



BRILL

Iran and the Caucasus 22 (2018) 38-49

The Iranian *Männerbund* Revisited

Touraj Daryaei

University of California, Irvine

Abstract

This article discusses some of the Iranian evidence in relation to the idea of Indo-European *Männerbund*, which first was brought forth by Stig Wikander. There have been objections to Wikander's work due to the fact that he wrote it during the rise of Fascism and the War. It is suggested that, indeed, there is more than the meager Old and Middle Iranian evidence that points out to the existence of the male unions in the Iranian world. The article specifically chooses the idea of rage among the young men, which is found not only in Old and Middle Iranian texts, but also in Persian epic and folklore up to the recent times. This rage can be seen among the *Javān-mardān* and in folklore for such figures as Hosein the Kord, or Gord, who exhibits archetype *Männerbund* traits.

Keywords

Männerbund, Wolf, 'Ayyār, *Javān-mard*, Stig Wikander, Hosein Kord/Gord

A substantial amount of work has been published on the Indo-European *Männerbund* (Speidel 2002: 253-290).¹ Most important, perhaps, has been the study of Swedish historian of religions and Iranologist Stig Wikander in relation to Iranian traditions, which was published in 1938, a period of major ideological shifts in Europe (see Wikander 1938):² Many commentators have demonstrated how his reading of the *Männerbund* was deeply influenced by ideas about the ancient Aryan race in fashion at the time.³

¹ For the Iranian evidence now, see Ahmadi 2015: 7-34.

² Wikander was influenced by Otto Höffler whose book was published four years before his own (see Höffler 1934).

³ Wikander mentions the influence of Höffler in the preface of his book (Wikander 1938: vii). B. Lincoln (1999: 125-127) has also touched upon the relationship between Höffler and Wikander, meanwhile his own dissertation (idem 1981) bears the obvious impact of the latter's work and narrative. For Wikander's approach to the history of religions, see Timuş 2008: 205-228.

Yet, for those who have had an interest in the Indo-European *Männerbund*, his work remains one of the most important studies discussing this social institution in the Indo-Iranian tradition, dealing mainly with the earliest stratum of the Indo-Iranian evidence.

In this essay, I aim to reassess Wikander's evidence beyond the stigma of early 20th century *Zeitgeist* and, specifically, to explore the "wolfish" elements in Iranian male unions in relation to later folk and epic literature.

WIKANDER'S ARGUMENT

Let us start with the argument proposed by Wikander and later furthered by Geo Widengren (1969) on the Iranian *Männerbund*. Wikander argues that ancient Indo-Iranian tradition, namely Vedic and Sanskrit, as well as Avestan, Old Persian and Middle Persian hymns and texts, contain evidence of a society belonging to Indo-European social groupings. He alludes specifically to the "young men", *mairyo* in Avestan and *márya-* in Vedic (Proto-Indo-European **mor-yo-s*) (Pokorny 1959: 738-739), who serve the Mitanni king as *Marian-ni*,⁴ and as *Ma-ri-a-at-ti* at Alalakh (Mayrhofer 1960: 139). In the *Avesta*, these young men are treated differently than in the Vedic corpus in which they are portrayed as evil and *daēuuaić* (Wikander 1938: 31-32). The *mairyo* are attached to what Wikander calls the cult of Miθra and Vərəθraϥna (ibid.: 33-34), whilst the *márya-* are closely associated with Indra (ibid.: 52). Drawing on Wikander's work, Herman Lommel (1939) also supports Indra's centrality and connection with the *márya-*.

The Iranian texts sometimes refer to the "youth war-band" as two-legged wolves. Two names in the Iranian tradition are closely associated, like *mairyo*, with wolves, namely Arətat.aspa (Yašt 9.30) and Fraγrasyan (Yašt 5.41, 9.18-22, 19.56, 19.82) (Wikander 1938: 35). Lastly, for our discussion, the *mairyo* are connected with the idea of *aēšma*, "fury" (ibid.: 58-60), which describes the state of mind for these young men when going into the fray of battle. Thus, we have a scenario in which the *mairyo*, that is the young men, in a state of wolfish rage or fury, enter the battle to defeat their foes.

⁴ For a survey of this term, see Hajiani/ Razmjoo/Rahimian 2010: 359-372.

