

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2019  
Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia  
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**Zoroastrians in Time and Space: Iran, India, and The Silk Road**

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The “Persian” religion has fascinated western authors since it was first mentioned in the writings of Herodotus. Despite the wealth of information uncovered in the early modern period, and the fact that there is a small, but vocal, number of living adherents across the world today, Zoroastrianism remains a relatively unknown religious tradition.

The seeds of the religion are thought to have originated among Iranians in the late Bronze Age, somewhere in the Central Asian Steppes. Primary (oral) texts, in a language known as “Old Avestan,” are attributed to a teacher known as Zarathustra. The Old Avestan *Gāthās* – “songs” – contain the core ideas of the religion, including the worship of Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord,” and the cosmological and ethical tension between “order/right” and “chaos/the lie.” Another Old Avestan text, the Yasna Haptanghaiti, contains an early liturgy in praise of Ahura Mazda and the good elements of the established world.

On the plateau of Iran, the Iranians established three great empires: the Achaemenid (c. 550-330 BCE); Parthian (c.247 BCE – 224 CE); and Sasanian (224-651 CE). Under these three empires, the religion of Mazda worship evolved alongside its Near Eastern neighbors, coming into contact with emerging Judaism, then Christianity, and later Islam. To the east, the Iranians also came into contact with Buddhists. In late antiquity some eastern Iranian Zoroastrians travelled along the Silk Roads into China proper, where several of their funerary monuments have been discovered in recent years.

After the arrival of Islam on the Iranian plateau, some Zoroastrians chose to emigrate to China, others to India, but the majority remained. Those who arrived on the shores of Gujarat in the early Islamic period are known as “Parsis” – “those from Persia.” In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Parsi goods and ideas began to make their way across the seas to America. The Zoroastrian diaspora now extends across the globe.

**Suggested Readings:**

M. Boyce. *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*. Chicago: Chicago U.P. rep.1990

J.R. Hinnells. *Persian Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, rep.1985

J.R. Hinnells and A. V. Williams, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007

M. Moazami, (ed.), *Zoroastrianism: A collection of articles from the Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2 vols. New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2016

D. T. Potts, *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, 2013

J. Rose. *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction*. London: I.B.Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2011

J. Rose. *Zoroastrianism A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2011.

M. Stausberg & Y. Vevaina. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015

S. Stewart (ed.). *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013

## **Glossary:**

Achaemenid: the first Iranian (Persian) Empire, c. 550-330 BCE

Ahura Mazda: 'Wise Lord'

*Amesha Spentas*: the 'beneficent immortals.'

*anjuman*: 'association' or 'council'

*aramgah* literally 'place of peace;' cemetery

Asha (Av.) *Arta* (OP): 'order, right, truth'; one of the seven *Amesha Spentas*

*ashawan*: 'one who follows *Asha*' – 'an orderly/righteous/truthful person'

*atash kadeh* (Pers.)/*agiary* (P.Guj.): 'house of fire'

Avesta: corpus of sacred texts of the Zoroastrians

*barsom*: the twigs or metal rods held by Zoroastrian priests in ritual

*chaharom*: the 'fourth day' ceremony after death, when the soul is judged

*daena*: '[religious] insight'; religion

*dakhma*: site of exposure of the dead – 'tower of silence'

*dastur*: the highest rank of Zoroastrian priest

*Druj* (Av.); *Drauga* (OP); deceit, chaos, confusion, 'the Lie'

*frasha*: (Av.) 'wonderful,' 'perfect;' (OP) 'excellent'

*fravashi*: the 'pre-soul' that pre-exists and post-exists the individual, and is venerated as efficacious on behalf of the living

*Gāthās*: The Old Avestan 'songs' attributed to Zarathustra

*kusti* (P.Guj.), *koshti* (Pers.): sacred cord, 72 threads, woven of wool (usually lamb); tied around the waist over the *sudreh* after initiation

*magush* (OP)/*magoi* (Greek): priests, religious specialists

Mithra: 'bond', 'contract'; a *yazata*

*mobed*: general term for priest

*navjote* (PGuj.) Parsi Zoroastrian 'initiation'

*Now Ruz*: 'New Day,' Zoroastrian New Year

*padan*: 'mouth cover' worn by Zoroastrian priest before the fire

*pairidaeza* (Av): 'enclosure'

Parsi: 'from Persia (Iran)'

Parthian: second Iranian Empire, c. 247 BCE – 224 CE

Rashnu: the *yazata* of justice

*raspi*: assistant priest at Zoroastrian ceremonies

Sasanian: third Iranian Empire, c. 224 – 651 CE

*sedreh-pushi*: Iranian Zoroastrian term for initiation

Sogdiana: an ancient Iranian land, part of modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

Sraosha: 'readiness to listen'; a *yazata*

*sudreh* (P. Guj.) *sedreh* (Pers.): white cotton shirt invested during initiation

Vohu Manah: 'good thought.' One of the seven *Amesha Spentas*

*xwarenah*: (divine) 'fortune' or 'glory'

*Yasht*: Young Avestan hymn to the *yazatas*

*Yasna* (Av.): 'worship/consecration;' term used for the liturgy and its Avestan text

*yazata*: 'worthy of worship'; divine being

*zot*: officiating priest at Zoroastrian ceremonies