

# FROM THE AVESTA TO SUFI TREATISES: A STANDARD LITERARY TECHNIQUE

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**Abstract:** Two accidental encounters with Jean Kellens' translations of Y.58.1 and Y19 allowed me to discover how interdependent was the Avestan literary format with later Sufi literature. This perception allowed in turn the understanding of the motives of the Zoroastrian priesthood in composing a Y19 type of text, the careful step by step escalating pattern built in, and the use of recurrent slogans and propaganda for their own glory. Essential to this analysis was the comprehension of the historic environment in which various actors fought each other. It is inevitably linked to the confrontation between the *pārsās* and the Zoroastrian priesthood on the one hand, and the Median magi on the other. As such, it negates once more the dogmatic belief in an ancient Zarathushtra, living at the dawn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

**Keywords:** *Ahuna Vairya, chithra, khrafstar, qalandar-nāmeḥ*

## I. Introduction

My first foray into the Avestan world was in pursuit of the meaning of *chithra*. I had sensed that by adopting a meaning of origin, seed or nature for this word, Avestan translations often lacked clarity, and bypassed an important concept, that of *chithra*, reflecting as light, the intensity of the *khvarenah* that empowered different beings. It took me several years to assert this conclusion,<sup>1</sup> and thereafter, I continued to check its validity each time I encountered a sentence that included *chithra*. Thus, when in 2010, I attended by chance one of Jean Kellens' lectures at the Collège de France, where *Yasna* 58.1 was translated with yet another meaning for *chithra*, I naturally sought to reassess the

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<sup>1</sup> Soudavar 2006; Soudavar 2009 : 442-50.

situation at hand. In doing so, I not only found more assurance in my own thesis, but also found confirmation for a thought that I had nurtured for some time: that Western specialists would be better served if they could also consult Persian translations of the Avesta. For, if Western specialists are more competent in philological technicalities, their Persian counterparts enjoy a natural advantage in sensing the form and flow of sentences. But whenever I expressed this idea, the response was that Western Avestologists often don't know Persian, and in any case, the Avesta is so distant from New Persian that no reverse projection can be of help.

The present article is to prove the contrary. It was sparked by the fortuitous preview of an article written by Amir Ahmadi in refutation of translations previously offered for parts of *Yasna* 19, by Kellens and others.<sup>2</sup> I suddenly realized that treatises written for dervish orders, called *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* or *qalandar-nāmeḥ*, had a structural format similar to the one used in Y19, a format that was essential to the understanding of each of these types of texts.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I shall first tackle the problems associated with Y58.1, and then, after exploring the format of *qalandar-nāmeḥs*, I shall delve into the particularities of Y19 and show its stylistic parallelism with the latter, while highlighting the general lack of understanding for the structure and purpose of Y19. The use of particular expressions by the author of Y19 will also provide the opportunity to reassess the historical process that affected the development of the Avesta, a process that inevitably brings to fore the late date for Zarathushtra.

### **The *Yasna* 58.1**

I shall compare hereafter two translations of the first stanza of Y58:

Y58.1     *taṭ sōidiš taṭ vərəθrəm dadəmaidē*  
          *hiiṭ nəmā huciθrəm ašiš.hāgəṭ ārmaitiš.hāgəṭ*  
          *yejḥē nəmaṇhō ciθrəm humatəmcā hūxtəmcā huuarštəmcā*

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmadi (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Jean Kellens for having graciously sent me a copy of his book (Kellens 2010b), the content of which I must criticize in this article.

Translation by Kellens :

« Nous tenons pour un manteau et une cuirasse l’Hommage qui a bonne caractéristique, qui s’associe à la Chance, qui s’associe à la juste-Pensée. La caractéristique de l’Hommage est la (pensée) bien pensée, le texte bien dit et le (geste) bien fait. »<sup>4</sup>

The Persian translation of the same, by Jalil Dustkhāh is:<sup>5</sup>

این نماز نیک بنیاد به اشه و به آرمیتی پیوسته، این نمازی را که بنیادش اندیشه نیک و گفتار نیک و کردار نیک است، رزم افزار پیروزی می دانیم.

Which translates as : “This prayer (homage), of good foundation, which is linked to *Asha* and *Armaiti*, this prayer whose foundation rests on good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, we hold it as an instrument of victory.”

In comparing these two translations, one can immediately see a difference in form: while the latter considers the stanza as one sentence, the former divides into two. For the Persian writer, the tone of the text naturally induced him to see it as a sentence in which, the power that the prayer is supposed to confer is defined along with explanations about the sources of its power.

Kellens’ technically more precise translation of the first line—as referring to robe and armor—is evoking the protective power of the prayer; it’s fully supported by the subsequent stanzas of the prayer as they evoke protection from demons.<sup>6</sup> It’s also a better fit than Dustkhāh’s aggression-oriented “instrument of victory,” and in line with the usually more passive tone of prayers. On the other hand, Kellens’ insistence on translating *humatəmcā hūxtəmcā huuarštəmcā* as “the thought, well-thought; the word, well-spoken; the gesture, well-performed” adds an unnecessary complication that goes against the usage of the famous triple Persian motto: *pendār-e nik, goftār-e nik, kerdār-e nik*. It is so engrained in Persian and Zoroastrian literature that

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<sup>4</sup> Kellens 2010a : 27.

<sup>5</sup> Dustkhāh 2002 : 229.

<sup>6</sup> Kellens’ translation of Y58.2 “Qu’un tel Hommage nous protège de la nocivité des démons et des hommes. A un tel Hommage nous confions nos biens-vivants et nos corps, pour qu’il les protège, les garde, les préserve et les surveille” ; Kellens 2010a : 28-29.

one must believe that this is how the original Avestan motto was understood.

The translations of both authors, however, is eschewed by the everlasting *chithra* predicament. I have criticized elsewhere, instances in which philologists had extrapolated the meaning of *chithra*, from “origin” to “nature,” “semen,” “seed,” or even “offspring.”<sup>7</sup> Here, while Dustkhāh has opted for “foundation,” Kellens has used “characteristic.” Both are problematic, especially the latter. Because a prayer is essentially an utterance, it can consist of “good words”, but it cannot “think,” and therefore cannot have good thoughts. Should we envisage that “good thoughts” went into the *composition* of a prayer, it would then define a characteristic of the composer and not the song. No matter how we twist it, we will end up with an illogical proposition.

Dustkhāh’s adoption of “foundation” for *chithra* is somehow less illogical, since a foundation can eventually be considered as the creation of a composer. But it leaves us up in the air as to who the composer might be, while pushing *chithra* towards a meaning that is attached to a foreign agent (the composer), rather than rooted in the prayer. If the starting point for *chithra* is “nature” or “origin,” it cannot be extrapolated to a foreign agent.

In reality, *chithra* is the manifestation of the *khvarenah* as light, and the source of all power. It can empower deities, humans as well as prayers. But since it is variable, one needs to increase it through good deeds and through the performance of religious duties. *Denkard* 3:361, specifically explains that the *kharrāh* (*khvarenah*) increases or diminishes according to one’s performance of religious duties.<sup>8</sup> And throughout Zoroastrianism, the recurring theme of “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” appears as a motto that defines religious duty. It’s almost self-evident then that, in order to increase the

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<sup>7</sup> See Soudavar 2006 : 166-67 ; Soudavar 2009 : 442-50.

<sup>8</sup> Soudavar 2009: 31.

protection-effectiveness of the prayer, one needs to concentrate on the three “good” things to increase one’s *chithra*.

Like the Sanskrit word *karma*, perhaps *chithra* should not be translated in English but understood as the light and radiance of the prayer’s *khvarenah*, and the measure of its power. The stanza would then read:

Y58.1: “We hold it as a robe and armor (of protection), this prayer of good *chithra* (Light) linked to Ashi and Armaiti, whose *chithra* (is derived from) good words, good deeds and good thoughts”

The problem of *chithra* notwithstanding, the comprehension of Y58.1 primarily depends on the correct perception of its literary format. If you break it into two separate sentences, you lose the *raison d’être* of the second part: how the prayer can become more effective. It’s a point that will become more apparent when analyzing Y19. But to do that, we shall first explore some relevant passages of Sufi literature.

## II. A literary format

Among various treatises composed for dervish orders, there is a genre called *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* or *qalandar-nāmeḥ*. They were supposed to be simple manuals for initiation procedures of dervish orders, but gradually adopted a stratified structure that allowed different writers to show their prowess by ever expanding the stratifications. In one such a treatise, the author tries to explain the worthiness of Sufism by presenting his arguments as reflecting justifications proffered by the sixth Shiite Imam, Ja`far as-Sādeq (702-765).<sup>9</sup> The essence of Sufism is then explained to encompass the three principles of *shari`at* (religion), *tariqat* (the Sufi path) and *haqiqat* (truth), which are then expanded by the following stratification process:

a) If you are asked: what is *shari`at*, and what is *tariqat*, and what is *haqiqat*?

