

The women and children who saved the *daēnā*

(an account of the loss and recovery of the sacred texts)

There is a gap between the first guides of the *daēnā* (Av. *paoiryō. fkaēša*) and the Magi (OPers. *magu*) who flourished in Achaemenian Persia. Xanthus the Lydian states that after the expedition of Xerxes there was a long line of Magians in succession, with names like Ostanas, Astrampsychos, Gobryas, and Pazatas, down to the conquest of Persia by Alexander.¹ The Magi must already have possessed a canonical form of the Avesta when they prepared standard copies of the Avesta text corpus (with 21 Nasks) for the Persian kings.² The scribes of the written versions of the *daēnā* –unlike the other Persian scribes who belonged to the third function – seem to have belonged to the priestly class. They used a new script for Avesta, “the Scripture writing”, probably similar to Kharoṣṭhi, and wrote on the tablets on hide. The oral transmission of the *daēnā* as a consecutive condition of the Magi and the written text corpus of the *daēnā* preserved in the Treasure(s) of the kings and in the Castle(s) of the archives (Library³) indicate an intimate relation between the *daēnā* and *xšaθra* in the Perso-Aryan society, reflecting the mythical twins, *Yimī and Yima.

The downfall of the Aryan Xšaça (the Achaemenian kingdom) led to a lot of damage to the *daēnā* through the plunder and destruction of the palaces and temples and the massacre of the priests who were the repositories and communicators of the sacred wisdom. Alexander earned the titles given him in the Aryan tradition of “the (world) destroyer”⁴ and “the murderer of priests” (**moγu.jan-*)⁵. The

¹ . See, Diogenes Laertius, Prooimion, 2 : Ξάνθος δὲ ὁ Λυδὸς εἰς τὴν Ξέρξου διάβασιν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ζωροάστρου ἑξακισχίλια φησι, καὶ μετ’ αὐτὸν γεγονέναι πολλοὺς τινὰς Μάγους κατὰ διαδοχὴν, Ὀστάνας καὶ Ἀστραμψύχους καὶ Γωβρύας καὶ Παζάτας, μέχρι τῆς τῶν Περσῶν ὑπ’ Ἀλεξάνδρου καταλύσεως.

² . The Dk iv M 412 indicates the royal patronage of Dārāy son of Dārāy for its production.

³ . See Gardīzī

«و جایی بود که آن را دز نوشت گفتندی یعنی دارالکتب. اندر وی بسیار کتاب بود از علم دین زردشتی و فلسفه و حساب و هندسه و هر علمی.» تاریخ گردیزی (زین الاخبار)، ع. حبیبی، تهران، ۱۳۶۳، ۵۹.

⁴ . مجمل التواریخ والقصص، ۴۱۸، Cf. اسکندر ویرانگره .

widespread slaughter of the Magi caused great harm to Avesta learning –also a small part of India suffered Alexander’s conquest and the killing of Brahmans.⁶ Many of the Avesta texts were lost for ever.

From the **Ardā-virāz nāmag**, 1.5-7:

*ud ēn dēn cōn hamāg abestāg ud zand abar gāv pōstīhā ī
virāstag ud ped āb ī zarr nibištāg andar staxr pābagān ped diz
<ī> nibišt ēstād ud ōy ... aleksander ... abar āvurd ud bē suxt.
ud cand dastvarān ud dāyvarān ud hērbedān ud mubedān ud
dēnburdārān ud abzārumandān ud dānāgān ī ērānšahr rāy bē
kušt.*

‘This religion, namely all the Avesta and Zand, had been prepared on cowhide and written with golden ink, and deposited in the Fortress of Writings in Staxr Pābagān (/ Persepolis). Alexander took away and burnt (those scriptures); he killed many of the high priests, judges, teaching priests, chief priests, the devout ones (lit. the upholders of the religion), the expert ones, and the wise men of the Aryan kingdom (/ Persia).’

The **Dēnīg Vizargird** refers to the 21 nasks (‘Avesta books’), and, while speaking of the various nasks alludes to the devastation at the hands of Alexander.⁷ Fol. 8^b:

⁵ . Cf. TM 393 (Sogdian) 26-7 rtyw nksyntr MLK’ ky ZY mwyztw
'kδ' rty.

