

# Hinduism and Zoroastrianism

The term “Zoroastrianism,” coined in the 19th century in a colonial context, is inspired by a Greek pseudo-etymological rendering (Zoroastres, where the second element is reminiscent of the word for star) of the ancient Iranian name Zaratuštra (etymology unclear apart from the second element, *uštra* [camel]). This modern name of the religion reflects the emphasis on Zarathustra (Zoroaster) as its (presumed) founding figure or prophet.

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism share a remote common original ancestry, but their historical trajectories over the millennia have been notably distinct. Just like Hinduism claims and maintains a particular relationship to the spatial entity known as India, Zoroastrianism has conceived itself as the religion of the Iranians and of Iran (Stausberg, 2011). In the aftermath of the Arab/Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-7th century CE, however, Zoroastrianism lost its claim to religious supremacy (which had already been challenged by Christianity) and over the centuries became a merely tolerated religious minority in Iran. Yet, the Zoroastrians continue to consider themselves the remnants of pre-Islamic Iran; for example, their religious calendar reckons the years according to the reign of the last emperor of Iran, Yazdgerd III (reportedly crowned in 631 CE).

Given extant trading networks, the coastal area of southern Gujarat has served as a refuge for Zoroastrian groups permanently settling there since an unknown period before the 10th century CE. There are also records of Zoroastrian settlements in North India, but these communities have disappeared over the course of time. Reflecting their Persian origins, the Zoroastrians of western India are known as the Parsis. In demographic terms, Zoroastrians currently count no more than some 120 to 130 thousand, around half of them residing in India, the homeland of contemporary Zoroastrianism where one finds most of its richest of social and religious institutions. Since the 19th century, Bombay (Mumbai) has emerged as the main center of the Parsis, an overwhelmingly urban community. Since Independence, partly caused by emigration and partly by changes in family structures and general values, the Parsi population of India (and Pakistan) has seen a sharp decline. Since colonial times, Parsis have

migrated to other parts of the world, and in the postcolonial age, especially since the 1960s, this movement has intensified, so that the so-called diaspora is becoming the key factor for the future development of the religion (Stausberg, 2002b; Hinnells, 2005). Given their tiny numbers, their non-proselytization and their constructive contributions to Indian society (e.g. example through their various charitable contributions [Hinnells, 2000]), and their commitments to the army and other Indian institutions, which are routinely celebrated in community publications, the Parsis and their religion have so far not drawn forth any negative social response in India.

Being offshoots of older Indo-European and Indo-Iranian poetic traditions, the oldest textual sources of Iranian and Indic religious traditions, namely the Avestan and the oldest vedic textual corpora (the *Rgveda*), share a series of grammatical and lexical similarities (so much so that Avestan can often be easily “retranslated” into Vedic and has been interpreted on the basis of Vedic grammar and lexicon/semantics). A “Vedicizing” reading of the Avestan texts, however, risks disconnecting the Avestan texts from the later developments in Zoroastrianism and the later Zoroastrian exegesis, hermeneutics, and interpretive history attested mainly in Middle Persian treatises dating from the 9th or 10th century CE (but often continuing and quoting much older materials). Interestingly, as shown by Y.S.-D. Vevaina (2010), this Zoroastrian exegesis employs strategies of cosmological homologies similar to those employed by the ancient Indian Brāhmaṇas (see → Vedas and Brāhmaṇas). (Note that the extent of Avestan textual corpus and the later religious literature of the Iranians [Zoroastrians] are much smaller than their Indian counterparts.)

The present entry will address main points of contact between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism diachronically. The timeline goes from the 2nd millennium BCE to the present.

## The *Rgveda* and the Avesta

Similar source-critical problems surround the vedic and the Avestan texts. To begin with, their

historical contexts remain a matter of speculation; in a circular operation, their societal context can only be extrapolated from the texts themselves. Scant geographical information contained in the Avestan texts points to an origin of at least some of these texts in Afghanistan and the regions around the Iranian–Pakistani borderland (in today’s political geography) – that is, west of the *rgvedic* texts. There is no archaeological evidence for the Avestan texts, but these texts have sometimes been read into archaeological findings.

Like the *vedic* hymns, the Avestan texts were transmitted orally. Sometime, probably in the 4th or 6th century CE, a special alphabet (the Avestan alphabet) was devised to commit the Avestan texts to writing in a phonetically “correct” manner, but the oldest extant manuscript only dates from the 13th century. Already relatively early, partly because of migration and the spread of the religion and partly due to ordinary linguistic change, the Avestan texts were recited by priests who no longer spoke the Avestan language. One can assume the existence of oral vernacular translations (and possible commentaries), but, with the exception of a Sogdian fragment, the Middle Iranian/Persian translations and commentaries are all that is left. In these manuscripts, text and translation-cum-commentary (known as *zand*) were largely transmitted together. The Avesta is not a uniform text, and its different strands (parts) have been transmitted independently. As a material reality, the Avesta first made its appearance as a result of European orientalist publications in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Linguistically, the Avestan corpus contains a somewhat more archaic stratum (the so-called Old Avestan texts), which is not a direct ancestor of the apparently later materials (the so-called Young Avestan texts) that make up for by far its largest part. The later texts seem to represent a linguistic stage of development similar to the inscriptions by the Achaemenian (Persian) kings from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, but this does not provide any sort of absolute chronology. It would be wrong to assume that the *Rgveda* necessarily is the older model compared to the Avestan texts; in fact, one finds linguistic and religious innovations on both sides, and one should not interpret the Avestan corpus as a reformed *Rgveda*. Almost all extant Avestan texts are used in rituals, and that is how they came to be transmitted.