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<sup>9</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995: 106-107. The attribution of these arguments to the Sixth Imam is without any substantiation or reference.

b) Say: *shari`at* is Islam, and *tariqat* is *imān* (faith), and *haqiqat* is *ehsān* (kindness)

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c) If they ask what is Islam?

d) Say Islam is based on : “I swear that there is no god but God (اشهد ان لا اله الا الله)” and “present your prayer (اقموا الصلوة)” and “donate your *zakāt* (آتوا الزكوة)” and “fast in Ramadan (الصوم الرمضان)” and ...

e) and if they ask what is *imān*?

f) say: it is to acknowledge the uniqueness of God Almighty, in relation to which the Prophet has proclaimed: “Faith is to believe in God, and his angels, books, messengers, and the Day of Judgment, and precise assessment by God Almighty, and resurrection after death,”<sup>10</sup>

g) and if they ask what is *ehsān*?

h) say: it is to know the Creator through your inner eye since the Prophet has said: “*ehsān* (kindness) is in reality the worship of God,...”;

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i) also the Imam has said: that the *shari`at* is to be uttered, the *tariqat* is to be taken, and the *haqiqat* is to be known, as the Prophet has said that “the *shari`at* is my sayings, the *tariqat* is my deeds, and the *haqiqat* is my being” and the Imam said again, that “the *shari`at* is a road, the *tariqat* is to engage that road, and the *haqiqat* is to reach the ultimate goal”; and the Imam also said that “the *shari`at* is a boat, the *tariqat* is the sea, and the *haqiqat* is the pearl (in the sea).”

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j) if they ask: how many letters has *shari`at* (شريعة)?

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<sup>10</sup> It is a fabricated saying for the Prophet Mohammad: الايمان أن تومن بالله و ملائكته و كتبه و رسله و اليوم الآخر و القدر خبيره من الله تعالى و البعث بعد الموت

k) say that *shari`at* has five letters and each letter has meanings: the ش of *shari`at* is a pointer to the acceptance of the *conditions* (شرايط) of Islam; and its “ز” is to distinguish between *permissible* (روا) and not permissible; and its ی is to *remember* (ياد کردن) God; and its ع points to *worship* (عبادت); and its ت is to *repent* (توبه) from sins.

l) and *tariqat* too has five letters: ...

m) and *haqiqat* too has five letters: ...

Of the three principles evoked in (a), the *tariqat* is what really defines Sufism, while the other two have been adjoined to give it a well-rounded definition, and better protection against accusations of non-religiosity. The reason being, dervish orders carried symbols and procedures from a pagan era, which made them vulnerable to attack by orthodox Muslims. Thus, the association of the *shari`at* with the *tariqat* was a good insurance policy. In addition, they not only rhymed together, but also with *haqiqat*. The resulting rhyming triplet became a motto that defined Sufism in a way that “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” characterized Zoroastrianism. But once this triplet was enunciated at the top level, the literary genre required further explanation for each of its components in subsequent levels. This was achieved through (b). The explanations provided in (b) were, in turn, further expanded through three pairs of question and answers: (c-d), (e-f) and (g-h). At this stage, to enhance the importance of the triplet, the author interjects in (i) three additional sets of metaphors, each of which cloak the three principles with a mystical aura. They are seemingly not his own, but borrowings from other writers. He then engages in a new process, one in which he uses the technique of revealing the inner meaning of each word by providing an explanation for each of its letters through a word that begins with the same letter. He applies this letter dissecting technique, first to *shari`at*, in (k), and then to the other two principles *tariqat* and *haqiqat*, in (l) and (m) respectively.

The question and answer sequence provides a tempo, and the stratification provides an arithmetic veneer of orderly, perhaps divine,

structure. The global effect was meant to dazzle the interlocutor. Because the process is artificial, it provides *a posteriori* explanations that are forcibly fed into the literary format. They provide fanciful explanations that are seldom meaningful.

But so important is the format that if the writer cannot apply it directly, he would try to introduce it through a detour. In the following example, since the writer could not dissect the word *kherqa* (the dervish robe) directly, he first equates it with *faqr* (poverty) and then proceeds with the stratification of the latter's meaning:

- A) if they ask "what is the *kherqa*?" say that it represents *faqr*
- B) and if they ask what is *faqr* (فقر) and how many meaning it has? Say that it has three letters and seven meanings:
- C) the ف of *faqr* points to *paucity* (فِاقِه), and the ق of *faqr* indicates *contentment* (قِنَاعَت), and its ر is for *hardship* (رِيَاضَت)
- D) and *faqr* is described by its (seven) states and qualities:
  - 1) *faqr* is nothingness, and one disappears in nothingness in order to reappear in the kingdom of eternity
  - 2) *faqr* breaks the neck of all drunkenness, and then achieves its goal
  - 3) the nothingness of all pure things has been gathered and thus named *faqr*
  - 4) *faqr* is a mirror that never rusts
  - 5) it is contentment in a kingly state, because it emanates from the Kingdom of Salomon
  - 6) it's a precious gem that cannot be priced or evaluated, and one that the Imam `Ali has approved of (to be worn)
  - 7) *faqr* is (to have) a lightweight mind and an empty stomach, and if the stomach is empty it will really smell *faqr*.<sup>11</sup>

In (C) the three letters of *faqr* are each explained individually, and then seven baseless and arbitrary qualities are proclaimed for *faqr*,

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<sup>11</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995:110-111.

because seven is a fundamental number for dervish orders. More generally, this is a literary genre that sacrifices meaning for form, and therefore it's almost futile to try to find esoteric meanings hidden in each of the above sentences.

Finally, this question and answer game, that was meant to dazzle the initiate, also emphasized the utterance of words and sentences. Thus, to each dervish symbol, such as *kherqa*, was associated a Qoranic verse that the initiate was required to utter before using it.<sup>12</sup> Priests and religious officials always promoted the power of the word. And that is what *Yasna 19* is all about.

### III. The *Yasna 19*

The *Yasna 19*, which is occasionally referred to as *Bagān Yasht*, is in praise of a Gathic prayer hymn, the *Ahuna Vairya*. There have been many attempts to translate it, the latest being that of Kellens as part of his analysis of preliminary recitations before the ritual of sacrifice (Kellens 2010b). It has drawn partial criticism from Amir Ahmadi who has focused on the illogical implications of many of the propositions advanced by Kellens.<sup>13</sup> While Kellens qualifies Y19 as “cosmogonie mentale,” Ahmadi sees it imbued with “eschatological purposes,” but also emphasizes its grammatical merits in terms of “how the exegete understood the syntax” of the *Ahuna Vairya*. My own views on the matter, however, are less grandiose and more cynical. I see it as a priestly composition, along the lines of the aforementioned *qalandar-nāmehs*, in which meaning is sacrificed to form. Its purpose was to induce the initiate to perform religious recitations and incantations. It thus emphasized the importance of the *Ahuna Vairya* as an empowered word, through the artificial techniques of explanation by stratification, quantification, as well as step by step escalation. It was meant to dazzle the initiate but at the same time elevate the position of priesthood. It also included rewards for good recitation, or even a deficient one. And

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<sup>12</sup> Afshāri & Mir`ābedini 1995: 146.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmadi (forthcoming).

where Kellens sees similarities with other hymns as an imbedded reference to them, I only see plagiarism.<sup>14</sup> Either the composer of this hymn copied certain passages from the others, or vice versa, for, as we saw in the case (i) of the *qalandar-nāmeḥ*, these authors often used borrowings from others to embellish their own.

The text of Y19 can be divided into five parts, each following a different literary technique and promoting a different agenda.<sup>15</sup> I shall present, hereunder, a translation of each part with an eye on various existing translations,<sup>16</sup> as well as the precisions advanced by Ahmadi. The more the general orientation of the text became clear, the less I needed to add explanatory words and sentences beyond the direct translation of each word. Like Iranian languages, English offers the possibility of expressing ideas in a concise manner. *I have thus opted for a more fluent English translation than what Avestologists prefer, which is a word by word translation that is more often than not incomprehensible, and at times utterly wrong.* They spend an enormous time to justify semantics only to fall short on meaning. The objective here is to explain Yasna 19 as a whole, i.e., its purpose and the logic imbedded in it, through a readable translation. Anomalies and particularities that need further elaboration, will be explained afterwards in sections IV-VIII.

