

## The Holiness of “Rooster” in Mithraism

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**Abstract:** According to the myths, the rooster was among the first birds, which was introduced to the Iranians by Keyumars, and stayed with the human forever. Since the beginning of domestication, and then at the peak time of the Mithraism among the Aryans, the rooster had holiness, and venerability. It was the partner of Sraosha Yazata, Mithra Yazata, and the Sun, and helped them in repulsing the Satan, demons, and elves. One can find its holiness and cooperation with the Sun and Mithra, in the Greek and Iranian myths. In the Zoroastrian religious books, rooster is one of the holy and good-created creatures of Ahura Mazda. Therefore, among the Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik people, the rooster, owned holiness. Therefore, in the works discovered, in the settlements and myths, one can find the relationship of the rooster with their religion and rituals, because, in the past, the rooster’s vigil and crow at dawns used to be like a warning or alert for the Aryan people. With its crow, people used to get up in the morning and started working, and it was known as the power of gods. The holiness and venerability of the rooster, stayed among the people after Islam as well.

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### 1. Introduction

From the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, the scientists started investigating on people’s beliefs. It’s been emphasized that there have been fictions, myths, and legends about the creation and the role of animals in the ancient people’s life, which have been left among them. The Aryan people believed that, the animals had relationship with the universe, and owned special characteristics. In fact, the animals were the symbol of the gods, and their fellows and assistants. They existed in the daily life of the people and owned specific characteristics. One of the holy animals for the Aryans is the rooster. It is among the best and the first birds, which became the human’s companion, and stayed with the human until the end of his life. In the religious Zoroastrian books and the Iranian Myths, the rooster is one of the Ahura Mazda’s good-created birds. This bird is the Sraosha Yazata’s assistant in accomplishing his affairs. Among the Tajik, and in the regions of Badakhshan and Sogd, the rooster is a good symbol of life. In the works, discovered from different places, where have been the Aryans’ settlements from the Middle Asian to Iran and Europe, one can find the holiness and the relationship of the rooster, with the religion and rituals of that region. Even, nowadays, there is the holiness of the rooster in the legends, myths, and the beliefs and rituals of the people of these regions.

In this article, the researcher has tried to find the root and the reason of holiness and the venerability of the rooster with Mithraism, as well as the entrance of the rooster to the life and religion among the Aryans around the world.

### 1.1. The Root of the Word “Rooster”

In Avesta, the rooster is written as the Parodarsh (Paravdarš), which is composed of two parts of “Paroh” meaning “before”, and “Darash” meaning “to see” (Duchesne-Guillemin, Jacques (1988)). This religious word means to predicate, it means that it has seen the light of the day in advance and gives the tidings of its entrance (Duchesne-Guillemin, Jacques (1988)). There is the word of “Khavaros” in Avesta as well, the Persian rooster is from the same material meaning to “shout” and “cry”. The words “Khoros” and “Khorosh” are the same and the letter “s” has turned into “sh.” Since the rooster cried and shouted, it was named as “khoros. (Duchesne-Guillemin, Jacques (1988).” Another name for rooster is “kahrkatas,” this word is onomatopoeia, like “rooster-a-doodle-doo” which is used in most of the European languages with small differences for the sound of the rooster (crow). In Gilan province, the rooster is named as “Garaktas;” however, in Avesta it is written that the sharp-tongued people names “paravdarš” as “Garaktas”( Kavasji Edulji Kanga.1900). In the Middle Asia, in the Badakhshan province in Tajikistan, the rooster is called “chookh” and the poultry “Chakh” in the Shoghani and Roshani languages. Moreover, in the region of Vakhan, the rooster is called “Ma’ak” and the poultry is called “Gahark.” this last word, is much similar to the Avestan word “Kahrkatas.”

### 2.1. The Holiness of the Rooster

The rooster has been with the human until the end of his life, and it has been regarded very holy and significant among the Aryan people. How did it enter the human’s life, and get domesticated? What is the reason for its holiness? A story about the entrance of

the rooster among the Aryans in the period of Keyumars (the first Pishdadian King) has been quoted in the Balami History. "It was the time for the Fajr prayer. Keyumars saw a white rooster. It stood in the middle of the way, and the poultry (hen and chickens) were behind it. A snake came to the rooster, and the rooster attacked it, and every time that it hit the snake, it crowed beautifully. Keyumars enjoyed it, and said "among the birds, it is a weird bird. It is so kind to its mate that keeps it away, and fights well. It is very close to the nature of people." Therefore, Keyumars killed the snake, and took the rooster and the hen for his kids and asked them "be kind to them (Abolqasem Ferdowsi.2007). The domestication of the poultry and the rooster at the Keyumars time by the Aryan people does not seem right, because the rooster and the poultry got domesticated in the later periods (Tahmuras). It is stated in Shahnameh (the Epic of Kings) that Tahmuras showed the rooster and the poultry to the people and learned the way to use them.