Several of the Young Avestan texts are framed as dialogues between Zarathustra and the supreme

deity Ahura Mazda (“Lord Wisdom”), where the deity answers Zarathustra’s queries on a variety of issues, so that these texts constitute Ahura Mazda’s revelatory speech. Zarathustra and Ahura Mazda also feature in the Old Avestan texts, in particular in the enigmatic five *Gāθās* (Songs), which are often interpreted as compositions by Zarathustra but whose historicity is denied by some scholars. Be that as it may, in the *Gāθās*, Zarathustra appears as the poet-performer/sacrificer (Skjærvø, 2003) and the intimate interlocutor of Ahura Mazda and other divine figures including the “fashioner of the cow” and some divine agents-cum-abstract entities and ethical qualities, most prominently *aša* (truth or order) and *vohu manah* (good thought). The former is etymologically and semantically related to Vedic *ṛtá* (and both are intimately linked with the fire), but *ṛtá* does not appear as a personal agent in the *Rgveda* (Oberlies, 2012, 67). The opposition between *aša* and *druj* (lie; Ved. *drúh*) is of fundamental importance for the *Gāθās* – and so is the opposition between the executors of truth (*ašāuuuan*) and the executors of lie (*draguuant*) and between the gods and the *daēuua*, which, contrary to their Vedic cognates (*deva*), appear as antigods/demons; *Aešma* (“Fury”) is a leading *daēuua*. The human and superhuman world of the *Gāθās* is torn by conflicts. On the human level, the community apparently saw itself threatened by others, hostile enemies who are characterized as non-herdsman (*Yasna* 31.10) – “non-cattle breeders among cattle-breeders” (*Yasna* 49.4); most of all, however, their rituals are wrong. Humans face the need to make the right decisions by engaging in the right form of ritual interactions; the consequences of the wrong choices are dramatic and extend into the postmortal state.

The *Gāθās* are referred to a *mąθra* (“word” or “formula,” corresponding to Ved. *mantra*) in *Gāh* 1.6. The poetry of the *Gāθās* is impregnated by features well known from the *Rgveda* and other Indo-European literatures. Examples include cultic vocabulary such as phrases of pleading (Oberlies, 2012, 45), the vocabulary of the chariot race (Hintze, 2009, 14–16), the poet’s complaints (Skjærvø, 2001), and blame and praise poetry (Skjærvø, 2002). Among the most significant differences is the prominence of Zarathustra in the poetry of the *Gāθās*. When “1st person singular speech is found in the Rig Veda,” it “is a characteristic of gods, not poets, in sharp contrast with the *Gāthās*” (Jamison, 2007, 35). The *Gāθās* are characterized by an

insistent monotony of 1st singular poet/2nd singular divinity that traps the two into a claustrophobic dialogue – which...is one of the features that gives the Gāthās their peculiar intimate power. (Jamison, 2007, 95)

Compared with the *Rgveda*, in the *Gāthās*, “the relations between man and god are depicted as more direct, immediate, and mutual” (Jamison, 2007, 31). In the (later) Young Avestan texts, however, the figure of Zarathustra becomes more schematic by being turned into a kind of role model and prototype for humanity (Stausberg, 2002a, 31–40); he becomes the central figure of a historical vision leading from the prototypical living being to the heroes of the future (eschatological) renovation of the world (see below). Later literary traditions in Middle and New Persian unfold “biographical” narratives on Zarathustra’s life and mission with a focus on his birth, his childhood, and his visions of and conversations with the deities (incl. Ahura Mazdā), culminating in Zarathustra making the “king” Wištaspa accept his religion (Stausberg, 2002a, 40–68).

The Old Avestan texts are the compositional center of the *Yasna* (Worship or Sacrifice), a text consisting of 72 divisions (where the Old Avest. sections can be found in chs. 28 to 54) recited in the priestly ritual of the same name. (The word corresponds to the Ved. → *yajña*.) The Old Avestan section comprises some manthric formula, the *Gāthās*, and the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* (Worship in Seven Chapters; see Hintze, 2007) – a recitation prose in praise of Ahura Mazdā and his creations, centering on the (ritual) fire in chapter 36, the kernel of the concentric structure of the *Yasna*. The Young Avestan parts of the *Yasna* placed around the Old Avestan core assemble a variety of materials declaring the praise of a series of material and divine entities including the fire, the waters, and Haoma, the Avestan counterpart of the vedic Soma.