⁶ . See Arrian *Anabasis* 6, 16: « Alexander captured besides another city (Harmatelia), which had at this time revolted, and he put to death all those Brahmans who had instigated the revolt. These Brahmans are the philosophers of the Indians... »

Bibliotheca Historica of Diodoros Siculus 17, 84: « He next plundered the kingdom of Sambos, and having enslaved and destroyed most of his cities, put upwards of 80 000 of the barbarians to the sword. The nation called the Brahmanoi were involved in like calamities, but, as the rest sued for mercy, Alexander punished the guiltiest and acquitted the rest of the offences charged against them. King Sambos escaped the danger with which he was menaced by taking flight with thirty elephants into the country beyond the Indus. »

Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander* 59: « The philosophers gave him no less trouble than the mercenaries, because they reviled the princes who declared for him and encouraged the free states to revolt from his authority. On this account he hanged many of them. »

⁷ . See J.J. Modi, “Alexander and Zoroastrian Literature”, *Oriental Conference Papers*, Bombay, 1932, 5: 74-9. On the possible connection between Pārsīg traditions on the loss of their Avesta and Zand by Alexander, and early traditions on the loss of the Jewish holy writings, see Sh. Pines, “A Parallel between Two Iranian and Jewish Themes”, *Irano-Judaica*, 2, 1990, 43-4.

vāy, nūn agar ēn hamāg nask nē mānd hend, nē tuvān yaštan, hān ēd rāy cē guzastag aleksander ī hrōmīg andar hān vīst-ud-ēk nask harv cē kē NUJŪM (axtarmārīh) ud bizešk<īh> būd andar uzvān ud ҲURŪF (nišān) ī hrōmīg cand nibišt kird ud anī naskīhā bē suxt ... pas az vattarīh ī aleksander cand dastvarān az dēn dānāgān būd <hend> ham-rasišnīh hamāg abestāg az gyāg gyāg āvurd hambār kird.

‘Alas, if now all these books [of the Avesta] have not remained, so that it is not possible to sacrifice [the words of the whole Avesta], that is for this reason, that the accursed Alexander, the Greek, took some transcript, in the Greek language and script, of any among those twenty-one books which were about astronomy and medicine, and burnt up the other books. ... After the villainy of Alexander, some high-priests, well versed in the Scientia Divina, who were yet alive, met together, and brought and collected all Avesta from various places.’

There exists a short treatise, in Pārsīg, from Drangiana (Sakastāna), the ASS (*abdīh ud sahīgīh ī sagestān*), that gives an original account of the loss and recovery of the Avesta liturgical texts: after Alexander’s onslaught, a few men of priestly class escaped and fled to Drangiana. There was a man, called Sēn-burzmīhr, who had compiled the Avesta of liturgies, the *Dva.yasna* ‘the Two Liturgies’: One, the Yasna and Visprad, and the other the Yasna (Yašt) and Niyāyišn (the X^vardag Abestāg). Mas‘ūdī tells obscurely how, after the year 300 (i.e., 300 years after the religion), a man in Sakastāna knew all the canonical texts by heart.⁸ A few women and young children tried to study and memorize the two texts. The Hērbedestān 5-6 refers to young women pursuing their studies (*aθauruna*) even after marriage –and even without the authority of the husband. Mazdayasnian women were admitted to full religious rites and consequently to complete educational facilities. Thanks to the women and minor children who pursued the study of the book of the *daēnā* arranged by Sēn-burzmīhr the religion returned to Drangiana, and thereafter to the whole Ērānšahr.

⁸ . Mas‘ūdī:

« وقد كانوا يقولون إن رجلاً منهم بسجستان بعد الفلثمائة مستظهر يحفظ هذا الكتاب على الكمال ... » مسعودی،

مروج الذهب ومعادن الجوهر، الجزء الأول، بيروت، ۱۹۸۶، ۲۳۷.

