mazdak was a vegetarian; and he,

¹² *Chronicle*, §23.

¹³ *Wars*, I: 5, 1f.

¹⁴ Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” 128 through 129.

¹⁵ See the references in Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” notes 9–14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24, 27 and notes 74–80, 159 thereto. The sources which present him as a chief priest (*ibid.*, note 160) do so on the basis of his supposed association with Kavād. For an attempt to deny his existence, see H. Gaube, “Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention?,” in (*Mélanges offerts à Raoul Curjel*), *Studia Iranica*, (1982).

¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, M. J. de Goeje and others, eds. (Leiden, 1879–1901, series 1), 885f [in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 141].

¹⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa’l-nihāl*, W. Cureton, ed. (London, 1846), 193, in *id.*, *Religionspartheien und Philosophen-Schulen*, Th. Haarbrückert, trans. (Halle, 1850), vol. 291.

¹⁹ For all this, see Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 24 and notes 81–87 thereto.

²⁰ M. Molé, “Un ascétisme moral dans les livres pehlevi?,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions*, clv (1959), 162ff; *id.*, “Le problème des sectes zoroastriennes dans les livres pehlevi,” *Orlens*, XXIII–IV (1960–61), 24f; M. Shaki, “The Social Doctrine of Mazdak in the Light of Middle Persian Evidence,” *Archiv Orientalni*, XXXV (1978), 291ff.

too, wanted to eliminate war, hatred, and dispute, though in practice he was responsible for massive bloodshed.²¹ He raised a peasant revolt. His followers were the poor, base, weak, and ignoble plebs (*al-fuqarāʾ*, *al-sifla*, *al-ḡuʿafāʾ*, *al-ghawghāʾ*). They “would break into a man’s home and take his dwelling, his wives and his property without him being able to prevent them”²²; “they killed those who did not follow them”²³; they claimed that “they were taking from the rich and giving to the poor, and that whoever had a surplus in respect of landed property, women or goods had no better right to it than anyone else.”²⁴ Mazdak himself “would take the wife of one and hand her over to another, and likewise possessions, slaves, slavegirls and other things, such as landed property and real estate.”²⁵ Huge numbers followed him: No less than 80,000 or 100,000 or even 150,000 were allegedly massacred in one day in just one place in Iraq, where the revolt was centered insofar as one can tell, though Fars is also said to have been involved. The revolt was suppressed by Khusraw I (531–71), who had completed the task by 540 at the latest.²⁶

Thereafter, the Zarādushtīs seem to have disappeared from Iraq, but they reappear from about 740 onwards in Iran under the label of *Khurramīs* or *Khurramdīnīs* (adherents of the joyous religion). By then they had changed somewhat. Typically, their religion was now a mishmash of Zoroastrian, Gnostic, and other ideas, to which Islamic notions were being added; but the old Zarādushtī conception remained. Thus, they were still pacifists, except in times of revolt, and vegetarians too: In their view, no living creature should be killed, and some of them even deemed it unlawful to cause injury to plants.²⁷ They do not seem to have clamoured for communal property any more; but almost all stuck to the idea of communal access to women (*ibāḥat al-nisāʾ*), if only in an emblematic vein. “Some of them believe in communal access to women, provided that the women agree, and in free access to everything in which the self takes pleasure and to which nature inclines, as long as nobody is harmed thereby,” al-Maqdisī observes with reference to tenth-century Khurramīs in western Iran.²⁸ “They say that a woman is like a flower, no matter who smells it, nothing is detracted from it,” Narshakhī explains with reference to Khurramīs of the same period in Transoxania²⁹; and twelfth-century Khur-

²¹ Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 26 and notes 122–8 thereto.

²² Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ser. 1, 886, in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 142.

²³ Al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-baḍʾ waʾl-tārīkh*, Cl. Huart, ed. and tr. (Paris, 1899–1919), vol. III: 168 [171].

²⁴ Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ser. i, 886, in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 141.

²⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī ʾl-tārīkh*, C. J. Tornberg, ed. (Leiden, 1851–76), vol. I: 297.

²⁶ Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 23, 30–33 and note 47.

²⁷ Maqdisī, *Badʾ*, vol. IV: 31 [28]; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, R. Tajaddud, ed. (Tehran, 1971), 406; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ser. 111, 1228, in id., *The Reign of Muʿtasim*, E. Marin, tr. (New Haven, 1951), 52; W. Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Columbia, 1988), 10.

²⁸ Maqdisī, *Badʾ*, vol. IV: 31 [29].

²⁹ Narshakhī, *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, C. Schefer, ed. (Paris, 1892), 73 in id., *The History of Bukhara*, R. N. Frye, tr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), 75.

ramīs in Azerbaijan claimed that women are the water of the house which every thirsty man is allowed to drink.³⁰ There may still have been Khurramīs in Iran in the seventeenth century.³¹

ARE THE SOURCES TO BE TRUSTED?