Haoma is at the same time a deity, a substance (originally probably bot. *Peganum harmala* [Flattery & Schwartz, 1989] but later in ritual practice replaced by ephedra), and a liquid prepared by the priests by reciting texts in honor of Haoma and other divine agents, mixing the ephedra twigs (with pomegranate twigs, consecrated water, and goat’s milk), pounding them, and filtering the mixture in the early first part of the *yasna* ritual and its preparatory service (where it is not mixed with milk). The status of Haoma in the *Gāthās* is

disputed (see e.g. Skjærvø, 2004, and Schwartz, 2006, for different interpretations). Compared with the *Rgveda*, the Avestan Haoma is of less importance for the order of society and the legitimation of power of the ruler (Oberlies, 2012, 31–33); in the Avestan texts, this function was absorbed by the *xʷarənah* (charisma or fortune), an elusive agent empowering those who manage to capture it; originally residing in the mythical sea, it is distributed over the earth for the benefit of the living by the (deity of) the sun.

The offering or consecration of sacrificial meat in the *Yasna* was abolished at an unknown date (maybe as late as in the early 19th cent., possibly as an adaptation to a Hindu environment). In some priestly ceremonies, the *Yasna* is recited in combination with two further Avestan texts, namely the *Visperad* (a collection of praise texts) and the *Vidēvdād* (The Law Keeping Demons Away). With the exception of some chapters (including the first two, describing the different places of the earth put in order by Ahura Mazdā [ch. 1] and the myth of Yima and the great winter [ch. 2]), the *Vidēvdād* is a “legal” text, framed as a dialogue between Ahura Mazdā and Zarathustra and mainly concerned with issues of pollution and ways to get rid of the pollutants (e.g. demons, witches, sorcerers). The text praises agriculture as the preferred mode of subsistence (*Vidēvdād* 3.4). Like in Hinduism, pollution and → purity are a main concern in Zoroastrianism (see Choksy, 1989; de Jong, 1999; Stausberg, 2004). Main forms of pollution discussed in the *Vidēvdād* include evil-created animals such as snakes and spiders, dead bodily matters (such as hair and nails once they are cut off) and bodily excrement, and, most of all, menstrual blood and corpses. Menstruation and the disposal of corpses (and the purification of people and things contaminated by menstrual blood and corpses) require extensive ritual elaboration and have over the millennia remained key modes of self-identification, but traditional modes of practices have undergone severe change in the modern period, in particular in Iran (somewhat less so in India), where the religious system has been simplified with an emphasis on ethics, history, and beliefs (Stausberg, 2004; 2012).

For the disposal of corpses, the *Vidēvdād* prescribes the removal of the dead bodies on dry, high, and deserted places, where the flesh is then removed from the bones by dogs and birds of prey; in a second, optional, step, the bones may then be gathered and preserved in special

receptacles (ossuaries). Note that this mode of procedure does not require the erection of any massive structures. Although propagated rigorously in the *Vidēvdād* and described by foreign observers, this was not the only funerary practice in ancient Iran; burial was also practiced. It was probably only in the Islamic period that funerary structures surrounded by walls became the norm. Given the different climatic conditions in India, the Parsis have developed a refined model (which includes a filtering system for water entering the interior and a hole serving as a main receptacle for the bones in the middle) for the *daxmahs* (known as towers of silence since the colonial period). In recent decades, since the large-scale (97–99%) decline of vultures in India caused by the anti-inflammatory drug Diclofenac, the natural functioning of this funerary system has been seriously compromised; so far the system has been retained with some modifications (the establishment of solar panels serving to dehydrate the corpses), because it is considered essential for the preservation of the religion and for the progress of the soul of the deceased to the other world, which requires the sun to shine on the bones. (The soul travels to the other world along the rays of the sun.) In many Indian cities, in Iran, and in most diaspora countries, Zoroastrians use burial or (to a lesser extent) cremation. The main argument against burial and cremation is the pollution of the earth and fire, which are both held to be inherently divine creations and material indices of two deities that form a group of the seven innermost deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon – the so-called beneficial immortals (*aməša spəntas*), who act in accordance with Ahura Mazda and embody virtues and the different parts of the cosmos.

In addition to the eschatological fate of the individual (see Stausberg, 2009, for the concept of hell), Zoroastrianism has developed a cosmological narrative, most fully elaborated in the Middle Persian literature. This narrative starts from the origin of the world, with the emergence of the conflict between Ahura Mazda and his adversary, resulting in the creation of the world and the state of mixture of good and evil. Humans are expected to fight with Ahura Mazda and his good creation (including the deities) against the adversary and his counter creations (including the demons, which strive to enter the human bodies). The narrative ends with the violent clashes at the end of “limited time,” the renovation of the cosmos, the final cleansing of sinners and their release

from hell, and the general resurrection and the establishment of a future body for mankind. The struggles for the renovation of the cosmos will be heralded by Zarathustra’s posthumous sons.

