

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism

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with the assistance of Anna Tessmann

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CHAPTER 5

Religion and Politics in Pre-Islamic Iran

Albert de Jong

The dominant political system of pre-Islamic Iran was that of the monarchy. Iranian history before the Arab conquests in the 7th century CE is a history of four empires, of different geographical extent and of different duration: the Achaemenid (550–330 BCE), the Seleucid (323–129 BCE), the Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE), and the Sasanian (224–651 CE). Three of these were “Iranian” empires, in the sense that their kings were drawn from Iranian families; the Seleucids were the only exception to this rule, for they were of Macedonian stock (although the mother of Antiochus I, the second Seleucid, was a Bactrian). In addition to being “Iranian,” there is ample evidence to show that these three empires were also “Zoroastrian” empires, but this interpretation is far from generally accepted. The main difficulty is the fact that, in discussing it, scholars have often been guided by the conviction that Zoroastrianism as we know it, i.e., the late Sasanian system (which survives to the present), can reasonably be taken as a normative system, more or less as a version of Zoroastrianism as it was intended. This system, in other words, is used as a yardstick to measure the behavior of Iranian kings in terms of meeting or failing the norms. While this is problematic in itself, its most dramatic consequence is the fact that it has blinded most scholars to the possibility of royal agency in religious affairs. The present contribution will attempt to show how misguided that approach is by focusing as much as possible on the active role kings played (or, in one case, did not play) in the development of Zoroastrianism.

It is perhaps best to begin with some examples. In the *Avesta* and the Pahlavi books – the two main blocks of textual sources – strict rules are given for human behavior in a large number of different contexts. These rules frequently confirm each other – the Pahlavi books tell us the same as the *Avesta*. This is usually explained by invoking notions of conservatism, loyalty to Zarathustra’s message, or to the Zoroastrian tradition (an entity that is treated as pre-given; Boyce 1992). This is a labor-saving strategy, for the “tradition” thus recovered gives us both an instrument to distinguish “real”

Zoroastrianism from deviations that failed to maintain themselves *and* an explanation for this failure. This strategy, however, comes at a huge cost: It excises human agency from the history of Zoroastrianism, or at least limits it to two options. The first option would be acceptance: adapting one's behavior to the requirements of the tradition. The other option would be a failure to meet these requirements and this is usually rationalized by the invention of a number of non-Zoroastrian Iranian religions, designed by scholars specifically to preserve the notion of a trans-historical Zoroastrian tradition. Examples of such invented religions (according to the present writer) are "the (non-Zoroastrian) religion of the Achaemenids" (sometimes known, confusingly, as Mazdaism; Lincoln 2012b); "Zurvanism" (Zaehner 1955), and "Iranian Mithraism" (Pourshariati 2008). None of these "religions" is documented anywhere in the sources: They owe their existence wholly to the fact that the scanty primary sources available for the entire pre-Islamic history of Iran occasionally yield data that cannot be harmonized with the (combined) evidence from the *Avesta* and the Pahlavi books. The most prominent examples are the names of deities that are worshipped (and the fact that these beings are sometimes "non-Iranian"), alternative cosmogonies, unknown rituals, and unknown types of sanctuaries. The fact that these all seem to disappear in late Sasanian times is often left unexplained or, at best, seen as a natural development of the religion.

One of the most fiercely debated subjects in this respect is the topic of Zoroastrian funerary traditions. The prescriptions for the treatment of corpses are strikingly similar in the *Avesta* and the Pahlavi books: Corpses are to be brought to a barren place, to be consumed by vultures and/or dogs. Against this unanimity in the sources (supported, moreover, to a certain extent by non-Zoroastrian sources of the pre-Islamic period) is the much more varied dossier of archaeology, which shows that many Iranians buried their dead, either directly in the ground (in various ways, but most prominently in coffins made of clay, a porous substance that would not, in the logic of the religious texts, prevent the earth from being contaminated), or in above-ground mausoleums. Most strikingly, it seems, members of *all* pre-Islamic dynasties used these types of funerary arrangements rather than "following" the prescriptions of the religious sources. In the case of the Achaemenids, whose tombs are known, either as freestanding mausoleums or cut in the living rock, this fact has been used more than once as decisive *evidence* that the Achaemenid kings were not Zoroastrians (e.g., Widengren 1965: 154–155). Scholars who claim that the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians have chiefly come up with the notion of "royal exception" (the idea that ordinary rules do not apply to extraordinary persons). In many other cases, the evidence for primary burial has been ignored, buried in footnotes, or assigned (without any evidence) to non-Zoroastrian communities in Iranian lands (Jews, Greeks, etc.). Very few scholars have entertained the possibility that a range of options in funerary traditions (and, by extension, a range of options in many other aspects of the religion) may have been the normal state of affairs in the Iranian world, without any religious implications being felt by communities or individuals in various parts of the Iranian world or in different periods in Zoroastrian history. By resisting this perspective, several key subjects for the history of Zoroastrianism have often been glossed over, especially regional and social variation, historical developments, and experimental new forms of Zoroastrianism that failed to maintain themselves.

Zoroastrianism before the Iranian Empires

In a field riddled with uncertainties, there are two very solid facts on which our entire reconstruction of earliest Zoroastrianism must be based. The first of these is the existence of the *Avesta*, in its own language (Avestan), preserved and transmitted over a very long period by Iranians who did not speak that language. The second is the fact that the corpus of Avestan texts mirrors a world (literally) far removed from those of the Iranian empires: centered in eastern Iran and Central Asia and borne by a society based on kin groups, tribal associations, and (probably) transient unions of villages and regions (Skjærvø 1995a). The enemies spoken of in the narrative portions of the Avestan texts are referred to under two different headings: The first are the *daēuuaiiasnas*, those who worship the (rejected/evil) *daēuuas* and who are contrasted to the “we-group” of the texts, the *mazdaiiasnas*, the people who worship Ahura Mazdā. The second heading appears to be an ethnic one: It is Tūiriia (together with a few other ethnic names), the name of the enemies of the “we-group” of the *Avesta*, the people who refer to themselves as “Arya.” There is a great elasticity in the application of these terms (in later times, for example, the Tūiriia were identified with the Turks) and together they are responsible for the situation that the identity of the Zoroastrians could be expressed both in “religious” and in “ethnic” terms – the source of much confusion for historians of Zoroastrianism.