Many scholars find it hard to accept the claim that the Zarāduštīs preached communal access to women. In their view the sectarians are more likely just to have tampered with Zoroastrian marriage law, for example by rejecting endogamy, prohibiting polygamy, calling for the abolition of harems, making it cheaper to marry, relaxing the rules of levirate marriages, or abolishing the institution of substitute heirs; but the Sectarians' horrified opponents, who were given to twisting and exaggerating what they heard, took these demands to mean that women should be shared. The alleged doctrine of communal access to women is a polemical fiction.³²

One might have been inclined to accept this argument if the sources had occasionally mentioned some of the marriage reforms suggested by modern scholars and added the sharing of women by way of rhetorical flourish; but they do not. Instead, they uniformly credit the Zarāduštīs with a conviction that women should be shared, no more and no less. The sources make this claim with reference to Zarādušt in the third century, to Kavād in the fifth, to Mazdak in the sixth, and to Khurramīs from the eighth to the twelfth century, if not the seventeenth. They say this in Syriac, Greek, Arabic, Pahlavi, and Persian, from the viewpoint of Christians, Muslims, and Zoroastrians, indeed from that of the Zarāduštīs themselves, if only in the form of Khurramīs. Several sources are contemporary with the sectarians they describe; a few are neutral or even sympathetic; and their statements are rarely formulaic: Kavād revived the abominable heresy of Zarādušt which teaches that women should be in common; Mazdak held that women and property should be held in partnership like water, fire, and pasture; women are like flowers that one can go on smelling without detracting from them, or like water which every thirsty man may drink. These and other statements hardly sound like polemical exaggerations of demands for Zoroastrian marriage reforms. Nor do they sound like the stereotyped accusations of promiscuity leveled at Gnostics.³³ In short, those who accuse the sources of exaggeration simply cannot believe that a doctrine of communal access to women can have existed, however good the evidence. They typically voice their skepticism in works of a general

³⁰ Madelung, *Religious Trends*, 10.

³¹ Thus, the Parsee *Dabistān-i madhāhib* (Calcutta, 1809), vol. I: 166f, in *The Dabistān, or School of Manners*, D. Shea and A. Troyer, trans. (Paris, 1843), vol. I: 378.

³² Thus Yarshater, "Mazdakism," 999f, cf. 1013; similarly, if more briefly, A. Bausani, *The Persians* (London, 1971), 63; R. N. Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians," *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III: 1 (Cambridge, 1983), 150; H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 9.

³³ This point is discussed at length in Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 29f.

nature; those who have worked closely with the sources rarely find it difficult to believe them.³⁴

If one denies that the Zarāduštīs were communists in respect of women, one must also deny that they were communists in respect of land, for their views on women and land obviously went together. As far as the Zarāduštīs were concerned, women were simply a kind of property, though certainly the most important kind as far as sharing was concerned. Kavād and the later Khurramīs were communists in respect of women alone, while Mazdak (presumably following Zarādušt) gave equal weight to both, but communism in respect of property alone is not attested for this sect. Yet one scholar asserts that Kavād only engaged in redistribution of noble property and that there is no evidence that he tried to enforce communal access to women!³⁵ Others accept that the Mazdakites were communists in respect of land while rejecting their views on women as polemical exaggeration, but this is equally untenable. Either the Mazdakites were communists in respect of land and women alike, with special emphasis on women; or else they were not communists at all. But if they were not communists at all, what is left of their creed? The result would be sectarians who argued that women and property were the chief causes of human strife and proposed a solution to this problem which everybody took to be communist but of which the only thing we know for certain is that communist it was not. It does not sound persuasive.

Given that the idea of holding women in common has figured in Western utopian thought from Plato to the 1960s, one may well ask why the Persians should be judged incapable of entertaining the idea. In fact they clearly were not, for the idea suggested itself easily enough to the opponents of the Zarāduštīs, even if we deem the latter innocent of it. However, communism in respect of women sounds like a doctrine of unbridled licentiousness which it would be both silly and offensive to attribute to others, and this is presumably why so many prefer to explain it away. But their reaction is mistaken. It is perfectly true that the sources present Zarāduštī communism as a hedonistic creed. Agathius opined that Kavād took it up "not . . . according to the argument of Plato or Socrates, or for the hidden benefit in their proposal, but so that anyone could consort with whichever one he liked."³⁶ Al-Bīrūnī held that Kavād took it up because he fancied an otherwise unavailable woman.³⁷

³⁴ Cf. Nöldeke, Christensen, Klīma (above note 1), Molé, Shaki (above, note 20) and myself. Only Yarshater is sceptical, but not consistently, for though he begins by toning down the Mazdakite doctrine concerning women (above, note 32), he later accepts that the Carpocratians and Mazdakites "offered the same argument for the community of property and women" ('Mazdakism', 1020).