Returning to the earlier sources, among the other texts making up the Avestan corpus, there are two lists of deities linked to the 30 days of the calendar, and there is a collection of 21 hymns (*yašts*) to individual deities (and the seven *aməša spəntas*), including the (deities of) sun, moon, and earth. The collection starts with Ahura Mazda; this hymn (*Yašt* 1) contains a list of 54 names of Ahura Mazda, which emphasize, among other aspects, his righteousness and founding activities; his benevolence and protection; his wisdom, insight, and omniscience; and his majesty and lordship (Panaino, 2002). The other deities deserve praise in their own right insofar as they are affiliated with Ahura Mazda by subordination and/or by mutual support, for example by worshipping each other or sacrificing for each other. Among the deities praised by the *yašts*, two names also occur in the *Rgveda*: Miθra (Mitra) and Vaiiu (Vāyu), and in both corpora, they have domains and functions in common, probably inherited from earlier historical layers. The Avestan Miθra shares some epithets (strong arms and carrying a club) with the vedic Indra (Oberlies, 2012, 69), the “Smasher of Obstacles” (Vṛtrahān); in Iran, the corresponding word Vərəθrajan is used as an epithet of some deities (Ahura Mazda, Sraoša, and Haoma), prayers (*Yasna* 54.2), the heroes of the great eschatological battles (*Yasna* 19.89, 95), and the dragon slayer Ōraētaona (*Yasna* 19.35f.); in addition, there is a separate deity of that name (Vərəθragna) in Zoroastrianism (see also Greenebaum, 1974).

In total, there are a dozen or so nominally identical deities (among the 90 or so attested Zoroastrian divine figures), mostly of inferior importance, in the vedic and the Avestan texts. The list includes, by way of examples, the water-deity Apam Napāt, the deity of hospitality Airiāman (Aryaman), the messenger-deity Nairiō. saṅha (Narāśaṃsa), the deity of healing Ōrita (Trita), the goddess of dawn Ušah (Ušas), and the wind-god Vāta. In addition, there are similar or partly identical mythical motives such as that of the dragon slayers (Watkins, 1995), and there are deities who share cognate functions and responsibilities such as Ātar and Agni, the deities of fire, or Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā and Sarasvatī, who both confer rain, fertility, and eloquence to their worshippers (Oberlies, 2012, 78).

Some Zoroastrian deities, most importantly the “Wise Lord” (Ahura Mazdā), are qualified as *ahura*, but there has probably been no cult of a class of *ahuras* (corresponding to the vedic *asuras*) in pre-Zoroastrian Iran (Narten, 1996). Several scholars have noted the similarities between Ahura Mazdā and Varuṇa, whereas Zoroastrian conceptions of the divine with their emphasis on law, morality, order, and regularity – and consonant with the negative semantics of the word *daēuua* (Ved. *deva*) – leave no space for a character like Indra, who is in fact castigated as a *daēuua* (demon) in some Zoroastrian texts starting with the Avestan *Vīdēvdād* (10.9; 19.43). In these texts, Indra appears at or near the top of lists of demons that are to be annihilated. Interestingly, it is Ardwaḥišt, the Middle Persian variety of the Avestan “Good Order” (Aša Vahišta), who is assigned that task (starting with the Middle Pers. translation of the *Gāθās* [ *Yasna* 48.1]). A Middle Persian text states that Indar (this being the Middle Pers. form) “freezes the minds of the creatures from practicing righteousness” (*Great Bundahišn* 27.7; Andrés-Toledo, 2009, 220), and another one (*Dēnkard* 9.32.3) gives an attribute for Indar, namely Kōšīdār (“Fighter” or “Slayer”). This fits the name of the demon following Indar on all these lists – namely, Saura (traditionally interpreted as Saurva, i.e. Ved. Śarvā), probably meaning arrow/spear but maybe already appearing here as a personified demon (Andrés-Toledo, 2009, 224). Together with Saura and sometimes also together with the third demon from these lists, Nāṅhaiṭiia (another name with a Ved. background, for the Ved. Nāsatya is an epithet of Áśvināu), the Middle Persian Indar prevents people from wearing the undershirt and belt/cord that all Zoroastrians are supposed to have on their bodies (*Dēnkard* 9.9.1). In a new Persian text (*Šad Dar-i Bondeheš* 2.13–16), however, Indra/Indar (now appearing as Andar) plays a malign role in individual eschatology by causing anguish to the departed and carrying the sinners to hell and inflicting punishments on their souls. At least from the time of the Middle Persian texts, but maybe already for the hearers of the Avestan *Vīdēvdād*, the identification of Indra/Indar/Andar as an Indian god was probably imperceptible, and he simply appeared as a powerful arch demon.

Indo-Iranian cultural encounters, exchanges, and translations are witnessed in → astrology / astronomy and games (see e.g. Panaino, 1999). Given this intercultural awareness, from a certain

point onward, Hindu India was clearly within the field of vision of Zoroastrian authors. A Middle Persian work of unknown date and miscellaneous content describes different kinds of people and countries. For India, the text emphasizes the complexity of the country: there are different climatic zones, different diets, different ways of life, and different funerary traditions; for religion, the text states that some belong to Ahura Mazdā and others to his adversary, since they practice witchcraft (*Ayātgar ī Žāmāspik* 8.4 [Messina, 1939]). In the 9th century CE, the Zoroastrian theologian Mardānfarrox, son of Ohrmazdād, writes about his religious quest that has taken him abroad, namely to India (*Škand Gumānīg Wizār* 10.44). Moreover, outlining the early history of the (Zoroastrian) religion, he notes that some of its early protagonists carried the religion all the way to “Rome and India” (10.68), which thereby becomes a potential Zoroastrian territory. In the 13th century, a New Persian text from Iran entitled the *Cangranghācah-Nāmāh* recounts the fictive story of the Brahman sage Cangranghācah, who at the time of Zarathustra had come to Iran and the court of Zarathustra’s patron; entering a debate, he was refuted by Zarathustra at every point, and, acknowledging his defeat, he accepted Zarathustra’s religion, which he subsequently spread in India and adjacent countries (Scott, 1988, 107; Jackson, 1899, 86). Interestingly, this text came about at a time when the Zoroastrians had already become a minority in Iran and some of their coreligionists had established themselves in India.

