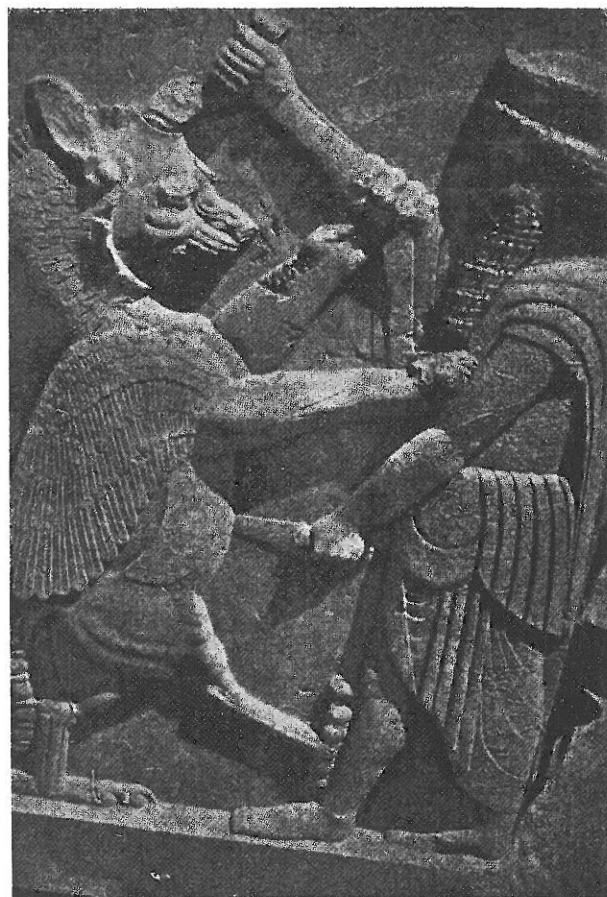


# HENRY CORBIN

## *A man and a work*

Henry Corbin's work in the field of Iranian studies can only be rightly appreciated if we understand the spiritual trend which stamps his life and activities. He may be said to have fulfilled a task of great importance in that field of studies, and he has accomplished it by making use not only of the external implements — his knowledge of the languages and doctrines — but also of his interior gifts of comprehension and elaboration of the intuitions handed down to us by the genius of Iran. He possesses of course the first requisites for the study of oriental theosophies, i. e. the ability of bringing to the task the hermeneutics of an intellect that is not scientific but spiritual — the « *ta' wîl* » — that frees the inner meanings from the logical spell of their formulation, restoring them to the living world. This is why his interpretation brings before us, in a luminous vision, a whole world of intuitions, hierarchies, victories, leading to liberation, that is to say to the world of the Iranian Gnosis. But this ability that Corbin possesses is not something that can be taught or learnt in the halls of Universities or on the benches

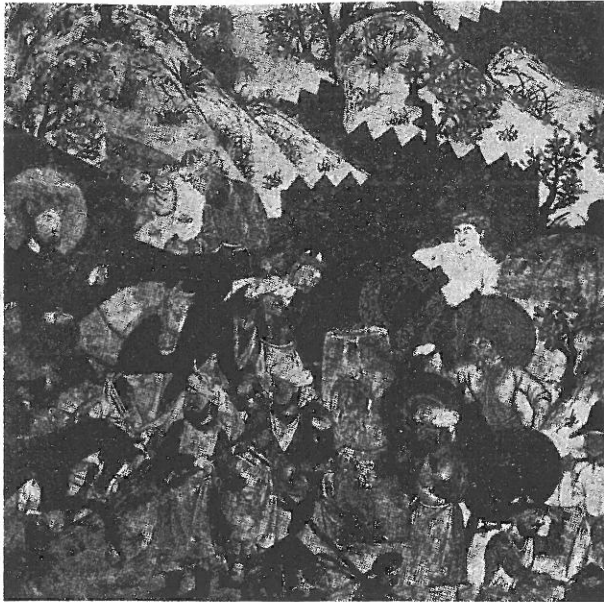


The Solar Hero fighting a Dragon. Bas-relief of Persepolis.

of schools of Oriental lore; it is a gift from on high, the recompense granted a soul entirely dedicated to a mission. Thus understood, we may truly say that Professor Corbin is a missionary, one of those who — as the Ishmaelian language would express it — have heard the call — a *dâ'î*, and the name of his mission is Irân.