When he did it with the poultry and rooster

*It wasn't necessary to drum  
He took them to the people  
And found a lot of benefits*

About the holiness of the rooster in Shahnameh, it is written that Tahmuras advised people to praise the rooster.

*He asked to praise it  
And worship the Demiurge*

Witzel Michael (2001) talks about the holiness of the rooster among the Aryan people. The narration of Shahnameh indicates that the rooster was worshiped by Aryans. In the remote villages of Gilan, if one wants to attribute pessimism to someone, he is called "Sokoleh Mazhab", and Sokoleh means rooster in those regions. Therefore, the holiness and venerability of the rooster as well as the way it entered among the Aryan people are seen in the Aryans' myths and legends. As an example, the people of Berit in the south of Siberia have a story about the domestication of the rooster: Rooster is a wild bird at the beginning, and the hunter took it home, and cut its wings, so that it cannot fly. The roosters set a meeting in the jungle, to song sings at dawns and asked for their wings. They continued singing in the middle and at the end of the day, unless they could regain their wings. Therefore, a rooster sings five times a day. The Russian ethnologist, V. Piscov, has written in one of his books: there was a belief that a rooster raises a stone in his body, and does not drink water. That stone gets complete after seven years, and the rooster throws it out, like an egg. Everyone, who finds this egg, and keeps with him, he will be safe and secure from the harm. This stone used to give the youth force to the oldsters. It is interesting to know that a person named Alishir, in Dushanbeh, proved this story.

He said that he has seen a rooster who was throwing out a stone. In Badakhshan, the rooster is the symbol of a good life. They believe that a rooster arouses the man at the dawn and makes him say his prayer and start working. If the man starts working in the dawn, he can finish it up to the sunset (Shadykhan. Joseph. Beikof). In a story, the reason for holiness of the rooster for the people of Badakhshan has been stated in this way: the residents of Bartang (Sariz, Dorom, Yarekh, and Shiveh) became very rich, and proud, and except one old woman, the others were buried under the mountain, and just that old woman, survived with her rooster, and sewing machine. It shows that that object and the rooster were sacred. Belief in divination and astronomy from the crow is highly frequent among the people of that region. For example, if on Sunday, the rooster crows untimely, the owner of the house will have children. Furthermore, the game of rooster fighting (game-rooster) is very frequent in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. Based on the belief, the people of North of Afghanistan call the rooster as the *Morgh-e-Parsa* (the Virtuous Bird) because it is always praying God. At the time of Faji Athan, it crows "o' people get up, Reminisce God, Thank God for his blessings, to be safe from the fire of the Hell".

### 3.1. The White Rooster in the Aryan's religion

It gets clear that the holiness of the rooster has been existed since from the ancient time among the Aryan people, and it has remained as the stories in the myths and the legends, and has become a part of their religion. When the Aryans separated and immigrated, each tribe took the religions and beliefs to the new country. As the result of combining their beliefs and rituals with the rituals of the natives and the geographical situation of the new place, there were some changes in their myths and beliefs, but the origin and the similarities of their beliefs remained. In the Greek myths there is a story about the creation and the cooperation of the rooster with gods: "Mars spend one night with Venus, in the absence of his wife, Volkan. Elektra (in Greek, means the rooster) was chosen as the night watchman. But Elektra went to sleep, and the Venus' husband came back. Therefore, in order to punish Elektra, Mars turned Elektra into a rooster. Since then he is awake, and watchful at the dawn (Sarkhosh-Curtis.V. (1993). The cooperation of the white rooster with the gods, in fighting with darkness and demons, existed in the Aryans' myths, and beliefs. Emerging and spreading the Mithraism among the Aryans, (probably from the of Fereydun Pishdadi era), the venerability and holiness of the rooster entered the Mithraism and the rooster became the assistant of the Mithra, and Sraosha. Among the works left in the Afshins Palace in Bungakiyon in Tajikistan, there is a semicircle wooden carved portal, on which the story of Kaveh and Zakhak fight has been carved. In the middle

part of the portal, there is a picture of two crested birds with whom, two men are riding. May be those two birds are the symbol of roosters that assist the Mithra, and Sraosha to fight with demons, and Satan (Zahhak) (Fig. 1).



