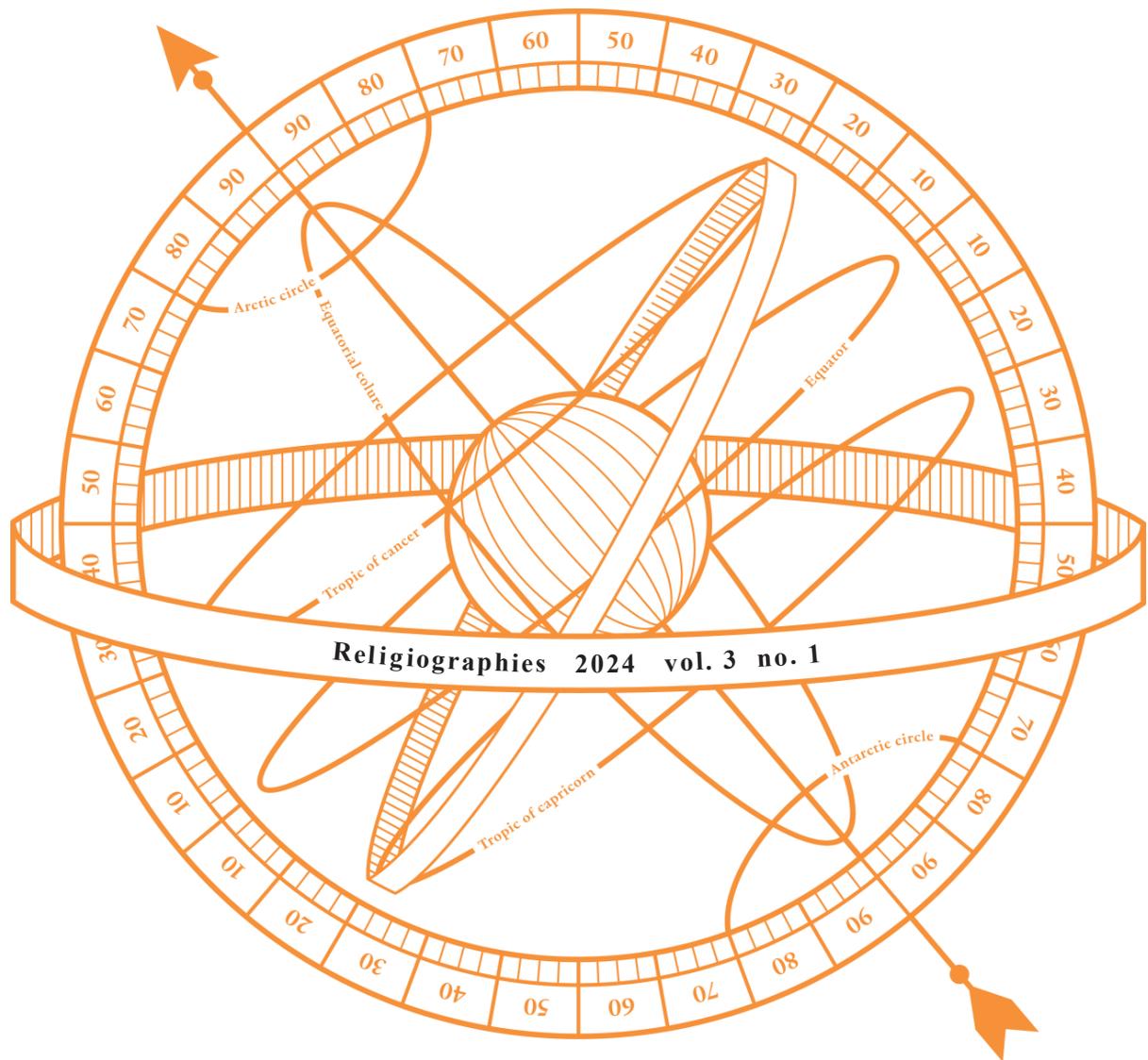


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The Mazdean Esoteric Dimension between Ritual and Theology

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Abstract

Zoroastrianism, as one of the oldest living religions in the world, presents a number of strictly archaic and initiatory characters, which emphasized the foundational role of the priestly college, specialized in the performative exercise of sacred oral poetry and its ritual use, and contemporarily charged with the mental and technical means to interplay with the gods in the daily and solemn sacrifices. The liturgy was the actual means through which it was possible not only to enter in direct connection with the gods invited to take part in the ritual, but also to promote the human sacerdotal college up to a higher dimension out of the mixed dimension of historical time. The power of the ritual thus elevated the priestly staff into an anticipation of the liberated time of the afterlife. The way through which the priests interplayed with the gods and on some occasions eventually represented and embodied them during the solemn liturgies, to which only strictly qualified members were admitted was, per se, hyper-esoteric. A number of Mazdean speculative categories created the theological framework for the philosophy of the liturgy. This was conceived as an uninterrupted chain of sacrificial events underpinning the order and the structure of the world and the teleology of time, thus protecting the life and the pillars of the positive creation against the anti-cosmic disorder of Ahreman, the evil spirit. The Zoroastrian tradition in its millennial history inevitably went through various phases in which some of its theological doctrines changed or engaged in adaptations, and apart from the decay suffered after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), it assumed new lines of development, which marked the history of a (now) minoritarian, sometimes even persecuted, community living within the framework of mainly Islamic- and Hindu-dominated societies. This socio-religious situation eventually produced some profound changes, but it did not destroy various basic elements of continuity underpinning its ancestral background. In modern times, mostly the Parsis and the Indian Zoroastrian community experienced new intellectual and spiritual trends in dialogue with modern western Esoteric movements in both the colonial and post-colonial eras.



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Introduction

Any theoretical attempt at description concerning the “esoteric” dimension proper of Zoroastrianism must include at least two strictly interconnected aspects, firstly the pragmatic and performative one and, secondly, its connections with the mythological and spiritual dimension. However, it would be sterile here to focus on the problem of the priority between myth and rite, or refresh the discussion about the meaninglessness of the rituals,¹ all issues that are very important, but which would divert the main scope of this contribution into abstractions, while it is possible to address all these matters directly by discussing the actual manifestation of the Mazdean image of the access to the sacred dimension and to a higher level of reality. As a necessary premise, I will consider “esoteric” as what concerns a “restricted” knowledge of spiritual matters, whose access needs a previous initiation, potentially including various steps or levels.² In this respect, all the mandatory training imposed upon the Indo-Iranian active members of the priestly class is *per se* restricted, and includes initiatory rituals, as an indispensable turning point. Non-initiated and lay persons were typically not given deeper access into the innermost doctrines of the faith.³ Furthermore, the priest must preserve his fitness for the rituals, and despite his relevant qualifications, he is obliged to follow some compulsory rules or he could lose his ritual power, becoming unfitting or inadequate for the liturgies. All these aspects, plus some other specifically sacerdotal activities connected with the sacrificial practice, mark the esoteric dimensions of the Zoroastrian religion, which preserves a number of very sophisticated pragmatic and theoretical characteristics that distinguish its tradition, and which I will try to discuss here.

The Priests

As already remarked, the priestly role was and is not accessible to every Zoroastrian and was not conceived of as just a vocational social function; on the contrary, this privilege belonged to a restricted social group, whose descendants, only if born from priestly parents, are worthy of the sacerdotal training and priestly initiation. This final step presupposes the normal initiation into the religions⁴ (*nawjot*), which is offered to all the full members of the community, but which has, hitherto, typically not been open to converts.⁵ In this respect, the Zoroastrian priests were (and are) a most selected social group within a (nominally) strictly endogamic community, where ethnic admixture was not impossible, but relatively rare, and in any case not particularly supported, at least at the highest social levels, if for political reasons alone. Even some aspects of the Zoroastrian doctrine concerning the justification of the *xwēdōdah*, or “the marriage within the family,” with all its subtle implications, contains a number of deep esoteric motivations, such as the desire for interrupting the time of the mixed condition of humanity (*gumēzišn*) by means of the reproduction of a divine hierogamy, the explicit acquisition of a higher knowledge, and the sole possession of an intrinsic anti-demonic force.⁶ In other words, this peculiar matrimonial custom cannot be studied as proof an intrinsic social deviance or as widespread manifestation of mental disease

*[Adopted Abbreviations: O.Ir. = Old Iranian; Av. = Avestan; M.P. = Middle Persian; Pahl = Pahlavi; Y. = *Yasna*; Yt. = *Yast*.]

1

Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1979): 2–22.

2

The variety of meanings associated with “esotericism” and currently employed in academic discourse emerged in nineteenth century Europe. Among them, Kocku von Stuckrad defines esotericism as a discourse claiming higher knowledge in a rhetoric of secrecy, also intended as specialized knowledge (K. von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 35, no. 2 [2005]: 78–97).

3

Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

4

Antonio Panaino, “Iniziazione e dimensione esoterica nella tradizione mazdaica,” in *Sulla soglia del sacro: Esoterismo e iniziazione nelle grandi religioni e nella tradizione massonica; Florence, dal 1° al 3 marzo 2002, Atti del convegno di studi*, ed. Antonio Panaino (Milano: Mimesis, 2002), 105–22.

5

Although the number of priests willing to perform the *nawjot* ceremony for children not descending from Zoroastrian parents has recently increased, this theological position still represents a minority, particularly in India amongst Parsis.

6

Maria Macuch, “Inzest im vorislamischer Iran,” *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 24 (1991): 141–54; Antonio Panaino, “The Liturgical Daēnā: Speculative Aspects of the Next-of-Kin Unions,” in *A Thousand Judgements: Festschrift for Maria Macuch*, ed. Almut Hintze, Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, and Claudius Naumann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 331–44.