³⁵ S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*³, vol. III (New York, 1957), 56 (another general work).

³⁶ Cameron, "Agathias on the Sasanians," 128 [129].

³⁷ Al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-bāqīya 'an al-qurūn al-khāliya*, C. E. Sachau, ed. (Leipzig, 1923), 209, in id., *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, C. E. Sachau, tr. (London, 1879), 192.

Joshua thought that the doctrine was impure, abominable and perverse; and others said that it was pure licentiousness.³⁸ But all this is merely to say that the sources misidentify the spirit in which the doctrine was propounded, not that they falsify the doctrine itself. It is only the alleged spirit that we must discount. Communism in respect of women evidently is not a doctrine of unbridled licentiousness, any more than communism in respect of property is one of unbridled greed. It should be obvious that Zarādusht conceived his doctrine in an attempt to devise a better way of organizing human society, exactly as did Plato, while Kavād took it up for its “hidden benefit,” whatever Agathias might claim. In defence of the sources it must be said that the Zarādushtīs laid themselves open to charges of hedonism, at least in their Khurramī form, in that they endorsed the enjoyment of “everything in which the self takes pleasure, and to which nature inclines, as long as nobody is harmed thereby,”³⁹ including wine, music, and flowers, real or metaphorical, which is an attitude so contrary to the ascetic currents of the period that some scholars prefer to turn the evidence upside down so as to present the Khurramīs as ascetics.⁴⁰ But it was apparently their attitude to the good things of life which caused them to be known as Khurramīs, the adherents of the joyous religion; and the slogan “make love, not war” would not have been an altogether inappropriate summary of their views, though unlike the flower-power children of the nineteen sixties, the Khurramīs do not come across as frivolous. But even the half-baked doctrines of the sixties were meant as solutions to a strife-ridden world, and this is certainly true of Zarādushtism, which was never a simple license to mindless pleasure. Naturally the enemies of the Zarādushtīs were convinced that so radical a heresy must have been propounded in the basest of spirits, but this is merely to say that they were shocked. This they had every right to be, for the doctrine was indeed radical.

³⁸ For Joshua, see the references given above, notes 6, 12; for Zarādusht’s doctrine as a tenet that “all physical pleasures are licit,” see Scher, “Histoire nestorienne,” part II: 1, 157.

³⁹ Cf. Maqdisī, *Bad*, note 28.

⁴⁰ Thus, G. Pugliese Carratelli, “Les doctrines sociales de Bundos et de Mazdak,” *Acta Iranica*, II (1974), 286f, takes the fact that the Zarādushtīs preached equal access to the good things of life to mean that they preached abstention from such things in an effort to kill desire; J. Duchesne-Guillemin argues much the same (*La religion de l’Iran ancien* [Paris, 1962], 286; Id., “Zoroastrian Religion,” in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III: 2, 892. Others merely credit the Khurramīs with ascetic tendencies: thus, Christensen, *Kawādh*, 102f; cf. also id., *L’Iran*, 342f; Yarshater, “Mazdakism,” 1013f; Madelung, *Religious Trends*, 5; M. Shaki, “The Cosmogonical and Cosmological Teachings of Mazdak,” *Acta Iranica*, XI (Papers in Honour of Mary Boyce) (1985), 543. But there is much evidence against the more modest proposition too, and none in its favour. The Shahrastānī passage adduced by Christensen does not refer to mortification of the self but to killing in the literal sense of the word (cf. Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 27, and notes 171–3 thereto; cf. also Qur’ān, 5:35); neither the vegetarianism nor the pacifism of the Zarādushtīs was meant in an ascetic vein (the taking of lives was forbidden because life was good, not because one should seek to escape from it); and the sixteenth-century assertion that Mazdak “wore woolen clothing and engaged in constant devotion” is obviously a mere embellishment (*Mīrkhwānd, Tārīkh-i rawḍat al-ṣafā*, vol. I [Tehran, 1338], 774, in id., *The Rauzat-us-safā*, E. Rahatsek, tr. part I, vol. ii (London, 1892), 369).

HOW WAS THE COMMUNIST IDEAL TO BE PRACTISED?

