

## KING HUVIŠKA, YIMA, AND THE BIRD: OBSERVATIONS ON A PARADISIACAL STATE<sup>1\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the significance of the unique gold coin of the Kushan king, Huviška. The legend on the coin reads Imšao which recalls the ancient Indo-Iranian mythic figure, Yima/Yama. It is contended that the reason for which Yima/Yama is portrayed on the coin with a bird on his hand is not the idea of Glory and his reign, but rather the paradisaical state according to the *Widēwdād*, where Yima/Yama ruled over the world. It is contended that Huviška aimed at presenting himself in this manner to his subjects who were familiar with the Avestan and mythic Indo-Iranian lore.

**Key words:** Imšao, Huviška, Kushan, Karšiptar, Yima, Yama.

In 1984 Robert Göbl, in his study of the coinage of the Kushan Empire, published a unique gold coin of king Huviška.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, Frantz Grenet published a major article laying out the importance of this coin for king Huviška's religious ideology.<sup>3</sup> This specific coin depicts a standing male figure wearing a sword around his waist and donning a tiara decorated with a ribbon. The figure also holds a spear in his left hand while a bird is shown sitting on his outstretched right hand. Although the legend on the coin is quite clear and readable, the coin and the study of the iconographic representations on it have proven to be quite challenging. In this article it is argued that the standing figure and the bird depicted on the reverse of the coin represents king Yima, the mythological Iranian ruler. We have also argued that the bird on his hand, unlike most cases, is not a falcon, but a lark or *čakāvak*.

In most of Huvishka's coinage, on the obverse, we have the bust of the king<sup>4</sup> and the legend reads: *Šaonanošao Oohški Košano* "Of the King of Kings, Huviška the Kushan."

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<sup>2</sup> Göbl 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Grenet 1984.

<sup>4</sup> For Huviška's coinage, see Rosenfield 1967, 93.

While the obverse of his coins do not pose a great challenge, the reverse of Huviška's coin make it's reading unclear. It is suggested that the reverse of most of Huviška's coins depict a deity, a hypothesis that is strengthened by the legend found next to the figures on the reverse. The legends read the names of Indo-Iranian deity such as: Farr, Mithra, Nana, Veš, or a Hellenistic deity, namely Heracles. In this context it is then assumed that the image of the standing figure under discussion should also be interpreted as a deity.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the Bactrian legend on the reverse of the coin, one hypothesis is that it reads *Iamšo*, which Grenet believes to be an abbreviated spelling for *\*Iamo šao* "King Yama" similar to the Kafirian form for Yama, given as *Imrā* < *\*Yama rājā*. Humbach disagrees with this hypothesis, and suggests that *Iamšo* is a short form of *\*Iamšēdo* (Old Persian *\*yama xšhaita*, i.e. Jamšīd), harkening back to the Avestan Yima Xšaēta (Yima the Brilliant/Majestic).<sup>6</sup> While both of the above arguments are plausible, the overall reading and the representation of this type of coinage produced for king Huviška is not conclusive.



Fig. 1. Gold coin of Huriška

Two main hypotheses have been suggested for the meaning of the figure and legend on the reverse of this gold coin. On one hand, Grenet suggests that the bird on the hand of *Iamšo* is the Avestan falcon, *Vārəγna*, which is the corporeal form of the element of Glory, *xvarənah-* and also an avatar of the Avestan deity of offensive victory, *Vərəθraγna*.<sup>7</sup> He states that we should be mindful of *Yast XIX* of the Avesta where Yima lost his *Farr* or Glory to *Miθra*, *θraētaona*, and *Kərəsāspa*.<sup>8</sup> Grenet's suggestion fits well with his comparison of Kafir *Imra* (Yama rājā), which Fussman had once believed to be the third

<sup>5</sup> Shenkar 2015, 166–167.

<sup>6</sup> Humbach 2004, 68–69.

<sup>7</sup> Yasht (14.19) of the Avesta describes the transformation of *Vərəθraγna* as: "Ahura-created Werethraghna came driving to him in the form of a falcon, seizing from below (with his talons), crushing (?) from above (with his beak), who is the fastest of birds, the swiftest of those that fly forth" (Malandra 1983, 84).