Here is the Pārsīg text of the ASS with an English translation.⁹

Text
mādayān

ped nām ī yazdān

¹ *abdīh ud sahgīh ī zamīg ī sagestān az abārīg šahrīhā ēd rāy abērdar ud veh:*

² *ēk ēn kū: rōd ī hēdumand ud var ī frazdān ud zreh ī kānse ud gar ī ušdāštār andar zamīg ī sagestān.*

³ *zāyīšn ud parvarišn ī ušīdar ud ušīdarmāh ud sōšyāns ī zarduštān ī spitāmān, u-š ristāxēz kirdan, <andar ham zamīg>.*

⁴ *ēk ēn kū: peyvann ud tōhmag ī kayān dahebedān ī ped ēn kišvar vizend aviš mad.* ⁵ *az frazendān ī frēdōn salm kē kišvar ī hrōm, ud tūz kē turkestān ped x^v adāyīh dāšt, ērēz ērān dahebed būd, u-š be ōzad.* ⁶ *ud az frazendān ī ērēz bē kenīg-ē anī kas bē nē mānd.* ⁷ *ud pas frēdōn ō var frazdān nīd, ud ped nihān dāšt dā dahum peyvann ka az hān kenīg pus zāyād.* ⁸ *pas frēdōn ō var frazdān šud, u-š az aredvīsūr anāhīd āyaft x^v āst, ped abāz ārāstan ī ērān šahr, ud x^v arrah ī kayān, abārīg yazdān kē andar sagestān gāh mehmānīh abardar. āyaft vindād, abāg manušcihr ud avēšān ērān. āfrīn.*

⁹ *ēk ēn kū: vištāsp šāh dēn ped var ī frazdān kird-ravāgīh, fradum ped sagestān, ud pas ped abārīg šahrīhā.*

¹⁰ *ud vištāsp šāh ped ham-pursagīh ī zardušt ud sēn ī ahūmstūdān ī bustīg cōn-š hāvištān ī zardušt fradum ped sar-hāvištīh (x^v sad-hāvištīh) ōy būd hend,* ¹¹ *andar sagestān [ō] cāšt ravāg dāštan rāy panzāh ud panzāh ped dūdag ī vehān frāz raft.*

⁹ . See *The Pahlavi Texts*, (Jamaspji M. Jamasp-Asana, Bombay, 1897), 25-26; Supplément persan 2044, 28-29 ; J.J. Modi, *Aiyâdgâr-i-Zarirân, Shatrôihâ-i-Airân, Afliya va sahgīya-i-Sistân*, Bombay, 1899, 122-127 ; E.W. West, "A Transliteration and Translation of the Pahlavi Treatise Wonders of Sagastān (Sistān)", JAOS, 36, 1917, 115-21 ; H. W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books*, Oxford, 1943, 161 ; B. Utas, "The Pahlavi Treatise Avdēh u Sahīkēh ī Sakistān, or Wonders and Magnificence of Sistan", *Acta Antiqua Ac. Sc. Hung.*, 28, 1980, 259-67 ;

داریوش کارگر، "سیستان و روایت حیاتش"، پژوهش در فرهنگ باستانی و شناخت اوستا، پاریس،

¹² *nask-ē <ī> 𐭠𐭣𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 /do-yasn-z¹⁰/ x^vānend, cōn sēn-
burzmihr ī zarduštān, ped vīrāstagīh ī hān būd, ī āšnāg. ¹³ ka
guzastag aleksander ī hrōmīg ō ērān šahr mad, avēšān kē ped
brāh ī muvmardīh raft <hend>, grift <hend> ud ōzad <hend>.
¹⁴ mard ud rēdak ēcand ō sagestān āmad hend. ¹⁵ būd ī zanān,
būd ī aburnāyag-ē nask ī do-yasn-z x^vast ud varm kird ēstād. pez
hān rāh, dēn andar sagestān abāz gašt, ud ārāst ud vīrāst nōg
nōg. bē ped sagestān enyā abārīg gyāg nē varm.*

¹⁶ *an kē ped hān gyāg, hamāg-dēn-ē yazānd, šādīh
guhrīgānīh rāy, hādōxt-ē framāyānd yaštan.*

frazaft ped drod, šādīh ud rāmišn.

*šād ud farrox ud dagrzīvišn ud pērōzgar ud ahlav,
kāmaghanzām bavād kē nibišt, kē x^vēš, ud kē x^vāned.*

ašəm.

vizārišn

Translation

The wonders and mirabilia of the land of Sakastāna are much more and better than other provinces, for these reasons:

One reason is this, that the river Haētumaṅt¹¹, the lake Frazdānu¹², the sea Kāşaya¹³, and the mountain Uši.darəna are located in the land of Sakastāna.