We do not know how Zarādušt envisaged the implementation of his ideas, but to his followers the solution lay in redistribution of women and property on the one hand and communal access to both on the other. His followers did not try to abolish pair bonding. Kavād is said to have ruled that children born of extramarital unions were to be affiliated to the woman's husband.⁴¹ If this is true (the source is late), Kavād clearly thought that marriage would continue, along with hereditary transmission of property and marital responsibility for the upbringing of children. Marriage certainly did continue among the later Khurramīs. Some sources (also late) say that Mazdak held children to be common property on a par with women.⁴² He may have regarded children in this way, but he did not attack the nuclear family in practice. Adults were not assigned to separate halls of men and women between whom mating (indiscriminate or controlled) was allowed, but permanent pair bonding forbidden; children were not placed in halls of children for collective rearing as they were to be in the future *kibbutzim*. What he did rule was that nobody was allowed to have more wives than others or to monopolize the wife he had. Of Kavād we are only told that he was against monopolization. He wanted all men to have free access to all women, to which end he established places where they could meet, but he did not apparently engage in redistribution. Mazdak, however, "would take the wife of one and hand her over to another"; his followers "would break into a man's home and take his . . . wives," arguing that "whoever had a surplus in respect of . . . women had no better right to it than anyone else."⁴³ At the same time Mazdak is said to have sanctioned wife lending.⁴⁴ Even among the twelfth-century Khurramīs of Azerbaijan, the vision is clear enough. Because all women were common property, nobody could have more than one at a time; and because they were common property, women were like water of which every thirsty man could drink.⁴⁵ To outsiders this combination of monogamy and promiscuity must have seemed insane, but in communist terms it made perfect sense.

The Zarāduštīs did not abolish private property, either. They made no attempt to institute state ownership of land, which is as might be expected given their pre-modern setting; nor did they pool their property, and this makes sense too. For it is followers of millenarian movements who will pool their resources typically on the eve of the great transformation (as in the Acts of the Apostles, 2:44f); and the Zarāduštīs were not millenarians. In fact, Mazdak's followers must be the only peasant rebels in pre-modern history to have been communists without being millenarians too. At all events, what

⁴¹ Scher, "Histoire nestorienner," part II (1), 125.

⁴² B. T. Anklesaria, ed. and tr., *Zand Ākāsīh* (Bombay, 1956), 276 [277]; Ibn al-Balkhī, *Fārsnāme*, G. Le Strange and R. A. Nicholson, eds. (London, 1921), 84.

⁴³ See the references given above in notes 22, 24, 25.

⁴⁴ Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 25 and notes 97–98 thereto.

⁴⁵ Madelung, *Religious Trends*, 10.

they aimed at was redistribution and denial of exclusive rights. Mazdak “ordered that people should be equal in respect of property.”⁴⁶ He would redistribute “possessions, slaves, slavegirls and other things, such as landed property and real estate.”⁴⁷ His followers “would break into a man’s home and take his dwelling . . . and his property,” claiming that “they were taking from the rich and giving to the poor, and that whoever had a surplus in respect of landed property . . . or goods had no better right to it than anyone else.”⁴⁸ They said that “nobody has the right to more property or wives than others, so that he who is able to take people’s possessions or obtain their wives by stealth, deceit, trickery or blandishment is allowed and free to do so; the property which some people have in excess of others is forbidden to them until it has been distributed equally among mankind.”⁴⁹ Put in modern legal terminology, the Zarādushtīs abolished private ownership but accepted private possession. Whereas ownership is a sacred right, possession is contingent. I may not possess what I own, for others may have stolen it from me; I can demand possession of a thing on the grounds that I own it, but I cannot claim ownership on the grounds that I possess it. Possession does not in itself establish exclusive rights. The Zarādushtīs said that as far as sacred ownership was concerned, women and wealth were communal property: Everybody had as much right to them as everybody else, meaning that they had to be distributed equally. But mere possession continued to be private. Possession without the backing of ownership did not, however, establish exclusive rights; so everybody was free to avail himself of what his neighbour did not seem to need. The doctrine was beautifully coherent.

DOES IT QUALIFY AS COMMUNISM?

Some might argue that Zarādushtism is too redistributionist to qualify as communism, but this is scarcely correct. It seems reasonable to identify as communism any doctrine which advocates collectivization of rights normally vested in individuals or families, and a doctrine to the effect that the means of production and reproduction should be held in common certainly falls squarely within that definition. How the doctrine proposes to effect the common ownership is another question which the generic definition should exclude.

Many scholars balk at classifying pre-modern communism as communist without circumlocution or quotation marks because real communism in their view requires state ownership of the means of production or at least state regulation of the productive process. Though his terminology differed, this was Durkheim’s position. He denied that modern communism (which he called socialism) belonged in the same genus as pre-modern communism, (which he called communism) on the grounds that modern communism/socialism seeks

⁴⁶ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, M. Th. Houtsma, ed. (Leiden, 1883), vol. I: 186; cf. Tabarī, *Ta’rikh*, ser. i, 893, in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 154.