### ***III.1. Yasna 19 –Part 1***

The first part establishes the merits of this hymn, by explaining the value of its invocation, as well as situating its first utterance in the very early stage of Creation. Except for Y19.2 and Y19.4 whose meaning I shall elaborate later on, the translation of the first part does not present any particular problem, and most translations agree with each other.

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance note 22 *infra* on how Kellens jumps from one text to another.

<sup>15</sup> Kellens (2010b: 27-51) has opted for a slightly different partition.

<sup>16</sup> I have relied on H.H. Mills' text ([www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm](http://www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm)), Dustkhāh's (2002:173-77), as well as Kellens (2010b: 27-51). But more importantly, I found the word translations provided in the online dictionary of Avesta.org to be sufficiently precise—in most cases—as to not need any further extrapolation.

One can note, however, that similar to the author of our *qalandar-nāmeḥ* who attributed his baseless arguments to the Sixth Shiite Imam, the author of Y19 puts his grandiose claims in the mouths of no less witnesses than Ahura Mazdā and Zoroaster, who are in conversation with each other:

- 19.1. Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazdā: O Ahura Mazdā, thou most bounteous Spirit, maker of the corporeal world, O Righteous one, which was that Word that you recited to me,
- 19.2. which came before (*para*) the sky, before the water, before the earth, before the cow, before the plants, before *Fire son of Ahura Mazdā*, before the righteous man, before the *khrafstarish* devils and their men (i.e., followers); and before all of the corporeal world, and those good things fashioned by Mazdā and imbued with the *chithra* (Light) of righteousness?
- 19.3. Thereupon Ahura Mazdā said: That was the *Ahuna-vairya* hymn, O Spitama Zarathushtra, which I recited for you,
- 19.4. before (the creation) of the sky, before the water, before the earth, before the cattle, before the plants, before *Fire son of Ahura Mazdā*, before the righteous man, before the *khrafstarish* devils and their men (i.e., followers); and before all of the corporeal world, and those good things fashioned by Mazdā and imbued with the *chithra* (Light) of righteousness.
- 19.5. This *Ahuna-vairya* hymn of mine, O Spitama Zarathushtra, if incanted without mistakes and omissions, is worth a hundred other chants that are likewise well recited without mistake and without omissions; and even if incanted with mistakes and omissions, its effect will be equivalent to ten other prominent chants.
- 19.6. And whoever in this corporeal world, O Spitama Zarathushtra, shall memorize the godly *Ahuna-vairya*, and recite its memorized words in undertone,<sup>17</sup> or whisper them as a chant, or chant them for

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<sup>17</sup> Zoroastrian recitations are done as an undertone, i.e., in a low voice, as a whisper (*drenj*).

worship, then I, Ahura Mazdā, will bring his soul over the Bridge (of Chinvat), to reach successively the three Heavenly stages of Excellent Life, Excellent Righteousness, and Excellent Lights.<sup>18</sup>

19.7. And whoever in this corporeal world, O Spitama Zarathushtra, while whispering by heart the *Ahuna-vairya*, omits one half, or one third, or one fourth, or one fifth, I who am Ahura Mazdā will pull away his soul from the heavenly world; yea, so far off as the earth is large and wide; and this earth is indeed long and broad.

### ***III.2. Yasna 19 - Part 2***

In this part the author introduces *ahu* and *ratu* as part of an eschatological projection that has been generally misunderstood because of the wrong translation of Y19.9. Although his real agenda is only revealed in Part 3, in this section, he already tries to prepare the ground for it.

19.8. Thus, the verse<sup>19</sup> that contained the word *ahu* and the word *ratu* was proclaimed before the appearance of the sky above, and before the appearance here of the waters, plants, bovine quadrupeds, before the birth of the righteous two-legged man, and before the body of the sun was made visible; but after the appearance of the *Amesha Sepentas*.

19.9. And these bounteous spiritual beings of mine proclaimed that the righteousness of the entire creation, existed in the past, exists now,

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<sup>18</sup> Compare with Kellens' less concise translation of same (2010b: 30) : "Quiconque en cet état osseux, ô Spitama Zarathušθra, mémorise la version analysée de l' *Ahuna Variia*, moi Ahura Mazdā je ferai passer son âme-moi par-dessus le pont vers l'excellent état de trois manières : jusqu'à l'excellent état s'il mémorise pour en maîtriser la diction, jusqu'à l'excellent Agencement s'il en maîtrise la diction pour la réciter, jusqu'aux excellentes lumières s'il la récite pour l'offrir en sacrifice. ». See also note 38 for my comments on the "version analysée" qualification.

<sup>19</sup> Within the primarily oral world of the Avesta, sentences are mostly referred to as "saying" rather than text as Kellens suggests (Kellens 2010b: 32). This paragraph, however, refers to the utterance of the first two verses of the *Ahuna Vairya* in which these two words appear.

and will exist in the future by the power of *šiiāoθānanāṃ aṅhāuš mazdāi*.<sup>20</sup>

19.10. And this Word (i.e., hymn) is the most emphatic of the words which have been pronounced before, or which are now spoken, or which shall be spoken in future; for, its power is such that if all the beings of the corporeal world should memorize it, and learn it, they would be redeemed from their mortality.

19.11. And this Word of ours has been proclaimed in order to be memorized and learned by all beings, for the sake of (establishing) best Righteousness.

We can sense that in 19.8, he is attaching a certain importance to the words *ahu* and *ratu* by emphasizing that they were pronounced basically before life came on earth. He presents it as a logical consequence of 19.1-2, because if the whole hymn was uttered before Creation, so would be the words *ahu* and *ratu* contained in its first two verses (see below). But then, at the end of the stanza, he seemingly backtracks a little bit, and rectifies his earlier statement by emphasizing that they were actually uttered after the appearance of the Amesha Sepentas. This added precision is to avoid blasphemy. By *ahu* and *ratu* he must have referred to mortals who could not be higher ranked than the Amesha Sepentas. As we shall see, the first stanza (Y19.12) of Part 3 clarifies this matter.

Once he introduces the Amesha Sepentas in Y19.8, he uses them in the subsequent stanza, as upholders of *asha* (Righteousness) who vouch for its ever presence, which they attribute to the power of *šiiāoθānanāṃ aṅhāuš mazdāi* sentence of the *Ahuna Vairya*, supposedly because it proclaims that the creation of the whole world was Ahura Mazda's.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Having evoked the Amesha Spentas in the previous stanza, it seems logical that the *frā mē spaniiā mainuuā* of Y19.9 (see next note) refers to them as “bounteous spiritual beings of mine” i.e., those that he, Ahura Mazda, had created.

<sup>21</sup> Y19.9: “*frā-mē spaniiā maniuuā vauuaca vīspāṃ aśāonō stīm haitīmca bauuainītmca būšiiēiñtīmca šiiāoθnō.tāitiia šiiāoθānanāṃ aṅhāuš mazdāi.*”

The Y19.9-10 stanzas reiterate then the fundamental eschatological idea of Zoroastrianism that Righteousness shall prevail over Evil, and present the power of the *Ahuna Vairya* as the main instrument of Righteousness' final triumph. Whereas in Part 1, our *Yasna* author used as witnesses Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster, he uses here the Amesha Spentas to give more weight to his assertions.

### **III.3. *Yasna 19 – Part 3***

Having praised the value and power of the *Ahuna Vairya* hymn as a whole, the author pushes his praise to another level, one in which he can explain the role of each of its components individually. It's a technique similar to the one used in the aforementioned Sufi treatise, in (k), (l), (m), which not only explained the merits of a name as a whole, but described the benefits associated with each of its letters. In what follows, I have juxtaposed the *Ahuna Vairya* with Y19.12-14, and underlined their common elements.

#### ***The Ahuna Vairya (Ahuna Variia).***

*Yaθa ahu vairiō*  
*aθā ratuš ašātcīt hacā*  
*vanhēuš dazdā mananhō*  
*šiaoθananam anhēuš mazdāi*  
*xšaθrəmcā ahurāi.ā*  
*yim drigubiiō dadaṭ vāstārəm*

Y19.12: (1) *yaθa<sub>1</sub> frā ida āmoraot yaṭ dim ahūmca ratūmca ādadaṭ,*  
*iθa dim para cinasti yim ahurəm mazdəm manas.paoiriiaēibiiō*  
*dāmabiiō*

(2) *yaθa<sub>2</sub> īm vīspanəm mazištəm cinasti,*

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Kellens' translation of Y19.9 (2010b : 32): "Celui des deux avis [sur moi] qui est bénéfique a proclamé tout l'état existant du soutien de l'Agencement aurait un passé, un présent et un futur sous l'action des mots *šiaoθananam anhēuš mazdāi* ». Because of the undefined « deux avis [sur moi] », his whole translation is meaningless, and cannot be integrated into the chain of ideas that bind the stanzas together; see also note 20.

