

The Goddess Nana and the Kušan Empire: Mesopotamian and Iranian Traces

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Nana was an important patron deity in the Kušan Empire and the most important deity worshipped by Emperor Kaniška (c. 127–150 CE). She was the head of the royal dynastic pantheon at this time. The cult of Nana may already have existed in Central Asia prior to the arrival of Indo-Iranians in the region, since she appears on a BMAC seal dating to the early second millennium BCE. Similarly, her cult in Bactria may pre-date her appearance in the Kušan pantheon by over two millennia. The spread of Nana's cult over such vast distances vividly illustrates the cultural connections (presumably stemming mostly from trade) that existed from prehistoric times linking the Mediterranean world to that of Central Asia and beyond, with the Iranian plateau at its center. The prevalence of Sogdian coins bearing Nana's name suggests that she was also the principal deity of Sogdiana. In Bactria, the goddess Ardoxšo (Avestan *Ašī vaŋv'hī*) was also worshipped by Kušāns and appeared on their coins. Nana, who was associated with war, fertility, wisdom, and water, was also equated with the Iranian goddesses Anāhitā, Aši, and Ārmaiti. The cult of Nana-Ārmaiti was widespread throughout eastern Iran.

Keywords: Iranian mythology, Mesopotamian mythology, goddess, Inanna/Ištar, Anahitā

Introduction

The Central Asian goddess Nana, who was immensely popular in pre-Islamic times, was long assumed by scholars to be identical with the Sumerian goddess Inanna, with Nana being her later incarnation.¹ However, recent research has cast doubt on such claims. It is not clear whether these names were originally different – their resemblance being due to cultural exchange – or whether they were different aspects of one ancient goddess. Potts (along with some other contemporary scholars) argues that Inanna/Ištar must be strictly distinguished from Nana, and that she (Nana) was not identical to Inanna.² He also notes that Nana “is frequently identified with the Iranian divinity Anāhitā and/or the Greek goddess Artemis.”³

Inanna/Ištar and Similarities with the Iranian Water/ River Goddess Anāhitā

Inanna was a Sumerian goddess who was worshipped from ancient times. The Babylonians knew her as Ištar. She was associated with war, nature (water), and sex (but not marriage), possibly involving sacred prostitution at her temples and perhaps even the sacrifice of the male partner.⁴

The most important goddess of pre-Islamic Iran was the water/river goddess Anāhitā, who may have evolved from the prehistoric river goddess(es) of the ancient proto-Indo-European peoples of the fifth millennium BCE or earlier.⁵ During the course of Anāhitā’s transformations over time, she acquired additional functions, presumably from pre-existing goddesses of the various regions where she was worshipped, particularly Mesopotamia.

Inanna/Ištar was identified as the anthropomorphic projection of the planet Venus. The terms Inanna-HUD and Inanna-SIG have been translated as “Inanna of the Morning” and “Inanna of the Evening,” representing the two appearances of the planet Venus as the morning and the evening star.⁶ This leads us to one example of cultural exchange between Anāhitā and Inanna, or more precisely what Anāhitā absorbed from Inanna. Anāhitā, who is presented as Ardwī-sūr-Anāhīd in the Pahlavi texts, was identified with the planet

¹ Daniel T. Potts, “Nana in Bactria,” *Silk Road Art and Archeology: Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies, Kamakura* 7 (2001): 23-35.

² Potts, “Nana in Bactria,” 23-35.

³ Potts notes that “while it is true that Aelian (on the nature of animals XIII.18) mentions a temple to Anāhitā in Elymais, there is no reason to equate this with the temple of Nane mentioned in II Maccabees” (See Potts, “Nana in Bactria,” 26).

⁴ Jan M. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 175.

⁵ Manyā Saadi-Nejad, *Anahita: Transformations of an Iranian Goddess* (London: I. B. Tauris, forthcoming).

⁶ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *A History of Babylon, 2200 BC–AD 75* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 33.

Venus in a precisely determined astronomical position (GBd.V.4.8). This clearly shows her syncretization with the goddess Inanna, and Anāhitā's transformation cannot accurately be understood without analyzing these mythological comparisons.