⁴⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-kāmil filta’rikh*, note 25.

⁴⁸ Cf. the references given above, notes 22, 24.

⁴⁹ Al-Malaṭī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, S. Dederig, ed. (Istanbul, 1937), 72f.

to regulate production by tying it to the state, whereas pre-modern communism only affects consumption and seeks to banish wealth rather than to “socialize” it, seeing wealth as a source of moral corruption.⁵⁰ But Durkheim’s claim that pre-modern communism never concerned itself with production is wrong, as the Zarādushtī example shows; and though he is right that the fundamental difference between modern and pre-modern communism lies in the different relationships which they envisage between state and production, this merely goes to show that they are communist creeds tailored to different types of states, not that they (or for that matter the states) belong to fundamentally different genera. Since pre-modern states did not take an interest in production as such, it stands to reason that pre-modern communism should have been prescribed for rulers who did not produce (as in Plato and his many imitators) or for producers whose economic organization was not perceived as relevant to the rulers (as in Mazdakism). By contrast, all modern states concern themselves intensely with production; and all modern political programmes envisage “a more or less complete connection of all economic functions or of certain of them. . . with the direction and knowing organs of society,” not just communism/socialism as Durkheim maintains.⁵¹ What singles out communism/socialism from other modern programmes is its recommendation of collectivization. This must clearly be accepted as the diagnostic feature of the genus, though Durkheim refused to admit it.⁵²

Some might put the two objections together and argue that redistribution along equitable lines is impossible to achieve without state ownership and that accordingly doctrines which sponsor the one without the other can only be classified as proto-communist at best. But equitable distribution cannot be achieved with state ownership either, and it would be absurd to include practicability in the definition of communism. One might as well build it into that of millenarianism and other utopian ideas. In general, the manifestations of communism with which we happen to be familiar have no greater claim to archetypal status than the rest. Pre-modern communism invariably looks more naïve than its modern counterpart, and so no doubt it was; but cities were cities before the invention of skyscrapers; smoke signals were a means of long-distance communication even though they were not faxes; and communism was communist long before the appearance of Marx.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT?

Kavād’s communism has long been interpreted as an anti-noble measure, and this is undoubtedly correct. Sasanian history is dominated by royal attempts to centralize power, among other things in response to competition with Byzantium, with which the Sasanians were almost constantly at war.⁵³ Kavād, who

⁵⁰ E. Durkheim, *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, C. Sattler, tr., and A. W. Gouldner, ed. (London, 1959), ch. 2.

⁵¹ Durkheim, *Socialism*, 21.

⁵² As he sees it, it has contributed most to the confusion (Durkheim, *Socialism*, 35).

⁵³ Cf. Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 50 and notes 212–20 thereto.

depended on the nobility for military and political services without which his empire would have collapsed, was not in a position forcibly to oust or shear it of its wealth; and he made no attempt to confiscate aristocratic lands or to abolish their hereditary transmission, as has been seen. But communal access to women, promoted in the name of the Zoroastrian faith to which practically all Iranian nobles were committed, offered a seemingly simple way of curtailing the power of the nobility in that it undermined the exclusivity of their lineages, which were sealed off from the rest of the community by endogamous or even incestuous marriages.⁵⁴ Communal access to women destroyed the mystique of noble blood, thus placing a question mark over the political entitlements with which such blood had been associated. What the enemies of the Zarādushtīs found particularly objectionable about *ibāḥat al-nisāʾ* was precisely that it obliterated hereditary ranking. It worked by “obscuring the descent of every individual,” a Zoroastrian book complains.⁵⁵ “Genealogies were mixed,” “base people of all sorts mixed with people of noble blood,” we are told with reference to Mazdak’s revolt.⁵⁶ “If people have women and property in common, how can they know their children and establish their genealogies?,” a Zoroastrian priest is said to have asked.⁵⁷ Besides, a peasant could hardly feel the proper awe and respect for an aristocrat if he had slept with his wife. But simple though the solution looked in theory, it unsurprisingly failed to work in practice; and Kavād would hardly have played around with so outrageous an idea if he had not been a very young man at the time: He was twelve or fifteen when he was raised to the throne or, at any rate, a minor (some dissenting voices notwithstanding) and thus in his early twenties when he was dethroned for his experiment.⁵⁸ But unconventional though it was, the experiment undoubtedly formed part of the protracted efforts of the Sasanian emperors to centralize the Sasanian state.