Among the evidence for such a scenario, first pointed out by Wikander (1938: 64-65), is the Scythian tribe known as the *Saka Haumavarga* who appear in the Achaemenid inscriptions of Darius at Naqš-e Rostam and his son Xerxes, at Persepolis. He also alludes to the Haoma Yašt (Y 9.18) and the *Wīdēwdād* (V 7.52) where there is an important mention of wolves who are biped (ibid.: 65-66). In the Hom Yašt we read (Yašt 9.18):

nī tat ya θa tauruuaieni vīspanqm
tbīšuuatqm tbaēšā daēuuānqm mašiiānqmčā
yā θβqm pairikanqmčā sā θrqm kaouiānqm karafnqmčā
mairiiānqmčā bizaṇgranqm ašəmaoyānqmčā
bizaṇgranqm vāhrkanqmca ca θβarə zaṇgranqm
haēniāscā pərə θu.ainikaiiā dauuqi θiā patqi θiā
 “This, that I may overcome all those who are hostile to,
 of *daēuuas* and mortals, and sorcerers and
 witches, tyrants, Kauuis, Karapans,
 and two footed (biped) scoundrels, deceivers of truth and four-footed
 wolves,
 and the brood front *daēuuāic* army, flying demons”.

(Kellens 2007: 59-60)⁵

This passage then can be read in conjunction with *Wīdēwdād* (V 7.52):

vāhrkəm yim bizāngrəm daēuuaiiasnəm
 “the wolf that is the two-legged *daēuuā* worshipper”.

(Ahmadi 2015: 15)

In lieu of the evidence of a two-legged wolf, one should pay attention to the Middle Iranian material as well, which is heavily Zoroastrian in content and world-view (Azarnouche 2016: 1-19). In a short manual on warfare (*Artēštārestān*) from the Eighth book of the Pahlavi *Dēnkard*, curiously, the first passage discusses the danger of the two-legged wolf (8.26):

abar zanišn arzānīgih ī gurg andar gurgān
zanišnīgтарih ī ān ī dō-zang ān ī čahār-zang
 “about the merits of smiting wolves among the wolves (species),
 the smiting of the two-legged more (needed) than the four-legged”.

(Boyce 1987: 515; Taffazoli 1995: 297-298; Azarnouche 2016: 5, 14)

⁵ For similar translation, see Malandra 1983: 153.

This passage may be a reflex of the Avestan tradition regarding the *bi-zangra-* and *čaθwarə-* (two-legged and four-legged) wolves. Interestingly, in the *Widēwdād* (5.35), the *dō-zang* (two-legged) is glossed as *anēr* “non-Iranian” / “barbarian” (Taffazoli 1995: 300; Moazami 2014: 146-147). This indicates that following the Zoroastrian reform, the Indo-Iranian tradition of “youth war-bands” became demonized, and major figures, such as Kəršaspa (Garšāsp), had lost their importance and prestige.⁶ In the classification of the Zoroastrian world of animals (Moazami 2014: 312-314; Azarnouche 2016: 3-7),⁷ where animals were separated into biped and quadruped,⁸ the wolf and the snake became metaphors and models of the evil. The snake, meanwhile, also personifies the dragon whose slaying abounds in Iranian literary tradition.

The matter of the *Saka Haumavarga* is a bit more difficult to assess, and there is no consensus on the meaning of the term, “Haoma-wolves”, first suggested, as was noted above, by Wikander (1938: 64ff.; see also Lincoln 1981: 31), or, rather, “laying the Haoma”, that seeds onto hot stones before taking a bath, as reported by Herodotus (4.75.1).⁹ However, some of Indo-Europeanists agree on the first meaning, “Haoma-wolves”. They explain how the consumption of the *Haoma* whose epithet is *dūraoša*-¹⁰ “keeping death away”, allowed men to go into battle believing that they were invulnerable, intoxicated (*maδu-*), with fury (*aēšma*), to use Lincoln’s words, “raging like the wild beasts” (Lincoln 1981: 130-131). Ahmadi argues that this was part of a ritual that he calls the “daēuuā rite” of the “youth-war-band” (Ahmadi 2015: 27). In line with such practices, wolf sacrifice appears to have also been part of an initiatory rite, whereby young men assumed the characteristics of the wolf (*ibid.*).¹¹

⁶ I shall discuss Garšāsp as the ultimate *Männerbund* hero in a forthcoming article (see Sarkarati 1378/1999: 251-286; Skjærvø 2011).

⁷ It is interesting that in the Indo-European tradition the slaying of snakes and wolves have close affinities (see Watkins 1995: 411-412).

⁸ For two- and four-footed classification, see Schmidt 1980: 233.

⁹ The bibliography of the discussion for *Haumavarga* is now extensive. Karl Hoffmann (1976: 612), Bruno Jacobs (1982: 78), and Rüdiger Schmitt (2003) appear to side against the common interpretation of “Haoma-wolf”.

¹⁰ For the etymology, see Bailey 1957: 55; *idem* 1985: 157-64.