Chaumont is among those who have suggested that at an early stage of the Iranian-Mesopotamian encounter (ca. 1000 BCE or later), the Iranian river goddess Anāhitā acquired some of attributes of the Mesopotamian Ištar/(I)nana, in particular her warlike character.⁷ The fact that a sanctuary in Rabatak in Afghanistan was dedicated to Nana, as a Sasanian sanctuary in Ēstaxr was to Anāhitā, can be considered additional evidence for a possible connection between the two goddesses.

Scholars such as Boyce,⁸ Gnoli,⁹ Malandra,¹⁰ Panaino,¹¹ and De Jong¹² have characterized the historical Anāhitā as a product of syncretism between an earlier Iranian goddess by that name and several important Mesopotamian goddesses, such as the Sumerian Inanna (Nana) and the Babylonian Ištar. Grenet considers Anāhitā a counterpart of the goddess Nana and some of the deities who have been identified in Sogdian art.¹³ He states:

Nana, depicted as Artemis, appears to fulfill the double function of guardian of the earth and of the water, as shown by her two attributes (wand with lion proteome and vase). In addition, her occasional title *šao* 'ruler' and the very wording of the Rabatak inscription show her as chief bestower and protector of royalty, a function which was already fulfilled by the Mesopotamian Nana-Ishtar. In her capacity as provider of water, she was probably considered by Zoroastrians as identical with the Avestan goddess Anāhitā, sometimes called "Nana" in Iran.¹⁴

Looking at a later period, Grenet has observed that in the Kušan Empire (1st-3rd centuries CE) the Miθra cult seems to have been paired with that of the goddess Aši (known as *Ardoxšō*); this would suggest that parallel male-female cults existed at that time.¹⁵ On Kušan coins,

⁷ Mary Boyce, M. L. Chaumont, and C. Bier, "Anāhid," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 1, fasc. 9, 1003-11. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anahid>.

⁸ Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 29-31, 201-4.

⁹ Gherardo Gnoli, "Politique Religieuse et Conception de la Royauté sous les Achéménides," *Acta Iranica* 2 (1974): 126-31 and 137-9.

¹⁰ William Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 117-20.

¹¹ Antonio Panaino, "The Mesopotamian Heritage of Achaemenian Kingship," in *The Heirs of Assyria: Proceedings of the Opening Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Heritage Project*, eds. Sanno Aro and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000), 36-9.

¹² Albert De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 103-110.

¹³ Frantz Grenet, "Zoroastrianism in Central Asia," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, eds. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, and Anna Tessman (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 129-146.

¹⁴ Grenet, "Zoroastrianism in Central Asia," 132.

¹⁵ Mary Boyce and Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, *Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*

Ardoxšo (Aši) appears with a cornucopia in hand.

Influences of the Mesopotamian Pantheon on Iranian Culture

A more perplexing question concerns the alleged emergence of henotheism among the Iranians as well as among the peoples of Mesopotamia. The rise of the god Marduk to his supreme position within the pantheon of the Babylonians, like that of Yahweh in the Israelite context, is best explained according to the henotheistic model, where a particular deity is championed as the patron of a specific group at the expense of its (and their) rivals. Cyrus II's attempt to associate himself with Marduk upon conquering Babylon in 539 BCE is the clearest example of how Iranian migrants deliberately appropriated Mesopotamian religion for their own purposes, but this is surely only the tip of the iceberg. From the elite classes down to the level of the general population, Iranians must have taken what they needed from Mesopotamian culture and adapted it into forms familiar to themselves.

The divine couple of Marduk and the goddess Ištar shows some interesting similarities with the Iranian pairing of Miθra and Anāhitā. In fact, Miθra and Anāhitā are the only deities who have been documented along with Ahura Mazdā in the inscriptions of the Persian kings (for example, those of Artaxerxes II, r. 404-358 BCE). The transformations accruing to Anāhitā during the Achaemenid period, during which she first comes into historical prominence, can be explained according to this model.