- (3) *aθa ahmāi dāmąn cinasti.*
- Y19.13 (1) *yaθa<sub>3</sub> mazdā hujītīš*  
 (2) *vanhəuš iða θritīm tkaēšəm ādrənjaiieiti*  
 (3) *dazda manəhō para im iða manəhe cinasti*  
 (4) *Yaθa<sub>4</sub> fradaxštārəm manəhe*  
 (5) *manəhō aētauuaitia īm kāraiieiti.*  
 (6) *šiiəθənanąm iða ahūm kāraiieiti*
- Y19.14 (1) *yaṭ dim damabiiō cinasti*  
*mazdā[i] iθa təm yaṭ ahmāi dāmąn,*  
 (2) *xšaθrəm ahurāi cinasti, taṭ mazda tauua xšaθrəm,*  
 (3) *drigubiiō vāstārəm cinasti,*  
*yaθa<sub>5</sub> uruuəθəm spitamāi,*  
 (4) *paṅca tkaēša, vīspem vacō frauuākəm haurum vacō ahurahe*  
*mazdā*

As their translation will show, each sentence of Y19.12-14 boasts the effect of the initial utterance of a component of the hymn, supposedly by Ahura Mazda. Of these elements, only *yaθa*, which is the very first word of the hymn, is repeated five times. *Yaθa* appears therein in its own capacity and on behalf of the whole hymn. To clarify the matter, the author of Y19 cleverly insinuates—in the last sentence of Y19.14—that this number five corresponds to the five times that the hymn was recited at the dawn of creation by Ahura Mazda himself. If Ahura Mazda recited it five times then the initiate and believer should do the same. He is implicitly inviting them to whisper this hymn five times a day on the occasion of the Zoroastrian daily prayer, the *nemāz*. Having praised the merits of the hymn in the earlier stanzas, he now justifies the five time recitals as a standard set by Ahura Mazda himself. In between, however, he interjects his hidden agenda in the very first line of Y19.12.

There has been much confusion about the meaning of the first two lines of this stanza, and Kellens' recent translation complicates matters even further:

Y19.12 “(Le vers qui commence par) *yaθa* a proclamé que (les créations) le faisaient seigneur (*ahū*) et maître (*ratu*). Ainsi ce vers pose en doctrine que lui, Ahura Mazda, est préalable aux créations dont la (Bonne) Pensée est la première, comme (Y45.6a) pose en doctrine qu’il est le plus grand de tous...”<sup>22</sup>

Not only his translation is awkward, but one wonders about the merits of introducing—unjustifiably—the created (*les créations*) in order to call Ahura Mazda a mere *ratu*, a generic term that in Y19.15 is applied to the head of families, clan or tribe. For Ahmadi, the subject of *ādadaṭ* must be the Amesha Sepentas since he believes that “according to Y 19.8, at the first utterance of the *Ahuna Vairya* they alone exist[ed].”<sup>23</sup> In truth, the subject of *ādadaṭ* (to create, to give) is neither *les créations* nor the Amesha Sepentas, but the *words* of the hymn. These words were imbued with power and gave to Ahura Mazda the *ahū* and *ratu*, whose necessity is explained by the second line. Whereas the aforementioned authors consider these two lines as two separate sentences, the *iθa* (i.e., “so that”) therein is to link the two together, and explain the reason for the appearance of the *ahū* and *ratu*: they were appointed in order to teach the virtues of knowing Ahura Mazda. The *ahū* (lord) and *ratu* (master, leader) therefore represent, for the author of Y19, the cast of Zoroastrian priesthood, which encompassed Zoroaster himself. They were needed at the very beginning and the *Ahuna Vairya* brought them into being. It’s self-promotion through a clever artifice. If you brake the sentence in two, as in the case of Y58.1, you lose the purpose of the verse.

The question then is: who were they to teach? Thanks to the analysis provided by Ahmadi, it is now clear that the addressees were a “sub-

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<sup>22</sup> Kellens 2010b: 42. Kellens introduces an unwarranted artifice by which the devotee must suddenly jump in the midst of reciting Y19.12 to a sentence pertaining to another Yasna, namely Y45.6a. One can hardly find any rational for the introduction of such an artifice.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmadi’s translation of the first two lines of Y19.12: “(the word) *yaθā* he (i.e., Mazda) pronounced as they (i.e., the Aməša Spəntas) made him the *ahū* and the *ratu*. In the same way one appoints him, Ahura Mazda, for the creations whose first existence is mental”; Ahmadi (forthcoming).

set” of the created, those who were foremost thinkers (*manas.paoiriia-*).<sup>24</sup> It implicitly chastises those who did not accept the teachings of the priesthood, and labels them in effect as those-who-could-not-think! Only good thinkers were worthy of teaching.

While this first sentence is astutely organized and pertains to the first utterance of the hymn, the rest follows the literary technique of ascribing a meaning to the components of the hymn without a precise purpose. By exploring the possible meanings of each of its components, the author develops a fictional creation process in which he projects what Ahura Mazdā had created, and what existed beforehand, in order to bring relevancy to the teachings of the priesthood. As other examples of this literary format show, not all of the supposed explanations can be coherent or meaningful.

#### Translations of Y19.12-14:

Y19.12(1) When “*yaθa<sub>1</sub>*” was so forth uttered, it gave him (i.e. Ahura Mazdā) *ahu* and *ratu* so that they could teach who Ahura Mazdā was, to those of the created who are foremost thinkers;<sup>25</sup> (2) “*yaθa<sub>2</sub>*” teaches that he (i.e., Ahura Mazdā) is the greatest; (3) “*aθa*” teaches that creation is his.

Y19.13 (1) “*yaθa<sub>3</sub>*” (teaches that) Mazdā (provides) good life, (2) as “*vaṇhēuš*” (provides) the undertone for the third incantation (*tkaēša*).<sup>26</sup> (3) “*dazda mananḥō*” teaches that before this, Good

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<sup>24</sup> For Ahmadi *manas.paoiriia- dāman-* would be the ‘creature for whom the mind is the first (existence); Ahmadi (forthcoming). I have preferred to substitute a more simple translation “those who are primarily thinkers” because the author is trying to define interlocutors for the priesthood who are basically the greatest thinkers of society.

<sup>25</sup> Although I argue in the text that the subject of *ādadaṭ* are the words (plural) of the hymn, in translation I use “it” in accordance with the single word *yaθa<sub>1</sub>*, as representative of all the words of the hymn.

<sup>26</sup> The incantation of the hymn is referred to as *tkaēša*, which Kellens translates as “doctrine” (Kellens 2010b: 38). Cheung favors “teaching,” but because he argues that NP *keš* (religion) is derived from it, we may consider it to have religious content; Cheung 2007: 30. Since it is religious, and recited, it is a religious utterance; it is also

Thought existed.<sup>27</sup> (4) “*yaθa<sub>4</sub>*” (teaches) the characteristics of Good Thought, (5) and “*manaḥhō*” much cultivates them (*kāraeiiti*). (6) “*šīiaoθənanəm*” ploughs the ground for the Lord (i.e., prepares the ground for Zarathushtra).<sup>28</sup>

Y19.14(1) (As to) teaching “what he created,” “*mazdaī*” infers that all creation was his. (2) “*xšaθrəm ahurāi*” teaches (to say): O Mazda, power is yours. (3) “*drigubiiō vāstārəm*” teaches that “*yaθa<sub>5</sub>*”<sup>29</sup> is a friend of Spitama.<sup>30</sup> (4) This incantation (*tkaēša*) was uttered five times in its entirety, all words of which were by Ahura Mazda.

#### **III.4. Yasna 19 - Part 4**

In this rather isolated stanza, the *Ahuna Vairya* is presented as an instrument that Ahura Mazda had created to fight Evil.

Y19.15 As Ahura Mazda, who is the greatest, recited the *Ahuna Vairya*, he fully cultivated it for greatest (future effect), as the evil one appeared, and He (Ahura Mazda) told the wicked one: Neither our minds are in harmony, nor our precepts, nor our comprehensions, nor our beliefs, nor our words, nor our deeds, nor our consciences, nor our souls.

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chanted, and as such “incantation” may be a more appropriate translation. In the context of Y19, however, it is more than a mere utterance or incantation: it is a religious manifesto.

<sup>27</sup> Because *dazda manaḥhō* means “gift of the Thought,” the author uses it, as a whole, to deduce that Thought existed before the utterance of the hymn. It goes back to the very notion of the complex nature of Thought as imbedded in *Yasna* 30.3, so lucidly explained by Ilya Gershevitch as the twin-egg that justified “good” against the foil of evil. (Gershevitch 1995: 6 & 16-19). It is these two opposing aspects of Thought that are brought up again in Y19.15.