The birth and fostering of Uxšyaṭ.ərəta, Uxšyaṭ.nəmah and Saošyaṅt, the sons of Zaratuštra Spitama, and also the making of the resurrection by Saošyaṅt (will happen there).

One reason is this, that the lineage and family of the Kavi-dynasty, i.e., the rulers of this country sustained some damage. Of the children of Ōraētaona, Salm (*Sairima) who had the reign of the Roman (/ western) Empire¹⁴, Tūz (*Tūr_aca) who

¹⁰ . Modi : Dvāsiražo ; West : guvāh-Sēn-iz ‘the witness is even Sēn’ ; Bailey : Bayān.

¹¹ . Haētumaṅt, identified with the modern Helmand.

¹² . Cf. the river Hrazdan in the Movsēs Khorenat ‘si’ s *History of Armenia*.

¹³ . Kāşaya, identified with the Hāmūn Lake, from which the three Saošyaṅt will emerge.

¹⁴ . Cf. Yt 13.143 *sairimanqam daxyunqam* ‘of the Sairima land’.

had the reign of Turkastāna (/ eastern) land¹⁵, killed Ērēz (**Airyāēca*) who was the ruler of the Aryan (land)¹⁶. And of the children of Ērēz none remained except a daughter. Then Ōraētaona conducted (her) to the lake Frazdānu and kept her hidden for ten generations, when a son was born from that daughter. Then Ōraētaona went to Frazdānu, and he asked for a boon from Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā¹⁷ to restore the Aryan kingdom, viz., the Fortune of the Kavi¹⁸ and the other, (the Fortune of) the Yazata¹⁹, that held a higher place in Sakastāna. He obtained the boon, together with Manuš.ciθra and the Aryans. Blessing!

One reason is this, that king Vištāspa celebrated the religion at Lake Frazdānu, propagated it first in Sakastāna, and thereafter in other lands. King Vištāspa (held) a conference with Zaraθuštra (in Sakastāna).

Saēna son of Ahūm.stūt, of Bust, was the first of Zaraθuštra's disciples (at the head of) a hundred pupils in the family of the good (in Sakastāna).²⁰

There was one book (*naska-*) which they call *Dva.yasna* ('Two Liturgies'), in whose preparation Sēn-burzmihr son of Zardušt was involved –it is well-known.

When the accursed Alexander the Greek came to the Aryan kingdom (/ Persia), he seized and slew those who walked with the appearance of the Magi. Some men and boys came to Sakastāna. There were some women and also some minor children who studied and learnt by heart the book *Dva.yasna*. In that way indeed the religion once more turned to Sakastāna, and was restored and re-established anew. But except in sakastāna, there was no recollection elsewhere.

¹⁵ . Cf. Yt 13.143 *tūiryanaqm ... daxyunqm* 'of the Tūirya land'.

¹⁶ . Cf. Yt 13.143 *airyanqm ... daxyunqm* 'of the Aryan land'.

¹⁷ . Cf. Yt 5.33-34 ... *vīsō puθrō āθβyānōiš vīsō sūrayā θraētaonō ... āaṭ hīm jaiḍyaṭ avaṭ āyaptəm dazdi.mē vaṇ^vhi səvište arədvī sūire anāhite* 'Ōraētaona of the strong house, the son of the house (= prince) of Āθβya, ... thus he asked her: Give me that boon, O good, strongest Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā!'

¹⁸ . *kavaēm x^varənō*, the royal fortune/ glory.

¹⁹ . *yazdān x^varraḥ*, the divine fortune. Cf. KAP 3.11 *yazdān x^varraḥ ī ērān šahr ≈ airyanqm x^varənō*.

²⁰ . Cf. Yt 13.97 *saēnahe ahūm.stūtō ašaonō fravašīm yazamaide yō paoiryō satō.aēθryō fraxštata paiti āva zəmā* 'We worship the fravaši of truthful Saēna (son) of Ahūm.stūt who first went forth upon this earth with a hundred students.'

I who am of that place, may they perform (for me) the whole-ceremonial-of-Religion (*hamāg-dēn*), and in requital of joy may they consecrate the ceremonial Haḍaoxta.

Finished with peace, joy and ease.

May he who wrote (or, will write), who possesses, who reads it, be joyful, fortunate, long-lived, victorious, blessed and successful. Truth!

(Raham Asha)