(an unacceptable solution, which has been usually adopted by Muslim authorities in order to criminalize the Zoroastrian social background). Instead, it should be framed within a complex speculative elaboration of the human soul appearing under its dual, complementary aspects, one male and one female. Practically, these two metaphysical components will be recomposed in the afterlife through a highly symbolic theatrical meeting. It is important to observe that these are male and female parts of the soul, and that this duality does not concern the sexual gender of the dead persons, so that in the afterlife the meeting is the same for men and women.⁷ The existence of clearly esoteric rituals anticipating the vision of the afterlife, such as the one concerning the High Priest Kerdīr⁸ (see below), shows that the symbolic game, which occurs in the meeting between the *uruuan-* (Pahlavi *ruwān*) and the *daēnā*⁹ (Pahlavi *dēn*), i.e., the male and female souls, corresponds to a doctrine of the human transfiguration within a process of “spiritual” (in the sense of an event concerning the soul) re-composition. The mirroring process occurring in the union between these two innermost components of the soul is a sort of perfect reconstitution of the individual ipseity overcoming an alienation (in the sense of “separation”) of the masculine and feminine aspects of the human being. Thus, the union of these two spiritual elements has been fittingly interpreted by Kellens¹⁰ as a hierogamy, in which the process of reconstitution of the individual being is the precondition for the final access to an eschatological liberation. The present doctrine is intrinsically linked with the idea that even Ahura Mazda possesses his own *daēnā*-, which was offered to Yima as his own double or twin, and that Yima refuses to join in order to postpone his transfiguration before the fulfilment of the earth’s triplication and the construction of the *vara*-,¹¹ the mythical stronghold of primitive humanity. In other words, my interpretation of Yima’s behavior assumes that Yima was not rejecting the Mazdean religion (*daēnā*-), a wrong explanation because Ahura Mazda gives him the magic power of enlarging the earth instead of killing him immediately, but created a sort of initiatory challenge, in which the provisory refusal of the *daēnā*- was the precondition for assuming the challenging duty to be performed by him. In addition, the “eye” of the *dēn* was attributed some solar qualities, which emphasizes the power of her gaze in the meeting with her masculine counterpart.¹²

The Zoroastrian specialization of the priestly class through a long process of education, memorization of the texts and of the rituals, but also by means of a severe discipline in the preservation of ritual purity, possessed and tested to preserve through the centuries a mass of initiatory knowledge, considered indispensable for contributing to the maintenance of the Cosmic Order (*aša*), and the defense of the orderly cycle of life against the disruptive actions of Angra Mainiiu (Pahl. Ahreman) and the demons. The texts of *Yt.* 4.9 and *Yt.* 14.46,¹³ within the framework of a patently magical performance against the demons, contain a clear reference to the restricted transmission of these secret competences within the inner circle of the family, from father to son or from brother to brother, or from teaching priest to his pupil. The same *Yasna* should have been kept secret, as stated in the 2nd chapter of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn.*¹⁴ The need to control and reserve the access to a too specialized religious knowledge emerged in the sixth century CE,

7

Antonio Panaino, “The Souls of Women in the Zoroastrian Afterlife,” in *Studi iranici ravennati*, vol. 2, ed. Antonio Panaino, Andrea Piras, and Paolo Ognibene, *Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazur* 14 (Milano: Mimesis, 2017), 293–306.

8

Antonio Panaino, “Apocalittica, escatologia e sciamanismo nell’opera iranologica di Ph. Gignoux con una nota sulla ‘visione’ del mago Kirdēr,” in *Rabbo l’olmyn: Florilège offert à Philippe Gignoux pour son 80^e anniversaire (Maître pour l’éternité)*, ed. Rika Gyselen and Christelle Jullien, *Studia Iranica: Cahier* 43 (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 2011), 205–43; Antonio Panaino, “The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr,” in *Afarin Nameh: Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar*, ed. Yousef Moradi (Tehran: The Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2019), 179–88.

9

Jean Kellens, “L’âme entre le cadavre et le paradis,” *Journal asiatique* 283 (1995): 19–56.

10

Jean Kellens, 19–56.

11

Antonio Panaino, “Mortality and Immortality: Yama’s/Yima’s Choice and the Primordial Incest,” in *Disputationes Iranologicae Vindobonenses*, vol. 2, ed. Velizar Sadovski and Antonio Panaino, *Mythologica Indo-Iranica* 1, *Sitzungsberichte der ÖAW: Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 845, *Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik* 65 (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 47–221; Antonio Panaino, “Yima ed il ‘rifiuto’ della *daēnā*-. Ovvero dell’incestualità, della beatitudine e della morte tra ambigui ostacoli e seducenti trasparenze,” in *Démons iraniens: Actes du colloque international organisé à l’Université de Liège les 5 et 6 février 2009 à l’occasion des 65 ans de Jean Kellens*, ed. Philippe Swennen (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2015), 98–123.

12

Antonio Panaino, “The Solar ‘Eye’ of the Dēn,” in *Kratér: Corpi di luce; Trasfigurazioni e altri fotismi nelle tradizioni mistiche dell’Eurasia*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Verucchio: Pazzini, 2022), 49–65; Samra Azarnouche and Olivia Rample, “La vision zoroastrienne, les yeux dans les yeux: Commentaire sur la dēn selon Dēnkard III.225,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 237, no. 3 (2020): 331–95.

13

Antonio Panaino, “Some remarks upon the initiatic transmission in Later Avesta,” in *Ātaš-e Dorun: The Fire Within; Jamshid Soroush Sourushian Memorial Volume*, vol. 2, *Assembled Papers on History and Culture of Ancient Iran in Commemoration of the Life of Jamshid Soroush Sourushian 1914–1999*, ed. Carlo Giovanni Cereti and Farrokh Vajifdar (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2003), 333–42.

under the kingdom of Xusraw I, in particular after the socially subversive Mazdakite revolt, and this political decision produced a strong restriction of the direct knowledge of the texts and rituals by non-priests and non-highly initiated persons.

Thus, the rituals and their interconnected enactment, eventually recurring in terms of an expansion of the ceremonial complexity allowing for the creation of longer and more solemn liturgies, represented a weapon against evil, whose basic core was attributed to the combination of the *maθra-* (= Vedic *mantra-*) of the priests (each one acting as a living embodiment of the prayers), and the performance of a series of ceremonies around the fire (*ātar-*), as the most important means of intermediation between humans and divinities. Of course, not only were the priests considered capable of speaking with the gods, because the *pater familias* was attributed some domestic ceremonies, and even female priests were potentially allowed to support the rituals, but the main power of the (male) priests was placed in their high qualification to enact and perform the main ceremonies indispensable for the community and the individuals. They had the whole package of secret knowledge allowing the access to another, higher level of reality, the one accessed through the ritual, in which, at a certain moment, it was possible not only to stay in the presence of the divinities, but also to behave as them. Connected with the power of the *maθra-* is the importance conferred upon the oral dimension, which distinguished the liturgy, whose performance was historically conducted without the support of books¹⁵ thanks to a special mastery of the oral competence in the recitation of long texts, a kind of competence, which has progressively decayed. Presently, the priests, during the performance of longer or special liturgies, read the sacred texts from books, sometimes even in Gujarati characters.

Other kinds of rituals can be mentioned, such as the one performed by Ardā Wirāz¹⁶ in order to journey into the afterlife, implying a state of trance and certain shamanic abilities. We cannot exclude the presence of ritual esoteric traditions performed by Zoroastrian members of other social functions, in particular by the warriors. One case concerns the special self-sacrifice of Ǝrəxša, whose traces can be detected in later sources,¹⁷ and whose death is directly connected with the salvific shot of the arrow that rescued Aryan independence from the Turanians.¹⁸ Another example concerning the performance of magical actions concerning the use of throwing weapons is attested within the cycle of Spandiad.¹⁹

The Magi

The clergy of the Magi (O.P. *magu-*) was responsible for the ritual within the Western Achaemenid space,²⁰ although their presence in the Avestan liturgical texts is debated, and if attested, was perhaps negative. In any case this community gained a strong role, and in the Sasanian period the main denomination of the priests was that of *moy/mow*, *mobad*.²¹ This fact confirms a certain continuous interaction between the Zoroastrian clergy and other religious communities. The suggestion²² that the Mazdean Achaemenid clergy was involved in a mixed liturgy, with Iranian and Elamite cults, is based on administrati-

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Carlo Giovanni Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalyptic*, Serie Orientale Roma 75 (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995), 133–34, 150; Kianoosh Rezaia, “Mazdakism and the Canonisation of Pahlavi Translations of the Avestan Texts,” in *The Transmission of the Avesta*, ed. Alberto Cantera, Iranica 20 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 479–94; Maria Macuch, “Mazdakite Heresy and Esotericism within the Framework of the Late Zoroastrian Tradition,” in *Dādestān ī Dēnīg: Festschrift for Mahmoud Jaafaru-Dehaghi*, ed. Amin Shayeste Doust (Tehran: Farhang-i Mu’āsir, 2022), 215–63.

15

Antonio Panaino “Books without Ritual-Ritual without Books: The Mazdean Approach to the Divine Liturgy between Literacy and Orality; A Reversed History of Avestan and Sasanian Scholarship,” in *Sasanian Iran in the context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaei, Ancient Iran Series 6 (Irvine: UCI Jordan Center for Persian studies, 2018), 79–106.

16

Philippe Gignoux, *Le livre d’Ardā Vīrāz: Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi*, Bibliothèque iranienne 30, Recherche sur les civilisations: Cahiers 14 (Paris: Editions recherche sur les civilisations, 1984).

17

Antonio Panaino, “Ǝrəxša’s self-sacrifice: Tradition or Innovation?,” *Historia i Świat* 10, no. 1 (2021): 15–42.

18

Antonio Panaino, *Philobiblos: Scritti in onore di Giovanni Geraci*, ed. Alice Bencivenni et al., Antiquitas: Saggi 4 (Milano: Jouvence, 2019), 19–66.