<sup>28</sup> Because *šīiaoθənanəm* is about “doing deeds,” it establishes Ahura Mazda’s deeds as examples to be followed, by the “Lord.” The Lord here does not refer back to Ahura Mazda because he created the *ahu* (Lord). It can only refer to Zarathushtra who will be the chief-created to transmit Ahura Mazda’s messages as teachings.

<sup>29</sup> This *yaθa* refers to the *Ahuna Vairya* hymn in its fifth recitation.

<sup>30</sup> The relevance of *drigubiiō vāstārəm* is that it invokes protection, and the author seizes upon that to say that the *Ahuna Vairya* acts as a protector for the one who recites it since it was a friend/companion to Zoroaster. It thus emphasizes the protection power of the hymn.

### **III.5. Yasna 19 - Part 5**

In this part, the author is stratifying the merits of the hymn by categorizing them in an escalating order. He suggests that the hymn initiates a world order predicated on three concepts (presented as mottos), four vocations and five positions of leadership. The stratification follows a mathematical order to give it a logical tint, but I believe the main purpose of the process was to arrive to the last station, the fifth and highest rank among men, in which is placed Zarathustra. It was therefore created to induce an exalted position for Zarathustra. If Zarathustra's position was elevated, so would be that of the Zoroastrian priesthood.

But once the stratification was initiated, the literary format required to further explain each category (it is done from the end of 19.16 through 19.18).

Y19.16. And this saying (i.e. hymn), uttered by Mazda, offered the gifts (*rāiti.haṅkaraθəm*) of three mottos, four vocations,<sup>31</sup> and five leaders (*ratu*).

(Q): What are these mottos? (A) (They are) good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

Y19.17. (Q) Which are these vocations ? (A) (Those of) the fire-priest (*aθrauua*), the army commander (*raθaēsta*),<sup>32</sup> the farmer cattle-breeder, and the artisan. Good ones, among them all, will assist the brave Righteous with their right thoughts, right words, and right deeds. (These are) conscientious mortal guides/masters whose actions push the living creatures toward Righteousness.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dustkhāh is right to equate *pištrəm* with MP *pishag*, NP *pisheh* (vocation), Dustkhāh 2002:176.

<sup>32</sup> *raθaēsta* means literally: the one who stands on the chariot.

<sup>33</sup> Y19.17 *kāiš pištrāiš, āθrauua raθaēštā vāstriiō fšuiiās hūitiš vīspaiiaeirina hacimna naire ašaone arš.manaḡha arš.vacaḡha arš.šiiāoθna, ratuš.məpəta daēnō-sāca yēḡhe šiiāoθnāiš gaēθā aša frādəḡte.*

- Y19.18. (Q) who are the leaders? (A.) They are the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, the nation-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fifth; except for the nation in which Zarathushtra reigns. Zarathushtra's Ragha has four chiefs (only). (Q) Who are the chiefs there? (A) (They are) the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, and Zarathushtra is the fourth.
- Y19.19. (Q) what is good thought? (A) (it is that of) the Righteous man who is a foremost thinker. (Q) What is the well-spoken word? (A) (it is the) Mathra Spenta (i.e., Holy Words).<sup>34</sup> (Q) What is the deed well done? (A) It is the one (considered) praiseworthy by the created-ones who are the foremost righteous.<sup>35</sup>
- Y19.20. Mazdā said; to whom did he say? (A) To the Righteous, whether spiritual or earthly (i.e. all of the *ashavāns*). (Q) What did he convey to the Righteous in his proclamation? A: Excellence in leadership. (Q) What is excellence for the Righteous?<sup>36</sup> A: ( it is) Leadership without selfishness.<sup>37</sup>
- Y19.21. We praise the godly *Ahuna Vairya*.<sup>38</sup> We praise the recital of the *Ahuna Vairya* in undertone, in regular chant, and in full prayer.

As we can see, Y19.19 is the formal expansion of 19.16, since it provides explanations for the three mottos therein. But this expansion

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<sup>34</sup> The answer here is not unlike the answers in d, f, h of the *qalandarnāmeḥ*, where they invoked mantras or Qoranic quotations rather than provide explanatory sentences.

<sup>35</sup> Y19.19 (a) *kaṭ humatəm aṣauuanəm manas.paoiriiō*, (b) *kaṭ hūxtəm maθrō spəntō*, (c) *kaṭ huuarštəm staotāiš aṣa.paoiriiāišca dāmābīš*

<sup>36</sup> The author of Y19 clearly considers the Righteous people as leaders.

<sup>37</sup> Y19.20. (a) *mazdā frāmraoṭ*, (b) *cīm frāmraoṭ ? aṣauuanəm mainiiaomca gaēθīmca*, (c) *cuuqs frāmraoṭ frauuākəm ? vahištō xšaiiamnō*, (d) *cuuqntəm aṣauuanəm vahištəmca ? auuasō.xšaθrəmca*.

<sup>38</sup> In translating *bayam ahunahe variia* as “la version analysée de l’*Ahuna Variia*” Kellens seems to believe that the interlocutors of Y19 are philology apprentices who absolutely need a technical adjective to qualify the hymn! If this whole *yasna* is about glorifying the *Ahuna Vairya*, one should normally expect a laudatory adjective instead of a technical one. Since the hymn emanated from Ahura Mazdā, *bayam* simply means godly or god gifted.

process also provides the means to bring out the topic of the *ashavans* (the Righteous), as a stepping stone for his next topic. Indeed, under the guise of defining the ideal *ashavan*, the author then uses yet another escalating pattern in Y.19.20, to couch a warning to the priesthood's main rivals, i.e., worldly rulers. To do so, he moves step by step from the *ashavans* as interlocutors of Ahura Mazdā; to the need for excellence if they want to achieve a position of leadership; to a worldly advice: that excellence in leadership must be without selfishness. Through these words of wisdom, the author is warning against authoritarianism, but also casting the Zoroastrian priesthood as moral judges over god-fearing rulers.

Although *Yasna* 19 might appear as an exegesis of the *Ahuna Vairya*, a closer look reveals a priestly attempt to encourage the Zoroastrian believers into prayer recitation, while peppering it with subtle hints about the special role of priesthood. The author proceeds step by step, with each step preparing the ground for the next statement. It's carefully constructed, but hollow nevertheless, because it is primarily an exercise in sophistry with sentences devoid of true meaning, and an escalating tempo with a cabalistic tint, which was supposed to dazzle the initiate. More importantly, it was a propaganda tool for the glory of the Zoroastrian priesthood.

#### **IV. The Personification of Fire in the Avesta**

In trying to establish the primordial nature of the *Ahuna Vairya*, Y19.2 enumerates a string of basic elements of the corporeal world that were created after the first utterance of this hymn by Ahura Mazdā. While all of these elements—such as sky, water, earth, etc—are defined by a single word, “fire” stands out because of an extra label that qualifies it as the *son of Ahura Mazdā*. It's a slogan that was part of the propaganda scheme that Zoroastrian priests elaborated to assure the supremacy of their religion. To expand its appeal, they had to integrate all other religious and sacrificial activities into the Mazdean fold. Their

supreme god, Ahura Mazdā, was a late comer to the Iranian pantheon and they had to devise ways to impose him on the general population.

As I have explained in a previous study, the process began under the Achaemenid Darius I (r. 522-486 BC), who had promoted a monotheistic ideology and needed to claim the Aryan *khvarenah*, the ultimate source of kingly power. As the *khvarenah* had been previously associated with Mithra and Apam Napāt, he had to dissociate it from them, and link it to Ahura Mazdā. His inscriptions as well as the iconography of his palaces show that, to address the first concern he opted to emphasize *ciça/chithra* as the manifestation of *khvarenah*. And to link it to Ahura Mazdā, he found an easy solution: he insinuated that the *khvarenah*, or rather its *chithra*, was Mazdā created.<sup>39</sup> Whether Darius was the source of this inspiration or Zoroastrian priests devised it on their own, it is a fact that in the Later Avesta, the *khvarenah* is systematically labeled “Mazdā-created.” It was an unprecedented propaganda aimed at driving an unfamiliar concept into the heads of their constituents. Like Mao’s Cultural Revolution, propagandistic slogans had to be repeated ad nauseam, and the little Red Book constantly brandished. Concurrently, the Aryan *khvarenah*, the ultimate power source of leadership, was given to Zarathushtra while creating a new source, the Kayanid *khvarenah*, for kings. Such a baseless propaganda was bound to lead to contradictory and illogical situations: in Yts 13.4, 13.9 and 13.12, the Creator Ahurā Mazdā is in need of his own created (!); and in Yts 5:42 & 19:57, the Turānian Afrāsiyāb (Frangrasyan), who recognizes Zarathushtra as the possessor of the Aryan *khvarenah*, actually belongs to the myth of Jamshid that the Prophet himself alludes to in his Gāthās (Y 32.8), and who was the first man that Ahura Mazdā spoke to, even before Zarathushtra (Vend. 2.2).<sup>40</sup> As for the general population, while they may have paid lip service to such a propaganda, they never abandoned the original

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<sup>39</sup> Soudavar 2010:119-25.