## Iconographical Convergence in Central Asia

Very few iconographical representations of Zoroastrian deities are available from ancient Iran, and the ones that we find are almost exclusively part of royal propaganda such as coins, seals, and reliefs. In the 3rd century CE, for example, Ahura Mazdā is presented as the almost exact counterpart of King Ardashīr; god and king face each other either standing or sitting on horses. The Zoroastrian scriptures – the Avesta and the Pahlavi literature in Middle Persian – do not describe visual manifestations such as images or statues of deities. The Pahlavi texts even contain a negative terminology for “idol,” “idolater,” and “idolatry.” (Boyce, 1975, interprets this as evidence for

an iconoclastic purification movement.) Among contemporary Zoroastrians, one finds various iconographical representations of Zarathustra, of Zoroastrian heroes and places, and of fire altars, but there are no cultic representations of deities (such as consecrated images, busts, or statues of deities used for ritual purposes).

In central Asia, however, Zoroastrianism took a different shape from the model championed by the Pahlavi literature from Persia. Especially in Sogdiana, situated north of Bactria, between the Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) in modern Uzbekistan (and partly Tajikistan), archaeologists have excavated a rich iconographic repertoire. (Direct traces of Zoroastrianism in central Asia disappear with the Mongol invasions, if not earlier.) In the present context, it is worth noting that Sogdian artists drew inspiration from Indian iconography when representing Zoroastrian deities.

In this, they may have been following the example set by the coins issued by the kings of the Kushana Empire in Bactria (where there was a strong Buddhist presence) in the 2nd century CE. While many images of Zoroastrian deities are derived from those of Greek gods with whom they were identified or associated, on some Kushana coins, one finds depictions of the Buddha and images of Mahāsenā, Viśākha, Skanda, and Kumāra. In an interlinear gloss of a dedicatory inscription, the names Mahāsenā and Viśākha are identified with the Zoroastrian deity Srōš (Avest. Sraoša [“Harkening”]), maybe because he and Mahāsenā shared the epithet of the cock (Grenet, 2010, 88). An even stronger fusion occurred when the Zoroastrian deity Oēšo – that is, Vayuš – assumed a kind of Śaiva iconography (three headed and four armed, with trident and club). Apparently, this god remained popular even among the later Kushano-Sasanians, who on their coins referred to themselves as “Mazdean [Mazda-Worshipping, i.e. Zoroastrian] Lord” and depicted fire altars, yet who would also show → Śiva in a traditional style,

with raised hair standing in front of the bull Nandī, while replacing the name Vayu by an epithet suitable for both Vayu and Śiva: *burzāwand yazd* (in the Pahlavi version), “the god who possesses the heights.” (Grenet, 2010, 89)

For Sogdiana, which had close contacts with India, F. Grenet has identified visual depictions

of no fewer than 23 Zoroastrian deities, which is a major part of the main pantheon. Many images were found in Panjikent, east of Samarkand, both in houses and in temples. Some representations still echo Greek models, while others are indigenous creations, but some, it seems, are deliberately modeled on Hindu iconography (Grenet, 2010). The Kushana Vāyu–Śiva iconographical fusion is continued by the pair of Mahādeva–Wēšparkar (as identified by the Sogdian *Vassantara Jātaka* [see Humbach, 1975]; the name Wēšparkar is derived from the full Avest. name of the deity). Another pair identified by the text is Indra–Adhvagh – the latter Sogdian word meaning “supreme god” – that is, Ahura Mazdā. Given the Avesta–Pahlavi textual tradition quoted above, this appearance of Indra is an inversion; the texts were either of little relevance or unknown or no longer understood. One example of depictions of Indra–Adhvagh is a series of terracotta figures (Marshak & Raspopova, 1996, 195–198). The artist drew on three iconographical registers:

Indra (hence the elephant *vāhana*), the Sasanian king (hence the royal ribbons), King David with his cithara, a proper allusion to Ahura Mazdā’s function as master of paradise. (Grenet, 2010, 92)

Other iconographical types or attributes of Hindu deities serving to illustrate (traits of) different Zoroastrian deities probably include Kārttikeya (→ Murukaṅ) and → Durgā. The Indian iconographical vocabulary was useful for the development of a Zoroastrian iconography, but eventually Sogdian artists became more independent in depicting Zoroastrian deities (Grenet, 2010, 94).