¹¹ For the archaeological evidence, see Powell 2013: 33-36. For the importance of the wolf as totem for the *Männerbund*, see Mallory 1989: 110.

Here, I would like to assess again the evidence for the early wolfish rage of the Iranian *Männerbund*, and begin with those who, according to B. Lincoln, propose a “specialized warrior” class in the Indo-Iranian world (Boyce 1988: 508-526; Lincoln 1991a: 159). Indeed, there is so much evidence in the Indo-European tradition (see Lincoln 1991b: 131-137) for such behavior that its denial, eighty years since Wikander, is almost impossible.¹² While there are specific studies on the male unions and their traits in the various Indo-European societies, one can point to H.-P. Hasenfratz’s (1982: 148-163) study and to the more detailed work by K. R. McCone (1987: 101-154). For the Iranian evidence, Hasenfratz draws heavily on Wikander and also Widengren (1969) who continued the former’s line of thinking and put forward more elaborate ideas. Again, the *Männerbund* is seen as the “Jüngling” (*mairyo*), “demon worshippers / *Dämonenvereherer*” (*daēvayasna-*), wolfish and imbued with fury (*aēšma*). Hasenfratz (ibid.: 150-151) argues that this state of fury is made possible by partaking in *haoma-*. These findings are discussed in detail for lycanthropy in the Indo-European tradition by K. R. McCone (1987: 101-154, specifically 119-121) who also takes up the *mairyo* “junger Mann”, the *haumavarka* “Hauma-Wölfe” and the two legged wolf in the *Avesta*, and provides all the available evidence through the Indo-European world.

THE MIDDLE IRANIAN EVIDENCE

In the Pahlavi texts, the two-legged wolf is strongly associated with apocalyptic literature where these *daēvuaic* forces appear in the following manner (ZWY 7, 11):

*pad dēn paydāg kū pad ham-ayārih ud ham-draṣṣ ō ēn ērān dehān rasēnd
ud was marg be ōzanēnd awēšān xēšm-tōhmagān ī šēdāsp ud hēn ī frāx-
anīg ud dām gurg ī dō zang ud dēw ī dawāl-kustīg*

“In the religion, it is revealed that through cooperation and under a common banner those of the seed of Xēšm (*aēšma-*) of Šēdāsp, the army of the broad front, the two-legged wolf creatures and the dēws with the leather girdle will arrive in these Ērāniān lands and will kill great numbers”.

(Cereti 1995: 143, 163)

¹² A. de Jong (1995: 17) has dismissed the *Männerbund* idea in the Iranian world, as the sources, in his view, are few and far in-between.

This passage makes clear reference to a two-legged wolf, along with the *dāeuua* (dēw) and *ayār* (in *ham-ayārīh*). The appearance of a seal from the Sasanian period, which portrays the two-legged wolf in battle (Azarnouche 2016: 11) is a further evidence of the existence of the biped wolves (*vāhrka-bizangra- / gurg ī dō zang*) in the Iranian world (Gnoli 1994: 455-498, idem 1995: 311-312). The figure of the wolf is also present in the Georgian tradition. According to the *Life of Vaxtang*, the hero-king Vaxtang Gorgasali ferociously fought the Sasanian armies in such a way that the Iranians were not able to defeat him. The text mentions that the king, called *gurgasal* “wolf-head”, had made a helmet, which displayed a wolf at the front. When the Sasanian soldiers saw him they said *dūr az gorgasal* (“flee from the wolf-head”).¹³ Etymologically, the name Vaxtang comes from the Iranian *Vərəθraγna*, the yazata of offensive victory,¹⁴ which epithet is *gurgasal*, meaning “wolf-head” (Rapp 2014: 310, 311, ft. 176). Similar traits can be found in the Turkic world as well. In the Orxan inscriptions, for instance, the following statement can be read: *qanim qağan süsi böri teg ermiş yağisi qon teg ermiş* “the army of my father, the Qağan, was like a wolf, his enemies were like sheep” (Golden 1997: 92). Incidentally, the term for wolf (*böri*) here, appears to have been borrowed from Iranian **bairaka-* “frightening”, or **birūka-*, cf. East Ossetic *bīrāg* “wolf”, and Russian *biryuk* taken via Turkic (ibid.: 92-93).¹⁵

FROM MÄNNERBUND TO JAVĀN-MARDĪ

The Old Persian term *marika-* (< **mairyāka-*), as well as Middle Persian *mērag* refer to young men of menial status (Widengren 1969: 15).¹⁶ One must pay special attention to Darius’ inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, which

¹³ *Life of Vaxtang*, ed. Qauc’išvili, 180, quoted by S. Rapp (2014: 311). The Persian soldiers should have said *dūr az gurgsar*.