19

Andrea Piras, “Spandyad’s lance and Message: Some Remarks about the Imagery of Shooting Weapons,” in *Studi iranici ravennati* 2, ed. Antonio Panaino and Andrea Piras, Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazura (Milano: Mimesis, 2018), 231–42. For the interaction with other magical traditions see Antonio Panaino, “Magic i. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, accessed April 14, 2024, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-i-magical-elements-in-the-avesta-and-nerang-literature>.

20

Antonio Panaino, “Erodoto, i Magi e la storia religiosa iranica,” in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich (Herodotus and the Persian Empire)*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Birgitte Truschneegg, and Reinhold Bichker, Classica et Orientalia 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 343–70; Bruce Lincoln, “From Ritual Practice to Esoteric Knowledge: The Problem of the Magi,” in *Religion, Culture, and Politics in Pre-Islamic Iran:*

ve data coming from Persepolis, which do not preserve any ceremonial documentation, and whose relevance is, per se, irrelevant for such a bold solution which assumes a new synthetic cult of which no witness survives in the later period.²³ The Magi played an enormous role in intercultural relations with Western cultures, and their role is frequently mentioned in Classical literature,²⁴ where Zoroaster became a member of their clergy. Thanks to this reception, which emphasized both positive and negative characters of the Magi,²⁵ a group of them (most frequently three, but also twelve in some Oriental sources) appear in the Christian nativity at Bethlehem, where, according to some Greek and Arabic sources, they were sent by Cyrus the Great to worship Jesus (see below). Western speculations about the Magi and their art of magic, contributed to maintaining a long focus on them and Zoroaster till the Renaissance and beyond, creating some further references in Western esotericism (see below). Ritual and esoteric traditions were kept by the western Zoroastrian clergy, and they are still visible in some documents concerning the Sasanian High Priest Kerdīr (see below).

The Esoteric Dimension of the Liturgy

In this section there is no need to describe in its particular aspects the fine articulations of the Mazdean ceremonies, but it would be important to emphasize their intrinsic esoteric character.²⁶ First of all, the access to the ritual was (and is) restricted, only to the initiated priests who can stay within the (small) ritual space in the presence of the burning consecrated fire. Although, in early times, and within the context of official ceremonies of political relevance in Sasanian times, we cannot exclude public performances with a great number not only of priests but also of authorities and other (initiated) people. In early times, rituals on the peaks of mountains were common.²⁷ The *Yasna*, which was the basic (and relatively most simple) ceremony, is anticipated by some introductory rituals, such as the *paragra* or *paragnā*. This ritual concerns the preparation of the *parahaōma* (i.e., a liquid obtained by pressing small branches of *haōma*- crushed with pomegranate leaves, infused, and then strained through the fur of a sacrificial ox, sometimes also mixed with water (*zaōθra*-; Pahl. *abzohr*) but without milk) and then that of the proper *haōma*-, whose functions derive from a pre-Zoroastrian, i.e., an Indo-Iranian ancestral tradition (cf. Vedic *soma*-). These preparations also include the collection of other implements and tools for the main ceremony. We may recall that there is not only a second preparation of the *haōma*-juice, which takes place from *Y.* 22 and continues until 27.12, but there is also a third pressing which starts at *Y.* 33.4.

The *Yasna* includes a series of formulations, which correspond to the Vedic *nividas*-, i.e., the invocations (cf. Av. *niuuaēdaiieimi*) to the divinities to take part in the ritual banquet,²⁸ and which survive also in the Sogdian tradition (*nw'yδ*, “to invite”). The ceremony thus included an archaic invitation to come “down” (*ni^o*) in order to “see” (*vid*-), although extended only to some gods, whilst excluding the demons and other dangerous and malevolent powers. The center of the ritual lies in the recitation of the Gāōic sections and in particular of the *Yasna Hap-tanhāiti*, during whose performance, it was possible, at least according

Collected Essays, Ancient Iran Series 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 321–42.

21

Antonio Panaino, “Parthian *moy* and Middle Persian *moy/mow* in Light of Earlier Eastern and Western Iranian Sources,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 25, no. 3 (2021): 252–71.

22

Wouter Henkelman, *The Other Gods who are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2008).

23

Antonio Panaino, “I Magi secondo G. Messina e H. Lommel nella riflessione critica di R. Pettazzoni: Nota in margine ad un’antica discussione,” in *Il mistero che rivelato ci divide e sofferto ci unisce: Studi pettazzoniani in onore di Mario Gandini*, ed. Gian Pietro Basello, Paolo Ognibene, and Antonio Panaino, *Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazur* 6, Supplemento speciale a *Strada maestra* (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), 365–86.

24

Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés: Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d’après la tradition grecque*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938).

25

Antonio Panaino, “Aspetti della complessità degli influssi interculturali tra Grecia e Iran,” in *Grecia Maggiore: Intrecci culturali con l’Asia nel periodo arcaico: Atti del simposio in occasione del 75 anniversario di Walter Burkert*, ed. Christoph Riedweg (*Graecia Maior: Kulturaustausch mit Asien in der archaischen Periode; Akten des Symposiums aus Anlass des 75. Geburtstages*, ed. Walter Burkert), *Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana* 30 (Basel: Schwabe, 2009), 19–53.

26

It would be useful to clarify that this is a reconstruction based on the study of texts and on the knowledge of the rituals still preserved today in the living Zoroastrian tradition, but we must remark that, nowadays, some of the liturgies are not performed in the earlier extended forms, or in the same way as they were even a few decades prior.

27

Antonio Panaino, “Sacertà delle montagne e metafisica della luce nella cosmografia iranica mazdaica,” in *La Montagna cosmica*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Milano: Medusa, 2010), 43–67.

28

Antonio Panaino, *Rite, parole et pensée dans l’Avesta ancien et récent: Quatre leçons au Collège de France (Paris, 7, 14, 21, 18 mai 2001)*, édité par Velizar Sadovski avec la collaboration rédactionnelle de Sara Circassia, *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 716* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften,

to the direction preserved in the *Nērangestān* (47.19), to put to sleep the sacrificial animal. This action was the special duty of a single priest, named *pasuuāzah-*, “the (priest) who must accompany the animal (to the sacrifice),” who was installed with the formula *pasuuāzayhəm āstaiia*: “I ritually install the *pasuuāzah*-priest.” Certainly, the idea of offering something of the living, such as the breath of the animal to the invited divinities, was one relevant aspect of this divine meeting, although it was possible to substitute the atonement of the animal by means of symbolic offerings of meat or vegetables to the fire, which maintains its central role, as a powerful divinity, considered the son of Ahura Mazdā himself. The sacrificial violence, in any case, was controlled and moderated. The Zoroastrians of Iran, as those of India, are no vegetarians, so that the killing of animals must be consecrated, according to the tradition. We may underline the fact that there is no evidence that the Zoroastrians refused or abolished the sacrifice of animals,²⁹ but simply moderated its violence and ritual practice. The animal consecration, for instance, was and is necessary also for other kinds of food by means of the *čāsni* ritual, concerning the partaking of the liturgical bread, named in Pahlavi *drōn* or later *darun*.³⁰ Furthermore, we must register a contrite attitude toward the treatment of animals, not only in the way of atonement and putting them to sleep (which was very carefully done in order to avoid excessive pain), but through the act of giving them a kiss of sorrow on their left cheek, just as the ancient Indians tried to “humanize” the act of killing.³¹ The relevance of the bread and its particular arrangement and preparation seems to find a certain echo in the sixth column of the Papyrus of Derveni, a very intriguing Greek text probably belonging to the fifth century BC, where the *Μάγοι* were apparently involved.³² In this text, the preparation of ceremonial cakes full of bumps is prescribed, and some scholars, such as Russell³³ and Tsantsanoglou,³⁴ have compared these cakes with the Mazdean ritual bread known as *drōn*.

The Fire and the Divine World

The sacrificial fire is a transcendental force, whose power is activated and multiplied during the ritual within a process of liturgical empowerment, particularly relevant in the context of the *Yasna Haptānhaiti*, where the divine and the earthly fire join together, while this form of assimilation decreases before the conclusion of the *yasna*. Certainly, the ritual maintains its central meaning as the axis of the world around which the liturgy rotates. Noteworthy is the fact that the fire is named in *Y. 36.2 nāmišta-*, “most honorable,” an epithet whose deep meaning can be explained again within the framework of an earlier Indo-Iranian ritual doctrine, where the fire, called in the Vedic tradition *agni-yājiṣtha-*, “the best sacrificial fire,” assumed the role of high priest, the *hótr-puróhita-*. This observation, originally expressed by Theodor Baunack³⁵ and later developed by Helmut Humbach,³⁶ states that the fire can assume at the same time a priestly and divine function, active and passive, a solution that fits into a conceptual scheme, in which the human ritual is a liturgy where the gods are actively present, because they are not only represented by the priests or by the ingredients of the sacrifice (such as fire itself, *haōma-*, etc.), but where also the priests’

2004), 45–47.

29

Alberto de Jong, “Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Zoroastrianism: A Ritual and its Interpretations,” in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, ed. Albert I. Baumgartner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 127–48.

30

J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and the Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: British India Press, 1922), 298–99.

31

Antonio Panaino, “*aētasa.tē ātarə zaōθrā*: On the Mazdean Animal and Symbolic Sacrifices; Their Problems, Timing and Restrictions,” in *Aux sources des liturgies indo-iraniennes*, ed. Céline Redard et al. (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2020), 119–63.

32

Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 170n78; Antonio Panaino, “Aspetti della complessità degli influssi interculturali tra Grecia e Iran,” 19–53, 37–38.

33

James Russell, “The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus,” *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 1, no. 1 (2001): 49–59, 54–55.

34

Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou, “The first Columns of the Derveni papyrus and their Religious Significance,” in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, ed. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 93–128, 114–115.

35

Theodor Baunack, “Der Yasna Haptānhāiti,” in *Studien auf dem Gebiete des griechischen und der arischen Sprachen*, ed. Johann Baunack and Theodor Baunack (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1886–1888), 303–463, 365.