## Magas and Bhojakas

The *Sāmbapurāṇa* and the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* report about a certain group of Brahmans, the Maga Brahmans. Their name seems to refer to the religious/ritual specialists of the ancient Iranians (Old Pers. *maguš*; Grk. *mágos*; Lat. *magus*), and the name of the special girdle worn by the Magas – the *avyaṅga* (lit. having non-incomplete limbs) – can be interpreted as deriving from the Avestan *aiβiiāṅhana*, the Avestan name of the belt/cord that Zoroastrians are supposed to wear (Humbach, 1978, 237; 2002, 89). The origin of the group is traced to a certain Sāmba, who (to give a very brief summary of the legend) – in the hope of

getting rid of leprosy, from which he suffered as a result of a curse by his father Kṛṣṇa – resorted to Mitravana, where he bathed in the Candrabhāgā; there he found the statue of the sun, carved in wood by the deity Viśvakarman, which Sāmba, on the request of the sun-god, put up in Mitravana in a newly constructed temple dedicated to the sun. Since no Brahmans were available, on the advice of the sun-god, Sāmba invited 18 families of the Magas of Śākadvīpa (i.e. the continent of the śāka tree), who wore the *avyāṅga*, and for them he built the city of Sāmbapura, which must be Mūlasthāna (modern Multan; see Humbach, 1978, 230ff., for the fuller version with sources; see also von Stietencron, 1966). In the → *Mahābhārata*, these Magas of Śākadvīpa are mentioned as one caste alongside three others, whose names seem to have been derived or formed somewhat artificially from Iranian words (Humbach, 1978, 230; 2002, 90). The name Sāmba probably derives from that of Sambos, a king who, according to several Greek and Latin sources describing Alexander the Great's expedition down the Indus in 326 BC, first subordinated to Alexander, then revolted, and eventually fled eastward beyond the Indus (Humbach, 1978, 238; 2002, 93).

Another piece of evidence for the Iranian background of the Maga Brahmans is provided by the 6th-century astrologer and Maga Brahman Varāhamihira, whose name is formed on the basis of an Indian borrowing (Mihira) of the Middle Persian form (Mihr) of the ancient Iranian Miθra. In his *Pañcasiddhāntikā* (1.23–25), which has a parallel passage in the *Vaṭeśvarasiddhānta* (1.5. 117–120), Varāhamihira (who may have had an Iranian astronomer as his *guru*) describes the “year of the Magas,” where he gives 30 names of the “lords of the degrees of the signs” (1.23 [Neugebauer & Pingree, 1970, 32–33]). A comparison of this list with that contained in the Zoroastrian calendar with its 30 deities (*yazatas*; “[beings] worthy of being worshipped”) shows several correspondences that “testify to a direct knowledge of the Zoroastrian list of the yazatas and the attempt to arrange them according to an Indian (Śaiva) picture” (Panaino, 1996, 585). This indicates the active knowledge of a Zoroastrian model, probably stemming from ancient traditions of reinterpretations.

Eventually, the Magas seem to have spread to Magadha (south Bihar) at a later date; accordingly, new versions of their history came into being. Their Iranian background or connection

receded under the surface. More recent reports quoted by H. Humbach (2002, 92f.) show that their Iranian background is obliterated but that they are still recognized as being somewhat different from other groups. Apparently, they enjoy a reputation as astrologers. In some passages in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the name of the Magas appears in alteration with that of another group, the Bhojakas (who are already attested in the 7th cent. [Humbach, 1978, 245]). H. Humbach argues “that the Bhojakas had usurped the Maga tradition and considered themselves as Magas but were not acknowledged as such by the Magas themselves” (2002, 91). While the Bhojakas are sometimes reported to wear the *avyāṅga*, other reports say that they wear the *amāhaka*, a snake-shaped girdle – which would be an antipode to Zoroastrianism, where the snake is a creature of the evil spirit. However, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* provides some pieces of information that have a Zoroastrian pitch: their wearing of a mouth veil and use of twigs in rituals (like Zoroastrian priests), their eating in silence and saying prayers five times a day, respect for the dog and its relation to funerals, the mention of Rājña and Srauša (i.e. the Zoroastrian deities Rašnu and Sraoša), and some reports about the genealogy and birth of Jaraśastra, apparently Zarathustra, which do not resonate with any known Zoroastrian sources (Humbach, 1978, 248–250; 2002, 91f.). Even if, as H. Humbach suggests, these pieces of information were acquired from Indian Zoroastrian (Parsi) informants, this does not diminish their value as evidence for the intended “Zoroastrianization” of the Bhojakas; even if they were Hindus, the author of these puranic passages wanted to make it clear that they, just like the Magas, had a Zoroastrian connection.

## The Parsis

Historically speaking, there is probably no one fixed date for the arrival of the Zoroastrians who became known as the Parsis (they probably arrived in several waves), but in 1599, an Indian Zoroastrian priest, Bahman Qay Qobād Sanjāna from Navsari (Gujarat), composed a unified narrative in 432 Persian couplets starting with the creation of the world and culminating in the transfer of the main consecrated fire of the Parsis to Navsari, thereby celebrating his own priestly lineage. From his priestly perspective, the narra-