Nana/Nanai/Nanā

As an originally Mesopotamian goddess and probably having undergone a degree of conflation with some other female deity, Nana eventually became popular in the south, especially at Uruk, Susa, and Kušān,¹⁶ as well as to the east within the pantheon of Bactria.¹⁷ Associated with war, fertility, wisdom, and water, the goddess Nana was worshiped at Dura-Europos as "Artemis Nanaia," reflecting the mixed Hellenistic-Semitic-Iranian culture there. In 2004 BCE, a coalition of Elamites and "Su-people" from Shimaski (possibly the BMAC region in Central Asia) captured Ur and took a statue of Nana back to Anshan "as a captive." She was returned to Ur after 1984 BCE.¹⁸

Nana appears as Nanai on Kušān coins (1st-4th centuries CE), indicating that her cult had spread as far eastwards as the territories of the Indus Valley and beyond. The Bactrian

(Leiden: Brill, 1991), 486-7, n. 629.

¹⁶ Beaulieu, "A History of Babylon," 33.

¹⁷ Potts, "Nana in Bactria," 23-35.

¹⁸ Javier Alvarez-Mon, "Khuzestan in the Bronze Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 221-2.

Rabātak inscription of the Kušan king Kaniška I (c. 127–150 CE) calls Nanai *amsa Nana*; on Kušan coins she is *Nanašao* (“royal Nana”) – “she is the goddess who rules and thus ordains kingship.”¹⁹ Nana was the principle deity in the Kaniška pantheon and the leader of the gods in the Rabatak inscription. The Rabatak sanctuary was also dedicated to her.²⁰ The idea that Nana was the principle deity in the Kaniška pantheon was challenged by Gnoli,²¹ who argued that she, like Anāhitā, was indeed the deity to whom the sanctuary was dedicated but that neither she nor Anāhitā were ever the head of the pantheon. Michael Shenkar, however, disagrees with Gnoli’s opinion, arguing that “Contrary to Gnoli, there are no sufficient grounds to doubt that Nana was the most important deity worshiped by Kaniška and the head of the royal dynastic pantheon of his time. This is confirmed by her place in the Rabatak inscription, the popularity of her image on coins and in personal names, and the fact that Nana was almost the most important goddess in neighboring Sogdiana and Chorasmia.”²²

Grenet notes that Nana(ia) appears on the selection of five gods represented on Kaniška’s gold coins, where they receive Iranian names: *Nana* or *Nanašao*, *Miuro* (Mithra), *Mao* (Māh), *Athšo* (Ādur), and *Oado* (Wād).²³ These deities are all connected to natural elements, either directly or indirectly: to the sun, moon, fire, and wind. So where is the deity for water? Water figures not only in Herodotus’ list of Persian prayers, but also in Y 1.16 and the *Njāyāšn*’s daily prayers to the sun, moon, fire and water. It seems that for the Kušans, Nana had replaced the concept of the water-deity (Anāhitā). Grenet states that she was the patron and protector of royalty, another similarity to Anāhitā. In the Sogdian pantheon, however, Anāhitā appears separately from Nana “on a few occasions.”²⁴

The prevalence of Sogdian coins bearing Nana’s name suggests that she was the major deity of Sogdiana in pre-Islamic times.²⁵ Despite her Mesopotamian origin, she was the deity most frequently represented in Sogdiana during the seventh and eighth centuries.²⁶ Since many of the ancient peoples living across this wide expanse of territory practiced agriculture, deities and rituals related to fertility are widely attested amongst them. The Indo-European

¹⁹ Martha L. Carter, “Kanishka’s Bactrian Pantheon in the Rabatak Inscription: The Numismatic Evidence,” in *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europea*, eds. A. Panaino and A. Piras (Milan: Mimesis, 2006), 325.

²⁰ Gherardo Gnoli, “Some Notes upon the Religious Significance of the Rabatak Inscription,” in *Exegisti Monumenta, Festschrift in Honor of Nicolas Sims-Williams*, eds. Werner Sundermann, Almut Hintze, and Francois de Blois (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 144.

²¹ Gnoli, “Some Notes,” 144–45.

²² Michael Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 120.

²³ Grenet, “Zoroastrianism in Central Asia,” 132.

²⁴ Grenet, “Zoroastrianism in Central Asia,” 134.

²⁵ Guitty Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting: The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 134.

²⁶ Matteo Compareti, “Nana and Tish in Sogdiana: The Adoption from Mesopotamia of a Divine Couple,” *Dabir* 1, no. 4 (2017): 1–8.