It has generally been recognized, moreover, that the Avestan texts that have been preserved are diachronically layered: There is a small portion in a much more archaic dialect (known as Old Avestan), traditionally attributed to Zarathustra himself, and a much larger group of texts that is seen as younger. This diachronic hierarchy is augmented, moreover, by the fact that the younger texts all presuppose the older ones: In some cases, they literally rework them or reflect on them (this is the case, for example, with the *Frauarānē* (Y 12), which contains quotations from the Old Avestan texts; and with the commentary on the Old Avestan prayers in Y 19–21), in other cases they show the presence of the Old Avestan texts in the use of names (Zarathustra, Ahura Mazdā) and technical terms (Aməša Spənta; Saošiiant) specific to that corpus. Most scholars agree that these Old Avestan passages were not always interpreted correctly – a first sign of the development of Zoroastrian theology – but what these passages do establish is the “foundational” character of the Old Avestan texts.

In the corpus of younger Avestan texts, the narrative of the foundation of the religion through the activities of Zarathustra and the support he gained from Vīštāspa is firmly in place. The important point of this is that from these early texts onward, a notion existed of the “historicity” of the religion: It had originated in a historical past and had not always been around. As a consequence, it had the natural option of presenting itself as a choice that could be made by all: As the religion had already begun to spread, so it could (and would, according to the texts) continue to spread around the world. These younger texts operate, as indicated, with an established notion of a “community” whose identity is expressed primarily – but not exclusively – in religious terms: Belonging to the community is not conditioned by birth, but depends on the choice of the believers to worship certain deities and not to worship others (as is clear especially from the *Frauarānē*, Y 12).

It must be assumed that at a certain moment in history there were people in the Iranian world who chose to adopt this religion, who did not speak Avestan, but were convinced that it was important for their belonging to the community of Mazda-worshippers to use the Avestan texts in their prayers and rituals. This has been evoked, somewhat romantically, as a result of the work of Zoroastrian missionaries (Boyce 1975a: 249–276), whose activities are to some extent recorded. Alongside this perspective, however, we find the story of the conversion of Vīštāspa to Zoroastrianism – with its important lesson (much emulated in later times, by Christians and Manichaeans) that the conversion of a ruler equals (or brings about) the conversion of the people in his domain (de Jong 2014).

There are, of course, no reliable sources on the details of this whole process, but the preservation of the *Avesta*, in its own language, is a very solid fact that can only be explained from such a background. At the same time, this necessary assumption produces a number of significant questions that cannot be answered and that make any history of the development of early Zoroastrianism impossible to sketch. This is one of the reasons why a history of (early) Zoroastrianism is most often a history of Avestan texts; the situation is roughly comparable to that of the history of Vedic religion, which is almost always written as a history of Vedic literature. For the purpose of the present chapter, there are three particularly important questions: a question of content, a question of understanding or translation, and a question of use. We do not know (exactly) which texts were present at any given moment in Zoroastrian history before the Sasanian period, nor how (or when) they were collected and rearranged (and brought into the service, for example, of the *Yasna* liturgy, the history of which is equally unknown). Nor do we know how these texts were understood or used by priests and lay people, apart from their (obvious) use in ritual. It has often been noted, for example, that for a native speaker of Avestan, all divine names would have an understandable meaning (since they all reproduce or encapsulate common nouns or adjectives). For them, “hearing” Avestan texts would be comparable to a 17th-century speaker of English listening to a recital of the exploits of Christian and Mr Worldly Wiseman in the town of Carnal Policy from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Much of this would be lost when the texts began to be recited and heard by people who did not speak that language itself: The goddess “Reward” would easily transform into a goddess with the *name* Arti, and the Wise Lord himself ended up as a deity with the *name* Ahura Mazdā (and appears thus, with both elements of his name joined as one, in the inscriptions of the Achaemenids as A^huramazdā-).

Finally, we do not know how the Avestan texts were used, apart from their (generally acknowledged) use in ritual contexts. It is customary to believe that the *content* of the texts (however well or poorly they were comprehended) mattered to the Zoroastrians, but there is no solid evidence for this assumption (de Jong 2009). Much of this has been circumvented on the assumption – reasonable in itself – that the texts were accompanied by translations, but if we do not know which texts were present, we obviously do not know anything about their translations either. Any scenario of the growth of Zoroastrianism must take account of all these variables and it is likely that serious reflection on these will help explain, to a certain degree, the considerable local and historical variety of expressions of Zoroastrianism. The question for this chapter is how we can account for the (eventual) uniformity of the religion.

The Achaemenid Empire

Little to nothing is known about the religion of the first two Achaemenid kings, Cyrus (r. 559–530 BCE) and Cambyses (r. 530–522 BCE), for the sources for their rule are scattered and refractory. There was a time of conquest and expansion, with the acquisition of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt alongside large parts of the Iranian plateau. In the Akkadian and Egyptian sources they (and their successors) naturally follow the conventions pertaining to Mesopotamian and Egyptian kings – in genres, moreover, that do not generally allow of expressions of personal conviction. In the (much later) Greek sources, the stories of their lives had already become legends, to exalt the one and vilify the other, so that no safe conclusions can be reached. There is one relevant fact that needs to be stressed here, however, and this is the cultural complexity of their native region (Pārsa) in south-western Iran. For alongside Persians and alongside the strong cultural impact of Mesopotamia, there was a region that had been dominated by another great civilization: that of the Elamites, whose traditions they seem to have continued to a large extent (Alvárez-Mon and Garrison 2011). This emerges clearly with the accession of Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) – from another branch of the Achaemenid family – who is the first Achaemenid monarch whose own statements in his own native language have been preserved. For the period of his reign, we also possess a huge amount of documentary texts in Elamite and it has been difficult to square the explicit proclamations of the greatness of A^huramazdā (and A^huramazdā alone, with “the other gods” mentioned only as a group) in Darius’ inscriptions, with the evidence for the worship of a multitude of gods, of various ethnic backgrounds, in the Elamite tablets (Henkelman 2008).