Along with other illustrious scholars such as the Iranian Professors Pûr Davûd and Mohammad Mo'in, he has undertaken the task of revealing, or at least of helping to a comprehension and knowledge of the eternal spirit of Irân — something whose intimate reality is quite independent of the means it has used for expressing itself in the several periods of history and from the systems within which scholars have attempted to circumscribe it, thus belittling it, in obedience to their wish to classify it among things already known and defined.

This work, emerging from the field of abstract speculation, makes a contribution of living ideas to Orientalism, and, more especially in the case of the two Persian scholars



A Persian illumination of the XIIIth century.

whose names we have mentioned, it penetrates deeply into the thought world of modern Iran, and is therefore pregnant with consequences, and may lead to incalculable developments, perhaps at a no distant date.

For this reason Prof. Corbin's studies open for us a wide horizon in which we see brought together within a single space of time all the aspects under which the spirit of Iran presents itself in its several formulations: Mazdaism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Islamicism, Ishmaelite, etc. Corbin considers that all these forms are aspects of one single reality independent of the appearances proper to the several epochs, a reality which is in itself the eternal spirit of Iran, the archetype that has inspired all the civilisations of that branch of human culture. Evidently, this point of view, that detaches the gnosis of a Sohrawardî or a



A couching lion, a bronze of Khorsabad, Louvre.

Nâsir-e Khosrou from Islâm (in so far as they are the creations of thought) will arouse the protests of the out and out Islamites and of many Iranists who consider the culture of that country as a whole formed of many watertight compartments.

Now the precise purpose of the *Département d'Iranologie*, and of the *Bibliothèque Iranienne*, of which Corbin is the head, is that of reconstructing the spiritual aspect of Iran, building it up from those fragments provided by the works its thinkers have bequeathed to the world. It is therefore no mere mechanical juxtaposition of the several fragments, for each of them reflects the whole, the archetype.

In the critical introductory studies to the various works published by the Iranian Library, Corbin connects up the individual work with the vision of the whole, and in his exegesis of the more characteristic philosophies he provides the key for understanding the direct filiation with Iran, over and above the special language in which they are expressed. Thus, for instance, in the introductory study to the « *Kitâb-e jâmi' al-hikmatain* » the exegesis of the conception of « *Jadd-Fath-Khayâl* » as « *Aura Glorïae-Interpretatio Victrix-Imago Glorïae* », personified in the triad Gabriel-Michael-Seraphiel, brings us with one sweep to the heart of a problem of exceptional importance, as it reveals to us through a series of faultless equations, the existence of an Iranian Gnosis, real and proper, provided with a complete mystic methodology of its own—a magic one—which we may say goes back to prehistoric times and consists, on its speculative side, of a hypostasization of the idea of the XVARNAH. A strict interpretation of these symbols shows that we are here dealing with a perennial form of the Iranian spirit, resting on a mystery content. Following Corbin's clue to the interpretation, the meaning of the intuitions of pre-Islamic Persian thought flashes on us, (a thought whose Mazadaean tradition, elaborated by the Sassanid State Church has handed down to us only the hard husk of religious dogmas). The continuity of this spiritual vision of the world is lucidly and lovingly recomposed by Corbin in his stringent and precise analysis of the works of Abû Ya'qûb Sejestâni, Shihâbaddîn Yahya Sohrawardî, Nâsir-e Khosraw, and it is presented even more efficaciously by the same Author in the summaries published by the *Eranos Jahrbuch* of Zurich, such as the study on Cyclical Time

in Mazdaism and Ishmaelism, the comment on the Book of the Glorious One by Jâbir ibn Hayyân and the Comment on the Sabaean Ritual. In the first of these studies Corbin attributes special importance to the notion of time as eternity descending in cycles of duration, of which our limited human time is the reflected image, adjusted to the terrestrial plane, the field of the struggle that man is engaged on in this stage.

The conception of cosmic cycles—cycles of fall and cycles of resurrection—belongs to the core of Ishmaelism. Corbin traces its connections with the whole series of the previous speculations based precisely on the two fundamental notions of Time-Duration-Eternity (« *dahr-muddat-zamân* » of the Irânsahrî and of Muh. ibn Zakarîyâ Râzî) and of Light-Thought; which lead us to that typical theosophy of Iran, military and chivalrous (1) in which we have a whole universe of angelic hierarchies culminating in man, conceived as the very body of the Divinity, who attains his liberation by means of struggle down the cosmic cycles.