<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth yasht of the Avesta it states that: "Then, when he (?) introduced falsehood to his mind, the Xwarenah, visibly in the form of a bird, went forth from him..." "First, the Xwarenah turned away from regal Yima, the Xwarenah went from Yima son of Wiwahwant in the form of a falcon..." Yt. 19.34, 5 (Malandra 1983, 91).

(beside the Indo-Iranian) view of Yama as a deity.<sup>9</sup> He concludes that as all of the reverse types of Huviška coinage show a deity, then we can conclude that Yima depicted on this specific coin must be a divinity as well.<sup>10</sup>

While Gnoli agrees that the figure portrays a king in an Iranian fashion, he disagrees with what he calls Grenet's "historical-religious inferences." This is because the standing figure is connected to the Iranian element of Glory in its most familiar animal shape that is a falcon which shows that the Kushans were familiar with the Avestan Yašts and its iconography. According to Gnoli, the main issue with Grenet's thesis is that he takes Yima to be the god of the world of the dead to who as a divinity sacrifice was made to prolong life, a role that is distinctly different from that of the Zoroastrian tradition.<sup>11</sup> Gnoli believes that in the Iranian world-view, Yima was never viewed as a divinity.<sup>12</sup> The question that rises here is how important Zoroastrianism was in the Kushan Empire. Here again Grenet and Gnoli have varied stances. While, Grenet believes that their version of Zoroastrianism was superficial, Gnoli very much disagrees and believes that coins could be deceiving for their larger meaning of the religious structure. He suggests that it is the Hellenic influence of the anthropomorphic representation of the deities that created a sort of confusion in the religious belief-system of the Kushans. We not only have Ahura Mazda, whom Gnoli aptly calls the Zoroastrian super-deity, but also other deities such as *Oado* (*Wād*), *Orlagno*, and *Šaornoro* (*Šahrēvar*) one of the Bounteous Immortals (*Aməša Spentas*).<sup>13</sup> For Gnoli the Kushan representation of these deities is closely and clearly related to the Zoroastrian tradition of the Avesta and the *Yašts*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Yima depicted on Huviška's coin is part of the late mytho-epic tradition of *Yima Xšaēta* encapsulated in the *Shahnameh* and cannot be a god of the underworld, because such a concept did not exist in the Iranian world-view. Gnoli concludes that since Huviška as part of the regal ideology favored various forms of iconographic representation of kingly Glory, it is not the figure of Yima himself that is central to the message conveyed through the coinage, but his possession of *Farr*.<sup>15</sup>

The Kushan *Iamšo* being the god of the underworld dating back to a pre-Zoroastrian tradition is possible as all the coins of Huviška portray a deity, but the importance of Yima may be more pronounced and for another reason which is in line with imperial ideology. Grenet suggests that Yima was the prototype deity of royalty associated with war.<sup>16</sup> However, there is another solution to the controversial reading of the figure on this coin. The first thing worth mentioning is that *Iamšo* was not a distant and insignificant figure in the region of Bactria. Whatever the association with *Iamšo*, we know that it was well-known to the late antique world of Balkh. Evidence such as Bactrian documents<sup>17</sup> and a seal published by Sims-William and Lerner,<sup>18</sup> suggest that the name of *Iamšo* and

<sup>9</sup> Fussman 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Gnoli 1989, 920.

<sup>11</sup> Gnoli 1989, 920.

<sup>12</sup> Gnoli 1989, 921.

<sup>13</sup> Gnoli 1989, 922.

<sup>14</sup> Gnoli 1989, 922.

<sup>15</sup> Gnoli 1989, 923.

<sup>16</sup> Grenet 2012, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Sims-Williams 2010, 167–172, 323, 504.

<sup>18</sup> Lerner/Sims-Williams 2011, 168.

Yima had been popular in that region. The Avestan and later Persianate lore of Yima together with the coinage of Huviška can also suggest another scenario.