¹⁴ On the fervor that *Vərəθraγna* (Armenian Vahagn) causes in the Armenian tradition, see Dumézil 1969: 124-124; for the appearance of *Vərəθraγna* on helmets in late antiquity, see Daryaei 1997: 41-54.

¹⁵ Wolf and wolfish motifs are also a steady element of the North Caucasian concept of the male unions, manifested in different versions among the inhabitants of Dagestan (see for details Karpov 1996; also Luguev 2003).

¹⁶ One should also pay attention to such terms as *kōtag* and *rēdag* on the one hand (7-15 years of age), and *juwān-mard* (15-20 years of age) (McCone 1987: 125, mainly based on Widengren 1969: 84-95).

is much more poetic and personal than his Persepolis inscriptions. On his tomb-inscription, the last passage (DNb 55-60) is of utmost importance; although in fragments, it could be read as:

*marīka mātai ava naibam ʒadaya taya ... kunavāti taya skauʒiš kunavāti
avašci dīdi marīkā ... ma patiyātaya ... māpati šiyātiyā ayāumainiš bavāhi
... mā raxʒa(n)tu...*

“O young man, let not that seem good to you, which the ... does, what the weak one does, observe that too. O young man, do not set yourself against the ... moreover do not become (a “young” man) without fervor in counter-attack owing to your blissful happiness. Let not...”¹⁷

Here Darius emphasizes that a young man (*marīka*-) should not be without fervor in battle. Thus, there seems to be a continuation between the Vedic *mārya*- and Avestan *mairyo* with that of Old Persian *marīka*- (**marīya-ka*-), in the same sense. As Benveniste (1969: 247) remarks, the Iranian terms *mairyo* / *mērak/g* refer to young men who are audacious, war-like, destructive and also sometime acting like brigands.

In the Iranian society, the idea of a “young man” is not necessarily connected to the terms *mairyo*, *marīka*-, and *mērag*. With a look at the corresponding terminology used by the late Sasanian, medieval, and pre-modern Iranian societies we discover the same meanings. Most importantly here is the Middle Persian word *mard-juwān* “young man”, and the institution of *Javān-mardī*, also known as *‘Ayyārī* in the Iranian world. There is a well-known literary genre on the topic of these youth groups called *Futuwat-nāmeḥ* (from the Arabic term *fatā* “young man”). *Javān-mardān*, the young men, are both manly and well-respected, and prone to violence and disorder at the same time. According to M. Shaki (1992), these young men acted as Robin Hoods of the Iranian society, taking from the rich and redistributing to the poor.¹⁸

The semantic parallels of Pahlavi *mard-juwān* and Persian *javān-mard* are Middle Persian *ayār* and Persian *‘ayyār*, both meaning “helper”. Sze-merényi (1950: 226-229) derives the lexeme from OIran. **adi-āwa-bara-*

¹⁷ With minor changes, the translation is by R. Schmitt (2000: 39-40). For the interpretation of this passage, see Sims-Williams 1981: 1-7.

¹⁸ *Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, II: 723; ed. Dresden: 281; tr. West: 78; *Vidēvdād* 3.41 as those who believed that robbing the rich to give to the poor was a meritorious act (tr. Darmesteter, II: 47 n. 81; also Shaki 1992).

“bringing help, succor, giving support”, through a set of further phonetic transformations: **adyāvar* > **ay(y)āvar* > *ay(y)ār/yāvar/yār*. These terms occur in the Persian epic vocabulary, particularly in the *Shāhnāme*, side by side. In the Pahlavi text *Kārnamag ī Artaxšīr ī Pābagān*, *ayārs* are the helpers of the king-to-be Artaxšīr (224-240 A.D.), and also aid his opponent, a Kirm “worm”, which in reality is nothing but a dragon who will be slain by the hero-king in the story.¹⁹ In the Manichaean Parthian documents, *aḍyāwar(ān)*, denoting “friends, helpers”, are both benevolent and malevolent, depending on the person they are helping (Zaehner 1937/1939: 309; Zakeri 1995: 85). And more importantly, in the *Dēnkard*, we come across a passage, which connects the *ayārs* with wolf (DK 730.13):

ud ēd ī az-aš paidāg ku man čē gurg čē ayār

“Und dies ist daraus offenbar: ich bin sowohl Wolf als Helfer”.