The problems appear to have been caused by the ineradicable wish of many scholars to retrieve the personal conviction of the king, but this will emerge neither from his official inscriptions, nor from the archives of his clerks. It is, in fact, lost to us forever and its relevance for the history of the religion is contestable. This is equally true for the inscriptions of the later Achaemenid kings. Two changes in the otherwise very formulaic inscriptions have caused much debate. The first, and most striking, one is in the so-called “Daiva Inscription” of Xerxes in Persepolis (XPh), where the king mentions the fact that he had destroyed a ritual place where the *daivas* were worshipped and that he had issued a proclamation that the *daivas* are not to be worshipped. The inscription ends, moreover, with an appeal to all those addressed in the text to follow the law of A^huramazdā, because doing so will make them happy in this life and righteous in the next. It is impossible to relate this inscription, with its unique content, to any specific event. The suggestion was made, therefore, that it did not refer to such an event, but was to be seen as a general (timeless) declaration (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 1–36). If that is the case, all attempts to dissociate this inscription from “Zoroastrianism” are vacuous, for the inscription finds its most natural interpretation from the background of Zoroastrian thought. This is true also of the addition, from the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (r. 404–358 BCE) onward, of two further named deities: Mithra and Anāhitā. We cannot build a history of the religion on these scattered data.

Since the discussion of the religion of the Achaemenids has, for the largest part, been based on such matters of detail in the Old Persian inscriptions (based on the idea that

these would somehow reveal the religiosity of the kings), whole areas of evidence that should have been at the center of the discussion have needlessly been sidelined. The Achaemenid period, I shall argue, was the period in which Zoroastrianism as we know it took shape. This can be shown from three different cases, which reinforce each other mutually. The first is the development of the Zoroastrian calendar, which regulates and dominates Zoroastrian ritual life (and incorporates Egyptian and Mesopotamian elements, which can only have been included in the Achaemenid period). The second is the transformation of the representation of the afterlife, in particular the judging of the soul of the deceased, which has an Elamite background. The third is the structuring of the Zoroastrian story of creation and the end of time. Before we discuss these three, however, it will be necessary to pay some attention to the mechanism that produced these transformations. This can be shown in the example of the development of court ceremony.

The Origin of Achaemenid Court Rituals

It has long been observed that the Achaemenids did not invent the inner workings of their empire from scratch (Briant 2002). In many details they followed the example of the kingdoms their empire replaced. These were the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Neo-Babylonian kingdom, the Median conglomerate, and the Neo-Elamite kingdom, within which the Achaemenid family had begun its rise to power. The best evidence comes from administrative matters, for wherever they found a functioning bureaucracy, the Achaemenids maintained it for its traditional local purposes. Where one was absent, they built one. The type of administration that was most obviously absent was one that would be capable of uniting the various provinces of the whole empire and for this they chose Aramaic as the most suitable language. In this, they followed the example of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian kingdoms, where Aramaic had long begun to coexist with the traditional cuneiform administrations (Folmer 1995:1–41). Achaemenid documents in (so-called) Imperial Aramaic are known from Bactria (Naveh and Shaked 2012) to Egypt (e.g., Driver 1957) and the spread of this administration is responsible for the development of almost all writing systems east of the Euphrates.

For other formal aspects of their empire, they equally looked at the examples of the kingdoms their empire replaced. This has been observed for royal titles and inscriptions, and for many aspects of court ceremony: royal sacrifices, processions, and similar key moments of imperial self-representation (de Jong 2010). When it comes to the religion, however, there was a crucial difference between the Persian religion and especially the royal precedents in Mesopotamia. This is the absence, as far as is known, of temples. Two cases may illustrate this. The Old Persian inscriptions generally begin with what has been called “the prayer”: a declaration that the world has been created by A^huramazdā and that A^huramazdā has given sovereignty to the (present) king. These declarations are then followed by the customary Near Eastern “I am” declarations, in which the king pronounces what he has achieved. Such inscriptions are also known from Mesopotamia, but there the religious declaration mainly appears when the inscription is *about* the religion, for example, when the king dedicates a divine statue or a temple. In the Achaemenid case, most of the rituals for which Mesopotamian kings

would go to the temple were brought into the palace or the royal cities: These were, in the Persian case, open-air festivals and gatherings, the main marker of which are the large platforms that have been found all over the empire. The Persian kings adopted, it seems, the Mesopotamian New Year festival, for the structure even of the modern Nowrūz celebration continues traditions from Mesopotamia: The bowls of greens that are sown to shoot up quickly undoubtedly continue the custom known in the West as “gardens of Adonis,” and the conclusion of the Nowrūz celebration by going outside on the thirteenth day also follows Mesopotamian precedent (Boyce 1982: 33–34). It is customary to highlight Nowrūz as a “secular” festival – chiefly because the Zoroastrian texts hardly ever mention the festival by its name. These priestly documents, however, do refer to the festival often, but replace it with a term that was meaningful for the priests: Rapiθwin (one of the festivals of obligation). It is here that we can find decisive proof for the Achaemenid transformation of Zoroastrian rituals. There is nothing in the Avestan passages that mention Rapiθwin (one of the five gods who represent the five watches of the day [MP *gāh*]; the name itself means “cooking time” and he is associated with the watch of the day that begins at noon, when the sun is at its highest) to suggest that he resided under the earth periodically, but this is how he is celebrated nowadays (Boyce 1968d). Rapiθwin, who is associated with heat, retreats under the earth in winter, to protect the roots of the crops from cold, and reappears above the earth at Nowrūz. This is especially important for priests, for it changes the number of the rituals associated with the watches. Rapiθwin is solemnly welcomed back upon his return for the New Year. These two facts, Rapiθwin’s departure under the earth for winter and his return with the New Year – wholly unattested in any Avestan text – can only be explained as a result of culture contact with Iran’s western neighbours, where variations on this ritual drama had persisted for millennia. The Achaemenid period is the *only* suitable timeframe for such a development. The idea that the Achaemenid period in that sense transformed Zoroastrianism even in its ritual expression is strongly supported by the three further transformations to be discussed.