36

Helmut Humbach, “Gathisch-awestischen Verbalformen,” *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* 9 (1956): 66–78, 77.

bodies are, in turn, inhabited by the gods to which they correspond. So, the relation between the visible, physical fire, which is very close, practically at hand in the sacrifice, and the *mainiiu- spāništa-*, “the most incremental spirit,” does not only represent an incarnation of the divine fire in the ritual one, but is also another demonstration of the double articulation of reality and existence, probably expressed in a very archaic way: the fire of the sacrifice is the fire of Ahura Mazda himself, and it is hot, red, and dangerous, if one is unworthy of him; it is physical, but it also represents the *mainiiu- spāništa-* of the god, his visible form in the ritual.³⁷ The living reality has thus been finally re-united with the active mental one, and the distinction between these different levels does not exist either. At this point, the ritual has achieved its goal. In conclusion, we can affirm that the fire in this process of identification with the *mainiiu- spāništa-*, but also in its close relationship with the *manah-*, “the mind,” which is intrinsically *vohu-*, “good,” (see *Y.* 46.7), confirms the particularity of the Mazdean speculative vision of the liturgical sacred space and its ritual functions. This is a space in which reality gives access to a different, higher dimension, which is opened just when the gods come to the sacrifice, and the priests become the gods whom they represent. Life and existence in reality share the physical world (or “the one which has bones,” [OAv. *astuuant-*; YAv. *gaēiθiiauu-*; Pahlavi *gētīg*]) and that which is referred to as “of the thought, mental” (OAv. *manahiia-*; Yav. *mainiiauu-*; Pahlavi *mēnōg*). The sacrifice becomes the moment of reunification, of synthesis, between these two dimensions. There, the fire, which is physical, but obviously has no bones, is the visible manifestation of Ahura Mazda’s thought-force and wrath. He is alive as material fire, but his materiality can be evidently perceived as divine, or better, as the wrath of god.³⁸ It is also clear that this is not a form of idolatry of the fire, but with a speculative ritual³⁹ in which the fire is the divine mediator between two worlds—the corporeal and the mental.

The meeting with Ahura Mazda and the other divine forces is activated thanks to the enactment of a correct ceremonial performance, without procedural mistakes of practice and of an oral nature, so that the priest who makes serious mistakes corrupting the efficacy of the ceremony can be severely disqualified. The idea of the ritual as a sort of active force field, which can be pierced and penetrated by evil antagonists, is common to the Indo-Iranian world, and special priests such as the Vedic *adhvaryu-* or the Avestan *sraōšauuarəza-*, within the framework of the solemn liturgies, were responsible for the control of the correct development of the liturgy and for the immediate enactment of magic reparations against mistakes. Recent studies confirm the importance of this priest,⁴⁰ particularly within the framework of the long liturgy, where he had special recitative duties. We must also consider that, if any sacrifice or ceremony contributes to the inner solidity of the natural development of life and the world, it can be damaged or even destroyed by demonic actions, particularly if the priests are not sufficiently qualified and prepared, and especially if they make mistakes, or celebrate in erroneous conditions or times. For instance, nocturnal rituals were particularly risky, because the darkness enforced negative and demonic forces, so that Avestan texts, such as *Yt.* 5.94-95 insist on the fact that the libations offered to Anāhitā after sunset do not sa-

37

Antonio Panaino, “Le Feu dans la littérature vieille-aveistique,” in *Cours et travaux du Collège de France: Résumé 2011–2012*, Annuaire du Collège de France 112 (Paris: Collège de France, 2013), 861–64.

38

Antonio Panaino, “Le Feu dans la littérature vieille-aveistique,” 861–64.

39

Clarisse Herrenschmidt and Jean Kellens, “La question du rituel dans le mazdéisme ancien et achéménide,” *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* 85 (1994): 45–67.

40

Alberto Cantera, “The *sraōšauuarəza*-priest and the Usage of the *sraōš-barišnīh* in the Greater Long Liturgy,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 31, no. 3, (2021): 479–514.

tisfy the goddess, but gratify the demons (*daēuuas*). These nocturnal offerings probably constituted a daēvic practice, as it results from the Avestan and Pahlavi text of *V. 7.79*.⁴¹ A condition of impurity⁴² or any pollution disables the powers of priests, and they must be liturgically re-qualified with a purification ritual, named *Baršnūmgāh*, which follows some complex rules, full of triadic esoteric symbolism, and takes nine days and nights.⁴³



Partial view of the disposition of the *Baršnūmgāh*, according to the present performance of the ceremony, in the Cama Baug Fire Temple of Bombay. Visual access to this space was granted thanks to the kind permission of the High Priest Vada Dastur Keki Ravji Meherjirana. Photograph @ A. Panaino, January 21, 2024.

We should also consider that some mental operations enforcing the vision of the CinuuaṭBridge (“the Bridge of the accumulator,” which becomes manifest only in the afterlife) and the union with the *daēnā*- of the sacrificers must take place in the emerging light of the sun or after sunrise, in particular towards the end of the nocturnal *Widēwdād-sāde* ceremony. If we also consider that this liturgy had extraordinary importance during the ceremonies in favor of the souls of the departed, such as those celebrated after the third day following death, we may

41

Antonio Panaino, “*aētasə.tē ātarə zaōθrā*: On the Mazdean Animal and Symbolic Sacrifices,” 119–63.

42

Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

43

Antonio Panaino, “The Triadic Symbolism of Yima’s *vara*- and Related Structures and Patterns,” in *Yama/Yima: Variations indo-iraniennes sur le geste mythique (Variations on the Indo-Iranian Myth of Yama/Yima)*, ed. Samra Azarnouche and Céline Redard, Collège de France: Publications de l’Institut de civilisation indienne 81 (Paris: Édition-Diffusion De Boccard, 2012), 111–30.

better appreciate the rich symbolic implications of these rituals. With a special function connected with the rising of the sun and the support of the soul marching toward the Cinuat Bridge, a special role was attributed to the *sraōšauuarəza*-priest, whose sacred animal was the cock, and whose crow announces a new day and summons the diligent priest to resume his sacerdotal works. In the course of funerary ceremonies, such as the *čaharōm* (the ritual accompanying the souls of the departed after the third day of mourning in his/her final journey to the Cinuat Bridge), these priests probably assumed special functions, and in the Central Asiatic iconography on funeral monuments (such as that of Xi'an), bird-priests were engraved, their appearance mixing human characteristics with bird wings and claws.⁴⁴

One of the most speculative moments of the sacrifice can be identified not only in the idea that the ritual opens a path along which gods and humans meet around the ritual fire and take part in a spiritual banquet, but also in the doctrine that the priests in this way have access to a superior vision and have the privilege to experience a brief, but intense, moment of liberation from the mixed dimension of the historical world, in which good and bad forces violently struggle. Within the categorization of the double dimension of existence, between *mēnōg* and *gētīg* (two dimensions which are not in opposition, but are complementary), the liturgy offers to a “living” being, as the priest is, the opportunity to obtain a provisory access to a condition of liberation, which will become permanent only in the afterlife and with the final liberation of the evil from the world. In this respect, the ritual does not only create a proper time, but at a certain point gets out from the historical continuum, and enters in a different supermundane dimension, without recurring towards a loss of conscience, but by means of an enforcement of the “mental sight” (*mēnōg-wēnišnīh*; see below). Very interesting is also the Indo-Iranian concept of ritual interiorization,⁴⁵ in which the priest (cf. even Zoroaster in *Y.* 33.14) offers his own *uruuan*- or other parts of his soul or body (such as the *uštāna*-, “the animation,” the *frauuaši*-, “the (pre-existing) chosing forth soul,” the *ast*-, “the bones”), in a way that can be compared with the tradition of the *ātmayajña*-, “self-sacrifice,”⁴⁶ through which the sacrificing priest offers as a gift his own body or his soul in order to create a new celestial body, worthy of the presence of the gods.

A debated subject, which is strictly related to the esoteric dimension, concerns the interpretation of the state of *maga*-, *m*. (but cf. Vedic *maghá*-, *n*.), a semantically tantalizing Avestan stem, whose interpretation remains most controversial and debated,⁴⁷ and which Gherardo Gnoli⁴⁸ interpreted as a technical term referring to a particular mental state of the officiating priest, in which he obtains through the ritual performance a separation of the psychic and spiritual part of his own self from the physical one. His is a sort of mystic visionary sight (but without loss of conscience), conferred on the priests in their quality of *magavan*- (cf. Vedic *maghāvan*-), so that they promote their own “mental” force and can make a direct experience of the new existence liberated from evil, as if they were in the final *frašgird*. This explanation has been criticized by Hanns-Peter Schmidt,⁴⁹ who prefers to remain within the limits of the exchange of gifts between priests and divinities. The discussion is very complex, and it cannot be resumed

44

Frantz Grenet, Penelope Riboud, and Yang Junkai, “Zoroastrian Scenes on a Newly Discovered Sogdian Tomb in Xi'an, Northern China,” *Studia Iranica* 33, no. 2 (2004): 273–84; Antonio Panaino, “Mimesis e rito: I preti alati del cerimoniale mazdaico,” *Bizantinistica* 16 (2014–2015): 41–61.

45

Antonio Panaino, *Rite, parole et pensée dans l'Avesta ancien et récent*; Antonio Panaino, “Aspects of the ‘Interiorization’ of the Sacrifice in the Zoroastrian Tradition,” in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg, *Studies in History of the Religions* 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 233–52.

46

Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996), 57–58. Charles Malamoud, *Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris: La découverte, 1989), 60–65.

47

Ilya Gershevitch, “A Helping Hand from Central Asia,” in *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1996), 49–75.

48

Gherardo Gnoli, “Lo stato di ‘maga,’ ” *Annali dell'Istituto universitario orientale di Napoli*, n.s., 15 (1965): 105–17.