**Fig 1:** the symbol of roosters that assist the Mithra, and Sraosha to fight with demons, and Satan

It was probably an ancient belief in the Middle East. Because the people of Badakhshan, believe that the rooster is equal with the phoenix and Huma, and they believed that these birds would bring them fortune and prosperity, and they believed in some miracles about them (Shadykhan. Joseph). Moreover, among the Iranian, Greek, and Middle Asian myths, one can find the relationship and assistance of the rooster, Sun, and Mithra. The Greeks believe that, the rooster is the holy animal of “Apollo” the god of the Sun, and later it connected to “Asclepius” the god of treatment and the Apollo’s son, through Cronus. This connection with Asclepius and treatment was the result of the Rooster’s connection with the Sun and the life-giving powers and its enmity with the force of blackness and darkness. In the book of “Phaidōn”, Plato wrote that, before drinking the hemlock cup, the Socrates asked the others to denote the rooster in his favor to Asclepius (Doty, William.2004). Then, by the emergence of Zoroastrian, in Iran, and the Middle Asia, the holy elements of the ancient religion, entered the new religion. As a result, in the Zoroastrian, the holiness and venerability of the rooster remained. Killing the rooster is banned in the Avesta, and having its meat is a taboo (Gray Louis Herbert [ed.]. 1916). In the religious books and contexts, and Iranian myths, there are some stories about the cooperation of rooster with the gods in fighting against darkness, demons, and magicians. The rooster is the representative and broker of Yazata (god), the wakeful of Sraosha Yazata on the earth. At the dawn, it cries and calls on people to get up and worship God and it gives the tidings of finishing the dark night, and respiring the light morning. In Vandid, Fargard 18, paragraph 14-28, about the holiness and venerability of the rooster is written “Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda: 'Who is the Sraosha-varez of Sraosha? The holy, strong Sraosha, who is Obedience incarnate, a

Sovereign with an astounding weapon.' Ahura Mazda answered: 'It is the bird named Parodarsh, which ill-speaking people call Kahrkatas, O holy Zarathushtra! The bird that lifts up his voice against the mighty Ushah: "Arise, O men! Recite the Ashem yad vahistem that smites down the Daevas(Kellens, Jean (1983). Abu Reyhan Birooni, talks about the cooperation and vigilance of the rooster and the Sraosha Yazata in “A’sar al Baqieh”: “the seventeenth day of the month which is known as the Sraosha Day, in the blessed day in all the months. The first Sraosha is the one who ordered people to whisper, he is the responsible for the night watching, he is called Gabriel as well. Among the angels, he is the most intensive in comparison with fairies. He orders the rooster to crow (birooni Aboureihan .1972). In his book, Pamir of the Aryans country, Abu Saeed Khan Komarov, writes about the holiness of the rooster: “the rooster is like the god’s song for the followers of Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. It awakes people with its song so that they serve God, and it used to be a holy animal (Shadykhan. Joseph. Beikof).

#### 4.1. The Role (Responsibility) of the Rooster

As it was mentioned before, the rooster cooperates with the Yazatas (Sraosha, Sun, and Mithra). What is the job and responsibility of the rooster? How are the relationship and cooperation between the rooster and the gods? One of the responsibilities of the Yazatas (the angels), is fighting with Ahriman and his demons. With the mace, Mithra fights against the Ahriman and his demons. In Khordeh Avesta, about the in the Litany to the Sun, paragraphs 12-15, about the fight between Mithra, the Sun and the demons, it is written that “When the Sun rises up, purification comes to the earth, Waters, If indeed the Sun were not to rise, then the devas would kill all things that are in the seven regions..... I shall sacrifice to Mithra of wide cattle pastures, who has a thousand ears, ten thousand eyes. I shall sacrifice to his mace, well aimed against the skulls of the Devas, Mithra of wide cattle pastures. And I shall sacrifice to that friendship which is the best of friendships, that between the Moon and the Sun (Kellens, Jean (1983). There are other Yazatas in this fight with Ahriman and his demons. The Moon and the Sraosha help the Sun and Mithra. The Sraosha Yazata is always awake like the Mithras Yazata. He never goes to sleep and guards the whole world as well as all the Ahura Mazda creatures with his mace, after the sunset. Mithras, in his four-wheeled golden chariot keeps the Ahriman and his demons away from Mazda and his creatures (Kellens, Jean (1983).