This brings us to Mazdak and his peasant revolt. We may begin by noting that the succession to Kavād was disputed. When Khusraw acceded, his older brother, Kāʾūs, laid claim to the throne and staged a revolt while others plotted to overthrow him in favour of one of his nephews.⁵⁹ Kavād’s death was thus followed by a disarray at the centre which made it possible for peasants to take action. Given that peasants always have reasons to rebel, it might be argued that this explanation suffices, but it is clear that additional factors were at work. Modern communists find them in the supposed erosion

⁵⁴ Cf. above, note 2. Modern Zoroastrians explain away the institution of close-kin marriage by blaming it on Mazdak! (Christensen, *L’Iran*, 325).

⁵⁵ Shaki, “Social Doctrine,” 291f; Molé, “Sectes,” 24f (both citing the *Dēnkard*).

⁵⁶ Maqdisī, *Badʾ*, vol. III: 168 [171]; Tabarī, *Taʾrikh*, ser. i, 893, in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 154.

⁵⁷ Al-Thʿālībī, *Ghurur akhbār mulūk al-furs wa-siyarihim*, H. Zotenberg, ed. and tr. (Paris, 1900), 602; cf. Nizām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme*, M. Qazvīnī and M. Modarressi Chahārdehī, eds. (Tehran, 1956), 203, in id., *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, H. Darke, tr. (London, 1960), 202f.

⁵⁸ See the references in Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” notes 210–11.

⁵⁹ Cf. Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy,” 32 and notes 244–5, 250 thereto.

of village communalism by the forces of feudalism,⁶⁰ but we do not know anything about village communalism in ancient Iran. Thus, this explanation rests on an a priori conviction that it must have existed in conjunction with Mazdak's statement that people should be partners in land and women as they are in water, fire, and pasture.⁶¹ This does indeed sound like an invocation of village practices, but the fact that Mazdak illustrated his ideas with reference to such practices does not of course mean that he was motivated by threats to them: The pre-modern communists who illustrated their ideas with reference to the communality of sunshine did not thereby mean to imply that sunshine was in danger of privatization.⁶²

It seems more likely that Mazdak's revolt was triggered by a fiscal reform. Kavād had begun a cadastral survey with an attendant tax reform which Khusraw was to complete. The reform involved a change from payment of a proportion of the harvest, presumably in kind, to payment of fixed taxes in cash; and this was the kind of change that could threaten the peasants' livelihood, partly because fixed taxes removed the guarantee that something would be left for the peasants themselves to eat and partly because taxes in cash forced the peasants to sell their crop, which they usually had to do immediately after the harvest because they lacked reserves. The sale of their crops would flood the market, causing prices to fall, so that they would find themselves unable to pay their taxes or to feed their families without ruinous loans from landlords or merchants. There are no complaints about taxes in cash in the sources, possibly because they are fragmentary in the extreme; but several passages tell us that the transition to fixed taxes was a source of hardship. The fiscal reform thus gives us a plausible cause of the revolt. The only problem is that most sources credit Kavād with merely initiating the cadastral survey, saying that Khusraw completed it and then instituted the reform. This would make the revolt come first. But it is likely that the reform was instituted piecemeal as the cadastral survey proceeded. In other words, both the survey and the reform were probably initiated by Kavād, who would undoubtedly have started work in Iraq; and several sources do in fact say that Kavād instituted the new tax system in Iraq, while others credit him with its initiation in Fars. If this is accepted, it is not surprising that the peasants of these regions rebelled under the leadership of a dissident priest as soon as an opportune moment presented itself in the form of a disputed succession.⁶³ Kavād's earlier attack on the nobility presumably also played a role, partly because his sponsorship of Zarāduštism must have assisted the diffusion of

⁶⁰ Klíma, *Mazdak*, 196; N. Pigulevskaya, *Les villes de l'état iranien aux époques parthes et sassanide* (Paris, 1963), 195, 209; F. Nomani, "Notes on the Origins and Development of Extra-Economic Obligations of Peasants in Iran, 300–1600 A.D.," *Iranian Studies*, IX (1976), 122f. Compare B. O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production* (Oxford, 1989), 145f.

⁶¹ See the reference given above, note 18.

⁶² Thus, for example, the Carpocratian treatise, below, note 79.

⁶³ For all this, see Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 30–34.

the heresy and partly because it is likely to have weakened aristocratic control of the peasants. That the revolt was a failure conforms to expectation.

HOW WAS THE HERESY BORN?