Corbin shows us the Iranian world of Fravartî in the Ishmaelite vision of the angelic beings that freely choose to follow the « Appeal » (*da'wat*), towards Tawhîd, the movement of prayer of the Prime Intelligence that

(1) *Le Temps Cyclique dans le Mazdéisme et dans l'Ishmaélisme*, p. 170.



A Post-Sassanide silver plate.



A Persian warrior of the Achaemenidian period.

spreads through the Universe, and is identified by Mazdaism with the Ahunavairyô, the Voice of Ohrmazd in the Light. The choice made by the Angels leads to a series of liberations converting the time of « fall » into a time of glorious resurrection, of a return to the Primeval Archangel who is perennially existentialising himself. On earth we have the glorious « Resurrection of the Resurrections » (« *qiyamat-e qiyamât* ») of Ishmaelism, the chain of human resurrections consisting in being constantly re-born beyond ourselves (2), beyond all ex-

(2) *Le Temps Cyclique*, etc., pp. 192-193.



cellence, in such wise as to reascend the divine hierarchy backwards.

In conclusion, and returning to the field of study — in which ideas are sown that in time will move mankind — we cannot but admit that Prof. Corbin and his associates of the Society of Iranology (*Anjuman-e Irânshenâsi*) are achieving a task of « resurrectionists » of the true spiritual Irân, Idea and Reality which play an active part in the puissant progress of human civilisation.

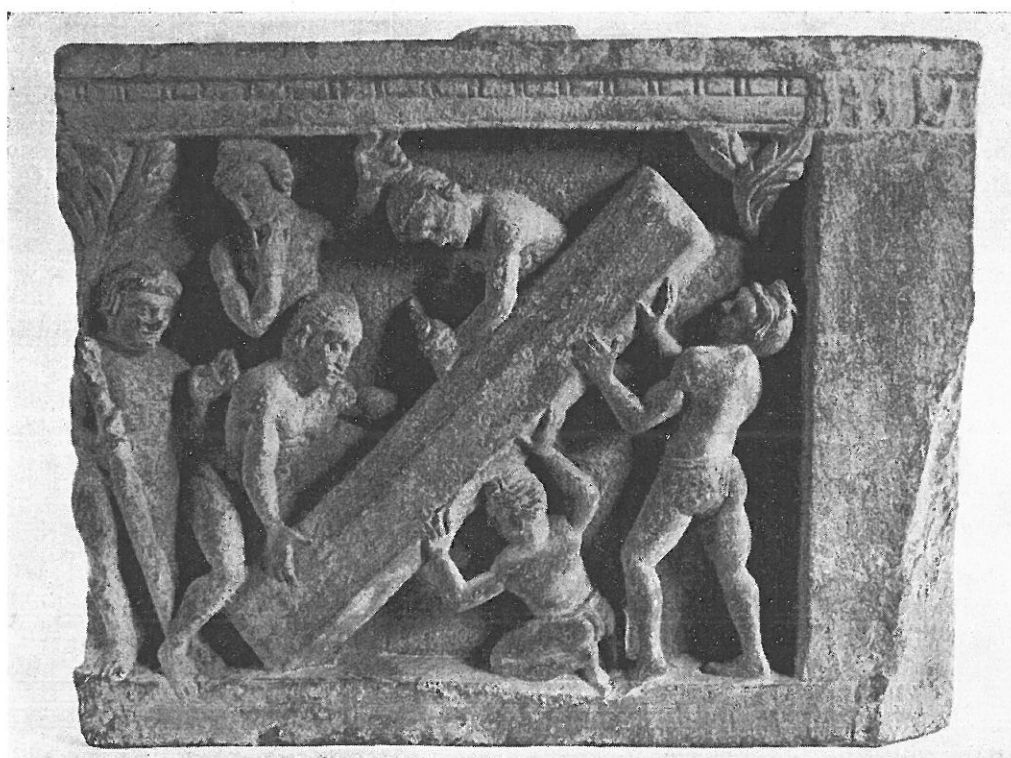
And here we venture to express the hope that this work, the result of harmonious collaboration between Iranians and Europeans, may lead in this Occident of ours, lucid and mathematical, to a salutary « chain reaction », bringing about a real series of resurrections and liberations of thought, at least in the field of Iranian studies, with beneficent reactions and echoes in the other branches of Oriental studies.

**Pio Filippini-Ronconi**

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