49

Hanns-Peter Schmidt, “Gathic *maga* and Vedic *maghá*,” in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute International Congress Proceedings: 5th to 8th January, 1989* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1991), 220–39.

here in detail: we can recall Gykiō Itō's⁵⁰ hypothesis that the basic meaning of this word could be "divine power," which does not seem to me to be too far-fetched, and the fresh studies by Almut Hintze,⁵¹ who has carefully analyzed the triangular exchange between gods, priests, and the patron of the ritual.

The esoteric character of the ritual is also emphasized from the evidence, well underlined by Jean Kellens,⁵² that with the end of the recitation of the *frauarānē* in *Y. 12*, the priest who assumes the function of *zaōtar-* actually "constitutes" his own *daēnā-*, while the members of the priestly order eventually cooperating in the realization of the ceremony, all become with him *saōšiiant-s* ("the ones who are destined to swell"), and then can take part in a (provisory) transfiguration. The basic idea seems to be the assumption that the *daēnā-s* of the *saōšiiant-s* (here corresponding to the priests officiating in the liturgy) journey along the ritual path (*paθ-/aduuān-*), their purposes being that of the possession of the *mižda-*, n., "reward," or "the price of victory." Thus, the symbolic mirroring game imagined for the afterlife meeting of the *uruuān-* and his corresponding *daēnā-* is clearly anticipated in the speculative dimension of the ritual, where the priests have the privilege of activating their own *daēnā-* within the ceremony. The transformation of the priests into an *alter ego* of the eschatological *saōšiiant-*, the third posthumous son of Zoroaster, the one named *Astuuat.ərəta* (*Yt. 19.92*), with his companions (*Yt. 19.95*), is one of the most important potential aspects of the ritual. He is expected to perform the main *frašō.kərəti-*, i.e., "the act of making excellent (the creation)," and to install the great sacrifice of the world transfiguration. He will also start the process of human resurrection (*Yt. 19.89-90*). In this case, we can observe that a mythological scenario concerning the final turn of the human existence is strictly connected with a ritual performance that can be repeated each time during the ceremonies, whose role props up the columns of the world order. As will be easier to see below, the performers of the liturgies (i.e., the priests) play a foundational role, which does not only contribute to the maintenance of life and its roots, but who interplay with the divinities in a mimetic correspondence of interactions, whose final result will be concretized in the final *apokatastasis*. We must note that the order of birth of the three posthumous sons of Zoroaster is reversed with respect to the prophet's emission of his sperm (in the water of the *Kāsaoya* sea) during the sexual intercourse with his third wife. It is possible that this sexual union, although mythological, was conceived as a kind of ritual ceremony, because the emission and deposition of the seed was not due to a mistake, but, rather, followed a rule and a specific eschatological purpose. If not a proper ritual, there was at least an idea behind it.

The Ritual Mimesis

The installation of the ritual priestly college with its seven assistants directed by their ritual leader, i.e., the *zaōtar-*, corresponding to the Vedic *hotṛ-*, constitutes one of the highest moments of the ceremonial complexity of the archaic Mazdean rituals, whose performance shows some impressive theatrical aspects. It is important to observe that some Zoroastrian ceremonies, after the earlier fusion of the Gāthic ma-

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Gykiō Itō, "On Yasna 51:16," *Orient* 23 (1987): 1–21.

51

Almut Hintze, *Lohn im Indoiranischen: Eine Semantische Studie Des Rigveda und Avesta*, Beiträge zur Iranistik Band 20 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000); Almut Hintze, " 'Do ut des': Patterns of Exchange in Zoroastrianism; A Memorial Lecture for Ilya Gershevitch," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 14, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

52

Jean Kellens, Résumé of the lecture delivered by Jean Kellens on the 20th January 2012, on the website of the Collège de France (2012).

terials, which was reasonably older (at least from the linguistic point of view) and the so-called Young (or Later) Avestan sections of the *Yasna*, include a number of liturgical extensions, specifically adopted in certain calendrically fitting occasions or under some special conditions. These solemn ceremonies, which can be equally denominated as Solemn Liturgies, are not simply added to the end of the basic *Yasna*, as an entire separated corpus, but are intercalated within its divisions (in particular among the sections of the individual *Gāθās*) in order to create a sort of sandwiched structure in which some chapters of the *Yasna* are followed by a chapter of the *Wisprad*, followed by the *Fragards* (sections) of the *Widēwdād*. These special sequences can be easily deduced from the liturgical (*sāde* “pure”) manuscripts, where the textual development of the ceremony is fully presented (with the additions of some ritual directions) in its performative course.⁵³ Originally, these ceremonies compellingly prescribed the presence and the cooperation of a larger sacerdotal staff, basically with the eight participating ritual actors mentioned earlier. These assistant priests should be installed within a ceremony starting with the intercalation of *Wisprad* 3.1-2 [= *VrS.* 11.9-12], which occurs just after *Yasna* 11 (more precisely, *Wisprad* 3.1-5 is intercalated between *Yasna* 11.8 and *Yasna* 11.9). A leading priest, probably corresponding to the *zaōtar-*, or to another of the priests who were previously consecrated in an immediately preceding *Yasna*, assumed the duty of installing these assistants, who, one after the other must come to the ritual place and declare they are ready to accept their own ritual functions. The authority of the installing priest was probably connected with the idea, preserved in the later Parsi sacerdotal speculations, about the ritual power. Amongst the more recent Zoroastrian priesthood we find concepts such as those of *mōt ī khūb*, “great ritual power,” which is retained for three days and nights, while the *nānī khūb*, “small ritual power” is active only up to the dawn of the following day.⁵⁴ Certainly, the priest responsible for the installation had to possess the powerful qualifications for the proper installation of the full sacerdotal college.

The following assistants were installed:⁵⁵

(zōt) <i>hāuuanānəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>hāuuanān-</i> (the pressing- <i>haōma</i> -priest).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>ātrauuaxšəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>ātrauuaxša-</i> (the fire-lighting-priest).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>frabərətārəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>frabərətār-</i> (the priest presenting [the offering]).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>ābərətəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>ābərət-</i> (the [water]-bringing-priest).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>āsnatārəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>āsnatār-</i> (the washer-priest).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>raēθβiškarəm āstāiia</i>	“I install the <i>raēθβiškara-</i> (the mingler-priest).”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”
(zōt) <i>sraōšāuuarəzəm āstāiia dāhištəm aršuuacastəməm</i>	“I install the <i>sraōšāuuarəza-</i> (the priest who practices the obedience), the most talented one, having the most correct words.”
(<i>rāspī</i>) <i>azəm vīsāi</i>	“I am ready!”

53

Alberto Cantera, *Vers une édition de la liturgie longue zoroastrienne: Pensées et travaux préliminaires*, Studia Iranica: Cahier 51 (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des Etudes Iraniennes, 2014); Alberto Cantera, “A Substantial Change in the Approach to the Zoroastrian Long Liturgy: About J. Kellens’ *Études avestiques et mazdéennes*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 59, no.2 (2016): 139–85.

54

J. J. Modi, *The religious Ceremonies and the Customs of the Parsees*, 91, 120, 140; Firoze M. Kotwal and James W. Boyd, *A Persian Offering: The Yasna*, Studia Iranica: Cahier 8 (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 1991), 63-64n6, 85n68.

55

Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux: Aux origines indo-iraniennes d’une tradition mimétique; Mythologica Indo-Iranica* 2, Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études: Sciences Religieuses 164 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022).

These assistants play the following actions:⁵⁶

- 1) the *hāuuanān-* must squeeze the *haōma-* and handle the pestle in a downward motion (*N.* 54.3);
- 2) the *ātrauuaxša-* must kindle the fire, purify its three sides, and respond to the *zaōtar-* (*N.* 55.1-2);
- 3) the *frabərətar-* must purify the remaining side of the fire, bring the *barəsmān-* and approach the fire with it according to the requirements of the liturgy and still pronounce the *Yasna* (*N.* 56.1-2);
- 4) the *āsnātar-* must wash the *haōma-* and filter it (*N.* 57.1-2);
- 5) the *raēθβiškara-* must mix the *haōma-* with milk and distribute it (*N.* 58.1);
- 6) the *ābərət-* (also called **dānuuuaza-* “the carrier (of water) of the river” in *N.* 64.3) must bring water (*N.* 59.1);
- 7) finally, the *sraōšāuuarəza-* must supervise all these activities (*N.* 59.1).

The present articulation of the solemn priestly college in eight plus one priest has an earlier background, because it finds a parallel functional structure in the Vedic ritual tradition, where we find seven priests cooperating under the direction of the *hotṛ-*. As shown by Hertha Krick,⁵⁷ they were the *hóṭṛ-*, the *póṭṛ-*, the *néṣṭṛ-*, the *agnīdh-*, the *praśāstṛ-* / *upavaktṛ-*, the *adhvaryú-*, and the *brahman-*. But what is more striking concerns the fact that we find in Iran and in India a similar correlation between the sacerdotal functions and some divinities in the pantheon, as we will see later. It should be noted that the recitation of the text of *Wisprad* 3.1, which follows, presents today (and going back several centuries) a simple bipartition of roles, now embodied during solemn rituals only by two priests: the *zōt* and the *rāspīg*, instead of the original seven in addition to their chief (the *zaōtar-* > *zōt*), as fully confirmed, even by many drawings appearing in certain medieval manuscripts.⁵⁸ A number of reasons have determined this bold reduction of the officiating priests, probably connected with the collapse of the sacerdotal organization of the official state-sponsored Mazdean Religious Authority after the Islamic conquest of Iran, although other trends aiming at a simplification of the ceremonies could have independently occurred. Notably, the priestly college invites Ahura Mazdā and his divine fellows to descend into the sacrificial space, so that the highest god accompanied by the six Aməša Spəntas plus Sraōša are expected guests. This divine college finds a direct symmetry among the attending priests, and this speculative mimetic process, in which every divinity corresponds to a single assistant priest, while Ohrmazd finds his alter ego in the *zaōtar-*, is explicitly offered in the Pahlavi text of the *Anthology* of Zādspram 35.16-17:

16) “Sōšans will establish himself in Xwanirah on the seat of the *zōt*, likewise the six agents of Renewal in the six regions, such as the *hāwanān*, the *ātarwaxš*, the *fraburdār*, the *āburd*, the *āsnadār* and the *rehwiškar*.”