Zarādushtī communism was of the anarchic rather than the regimented type (represented above all by Plato);⁶⁴ and the vision has a strong primitivist ring to it. As regards women, the Zarādushtīs hoped to achieve the organization imputed by Herodotus to the Agathyrsoi, who “have their women in common so that all may be brothers and, as members of a single family, be able to live together without jealousy and hatred.”⁶⁵ As regards property, the Zarādushtīs envisaged society along the lines of Trogus’ aboriginal Italians, among whom “all things belonged to all in common and undivided, as if all men had one patrimony.”⁶⁶ But was there a primitivist streak in Zoroastrianism? The Iranians are not known to have idealized barbarians or routinely to have credited them with communist organization after the fashion of the Greeks.⁶⁷ Nor is it possible to demonstrate that they had a myth of primordial freedom and equality: The first king on earth is a culture hero whose institution of kingship and other appurtenances of civilization is applauded without any indication that inequality and oppression were the other side of the coin.⁶⁸ Given the fragmentary nature of the sources, however, it cannot be inferred that no such myth existed; and it is tempting to see a reference to one in the Zarādushtī claim that God had created all men alike and allowed the sons of Adam to inherit the earth equally.⁶⁹ This is admittedly formulated in Islamic language, but the fact that golden age myths postulating aboriginal absence of private property and pair bonding crop up on both the Greek and the Indian sides of the fence suggests that such ideas were part of a common Indo-European legacy.⁷⁰ It surely cannot be accidental that Greece, Iran, and India alike produced thinkers who rejected private property and pair bonding while at the same time sponsoring vegetarianism and pacifism, though only the Greeks and the Iranians considered the possibility of collectivizing women and wealth, the Indian solution always being to renounce them.

⁶⁴ I owe this useful distinction to M. Schofield, “Communism in Plato and the Stoics,” an unpublished paper submitted to the conference on pre-modern communism (Cambridge, 1992).

⁶⁵ Herodotus, *Histories*, IV: 104. The translation is A. de Selincourt’s.

⁶⁶ Pompeius Trogus (first century A.D.) in A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), 67.

⁶⁷ Cf. Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism*; J. Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World* (London, 1975), 19f.

⁶⁸ Cf. A. Christensen, *Les types du premier homme et du premier roi*, part i (Stockholm, 1917), 145ff, on Hōshang.

⁶⁹ Above, note 17; Malaṭī, *Tanbih*, 72; cf. also Ibn al-Balkhī, *Fārsnāme*, 84; Nizām al-Mulk, *Siyāsatnāme*, 197 [197]. For the Iranian Adam (Gayōmard), see Christensen, *Premier homme*, 41ff.

⁷⁰ The evidence is assembled in Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism*. To the section on India (by Dumont), add W. Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley, 1976), ch. 2.

There are however three additional features to consider on the Iranian side. First, Herodotus claims that among the Massagetes, an Iranian tribe, "each man marries a wife, but the wives are common to all . . . when a man desires a woman, he hangs a quiver before her waggon."⁷¹ This description suggests that what the Greeks took to be communism of women among the Massagetes was in fact polyandry, that is, the institution whereby a number of men share one wife (or one woman has a plurality of husbands). Whether this could account for the imputations of communism to other Iranian pastoralists is less clear.⁷² In any event, the institution is associated with matrilineal organization; and references to both polyandry and matrilineal organization crop up again in connection with the Khurramīs.⁷³ It is thus tempting to speculate that familiarity with polyandry lay behind the ease with which the Zarāduštīs could envisage general sharing of women. But this is highly conjectural.

Secondly and more importantly, however, whether polyandry was practised in ancient Iran or not, there certainly was another institution of wife sharing. Zoroastrianism sanctioned a variety of arrangements designed to procure male heirs for those who lacked them.⁷⁴ Usually the men in question had died without male issue, but they might also be alive; and two of the arrangements designed for these situations amounted to wife lending. A man could give his wife to another man with a view to procuring heirs for himself ("rent an inseminator"). He would retain his guardianship over his wife, in addition to his rights to any children she might bear; and the arrangement would come to an end when a son was born or when the term specified in the agreement expired.⁷⁵ Apparently he could also lend her to another man, so that the latter could procure sons ("lend a womb"), though this is more contentious.⁷⁶ Both institutions, which are sometimes subsumed under the label of interim marriage, counted as charitable. The Zarāduštī idea that women should be shared would thus appear to be a generalized version of a charitable institution rooted in Zoroastrianism itself⁷⁷; and its origins in this institution would

⁷¹ Herodotus, *Histories*, I: 216 (the translation is Godley's).

⁷² As seen already, Herodotus also imputes it to the Agathyrsoi, presumably an offshoot of the Scythians (above, note 65); and Herodotus knew that others attributed it to the Scythians themselves, though he himself did not believe it: "The Greeks say that this is a Scythian custom; it is not so, but a custom of the Massagetae" (*Histories*, I: 216). His correction notwithstanding, later authors continued to present the Scythians as communists, usually in respect of women and property alike (Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism*, 288f, 315n, 327, cf. 328), but it seems unlikely that there was more to it than an initial mistake and continued romanticism.

⁷³ Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 25 and notes 112–17 thereto.