Iranian-speaking tribes were relative latecomers to this region, and it is inevitable that their culture was shaped and influenced by those of the peoples already living there.

The spread of Nana's cult over such vast distances vividly illustrates the cultural connections (presumably stemming mostly from trade) that existed from prehistoric times linking the Mediterranean world to that of Central Asia and beyond, with the Iranian plateau at its center. She was worshiped in Susa from the third millennium BCE, and she remained the principle object of worship during the Seleucid and Parthian period through the Artemis-Nanaia cult.²⁷ Azarpay notes:

The symbols and attributes of the early medieval Soghdian and Khwarezmian images of Nanā, though influenced by Indian formal models, indicate that the goddess preserved both her early Mesopotamian affiliation with the sun and the moon, and her identity as a love and war deity.²⁸

The cult of Nana may have already existed in Central Asia prior to the arrival of the Indo-Iranians in the region, since she appears on a BMAC seal dating to the early second millennium BCE.²⁹ Similarly, her cult in Bactria may pre-date her appearance in the Kušan pantheon by over two millennia.³⁰

The Cults of Nana and the Iranian Water Goddess Anāhitā

During the centuries leading up to the Arab conquests, the goddess Nana/Nanai, as she was locally known, was apparently the principal Soghdian deity. She was the patron goddess of the city of Panjikent, where she was referred to as “the Lady.”³¹ Further south in Bactria, she was the principal protector of the Kušan king Kaniškā, where, as Skjaervø notes, she probably replaced Anāhitā.³² Skjaervø adds that the phonetic (acoustic) similarity of the names “Nanai and Anāhitā” may have played a role in this identification. Anāhitā absorbed many of Nanai's characteristics and was widely syncretised with her. As with the Achaemenids centuries earlier, the transformation of the Mesopotamian Nanai into the Iranian Anāhitā appears to have been due to a conscious effort on the part of the Sasanians, who took over the eastern regions during the third and fourth centuries. A Bactrian coin from the time of Kushanshah

²⁷ Azarpay, *Soghdian Painting*, 136.

²⁸ Azarpay, *Soghdian Painting*, 136-37.

²⁹ Jan M. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 176.

³⁰ Potts, “Nana in Bactria,” 30.

³¹ W. B. Henning, “A Soghdian God,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 28, no. 2 (1964): 252, n. 68.

³² Prods Oktor Skjaervø, “Introduction to Zoroastrianism,” *Early Iranian Civilizations 102*, Harvard Divinity School, 2005, 33.

Hormizd II bears an image of Artemis the Hunter but with the Pahlavi inscription “Lady Anāhid,” whereas the coinage of the previous Kušan ruler used similar iconography but identified the figure as “the goddess Nana.”³³

The cults of Nana and Anāhitā were also present in Armenia. Nana was worshipped as Nane in a temple in the small town of Thil. She was believed to be the daughter of Aramazd (the Avestan Ahura Mazdā). Her cult was closely tied to that of Anahit (the counterpart of Avestan Anāhitā), and was the iconographic prototype for several goddesses in the Indo-Iranian pantheon.³⁴ Rosenfield notes that “As the feminine personifications of abundance among the Kušāns, Nana-Anāhitā had much in common with Ardoxšo, but the cult of Ardoxšo seems to have been centered upon dynastic and political abundance, whereas that of Nana emphasized natural phenomena.”³⁵ In Bactria, the goddess Ardoxšo (Avestan *Ašvī vaŋvhi*) was worshipped by the Kušāns and appeared on their coins. Azarpay states that Nana was also equated with the Iranian goddess Ārmaiti, and that the cult of Nana-Ārmaiti was widespread throughout eastern Iran.³⁶

It seems that all of these goddesses had some functions in common, most likely through cultural borrowing. Since these borrowings were often only partial, they should be analyzed with caution when attempting to document Anāhitā’s transformations.