(Widengren 1969: 15-16, fn. 24)

Now this relation between wolf and *ayār/‘ayyār* can be substantiated from the recently published Classical Persian texts, which date back to the 15th-16th centuries. These folkloric texts make reference to the institution of *‘ayyārī* manifested, for instance, in the story of Hosein the Kord, or Gord (Hero), a young man whose feats are equally famous to those of Rostam, a great hero of the Iranian national epic (Afšār/Afšārī 1385/2007: 10). Rostam shares many traits with the *Männerbund* hero, Kəršāspa/Garšāsb.

Although the story of Hosein the Kord happens at the time of Shah ‘Abbas, the greatest of the Safavid rulers,²⁰ and he is already mentioned in the *History of Tabarestan and Rūyan*, a century earlier, it probably must have older roots, going back to the pre-Islamic times (Marzolph 1999: 279-303, 281). Furthermore, Hosein carries the title *now-javān* “young man” (ibid.: 17). What is of interest is how the young men, or *‘ayyārs*, are described in this and other similar texts in early modern Persian literature. When, in a passage a man named Mobārak Siyāh swears that if he becomes in charge of the city, he will punish the bandits severely and that if

¹⁹ On the semantics of worm and dragon in Iranian, see Watkins 1995: 313.

²⁰ There is a report from the early 16th century on how the Qizilbash helped Shah Isma‘il forge his empire during battle: “His soldiers, many of whom enter into battle without armor, expecting their master Ishmael to watch over them in fight” (Babayan 1994: 135, ff.).

he catches them, he will pour oil on them and set them on fire, the reaction to such a threat was as follows (HK 250):

Īn xabar dar šahr montašer šodeh, tamām-e gorgān va ‘ayyārān va sarhangān dar makān-e xod ārām gereftand

“The news circulated in the city, all the wolves and ‘Ayyārs and Sarhangs became pacified in their own place”.

(Afšār/Afšāri 1385: 250)

This passage reminds us of the *Dēnkard* (730.13) *če gurg če ayār* “either wolf or helper”, demonstrating together the long *durée* interrelation between the wolf and *Männerbund* in Iranian texts. Hosein Kord is a typical ‘*ayyār*’ who also frequently becomes intoxicated (Marzolph 1999: 286). We also come across images where Hosein Kord and his “helpers” (*yārān*) battle sea monsters who are very much like dragons (Marzolph 1999: 289), which again reminds us of Indo-Iranian *Männerbund* archetype Kəršaspa/Garšāsb, the killer of the golden heeled Gandərwa who dwelt in the Sea of Vourukaša.²¹ A number of the characteristics of Hosein Kord bear obvious traits of the Indo-European antiquity, such as, for instance, the anger (Avestan *aēšma*, Persian *xašm*): in one of the tales, our hero becomes so angry that: *donyā dar nazaraš tire-o tār shod*—“the world became dark”. Four times in the story Hosein Kord becomes angry to such an extent that he literally goes berserk (Marzolph 1999: 294). Furthermore, his anger also manifests itself through self-biting. As blood pours out of his body, he goes into a rage (ibid.: 296). The ‘*ayyārs*’ are not only discussed in this story, but also in other stories associated with virility, mania and wolves (Afšār/Afšāri 1385: 250, fn. 1). Hence, while Hosein Kord is the well-known character of this tradition, it is by no means the only example.

In conclusion, it could be said that whilst there may be criticism about the views of Stig Wikander, one cannot dismiss his important findings, which he attempted to present in the first half of the last century. There is now a steady corpus of texts demonstrating the continuation of the traits associated with the Iranian male unions. Be it Kəršaspa or Hosein Kord, the heroic and the ruffian nature of the youth who are likened to the

²¹ On Kəršaspa slaying of Gandərwas, see Yašts 5.38, 15.28, 19.41, and Garšāsb’s slaying the sea monster in the Persian epic, the *Garšāsp-nāmeḥ*, in Huart 1926: 109-33; for this, see Panaino 2000. Also, one must mention Wikander 1941: 75-77.

wolves continued to exist from the earliest stratum of Iranian literature, which, no doubt, is part of the Indo-European heritage preserved to the modern times in Iran where the youth did heroic deeds so to be remembered.²²

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²² If one is to push the envelope and attempt to make further connection to the modern period, one can point to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when the Iranians were outgunned by the Iraqi side. Amidst the battles there are tales of the youth (sixteen years old) volunteering to run on minefields to clear them for the Iranian forces to move ahead. The night before the battle, the young fighters were given a drink, which was called *šarbat-e šahādāt*, "the drink/syrup of martyrdom", and a key for paradise. According to one of the men who made such a drink, all those who drank the *šarbat-e šahādāt* would be martyred for certain (see Baxšī 1392). The idea of the Basij, i.e., the youth volunteers, with regard to the *Männerbund* is certainly worth studying.

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