<sup>40</sup> For more on these contradictions see Soudavar 2010:122-23.

concepts, as the example of the fire tower that the Sasanian Ardashir (r. 224-42) built to his own glory fully demonstrates: people referred to this very symbol of Ardashir's *khvarenah*, as both the Aryan *khvarenah* and Kayanid *khvarenah*, because for them it was one and the same.<sup>41</sup>

By the same token, the creation of water that had been the very symbol of Apam Napāt was appropriated for Ahura Mazdā, and usually accompanied with a “Mazdā-created” epithet.<sup>42</sup> The earth too was often labeled as “Mazdā-created” (e.g., Yt 13.9). Thus, two sets of questions come to mind concerning the elements enumerated in Y19.2. First, why have water and earth lost their epithet in here? The answer to this question is straightforward: all the elements in Y19.2 are presented as Ahura Mazdā's primordial creation, and therefore a “Mazdā-created” label in front of each would have been redundant in this context. But fire's label as “son of Ahurā Mazdā” did not create any redundancy, and was therefore not scratched. The more pertinent question, however, is: why was fire's epithet different than the one for water and earth? That I believe pertains to the special status that fire had in all Iranian sacrificial rituals: it was a conduit for communications with the gods. Through the sacrifice before the fire, one's wishes were conveyed to the gods, and through the *khvarenah* that was imbedded in the fire, gods empowered mortals who stood next to fires. It was thus not a natural element left at the disposal of mortals that could be simply labeled as “Mazdā-created,” but an extension of god's reach over the universe, which required a different epithet. The “son of Mazdā” epithet linked fire to Ahura Mazdā in a permanent and active fashion. The artifice is not unlike the adoption of the “Son of God” qualification for Jesus Christ prior to the Council of Nicaea; it elevated his status from a mere



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<sup>41</sup> Soudavar 2012 : 14-16.

<sup>42</sup> Soudavar 2010 : 137 n. 26

mortal to one who was in effect from the family of gods with a mission on earth. He was a conduit of heavenly precepts on earth, and at the same time the savior of man through his interventions on his behalf.

By the adoption of the “Son of Ahura Mazdā” epithet though, fire became personified and that is why on a number of Sasanian coin issues, a bust is situated in the midst of the flames of the fire altar. It represents Fire, Son of Ahura Mazdā.

### **V. The *khrafstarish* priests**

In both Y19.2 and 19.4, the creation of Righteous men is juxtaposed with the *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš mašiiāišca* that Kellens translates as “*les démons infectes et leurs hommes-liges*,” and I translated as the “*khrafstarish* devils and their men (i.e., followers).”<sup>43</sup> A simple translation is not good enough. One must try to explain who are meant by such a characterization. The *khrafstar* therein needs clarification, because it’s not a vague adjective but a very specific term that applies to noxious animals, mainly the snake and the scorpion. Its correct translation is not a matter of guessing but understanding the historic context by which these animals were labeled as such, as well as their relationship with *daevas*. For, as C.F. Oldham explains, the labeling of Indian kings or dynasties as *ahi* (i.e. serpent) must have been the result of the hostility of the local tribes against invaders.<sup>44</sup> We know of one such a king in the Iranian context: the last of the Medians, Astyages, who was nicknamed Azhi-Dahaka, probably for the sin of running Zarathushtra off his dominions.<sup>45</sup> As Martin Schwartz has argued, Azhi-Dahaka was actually understood as “snake-man.”<sup>46</sup> In the *Shāhnāmeḥ* for instance, Zāhhāk (alias Azhi-Dahaka), the king with two snakes on his shoulders, is considered to be a serpent himself

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<sup>43</sup> Initially I had translated it as “devilish *khrafstar*-men and their likes” but then realized that it was really attacking enemy priests and their followers.

<sup>44</sup> Oldman 1905 : 31-35.

<sup>45</sup> Soudavar 2012 : 4-8

<sup>46</sup> Schwartz 2012: 276.

(*azhdahā* اژدها), and his progeny is called Mehr-āb, an obvious reference to his affiliation with Mithra and Apam Napāt (as god of waters, *āb*).<sup>47</sup> It clearly indicates a possible linkage between snakes and the followers of Mithra and Apam Napāt.

This brings out once again the controversy of Zarathushtra's date and the historical events that lead to what Herodotus called Magophonia, or the massacre of the Median magi. The latter was not a fiction of Herodotus' imagination but a phenomenon also reported by Ctesias and Agathias, and reflected in Iranian sources. Its impact is nowhere more felt than in the Avesta itself. For, as the late Xavier Trembaly had pointed out to me, the Avesta is the only Iranian religious text in which the priesthood is not designated by the generic term *magu*. They chose instead an artificial one, *athravan* or fire keeper, which mimicked *pārsā* that designated the cast of Achaemenid fire-priests to whom belonged Darius. *Pārsā* designated the one "close to the fire," and Zarathushtra himself referred to the *pārsās* as *kāvis*.<sup>48</sup> The only valid explanation for such an anomaly is the Magophonia. If the magi were massacred and reviled, the Zoroastrian priesthood had to adopt another term for themselves. The fact that on the tombs of Darius, and his progenies, it's the king who stands bow in hand next to the fire altar clearly shows that the *pārsās* were in control, and the Zoroastrian priesthood held at best a secondary position. While Darius' progenies ruled and continued to boast the "Pārsā son of Pārsā" title, no Zoroastrian priest would have dared to claim the ownership of the fire and call himself an *athravan*. This was an invented and artificial term, which usurped the *pārsā* role of the Achaemenids. The very proof of its

<sup>47</sup> Ferdowsi 1988: 226:

به هندوستان آتش اندر فروز      همه کاخ مهرباب و کابل بسوز  
 نباید که او یابد از بد رها      که او ماند از بچهی اژدها  
 سر از تن جدا کن زمین را بشوی      ز پیوند ضحاک و خویشان اوی

Put Hindustān to fire, and burn Kabul and the castle of Mehr-āb

He should not go unharmed, for, he is an offspring of the Snake

Cut off his head, and clean the earth from the strand of Zakhāk and his progeny.

<sup>48</sup> Soudavar 2012 : 27.

artificiality lies in the fact that it was discarded later on, as Zoroastrian priests were once again called *magu* in the Sasanian era. It was all part of a campaign to shift the balance of power from kingship to priesthood, which could only occur after the fall of the Achaemenids.

The Magophonia was essentially the eruption of a long-simmering animosity between the *pārsās*, who revered Ahura Mazdā, and the Median magi who believed in the supremacy of Mithra and Apam Napāt. A vivid expression of this animosity is displayed on the door jambs of Persepolis, where Darius is killing with a dagger a chimera monster with a scorpion tail. The scorpion and snake were of course ever present in taurochtony scenes (fig. 1).<sup>49</sup> But their association with Mithra goes beyond that, as we have a number of objects in which Mithra is represented in the so called “master of the animal” mode, holding lion-serpents in his two hands (fig. 2). What’s more, in a forthcoming publication on Mithraic Societies, I demonstrate how a number of Sasanian seals with scorpions or snake emblems belonged to the hierarchy of Mithraic Societies in the Iranian context. Therefore, from Astyages who was labeled as the snake-man, to Roman Mithraic scenes, to the scorpions of Sasanian Mithraic seals, we have a clear association of the *khrafstars* with those perceived as enemies and rivals of Zoroastrians, i.e., those who revered Mithra.



Fig. 2 – Details of taurochtony scene, British Museum



Fig. 3 – Bronze object , Mithra holding two lion-serpents. Archeological Museum, Istanbul

<sup>49</sup> See Soudavar 2012 : 9-14.