Especially (the white rooster) is the companion and the agent of Sraosha on the earth, and assists the Yazatas in fighting against Ahriman and his demons. About, the fight of rooster with demons, in *Tarikh-e-Balami*, it is written that: “the rooster and its song are

good and auspicious for the Ajam (Iranians), especially the white rooster, because the demons do not enter the house, where one white rooster is kept (öTabarâi, Muöhammad Taqâi Bahâar, Abâu Alâi Muöhammad ibn Muöhammad Bal°amâi.2001). In “Bundahishn,” chapter nine, about the rooster’s assistant with Yazatas, in fighting against demons and Ahriman, it is written that “the rooster is created to fight Ahriman and his demons (Boyce, Mary (1968). The Russian orientalist, Evgeny Edvardovich Berthels, talks about the roosters and says “in Zoroastrianism, the rooster is the fellow traveler of Sraosha (the faculty of good), and its crow scared the faculty of evil and the demons.

### 5.1. Such a belief existed among the other Aryan people.

And these imaginations existed among Slovaks, who believed that the rooster’s crow scares the Ahriman and his demons and the rooster is always the companion of Sraosha. According to the Lezgian people in the Caucasus, the hen and the rooster have always been the human guard from demons and elves, and they are afraid of the rooster’s crow. Among the people of Middle Asia, there was a belief based on the human protection from the demons and elves by the rooster. Therefore, in the long past, in the regions of Badakhshan, Soghd, and Kharazm, the sacrifice ritual of the rooster was common in both Norouz, and mourning, which is related to the Mithraism in these regions. Komarov believes that sacrificing the rooster in mourning rituals was customary since from the Siavash era, and on the day of Norouz celebration, people went to the cemetery, on the Siavash tombstone and sacrificed the rooster, at the dawn. Moreover, among the people of Bukhara, and Kharazm, it was common to sacrifice the rooster at the dawn on the Norouz Day. Entering Islam in Iran, and the Middle East, the holiness and venerability of the rooster, its role in fighting against demons, and all the beliefs related to it, remained among the people, and entered as a new religion. On the position of the white rooster in the seventh heaven, and its assistance with Gabriel, in sending away the demons, and visiting the Prophet on the night of *Meraj*, in the book of “*Hayat Al Hayavan*” (The Life of Animal), Damiri, the Egypt Publishing, it is written that: “The Islam Prophet says so: “that I saw a bird in the fourth Heaven, more white than ivory, similar to a rooster, and its foot was on the seventh floor of the ground, and I saw its head, under the seventh of the Heaven. One side of it was on the East, and the other on the West, and I asked Gabriel, if he knows the name of such a big bird? Gabriel told me: it is the white rooster, and the Almighty God has created it in this way. And it opens its wings every night until the dawn, and crows. The entire rooster hears its crow, and they crow as well. And said, wherever there is a white rooster, the magician is neutral on the members