17) “And the seven Amahraspandān will take place in the minds of the seven Agents of Renovation, Ohrmazd the *zōt* with Sōšans, Wahman, the *hāwanān*, with Rōšn-čašm, Ardwhišt, the *ātarwaxš*, whose sign is fire with Xwar-čašm, Šahrewar, the *fraburdār*, with

56

Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux*.

57

Hertha Krick, *Das Ritual der Feuergründung (Agnýādheya)*, ed. Gerhard Oberhammer, ÖAW Philosophische-Historische Klasse: Sitzungsberichte 399, Band Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 16 (Wien: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1982), 417n1126.

58

Alberto Cantera, *Vers une édition de la liturgie longue zoroastrienne*; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux*.

Frādat-xwarrah, Spandarmad, the *āburd*, with Wīdat-xwarrah, Hordād, the *āsnaḍār*, with Worunēm, Amurdad, the *rehwiškar*, with Worusūd, each in his region, because of the common will of the seven Amahraspandān, what one thinks, then all will know, what one says, all will recite, what one does, all will see.”

This doctrine, repeated in other sources, such as the Persian *Rivāyat* of Kāmdīn Šāpur (A.Y. 928/1558);⁵⁹ develops a very esoteric spiritual conception of the liturgy and of the priestly function. In this way, the six Amahraspandān correspond to the priests involved in the final eschatological renovation, each one located in one of the six continents (*kišwar*), Ohrmazd being in the central *kišwar* (*Xwanirah*) together with Sōšans. The preeminent role of the *zaōtar*- symbolically reinforces not only the superior position of Ohrmazd, but also the eschatological role of the Saōšiiants/Sōšans, showing another aspect of the speculative character of the ritual as an instrument for forecasting the last Renovation, which can be obtained by means of the *cišti*- and the *mēnōg-wēnišnīh*, “the mental sight.” This Pahlavi text is apparently defective in the single case of the omission of the seventh priest, the *srōšāwarz* (Av. *sraōšāuuarəza*-), who should correspond to Sraōša, but this absence can be explained by the desire to obtain a direct parallelism between the sacerdotal places within the sacrificial area and the divine distribution over the seven climates of the world, without excluding Ohrmazd (who is the supreme *zōt*). Certainly, the presence of a human fellow, who accompanies each divine priest, confirms the hypothesis that other assistants could also be involved in the ritual, in relation to other deities. Thus, the ritual microcosm corresponds to a celestial macrocosm, while the divine world and the human world co-exist, or even become one and the same reality. Within the framework of the liturgy, humans and gods not only correspond to each other, but perform the same functions, as if the two dimensions had been homologized. In this context, the human college ascends, while the divine one descends, and both groups of entities inter-penetrate each other within a new spiritual synthesis. This is one of the most relevant aspects of the Mazdean metaphysics of the liturgical mimesis.

As stated before, it should be equally noted that some of the Avestan priests display characteristics which find significant parallels in the Vedic tradition: for example, the *ātrauuaxša*- corresponds to the Vedic *āgnīdhra*- or *aghnīdh*-, who is actually responsible for lighting the fire. Victor Henry⁶⁰ compared the office of the *frabərətār*- (as well as that of the *ābərət*-) to that of the Vedic *néšṭr*-, while Hermann Oldenberg⁶¹ connected the functions of the fifth assistant, the *āsnātar*-, to those of the Vedic *pótr*-, “the purifier.” Martin Haug⁶² for his part compared the *sraōšāuuarəza*- to the Vedic *pratiprasthātar*-, a collaborator of the *adhvaryú*-. In particular, it is noteworthy that the old Indian *pratiprasthātar*- held in his hand a wooden sword, a weapon which can be compared with the club attributed to the Avestan god of obedience, Sraōša. These Indo-Iranian comparisons are important and numerous. What seems particularly interesting, however, is the idea of a direct correlation between the priestly college and the pantheon. This correlation is also present in the *Ṛgveda*. We may recall that in the *Agniṣṭoma* ritual, any priest was individually and directly linked to

59

B. N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others: Their Version with Introduction and Notes* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1932), 424.

60

Willem Caland and Victor Henry, *L'Agniṣṭoma: Description complète de la forme normale du sacrifice de soma dans le culte védique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Leroux, 1906), 479.

61

Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Hertz, 1917), 386.

62

Martin Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, 3rd ed. by Edward W. West (1862; repr., London: Trubner & Co., 1884), 280.

a divine being, as Thomas Oberlies⁶³ has shown by emphasizing that the seven Vedic priests can maintain a very specific relationship with the most important divine beings, as follows:

Hóṭṛ-	Indra,
Póṭṛ-	Marut,
Néṣṭṛ-	Tvaṣṭṛ- (and the divine females)
Agnīdh-	Agni,
Prasāṣṭṛ- / Upavakṭṛ-	Mitra and Varuṇa,
Adhvaryú-	Aśvin,
+ Brahman-	Indra (and/or Bṛhaspati).

The End of the Yasna

Very interestingly, a ritual of dis-installation or dis-engagement of the seven priests of the solemn ceremony is attested in the text of the *Yasna* (Y. 58.4-8). It is peculiar that this pendant of the installation does not appear within the text of the *Wisprad*, as we should suppose for reasons of symmetry, but is presented toward the end of the ceremony in a special framework. Probably, this displacement is due to a reorganization of the solemn ceremonies, when their actual performance became obsolete, although a definitive solution is still a matter of discussion. Certainly, the end of the ritual presents a number of problems which are under close investigation. The important studies by Céline Redard and Jean Kellens⁶⁴ have shown the presence of some textual (and presumably performative) varieties in the conclusion of the *Yasna*, which in any case offer some parallels with the beginning of the liturgy, as underlined in different ways by Velizar Sadovski⁶⁵ and Alberto Cantera.⁶⁶ I would like to stress the fact that in one of the possible conclusions of the text of Y. 72.10, we find the meaningful sequence of *Ṫbāṣa x^vadāta*, *Zruuan Akarana*, and *Zruuan darəṃō.x^vadāta*. These divinities respectively correspond to “the Vault of the Firmament, the Limited Time, and the Unlimited Time” (i.e., the revolving motion of the heavens and the two manifestations of time); their mention exactly in proximity of the conclusion of the *Yasna* ceremony emphasizes the cosmological role of the ritual, and its connection with the sequence of time’s order (visible throughout the stars), which works as a weapon against Ahreman. It deserves careful observation, because its presence confirms the importance of a relatively ancient reflection on the sacrifice and its cosmogonic function even within the cycle of the 12 millennia, whose theological role was defined in the Young Avestan context.⁶⁷ This presence not only confirms that within the Later Avestan rituals, speculation on time and the intrinsic distinction between eternal and limited time already existed, but it also emphasizes the role of the power of time in the strategy of the eventual demolition of evil. It is within the limited time, with the cooperation of the stars and the motion of the heavens, supported by the *Frauuāšis*, that Anra Mainiiu was entrapped within the living world, and it is thanks to the uninterrupted course of time that evil will be destroyed. In other words, the ritual cooperates in the preservation of cosmic order, which is strictly linked with the orderly and regular motions of the sun,

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Thomas Oberlies, *Die Religion des Ṛgveda*, vol. 1, *Das religiöse System des Ṛgveda*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 26 (Wien: Gerold, 1998), 275n603; Christopher Z. Minkowski, *Priesthood in Ancient India: A Study of the Maitrāvaruṇa Priest*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 18 (Vienna: Sammlung de Nobili, 1991), 82.

64

Céline Redard and Jean Kellens, *La liquidation du sacrifice (Y62 à 72)*, *Études avestiques et mazdéennes* 5, *Persika* 18 (Paris: De Boccard, 2013), 62-72; Céline Redard, “Y72.11: Un final qui n’en est pas un!,” in *Iranian Studies in Honour of Adriano V. Rossi*, ed. Sabir Badalkhan, Gian Pietro Basello and Matteo De Chiara, vol. 2, *Series Minor* 87 (Napoli: UniorPress, 2019), 757–68.

65

Velizar Sadovski, “Avestan and Vedic liturgies in comparison, 1: Sociolinguistic stratification, politics of discursive authority and development of Indo-Iranian poetic genres,” in *Lectures at the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna: Ravenna, February 17–18, 2017* (Department of Cultural Heritage, 2017).

66

Alberto Cantera, “A Substantial Change in the Approach to the Zoroastrian Long Liturgy,” 139–85.