Another interesting piece of evidence can be obtained from the chronology of King Huvishka's reign. Although the dating of Kushan coinage and the chronology of the Kushan Empire is a complicated affair (three hypothesis so far), it may be that Huvishka ruled from 155 to 190 CE.<sup>19</sup> King Huviška produced a large variation of coinage, mainly in gold which can point to the prosperity of the Kushan Empire during his reign. Royal propaganda and legitimation also played a central role in Huviška's royal ideology.<sup>20</sup> He was certainly an ambitious ruler who wanted to outdo his predecessor, Kaniška. This is clear from the number of coins produced during his rule. Based on his royal insignia, Bivar believes that Huviška was not a son, but rather a younger brother of Kaniška.<sup>21</sup> In favor of his legitimacy and sense of importance, Huviška must have wished to surpass the great Kaniška. This aim could have been achieved by minting gold coins with different religious themes in order to appeal to his diverse subjects, the Hindus, the Buddhists, and the Zoroastrians. We believe that what we are seeing on this unique coinage is part of the Iranian lore of Yima that had survived in the region. In fact the image of Yima was very much present in memory of the people of the region from the Avestan era to what Gnoli calls the "mytho-epic period." We should remind ourselves that Yima was the Iranian king *par excellence*, as he ruled over a place and time when a state of perfection existed for humanity. Yašt XIX.33 beautifully mentions this paradisiacal state:

*yeñhe xšathrāda  
nōiṭ aotəm āñha nōiṭ garəməm  
nōiṭ zauruua āñha nōiṭ mərəiθiiuš  
nōiṭ araskō daēuuō.dātō*

(Yima) under whose reign,  
There was neither cold nor heat,  
Neither old age nor death,  
Nor the envy created by the *daēvas* (demons/fallen deities).<sup>22</sup>

We think that this paradisiacal state is the aim of Iamšo coinage of Huviška who was trying to promote, harkening to a time of greatness, ease and lack of any hardship or disease<sup>23</sup> and a golden age under the almost perfect king. The continuation of the story of Yima's paradisiacal or golden age, when Yima ruled is not only well-known in the *Avesta*, but also lived onto the time of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, composed in Khurasan.<sup>24</sup> This shows that Yima lived not only in the religious memory of the people of this region, but also in the popular oral tradition. It is also worth noting that both the *Avesta* and the

<sup>19</sup> Samad 2011, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Huviška was succeeded by the last of the great Kushan rulers, Vasudeva, before the Sasanians destroyed their power and established the great Kušānshahs of the Sasanian dynasty (Frye 1984, 261).

<sup>21</sup> Bivar 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Humbach 2004, 69.

<sup>23</sup> However, there is also the probability that the catastrophic outbreak of smallpox in Rome in 166 CE which spread through trade lines to the east, also affected the Kushan Empire (Bivar 1970, 19–21) increasing the need for Huviška to project an image of himself as a ruler that can bring about a plague-less era for his subjects.

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive review of Yima, see Skjærvø 2012.

*Shahnameh* were composed in approximately the same geographical region as that of the Huvishka rule. This paradisiacal state of course takes place with Yima's building of the underground Vara- or enclosure which he rules over. As Jean Kellens has noted, Yima at the Vara- acts as the pastor of the living and the earth<sup>25</sup> and the artisan of the world.<sup>26</sup> Michael Shenkar has observed that the image of Iamšo on the coin matches most closely with the image of King Huviška.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Yima as the first king of the Iranian world,<sup>28</sup> and his lore as the greatest of kings was a model for our Kushan king.<sup>29</sup> This vita of Yima was probably what king Huviška wished to project as the living example in the Kushan Empire.