of that family in that house, and the demons are away from there (Sarkhosh-Curtis.V. (1993).” Yet, another responsibility of the Mithra, and Sroasha Yazatas, was the companionship of the human after the death in the Other World, and assisting the dead man on the Chinuat Bridge. Therefore, the rooster that was regarded as these two Yazatas colleagues, assists the dead person, and keeps the Ahriman and the demons from him and his family. This belief remained among the people after Islam, as well. In the village of Badakhshan Mountain, before doing the ritual of the bright light, three days after the funeral around the sunset, the villagers sacrifice the rooster, and believe that by killing the rooster and pouring its blood, the house of sadness gets clean of the infection, because since that time, the dead soul was at home, and the elves and the demons did not leave the house. Then the villagers used to boil the offered rooster, and throw its body out of the house, and throw the water on the four columns, so that the dead soul, as well as the elves, and the demons leave the house. In the village of Vakhsh Badakhshan, if someone dies, the rooster is sacrificed in the houses of his relatives. Sacrificing the rooster or hen, at the beginning of the month of Safar, is customary for eliminating the evil among the people of Iran and the Middle Asia. In the village of Nahidi (Roshan), if someone dies in the month of Safar, first, a rooster is placed in his grave, and brought out, then it is sacrificed, so that the malevolent way, and the relatives’ death are blocked. In the past, the Ishmaelites of Badakhshan, sacrificed a rooster at the dawn, on the third day of the funeral, when the relatives came back from the cemetery. Then some women, washed the close relatives of the deceased, and bring them out of sorrow (Shadykhan. Joseph. Beikof). During the Achaemenids, the holiness of the rooster existed among Iranians as well. The rooster was the symbol of army like the eagle, and Falcon. Since from the Artaxerxes II, Plutarch writes, when the Cyrus the Younger (the brother of the Artaxerxes II) murdered one of the men of Karia, the Artaxerxes rewarded him a golden rooster, so that he hanged it on the top of his spear when he went to the battlefield. The Iranians named the Karia warriors, who had, on the helmet a symbol of tumbleweed or rooster’s wing, “Khorosan” (the roosters) (Sarkhosh-Curtis. V., 1993). Among the Greeks, as well, one can find the holiness and venerability of the rooster. Zareh believes that *Derafsh (Banner)*, (the Battle of Alexander) and the available flag on the Achaemenid coins, is the Kavian *derafsh* (The Kavian Banner). The royal banners, which were used at the time of Xenophon (the Greek Commander-in-chief of the Cyrus the Younger) is in the form of a golden eagle with spread wings, which is installed on the spear, has the “golden bear” picture on it, and is placed in a frame. The Iranian princes, used to keep

their military banners as the sign of nationalist legitimacy, which were decorated with the image of the rooster, in the worship places of their residence. Dominating the Western world, and forming the great emperor of Rome, the Greeks entered all their cultural heritage, beliefs, and rituals Rome. By expanding the Mithraism, one can see the holiness of the rooster in the Roman Mithraism. In a Mithraic temple, near the church of Santa Prisca, situated on the Avantine Hill, in Rome, on a wall, on which the prominent image of the cow sacrifice ritual by Mithra. Yet, in a section, a man who is holding the tether of a white cow is seen and then a lion comes that is holding a white rooster. About this picture Martin Vermazeren, believes that “this man seems like a religious man who is holding his offering proudly, but humbly among the group.... The existence of the rooster is considerable in these images, and they are seen in the images on the lower floors of the temple both on the right and left sides.” Martin Vermazeren continues and says: “the rooster is the Iran’s bird, whose crow sends the Ahriman away, and is a holy and sacred animal in the Zoroastrianism. The white type of them has been gifted to Ahura Mazda, and Mithra.” I believe that this theory is not correct, because according to the issues explained, the holiness of rooster is not specialized to the people of Iran. The Holiness of the rooster has been existed among Iranians since the ancient time, and it has been remained in their myths, rituals, and beliefs. The Romans were the borrowers of the Greece ritual and culture. It is interesting to know that Martin Vermazeren writes in another part of his book “the Hippolyta’s opinion is significant since he believes that one should do the Baptism when the rooster is crowing, because as it was stated, the rooster’s crow can send the Satan away. The texts written on the walls of the temple confirms the above-mentioned issues, moreover, the dawn is regarded as the time for understanding the religious secrets (Zaehner, Richard Charles (1955). Spreading the Christianity in the West, the rituals and beliefs of Mithraism entered the new religion, including the holiness of the rooster. The Nazarene sect believes that the rooster crows at the dawn, and it is the sign of awakening, and consciousness.

## 2. Discussions

The rooster was among the first and the best birds that became the companion of the human, and stayed with him until the end of his life. Since from the beginning, it was regarded as the holy bird in the Aryans religion and ritual. The rooster’s vigil and crow at the dawn, was like a warning to the ancient people. In fact, it was a live clock. People got up with its crow,

and started working, and believed that it is the gods’ power. Separating from each other, and immigrating to the other countries, the Aryan people took their beliefs and rituals to the new countries and gradually they combined the beliefs with theirs. As a result, the common stories and narration about the holiness and venerability of the rooster have been left around the world from East to West. Emerging the new religion among people, the deep beliefs and rituals have gradually entered the new religion, so one can see the holiness and companionship of the rooster with Yazatas in Mithraism. Therefore, emerging the Christianity in the West and Islam in East, the sacred position of the rooster did not decrease and it remained as a lovely and venerable bird among people.

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