The question then is: could this Mithra be labeled *daiva*? Citing a number of previous studies, Clarisse Herrens Schmidt and Jean Kellens conclude that in the Gathas, the *daivas* had not as yet “become demons” but constituted a category of “genuine gods” who had been “rejected.” This, they argue could be the basis of an abrupt or gradual change in belief for the Iranians, except “for the fact that no known Iranian dialect attests clearly and certainly the survival of a positive sense for \**daiva*-.” Four possible such cases are presented and quickly rejected for not being conclusive. The most important one is the onomastic evidence. They remark that names with a *div/daiva* component only pertain to Sogdiana, where they insinuate Buddhism might have been at play.<sup>50</sup> This is simply not true. Titles and names of the rulers of Māzandarān and Gilān, clearly vouch for a strong survival of non-Zoroastrian beliefs in Iran proper. Chronicles of the Mongol and Safavid era, often name provincial rulers of the Gilān area with epithets such as *amirag*, *mirag* and *sa`luk*, which, as I shall argue in my forthcoming book, link back to Mithraic Societies and its avatars. More pertinent to our study, though, are names such as Mohammad-e Div and Shams-od-din-e Div who were local rulers of Māzandarān and Gilān.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Safavid chronicler Eskandar Beyk relates that a certain Mirak-e Div, who was from the “cast of the Divs of Māzandarān,” was appointed deputy governor to a prince.<sup>52</sup> For Eskandar Beyk, not only these rulers were part of a cast surnamed “The Divs,” but they belonged to Māzandarān, the very region that the *Shāhnāme*h says to have been ruled by *divs*. While these rulers proudly assumed the name Div, others associated the word *div* with demoniac creatures. And throughout the ages, the projection of the *div* (e.g., fig. 4) remained very similar to one of the chimera monsters that Darius was killing in Persepolis (fig. 5). In all likelihood the “Mazandari





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<sup>50</sup> Herrens Schmidt & Kellens 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Khorshāh 2000: 227; Qomi 1980, II:690-702

<sup>52</sup> Eskandar beyk, I:210 : میرک دیو را که از طبقه دیوان مازندران بمزید عقل و کیاست ممتاز : بود بوکالت شاهزاده تعیین کردند

*daivas*” expression, used for instance in Yt 5:22, and Yt 17:25, reflected a demonization of that Supreme Mithra and its followers. Interestingly, both of the chimera monsters that Darius is killing in Persepolis—the horned one of fig. 5, and the griffin on the opposite side—have an earlier prototype in the gold pectorals from Ziwiyeh of circa 8-7<sup>th</sup> century BC. While the horned chimera of Ziwiyeh has a scorpion tail (fig. 6), as in Persepolis, the griffin of Ziwiyeh has a solar emblem on its hindquarters (fig. 7).<sup>53</sup> It clearly classifies both as guardians of a solar and Mithraic pantheon.

	
<p>Fig. 4 – Divs from the Tahmasb <i>Shahnameh</i>. Metropolitan Museum</p>	<p>Fig. 5 – Darius killing a chimera monster<sup>54</sup></p>
	
<p>Fig. 6 –Ziwiyeh pectoral (det.). Metropolitan Museum</p>	<p>Fig. 7 - Detail of Ziwiyeh pectoral. Tehran Museum<sup>55</sup></p>

<sup>53</sup> This solar emblem mostly adorns lion effigies, from those found on the Kalmākareh grotto objects, all the way to 20<sup>th</sup> century Bakhtiyāri tombstones.

<sup>54</sup> From Curtis & Tallis, 2005: 82.

The event that gave a negative connotation to a certain number of Iranian deities and at the same demonized their followers was not initiated by Zoroaster, for, as we saw, in the Gathas they are still respectable entities. Such a major upheaval necessitated a cataclysmic event. It can only be the Magophonia that pitted the *pārsās* against the Mithraic magi. In the process, the Zoroastrian priesthood sided with the *pārsās* for two reasons: 1) they shared the same veneration for Ahura Mazda, and 2) their Prophet, and perhaps family members of his, had been chased and persecuted by the same Mithraic magi.<sup>56</sup> In revenge, not only the magi were massacred when Darius and his co-conspirators killed the usurper Gaumata, but that event was celebrated as a yearly festival during which no magus could venture outside and all of them had to stay home the entire day (Herodotus III:79). It clearly shows a continued process of witch hunting by which the enemy was constantly vilified, and demonized. The reason for such a continued display of animosity was that the *pārsās* and the Zoroastrians were in minority, and Mithra continued to command the respect of most of the population, to the extent that at the end, a sanitized version of Mithra was integrated into the Zoroastrian pantheon—a pantheon that the monotheistic Zarathushtra would have certainly disapproved of. While this sanitized Mithra may have provided the means to woo a good portion of the population, there was certainly a sizeable portion that did not accept the subordination of Mithra to Ahura Mazda. The duel and skirmishes between the two factions must have endured for a long time, for as I mentioned before, the scorpion that Zoroastrians abhorred still adorned many Sasanian seals.

Combining *daiva* with *khrafstar* was thus the very natural outcome of the vilification process against those who were perceived as holding a doctrine that posed a major threat to Zoroastrianism. That is, those for whom Mithra remained the ultimate *baγa*—as he still was in the

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<sup>55</sup> From Godard 1950 : 26.

<sup>56</sup> Soudavar 2012 : 22.

calendar that Darius himself had used.<sup>57</sup> Because the followers of this supreme *daiva* were vilified, so was eventually the word *daiva* itself, which Xerxes himself had used in a negative way in *XPh*, against a region that had strong reserves in accepting the supremacy of Ahura Mazdā, most probably the Māzandarān.

The *daēuuāišca xrafstrāiš* must therefore refer to priests who cherished scorpions or snakes, and are therefore branded as *khrafstarish* devils. They should be simply referred to as snake-priests or scorpion-priests. The term can apply to the Ahrimanic figure—with a snake-wrapped head—who is trampled by Ahura Mazdā’s horse in Ardashir I’s rock relief of Naqsh-e Rostam, as well as the serpent wrapped Arimanius of Roman Mithraism.<sup>58</sup>

## **VI. A problem of methodology**

I cannot criticize neither Jean Kellens, nor any other Avestologist, for not being familiar with the *qalandar-nāmeḥ* genre, which would have perhaps facilitated the comprehension of Yasna 19. What I must criticize, however, is the contradictions that are apparent in his translations, some of which were pointed out by Ahmadi, and others that I have referenced in this study. But more importantly, I must criticize his cavalier attitude to brake rules and change meanings wherever it suits him. Kellens rightly remarks that the author of Y19 “takes the liberty to make the texts say things that he wishes them to say.”<sup>59</sup> But so does Kellens himself in his translation of Y19.

In Y19.12(1), he postulates that Ahura Mazdā’s own creations called him a mere master (*ratu*). But then takes the liberty to change *ratu*’s meaning in 19.16 to a totally unexplained “mots clés,” to produce a recitation stratification for a supposed offering ritual, rather than a

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<sup>57</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin 1974 : 17 ; Soudavar 2010 : 114.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Turcan 2000: 62-67, pls. 9 and 10b.

<sup>59</sup> Kellens 2010b: 40.

worldly structure that the proclamation of the *Ahuna Vairya* provided as a gift to mankind.<sup>60</sup>

For the same Y19.12(1), he argues that the adverbial *para* affects not the time sequence of the verb immediately after it (i.e., *cinasti*), but creates an order of things way beyond. He then arbitrarily moves the effect of *para* (i.e. “prior, before”) further down, to state that Ahura Mazda was *prior* to “creations” (supposedly *dāmabiiō*). It’s stating the obvious through an arbitrary artifice.<sup>61</sup>

*iθa dim para cinasti yim ahurəm mazdəm manas.paoirīaēibīiō dāmabīiō*

And because of a dogmatic belief in the non-existence of Zarathushtra he posits that “the editors of the Ancient Avesta were *indifferent* to the historic Zarathushtra, or didn’t know him.”<sup>62</sup> To the contrary, next to Ahura Mazda, the most important witness that Y19’s author invokes for his propositions, is Zarathushtra. He is a pivotal actor not only for Y19, but for whatever the priesthood invented. To say that they were indifferent to Zarathushtra, or didn’t know him, is like saying that Jesus Christ was a non-entity for Christianity! Moreover, like in Christianity, which tried to place the Pope above kingship, in Y19.16 Zarathushtra is placed at the highest echelon of temporal hierarchy, above kings and other rulers. It was by no means an isolated effort, but paralleled the—previously mentioned—attempt to make Zarathushtra the possessor of the Aryan *khvarenah*. They both had the same effect and made the Prophet more powerful than kings. Aggrandizing Zarathushtra was in fact a constant preoccupation of priesthood, which Kellens cannot—or doesn’t want to—see it as he reshuffles Y19.16 into a meaningless sacrificial procedure. The crux of

<sup>60</sup> “Le texte qu’(Ahura) Mazda a prononcé dispense une organisation parfaite de l’offrande an trois vers, quatre figures de style, et cinq mots clés”; Kellens 2010b : 47.