tive fuses the history of the world with the history of his community and that of its main sanctuary; by implication, this establishes the leadership of the priesthood (in his lineage) as the guardians of this fire sanctuary. The account is entitled *Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* (Story of Sanjān), after the name of the place on the Indian coast where the nucleus community, led by a learned priest-astrologer, arrived by boat from Iran “to save our lives and for Religion’s sake” (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 111; trans. Williams, 2009, 77). Threatened by a dangerous storm, they made a vow to establish an *ātaš-i bahrām*, a fire of Bahrām (Avest. *Vərəθragna*), the protector deity whom they had invoked (along with Ahura Mazda) in their desperation. (An *ātaš-i bahrām* is the highest class of ritual fires; until 1765, the Parsis had only one *ātaš-i bahrām*, and the consecration of the second one resulted from a conflict between different groups of priests; nowadays there are eight fires, or fire temples, of that type in India: four in Mumbai, two in Surat, one in Navsari, and one in the coastal village of Udvada.) Since Bahman Qay Qobād provides some apparently clear dates about the itinerary of the Parsis from Iran to India (via Hormuz), earlier generations of scholars tried to establish a date of arrival (reviewed by Williams, 2009, 207–217), but these reconstructions have failed to yield any consensus. In the *Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān*, the *ātaš-i bahrām* is referred to as *šāh-i irān* (king of Iran), or as the *šāh-i šāhān* (king of kings), and today it is called Iranshah, implying that the fire is the successor of the Iranian kingship that was lost with the Arab invasion but is kept up by the Parsis in India.

Bahman Qay Qobād reports a dialogue between the priest-leader of the migrants and the local ruler of Sanjān, who is introduced as a “good *rājā*” by the name of Jādi and whose historical identity remains unresolved (Williams, 2009, 175). When the priest asks for asylum for the “strangers” who “have come... for refuge and home within your land” (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 142; trans. Williams, 2009, 83), the ruler grants this on five conditions: that they must explain their religion to him, that “they must renounce the language of their own land” and “speak the language of Hend,” that their women shall “wear such garments as our women wear,” and that “they shall lay down these swords and weapons, and never more shall gird them on again” (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 154–157, trans. Williams, 2009, 85); the fifth and final requirement has traditionally been understood as an obligation to celebrate weddings at night, but A. Williams (2009,

85) now translates it in the following way: “when they perform the noble act of children, on that night they should be married” (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 158). The text proposes a program of assimilation by abandoning weapons and adopting language and clothing (for women) and non-secretiveness about their religion. The first element of the subsequent explanation or translation of their religion by the priest points to their descent from the mythical first (Iranian) king, Jamšid (Avest. *Yima*); the priest then points to their religious respect for or worship of five elements (fire, water, sun, moon, and cow) before he mentions the creator-god, their belt/cord, and their prayers (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 167–171). The final three elements address purity rules for the women in case of menstruation, childbirth, or miscarriage/stillbirth (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 172–175).

A widely circulating oral narrative of unknown date (often erroneously believed to be part of the *Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān*) reports the ruler to initially have denied access, pointing to a full glass of milk; with great presence of mind, the priest is reported to have inserted some sugar into that glass, which did not flow over; being like the sugar in the milk of Indian society has become a leitmotiv of Parsi identity making in modern India. The five conditions explain the ethnoreligious diversity of the Parsis and reflect some factual cultural patterns such as their specific Gujarati dialect (known as Parsi Gujarati) and their food and garments, which are all recognizably regional but with some special (Persian) traits. Nowadays, initiations and weddings are occasions to display this ethnic heritage ceremonially in combinations with the purifications and blessings performed by the priests. The Zoroastrian religion is embedded in an ethnic legacy, together constituting what has been called Parsi Zoroastrianism. In modernity, when boundaries became challenged, this ethnoreligious continuum with its diverse poles of genealogical lineage and religious universalism turned out to be a fragile construct; intermarriages (and the related issue of conversion) have been the key sites to expose its ambivalences.

Another notable episode of the *Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* narrated by Bahman Qay Qobād in quite some detail are two battles in which the Parsis, on request of the Hindu rulers, join the Hindu army to fight against Islamic forces on their way to conquer that part of India. Having won the first battle, the Hindu-Parsi coalition is annihilated in the second battle (*Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* 243–352). It is



unclear whether these battles ever occurred, but the account was probably inspired by political and military events in the 15th and 16th centuries in Gujarat. Bahman Qay Qobād sides the Parsis with the Hindus against the Muslims; the lost battle and the immersion of their blood into the soil of India amount to their ultimate sacrifice for their host country, sealing their transformation from Iranians into Parsis, even though as Parsis, they retain a distinctive ethnic and religious culture. Historically speaking, though, despite some instances of discrimination, it seems that the period of Islamic rule over India allowed the Parsis to prosper (Stausberg, 2002a, 404f.).

It is reported that a learned priest by the name of Neryōsang Dhaval, who probably lived in the 11th or 12th century CE, was the first and most prominent of some learned Zoroastrian scholar-priests to translate several Avestan and Middle Persian texts into Sanskrit (see Bharucha, 1906). In addition to these translations, a certain Ākā Adhyāru (who some think was a Hindu) composed 16 Sanskrit *ślokas*; the oldest manuscripts are from the 17th century, but H.-P. Schmidt, the principal editor and translator, believes them to be from the period of 900 or 1000 CE (1960–1961, 192), a theory that strikes me as rather speculative. Apparently, these *ślokas* were meant to define the identity of the Parsis, even though they were not widely known among them: almost all of these 16 *ślokas* end on the line, “those are we Parsis.” The Parsis are referred to as a *varṇa* (*śl.* 11). Hormazd (i.e. Ahura Mazdā) is mentioned in the first and last *śloka*. In addition to various elements familiar from other Zoroastrian sources, the *ślokas* also have some points stemming from a Hindu background; interestingly, the woolen belt/cord is described as “well measured (with ends) like snake-mouths” (*śl.* 3), which recalls the information about the Bhojakas, so that the text can have originated in a Hindu-Parsi environment similar to such a group (Stausberg, 2002a, 393–398; Schmidt’s translation is reprinted in Williams, 2009, 233–237).