The Zoroastrian Calendar

It has always been assumed that the Zoroastrian calendar was introduced in the Achaemenid period, but for a long time there was no real evidence of its presence in documents that could be dated to this period. Scholars remained divided, moreover, in their appreciation of the use of the calendar. Many of them wanted to find evidence for its use as a system of dating and of time-keeping and lost track of its primary importance in the structuring and organization of priestly and lay rituals (Boyce 2005). Like most ancient societies, the Achaemenid Empire knew a plurality of calendars: There is evidence for the standard Mesopotamian one (used in all Aramaic documents), and a local Old Persian one (known from the inscriptions), but it is likely that there were others as well. The development of the Zoroastrian calendar (modeled on the Egyptian solar year; de Blois 1996) does not have to be interpreted as a development intended to replace the “civic” calendars; its most likely background is the wish to establish a uniform ritual year. This is precisely what now emerges from the Aramaic documents from ancient

Bactria, which use the Mesopotamian calendar for all “civil” purposes, but contain the first datable use of the Zoroastrian calendar in a context that is specifically concerned with the religion (Naveh and Shaked 2012: 35–36). The calendar, in its modified form, survived, moreover, to reappear in various individual transformations, from all former parts of the Achaemenid Empire: Armenia, Georgia, Cappadocia, Parthia, etc. In this, it is wholly parallel to the reappearance (in these same areas) of Imperial Aramaic – on its way to being transformed to a system of writing Iranian languages. This latter process has always been understood as the result of the strength of the Achaemenid administrative reforms, and, if one views the evidence of the Zoroastrian calendar from this perspective, it offers solid evidence for a similar restructuring of religious observance. This makes it easier to argue for developments that are not themselves safely attested, but have been widely attributed to the Achaemenid period: the development of priestly titles (with the rise of the ⁺*magupati* > *mowbed*) and the development of a temple cult of fire, as well as temples dedicated to named deities other than Ahura Mazda (Boyce 1982: 221–231).

The Judgment of the Soul

It is only natural that the development of structural aspects of the religion, such as the New Year festival, the calendar, and fire-temples, can better be traced than the development of ideas, especially in a civilization that consciously rejected the use of writing for its religious (and literary) texts. It is striking, therefore, that evidence can be produced for two crucial Achaemenid developments in Zoroastrian theology. The first of these was the development of the idea of the judgment of the soul after death. There is no doubt that the ancient Iranians believed that the soul of a deceased person would be judged after death, but there is a wide gap between the representation of this judgment in the Avestan texts and in the later Zoroastrian tradition. In the *Avesta*, the judgment is either implicit and its results are communicated to the soul (as is the case in *Hāddōxt Nask* 2; Piras 2000), or the judgment is carried out by the “Bridge (of the Separator)” itself, but there is no mention at all of a triad of divine judges who weigh the thoughts, words, and deeds of the soul. They appear only in much later texts, and one can easily see why the divine judge (Mithra), the god of righteousness (Rašnu), and the god of obedience (Sraoša), who are mentioned as a triad in *Yt* 10 and who follow each other in the day dedications of the calendar, would have been chosen for this function. But the triad of judges itself appears to have an Elamite background (Henkelman 2008: 61–62; Tavernier 2013): Although the Elamite evidence is much older than the Achaemenid period (the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE in Susa; Bottéro 1982: 393–402), the divine triad of Inshushinak “the Weigher,” Ishnikarab, and Lagamar offers such a crucial structural parallel to the (otherwise wholly unexplained) appearance of the triad of judges in later Zoroastrianism (and is unknown, as such, from Mesopotamia) that it is difficult not to accept them as the most likely example for the Zoroastrian development, where the Bridge continued its judicial function, but came to be preceded by a formal judging by three gods (who are not known to carry out this judgment in any Avestan source).

The Zoroastrian Story of Creation and the End of Time

Something similar must be said about the basic framework of all (later) Zoroastrian thought. There are numerous references in the *Avesta* to Ahura Mazdā's act of creation and to Anra Mainiiu's activities to counteract it, but one will look in vain for the full story of the creation of the world (and the pact sealed between the two spirits, specifying time and place of their mutual struggle). In this case, however, we have evidence for the presence of this story, systematically presented, that can be dated to the late Achaemenid period. The evidence comes from Greek literature, especially from chapters 46–47 of Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (de Jong 1997: 157–204). This text itself is from the early 2nd century CE, but there is no doubt that its contents are based wholly on the works of other authors, one of whom (Theopompus) he names. These authors, whose works are chiefly known from being thus cited by Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, can all be dated to the 4th and the 3rd centuries BCE. This makes it certain that this crucial Zoroastrian narrative (with speculations, for example, on the division of time in nine or twelve millennia, and with a clearly defined list of seven Aməša Spəntas and their role in creation) had been developed by then and had been spread widely enough in the Persian world to count as a summary of what "the Persians" believed. This fact derives its greatest significance if it is viewed in the context of the other evidence for an Achaemenid restructuring (or even shaping) of Zoroastrianism. It is unimaginable that all of this would have occurred spontaneously: Some of the developments clearly point to Persia as the locus of its origins (the judgment of the soul), whereas others (the calendar) can be shown to have spread all over the empire. Taken together, they build a very strong case for the fact that we should not interpret the Achaemenid evidence on the basis of what we "know" of Zoroastrianism, but that we should recognize the fact that the Zoroastrianism we know (best), was given shape – purposely, in an act of imperial unification – by the Achaemenids. This will also give us instruments to judge developments in later periods. It is to these that we must turn now.