67

Antonio Panaino, “The End of the Yasna Between Philological and Theological Problems,” *Dabir* 1, no. 4 (2017): 73–84.

the moon, the stars, and with all the *ratus*, i.e., the orderly masters of the universe, which cooperate in the resistance against the presence of evil. In this respect, as all the parts of the days, of the months, of the years are worshipped and assimilated to cosmic forces; they constitute the architectural pillars of the world, and must be carefully protected and supported.⁶⁸ For this reason, it is likely that the ideal model of sacrifice was seen in the continuum of the ritual chain, which links every Mazdean ritual taking place, one after the other, in each of the five (or four) daily *gāh*, (i.e., the different liturgical moments of the day), within an interrupted sequence of ceremonies, in which one priestly college transmits to the following one the regular duty of the ceremonial performance. This, at least, acts as a theoretical model, in which the time of the cosmic year must continue till the final battle against Ahreman, thus accompanied by continuous liturgical activity, underpinning the bones of the universe against the disentangling and chaos-inducing actions of the demons and their chief. With the birth of the *Saōšiiant* and the final resurrection, even Ohrmazd will irrupt into the world, whose mixture will be definitively purged, and the divine priestly college will join the human one. Only then will limited time be mixed and poured again⁶⁹ within eternal time, so that the present battle will find its totally irreversible conclusion with the total regeneration of the world, and the human liberation into the superb dimension of the *tan ī pasēn*, “the afterbody” of the transfiguration (*frašgird*) and resurrection (*rist-āxēz*). During the period of mixture (*gumēzišn*), the sacrifice is also a way to enforce the champions of Ahura Mazda in their battle against evil, and the highest god himself can offer to them an enforcing *yasna* in order to promote their success.⁷⁰

The Vision of the Great Priest Kerdīr

It is well known that in two of the four inscriptions of the high Priest Kerdīr (a man living in third-century Iran and playing an authoritative role in the Sasanian court), that of Naqš-e Rostam (KNRm) and the nearly identical one of Sar Mašhad (KSM), §§ 26, 29, we find the description of a metaphysical journey into the afterlife. This description has been explained according to different interpretative keys.⁷¹ Much has been said about a kind of potentially shamanic journey and a number of other solutions have been proposed, some even supposing the active presence of intermediaries, such as young people capable of going into a trance and hence narrating aloud their vision of the other world. I have rejected these solutions, preferring to situate the vision of which these texts speak within the framework of a sort of liturgical drama, celebrated by a priestly college in favor of the High Priest Kerdīr. This esoteric ceremonial, of which we can only infer few scattered fragments, would have been aimed at the acquisition of a higher “mental sight,” the *mēnōg-wēnišnīg*, on which the Pahlavi sources preserve some pieces of information. Thus, the ritual mentioned there would be the anticipated representation, performed by a priestly college, of the future journey of Kerdīr’s soul, as a physical enactment of his eschatological future destiny. The text of the inscriptions indeed evokes this *post-mortem* journey on several occasions, with the adoption of a precise terminology, which marks a difference between the real di-

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Antonio Panaino, “Avestan *aitara-* and *asniia-* (Y. 1,17; 2,17, etc.),” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 60 (2017): 303–30.

69

Antonio Panaino, “The ‘Other’ *gumēzišn*: About the Final ‘Merger’ of Limited Time with Eternity,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (2021): 591–97.

70

Antonio Panaino, “An Aspect of the Sacrifice in the Avesta,” *East and West* 36 (1986): 271–74.

71

Antonio Panaino, “Apocalittica, escatologia e sciamanismo nell’opera iranologica di Ph. Gignoux con una nota sulla ‘visione’ del mago Kirdēr,” 205–43; Antonio Panaino, “The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr,” 179–88; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux*.

mension and its ritual presentation. In this ceremony, a relevant part was practically played by a group of persons named *lysyk* (*rēhīg*). It is implausible to suppose that these *lysyk* went into a trance all together (a solution technically impossible) or that they were “children” used within a divinatory ceremony (in this case, the counterargument is that children were usually excluded from rituals, because they were not yet qualified officiants). More simply, this could have been a group of assistant priests, who would have enacted the ritual and perhaps even dramatized its realization, if the oral performance was accompanied by a theatrical enactment. Kerdīr, in his turn, would have just observed the ritual (like a sort of Vedic *yájamāna*-) without playing any active role in the course of the ceremony, where, on the contrary, one finds reference to his “double” (*hangerb*), i.e., the image of his future alter ego in the afterlife. Very interestingly, the *hangerb* of the High Priest was in his turn accompanied by his wife, named *zan* “woman,” both representing the “father” and “mother” of Kerdīr’s soul (*ruwān*), just as in the *Anthology* of Zādspram 31, where we find a *mard-kirb*, “the form of a man” and the *kanīg-kirb*, “the form of a woman.” It is clear that the deeply archaic and esoteric dimension of this ceremony was poorly understood by Zādspram, who had only preserved scattered fragments of an older tradition. In the context of Kerdīr’s inscriptions, neither the *ruwān* nor his *dēn* are directly involved, reasonably because Kerdīr was still alive, so that the true separation of the male and female components of the soul (*ruwān* and *dēn*) could not still take place. For this reason, the late attestation (i.e., in the ninth century CE) of the *mard-kirb*, “the form of a man” and the *kanīg-kirb*, “the form of a woman” in an afterlife context, but well distinct from *ruwān* and *dēn*, shows that some memory of earlier esoteric traditions, probably similar to those ordained by Kerdīr, had survived, although their true meaning had become opaque. In conclusion, eight people (plus the *hangerb* and the *zan*) are mentioned in the frame of the “vision” of the Great Priest. This number corresponds exactly to that of the previously mentioned, old priestly college with its seven assistants in addition to the *zaōtar*-. This evidence does not exclude the presence of other assistants, in particular, for solemn or particularly complex ceremonies, such as this one. A priori, even the exclusion of women cannot be established, firstly because women could also receive (although with certain restrictions) elementary priestly training, so that in certain circumstances they might contribute to the *Yasna* ceremony by occupying the function of *zaōtar*- (*Nērangestān* 22) at least in theory. Secondly, because the seven sisters/wives of Ardā Wirāz are present, for example, when he takes the *bang*, “henbane,” and help him during the preparation of his “journey.” We may eventually remark that these ladies were presented in this Pahlavi text as persons who know the sacred sources by heart, and who are able to celebrate the liturgical ritual.⁷²

Zurwān and Αἰὼν in the Framework of the Mazdean-Christian Intercultural Relations

It is a well-known fact that the time god Zurwān, whose cosmological importance has been previously emphasized, assumed a tetramorphous aspect, with three hypostases, named in Syriac sources as Ašōqar (cf.

Av. *aršō.kara*- “the one who makes virile”), Frašōqar (cf. Av. *frašō.kara*- “the one who makes splendid”), and Zarōqar (< **zarōkara*- “the one who makes old,” probably a name re-interpreted after the model of Av. *maršō.kara*-, “the one who makes old”). In this way, he represented the three ages of life, which accompanied his main resumptive identity as the great divinity of eternal and limited time. This tetradic representation was explicitly mentioned by Theodor Bar Kōnay in his account on Zoroastrianism,⁷³ a work dated to 791–792 CE, but these forms of the time-god were also quoted in the Syriac *Acts of Ādur-Hormizd*.⁷⁴ This *Martyrologium* mentions Zurwān as the “Fourfold” God and as the highest divine figure, hence following a Manichaean pattern, but we know that this divinity was equally denominated τετραπρόσωπος πατήρ τοῦ μεγέθους, “the four-faced father of Greatness” in the Byzantine anathemas against the Manichaeans.⁷⁵ Other sources confirm this tradition, which was certainly current among a number of Oriental Christian communities between the fifth and sixth centuries. Similar speculations about the divine image of time were developed in the Mediterranean context with close regard to Αἰών, the Greek high divinity of time, whose role increased after the Platonic speculations about him. For instance, in a very remarkable third century CE mosaic of Antioch,⁷⁶ three personages, denominated as “Chronoi” (Χρόνοι), sit in front of Αἰών. They represent (from the right to the left) “Past (Time)” (Παρω(τ)χημένος), “Present (Time)” (Ἐνεστώς), and “Future (Time)” (Μέλλων) (Levi 1944: 273-274).⁷⁷ Some scholars, such as Duchesne-Guillemin,⁷⁸ Leo Olschki,⁷⁹ and many others,⁸⁰ have called attention to the fact that when in some Christian apocryphal traditions the Magi go to worship Jesus in Bethlehem, they are presented as showing three different ages, one young, one adult, one very old, and equally Jesus reveals himself to each of them assuming a visible aspect of a being of the same age. This is narrated by Marco Polo with reference to a Persian context, but the same tradition is documented in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*⁸¹ or in the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*. In particular, this Armenian source, in chapters 17–21,⁸² after the Magi have brought the gifts to Jesus (ch. 16), shows an enlarged variant, in which the visit of the Magi to Jesus is repeated three times, and, on each occasion, the Magi have the privilege to see also the other manifestations of Jesus. The basic idea underpinning this esoteric vision was that every Magus started with a vision of Jesus corresponding to his present human condition (young, mature, aged), which did not simply correspond to a mirroring reproduction, but involved a speculative doctrine, in which, as Henry Corbin⁸³ had already fittingly emphasized, each age of Jesus represents the “bridge” through which a single human mind might try to perceive a little part of the whole greatness of God in his incomprehensible and extraordinary power. Thus, we can fittingly repeat the famous sentence of the *Acta Petri* 20, I:⁸⁴ *Unusquisque enim nostrum sicut capiebat uidere, prout poterat uidebat*, “in fact, as far as each one among us tried to see, he saw just according to his own possibility,” which has been rightly connected with the idea that *Talem eum uidi qualem capere potui*, “I saw him such as I might seize,” attested in the Christian-Gnostic Literature.⁸⁵ By contrast, we must consider that the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem was presented in the East as an event prophesied by Zoroaster himself, and that

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Emile Benveniste, “Le Témoignage de Théodore bar Kōnay sur le zoroastrisme,” *Le Monde Oriental* 26–27 (1932-33): 170–215; Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, with a new introduction by the author (1955; repr., New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1972).

74

Emile Benveniste, “Le Témoignage de Théodore bar Kōnay sur le zoroastrisme,” 170–215, 176; Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, 434–37.

75

Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, 54.

76

Doro Levi, “Aion,” *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 13, no. 4 (1944): 269–314, 269–71.

77

Doro Levi, “Aion,” 269–314, 273–74.

78

Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Opera Minora*, vol. 3, *Iran-Grèce-Israël* (Téhéran: Univ. de Téhéran, 1978).

79

Leonardo Olschki, “The Wise Men of the East in Oriental Traditions,” in *Semitic and Oriental Studies: A Volume Presented to William Popper, Professor of Semitic Languages, Emeritus, on the Occasion of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday, October 29, 1949*, ed. Walter Joseph Fischel, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology 11 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 375–95.