In the 19th century, like in other religious traditions, a reform movement started among the Parsis, aiming at modernizing the religion under the rhetorical guise of a return to its authentic historical kernel. The initial targets were practices such as child marriages, which were branded as “Indian” – that is, as not originally Zoroastrian (i.e. Iranian). Not without resistance from influential people, child marriages became less com-

mon among the Parsis in the course of the 19th century (Stausberg, 2002b, 66). In 1858, Dosa-bhoy Framjee, a notable reformer, reinterpreted the *Qeṣṣe-yi Sanjān* by suggesting that the Zoroastrians might have tried to conceal their real beliefs from the Indian ruler, but now the time had come to once again rid Zoroastrianism from “Hindu superstitions” (Ringer, 2011, 157). Later, however, the strong impact of the → Theosophical Society among the Parsis (Stausberg, 2002b, 112–118) allowed the discourse of reform to become reconciled with an interest in Hinduism (and esotericism). Reincarnation (which is not a point of Zoroastrian doctrine) was championed by some Parsi theosophist authors. Theosophists like H.S. Olcott and A. Besant gave speeches about Zoroastrianism. In the 1920s and 1930s, some Indian intellectuals – among them Rabindranath → Tagore – published books on Zoroastrianism that partly tried to align it with Indian religious literature, most notably the → *Bhagavadgītā* or the → Upaniṣads (Stausberg, 2012, 127–132).

Comparison with the Zoroastrian communities in Iran indicates a number of Parsi practices that have originated as a result of their interaction with their Hindu environment. Like Hinduism, Parsi Zoroastrianism puts a great emphasis on → auspiciousness, especially in relation to births, initiations, and marriages (referred to as “auspicious occasions” in Parsi folk taxonomy); the date of initiations, engagements, and marriages is partly determined with reference to astrology. The celebration of auspicious occasions includes the performance, by (preferably married) women (with children but barring widows), of a number of rites (Stausberg, 2004, 35–37; Kreyenbroek & Munshi, 2001, 18–19) centered on the body of the subject to be felicitated with the help of a set of “auspicious objects,” which are arranged on a metal tray (Guj. *sēs*). Such objects include vegetal items such as flowers, rice, unshelled almonds, dried dates, betel leaves and betel nuts, and coconuts that are often painted (in red) with the *svastika* symbol. Water is kept in silver beakers. In one rite (known in Guj. as *sagan*), the person to be felicitated receives a colored *kumkum* dot on the forehead (and often also on the feet), where some grains of rice are made to stick on the *kumkum* dot; the person also holds some items placed on the metal tray. The coconut is handed to him or her, a garland is placed around his or her neck (a common form of felicitation in its own right), and rice is showered on him or her

(a common gesture of blessing). Contrary to the rituals performed by the priests, who are all male, these rites are executed in silence—that is, the women do not recite any texts. Moreover, on auspicious days or occasions, Parsi women mark relevant thresholds with ephemeral drawings with white or colored chalk powder on the ground; these are known as *chalk*, *chawk*, or → *rañgolī* (see Stausberg, 2004; Munshi & Stewart, 2002, for illustrations). There are floral or geometric motifs; for especially auspicious occasions, fish designs are vital. At weddings or initiations, elaborate patterns are drawn. Apart from their aesthetic appeal, they are held to convey auspiciousness and to create a pure atmosphere.

In 1819, a community meeting decided (among other things) that “[n]o woman should resort to such temples as Mumbadevi, Bhuleshwar, Mahalaxmi, Walkeshwar or any other place of Hindu worship, for idolatry” (Jeejeebhoy, 1953, 305). Apparently, some Hindu temples were attractive to Parsis. Today, images of Hindu deities like Lakṣmī (→ Śrī Lakṣmī) and Gaṇeśa (→ Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa) can be seen in some Parsi homes. Hindu *bābās*, *svāmīs*, or *gurus* are venerated by some. More than anybody else, → Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) is popular among the Parsis. Meher Baba (1894–1969), who studied with a student of Shirdi Sai Baba (among others) and extended his activity beyond India, was born a Zoroastrian by the name Merwan Sheriar Irani; he had several Parsis among his earliest and most intimate followers (Stausberg, 2002b, 96–97). In recent years, in Mumbai, a Parsi woman and a Parsi man called Gururani and Yogiraj, respectively, established a transreligious cult, where their *darśans* (see → *pūjā* and *darśana*) are the key performances; their divine status is expressed by using Hindu vocabulary, and the → cobra is a main iconographical motif (Keul & Stausberg, 2010).

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