Alexander and the Seleucids

Religion played no role in the conquests of Alexander, just as it had served no agenda in the conquests of the Achaemenids themselves. This fact creates some problems for the interpretation of the hostile image of Alexander that has been preserved in Zoroastrian writings (*AWN* 1.3; *ŠĒ* 4–5, etc.). There is nothing to suggest that Alexander or his successors were obtuse in dealing with their newly conquered territories, and the recent find of administrative documents from Bactria, which includes a document dated to the seventh year of "Alexander, the King" (Naveh and Shaked 2012: 199–206) attests the continuity of administrative practices. This continuity was known, at any rate, from the survival of the use of Imperial Aramaic in various provinces of the former Achaemenid Empire. The document in which the first use of the Zoroastrian calendar is attested is likewise dated (by its first editors) to the reign of Alexander, which shows that in the sphere of religion, too, life continued as usual with the change of rulers.

The negative image of Alexander (known in Middle Persian as *gizistag* ‘the accursed’), a title he shares with the Evil Spirit himself) is often attributed to the loss of knowledge, the destruction of holy sites, and the murder of priests, and all these are likely to have occurred with the heavy fighting that accompanied some of Alexander’s campaigns (Boyce and Grenet 1991: 12–17). The evidence, however, is largely anecdotal and there is obvious evidence for the preservation and continuity of the religion of the Iranians in this period. It is likely, therefore, that the hatred shown for Alexander in Zoroastrian texts is not due to specific crimes against the religion, but is rooted in the fact that by the time of Alexander’s conquests – and as a result of the Achaemenid transformation of the religion – Zoroastrianism had come to be seen as the *national* and *imperial* religion of the Iranians. The crushing of the Achaemenids, from such a perspective, would equal the (attempted) destruction of the religion. As was to be the case with the (much more damaging) Arab conquests of Iran in the 7th century CE, the group that would be most immediately afflicted were the court priests, for they no longer had useful services to offer. It seems, therefore, that with the downfall of the Achaemenid Empire, Zoroastrianism reverted to what has throughout its history been the mainstay of the religion: a religion grouped around family traditions, served by priests whose primary duties were defined by the families and communities that employed them. It is possible to see in this a “fragmentation” of the religion, for there is no evidence for a central religious authority that would be accepted by all Iranians. Such an authority was not developed, moreover, by the next, and most successful, dynasty to rule the Iranian world: the Parthians.

The Parthian (Arsacid) Empire

The Parthians are the step-children of ancient history and, strangely, also of Iranian history. In spite of the fact that they held the affection of the Iranians longer than the Achaemenids and the Sasanians, the historical memory of the Iranians has no place for them. They are seen as an intrusion in the great narrative of Iranian history, which took shape in Sasanian times. Western scholars, too, have treated them only casually, especially when it comes to their importance for the history of Zoroastrianism. Many of them have made much use of the notion that they were “originally” Sakas, nomadic invaders from the Central Asian steppes (e.g., Wolski 2003). While this is based on the flimsiest of evidence (Boyce 1994), it has been stretched to great length, more or less as a permanent instrument by which to explain and interpret the inner workings of their empire (Hauser 2005). Since they are thus seen by many as lacking a culture of their own, they are regularly presented as the “beneficiaries” of cultural contacts with more cultured peoples: the Persians and especially the Greeks (Rawlinson 1887). The impact of Greek culture on some expressions of Parthian culture, moreover, has produced an image of the Parthians as somehow non-genuine Iranians, and – by extension – as failed Zoroastrians (de Jong 2008 [2012]).

None of this can seriously be maintained at present. The large collection of ostraca with Parthian texts excavated from the Arsacids’ first capital, Nisa, has removed any doubts about the fact that the Arsacids were Zoroastrians: The use of the Zoroastrian

calendar in these documents and incidental references to priests offer strong supportive evidence for this claim (Bader 1996). This fact is corroborated in all other Parthian documents that have come to light in the 20th century. Two further facts, whose importance has not been sufficiently realized, have become clear, moreover: the first is that the Parthians did not use their religion as an instrument of governance. The second, closely related, fact is their reliance on spreading Parthian culture (including religion as practiced in a family context) by setting an example to be emulated all the way down through the (extensive) network of families and officials that built the core of the empire (Boyce and de Jong forthcoming).

This was already hinted at above: Parthian Zoroastrianism, as far as we can grasp it, lived in the context of family life, with the royal family maintaining it in an appropriately lavish way. That this is a likely model emerges mostly from the fact that we can see it being copied in the western parts of the Parthian Empire, especially in Armenia (Russell 1987), which was ruled by a junior branch of the Arsacid family. There, as elsewhere, wealthy families employed priests and minstrels (*gōsāns*) to take care of their religious needs and of the task of remembering and eulogizing past successes and current endeavors. Much effort was thus spent in promoting the interest of the families themselves, and this included the construction (and maintenance) of funerary structures as well as the sponsoring of temples. These temples were not (only) the fire-temples one would generally expect, but they included temples dedicated to gods and goddesses other than Ahura Mazdā. It seems that princes and kings acted as wardens, or even priests, in some of these temples, while patronizing others by sending gifts to them. Such activities used to be seen as indicators of the fact that the Parthians were no real Zoroastrians, but this can only be maintained if one works with a strictly defined notion of what Zoroastrianism is. This reconstructed Zoroastrianism, it will be shown, is a Sasanian invention – and therefore of little use for the interpretation of pre-Sasanian varieties of the religion. The time has come to liberate the Parthians from this yoke, and restore to them a place in the long and checkered history of the Zoroastrian religion.