But why these goddesses, and where and how did this shift in conceptualization occur? The most likely explanation would seem to lie in the encounter of Iranians with the settled populations of Elam and Mesopotamia during the first millennium BCE. Throughout this period, Iranians were in contact – and indeed intermingled – with peoples who had a very different approach to their deities, and for whom goddesses had firmly established roles. One might further surmise that the notion of a centrally important female deity, apparently alien to proto-Iranian religion, can be traced back to the Elamites, whose original supreme deity Pinikir was a goddess, through the Sumerian Inanna (Nanai) and the Babylonian Ištar to Anāhita.

The Sacrificial “Death”

The influences of Mesopotamian culture and rituals on the Indo-European Iranian-speaking tribes happened gradually. Perhaps the strongest example of this influence can be seen in the annual mourning ritual associated with the sacrificial “death” of the vegetation god Dumuzi in connection to the goddess Inanna. This ritual symbolized the annual regeneration of

³³ Frantz Grenet and Boris Ilich Marshak, “Le Mythe de Nana dans l’Art de la Sogdiane,” *Arts Asiatiques* 53 (1998): 8.

³⁴ Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 134.

³⁵ John M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1967), 88.

³⁶ Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 135.

nature and was thus centrally important to a Mesopotamian civilization which depended heavily on agriculture. One of the main components of the annual religious cycle connected with this myth was ritual mourning over the death of this divine lover, who was considered to have died a martyr.

The death of Dumuzi and his descent into the underworld symbolized winter, while his revival and return to the world signaled the coming of spring. Nevertheless, such mourning rituals, which involved much crying and sometimes self-flagellation and recurred every year, seem to have been borrowed from the Sumerian, Semitic, and Mediterranean cultures with which Iranians came into contact, along with the myths and mythical characters (specifically Ištar and Dumuzi) associated with these rituals. One of the main components of the annual ritual cycle connected with this myth was mourning and lamentations over the death of the divine son/lover, who was considered to have died the death of a martyr. Variations on this myth and its attendant rituals can be detected throughout subsequent Iranian history, from the *Šāh-nāmah* to Shi'ism.

As mentioned above, mourning and lamentations over the death of the vegetation god were very important. Women were prominent in these mourning ceremonies, wailing and beating themselves in grief in imitation of the goddess herself who had been deprived of her son/lover.³⁷ In particular, women's tears, being symbolic of water, were important. In ritual terms, the role of women in re-enacting the goddess's grief also helped her divine son/lover to return, their tears symbolizing the rain needed to bring the soil back to life. Groups of villagers with blackened faces, representing the martyred god, would appear to herald his return. In some cases, the villagers would wrap up a tree in a shroud, then raise it up and recite prayers and invocations.

These grief rituals, dramatic as they were, at the same time served as a kind of ushering in of the martyred god's subsequent rebirth.³⁸ At least some of the Iranian tribes who came into contact with the Mesopotamian peoples by the end of the second millennium BCE adopted these mourning ceremonies, which is strange since mourning is frowned upon in Zoroastrianism. The vegetation god embodied by Dumuzi in the Mesopotamian myth survived in Iran and Central Asia under the name Siyāvaš, especially in Bukhara where his cult was prominent. In Chorasmia and Sogdiana, where people worshipped Inanna under the name Nanai, the important role of the martyred vegetation deity Siyāvaš is not surprising. What seems likely in the case of Siyāvaš and the mourning rituals associated with him is that this influence from Mesopotamia had already entered Iranian culture (presumably via the trade routes) by the time of the composition of the *Avesta*.

In pre-Islamic Bukhara, every year a rooster would be sacrificed to Siyāvaš (or Dumuzi,

³⁷ Frantz Grenet, *Les Pratiques Funéraires dans l'Asie Centrale Sédentaire de la Conquête Grecque à l'Islamisation* (Paris: CNRS, 1984).

³⁸ Manya Saadi-Nejad, "Mythological Themes in Iranian Culture and Art: Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009).

as in the well-known mourning scene depicted on a wall painting from Pendjikent)³⁹ before dawn on the occasion of *Nōwruz*, the Iranian New Year.⁴⁰ The rooster is a sacred animal in Zoroastrian tradition, associated with Sraoša the god of wakefulness and prayer, and like the martyrdom of Siyāvaš/Dumuzi, its sacrifice was considered necessary for the re-birth of nature and for fertility in the new year. Siyāvaš was an important figure among both the nomadic Sakas and the settled Sogdians, and he came to be celebrated in some Iranian texts, most famously through his story in the Iranian national epic the *Šāb-nāmeb*. Even in present-day Iran, there are some mourning ceremonies (Sāvūšūn) which can be traced to Siyāvaš.⁴¹

Parallels among the different versions of this regeneration myth abound. In the mourning ceremony for the Greek god Adonis, devotees carried a tree, symbolizing and connecting Adonis to the vegetation deity. Similarly, in the story of Siyāvaš, following his murder, his blood pours into the soil, from which a plant later grows.