<sup>61</sup> See for instance Y19.2 for the repeated use of *para* as “before.”

<sup>62</sup> Kellens 2010b: 74.

the matter is that placing Zarathushtra above kings defines a post-Achaemenid context. Nobody would have dared to proclaim this under the Great Kings, and no Achaemenid imagery shows a Zoroastrian priest. One cannot simply sweep this evidence under the rug because of a dogmatic view on the era of Zarathushtra.

Kellens faults Antonio Panaino for believing that the Gathic teachings are based on a “monotheistic faith and inner religiosity that is emphatically anti-ritualistic and anti-sacrificial.” He proclaims that it is in fact a “negation of existing evidence.”<sup>63</sup> I wonder which evidence. For, the most superficial reading of the Gathas reveals that it’s about the lamentation of a pure hearted man with his beloved Creator. It is a text imbued with a monotheistic fervor that displays “spiritual esoterism” down to its inner core;<sup>64</sup> and is fundamentally at odds with the pantheon that the Zoroastrian priesthood later erected for their religion. One cannot judge the Gathas by later propaganda that only paid lip-service to the Prophet’s vision.

## **VII. The “258” dating**

The dogmatic belief in an old or inconsequential Zarathushtra, prompts Kellens to deride the “258” on every occasion without giving a plausible argument. Sensing that the monotheistic vision of the Gathas could not have been developed early on, he wonders at the very end of his analysis whether “it did not reflect a more recent religiosity,” close to the “258 years before Alexander?”<sup>65</sup> The purpose of his question is nothing but one extra gratuitous stab at an argument that he cannot refute otherwise.

The problem with 258-negationists, in general, is that they have never bothered to read or understand its development, from the very thorough calendar analysis of Taqizādeh to all the supportive material and analysis advanced by Gershevitch and Gnoli. What I have heard

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<sup>63</sup> Kellens 2010b: 70.

<sup>64</sup> Humbach 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Kellens 2010b: 74.

them say—and I have heard many—is that “we don’t believe in it,” or “it’s a Sasanian forgery.” They don’t believe in it, because it’s contrary to their dogmatic belief in the antiquity of the Avesta, even though they have never been able to prove it. They freely jump from a circa 1200 BC, to 1000 BC or 800 BC date for Zarathushtra, without methodology and without ever presenting a shred of evidence to that effect. As for the forgery argument, it’s the best refuge for scholars who cannot understand or decipher a phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> But one cannot claim forgery without explaining a beneficial motive. For the Sasanians, the 258 dating forced them to restate past history by cutting 266 years of Arsacid history. Rather than having a benefit, it brought ridicule, and that is not a good motive.

Helmut Humbach’s opinion in this respect is quite revealing. He states:

“All transmitted dates for Zoroaster’s life are speculative, obviously ranging the prophet in a religious history of salvation. The traditional date of 300 years before Alexander’s invasion is transmitted in several variants, all of which are of the same type as Abū Rayhān Bīrūnī’s 258 years before Alexander’s invasion, which was taken by Walter B. Henning (p. 41) as a precise and reliable date but which is just derived by deducing the traditional 42 years of Zoroaster’s age at Vištāspa’s conversion from the round number of 300 years. In the view of the present author the only date of some historical plausibility is that of Xanthos the Lydian, a contemporary of Herodotus, according to whom Zoroaster lived 600 years (*lectio facilior* 6000 years) before Xerxes’s expedition against Greece.”<sup>67</sup>

Firstly, the multitude of sources stating the 258 are all bundled up into one category because they are thought to be variants of the same type, and then dismissed en bloc. In terms of logic, my understanding is that multiplicity is an argument for higher probability and not the other way around. Moreover, these supposed variants of the same come from independent sources, because they are related by authors from different geographical areas, different centuries and different traditions: Mas`udi

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<sup>66</sup> See Soudavar 2012: 25-27.

<sup>67</sup> Humbach 2000.

(9<sup>th</sup> century SE Iran), Biruni (10<sup>th</sup> century NE Iran), *Bundahishn*. These are sources that directly give us the 258 time period from “the coming of the religion,” i.e., when it was revealed to the prophet, until Alexander. And it is not repeated as just a figure but given as a time bracket in which regnal years are fitted. In addition, it concords with other type of information provided by these sources: Mas`udi for instance states that the father of Vishtaspa was the contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar, which clearly situates Vishtaspa in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>68</sup> And Bar Hebraeus affirms that Zarathushtra, “who had predicted” the appearance of Jesus as the Messiah, was the contemporary of early Achaemenids.<sup>69</sup> Second, the claim that 42 (as Zarathushtra’s age when Vishtaspa was converted) is the pivotal number, and that 258 is a derivative because it is the result of the subtraction from the “round number” 300, is to turn the available information on its head. Because, the basic information that appears in the sources is 258, both as a number and as a bracket, while 42 does not appear systematically, and when available it is through calculation, and therefore cannot be labeled as “traditional.”<sup>70</sup> In any case, Humbach’s main objection is the “roundness” of the number 300, which makes it invalid or at best suspicious. The problem is that for him, roundness is suspicious only

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<sup>68</sup> Mas`udi 1962, I: 202.

<sup>69</sup> Bar Hebraeus 1947: 31. The story is used to justify the appearance of the three magi as following a brilliant star predicted by Zarathushtra. He could have placed the Prophet anywhere in time for his story; the more ancient he was, the more powerful would have been his prediction. Nevertheless, he placed him in the Achaemenid time bracket.

<sup>70</sup> Dk 7.5.1 for instance gives the age of Zarathushtra as 77 at death, and 35 years after Vishtaspa accepted the religion, which by inference gives the Prophet’s age as 42 at this moment. The same number in the Zadspram is presented in an even more convoluted way (24.5): 2 years after the conversion of a certain Medyomāh, which itself occurred 10 years after the Revelation, Zarathushtra submitted to a test before Vishtaspa, at the end of which, the latter accepted the Prophet’s religion. These 12 years must now be added to Zoroaster’s age at revelation (30) obtained from another section to get 42. The number 42, therefore, constitutes by no means a pivotal element to build the rest on it.

For reasons as to why we have the 300 years figure, see Gnoli 2000: 138-39.

when it concerns an Iranian source, because if a Greek source mentions the astronomical number of 6000 years it is based on truth and must be corrected, *lectio facilior* oblige. Therefore, the right number is 600. That 600 is a round number is inconsequential for him because it preserves the dogma. A Greek number, adjusted by a Latin dictum, is enough to validate the dogma and discard the multitude of 258 evidence!<sup>71</sup>

The belief in an ancient Zarathushtra is a dogmatic choice that the 258-negationists have made, the byproduct of which are uninspired translations of the type I have criticized in this study.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

I am neither an Avestologist nor a philologist, but the translations of the few passages that I have delved into, are truly disappointing. If these are symptomatic of the rest of the corpus, then the field is seriously in need of reevaluation. Three problems come to mind. The first is a lack of interest in later Persian literature, especially in the structuring of sentences and literary formats. Second, the lack of understanding for the general subject and purpose of texts. These are texts prepared by a priesthood who are preaching with an agenda. One must perceive the agenda in order to comprehend the text. Third, the development of all the corpus that was added to the Gathas, stem from political aspirations that can only be understood if the ideological position of the main actors is determined. As long as the dogmatic belief in an old date for Zarathushtra prevails, the historic dimension and the political aspects of the Avesta, which are so essential to its comprehension, will not be understood and will lead to unwarranted exegetic speculations.

Equally important is the correct understanding of *chithra* as the essential element of a cosmogony of light that empowers all beings, including deities. In my persistent effort to sway away philologists

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<sup>71</sup> For detailed arguments refuting the validity of the 6000 years dating, and its irrelevance to the correct dating of Zarathushtra's era, see Gnoli 2000:43-79.

from meanings such as seed, origin or nature, I had finally persuaded the late, and most erudite, Xavier Tremblay to alter his views. In a review of Avestan terms, he proposed that perhaps my views on *chithra* should be taken into account for future Avestan translations.<sup>72</sup> Those who will persist on ignoring *chithra* as light and/or manifestation of the *khvarenah* will continue, at their own risk and peril, to produce incomprehensible translations.

Finally, I have no hope in changing the dogmatic belief of Avestologists in a circa 1000-BC Zarathushtra, because dogma is neither overturned by logical argument nor by a preponderance of evidence. But my hope is that a younger generation of students will finally emerge from the shadows of their tutors, and will espouse a more open-minded and logical approach.

**Photography credit:** All photos are by A. Soudavar unless otherwise stated.

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<sup>72</sup> Tremblay 2008: 36. His observations came even before I published Soudavar 2009 in refutation of objections raised by O.P. Skjaervo.

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