One crucial contribution to Zoroastrian culture has generally been ascribed to the Parthians, and with reason. This is their role in the preservation, development, and spread of the epic traditions of the Iranians. These can be seen, of course, as belonging to the history of Iranian literature, but this would force modern Western distinctions on a non-modern non-Western context. It is clear that narrative traditions were the domain of the *gōsāns* and not of priests, but in developing them, it can be shown that the *gōsāns* made use of traditions and names from the *Avesta*. This gives us virtually the only evidence for the use of the *Avesta* in a non-ritual context and this evidence is considerable: Wherever the Parthians settled, as administrators or in estates, evidence for Iranian epic conventions pops up. This has generally been recognized for Armenia and Georgia, but it is equally true of the Syro-Mesopotamian world, where pieces of literature filled with Parthian conventions have been found in the works of Josephus, the *Babyloniaca* of Iamblichus, the *Acts of Thomas* (and the *Hymn of the Pearl* contained in it), Manichaean and Mandaean texts, and, further afield, in the development of meaningful stories for several experimental forms of Christianity (e.g., the *Paraphrase of Sēem* found in the Nag Hammadi codices). While this evidence does not allow us to trace the history of Zoroastrianism, it strongly supports the notion that Parthian culture spread

through the network of Parthian families in their estates and cities, in a process of cultural radiance (de Jong 2013a). There is a whole world to discover here, but since this chapter is devoted to religion and politics, we have to move on to the dynasty that destroyed the Parthian Empire and, as we shall see, immediately set out to reconnect the link between Zoroastrianism and imperial politics.

The Rise of the Sasanians

In 224 CE, the first Sasanian, Ardašīr I (r. 224–242 CE), was crowned king in the royal capital of Ctesiphon in Babylonia. The years before his coronation are difficult to reconstruct in detail, because the Sasanians immediately launched a campaign of numismatic, narrative, and pictorial propaganda that was designed to present the change in dynasty as a victory, not just for the new ruling family, but for the Iranian world as a whole. Religion played an important part in this campaign: Ardašīr's coins were wholly new (and of staggering quality compared to late Parthian coinage) and presented the king as “the Mazdā-worshipping lord” on the obverse, while representing his regnal fire (identified as such: “Fire of Ardašīr”) on the reverse (Alram and Gyselen 2003). In the famous investiture relief from Naqš-e Rostam, Ardašīr meets Ohrmazd face to face and receives from him the ring of sovereignty, while the horses on which they are mounted trample under foot defeated enemies: Ahreman in the case of Ohrmazd, and the last Parthian king (Artabanus V; r. c. 213–c. 224 CE) in the case of Ardašīr (Hinz 1969: 115–143; Canepa 2009: 59–60). Stories were told, moreover, on a precise theme that is only found for the first two Sasanian kings: how they destroyed sanctuaries in which monstrous kings and queens were worshipped as living deities, receiving horrid offerings from terrorized subjects, and hoarding great treasure. These stories have been recognized as epic embellishments of very real activities by the first Sasanian kings: the demolition (and re-foundation as “normal” fire-temples) of dynastic fires lit by various lesser kings under Parthian suzerainty (a group to which the Sasanian family itself appears to have belonged; de Jong 2006).

The dominant theme of early Sasanian history is that of the unity of all Iranians under one king, who rules with the approval of the supreme god. This was translated into a restructuring of Sasanian administration, with the appointment of members of the Sasanian family in the former semi-independent principalities, but it was accompanied by an intense restructuring, or veritable recreation, of Zoroastrianism. This programme is known (apart from the fact that it gave rise to Zoroastrianism as it is still known) especially from the inscriptions of the high priest Kerdīr, who was allowed – uniquely, as a non-royal (and for unknown reasons) – to have these texts, together with his effigy, carved in the rock on symbolically highly significant sites of Sasanian Pārs (Naqš-e Rostam itself and nearby Naqš-e Rajab; Gignoux 1991). Kerdīr's inscriptions have usually been divided into two different subjects: a report on his career and a report on a visionary journey he made to the hereafter. This latter part, which has been much discussed (Grenet 2002a), derives most of its significance from a comparison with similar visionary journeys (of Zoroaster's patron Wištāsp, *Dk* 7.4.83–86), and of the legendary holy man Wīrāz, as told in the *Ardā Wīrāz-Nāmag*, for they all have the same

function: to establish (or re-establish) the truth of the religion (or, as in the case of Kerdīr, of a particular formulation of the religion), after a period of difficulty and looming threats. For our purpose, the first part is much more interesting, even though it appears to be a simple list of honors bestowed on the priest by various Sasanian kings. Kerdīr lists the accumulation of titles and dignities (including, for example, the wardenship of a temple in Staxr, which may have belonged to the traditional privileges of the Sasanian family) and illustrates some of the reasons why he received them. These reasons amount to a complete take-over of the system of the religion: Kerdīr (personally) vets all priests and brings them “back” to the tradition, closes various types of sanctuary, and orders the build-up of a network of temples, a structured priesthood, and a uniform cycle of rituals. He also claims to have persecuted all non-Zoroastrian religions in the world of the Iranians, and since this does not seem to have actually happened (for it is nowhere confirmed), there may be some doubts as to the reality of his earlier activities too. What cannot be doubted, however, are the intentions Kerdīr had with his programme of reforms: to tighten a centralized grip on the network of priests and fire-temples and to reinstate Zoroastrianism as an instrument of statehood.

This was necessary, it can be surmised because, by the 3rd century CE, the religious situation of the ancient world was changing rapidly, with the rise of actively missionary religions to the West and East of the Iranian world: Christianity, Manichaeism, and Buddhism. For the first time, Iranians were leaving the religion of their ancestors to join other religions. This unleashed periodic episodes of religious persecution (the evidence we have only concerns Christians and Manichaeans) as well as recurring attempts, by priests, to strengthen certain aspects of Zoroastrianism and thus make it less vulnerable to apostasy. It can be shown that almost all persecutions, which have mainly been recorded by Christian authors, were caused by the conversion of Zoroastrians to Christianity (Walker 2006). The best-known episode in this connection is the war undertaken by the Sasanians in the 5th century to “reconvert” Armenia to Zoroastrianism (Thomson 1982). The Armenian king Tirdat IV had converted to Christianity in the 4th century and by the time of the Sasanian king Yazdgird II (r. 438–457 CE), the Armenian church was firmly established. The Sasanian king, on the advice of his ministers, urged the Armenians to return to their ancestral religion, Zoroastrianism, but the version of Zoroastrianism he intended to promote among them was utterly alien to the Armenians, who did not even recognize it as the religion from which their ancestors had converted to Christianity. Although the Persians defeated the Armenians at the culminating battle of Avarayr (451 CE), eventually they had to forsake all hope of reinstating Zoroastrianism as the official religion of Armenia.