In a Middle Persian Zoroastrian text, *Mēnōg ī Xrad*, the *Vara-* is described as:

*war ī yimkard pad ērānwēz azēr zamīg ēwēnag ud tōm ī hamāg dām ud dahišn ī ohrmazd ī xwadāy az mardōm ud stōr ud gōspand ud wāyendag har čē wehtar ud (pad) wizēntar ō anōh burd ēstādēd.*

The enclosure made by Yima was in the home of the Aryas below the earth, and the genus and species of every creature and creation of Ohrmazd the lord, the best and most choice of men and horses and cattle and birds, each were brought there.<sup>30</sup>

This heavenly realm is “a world of perfection, a world without cares in many ways, a paradise.”<sup>31</sup> In fact in the Middle Persian translation of the Avestan *Wīdēwdād* (2.41) it is stated that in Yima's *Vara-* such a life existed: *Awēšān-iz mard nēk pad gyān ziwēnd [kū sad panjāh sal ziwēnd]* “those humans live the happiest life [they live one hundred and fifty years].”<sup>32</sup> It can be assumed that Huviška meant to highlight the heavenly and blissful characteristics of Yima's paradisiacal realm and to make his subjects view him in the same light. It is clear that in the Kushan realm the Avestan tradition was known and this coin clearly suggests such a tradition connected with Yima.<sup>33</sup> The recent work by Kuzmina, based on Viktor Sarianidi's excavations at Bactrian/Balkh cult centers such as Dashly III and Dzarkutan, may be models of our Avestan *Vara-*, is also of interest for this paper.<sup>34</sup> Also, Pyankov points to the importance of the mythological memory of Yima and his *Vara-* for the people of this region up until today.<sup>35</sup>

Another important depiction on the gold coin of Huviška is the image of the bird sitting on Yima's hand. If we accept the figure on this coin as Yima and that those who were exposed to this political propaganda were familiar with the Avestan story and the fate of Yima, then it would be safe to assume that associating the bird on this coin with the idea of Glory, that is *farr* or *xwarənah-* would not have been the best choice. The Iranian element of glory in the form of the falcon actually serves as an ill-omened element for Yima

<sup>25</sup> Kellens 1984, 278.

<sup>26</sup> Kellens 1984, 279.

<sup>27</sup> Shenkar 2015, 166.

<sup>28</sup> Shaked 1987, 240.

<sup>29</sup> Piras (forthcoming), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Lincoln 1981, 234.

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln 1981, 234.

<sup>32</sup> Moazami 2014, 66–67.

<sup>33</sup> Shenkar 2015, 167.

<sup>34</sup> Kuzmina 2007, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Pyankov 2002, 43–49.

who lost his Glory because of committing a sin. This part of the story of Yima could not have been a point of pride for Huviška's political aims.

Recent studies on the Indo-Iranian Yama/Yima have been helpful in improving our understanding of Yima in the Indo-Iranian and Kafiri tradition and can be useful in helping us see the bird on this coin in new light.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, *Vārəyna* or the falcon is not the only bird associated with Yima. Another mythical bird associated with the Vara- and with Yima is the mythical Avestan bird *Karšiptar* which makes its appearance in the *Wīdēwdād*, perhaps codified as late as the Parthian/Kushan era. *Karšiptar* is supposed to have brought the Zoroastrian religion to the Vara- of Yima. However, in the Middle Persian translation of the *Wīdēwdād* 2.42 Zarathushtra asks Ohrmazd:

*kē ō ānōh dēn māzdesnān be burd ō awēšān war mānišān jam kard, u-š guft Ohrmazd kū way karšift Spitāmān Zarduxšt [čaxrwāk ī pad axw ī mēnōgān abāz šawēd]*

Who brought the Mazdayasnian religion to these enclosures that Jam (Yima) made? Ohrmazd answered: "the bird *karšift*, O Spitama Zarathushtra! [that is, *čaxrwāk* who will return to the spiritual world]."<sup>37</sup>