80

Antonio Panaino, “Jesus’ Trimorphisms and Tetramorphisms in the Meeting with the Magi,” in *From Aṣṣl to Zā’id: Essays in Honour of Ēva M. Jeremiás*, ed. Iván Szántó (Piliscsaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2015), 167–209.

81

Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Anonymum Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum*, vol. 1, *Versio Latina*, edidit [et interpretatus est] I.-B. Chabot, CSCO 121, *Scriptores Syri*, 3rd ser., 53 (Lovanii: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1927), 54–70.

82

Abraham Terian, *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy with Three Early Versions of the Protevangeliolum of James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 55–57.

83

Henry Corbin, “Épiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 23, *Mensch und Wandlung* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1954), 141–249 (trans. Ralph Manheim as “Divine Epiphany and Spiritual

the expectation of the three posthumous sons of the Mazdean prophet, in particular the third one, the *Saōšiiant par excellence*, so that the Christian propaganda played with the explicit presentation of Christ as the true “savior,” whom Zoroastrian people, for many centuries, had been longing for.⁸⁶ This assumption is based on a number of textual pieces of evidence, such as the one preserved in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*⁸⁷ (*Codex Laurentianus*), which starts with a prophecy by Zoroaster concerning Jesus’s coming. Other sources state that some Iranian Magi were looking for a sign connected with the birth of a “savior,” who corresponds to Jesus.⁸⁸ This happened also in Syriac Literature,⁸⁹ but in particular it occurs in the *Disputatio de Christo in Persia*, a very intriguing Byzantine source, which had already introduced the anachronistic association between Cyrus the Great and Jesus.⁹⁰ Cyrus, who, in fact, (as stated by Isaiah), was a Messiah, according to this text received an astral sign announcing the future birth of Jesus, so that it was he himself who ordered his Magi to go to Bethlehem. This story was not isolated but was reported also by Mas ūdī and Ṭabarī.⁹¹ Its meaning was quite simple and concerned the *Translatio Imperii*, from the most powerful human king (Cyrus) to Jesus, as universal emperor. Thus, the priests who anointed Cyrus were sent to anoint the new king of the universe, Jesus the Christos. Finally, it is useful to observe that the apocryphal representations of three Magi in the mirroring interplay with Jesus as *kosmokrator*, which marked what has been defined as Christ’s “tetramorphism,” offers not only a direct comparison with the similar tetramorphic aspects of Αἰὼν and Zurwān, but also with Zoroaster and his three posthumous sons. All together, they actually formed a group of four “messengers” or “apostles” of Ahura Mazdā. As Widengren⁹² remarked, if the Iranian god *Nairiīō.sarha* was already considered as an *ašta-*, i.e., a “messenger” (*Vd.* 19.34), also the third and last of Zoroaster’s posthumous sons, the true *Saōšiiant*, *Astuuat.ərəta*, was literally presented as *aštō mazdā ahurahe*, i.e., “the messenger of Ahura Mazdā” (*Yt.* 19.22). According to the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 1.8,⁹³ Zoroaster, Ošēdar, and Ošēdarmāh (i.e., the other two sons of the prophet) were all together *frēstagān* “apostles,” and a reference to “the four apostles of the good-religion” (*čahār hudēnwar frēstagān*), literally “the sent ones” (*frēstag*), the “envoys” from Ohrmazd, was again formulated in a very incisive way in the same Mazdean source (48,30).⁹⁴ There, Zoroaster, Ošēdar, Ošēdarmāh, and Sōšāns himself were meant without any doubt all together.⁹⁵ Thus, if Jesus indeed offered a tetramorphic image, and constituted with the three Magi a group of four, where the universal power of Time might be finally mirrored, Zoroaster himself with his three posthumous sons, who will come at a millennium of distance one after the other, formed yet another tetradic group, which again interplayed with the four aspects of Zurwān/Αἰὼν.⁹⁶

Some Esoteric Trends Among Modern Parsis

The impact of western esotericism⁹⁷ on the Parsi community can be dated around the middle of the nineteenth century, when some members of the Zoroastrian elite entered in close contact with British and French freemasons.⁹⁸ But, despite the early foundation of the first In-

Rebirth in Ismailian Gnosis,” in *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Ernst Benz and Ralph Manheim, vol. 5, *Man and Transformation*, [London: Routledge & Paul, 1964], 69–160); Henry Corbin, “Face de Dieu et face de l’homme,” in “Polarität des Lebens” ed. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1968), special issue, *Eranos Jahrbuch* 36 (1967): 167–229.

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Henri-Charles Puech, “Histoire de l’ancienne église et patristique,” *Annuaire de l’école pratique des hautes études: Section des sciences religieuses* 73 (1965–1966): 122–25; Henri-Charles Puech, “Histoire de l’ancienne église et patristique,” *Annuaire de l’école pratique des hautes études: Section des sciences religieuses* 74 (1966–1967): 128–38, 129; Henry Corbin, “Face de Dieu et face de l’homme,” 167–229, 198.

85

Rudy Favaro, “Un’inconsueta adorazione dei Magi in un affresco di San Giorgio a Velo d’Astico,” *Studi sull’Oriente cristiano* 4, no. 2, *Miscellanea Metreveli* (2000): 229–66, 237.

86

Giuseppe Messina, “Il *Saušyant*- nella tradizione iranica e la sua attesa,” *Orientalia*, n.s., 1 (1932): 149–76; Giuseppe Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme ed una predizione di Zoroastro*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 3 (Romae: apud Pont. Institutum biblicum, 1933); Antonio Panaino, “The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons,” in *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism: The Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East and Beyond*, ed. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 368–82.

87

Mario E. Provera, *Il Vangelo arabo dell’infanzia secondo il ms. laurenziano orientale (n. 387)*, *Quaderni della Terra Santa* (Gerusalemme: Franciscan printing press, 1973).

88

Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici*, *Studi e testi* 163 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1952), 6–13, 96–98.

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Giuseppe Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme ed una predizione di Zoroastro*, 62–85.

90

Antonio Panaino, “The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons,” 368–82.

91

Antonio Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella: Storia, scienza e teologia di un racconto evangelico*, *Parola di Dio*, 2nd ser., 67 (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2012); Antonio Panaino, “The Esoteric Legacy of

dian lodge in Fort William, Bengal, on January 24, 1728, under the authority of the Grand Lodge of England, the initiation of local people was not favored, and the admission of prestigious Parsis, such as Mr. Maneckjee Cursetjee (1808–1887) was refused. Because of some peculiar circumstances, this gentleman was finally initiated in Paris in 1842 in a very old French lodge, *Les Admirateurs de l'Univers*. The French reception was very positive because of the traditional association of Zoroaster in the foundational masonic mythology of the origins, which followed some speculations attested in the Classical, Mediaeval, and Renaissance literatures about magic and the Magi, among whom the role of Zoroaster emerged as one of the highest peaks.⁹⁹ Only when Cursetjee came back to Bombay was he invited to join the British lodge “Perseverance,” and then from this episode onward other qualified Indians were allowed to join the Craft. Thus, in December 1843, a new lodge, named “Rising Star of Western India” was created, and in a few

the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons,” 368–82.

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Geo Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God: Studies in Iranian and Manichaean Religion*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 5 (Uppsala: Lundequistska bokhandel; Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1945), 61–62.

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Mahmoud Jaafari–Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, vol. 1, *Transcription, Translation and Commentary*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 20 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1998), 40–41.

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Geo Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God*, 64.

95

Geo Widengren, “Man and his salvation,” in *Man and his salvation: Studies in memory of S. G. F. Brandon*, ed. Eric J. Sharpe and John R. Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 315–26.

96

Antonio Panaino, “The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons,” 368–82.

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Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. Christine Rhone (New York: State University Press, 2010).

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Antonio Panaino, “Zoroastrians and Freemasonry,” in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood; Transactions of the Sixth International Conference, London, 6-7 November 2004*, ed. Trevor Stewart, The Canonbury Papers Volume 3 (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2006), 51–67.

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Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*, 2 vols., Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 42 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998); Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).



The impressive memorial inscription in honour of Khurshedjee Rustomjee Cama (1831-1909), in the building of the Grand Lodge of Bombay. The highest and most important roles assumed by Cama in his 56 years of Masonic uninterrupted activity are there outlined. Photograph @A. Panaino, January 15, 2024.

years it became the center of the Zoroastrian masonic attraction. Some Muslims were admitted as well, while Hindus entered only in the year 1872. It is to be noted that not only Parsis (i.e., Indian Zoroastrians for many years), but also Iranis, i.e., Mazdeans of Persian origin, were interested in the masonic initiations. The rituals were translated even in Persian and a copy of the Avesta was placed on the altar together with the Bible and the Quran. It is interesting to note that the masonic framework, particularly in Europe, urged persons such as Khurshedjee Rustamjee Cama (November 11, 1831–August 24, 1909) to approach linguistics and Zoroastrian studies in a Western way, and to promote a refreshment of Mazdean culture, in particular with regard to priestly education. His role was so important that on December 18, 1916, the Marquess of Willingdon (1866–1941), the Governor-General of Bombay, inaugurated the official opening of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, which is still one of the most important archives in the academic world. During this new period, many social and cultural movements had a major impact on the educated Zoroastrians, who were interested not only in the Masonic “mysteries,” but also in the esoteric messages of the Theosophical Society, which for instance involved distinguished Parsi scholars, such as Ervad Jivanji Jamshedji Modi. Thus, we can observe different trends¹⁰⁰ in which Western masonic esotericism underpinned a sort of rationalist approach to the religious sources, without excluding the role the other Masonic or Western esoteric cultural lines, that of the *Schwärmerei*, which involved the spiritualist attitudes of Theosophy.¹⁰¹

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Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Jan A. M. Snoek, “Freemasonry and Eastern Religions,” in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Jan A. M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 258–76.

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James Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993): 73–94.