⁷⁴ Cf. A. Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III: 2, 649f, 653ff.

⁷⁵ Perikhanian, "Iranian Law and Society," 650; compare M. Shaki, "The Sassanian Matrimonial Relations," *Archiv Orientální*, xxxix (1971), 330f.

⁷⁶ C. Bartholomae, "Zum sasanidischen Recht, I," *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie* (1918), 29f, 36ff; disputed by Shaki, "Matrimonial Relations," 324f, but not convincingly (cf. Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 25 and note 103 thereto).

⁷⁷ Thus already Christensen, *L'Iran*, 329f, 344f.

explain why it combined communal access to woman with continued subordination of women: When the Greeks and the Indians thought away pair bonding, they tended to think away male control of women too.⁷⁸

Thirdly, a good case can be made for the view that the Gnosticism prevalent in Sasanian Iraq acted as a catalyst in the formulation of the creed. Some scholars would have it that Zarādusht actually got his ideas from the Gnostics who go under the (probably mistaken) name of Carpocratians and who believed in sharing wives and property too⁷⁹; but though the parallel is certainly striking, this is implausible. There is no evidence for this particular brand of Gnosticism in Iraq, let alone further east; and modern attempts to have Zarādusht visit the Roman empire (under the name of Bundos) in order to pick up Carpocratian ideas (or other Greco-Roman thought) are wholly unconvincing.⁸⁰ But Carpocratians aside, Iraq was full of Gnostics; and though the supposition that Zarādusht was active in Iraq is conjectural, Gnosticism was certainly a factor in Mazdak's thought, as is clear from a cosmological fragment of his preserved by a Muslim heresiographer.⁸¹ Gnosticism was well placed to act as a catalyst in that it concerned itself with man's original state; had unconventional views on the relations between the sexes; was fundamentally subversive and last, but not least, rejected the things of this world, which is precisely what Zoroastrianism and its Zarādushtī offshoot did not.⁸² The Zarādushtī claim that women and wealth are the chief causes of human unhappiness was a Gnostic commonplace, as was the view that war and bloodshed should be avoided. But the Gnostic solution (like that of the Indians) was renunciatory: Women, wealth, war, and eating meat had to be given up so that mankind might liberate itself from matter. By contrast, the Zarādushtī solution was life-affirming: War and eating meat were indeed to be given up, but not because they entangled man in matter, only because nobody was allowed to inflict damage on other living beings, life in the here and now being good; and women and wealth were not to be renounced but on the contrary to be

⁷⁸ The Zarādushtīs have also been presented as female liberators (Pigulevskaja, *Villes*, 200; Klīma, *Mazdak*, 186), but this is certainly mistaken (cf. Shaki, "Social Doctrine," 301ff).

⁷⁹ Klīma, *Mazdak*, 209ff (but he later changed his mind, cf. Klīma, *Beiträge*, 129, n. 20); Carratelli, "Doctrines sociales de Bundos et Mazdak," 288ff; Yarshater, "Mazdakism," 1020. Klīma helpfully translates Clement of Alexandria's extract from the Carpocratian treatise "On Justice," of which there is also an English summary in N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1984; first published 1957), 189f. Cohn asserts that the treatise is probably not of Gnostic origin, with reference to H. Kraft, "Gab es einen Gnostiker Karpokrates?," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 8 (1952); but Kraft does not deny the Gnostic origins of the treatise, only the existence of a Gnostic sect by the name of Carpocratians.

⁸⁰ Cf. Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 28.

⁸¹ Shahrastānī, *Milal*, 193f, in vol. 1, 291ff; cf. H. Halm, "Die Sieben und die Zwölf. Die ismā'īlītische Kosmogonie und das Mazdak-Fragment des Šahrastānī," in *XVIII. Deutscher Orientalistentag*, W. Voigt, ed. (Wiesbaden, 1974); Shaki, "Cosmogonical and Cosmological Teachings."

⁸² That Zarādushtism was an offshoot of Zoroastrianism rather than Manichaeism should no longer need to be stressed, though Christensen's mistaken ideas to the contrary still have not been flushed out of the secondary literature (cf. Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," 26ff).

shared, enjoyment of the here and now (in the right measure) being part of the struggle against evil. Zarāduštism could be characterized as Gnostic thought in a life-affirming spirit, and this is so odd a phenomenon that some scholars have trouble accepting it.⁸³ But whatever else may be said about Zarāduštism, run-of-the mill it was not. The key to its oddity seems to lie in the fact that it was a Zoroastrian answer to Gnosticism.

⁸³ Cf. above, note 40. That it is the presence of Gnostic ideas in Khurramism which causes some to present them as ascetics is particularly clear in Duchesne-Guillemin.