Nana and the Iranian Earth Goddess Spəntā Ārmaiti

One of the most important Iranian goddesses is Spəntā Ārmaiti – the abstract concept of “right-mindedness” and the spirit of the earth. An Indo-Iranian deity, she appears in the *Vedas* as Aramati, who is also associated with the earth. In her identification with the earth, she follows the old Indo-European mythological paradigm of “sky father-earth mother.” In Iranian myth, however, Ahurā Mazdā is “the father” only of the Iranian pantheon, whereas Vedic mythology preserves the older pairing in which *Dyaus-Pita* is the “Sky Father” who appears in conjunction with *Mata Prithvi*, “Mother Earth.” *Dyaus* is etymologically identical to the Greek *Zeus* and the Latin *Ju(piter)*. The goddess has been identified as the Sumerian goddess Nana.⁴² Azarpay proposes that Spəntā Ārmaiti was identified with Nana, and “the syncretic cult of Nanā-Ārmaiti was fairly widespread throughout the east Iranian world in early medieval times.”⁴³ If we accept this assertion, then it follows that Nana’s cult affected both of these two important Iranian goddesses, Ārmaiti and Anāhitā.

³⁹ Gabriele Rasuly-Palczek and Julia Katschnig, eds. *Central Asia on Display, Proceedings of the VII Conference of the European Society for Central Asian Studies, Vienna 2000*, vol. 2 (Reihe: Wiener Zentralasien Studien, 2005), 33-37.

⁴⁰ Katayūn Mazdāpūr, “Afsāneh-ye pari dar hezār va yek shab,” in *Šenāxt-e haviat-e zan-e irāni: Dar gostare-ye pish-tārīx va tārīx* [The Quest of Identity: The Image of Iranian Women in Prehistory and History], eds. Shahlā Lāhijī and Mehrangīz Kār (Tehran: Roshangarān, 2002).

⁴¹ Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun* (Washington, DC: Mage, 1990).

⁴² Katsumi Tanabe, “Nana on Lion: East and West in Sogdian Art,” *Oriens* 30/31 (1995): 309-334.

⁴³ Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 139.

Conclusion

Nana and Inanna, and later Ištar, were long assumed by scholars to be one goddess. Nana, as the patron deity of the Kušan Empire, was the head of the royal dynastic pantheon of Kaniška's time. The spread of Nana's cult from the southwest, especially at Uruk, Susa, and Kušan, as well as to the east within the pantheon of Bactria and over such vast distances shows her strong popularity. However, it is not clear whether these names (Nana/Inanna/Ištar) were originally applied to different goddesses – their resemblance being due merely to cultural exchanges – or whether they were counterparts of one ancient goddess. From one region to another, the specific identity of these goddesses, as well as their particular blend of functions, might have differed.

In the largely sedentary BMAC culture of southern Central Asia, the eminence of the goddess of waters and fertility – Nana, an imported variation of the Sumerian Inanna – strongly affected Iranian culture, in particular Anāhitā (and the Vedic Sārasvatī as well), giving them more prominence than the other Indo-European river goddesses. Mesopotamian civilization affected Iranian culture both directly through ongoing encounters between Iranians and Mesopotamians and indirectly through the Elamites. Like the Elamites, the ancient Mesopotamian peoples had a number of important goddesses whose roles and functions were slowly taken over by male deities with the passage of time. The Sumerian goddess Inanna and the Babylonian Ištar, who shared many similarities in their functions and associated rituals, are two examples of goddesses who held central importance in their respective societies. Many of their functions as well as their broad popular appeal appear to have been passed on to Anāhitā. Similarly, Inanna/Ištar was identified with the planet Venus, an association later inherited by Anāhitā.

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