What makes this episode important for the history of Zoroastrianism is that it shows that, by that time, the version of Zoroastrianism espoused by the court made use of a variety of the Zoroastrian cosmogony that has come to be known as “Zurvanism,” which is the version of the religion urged upon the Armenians in texts that describe the events leading up to the battle of Avarayr. According to the Zurvanite version, Ohrmazd and Ahreman were the twin offspring of the god Zurwān, a god of time (Rezania 2010). Zurvanism has been the subject of bitter debates, because some scholars considered it a betrayal of “true” Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1996: 15–17). There was a tendency, moreover, to use the concept as a convenient receptacle of a wide variety of Zoroastrian beliefs that

somehow did not conform to (later) Zoroastrianism (Zaehner 1955; see de Jong 1995: 15–18). Most of these, unhistorical, strategies were countered by the observation that the Zurvanite myth was only one of a fairly wide variety of significant stories that circulated among Zoroastrians in Sasanian and early Islamic Iran (Shaked 1992a). While this is true, that interpretation itself tends to gloss over the fact that, at least in the 5th century, it was not “just any” version of the cosmogony: It was the version of the court.

To understand why, in the end, even this courtly backing did not guarantee the survival of the Zurvanite myth as the main version of Zoroastrian thought, we need to pay attention to the two most crucial developments in the relation between Zoroastrianism and the state that took place more or less at the same time, in late Sasanian times. With these two transformations, one negative and one positive in outlook, we reach the version of the religion as it has survived. The first of these is the challenge of Mazdak; the second the writing down of the *Avesta* (accompanied, it will be argued, by a certain closing of the Zoroastrian mind).

It is impossible to trace in detail the history of the Mazdakite movement, since no sources from Mazdakites themselves have survived, and all reports on the movement are intensely hostile to it. What is clear, however, is that it was remembered as a huge religious, social, and political trauma. It is likely that there was a movement of social reform, based on novel interpretations of Zoroastrianism, long before Mazdak entered the stage. This movement advocated the abolition of envy, strife, and war (in accordance, it seems, with the Zoroastrian notion that “negative” emotions quicken the Evil Spirit; note, however, that pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism, in spite of this general idea, has never developed the notion that the taking of human lives is a sin). It located the chief trigger of these adversities in “greed” and “envy” (again, two well-known Zoroastrian demons thought to be extremely active in the world), and the main reason for greed and envy in the unequal distribution among men of access to farming grounds, water, and women. The movement gained momentum, it seems, when it received surprising royal backing from Kawād I (first reign 488–496 CE), who paid for this with his throne: He was deposed and sent to Central Asia. Two years later, he was able to reclaim the throne (second reign 498–531 CE), but nothing more is heard of his sympathies for the movement, which appears to have grown in number and importance under its new leader Mazdak, leading to widespread revolt (Crone 1991; Gariboldi 2009: 85–142). The movement, and Mazdak with it, was quelled by Kawād’s son Khosrow I (r. 531–579 CE), although the ideas associated with it remained very active, locally, until early Islamic times (Crone 2012).

While much remains uncertain about the Mazdakite movement, it is clear that the trauma caused by it induced the king and his priests to initiate a pervasive programme of reforms, including reforms in the structure of the religion. In order to understand these reforms, it is necessary to discuss the final – and most important – transformation of Zoroastrianism in late Sasanian times: the codification of the *Avesta*.

It is not clear whether this transformation itself was prompted by the Mazdakite movement, but it is likely, especially in light of the drastic measures taken to prevent access to the newly standardized texts, and to accompany the writing down of the holy texts with the rise of the notion of the necessity of each and every Zoroastrian to have a living priest in a position of authority, to validate the performance of rituals.

The most important source on this process is the “history of the *Avesta*” in the fourth book of the *Dēnkard*, a text that can be attributed to the reign of Khosrow I (Shaked 1994a: 99–104; Skjærvø 2011a: 40–43). The text itself follows an internal logic that is based on the outcome: the fixation and codification of the *Avesta*. In order to grant this process due authority, royal attempts to gather and fix the Avestan texts were charted through the most significant episodes of Iranian history: the conversion of Wištāsp (who first collected the texts in writing), through Darius III (and the destruction wrought by Alexander), to an Arsacid Walaxš and then to Ardašīr I, Šāpūr (Šāhbuhr) I, Šāpūr II, and, finally, Khosrow I, “his (present) Majesty” (MP *im bay*). The text obviously does not mention the details of the process, since it is concerned much more with proving the unadulterated preservation of the divine words, and the accompanying version of these words in languages humans actually speak, that is the *Avesta* and its *Zand*. In later Zoroastrianism, these two were seen as two halves of a single divine revelation, of equal authority, but with different purposes. The Avestan texts were perfect and without falsehood and meant for praising and blessing, that is, for use in the ritual; the *Zand* was equally perfect, its perfection being guaranteed by impeccable lines of priests, but it had a different purpose: to be accessed for the actual practice of the religion in everyday life (de Jong 2009). There was evidently some concern over the matter of access to the scriptures, and it is here that one can surmise the influence of popular movements such as the Mazdakites (and earlier the Manichaeans). Before the writing down of the texts, access to the texts was necessarily a priestly accomplishment (since they alone memorized them), although lay Zoroastrians could go to an institution called *hērbedestān* to listen to priests explaining the religion (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 1992: 15–18; Azarnouche 2012). Although that institution continued, at some unknown moment it came to be hedged in by further restrictions: Access to the *Zand* became restricted to priests only, while lay Zoroastrians retained the right to memorize Avestan texts. The application of knowledge from the *Zand* became one of the duties of priests and every lay Zoroastrian needed to submit to a priestly authority (*dastwar*): For every problem and decision, he/she had to consult a priest, whose ruling was binding. This was coupled with the notion that one’s ritual acts were only counted as valid when one possessed a *dastwar* (Kreyenbroek 1994b).