Here we see that the *Karšiptar*<sup>38</sup> is also called *čaxrwāk*.<sup>39</sup> Redard in her excellent contribution studies the bird in the Iranian, Armenian, and Indic tradition and also provides the Sanskrit cognate *čakravākā* for the Middle Persian name of this bird.<sup>40</sup> In Sanskrit Literature, the lark or *čakāvāk*'s songs are viewed as a prayer, encompassing both Iranians views regarding the bird, its heavenly songs and its religious connotation as well.<sup>41</sup> Based on the probable roots of this name, she asserts that *caxrawāk* is a sort of "speaking" *-vāka-* bird.<sup>42</sup> What we can add to this is the Persian cognate for the bird which is *čakāvāk*<sup>43</sup> "lark" and associated with heavenly singing. The *čakāvāk* bird is also a well-known and old part of Persian musical tradition. More interestingly, Manuchehri Damghani,<sup>44</sup> an eleventh century Persian poet, in one of his poems mentions the *čakāvāk* in relation to a treasure called *Ganj-e Gāv*, which is said to have been one of Yima's treasures in his Vara.<sup>45</sup> It is also worth noting that this specific line is part of a greater

<sup>36</sup> Azarnouche/Redard 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Moazami 2014, 66–67.

<sup>38</sup> Middle Persian: *Karšift*.

<sup>39</sup> On *čaxrwāk*, see Benveniste 1960, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Redard 2012, 198.

<sup>41</sup> Dave 2005, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Azarnouche/Redard 2012, 199.

<sup>43</sup> The *čakāvāk* or lark is a bird widely found in the Persian plateau. Twelve species of larks have been recorded in to be native of Iran and Afghanistan (Hüe/Etchécopar 1970, 465–493). However, due to the modern construction of roads this bird is witnessed less than before, as it prefers to run through dirt fields often found across Iran and Afghanistan. See also A'lam 1990, 649–650.

<sup>44</sup> *vašt e sahangah čakav xoš bezanad dar takāv / sā' ataki Ganj-e Gāv, sā' ataki Ganj-e Bād*. The line of poetry reads as: "The skill of the poet is in using four central words that create a double entendre." The poem creates a simultaneous atmosphere of sound and space, the first verse translates as "At the break of dawn the lark starts its sweet music / At the break of dawn the lark dashes toward the creek" while the second verse points to two musical genres two of the greatest mythological treasures, the first belonging to Yima and the second to Khusro Parviz (Manuchehri Damghani 1977, 19, v. 281).

<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that in the oral tradition, Yima's wealth that is the *Ganj-e Gav* moves in a full circle, from the first beneficent king Yima to Bahram Gur, who is also renowned for the charity and love he bestowed upon his subjects which won great fame (*Shahnameh* VII, 457–463).



poem, which Manuchehri composed in lieu of the Persian New Year, *Nowruz*, a celebration that is also attributed to Yima. In the *Shahnameh* it is stated that Yima proclaimed the first day of Spring as the Persian New Year, which symbolized the end of winter and the beginning of a “new era.”<sup>46</sup> In the *Shahnameh* this bird is also portrayed in the context of daybreak and a symbolic messenger whose arrival and singing is followed by the ultimate victory of the Iranian army over their arch enemy Afrasiyab.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, this bird, unlike most birds that have nests on branches and high places, builds its nest in a hollow in the ground, similar to Yima’s Vara- which is was an enclosure underground.

If we follow this tradition and take into account that the Kushana king Huviška was not only familiar with the lore of the *Avesta*, but with the Iranian epic tradition (oral or otherwise), we can provide another suggestion for the meaning of this unique lamšo and the bird coinage. It can be suggested that the image on the reverse of Huviška’s coinage represents the mythical king Yima or Jamšīd as the lord of the Vara- with the bird čakāvak. That story is reminiscent of the idea that King Yima/Jamšīd was the ultimate culture-hero and king of the Iranian world, where for 250 year he taught people all that was needed to know and then ruled over a paradisiacal world for another 250 years. This is the paradise now lost, but was the greatest time for the Iranian speaking peoples, and it was remembered in the *Wīdēwdād*. As time passed the tradition became embellished with more details, in the Pahlavi translations of the *Wīdēwdād*, the Middle Persian *Xwadāy-namg* of the Sasanian period and finally in the *Shahnameh*.

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<sup>46</sup> *Shahnameh* I.

<sup>47</sup> *Čo xoršīd bar zad sar az borj e gāv / ze hāmun bar āmad xoruš e čakāv* (*Shahnameh* I, 44–52).

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