This development can be traced especially from its survival in early Islamic times (when, for example, the teaching of Pahlavi script was forbidden to non-priestly Zoroastrians), and this is true also for the other, perhaps more momentous, transformation of Zoroastrianism, which was produced by the codification of the religious texts. For the writing down of the *Avesta*, a special script was developed that was capable of rendering all phonetic nuances of the Avestan language as it was pronounced at the time. Texts, it is well known, needed to be recited, correctly, in order to mobilize their ritual efficacy. These texts, in their own ritual language, were not used for any other purpose than ritual ones, but it seems that the process of writing them down gave momentum to a different, possibly unintended, further development: that they began to be studied and interpreted in ways that had not been possible or necessary before. The first development that can be traced is that of a selection: A decision had to be made which texts to include in “the” *Avesta* and which texts, if any, to discard. Uncertainty as to the development of Zoroastrian rituals makes it difficult to reconstruct this

process, but it seems to be clear that the “high liturgy” of the *Yasna* with its elaborations in the *Vīsprad* and the *Vīdēvdād* rituals yielded the core of the written *Avesta*, with the remaining texts surviving in what would later be called the “Little *Avesta*”: a collection of smaller rituals texts and a (now dislocated?) collection of hymns to individual deities (Kellens 1998). Of the former collection, the *Zand* has been preserved very nearly intact, but this is not the case with the latter, the *Zand* of which is very incomplete. In addition, huge amounts of *Zand* seem to have survived for which there was no “*Avesta*.” It cannot be known whether the surviving *Zand* was already in existence before the codification of the texts, although tiny linguistic peculiarities of the texts seem to support that idea. It is likely, moreover, that with the “collection” of the *Avesta*, texts emerged that were included in the new collection, but had no existing Middle Persian *Zand*. The point of these speculations is that it is becoming clearer that once the written *Avesta* came into being it began to be studied as a text, something that had not really happened before. This can explain some remarkable facts that have often puzzled historians of Zoroastrianism. One of these is the disappearance of “non-Avestan” deities from the Zoroastrian pantheon of those parts of the Iranian world that were governed by the Sasanians: the god *Sāsān* and the goddess *Nanaia*, for example, but also the god *Zurwān* as the progenitor of the two spirits. Another is a huge elaboration of the rules of purity and, it seems, a gradual spread of the rites of exposure of dead bodies, in line with the Avestan prescriptions. This is why this chapter more or less began with the statement that there is a reason why the *Avesta* and the Pahlavi books so often confirm each other – and that this is not because they both represent a “deeply conservative” Zoroastrianism as the prophet had intended it to be: The Pahlavi books are rooted in a variety of Zoroastrianism that was convinced that one could find the truth by reading the words of the revelation. This is far removed from the approach we have surmised for the Parthians, who practiced the religion rather than preach it, and it can only be understood in the light of the enduring political interest of the Sasanians in the potential their ancestral religion had to mobilize and consolidate the Iranian people.

When the Arabs destroyed the Sasanian Empire, this fairly recently shaped structure of Zoroastrianism survived, as it still survives to the present. This fact is an object of marvel and admiration, for, unlike the Christians of the Middle East, Zoroastrians could not look to parts of the world where their religion retained some of its secular power. All was lost, but the religion survived, probably due to the fact that those who were responsible for it, priests *and* rulers, had given it a shape that made it possible to be maintained under new conditions: by the production of a narrative that united the story of the religion with the history of the Iranians; by the restatement of Zoroastrianism as a religion with a (known) history, grouped around a divine text revealed to a founder figure; by interpreting the religion as based in this text, fully living up to its message, a message, moreover, that was free of contradictions; by having removed from the religion those aspects – a chaotic pantheon, the cult of images – that would have made it vulnerable to Muslim derision. None of this happened spontaneously, and little can be attributed to priestly initiative only. Much of it was the result of royal initiative and can be explained only if we attempt to locate the development of Zoroastrianism in the context of the three successive Zoroastrian empires and their monarchs.

Further Reading

Resources for the subjects dealt with in this chapter come in two basic types: studies of the various periods of pre-Islamic history, and historical overviews of Zoroastrianism. Many of these are of excellent quality, although it is noticeable that the historical works are often weak on the subject of religion, and the religious histories weak in more general history. The basic work of reference for the Achaemenid Empire is Briant (2002); a most valuable collection of sources, with critical discussion, is Kuhrt (2007); a bibliography of studies of the empire is given by Weber and Wiesehöfer (1996), with supplementary information in Briant (2001). The field of Achaemenid studies is well organized and served by an important website: www.achemenet.com. The crucial Elamite evidence on Persian religion is the subject of Henkelman (2008). In the absence of a similar historical reference work for the Parthians, scholars had to rely for a long time on Schippmann (1980) and Wolski (1993). The situation is much improved with the publication of the source collections of Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber (2010). Important projects on Parthian coins – one of the main sources for

Parthian history – are currently underway (Sinisi 2012, the first installment of a *Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum*), and coins are the main subject of the website www.parthia.com (with extensive bibliographies).

For the Sasanian Empire, the scholarly world has likewise long relied on earlier studies, especially Christensen (1944), but in recent years again source collections (Dodgeon and Lieu 1991; Greatrex and Lieu 2002; Dignas and Winter 2007) and first attempts at a new synthesis by Daryaee (2009) are signs of hope for the future. Here, too, there is an important website by Daryaee: www.sasanika.org.

For the specific subject of the history of Zoroastrianism, the first three volumes of Mary Boyce's *History of Zoroastrianism* remain indispensable: Boyce (1975a, 1982) and Boyce and Grenet (1991) – and so, hopefully, will the fourth volume of that history be: Boyce and de Jong (forthcoming). For Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Shaked (1994a) is crucial; the most up-to-date general overviews of the history of Zoroastrianism are Stausberg (2002b) and Rose (2011b). What we lack are in-depth studies of “religion” in *any* of these periods.